

## MAIMONIDES' CONCEPT OF MOSAIC PROPHECY\*

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SIGNIFICANT difficulties obstruct the path to a systematic understanding of Maimonides' concept of Mosaic prophecy. The primary reason for these difficulties is that Maimonides considered the Sinaitic revelation, which is the apex of Mosaic prophecy, to be one of the "secrets of the Law."<sup>1</sup> It was therefore Maimonides' duty to keep the nature of Mosaic prophecy a "secret" from the uninformed masses while revealing its truth to the initiates of metaphysical science.<sup>2</sup> Prominent among the techniques Maimonides employs in concealing the nature of Mosaic prophecy are *omission*, *scattering*, and the *use of language of multiple significances*. Thus Maimonides omits making any explicit statements on the essence of Mosaic prophecy; rather he specifically excludes it from his general discussion of prophecy with the assurance that not "a single word" about it would be said.<sup>3</sup> When Maimonides forthrightly contradicts this assurance

\* This article proceeds on the basis that Maimonides' admonition in the Introduction to the *Moreh Nevukhim*, that there is a secret teaching contained in its pages, is correct and, consequently, that all interpretations of the *Moreh Nevukhim* must take this warning into consideration. It, therefore, utilizes a methodology which may yield conclusions that differ from those of traditional scholarship. Ed.

<sup>1</sup> *Moreh Nevukhim* II, 33. The *Moreh Nevukhim* will henceforth be referred to as *MN*. Reference will be made to the following translations: S. Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago, 1963); M. Friedländer, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (New York, 1881); S. Munk, *Le Guide des Égarés* (Paris, 1856).

<sup>2</sup> See generally Maimonides' Introduction to the *MN*; also, I, 68, 32-34. For an interesting discussion of the secret nature of the *MN*, see L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952), pp. 38 ff. However, Strauss' emphasis upon the extent of the secrecy and contradiction in the *MN* is overdone. As this paper attempts to illustrate, the basic religious beliefs Maimonides teaches in the *MN* can be reasonably determined. However, by the very nature of Maimonides' intent in writing the *MN*, and the method that he employed, it does not appear likely that an absolutely certain determination of his beliefs can be made which would preclude or prohibit entirely all alternative explanations; cf. e. g., L. Strauss' Introductory Essay to S. Pines, pp. xxxvi ff.

<sup>3</sup> *MN* II, 35. Maimonides' complete statement is: "For I must tell you that whatever I say here of prophecy refers exclusively to the form of prophecy of all

and returns to Mosaic prophecy time and again, his remarks are cryptic, fragmentary, and above all scattered. In speaking of his treatment of subjects that are to be kept secret from the uninformed masses, Maimonides describes the technique of concealment by "scattering" in this way: "these have not been methodically and systematically arranged in this work, but have been, on the contrary, scattered, and are interspersed with other topics which we shall have occasion to explain. My object in adopting this arrangement is that the truths should be at one time apparent, and at another time concealed. Thus we shall not be in opposition to the Divine Will (from which it is wrong to differ) for it has withheld from the multitude<sup>4</sup> the truths required for the knowledge of God."<sup>5</sup> In using language of multiple significances, Maimonides takes Scripture as his model. The mythological language of Scripture, according to Maimonides, is not to be taken literally, but as communicating in metaphorical fashion a rational metaphysical-scientific theology. Hence the words of Scripture possess multiple meanings, at times several, but usually two. The latter reflects the two basic religious systems contained in Scripture: the exoteric mythological system and the esoteric rational system. Maimonides makes frequent use of scriptural mythological language to convey his own thoughts, although the significances he intends by this language are revealed in various critical chapters of the *Moreh*.<sup>6</sup>

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prophets before and after Moses. But as to the prophecy of Moses, I will not speak of it in this work with one single word, whether directly or indirectly, because, in my opinion, the term prophet is applied to Moses and other men equivocally." Inasmuch as Maimonides does go on to make further statements about Mosaic prophecy (notably, in II, 45, and elsewhere), his remark here is clearly contradictory. *Contradiction*, as explained by Maimonides in the *MN*, is also one of the devices he employs to conceal truth from the uninformed reader. I have not included *contradiction* with *omission*, *scattering*, and the *use of multiple significances* for the reason that Maimonides seems to have employed it in connection with Mosaic prophecy this one time, and only to convey a preliminary communication. As I understand the contradiction, it conveys two points. First, by the very fact that Maimonides contradicts himself, he alerts the initiated reader to the fact that there is a secret teaching in relation to Mosaic prophecy. Second, when Maimonides says he will say nothing further about Moses' prophecy, it is in a sense true: he will say nothing further that will be intelligible to the uninitiated reader, who is to think that the metaphysical problems connected with Moses' prophecy have been solved by the fact that it is scientifically inexplicable. But the initiated reader is to proceed further, as Maimonides himself does in his additional remarks, and there the reader will discover further information pointing to the truth of Mosaic prophecy.

<sup>4</sup> I. e., the uninformed masses.

<sup>5</sup> Introduction to the *MN*; tr. M. Friedländer, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Illustrations of this point will appear in the course of this study.

## I

The most basic statements Maimonides makes regarding Mosaic prophecy appear in passages that compare Moses' prophecy with that of the ordinary prophets.<sup>7</sup> It is necessary, therefore, to recall Maimonides' theory of ordinary prophecy before proceeding further. This theory is epitomized by the definition Maimonides gives of prophecy: "Know that the quiddity of prophecy, in truth,<sup>8</sup> is an emanation<sup>9</sup> that flows forth from God through the medium of the Active Intellect, first upon the rational faculty, and then upon the imaginative faculty." This definition describes generally the natural process through which prophecy, according to Maimonides, originates. The "emanation that flows forth from God through the medium of the Active Intellect, first upon the rational faculty" refers to the various incorporeal actions of the Active Intellect that result in prophecy: the bestowal of the human form or essence which endows man with intellect; the realization of the human intellect from a state of potentiality to actuality;<sup>10</sup> and union with the human intellect, which occurs when the acquired intellect reaches the stage of development at which it shares with the Active Intellect a significant degree of identical abstract contemplation.<sup>11</sup> At the moment of prophecy the intellect or essential quality of man is most fully realized and its union with the Active Intellect most complete. However, ordinary prophecy is not a purely intellectual activity. It involves the imagination as well. Hence prophecy is an emanation that flows from the rational faculty "upon the imaginative faculty." This phrase refers primarily to three functions of the imagination in prophecy: the imagination, under the influence of a perfected rational faculty, produces parables or imaginative representations of the abstract knowledge that the rational faculty conceptualizes in

<sup>7</sup> The term "ordinary" referring to prophets or prophecy will mean "non-Mosaic."

<sup>8</sup> Literally: "Know that the truth of prophecy and its quiddity . . ."

<sup>9</sup> Hebrew שפץ; Arabic فُي. These terms are translated in a variety of ways. S. Munk, II, 281 (and throughout), translates *emanation*; so Friedländer, II, 173 (and throughout). S. Pines, p. 369 (and throughout) translates *overflow*. The term *emanation* is the one generally employed in philosophic translations. Emanation refers to incorporeal causation; cf. *MN* II, 12.

<sup>10</sup> I. e., the realization of the hylic intellect into an acquired intellect.

<sup>11</sup> All intellects that contemplate abstract knowledge share the same objects of thought. Consequently, all abstract knowledge is identical. Some intellects, of course, comprehend more concepts than others, but those comprehended are the same. Moreover, inasmuch as an intellect is nothing other than the abstractions it conceives, the Active Intellect and the human intellect constitute the same intellect to the degree that they conceive the same abstractions. This is what is meant by the "union" of the Active Intellect and the human intellect.

prophecy;<sup>12</sup> the imagination concretizes the abstract knowledge of the rational faculty so that it refers to particular objects individuated in space and time;<sup>13</sup> the imagination produces parables of abstract knowledge the rational faculty cannot fully grasp.<sup>14</sup> The distinction between the first and third functions of the imagination is to be carefully noted. In the first function, the rational faculty employs the imagination as an instrument to convey in parable form information the rational faculty fully comprehends. The purpose of this function is largely to reproduce abstract concepts in a figurative way to enable the uninformed masses to grasp something of their meaning.<sup>15</sup> In the third function, the rational faculty falls short of fully comprehending the information it is attempting to conceive in prophecy, and is forced, therefore, to supplement its faulty comprehension by use of the imagination. One final point, ordinary prophecy does not take place at will in a state of complete consciousness. It is apprehended unexpectedly either in a state of deep unconsciousness, a dream during sleep, or in a vision, a trancelike state between consciousness and unconsciousness.<sup>16</sup>

So much for ordinary prophecy. The first reference to Mosaic prophecy we will examine appears in the *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>17</sup> In a well-known passage, Maimonides enumerates four differences between ordinary and Mosaic prophecy. Ordinary prophecy is apprehended in dreams or visions; Mosaic prophecy in full consciousness. Ordinary prophecy comes by means of an angel; Mosaic prophecy without an angel. The apprehension of ordinary prophecy is accompanied by fear and terror; Mosaic prophecy comes peacefully. Ordinary prophecy arises involuntarily and unexpectedly; Moses' prophecy comes at will. These four differences are derivative, however, and they do not in

<sup>12</sup> This abstract knowledge is a high order of metaphysical-scientific knowledge, as, e. g., Ezekiel's vision of the "chariot" (מעשה מרכבה) is an imaginative representation of metaphysical cosmology; see *MN* III, 1-7.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Narboni, *Commentary on the Moreh Nevukhim* II, 36. For Abrabanel's opposing view, see my "Abrabanel on Prophecy in the *Moreh Nevukhim*," *HUCA* 36 (1965), pp. 125 ff.

<sup>14</sup> This critical point has generally gone unrecognized. Maimonides refers to this function of the imagination in his Introduction to the *MN* by the statement that "matter and habit" overtake the person when the "lightning" of understanding ceases. I. e., the material faculty or imagination produces phantasy or mythological theology when the intellect in ordinary prophecy reaches the limits of its ability.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the Introduction to the *MN*, *inter alia*.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of this view of ordinary prophecy, see my "Abrabanel on Prophecy . . .," *HUCA* 35 (1964) and 36 (1965).

