

WHAT'S NEW IN GUIDE 2:48?

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After a brief introduction, Maimonides springs on the reader a surprising warning:

...listen to what I shall explain in this chapter and consider it with particular attention, with an attention exceeding the attention with which you consider the other chapters of this Treatise.¹

Stimulated by this very unusual call to attention prominent scholars suggested that Maimonides was about to reveal to the cognoscenti, though as always, in carefully couched language, that he was a covert determinist, a stance that would have upended his long-held view that man possessed free will.²

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¹ Shlomo Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 410. Henceforth, all quotes and references to the *Guide* are from this edition.

² The first modern scholar to interpret this chapter in this manner was Shlomo Pines, "Abul Barkat Poetics and Metaphysics", *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4 (1960): 120–198. Alexander Altmann disagreed with Pines' deterministic interpretation with regard to *Guide* 3:17 but agreed concerning 2:48, in "Free Will and Predestination in Saadia, Bahya and Maimonides", in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History*, ed. idem (Hanover: New Hampshire, 1981), 35–64; Moshe Sokol, "Maimonides on Freedom of the Will and Moral Responsibility", *Harvard Theological Review* 91 (1998): 25–39; Warren Z. Harvey, "Maimonides on Genesis 3:22", *Daat* 12 (1984): 15–22 (Heb.). See also Bezalel Safran, "Maimonides on Free Will, Determinism and Esotericism", in *Porat Yosef, Studies Presented to Rabbi Dr. Joseph Safran*, Bezalel, ed. Safran and Eliyahu Safran (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 111–128. Critiquing Pines' and Altmann's approaches, Jerome Gellman, "Freedom and Determinism in Maimonides' Philosophy", in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 139–150; and Josef Stern, "Maimonides' Conception of Freedom and the Sense of Shame", in *Freedom and Moral Responsibility: General and Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Charles H. Manekin and M. Maimonides Kellner (College Park: University Press of Maryland, 1997), 217–265. Dismissing the implications that our chapter supports a deterministic reading as per Pines, Jacob S. Levinger offers an artificial, man-made (and anti-deterministic)

This esoteric doctrine, they suggested, needed to be concealed from the vulgar in keeping with the statement that Maimonides made in the Introduction that “in speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others.”³ But, as so well put by Sagan, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence⁴ and there is not a shred of evidence, let alone extraordinary evidence, that Maimonides reverted to a position that, in his own words, would uproot the pillars of religion.⁵ Maimonides’ exposition in our chapter, though broadened and refined, parallels almost exactly what he had already stated in his previous works. And yet, I will contend, there is much that is new and even striking in this chapter if we only wish to follow Maimonides’ hermeneutical keys to their logical conclusion.

Maimonides begins chapter 48 with an attempt to answer the question of why the prophets ascribe all actions to God when in fact there are observable proximate causes to account for these events:

It is very clear that everything that is produced in time must necessarily have a proximate cause, which has produced it. In its turn, that cause has a cause and so forth till finally one comes to the First Cause of all things, I mean God’s will and free choice. For this reason all these intermediate causes are sometimes omitted in the dicta of the prophets, and an individual act produced in time is ascribed to God, it being said that He, may He be exalted, has done it. All this is known. We and other men from among those who study true reality have spoken about it, and this is the opinion of all the people adhering to our Law. (*Guide*, 409–10)

God is posited as the First Cause, the cause of all causes, and therefore every cause must ultimately be ascribed to Him. “All this is known”, he adds. Yet this statement is inextricably related to the question of determinism vs. free will, for, from this premise, one can draw two possible corollaries. One, that all temporal causes must be ascribed to God even when we observe proximate causes since

interpretation of Moses’ prophecy, *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), 49–54.

³ *Guide*, Introduction, 18.

⁴ Carl Sagan, *Broka’s Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2021).

⁵ Hilkhot Teshuvah (*HT*) Chapter 5, and in particular Halakhah 3, “This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and commandment.” I am using the translation of Eliyahu Touger, Moznaim Publishing, available through Sefaria, with occasional changes.

He is the cause of these proximate causes, too. This is the deterministic conclusion.⁶ Or, alternatively, that proximate causes are the result of voluntary causes, free choice in man and volition in animals, and natural effects in things by virtue of natural laws, and that these determine what is produced in time; the deity has caused his creations to acquire this independence. Humans have free will because the First Cause has given them the possibility to choose their actions, has given animals volition to act in the way they choose to act, and has endowed nature with laws that generate constant and predictable results. This view is based on the belief that God intermitted the process of causation, which, automatically enabled Man to exercise free will, i.e., freedom from the chain of causation that reaches back to the First Cause.⁷ On this view, proximate causes are independent of the concatenation of causes that reach back to the First Cause. In his earlier theological writings, Maimonides strenuously argued for the latter view, as we saw earlier, saying that it is the only conclusion that can be reconciled with the fundamental principle of the Torah.⁸ Maimonides abstains from discussing here these two divergent corollaries of the proposition that God is the First Cause since this is not his present concern — he did so in the *Eight Chapters (EC)* as we shall see. It is however worthwhile to keep these corollaries in mind as we move through the chapter. Instead, the proposition serves to justify the prophets' frequent ascription to God of acts produced in time even while we observe intermediate causes. Maimonides further notes that this notion is "known" and that "we and other men from among those who study true reality have spoken about it and this is the opinion of all the people adhering to our Law." Maimonides seems to be referring here to two types of people, "those who

⁶ This is the view of Alfarabi, for example, an Islamic Aristotelian philosopher whom Maimonides held in very high esteem. In a passage quite evidently having in mind the Mu'tazilite belief in free will says Wolfson, "Alfarabi comes out in opposition to it by asserting that in human action there is no 'choice' (*ihyyar*) without a 'cause' that ascends to the 'causes of causes', and then goes on to show how God is the ultimate cause of all human actions by the intermediacy of a series of inter-concatenated causes, of which man's choice is the last cause in that intermediate series of causes." Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 696.

⁷ Compare Harry Austryn Wolfson's description of the Philonic view in his "Causality and Freedom in Descartes, Leibniz and Hume," in *Freedom and Experience: Essays presented to Horace M. Kallen*, ed. Sidney Hook, Milton R. Konvitz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1947), 97–114, here 97.

