

Averroes and Maimonides on Equivocal Terms in the Qur'ān and the Torah¹

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This essay is a brief exploration of the Scriptural exegesis of two of the most noteworthy sons of Córdoba, Averroes or Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) and Moses Maimonides or Rambam (1135-1204). We will examine the manner of their exegesis of the Scriptural texts, the Qur'ān and the Torah, of their respective religious communities. Although Averroes is nine years older than Maimonides, they are near contemporaries. We do not know whether in their youths these Córdobans ever met; they will emerge as two of the most renowned scholars and judges of their communities. Neither of them lives his entire life in Córdoba; Averroes moves to the capital city of the Almohads, Marrakesh, then to Seville and then back to Marrakesh again. Maimonides travels to Fes, Morocco, then east, first to Cairo, then to Tiberias, a prestigious rabbinical city beside the Sea of Galilee during the Roman period, then back to Cairo. In Cairo, he became the doctor to Saladin (صلاح الدين يوسف بن أيوب), the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty. The city of Cairo provides witness even today to his presence there in the Middle Ages. In the old city of Cairo on the stone arch of the door of a building are engraved several Hebrew words, including the name “Moses Ben Maimon, the Rambam” (בית כנסת היד משה בר מימון הרמבם).² When I visited the synagogue in 2005, it was dilapidated and was protected by two Egyptian guards. The synagogue has since been restored with the collaboration of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the Jewish community of Cairo.³ Averroes was initially buried in North Africa but his remains were later buried in Córdoba. In regard to Maimonides, neither he nor his remains ever return to Córdoba; he is buried in Tiberias. I like

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² The inscription means: “The Synagogue, the Hand of Moses son of Maimon, the Rambam.” The phrase “the hand of [someone]” indicates that the synagogue is established by the generosity of a person, perhaps in this case due to a donation of funds from Maimonides’s family, but most certainly because of his intellectual and judicial leadership of the community. “Son” uses the Aramaic spelling as *bar*; בַּר. There is an Arabic inscription as well, but it is illegible in the photograph.

³ The restoration of the synagogue and the yeshiva is due to collaboration of M. Farouk Hosny, the Minister of Culture, M. Zahi Hawass, the Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Antiquities, and Mrs. Carmen Weinstein, the President of the Jewish Community in Cairo.

to think these two Córdoba youths played football together as children in the streets and discussed philosophy and Law during the intermissions. Be that as it may, in this essay I will examine two of their treatises, Averroes's *The Book of the Decisive Treatise* (*Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl*)⁴ and Maimonides's *The Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*).⁵

Averroes concludes the *Decisive Treatise* with the following remark:

(59) We would love to devote ourselves to this intention [that is, the defense of the teaching of the Qur'ān against the misguided readings of the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites] and carry it out thoroughly; and if God prolongs our life, we shall establish as much of it as we can. That could possibly be a starting point for someone who comes afterward. Now our soul is in utmost sorrow and pain due to the corrupt dissensions and distorted beliefs that have permeated this Law, especially those that have occurred to it from among people linking themselves to wisdom. For injuries from a friend are graver than injuries from an enemy – I mean that wisdom is the companion of the Law and its milk sister. So injuries from those linked to it are the gravest injuries – apart from the enmity, hatred, and quarreling they bring about between both of them. These two are companions by nature and lovers by essence and instinct.⁶

This entire treatise is devoted to the exposition of the relation between philosophy and Law, and although Averroes does not conduct an exhaustive study of the Qur'ān, he establishes essential directions for further study. One element of the study is his recognition that the Qur'ān uses terms equivocally. A term used in the Qur'ān may have more than one meaning, an apparent meaning (*ظاهر*, *ẓāhir*) and an interpreted (*تأويل*, *ta'wīl*) or figurative meaning. Averroes first introduces this distinction in section thirteen of the treatise. The context is the explanation that different individuals have different means of assent (*تصديق*, *taṣḍīq*) in their cognizance of God. This distinction is the beginning for Averroes of an extended account of when words are to be understood in the apparent sense and when they are to be understood in an interpreted or figurative sense. In the conclusion (§59), he says that this study is necessary to the resolution of all conflicts that may appear to exist between philosophy and Islamic Law.