<sup>17</sup> *Sefer ha-Madda*, "Yesode ha-Torah" VII, 6. Cf. "Abrabanel on Prophecy . . .," *HUCA* 34 (1963), generally on my interpretation here, which follows that of Abrabanel.

themselves constitute the fundamental distinction between the ordinary prophets and Moses. This distinction is that the ordinary prophets prophesied through the medium of the imagination and Moses did not. On this basis, the four differences between these two kinds of prophecy can be readily explained. The ordinary prophets were unable to prophesy when fully conscious because the imagination, when intensely engaged as it is in prophecy, draws power away from the external senses and induces a nonconscious state. Similarly, the use of the imagination explains why ordinary prophecy is said to come through an angel. The angel the ordinary prophets beheld was in reality a phantasy representation of an incorporeal being, the Active Intellect. Accordingly, the fact that the ordinary prophets received prophecy in which imaginative representations appeared reproducing in corporeal form abstract beings and concepts shows that this prophecy came through the imagination. Also, the ordinary prophets were frightened when they prophesied because the imagination becomes overwhelmed upon receiving the awesome emanation of prophetic knowledge. Finally, the ordinary prophets were unable to prophesy at all times owing to the fact that the imaginative faculty is a corporeal faculty and dependent for its functioning upon the emotional and physical condition of the body. If the emotions are disturbed or the body enfeebled, the imagination is affected and becomes too weak to meet the intense demands of prophecy. Moses, free of the imagination, suffered none of these disabilities: he prophesied in full consciousness, without envisioning an angel, without fear and whenever he chose.

The thesis that use of the imagination provides the fundamental distinction between Moses and the other prophets is confirmed by the following passage in the *Moreh*:

You will perhaps raise an objection against me, saying: You have counted among the degrees of prophecy one where the prophet hears speech from God addressing him, as, for example, Isaiah and Micaiah. Yet how can this be when our fundamental principle is that every prophet heard speech only through the medium of an angel, except Moses, of whom it is said, "with him do I speak mouth to mouth" (Num. 12:8)? Know that it is in fact so, and the intermediary here is the imaginative faculty; for he<sup>18</sup> only hears God speaking to him in a prophetic dream, whereas Moses (heard Him) "from above the ark cover, from between the two cherubim" (Exod. 25:22) without making use of the imaginative faculty. We have already explained in the *Mishneh Torah* the differentia of that kind of prophecy, and we have explained the meaning of "with him do I speak mouth to

<sup>18</sup> The ordinary prophet.

mouth" (Num. 12:8), and "as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exod. 33:11), and other expressions.<sup>19</sup>

Maimonides here reaffirms the distinction he has drawn in the *Mishneh Torah* between Moses and the other prophets but goes further, explicitly linking the distinction to the action of the imagination. In addition, Maimonides departs from his negative approach to delineating Moses' prophecy, which consists of merely distinguishing it from the imaginative phantasy of ordinary prophecy, to the positive assertion, albeit cryptic, that Moses heard God "from above the ark cover, from between the two cherubim."

To explain the phrase "from between the two cherubim" it is necessary to digress briefly. Two significant references to the term cherub or cherubim appear in the *Moreh*. In speaking against the belief of the Sabians that the celestial sphere with its stars is God, Maimonides says:

Now, inasmuch as the Sabians were ignorant of the existence of God and thought that the eternal being, which can never be overtaken by nonexistence, was the celestial sphere with its stars, from which forces flow upon idols and (upon) certain trees, I mean the *asheroth*, they thought that it was the idols and the trees which imparted revelation to prophets, spoke to them during the revelation, and made known to them that which is useful or harmful, as we explained to you regarding their opinions in speaking of "the prophets of Baal and the prophets of Asherah." But when the truth became clear to the wise men, and it became known by demonstrative proof that there exists a being who is neither a body nor a force in a body, who is the true God, and that He is one, and that there are also other beings, separate (from matter) and incorporeal, upon which the divine being emanates and these are the angels, as we have explained, and these beings are not included in the sphere and its stars, it became known with certainty that it was these angels that in reality imparted revelations, and not the idols of the *asheroth*. Thus it is clear, through that which we have stated previously, that belief in the existence of angels is related to belief in the existence of God, and through them prophecy and the Law are established as true. To strengthen belief in this principle God commanded that the image of two angels should be made over the ark in order to establish the existence of angels in the belief of the multitude, which is a true opinion, second to belief in the existence of God, and it is the principle underlying prophecy and the Law and refutes idolatry, as we have explained. If there

<sup>19</sup> *MN* II, 45. Owing to Maimonides' use of a language of multiple significances and to the scattered and cryptic nature of his remarks, all relevant texts will be reproduced so that the reader will have readily available the evidence upon which the conclusions of this study are based.

had been one image, I mean the image of a single cherub, this might have been misleading, for it could be thought that this was the image of God which was to be worshipped, as the idolaters do, or that there was only a single individual angel, which would lead to a certain kind of dualism. But since two cherubim were made, along with the explicit declaration stated that "the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4), belief in the existence of angels and that they are multiple was clearly established.<sup>20</sup>

The second reference reads as follows:

A passage of the Midrash Qoheleth states: "When man sleeps, his soul speaks to the angel, and the angel speaks to the cherubim." Here, then, for someone who understands and who thinks, they have stated clearly that the imaginative faculty is likewise called angel, and that the intellect is called cherub.<sup>21</sup>

On the basis of these two passages an interpretation may be given of Maimonides' statement that God spoke to Moses "from between the two cherubim." In the first passage, the terms angel and cherub are used interchangeably, which signifies that angel and cherub can have the same reference. As is also clear from this passage, and from numerous others as well, the term angel refers to the celestial Intelligences.<sup>22</sup> Hence the term cherub has the meaning of Intelligence. In the second passage, the point is made that cherub also refers to the human intellect. Inasmuch as Moses heard God "from between the two cherubim," we may conclude that Moses heard God "from between an Intelligence and the human intellect," two cherubim having been selected to indicate that the cherubim here refer to the two kinds of intellectual beings for which the term is employed, celestial Intelligence and human intellect. Since the Active Intellect is the only Intelligence Maimonides mentions in connection with prophecy, it may further be inferred that the Intelligence is the Active Intellect. Accordingly, the meaning of Maimonides' statement that Moses heard God "from between the two cherubim" without making use of the imaginative faculty" is that Moses apprehended prophecy through the Active Intellect and the human intellect alone; he did not make use of the imagination which the other prophets all found it necessary to employ.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *MN* III, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *MN* II, 6.

<sup>22</sup> See, e. g., *MN* II, 6, 7, and 10.

<sup>23</sup> Efodi explains that the ark cover refers to the Active Intellect and the two cherubim to the intellectual faculty and the judgment faculty, *Commentary on the Moreh Nevukhim, ad loc.* Shem-tov's interpretation is that the ark cover refers to the intellectual faculty, and the two cherubim to the judgment faculty and the imagination, *Commentary on the Moreh Nevukhim, ad loc.*

It will be useful at this point to attempt to reconstruct a definition of Mosaic prophecy as understood by Maimonides while keeping in mind that this reconstruction is offered primarily as heuristic. Although Maimonides gives no definition of Mosaic prophecy, it would appear that he had such a definition in mind. Maimonides implies as much in his explanation why the formal exposition of prophecy in the *Moreh* (II 32–48) does not apply to Moses' prophecy. "For in my opinion," he says, "the term prophet is applied to Moses and the other prophets amphibolously." An amphibolous term is defined by Maimonides as one that is "predicated of two things between which there is a likeness in respect of some notion, which notion is an accident attached to both of them but not a constituent element of the essence of either one of them."<sup>24</sup> Since it is necessary, therefore, to know what the essence of a thing is before it can be asserted to be in the kind of relation with another thing whereby the two are described by the same term amphibolously, Maimonides did have an idea of the essence of Mosaic prophecy. In the light of the foregoing, the definition that suggests itself is: Mosaic prophecy is an emanation that flows from God through the medium of the Active Intellect upon the rational faculty. Ordinary prophecy, by way of comparison, is defined as "an emanation that flows forth from God through the medium of the Active Intellect, first upon the rational faculty, and then upon the imaginative faculty."<sup>25</sup> The essence of a thing, which is given by its definition, is *per proximum genus et differentiam*. Comparing the definitions of ordinary and Mosaic prophecy, we have the following: The genus of ordinary prophecy is "an emanation that flows from the Active Intellect upon the rational faculty;" the specific difference is "an emanation that flows from the rational faculty upon the imaginative faculty." The genus of Mosaic prophecy is "an emanation that flows from God through the medium of the Active Intellect," and the specific difference is "an emanation that flows from the Active Intellect upon the rational faculty." In accordance with the requirement that two things to which the same term is applied amphibolously cannot share constituent elements of their essence in common, the proximate genera as well as the specific differences of the two kinds of prophecy differ. The fact that in both Mosaic and ordinary prophecy the Active Intellect emanates upon the rational faculty constitutes only an accidental similarity, since in the former the prophecy itself is pure concept, whereas

<sup>24</sup> *MN* I, 45 (tr. primarily S. Pines, p. 131). Cf. S. Munk, I, 6, nn. 3 and 22; also, II, 278, and n. 1. See generally, H. A. Wolfson, "The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy, and Maimonides," *The Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938), pp. 151–173.

<sup>25</sup> *MN* II, 36.

in the latter, owing to the participation of the imagination in assisting the intellect to apprehend the prophetic emanation, the actual prophecy is intellectualized phantasy. Between prophetic knowledge that is pure concept and prophecy containing material representations there exists an essential difference.<sup>26</sup>

## II

The above reconstruction of Maimonides' view of the essence of Mosaic prophecy, although it must remain a conjecture as a definition, is nonetheless correct in its general outlines, agreeing with and epitomizing Maimonides' various statements on the subject of Mosaic prophecy. Still, as is the case regarding the definition of ordinary prophecy, this description of Mosaic prophecy is quite broad, and leaves a number of significant points unresolved.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Maimonides' opinion regarding three questions remains to be explored: whether Mosaic prophecy was a natural or miraculous event; the phenomenology of Mosaic prophecy; and the actual content of Mosaic prophecy.

A. The distinction between natural and miraculous events for Maimonides is not that one is produced by nature and the other by God. Both are produced by God. However, natural events are produced by the general will of God, which has created the universe and ordained the regular and repeatable sequences of events generated by ordinary causation; whereas miracles are produced by the special will of God which interrupts the natural succession and by direct divine action generates extraordinary and unique events.<sup>28</sup> Maimonides nowhere states explicitly that Moses' prophecy is either a natural or miraculous event. His exclusion of Mosaic prophecy from the definition of ordinary prophecy, which is clearly a natural occurrence, does not by itself reveal Maimonides' opinion on the issue. Mosaic prophecy

<sup>26</sup> In fact, owing to the participation of the imagination, Maimonides says ordinary prophecy belongs to the same species as dreams; cf. *MN* II, 36. For the distinction between Mosaic prophecy and the philosophic emanation, see *infra*, n. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Maimonides, e. g., spends all of *MN* II, 36 explaining the details of his definition of ordinary prophecy, and *MN* II, 32 merely to introduce it. See further in the discussion.