⁸ To be sure, there is no evidence to conclude that Maimonides thought that this view was philosophically demonstrable. He simply held that it was the most reasonable stance to maintain in view of his religious beliefs: there is no room for commandments and personal responsibility in a deterministic world.

study true reality” no doubt a reference to philosophers and “all the people adhering to our Law”, presumably the faithful who have not had any philosophical training (cf. *Guide* 3:51). It should be noted, however, that the fact that “all the people adhering to the Law” have made up their mind could be read as meaning that they are of the opinion that the proposition God is the cause of all causes, which leads to the idea that the mention of intermediate causes can be done away with, means in effect that all causes of things produced in time must be attributed to Him and that the mention of God is not merely a linguistic (shorthand) convenience. The reader may recall that this is the deterministic model. Reading the *EC*, as in the following, confirms this apprehension. Maimonides presents the role of divine causation in the *EC*: “As regards the theory generally accepted by people, and likewise found in rabbinical and prophetic writings, that man’s sitting and rising, and in fact all his movements, are governed by the will and desire of God it may be said that this is true only in one respect.”⁹ Note that, here again, it is only the common people who generally accept this theory, and perhaps a number of rabbis and prophets as these views are found in presumably some, but not all, of their writings. After making the notable qualification that “this is true only in one respect”, Maimonides goes on to offer in what respect this theory is true:

When ...they said that man rises and sits down in accordance with the will of God, their meaning was that, when man was first created, his nature was so determined that rising up and sitting down were to be optional to him; but they as little meant that God wills at any special moment that man should or should not get up, as He determines at any given time that a certain stone should or should not fall to the ground.

Similarly, in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (*HT*) 5:4:

A person should not wonder: How is it possible for one to do whatever he wants and be responsible for his deeds? It is possible for anything to happen in this world without the permission and desire of its Creator as [Psalms 135:6] states: ‘Whatever God wishes, He has done in the heavens and in the earth?’ One must know that everything is done in accord with His will and, nevertheless, we are responsible for our deeds. How is this [apparent contradiction] resolved? Just as the Creator desired that [the elements of] fire and wind rise upward, that the

⁹ Joseph I. Gorfinkle (ed., transl., with introd.), *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics: A Psychological and Ethical Treatise* (New York: AMS Press, 1866), 90.

heavenly spheres revolve in circular orbit, and all other creations of the world follow the nature which He desired for them, so too, He desired that man have free choice and be responsible for his deeds, without being pulled or forced. Rather, he, on his own initiative, with the knowledge which God has granted him, will do anything that man is able to do.

In both texts, Maimonides makes it clear that the proposition God is the First Cause, “desire and permission” in non-philosophical language,¹⁰ is accompanied by a condition, namely, that God intermits the process of causation and grants freedom of action to rational and irrational beings.

Wishing to find an analogy to the idea that man is governed by the will and desire of God only in so far that he is granted free choice but not that God directs his choices, the lengthy *EC* passage expands on a better understood phenomenon, the course of the natural elements:

Thus, for instance, when a stone is thrown into the air and falls to the ground, it is correct to say that the stone fell in accordance with the will of God, for it is true that God decreed that the earth and all that goes to make it up, should be the center of attraction, so that when any part of it is thrown into the air, it is attracted back to the center...but it is wrong to suppose that when a certain part of the earth is thrown upward God wills at that very moment that it should fall.

The idea that natural things follow natural and constant “laws” was probably well understood by his less sophisticated readers. After all, natural things always follow the same course, there is no need to resort to the will and desire of God to explain their movements. It is the same with human action, he asserts, God has granted humans the capacity to make choices, the will and desire of God do not come into the picture. This, too, was noted in the *HT* passage quoted above though in a more abbreviated fashion. Summing up according to the *EC*, humans and natural elements act without any divine intervention, the former through their free will and the latter through natural laws. In the *HT* passage quoted earlier Maimonides adds a third category for acts produced in time, the volition of animals:

¹⁰ Ivry may be right when he noted that Maimonides may have wished to distance himself from “what he regards as Aristotle’s mechanistic, necessitarian approach to causality”. Alfred L. Ivry, *Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed: a philosophical guide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 270, n. 30.

Just as the Creator desired that [the elements of] fire and wind rise upward, that the heavenly spheres revolve in circular orbit, *and all other creations of the world* follow the nature which He desired for them...

At this stage, then, Maimonides has God grant freedom of action to — He does not determine the decisions of — rational and irrational creatures, nor does He determine the movements of natural things, each follow their own nature.

In 2:48, Maimonides broadens these three categories to include causation in chance occurrences. Following Aristotle, Maimonides posits that chance occurrences are themselves the product of causes even if their outcomes are not anticipated. What distinguishes accidental from non-accidental causes is that the former causes yield unexpected effects. These effects may be characterized as highly improbable but not for this reason can we say that these effects reflect an absence of natural causes. Ergo, no divine causation is ascribed to chance or accidental occurrences either. This is new and represents a radical departure from traditional thinking, as we shall see below, and it is one of the novelties of this thought-provoking chapter.

Know that all proximate causes through which is produced in time that which is produced in time, regardless of whether these causes are essential and natural, or voluntary, or accidental and fortuitous¹¹ — I mean by the voluntary cause of that particular thing produced in time, the free choice of a man — and even if the cause consists in the volition of an animal other than man: that all these causes are ascribed in the books of the prophets to God may He be exalted.” (*Guide*, 410)

All proximate causes of things produced in time are now identified, and behind all these causes lie other causes. Nevertheless, all causes are natural, in the sense that they are free of divine intervention.

Immediately following, in what represents the chapter’s main hermeneutic contribution, Maimonides lists some key biblical terms, prophetic manners of speech, as Gellmann calls them,¹² that appear to ascribe to God certain acts

¹¹ Ibn Tibbon has במקרה. Michael Schwartz also translates מקרייות, however he notes that in the original we see two terms: ערצ'י, which Schwartz translates לא עצמותי, and אתפאקי which he explains as מזדמן by chance and they are random accidental causes. Schwartz traces these terms to Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. Michael Schwartz, *Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), 422 n. 6; 423, n. 13 and 14.

¹² Gellman (1989), 150.

produced in time but which in reality are caused by natural causes. As he proposes, the verbs predicated of God ought to be read as meaning “as if”, “as if God spoke”, “as if God commanded”, and so on.¹³ Subsequently, Maimonides expands on the notion of chance or accidental causes.

