



LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MAIMONIDES AND SPINOZA: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

RANDI FEDER

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2016

Copyright by Randi Feder, 2016  
All rights reserved.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thank you to Terri Rothstein for telling me how to finish.

Thank you to Interim President John Pelissero, Dean Samuel Attoh, Associate Dean Jessica Horowitz, and Drs. Andrew Cutrefello, Blake Dutton and Victoria Wike for allowing me the opportunity to complete the journey, with a special thank you to Dr. Dutton for his supervision and encouragement, and to Drs. Wike and Peter Hartman for serving on my committee.

Thank you also to “my team” for being there through all kinds of times: Marcie Eskin (as well as for her librarian skills), Vicki Hass, Lynn Kahn, Linda Kupfer, Deborah Rosenbaum, Dori Rosenbloom, Terri Rothstein, and Karen Thirman; to Addison Ullrich for lo these many years; to Annie Tucker for the first toast; to Jacqueline Haimés for listening, always; and to Kristina Grob for her manuscript assistance.

And with loving gratitude and special appreciation to my husband Dr. Robert Feder and my sons Alex and Seth whose belief, encouragement, and support could have run out long ago but never did and never will.

For Mom, Dad, Scott, and Marcia Beth, who, somewhere, is planning the party.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: MAIMONIDES	6
CHAPTER TWO: SPINOZA	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY	74
VITA	76

## INTRODUCTION

Ever since Philo aspired to synthesize Hebrew Scripture and Platonic philosophy in the first century CE, the relationship between religion and philosophy has been an area of abiding interest in Jewish thought. That interest manifests in both the Jewish and broader community in our own time whenever we ask whether religion's teachings, derived solely from revelation, are opposed to or are compatible with knowledge derived through other sources, a question playing out today on a global stage. More precisely, because biblical teachings and philosophical knowledge appear to be in conflict, we want to determine whether the teachings of Scripture can be reconciled with knowledge acquired through sources other than revelation.

As Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher, noted, because of the apparent conflict between religion and philosophy, a person who is

perfect in his religion and character and having studied the sciences of the philosophers and come to know what they signify would . . . remain in a state of perplexity and confusion as to whether he should follow his intellect.<sup>1</sup>

or remain loyal to his religious teaching. For those wishing to resolve that confusion,

---

<sup>1</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines, trans., 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) “[Introduction to the First Part],” 5. It should be noted at the outset that there is ongoing debate as to whether the *Guide* should be read in a straightforward manner as a work of philosophy or instead as a piece of non-philosophical esoteric writing. It is claimed by some scholars that the *The Guide*, as an esoteric work, would allow Jewish philosophers to accept philosophical teachings that were incompatible with the Mosaic Law, while protecting the larger Jewish community from knowledge that would endanger its continued existence. That debate is beyond the scope of this paper which reads *The Guide* in a straightforward manner. For discussion on the debate see, e.g., Leo Strauss in Pines, *The Guide*, xi–lvi and Daniel Frank in Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Julius Guttmann, abridged ed. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1995), vii–xii.

answering the question as to whether revelation and knowledge acquired through other sources can be harmonized becomes compelling.

This paper examines Maimonides' and Spinoza's differing answers, specifically with regard to the relationship between Hebrew Scripture and philosophy. To determine that relationship, Maimonides in *The Guide of the Perplexed* and Spinoza in the *Theological Political Treatise*,<sup>2</sup> analyzed two aspects of the Hebrew Bible: (1) the Mosaic Law, that, according to tradition, God revealed to Moses at Sinai and which is at the heart of Hebrew Scripture and (2) the validity of prophecy, through which the Law was revealed.

Maimonides and Spinoza agree that a true understanding of Scripture could be achieved by the correct method of biblical interpretation. Despite each author's methodical interpretation of Scripture, however, they arrive at significantly different understandings of Scripture's relationship to philosophy. Maimonides sought to aid devout persons attracted to the enterprise of philosophy in resolving their perplexity by showing that Hebrew Scripture teaches the same knowledge acquired through sources other than revelation. More specifically, Maimonides claims that the Bible, teaches largely the same correct understanding of God, the universe, and man's place in it, as does Aristotelian philosophy (as it was conjoined to Neo-Platonism and re-worked by the *falasifa*). Further, for Maimonides, the Law aids man in attaining man's highest good.

For Spinoza, however, Scripture conveys little more than ethical teachings. This paper will show that their differing interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and their

---

<sup>2</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*. (Gebhardt Edition) 2nd ed., Samuel Shirley, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001).

divergent views on the relationship between religion and philosophy are readily understandable in light of each author’s pre-existing religious and/or philosophical commitments—those religious and philosophical commitments that existed *prior* to Maimonides’ and Spinoza’s projects of scriptural interpretation, *The Guide* and the *TPT*, respectively.

Maimonides was a devout Jew and committed Aristotelian. Committed to the Law<sup>3</sup> and to philosophy as an intellectual enterprise, his interpretation of the Hebrew Bible would seek to demonstrate that Scripture and Aristotelianism can be reconciled, and further, that the Law aided man in attaining his highest good, the intellectual contemplation of God. Given both his religious and philosophical commitments, Maimonides needed to harmonize the Law and philosophy and to adjudicate between apparently conflicting religious and philosophical claims without sacrificing either philosophical integrity or the very foundations of Judaism. This is what Maimonides sought to do in *The Guide*.

Spinoza, having been excommunicated by the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam on July 27, 1656, and seemingly unperturbed by the event, had no commitment to Judaism or any other religion for the rest of his life. Rather, his sole

---

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides does not refer to “Judaism” in *The Guide*. Rather he refers to “the Law” or some form of the “Law of Moses” (Kenneth Seeskin, e-mail message to author, January 15, 2015). As Leora Batnitzky notes, “[prior] to the modern period Jewish Law was simultaneously religious, political, and cultural in nature. Jewish modernity most simply defined represents the dissolution of the political agency of the corporate Jewish community and the concurrent shift of political agency to the individual Jew who became a citizen of the modern nation-state.” (Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011], 2). Thus the religious aspect of the Law became an entity unto itself. Thinking of it as “the Law” no longer made sense. This was a shift that Maimonides, in his time, could not envision but the precise shift that Spinoza was advocating for in his time. For Maimonides, the Law exists necessarily as a communal function. Spinoza saw religious belief and practice as a private personal matter.

commitment was to philosophy and the unimpeded pursuit of knowledge, disentangled from any association with traditional religious doctrine. Spinoza's seminal work, *The Ethics*<sup>4</sup> (written *prior* to the *TPT*) articulated this vision wherein philosophy supplants traditional religion, and its belief in a commanding God, as the correct means for living the most meaningful human life possible.

Anticipating the furor that the *Ethics* would engender, he sought to lay the groundwork for its publication. This Spinoza attempted to do by writing the *TPT* in which he distinguished traditional religion from *true* religion, a universal ethic of loving one's neighbor. He sought to demonstrate that *true religion's* teachings were not in conflict with knowledge derived from sources other than revelation. To promote this understanding of true religion, Spinoza needed to radically re-interpret religion's traditional foundation, Scripture. His new interpretation could not conflict with his philosophical vision articulated in the *Ethics*. It would also need to maintain a role for traditional religious concepts such as God and ritual to pacify the masses and the clergy, insuring its broader based acceptance. So while Spinoza's Scripture would not offer a true understanding of God or the universe, it would maintain God and ritual as a means of inculcating ethical behavior. Because Scripture dealt only with ethical behavior and did not offer any philosophical truths, it could co-exist with free philosophical inquiry. Re-interpreting religion and Scripture in order to allow the unimpeded pursuit of philosophical inquiry is the project of the *TPT*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works: Benedict de Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

To establish how their pre-existing commitments shaped their interpretations of the Hebrew Bible we will (1) briefly describe Maimonides' and Spinoza's personal backgrounds and the historical circumstances which motivated them to undertake an analysis of Scripture, (2) explain the religious and/or philosophical commitments that existed for each of them prior to their in-depth analyses of Scripture, (3) describe their views on prophecy, the means of communication through which the Torah was revealed, and (4) outline their general understandings of the purpose of the Mosaic Law. *The Guide*, published in 1190, and the *TPT*, published in 1670, create a kind of dialogue, with Spinoza's later work referring back both explicitly and implicitly to the *Guide* as Spinoza challenges both Maimonides' methodology and conclusions.

## CHAPTER ONE

### MAIMONIDES

#### Maimonides' Background

Maimonides was born most likely in either 1137 or 1138 in Cordova, a center of intellectual learning, to Maimon ben Joseph, a rabbinic scholar and rabbinic judge.<sup>1</sup> In approximately 1148, the Almohads, a fundamentalist Islamic group emerging out of the Maghrib (North Africa), completed their conquest of Muslim Spain, defeating the ruling Almoravids. Maimonides and his family fled when the puritanical Almohads invaded Cordova. Jews and Christians, who had been tolerated and to a certain degree integrated into society under the Almoravids, were now considered infidels. Many were forced to convert under the threat of death. However, the Maimon family remained in al-Andalus for approximately seventeen years, though their exact whereabouts during those years are uncertain. Maimonides would have been exposed to the Greek philosophical ideas disseminated through elite cultural circles during his formative years.<sup>2</sup>

He also would have been aware that Christianity and Islam were incorporating

---

<sup>1</sup> Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 9. Maimon ben Joseph's writings included a commentary on an Arabic astronomical treatise, and Davidson surmises he possessed some scientific interests and knowledge that could have influenced Maimonides' own interests. Davidson explains that an educated, well respected, and well off family such as Maimonides' would have participated in the larger surrounding culture and been familiar with its literary, scientific, religious traditions and innovations. The Greek philosophical tradition as taught by the *falasifa* would have been accessible to Jewish intellectuals.

<sup>2</sup> Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 37. Kraemer writes that despite the religious fanaticism of the Almohads, intellectual life continued for the elites and courtiers.

aspects of Aristotelian philosophy (as understood by its Arab interpreters) and that Jewish intellectuals felt attracted to Christianity, Islam, and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> There were well known cases of Jewish intellectuals converting to the other monotheistic religions.<sup>4</sup> These Jewish apostates objected to Judaism's mythological presentation and exclusivity in view of the rationality and universalism developing in Christianity and Islam as those religions incorporated philosophical teachings. Specific doctrinal challenges posed by philosophy to the three monotheistic faiths included the Aristotelian belief in the eternity of the world. Muslim and Christian thinkers were already grappling with this idea and attempting to reconcile it with their respective theologies. For Judaism, the eternity principle negated the belief in a personal God creating the universe out of free will and before which nothing existed, a belief that provides the theological underpinnings of the Mosaic Law. Islam and Christianity considered Judaism unsophisticated because Hebrew Scripture contained base anthropomorphisms. Christians considered the Torah to have been superseded by the New Testament. Muslims believed that the Torah had been corrupted in its transmission. Muslims also assumed that their military superiority indicated their religious superiority.

#### Physical persecution under the Almohads and religious-intellectual challenges

---

<sup>3</sup> Davidson, *The Man and His Works*, 90. As Davidson points out, however, it would have been a very small number of Jews who would have been studying philosophy, despite Maimonides' claim that many in the Jewish community were pursuing such study.

<sup>4</sup> Kraemer, *Life and World*, 16–17. Kraemer offers examples of Jewish converts such as Peter Alfonsi, formerly Moses Sefaradi, (1062–1110) who wrote an anti-Judaic tract ridiculing talmudic stories that contradicted reason, or the formerly Jewish mathematician and doctor, Samaw'al (Samuel) al Maghribi (1126–1175) who wrote that "human reason is the ultimate criterion of the truth and that it requires us to examine ancestral traditions." Along with Jewish apostates, Christian and Islamic theologians also criticized Judaism. Ibn Hazm of Cordoba, a Muslim jurist, theologian, and poet who befriended Jewish intellectuals wrote some of the most challenging critiques against Judaism.

from Christianity, Islam, and philosophy were likely motivating forces in his attempt to transform Judaism, the Law, into a religion based on reason:

Maimonides stepped into the fray with sword and buckler to defend Judaism and to portray it as intellectually respectable. He sought to revive the ancient wisdom of the Jewish people and to assure them that God had not rejected them and that history would vindicate their case.<sup>5</sup>

While the impact upon Maimonides of these existential challenges to his faith cannot be doubted, it is also clear that his intellectual pursuits and writings seem rooted, ultimately, in his own “fascination of truth.”<sup>6</sup> It was this commitment to truth that would motivate his more fundamental goal of seeking to reconcile the Law and philosophy.

### **Maimonides’ Pre-Existing Religious and Philosophical Commitments**

A prodigious Jewish legal scholar, Maimonides devoted much of his life to rabbinics, the work of explaining, systematizing, and codifying Jewish law. He referred to rabbinics as the “wife of my youth, with whose love I have been ravished from my early years.”<sup>7</sup> His most significant contribution to Jewish life is his codification of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, which permitted quick and convenient access to the Talmud’s legal findings.

The Talmud is the authoritative collection of Jewish Law. It is comprised of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Kraemer, *Life and World*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Pines, *The Guide*, Translator’s Introduction to *The Guide*, lviii.