<sup>28</sup> There is reason to doubt that Maimonides actually believes in miracles in any ordinary sense at all, despite his apparent acceptance. However, the question of miracles is a separate problem, requiring a separate investigation. If Maimonides does not accept miracles, then, of course, Mosaic prophecy is a natural occurrence, the conclusion I have drawn here. But this inquiry proceeds according to the face value of the text: assuming the apparent meaning that Maimonides accepts miracles to be correct, does he believe Mosaic prophecy to have been a miracle?

can be essentially different from ordinary prophecy and still remain natural. On the other hand, as is apparent from the hypothetical definition given above, a definition by itself does not resolve the question of natural occurrence or miracle. The language of definition is too general. This is evident from the definition of ordinary prophecy that Maimonides himself gives, which on the face of it allows either a naturalistic or miraculous interpretation. We only know Maimonides' opinion, that ordinary prophecy arises naturally, from explicit statements he makes in introducing and explaining his definition, but not from the definition itself.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, in the absence of such explicit discussion by Maimonides regarding Mosaic prophecy, judgment must be based upon implicit evidence, which appears as hints or in otherwise veiled terms. The weight of the implicit evidence is that in Maimonides' view Mosaic prophecy was a natural event. Several lines of reasoning support this conclusion:

1. Natural knowledge, like all natural events, is an effect produced by prior natural causes. These causes in the case of knowledge are called "preparation"<sup>30</sup> by Maimonides and consist of the native endowment of a superior brain, excellent moral character, and proper study and training.<sup>31</sup> Knowledge that is produced miraculously does not, of course, require prior natural causation. God produces the knowledge directly without preparation by the knower.<sup>32</sup> Yet Maimonides points out explicitly and with great emphasis that Moses did not attempt to acquire a knowledge of God until he had first acquired the necessary preparations. Moreover, the implication is present that the superiority of Moses' prophecy was proportionate to his preparation, which means the effect was equal to the cause, a distinctive characteristic of natural causation:

In the same way we say that man should not hasten too much to accede to this great and sublime matter<sup>33</sup> at the first try, without having made his soul undergo training in the sciences and the different kinds of knowledge, having truly improved his character, and having extinguished the desires and cravings engendered in him by his imagination. When, however, he has achieved and acquired knowledge of true and certain premises and has achieved knowledge of the rules of logic and inference and of the various ways of preserving himself from errors of the

<sup>29</sup> Cf. my "Abrabanel on Prophecy . . .," *HUCA* particularly vols. 31 (1960) and 35 (1964).

<sup>30</sup> Hebrew, הַכְנָה; Arabic, حَهْو.

<sup>31</sup> *MN* II, 36.

<sup>32</sup> In *MN* II, 32, Maimonides inveighs against the notion that miracles produce prophecy.

<sup>33</sup> I. e., metaphysical theology.

mind, he then should engage in the investigation of this subject. When doing this he should not make categoric affirmation in favor of the first opinion that occurs to him and should not, from the outset, strain and impel his thoughts toward the apprehension of the deity; he rather should feel awe and refrain and hold back until he gradually elevates himself. It is in this sense that it is said, "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" . . ." (Exod. 3:6). [Moses], peace be on him, was commended for this; and God, may He be exalted, let overflow upon him so much of His bounty and goodness that it became necessary to say of him: "And the figure of the Lord shall he look upon"<sup>34</sup> (Num. 12:8).<sup>35</sup>

2. In discussing the distinction between Mosaic and ordinary prophecy, Maimonides says that a distinction must similarly be drawn between the miracles of Moses and the other prophets:

For in my opinion the term prophet is applied to Moses and the other prophets amphibolously. It is the same, in my opinion, regarding his miracles and those of others, for his miracles do not belong to the same class as those of the other prophets.<sup>36</sup>

From this passage it is evident that Moses' prophecy is not considered a miracle by Maimonides, seeing that Moses' prophecy is treated as an entirely distinct matter from the miracles he performed. Similarly, further in the chapter, Maimonides offers proof of the qualitative superiority of Moses' prophecy over ordinary prophecy, and for the superiority as well of Moses' miracles over those of the ordinary prophets. But Maimonides finds it necessary to employ one set of proofs to establish the former and an entirely different set for the latter, thereby confirming again that Moses' prophecy is not included among the miracles he performed, but is a natural event.

3. Logically, there is no place for development or improvement in events produced by miracles. Since miracles originate in the direct act of the perfect God, events produced by miracles cannot improve from one time to the next, but must always occur in the same perfect manner. Yet Moses' prophecy underwent development and improvement. Maimonides states:

Moses himself was initiated into his prophetic mission by an angel: "And the angel of the Lord appeared to him out of the midst of the fire" (Exod. 3:2).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> I. e., since Moses was so thorough in his preparation, a superior emanation came upon him. The language is metaphorical and an example of Maimonides' use of language of multiple significances. This point is discussed further below.

<sup>35</sup> *MN* I, 5 (tr. S. Pines, p. 29).

<sup>36</sup> *MN* II, 35.

<sup>37</sup> *MN* III, 45 (tr. S. Pines, p. 576).

The “angel” referred to as initiating Moses into his prophetic mission is prophecy that comes from the Active Intellect by means of the imagination as well as the intellect.<sup>38</sup> The point Maimonides makes, therefore, is that at the beginning of Moses’ prophethood he prophesied by means of the imaginative faculty, at the level of ordinary prophecy. Only later did Moses reach the superior and unique degree of prophesying by means of the intellect alone. Such development is incomprehensible unless Moses’ prophecy was a natural occurrence, for had it been a miracle, God would have produced the purely intellectual prophecy of Moses’ later period immediately, since in His perfection He always performs the superior act.

4. Inasmuch as miracles are not produced by natural causes, miraculous events are not affected by natural disturbances. Yet Maimonides says that Moses did not prophesy when undergoing a period of stress:

You know . . . that prophetic revelation did not come to Moses, peace be on him, after the disastrous incident of the spies and until the whole generation of the desert perished, in the way that revelation used to come before, because—seeing the enormity of their crime—he suffered greatly because of this matter. This was so even though the imaginative faculty did not enter into his prophecy, peace be on him, as the intellect overflowed toward him without its intermediation.<sup>39</sup>

The arguments above establish with reasonable certainty the conclusion that Moses’ prophecy was viewed by Maimonides as a natural occurrence. Still, one possible objection to this conclusion remains to be considered. This objection arises from such statements attributed to God in Scripture as, “and I will speak with thee,” which appears in the critical verse, “And there I will meet with thee and I will speak with thee from above the ark cover, from between the two cherubim, etc.” (Exod. 25:33), as well as the general scriptural formula “And

<sup>38</sup> Moses’ prophecy begins at the vision of the burning bush and culminates at Sinai.

<sup>39</sup> *MN* II, 36 (tr. S. Pines, pp. 372 f.). The commentators generally have noted a problem in connection with this passage. If Moses did not employ his imagination in prophesying, why should he have been affected by emotional distress? For only a corporeal faculty, like the imagination, would be affected by emotion, and Moses, according to Maimonides, prophesied through the intellect alone. Efodi comments that Maimonides here hints that Moses also used his imagination to prophesy, a suggestion Abrabanel finds scandalous (see my “Abrabanel on Prophecy . . .,” *HUCA* 36, pp. 144 ff.). It is certainly likely that Maimonides here is hinting at some secret notion, but this seems to me to be that Moses’ prophecy was produced naturally. For the intellect can become preoccupied at times of stress with problem-solving, even though these problems require a lower degree of intellectual effort. If prophecy were produced miraculously, it would not cease owing to such disturbances.

the Lord spoke unto Moses.” In the various texts of the *Moreh*, and similarly, in the other philosophic writings of Maimonides, he cites verses containing phrases such as these without comment or explanation. Certainly the literal meaning of these phrases is that God spoke words directly to Moses, which constitutes a miracle, since we do not find such events in nature. Consequently, if Maimonides truly takes these verses literally, this would provide convincing proof that regardless of any implications to the contrary elsewhere, he subscribes to the miraculous interpretation of Mosaic prophecy. However, in two significant passages in the *Moreh*, Maimonides explains the proper manner in which phrases such as “And the Lord spoke unto Moses” are to be interpreted.

In the first passage, Maimonides emphatically rejects the notion that the phrases which attribute speech to God are to be taken literally. Their correct meaning is that God created a universe in which objective truth concerning divine or metaphysical matters can be apprehended naturally by man. Accordingly, the speech Moses “heard” refers to nothing more than metaphysical knowledge naturally attained by the human mind which is produced by the universe as part of the ordinary and regular processes that were brought into existence and ordained by God:

After you have advanced thus far, and truly comprehended that God exists without having the attribute of existence, and that He is One, without having the attribute of unity, I do not think that I need explain to you the inadmissibility of the attribute of speech in reference to God . . . Speech is attributed to Him only because the words heard by Moses were produced and brought into existence by God in the same manner as He produced all His other works and creations . . . When we are told that God addressed the prophets and spoke to them, our minds are merely to receive a notion that there is divine knowledge to which the prophets attain.<sup>40</sup>

In the second passage, Maimonides further explains the meaning of such expressions as “to speak” when ascribed directly to God. This is done only in the sense that God is the ultimate ground of being, that is, of natural being, not that He directly and miraculously communicates with any of the prophets:

It is clear that everything produced must have an immediate cause which produced it; that cause again a cause, and so on, till the First Cause, viz., the will and decree of God. The prophets therefore omit sometimes the intermediate causes, and ascribe

<sup>40</sup> *MN* I, 65 (tr. primarily, M. Friedländer, I, 243 f.). See this chapter generally for Maimonides’ interpretation as equivocal of the terms attributing speech to God.

the production of an individual thing directly to God, saying that God has made it. . . . As regards the immediate causes of things produced, it makes no difference whether these causes consist in substances, physical properties, freewill, or chance . . . The prophets [omit them and] ascribe the production directly to God and use such phrases as, God has done it, commanded it, or said it; in all such cases the verbs "to say," "to speak," "to command," "to call," and "to send" are employed. . . . You see clearly that the providing of a cause, in whatever manner this may take place, by substance, accident, freewill, or will, is *always* expressed by one of the five terms, commanding, saying, speaking, sending or calling. Note this, and apply it everywhere according to the context. Many difficulties will thereby be removed, and passages apparently containing things far from truth will prove to be true.<sup>41</sup>

B. The end sought in pursuing Maimonides' phenomenology of Mosaic prophecy is to discover his view of the psychological and epistemological activity of which this form of prophecy consists. What is the process Moses underwent at the precise moment of prophecy? Before entering upon this inquiry, Maimonides' admonition must be recalled that in his view no one is capable of fully comprehending Moses' prophetic experience. "If you further assume," he writes, "that we are unable fully to comprehend the nature of this greatness, you will understand that when I speak . . . I only refer to the prophets which have not attained the high degree that Moses attained."<sup>42</sup> Still, the evidence mounts as one turns the pages of the *Moreh* that although Maimonides may not have arrived at or thought himself capable of fully comprehending the nature of Mosaic prophecy, he did have in mind a notion of the kind of epistemological and psychological experience it constituted. This experience in Maimonides' phenomenology appears to have consisted of two kinds of intuition, one may be called gestalt intuition, the other premise intuition.

