

## MAIMONIDES' CONCEPT OF MIRACLES

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MAIMONIDES' concept of miracles, judged from appearances, occupies a relatively unimportant place in the religious philosophy he presents in the *Moreh Nevukhim*.<sup>1</sup> Considering the prominence in the *Moreh* of discussions devoted to God, creation, prophecy, providence and salvation, seemingly little significance is attached to miracles. Such a judgment though would be erroneous. No subject in the *Moreh* is of greater consequence or more pervasive than that of miracles. It is rooted in the concept of God, and touches every other principal theme. Maimonides' concept of miracles is important not only for comprehending his total religious philosophy, but also for evaluating his coherence as a thinker. The treatment of miracles in the *Moreh* presents the reader with a disconnected mélange of diverse statements. It is true that the *Moreh* is a document intended to present an interpretation of Judaism that is to be kept secret from the philosophically uneducated masses, and that such an esoteric work will, of necessity, contain contrived obscurity.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even taking this factor into account, Maimonides' treatment of miracles might still convey the impression of an author whose emotional and character inadequacies overcame his intellect, resulting in a religious philosophy of unintegrated eclecticism in which rationalistic and naturalistic philosophic concepts are arbitrarily joined to nonrationalistic and supernaturalistic scriptural concepts.<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, consequently, owing to human frailty, would thus be judged as having failed to solve the essential problem he set himself in the *Moreh*: to demonstrate there is

1 The *Moreh Nevukhim* will henceforth be referred to in the text as the *Moreh* and in the notes as *MN*. The following translations have been used: S. Munk, *Le Guide des Égarés* (Paris, 1856); and S. Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago, 1963). These translations have been altered when deemed necessary for general comprehension. But, by and large, the quotations are from the translation by Pines. M. Friedländer's *The Guide of the Perplexed* is more a paraphrase than a translation and is employed as the former.

2 See Maimonides' Introduction to Part I of the *MN*.

3 Cf., e.g., the criticism of I. Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Philadelphia, 1946), pp. 274–276.

a religion named Judaism that coherently embraces the truths of Scripture and philosophy.<sup>4</sup> In the following study, the position is developed that Maimonides' concept of miracles, although tortuous and complex, is nonetheless ultimately consistent with the basic Maimonidean rationalistic religious philosophy. The study is divided into four parts: Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles; qualifications and contradictions relating to the apparent concept leading to Maimonides' real concept of miracles; the method of nonessentialization; reconciliation and the esoteric teaching.

## I

Maimonides provides no discussion in the *Moreh* devoted exclusively or primarily to the subject of miracles.<sup>5</sup> In the second part of the *Moreh*, however, a concept of miracles emerges as part of a general theology of creationism.<sup>6</sup> This concept of miracles will be referred to as Maimonides' "apparent concept of miracles." The reason for this designation is that the concept is stated in such a manner as to give the impression that it is Maimonides' true view of miracles, whereas examination of other, less obvious passages in the *Moreh*, requires that this impression be subjected to fundamental reassessment.<sup>7</sup> To define the apparent concept of miracles, it is necessary to begin with the theology of creationism upon which it is based.

This theology of creationism<sup>8</sup> comes not only as a discourse on Maimonides' view of cosmogony, but as a critique as well of the Aristotelian theology of eternalism,<sup>9</sup> and, to a lesser extent, of the Platonic theology

4 Critically considered, there are a number of different religious systems that go by the name "Judaism." What is meant here by Judaism is Maimonidean Judaism, which is the religion taught in Scripture and the Talmud as Maimonides interprets them. Maimonides does not understand his work to be a synthesis of Judaism and philosophy, rather an explanation that shows Judaism already contains the truths of philosophy.

5 As he does, e.g., in the cases of prophecy, providence, etc.

6 *MN*, II, 13–25. This is followed by an epilogue of sorts, 26–29, in which Maimonides argues that the universe, although created, is eternal *a parte post*. In this Judaism agrees with Aristotle. Judaism's disagreement with Aristotle is that he also maintains the eternity of the universe *a parte ante*. The term "creationism" refers to *creatio ex nihilo*. The expression "preexistent creationism" is used to refer to creation of the universe from a preexistent matter.

7 H.A. Wolfson, "Hallevi and Maimonides on Design, Chance and Necessity," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XI (1941), p. 161, takes what is termed here "Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles" as Maimonides' real concept of miracles.

8 I.e., the theory of creationism in *MN*, II, 13–25. Maimonides presents alternative cosmogonies as will appear in the course of this study.

9 Not only Aristotle, but various Aristotelian schools are included in this critique; *MN*, II, 13 (third opinion).

of preexistent creationism.<sup>10</sup> In the Aristotelian theology, God and universe are both conceived of as eternal. No creative or emergent innovative change in existence ever occurs. Deity never changes at all. It is impossible for deity to become nonexistent or for his essence or will to change; neither can a new volition arise within him. The universe as a whole does not change, although there are local changes within the totality. The individual spheres that together with the Intelligences constitute the heavens move repetitively but never go out of existence; motion and time are eternal; and the sublunar world is constituted of prime matter that produces transient individuals by taking on successive new forms, but the matter and forms are themselves all eternal. Moreover, even regarding the change that does take place in the universe there is an unchangeable aspect, in that all change occurs in accordance with the immutable laws of nature. Existence, for Aristotle, therefore, "is never disturbed or interrupted, and nothing is produced contrary to the laws or the ordinary course of nature;" existence "has always been the same in the past, and will be the same eternally."<sup>11</sup> In the Platonic theology, deity is conceived of as eternal, but the universe is viewed as created. God, however, cannot produce existence *ex nihilo*; the universe, therefore, was created from a preexisting matter that is itself eternal. Creative and emergent innovative change, consequently, has occurred in the past and can occur in the future. Deity has the power to destroy the present heavens and earth, and bring new beings into existence. Still, God cannot annihilate the underlying eternal matter, and it must, of necessity, be used to constitute any new universe He may wish to fashion.<sup>12</sup>

In opposition to the Aristotelian and Platonic views, Maimonides sets forth a theology of creationism that vigorously asserts a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. God alone has existed from eternity. Nothing has coexisted eternally with Him: neither the Intelligences and spheres; bodies such as the stars embedded in the spheres; nor first matter, motion, and time.<sup>13</sup> Beyond the power of eternal existence, God possesses free will and wisdom.<sup>14</sup> Since God is a perfect simplicity, His essence, will, and wisdom are one. In the course of His eternal duration, out of His wisdom and by His free choice, God willed the creation of the universe. We do not know why God's wisdom decided to create the universe at one time rather than another, but regardless, the will to create produced no change in God even though He created after not creating. God can will different

10 Plato is the chief exponent of this view, according to Maimonides, but he includes everyone generally who takes this position; *MN*, II, 13 (second opinion).

11 *MN*, II, 13. Friedländer (supra, n. 1), Part II, p. 66.

12 *MN*, II, 13.

13 *MN*, II, 13, 17.

14 *MN*, II, 13; S. Munk (supra, n. 1), Part II, p. 105.

things at different times without occasioning a change in His essence.<sup>15</sup> The creation of the universe with wisdom means God acted intentionally, with purpose and by design.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, God created the universe from absolute nonexistence. For free creation by design presupposes not only that deity has a choice of creating the universe or not, but a choice as well of creating the universe according to alternative designs. Action by design can only take place with respect to something that does not yet exist, and which may exist in alternate ways.<sup>17</sup> The universe as it is, therefore, does not exist of necessity, but as the free choice of God's wisdom deciding among alternatives.

The principle of free creation by design is the fundamental issue dividing Maimonides from the Aristotelians. In their theology of eternalism, the Aristotelians maintain that every event in the universe is caused by deity according to natural necessity. God himself may be understood to be subject to the determinism of the laws of nature.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, since existence for the Aristotelians is the result of necessity rather than design, the universe must exist, and it must exist eternally in exactly the way it does in fact exist.

It is the evident result of the system of Aristotle—as well as the system of all who profess the eternity of the world—that according to him the universe has proceeded from the Creator by necessity; that He is the cause and this world the effect, and it was necessary that this should be so . . . . For it is necessary that all this exist thus, both cause and effect, and it is impossible for them not to exist or to change from the way they exist. It follows then from this opinion that everything must always keep the nature that it has, and nothing can change its nature in any way. According to this opinion, a change of the nature of some existing thing is impossible, and consequently, no thing has come into existence by the design of a being possessing intention who has chosen freely that all things should be as they are. For if they had come into existence by such a design, they would not have existed in the manner they do before the design had been decided upon.<sup>19</sup>

Deity, therefore, according to Aristotle, cannot bring about any deviation or innovation in the natural order: “if He wished to lengthen a fly's wing or shorten an insect's foot, He could not do it.”<sup>20</sup>

15 *MN*, II, 18.

16 *MN*, II, 19, 21. Cf. Wolfson (supra, n. 7), p. 129.

17 *MN*, II, 20.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *MN*, II, 19; cf. Munk (supra, n. 1), II, 145, n. 2.

20 *MN*, II, 22.

The creation of the universe, Maimonides says, took place over a period of time rather than instantaneously. During this period, two different systems of causation, both originating in God and producing effects external to Him, came into existence. The primary system is causation in which deity by a free act of creation produces the effect either directly or through nonnatural intermediation.<sup>21</sup> The secondary system is causation in which nature or the laws of nature produce the effect. The secondary system of natural causation was itself produced by the primary system when God created the universe of which nature is part. Thus the events produced by the secondary system of natural causation are equally willed by God as are those resulting directly or through non-natural intermediation from the primary system. In view of the fundamental relationship both these systems of causation have to the deity, the primary system of free creation by deity may be referred to as the special will of God, and the secondary system, natural causation, the general will of God.<sup>22</sup>

From the time the process of the creation of the universe out of absolute nonexistence was begun until it was completed, the special will of God, rather than natural causation, was in control of its emerging existence. Events, therefore, that would be considered impossible when judged by natural necessity may be considered to have occurred generally before the creation of the universe was completed.<sup>23</sup> Among these naturally impossible events, Maimonides refers to the following: God “by His free will brought into existence out of nothing all the beings as they are;”<sup>24</sup> and the “heaven was generated out of nothing after a state of absolute nonexistence.”<sup>25</sup> Even beings that in nature must exist in an organic unity and cannot exist independently could do so in the interim period before creation was completed:<sup>26</sup> “It is not absurd for us if someone

21 In the primary system of causation it would seem that *creatio ex nihilo* is always involved since the will of God alone is the essential cause of the effect. On the other hand, in natural causation every effect is produced by or originates in some natural object or condition.

22 In *MN*, II, 10, Maimonides equates “nature” with אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי, “the divine thing.” Pines (supra, n. 1) provides the translation “divine decree” as an alternative, p. 272, n. 11; and Friedländer (supra, n. 1) has “Divine Will.” The essential point is that for Maimonides deity wills the action of nature.

23 Maimonides takes the position that the state of the universe during the period of its creation cannot be judged from the properties it has after creation has been completed, *MN*, II, 17.