<sup>7</sup> Maimonides, *Responsa*, ed. J. Blau, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1986), 3.57, cited in Davidson, *The Man and His Works*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Traditional Jewish religious belief holds that Judaism possesses an Oral Law, given by God to Moses at Sinai at the same time as the Written Law (the Torah). It is useful to think of the Torah as an unassembled bicycle and the Oral Law as the instructions for its assembly. While the rabbinic commentaries in the Talmud are intended to illuminate the “instructions” for assembly, they are often terse, assume prior knowledge, and present legal arguments without necessarily stating the majority view, Aggadic material includes folklore, history, parables, and medical advice.

*Mishna*, Judah Ha Nasi’s codification of the Oral Law in approximately 200 CE, and the *Gemara*, a collection of rabbinic commentary on the Law that spans several hundred years. The Talmud took its final form sometime between the end of the 5th and 7th centuries. Not simply an annotated Law Code, the Talmud is a thicket of rabbinic legal reasoning developed over centuries as well as a source of *aggadic* (non-legal) material which is interspersed throughout.<sup>8</sup> Without proper training in analyzing Talmudic passages, it would be difficult for a lay individual to ascertain the legally prescribed behavior for any given situation—or too easy for a self or poorly taught scholar to disseminate incorrect information. Concerned with the proper practice and preservation of the Law, Maimonides wanted to ensure easy accessibility to and correct interpretation of the legal content of the Talmud. In the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah* he writes,

when severe disasters keep following one another and the needs of the moment brush aside all things, our wise men lose their wits and the understanding of our clever people is hidden. Hence the commentaries, the codes of law, and the response . . . have presented difficulties in our days so that a mere few are capable of understanding their subject matter properly. . . [Thus I] decided to put down in writing . . . as to what is prohibited or permitted, unclean or clean, and the other laws of the Torah...all in plain language and concisely, so that the entire Oral Torah might become familiar to all systematically, without arguments and counter-arguments . . . so that all the laws be open to young and old alike.<sup>9</sup>

In producing the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides’ allegiance to the Law is clear. Notably, his allegiance to *philosophy* is also made clear in that work as he discusses correct beliefs, ascribes the study of cosmogony and metaphysics to the Sages, and underscores the need for meaningful study. The first chapter following the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah* is “Book of Knowledge.” The Book’s first section, “Fundamentals of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Maimonides, *Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah (Yad Hazakah)*, ed. Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1967), 3.

Torah”, chapter one, opens with Maimonides stating that “[the] fundamental principle and pillar of all science is to know that there is a First Being who has brought everything that exists into being.”<sup>10</sup> It continues:

[this] Being is the God. . . of the universe who controls the celestial sphere with a power to which there is neither end nor limit. . . .For, the celestial sphere is always revolving, and it is impossible for it to revolve without someone causing it to revolve; it is God, blessed be He, who causes it to revolve without using a hand or physical force.<sup>11</sup>

Maimonides also discusses God’s unity and non-corporeality. He claims that each of these understandings of God are included in *Ma’aseh Merkavah*, a rabbinic term meaning “The Account of the Divine Chariot,” Ezekiel’s prophecy conveying God’s mystery and awe.<sup>12</sup> Maimonides interprets the term to mean metaphysics. *Ma’aseh Merkavah* may be taught only to a mature individual possessing wisdom who is able to engage in logical reasoning and deduction independently.<sup>13</sup> *Ma’aseh Bereshit*, the rabbinic term referring to “The Account of Creation,” Maimonides interprets to mean physics.

Why does Maimonides’ monumental *legal* code also set forth true beliefs? Their inclusion reflects his belief that possessing correct beliefs is necessary in attaining the supreme good, that is, intellectual communion with God; one cannot enter into a meaningful relationship with another without knowledge of the other. Thus, to be able to enter into intellectual communion with God, an individual must have knowledge of God,

---

<sup>10</sup> Birnbaum, *Mishneh Torah*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Birnbaum, *Mishneh Torah*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ez. 1:1–28 details Ezekiel’s vision of God’s chariot.

<sup>13</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 1.34, 72

that is, must hold correct opinions about God. The Law sets the learner on the correct road toward understanding God.

With regard to study, Maimonides states that one third of one's study time should be devoted to studying the Written Law, the next third to the Oral Law, and the final third

in reflection, deducing conclusions from premises, developing implications of statements, comparing dicta, studying the hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is interpreted, till one knows the essence of these principles and how to deduce what is permitted and what is forbidden from what one has learned traditionally. This is termed Talmud.<sup>14</sup>

Maimonides is stating that with regard to what is permitted and forbidden according to the Talmud, it is better to learn how to deduce the underlying principles rather than merely know what is permitted or forbidden based on traditional authority. This kind of reasoning, along with the very skills Maimonides sets forth to study Scripture and Talmud, is what is necessary for philosophical inquiry. Further, the very skills Maimonides sets forth to study Scripture and Talmud are those that require reason and are necessary in philosophical inquiry. Particularly in light of *The Guide's* use of philosophical teachings to illuminate Biblical meaning, Maimonides' commitment to philosophy is readily apparent in his legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*.

Maimonides, through his own study and pursuit of knowledge, was committed to the belief that Aristotelian philosophy (as refracted through an Islamic Neo-Platonism) taught, for the most part, the truth about the universe, about all being. Given his commitment to the Law as evidenced in his dedication to rabbinics and in his creation of the *Mishneh Torah*, his belief that the Law by and large taught the same philosophical

---

<sup>14</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Book One: Knowledge," Laws Concerning the Study of Torah, Chapter 1:11 in Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, Inc., 1972), 65.

truths as Aristotelianism was inevitable. His interpretation of Scripture flowed from these beliefs. There could not be two truths. Thus his own religious commitment and philosophical inclinations, impacted by the religious and intellectual milieu of his times, led to the creation of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, a work attempting to bridge the domains of religion and philosophy.

### **Evidence in *The Guide of***

#### **Maimonides' Commitment to the Law and to Philosophy**

Given Maimonides' commitments to both Aristotelianism (as he understood it) and to the Law, he would feel compelled to resolve any apparent conflicting claims between philosophy and Scripture without sacrificing philosophical integrity or undermining the foundations of the Law. He would seek to establish that Judaism does not need to reject philosophical investigation and its findings. However, an immediate obstacle to his project was the Aristotelian and Islamic philosophical view that the world was eternal. This view conflicts with the Scriptural view that the world had been created in time and out of nothing. Maimonides' analysis and decision regarding this debate provides insight into one way he approached this kind of challenge to the Law. He allows for the possibility that when philosophy and religion put forward opposing claims and philosophy cannot demonstratively establish its claim, one may be justified in relying on Revelation. While Maimonides will provide a philosophical analysis of the issue, ultimately, his determination of the debate will revolve around religious concerns. The determination of which view had the better claim was critical, because, as Maimonides states in *The Guide*,

if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void, and a shift to other opinions would take place.<sup>15</sup>

More specifically, the eternity doctrine, “that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything— destroys the Law in its

principle...,and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out.”<sup>16</sup>

Given his commitment to philosophy he must present a careful analysis of the philosophical understanding of the world’s existence. However, given his commitment to the Law, he must seek to validate that creation in time has the superior claim over that of the world existing eternally.

Maimonides begins his discussion of whether the world is eternal or created in time and *ex nihilo* by summarizing three opinions he asserts exist among people who believe a God exists. The first opinion belongs to “all who believe in the Law of *Moses our Master*” and states that

the world as a whole—I mean to say every existent other than God . . . was brought into existence by God after having been purely and absolutely non-existent. . . .Afterwards, through His will and His volition, He brought into existence out of nothing all the beings as they are, time itself being one of the created things.<sup>17</sup>

Though here he states that time itself came into being only once the world was created,

Maimonides will refer in other passages to the world being “created in time.” It is important to emphasize that Maimonides’ use of that phrase does not mean that the

---

<sup>15</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.26, 330.

<sup>16</sup> Pines, *The Guide*, 2.25, 328.

<sup>17</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.13, 281.

universe was created *within* time. Rather, to say that the world was “created in time” simply means that it was created a finite number of years ago. Maimonides believed that nothing, including time, existed before God created the universe. Time itself came into being with the creation of the universe as he states in this passage. Time is consequent upon motion which is itself an accident of moving things. Thus time is also an accident. Since time itself depends upon the existence of the world, the world cannot have a beginning within time. If one should believe that time existed prior to the world, one is conceptually accepting belief in the eternity of the world, because if “time is an accident, [it] . . . [must] necessarily . . . have a substratum. Accordingly it follows necessarily that there existed some thing prior to the existence of this world existing now.”<sup>18</sup> This would negate the Jewish belief that God created the world out of nothing and before anything else existed. So important is belief in creation in time and out of nothing to the underpinnings of the Mosaic Law that Maimonides instructs his student for whom he is ostensibly writing *The Guide*, to thoroughly study and comprehend what Maimonides is saying here, otherwise the student will not be able to defend intellectually against the concept of the eternity of the world and presumably further question the teachings of his faith.<sup>19</sup>

The second opinion is that of Plato and other philosophers. They do not believe it is possible

that a certain being endowed with matter and form, should be generated out of the absolute non-existence of that matter, or that it should pass away into the absolute non-existence of that matter. To predicate of God that He is able to do this is,

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>19</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.13, 282

according to them, like predicating of Him that He is able to bring together two contraries in one instant of time . . . and similar impossibilities.<sup>20</sup>

Thus they believe matter must have co-existed eternally with God and that while God is the cause of matter, God and matter have the same relationship as the potter and clay: already existent clay takes on whatever form the potter chooses. That is, while it is impossible that God made the universe out of nothing, it is possible that God made the universe out of pre-existent matter. So while the universe is not eternal, matter is.

Finally, in explaining the third view, which is that of Aristotle and his followers, Maimonides explains that Plato and Aristotle agree “that something endowed with matter can by no means be brought into existence out of that which has no matter.”<sup>21</sup> However, the two opinions are distinguished in that Aristotle does not accept that God fashioned the universe in any manner at all. He believes that the universe, as it exists, has existed eternally and always will. Maimonides summarizes:

[Aristotle] thinks that this being as a whole, such as it is, has never ceased to be and will never do so; that the permanent thing not subject to generation and passing-away, namely the heaven, likewise does not cease to be; that time and motion are perpetual and everlasting and not subject to generation and passing-away; and also that the thing subject to generation and passing away, namely, that which is beneath the sphere of the moon, does not cease to be.<sup>22</sup>

Maimonides continues his summary of Aristotle’s position. Here, however, he is more correctly articulating the emanation theory that the *falasifa* glommed onto Aristotle’s eternity doctrine. Maimonides writes:

[Aristotle] asserts though he did not do so textually, but this is what his opinion comes to that . . . it would be an impossibility that will should change in God or a

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>22</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.13, p. 284.

new volition arise in Him; and that all that exists has been brought into existence, in the state in which it is at present, by God through His volition; but that it was not produced after having been in a state of non-existence. He thinks that just as it is impossible that the deity should become non-existent or that His essence should undergo a change, it is impossible that a volition should undergo a change in Him or a new will arise in Him. Accordingly, it follows necessarily that this being as a whole [i.e., the universe] has never ceased to be as it is at present and will be as it is in the future eternity.<sup>23</sup>

This view establishes the link between the eternity doctrine and necessitarianism because of its understanding of God's will. The claim is that the universe is the result of God's will, but God's will does not contain the capacity for change and therefore what God wills is eternal and unchangeable. Thus the universe's existence is eternal and the manner in which it exists is unchangeable. The universe, as it is, exists necessarily. Aristotle (or rather his Islamic interpreters) is invoking a will that does not include volition.

Maimonides challenges this idea by stating that "the true reality and quiddity of the will means: to will and not to will."<sup>24</sup> That is, to choose to do one thing over another is essential to "will." Maimonides claims the use of "divine will" is disingenuous when what is actually meant is "necessity."<sup>25</sup> In other words, necessitarianism says that the universe (and the manner in which it exists) exists necessarily. Some philosophers say that the universe, as it is, exists as a result of God's will. However, since they do not believe that God's will is free, they have not negated necessitarianism. Having linked the eternity thesis with the universe existing necessarily, Maimonides goes on to argue that

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.18, 301.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 2.21, 315.

necessitarianism, and thus the eternity doctrine itself, presents a problem for Aristotelian cosmology in terms of particularization.<sup>26</sup>

Maimonides contends that necessitarianism cannot account for those particulars in the universe that seemingly could have different qualities than the ones they possess. Only a God acting out of free will can account for those particulars. He begins by summarizing Aristotle's naturalistic account of the differences among the four elements in the sub-lunar region. The account requires no agent acting purposively. Everything that exists beneath the sphere of the moon is made of the same matter and yet has different qualities. The differences result from matter's specific placement in the encompassing sphere.<sup>27</sup> Knowing where matter is placed allows one to predict what form that matter will take—which element it will become. Then the elements are mixed according to the motion of the sphere. This in turn produces combinations of the elements and increasingly complex compounds. The whole process naturally and necessarily unfolds through the influence of the spheres. No God acting freely and with purpose is required.