The meaning of gestalt intuition can perhaps best be illustrated by referring to an autobiographical remark Maimonides makes in the course of expounding the secret theodicy concealed in the Book of Job. He says of his interpretation: "Understand this notion and consider how extraordinary it is, and see how these notions came to me through something similar to prophetic revelation."<sup>43</sup> The question presents itself why Maimonides considered his interpretation of Job to have come in a manner similar to "prophetic revelation." The answer would seem to be that Maimonides did not have available the usual ratiocinative procedures he would ordinarily have followed in

<sup>41</sup> *MN* II, 48 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, II, 222 ff.).

<sup>42</sup> *MN* II, 36 (tr. M. Friedländer, II, 173). <sup>43</sup> *MN* III, 22 (tr. S. Pines, p. 488).

arriving at some intellectual conclusion. The literal sense of the text of Job could not be employed as premises for his conclusion since the literal meaning serves as exoteric camouflage disguising the secret interpretation. The secret meaning could not be employed since it is concealed from view. Neither could past interpretations of the Jews inasmuch as there is no mention of Job's true meaning aside from one obscure reference in the rabbinic literature. Certainly there was no way from metaphysical science per se to arrive at the correct explanation of a book ostensibly foreign to its thinking. In short, Maimonides was unable to arrive at his interpretation of Job either through scriptural interpretation or the syllogistic procedures of discursive reasoning, moving from premises by means of logical inference to a demonstrated conclusion. Nevertheless, Maimonides did arrive at an interpretation. This must then have occurred through a flash of intuitive reasoning in which his knowledge of the text of Job and his understanding of metaphysical science suddenly coalesced into a gestalt in which the two sources were immediately structured into a coherent and integrated whole. It is this process of gestalt intuition that Maimonides likens to a "prophetic revelation," and which he considered to be a general characteristic of all prophecy.<sup>44</sup> In Mosaic prophecy, there was no participation by the imagination in the intuitive act and the gestalt contained no images and parables. Thus freed of the imagination when prophesying, Moses enjoyed the fourfold advantage over the ordinary prophets described earlier: he apprehended the prophetic gestalt when fully conscious; he saw no imaginative representations such as angels; he was not frightened by the gestalt since it was free of phantasy and entirely intelligible to his intellect; and finally, he intuited the gestalt at will, so that he was not overwhelmed by its suddenness.

The interpretation of gestalt intuition as the quintessential act of prophecy is supported by Maimonides' well-known description of the difficulties encountered by the finite intellect of man when he attempts to fathom metaphysics (מעשה מרכבה) and natural science (מעשה בראשית):

Do not imagine that these most difficult problems can be thoroughly understood by any one of us. This is not the case. At times the truth shines so brilliantly that we perceive it as clear

<sup>44</sup> Maimonides also considered the capacity of gestalt intuition as necessary for the "nonprophet" intellectual who reads Scripture or who reads the *Moreh*. When Maimonides says he will only give "chapter headings" with regard to some secret subject, I think he meant for the hints so given to provide the deserving reader with the stimulus for a gestalt intuition whereby the hidden meanings would be revealed.



as day. Matter<sup>45</sup> and habit then draw a veil over our perception, and we return to a darkness almost as dense as before. We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightning, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night. On some the lightning flashes in rapid succession, and they seem to be in perpetual light, and their night is as clear as the day. This was the degree of prophetic excellence attained by (Moses) the greatest of prophets, to whom God said, "But as for thee, stand thou here by Me" (Deut. 5:31), and of whom it is written "the skin of his face shone," etc. (Exod. 34:29).<sup>46</sup>

Since the above passage refers to the acquisition of metaphysical and scientific knowledge, which consists of a process of abstraction and generalization, the "flashes of lightning" may be understood as acts of gestalt intuition in which knowledge of a less abstract and general nature is immediately sublated into levels of higher abstraction and generalization.<sup>47</sup> Moses did not employ his imagination in prophesying, and he could therefore sustain the act of gestalt intuition for very lengthy periods of time.<sup>48</sup>

The novelty of prophecy is not exhausted by gestalt intuition. A necessary concomitant to gestalt intuition is premise intuition, which serves as an integral element in the quintessential act of prophecy. Premise intuition is the originative act of knowledge in prophecy. Whereas gestalt intuition is in a sense secondary, acting on knowledge the prophet already has, premise intuition arrives at new or original knowledge. This original knowledge is integrated into the knowledge apprehended by gestalt intuition and determines its structure. Hence there are two aspects to the quintessential act of prophecy: the immediate apprehension of original knowledge through premise intuition;

<sup>45</sup> Friedländer's translation of "nature" has been changed to "matter." (See S. Munk, 1, 40, n. 4.) By matter is meant the imagination, a material or bodily faculty which corporealizes the pure concepts into images, metaphors, and parables.

<sup>46</sup> *MN*, Introduction (tr. M. Friedländer, pp. 8 f.).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. S. Pines, pp. cv f., who is of the opinion that the lightning flashes refer to those who have "intuitive theoretical knowledge." From the viewpoint expressed here, the remainder of his comment on intuition in Maimonides' prophecy is confusing and faulty. One problem in Pines' interpretation is the unwarranted reduction of Maimonides' thought and terminology to that of the philosophers who preceded him. In fact, Maimonides was a philosopher of religion with original gifts, and his thought should primarily be understood from within the *Moreh* itself.

<sup>48</sup> But not always, as is shown by Moses' failure to prophesy during a period of stress. However, Maimonides' point is not that Moses always prophesied, but that, when he did, he always received a purely intellectual gestalt. It was not an inherent limitation that kept Moses from the act of gestalt intuition, as it was in the case of the ordinary prophets who needed the imagination to apprehend their prophecy. The imagination intrinsically obscured the clarity of their intuition, whereas Moses' stress was an accidental circumstance.

and the immediate integration of the knowledge thus acquired with all other knowledge the prophet possesses. Premise intuition is defined as the act of intellect by which the axioms and definitions that constitute the first principles or premises of prophetic science are apprehended. Although prophetic premise intuition is to be distinguished from the action of intuitive reason in ordinary metaphysical science,<sup>49</sup> their general nature is nonetheless similar.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the following description by Aristotle of intuitive reason in ordinary science is broadly applicable to premise intuition in prophecy: "Now of the thinking states by which we grasp truth, some are unfailingly true, others admit of error — opinion, for instance, and calculation, whereas scientific knowledge and intuition are always true: further no other kind of thought except intuition is more accurate than scientific knowledge . . . primary premisses are more knowable than demonstrations, and all scientific knowledge is discursive. From these considerations it follows that there will be no scientific knowledge of the primary premisses and since except intuition nothing can be truer than scientific knowledge, it will be intuition that apprehends the primary premisses — a result which also follows from the fact that demonstration cannot be the originative source of demonstration, nor, consequently, scientific knowledge of scientific knowledge. If, therefore, it is the only other kind of true thinking except scientific knowing, intuition will be the originative source of scientific knowledge. And the originative source of science grasps the original basic premiss, while science as a whole is similarly related as originative source to the whole body of fact."<sup>51</sup>

Maimonides' opinion that the conjunction of premise and gestalt intuition form the quintessential act of prophecy is clearly seen in the general phenomenology of prophecy Maimonides presents in the

<sup>49</sup> I. e., the intuitive reason of those Maimonides calls the "philosophers." See *infra*, n. 51.

<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that the intuitions of prophecy constitute natural acts of reason just as do the intuitions of philosophy. The difference between them is not that the former is miraculous and the latter natural, but that the former is a superior kind of knowledge. Moreover, they are both produced by the human person in participation with the Active Intellect as high stages of the natural process of realizing the intellect.

<sup>51</sup> "Analytica Posteriora II," 19.100<sup>b</sup>5; tr. G. R. G. Mure, from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon (1941), p. 186. The distinction, according to Maimonides, between philosophic and prophetic science, both of which are rational procedures, is pointed to by this passage from Aristotle: Philosophic science is constituted of ordinary premise intuition and discursive reasoning; prophetic science is constituted of prophetic premise intuition and gestalt intuition. The prophet has already mastered philosophic science before he reaches the stage of prophecy.

*Moreh*.<sup>52</sup> Maimonides first refers to premise intuition alone and explains that the prophets have knowledge whose premises are unknown to other men since they cannot be apprehended through ordinary or philosophic reasoning:

Know that there undoubtedly come to the true prophets speculative perceptions<sup>53</sup> (of such a nature) that man by his speculation<sup>54</sup> alone is unable to comprehend the premises<sup>55</sup> from which what is known (to the prophets) necessarily follows.

Maimonides then turns to the distinction between discursive reasoning and the gestalt intuition of prophecy. He argues that just as the imagination in prophecy arrives at imagery that does not come to it in the usual way, from the external senses, so must the intellect of the prophet apprehend knowledge in a manner different from the ordinary discursive reasoning of metaphysical science — through premise and gestalt intuition:

How then can the imaginative faculty be perfected in so great a measure as to apprehend what does not come to it from the senses, without the rational faculty being affected in a similar way so as to apprehend without having apprehended by way of premises, inference and reflection?<sup>56</sup>

Maimonides, in still another significant passage relating to prophetic intuition, emphasizes the qualitative superiority of the intuitive reasoning of Mosaic prophecy over the discursive reasoning of Aristotelian science. In this quite extraordinary statement, Maimonides' attack on the capacity of philosophic reasoning to attain accurate knowledge of cosmology or theology reaches its climax. Maimonides declares that the syllogism is neither competent for scientific knowledge

<sup>52</sup> *MN* II, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Here perceptions (Arabic *أدراكات*) has the sense of "immediate or intuitive cognitions."

<sup>54</sup> I. e., through philosophic speculation.

<sup>55</sup> Literally "causes." The term causes here is synonymous with premises. Cf. I. Eros, *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim* (New York, 1924) p. 89; also S. Munk, II, 297, n. 4.