24 *MN*, II, 13.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Cf. *MN*, I, 72, “It is impossible that one part of the universe should exist independently of the other parts in the existing order of things . . . The earth without the heaven, or the heaven without the earth”; tr. Friedländer (supra, n. 1) I, p. 298; and cf. n. 4.

says that the heavens were generated before the earth or the earth before the heavens, or that the heavens have existed without stars or that a particular species of animals has existed without another species being in existence. For all this applies to the period when this universe was being formed.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the primary system of causation, God’s free action, continues to be the ground of natural causation even after the universe has been established, so that God, therefore, if He chooses can annihilate the universe and the laws of nature that govern its existence whenever He pleases to do so.<sup>28</sup>

Despite Maimonides’ forceful exposition of his theology of creationism,<sup>29</sup> he concedes there is no more real proof for his position than there is for Aristotle’s theology of eternalism. “To our mind, it has been established that regarding the question whether the heavens were created or are eternal, neither of these two contrary hypotheses can be demonstrated.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, in his exposition, Maimonides’ purpose was not to refute Aristotelian eternalism and prove his own view exclusively true, but to make a case on rational and empirical grounds for creationism as an equally if not more acceptable cosmogonic theory. It is unnecessary in this study to enter into the details of the philosophic arguments Maimonides employs. Briefly stated, Maimonides takes a twofold approach: he first attempts to undermine the Aristotelian arguments against creation out of nothing, and he then attempts to show that creation by design provides a superior explanation of the heavenly phenomena revealed by astronomical observation.

The arguments of the Aristotelians against creation out of nothing are all based on the present natural characteristics and laws of the universe. Maimonides contends, however, that these existing natural properties themselves were produced from nonexistence, and their present condition therefore provides no certain evidence for the state of affairs that existed before their creation. A being created from nothing, such as the universe, can be given properties from which it may be indubitably inferred that the being is eternal; but this certainty comes because the possibility has not been entertained that the being and its properties were created out of nothing, and any evidence derived from it about its origins, therefore, cannot be accepted as certain.

Aristotle begins to contradict us and argues from the nature of existence that has attained a final and perfect state, and has achieved

27 *MN*, II, 17.

28 *MN*, II, 27. It is Maimonides’ view, however, that God will not choose to annihilate the universe.

29 As presented in *MN*, II, 13–25.

30 *MN*, II, 22; cf. 15, 17.

actuality; whereas we, we declare to him that after existence has attained its final state and become perfect it does not at all resemble the state it was in at the time of being generated, and that it has been produced from absolutely nothing . . . . If Aristotle, I mean to say someone who adopts his opinion, should argue against us saying: “If no proof can be derived from this universe,<sup>31</sup> then how do you know that it has been created and that there is another (divine) nature (i.e., God<sup>32</sup>) who has created it?” We would respond: “This does not relate at all to our true purpose. We do not wish at this time to prove as true that the universe has been created. Rather that which we wish to show is that it is possible that it has been created; and this assertion cannot be proved false by argumentation from the nature of that which exists . . . . When the possibility of this assertion has been established, as we have made clear, we will then seek to show the superiority of the opinion of creation.”<sup>33</sup>

Maimonides’ efforts to show the “superiority of the opinion of creation” are based primarily on two groups of astronomical phenomena that he claims free creation by design explains more satisfactorily than does eternalism.<sup>34</sup> The first group of astronomical phenomena concerns the spheres: a) the outermost sphere moves from east to west; b) some spheres move with greater velocity than others; c) there are several spheres for each of the planets, but only one sphere for the great number of fixed stars. The second group of astronomical phenomena concern the stars: a) stars are very different bodies from the spheres in which they are embedded; b) stars exist only in the eighth sphere—they are all spherical but vary in size; c) the stars are distributed unevenly in the sphere—many are gathered together in some parts of the sphere, a few in another part, and still another part of the sphere has no stars. Maimonides’ critique of Aristotle’s eternalism is basically this. According to Aristotle’s theology of eternalism, the only system of causation is natural causation in which all phenomena are regulated by the laws of nature. In dealing with the astronomical phenomena described above, however, Aristotle has failed to explain the various facts they present in the co-

31 I.e., what proof can man have except from this universe? Maimonides himself admits that proof for the existence of God must come from existing things, *MN*, I, 76.

32 Cf. Munk (supra, n. 1), II, 137, n. 2.

33 *MN*, II, 17. I have juxtaposed two passages from different parts of chapter 17 in this quotation to bring out their meaning more clearly.

34 These arguments are taken from *MN*, II, 19, in which Maimonides declares that the arguments given here from the spheres and the stars provide “the best proof for design in the universe.” In II, 24, Maimonides provides additional argumentation for creation by design.

herent, systematic way that an explanation based upon natural causation requires. He cannot account acceptably for the direction in which the spheres move, for their different velocities, or for the distribution of planets and stars to spheres. Similarly, there are no rational answers given to the problems raised by the stars: how the union of such different bodies as the stars and spheres came about; why the stars are so numerous in the eighth sphere; why in a uniform body such as a sphere one portion has many stars and another none, while some stars are large and others small.

Maimonides argues, consequently, that inasmuch as the astronomical questions that have been raised cannot be answered by a cosmogony of eternalism such as Aristotle proposes, it should be replaced by a cosmogony of creationism which can. The difficulty with eternalism is that it allows for only one system of causation, natural causation, which is unable to provide a coherent explanation of the heavens. If we assume with Aristotle that everything is necessarily caused by God according to the laws of nature, and no natural explanation of the heavens is acceptable, then we are left without any coherent explanation of the super-lunar world at all. A cosmogony of creationism, however, provides an opportunity for explanation because it asserts two causal systems operative in the universe, free creation by design, the special will of God, and natural causation, the general will. In the case of the heavens, when the natural explanation fails, the special will of God still remains as a consistent theory accounting for the astronomical irregularities that have been observed. To the questions regarding the spheres, Maimonides says, the answer may be given "that there is a being (God) who has determined as it wishes the direction and rapidity of motion (of each sphere)." Similarly, the answer to the problems relating to the stars is that "it all is due to the design of a being (God) acting with intention who made it thus." The only difficulty that then remains is that we cannot know what the wisdom or design of God might have been in making the spheres and stars as they are.<sup>35</sup>

In the course of his exposition on cosmogony in chapters thirteen through twenty-five (Part II) of the *Moreh*, Maimonides gives four principal reasons for accepting his theory of creationism over eternalism. The most prominent of these has been discussed. This is that creationism is a philosophic theory superior to eternalism in that creationism offers a coherent explanation of various astronomical irregularities that are left unaccounted for by eternalism. Still, despite the elaborate argumentation

<sup>35</sup> *MN*, II, 19. The contents of the preceding paragraphs constitute generally a selective conceptual reconstruction of II, 19, to show its relation to Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles.

he presents, Maimonides is careful to state that philosophically speaking he has neither proved creationism nor disproved eternalism.<sup>36</sup> He has simply made three points: a) that creationism is not rationally impossible; b) that the arguments against creationism are inconclusive; c) that certain physical phenomena are better explained by creationism than by eternalism, which by no means establishes creationism as correct however.<sup>37</sup> So far as philosophic speculation is concerned, therefore, the question of creationism or eternalism remains open, with either opinion possible.<sup>38</sup> Thus lacking philosophic proof, Maimonides offers three other reasons for subscribing to creationism. These are that prophets such as Moses and Abraham held and taught creationism; creationism is a fundamental principle of the Mosaic religion; and finally, a belief in eternalism tends to be dangerous and harmful for the proper belief that should be held regarding God.<sup>39</sup>

Without entering into the details of Maimonides' concept of prophecy, the significance of his statement that the teachings of the prophets may be taken as a reason for accepting creationism is this.<sup>40</sup> For Maimonides, metaphysical or theological knowledge<sup>41</sup> can be attained in two ways, through philosophy or prophecy. Both use reason, but differ in their methods. Philosophy employs the common epistemological procedures of empirical observation, intuition such as is used ordinarily in apprehending first principles, and syllogistic reasoning. Prophets do not employ these procedures to acquire their knowledge even though they are aware of them inasmuch as a mastery of philosophy is a prerequisite of prophecy. Prophetic knowledge is apprehended immediately in a special act of intuitive reasoning essentially different from ordinary intuition.<sup>42</sup> Since prophetic knowledge is grasped immediately, there are no intermediate steps leading to the prophet's conclusions that can be communicated to others so that they might retrace the prophet's thinking and thereby assent to the prophet's conclusions on the basis of their own reasoning.<sup>43</sup> The nonprophet simply must accept the prophet's word for

<sup>36</sup> *MN*, II, 16, 22.

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

<sup>38</sup> *MN*, II, 16.

<sup>39</sup> *MN*, II, 16, 22.

<sup>40</sup> See A.J. Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," *HUCA*, XL-XLI (1969-1970), pp. 338-344.

<sup>41</sup> I.e., prophecy provides theological knowledge equally as rational as that of philosophy; prophecy simply includes the truths of philosophy and goes further because it is a superior rationality. Cf. A. J. Reines, *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy* (Cincinnati, 1970), pp. xxxv-xliv.

<sup>42</sup> See Reines (*supra*, n. 40), p. 341, n. 51.

<sup>43</sup> Maimonides, in *MN*, II, 40, recognizing the inability to verify a prophet's teaching per se, attempts to provide visible grounds for judging whether someone is a prophet, as, e.g., by his moral conduct.

what he claims to be true. *Creatio ex nihilo*, according to Maimonides, is a belief that can be arrived at rationally only by prophetic intuition.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, he says, inasmuch as philosophic reasoning is inconclusive regarding the ultimate questions of cosmogony, we should accept a belief in creationism on the authority of the prophet's teachings since they achieved a level of rational knowledge far superior to our own.

We arrive then at the other two nonphilosophic reasons Maimonides offers for accepting creationism: that it is a fundamental belief of Mosaic religion; and that a belief in eternalism is dangerous for proper belief regarding deity. Integral to these two points is the view of miracles that has been termed Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles. Maimonides' full reasoning is best examined in relation to the text of chapter twenty-five (Part II) of the *Moreh*, which is the capstone of the theology of creationism he has developed in the preceding chapters.

Know that our avoiding the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been created. For the texts indicating that the world has been created are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation closed to us or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.

Two causes are responsible for our not doing this or believing it. One of them is as follows. That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its literal meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively, for it is known that such texts are of necessity subject to figurative interpretation. However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated . . . .

The second cause is as follows. Our belief that the deity is not a body destroys for us none of the foundations of our religion and does not give the lie to that which has been proclaimed by the prophets. The only objection to it is constituted by the fact that the ignorant think that this belief is contrary to the text (of Scripture); yet it is not contrary to it, as we have explained, but is intended by the text. On the other hand, the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it—that is, the belief according to which the

world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything—destroys the base of religion, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and repudiates all that religion makes us hope and fear, unless—by God!—one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic allegorists; this, however, would result in some sort of absurdities.

If, however, one believed in eternity according to the second opinion we have explained—which is the opinion of Plato—according to which the heavens too are subject to generation and corruption, this opinion would not destroy the foundations of religion and would not be followed by the lie being given to miracles, but by their becoming admissible. It would also be possible to interpret figuratively the texts in accordance with this opinion . . . . However, no necessity could impel us to do this unless this opinion were demonstrated. In view of the fact that it has not been demonstrated, we shall not favor this opinion, nor shall we at all heed that other opinion, but rather shall take the texts according to their literal sense and shall say: Religion<sup>45</sup> has given us knowledge of a matter the grasp of which is not within our power, and the miracle attests to the correctness of our claims.<sup>46</sup>

Know that with a belief in the creation of the world, all the miracles become possible and (the Revelation of) the Law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish. Thus it might be said: Why did God give this Law to this particular nation, and why did He not legislate to the others? Why did He legislate at this particular time, and why did He not legislate before it or after? Why did He impose these commandments and these prohibitions? Why did He privilege the prophet with the miracles mentioned in relation to him and not with some others? What was God's aim in giving this Law? Why did He not, if such was His purpose, put the accomplishment of the commandments and the nontransgression of the prohibitions into our nature? If this were said, the answer to all these questions would be that it would be said: He wanted it this way; or His wisdom required it this way. And just as He brought the world into existence, having the form it has, when He wanted to, without our knowing His will

45 The term *אלשריעה*, which is here translated "religion," has the basic meaning in the *MN* of a religion that is constituted of a revelation of the divine will in the form of commandments expressed as law, and refers usually to the Mosaic law. In different contexts, for the purpose of clarity, *אלשריעה* has been translated as "religion" or "Law." It is also what is meant by the term "Mosaic religion."

