

GUIDE 1:9 THRONES

This is a lexical chapter (See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide). Maimonides continues his discussion of the distinction between God’s essence and His emanation, introducing his cosmology.

KISSAY (CHAIR)

1. Throne.
2. Superior rank, dignity, or position
3. A place which God governs or in which He has manifested His glory, i.e., in the Temple Sanctuary in Jerusalem, in heaven, or on the uppermost cosmological sphere, and possibly, but only by extension, the ether or quintessence that the sphere is composed of (See Guide 1:28; 2:26, last paragraph; 1:73 Prop. VIII). Maimonides hints at this extended meaning in the last sentence at the end of our chapter, “Our opinion will be further elucidated in the course of this Treatise”). The key to Definition 3 is that this “throne” is *created* by and separate from God.
4. The essence and greatness of God, inseparable from himself. This would include the “essential attributes” of will, wisdom, power, existence, which have no independent existence. The key to Definition 4 is that this “throne” is *identical* with God and used tautologically with Him.

Instances of Definition 2 and 3, Contextualized:

“A *glorious high throne* from the beginning [is] the *place* of our *sanctuary* (*kissay kavod marom me’rishon makom mikdashenu*).” (Jeremiah 17:12)

I italicized the four key English terms: *glory, throne, place, and sanctuary*. Maimonides says that the extended meaning of *throne* is the *seat of royalty*, that is, any place exalted by: “God’s manifestation of his greatness causing his *Shekhina* and splendor to rest upon it” (*g’dolat mi sh’nigla bo v’hashra shekhinato v’yakro alav*). The whole verse would then mean that the *sanctuary* of our communion with God is a *throne*, since God caused His created emanation to rest upon it. See my chapter-essay “The Created Light” on Guide 1:5, above.

“Thus saith the Lord, The heaven [is] My *throne* (*kissay*), and the earth [is] My footstool (*hadom raglai*): where [is] the house that ye build unto Me? And where [is] the place of My rest?” (Isaiah 66:1)

Maimonides says that those whose “mind. . .observes...with intelligence” extend the meaning of *throne* to the heavenly spheres. This suggests to him “The omnipotence of the Being which has called them (the spheres) into existence, regulates their motions, and governs the sublunary world by their beneficial influence (*b’shefa tovam*).” See Guide 2:5, which is about God’s government of the spheres, and see my essay below.

Instances of Definition 4 Contextualized:

“And he said: ‘The hand upon the throne of the Lord (*ki yad al kes y-h*): the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.’” (Exodus 17:16. Trans. JPS 1917 rather than KJV)

The verse is God’s oath, sworn on His eternal throne, to destroy Amalek. The phrase “...hand upon the throne of the Lord” includes two potential anthropomorphisms, *hand* and *throne*. Maimonides argues that

we never swear on anything beneath us, only on what is superior to us. But no throne, however defined, is superior to God. Were God to swear, therefore, it could only be on Himself. This reflexive interpretation is suggested by the duplicative phrase “generation to generation,” *midor dor*. The term *throne* therefore conceals a tautologous reference to God, to His eternal essence. See essay below, and the chapters on the divine attributes, Guide 1:51 to 1:60.

“Thou, O Lord, art *enthroned (teshev)* for ever, Thy throne (*kisakha*) is from generation to generation.” (Lamentations 5:19. Trans. JPS 1917)

Maimonides: “By ‘Thy throne’ we understand something inseparable from God.” He uses the same idea from the previous quotation, “from generation to generation,” to suggest the eternal *identity* of the throne with God. The idea that any other *separate* thing could be eternal *with* God constitutes heresy (*zohi kefirā bli sofek*), suggesting “partnership” (Arabic: *shirk*) and polytheism. Therefore, the *throne* that is *eternal* must be a tautologous reference to God himself, his self-same essence. The throne eternally “with” God reminds us of the eternal attributes of God. Maimonides teaches that the so-called “essential attributes” of God, i.e., His will, intellect, etc., are identical with God. Their distinction as “separate” attributes is no more than our anthropomorphic projection of the humanly familiar experience of will, intelligence and power upon God.