And according to their manner of expressing themselves, it is said of such and such an act that God did it, or commanded it, or said it. For all these things, the expressions to say, to speak, to command, to call and to send are used. This is the notion to which I wished to draw attention in this chapter. For inasmuch as the deity is, as has been established, He who arouses a particular volition in the irrational animal, and who has necessitated this particular free choice in the rational animal and who has made the natural things pursue their course — chance being but an excess of what is natural, as has been made clear, and its largest part partakes of nature, free choice, and volition — it follows necessarily from all this that it may be said with regard to what proceeds necessarily from these causes that God has commanded that something should be done in such and such a way or that He has said ‘Let it be thus.’¹⁴

This paragraph has caused some difficulties and it is from here that some of the proponents of the idea that Maimonides was secretly advocating a deterministic position draws support.

I explain. While Maimonides affirms here the principle of freedom from divine intervention in all acts produced in time as he had done in his previous writings, his choice of words appears to contradict this stance. Fortunately for our thesis, this impression is but an artifice of Pines’ infelicitous translation, no doubt influenced by his view that Maimonides had changed his mind in this chapter. Firstly, by calling free choices “necessitated” the impression is given that God determines what man chooses. And secondly, by having Maimonides speak about “a particular volition” in the animal and “this particular free choice” in man, Pines has Maimonides seemingly refer to particular choices and incidents and has us believe that God intervened in at least some choices. With respect to the sentence “necessitated this free choice” Goodman and Lieberman note that

¹³ In at least one of the examples that Maimonides offers, this mode of reading presents an apparent contradiction. Joseph says *It was not you that sent me hither, but God*. Accordingly, we should read it as if God sent me here (but in reality it was you). But this paraphrase contradicts the first part of the verse that says “It was not you”. Perhaps it needs to be read that, in reality, it was chance occurrences that sent me hither, not just you.

¹⁴ Note here the unmistakable allusion to the Works of Creation. Genesis 1:3,6, 14, etc.

“even on this reading of the Arabic, the words do not imply that God necessitated the outcome of one’s choices but only that God gave us a nature demanding that we choose freely.”¹⁵ As to the second infelicitous rendering, Ivry points out that while Pines’ translation is acceptable, *tilqa* and *dhalika* “technically should be rendered as ‘that’ and not ‘a particular’ or ‘this particular’.”¹⁶ Thus, the translation should read as follows: “He who arouses that volition in the irrational animal and who has necessitated that free choice in the rational animal” restoring the sense that God endows his creatures with volition and free choice at all times.¹⁷ Munk offers a clear and unproblematic translation: “*En effet, comme c’est Dieu ... qui a excite telle volonte dans tel animal irraisonnable, comme c’est lui qui a fait que l’animal raisonnable eut le libre arbitre...*”¹⁸ The point is not that God determines *what* man chooses but *that* man chooses, a point that was well put by Gellman.¹⁹

The inclusion of accidental or chance effects as being products of causes lying outside of God’s interference, runs contrary to rabbinic understanding, at least in some of the examples that Maimonides offers of accidental things “due to pure chance”.²⁰ Take the case of Joseph. In trying to comfort his brethren for selling him to slave traffickers, Joseph reassures them that it was not they who sold him. Rather, he says, it was God who sent Him to Egypt ahead of them to ensure their survival on earth and to save their lives (Gen 45:7). There is no doubt that behind this fortuitous outcome lies a number of highly improbable concatenation of events, including Joseph’s survival and his extraordinary rise to power. Though the outcome was unexpected, Maimonides suggests that each step in the chain of events was the result of an identifiable natural proximate cause, free choices on the part of Joseph’s brothers, the traffickers, the ultimate buyers, and so on. So were the various dreams that afforded Joseph the opportunity to demonstrate and put to work his dream-reading abilities. The

¹⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed. A New Translation*, trans. and comm. by Lenn E. Goodman and Phillip I. Lieberman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), 326, note 430.

¹⁶ Ivry (2016), 147.

¹⁷ See also Levinger (1989), 50, note 1.

¹⁸ Salomon Munk, *Le Guide des égarés par Moïse ben Maimoun dit Maimonide. Trad. pour la première fois sur l’original arabe et accompagné de notes critiques, littéraires et explicatives par S. Munk* vol. 2 (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1963), 363.

¹⁹ Gellman (1989), 146.

²⁰ The emphasis on accidental things due to *pure* chance is noteworthy. It appears that Maimonides wanted to stress the accidental nature since some readers may have wished to draw the line between improbable and highly improbable occurrences. He is emphatic, even highly improbable occurrences have natural causes.

chain of causes resulted in the unexpected: Joseph is instrumental in the survival of his family and their migration to Egypt and all that resulted from there. The ineluctable upshot of considering chance events no less natural than the direct effects of human or animal choices or the tendency of fire to rise is the realization that, at least from the human perspective, there is no such thing as a grand divine plan. History is contingent: Had Joseph perished in the pit (Gen 17:34, “and the pit was empty, without water”, from which Rashi infers that the pit contained no water but was infested with serpents) or had a different group of merchants appeared and instead of selling Joseph to Egypt they sold him to Crete, or Pharaoh did not have the premonitory dream that gave Joseph the opportunity to be named vizier, etc., history may have taken an entirely different course. In contrast, rabbinic midrashim view the story as being guided from Heaven.²¹

In Maimonides' highly naturalistic portrayal of history, none of the events can be said to be determined, or as being part of a grand divine plan. They appear to be so only because they turned out to have resulted in the familiar history to which we are so accustomed. What's at work is a sort of anthropic principle: the search for explanations in the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt is a *a posteriori* necessity once we have a biblical narrative that relies on the oppression and exodus as formative phenomena. The inevitable conclusion of Maimonides' hermeneutic is that history could have turned out entirely different than it did.²²

²¹ See Torah Shelemah (*TS* in Talmudic-Midrashic Encyclopedia of the Pentateuch, vol. 6 Genesis, ed. M. M. Kasher, New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society 1948), 1413, citing Midrash Tanhuma Yashan on Genesis 37:17, footnotes to #120, to the effect that an angelic intervention caused the brothers to migrate to Egypt; *TS*, 1415, citing Midrash Tanhuma Yashan on Genesis 37:20, #131 and footnotes, with literature on other similar rabbinic exegesis (and also cited by Rashi), to the effect that the Holy Spirit frustrated the intention of the brothers to kill him and affirmed Joseph's dreams; *TS*, 1480–1, citing Midrash Tanhuma on Genesis 39:1, #5, and footnotes with extensive literature, that Joseph brought down his father and brothers to Egypt (reading *horid* rather than *hurad*, passive, was brought down), to the effect that to accomplish the divine plan of bringing down Jacob and his sons to Egypt, God found it first necessary to bring down Joseph to Egypt. This would cause Joseph's father and brothers to follow him, just like a cow follows her young and straying calf when the latter weeps.