Regarding the spheres themselves, however, Maimonides states that each sphere must have the same matter as the others since they all share circular motion but “that the form of every sphere is different from every other sphere, as one moves from the East to the West and another from the West to the East and as they also differ in their rapidity or

---

<sup>26</sup> Maimonides' argument regarding will and volition seems somewhat dangerous to his idea of monotheism because, in arguing against necessitarianism, Maimonides is arguing for the importance of God's will. Will implies choice. However, choice implies a capacity for a new will, or change, and Maimonides cannot support the idea of a new will in God because God is an eternal simple unity. See *ibid.*, [Introduction to the Second Part], 2.1, and 2.2. for Maimonides' discussion of the unity of God.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.19, 305.

slowness.”<sup>28</sup> The difference in speed might be accounted for by the proximity of each sphere to the highest sphere. However no pattern appears because some of the lower spheres move more slowly than the higher spheres, yet there are some that move more quickly. Others move at the same speed as ones below them.<sup>29</sup> Further, there is no explanation for the varying directions of the spheres. There is no discernible necessity underlying the speeds or directions of the spheres. Aristotle and his Islamic successors have not explained why this particular arrangement of the universe, as opposed to some other, is necessary. Therefore, there is no reason to accept this arrangement as existing necessarily. Resorting to the eternity doctrine, which incorporates necessitarianism, to explain these differences is unsatisfactory. Rather,

[if]. . . we believe that all this has been produced through the purpose of one who purposed, made, and particularized it—as His wisdom, which cannot be grasped, required—none of these questions affect us, whereas they do affect him who claims that all this has come about through necessity and not through the will of one who wills.<sup>30</sup>

Maimonides is asserting that the eternity doctrine and necessitarianism leave unanswered questions about the manner of the universe’s existence. He claims that the more satisfactory explanation is that a God acting out of free will chose to create the universe in this particular way. And, since there is no good explanation for the necessity of the structure of the universe, then it is acceptable to ascribe the structure of the universe to a God who has chosen to create the world the way it is.

---

<sup>28</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.19, 306.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>30</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.22, 319.

Further, if the eternity doctrine cannot provide a satisfactory answer for certain particulars of cosmology, it cannot provide a satisfactory answer to the Law's existence because the Law, too, is particularized, especially in its ritual commandments. While it is possible to reason to the ethical commandments and to universal principles concerning God, such as the non-corporeality of God or God's unity, the particular ritual commandments can only be apprehended through revelation from a God who, through His will and wisdom, chose to create particular laws for a particular people. As Maimonides explains in a passage that echoes the passage quoted above, creation in time and *ex nihilo* (which depend on a God freely exercising his will and wisdom) allows all questions pertaining to revelation—its timing, its specific commandments, its method of communication, the fact that Moses and not another was chosen to receive the Law, to be answered by saying

[God] wanted it this way; or His wisdom required it this way. . . [if], however, someone says that the world is as it is in virtue of necessity, it would be a necessary obligation to ask all those questions; and there would be no way out of them except through a recourse to unseemly answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the external meanings of the Law with regard to which no intelligent man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their external meanings. It is then because of this that this opinion [that the world is eternal] is shunned and that the lives of virtuous men have been and will be spent in investigating this question.<sup>31</sup>

While Maimonides' analysis of creation in time and of the eternity thesis does not establish that the Law and Aristotelianism teach the same beliefs, the analysis does demonstrate Maimonides' over-arching commitments to both the Law and to philosophy. He asserts the finality of philosophical demonstration as determining true belief. He says,

---

<sup>31</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.25, 330.

as noted above, that if philosophers *had* demonstrated Aristotle's eternity thesis, then "the Law as a whole would become void, and a shift to other opinions would take place."<sup>32</sup>

Since Aristotle's eternity doctrine has not been demonstrated, it need not be accepted as a true belief. He has preserved the foundation of the Law, while still maintaining his commitment to philosophical reasoning.<sup>33</sup> The difference between Scripture and Aristotelianism in this instance does not impede his project of reconciling the two. We examine next Maimonides' depiction of prophecy, the means through which the Law was made known.

### **Maimonides' Account of Prophecy as a Natural Rationally Occurring Event**

Maimonides' commitment both to the Law and to philosophy is evidenced in his claims that revelation's content is rational and that prophecy is a naturally occurring event. His commitment to showing that the Law and Aristotelian philosophy can be harmonized is seen in his interpretive method wherein he seeks to elucidate the Hebrew Bible's true teachings through exegesis of specific terms and analysis of what he defines as parables in the prophetic teachings.

Accordingly, he states in his introduction to the first part of *The Guide* that "[the] first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in the books of prophecy."<sup>34</sup> He explains that this is necessary because some of the terms the

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2.26, 330.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 328–329. It should be noted that Maimonides believes that if Plato's view had been demonstrated it would not destroy the Law, because it would still support the idea that God freely chose how to structure the world. Thus the specificity and rationality of the Law would be preserved. However, since neither Plato's or Aristotle's view have been demonstrated, the Jewish community is justified in accepting revelation's teaching that the world was created in time and out of nothing.

<sup>34</sup> Pines, *The Guide* [Introduction to the First Part], 5.

prophets use are equivocal, derivative or amphibolous. Such terms could be a source of confusion to the devout yet well-educated man who has studied the science of the philosophers. The first portion of *The Guide* is devoted to the explanation of these kinds of terms. The second purpose of *The Guide* is to explain

very obscure parables...in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified as such. . . . [that could] lead an ignorant or heedless individual . . . [to] think that they possess only an external sense, but no internal one. . . . [Even] when one who truly possesses knowledge considers these parables and interprets them according to their external meaning, he too is overtaken by . . . great perplexity. But if we explain these parables to him or if we draw his attention to their being parables he will take the right road and be delivered from this perplexity.<sup>35</sup>

Maimonides is addressing the difficulty that results when the Torah employs unphilosophical terms and parables to discuss issues that belong in the realms of physics (creation) or metaphysics (God). For Maimonides, Torah itself teaches the same knowledge that results from philosophical speculation. If what the Torah states seems in conflict with a philosophical claim that has been demonstrated (or developed to the degree that it could be developed), it is because the Torah is using metaphors and parables to “*speaketh in the language of the sons of man.*”<sup>36</sup> The masses need the philosophical teachings of the Bible to be made accessible through imagery. For example, most people cannot comprehend existence without corporeality. So while God’s existence can be grasped by all men, the prophets must speak of God in a way that the

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>36</sup> Pines, *The Guide* I.26, 56. Here Maimonides is quoting from the Babylonian Talmud, Yebamoth 71a; Baba Mešî’a, 31b. In interpreting the Bible, Maimonides makes use of works external to the Bible such as the Talmud and other rabbinic writings. Including Talmud and other rabbinical writings in Biblical interpretation has historically been the normative practice in Judaism. This is precisely what Spinoza says should not be allowed—that the Bible needs to be interpreted solely based on internal hermeneutics. But even Spinoza relies on external historical knowledge when interpreting Scripture. See Shirley, *TPT*, chapters 8–10.

masses can comprehend and, therefore, they resort to describing God as having physical features. That is why Scripture includes anthropomorphic terms which require the kind of interpretation that Maimonides is pursuing. He reveals the actual meaning of Scripture by showing the correct meanings of those “equivocal, derivative or amphibolous” terms the Bible uses.

Maimonides’ justification of the prophets’ use of language implying corporeality to teach that God exists, however, seems at odds with his radical monotheism, which requires God’s absolute unity. The corporeality of God implies that God is divisible since a body is comprised of matter and form. For Maimonides, believing that God is incorporeal was a fundamental building block for acquiring correct opinions. Most fundamental were that God exists and is a simple unity. However, Maimonides was an elitist and knew that the masses would not be capable of understanding correct opinions about God. Perhaps it was more important that they understand that God exists since God’s existence had to precede the Law. The Law created the society best suited to aiding those with the capacity to attain man’s highest good to do so. Thus the Law had to be upheld. If describing God as corporeal would initially help the multitude to accept God’s existence, Maimonides could accept the need for anthropomorphic language in the Bible. Maimonides states, though, that “it behooves [the multitude] that they should be *made to accept on traditional authority* [emphasis added] the belief that God is not a body; and that there is absolutely no likeness in any respect between Him and the things created by Him.”<sup>37</sup> Though the masses are introduced to God through biblical metaphors, religious teachings, over time, should inculcate basic correct beliefs in the multitude

---

<sup>37</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 1.35, 79–80.

through promulgation of those beliefs. Maimonides wanted fundamental knowledge about God to be disseminated through the society, but he did not care if the “vulgar among the people”<sup>38</sup> accepted it because of traditional authority rather than through true comprehension. His commitment to philosophy did not reflect the belief that all persons would acquire correct opinions through reason; but it did reflect his belief that true beliefs had to be accepted as the basis of the Law.

Maimonides’ analysis of prophecy also encompasses prophecy’s mechanics, that is, the means by which prophecy takes place, including the means by which one becomes a prophet. In discussing how prophecy occurs, Maimonides begins by asserting that three opinions exist regarding prophecy. Firstly, pagans and the common people in the Jewish community believe that God makes anyone He chooses a prophet so long as they have “a certain goodness and sound morality.”<sup>39</sup> Prophets who are responsible for conveying God’s truths do not need to be trained or even knowledgeable. God picks whomever He wants among good moral people and simply makes them capable of prophecy. For persons holding this opinion, God’s seeming random intervention in the process makes prophecy seem miraculous. Also, they believe the sole requirement for prophecy is ethical behavior. Neither belief is acceptable to Maimonides.

Secondly, the *falasifa* believe that “prophecy is a certain perfection in the nature of man . . . it exists in the potentiality of the species.”<sup>40</sup> It will pass into actuality in an

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., [Introduction to the First Part], 9.

<sup>39</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.32, 360.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 361.

individual who has had the proper training and preparation and who possesses perfect rational, moral, and imaginative faculties. Such a person “will necessarily become a prophet, inasmuch as this is a perfection that belongs to us by nature.”<sup>41</sup> Maimonides describes the preparation required for prophecy as the training which a philosopher would undertake: “[it] is certainly necessary for whoever wishes to achieve human perfection to train himself at first in the art of logic, then in the mathematical sciences according to the proper order, then in the natural sciences, and after that in the divine science.”<sup>42</sup>

The third opinion is that of Jews whose philosophical understanding exceeds that of the common Jews. This opinion is identical with that of the philosophers, that is, that prophecy, as a naturally existing perfection of man, will become actualized in one who has the proper character, intelligence and training. Thus prophecy is a rational naturally occurring phenomenon. Maimonides explains, however, that there is one exception in the Jewish view to this process. God can prevent someone who is capable from becoming a prophet from doing so. Maimonides has just said that prophecy is a rational naturally occurring event. To maintain that understanding he must address God’s intervention. He writes

that one who is fit for prophecy and prepared for it should not become a prophet, namely on account of the divine will. . . is like all the miracles and takes the same course as they. For it is a natural thing that everyone who according to his natural disposition is fit for prophecy and who has been trained in his education and study should become a prophet.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1.34, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.32, 361.

Here Maimonides is referring both to a naturally occurring event (becoming a prophet) and to a miracle (the prevention of one becoming a prophet). Introducing the idea of miracles in a context in which he is emphasizing a rational process seems curious.

However, Maimonides' understanding of miracles also places them in a rational universe.

He refers to a statement in the Babylonian Talmud: "*The world goes its customary way,*"

and says that that is his opinion also.<sup>44</sup> He explains that the Sages had a

notion [that] consists in their holding the view that miracles too are something that is, in a certain respect, in nature. They say that when God created that which exists and stamped upon it the existing natures, He put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred. According to this opinion, the sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and thereupon a certain thing is effected according to what was put into its nature when first it received its particular impress.<sup>45</sup>

Maimonides continues:

[God's] wisdom required that He should bring creation into existence at the time he did do it, and that what He has brought into existence should not be annihilated nor any of its natures changed except in certain particulars that He willed to change; about some of these we know, whereas about others . . . in the future we do not know. This is our opinion and the basis of our Law.<sup>46</sup>

Miracles are not anomalies outside the patterns of the universe. They occur because God put them into the very natures of what He created and into the timeline of the universe at the time of creation. "Miracles" occur naturally, as does someone's incapacity to become a prophet, despite previous training, because God, at the time of creation, changed some particular in a created thing's nature, (e.g., changing the outcome of a prepared individual

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2.29, 345 quoting B.T. °Abodah Zarah, 54b.

<sup>45</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.29, 345 quoting B.T. °Abodah Zarah, 54b.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 346.

becoming a prophet). However, though miracles occur within the natural flow of the world, he is not endorsing a necessitarian perspective. Events occur or do not occur because God has chosen whether they will take place or not. God's volition remains intact. Maimonides has managed to maintain the concept of God's free will while at the same time co-opting the meaning of "miracle," so that it can be seen as a naturally occurring event. He has shown his allegiance to religion in preserving God's free will and to philosophy by placing miracles within the natural order of things rather than saying they occur supra-rationally.

Maimonides then goes on to explain the process of prophesying. For all people, intellectual cognition occurs through the Active Intellect's mediation between the divine overflow and our rational and/or imaginative faculties. Regarding prophesy, Maimonides writes that the

true reality and quiddity of prophecy consists in its being an overflow overflowing from God . . . through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species; and this state is the ultimate term of perfection of the imaginative faculty.<sup>47</sup>

Divine overflow, through the action of the Active Intellect, causes the rational faculty to move from potentiality to actuality, that is, it causes intellectual cognition, though there are differences between our intellects' capacities. "This is what happens to all beings: some of them achieve perfection to an extent that enables them to govern others, whereas others achieve perfection only in a measure that allows them to be governed by others."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.36, 369.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.37, 374.

