

GUIDE 1:5 MORE WARNINGS

Maimonides interrupts his lexicon of terms used in prophecy to begin another prologue. He wants to slow down his over-hasty students. The biblical terms for “sight” discussed in the last chapter are the cause for these further warnings.

He has said elsewhere that sense perception is generally reliable, and that sight is the most reliable of the senses. But sense perception is not his concern in these chapters, his concern is prophecy. In the context of prophecy, the term “sight” is fraught with danger.

Maimonides locates this danger in the account in Exodus 24:11, where the Jewish elders and priests look upon God and have a feast. This story has good and bad messages for Maimonides, which he now begins to explain. He continues his explanation in several subsequent chapters, especially 1:28. This story contains elements of the account of creation and the account of providence, *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkavah*, and therefore links to themes in every other section of the book. On the other hand, the story displays the pitfalls of anthropomorphism, dangerous meditation, and sexual prurience.

REFERENTIALISM

The student should now read Guide 1:28, and refer to my section on that chapter.

I know that this jumping around slows the diligent reader. The student should recognize that the Guide is extremely self-referential. In the Introduction, Maimonides warned that we would have to link chapters strewn throughout the book. Part of his reason for organizing the material this way was to avoid violating the rule in Talmud *Hagigah* 11b against teaching the subjects of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* in public. By forcing the reader to link passages (and through other techniques), he conceals these subjects sufficiently from the public. This linking is also the prophetic technique for the construction of imaginative allegory, as we saw in the Parable of the Well (see Maimonides’ *Introduction*).

All commentators on the Guide seek to render these connections apparent, and the reader has to follow the breadcrumbs to understand the book. I try to make the major connections available in these commentary essays and through the index. You will discover links for yourself that others may not have appreciated.

MAIMONIDES ON ARISTOTLE

Maimonides usually invokes the rule of *Hagigah* when discussing the dangers in prophecy, repeating that law’s strictures against public teaching of the accounts of creation, providence, and prohibited sexual relations. In departure from usual practice, he includes Aristotle in this tradition of admonition. Referring to *De Caelo*, Maimonides rephrases Aristotle to say that we should not call him reckless or impudent for venturing into obscure matters.

“When the chief of philosophers (Aristotle) was about to inquire into some very profound subjects, and to establish his theory by proofs, he commenced his treatise with an apology, and requested the reader to attribute the author’s inquiries not to presumption, vanity, egotism, or arrogance, as though he were interfering with things of which he had no knowledge, but rather to his zeal and his desire to discover and establish true doctrines, as far as lay in human power.”

Maimonides, however, takes a different path. He writes, “We take the same position,...[but] think that a man, when he commences to speculate, ought not to embark at once on a subject so vast and important...”

That is, we should approach obscure subjects with humility. This “humility” is what makes the student train his mind and character for the studies ahead. Most importantly, he trains his imagination to be steered by his mind, not his lusts. God rewards Moses for such intellectual humility when Moses “hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God,” by granting him the blessing of higher vision (Exodus 3:6).

Maimonides came to a somewhat different conclusion than Aristotle. Aristotle holds that the theorist’s zeal is to be applauded, while Maimonides holds that humility is the virtue praised.

He repeats the paraphrase from Aristotle at Guide 2:19, but in different language. In neither case is the original (*De Caelo* 2:12, 291b24) reproduced accurately. In his text, Aristotle explains why theorists sometimes employ working hypotheses. Here is J. L. Stocks’ translation (Oxford, 1930):

“There are...difficulties, which may very reasonably here be raised, of which we must now attempt to state the probable solution: for we regard the zeal of one whose thirst after philosophy leads him to accept even slight indications where it is very difficult to see one’s way, as a proof rather of modesty than of overconfidence.”

On the accuracy of Maimonides’ quotes from Aristotle, Herbert Davidson (*Moses Maimonides, the Man and His Works*, Oxford, 2005, 93-107) says:

“The conclusion that the evidence strongly suggests, with all due reservations about arguments from silence, is that the Aristotle whom Maimonides praises as the greatest human intellect to have seen the light of day was known to him only in a truncated and distorted guise.” (See also Davidson’s note 150 criticizing Shlomo Pines’ contrary view, found in Pines’ “Translator’s Introduction” of the Guide, p. lxi.)