Maimonides also implied that though he has two contradictory definitions for *throne*, Definitions 3 and 4, they can be harmonized. (See below, as well as my *Introduction II*, which discusses “contradictions” in the Guide, and why we should not take them as absolute contradictions).

WHEN IS A CHAIR NOT A CHAIR?

The definition that Maimonides *excludes* for *kissay* is the most obvious: a chair you that sit on. R. Kafih says, footnote 1, *ad loc.*, (my trans.): “In Maimonides’ day, in Europe, everyone sat on chairs and ceased using the term “chair” to indicate degree or level of spiritual significance.” This democratic assertion is not precisely true, since in English we still distinguish between chairs and thrones. What he means is that in the distant past people usually sat on the floor, but to indicate the superiority of a ruler they gave him a chair. Maimonides certainly understood the general use for chairs, and discussed the subject at Guide 1:69:

“The same argument holds good in reference to all final causes. If you assign to a thing a certain purpose, you can find for that purpose another purpose. We mention, e.g., a (wooden) chair; its substance is wood, the joiner is its *agens*, the square its form, and its purpose is that one should sit upon it [the four Aristotelian causes]. You may then ask, For what purpose does one sit upon it? The answer will be that he who is sitting upon it desires to be high above the ground. If again you ask, For what purpose does he desire to be high above the ground, you will receive the answer that he wishes to appear high in the eyes of those who see him. For what purpose does he wish to appear higher in the eyes of those who see him? That the people may respect and fear him. What is the good of his being feared? His commands will be respected. For what purpose are his commands to be respected? That people shall refrain from injuring each other. What is the object of this precaution? To maintain order amongst the people. In this way one purpose necessitates the pre-existence of another, except the final purpose, which is the execution of the will of God, according to one of the opinions which have been propounded, as will be explained (3:13 and 3:14), and the final answer will be, ‘It is the will of God.’ According to the view of others... ‘It has been decreed by His wisdom.’ According to either opinion, the series of the successive purposes terminates, as has been shown, in God’s will or wisdom, which, in our opinion, are identical with His essence, and are not

any thing separate from Himself or different from His essence. Consequently, God is the final purpose of everything.”

God’s idea of the chair (or at least of chair-ness) links all four definitions in 1:9. Whether it is a chair to sit on, a throne, a degree of majesty, the *glory* or the “created light,” all exist because God wills or thinks of them. These attributes, *will* and *thought*, are identical with God

This *identity* provides Maimonides the basis to harmonize Definitions 3 and 4 above. He suggested this by his choice of two references from the prophet Jeremiah (Lamentations is rabbinically attributed to Jeremiah) as instances of the two definitions of *throne*. Since Jeremiah uses both definitions, the assumption is that they must be harmonizable.

AN ETERNAL PRE-EXISTENT THRONE?

H. A. Wolfson, in a chapter entitled “The Pre-existent Throne and Created Will,” mentions the Qur’an passages (7:52, 20:4) showing Allah mounting or seated on a pre-existent throne borne by four angels. He argues that these texts reminded the Jews of similar material in the Bible and in the Talmud (1 Kings 22:19, Ezekiel 1:5, *Pesakhim* 54a). They also learned of Muslim scholars who opposed the literal interpretation of these verses in the Qur’an and who contended that the throne was the ninth and outermost Aristotelian sphere (*Repercussions of the Kalām in Jewish Philosophy*, Harvard, 1979, pp. 113, 114, and 116)

The Muslim idea of a pre-existent throne closely parallels the Muslim discussion of a pre-existent uncreated Qur’an. Wolfson contends that this discussion of a pre-existent divine partner was a repercussion in Islam of an older idea. This was the Philonic Logos reconstituted as the Johannian “Word,” in “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). As there is in Christianity an *incarnated* word, Wolfson argued that the Qur’an became the “inlibrated” word of God. Furthermore, just as the Word was “with” God, so the Qur’an was “with” God, eternally.