Aside from those who become the governed, Maimonides describes three groups of persons. In some cases, the intellectual overflow goes toward only the rational faculty, either because there is little content in the overflow or because of a deficiency in the “natural disposition” of the recipient’s imaginative faculty. These persons become “the men of science engaged in speculation”—that is, philosophers.<sup>49</sup> Those who interact with the Active Intellect only through their imaginative faculties because of a defect in their rational faculties or lack of training, become legislators. The third group, the prophets, are the greatest of the three. The prophet is that person whose rational faculty and imaginative faculty both interact with the divine overflow. The prophet attains speculative knowledge through the Active Intellect’s interaction with the rational faculty which then passes that knowledge on to the imaginative faculty. The prophetic imagination translates the speculative knowledge, through dreams and visions, into the language of symbols and images comprehensible to the masses, both cognitively and emotionally. Spinoza will agree that the prophets have highly developed imaginations. He will conclude, however, that because the imagination is incapable of possessing adequate ideas, prophecy cannot contain speculative knowledge.

As Maimonides writes, “[prophecy] occurs *in a vision* or *in a dream* [*sic*].”<sup>50</sup> These are akin to the dreams that we experience, via the imaginative faculty, during sleep. Indeed, the imaginative faculty’s “greatest and noblest action takes place only when the senses rest and do not perform their actions.”<sup>51</sup> Just as the overflow to the

---

<sup>49</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.37, 374.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.44, 394.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 2.36, 370.

imaginative faculty causes dreams in a sleeping person, so too does the overflow engage with the prophet's imaginative faculty when the prophet is asleep or is having a daytime vision. And because the imaginative faculty of the prophet has become so perfected due to the overflow, it perceives the content of the dream or vision as external to itself. The prophet may experience and report as factual an angel or God speaking directly to the prophet himself, but this event did not actually occur. It was a product of the prophet's own imagination that appeared as an angel in the dream; there was no angelic entity describing the details of the prophecy to the prophet. The prophet is thus explicating speculative knowledge, but through the filter of the language of man. Maimonides' commitment to philosophy requires him to establish that the dreams and visions of the prophets occur through a natural process of intellectual cognition. He accomplishes this through explaining that prophetic dreams and visions are symbolic representations or translations of speculative knowledge. Prophecy thus proceeds in a naturalistic manner, just as philosophical speculation does. Maimonides wants to emphasize this point particularly for Moses' prophecy.

It was Moses alone who received the Law from God directly and who conveyed it to the people; subsequent prophets did not have direct communication with God, nor did they prophesize the Law, *de novo*. Rather, their prophecies were exhortations employing threats or promises, or prophecies of comfort, to persuade the people to keep and obey the Law that God, through Moses, had already commanded them to follow. Maimonides repeatedly asserts that the prophecy of "*Moses our Master*" is different from all prior and subsequent prophecy.

In *The Guide* he alludes to the distinctions he has made between Moses and all other prophets in his previous works, the *Commentary on the Mishna* and the *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>52</sup> In these works he lays out four ways in which Moses is unlike the other prophets: (1) all other prophets were addressed by God through intermediaries, which resulted in their prophesying with metaphors and imagery. God directly addressed Moses, (2) the other prophets received their prophecies while asleep at night or during a daytime trance. Moses spoke with God during the day, (3) the other prophets were terrified and sapped of energy when receiving visions of God. Moses had no anxiety or fear when communicating with God, and (4) the other prophets could not prophesy at will. Their visions depended on God's will. Moses could approach God and communicate with Him whenever he chose.<sup>53</sup> In *The Guide* itself he further emphasizes Moses' difference from all other prophets by explaining that he is not including Moses in the chapters on prophecy:

I will let you know that everything I say on prophecy in the chapters of this Treatise refers only to the form of prophecy of all the prophets who were before *Moses* and who will come after him. As for the prophecy of *Moses our Master*, I shall not touch upon it in these chapters with even a single word, either in explicit fashion or in a flash. For to my mind the term *prophet* used with reference to *Moses* and to the others is amphibolous.<sup>54</sup>

Most importantly in *The Guide*, Maimonides further distinguishes Moses when he claims, that whereas the other prophets' imaginative faculties were engaged in receiving God's

---

<sup>52</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.35, 367.

<sup>53</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah, Tractate Sanhedrin*, trans. Fred Rosner, (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981).

<sup>54</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.35, 367. Maimonides does speak of Moses throughout the chapters on prophecy, however.

message, “the imaginative faculty did not enter into [Moses’] prophecy . . . as the intellect overflowed toward him without its intermediation. For, as we have mentioned several times, he did not prophesy like the other prophets by means of parables.”<sup>55</sup> At Sinai, the people Israel heard God’s voice, but Moses alone heard the articulated speech, the actual words of God.<sup>56</sup> Maimonides offers as a prooftext Deuteronomy 5:5 which reads in part “*I [Moses] stood between the Lord and you at that time to declare unto you the word of the Lord . . . [for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.]*”<sup>57</sup> Maimonides also states that “it is explicitly said in the *Mekhilta* that . . . [Moses] repeated to . . . [the people] each and every *commandment* as he heard it.”<sup>58</sup> To be able to articulate each commandment word for word, Moses would have needed to hear each word just as God said it. This does not mean, however, that God was literally speaking and Moses was literally hearing words coming forth from God. The biblical passages cited contain the language of metaphors Maimonides is seeking to illuminate. They are made clear by yet other metaphors interpreted by Maimonides. Earlier in *The Guide* Maimonides has written of God’s granting Moses’ request that he may know God’s ways, that is, God’s attributes:

[Moses] was told: *I will make all My goodness pass before thee*. . . . This dictum—*All My goodness*—alludes to the display to him of all existing things of

---

<sup>55</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.36, 373.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.33, 364. However, the people were able to hear the first two commandments—(1) I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. (2) Thou shalt have no other gods before Me—because the principles that God exists and that His being is one can be attained through reason, available to all people; understanding the rest of the Law was not possible through speculation.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

which it is said: *And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold it was very good.* <sup>6</sup>By their display, I mean that he will apprehend their nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how He governs them in general and in detail. This notion is indicated when it says: *He is trusted in all My house;* <sup>7</sup>that is, he has grasped the existence of all My world with a true and firmly established understanding. For the opinions that are not correct are not firmly established. Accordingly the apprehension of these actions is an apprehension of His attributes . . . with respect to which He is known.<sup>59</sup>

Here Maimonides is emphasizing Moses' possession of correct opinions regarding God and the world. Opinions that are not firmly established are not correct.

However, Moses grasped God's world with a true and firmly established understanding.

The implication is that because Moses has a firmly established understanding of the manner in which all existing things are interconnected and how God governs over everything, he possesses correct opinions regarding God and the universe. Thus the description given above of Moses hearing each of God's words articulated (as well as the descriptions of Moses in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and the *Mishneh Torah*, noted above) is a metaphor for Moses comprehending at once, through God's actions, the correct opinions about God and the universe. Why would Maimonides want to establish that Moses used only his rational faculty? In the chapters on prophecy, wherein Maimonides says he will not discuss Moses' prophecy, he states that "the overflow of the Active Intellect goes in its *true reality* [emphasis added] only to it [that is, to the rational faculty *sic*]." <sup>60</sup> Philosophical speculation uses reason alone. The elimination of the

---

<sup>59</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 1.54, 124. For discussion on this quotation see Howard Kriesel, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) p. 15; Lawrence J. Kaplan, "Maimonides on Mosaic Revelation" *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: notes on Jewish theology and spirituality* (blog) edited and maintained by Alan Brill. <https://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/maimonides-on-mosaic-revelation-prof-lawrence-j-kaplan/>.

<sup>60</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.38, 377.

imaginative faculty in Moses' prophecy leaves it solely in the province of the rational faculty and maintains the equivalency between knowledge obtained through philosophy and the teachings of revelation.

Finally, the Law's rationality is preserved when Maimonides distinguishes Moses by saying that there was no one like him who preceded him nor any like him who would follow him. As proof, Maimonides first quotes Exod. 6:3, "*And I appeared unto Abraham, and so on, but by My name, the Lord, I made me not known to them.*"<sup>61</sup> God's true name was revealed to Moses alone, and this makes Moses superior to even the Patriarchs. Maimonides then offers Deut. 34:10 in part, "*And there hath not arisen a prophet since . . . in the sight of all Israel.*"<sup>62</sup> That there never was and never will be a prophet like Moses is clear, Maimonides explains, because

when a thing is as perfect as it is possible to be within its species, it is impossible that within that species there should be found another thing that does not fall short of that perfection either because of excess or deficiency.<sup>63</sup>

The perfection of the Law is preserved because there had never been and would never again be a prophet such as Moses whose prophecy was based solely on speculative knowledge. The prophets after Moses received the content of their prophecies via their rational faculties before employing the symbolic language of their imaginative faculties. Their prophecies contained speculative knowledge as did Moses' prophecy. Thus the Law could never be in fundamental conflict with philosophy.

---

<sup>61</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 2.38, 368.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.39, 380.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Maimonides on the Rationality of the Law**

Toward the beginning of his sustained discussion of the Law in Book III, Maimonides writes that “[the] Law as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body. As for the welfare of the soul it consists in the multitude’s acquiring correct opinions corresponding to their respective capacity.”<sup>64</sup> Acquiring correct opinions refers to acquiring the correct understanding of God, an understanding that leads to attaining one’s ultimate good. The welfare of the body, including health and the means to sustain one’s life, is necessary for pursuing the welfare of the soul. While pursuing the welfare of the soul is the nobler endeavor, endeavoring to ensure the welfare of the body comes prior in nature and time. The welfare of the body, which consists of those things necessary for good health and “the very best bodily state” also depends on the welfare of the body politic. This is so because things such as food, shelter, a means for bathing “cannot be achieved in any way by one isolated individual. . . . [One] can only attain all this through a political association, it being already known that man is political by nature.”<sup>65</sup> The welfare of the body politic requires a well-ordered society that prevents reciprocal wrong-doing and inculcates moral qualities conducive to individuals maintaining a well-ordered society together. Maimonides explains the relationship between the welfare of the soul and of the body thusly:

His [man’s] 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 it is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection. It is clear to this ultimate perfection there do not belong either actions or moral qualities and that it consists only of opinions toward which

---

<sup>64</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 3.27, 510.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

speculation has led and that investigation has rendered compulsory. . . . [But] a man cannot represent to himself an intelligible even when taught to understand it and all the more cannot become aware of it of his own accord, if he is in pain, or is very hungry or is thirsty or very hot or very cold.<sup>66</sup>

Aside from explaining why the body must be attended to before intellectual contemplation can be undertaken, Maimonides is disassociating ethics and action, both accepted constituents of religion, from man's ultimate good. He emphasizes instead the philosophical pursuit of knowledge. This discussion of philosophical speculation in his sustained discussion of the Law parallels his discussion of correct opinions in the *Mishneh Torah*, his legal code. It highlights Maimonides' belief that the Law, in having the acquisition of correct opinions as one of its aims, aids its followers in the intellectual contemplation of God.

The importance of possessing correct opinions about God, as well as having demonstrated speculative knowledge in the natural sciences, is illustrated in Maimonides' Parable of the Palace. The parable illuminates different levels of philosophical understanding possessed by specific groups of people and how the highest level of understanding is necessary to stand closest to God. In the story, Maimonides describes a scene in which a ruler is in his palace and his subjects are divided among those who are in the city and those who are outside of it. Of those who are in the city, some have their backs toward the palace,

their faces being turned another way. Others seek to reach the ruler's habitation, turn toward it, and desire to enter it and to stand before him, but up to now they have not yet seen the wall of the habitation. Some of those who seek to reach it have come up to the habitation and walk around it searching for its gate. Some of them have entered the gate and walk about in the antechambers. Some of them have entered the inner court of the habitation and have come to be with the king, in one and the same place with him, namely in the ruler's habitation. But their

---

<sup>66</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 3.27, 511.

having come into the inner part of the habitation does not mean that they see the ruler or speak to him. For after their coming into the inner part of the habitation, it is indispensable that they should make another effort; then they will be in the presence of the ruler, see him from afar or from nearby, or hear the ruler's speech or speak to him.<sup>67</sup>

Maimonides uses the parable to delineate between persons possessing varying levels of knowledge and understanding. He explains that those persons who desire to reach and enter the palace but never see it

are the multitude of the adherents of the Law, I refer to *the ignoramuses who observe the commandments* [italics sic]. Those who have come up to the habitation and walk around it are the jurists who believe true opinions on the basis of traditional authority and study the law concerning the practices of divine service, but do not engage in speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion and make no inquiry regarding the rectification of belief.<sup>68</sup>

Finally,

[those] who have plunged into speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion have entered the antechambers. People there indubitably have different ranks. He, however, who has achieved demonstration, to the extent that is possible of everything that may be demonstrated; and who has ascertained in divine matters, everything that may be ascertained; and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it—has come to be with the ruler in the inner part of the habitation. . . . [For those who], however, have achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science. . . . [they] have entered in the ruler's place *into the inner court* [italics sic] and are with him in one habitation. This is the rank of the men of science; they, however, are of different grades of perfection.<sup>69</sup>

The greatest of those are those who

turn wholly toward God . . . [and] renounce what is other than He, and direct all the acts of their intellect toward an examination of the beings with a view to

---

<sup>67</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 3.51, p. 618.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

<sup>69</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 3.51, 619. See, *ibid.*, 618–622 for Maimonides' rather extreme and ungenerous descriptions of the ruler's other subjects.

drawing from them proof with regard to Him, so as to know His governance of them in whatever way it is possible.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, those who accept true opinions merely on the basis of traditional authority remain outside the palace. Those who achieve some degree of speculative understanding are inside the palace. However, only those who achieve speculative knowledge through demonstration regarding all that can be demonstrated, including the natural sciences and metaphysics, come to be with the ruler exactly where he stands. These are the men of science, the philosophers. Among the philosophers are those who turn all of their intellect toward God. They are the prophets, the greatest of philosophers. Maimonides claims that man's intellect and intellectual development are necessary to achieve man's ultimate good, the knowledge and intellectual contemplation of God.