Maimonides, like Averroes, is devoted to the exposition of the sacred texts of his religious community and he, like Averroes, begins his exposition of the Jewish prophetic texts, specifically of the Torah, with the examination of particular biblical terms that are used equivocally. Maimonides states in the Introduction to his *Guide* that “the first purpose of this treatise is to

⁴ Averroës, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise, Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom, & Epistle Dedicatory*, translated with Introduction and notes by Charles E. Butterworth, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2001). Hereafter referred to as the *Decisive Treatise*. I have also consulted Averroës, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, translated with an Introduction and notes by George F. Hourani, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Fund, New Series XXI, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961). All references to the *Decisive Treatise* are to Butterworth's edition and translation.

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated, and with an Introduction and notes by Shlomo Pines and an Introductory Essay by Leo Strauss, Two volumes, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). Hereafter referred to as the *Guide*.

⁶ Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, §59, p. 32 ll. 17-27 and p. 33 l. 1 (on both the English and Arabic pages).

explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in prophecy.”⁷ The first step in achieving this aim is, as he explains in the next sentence, to understand that the terms he intends to elucidate are equivocal. For Maimonides, the careful identification of the equivocal meanings of words turns into an extended study of biblical passages.

My intention in this paper is not to show the historical reliance of one scholar on the other, nor to show that one does a better job of explicating the prophetic texts of his religious community than the other. Rather, my aim is to provide an explanation of the way in which they conduct their analysis of Scriptural texts by providing examples of each scholar's study of passages from the Qur'ān and the Torah. Both of them begin their exegesis of Scriptural texts through a study of equivocal terms.

Averroes on the Teaching of the Qur'ān

Averroes's aim in the *Decisive Treatise* is to explain that philosophy and Law are in harmony with one another, or to state it more accurately, philosophy – or wisdom as he also calls it – rightly understood is in harmony with religion, rightly understood. He begins in a religious way, by quoting passages from the Qur'ān which call the reader to “consider” and “reflect” upon the things of nature and “to seek cognizance of them” by means of the intellect (§2). Since this intellectual activity is required as an obligation, this allows Averroes the opportunity to explain the need to draw out the unknown from the known, the intellectual process which is known as syllogistic reasoning. There are different types of syllogistic reasoning, the dialectical, the rhetorical and the sophistical, and these differ from another type, the highest type, which is demonstrative syllogistic reasoning. Prior to an examination of these types of syllogistic reasoning, it is necessary to learn unqualified syllogistic reasoning, and also the parts of which unqualified syllogistic reasoning are composed, that is, the premises of each and the words that are used to make the premises. “Unqualified syllogistic reasoning” (القياس المطلق, *al-qiyās al-muṭlaq*) refers to the account in Aristotle's *Categories*, *De Interpretatione* and the *Prior Analytics*, as well as what is necessary to determine the nature of premises used in the syllogisms of the four types of qualified syllogistic reasoning already introduced, rhetorical, dialectical, sophistical and demonstrative. These various types of syllogistic reasoning lead to cognizance of God (معرفة الله, *mā'rifa llāhu*). All of these types, Averroes calls “tools” (الألات, *al-'ālāt*) in relation to work and thus he rejects the notion that there are doctrines being imported into the texts of Scripture from the use of these tools. All of these types of syllogistic reasoning, therefore, lead to a cognizance of and assent to God. They are tools in the assistance of a religious obligation.