The context of the sentence from *De Caelo* (*On the Heavens*) is Aristotle’s concern that the motions of the astronomical spheres run counter to our expectations. “We find the greatest number of movements in the intermediate [astronomical] bodies,” where we should find fewer movements closer to the outer sphere and more movements closer to the earth at the center. The variation is disproportionate to their distance from the single primary motion of the final outermost sphere. He reasons, in a hypothetical spirit, that this is explained if the astronomical bodies are *animate*. His introductory statement suggests that he tentatively advanced this hypothesis and should not be blamed for temerity in doing so.

Maimonides learned from the text that when Aristotle discussed astronomy he produced no apodictic proofs but only reasonable estimates. Aristotle sought indulgence for hazarding an explanation “where it is very difficult to see one’s way.” We are reminded that Maimonides’ used phrases like this several times in his Introduction to the Guide, where he discussed flashes of inspiration occurring in the dark night of our consciousness, and also in his Allegory of the Pearl lost in the darkened room, both cases in which “it is very difficult to see one’s way.”

Ultimately, Maimonides’ will use Aristotle’s admission of the tentativeness of his cosmology to challenge Aristotle’s contention that the universe is eternal and uncreated. Even Aristotle admits he has not proven his tentative conclusion; therefore, Maimonides is free to argue the contrary position (Guide 2:15). But both Maimonides and Aristotle are justified in trying to answer the question because both of them have approached the subject with *humility*.

All of which leads to Maimonides’ definition of the humility of Moses.

MOSES' HUMILITY DEFINED

Moses understood the dangers of revelation, and humbly “hid his face.” For his humility, he was rewarded at Sinai with the vision of God’s entire creation, His “goodness,” as abstracted by the Torah in the thirteen attributes of action (Ex. 34:6, Guide 1:4: *middot*). This humility is required for the study of the divine science of creation and providence. It is also the precondition of prophecy. What a prophet can envision depends on his level of humility (*Shemonah Perakim*, ch.7). How is *humility* defined?

Humility has two parts, intellectual perfection and moral perfection. It goes without saying, and so it is not said, that the student is expert in Torah, Talmud, *Midrash* and succeeding layers of Jewish learning, including the *Mishneh Torah* of Maimonides. The adept then decides to enter the path to intellectual perfection. He must begin with mastery of logic. Logic prevents the student from suffering the “defilement of error” (...*ha-m'taharot et ha-hasaga m'tumata sh'hen ha-ta'uyot*). Having mastered the sciences of mathematics, astronomy, and so on, he graduates to metaphysics. He then masters the “true fundamental propositions.” These are the axioms of Aristotelean thought that Maimonides assembled as the first twenty-five propositions at the beginning of Book Two of the Guide.

He prepares for moral perfection by subduing his passions and desires, which are the “offspring of his imagination.” Maimonides does not provide a curriculum. It seems obvious, though, that the student must live a virtuous life in line with Maimonides’ revision of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* found in *Shemonah Perakim*, as well as the chapter *Deot* in *Mishneh Torah*.

There remains what we might call the moral aspect of the intellectual pursuit. This is the *patience* of the scholar in his pursuit of knowledge. Again and again he warns against accepting first impressions. The Elders of Israel lacked this intellectual humility. Although they were allowed the revelation of the vision of the *Maaseh Merkavah*, they lacked both the intellectual preparation to understand it correctly, and the moral humility to realize their deficiency.

THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL

“Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the Elders (*m'ziknei*) of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and [there was] under His *feet* as it were a *paved work* of a sapphire stone (*k'maaseh livnat ha-sapir*. *Livna* can mean “whiteness”), and as it were the body of heaven in [its] clearness. And upon the nobles (*atzilei*) of the children of Israel He laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink.” (Exodus 24:9-11)

The Elders are condemned for their vision. Maimonides sides with Rashi and against Onkelos in taking the Elders action pejoratively. Exodus 24:11, “And they saw the God of Israel, and there was under His *feet*,” is only quoted by Maimonides up to “His *feet*” to underscore the extreme prurience and corporeality of their vision. The Elders failed to sublimate the imaginative elements of their vision. Instead of focusing on the feet, they should have understood that God has no feet. They should have realized what the “feet” are supposed to represent, as we explain below. Their lack of humility, as defined above, caused them to err in what was most important. The elders were condemned to death, and would perish after the extension Moses prayed for (Maimonides thought that their punishment came after Golden Calf. See Kafih footnote 21).

