

READING STRAUSS ON MAIMONIDES: A NEW APPROACH

ALAN VERSKIN

University of Chicago

Strauss's essay "How to Begin to Study The *Guide of the Perplexed*"¹ contains his last and probably most developed position on Maimonides' views on the relation of philosophy to the Law. It is also perhaps one of his most difficult essays to understand as he takes his form of esoteric interpretation to extremes not present in his other works on Maimonides. Focusing largely on this essay, I suggest an approach to reading Strauss on Maimonides.

Strauss's main contribution to scholarship on Maimonides is his contention that Maimonides is an esoteric writer. Strauss explains the principle behind esoteric writing thus:

Esoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having being hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths.²

¹ Henceforth: HB. For exact bibliographic references see the bibliography at the end of this essay.

² *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (henceforth: PAW), p. 36.

As Strauss sees it, Maimonides expresses this problem in Jewish terms by referring to the legal prohibition against disseminating the “secrets of the Law” to the general public. Maimonides cannot simply write a conventional book to convey these truths to the few fit to receive them since to write a book is essentially to give a public teaching.³ He therefore writes esoterically with the result that his true meaning can only be understood by a small number of talented and careful readers. This esotericism, Strauss says, is achieved in three ways:

First, every word of the *Guide* is chosen with exceeding care; since very few men are able or willing to read with exceeding care, most men will fail to perceive the secret teaching. Second, Maimonides deliberately contradicts himself, and if a man declares both that *a* is *b* and that *a* is not *b*, he cannot be said to declare anything. Lastly, the “chapter headings” of the secret teaching are not presented in an orderly fashion but are scattered throughout the book⁴.

For Strauss, the method of self-contradiction is of particular importance in Maimonides’ esotericism. Strauss dismisses the claim that “unconscious and unintentional contradictions have crept into the *Guide*.”⁵ He therefore says that the task of the interpreter is to “find out in each case which of the two statements was considered by Maimonides to be true and which he merely used as a means of hiding the truth.”⁶ Strauss claims that the key to determining which of two contradictory statements is true is their relative rarity. Thus he says “we may therefore establish the rule that of two contradictory statements in the *Guide* or in any other work of Maimonides, that statement which occurs least frequently, or even which occurs only once, was considered by him to be true.”⁷

³ PAW p. 35. Cf. *Guide* I, Intro, p. 7.

⁴ HB. Pg. xv.

⁵ “The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*” [henceforth: LC] p. 69.

⁶ LC pp. 69-70

⁷ LC pp. 73. It is important to note that Strauss never draws attention to his own contradictions and when he draws attention to those in Maimonides, it is only in a subtle

Strauss's admiration for Maimonides' esotericism has a bearing on his own writing. He says that, out of respect for Maimonides, "an esoteric interpretation of the *Guide* seems to be not only advisable, but even necessary"⁸ and the result is that his works on Maimonides are themselves written in an esoteric style.⁹

Just as Strauss considered it of vital importance to determine the genre of the works with which he was dealing, so too must one determine the genre of his own works. At first glance, most of his works appear to be historical studies. *Philosophy and Law* (*Philosophie und Gesetz*, first published Berlin: Schocken, 1935), perhaps the locus classicus of his own thought, is subtitled "Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors" – a subtitle which could comfortably fit an exclusively historical work. This impression is further reinforced by his numerous statements that he is a careful reader whose goal is "to understand the thinkers of the past exactly as they understood themselves."¹⁰ This kind of historical treatment means that

the seemingly infinite variety of ways in which a given teaching can be understood does not do away with the fact that the originator of the doctrine understood it in one way only, provided he was not confused.¹¹

Strauss seems thereby to indicate that his study follows the very highest standards which one would expect from a historical study.

I would suggest, however, that, despite his claims to the contrary, Strauss's interest in accurate historical interpretation is less than at first

and oblique manner. The effect is to heighten the esotericism of Strauss's writing, so leaving much scope for the kind of interpretation which must, by its nature, be speculative.

⁸ LC p. 56.

⁹ Strauss's esotericism seems to adopt a more Socratic form than that of Maimonides. His essay "How to Begin" is in the form of a dialectical inquiry which progressively points his reader towards a particular direction of inquiry in a number of steps which, if individually considered, would appear contradictory. Thus it does not offer any firm conclusions or systematic interpretations, but only, as the title suggests, a strategy for beginning a study of the *Guide*.

¹⁰ "Political Philosophy and History," p. 67.