²² Kellner expresses a similar sentiment: “the commandments shape a social/institutional reality and certainly could have been different...in the eyes of Rambam the Torah describes what transpired and tells what happened not what needed to happen...”. See Menachem Kellner, “ha-Ish Moshe Shel ha-Rambam (in Hebrew)”, in: *Moses the Man – Master of the Prophets. In the Light of Interpretation Throughout the Ages*

And so, too, only looking back could we say that Rebekah was destined to be Isaac's wife despite Laban's statement *And let her be thy master's son's wife, as the Lord hath spoken* (Gen 24:51). The fortuitous meeting between Eliezer, Abraham's servant, and Rebekah at the well, and their agreement, was the result of choices made by the protagonists of the story. While it is unlikely that a maiden would appear at the well answering Eliezer's criteria, such an occurrence was possible — improbable but nonetheless possible. Eliezer may not have found a maiden for Isaac and he may have returned home empty handed, Isaac may not have had non-Canaanite descendants or may not have ever married, Jacob may never have been born, and so on. Only in retrospect could we speak of the "necessity" of Jacob being born, of such a nation as the children of Israel, etc. This is a surprising but inescapable conclusion from Maimonides' interpretive key.

I have maintained that Maimonides' views on freedom for all his creations (and creatures) — all understood as freedom from divine interference — as well as his opinion that nature is allowed to follow, undisturbed, its own course, are simply reaffirmations and reiterations of previous statements. I have also maintained that there is no warrant to read *Guide* 2:48 in a manner inconsistent with his previous works.²³ Maimonides is not a determinist and this was also a position taken by other scholars, Gellman being one of the most articulate voices. And yet, while vigorously defending a reading of 2:48 that was congruent with Maimonides' long held and insistent view that man possessed free will, Gellman argued that, according to Maimonides, there was still room for God to affect the course of history. In his words:

...we act freely only because God has created the world, has created us free, and has brought us to the choice. Only with regard to the ensuing consequences of our free acts can it be significantly said that God does them or commands them. That is because once we act, we give over the consequences of our acts to the natural order and chance. We, however, exercise no choice over the natural order or over chance. But God does. Since that natural order is, strictly speaking, willed by God, there is a

(Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 2011), 151–177, here 152. I thank one of my anonymous readers for bringing this article to my attention.

²³ This is not presented as an argument in favor of continuity, Maimonides was known to have revised some of his earlier views. See Albert D. Friedberg, "...*Hasidut* leads to *Ruah Haqodesh*..." — a new reading of the closing chapters of Maimonides' *Guide*", *JSIJ* 17 (2019): 1–32, here 1–2. It is simply a way of saying that those who advocated that Maimonides was expressing here an esoteric doctrine — an extraordinary claim given his religious leanings — must adduce some extraordinary evidence.

significant sense in which the consequences of our acts are commanded by God. (Gellman 1989, 148–149)

Gellman agrees that man makes the first choice but believes that the consequences deriving from this choice are guided by God. For purposes of illustration, let us take one of the examples of human choice that Maimonides offers. It is described by the prophet as God commanding the action, one of Nebuchadnezzar's military campaigns. Gellman would say that Nebuchadnezzar and his forces chose on their own, without divine interference, to engage their enemies²⁴ in battle but that their victory which represents the consequences of the initial choice, lies ultimately with God. This, however, is surely inconsistent with Maimonides' exposition. Recall that he has told us that every act that is produced in time has a proximate cause, and that proximate causes are four, essential and natural, voluntary (human choice, animal volition), and accidental or fortuitous. By grouping all these causes together, Maimonides means to characterize them all as sharing the same common denominator, i.e., they are all naturally determined. It follows then, that every consequence, i.e., effect, that follows from the first cause, specifically, human choice, is itself the cause of the next effect. But, it too, must be a naturally determined proximate cause. In the specific case cited above, Nebuchadnezzar made the choice to fight the enemy, and then exercised his greater strength, determination, etc., and made correct use of natural elements (which comported in the same manner as they always do)²⁵ to defeat the enemy. The consequences of his first choice could have worked out differently than how they did, but in each case, Maimonides tells us, the proximate causes of those consequences were free of God's intervention. In short, while it is true that we "exercise no choice over the natural order or over chance" neither does God. There is therefore no room for Gellman's assessment that "Only with regard to the ensuing consequences of our free acts can it be significantly said that God does them or commands them." In fact, we suggest that it is precisely *this* belief that Maimonides wants us to reject and it is one of the implications worthy of great attention to which he alluded at the beginning of the discussion.

Maimonides' striking hermeneutic offers a novel way to deal with a problem that he flagged early on: the anthropomorphisms implied by the terms "say" and

²⁴ Munk notes that Isaiah is speaking about the Medes attacking Babylonia, not Nebuchadnezzar. But the point is the same.

²⁵ Using Maimonides' phraseology: "speaking of natural things, which always follow their course". Of course, natural things do sometimes, though very rarely, deviate from their course, but that, too, is ascribed to the way nature operates.

“speak” connected with Creation. In 1:65 Maimonides suggested that “say/speak” cannot be ascribed to God and must be seen as equivocal terms. As with the other entries in the lexicographic section, Maimonides demonstrates that these terms are variously used to mean different things, in this case three things: utterances by the tongue, notions represented by the intellect without being uttered (thought) and wishing/will. Maimonides indicates that when these terms are ascribed to God they are only used in the last two senses, either that God thought or that God willed. He notes that “this has already been said by an individual other than we and is very well known”²⁶ The inadequacy of the interpretation is readily apparent since these meanings, too, reflect human usage. Maimonides offers an additional reason to justify why He says must be rendered as representing volition and not speech and that is because His sayings must be directed at an existent and, at Creation, there was no one to receive that command. But, on further thought, this, too, is problematic for one can similarly ask who are the recipients of His will? And how does will translate into action? And so, as Maimonides begs us to do, we are forced to treat thought and will figuratively. To distance ourselves from the resulting anthropomorphism, “speak” and “say” must be rendered as making a divine message understood, say via prophecy, or via inspiration.