46 Friedländer (*supra*, n. 1), II, p. 119, n. 4 explains that "the miracle" here attests to eternalism being incompatible with the teaching of the Bible. This appears incorrect. Maimonides is saying rather that miracles attest to the correctness of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is the knowledge religion has given us.

44 See Reines (*supra*, n. 40), pp. 345 f.; cf. II, 24, also Munk (*supra*, n. 1), II, pp. 194 f., n. 4.

with regard to this, or what the wisdom was that particularly made him choose the forms of the world and the time of its creation—in the same way we do not know His will or the requirement of His wisdom that caused all the matters, about which questions have been posed above, to be determined. If, however, someone says that the world is as it is in virtue of necessity, it would be a necessary obligation to ask all those questions; and there would be no way out of them except through recourse to unseemly answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the literal meanings (of the texts) of the Law with regard to which no intelligent man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their literal meanings. It is then because of this that this opinion is avoided and that the lives of virtuous men have been and will be spent in investigating this question. For if creation were demonstrated—if only as Plato understands creation—all the rash claims made against us on this point by the philosophers would become void. In the same way, if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity as Aristotle understands it, religion as a whole would become void, and a change to other opinions would take place, I have thus explained to you that everything is bound up with this problem. Know this.<sup>47</sup>

Analyzing the contents of chapter twenty-five, we find Maimonides lays down the general principle that Mosaic religion requires the affirmation of a theology of creationism and the rejection of eternalism. In eternalism, God is subject to the laws of nature, and as a consequence, no nonnatural event has ever occurred or can ever occur. If this were the case, says Maimonides, then three beliefs basic to Judaism, would be false. These beliefs are: the revelation of the Law; the miracles reported in Scripture; and providence, which brings the hope of reward or the fear of punishment according as man obeys God's commandments.<sup>48</sup> Since these three beliefs must be rejected if eternalism and its necessary naturalism are true, we may conclude that revelation, miracles, and providence are all nonnatural events.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, Mosaic relig-

47 *MN*, II, 25.

48 The phrase "all that religion makes us hope and fear" refers to the rewards and punishments dispensed by divine providence.

49 It is possible to consider all events produced by God outside nature as miracles, so that prophecy and providence produced nonnaturally would then be miracles. However, Maimonides distinguishes miracles proper from nonnatural prophecy and providence. Miracles proper refer generally to a change of some physical power or property by an interruption of the laws of nature. However, it should be borne in mind that the analysis of chapter 25 presented here does not provide us with the true meaning of the chapter, but one that gives us Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles. According to the apparent concept of

ion presupposes a theology of creationism in which God by His special will brings the universe and laws of nature into existence *ex nihilo*, and who can, therefore, suspend these laws or otherwise produce nonnatural events as He wishes. Moreover, creationism provides a basis for justifying the claim that Mosaism is the supreme religion. The supremacy of Mosaism is based upon a series of unique circumstances: that the law was revealed to a particular prophet; to a particular people; and that this Law has been revealed only once, and never again, before or after.<sup>50</sup> None of these circumstances can be explained by the naturalism of eternalism. In the eternity of natural causation there is no uniqueness; all events that have been produced in the infinite past can occur in the infinite future again. If a revelation of knowledge such as came to Moses was produced naturally, then equal or even superior knowledge could come to someone else. Moreover, how can a naturalism account rationally for the particular commands and prohibitions the Law imposed; and (if miracles are naturally possible) why are only certain miracles ascribed to any given prophet? Furthermore, what, according to a naturalism, would be the divine purpose in producing the Mosaic religion; and if nature wanted us to follow Moses' commandments, why were they not simply made part of human nature? None of these difficulties appears, says Maimonides, in a theology of creationism. For the answer to all these questions that are naturally inexplicable is that God, who by His wisdom freely created the universe with a certain form and at a certain time for reasons we are unable to understand, also freely willed all these particular events. Thus the full significance of Maimonides' two final reasons for insisting upon creationism is clear. Creationism is a fundamental belief of Mosaic religion because the uniqueness and truth of Judaism are based upon it. And eternalism is dangerous for proper belief regarding deity because, in addition to all else, it removes from God the power of exercising supernatural providence, which frees the masses from the fear of divine punishment that helps to keep their brutish and lustful appetites under social control.<sup>51</sup>

The foundations of Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles are an integral part of the theology of creationism that appears in the foregoing discussion. Still, an explicit description remains to be stated. A miracle, according to Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles, is an event that

miracles then, this chapter speaks of three nonnatural events, miracles proper, prophecy, and providence. See *infra*, pp. 281 ff. for the true meaning of chapter 25.

50 On the reasoning that only nonnaturalism could make the revelation of the Law unique, see Reines (*supra*, n. 41), pp. 25 f.

51 I.e., the connotation of "dangerous" for proper belief regarding deity is that the common people will not fear divine providence and consequently behave in a way dangerous for society.

is produced by the special will of God, who, having created the universe *ex nihilo*, has the power to bring into existence without natural causation whatever He wishes and to suspend or otherwise interrupt natural causation wherever and whenever He pleases. Furthermore, according to the apparent concept of miracles, nonnatural events are of two kinds: miracles proper, which occur once or for a limited period of time, and usually produce changes in the natural properties of physical objects;<sup>52</sup> and such ongoing or repetitive events as prophecy and providence.<sup>53</sup> Finally, according to the apparent concept of miracles, all the miracles reported in Scripture are to be understood as having literally occurred.<sup>54</sup>

Several references are made by Maimonides to miracles that illustrate the apparent concept of miracles and serve to strengthen the impression that this concept represents his true view. Regarding the signs Moses employed to establish his authenticity as a prophet of Yahveh, Maimonides states:

I have said that a thing does not change its nature in such a way that the change is permanent merely in order to be cautious with regard to the miracles. For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, and the pure and noble hand became white without a natural cause that necessitated this,<sup>55</sup> these and similar things were not permanent and did not become another nature. But as they, may their memory be blessed, say: The world goes its customary way.<sup>56</sup>

Maimonides takes the appearance of manna as one of the greatest miracles:

It is well known that it is impossible and inconceivable that a miracle last permanently throughout the succession of generations so that all men can see it. Now one of the miracles of the Law, and one of the greatest among them, is the sojourn of Israel for forty years in the desert and the finding of the manna there every day. For that desert was, as is stated in Scripture, a place "wherein were serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where there was no water."<sup>57</sup> Those are places that are very remote from cultivated land and unnatural for man; "it is no place

52 As, e.g., water changing into blood.

53 The distinction between the revelation of the Law and miracles as though the revelation was not a miracle is criticized by H. Crescas and I. Abrabanel; see Reines (supra, n. 41), pp. 78 f.

54 Chapter 25 states, "all the miracles become possible."

55 Exodus 4:1-9.

56 *MN*, II, 29.

57 Deuteronomy 8:15.

of seed or of figs or of vines or of pomegranates, and so on."<sup>58</sup> It is also said of it that it is "a land that no man passed through, and so on."<sup>59</sup> The text of the Torah states: "Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink, and so on."<sup>60</sup> All these are manifest visible miracles. Now God, may He be exalted, knew that in the future what happens to traditional narratives would happen to those miracles: People would think that [the Children of Israel] sojourned in a desert that was near to cultivated land and in which man can live, like the deserts inhabited at present by the Arabs, or that it consisted of places in which it was possible to till and to reap or to feed on plants that were to be found there, or that it was natural for the manna always to come down in those places, or that there were wells of water in those places. Therefore all these fancies are rebutted and the traditional relation of all these miracles is confirmed through the enumeration of those stations, so that men to come could see them and thus know how great was the miracle constituted by the sojourn of the human species in those places for forty years.<sup>61</sup>

## II

Maimonides has thus developed a theology of creationism that climaxes with his apparent concept of miracles, that, given God's free creation of the universe out of nothingness, all the miracles described in Scripture may be affirmed to have occurred in reality. Whereas the apparent concept of miracles emerges in an obvious, almost systematic manner, the passages in which Maimonides qualifies or contradicts this concept are placed obscurely throughout the *Moreh*. In this section, these various passages and their relation to the apparent concept of miracles will be considered.

A. Maimonides' primary qualification of the apparent concept of miracles arises from his view of the nature of God's power. All events in the universe are caused ultimately by deity.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, if nonnatural events such as miracles arise, God must have the power to produce events in the universe by means other than natural causation. If deity, consequently, for whatever reason, should be limited to producing events by natural causation alone, or to producing only certain kinds of non-natural events, then miracles either cannot occur, or only certain kinds of miracles can occur. From Maimonides' discourse on creationism,<sup>63</sup>

58 Numbers 20:5.

59 Jeremiah 2:6.

60 Deuteronomy 29:5.

61 *MN*, III, 50.

62 *MN*, II, 48; *et al.*

63 *MN*, II, 13-25.



the impression is gained that God not only produced all the miracles reported in Scripture, but could bring about any nonnatural event conceivable or imaginable—the logic being that God, having created all existence and the laws of nature out of nothingness, has nothing external to himself to prevent absolute control over his own creation.<sup>64</sup> In point of fact, this absolute view of God's power is rejected by Maimonides. God, he says, cannot do the impossible.<sup>65</sup> The impossible provides a general limit on God's power.

The impossible has a permanent and constant nature which is not the work of an agent, and which cannot be changed in any way. Consequently, the power of doing what is impossible is not attributed to God. This is a point regarding which none of the thinkers<sup>66</sup> differs in any way; and only those who do not understand intelligible notions<sup>67</sup> are ignorant of this.<sup>68</sup>

The fact that God cannot do that which is impossible, Maimonides contends, does not mean that He is not omnipotent; omnipotence does not mean the ability to do the impossible.

It has then become clear that, according to every opinion and school, there are impossible things whose existence cannot be admitted. Power to bring them about cannot be ascribed to the deity. The fact that He does not change them signifies neither inability nor deficiency of power on His part.<sup>69</sup>

Regardless of the semantics of omnipotence and whether a deity who cannot do the impossible is to be termed omnipotent, the fact that God is limited to the possible means there are certain things He cannot do. The question immediately arises in this regard: by what means is that which is possible and impossible for God determined? Two faculties, the

64 Still, according to Maimonides, miracles are possible in preexistent creationism; *MN*, II, 25. However, he says it would then be necessary to understand them differently and reinterpret Scripture figuratively.

65 Maimonides does allude in the course of his exposition of creationism to his belief God cannot do the impossible (*MN*, II, 19), but it is noted unobtrusively and would make little impression on the reader. Maimonides never relates the subject of divine impossibility to the question of God's ability to work miracles, which perhaps accounts for its having been overlooked. Munk (*supra*, n. 1), III, 105, n. 1 does observe that the question of divine impossibility is pertinent to the subjects of omniscience and providence.

66 Literally: men of speculation; cf. Munk (*supra*, n. 1), III, p. 105, n. 2.

67 Such as the laws of thought; cf. Munk (*supra*, n. 1), III, p. 105, n. 1.

68 *MN*, III, 15.