¹¹ Ibid.

appears from his surface meaning and that his focus on the past is for a purpose other than the furthering of historical study. My argument is not uncontroversial. Some scholars, for example Shlomo Pines, have taken up a number of Strauss's more radical interpretations of Maimonides in apparently purely historical contexts – an indication that they consider them to be an accurate reflection of Maimonides' actual opinions. Also in opposition to the view which I advance, other scholars regard aspects of Strauss's interpretation of Maimonides simply as inaccurate historical studies, in other words, they maintain that Strauss made a sincere effort to ascertain what Maimonides really meant but failed. Alfred Ivry, a proponent of this view, argues that Strauss's historical interpretations of Maimonides are mere "conjecture" and that

upon close examination it would appear that his elaborate attempts to discern the hidden structures of Maimonides' work are not particularly successful. More to the point, it would seem his analyses of Maimonides' true teachings are often adventitiously connected to his lexicographical efforts.¹²

In reading Strauss, I think that it is reasonable to apply to his own writings the hermeneutic which he applies to others. If one adopts this approach, then, if any of his interpretations of Maimonides appear to be historically inaccurate, it is reasonable to suspect that Strauss is aware of this and that he is deliberately advancing these views for some ulterior purpose. Rémi Brague seems to give some support to my view when he says, referring to those passages which he believes are not historically accurate, that "the Straussian Maimonides might be, at least in part, a construction and the projection into the past of a personal project."¹³ In other words, it might be

¹² Ivry (1991), p. 86.

¹³ Brague (1991), p. 104. Jonathan Cohen slightly differs from Brague in his understanding of the reason behind Strauss's historical inaccuracies. Cohen says that Strauss consciously adopted "the typical Jewish mode of search for the truth" which is "commentary, rather than the independent mounting of philosophical systems." Cohen is correct in identifying the form of Strauss's argument as traditional; however, I argue that it is perhaps more correct to regard Strauss's works as an independent philosophical system clothed in the garb of traditional Jewish thought or the "projection into the past of a personal project" as Brague

better to characterize Strauss's work as the textual manipulation of historical texts rather than as a historical study. I suggest that it is reasonable to suppose that, as a self-proclaimed esoteric writer, Strauss leaves hints as to the nature of his "personal project" for those who are fit to understand it. Strauss's textual manipulation perhaps becomes most conspicuous when one considers the nature of this "personal project."

In *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss engages in a sustained polemic against Enlightenment Judaism. Although he tacitly agrees with many Enlightenment concepts of truth and critiques of tradition, he argues that the Enlightenment project of spreading such truths is politically inadvisable. For Strauss, government is based upon a received tradition, grounded in revelation, the function of which is to firmly entrench a legal structure. At the heart of the Enlightenment position, as Strauss sees it, is the belief that the human being can and should overcome revelation and tradition: "Man had to establish himself theoretically and practically as master of the world and master of his life; the world created by him had to erase the world merely "given" to him."¹⁴ Strauss pinpoints the Jewish break with tradition at Spinoza's critique of Maimonides in which Spinoza claimed to have rendered incoherent Maimonides' synthesis between reason and revelation, a synthesis which had provided for a concept of truth in revelation.¹⁵ I believe that Strauss's work is a rhetorical attempt to repair that break, and, in so doing, re-establish what he regards as the politically necessary belief that there is a valid and continuous Jewish tradition to which modern Jews are heir.

Perhaps following the example of some of the mediaeval texts he studies, Strauss prepares different teachings for different audiences. I believe that he follows, loosely, Averroes, who, in his treatise dealing with philosophy and law, indicates that he uses three different kinds of arguments geared at three different audiences. The three kinds of

suggests. In fairness to Cohen, his article only considers Strauss's article on the interpretation of Genesis which is much more susceptible to such a reading. See Cohen (1995) pp. 142-143.

¹⁴ PL, pp. 31-32.

¹⁵ PL, p. 31; cf. TPT Chapters 1, 5, 7.

arguments are the rhetorical, the dialectical, and the demonstrative.¹⁶ The first is directed to an audience which consists of those who still naively believe in the teachings of revelation. Strauss's work is not primarily directed to them but it is written so as not to disturb their beliefs. The second is directed to an audience which consists of those who have accepted Enlightenment views as dogmas rather than through reasoned argument. This is the kind of audience for whom "How to Begin" and *Philosophy of Law* are mainly written.¹⁷ Strauss cannot return this group to its pre-Enlightenment beliefs but nonetheless wishes to instill in them a respect for tradition. Therefore, to its members, Strauss offers the spurious assurance that, as a matter of historical fact, Maimonides, one of the greatest of Jewish thinkers, agreed with the Enlightenment's historical criticism of the teachings of revelation but had found a way to justify a belief in the teachings of revelation on different and more acceptable grounds. Strauss thus provides a way for this audience to participate in the Jewish tradition in good conscience. Finally, there is the third kind of argument, directed at an audience comprised of the comparatively rare and gifted people who see through the teachings which Strauss gives to the first two audiences. Such a person understands that, as a matter of historical fact, Maimonides did not share the Enlightenment critique of revelation but sees Strauss's need to persuade the second audience that he did. Strauss's exoteric writing style makes it comparatively easy to perceive the layer of his text directed to the second audience but difficult to perceive the third layer. In this essay I mainly discuss the third layer, its contents, its objective, and the reasons for believing that it exists.