Having established that both philosophical inquiry and the Law entail the acquisition of true beliefs, Maimonides then seeks to establish the rationality of the specifics of the Law. He must establish how each law goes toward achieving either the welfare of the body or of the soul. To that end, Maimonides engages in an analysis of *ta amei ha-mitzvot* (reasons for the commandments). He examines each of the specific commandments, dividing them among fourteen classes.<sup>71</sup> These classes include, for example, commandments promoting correct opinions, (e.g., that God exists), improving moral qualities, or ending idolatry. Regarding correct opinions, Maimonides claims that “they do not last unless they are accompanied by actions that strengthen them, make them

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 620.

<sup>71</sup> Pines, *The Guide*, 3.35–3.49. Maimonides' discusses specific commandments in these chapters.

generally known, and perpetuate them among the multitude.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, we are commanded to celebrate and to rest on the Sabbath in order to underscore the belief in the creation of the world in time<sup>73</sup> “which at the first go and with the slightest of speculation, shows that the deity exists—and the memory of the benefit of God bestowed upon us by giving us rest *from under the burdens of the Egyptians*.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the Sabbath reinforces “a true speculative opinion” and promotes physical well-being through encouraging rest for the body. Here the commandment serves the two purposes of the Law, acquiring correct opinions and maintaining the welfare of the body.<sup>75</sup> The rationality of the Law is apparent. Also clearly rational are those commandments that prohibit harm, both through civil wrongs and physical aggression. There are, however, commandments that seem to have no rational purpose.

The commandments are broadly divided into two categories, *mishpatim* (ordinances) and *huqqim* (statutes). The former consist of those commandments that clearly bring a benefit or avoid a harm on an individual or societal level. The *huqqim* are comprised of those commandments “from whose external meaning it does not appear that they are useful...[because] they neither communicate an opinion nor inculcate a noble

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 2.31, p. 359.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 359–360. Maimonides claims creation in time is found in Exod. 20:11 which states “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 360. Footnote 7 in Maimonides’ quote refers to Exod. 6:7 which states in part “And you shall know that I the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 360.

quality nor abolish reciprocal wrongdoing.”<sup>76</sup> Man cannot reason to those types of commandments; they seem to go neither to the welfare of the soul, nor of the body, which are the two aims of the Law. They appear irrational. Maimonides will explain, however, that those commandments do have rational purposes and do serve the aims of the Law. He writes “that the first intention of the Law as a whole is to put an end to *idolatry*, to wipe out its traces and all that is bound up with it, even its memory as well as all that leads to any of its works.”<sup>77</sup> This purpose seems in alignment with the Law’s purpose of promoting the welfare of the soul because ending idolatry is a pre-requisite for developing the ability to acquire correct opinions regarding God’s existence, uniqueness, and unity. To show how the *huqqim* aided in ridding the community of idolatrous practices, Maimonides employs historical analysis.

He claims that Abraham grew up among the Sabians, described by Maimonides as star worshippers.<sup>78</sup> Their beliefs that the stars were deities and that the sun was the greatest deity of all, led them to the practice of astrology and to idol worship.<sup>79</sup> Maimonides claims that certain of the *huqqim* were needed to combat these pagan practices. One manner of combatting pagan practices was the divine ruse. God’s “ruse” shifted idolatrous ceremonial practices to service for God because to simply uproot these familiar practices would have been traumatic for man. So pagan temple rites were preserved as an accommodation to human nature but re-directed to the worship of God:

---

<sup>76</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 3.28, p. 513.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.29, p. 517.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.29, 514, fn.1. Pines states “[the] term ‘Sabians,’ as used by Maimonides, designates the pagans.”

<sup>79</sup> Pines, *The Guide* 3.29, 516.

Through this divine ruse. . . memory of *idolatry* [italics sic] was effaced and that the grandest and true foundation of our belief—namely, the existence and oneness of the deity—was firmly established, while at the same time the souls had no feeling of repugnance and were not repelled because of the abolition of modes of worship to which they were accustomed and than which no other mode of worship was known at that time.<sup>80</sup>

Aside from *huqqim* that fall under the “divine ruse,” are *huqqim* that fall into one of three categories: (1) actions we are *required* to undertake because they are the opposite of what the Sabians performed, (2) actions we are *forbidden* to do because they were part of the pagan idolatrous practices, or (3) actions we perform because they prohibited them. Maimonides writes “[thus] wrong opinions, which are diseases of the human soul, are cured by their contrary at the other extreme.”<sup>81</sup> In this way Maimonides was able to explain the rational purpose of the law of *sha’atnez* (mingled stuff), for example, which prohibits the wearing of garments made of linen and wool.

### **Maimonides: Conclusion**

Maimonides was committed to both the Law and to Aristotelian philosophy, refracted through an Islamic prism. Knowing that there could not be more than one truth, Maimonides felt impelled to illuminate how Hebrew Scripture and philosophy taught the same correct opinions. The difference between Scripture and philosophical inquiry lies in the manner through which each provides knowledge. Scripture’s teachings, regarding the world and God, are revealed to man through prophecy, while philosophy’s teachings result from man making use of reason to discover the physical and metaphysical truths of the universe. Given that most people are not capable of exercising pure reason or

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 527.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 3.46, 582.

understanding abstract concepts, the truth of the world must be conveyed to them through images, symbols, and metaphors, “the language of the sons of man,” which is the language of Scripture. In order then, to interpret Scripture, one must use philosophy’s teachings as a key to unlock Scripture’s true meaning. Maimonides was not reading outside material *into* the Bible, rather he was using it to reveal the truth of Scripture. To be able to fully understand the Law, then, one would have to study philosophy in order to obtain the keys to biblical interpretation.

In interpreting the Bible through metaphors and parables and in stripping biblical terms of their anthropomorphic meanings, Maimonides was attempting to de-mythologize Scripture and religion and to establish its equivalency with philosophical knowledge. Maimonides’ interpretation allowed him to portray the Law as broad in purpose and rational in its means for inculcating correct beliefs and good character—that it taught, in essence, the same truths as philosophy. The goal of both the Law and philosophy is to aid people in reaching correct opinions and in shaping their character to attain their highest good, the intellectual contemplation and understanding of God and the universe.

As we turn to Spinoza, we see, that while being influenced by Maimonides’ rational approach to biblical interpretation,<sup>82</sup> Spinoza’s dismissal of Aristotelianism and his emphasis on inter-textual interpretation enabled him to find the Law narrow in purpose, merely a means of governing a specific people, the Hebrews, at a specific time and in a specific place, when they lived in their own sovereign nation. Spinoza claimed that outside of that scope, revelation’s content had no real utility, aside from teaching the

---

<sup>82</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, fn. 1, 9. For example, Shirley notes “[t]hroughout chapters 1 and 2 [of the *TPT*] Spinoza has Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* before him. The reader should consult part 2, chapters 32–45 [on prophecy] of the *Guide*.”

universal ethical concept, loving one's neighbor as one's self, and that unimpeded philosophical inquiry alone could lead to the attainment of one's highest good.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SPINOZA

#### Spinoza's Background

In 1656, elders of an Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish synagogue read aloud a writ of excommunication against Baruch de Spinoza. The writ referred to his “evil opinions and acts” and “abominable heresies which he practiced and taught,” though the evil opinions and heresies were never defined.<sup>1</sup> Through this writ, Spinoza was placed in *cherem* (ban or ex-communication). Given this enforced separation from the Jewish community, Spinoza’s status as a Jewish philosopher in terms of themes, insights, or approaches is a matter of debate.<sup>2</sup> There is no debate, however, regarding his influence on the development of modern Jewish philosophy. Through astute and rigorous analysis of the Bible in the *TPT*—in essence the first example of modern biblical criticism—Spinoza declared that the Bible was a work of human authorship devoid of any sacred or divine meaning and that the Mosaic Law applied to the Jewish people only in the time that Israel had been a sovereign nation. It is unsurprising, then, that much of Jewish intellectual thought since Spinoza has been, in one way or another, an attempt to respond to his

---

<sup>1</sup> *Spinoza: A Life*, Steven Nadler, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 120.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*, eds. Heidi M. Ravven, Lenn E. Goodman, (State University of New York Press, 2002).

arguments regarding the authority, validity, and centrality of Torah and the Mosaic Law for the Jewish people.<sup>3</sup>

Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza was born November 24, 1632 into a successful merchant family living in the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. He died in 1677, neither Jew nor Christian, buried in the courtyard of the New Church in the Hague. Spinoza's personal history is rooted in the destruction of Spanish Jewry, which, until 1492 had been the center of Jewish life for half a millennium. Despite facing a degree of legal and social discrimination and waves of physical persecution, Jews had established a flourishing and prosperous life in Muslim al-Andalus, as we saw in the biography of Maimonides. Over the centuries Christian rule was re-instated in the Iberian Peninsula. Beginning in 1391 with increasing physical attacks fomented by local Christian clergy and ending in 1492 with the Edict of Expulsion from Spain, under which Jews were given the choice of either conversion to Christianity or expulsion, Jewish life disintegrated. Even prior to the Edict of Expulsion, Jews had been converting to Christianity. After these conversions, however, the former Jews (called conversos or New Christians ) were often looked upon with suspicion as Judaizers—Jews who had converted but were suspected of continuing to practice Judaism to some degree. The Spanish Inquisition was

---

<sup>3</sup> Philosophers in the field of Jewish philosophy and historians of Jewish intellectual thought acknowledge that in many ways modern Jewish thought is simply a response to arguments laid out by Spinoza in the 17th century regarding Hebrew Scripture and religion in general. Nadler states that the significance of Spinoza's contribution to Dutch intellectual culture, "is perhaps as great a contribution *as that which he made to the development of the character of modern Judaism* [emphasis added]." *Spinoza: A Life*, xii. Allan Levenson writes "we may consider Baruch Spinoza as the first modern Jewish thinker—perhaps, above all, because his presentation needed to be engaged again and again by his Jewish successors" (Allan T. Levenson, *Modern Jewish Thinkers: An Introduction* [Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 2000], 14).

instituted in 1478 to find Judaizers among the New Christians. All Jews were exiled from Spain under the 1492 Spanish Edict of Expulsion.

Many of those fearing the Inquisition fled to Portugal and later, Jews leaving under the expulsion order, also arrived in Portugal. In 1547 Portugal established its own Inquisition, once again sending the community into flight. Many of those leaving Portugal settled in Holland, attracted both by commercial opportunities and religious toleration.<sup>4</sup> Upon settling in Amsterdam, conversos who desired to practice the religion of their forebears were free to do so. However, descendants of Jews who had converted and had still attempted to hold onto Judaism in some manner were no longer familiar with rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism of the Talmud. Their understanding of Judaism was influenced by the Catholicism under which they had lived in Spain and Portugal and by the biblical Judaism of the Old Testament which was part of the Christian Bible. Conversos, for example, accepted the idea of personal salvation, but believed salvation was found, not through Christ, but through the laws of Moses in the Torah.<sup>5</sup> They did not have recourse to the Talmud and were not fully aware of the innovations in belief and practice created by rabbinic Judaism.<sup>6</sup> For some members of the community, the attempt to integrate traditional Judaism with the Catholic-tinged biblical Judaism of Spain and Portugal, led to a rejection of both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Amsterdam Jewish Portuguese community, established towards the end of the sixteenth century,

---

<sup>4</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 20–21.

<sup>6</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 15–17.

<sup>7</sup> Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 26.

required instruction on the beliefs and practices of traditional Judaism. Eminent rabbis from Venice, Constantinople, and Morocco, among other places, arrived in Amsterdam to teach the community how to practice rabbinic Judaism.

Spinoza's grandparents were among those Sephardic Jews who left Portugal, bringing with them Spinoza's parents, who had been raised Catholic but had retained some connection to Judaism.<sup>8</sup> Spinoza received an elementary-school Jewish education which would have included Hebrew, the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), Rashi's commentaries, and basic cultural and literary materials. These studies ended in the fourth grade when pupils were about fourteen years old.<sup>9</sup>

Although he most likely continued with informal Jewish studies, it did not prevent him from abandoning Jewish teachings nor prevent the Jewish community from abandoning him when it excommunicated him on July 27, 1656. As noted before, the writ of excommunication did not spell out Spinoza's misdeeds. However, biographers fix the date of Spinoza's earliest work, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* around 1656.<sup>10</sup> Spinoza writes in that work,

---

<sup>8</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, viii.