69 *Ibid.*

imagination and the intellect, present themselves to Maimonides as potential answers to this question. If the imagination provides the test of divine possibility, then God can do anything imaginable, whether the action can be conceived by the intellect or not. If the intellect is the test, then the possible is only that which is logical and rational. There is no way, Maimonides concludes, to decide with certainty which of these faculties is the true determinant of divine possibility. Moreover, assuming that we decide in favor of the intellect as the criterion of the possible, how can we know with certainty when a conclusion has been reached regarding some divine action as possible that the decision came through the intellect and not the imagination? What distinguishes ideas that come through intellectual thinking from those resulting from imaginative thinking? Is it the intellect that decides this, or some psychic faculty different from both the intellect and the imagination? Maimonides is unable to arrive at a definite conclusion.<sup>70</sup>

Would that I knew whether this gate is open at the pleasure of everyone, so that anyone can claim and assert with regard to any notion whatever he may conceive that it is possible, whereas someone else maintains that by its very nature it is impossible. Or is there something that shuts this gate and prevents entry so that a person is obliged to declare decisively that such a thing is impossible by its nature."<sup>71</sup>

Despite Maimonides' admission that he is unable to decide with certainty the psychic faculty whereby the possible is determined,<sup>72</sup> he commits himself to the conclusion that this faculty is the intellect.<sup>73</sup> This means that the possible is the logical and rational whereas the illogical and irrational, no matter how convincing a fantasy may be to the imagination, has no existence in reality. Still, there is no absolute certainty on the question of the possible among thinkers. Philosophers simply choose arbitrarily positions on the possible that seem correct to them. Disagreements among thinkers consequently arise. The fundamental disagreement between Maimonides and other philosophers is over the question whether *creatio ex nihilo* is possible. In fact, it may well be said that for Maimonides the three major cosmogonies arise from different resolutions of the issue of the possible.<sup>74</sup> The Platonic and Aristotelian philosophers contend it is impossible for God to create the universe out of

70 *Ibid.*, cf. Munk (*supra*, n. 1), III, p. 107, n. 3.

71 *MN*, III, 15. The impossible is equally impossible for God and man.

72 *Ibid.*

73 *MN*, I, 73.

74 *MN*, II, 13.

nothing; Maimonides maintains it is possible. The issue of creationism aside, Maimonides is in substantial agreement with all philosophic thinkers regarding that which is impossible. The following points receive general affirmation as impossible, and cannot be accomplished by God or man.

- a) Contraries cannot exist together in the same subject at the same time and the same place;<sup>75</sup>
- b) The transmutation of substances is impossible, that is, the transformation of a substance into an accident and of an accident into a substance;
- c) A corporeal substance cannot exist without accidents;
- d) God cannot create a being equal to Himself;
- e) God cannot annihilate Himself;
- f) God cannot become a body;
- g) God cannot change;
- h) A square cannot be produced whose diagonal is equal to one of its sides; and similarly a corporeal angle encompassed by four plane right angles is impossible, as are all other supposed entities referred to by similar empty statements.<sup>76</sup>

The essential point that emerges from Maimonides' treatment of the impossible is that his disagreement with the philosophers in asserting that *creatio ex nihilo* is possible does not mean that he believes God has the power to do with the universe whatever He pleases. God's power to overcome nothingness does not give Him absolute power over being. The impossible remains impossible for everyone and everything including God. Moreover, says Maimonides, God's action is limited not only by the external restraint of the impossible, but internally as well, by His essential nature. In God, who is a perfect simplicity, wisdom and will are one, so that He wills to act only in a logical and rational manner. Therefore, since the possible is the logical and rational, God wills only the possible.

The meaning of these texts and of others of the same kind is that the things willed by God are necessarily accomplished, there being no obstacle to hinder the carrying-out of His volition; but that He, may He be exalted, wills only what is possible, and not everything that is possible, but only that which is required by His Wisdom to be such.<sup>77</sup>

In his concept of the impossible, Maimonides has laid down a general limiting principle on God's ability to perform miracles. Contrary to the

75 Cf. Munk (supra, n. 1), III, p. 105, n. 1.

76 *MN*, II, 15; cf. I, 73.

77 *MN*, III, 25.

impression generated by the apparent concept of miracles, God cannot produce just any miracle that He pleases. The difficulty is that Maimonides leaves the principle of the impossible sufficiently vague so that we have difficulty in determining which miracles reported in Scripture fall under the category of the impossible and cannot have occurred. For example, regarding the impossibility of the transmutation of substances, substances changing into accidents and the reverse, does this mean that the rod cannot really become a snake, the water blood, and the hand immediately leprous and then healthy again?<sup>78</sup> Similar questions can be raised about numerous other miracles.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Maimonides leaves no doubt that he employs the principle of impossibility as a criterion to determine which events in Scripture actually occurred, and which are to be interpreted away in one fashion or another.<sup>80</sup> One passage shows this clearly. Maimonides discusses the reality status of various events related by the prophets, one of which is the story recounted by Ezekiel regarding the valley of dry bones.<sup>81</sup> This story has no introductory preface by the prophet explaining that the incident about to be related takes place in a prophetic vision. Hence the reader has no reason not to conclude that it took place in reality, that there existed in fact a valley of dry bones, and that by the command of God and the action of the prophet a miracle occurred which brought the dead back to life. Of this prophecy—and his comments are extended to all similar prophecies—Maimonides, among other remarks, states the following.

What I want to say by this is that from a single form of the communications of the prophets, a conclusion can be drawn regarding all the communications of that same class. After this introduction you should know that just as a man sees while sleeping that he had made a journey to a certain country, has married there . . . so in the case of prophetic parables<sup>82</sup> seen or enacted in a vision of prophecy, when the parable requires a certain action, when things are done by the prophet, when intervals of time are mentioned within the parable between the various actions and the transportation from one place to another, this takes place only in a vision of prophecy, they are not real actions, actions that exist for the external senses. Some of them are set forth in the books of prophecy without qualification<sup>83</sup> . . . Therefore the multitude think

78 See supra, p. 256.

79 E.g., the leprosy of Miriam, Numbers 12:10; the splitting of the sea, Exodus 14:22-29.

80 *MN*, II, 218.

81 Ezekiel 37.

82 Parables are the allegories of prophecy which have exoteric and esoteric meanings.

83 Literally: absolutely.

that these actions . . . occurred all of them in a state in which they could have been perceived by the senses, not in a vision of prophecy. . . . Only persons weak in reasoning believe that in all these passages the prophet tells that he was ordered to do certain things and consequently did them . . . This (explanation) is one that cannot be doubted, and which can be ignored only by one who confuses the possible things with the impossible ones.<sup>84</sup>

No absolute decision can be reached regarding which particular miracles recorded in Scripture are rejected by Maimonides on the basis of the principle of the impossible. Still, it is clear that this principle limiting God's action to the possible raises serious doubts that the apparent concept of miracles is Maimonides' true concept. For one thing, by his denying a miracle such as Ezekiel's resurrection of the bones, the assertion in the apparent concept of miracles that "all the miracles become possible" is contradicted. Perhaps even more destructive to accepting the apparent concept of miracles as Maimonides' genuine opinion is his admitted inability to determine with certainty exactly which kinds of events are possible or impossible.<sup>85</sup> Thus he himself is necessarily uncertain regarding the truth of any given scriptural miracle and consequently the apparent concept of miracles is placed generally under a cloud of suspicion.

B. The second qualification of Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles arises from the manner in which miracles occur and their relation to his cosmology. In the chapters of the *Moreh* that give rise to the apparent concept of miracles, the implication exists that the miracles of Scripture occurred as literally described.<sup>86</sup> Since miracles, according to Scripture, are produced directly by God (with the prophet as His symbolic instrument) in response to the exigencies of a situation at the time they are needed, a miracle, then, according to the apparent concept of miracles, is a nonnatural event produced directly by God at a time of need. Selected verses from the narrative recounting the miracle whereby the Jews escaped from the Egyptians during the Exodus by walking on dry land through a sea illustrate this point.

And the Lord said unto Moses: "Wherefore criest thou unto Me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward. And lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thy hand over the sea and divide

84 *MN*, II, 46; cf. II, 47.

85 *MN*, III, 15; see *supra*, p. 259 f.

86 In *MN*, II, 25, (quoted *supra*, p. 253), Maimonides says we "shall take the (scriptural) texts according to their literal sense." Maimonides, in fact, contradicts this statement completely, as will appear in the course of this study.

it; and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground . . ." And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand and on their left. And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea . . . And the Lord said unto Moses: "Stretch out thy hand over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and upon their horsemen!" And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared . . . and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, even all the host of Pharaoh that went in after them into the sea . . . Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians . . .<sup>87</sup>

In the theology of creationism underlying the apparent concept of miracles, Maimonides proceeds with great care to show philosophically that God has the power to nullify the laws of nature. God is a free being who created as He willed. Thus His essential will is free, and out of His freedom He created the laws of nature. We have termed God's essential will the special will since it acts to produce particular events; whereas the laws of nature are called the divine general will since they produce generally what God desires to be done in the universe. The clear implication of Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles is that the special will created the universe and governed it during the period of its creation before the laws of nature were established,<sup>88</sup> and then, after the universe was completed, the role of the special will was to sustain the universe and the laws of nature that now generally governed it. However, in addition, the special will, as God pleased, since it was the ground of existence, could interrupt its natural laws to produce miracles such as occurred during the Jews' exodus from Egypt. In other words, according to the apparent concept of miracles, God's special will existed alone before the creation of the universe, and, after the creation, has coexisted with the laws of nature as their preserving force, and interrupts these laws as it pleases.

This being the case, it appears rather extraordinary for Maimonides to state with obvious approval the theory regarding the occurrence of miracles that is described in the following passage.

The Sages, may their memory be blessed, have made a very strange statement about miracles, the text of which you will find in *Bere-*

87 Exodus 14:15-30.

88 See *supra*, p. 247.

*shith Rabbah* and in *Midrash Qoheleth*. This notion consists in their holding the view that miracles too are something that is, in a certain respect, in nature. They say that when God created that which exists and stamped upon it the existing natures, He put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred. According to this opinion, the sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and thereupon a certain thing is effected according to what was put into its nature when first it received its particular impress. If this statement is as you will see it, it indicates the superiority of the man who made it and the fact that he found it extremely difficult to admit that a nature may change after the Work of the Beginning or that another volition may supervene after that nature has been established in a definite way. For instance, he seems to consider that it was put into the nature of water to be continuous and always to flow from above downwards except at the time of the drowning of the Egyptians; it was a particularity of that water to become divided. I have drawn your attention to the spirit of that passage and to the fact that all this serves to avoid having to admit the coming-into-being of something new. It is said in the passage: "Rabbi Jonathan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions to the sea: [to wit,] that it should divide before Israel. That is [the meaning of the words]: 'And the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared.' Rabbi Jeremiah, son of Elazar, said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions not only to the sea, but to all that has been created in the six days of the Beginning. That is [the meaning of the words]: 'I, even My hands have stretched out the heavens, and all their hosts have I commanded.' I have commanded the sea to divide; the fire not to harm Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; the lions not to harm Daniel; and the fish to spit out Jonah." All the other miracles can be explained in an analogous manner.<sup>89</sup>

Analyzing this passage, the following points appear. When God created the several primary parts of the universe,<sup>90</sup> and He impressed upon them their various natural properties, He inserted into these natures certain characteristics which would make them produce anomalies at various times in the course of history. These anomalies are what we call miracles, and they are produced by the unfolding of nature itself. In a certain sense, therefore, miracles are produced by nature. Just as the regular effects of nature result from properties God impressed upon existence

<sup>89</sup> *MN*, II, 29.