Strauss's stated purpose in studying Maimonides is to justify his thought in the face of the Enlightenment attack:

¹⁶ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, p. 49. Maimonides possibly has a parallel understanding when he refers to the multitude (*Guide*, III 12, p. 441), the ignorant (*Guide*, Intro, p. 6) and the perfect (*Ibid.*).

¹⁷ This group differs from Averroes group in that, unlike Averroes, Strauss furnishes them predominantly with rhetorical rather than dialectical arguments.

Maimonides' rationalism is the true natural model, the standard to be carefully protected from any distortion, and thus the stumbling-block on which modern rationalism falls. To awaken a prejudice in favour of this view of Maimonides and, even more, to arouse suspicion against the powerful opposing prejudice, is the aim of the present work.¹⁸

Thus, crucial to an understanding of Strauss is an understanding of what he means by Maimonides' rationalism.

Strauss says that, for Maimonides, the problem of reason and revelation was the problem of the relation of philosophy to the Law. Three solutions to such a problem are possible. Either authority can come from philosophy, or it can come from the Law, or from both. "Philosophers," Strauss says, "are men who try to give an account of the whole by starting from what is always accessible to man as man."¹⁹ A traditional Jew on the other hand is obligated to start from what is contained in the Law, which requires deference and obedience to its every word.²⁰ Strauss contends that these two authorities, philosophy and the Law, are "in radical disagreement with each other"²¹ with the result that any thesis of harmony is precluded – one can believe in the truth of either philosophy, or the Law, but one cannot believe in both. The problem is perhaps presented most elegantly in *Natural Right and History*:

Both philosophy and the Bible proclaim something as the one thing needful, as the only thing that ultimately counts, and the one thing needful proclaimed by the Bible is opposite of that proclaimed by philosophy: a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight. In every attempt at harmonization, in every synthesis however impressive, one of the two opposed elements is sacrificed, more or less subtly but in any event surely, to the other: philosophy, which means to be the queen, must be made the handmaid of revelation or vice versa.²²

¹⁸ PL, p. 21.

¹⁹ HB, p. xiv.

²⁰ OIG, p. 393, cf. HB, p. xiv.

²¹ "Progress or Return," p. 105.

²² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 74-5, cf. idem, JA, p. 383, OIG, p. 370.

Spinoza had argued that Maimonides was either entirely confused as to the nature of this dispute between reason and revelation and naively accepted the idea of truth in revelation,²³ or was deliberately dishonest in forcing interpretations on the Bible which are mere “confirmations of Aristotelian quibbles.”²⁴ Strauss defends Maimonides against Spinoza’s claim that he was unaware of the nature of the differences between reason and revelation: “Jews of the philosophic competence of Halevi and Maimonides took it for granted that being a Jew and being a philosopher are mutually exclusive.”²⁵ Therefore, for Strauss, despite Maimonides’ claims to the contrary,²⁶ the project which Maimonides sets himself cannot be the kind of reconciliation which would mean identifying “the core of philosophy (natural science and divine science) with the highest secrets of the law.”²⁷ How then, according to Strauss, did Maimonides understand the relation of philosophy to revelation? At first glance, it appears that he considers Maimonides to be a Jew and not a philosopher. In the “Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” he says that Maimonides, since he is an “adherent of the law (...), cannot possibly be a philosopher.”²⁸ In “How to Begin,” Maimonides is contrasted with the philosophers because he “starts from the acceptance of the Torah”²⁹ and the *Guide* is therefore “a book written by a Jew for Jews.”³⁰ Such seems to be Strauss’s teaching to his most naïve audience. A different and more complex position is presented for his second audience.

Strauss notes that, bearing in mind the historical and philosophical problems with the Bible as revealed by Spinoza, were Maimonides to have

²³ TPT, ch. 7.

²⁴ TPT, ch. 1.

²⁵ PAW, p. 19, cf. HB, p. xiv.

²⁶ Guide I, Intro, p. 6.

²⁷ HB, p. xvi.

²⁸ LC, p. 43.

²⁹ HB, p. xiv.

³⁰ Ibid.

started from a simple “acceptance of the Torah,” this would suggest a certain naïveté on his part. Strauss consequently suggests that Maimonides’ acceptance of revelation must have a “more radical significance.”³¹ He suggests that Maimonides, like Spinoza, did not believe that scripture could provide any information to those interested in the pursuit of philosophic truths. A philosopher cannot, as a philosopher, incorporate the metaphysical propositions of scripture into his philosophy. However, Maimonides, according to Strauss, argues that the philosopher does have an interest in revelation “since he is essentially a man and man is essentially a political being.”³² Therefore, because of the importance of revelation to his life as a citizen, he is “driven to interpret Revelation as the perfect political order.”³³ This does not mean that the philosopher considers the political propositions of revelation to be forms of absolute truth. On the contrary, the philosopher is able to do this because “philosophy is (...) transpolitical, transreligious, and transmoral.” Nevertheless, the philosopher agrees that “the city is and ought to be moral and religious.”³⁴ Strauss writes:

It is precisely this view of the non-categorical character of the rules of social conduct which permits the philosopher to hold that a man who has become a philosopher, may adhere in his deeds and speeches to a religion to which he does not adhere in his thoughts; it is this view, I say, which is underlying the exotericism of the philosophers.³⁵

Looking at the matter in this way, one might say that Maimonides understood the political importance of revelation and, feeling a strong responsibility to the Jewish community in which he lived, asserted what Ralph Lerner calls a “high-minded citizenship.”³⁶ It is to this concept that Strauss refers when he speaks of reviving “Maimonides’ rationalism.”