Chapter 48, however, offers an elegant exegetical resolution. The five terms mentioned, to command, to say, to speak, to send, to call, are simply ways of designating “the shaping of causes in whatever way they are shaped”, that is, they are code words to indicate the workings of natural causes, be they physical properties, volition or chance. Using this hermeneutic key and applying it “regarding every passage in the way that fits it” as he urges us to do, one arrives at a far less problematic reading of Genesis 1: natural causes are responsible for creation at the sublunar level — effectively what Maimonides calls *maaseh bereshit*, the domains created by the “ten utterances”²⁷ — notwithstanding the implications of direct divine participation denoted by the terms speak and command. The building blocs are formulated in *Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah* (henceforth, *HYhT*) the first book of his encyclopedic *Mishneh Torah* (*MT*). According to *HYhT* 2:3–9 all that God created in His universe fell into three divisions. The most noble of these creations were the incorporeal supernal beings. These beings consisted of Form without Substance and were called

²⁶ Maimonides is likely referring to Saadya.

²⁷ “With ten utterances was the world created” (*mAvot* 5:1), and see Maimonides’ commentary ad loc. Creation writ large, the creation of the cosmos, must remain in some way a miraculous event (*Guide* 2:13–25). I thank the anonymous reader for forcing me to sharpen my conclusion.

Intelligences in the philosophical language of the Middle Ages, while Maimonides called them angels.²⁸ Maimonides identifies each of the ten Intelligences by a biblical name. The Intelligences are ordered hierarchically, with the higher Intelligence being more noble than the immediately lower one; their principal function resides in causing (via a final cause) their accompanying celestial spheres to rotate. These spheres represented the second division; unlike the Intelligences, the spheres possess Form and Substance and retain their Form permanently in their Substance. In this cosmology, the stars are embedded in the rotating spheres. The last of the ten Intelligences, named the Active Intellect²⁹ lies below the lowest sphere, which is the sphere of the moon. Maimonides explains that the Active Intellect is called *Ishim* (men) because it interacts with prophets and their standing is close to that of humans. Unlike the Intelligences and the Spheres, the third division lies below the lunar sphere; it consists of four types of unformed, inert substances, namely, fire, air, water, earth (*HYhY* 3:10–11). These elements take various forms; all sub-lunar creatures and things, including humans, are created through the constant mixing and combining of these elements in various proportions, that is, they are constantly coming into being and decaying, and in that respect, they differ from Spheres.

The [cycle of] change is caused by the revolution of the sphere. Its revolution causes the four [fundamental elements] to combine, and thus forms the bodies of men, living beasts, plants, stones and metals. God gives each body the form appropriate to it through the angels of the tenth [level], which are the form called *ishim*. (*HYhT* 4:6)

While the (rotations of the) Sphere directs the elements to mix and combine and form bodies, God works through the Active Intellect to give these bodies a suitable form. This last statement, however, is correct only up to a point. The more mature author of the *Guide* suggests that it is the Active Intellect that chooses to give form on its own accord; God does not direct nor work through the Active Intellect. In a little noticed and little commented passage in the *Guide* we find Maimonides advancing an extraordinary and novel notion. It is worth quoting it in full:

²⁸ Though the term angel is itself equivocal, see *Guide* 2:7.

²⁹ Davidson noted that the difference between the higher linked Intelligences and the last and lowest intellect is merely a convention; Greek, Arabic and Hebrew have a single word for both terms. *Moses Maimonides, the Man and his Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 540, n.5.

Do not think, however, that the spheres or the intellects [=Intelligences] have the same rank as the other corporeal forces, which are a force of nature and do not apprehend their acts. For the spheres and the intellects apprehend their acts, choose freely, and govern but in a way that is not like free choice and our governance, which deal wholly with things that are produced anew. The *Torah* has by its letter expressed several notions that drew our attention to this ... All this indicates to you that that they apprehend their act and have will and free choice with regard to the governance committed to them, just as we have will with regard to that which from the foundation of our existence has been committed to us and given over to our power. Only we sometimes do things that are more defective than other things, and our governance and our action are preceded by privations; whereas the intellects and the spheres are not like that, but always do that which is good, and only that which is good is with them, as we shall explain in several chapters; and all that they have exists always in perfection and *in actu* since they have come into existence. (*Guide 2:7*)³⁰

Significantly, Maimonides compares the Intelligences' will and free choice to the will of humans. It follows that their will and free choice are as much the causes of acts produced in time — in this case creating forms out of substances— as humans are the causes of such acts. God takes no part in Creation, the universe is naturally created.

It follows that the terms “speak/say” need no longer be reinterpreted, as they were in 1:65. In this new understanding the expressions “God said” or “God spoke” used at Creation should be read in the sense of “as if God said or spoke” and are used by the prophet to “designate the shaping of the causes in whatever way they are shaped”. These terms are so ascribed to God only because He is the First Cause. But, as described earlier, Maimonides held that the First Cause intermitted the process of causation and, as we now see, endowed the Intelligences and the Spheres by derivation, with free choice. It is the Intelligences and the Spheres that caused life to emerge in the sublunar world and it is these supernal beings who instilled free choice in humans and volition

³⁰ Goodman and Lieberman among the few to do so recognize the significance of this contribution: “The exercise of rational choice by the ‘incorporeal intellects’ is critical to Maimonides’ understanding of the agency God gives them.” Much the same can be found in *HYhT* 3:9.

in animals. In short, “God said” or “God spoke” used in connection with Creation is only another way of saying that Creation, too, is a product of natural forces.³¹

Again, but perhaps not lastly, Maimonides’ new hermeneutical insight forces us to pay special attention to one of the most important beliefs in the Jewish credo, the phenomenon of prophecy. It is not its existence that is at stake for that remains firmly a pillar of belief, but the manner by which prophecy is linked to the divine emanation.

It should not come as a surprise that all or most of the five terms singled out by Maimonides are abundantly present in connection with Mosaic prophetic oracles. These terms and their symbolic meaning may, in fact, help us understand in what manner Maimonides thought that Moses’ prophecy was distinct from that of all other prophets.