<sup>9</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 61–65, 89–93. Nadler comments that subjects beyond those years would have included in-depth study of Talmud, the commentaries of Rashi and other medieval commentators, the *halacha* (Jewish Law), Maimonides' commentaries and other rabbinical and philosophical works. He speculates that Spinoza did not study beyond the fourth or possibly fifth grade but rather that he continued less formal Jewish studies when he took over his family's business at the age of twenty-one, upon his father's death. His informal studies would have most likely included reading medieval Jewish commentators and philosophers including Rashi and Maimonides. However, those studies would have taken place in a weekly adult study group that would not have provided a meaningful framework for in-depth Talmudic study. It is more likely than not that while Spinoza would have been familiar with the Talmud, his knowledge of it would have been superficial.

<sup>10</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* in W. N. A. Klever, "Spinoza's Life and Works," *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge University Press: 1996), 25.

[after] experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing good or bad in themselves, except insofar as my mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be true good.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, Spinoza had been moving away from traditional religion as a source of truth, goodness or even solace. More specifically, this passage indicates that Spinoza did not accept Judaism's belief that true good, or at a minimum, the good life, could be found through obeying God's commandments. Given that Spinoza's *cherem* took place near the time of publication of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the community and rabbinic authorities must have been aware for some time of Spinoza's unorthodox opinions regarding Judaism and religion generally, opinions developed before the *TPT* was ever conceived.

Spinoza did go on to find "a true good" which "vanquished the futility and emptiness" he found in ordinary life. This true good, described as the intellectual love of God, and the means for attaining it, were worked out in the *Ethics*, published posthumously, and in light of which the *TPT* must be read.

### **Spinoza's Pre-Existing Commitment to Philosophy and Negative View of Religion**

Ascertaining Spinoza's commitment to philosophy and his attitude toward religion prior to writing the *TPT* is simple work: he was thoroughly committed to philosophy. After his ex-communication he never attempted to practice Judaism again, nor he did he convert to Christianity, and he exhibited no interest in religion other than to

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

critique it.<sup>12</sup> Prior to writing the *TPT*, Spinoza had been working on his magnum opus the *Ethics*, a work of deterministic metaphysics, psychology, and ethics. The *Ethics* unfolds in a fashion similar to a geometric system encompassing definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations, and corollaries, wherein each proposition gets its own proof. According to the view Spinoza articulates in the work, rational contemplation of the universe along with the development of man's ability to control his passions displaces traditional religion as the correct route to the highest good. The first part of the *Ethics* deals with the concept of "God."

Despite retaining certain religious terms such as "God" and "divine knowledge," the work did not present a picture of religion comprehensible to the masses, clergy, or the ruling elite. An analysis of Spinoza's understanding of God, for example, shows why lay people and religious professionals alike would not recognize Spinoza's God as their own. In the *Ethics* Spinoza defines God as "a being absolutely infinite, that is a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence."<sup>13</sup> Something existing outside God's attributes would be a limiting factor, but given the definition of God's attributes, eternal and infinite expressions of an absolutely infinite being, no limiting factor can exist. Therefore no thing can exist outside of God.

---

<sup>12</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 18. Spinoza did, however, object to being called an atheist. According to Nadler, his desire to address what he felt was a misconception about him, held by many people, was one of the motivating factors in writing the *TPT*. Spinoza's views do not seem to preclude him from possessing a sense of spirituality. He must have also understood that anyone characterized as an atheist could not affect the fundamental changes in knowledge and politics that he believed were necessary for man to attain his highest good.

<sup>13</sup> Curley, *Ethics*, D6, P14, 86.

Spinoza writes that “[except] God, no substance can be or be conceived.”<sup>14</sup> Given that nothing exists outside of God, Spinoza has removed the distinction between God and creation, God and Nature. God is Nature and is not the creator God fundamental to traditional religion.

Further, Spinoza defines a thing as free when “it exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. That is, a thing which is inner determined and whose self-expression of its essential nature is not impeded by anything external may be called free.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, whereas God is free in that he exists necessarily as a manifestation of His nature, He does not possess free will as commonly understood. Spinoza asserts that God could not have produced things in any other way or in any other order. This point, too, undercuts the idea of God creating a world, distinct from Him, through will and choice. This view of God removes the foundation of the Mosaic Law that Maimonides preserved in showing the problems associated with Aristotle’s eternity doctrine and resultant necessitarianism.

Spinoza expresses this idea of the non-creator God in the *TPT* when he writes that “[the] universal laws of Nature according to which all things happen and are determined are nothing but God’s eternal decrees, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. So it is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature’s laws

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., I P14, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., D7, P14, 86.

or that they are regulated by God's decree and direction."<sup>16</sup> Spinoza is claiming that the laws of Nature are God's decrees and that they exist necessarily.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza claims that what we perceive occurring in the universe, occurs through God's attributes of thought and extension.<sup>17</sup> These attributes account, respectively, for the psychological laws and physical laws operating in the universe. Since God exists necessarily, God's attributes exist necessarily, and thus the psychological and physical laws of the universe exist necessarily. That is, what Spinoza calls God's decrees are the laws of Nature that result *necessarily* from God's attributes of extension and thought rather than from God's free will. Clearly, these laws and decrees are not synonymous with the Laws of Moses, which are the result of God's free will. Again, Spinoza's understanding of God as Nature does not allow for a Law resulting from a creator God's wisdom and free will. The foundation of the Mosaic Law is destroyed. This perspective preceded his undertaking of the *TPT* wherein he sought to analyze Hebrew Scripture objectively.

The fact that the New Testament had already abrogated the Law for his Christian audience was not sufficient for Spinoza's purposes because to extricate philosophy out of religion's grasp, he had to show that the Mosaic Law had never been useful in teaching truth, had never had any universal authority and did not offer a blueprint for establishing a contemporary nation-state. This view would offend not only Jews, however. Destroying the theological concept of the Mosaic Law would also be offensive to Christianity because that destruction undercuts Jesus' sacrifice as the replacement for the Law and

---

<sup>16</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Curley, *Ethics* D4 p. 85/P14c2.

vitiates the ideas of the old and new covenants. It is unlikely, however, that the general populace would understand the implications for Christianity of undercutting the Mosaic Law. For whom was Spinoza writing then?

That Spinoza wrote the *TPT* in Latin shows that he was writing neither for the Jews nor the masses. In concluding his Preface he writes that

I do not want my Preface to expand to a volume, especially since I believe its main points are quite familiar to philosophers. To others I seek not to commend this treatise. . . .I know how deeply rooted in the mind are the prejudices embraced under the guise of piety. I know, too, that the masses can no more be freed from their superstitions than from their fears. . . .[and] that they are not guided by reason. . . .Therefore I do not invite the common people to read this work, nor all those who are the victims of the same emotional attitudes.<sup>18</sup>

Spinoza writes that he would prefer that the common people and those who share their fears and superstitions

disregard this book completely rather than make themselves a nuisance by misinterpreting it after their wont. For . . .they would stand in the way of others for whom a more liberal approach to philosophical questions is prevented by this one obstacle, that they believe that reason must be the handmaiden of theology. These latter, I am confident, will derive great profit from this work.<sup>19</sup>

He seems to be addressing those persons philosophically inclined but who still seek to fully reconcile biblical teachings with the Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism embraced by the Church.<sup>20</sup> They are open to the idea that truth can be found outside of revelation but are not yet comfortable with or perhaps aware of the possibility that revelation's teachings do not touch on the metaphysical and that they do not need to occupy that

---

<sup>18</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 7–8.

<sup>19</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Susan James, *Spinoza Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29. James suggests that Spinoza's audience may have included some persons who were conflicted about pursuing philosophy because they felt it was impious and may jeopardize their salvation.

domain. He wished to demonstrate to those persons that the traditional understanding of the Old Testament, which included believing (1) that the prescribed ceremonial rites were divine commands from God, (2) that God performed miracles, and (3) that God intervened in history, did not convey the *true* religion. True religion *is* contained in the Bible but consists solely of the moral imperative to obey God, which Spinoza interpreted to mean loving one's fellow human beings as oneself. True religion is simply a universal ethical teaching requiring no particular set of rituals nor a means of conveying metaphysical knowledge. Given that Scripture conveyed merely a moral lesson and no speculative knowledge, religion and philosophy did not need to be reconciled. Once his audience understood that, he would have a philosophically sophisticated segment of the populace who would be committed to and capable of aiding in the dissemination of his ideas when the *Ethics* was published.

Given the outcry the *Ethics* might engender, its publication, acceptance, and successful dissemination could only occur in a society in which traditional religious power was limited and in unimpeded philosophical speculation was upheld. Revealing the true religion and diminishing traditional clerical power while demonstrating that philosophy endangered neither the state nor true religious belief but rather supported both, was necessary for the *Ethics*' acceptance. Undermining traditional Scriptural interpretation, which Spinoza does in the course of the *TPT*, accomplishes those two goals.

Firstly, by demonstrating that Scripture is not the authoritative Word of God, through which the clergy claimed power and demanded obedience, clerical power would be constrained. Secondly, by showing that the Bible did not teach metaphysical truth or

the way for man to attain his highest good, Spinoza established that Scripture and philosophical inquiry did not concern the same questions and thus could exist together without any need for reconciliation. Scripture (as a lesser version of itself) and philosophical inquiry could co-exist in the social fabric. Religion, as had been traditionally taught by the clergy and practiced by the masses, however, had little of value to offer to man, and the *TPT* opens with a critique of traditional religion.

Spinoza believed traditional religion developed out of men's inability to control their own destinies. He explains that when life is proceeding well, men are happy to credit their own wisdom. However, during times of adversity, they become anxious and afraid and will

[beg] for advice from any quarter; and then there is no counsel so foolish, absurd or vain which they will not follow. . . . [And] if, while possessed by fear they see something happen that calls to mind something good or bad in the past, they believe that this portends a happy or unhappy issue, and this they therefore call a lucky or unlucky omen, even though it may fail them a hundred times. Then again, if they are struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of a supreme deity, and they therefore regard it as a pious to avert the evil [in their lives] by sacrifice and vows, susceptible as they are to superstition and opposed to religion.<sup>21</sup>

The multitude mistakes superstition as the path to fulfillment. However, given that superstition is inherently unstable "like all other instances of hallucination and frenzy"<sup>22</sup> and men may seek now one form of superstition and then another in looking to improve their fortune, "pomp and ceremony [so] that it can sustain any shock and constantly

---

<sup>21</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

evoke the deepest reverence in all its worshippers.”<sup>23</sup> It is the clergy who promote this arrangement because it allows them to derive benefit and power from exploiting men’s fears and need in their desperate search for good fortune.<sup>24</sup> It is also important to note that Spinoza speaks of people as susceptible to “superstition” and opposed to “religion.” He will maintain that he is not opposed to the true religion, but rather to superstition masquerading as religion.

### **Unimpeded Philosophical Inquiry Requires Political Stability**

Spinoza understood that the pursuit of true knowledge required a stable political state wherein freedom of thought and expression are upheld. During the time Spinoza was working on the *Ethics*, the United Provinces of the Netherlands’ republican government, headed by Johann de Witt, was opposed by the Orangist royalist faction.<sup>25</sup> De Witt stood for the belief that the federal government’s powers should be limited to declaring war and making international treaties; all other powers should belong to the provincial states which in turn derived their powers from the towns within their jurisdictions. He also believed in freedom of religious belief, though he upheld the preeminence of the Dutch Reformed Church. De Witt’s tenure, known as the “True Freedom,” included, alongside decentralized government, a general sense of tolerance toward social, cultural, intellectual and religious diversity. While those political leaders who governed the cities and provinces during this time were affiliated with the Dutch

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4–5. See Spinoza’s discussion of the clergy.

<sup>25</sup> Nadler, Steven. *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 44. The following discussion of Dutch history is taken from Nadler’s work.

Reformed Church, they largely believed in the separation of Church and State in terms of social and foreign policy. They found support among liberal clergy who supported DeWitt and opposed the intrusion of the Church into everyday life and any entanglement between the Church and politics. However, the royalist Orangist faction found support among the more orthodox clergy who did not wish to see their authority limited by DeWitt's True Freedom. Religiously conservative, they were displeased with the growing moral laxity they perceived both in everyday activities as well as Sabbath observance.<sup>26</sup>

Further, the Dutch Reformed clergy posited a relationship between religion and philosophy. Aspects of Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism had long been embraced in Christian doctrine, but the Church was opposed to the new Cartesian philosophy and taught that contemporary philosophical speculation and its findings were opposed to faith and religious dogma. In either case, whether the Church embraced philosophy or claimed that a specific philosophical system was opposed to Church teachings and doctrines, any relationship between the two spheres, philosophy and religion, suggested that they were concerned with the same issues. The clergy, interested in maintaining its power, could not allow philosophical speculation to challenge religious teachings. Because the sovereign was drawn into the religious sphere, undermining religion in any way could undermine the authority not only of the Church but of the Sovereign also. Thus, the political entanglement between the clergy and sovereign resulted in both entities attempting to stifle intellectual inquiry that could undermine religious teachings.

---

<sup>26</sup> Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 47: "The Lord's Day, they argued, was for rest and prayer, not for ice-skating parties along the rivers."