³¹ SCR, pp. 191-2.

³² PL, p. 71.

³³ PAW, p. 10.

³⁴ “A Giving of Accounts,” p. 463.

³⁵ “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” p. 139.

³⁶ Quoted in Green (1993), p. 229. Lerner used this phrase in a conversation with Green.

The main source from which Strauss develops this theory, a theory which I argue he does not truly believe but which he sees fit to offer to his second audience, is Maimonides' account of prophecy. According to Strauss, medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers held the position expressed by Avicenna that "the philosophic discipline which deals with prophecy is political philosophy or political science, and the standard work on prophecy is Plato's *Laws*."³⁷ This statement is intended to exclude the notion that prophetic statements can be considered as metaphysics or mantics. Thus Guttman, as Strauss sees it, is incorrect when he says that, for Maimonides, "the communication of *truths* and not the proclamation of the *Law*, is the *primary* end of the revelation."³⁸ According to Strauss, the "end of revelation is the transmission of the teachings necessary for life" and thus revelation may convey teachings which are "not properly true but are nevertheless necessary to make human life, that is, community life, possible."³⁹ He concludes that it was in the light of Avicenna's understanding of prophecy that he "began to begin to understand Maimonides's prophetology and eventually (...) the whole *Guide of the Perplexed*."⁴⁰

According to Strauss, Avicenna's conception of prophecy is presented only esoterically in Maimonides' writings. Exoterically, Maimonides claims that prophets are privy to certain truths the knowledge of which is beyond human reason. The key to understanding the esoteric teaching, Strauss says, lies in the realization that, in claiming that certain truths lie beyond human reason, Maimonides can mean either that such truths are supra-rational or infra-rational. Strauss claims that Maimonides secretly agreed with Spinoza's belief that these truths are infra-rational and consequently that they are not truths at all. He bases his argument on Maimonides' statement that prophecy contains an imaginative element

³⁷ PAW, p. 10.

³⁸ PL, p. 72.

³⁹ PL, p. 140n18. On the belief in *creatio ex nihilo* see "Why We Remain Jews," pp. 344-5.

⁴⁰ "A Giving of Accounts," p. 463.

which, Strauss claims, is identical to claiming that it has an infra-rational element.⁴¹ Strauss argues that in this way Maimonides subtly introduces an epistemological doubt concerning the metaphysical truth of all prophecy: because of the imaginative element, a person who is not a prophet can never be sure whether a given teaching is supra-rational and true, as the prophet claims, or infra-rational and false.

Arguing from his premise that the nature of prophecy is infra-rational, Strauss calls the problem of establishing the truth of prophecy “the difficulty of the Law.”⁴² He does so in quotation marks but with no reference. The quotation marks give the impression that Maimonides acknowledges this problem, even giving a name to it. In fact, however, Maimonides never acknowledges any such problem and when he uses this phrase he does so referring to something entirely different.⁴³ One can therefore draw the conclusion that Strauss uses this phrase rhetorically for the benefit of his second audience, as a way of giving a superficial legitimacy to his argument.⁴⁴

Strauss says that Maimonides’ arguments in support of the metaphysical truth contained in prophecy are disingenuous. He begins by claiming that Maimonides writes that miracles attest to the truth of prophecy and then, both in his own name and in that of Maimonides, he rejects this statement on the ground that

miracles do not merely confirm the truth of the belief in revelation but also presuppose the truth of that belief; only if one holds in advance the

⁴¹ HB, p. xxxviii. He refers to the “imaginary, i.e., infra-rational.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Maimonides uses the phrase “the facility or difficulty of the Law” (Guide II 39, p. 381] to indicate the problem of whether the law is a burden and hindrance or if it is indeed easy to bear. There is an insignificant difference between the translations of Pines and Strauss. The “the” in front of “difficulty” in Strauss’s introduction is not present in the Pines translation but it is implied in the latter’s translation and is also present in the Arabic original.

⁴⁴ His use of this phrase might also serve a further purpose: by using this phrase, Strauss draws attention to the chapter of the Guide in which Maimonides uses it. In that chapter, Maimonides establishes the supremacy of Moses’ legislative prophecy. It is possible that Strauss wishes to indicate that his critique of prophecy in the name of Maimonides applies with equal force even to Mosaic prophecy.

indemonstrable belief that the visible universe is not eternal can one believe that a given extraordinary event is a miracle.⁴⁵

However, as we might assume that Strauss is aware, Maimonides is abundantly clear that it is not on account of the presence of a certain prophet's miracle that he is believed. Rather, it is only because of Moses' normative injunction that this becomes the test of a true prophet. Maimonides notes that we follow this injunction of Moses' even though it does not seem a reasonable test for we can never know whether the miracle which the prophet brings about is genuine or has been produced through sorcery.⁴⁶ Thus there can be little doubt that Strauss realizes that he is labelling as disingenuous a statement which Maimonides in fact never made.