This notion was deeply disturbing to the Jewish conception of monotheism. It provoked responses from medieval Jewish philosophers, including R. Saadia Gaon and R. Ibn Gabirol. Maimonides is part of this tradition, which calls forth his chapters 1:51 to 1:60, where he rejected the separate existence of divine “essential attributes” such as power, will, or wisdom. We must take them as *identical* with God. They are tautologous utterances. To say that God is “wise” is as much as to say that He is God.

Maimonides treats the concept of the *throne* similarly. Since it is what God himself swears on when he vows eternal war on the Amelekites, and since all vows are made on that which is superior, God can only vow by *Himself*. We should take this as the meaning of *ki yad al kes y-h*, “For My hand is upon the throne of God.” The doubled clause in that verse, “from generation to generation,” supports this reflexive reading, especially since it is heresy (*kefira* / Judeo-Ar.: כפּר) to hold anything else an eternal partner (Arabic: *shirk*) with God.

GOD OR HIS SHEKHINA?

This reading of *throne* as God’s essence seems to contradict Onkelos and differs from another Maimonidean discussion of this passage. Onkelos authored the Aramaic “Targum” translation of the Torah. In the “foot” chapter of the Guide, 1:28, Maimonides applauds Onkelos’ translation of *foot* (*regel*) as *throne* in the discussion of the vision of the elders of Israel, Exodus 24:10. Nor does he there dispute Onkelos’ translation

of *ki yad al kes y-h* as “by God whose *Shekhina* is upon the throne of His glory.” Onkelos thereby identified the “hand of God” with His “*Shekhina*.” The *Shekhina* is the personification of the divine indwelling or presence. It happens to bear a feminine ending. Onkelos frequently substitutes this term when the Biblical text makes direct or anthropomorphic references to God. Maimonides always treats the *Shekhina* as a creation of God, not His essence, and certainly not a “partner.” But the thought had occurred to the Talmudic tradition. In my *Introduction I*, I mentioned Rabbi Akiva’s interpretative dance around Daniel 7:9, a famous passage about thrones, pointedly *not* quoted by Maimonides here. The Daniel passage reads:

“I beheld till the *thrones* were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment [was] white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne [was like] the fiery flame, [and] his wheels [as] burning fire.”

The passage has parallels to the vision of the elders of Israel as well as the classic visions of the *Merkava* in Isaiah and Ezekiel. However, this is the only passage that takes the celestial throne as *plural*. Rabbi Akiva (*Hagigah* 14a and b) first interprets the plural “thrones” as the thrones of God and *his beloved*, but then *re-explained* them as thrones of justice and grace. R. Akiva thus sublimated his initial gloss, with its prurient idolatrous subtext. Its explosive character made this necessary. It is precisely this plural understanding that Maimonides must avoid in his discussion of the *Shekhina*.

(Soncino mistranslates the passage in 14a as *David* instead of *dod*—beloved. Maimonides discussed Daniel 7:9 in *Mishneh Torah, Ysodei haTorah* 1:9. See David Bakan, *Maimonides on Prophecy*, p. 6, principle 27; pages 27 through 33, where he refers to this practice of sublimation as “The Principle of R. Akiva”).

In the “foot” chapter, Maimonides explains that the whiteness of the sapphire (*livnat ha-sapir*) which is “under His feet” or “under His throne” in the vision of the elders of Israel (Ex. 24, 9-11), is the *created* unformed prime or potential matter (hyle). Additionally, in our own chapter, Definition 3 of *throne*, is specifically about *created* exalted existences other than Himself. There is thus a question whether *throne* in Exodus 17:16 should refer to:

“His glory, i.e., to the *Shekhina*, which is a light *created* for that [prophetic] purpose,” (Guide 1:28);

Or whether, as he says in our chapter:

“These, however, *need not* be considered as something *separate* from the existence of God or as part of the *creation*, so that God would appear to have existed both without the throne and with the throne; such a belief *would be undoubtedly heretical*.” (*zohi kefira bli safek: Jud.Ar.: הדא כפר בלא שך*)

Is the throne created or not? Is it identical to God or not? The key may be the term *yad*, “hand,” which does not get a lexical chapter, but which Maimonides explains at 2:41 in the following language:

“I need not explain what a dream is, but I will explain the meaning of the term *marei*, ‘vision,’ which occurs in the passage: ‘In a vision (*be-marei*) do I make myself known unto him’ (Numbers 12:6). The term signifies that which is also called *marei ha-nevua*, ‘prophetic vision,’ *yad ha-shem*, ‘the hand of God,’ and *makhazei*, ‘a vision.’”