Let us first review the basic tenets of prophecy as presented by Maimonides in his principal theological expositions. As briefly mentioned earlier, Maimonides advanced the notion that the tenth degree of the Intelligences, denominated the Active Intellect, or *ishim*, are “the angels that commune with the prophets and appear to them in the prophetic vision” (*HYhT* 2:7). In *HYhT* 7:1, Maimonides develops this notion a bit further and says that the Holy Spirit will immediately descend upon a person who prepares himself mentally and morally to receive prophecy (for a detailed list of qualifications see the Halakhah), and “when the Spirit rests upon him, his soul will mingle with the angels called *ishim*.” While the reference to the Holy Spirit is somewhat cryptic (see below), what is clear, though the exact mechanism is not explained, is that the prophet receives the prophetic messages from the overflows of the Active Intellect.

Following various rabbinic traditions, Maimonides states that Moses’ prophecy was distinguished from that of the other prophets in four ways. Of particular interest to us is his description of the second difference. Here is how he formulates it:

All the [other] prophets [receive their prophetic insights] through the medium of an angel. Therefore, they perceive only metamorphic imagery and allegories. Moses, our teacher, [receives his prophetic insight] without the medium of an angel, as (Numbers 12:8) states:

³¹ It should be noted that the long (“the [cycle of] change [proceeds] little by little over the course of time”, *HYhT* 4:5) and complex process of mixing and combining of elements accompanying the emergence of particular classes of creatures and organic life in general as well as their eventual demise and return to constituent elements described in 4:3 and 4:5 live surprisingly well with modern notions of evolution.

Mouth to mouth I speak to him” and (Exodus 33:11) “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face” and (Numbers 12:8) states: “He gazes upon the image of God” - i.e., there was no metaphor. Rather, he would perceive in its fullness without metaphor or allegory. The Torah testifies concerning him (Numbers 12:8) [“I speak to him...] manifestly, without allegory”. His appreciation of prophecy would not be through metaphor, but through open revelation, appreciating the matter in its strength (HYhT 7:6).

It appears from the above that messages received via the angel (the Active Intellect, one is entitled to assume) are not as clear as those received in ways other than through the angel. The problem for the reader is that nowhere in the earlier discussions does Maimonides suggest that the overflow from the Active Intellect is unclear.³² Nor is there any prior mention that there are other ways by which a prophet can receive prophetic messages (see in particular 2:7 and 7:1 cited earlier). The contrast with the manner by which Maimonides formulates this same point in the *Commentary on the Mishnah (CM)* is suggestive: “with regards to every prophet, whoever he may be, God speaks to him only via an angel, with regards to Moses [He speaks to him] directly”. Here, Maimonides indicates that, in contrast to other prophets, God speaks to Moses directly, without the mediation of an angel. It would appear then that the difference between an opaque and a clear prophetic message lies in the manner by which the prophet receives his message: if through an angel, i.e., the Active Intellect, the message is either couched in parabolic fashion, or may come in the form of a riddle. If, by way of contrast, the prophetic message comes to Moses via God directly, the message is clear. While methodologically this solution is not satisfying as it assumes that the MT, written later and assumed to be written with a great deal more of precision and care, is less complete and less consistent than the *CM*, there is something to be gained by comparing these two formulations. Viewing the *HYhT* formulation in the light of the one presented in the *CM*, we note that in *HYhT* Maimonides is careful to avoid mentioning God as the ultimate source. This leads us to conclude that, at this point, Maimonides believes that Moses, too, receives his prophetic messages through an angel rather than directly through God.³³ But what are we to make with the second half of the sentence

³² Kreisel is similarly puzzled by the implications of this statement. See Howard Kreisel, *The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 190. I thank the anonymous reader for referring me to this excellent discussion of prophecy in Maimonides.

³³ Kreisel astutely notes that Maimonides is “not prepared to surrender completely the deliberate ambiguity of his position” (Kreisel 2001, 190) since he formulates his

where Maimonides states that “Moses received his messages not through an angel”? Does angel not mean the Active Intellect? As we shall soon see the answer is no, the term angel does not always stand for Active Intellect.

In *Guide 2:7* Maimonides notes that the word angel is equivocal and that it includes the intellects, the spheres and the elements “inasmuch as all carry orders”. Since none of these meanings offer a better reading in *HYhT 7:6*, a fourth meaning must be sought for in Maimonides’ works. Fortunately, a fourth meaning is suggested in *Guide 2:45* and it is this new meaning that allows him to rephrase and clarify what he left unsaid in *HYhT 7:6*. Here is what he says:

you have counted among the degrees of prophecy the degree in which the prophet hears speech coming from God who addresses him as in the cases of *Isaiah* and *Micaiah*. How can this be in view of the fact that our principle states that all prophets hear speech only through the intermediary of an angel, the sole exception being Moses our Master, of whom it is said: *With him do I speak mouth to mouth* (Num. 12:8). Know then that this is in fact so, and that in these cases the intermediary is the imaginative faculty. For a prophet can hear only *in a dream of prophecy* that God has spoken to him. *Moses our Master*, on the other hand, heard Him *from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim* (Exod. 25:22) without action on the part of the imaginative faculty. We have already set forth in *Mishneh Torah* the peculiarities of this prophecy and have interpreted the meaning of the passages: *Mouth to mouth* (Num. 12:8); *As a man speaketh unto his friend* (Exod. 33:11); and of other passages.

This seemingly disingenuous reference to a previously made statement, now thought to be incorrect or incomplete, with the intention to indicate, despite appearances, continuity of thought does not constitute an exception.³⁴

HYhT 7:6 can now be read as follows: All prophets other than Moses process their prophecy through an angel, i.e., their imagination, while Moses does not. Left unsaid but obvious is that all prophecy, Mosaic and Non-Mosaic, comes

concluding remarks in *HYhH 7:6* in a manner that suggests that Moses conjoined with God, Rock of Ages, instead of “under the Throne” as the way other prophets’ intellect are described as conjoining (7:1).