The Elders failed to observe Solomon’s later commandment, significantly brought here by Maimonides, “Guard thy *foot* when thou goest to the house of God,” Ecclesiastes 4:17. This is a cautionary tale for all of us less prepared than the Elders of Israel:

“If such was the case with them, how much more is it incumbent on us who are inferior, and on those who are below us, to persevere in perfecting our knowledge of the elements [of the curriculum], and in rightly understanding the preliminaries which purify the mind from the defilement of error.”

Just before this event, Moses had given the Jews the entire Torah text up to this revelation (Exodus 24:4: “And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord.” Rashi: *mi’bereshit v’ad matan tora*). This significant moment is celebrated in heaven and on earth by the revelation of the vision of God’s creation of matter. The Elders, having failed to sufficiently prepare themselves for the vision, drew a corporeal and prurient meaning for which they were condemned. What was the corporeal meaning that the Elders of Israel drew from their vision?

SAPPHIRE

Maimonides appreciates the way Onkelos (3d Century C.E.) retranslates corporeal terms into spiritual language. Maimonides notes that Onkelos’ translated “under *His feet*,” in Aramaic as *cursa yakria*, “under the *Throne of His glory*,” and not just as “throne.”

“For he does not say *v’takhat cursa* ‘and under His throne’; the direct relation of the throne to God, implied in the literal sense of the phrase ‘His throne,’ would necessarily suggest the idea that God is supported by a material object, and thus lead directly to the corporeality of God: he therefore refers the Throne to *His glory*, i.e., to the *Shekhinah*, which is a light created for the purpose.” (Guide 1:28)

Does this statement imply that the Elders were punished for interpreting “feet” as “throne,” i.e., for thinking that God sits on a chair? It is true that the Qur’an speaks of God sitting, and that Muslim fundamentalists took such statements literally. Maimonides may have used the passage about the Elders to criticize such literalism. There is more to it, but this is the surface meaning the un-inquiring reader takes from the Guide text. He wants us to search further.

Maimonides does not refer here to the three accounts of Ben Zoma found in the second chapter of Talmud *Hagigah*. The Guide’s target audience would have those passages in mind when they read of the “sapphire stone.” Ben Zoma was one of the four who, upon entering paradise (*pardes*), gazed on “marble bricks,” and was warned not to call them “*water, water*.” His mind was “affected” by this experience, which also resulted in the death and apostasy, respectively, of two of his comrades (14b). In another passage, this hero of Talmud mysticism meditated on the upper and lower *waters* of Genesis 1:7 and viewed the space between them (15b). In the third account, he held that *water* in a bath transports spermatozoa to cause pregnancy (15a). In all three accounts, “water” is the medium of creation.

The sapphire stone, the “marble brick,” seen as “water” by Ben Zoma, is the “*materia prima*,” hylic unformed matter. The marble bricks of *pardes* are the same as the sapphire stone under the Throne of Glory.

Maimonides explains the term *livnat*, usually translated as “paved” in “... as it were, a paved work of a sapphire stone” to instead mean “whiteness,” which is a plausible translation. He says in 1:28:

“They (the nobles of the children of Israel) therefore comprehended the real nature of the *materia prima*, which emanated from Him, and of whose existence He is the only cause. Consider well the phrase, ‘like the action of the whiteness of the sapphire stone.’ If the colour were the point of comparison, the words, ‘as the whiteness of the sapphire stone’ would have sufficed; but the addition of ‘like the action’ was necessary, because matter, as such, is, as you are well aware, always receptive and passive, active only by some accident. On the other hand, form, as such, is always active, and only passive by some accident, as is explained in works on Physics. This explains the addition of ‘like the action’ (lit. trans of *k’maaseh*, KJV: “as it were”) in reference to the *materia prima*. The expression ‘the whiteness of the sapphire’ refers to the transparency, not to the white colour: for ‘the whiteness’ of the sapphire is not a white

colour, but the property of being transparent. Things, however, which are transparent, have no colour of their own, as is proved in works on Physics: for if they had a colour they would not permit all the colours to pass through them nor would they receive colours: it is only when the transparent object is totally colourless, that it is able to receive successively all the colours. In this respect, it (the whiteness of the sapphire) is like the *materia prima*, which as such is entirely formless, and thus receives all the forms one after the other. What they (the nobles of the children of Israel) perceived was therefore the *materia prima*, whose relation to God is distinctly mentioned, because it is the source of those of his creatures which are subject to genesis and destruction, and has been created by Him. This subject also will be treated later on more fully.”