The reason for these different types of syllogistic reasoning is linked by Averroes to the different natures and capacities we have as human beings for assent. Some of us assent by means of demonstrative statements, some assent by means of dialectical statements and some assent by means of rhetorical statements, each arriving at a similar type of assent. The richness and beauty of the Divine Law is that it calls all human beings according to their capacities and strengths. In order to confirm these three types of reasoning, Averroes cites a verse in the Qur'ān which

⁷ Maimonides, *Guide*, Introduction to the First Part, vol. 1, p. 5.

identifies them: “Call to the path of your Lord by wisdom, fine preaching, and arguing with them by means of what is finest” (16:125).⁸

Demonstrative statements derived from the syllogistic arts which refer to existing beings must either be consistent with the wording of the Law or the Law will be silent about them (§13). If the Law does not make a statement about the nature of thing, there is no conflict between philosophy and Law. If the Law does make a statement about the nature of thing, then the apparent sense of that statement must be accurate or it must be interpreted in some way. It is at this point that the equivocality of words may be identified. If the reader sees no conflict between philosophy and the apparent meaning of a term in Scripture, then it is possible that the apparent meaning of the term will lead that person to assent. If someone sees a conflict between philosophy and the apparent meaning of the term, an interpretation is allowed, is perhaps even necessary, for this other person to assent. If an interpretation is not allowed, the resulting perplexity arising from the apparent conflict between philosophy and Law may lead to unbelief, a failure of assent. Thus, both readers assent, but in different ways, according to their comprehension of the meaning of the term under examination. The meaning of these terms may be identified as dialectical, rhetorical or demonstrative, as they are the key term used in a premise of a syllogism of the same name.

The following are a couple examples cited by Averroes. In Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:28-29, it says:

It is He who created for you everything that is in the earth; then He directed Himself up toward the heavens and he made them congruous as seven heavens; He is knowledgeable about everything.⁹

Does the word “directed”, *istiwā’* (استواء), indicate that God has motion or that God is a body who moves and is therefore like other bodies? Averroes adds at this point a reference to *Ḥaḍīth al-Nuzūl*, which says: “God descends to the lower world.” Does this *ḥaḍīth* confirm that God has motion and therefore is corporeal? Averroes answers the perplexity by saying that *istiwā’* has more than one meaning; the term can and should be understood in respect to one’s understanding of the corporeality of God. Some readers will accept that motion and body can be ascribed to God. These readers are those who accept the apparent meaning; the Hanbalites are examples of this way of comprehending. Averroes does not say there is harm in this apparent meaning, for it ascribes existence to God which will lead to assent. But at some point in reflection, the reader may become puzzled at ascribing a physical body to God. If God is a body, what are the attributes of his body? White hair and a beard, as depicted in the biblical book of Daniel (Daniel 7:9), male or female, and so on? For those who recognize that God is not a body nor a force in a body because such an affirmation would require God to be limited, these readers recognize that the term is to be understood in an interpreted or figural way. For this second reading, the term is not actually saying that God moves, but it affirms that God is the cause of the heavens, in whatever mysterious way this is done. The ascribing of motion to God is an anthropomorphism

⁸ Butterworth’s translation, p. 8.

⁹ Butterworth’s translation, footnote 18, p. 52.

to assist us in our assent. A second reader, however, who recognizes the difficulty of ascribing corporealism to God will identify the anthropomorphism. The first reader, who uses the corporealistic meaning, does not identify the term as anthropomorphic and he reads the word as if it is univocal.