³⁴ See Albert D. Friedberg, “Maimonides’s Long Journey from Greek to Jewish Ethics,” in *Accounting for the Commandments in Medieval Judaism: Studies in Law, Philosophy, Pietism, and Kabbalah*, ed. Jeremy P. Brown, Marc Herman (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 97–117, here 114.

through the Active Intellect, in keeping with Maimonides' earlier descriptions (2:7, 7:1).³⁵

It is obvious that Maimonides' thinking had evolved between the time he composed the *CM* and the time he composed the *MT* but, with the sole exception of the passage just cited in *Guide* 2:45, Moses' particular prophetic uniqueness was kept a mystery. And so, Maimonides will say in 2:35 that "the term prophet used with reference to Moses and to the others is amphibolous" (2:35, 367), a term denoting that an essential difference exists between the two prophecies but fails to explain the nature of the ambiguity. Again in 2:39 Maimonides is content to merely say that "[we] have made clear that the prophecy of Moses our Master is different from that of the others" but adds no further details. Thanks to his comments in 2:45 we now learn that the essential difference between the two prophecies lies in the intermediation of the imaginative faculty, or the lack of it, in processing the overflow and not in the source of the overflow.³⁶

³⁵ Here I take issue with Levinger (1989). For him, Moses' prophecy is not simply "natural", it is artificial (or, rather, man-made). While the prophetic message is ascribed to God because He granted man the facility to prophesy as we saw, it is Moses' own intellect and imagination, says Levinger, that create legislation, not the overflow from the Active Intellect. I believe there is no other reasonable way to read *Guide* 2:45 than to posit that, for Maimonides, Moses also received the overflow from the Active Intellect. While I did not see it necessary to rely on it in my exposition, the sentence "Moses our Master, on the other hand, heard Him 'from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim' (Exodus 25:22) without action on the part of the imaginative faculty", speaks about an act of hearing/receiving. Kreisel suggests that Moses "did not hear an audible voice at all" and that "hearing" is used figuratively to indicate intellectual apprehension; still, he also maintains that "Moses...received his prophecy from the Active Intellect" (Kreisel 2001, 282; and see his footnote 193 elaborating on the "speech" he heard).

³⁶ Abrabanel finds a further distinction in Maimonides' position between the type of overflow from the Active Intellect coming to the ordinary prophet and that coming to Moses. As summarized by Alvin J. Reines, "...Moses' prophecy is distinguished from ordinary prophecy in two essential ways. First, Moses did not use his imagination in prophesying. The only faculty Moses employed in apprehending prophecy was the intellect, whereas every ordinary prophet found it necessary to use the imagination as well. Second, and more significant, Mosaic prophecy is different in that it consisted of objective knowledge entirely produced by an external source. Ordinary prophetic knowledge, as previously explained, is not received from the Active Intellect, it is produced completely by the prophet's own faculties, the intellect and the imagination. The only functions performed by the Active Intellect relative to ordinary prophecy are the emanation of the form necessary for a perfect intellect and imagination, and the subsequent emanation of the force necessary to actualize the intellect. The intellect and the imagination in turn create ordinary prophecy. But Moses apprehended real

Maimonides' apparent "coyness" may have been due to his fear of devaluing the strongly entrenched traditional belief that Moses the Master spoke to God directly. Or it may simply have been the result of first becoming aware of the role played by the imaginative faculty in prophecy in the discourse of the Islamicate philosophers that he so respected.³⁷

Whatever the reason, the role of the imaginative faculty in the prophetic experience — not discussed in any of the earlier works — makes its first appearance in *Guide* 2:36:

Know that the true reality and quiddity of prophecy consist in its being

'speech' from the Active Intellect, that is, Moses' prophecy was created by the Active Intellect and communicated complete to his intellect. Inasmuch as Moses' prophecy was created by the divine Active Intellect, it consists necessarily of a knowledge that is superior to ordinary prophetic knowledge. For the knowledge of the Active Intellect, a celestial Intelligence, possesses a higher degree of accuracy than does knowledge produced by the human mind, which is the source of ordinary prophecy." I have not been able to find the distinction that Abrabanel makes with regard to the different types of emanations of the Active Intellect on the ordinary prophets nor of the extraordinary idea that their prophecies were produced by their own faculties. This is not alluded to nor even hinted at in *HYhT* 7:6, its reformulation in *Guide* 2:45, or in *Guide* 2:36, quoted below. It would seem that for Abrabanel, the immutability and uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy required a higher degree of knowledge (and an explicit "speech") than that available to ordinary prophets. As I see it, Maimonides speaks of only one type of emanation from the Active Intellect and rests the entire distinction between Mosaic and non-Mosaic prophecy on the existence or non-existence of imagination acting as a medium of communication. Alvin J. Reines, *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1970), lxiii–lxiv.

³⁷ According to Davidson, Alfarabi held that both "prophecy" and the higher level "revelation", consisted in receiving an emanation from the active intellect upon the imaginative faculty, the difference residing however in the respective perfection of their intellect. Those experiencing revelation enjoyed the most perfected state and stood at the stage of acquired intellect. The higher level was, according to Alfarabi, incomparably superior to the lower level. Be that as it may, the imaginative faculty played for Alfarabi a crucial role in both levels of prophetic phenomena. Since there is no mention of the imaginative faculty in Maimonides' earliest writings, we could speculate that he only became aware of its role late in his life. Still, in describing Moses, Maimonides departed from Alfarabi's characterization of the superior man, by denying to Moses even a whiff of imagination. Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 59–61. Kreisel suggests that Maimonides steered a middle course between Alfarabi's two approaches and conflated them, and that Alfarabi provided him with "the basis for distinguishing Mosaic prophecy from non-Mosaic" (Kreisel 2001, 242–46).

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 for the imaginative faculty.

Bear in mind that this description is meant to apply to ordinary prophets only for, as we were told, Maimonides will not speak about Moses.