<sup>56</sup> *MN* II, 38 (tr. S. Pines, p. 377). Apprehension "by way of premises, inference, and reflection" describes the total process of discursive reasoning which starts from the intuition of the ordinary premises of philosophic science. In prophecy, in place of conscious and deliberate deduction from its premises, there is a sudden gestalt in which the conclusion immediately appears. Hence three levels of scientific and metaphysical thinking can be distinguished according to Maimonides: philosophic thought, which consists of ordinary premise intuition and discursive reasoning; ordinary prophecy, which consists of prophetic premise intuition and gestalt intuition, but involves use of the imagination; Mosaic prophecy, which consists of absolutely intellectual prophetic premise and gestalt intuition.

like astronomy, nor to provide a fully satisfactory proof for the existence of God.<sup>57</sup> These limits of discursive reasoning should be recognized, and conclusions that are beyond its scope are properly left to a Moses, whose knowledge was produced by "the great divine emanation"<sup>58</sup> which is known as "mouth to mouth" prophecy. As Maimonides explains in the *Mishneh Torah*, knowledge that is characterized as "mouth to mouth" comes to the prophet without the mediation of the imagination. Since, as described here, this knowledge also comes without the mediation of the syllogism as well, it must be knowledge that is produced by the purely intellectual procedures of prophetic premise and gestalt intuition. Hence Mosaic "mouth to mouth" prophecy is based upon premises different from those of philosophic science, which through gestalt intuition are immediately structured into rational, scientific knowledge of the universe and God that Aristotle did not possess:

What I said before I will repeat now, namely, that the theory of Aristotle in explaining the phenomena in the sublunary world, is in accordance with logical inference;<sup>59</sup> here we know the causal relation between one phenomenon and another; we see how far science can investigate them, and the management of nature<sup>60</sup> is clear and intelligible. But of the things in the heavens man knows nothing except a few mathematical calculations, and you see how far these go. . . . Man's faculties are too deficient to comprehend even the general proof the heavens contain for the existence of Him who sets them in motion. It is in fact ignorance or a kind of madness to weary our minds with finding out things which are beyond our reach, without having the means of approaching them. We must content ourselves with that which is within our reach, and that which cannot be approached by logical inference let us leave to him who has been endowed with the great divine emanation, expressed in the words: "Mouth to mouth do I speak with Him" (Num. 12:8).<sup>61</sup>

C. The particular items that constitute the actual content of Mosaic prophecy are scattered by Maimonides throughout the *Moreh*. Ultimately, as stated previously, the reason for this is to conceal from the

<sup>57</sup> Maimonides feels that Aristotle's cosmological proof does not provide a certain proof of the existence of God. This is because the premises required for Aristotle's proof includes one, the twenty-sixth in Maimonides' enumeration, that cannot be proved. Cf. Introduction to Part II of the *MN* and II, 15, *inter alia*. This point is further discussed below.

<sup>58</sup> Arabic *ألمة الله*.

<sup>59</sup> I. e., discursive reasoning.

<sup>60</sup> Literally "the wisdom and providence of nature."

<sup>61</sup> *MN* II, 24 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, pp. 8 f. [Friedländer's translation, although in large degree a paraphrase, expresses the point clearly]).

unqualified or hostile reader Maimonides' view of the origin of the Torah or the Law and the nature of the Sinaitic experience. As Maimonides' opinion of Mosaic knowledge is pieced together, two points emerge: Moses' prophecy consisted of scientific and metaphysical knowledge, not some nonrational or irrational content miraculously come upon; Moses possessed knowledge qualitatively superior to that of the philosophers, and it is not the case that Maimonides is concealing in the pages of the *Moreh* Moses' (as well as his own) absolute agreement with the philosophers. Moses' prophecy, then, was unique, and this uniqueness consisted in the absolute supremacy of its metaphysical and scientific truth.<sup>62</sup> As Maimonides says, "Moses was the Lord of the savants," or, in other words, the greatest philosopher-scientist of all time.<sup>63</sup> Included in the knowledge Moses possessed, Maimonides specifically mentions the following:

1. Moses penetrated the truths of metaphysics (מעשה מרכבה) and of physics (מעשה בראשית) to a greater depth and with greater clarity than any other person ever would. Referring to Moses' status in apprehending these profound subjects, Maimonides, employing the metaphor of the "lightning flashes," says: "Among us there is one<sup>64</sup> for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light."<sup>65</sup>
2. Moses knew the proofs for the existence of God. Through these proofs he was able to establish the true concept of deity: "that there is a Being of absolute existence, that has never been and never will be

<sup>62</sup> As S. Munk (I, 216, n. 2) points out, certain commentators distinguish between Maimonides calling Moses "the Lord of the savants" and "the Lord of the prophets." They say the former designation is given Moses when he acts as a metaphysician rather than as a prophet. I believe this dichotomy is erroneous. It is evident from the *Moreh* that no distinction is drawn between Moses' prophetic and metaphysical knowledge. E. g., in the Introduction, speaking of the knowledge of physics and metaphysics, Maimonides calls Moses "the greatest of the prophets" rather than "the Lord of the savants." This is understandable since Moses' metaphysical knowledge is necessarily based on the premises he intuited in prophecy, and he cannot therefore have separate metaphysical and prophetic knowledge: his prophetic knowledge permeated and shaped all his knowledge. It is true, of course, as Maimonides points out in the passage quoted above, p. 343, that regarding the sublunar world, Mosaic knowledge and philosophic knowledge coincide, since the philosophers' knowledge is competent there. The superiority of prophetic knowledge relates primarily to cosmology and theology.

<sup>63</sup> Moses was also the greatest political philosopher, moralist, and legislator, but these follow from and are secondary to his metaphysical attainments; see *infra*, pp. 355 f.

<sup>64</sup> Moses.

<sup>65</sup> Introduction to the *MN* (tr. S. Pines, p. 7).

without existence."<sup>66</sup> However, Moses' proofs for the existence of God were not those of the philosophers. For the philosophers' proofs were defective owing to their faulty knowledge of the universe, upon which the proofs are based. Moses' knowledge of the universe, on the other hand, having been arrived at through premise and gestalt intuition, was as perfect as the limitations of the human mind would allow.<sup>67</sup> It stands to reason, therefore, that Moses in his superior wisdom would not employ the defective proofs of the philosophers to establish the existence of God.<sup>68</sup> The nature of Moses' proofs is not told us by Maimonides, and he apparently did not know them.<sup>69</sup> Still, Maimonides' opinion regarding the primary distinction between the proofs of Moses and those of the philosophers<sup>70</sup> may be inferred by a piece of simple deduction. The premises employed by the philosophers to establish the existence of God are listed in the Introduction to the Second Part of the *Moreh*. They are prefaced by Maimonides with the following comment:

The premises needed for establishing the existence of the deity . . . are twenty-five — all of which are demonstrated without there being a doubt as to any point concerning them. Aristotle and the Peripatetics who followed him have arrived at a demonstration for each one of them. There is, however, one premise which we do not accept — namely, the premise which affirms the eternity of the universe, but we will admit it for the present, because by doing so we shall be enabled clearly to demonstrate our own theory.<sup>71</sup>

As is stated, the philosophic proofs require the acceptance of the premise that the universe is eternal. From repeated remarks by Maimonides, his view is unequivocally explicit that Moses did not accept the doctrine of eternalism. On the contrary, Moses insistently taught the belief in the creation of the world.<sup>72</sup> Yet if this is the case, and

<sup>66</sup> *MN* I, 63 (tr. M. Friedländer, I, 230).

<sup>67</sup> *MN* II, 24. Only God has a perfect knowledge of the universe.

<sup>68</sup> In *MN* II, 24, Maimonides states explicitly that the proofs for God of the philosophers are defective. He also states just as explicitly that Moses had different, superior knowledge of the heavens, upon which any proof would be based.

<sup>69</sup> I feel Maimonides' theologic agony was his striving and subsequent failure to discover the Mosaic mode of proof for the existence of God. The intensity of the battle he waged is reflected in the many chapters attacking Aristotle's theory of eternalism. Maimonides' final surrender and resignation is expressed by the words, "It is in fact ignorance or a kind of madness to weary our minds with finding out things which are beyond our reach" (*ibid.*).

<sup>70</sup> Apart from the fact that Moses employed gestalt intuition and the philosophers discursive reasoning.

<sup>71</sup> Translation adapted primarily from M. Friedländer, II, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *MN* II, 13, 17, *inter alia*.

Moses had proofs for the existence of God, then these proofs of necessity did not require the premise that the universe is eternal. Consequently, Moses possessed premises for the construction of a metaphysical and theological science that were unknown to Aristotle. These premises were arrived at through prophetic premise intuition, and the science based on them permitted or demonstrated belief in the doctrine of creationism.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, ignorant of the Mosaic premises, Maimonides adopted the philosophers' proof as the only scientifically acceptable demonstration available, although he did not think the proof, owing to its reliance on the dubious premise of eternalism, was perfectly sound.

3. Moses achieved the highest possible degree of theological knowledge.<sup>74</sup> At first, Moses sought to discover positive knowledge of God's essence, but he learned that such knowledge transcends the capacity of the human intellect, and he was unable to realize his desire.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, Moses came to know more about God than any other human being. The reason is that true knowledge of God for finite intellects consists of knowing what God is not, the qualities, in other words, that are *not* to be attributed to the Godhead. Each time a person negatives an inappropriate quality of God his knowledge increases. Moreover, theological knowledge increases with the excellence of the negation as well as the quantity. A person who negatives a quality of God superficially and without thought has less knowledge of God than one who does so with the conviction that is born of metaphysical demonstration. Moses, therefore, who possessed the greatest knowledge of metaphysical science, was able to negative more inappropriate qualities of God by demonstration than any other person, and thus

<sup>73</sup> For this reason, in *MN* II, 16, Maimonides says he accepts the truth of creationism on the authority of prophecy. The ordinary prophets apparently had glimpses of the Mosaic premises, and therefore, also subscribed to creationism. The non-Aristotelian cosmology, able to be constructed from the different Mosaic premises, reminds one of the new definitions of cosmic events Einstein was able to construct on the basis of a non-Euclidean geometry such as Riemann's.

<sup>74</sup> This paragraph and the one following reflect the two kinds of knowledge man can have of God as described by Maimonides in his theory of attributes, negative attributes and action attributes; cf. *MN* I, 52 and 58. The negative attributes constitute a higher knowledge than the action attributes.

<sup>75</sup> *MN* I, 54. Moses' quest for essential knowledge of God is presented in metaphorical language by Maimonides. Since there is no way, according to Maimonides, for man to relate to God (*ibid.*, 52), the prayer Moses is reputed to have offered to God (Exod. 33:18) and the subsequent answer (vs. 20) are to be understood as metaphorical descriptions of Moses' thoughts. The former verse expresses the hypothesis and goal Moses entertained when he began his metaphysical studies; the latter verse tells the conclusion to which he came.

acquired the supreme knowledge of God attainable by man.<sup>76</sup> Maimonides describes Moses' discovery of the incapacity of man to apprehend the essence of God, which then becomes the doctrine of negative attributes, in this way:

Moses sought to attain to a certain perception which is called ראייה פנים "the seeing of the face," a term occurring in the phrase ראייה אחור "the seeing of the back," in the words וראית את אחורי "and thou shalt see my back" (Exod. 33:23). We have mentioned this in our work *Mishneh Torah*. Accordingly, it is stated in the above-mentioned passage that the Lord withheld from Moses that perception which is termed "the sight of the face" and substituted for it another gift, viz., the knowledge of the acts attributed to God, which, as I shall explain, are considered to be different and separate attributes of the Supreme. In asserting that God withheld from Moses (the higher knowledge) I mean to say that this knowledge was unattainable, that by its nature it was inaccessible to Moses."<sup>77, 78</sup>

4. Moses achieved the profoundest knowledge attainable of the action attributes of God. The action attributes refer to those qualities God may be judged to have on the basis of the events that occur in the universe, all of which are attributable to the Godhead as the ultimate cause and ground of being. These attributes are not to be understood as actually inhering in God, but as anthropomorphic, describing qualities human persons would possess if the events of the universe were attributed to them.<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, action attributes predicated of God tell us only that events of a certain kind occur in a universe that had God as its first cause but provide no information about the divine essence. Since action attributes consist of the events of the universe and their causes, they were most completely understood by Moses, whose grasp of the causal structure of the universe was the most comprehensive possible. In the course of interpreting the language of multiple significances in which Exod. 33:13, 18–23 is written, Maimonides gives this description of Moses' knowledge of the action attributes:

Moses asked for knowledge of the (action) attributes . . . Then he asked for the knowledge of God's essence in the words "Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory" whereupon he received, respecting

<sup>76</sup> *MN* I, 59.