In section 21, Averroes gives a second example. The context is the question of the age of the earth. He quotes the following verse in Sūrah Hūd 11:7: “And it is He who created the heaven and the earth in six days, and His Throne was on the waters – that He might try you, which one of you is fairer in works.”¹⁰ To be specific, the perfect form of the verb is used in the second phrase – *وكان عرشه على الماء*. Averroes follows with this comment: “[This statement] requires, in its apparent sense, an existence before this existence—namely, the throne and the water—and a time before this time, the one joined to the form of this existence, which is the number of the movement of the heavenly sphere” (§21, ll. 19-20).¹¹ He says that the apparent meaning of the verse is that the throne and water existed prior to the creation of the heaven and the earth, and moreover, being and time had to exist prior to the time of creation. He quotes two other Qur’ānic verses which are similar in intent. Sūrah Abraham 14:48 says: “On the day the earth shall be changed into other than earth, and the heavens also.”¹² According to the apparent sense of the passage, creation here is depicted as change rather than bringing existence from non-existence. Sūrah The Believers 41:11 says: “Then he directed Himself towards the heaven, and it was smoke.” According to the apparent sense of the passage, smoke existed as God begins to create. Averroes says in fact there are no verses in the Qur’ān that suggest there was absolute nothingness before the act of creation, at best only a qualified nothingness (§22, ll. 31-32).¹³ Averroes notes that the dialectical theologians do not adhere to the apparent sense of any of these verses, but they interpret them in order to make them conform to a notion that only nothingness and God existed at the beginning of creation and time did not precede the generation of form. Thus, it is not the case that the apparent sense of the Law is always what is recommended by dialectical theologians, even amongst those who claim to be literalists.

Although Averroes does not address the meaning of the term “throne” in this verse, it also raises the question of the equivocal usage of terms. To say that God has a “throne” or that he sits on a throne are also anthropomorphisms. For those who read this term in the apparent sense, God has a body that sits on the throne. According to the apparent reading, the term “throne” teaches rightly that God is a king who possesses a throne like human kings, even if in a more exalted way as the notion of a throne of God in the heavens establishes and promotes his supreme authority. In this case, in contrast, the philosophic scientist accepts the non-apparent or interpreted meaning of the Throne Verse.

These examples indicate the ways in which Averroes shows the harmony of philosophy and the Law. The recognition of the equivocal meanings of terms leads to different ways in which each passage may be understood. The range of meanings are not usually contradictory,

¹⁰ *The Koran Interpreted*, a translation by A. J. Arberry, (New York: Touchstone, 1955), p. 240.

¹¹ Butterworth, p. 16.

¹² Butterworth’s translation.

¹³ Butterworth, p. 16.

although on occasion they may be,¹⁴ and it is salutary for every reader to fasten onto the reading that is most suitable to his or her understanding. It is necessary, for example, to recognize that God is a sovereign who rules over all whether he possesses a body and sits on a throne somewhere in the heavens or whether this is a figural depiction. The Qur'ān speaks to everyone according to his or her capacities, which is an example of the richness and wisdom of the Qur'ān, an indication of its inimitability (§58 ll. 5-7). The Qur'ān speaks according to the types of syllogistic reasoning, dialectical, rhetorical, sophistical and demonstrative; in doing so it speaks to those who are not learned in any of these arts but who may respond to the degree of cognizance in each of these arts. The Qur'ān is not strictly a philosophical treatise, though it is not against philosophy, and it speaks to those trained in philosophy as much as it speaks to those who are not. If it is only a philosophic treatise, or to be precise, if it only presents demonstrative arguments, it would exclude the greater portion of humanity from its comprehension. It is rather a text designed for a community, a community with various types of readers and it guides all of them to assent to truth. The excellence of the text is that it gathers readers in a common assent to the truths about the existence of God, His justice, His mercy, and so on.

Averroes says that in regard to equivocal meanings of terms it would be a mistake to assume the second meaning always has the same relation to the apparent meaning. The relation of the second meaning to the apparent meaning may be varied; the second meaning may be a consequence, or a cause, or may resemble the apparent reading in some other way or have no relation at all, including being a contrary meaning (§13, ll. 15-18). The second reading itself is not the figural or anthropomorphic reading, but is abstracted from the figural or anthropomorphic sense which is the apparent reading. For example, the reference to God sitting on a throne is, according to the abstracted reading, a recognition that God rules, has the excellence and dignity of a true king, although it is not understood that God is like a human king with a body which sits somewhere on a throne. The cognizance of the second meaning causes the recognition of the distinction between the apparent reading and an interpreted reading. Notice that I have avoided calling the apparent reading a literal meaning because, as we have noted, Averroes is careful to show that those who think of themselves as literalists do not conform in all cases to the apparent sense of the Law (§22). The apparent reading of the term or passage is derived from the generally accepted opinions of a society of what is obvious and unquestionable. The uncritical acceptance of those opinions has direct consequences for our literary sensibilities. We accept the most obvious reading of a text because of the strength and universality that the generally accepted opinions have on our sensibilities and we may not apprehend that our most obvious reading is not the only reading. Generally accepted opinions may cause us not to recognize the equivocality of terms and the implication that such equivocality has on the comprehension of passages. A defense of the literal reading is usually a defense of powerful, generally accepted opinions, but it is another question altogether whether this reading is consistent with philosophic science.