Thus, *yad ha-shem*, “hand of God,” can mean prophetic vision. The reasonable conclusion is that we should reinterpret *throne* in *ki yad al kes y-h* as tautologically essential and uncreated from the point of view of God,

but occurring as a “created light” in the prophetic *vision* of the elders.

God’s essence is unavailable to prophecy, but the prophetic imagination receives images that darkly illumine its understanding of His ungraspable essence.

THE BENEFICIAL INFLUENCE OF THE SPHERES

“Thus saith the Lord, The heaven [is] my *throne* (*kissay*), and the earth [is] my footstool (*hadom raglai*): where [is] the house that ye build unto me? And where [is] the place of my rest?” (Isaiah 66:1)

With this quotation, Maimonides begins to introduce his cosmology. He defines God’s “throne” in Definition 3 as the cosmological spheres. Because *throne* indicates a high degree of majesty, those in the know (*sh’yodan u’mithbonen*) understand the greatness of their Creator (*g’dolet m’mtsiam*) who created the celestial spheres that govern the world through their beneficial influence or emanation (*b’shefa tova*).

The passage extends the idea of the previously cited verse, Jeremiah 17:12, that the throne “is the place of our sanctuary” upon which God emanated his *Shekhina*. The sanctuary is just a physical space, but because of this divine manifestation, it becomes the place of our communion with God. Still, the spheres are mere cosmological objects. Why should they receive the dignity of the designation *throne* from Him? In other words, what have the objects of astronomy to do with the divine *Shekhina*? How did they become sanctified?

Maimonides’ answer, set forth in Guide 2:5, is that the spheres are *alive*:

“The opinion of Aristotle, that the spheres are capable of comprehension and conception, is in accordance with the words of our prophets and our theologians or Sages. The philosophers further agree that this world below is governed by influences *emanating* from the spheres, and that the latter comprehend and have knowledge of the things which they influence. This theory is also met with in Scripture: comp. ‘[the stars and all the host of heaven] which the Lord thy God hath divided unto all nations’ (Deuteronomy 4:19), that is to say, the stars, which God appointed to be the means of governing His creatures, and not the objects of man’s worship. It has therefore been stated clearly: ‘And to rule over the day and over the night’ (Genesis 1:18). The term ‘ruling’ here refers to the power which the spheres possess of governing the earth, in addition to the property of giving light and darkness. The latter property is the direct cause of genesis and destruction; it is described in the words, ‘And to divide the light from the darkness (*ibid.*).’ It is impossible to assume that those who rule a thing are ignorant of that very thing which they rule, if we take ‘to rule’ in its proper sense.”

If, then, the living heavens are God’s throne, why is the earth the stool for his feet (*hadom raglai*)? Maimonides’ invocation of Isaiah 66:1 links our chapter, 1:9, with Guide 1:28, the “foot” chapter. “Foot” is the male causative principle in Maimonides’ lexicon. The spheres’ motion causes all physical change, generation and corruption on earth. God makes the spheres emanate the forms that in-form matter (Guide 2:4 and 2:10). That is why Maimonides can call the spheres a *throne*, Definition 3. It is not that they are, in themselves, a “throne,” but just as the throne is the symbol of governmental rule, the spheres rule the world with their emanations. They thereby are like God’s *Shekhina*, the divine indwelling that rules our world by activating and regulating life on earth.

wonderful ordering of the levels of existence in the universe, i.e., the levels of the heavenly spheres and their lawful movements, which engender the reception of forms in matter, according to the preparation of that matter; and the emanation of the upper world upon that which is in the lower world—all of these attest to the existence of universal order, from which flow all the levels of the universe, and by means of which they are connected, all from the existence of the upper world, its movement, and its emanative governance of the lower world.” (My translation)

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