<sup>77</sup> I. e., not God, by some special act of will, but the nature of reality deprived Maimonides of knowledge of God's essence.

<sup>78</sup> *MN* I, 21 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, I, 78 f.).

<sup>79</sup> *MN* I, 52, 54.

his first request . . . the following favorable reply, "I will make all My goodness pass before thee;" as regards the second request, however, he was told, "Thou canst not see my face." The words "all My goodness" imply that God promised to show him the whole creation . . . I mean to imply that God promised to make him comprehend the nature of all things, their relation to each other, and the way they are governed by God both in reference to the universe as a whole and to each creature in particular . . . Whenever any one of His actions is perceived by us, we ascribe to God that emotion which is the source of the act when performed by ourselves . . . We see, e. g., how well He provides for the life of the embryo of living beings; how He endows with certain faculties both the embryo itself and those who have to rear it after its birth in order that it may be protected from death and destruction . . . Similar acts, when performed by us, are due to a certain emotion and tenderness called mercy . . . God is, therefore, said to be merciful.<sup>80</sup>

### III

The character and content of Mosaic prophecy having been described, the nature of Moses' experience at Sinai remains to be explored. Since Moses' experience, in Maimonides' view, was essentially different from that of the other Israelites present at Sinai, it can be examined independently.<sup>81</sup> The Mosaic experience was twofold: prophetic and subprophetic. A subprophetic experience is defined as one that is not prophetic but which bears a special relation to prophecy.<sup>82</sup> The Torah was produced by Moses as a subprophetic experience. Accordingly, Maimonides' admonition that the true nature of the Sinaitic revelation is one of the "secrets of the Law" can be well understood.<sup>83</sup> The Torah is the foundation of the truth and authority of Judaism.<sup>84</sup> This foundation is most secure in the eyes of the uninformed masses when based not upon metaphysical science but upon a miraculous, direct, and infallible revelation. Hence the Sinaitic revelation is presented in Scripture as a "secret of the Law." This means that it is written in a language of multiple significances, as a parable primarily with two

<sup>80</sup> *MN* I, 54 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, I, 192 ff.).

<sup>81</sup> *MN* II, 33. For a general discussion of the distinction between Moses' and the Israelites' experience at Sinai, see my "Abrabanel on Prophecy . . .," *HUCA* 33 (1962).

<sup>82</sup> Subprophetic experiences relative to ordinary prophecy are the first two degrees of the classification of prophecy Maimonides gives in *MN* II, 45.

<sup>83</sup> *MN* II, 33.

<sup>84</sup> I. e., the foundation of the truth of the religious system Maimonides understood to be Judaism, and of the political and social authority of the semiautonomous medieval Jewish community.

fundamentally different meanings, one exoteric, the other esoteric. The exoteric meaning is substantially the literal sense, and the meaning taken traditionally to be the rabbinic interpretation. This is that Moses received the Law at Sinai directly and miraculously from God, verbally, with all the other Israelites sharing in the miraculous revelation when they too heard the Ten Commandments directly from God. Revelation received in this manner is absolute and infallible since, as the immediate creation of the perfect God, there is no way for error to arise. The esoteric meaning, in accordance with metaphysical truth, is that the Law, far from being a miraculous revelation from God, is not a work of prophecy at all, even in the naturalistic sense, but a nonprophetic work produced by Moses at a subprophetic level. Both the exoteric and esoteric meanings for Maimonides are of great value: the former is pragmatically effective in establishing an orderly and ethical society while providing the masses with a religion appropriate to their capacities; the latter is true and guides beyond imaginative religion those who are qualified to the realization of the intellect and salvation.<sup>85</sup>

Maimonides develops his concept of the Mosaic experience at Sinai in various passages scattered throughout the *Moreh*.<sup>86</sup> These passages reveal four major points that Maimonides seeks to determine: the natural character of the revelation at Sinai;<sup>87</sup> the content of the prophecy Moses apprehended at Sinai; the subprophetic character of the Law; the unique place occupied by Moses' prophecy and the subprophetic Law in the providential structure of the universe.

1. In establishing the natural character of the Sinaitic revelation, Maimonides first removes the miraculous interpretation implicit in the literal meaning of the words by which it is described in Scripture.<sup>88</sup> He explains that in the account given of Sinai, Scripture employs its language of multiple significances, and the words that appear to connote a miraculous occurrence are to be understood equivocally. Hence God did not "descend" in space onto Sinai, and Moses did not "ascend" in space to God, but the emanation or "inspiration" that produces prophecy came to Moses, who had previously directed his

<sup>85</sup> These functions are served by the law that is prophetic or "divine;" cf. *MN* II, 40.

<sup>86</sup> As noted earlier, "scattering" the constituent parts of a single theme is one of Maimonides' methods for concealing a "secret of the Law."

<sup>87</sup> The question whether there were miracles at Sinai regarding certain sights and sounds is not under discussion here. My point is that no matter what may have occurred at Sinai of a miraculous nature the revelation or prophecy came as a natural event.

<sup>88</sup> Exod. 19-34.

thoughts to the lofty subject of metaphysical theology.<sup>89</sup> The revelation at Sinai, in other words, consisted of an intellectual apprehension that, like all natural intellectual occurrences, would have occurred anywhere in the world there was a person with the potentiality to receive it:

Now we, the community of men, are, in regard to place as well as degree of existence, in a most lowly position if we are compared to the all-encompassing heavenly sphere; whereas He, may He be exalted, is in respect of true existence, sublimity, and greatness in the very highest position — an elevation that is not a spatial one. And as He, may He be exalted, wished — as He did — to let some of us have knowledge deriving from Him and an overflow of prophetic inspiration, the alighting of the prophetic inspiration upon the prophet . . . to a certain place was termed *descent*; whereas the removal of this prophetic state from a particular individual . . . was termed *ascent*. . . . As for the first meaning — I mean that which refers to prophetic inspiration and to ennobling — it is frequent. Thus: “And I will descend and speak with thee” (Num. 11:17); “And the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai” (Exod. 19:20); . . . When, on the other hand Scripture says, “And Moses ascended to God” (Exod. 19:3), the third meaning of the term [*to ascend*]<sup>90</sup> is meant.<sup>91</sup>

Natural events occur only if the causes necessary to produce them are present, and only to the extent that the causation necessitates. At Sinai, Maimonides says, only those who were fit<sup>92</sup> to apprehend prophecy received it, and only to the degree they were qualified. Moses, therefore, and the other distinguished Israelites who were qualified apprehended prophecy, whereas the uninformed masses did not.<sup>93</sup> If Sinai had been the occasion of a miraculous revelation, the

<sup>89</sup> I. e., Moses had prepared himself and then received from the Active Intellect an emanation or incorporeal force that realized his hylic intellect.

<sup>90</sup> “Denoting the direction of thought to an exalted object;” Pines’ note. See also references in following footnote.

<sup>91</sup> *MN* I, 10 (tr. S. Pines, pp. 36 ff.); cf. also I, 18.

<sup>92</sup> I. e., prepared; see *supra*, p. 9.

<sup>93</sup> There is no question that only the qualified received prophecy at Sinai, but Maimonides does not make an unequivocally clear statement about the qualifications of the ordinary Israelites. From *MN* II, 33, the locus classicus of this subject, it appears that the ordinary Israelites did not prophesy. (See my “Abrabanel on Prophecy . . .,” *HUCA* 33 (1962), pp. 221 ff.). But in *MN* I, 46, Maimonides seems to indicate that the Israelites “saw” the “thunderings and lightnings” (Exod. 20:15) in a prophetic vision. However, as Maimonides points out in *MN* II, 32, the term “prophecy” can be used loosely to describe change to nonprophetic experiences. The Israelites at Sinai, therefore, may have perceived the extraordinary sensations they apprehended as the result of vivid imagination, and there was, then, no miracle at Sinai at all, not even regarding the extraordinary perceptions.

degree of qualification possessed by the recipients would have been irrelevant:

As for the *Gathering at Mount Sinai*, though through a miracle all the people saw the great fire and heard the frightening and terrifying noises, only those who were fit for it achieved the rank of prophecy, and even those in various degrees.<sup>94</sup> Do you not see that He says: “*Come up* unto the Lord, thou and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel?” (Exod. 24:1). He . . . had the highest rank, as He said: “And Moses alone shall come near unto the Lord, but they shall not come near. (vs. 2). *Aaron* was below him; *Nadab and Abihu* below Aaron; the *seventy elders* below *Nadab and Abihu*; and the other people below the latter according to their degrees of perfection.<sup>95</sup>

2. The content of the prophecy Moses apprehended at Sinai was that the knowledge of God’s essence utterly transcends the inherent cognitive capacity of man, and that man’s knowledge of God is limited to the divine actions. Thus the Sinaitic revelation for Moses consisted of the negative theology and the theology of action attributes.<sup>96</sup> Maimonides’ description of Moses’ prophecy at Sinai is presented in the *Moreh Nevukhim*, I, 54, as commentary to Exod. 33:13–34:7. In interpreting the scriptural account so as to preserve the revelation at Sinai as a “secret of the Law,” Maimonides retains basically the same language of multiple significances employed by Scripture, which has a literal sense that is imaginative and anthropomorphic, and an esoteric sense that is scientific.<sup>97</sup> Hence the Sinaitic revelation is presented as a dialogue between God and Moses, whereas, in fact, Moses’ prophecy was produced by his own intellectual study and the natural action of the Active Intellect, since God in no way relates to man and certainly does not speak to him.<sup>98</sup> In this dialogue, Moses makes two requests of God: to reveal to him His true essence and His actions. The answer Moses receives is that he cannot know the first, but that he would receive a greater knowledge of God’s actions (attributes) than would any other man:

<sup>94</sup> This sentence clearly indicates that a distinction is to be drawn between the “miracle” of Sinai and prophecy, which was naturalistic.

<sup>95</sup> *MN* I, 33 (tr. S. Pines, p. 363).

<sup>96</sup> These were referred to earlier in the discussion of Mosaic knowledge, *supra*, pp. 21 ff.

<sup>97</sup> Maimonides’ efforts at secrecy extend even to such small points as omitting any indication that these remarks describe Moses’ actual Sinaitic prophecy even though his remarks constitute commentary on verses that appear in the midst of the account of the revelation.