¹⁴ For examples of terms which have opposite meanings see §17, Butterworth, p. 13.

Maimonides on the Teaching of the Torah

Following a short Epistle Dedicatory, Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* begins with a summary of his intentions in an Introduction to Part I.¹⁵ His aim, he says, is to explain the meaning of biblical terms and biblical parables. He begins with the discussion of biblical terms. This inquiry into terms will eventually lead to a discussion of biblical parables, the two most prominent parables being Genesis 1-3, the *Account of the Beginning*, and Ezekiel 1 and 10, the *Account of the Chariot*. He says he will also address numerous other biblical parables. The Introduction to Part I begins with an identification of four types of terms that are found in the Torah. These are: equivocal terms which have more than one meaning; derivative terms which the public assume have a root meaning from which all related terms derive their meaning; amphibolous terms which at times are believed to have only one meaning and at other times are equivocal; and univocal terms which have only one meaning. Any particular passage may use a term that is understood one way by one reader and another way by someone else or whose equivocal meanings are recognized by an individual. Maimonides does not claim to make every passage intelligible to every reader; he says he is only interested in the religious reader "for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief"¹⁶ and who is devoted to the true science of the Law. In the study of the Law the student may become perplexed with certain externals of the Law and Maimonides seeks to address this perplexity. This perplexity exists at least in part, according to Maimonides, due to the failure to appreciate the equivocal meanings of numerous biblical terms. The identification of whether a term is used in one of these four ways leads to precision in the knowledge of the Torah. The removal of perplexities in the Law, Maimonides reminds us, leads to a wonderful recognition of what is true and brings us to an assent to the cognizance of God's wisdom and glory.

Part I chapter I of the *Guide* examines two Hebrew terms of the Torah, *ṣelem* (צֶלֶם), "image", and *dāmūth* (דְּמוּת), "likeness". One meaning of the term *ṣelem* is the "shape" or "configuration" of the thing. However, in certain passages if this is the meaning that is comprehended, Maimonides says, it will lead to the supposition of the doctrine of the corporeality of God. Thus, Gen. 1:26 says: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Both the terms *ṣelem* and *dāmūth* are used in this sentence. To some readers there is a recognition of the limitations of ascribing a body to God, and this reader would arrive at the recognition of another meaning to the term as a spiritual or intellectual image. Maimonides proceeds to point out that the proper word for the physical form of a thing is *tō'ar* (תֹּאֵר), as is used of Joseph in Genesis 39:6 who is described as "beautiful in form (*tō'ar*) and beautiful in appearance" and of Samuel who is called forth from the underworld for the benefit of a conversation with king Saul in I Samuel 28:14 with the question "What form (*tō'ar*) is he of?" *Tō'ar* is also used in this physical sense elsewhere. *Ṣelem*, on the other hand, can also mean the natural form of a thing, the notion which constitutes the substance or essence of an entity and in no way refers to the physical shape of an entity. In man, this natural form is reason, the basis of which he is capable of intellectual apprehension and able to know