The reader will note that, in this description, the Active Intellect merely acts as a conduit between God and the prophet. Coming close to this notion but not exactly so, we find in *HYhT* 7:1 that the Holy Spirit (*ruah haqodesh*) envelops the prophet-to-be and, and while so enveloped, the prophet's soul achieves union with the Active Intellect. There is no indication, however, that the Holy Spirit speaks to him through the Active Intellect. The term used to describe God is אל, precisely as in the opening of the Halacha (שהאל מנבא את בני אדם) and not Holy Spirit, which Maimonides defines as a “divine help that moves and activates him to a great, righteous and important action” or a force that comes upon him “and has made him speak so that he talks in wise sayings...”.³⁸ It's difficult to fathom what precisely Maimonides had in mind here other than perhaps indicating stages of ascent: first he is enveloped by the Holy Spirit and then he begins to receive the prophetic message from the Active Intellect. Nowhere else in the MT or in the *Guide*, to the best of my knowledge, do we find even a hint that the Active Intellect acts as a conduit between God and the prophet. While there is no doubting of what Maimonides says in this passage with respect to the role of God in prophecy, the proposition could not well reflect his final position since, as we already saw earlier, Maimonides had told us that the Intelligences enjoy free will. The Intelligences' choices can therefore be said to be the proximate causes of the prophetic overflow. And because of their free will it follows that their action, as the actions of humans in the sublunar region, are similarly (divinely) unconstrained. Furthermore, since the Intelligences are the proximate causes of the overflow, prophecy is a naturalistic phenomenon — from the recipient's side, as we have always known, as well as from the donor side. God's involvement is merely by way of His original decision at Creation to grant free will to these supernal beings. To recapitulate, all prophecy, Mosaic and non-Mosaic, originates from the overflow of the Active Intellect. The difference between

³⁸ See his discussion of the Holy Spirit in *Guide* 2:45, 396–400; there is no hint there that the prophet is required to go through the stage of being enveloped by the Holy Spirit to attain the higher degrees of prophecy.

Moses and the rest of the prophets is that Moses receives the prophetic message through the rational faculty and communicates it in that fashion; the rest of the prophets receive their message by way of their rational faculties but then transfer these to the imaginative faculty. Therefore, Moses' prophecy is absolutely clear while that of the other prophets is not, prophecy is "seen" by them in the form of parables and riddles. This is then the true meaning of the countless instances of the expression "And God spoke to Moses" and other similar such expressions and it represents one of the striking lessons of *Guide* 2:48.

Let me make a few general remarks. *Guide* 2:48 contains much that is new in Maimonides' already rich theological and exegetical oeuvre. We find here the master reading what he wants Scripture to say, totally unconstrained by linguistic canons. He no longer needs to justify the meaning of certain terms under the cover of presumed equivocality. He has already expressed satisfaction that Scripture is best read in its plain sense; this is the significance of the Torah spoken in the language of man, as he explained in 1:26.³⁹ There is no need to give terms a figurative, more abstract, or even philosophical meaning to anthropomorphic terms, the plain sense is what the early Israelites needed to hear. Discussing Scripture's philosophically problematic ascription of speech to God in Genesis 1 to explain the Works of Creation, Maimonides offers the following justification: "Thus the minds of people are rightly guided toward the view that there is a divine science apprehended by the prophets in consequence of God's speaking to them and telling it to them so that we should know that the notions transmitted by them from God to us are not, as shall be made clear, mere products of their thought and insight."⁴⁰ The simplicity of this explanation far outdoes the more philosophically "acceptable" reinterpretations he offers later, such as for example, rendering "He wished" for *He said*. Liberated from this corset, *Guide* 2:48 suggests that certain frequently used anthropomorphic terms need to be read in the sense of "as if" to signify God's role as the ultimate First Cause and as the grantor of freedom to Creation.

Maimonides' naturalistic stance, as suggested in this chapter, is radical by the standards of all religious thinkers of his day and clashes with a great deal of what is found in rabbinic exegesis and dogma. This stance has been well recognized and discussed, in particular his description of the messianic times, a

³⁹ See my article "Maimonides on Scriptural Anthropomorphisms: It Is What It Is," a paper I delivered at the XVth International Congress of SIEPM, August 22–26th, 2022 (to be published in the forthcoming conference volume).

⁴⁰ *Guide* 1:65, 158.

time, he says, brought about by the active participation of human beings.⁴¹ The rabbis, by contrast, have always viewed history as moving toward a foreordained end, guided by Divine fiat. “The teleology of Israel’s life finds its definition in eschatological fulfillment. Eschatology therefore constitutes not a choice within teleology, but the definition of teleology. In other words, a theory of the goal and purpose of things (teleology) is shaped solely by appeal to the account of the end of time (eschatology)”.⁴² By dealing effectively with all that is produced in time — and therefore what becomes part of history — Maimonides closes the circle, so to speak, allowing no exceptions to his naturalistic stance encapsulated by the refrain *olam keminhago holekh*.⁴³ He does so by assigning accidental or chance occurrences, the types of events that frequently changed the course of Israel’s history — as did the descent of Joseph and his family to Egypt or the finding of Rebecah for a wife to the patriarch Isaac— to the same category as those of natural events and events arising out of the free exercise of human will. These events, as he sees them in our chapter, follow a natural course and are free of Divine intervention; and without Divine guidance there is no particular end toward which events move.

Maimonides’ categoric characterization of certain biblical terms that he lists in 2:48 helps us discover — perhaps a better word would be “anchor” — his genuine views, often hidden to safeguard the multitudes’ adherence to religion. Moses’ legislative activities are a case in point: did God dictate word for word the Law to Moses, who acted as no more than a faithful scribe, as described in the eight principle of faith, or did Moses legislate “on his own” as consequence of his highly refined intellect conjoining with the Active Intellect, fully in accordance with a naturalistic model?⁴⁴ Many other such examples can no doubt be found. How is one to fit in this scheme reward and punishment and the occurrence of miracles are matters that need to be addressed. But quite obviously, these matters did not seem to disturb the master, reinterpretation was always possible. A final word. Maimonides’ universe, with its total freedom of action,

⁴¹ See for example “Maimonides on the Messianic Era: The Grand Finale of Olam ke-Minhago Noheg”, by James A. Diamond in *Hakirah: Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* 32 (2022): 41–64, here 54–57, 62 and passim.

⁴² Jacob Neusner, William S. Green (eds.), *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), s. v. history, p. 295.

⁴³ “The world runs its normal course” bt Avodah Zarah 54b. In Maimonides’ writings it appears on a number of occasions, among them: *EC*, ch.8, in *Haqdamot ha-Rambam le-Mishnah*, translated and annotated by Y. Sheilat (Maalyot 1992), 251; “Iggeret Tehiyat ha-Metim,” in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, with a commentary of Y. Sheilat (Maaliyot 1987), 362; *Hilkhot Melachim*, 12:1.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kreisel 2001, 261, and see footnote 152.

What's New in Guide 2:48?

at the same time as it places greater responsibility on the shoulders of its actors, permits a much grander appreciation of divine transcendence. And it is perhaps this appreciation that drove Maimonides to postulate such a radical reading.