<sup>90</sup> Apparently such fundamental constituents of the universe as the heavens and first matter.

during creation, so do the effects called miracles result from properties impressed upon existence during creation. Consequently, contrary to the apparent concept of miracles, God does nothing special at the time the miracle occurs, and the prophet does not participate in the miracle by calling upon God for divine assistance in time of need or otherwise serving as a symbol of the interruption of nature by God's special will. Indeed, inasmuch as the miracle is stamped upon nature and constitutes part of its unfolding, miracles will occur regardless of whatever event in human history might be taking place. Thus the miracle is called a "sign" given by God to a prophet not because God interrupts nature at the need and petition of the prophet, but because the prophet possesses information necessary to predict that a certain anomaly will be produced by nature.<sup>91</sup> This information, Maimonides says, is made known to the prophet by God.<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, Moses' part in the Jews' crossing of the sea was not in calling upon God for supernatural intervention but in knowing beforehand that nature would produce an anomaly that would enable the Jews to cross on dry land. This interpretation of miracles, says Maimonides, prevents us from having to contend that a new creation has taken place after the original creation of the universe. Finally, Maimonides concludes, this principle of interpretation is to be applied universally to all scriptural accounts of miracles. No matter the literal sense of the text, miracles when they occur are produced by nature unfolding, not by the special will of God.

Maimonides' concept of miracles described in the preceding paragraphs will be referred to as his "modified concept of miracles." A number of difficulties arise in connection with this concept. The most evident derive from its conflict with the spirit of the apparent concept of miracles and the theology of creationism underlying it. In the apparent concept of miracles Maimonides says *all* the miracles are possible given creationism. Why must he now seriously compromise their literal description in Scripture if they are all possible? In the theology of creationism, Maimonides argues vigorously for a free will of God that is not subject to the laws of nature. Why then, in the modified concept, is the free special will of God restricted to the period of the original creation of the universe, with only nature, the general will, governing all subsequent events? Furthermore, if Maimonides' purpose is to limit nonnaturalism, what difference does it make in principle whether miracles are produced by God at one time, before the completion of creation, or at another

<sup>91</sup> Cf. *MN*, I, 63, where Moses, to show he was a prophet, had to do more than simply provide philosophic proofs for the existence of God. He had to have the power of miracles, which means the ability to predict anomalies.

<sup>92</sup> "The sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation."

time, after the completion of creation? So far as the philosophic quality of the reconciliation of nonnaturalism and naturalism is concerned, it is difficult to see how the time of the miracles makes one reconciliation superior to the other. The primary issue, whether God works miracles that suspend or otherwise interrupt nature, seemingly remains unaffected. Maimonides' answer in the modified concept, just as in the apparent concept of miracles, appears to be that He does.

Still, the most serious problem that derives from the modified concept is not evident. It is seen by piecing several points together. Maimonides says the role of the prophet in miracles is limited to knowing beforehand that an anomaly in nature will occur. This anomaly is considered a miracle because it does not arise from the natural properties of the universe but from special characteristics inserted into these properties by God in the period during which the universe was brought into existence. Apparently, therefore, the occurrence of such an anomaly cannot be predicted on the basis of natural scientific knowledge since it does not flow from natural causation. Hence Maimonides says, "the sign of a prophet consists in God making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation,"<sup>93</sup> the implication being that God nonnaturally informs the prophet of a miraculous event, albeit built into nature, that is about to occur. Without the nonnatural knowledge of prophecy, presumably, the prophet cannot know of the miracle to be. However, we know from Maimonides' own explicit statements that prophecy is a natural event, and the prophet is only aware of natural knowledge that is obtainable rationally and scientifically.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, prophets possess the most expert scientific knowledge available to man.<sup>95</sup> If prophets know, therefore, that miracles will occur, the reason is simply that miracles are not nonnatural but natural events, anomalies that occur only irregularly, but produced by the laws of nature equally as are customary events, and predictable in the same way. Miracles as anomalies occur only because nature produces certain events irregularly, such as earthquakes, tidal waves, and volcanoes. To someone who knows the full series of natural causes underlying such sporadic occurrences, they are predictable, and

93 For Maimonides' interpretation of scriptural statements that imply God directly communicates with prophets as really meaning that the prophet receives knowledge through the ordinary processes of nature, see *MN*, II, 48.

94 *MN*, II, 32, 36. Maimonides states explicitly that non-Mosaic prophecy is a natural process; cf. Reines (supra, n. 41), pp. xxxi-xxxv. Although Maimonides does not state explicitly that Mosaic prophecy is a natural process, there is good reason to believe he thinks it is; see Reines (supra, n. 40), pp. 333-338. In any case, *all* prophets predict miracles, not only Moses, which means the occurrence of a miracle must be naturally foreseeable.

95 See Reines (supra, n. 40), pp. 342 f.

in the broadest sense, regular happenings of nature. Consequently, when we delve beneath the surface, Maimonides' modified concept of miracles presents us with still another concept: This is that there are no such events as are reported in the literal accounts of miracles in Scripture; miracles are simply anomalies of nature, rationally and scientifically explicable, whose natural causation and therefore future occurrence is known and predictable by the prophet. This concept, I propose, is Maimonides' true view, and will be referred to as his "real concept of miracles."

Accordingly, when the full implications of Maimonides' modified concept of miracles are drawn, it opposes not only the spirit of the apparent concept of miracles, but contradicts its very substance. To the question that must be confronted, whether a contradiction such as this is to be attributed to intellectual inadequacy on the part of Maimonides who simply was not aware of the incoherent consequences of the two concepts, Maimonides himself provides the answer. The *Moreh* is a work intended to communicate an esoteric teaching in a secret manner,<sup>96</sup> and the contradictions encountered in the *Moreh* are deliberately inserted in the text to teach the true belief to the elite, philosophically educated reader while obscuring the truth from the common people. In his introduction to the *Moreh*, Maimonides lays down seven causes of contradictory or inconsistent statements that are found in literary works. The seventh cause, which Maimonides states is one of the reasons for contradictions in the *Moreh*, reads this way:

The seventh cause: In speaking about very abstruse<sup>97</sup> matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain opinions this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain proposition, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another proposition contradicting the first one. In such cases, the common people must in no way be aware of the contradiction. The author consequently uses some device to conceal it by all means.<sup>98</sup>

Accordingly, the reasons for Maimonides' contradictory statements on miracles, which in effect amounts to three different concepts, can now be understood. The apparent concept of miracles is for the masses of common people who take Scripture literally. The modified concept of

96 Generally, the secret teaching is rationalistic and naturalistic.

97 Pines (supra, n. 1), p. 18, translates "obscure." But the matters themselves are not obscure, they are abstruse, and should be obscured from the masses.

98 *MN*; Maimonides' introduction to Part I.

miracles, which limits the creation of miracles to the period before the completion of the universe, and attributes their subsequent occurrence to the unfolding of nature, is for the relatively sophisticated who wish to limit the nonnaturalism of Scripture but cannot fully reject it. Also, the modified concept serves to hint at still a third concept. This is Maimonides' real concept of miracles which is for the philosophic elite whose only purpose is to know the authentic truth of Mosaic religion and structure their religious concepts in accordance with it. On the basis of Maimonides' real concept of miracles, several other difficult passages in the *Moreh* relating to the apparent concept of miracles can be clarified.

C. A perplexing qualification laid down by Maimonides regarding the occurrence of miracles is the relation he states obtains between miracles and prophets. This relation is twofold: miracles take place only by means of prophets; and the excellence of a prophet's miracles corresponds to his excellence as a prophet. Hence there are no miracles without prophets; and the greater the prophet, the greater his miracles. The first point appears with respect to Maimonides' statement that Gideon was not a prophet and therefore could not perform miracles;<sup>99</sup> the second point is made regarding Moses' miracles which, Maimonides says, belong in a supreme class of their own that corresponds to Moses' prophecy which is *sui generis*.<sup>100</sup> Given Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles, the objection to this twofold relation between miracles and the prophet is evident. If miracles are created directly by God as a special act of will they have no particular relation to prophets or their competence, and consequently whether prophets are present or not, miracles should take place dependent only upon God's purpose and the need He means to satisfy.<sup>101</sup> Maimonides' real concept of miracles explains why he relates miracles to prophecy. A miracle is not created by God's special will, but occurs as an anomaly of nature. The greater the scientific knowledge a person possesses, the greater his ability to predict irregular events of nature, and the higher the status of a prophet, the more his scientific knowledge. For this reason the occurrence and magnitude of a miracle is dependent upon the presence and status of a prophet. For unless a prophet with his superior scientific knowledge makes a prediction that an anomaly will occur, the event takes place without being regarded as a miracle. In other words, the prediction makes the anomaly a miracle in the minds of the masses. Similarly, the higher the prophet,

99 *MN*, II, 46.

100 *MN*, II, 35.

101 See Reines (*supra*, n. 41), pp. 77–79, for Abrabanel's critique of Maimonides' notion that miracles correspond to the status of a prophet.

the greater his scientific knowledge and ability to predict such spectacular natural anomalies as, for example, volcanoes. Hence Moses whose scientific knowledge was supreme among prophets and all mankind, could predict anomalies as no one else ever could, and consequently, his "miracles" were greater than those of any other prophet. It follows logically for Maimonides that Moses would use his great scientific knowledge for religious and moral purposes. Therefore, if Moses knew beforehand that some spectacular natural event was to occur at Mt. Sinai, he would employ his foreknowledge to help the masses accept a restrictive religious and moral covenant they might otherwise reject.<sup>102</sup>

D. Still another fundamental contradiction in the *Moreh* points to Maimonides' real concept of miracles as entirely naturalistic. Maimonides' primary justification for the apparent concept of miracles as well as for the modified concept of miracles is a theology of creationism in which God is free of the laws of nature and can and does, therefore, perform the actions that produce the nonnatural events called miracles. The evidence for asserting that deity not only can but does in fact produce nonnatural actions is to be found in certain observable irregularities in the heavens which cannot be explained by reference to the laws of nature, and which, consequently, must have been produced by a cause that creates free of natural necessity. This cause must be God. For if the heavens had been created by free, rational beings such as the Intelligences, serving as intermediaries for God, there would be no explanation for the irregularities in the heavens since the Intelligences as rational beings are guided by the logic of nature and no natural, rational explanation exists.<sup>103</sup> Thus the ultimate evidence for the apparent and modified concepts of miracles constitutes the irregularities in the heavens which require postulating a God who can freely create according to a design not ordered by ordinary rationality or the laws of nature. Moreover, such a deity would necessarily have created the irregularities directly, since the Intelligences are incapable of behaving according to God's higher non-natural rationality. Maimonides, therefore, in the passages that expound the theology of creationism that supports the apparent and modified concepts of miracles, as well as in other passages opposed to Aristotelian naturalism, emphasizes that the fundamental constituents of the universe were created by God directly, through His special will. These include the heavens, consisting of the Intelligences and spheres, and the first mat-

102 This is a reasonable inference from Maimonides' various statements regarding the experience of the common people at Sinai. Cf. *MN*, I, 21; II, 33; and *infra*, pp. 274 f.