In the *TPT*, Spinoza writes that “[as] for those persecutions that are incited under the cloak of religion, they surely have their only source in this, that the law intrudes into the realm of speculative thought, and that beliefs are put on trial and condemned as crimes.”<sup>27</sup> While that statement encapsulates Spinoza’s fundamental vision of the relationship between Church and State, at the time he wrote the *TPT* he was also surely mindful of particular acts of retribution by the authorities against “free-thinkers.”<sup>28</sup>

Given the political circumstances and the involvement of the Church in the State, Spinoza believed that he could not complete and publish the *Ethics* without laying the groundwork for its acceptance. The instability created by the struggle between republicans and royalists and their respective allied religious factions caused Spinoza to put aside the *Ethics*, for the time being, in order to challenge clerical power and its role in government. He wanted to show that free philosophical inquiry conflicted with neither religion nor the State, but rather, that such inquiry was necessary for true piety and the safety of the State. Spinoza states this explicitly in the title page of the *TPT*:

THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TRACTATE  
Containing  
Various disquisitions,  
By means of which it is shown not only that Freedom of Philosophising  
can be allowed in Preserving Piety and the Peace of the Republic:  
but also that it is not possible for such Freedom to be upheld  
except when accompanied  
by the Peace of the Republic and Piety Themselves.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, chapter 3.

<sup>29</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, Spinoza’s Title Page preceding his Preface.

Before he could continue engaging meaningfully (and safely) in free philosophical inquiry, he had to create a suitable environment. That environment would be one in which the clergy's power and, therefore the grasp of traditional religion, were diminished. The source of both traditional religion and the clergy's power, Scripture, would thus also have to be diminished. A universal religion requiring no specific actions would diminish the power of the clergy in that there would be no proper (religious) behavior to enforce. Regulation of action would belong to the sovereign alone, defusing the kind of unstable political situation Spinoza found himself in in the Holland. With traditional religion and clerical rule diminished, philosophical inquiry could proceed more freely.

#### **Spinoza Claims Prophecy Does not Teach Speculative Knowledge**

Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture begins with an analysis of revelation, or prophecy. Whereas Maimonides was at pains to explain the "mechanics" of prophecy (e.g., the necessary training, the activity of the Active Intellect and the imaginative faculty), Spinoza is not particularly concerned with how prophecy occurs. He simply states "[as] to the particular laws of Nature involved in revelation, I confess my ignorance."<sup>30</sup> To say that they are caused by the power of God is to explain nothing, since everything that occurs does so because of God.

Spinoza defines prophecy as "the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man. A prophet is one who interprets God's revelations to those who cannot attain certain knowledge of the matters revealed, and who, therefore, can be convinced of them

---

<sup>30</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 19.

only by simple faith.”<sup>31</sup> Spinoza distinguishes prophetic knowledge or revelation from natural knowledge by stating that while prophetic knowledge is not attainable by all people, natural knowledge rests on “foundations common to all men.”<sup>32</sup> Through these principles common to all humans, individuals are able to use the natural light of reason to attain knowledge. More specifically, the human mind contains within itself the nature of God and through participation in that nature we are able to formulate (to reason to) certain basic ideas about the world around us and about ourselves. Prophetic knowledge transcends natural knowledge in that it is not based upon principles common to all persons. Once he has acknowledged the difference between the two types of knowledge, however, Spinoza seeks to establish a link between them.

Prophecy comes from God. That is, whatever a prophet “knows” and then conveys to the people, is “knowledge” that he has received from God. Similarly, natural knowledge also depends on God: “all that we clearly and distinctly understand is dictated to us by the idea and nature of God—not indeed in words, but in a far superior way and one that agrees excellently with the nature of mind, as everyone who has tasted intellectual certainty has doubtless experienced in his own case.”<sup>33</sup> Spinoza then asserts that since the knowledge the prophet comes by via God is called prophecy and that natural knowledge also depends on God, natural knowledge can also be called prophecy. Further, since prophecy is considered divine knowledge because it comes from God, natural knowledge may also be considered divine knowledge because it too depends on

---

<sup>31</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 10.

God. The reason that natural knowledge is not usually considered part of prophecy's teachings is because "natural knowledge is common to all men—for it rests on foundations common to all men—it is not so highly prized by the multitude who are ever eager for what is strange and foreign to their own nature, despising their natural gifts. Therefore prophetic knowledge is usually taken to exclude natural knowledge."<sup>34</sup> The implication is that, properly understood, natural knowledge is both prophetic knowledge and divine since the source of both kinds of knowledge is God. However, Spinoza's inclusion of God's "eternal decrees" as an element of natural knowledge presents a problem for incorporating natural knowledge into prophecy.

In the *Ethics*, God's eternal decrees are equated with the universal laws of Nature. Therefore, when referring to "God's eternal decrees" Spinoza means the rigid determinism found in the universal laws of Nature (which also include mental laws of human nature). Traditional religion, however, understood prophecy to be a volitional act on the part of God. Spinoza attempted to establish an association between traditional prophecy, an act requiring volition, and natural knowledge, which is comprised in part of the deterministic laws of nature, laws that do not require volition. In aligning prophecy with natural knowledge, Spinoza co-opted, to some degree, the notion of prophecy in order to maintain a sense of traditional religion for his readers—despite his own beliefs that God did not possess volition, that God and Nature (the laws of the universe) were the same, and that traditional religion was merely superstition. Maintaining the concept of prophecy helps maintain the idea of a purposeful God acting with intent on behalf of His

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9.

creation. Shading his actual beliefs could aid in a more sympathetic reading of the *Ethics*.<sup>35</sup>

Spinoza undertakes an exegetical analysis of Scripture, just as Maimonides does. However, unlike Maimonides, Spinoza will “[take] care . . . not to make metaphorical interpretations or to attribute anything to the prophets which they themselves did not clearly declare.”<sup>36</sup> He contrasts this with Maimonides’ approach, stating that

Maimonides took a quite different view; for he held that every passage of Scripture admits of various—and even contrary—meanings, and that we cannot be certain of the true meaning of any passage unless we know that, as we interpret it, there is nothing on that passage that is not in agreement with reason, or is contrary to reason.<sup>37</sup>

For example, Spinoza refers to a number of instances in the Hebrew Bible where revelation has occurred through images of an angel. He says that

Maimonides, and some others, [though,] take the view that this and all other instances of an apparition of an angel . . . occurred in dreams, on the grounds that nobody could have seen an angel with his eyes open. But this is mere rubbish. They are concerned only to extort from Scripture some Aristotelian nonsense and some fabrications of their own; and this I regard as the height of absurdity.<sup>38</sup>

Spinoza is criticizing Maimonides for interpreting the Bible by appealing to sources outside the Bible and attempting to read them into the Bible. Scripture must be understood solely through the Scripture’s own words. If, through metaphorical interpretation, or through peeling away layers of the Bible’s literal meanings, “it is

---

<sup>35</sup> Or as Nadler notes, Spinoza’s true understanding of God worked out in the *Ethics* does inform the *TPT*, “even if . . . [Spinoza] is, for the sake of accommodating his Christian audience, hesitant to proclaim it too loudly.” *A Book Forged in Hell*, p. 59.

<sup>36</sup> *TPT* 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

permissible to pretend that the writer meant something different, but for reasons unknown to us decided to write in that way, this is nothing else but the utter ruination of the whole of Scripture” because, in essence, then, anything goes.<sup>39</sup>

While Spinoza disagreed with both Maimonides’ specific methodology for interpreting Scripture and the resultant conclusions, he did follow Maimonides’ general outline in analyzing prophecy.<sup>40</sup> So though the actual process through which prophets received revelation was not important to Spinoza, he did address the ideas put forth by Maimonides that prophets received revelation through the imaginative faculty and that Moses was distinguished from the other prophets.

Spinoza acknowledged that the prophet’s imaginative faculty may have allowed him to perceive things beyond the capacity of the intellect: “For many more ideas can be constructed from words and images than merely from the principles and axioms on which our entire natural knowledge is based.”<sup>41</sup> However, Spinoza believed that the imaginative faculty was faulty because it was based on the senses. In the *Ethics*, imagination, associated with the lowest form of knowledge, results in inadequate ideas that do not reveal any philosophical truths. Thus, we can acquire knowledge through the imagination but it is not knowledge that will lead to the correct understanding of God and the universe and thus will not lead to our highest good.

Because prophecy did not carry the certainty of rational thought, the prophets had to rely on other means that afforded them certainty with regard to that which they were

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>40</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, fn.1, 9. See footnote 85 above where Shirley notes, “throughout chapters 1 and 2 [of the *TPT*] Spinoza has Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* before him.”

<sup>41</sup> Shirley, *TPT* 20.

seeing and hearing. The three factors going to certainty were that “things revealed were the most vividly imagined, the occurrence of a sign . . . and . . . lastly and most important, that the minds of the prophets were directed exclusively towards what was right and good.”<sup>42</sup> He offers as an example of the importance of a sign, “the case of Gideon, who says to God, ‘Show me a sign (that I may know) that it is Thou who talkest to me’ See Judges ch. 6 v. 17.”<sup>43</sup> Given that the signs were used to convince the prophets themselves, Spinoza concludes that both the prophetic content and any signs seen by the prophets were suited specifically to each prophet’s disposition, ingrained beliefs, and background. Prophecies reflected the differences between the prophets and did not lead to them becoming more “learned.”<sup>44</sup> Their “gift of prophecy . . . left them with the beliefs that they had previously held, and therefore we are in no way bound to believe them in matters of purely philosophic speculation.”<sup>45</sup>

Spinoza says this is also true of Moses. Because Moses believed God to be merciful, gracious, and extremely jealous and believed that God could not be seen because of man’s limited capacities rather than some intrinsic impossibility, these beliefs were incorporated in Moses’ revelations.<sup>46</sup> Also, unlike Maimonides who claimed that

---

<sup>42</sup> *TPT*, 23. Spinoza also writes here that “[although] Scripture does not make mention of a sign, it should nevertheless be assumed that the prophets always received a sign. Scripture does not always relate in full every detail and circumstance . . . but tends rather to take such things for granted.” This statement is not in line with his claim that he is analyzing Scripture based solely on the actual words of the text.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

the imaginative faculty played no role in Moses receiving the Law, Spinoza claims that the Law was revealed to Moses through his imaginative faculty, like all other prophets.

However, like Maimonides, Spinoza does distinguish Moses from the other prophets, though not in a manner that would have been acceptable to Maimonides. Spinoza claims that Moses alone had direct communication with God. That is, Moses actually heard, rather than imagined, God speaking to him, while the other prophets only imagined that they heard God speaking to them. Maimonides' metaphorical interpretation of the Bible as well as his belief that Moses' prophecy came through the rational faculty alone is in stark contrast to Spinoza's assertion that Moses heard God actually speaking. Spinoza, however, claims that everything that God revealed to the prophets came through either words or appearances or a combination of the two. He further states that

[the] words and appearances *were either real and independent of the imagination of the prophet* [emphasis added] who heard or saw, or they were imaginary, the prophet's imagination being so disposed, even in waking hours, as to convince him that he heard something or saw something.<sup>47</sup>

Happily for Spinoza, because all things happen as a result of God's eternal decrees, he need not speculate as to how Moses' direct communication with God took place. But what is significant for Spinoza is that Moses could not communicate with God without the mediation of hearing God's speech. That is, Moses was unable to communicate with God without engaging his (Moses') senses. Because the senses are processed in the imaginative faculty, Moses' imaginative faculty was used in his communications with God. Imagination is not capable of receiving any kind of truth or adequate knowledge. Therefore, any knowledge gained by Moses from God, that is, the Mosaic Law, could not

---

<sup>47</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 11.

be a part of the knowledge that is man's supreme good, the true understanding of God.<sup>48</sup>

The certainty that the prophets attained was not a rational certainty but rather a moral one. This will have implications for the status of the Law itself.

### **Spinoza on the Different Purposes of the Mosaic Law and True Religion's Divine Law**

As noted above, Spinoza's understanding of God incorporates rigid determinism in equating Nature's universal laws and God's eternal decrees. God does not have freedom of will, does not exercise choice, and therefore could not be said to act purposefully. Thus the idea that the Law results from God's will and purpose, fundamental to Maimonides' argument, is destroyed. This uprooting of the foundations of the Law allows Spinoza to examine the purposes and ends of the Law through a different lens than does Maimonides. Spinoza will argue that the entire essence of the Law is political and geared to social stability, has no role to play in the attainment of the supreme good, and that other nations also possessed prophecy.

Through this lens, Spinoza will be able to put forth a concept of the Law that would weaken the grasp of religion on Dutch society. He will say that the Mosaic Law is not *true* religion. As noted before, the *true* religion requires no specific religious rites and consists only in the universal moral imperative to obey God, which Spinoza interpreted to mean loving one's fellow human beings as oneself.

---

<sup>48</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 13–14. Spinoza does not claim that no one could commune with God directly, without the use of the imagination. He writes that Christ did.

No longer looking at the Law as a bond between God and man, (and thus as a step in the attainment of man's supreme end), Spinoza will argue that the entire essence of the Law is political and geared to social stability and has no role to play in the attainment of the supreme good. Here Spinoza refutes Maimonides' claim that the Law aims at the welfare of the soul, that is, at the acquisition of correct opinions. Rather, it merely served the welfare of a specific body politic, the Hebrews at the time they lived in Palestine. Spinoza holds that Biblical teachings stand in no relationship to philosophical teachings and that the commandments play a role only in sustaining the political life of a sovereign Israel. Once that state ceased to exist, the Mosaic Law became irrelevant.<sup>49</sup>

Spinoza's discussion of the purpose of the Mosaic Law begins in the context of his description of the people of Israel being chosen by God. Spinoza will seek to diminish the significance of Scriptural teachings through eliminating the Hebrews' special bond with God by re-defining "chosenness." Spinoza wants to establish that the Mosaic Law does not represent a special relationship between God and the Hebrews (and therefore not between God and Christians), wherein God has conveyed any kind of philosophical truth. If that is the case, then the teachings and strictures in the Bible lose any sense of specialness and their meaning is diminished.