Therefore, if Strauss's contention that Maimonides' arguments regarding prophecy are disingenuous is to be accepted as anything more than a rhetorical statement made for the benefit of his second audience, it must be on the basis that it is Maimonides' doctrine of Mosaic prophecy which is disingenuous. Mosaic prophecy, however, is a difficult target because Maimonides claims that it is entirely independent of the imagination, possessing no infra-rational element. For this reason, Mosaic prophecy does not require miracles to attest to its truth and hence is not susceptible to Strauss's argument of the imagination which he applies to general prophecy. Strauss therefore approaches this task from a different angle. He argues that Maimonides, when discussing Mosaic prophecy, presents us with an intentional contradiction and that this intentional contradiction indicates that Maimonides is signaling that he does not believe in the doctrine of Mosaic prophecy which he superficially seems to be advocating. This is his argument. Strauss says, "if Moses' prophecy alone is wholly independent of the imagination, the Torah alone will be simply true, i.e., literally true." In that case, it can possess no truths expressed metaphorically because metaphors contain imaginative

⁴⁵ HB, p. xxxviii.

⁴⁶ MT, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, VII, 2. Cf. Maimonides, *Introduction to the Mishnah*, ch. 2.

elements. However, if Maimonides believed that Moses' prophecy contained no imaginative elements, then he must also have thought that Moses believed in an "extreme corporealism."⁴⁷ If on the other hand we assume that Maimonides was being disingenuous when he said that the faculty of the imagination did not play a role in Mosaic prophecy, the Law similarly loses its status because its imaginative element makes it infra-rational and therefore not different from the prophecy of any other Hebrew prophet and perhaps even from the prophecies of other religions. In either case, Strauss concludes, Maimonides does not think the metaphysical claims of the Bible worthy of consideration.

I suggest that this stark view is not Strauss's true position but one which he thinks important to reveal to his second audience. This position, outlined in "How to Begin," is not one which he recognizes in his earlier work *Philosophy and Law*. There he deals with the presence of obviously imaginative language in the prophecy of Moses in a less radical manner. He says that the "non-imaginative" character of Moses' prophecy means only that Moses was "*not under the influence* of the imaginative faculty when he was in the condition of prophetic comprehension." It does not mean that he did not have the imaginative faculty "*at his disposal*," because he needed this faculty in order to make his words understandable to the multitude.⁴⁸ Did Strauss consider his statement on Mosaic prophecy in "How to Begin" as a new historical reality which had escaped him in his previous works or does he merely advocate such an approach for the benefit of his second audience? While a definite answer to this question is impossible, it is reasonable to assume the second alternative in view of its context in a work which contains a number of other contentions which appear to have been advanced with apparent knowledge of their inadequacies.

Strauss concludes this discussion with the remark that the problem of distinguishing between the supra-rational and the infra-rational cannot be solved "by recourse to the fact that we hear through (...) the Torah, 'God's

⁴⁷ HB, p. xxxviii.

⁴⁸ PL, p. 151.

book' par excellence, not human beings but God himself."⁴⁹ For, Strauss says, "God does not use speech in any sense and this fact entails infinite consequences."⁵⁰ I think Ivry correctly interprets this passage when he says: "this is very extreme language for Strauss to use and casts serious doubt upon the veracity of the scriptural text *in toto*."⁵¹ In this regard, it is significant that Maimonides heavily qualifies his statement that God does not use speech with respect to Moses and that Strauss, though certainly aware of this, does not mention it.⁵² These omissions seem to indicate a rhetorical approach to the topic, rather than one which conveys Strauss's true views.

Most of the *Guide* is devoted to showing that both philosophy and the Law express the same metaphysical truths and are therefore fundamentally in harmony, whatever their superficial differences. Such a view is incompatible with the views on prophecy which Strauss imputes to Maimonides outlined above. Therefore, in "How to Begin," Strauss attempts to reveal what he appears to regard as the hints and intentional contradictions in the *Guide* which Maimonides left to indicate that he did not truly believe in any such harmony. Much of "How to Begin" focuses upon the "three most fundamental truths" which Maimonides said are taught both by philosophy and by the Law: the existence of God, His unity, and His incorporeality.⁵³

Strauss maintains that, although Maimonides is adamant that belief in God's incorporeality is obligatory, there is "a certain confusion"⁵⁴ on this issue because many biblical texts seem to indicate God's corporeality. Maimonides says that the incorporeality of God is both a demonstrable or philosophic truth and is also what the Law teaches. Strauss does not

⁴⁹ HB, p. xxxviii.