103 *MN*, II, 19. See *supra*, pp. 249 f.

ter<sup>104</sup> out of which the sublunar world is generated. In the following passages, Maimonides describes the direct creation by God of the Intelligences, spheres and first matter,

However, a point on which he (Aristotle) disagrees with us in all this is constituted by his belief that all these beings are eternal and that they proceed necessarily from Him, may He be exalted, in that way. For we ourselves believe that all this has been created, and that God has created the separate intellects and has put into the sphere the force of desire toward them, and that it was He who created the intellects and the spheres and put in them the governing forces.<sup>105</sup>

For we do not maintain that the first matter is generated as man is generated from the seed or that it passes away as man passes away into dust. But we maintain that God has brought it into existence from nothing and that after being brought into existence, it was as it is now—I mean everything is generated from it, and everything generated from it passes away into it; it does not exist devoid of form; generation and corruption terminate in it; it is not subject to generation as are the things generated from it nor to passing away as are the things that pass away into it, but is created from nothing.<sup>106</sup>

The fundamental importance of deity's direct creation of the Intelligences, spheres, and first matter to the apparent and modified concepts of miracles having been established, we find Maimonides inconspicuously introduces another cosmogony that directly contradicts this notion. In this opposing cosmogony, God creates only the first Intelligence, which through successive emanations produces the Intelligences and spheres that constitute the heavens and eventually result in the creation of first matter, from which the sublunar world is generated.

The whole creation is divided into three parts: 1) the pure Intelligences; 2) the bodies of the spheres endowed with permanent forms. . . ; 3) the transient earthly beings. . . A thing perfect in a certain way is either perfect only in itself, without being able to communicate that perfection to another being, or it is so perfect that it is capable of imparting perfection to another being. . . In the same manner the creative act of deity in giving existence to

104 The first matter, according to the modified concept, would apparently have to be created with nonnatural properties in it so that the physical objects generated from it after creation would exhibit miraculous characteristics.

105 *MN*, II, 6.

106 *MN*, II, 17.

the pure Intelligences endows the first of them with the power of giving existence to another, and so on, down to the Active Intellect, the last of the Intelligences. Besides producing other Intelligences, each Intelligence gives existence to one of the spheres, from the highest down to the lowest, which is the sphere of the moon. After the latter follows the body subject to generation and corruption, that is, first matter and what is composed of it.<sup>107</sup>

Applying Maimonides' seventh cause of contradictions in a literary work, the reason for the two contradictory cosmogonies is understandable. Contradictions of the seventh cause enable an author to conceal concepts whose philosophic sophistication would harm the religious and social commitments of the common people.<sup>108</sup> Accordingly, Maimonides presents prominently a cosmogony in which God is represented as creating directly the fundamental constituents of the universe for those readers who require a belief in miracles understood as nonnatural events. Only such a cosmogony will support the apparent and modified concepts of miracles. For the readers who are capable of understanding and accepting the true cosmogony, which allows only for miracles understood as anomalous natural happenings, Maimonides inconspicuously presents his true belief regarding creation, that God created only the first Intelligence, and through successive natural emanations the Intelligences created the rest of the universe.

E. In view of the great lengths to which Maimonides went in concealing

107 *MN*, II, 11. This passage is primarily a paraphrase based upon Friedländer (supra, n. 1), II, pp. 55f. Generally, the arguments for creationism from the irregularities of the heavens presented in *MN*, II, 19 and 24 have been taken as Maimonides' truly believed arguments against eternalism and as entailing his real concept of creationism; see I. Husik (supra, n. 3), pp. 271–274; H. A. Wolfson (supra, n. 7), 117–119, 129f.; also, H. A. Davidson, "Arguments from the Concept of Particularization in Arabic Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West*, XVIII (1968), pp. 312–314. This would then necessitate the conclusion that Maimonides believed God had directly created the heavens and first matter. Unfortunately, these writers judge Maimonides on the basis of a fragment of his system. The contradictory cosmogony in *MN*, II, 11 goes unnoticed. This latter cosmogony, as well as the significant evidence that Maimonides rejects miracles in particular and nonnaturalism in general, in addition to the recognition that Maimonides is writing an esoteric work, all warrant the conclusion that Maimonides' cosmogony of deity's direct creation is presented primarily to support the apparent concept of miracles (as well as nonnatural revelation and providence), all of which he rejects. The supposed irregularities in the heavens, following the cosmogony of *MN*, II, 11, can be accounted for on natural grounds by the free and rational action of the Intelligences.

108 Maimonides' Introduction to Part I of the *MN*, et al.

his true opinions on such subjects as miracles,<sup>109</sup> the question understandably arises why he would write a work like the *Moreh* at all. The answer is that Maimonides believed he had a religious obligation to communicate to others as much of the knowledge he possessed as was possible.

However, inasmuch as the divine precept necessarily obliges everyone who has acquired a certain perfection to pour it forth to others, as we will explain in the chapters on prophecy that follow, every scholar who has come to understand something of these secrets, either through his own speculation, or through some guide conducting him, must inevitably say something. But it is forbidden to speak explicitly about it. He must make the secret appear by means of hints.<sup>110</sup>

Maimonides not only felt it was necessary to communicate as much truth as others could understand, but, in addition, if readers were incapable of what he considered to be the real truth, to limit to the fewest possible the number of erroneous beliefs they might hold.<sup>111</sup> We see this in the way Maimonides deals with the apparent concept of miracles, which views the miracles of Scripture as literally true, a view that Maimonides rejects. For those who are capable of deeper theological comprehension, he presents first the modified concept of miracles, and then, beyond that, his real concept. However, even for those who are unable to go beyond the apparent concept, he attempts to limit the number of scriptural stories in which the miracles are to be taken literally. These efforts at limitation fall broadly into four categories: subjectivizing; naturalizing; optionalizing; and temporalizing.

1. In subjectivizing miracle stories, Maimonides reduces the miracle to an event that takes place in some human mind, not in objective reality. Primarily, these subjective events occur in the prophetic dreams and visions that are produced by the intuitive intellectual imaginations of the prophet.<sup>112</sup> To illustrate the method of subjectivizing, let us take the references in Scripture to angels, which, understood literally, are miraculous phenomena. Maimonides states that all appearances in Scripture of an angel are to be understood as having taken place subjectively in prophecy. Moreover, once an angel is in any way mentioned in connection

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *MN*, II, 29.

<sup>111</sup> See, e.g., *MN*, I, 35, where Maimonides insists that even women and children must be taught God's incorporeality, and certain other basic theological truths. Also cf. *MN*, I, 59.

<sup>112</sup> See *MN*, II, 36–47, *et. al.*

with a narrative, the entire narrative is to be taken as prophetic phantasy. This would include any other miraculous events alluded to, such as, for example, Jacob wrestling with God and Balaam's ass speaking.

We have explained that wherever it is mentioned that an angel was seen or had spoken, this has happened only in a vision of prophecy or in a dream whether this is explicitly stated or not as has been said before. Know this and understand it thoroughly. And there is no difference between a statement in which the prophet literally affirms from the first that he saw the angel and a statement according to whose literal meaning the prophet at first thought that a human individual had appeared to him, whereas at the end it became clear to him that it was an angel. For inasmuch as you find in the course of the event that he who was seen and had spoken was an angel, you ought to know and to establish as true that the event was from the first a vision of prophecy or a dream of prophecy. For in a vision of prophecy or a dream of prophecy, the prophet sometimes sees God speak to him,<sup>113</sup> as we shall explain, and sometimes an angel speaking to him. . . . It is similar with regard to Jacob. . . . All the wrestling and conversation in question happened in a vision of prophecy. And likewise the entire story of Balaam on the way and of the ass speaking; all this happened in a vision of prophecy. . . .<sup>114</sup>

Thus by laying down the principle that every scriptural story in which an angel appears or speaks is in its entirety subjective, Maimonides takes away the reality of the vast majority of miracle stories in Scripture without denying the apparent concept of miracles itself.

2. In naturalizing scriptural miracle stories, Maimonides reduces the miracle story to a natural event by equating the phenomena that would ordinarily be understood as miraculous with natural phenomena. As an example of naturalizing, we may again make use of the term angel. There are instances where the scriptural use of angel is not satisfactorily accounted for solely by subjectivization. Hence Maimonides says the term angel is at times employed in Scripture to refer to a number of different natural causes, from the Intelligences that emanate on heaven and earth, to physical and psychical forces in man, and even to forces in irrational animals. In the course of naturalizing the term angel, Maimonides, among

<sup>113</sup> A phrase in Scripture of the type that states "God speaks" is always to be understood figuratively for Maimonides. This holds true for Maimonides' own use of such phrases in the *Moreh*.

<sup>114</sup> *MN*, II, 42.



other things,<sup>115</sup> explains away the putative miracle of Daniel's survival in the lion's den.

Now a chapter making it clear for us that the angels are not bodies occurs previously in this treatise. This is also what Aristotle says. There is only a difference in terms; he uses "Intelligences" while we use "angels." As for his (Aristotle's) saying that these Intelligences are also intermediaries between God and the existing things, and that it is through their intermediation that the spheres are in motion, which motion is the cause of the generation of all that comes into existence, this is also the teaching of all the (sacred) books . . . . You know that the meaning of "angel" is messenger. Accordingly, everyone who carries out an order is an angel; so that the movements of animals, even when these beings are not rational, are stated in the text of Scripture to have been accomplished through an angel . . . . Thus it says, "My God hath sent His angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me"<sup>116</sup> . . . . (Rather do) all these texts state plainly that all this, including the various parts of the universe and even the creation of the limbs of animals as they are, has been brought about through the intermediation of angels. For all (natural)<sup>117</sup> forces are angels . . . . A circumstance that should confirm in your opinion the assertion that individual natural and psychic forces are called angels is the Sages' statement . . . . Thereby they have stated plainly to him who understands and cognizes intellectually that the imaginative faculty is likewise called an angel and that the intellect is called a cherub.<sup>118</sup>

3. In optionalizing a miracle story, Maimonides provides an optional interpretation of the supposed miracle which enables the reader to choose between a nonnatural and natural explanation of the event. Optionalizing limits the number of stories in Scripture that must be understood according to the apparent concept of miracles. More subtly, it serves to devalue nonnaturalistic beliefs by making them of equal value in understanding Scripture to naturalistic interpretations. Two instances of optionalizing may be cited. In discussing the revelation to Moses at Mt. Sinai, Maimonides offers three different explanations of Moses' experience: either a prophetic vision that took place subjectively entirely in the mind of Moses; or a subjective event that was accompanied by the visual perception of a real object; or, in addition to both of these, a perception of real sound as well.

115 See *MN*, II, 6; also, cf. *MN*, I, 49.

116 Daniel 6:23.

117 Cf. Friedländer (supra, n. 1), II, p. 39.

118 *MN*, II, 6. On naturalizing, see also, II, 47 and 48, *et al.*

And you are free to choose whatever belief you wish. You may believe that great scene<sup>119</sup> was indubitably, in its entirety a prophetic vision, and that he (Moses) sought only intellectual apprehensions—everything . . . being intellectual and admitting of no recourse to the senses. Or you may believe that there was, in addition to this intellectual apprehension, an apprehension due to the sense of sight, which, however, had for its object a created thing . . . . Or again you may believe that there was in addition an apprehension due to the sense of hearing . . . . Choose whatever opinion you wish . . .<sup>120</sup>

The first choice, that the revelation was a subjective event requires no nonnatural interpretation at all;<sup>121</sup> the second offers a lesser degree of nonnaturalness; and the third a greater degree. In the second example of optionalizing, Maimonides simply offers a choice between a natural and nonnatural explanation of the remarkable longevity Scripture reports certain people in the biblical age attained.