Traditionally, chosenness has meant that that the Jews were chosen by God to receive the Mosaic Law which would serve as the means for entering into relationship with God. But Spinoza writes that "the Hebrews were chosen by God above all others not for the true life nor for any higher understanding—though often admonished thereto—but

---

<sup>49</sup> Given the sovereign nation of Israel, what might Spinoza say today?

for a quite different purpose.”<sup>50</sup> That purpose will turn out to be political independence, stability, and material sustenance. “[The] Hebrew nation was chosen by God before all others not by reason of its understanding nor of its spiritual qualities, but by reason of its social organization and the good fortune whereby it achieved supremacy and retained it for so many years.”<sup>51</sup>

We should note that by using familiar religious terminology, he softens the meaning of his actual views in the interest of making the system developed in the *Ethics* more palatable to a religious sensibility or to a philosophical sensibility that still embraced certain elements of a traditional religious perspective. Therefore, after reading that the Hebrews were “chosen” for a certain purpose which was political stability and material sustenance, one must pay close attention to Spinoza’s following comments wherein he describes God’s direction as “the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events” and states that “whatever falls to a man’s advantage from the power of eternal causes can rightly be called God’s external help.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, a fairer rendering of the discussion regarding the chosenness of the Hebrews would explain that through a causal chain of natural events, the Hebrews acquired the Law which, when followed, promoted social stability and prosperity.

Chosenness does not imply a supra-rational event. But the views underlying the *TPT* and systematically developed in *The Ethics* cannot yet be stated straightforwardly without the groundwork he is trying to set forth in the *TPT*. Maintaining the notion of

---

<sup>50</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 36

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

chosenness or election would seem to serve Spinoza's interest. The Calvinism of the Dutch Reformed Church was based on the idea of salvation through grace by which certain individuals were pre-destined to be saved (and others not) simply through God's grace rather than for any apparent rational reason such as greater wisdom or goodness. Spinoza's description of the Hebrews being chosen for material prosperity seems akin to this kind of grace. Secondly, in emphasizing that the Hebrews had no better means of attaining true happiness than any other people, he is laying the groundwork for his argument that *true* religion is universal and does not consist of the specific behaviors or beliefs of any one group.

Spinoza establishes that the gift of prophecy did not belong to the Hebrews alone. He writes "this at least is evident from Scripture, that other nations also had their own state and their special laws by God's external guidance."<sup>53</sup> Each nation's laws dictate the specifics of social responsibilities and rights. These are the laws that, in Maimonides' language, go to the welfare of the body, not to the welfare of the soul. Spinoza wrote that, according to Hebrew Scripture, other nations have their own revealed law. So it cannot be that the specific laws of the Hebrew Bible are unique in that they exist. Nor is the Law special in that it contains or represents any divine truth that binds man to God. Rather, Scriptural prophecy or the sense of the Jews having been chosen goes only to

the nature of their commonwealth and their material welfare (since this is the only distinguishing mark between one nation and another); whereas in respect of understanding and true virtue there is no distinction between one nation and another, and in regard to these matters, God has not chosen one nation before another.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 39. See the rest of chapter 3 for Spinoza's discussion of other nations' prophecy.

<sup>54</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 46–47.

Unlike Maimonides who claimed that the Mosaic Law has two purposes, the welfare of the body and the welfare of the soul, Spinoza redefined both the Mosaic Law and chosenness as supporting only material and political well-being (the welfare of the body). Like Maimonides, Spinoza did acknowledge that a law exists that aids people in attaining their supreme good. That law, however, is not the Law of Scripture. It is law that results from human effort but that may be called divine law because its aim is to help us achieve our supreme good which is the knowledge and love of God.

Spinoza writes that “since [the ordinary meaning of] law is simply a rule of conduct which men lay down for themselves or for others to some end, it can be divided into human *and* divine law [emphasis added].”<sup>55</sup> The sole purpose of human law is to protect life and regulate our communal welfare. Laws that help us attain our supreme good are *divine* law because our supreme good consists in our knowledge and love of God.<sup>56</sup> Spinoza explains that because our intellect is the better part of our selves, our supreme good rests in perfecting it to the highest degree possible, which is the attainment of certain knowledge. Perfection of our intellect consists solely in knowledge of God because nothing can exist or be conceived without God. Also, having no doubt depends solely on a clear and distinct idea of God. We achieve this clear understanding and knowledge of God by studying nature:

[Everything] in Nature involves and expresses the conception of God in proportion to its essence and perfection; and therefore we acquire a greater and more perfect knowledge of God as we gain more knowledge of natural phenomena. To put it another way, since the knowledge of an effect through its

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

cause is nothing other than the knowledge of a property of that cause, the greater our knowledge of the more perfect is our knowledge of God's essence, which is the cause of all things.<sup>57</sup>

Spinoza continues that

the means required to achieve this end of all human action [our supreme good]—that is, God insofar as his idea exists in us—may be termed God's commands for they are ordained for us by God himself, as it were, insofar as he exists in our minds. So the rules for living a life that has regard to this end can fitly be called the Divine Law.<sup>58</sup>

That is, the divine law is not called “divine” because a creator God issued it as a list of commands. Rather it consists of laws whose purpose is to lead people to attaining true knowledge of God. Further, these laws result from our being a part of Nature/God and coming to understand God's laws, insofar as He exists in our minds. Further, the more we come to understand God, the more we will understand the kinds of laws that would be most helpful in reaching the supreme good. Only in that sense are the laws commands ordained for us by God. Spinoza does not delve into the specific means for achieving the supreme good. He says that what the rules of society and the organizing principles of the commonwealth would be with regard to achieving this end properly belong to a treatise on ethics. He is confining himself in the *TPT* to a general discussion of Divine Law.<sup>59</sup>

The Divine Law commands us to know and love God as the supreme good. And as the supreme good, we should not seek it out of fear of punishment or promise of reward. Its reward is the law itself, that is, to know and love God. The Divine Law is

---

<sup>57</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 50.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

universal in that “it [was] deduced from human nature, as such.”<sup>60</sup> It does not require belief in any historical narratives because it is universal and because such narratives do not contribute to our knowledge of God. Rather, “knowledge of God [derives] from general axioms that are general and self-evident.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, the Divine Law does not require any ceremonial rites. True knowledge of God is arrived at only through reason.<sup>62</sup> Religious rituals are deemed good or necessary only because of authority and tradition and therefore do not help us attain our supreme good. Spinoza strips Scripture of its traditional meaning, emphasizing instead the universality of both man’s supreme good and the means to achieve it. He does, however, claim that Scripture actually plays a necessary role in the universal religion. When stripped of everything but the moral essence of the prophetic teachings, the Bible contains one commandment, obedience to God. Significantly, Spinoza claims we need revelation to make it known to us.

He writes that, “the chief aim of Scripture in its entirety . . . is simply to teach obedience . . . .For who can fail to see that both the Testaments are simply a training for obedience . . . that men should sincerely hearken to God?”<sup>63</sup> Spinoza writes that Moses sought to bind the people to the covenant through the promise of rewards and the threat of punishment and interprets such exhortations as ways of inculcating obedience, not teaching universal truth. Obedience, though, is not simply blind. It is based on knowledge

---

<sup>60</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 51.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 51–52.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

of God's divine justice and charity, attributes that would cause men to obey God's moral law.<sup>64</sup> How is obedience to God defined?

“Scripture itself tells us quite clearly over and over again...declaring that the entire Law consists in this alone, to love one's neighbor.”<sup>65</sup> Further, “it is also undeniable that he who by God's commandments loves his neighbour as himself is truly obedient and blessed according to the Law.”<sup>66</sup> This commandment, to love one's neighbor as himself, is the “one and only guiding principle for the entire faith of mankind, and through this commandment alone should be determined all the tenets of faith that every man is duty bound to accept.”<sup>67</sup> If this is the only *commandment* in the Bible, then any other action prescribed by clergy based on Scripture, such as appropriate Sabbath behavior, lacks authority, leading to diminished authority for the Church. Additionally, loving one's neighbor requires, at a minimum, a certain tolerance of others and promotes the idea of a common good, an idea which could help stabilize a society dealing with factionalism.

Regarding the necessity of Scripture, Spinoza claims that living according to the commandment to love one's neighbor is the means to salvation. Most people would not be able to reason to that conclusion. Therefore, revelation, which through its stories teaches what is in essence the Golden Rule, is required to teach the multitude what God requires. As Spinoza writes, “since we cannot perceive by the natural light that simple

---

<sup>64</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 157.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

obedience is a way to salvation, and since only revelation teaches us that this comes about by God's singular grace which we cannot attain by reason, it follows that Scripture has brought very great comfort to mankind."<sup>68</sup> It also assures the clergy continued purpose in that they are needed to interpret the prophets' moral teachings for the masses. In retaining the notions of God, revelation and salvation and preserving a role for ministers and other religious leaders, Spinoza is attempting to, as he does throughout the *TPT*, introduce elements of his new philosophical system while retaining religious language in order to lay the necessary groundwork for the *Ethics*.

Spinoza's pre-commitment to philosophy and his rejection of traditional religion, including seeing Scripture as a means of conveying metaphysical and scientific truths, were already established when he wrote in the *TPT* that it was

when . . . [he] saw that the disputes of philosophers were raging with violent passion in Church and Court, and . . . breeding bitter hatred and faction . . . together with other ills too numerous to mention here, I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely, and to admit nothing as its teaching which I did not most clearly derive from it.<sup>69</sup>

Just as Maimonides' interpretation of the Bible in *The Guide* was compelled by his own devotion to the Law and to philosophy, Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture in the *TPT* was compelled by the system he had articulated in his *Ethics*.

### **Conclusion**

The foundation of Spinoza's philosophy was intellectual contemplation which would lead to rational comprehension of the universe that would result in an

---

<sup>68</sup> Shirley, *TPT*, 172.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. However, Spinoza's interpretation was not based on Scriptural text alone. It included historical analysis. See chapters 8–10.

understanding of man's place in it, and our strengths and limitations. A correct understanding of the Supreme good would free us to live the best human life possible. Scripture did not rest on intellectual contemplation. It rested on knowledge delivered to man through Moses (and maintained through the prophets' exhortations) and on required actions. In order to pursue his philosophy and to enlighten others, Spinoza first needed to undermine the foundations of contemporary religious belief—Scripture—and in its place raise his philosophical system. For Maimonides, however, the Law provided the means to achieving intellectual communion with God, the highest good of man.

Each applied methodical interpretation to Scripture, but to different ends. In essence, Maimonides believed that only by understanding philosophy could one come to understand the teachings of the Bible. Philosophical teachings comprised the key to interpreting biblical terms and parables. Maimonides used philosophical insights to remove the miraculous, supra-rational connotations associated with religious terms such as "prophecy" and "miracle." In so doing, he revealed that Scripture and philosophy taught largely the same insights and could be reconciled. Spinoza sought to infuse philosophical ideas such as "necessity" and "determinism" with religious connotations by equating them with God's eternal decrees or the Divine Law in order to forge a link between religion and the new philosophical system presented in the *Ethics*. Such a link would aid in the acceptance and dissemination of the *Ethics*.

Both Maimonides' and Spinoza's projects were ultimately concerned with helping individuals who possessed the capacity to achieve man's highest good to attain that goal, while providing a safe and stable social environment for the rest of the community. *The Guide* and *TPT* saw man's highest good as the intellectual contemplation of God.

However, their authors' differing views on God and on the role religion and philosophy play in achieving the supreme good, existed prior to the creations of those works. The methods of biblical interpretation each author chose to use in analyzing Scripture supported their pre-existing views.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Batnitzky, Leora. *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Davidson, Herbert A. *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Garrett, Don, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- James, Susan. *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2012.
- Kaplan, Lawrence J. "Maimonides on Mosaic Revelation." *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality* (blog). Hosted and edited by Alan Brill. <https://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/maimonides-on-mosaic-revelation-prof-lawrence-j-kaplan/>.
- Kraemer, Joel L. *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.
- Kriesel, Howard. *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Levenson, Allan T. *Modern Jewish Thinkers: An Introduction*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 2000.
- Maimonides. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. 2 vols. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- . *Mishneh Torah*. Edited and Translated by Philip Birnbaum. New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1967.
- . *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah, Tractate Sanhedrin*. Translated by Fred Rosner. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981.
- . *Responsa*. Edited by J. Blau, 2nd ed. Jerusalem, 1986.

- Nadler, Steven. *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- . *Spinoza: A Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Ravven, Heidi M. and Lenn E. Goodman, eds., *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Spinoza. *Theological-Political Treatise*. 2nd ed., (Gebhardt Edition). Translated by Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001.
- Spinoza. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Twersky, Isadore, ed., *A Maimonides Reader*. Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, Inc., 1972.
- Yovel, Yirmiyahu. *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

## **VITA**

Randi Feder received her J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C., and is retired from the practice of law. In 2016, Feder completed her Master's Degree in Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. She is active in Jewish Adult Education as a coordinator and teacher. She looks forward to tutoring literacy students this spring and to teaching an adult education class on Maimonides and Spinoza in the summer.