⁵⁰ HB, p. xxxix.

⁵¹ Ivry (1991), p. 87.

⁵² *Guide* I 65, pp. 158-160.

⁵³ HB, p. xxi.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

challenge that philosophy as represented by the Aristotelian tradition teaches the incorporeality of God and he accepts this also as Maimonides' true opinion. However, Strauss denies that the Law teaches this doctrine and that Maimonides believes that the Law does so. It is therefore to Maimonides' derivation from scripture of the prohibition against believing in the corporeality of God that he devotes his critical efforts.

Maimonides' legal proof that belief in the incorporeality of God is required is derived, like the commandment against idolatry, as an implication from the scriptural statement on the unity of God.⁵⁵ It is important to understand Maimonides' differentiation between believing in the incorporeality of God, on the one hand, and the rejection of idolatry on the other hand, both of which Maimonides says are commanded by the Law. The purpose of both these commandments is to establish God's unity. However, Maimonides says that "not idolatry but the belief in God's corporeality" is "a fundamental sin."⁵⁶ Belief in God's corporeality is more serious than idolatry because, while an idolater believes that the idol which he uses is but an intermediary between him and the true God and thus he is still directed towards the correct object although in an improper manner, the object of the person who believes in the corporeality of God is itself incorrect.⁵⁷ Idolatry is dangerous because it can eventually degenerate, especially in the minds of the multitude, into a denial of the existence of the true God, but belief in the corporeality of God is a violation of belief in God's unity from its very inception.⁵⁸ Belief in the corporeality of God denies the fundamental biblical principle of God's unity because "a body cannot be one, but is composed of matter and form, which by definition are two," etc.⁵⁹ Thus it is the more serious infraction. However, as Strauss correctly notes, according to Maimonides this principle alone is

⁵⁵ *Guide* I 35, p. 81: "There is no profession of unity unless the doctrine of God's corporeality is denied." His philosophical proof is different, see *Guide*. I 76, p. 227.

⁵⁶ HB, p. xxii. Cf. *Guide* I 36, pp. 84-85.

⁵⁷ *Guide* I 36, p. 83.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Op. cit.*, I 35, p. 81.

insufficient to reject all forms of “forbidden worship” for a person can believe, without logical inconsistency, in many gods and yet believe that all of those gods are incorporeal. Thus Strauss remarks:

Only if the belief in God’s incorporeality is based on the belief in His unity, as Maimonides’ argument indeed assumes, does the belief in God’s incorporeality appear to be the necessary and sufficient ground for rejecting “forbidden worship” in every form, i.e., the worship of other gods as well as the worship of both natural things and artificial things.⁶⁰

However, Strauss says that this position of Maimonides is disingenuous. His argument: Aristotle believed in both the incorporeality and in the unity of God and yet was an idolater and Maimonides’ “admiration for him would be incomprehensible”⁶¹ if he thought that Aristotle were incorrect regarding this particular issue. Strauss therefore claims that Maimonides is making an intentional contradiction for he cannot at once venerate Aristotle and consider belief in God’s unity and incorporeality to lead to the rejection of idolatry. Strauss resolves the contradiction in favour of the Aristotelian position.

In view of the weakness of the argument that for Maimonides the rejection of idolatry is not the logical result of belief in God’s unity and incorporeality, it is reasonable to assume that Strauss did not believe in its historical veracity but expressed it for the benefit of his second audience. Other than mentioning that this is a view of which Aristotle disapproves, Strauss does not explain why he considers Maimonides’ statement to be insufficient. This is poor evidence because, as Strauss acknowledges elsewhere in the same essay,⁶² Maimonides is not a slavish follower of Aristotle and thus there is no reason why he cannot disagree with Aristotle, and even consider him to egregiously err on important issues, yet still respect him for the remainder of his teaching. Furthermore, the notion that Maimonides regarded Aristotle as an idolater may well be

⁶⁰ HB, p. xxii.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² HB, p. lv.

incorrect. Strauss offers two references in the *Guide* in support of this notion, neither of which is persuasive. The first passage which he quotes, *Guide* I 71, does not have a single reference to Aristotle.⁶³ The second refers to two books on idolatry which Maimonides says were incorrectly ascribed to Aristotle.⁶⁴ Strauss offers a further two references to prove that Maimonides thought that Aristotle believed the heavenly bodies to be divinities. In both passages, however, Maimonides suggests that although the philosophers may refer to the Intelligences as “divinities,” it is not true idolatry but rather amounts to a difference in nomenclature.⁶⁵ Maimonides writes: “Just as we maintain that the Holy One... performs signs and wonders through the angels, so do these philosophers maintain that all these occurrences in the nature of the world come through the spheres and the stars. They maintain that the spheres and the stars possess souls and knowledge. All these things are true.”⁶⁶ In other words, there is strong evidence to indicate not only that Maimonides did not consider Aristotle to be an idolater, but also that Strauss was aware of this. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that Strauss expects his gifted readers, those comprising his third audience, to perceive the dubiousness of his historical argument.

