ON MAIMONIDES' ALLEGORICAL READINGS OF SCRIPTURE

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Rabbi Moses ben Maimon's *Guide of the Perplexed*, completed in the final decade of the twelfth century, stands at the junction between Arabic and Latin Aristotelianism. It is the last great book in the 300-year-old tradition of Arabic Aristotelianism, and it had a formative influence on the founders of Latin Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century. The *Guide* contains many fascinating allegorical interpretations of Scripture, and also some discussions about the nature of allegory. [On the self-consciously allusive design of the *Guide* itself, see chapter 2 (vi); on the work's influence upon later Jewish interpretation, see chapters 9 and 13. —ed.] In the following remarks, I shall try to clarify briefly some questions regarding Maimonides' allegorical readings of Scripture.

When should a biblical text be interpreted allegorically? Maimonides' hermeneutical principle is stated clearly in *Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 25. Whenever a decisive scientific demonstration (Arabic: *burhān*) contradicts the literal sense (*zāhir*) of the biblical text, it is obligatory to interpret it by way of allegory (*ta'wīl*). Thus, biblical texts which attribute corporeality to God must be interpreted allegorically since God's incorporeality is demonstrable. Similarly, if it were proved that the universe is eternal *a parte ante* (i.e., with reference to preexistence), it would be obligatory to interpret the opening verses in Genesis in such a way as to insure their accordance with eternal preexistence. As Maimonides remarks: 'the gates of *ta'wīl* are not shut in our faces.'

This position of Maimonides was vehemently attacked by Spinoza in his *Theologico-Political Tractatus*, ch. 7. Spinoza held that the Bible

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1 See Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. with introd. and notes by Shlomo Pines, introductory essay by Leo Strauss (Chicago, 1963), p. 327; my translations are adapted from this work. For the Arabic text, see the edition of S. Munk and I. Joel (Jerusalem, 1929).
should be interpreted on its own terms, and passages which clearly contradict reason must be understood in accordance with their clearly irrational meaning. Maimonides' position, according to which such passages must be interpreted allegorically, struck Spinoza as 'noxious, useless, and absurd'; for according to it, one could never know what a biblical text meant until one conducted an independent scientific investigation and determined whether or not its plain meaning contradicted reason. Of course, Spinoza was able to reject Maimonides' position regarding the allegorical interpretation of Scripture because, unlike him, he was not committed to the reasonableness of the biblical text. [Compare the later position of Vico regarding the interpretation of ancient poetry, discussed in chapter 17. —ed.]

Maimonides' position regarding the allegorical interpretation of Scripture is similar to that of his contemporary and fellow Cordovan, Averroes. Averroes' views on ta'wil are stated succinctly in his Decisive Treatise (Fatâl al-Maqâl), and it is quite possible that they influenced Maimonides' formulation in Guide, II, 25. According to him, truth is its own witness (cf. Aristotle, Prior Analytics, I, 32, 47a 8), and thus the truth of reason cannot conflict with that of Scripture; so whenever demonstration (burhân) contradicts the literal meaning (zâhir) of the Quran, the text must be interpreted by way of allegory (ta'wil).3 [On the interpretive approaches of Averroes and other Islamic philosophers, see chapters 2 (v) and 7. —ed.]

It may be noted in passing that Maimonides states, with regard to those biblical texts which attribute corporeality to God, that their allegorical interpretation (ta'wil) is 'the intention of the text' (qasât al-nass; II, 25, p. 328). This expression is absent in Averroes' discussion in the Decisive Treatise, and the determination of its precise meaning here requires careful analysis.4

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3 See the translation by George F. Hourani in Averroes: On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy (London, 1961), p. 50. For the Arabic text, see the edition of Hourani (Leiden, 1959). The Decisive Treatise was completed before 1179 in Cordoba, and the Guide was composed during the 1180s and early 1190s in Cairo. Since Averroes (1126–1198) and Maimonides (1135/38–1204) belonged to the same Andalusian Arabic Aristotelian tradition, the similarities between them are often adequately explained by their use of common sources.

4 Professor Josef Stern, in a communication to me, aptly contrasts Maimonides' statement here regarding his interpretation of anthropomorphisms with his statement regarding his interpretation of the Chariot of Ezekiel: 'no divine revelation [wahy ilâhi] has come to me to teach me that the intention [qasât, or qusida, accord-