¹⁵ Maimonides, *Guide*, vol. 1, Introduction to the First Part, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and act according to the Law or to disobey it; it is reason that makes man like God. Thus, *selem* is an equivocal term which is applied either to the specific form of a thing or to the shape or configuration of natural bodies. Like Averroes's philological study, the meanings of a term such as *selem* will be understood differently by different readers. For those who understand the term as denoting a physical form and therefore who ascribe this form to God, it is an indication of their ignorance of his incorporeality yet it is not without benefit because it may encourage someone to believe in God who cannot imagine that a spiritual being could exist. For those who understand the problem of ascribing corporeality to God, the term is understood as the incorporeal essence of the species. This recognition of the equivocality of certain terms is not a recipe for the relativization of meaning, but the basis of a sensitive comprehension that some words have equivocal meanings and our readings will need to consider these possibilities in order to determine which reading is best. Maimonides concludes chapter 1 with a discussion of the term *damuth* and he makes the same point that it is an equivocal term, and that in the context in Gen. 1:26-27 it refers to the spiritual essence of a thing and not the physical form.

As we study the *Guide* and reflect on the Scriptural texts from which Maimonides identifies his terms, we discover that a number of the initial terms are taken from Gen. 1-3. In chapter 2, Maimonides digresses from his study of biblical terms to provide an account of an objection that is raised to the depiction of the "fall" of man in Gen. 3. Maimonides reports that a learned man raised the objection that in Gen. 3:5 the serpent's temptation of Eve is not a fall for mankind, but rather the serpent raises the possibility that Eve, and Adam, will receive a perfection which they did not have previously. This perfection is the noblest of characteristics existing in us, namely, reason. After all, the serpent says: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."¹⁷ The serpent insinuates that God's prohibition of the tree indicates that he does not wish to share his divine nature with Eve and Adam and the law which he had given them in Gen. 2 against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was for the purpose of preventing Eve and Adam from becoming like unto God himself. In particular, the serpent suggests they will obtain knowledge, which is a good, and with this knowledge, they shall be like gods or God, having the knowledge of good and evil. How can knowledge be a bad thing and how can the capacity to be able to distinguish between good and evil be itself an evil? The apparent meaning of the serpent's statement is that Adam and Eve will not experience a "fall" but will attain the most excellent faculty that human beings could obtain, namely, reason. It was reason that God was denying them in the first law he gave them in Gen. 2.

The objection has had other and even more recent supporters. Immanuel Kant, for example, argues in an essay published in 1786 entitled "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" that the discovery of reason and freedom is what the serpent offered and is exactly what they received.¹⁸

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible*. The King James Reference Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994). All biblical translations are to this translation as contained in this edition.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," in *On History*, edited, with an introduction by Lewis White Beck and translated by Emil L. Fackenheim, (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 53-68.

Their attainment of reason and freedom from the disobedience is an improvement in their situation, a “fall upward.” Moreover, Kant claims that these early chapters of Genesis are a “conjectural” beginning, that is, historically primitive beginnings composed with imagination and instinct and they are not philosophically adequate beginnings. According to Kant, modern philosophy and science has progressed over these conjectural, imaginary chapters. Although Kant appears to defend some versions of Christianity in his writings, it will be difficult for Kant to take seriously what the Bible is teaching about a solution for mankind if the initial problem of existence as depicted in Gen. 3 is ill-defined or if the God of Genesis is a tyrant who deprives his noblest of creatures of good things. Other readers, some of whom see themselves as religious, follow a similar account and also conclude that reason is what leads mankind away from God; thus they limit or deny the value of the use of reason, especially in theology. There are also those readers who suggest that, although what Eve and Adam are tempted by is knowledge, what they discover for the first time is sensuality and sex; reason, even though still a perfection, is weak and is dethroned by passions. In summary, in these two versions of the objection, reason and sex are the two great temptations offered Adam and Eve because either one or the other or both are what God prohibits. If either of these readings is the intention of the biblical author, it would be difficult for any of us not to find ourselves in agreement with the crafty serpent. But Maimonides has more to say.