Strauss then goes on to attempt to demonstrate that Maimonides considered the philosophical ideas regarding God’s unity and incorporeality to be themselves entirely incompatible with their biblical cognates. His argument is as follows. First he argues that Maimonides was being disingenuous in advancing his theory of scriptural interpretation. In the *Guide*, Maimonides states that if the surface meaning of a passage in scripture contradicts reason, that meaning is not the intention of scripture and the text must be interpreted figuratively, for the true

⁶³ It is not clear to me why Strauss refers to this chapter.

⁶⁴ *Guide* III 17, p. 466.

⁶⁵ Op.cit. II 5, p. 259.

⁶⁶ “Letter on Astrology.” English translation in R. Lerner’s *Medieval Political Philosophy*. New York: The Free Press, 1963, 232. Hebrew original in “The Correspondence between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides about Astrology.” Ed. Alexander Marx. *Hebrew Union College Annual* III (1926), 353-354.

meaning of scripture is always in agreement with reason.⁶⁷ Thus the meaning of a passage in scripture is determined by the conclusions of reason and therefore the philosophical meaning is necessarily attached to the biblical text whether exoterically or esoterically. Maimonides' theory thus presupposes that there is a compatibility between philosophy and scripture regardless of whether the surface meaning of scripture is compatible with philosophy. Spinoza had dismissed this theory as devious if not ridiculous⁶⁸ and it is to Spinoza's opinion that Strauss's second audience is likely to be sympathetic. To preserve the tradition for this audience, Strauss suggests that Maimonides was as sophisticated a reader of the Bible as Spinoza but that what Spinoza expressed openly, Maimonides expressed secretly. He says that although Maimonides does indeed present the type of interpretation of which Spinoza accuses him, he also presents another more sophisticated contrary teaching. This contrary teaching is expressed, according to Strauss, in the section in the *Guide* on providence. There, Strauss says, Maimonides draws a distinction between what Strauss calls "the view of the Law" and the "true view".⁶⁹ These, however, are not Maimonides' terms. Drawing the conclusion obvious from a comparison of these two terms that, in contrast with "the true view," the "view of the Law" does not express the truth, Strauss concludes that Maimonides, like Spinoza, draws a distinction between what Scripture says and the truth. It is clear, however, that Strauss misstates Maimonides and it is likely that he knew that he was doing so. The dichotomy which Maimonides draws is between "what has been literally stated in the books of our prophets and is believed by the multitude of our scholars"⁷⁰ on the one hand, and his own belief, regarding which he says:

⁶⁷ *Guide* II 25, p. 328.

⁶⁸ TPT, ch. 7.

⁶⁹ HB, p. xxxvi.

⁷⁰ *Guide* III 17, p. 469.

In this belief that I shall set forth, I am not relying upon the conclusion to which demonstration has led me, but upon what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God and of the books of our prophets.⁷¹

This is not a dichotomy between the “true view” and “the view of the Law.” On the contrary, in this passage Maimonides claims that he has captured the true intention of the holy books. He regards himself as within the tradition despite his differences with the majority of its adherents. Maimonides is concerned to show that the tradition does not require consensus [*ijma* ‘] on this issue. Thus he mentions that the beliefs of “some of our latter-day scholars” also differ from those of the majority but gives no indication that such scholars are to be regarded as outside the Jewish tradition. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Strauss does not truly believe in the dichotomy which he presents to his second audience.

However, it is this contention, that the “true view” differs from that of the law, which informs Strauss’s position that Maimonides secretly thought there was an unbridgeable disjunction between the biblical teaching of unity and the philosophical conception of unity such that the two teachings have little but their names in common. Strauss’s proofs for this contention are, for the most part, *ex silentio*. For example, Strauss argues that, since scriptural quotations are sometimes absent from Maimonides’ discussions of unity, Maimonides saw an opposition between philosophical and biblical conceptions of unity. In what he calls the “fifth subsection” of the *Guide*, which is devoted to a discussion of God’s unity, Strauss notes that no quotations from scripture are to be found and contends that this section must thus be considered “entirely speculative”⁷² and uninfluenced by scriptural dogma.

Basing himself upon his claim that Maimonides thought that the biblical idea of the unity of God is vastly different from the philosophical one, Strauss concludes that, when Maimonides said that belief in God’s incorporeality follows from biblical conceptions of his unity, he did so disingenuously. Strauss says that although a teaching of incorporeality

⁷¹ Loc. cit., p. 471.