This is a two-stage metaphor. The first stage is the recognition of sapphire’s transparency. The second is that the transparency receives all colors. Sapphire, then, is a symbol for unformed matter in its aspect of *receptivity*.

The concept of *materia prima*, or hylic matter, comes from the thought that there must be a substrate supporting changes in things. The ancients believed the elements could transform into one another. For example, they thought that the element of water became the element of air when vaporized (rather than remaining water in its vapor state, as we think). Since air and water were *elements*, there had to be something that remained through the transformation. That substrate was *unformed matter*. This matter was, as yet, *un-actualized* in its element form as either air or water. Such matter without form is pure potentiality, receptivity. That ungraspable concept is what Ben Zoma saw. It is the medium of creation. Matter is the *medium* that form actualizes; just as water is the *medium* that Ben Zoma thought transported spermatozoa. It is that which receives, and is therefore considered *female*. It follows that the next Guide chapter defines the words *ish* and *isha*, male and female, and that the emphasis there is on the female.

The lesson is that Ben Zoma had a vision of the prime matter, the *hyle*, and further, these “waters” are portrayed as shining marble that appears like water. Its pure receptivity is symbolized by the imagination as the transparency of water. This *matter* is essential to Divine causation. This is what the elders should have recognized in the vision of sapphire paving.

FOOT

In Chapter 1:28, Maimonides explains that the term “foot,” *regel*, means *cause*, but it is clear from other sources that “foot” is a euphemism for phallus (Jastrow 1448; Talmud *Berakhot* 22a-b *ha-margil*; Bakan, *Maimonides on Prophecy*, 215, 219). Like the foot, it sticks out, and may be said to be like a third foot. Maimonides never explicitly uses the term *regel* as a euphemism for the male genital organ. He always sublimates *regel* to the idea of *cause*, since by being generative it is causative. This is not prudishness. Dr. Ben Maimon was an expert on genitalia who published a work on venereal disease. Rather he is at pains to avoid prurience. Prurience is, after all, a target of the rule in *Hagigah* against teaching forbidden sexual relations in public. Maimonides will later explain that to avoid prurience the Hebrew language has no direct terms for the generative organs (Guide 3:8).

The Elders failed to sublimate “His feet” to “His causative power.” Had they done so they would have realized that their vision was the *formation* or “actualization” of unformed matter. *Regel* represents the male principle, the causative principle, and is therefore a metaphor for *form* in its relation with matter.

THE CREATED LIGHT

Maimonides concludes by reminding us that whenever terms for sight occur in the Torah with God, intellectual apprehension is meant and not sensual vision. Nonetheless, he makes a surprising concession. He says that some believers will still understand these words as physical sight, and if they think they mean *created lights*, or angels, or similar beings, “there is no harm in that” (*ayn nizek b’kakh*). He is not really indicating displeasure here. In Chapter 1:63-65 he will return to the subject of the created light, the “*or ha-nivra*” and to angels in order to show

how they fit into his philosophy of prophecy (See, esp., my essay in Guide 1:65, Is *there a Physical “Created Voice” or a “Created Light”?*).

The created light is the *Shekhinah*, and it may also be the Throne of Glory. Maimonides understands the Throne of Glory as the “active intellect” (see essay on Guide 1:19). At least one commentator, Hasdai Crescas, took it to be the cabalistic *sefira* of *yesod*, the element of “impregnation” by which “through the emanative quality of His Glory, i.e., the *Sefirot*, He is present in the terrestrial world” (H. A. Wolfson, *Crescas Critique of Aristotle*, Harvard, 1971, p. 201, note 92). In Cabala, *yesod* (foundation) represents the generative male principle, form, which enters the female principle, the *sefira* of *malkhut* (kingdom), matter.

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