<sup>98</sup> See *supra*, pp. 12 ff.

Know that the master of those who know, Moses our Master . . . made two requests and received an answer to both of them. One request consisted in asking Him to let him know His essence and true reality. The second request, which he put first, was that He should let him know His attributes. The answer to the two requests that He . . . gave him consisted in His promising him to let him know all His attributes, making it known to him that they are His actions, and teaching him that His essence cannot be grasped as it really is.<sup>99</sup>

Although Moses at Sinai came to know all God's actions, Scripture tells us only of those that concern the government of human existence: the causation that produces man and preserves his existence. The reason for this is that Moses' principle object in his prophecy was to penetrate the divine government that emanates from the ground of being and exercises rule over mankind:

Scripture has restricted itself to mentioning only those *thirteen characteristics*,<sup>100</sup> although Moses apprehended . . . all His actions — because these are the actions proceeding from Him . . . in respect of giving existence to men and governing them. This was [Moses'] ultimate object in his request. This is shown by the conclusion of his request, "That I may know thee, to the end that I may find grace in thy sight and consider that this nation is Thy people," that is to say, the people whom I have to rule by certain acts in the performance of which I must be guided by Thy own acts in governing them.<sup>101</sup>

The verses in Scripture that represent the prophecy at Sinai in which Moses apprehended the divine actions governing man are: "The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin," etc. (Exod. 34:6 f.). As is evident from the following illustrations Maimonides offers of the divine actions enumerated here, the divine actions are nothing other than the actions of nature and natural man that produce and affect existence.<sup>102</sup>

One apprehends the kindness of His governance in the production of the embryos of living beings . . . Now actions of this kind proceed from us only after we feel a certain affection and compassion, and this is the meaning of mercy. God . . . is said to be

<sup>99</sup> *MN* I, 54 (tr. S. Pines, p. 123).

<sup>100</sup> The thirteen attributes of God listed in Exod. 34:6 f.

<sup>101</sup> *MN* I, 54 (tr., primarily, S. Pines, pp. 124 ff., and M. Friedländer, I, 194).

<sup>102</sup> Maimonides explicitly equates "divine actions" and "natural actions" in *MN* III, 32.

merciful . . . It is not that He . . . is affected and has compassion. . . . Similarly we find among His actions that proceed with regard to mankind great calamities overtaking certain individuals . . . or annihilating whole tribes . . . for instance, inundations, earthquakes, destructive storms, military expeditions of one people against others in order to exterminate . . . all traces of them . . . With reference to these actions He is called "jealous and avenging and keeping anger and wrathful," etc. (Nah. 1:2).

3. The subprophetic character of the Law has a dual aspect: that the Law itself is not prophecy; and that it bears an intimate relation to prophecy. The nonprophetic character of the Law is self-evident when the essential nature of Mosaic prophecy and the contents of the Law are compared with one another. As was shown previously, Mosaic prophecy for Maimonides is entirely free of imaginative elements, whereas the Torah is patently the product of imaginative thought. Among the functions of the imagination in Maimonides' epistemology is the retention and combination of images, which in turn are reproductions of sensed particulars. All thought that employs images, therefore, uses the imagination. Hence the major contents of the Torah, apart from the historical narratives, must necessarily have been produced through the participation of the imagination. The truths of natural science, according to Maimonides, are presented in figurative form, as in the story of creation,<sup>103</sup> and figurative language requires the imagination. Similarly, the truths of metaphysics are presented metaphorically, as in the Mosaic revelation itself, which appears as a conversation between God and Moses in which God describes Himself anthropomorphically. The laws, statutes, and commandments of the Law all refer to particular situations and employ language, therefore, that refers to images of persons and things.<sup>104</sup> Nothing of this, then, could have come to Moses in prophecy, where only completely abstract concepts were apprehended. Maimonides' opinion that the Torah is an imaginative and therefore nonprophetic work is clearly seen in the following passage. The nonprophetic character of the Torah is also apparent in this passage from the elementary didactic purpose assigned to it by Maimonides, considering his view

<sup>103</sup> Cf. *MN* II, 30, where Maimonides gives an explanation of the many metaphorical images and figures in the scriptural account of creation.

<sup>104</sup> In *MN* II, 33, Maimonides states that only the first two of the Ten Commandments were truths apprehended by the intellect. The other eight were ethical and traditional truths. Inasmuch as Moses' prophecy was absolutely intellectual, the latter could not have been apprehended by him prophetically.

that Mosaic prophecy is so complex and abstract that it transcends the capacities of an Aristotle:

Similarly, these true opinions<sup>105</sup> were not hidden, enclosed in riddles, and treated by all men of knowledge with all sorts of artifice through which they could teach them without expounding them explicitly, because of something evil being hidden in them, or because they undermine the foundations of the Law, as is thought by ignorant people who deem that they have attained a rank suitable for speculation.<sup>106</sup> Rather have they been hidden because at the outset the intellect is incapable of receiving them; only flashes of them are made to appear so that the perfect man should know them. On this account they are called *mysteries and secrets of the Torah*, as we shall make clear. This is the cause of the fact that "the Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man," as we have made clear. This is so because it<sup>107</sup> is presented in such a manner as to make it possible for the young, the women, and all the people to begin with it and to learn it. Now it is not within their power to understand these matters as they truly are. Hence they are confined to accepting tradition<sup>108</sup> with regard to all sound opinions that are of such a sort that it is preferable that they should be pronounced true . . . and this in such a manner that the mind is led toward the existence of the objects of these opinions . . . but not toward grasping their essence as it truly is. When, however, a man grows perfect and the secrets of the Torah are communicated to him either by somebody else or because he himself discovers them . . . he attains a rank at which he pronounces the above-mentioned correct opinions to be true; and in order to arrive at this conclusion, he uses the genuine methods,<sup>109</sup> namely, demonstration in cases where demonstration is possible or forcible argument where this is possible. In this way he represents to himself these matters, which had appeared to him imaginings and parables, in their truth and understands their essence.<sup>110</sup>

The precise nature of the relation between Mosaic prophecy and the Law is not explicitly stated by Maimonides. However, the relation between the two that is implied by Maimonides' covert remarks on the subject may be summarized in this way: At Sinai, Moses attained a prophetic revelation in which he acquired the greatest knowledge possible of God — the negative theology and the theology of divine

<sup>105</sup> I. e., the true principles of science.

<sup>106</sup> I. e., metaphysical speculation.

<sup>107</sup> I. e., the Torah.

<sup>108</sup> I. e., acceptance on the basis of authority; cf. S. Munk, I, 116, and n. 4.

<sup>109</sup> The genuine methods for arriving at truth, which are scientific and not authoritarian.

<sup>110</sup> *MN* I, 33 (tr., primarily, S. Pines, pp. 71 f.).

actions.<sup>111</sup> In particular, Moses discovered those actions whereby the divine ground governs man, that is, the causation that gives man life and preserves human existence. Inasmuch as Moses' prophetic apprehension was intellectual or conceptual, he did not learn the particulars of divine government in his prophecy but its abstract essence.<sup>112</sup> The ideal end of the law of the state is precisely the same as that of divine government: to promote the existence and welfare of man. Hence Moses, in apprehending the essence of the divine government, had discovered as well the essence of the ideal law whereby man should be ruled by human government. With the essence of the ideal law apprehended by his reason to guide him, Moses then wrote the Torah, creating the particular laws that reify the essence of the ideal law and which serve best to order society and further the spiritual and physical well-being of man. In writing the Torah, which was not prophecy, Moses employed his imagination to fulfill the twofold function of divine law: the teaching of true theological beliefs; and the establishment of the just and moral society.<sup>113</sup> The first is accomplished through the use of parables, with exoteric and esoteric meanings, so that just as the divine government concerns itself with furthering the existence of all men, so does the Law further the spiritual existence of all men.<sup>114</sup> The second is realized through the concrete political laws contained in the Torah and through the laws of personal morality curbing excess.<sup>115</sup> Thus the essence of the Torah is divine, since it is

<sup>111</sup> These are the same as natural actions, and are actually produced by the Active Intellect and the spheres as proximate agents. They are called the actions or attributes of God in the Maimonidean language of multiple significances since, as the ground of being, He is their ultimate source and remote agent; cf. *MN* II, 6; and III, 32, *inter alia*.

<sup>112</sup> Since the proximate source of Moses' prophecy is the Active Intellect, which is also the intelligent force in nature, the Active Intellect revealed itself to Moses in realizing his intellect to the point of grasping the divine actions.

<sup>113</sup> *MN* II, 40. See on this point, as well as on Maimonidean prophecy generally, L. Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin, 1935), pp. 87–122.

<sup>114</sup> I. e., the exoteric, imaginative meaning teaches the uninformed masses the degree of truth they can understand, while the esoteric, intellectual meaning stands available to deepen the knowledge of the metaphysical theologian, who can arrive at it either through being taught by a Maimonides or by himself through nonprophetic gestalt intuition like Maimonides.

<sup>115</sup> It certainly seems that the rational, moral principle taught by Aristotle, "nothing to excess," is part of Maimonides' understanding of the essence of the ideal law. He writes, "The governor of a country, if he is a prophet, should conform to these attributes. Acts [of punishment] must be performed by him moderately and in accordance with justice, etc." *MN* I, 54 (tr. M. Friedländer, I, 196 f.). That the law follows the principle of the golden mean is expressly stated by Maimonides in *MN* II, 39. In his prophecy, then, Moses apprehended the most abstract principles



the essence as well of the divine actions that govern man, but the particulars of the Law are human, having been created by Moses. The reason Moses' prophecy is a *sine qua non* of the Law is now explained: only Moses, who had discovered the essence of the divine government through prophecy, could possess the fundamental knowledge of theological and political principles necessary to write the Law. This interpretation that the Law is subprophetic in character is indicated by Maimonides in a number of passages.

In making the point that the Law does not take into account exceptional circumstances, Maimonides makes a series of observations which reveal his underlying position that the Law is patterned after nature, or, in other words, shares its essence with nature. The Law, he says, is divine; therefore, to understand it, we must turn to nature. Hence the Law is divine because it imitates nature, which it does by sharing its essence. Since the Law essentially imitates nature, it acts in similar fashion, benefiting the generality of mankind rather than every individual in every instance. Moreover, since nature is its pattern and consequently its sanction as well, the Law, even though imperfect in particular cases, must still be immutable, absolute, and universal because nature is unchanging and constant. In the course of his remarks, Maimonides interjects the critical point that both natural action and the Law come from one God and the same agent, namely, the Active Intellect:

It is also important to note that the Law does not take into account exceptional circumstances; it is not based on conditions which rarely occur. Whatever the Law teaches, whether it be of an intellectual, a moral, or a practical character, is founded on that which is the rule and not on that which is the exception; it ignores the injury that might be caused to a single person through a certain maxim or a certain divine precept.<sup>116</sup> For the Law is a divine institution, and [in order to understand its operation] we must consider how in Nature the various forces produce benefits which are general, but in some solitary cases they cause also injury. . . . We must consequently not be surprised when we find that the purpose of the Law is not perfectly achieved in every individual; there must naturally be people who are not perfected by the instruction of the Law, just as there are beings which do not receive from the specific forms in nature all that

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of political and ethical philosophy, but did that which no moral philosopher ever would accomplish: since Moses through prophetic gestalt intuition best understood the principles of divine government, he wrote the finest constitution of a state possible, the Torah.