As for the precise statements made by the texts of the Torah regarding the length of life of certain individuals, I say that only that individual who is mentioned lived so long a life, whereas the other men lived lives that had the natural and usual duration. The anomaly of such an individual is due either to various causes relating to their nutrition and mode of living, or to a miracle . . .<sup>122</sup>

4. In temporalizing miracles, Maimonides restricts every interruption of the laws of nature reported in Scripture to a limited time span. All miracles, he declares, are temporary in nature. Thus through temporalization, Maimonides is able to limit severely the efficacy and effects of every scriptural miracle without overtly rejecting the apparent concept of miracles. Maimonides states the principle of temporalization absolutely.

It is well known that it is impossible and inconceivable for a mi-

119 I.e., the Sinaitic revelation.

120 *MN*, I, 21.

121 Cf. *MN*, II, 33; Reines (supra, n. 40), pp. 348–353.

122 *MN*, II, 47. Another possible instance of optionalizing occurs with respect to the manna story. Maimonides makes two references to the manna story. In one, supra, p. 14, he describes the appearance of manna as a miracle. However, in *MN*, III, 24, the manna is described simply as help that comes to the faithful in an "unexpected way" (Pines, "unthought-of") לא יָטוּ. The distinction between "unexpected" and "miraculous" is evident. For an additional instance in which Maimonides employs contradictions to hint at his rejection of miracles, see Reines (supra, n. 41), pp. 256 f.

racle to last permanently throughout the succession of generations so that all men can see it.<sup>123</sup>

Beyond its function of qualifying the apparent concept of miracles, temporalization serves to point the reader to Maimonides' esoteric real concept of miracles. Viewed theologically, there is little logic to temporalization. Why is it "impossible and inconceivable" for the special will of God, if it can interrupt the laws of nature for a brief time, not to be able to do so permanently in whatever way it chooses. Once the principle is established that deity interferes with the course of nature, what difference does it make whether the duration of that interference is limited or not? The very arbitrariness of the notion of temporalization bids the reader of the *Moreh* to search deeper for Maimonides' true intent regarding the nature of miracles.

### III

One further point provides strong corroboration for the thesis that Maimonides rejects both the apparent and modified concepts of miracles he sets forth, which view miracles as interruptions of the laws of nature. This is that Maimonides nonessentializes miracles. Nonessentialization is the process whereby a belief or other feature ostensibly associated with a religious system is repudiated not by words but in fact, by assigning no effective function to it in the system. Whether a religious belief has been nonessentialized can be decided only after examining its place in serving the fundamental purpose of every religion: human salvation. In Maimonides' philosophy of Judaism, miracles play no part in salvation. Yet if Maimonides truly believed God had ever interrupted the laws of nature by redemptive acts produced by His special will, as Maimonides' apparent and modified concepts of miracles contend He did in past biblical times and can continue to do in the present and future, it would be reasonable for Maimonides to propose miraculous salvation as an integral part of his system. On the contrary, Maimonides denies that man can hope for miracles to resolve the human condition. Thus Maimonides says God will never change the nature of man to provide him miraculously with redemption.

Inasmuch as it is the principal object and purpose of God that we should believe in this Law, and observe the practices that it prescribes, why did He not give us the capacity always to understand this purpose and to act in accordance with it? . . . What was there to prevent Him from establishing a natural disposition within us to perform the acts of piety He desired and avoid the acts of dis-

123 *MN*, III, 50.

obedience He abhorred? There is one general answer. . . Though all miracles change the nature of some individual being,<sup>124</sup> God does not change at all the nature of human individuals by means of miracles.<sup>125</sup>

Similarly, Maimonides denies that there will be a miraculous destruction of this world and a subsequent new creation that will bring the Messianic Age. The Messianic Age will be produced by the natural conditions that have been in existence since the original creation of the universe.

Th opinion at which we are aiming has already been made clear: it is that a (future) destruction of this world, a change in its nature,<sup>126</sup> so that it then remains permanently in that altered state, is something no prophetic text or any statement of the Sages affirms. . . . Even he who takes "new heavens and a new earth" literally,<sup>127</sup> says: "Even the heavens and the earth that will be created in the future are already created and exist. . . And he gives as a proof the verse, "There is nothing new under the sun."<sup>128</sup> Do not believe that this is in contradiction to what I have stated. On the contrary, it is possible that he means that the natural disposition<sup>129</sup> that will necessitate at that time these promised states of existence<sup>130</sup> has been created since the "six days of the creation."<sup>131</sup>

### IV

Maimonides' concept of miracles, as developed in this study, is that events such as those reported in Scripture as miracles are not, in fact nonnatural occurrences, but anomalies produced by nature. In addition to natural anomalies, which are "miracles" proper, Scripture, according to Maimonides, speaks of other putative nonnatural occurrences that are thought to be miracles only because the reader did not understand that they took place subjectively as, for example, in prophetic phantasies, or

124 Maimonides, as he generally does, speaks on more than one level at once. Here, using the language of the apparent and modified concepts of miracles, he says that even for these concepts it must be understood that miracles do not change human nature.

125 *MN*, III, 32; cf. A. J. Reines, "Maimonides' Concepts of Providence and Theodicy," *HUCA*, XLIII (1972), pp. 198-205.

126 I.e., a change in any of its natural properties.

127 Isaiah 66:22.

128 Ecclesiastes I:9.

129 Arabic, אֱלֵטִיבָעָה. Munk (supra, n. 1), II, p. 224, "la disposition physique."

130 I.e., the future condition of Israel; Friedländer (supra, n. 1), II, p. 139.

131 *MN*, II, 29. Another instance of the nonessentializing of miracles is that they do not provide evidence of truth; *MN*, III, 24.

the reader otherwise misunderstood the metaphorical language in which Scripture is couched. Accordingly, miracles are not produced by a special act of God's will, but by the general will that is expressed in and through nature. Underlying this concept of miracles is Maimonides' real cosmogony, which contains generally these basic notions. God created the universe out of nothing by a free and purposeful act of will. The only direct creation of God was the first Intelligence, a being endowed with free will but subject to the laws of nature.<sup>132</sup> The first Intelligence then initiated a chain of emanations, all unfolding within the limits of natural necessity,<sup>133</sup> which resulted ultimately in the creation of the universe.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, only one act in the entire Maimonidean cosmogony took place outside the laws of nature, this was the creation of the first Intelligence by the special will of God which brought the laws of nature into existence. From the time of that original creation, no nonnatural event ever again occurred. Thus Maimonides' disagreement with the Aristotelians is basically with respect to one point.<sup>135</sup> The Aristotelians claim God is subject to the laws of nature, whereas Maimonides maintains that God is free, limited only by His own essence and the impossible. Both the Aristotelians and Maimonides agree the universe is entirely subject to the laws of nature. Represented this way, Maimonides' system is integrated and coherent. There is no logical difficulty in maintaining that God, out of His freedom and in accordance with His wisdom, willed to create a universe that is subject to the laws of nature. The difficulty arises when either Maimonides' apparent or modified concept of miracles is taken as his true view. The reason is not that naturalism and nonnaturalism can never be coherently combined in a single theological system, but that in Maimonides' presentation they are not. Maimonides' apparent and modified concepts both propose that God governs the universe through nature except sporadically when His special will interrupts the laws of nature to produce an occasional trivial event called a miracle. Miracles are necessarily trivial according to these concepts seeing that they produce neither individual nor group salvation, are incapable of testifying to truth, and in any case, last only a brief period of time. Such a view of miracles is obviously grafted arbitrarily onto a basically naturalistic system, rendering the total system incoherent as a whole. Maimonides' purpose in the *Moreh* is to provide an interpretation of Judaism as a rational religion, yet what logic is there to a concept of deity who wills to interrupt miraculously the laws of nature but who limits his miracles to trivia? The answer is that deity, in truth, does not will to act

132 *MN*, II, 7.

133 See *supra*, pp. 270. f.

134 *MN*, I, 72.

135 I.e., based upon the conclusions of this study.

in the universe outside nature. Deity wills only the most excellent action, and the creation of the universe as it is is the most excellent action of which deity is capable, for the natural universe is the best of all possible worlds.

Similarly, no obstacle intervenes between Him and the exceedingly excellent action He wishes to accomplish, and nothing can hinder it . . . . You will find this notion frequently repeated by the Sages when they interpret the verse, "He hath made everything beautiful in its time."<sup>136</sup> Such is the belief of the multitude of the men of knowledge in our Law, and this was explicitly stated by our prophets, namely, that the actions of nature to the slightest details are all wisely regulated and connected to one another, all of them causes and effects, none of them is futile, frivolous, or vain, being acts of perfect wisdom . . . It is upon this opinion that the whole of the Torah of Moses our Master is founded. It begins with it, "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good;"<sup>137</sup> and it concludes with it, "The Rock, His work is perfect . . ."<sup>138</sup>

Two questions remain to be answered. First, if Maimonides does not believe miracles as nonnatural events have ever occurred, what is his understanding of why Scripture describes them in nonnatural terms? Second, if Maimonides does not believe nonnatural events have ever occurred, how precisely are we to understand chapter twenty-five (Part II) of the *Moreh*, which seems to present a contrary view? The answers to these two questions bear closely upon one another.

The answer to the first question is to be found ultimately in Maimonides' view of the objectives of Mosaic religion. The Law, says Maimonides, has two fundamental purposes: the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body. The Law serves the well-being of the soul by teaching it theological beliefs about God and the universe. Unfortunately, not all persons have the capacity to understand the true beliefs of theology, so Scripture finds it necessary to present its teachings in a way that will enable each person to receive the maximum information he can comprehend. The method Scripture employs to accomplish this is to couch its truths allegorically in parables. These parables have a literal or exoteric meaning that is intended for the common people and a figurative or esoteric meaning intended for the philosophically educated elite. The exoteric theology of Scripture is generally that of a deity who continuously acts supernaturally, through nonnatural prophecy, provid-

136 Ecclesiastes 3:11; cf. Genesis Rabbah, IX; Midrash Qoheleth, 3:11.

137 Genesis 1:31.

138 Deuteronomy 32:4; *MN*, III, 25.

ence, and miracles. The esoteric theology is that of Maimonides, a creator God who manifests His will through the natural universe alone. The Law serves the well-being of the body by teaching ethical beliefs that are necessary for social welfare. In this area, too, the masses are unable to comprehend the true beliefs that lead to proper morality. Hence the Law teaches certain beliefs that are not true at all, but whose sole function is to impel the common people to behave in a manner necessary for the welfare of society. These points in the main appear in the following passages.

The Law as a whole aims at two things: the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body. As for the well-being of the soul, it consists in every person acquiring correct opinions according to their respective capacities. Therefore, some (opinions) are stated explicitly and some are stated in parables. For it is not within the nature of the common people to possess the capacity necessary to comprehend the subject matter as it actually is. As for the well-being of the body, it comes about by the betterment of the way in which men live with one another.<sup>139</sup>

One thing to which your attention should be directed is that regarding the (theological) truths through which ultimate perfection is attained, the Law only communicates the most important points and calls us to believe in them in a general way. These points are: the existence of God, His unity, knowledge, power, will, and eternity. All these points are the final results (of scientific inquiry)<sup>140</sup> which can be understood in detail and definitively only after a knowledge of many other ideas.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, the Law calls us to adopt certain beliefs acceptance of which is necessary for the sake of social welfare. Such, for example, is the belief that He is violently angry with those who disobey Him and that it is therefore necessary to fear Him and to dread Him and to take care not to disobey.<sup>142</sup>

Hence Scripture is written in parables that contain two basic levels of meaning, a literal meaning that teaches an exoteric religious system to the masses, and a concealed meaning that reveals an esoteric religion to the

139 *MN*, III, 27.