⁷² HB, p. xlvii.

might be reasonably drawn from the philosophical conception of the unity of God as the Prime Mover, for such a doctrine implies the absolute simplicity of God, such a view cannot be drawn from the biblical statement “the Lord is one,” since this suggests only that “there is no one or nothing similar or equal to Him,”⁷³ but not that He is absolutely simple or incorporeal. Dismissing Maimonides’ allegorical readings of such passages as disingenuous, Strauss adds that the kind of unity which implies an incorporeality and absolute simplicity in God is opposed to the opinion of the Law, according to which we must call God “great, mighty, and terrible” in our prayers.⁷⁴ He therefore concludes that the only view which can be said to teach incorporeality of necessity is the eternity of the universe.⁷⁵ This does not mean that the view of creation in time necessarily logically excludes the teaching of God’s incorporeality but only that this teaching does not necessarily imply such a view. However, for Strauss, this is sufficient because it shows that Maimonides’ only source for his strong position on the incorporeality of God is Aristotle’s doctrine of the eternity of the universe. The result is that, by a chain of arguments which Strauss must certainly know to be weak, he appears to have demonstrated that Maimonides clearly deferred to philosophic authority and not to scriptural teaching. By this stratagem, Strauss would seem to be aiming to gain the loyalty of his second audience so enabling them to retain unthinkingly their enlightenment views while using this new interpretation of Maimonides as a paradigm for a new kind of adherence to Jewish tradition.

In conclusion, Strauss appears to be addressing three separate audiences, giving three separate messages. Because he adopts an esoteric style, it is often not easy to determine what the messages are and to whom they are addressed. Strauss is telling his very naïve and his very

⁷³ HB, p. xlviii.

⁷⁴ HB, p. xlviii. Cf. *Guide* I 59, pp. 139-140, Dtn. 10:17. There is an insignificant discrepancy between Strauss’s translation and that of Pines.

⁷⁵ HB, p. liv.

sophisticated audiences much the same thing, though for different reasons and with different implications – both are told that Maimonides believed that the teachings of scripture and of philosophy are reconcilable. At the same time, he propounds an elaborate but weak argument to support the opposite message which he addresses to his intermediate audience, those who accept Enlightenment ideas as dogma rather than on the basis of philosophical reasoning. He addresses his intermediate audience in this way because he appears to believe that this elaborate argument, with all its appearance of intellectual rigour, will lure them back to the Jewish tradition. There is a strong patronising element in this approach, but Strauss believes that there are certain people “who cannot see the wood for the trees” and that such an approach is therefore necessary.⁷⁶ Strauss’s esoteric style requires the kind of analysis which is to a significant extent speculative, with the result that certainty can usually not be reached. However, it is reasonably clear that Strauss’s works on Maimonides must be regarded not as historical studies the aim of which is to establish what Maimonides thought, but as rhetorical works in which he transforms Maimonides’ thinking to use it as a vehicle for expressing ideas which he believes are politically necessary for his mission. Thus Strauss, when he writes on Maimonides, is better understood as a thinker more concerned with the propagation of what Rémi Brague calls a “personal project” than with the discipline of intellectual history.

⁷⁶ PAW, p. 36.

Works Cited

- Averroes, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* [*The Decisive Treatise*], tr. George F. Hourani, London: Luzac, 1967.
- Brague, Rémi, "Leo Strauss and Maimonides," in *Leo Strauss's Thought*, ed. Alan Udoff, Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 1991, 93-114.
- Cohen, Jonathan, "Strauss, Soloveitchik and the Genesis Narrative: Conceptions of the Ideal Jew as Derived from Philosophical and Theological Readings of the Bible" in *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* vol. 5 (1995), 99-143.
- Green, Kenneth, *Jew and Philosopher – The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Ivry, Alfred L., "Leo Strauss on Maimonides" in *Leo Strauss's Thought*, ed. Alan Udoff. Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 1991, 75-91.
- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Idem, *Hakdamot le-Perush ha-Mishnah*, ed. M. Rabinowitz. Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-rav Kook: 1960.
- Idem, *Letter on Astrology*. English translation in R. Lerner's *Medieval Political Philosophy*. New York: The Free Press, 1963, 227-236. Hebrew original in "The Correspondence between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides about Astrology," ed. Alexander Marx. *Hebrew Union College Annual* III (1926), 349-358.
- Idem, *Mishneh Torah*. Jerusalem: El Ha-Mekorot, 1954.
- Spinoza, Benedict. *Theological-Political Treatise* [TPT], tr. Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991.
- Strauss, Leo. "A Giving of Accounts," *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity – Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth H. Green. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.
- Idem, "How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*" in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, xi-lvi.
- Idem, "How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise" in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 142-201.

- Idem, "Jerusalem and Athens," [JA], *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity – Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Green. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997, 377-408.
- Idem, "The Law of Reason in the Kuzari" in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 95-141.
- Idem, "The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed" [LC] in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 38-94.
- Idem, *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.
- Idem, "On the Interpretation of Genesis" [OIG] in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity – Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Green. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997, 359-376.
- Idem, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. [PAW] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.
- Idem, *Philosophy and Law – Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, [PL] tr. by Eve Adler. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.
- Idem, "Progress or Return" in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity – Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Green. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997, 87-136.
- Idem, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.
- Idem, "Political Philosophy and History" in *What is Political Philosophy?* New York: The Free Press, 1959, 56-77.
- Idem, "Why We Remain Jews" in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity – Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Green. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997, 311-358.