<sup>116</sup> An untenable position if the Law were the direct, miraculous, and perfect work of an omnipotent deity.

they require. For all this comes from one God and is the result of one agent. . . . The divine guidance contained in the Law must be certain and general, although it may be effective in some cases and ineffective in others. If the Law depended on the varying conditions of man it would be imperfect in its totality, each precept being left indefinite.<sup>117</sup> For this reason it would not be right to make the fundamental principles of the Law dependent on a certain time or a certain place; on the contrary, the statutes and the judgments must be definite, unconditional, and general. . . . They are intended. . . . for all persons and times.<sup>118</sup>

Maimonides draws a distinction between the general nature of a particular law and the particular law itself. A particular law may be meaningless in its particularity, but nevertheless possess general value. Accordingly, Maimonides distinguishes between the essential character of the Law and its particular manifestations. If the Law were entirely divine, it is inconceivable that a particular law could be said to be meaningless. Consequently, the essence alone is divine, and the particular laws are valuable only as reifications of the essence. Thus Maimonides, both here and implicitly in the passage cited above, distinguishes between the totality of the Law and the particular laws. This is coherent only if the totality is valuable in a way that the particular laws are not, which is precisely the case when the essence of the Law alone is divine. For the essence of the Law is concretized by the structure of the Law as a whole and not by any given particular law. Hence individual laws may be meaningless, antiquated, and even injurious, yet inasmuch as particular laws of one kind or another are necessary, and the immutability of the total Law is necessary to make the particular laws efficacious, the totality of the Law as the concrete manifestation of the divine essence is good and must be observed absolutely:

I will now tell you what intelligent persons ought to believe in this respect; namely, that each commandment has necessarily a cause, as far as its general character is concerned, and serves a certain object; but as regards its details we hold that it has no other purpose than to command something. . . .<sup>119</sup> The true

<sup>117</sup> The Law can be a perfect totality while at the same time imperfect as regards its particular laws. See the paragraph following.

<sup>118</sup> *MN* III, 34 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, III, 162 f.; also S. Pines, p. 534). Theoretically, of course, changes in particular laws could be made, if the totality of the Law were not undermined.

<sup>119</sup> The general subject of this chapter is the question whether the commandments of the Law are rational and serve a purpose. The position Maimonides takes is precisely that which is to be expected from the interpretation that the essence of the

reality of particulars of commandments is illustrated by the sacrifices. The law that sacrifices should be brought is evidently of great use . . . but we cannot say why one offering should be a lamb, whilst another a ram, and why a certain number of them should be brought. Those who trouble themselves to find a cause for any of these detailed rules are in my eyes void of sense . . . Those who believe that these detailed rules originate in a certain cause are as far from the truth as those who imagine that the generalities of a commandment are not designed with a view to some real utility. You must know that Divine Wisdom demanded it . . . that there should be parts [of the universe] which have no certain reason; and as regards the Law, it appears to be impossible that it should not include some matter of this kind. That it cannot be avoided may be seen from the following instance. You ask why must a lamb be sacrificed and not a ram, but the same question would be asked why a ram had been commanded instead of a lamb, so long as one particular kind is required, etc.<sup>120</sup>

4. Moses and the Law occupy a unique position in Maimonides' theory of the providential structure of the universe. Providence, for Maimonides, is action that orders, governs, provides, or displays care for the preservation of some existent.<sup>121</sup> Man, says Maimonides, receives both physical and intellectual providence. Through the "form of growth" he is able to attract the good and repel the noxious; through the "form of sensibility" he is able to move toward the beneficial and flee the injurious; also every individual human receives the capacities necessary for the preservation of the species; and finally, through the "form of the intellect" man receives the capacity to govern, think, and reflect about that which will preserve his own existence and the existence of the human species.<sup>122</sup> The source of this providence is nature, or the emanations that flow from the Active Intellect and the spheres upon the sublunar world. However, natural providence is imperfect. Although the Active Intellect is a being endowed with thought, its providential influence is limited to universal and immaterial action owing to its purely intellectual nature as an Intelligence. It cannot,

Law is divine, but that the particular laws serve only to concretize the essence. The Law in general or the general aspects of particular laws are rational and purposeful, but not the "particularity" of the particular laws. Moreover, the essence of the Law has to be rational, i. e., purposeful, since Moses intuited it through his reason.

<sup>120</sup> *MN* III, 26 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, III, 127 f.; also S. Pines, pp. 508 f.).

<sup>121</sup> *MN* III, 17.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*; the second, or Aristotle's, opinion on providence. However, Maimonides says in the fifth opinion, his own, that he is in agreement with Aristotle on these points.

in any detailed sense, provide for material particulars.<sup>123</sup> Consequently, human beings are to a significant degree left to the blind, mechanical causation of the spheres. It is the purpose of the Law of Moses to particularize the universal providence of the Active Intellect and thus perfect the capacity for human providence latent in nature:

For the Law always imitates nature and in some respects brings it to perfection. For nature is incapable of thinking and reflecting,<sup>124</sup> whereas the Law is the rule and governance that emanates from God, who grants intellect to all intelligent beings.<sup>125</sup>

As described in the paragraph above, the sources of human providence are the preservative forces of the individual body and intellect.<sup>126</sup> Still a third source is society. Therefore, natural providence endows the human species with the ability to establish the good society. This is accomplished by providing certain men with the capacity to govern others. They write and enact laws, and through these laws the aim of natural providence is fulfilled:

It has already been explained that man is naturally a social being, that by virtue of his nature he seeks to form communities . . . But the well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of man; he must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, and the order of society be well established. I therefore maintain that the Law, although it is not natural, enters in certain respects, into the category of the natural.<sup>127</sup> It being the will of God that our race should exist and be permanently established, He, in His wisdom, gave it such properties that men can acquire the capacity of ruling others. Some persons are therefore inspired with theories of legislation, such as prophets and lawgivers . . . I only wish to instruct you about laws which are proclaimed as prophetic . . . You will . . . find laws which, in all their rules, aim . . . at the soundness of the . . . body and also the the soundness of belief, to create first correct notions of God, and of

<sup>123</sup> Particulars are necessarily material since matter is the individuating principle.

<sup>124</sup> I. e., thinking and reflecting about material particulars.

<sup>125</sup> I. e., the Law is the providential government that comes from God in that it is the product of an intellect able to think about particulars (the human intellect of Moses), and God as the ground of being is the ultimate source of all intellects.

<sup>126</sup> The providence or preservation of the body is served by the Law through its moral precepts prescribing moderation and abstention from vice; the providence or preservation of the intellect is effected by the Law through its esoteric teaching which produces the immortal acquired intellect. The instrument of these two kinds of providence is the ideal society.

<sup>127</sup> The Law is not natural in that it is the artificial creation of men; it enters into the natural by realizing the natural providential purpose.

angels,<sup>128</sup> and then to lead the people, by instruction and education, to an accurate knowledge of the universe: this guidance comes from God; these laws are divine.<sup>129</sup>

The Mosaic Law is divine and the ideal law for mankind. Consequently, since it is the providential wish of the Godhead as expressed through nature that mankind be organized into the perfect society, the authority of Moses to proclaim and command the Law is rooted in the Godhead.<sup>130</sup> For as the ideal law, the Mosaic Law alone can realize the divine will. Consequently, no authentic prophet other than Moses ever claimed authority over his fellowmen, and the prophets subsequent to Moses served only the subsidiary role of exhorting the people to obey his Law:

There were prophets before Moses, as the patriarchs, Shem, etc., but of these none said to any portion of mankind that God sent him to them and commanded him to convey to them a certain thing. . . . This was the state of prophecy before Moses. But as regards Moses, you know what was said to him, what he said, and what all the people said to him: "This day we have seen that God doth speak, etc." (Deut. 5:21).<sup>131</sup> The history of all our prophets who lived after Moses is well known to you; they performed, as it were, the function of warning the people and exhorting them to keep the Law of Moses, threatening evil to those who would neglect it and announcing blessings to those who would submit to its guidance.<sup>132</sup> This we believe will always be the case. . . . For if one individual of a class has reached the highest perfection possible in that class, every other individual must necessarily be less perfect, and deviate from the perfect measure either by surplus or deficiency.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>128</sup> I. e., the Intelligences.

<sup>129</sup> *MN* II, 40 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, II, 189-191; cf. S. Munk, II, 307 ff.).

<sup>130</sup> I. e., the Mosaic Law, based as it is upon the essence of the divine providential actions or nature, has the authority of divine providence as its ideal concrete expression.

<sup>131</sup> The verse is to be taken as written in the language of multiple significances. What is meant is that the people, particularly the prophets among them, recognized that the Mosaic Law was the ideal concrete expression of the divine providential actions, and therefore, since the way of the Godhead with respect to man had become verbalized, God had spoken.

<sup>132</sup> Not that God directly and miraculously intervenes in history, but to violate the Mosaic Law is to violate the demands of natural providence which leads to natural destruction. Similarly, to obey the Mosaic Law is to live in harmony with natural providence and reap its benefits.

<sup>133</sup> *MN* II, 39 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, II, 185 ff.). The Mosaic Law is eternal because it perfectly expresses the essence of divine providence. Any other legal system would necessarily be inferior since there is no way to change the perfect other than to imperfect.

Finally, the Mosaic Law redeems mankind from the damnation of its material condition:

The following is also a remarkable passage, most absurd in its literal sense; but as an allegory it contains wonderful wisdom and fully agrees with real facts, as will be found by those who understand all the chapters of this treatise: "When the serpent came to Eve he infected her with poison; the Israelites, who stood at Mount Sinai, removed that poison; idolaters, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, have not got rid of it."<sup>134</sup> <sup>135</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Bab. Shabbat 146a; Yevamot 103b. This midrashic passage is taken by Maimonides as written in the same language of multiple significances as is the scriptural account of creation. A generally accepted interpretation is that the serpent represents the imaginative faculty, and Eve represents the body or material part of man who is composed of immaterial form and matter. The serpent, as the imagination, prompts the body through sensual phantasy to base desire, and through mythological phantasy corrupts true belief. The Mosaic Law, by inculcating moderate desire upon man and teaching him true belief, strengthens and realizes his intellect and thus enables him to achieve salvation by overcoming the corrupting influence of the imagination.

<sup>135</sup> *MN* II, 30 (tr., primarily, M. Friedländer, II, 156).