140 See Munk (supra, n. 1), III, p. 214, n. 2.

141 Tr. Munk (supra, n. 1), III, p. 214.

142 *MN*, III, 28. The point is that the notion God has emotions and can be angry is absolutely false for Maimonides. Even so, the belief is socially useful. Cf. Friedländer (supra, n. 1), III, 28, n. 2. The same applies, as is suggested below, to the belief in nonnatural miracles.

elite. On the exoteric level belief is presented in a general and imaginative way. To comprehend the esoteric level, a person must be educated in metaphysics and science. Among the principal truths Scripture means to teach is belief in *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>143</sup> One way in which this belief in creationism is taught the masses, Maimonides says, is through stories of miracles as nonnatural events. Such miracles are evidence of creationism because the natural inference is that only a God who created the natural universe would have the power to interrupt the laws of nature.<sup>144</sup> Consequently, one reason Scripture speaks of nonnatural miracles although they have never occurred is that they serve to implant firmly in the common people a belief in creationism. In addition, a belief in nonnatural miracles by the masses contributes to social welfare. Commenting on a verse in Ecclesiastes, Maimonides says, "Solomon, as it were, describes the purpose of exceptions to the laws of nature, or an excuse for changes in them, when he says, 'And God hath so made it (namely, He performs miracles) that men should fear before Him.'" <sup>145</sup> Those who fear God will not disobey the ethical imperatives they believe were revealed by Him. Consequently, Scripture teaches miracles not because nonnatural events truly occur, but because miracle stories serve the Law's dual purpose of teaching the masses a true belief, creationism, while helping them through fear to control their asocial desires.

We turn then to the second question: how are we to understand chapter twenty-five (Part II) of the *Moreh* if it is Maimonides' view that no nonnatural events have ever occurred in the universe? Preliminary to dealing with this question, a brief discussion is required regarding Maimonides' notion of the relation that obtains between the literal and figurative meanings of scriptural texts.<sup>146</sup> In general, the literal meaning of these texts provides the beliefs of the exoteric religion; the figurative meaning, the esoteric religion. However, not just any figurative meaning can be given a text; there must be some internal relation between the figurative meaning and the text's literal sense.<sup>147</sup> Maimonides is not specific about what this internal relation should be, and provides examples

143 *MN*, III, 32.

144 *MN*, II, 25.

145 *MN*, II, 28.

146 This discussion applies as well to talmudic or midrashic texts, but they are of secondary significance.

147 Thus in *MN*, II, 25, Maimonides condemns the figurative interpretations of certain Islamic allegorists as absurd; see Munk (supra, n. 1), II, p. 197, n. 2; also Pines (supra, n. 1), p. 328, n. 1. On the other hand, a traditional rabbinic thinker such as I. Abrabanel vigorously condemns Maimonides' figurative interpretations; see Reines (supra, n. 41), p. 136, *et al.*

rather than rules.<sup>148</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that some degree of analogy must exist between the literal and figurative meanings.<sup>149</sup>

Accordingly, the Sage said that a saying voiced with the purpose of expressing two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree having very fine openings. Now see how marvellously this statement describes a well-constructed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings, that is, a literal and a figurative<sup>150</sup> one, the literal meaning must be as beautiful as silver, while its figurative<sup>151</sup> meaning must be more beautiful than the literal one, the former in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its literal meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone examining it what is to be found in its figurative meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree having very fine openings. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it very attentively, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets are similar. Their literal meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of the state of human societies, as is apparent in the literal meaning of Proverbs and of similar discourses. On the other hand, their figurative meaning contains wisdom that leads to real truth.<sup>152</sup>

Despite the lack of preciseness in Maimonides' description of the proper relation that should obtain between the literal and figurative meanings of scriptural texts, some specific principles of interpretation can be inferred from comments appearing in various parts of the *Moreh*. One such principle concerns phrases of the type "God revealed this knowledge to a prophet," and "God brought this event about in the universe." Since all knowledge and actions in the universe, according to Maimonides, result from natural causes, these phrases must all be interpreted figuratively as referring to knowledge and action produced by nature.<sup>153</sup> However, the part of the phrase in which these occurrences are attributed to God,

148 E.g., the first forty-five chapters of the *Moreh* are almost entirely given over to figurative interpretations of scriptural terms. To a lesser degree this occurs throughout the *Moreh*.

149 However, the lack of interpretive rules means that a degree of arbitrariness will enter into every interpretation.

150 Munk (supra, n. 1), I, p. 19, "un (sens) extérieur et intérieur;" so Pines (supra, n. 1), p. 12, "an external and an internal one."

151 I.e., concealed or secret meaning.

152 *MN*, Maimonides' Introduction to Part I.

153 See *MN*, II, 48; *et al.*

even though the knowledge and action are directly produced by nature, must be understood as having a meaning internally related to the phrase's literal sense. This is that the knowledge or action, although natural in origin, is attributed to God because He is the creator of nature, and therefore the ultimate cause of everything nature produces. Nature, in other words, is God's general will and serves as His intermediary. However, God cannot be considered the ultimate cause of all natural events unless He is truly the cause, that is, the being who in freedom created the natural universe out of nothingness with intent and by design. Accordingly, if there were no creation of the universe, as is the case in eternalism, then there is no proper figurative interpretation for scriptural sentences of the types beginning "God said . . ." or "God did . . ." It is this principle of interpretation that underlies Maimonides' discussion in chapter twenty-five (Part II) of the *Moreh*.

Maimonides frequently employs the method of Scripture, as he understands it, of stating ideas ambiguously, with an exoteric meaning for the ordinary reader of the *Moreh*, and an esoteric meaning for the reader aware of its labyrinthine structure of concealment.<sup>154</sup> Chapter twenty-five is written in this manner, and contains both an exoteric and an esoteric sense. In this way, Maimonides provides two different answers for the difficult problem with which chapter twenty-five deals. This problem, as previously discussed, is that despite Maimonides' vigorous argumentation in the previous chapters, thirteen through twenty-four, he admits that he has only made a case for the possibility of creationism. He has not been able to refute eternalism, or demonstrate the truth of creationism. Should creationism then be accepted? Maimonides says it should, and he cites various reasons: that there are more doubts regarding the truth of eternalism than of creationism;<sup>155</sup> that Abraham and Moses have taught creationism is true;<sup>156</sup> and that eternalism is dangerous to proper theological belief.<sup>157</sup> In chapter twenty-five, Maimonides provides his final argumentation for affirming creationism. This argumentation, however, consists actually of two different arguments, one exoteric and the other esoteric. The exoteric argument is the basis of the apparent concept of miracles and has already been discussed in that context.<sup>158</sup> It is that the acceptance of eternalism and the consequent rejection of creationism means the rejection of the revelation of the Law, miracles, and provid-

154 This is in addition to such methods of concealment as contradiction, or scattering the constitutive elements of a concept, which also appear in this study.

155 *MN*, 16; *et al.*

156 *MN*, 22, 23, 24.

157 *MN*, II, 22.

158 See supra pp. 249–255.

ence, with the latter's promises of reward and punishment. The reason that the affirmation of eternalism entails the rejection of these three fundamental principles of Judaism is ostensibly that they are all nonnatural events and require, therefore, in order to be true, the deity of creationism, who is the only being capable of producing nonnatural events in the universe. However, for the reader who is aware of the esoterica of the *Moreh*, this cannot be Maimonides' true reasoning. This is because Maimonides actually believes the revelation of the Law, miracles, and providence are all natural events and, therefore, can take place equally well in Aristotle's universe as in Maimonides'.<sup>159</sup> What, then, is the esoteric argument for creationism Maimonides is presenting to the elite reader? It is not that revelation, miracles, and providence properly understood cannot occur in an eternalistic, naturalistic universe, but that the literal meanings of Scripture that describe these three classes of events cannot be given a proper figurative or esoteric meaning that accords with eternalism.<sup>160</sup> In the scriptural narratives, revelation, miracles, and providence are all attributed to God as producing them nonnaturally. It is proper, Maimonides says, to understand these nonnatural narratives figuratively as referring to natural events so long as some analogy to their literal meaning is retained, and this is that these events, although natural, have really come from God. However, natural events can be attributed to God only if He is in truth taken as the creator of nature and the universe. It is not a legitimate interpretation to attribute events to God if the universe is eternal and never was created by Him.<sup>161</sup> In other words, Maimonides' argument in chapter twenty-five against accepting eternalism is that given the proper use of figurative interpretation, the acceptance of eternalism means that one must reject Scripture in its entirety. The reason is that literal meanings of Scripture ultimately govern the limits of figura-

<sup>159</sup> On the reasons for concluding Maimonides believes the miracles of Scripture were natural events, see *supra*, pp. 257–271. Regarding the naturalness of prophecy, Maimonides states explicitly that those who believe in eternalism recognize prophecy; *MN*, II, 16. Also, see *MN*, II, 32, the second opinion on prophecy, which is the opinion of the philosophers. As for providence, see Reines (*supra*, n. 125), pp. 173–197.

<sup>160</sup> However, since Plato believes in a creator God, albeit creation from a pre-existent matter, Scripture can be interpreted figuratively to fit his position. I.e., the miracles, etc., are properly attributed to God, who ultimately is the creator of the universe.

<sup>161</sup> Hence what Maimonides means by his statement in *MN*, II, 25 that “with a belief in the creation of the world, all the miracles become possible and (the Revelation of) the Law becomes possible” is this: that with the acceptance of creationism it is possible to believe that the events attributed to God in Scripture nonnaturally, when taken in a demythologized sense, did in fact come from Him, although by means of nature. Without a belief in creationism, nothing theological of the scriptural texts describing revelation, providence, or miracles is true.

tive interpretation and these meanings do not allow eternalism.<sup>162</sup> Hence creationism is to be accepted over eternalism, assuming each is equally unproved, because creationism is pragmatically and socially superior. Creationism allows the affirmation of Scripture, and Scripture gives to the masses an exoteric religion of beliefs, such as nonnatural miracles, that provides personal contentment and social control. At the same time, creationism takes nothing away from the proved teachings of philosophy. Esoterically understood, creationism teaches the same naturalistic, rational universe as does eternalism, in which miracles themselves are reduced to simple anomalies of nature. Consequently, it is on the grounds of its superior social consequences that Maimonides ultimately argues for a theology of creationism. Having thus traced Maimonides' concept of miracles to its conclusion, we find it leads to the fundamental principles of his thought: a theology of creationism and a universe of nature; an exoteric religion of nonnaturalism for the masses, and an esoteric religion of naturalism for the elite.

<sup>162</sup> Having reconciled Judaism in all religiously essential ways with eternalism, except for the problem of the legitimate figurative interpretation of Scripture, Maimonides would seem to have left the door open for eternalists and naturalists among the Jews to remain within the community, their perplexities and internal conflicts now having been fundamentally resolved, and in a very real sense, minimized.

This conclusion is borne out by Maimonides' unusual remark toward the conclusion of *MN*, II, 25 that owing to the destructive consequences of eternalism for the Law, “the lives of virtuous men have been and will be spent in investigating this question,” i.e., the question of creationism or eternalism. We would have expected Maimonides to say that owing to such destructive consequences for the Law “the lives of virtuous men will be spent in emphatically denying eternalism.” Instead, virtuous and thinking persons are invited to spend their lifetimes in continuing investigation of the question. We may assume such investigation and any conclusions reached would be private and secret.