Maimonides sets out to answer this objection, for its critique of the biblical teaching is so devastating that it would be impossible to read on, impossible to see the Bible as worthy of our attention once its God is discovered to be stingy and to be resistant to allowing human beings to achieve their greatest goods and the greatest happiness (I 2). Maimonides answers this objection by the study of several other biblical terms. They are terms found in the serpent’s statement to the woman in Gen. 3:5. The first is the term *‘lohim* (אֱלֹהִים). He says that the term is equivocal; it has three meanings, that of the divine name, ‘God’, or possibly the plural “gods”, or “angels” or “rulers”. Maimonides says that every Hebrew knows that the term *‘lohim* is used in these three different ways in the Bible. The context determines which meaning is used. Maimonides’s determination of the meaning of the term in Gen. 3:5 is that *‘lohim* refers to “rulers”; he notes that this is in agreement with the authoritative Aramaic translation of Targum Onqelos, which translates the term as “rulers” (רַבְרָבִין, *rābrābīn*). Since Targum Onqelos was read alongside the Hebrew of the Torah in most synagogues from at least the time of the rabbinical period and even perhaps as early as 200 B.C., there was no ambiguity in the interpretation of the term in mainstream Judaism from the time of the translation of Onqelos.¹⁹ Maimonides’s reading is uncontroversial within Judaism.

¹⁹ The Aramaic of Targum Onqelos is that of the dialect known as Jewish Literary Aramaic which is the same dialect as the Aramaic of the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as the biblical book of Daniel. This dialect of Aramaic is Palestinian rather than Babylonian, although Targum Onqelos is later accepted as authoritative by the Babylonian *Geonim*. Thus, Targum Onqelos predates both the great rabbinical schools in both Babylon and Palestine and likely predates the emergence of Christianity. Bruce Chilton and Paul V. M. Flesher, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), p. 84. The edition of Targum Onqelos that I use is: *The Bible in Aramaic. Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts. Edited by Alexander Sperber, Volume I: The Pentateuch According to Targum Onqelos, Third Impression*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004). For Aramaic vowel signs, I have used the Tiberian signs rather than the Babylonian or Yemenite supralinear signs which are used by Sperber in his edition.

Other terms in this statement of the serpent are also equivocal. “Knowledge” does not mean one and the same thing, for the Hebrew term “to know”, *yād’a* (יָדָע), can refer to knowledge of the most excellent rank or may refer to lower and limited ranks of knowing, for example, in reference to generally accepted opinions (*al-mashūrāt*, المشهورات). Maimonides says it is only the meaning as generally accepted opinions that is used in Gen. 3:5. Both “good” and “evil” also are equivocal, referring to an absolute standard of what is “true” or “false” or to what is generally accepted as “fine” or “bad” (I 2). Maimonides, thus, reads the statement as “God knows that in the day that you eat therefore you shall be as rulers having generally accepted opinions about good and evil.” What the serpent actually offered was less than what the initial reading appeared to say. The serpent wants Eve and Adam to accept the apparent reading. He is crafty enough to know the equivocal meaning of terms and he seeks to outwit Adam and Eve. To be sure, it may be laudable to be or become rulers, but rulers are not gods or God, and moreover, having generally accepted opinions of what is good or evil is an inferior rank than having certain knowledge of them. The knowledge that Adam and Eve have because they are made in the image of God in Gen. 1:26-27 now becomes, after they eat, mere opinions about things, even if these opinions are widely accepted. According to Maimonides, Eve’s and Adam’s reason is diminished in Gen. 3; they fall downward, not upward. The key to Maimonides’s account is the recognition of the equivocal words used by the serpent. Adam and Eve are warned that he is ‘crafty’ (*‘arum*, עָרוּם, vs. 1), and the craft is manifest in the serpent’s understanding of philology. Maimonides’s philological work is at least as competent as the serpent’s and Maimonides’s reading is supported by the long-standing Jewish translation of Targum Onqelos. With this second reading, Maimonides answers the objection.

For Maimonides the greatest consequence of the fall is the diminishment of the image of God in man, a diminishment of man’s intellect. It is knowledge that is lost and it is the faculty of reason which is clouded and becomes obtuse. Although Maimonides says that Adam and Eve “disobeyed and inclined toward his desires of the imagination and the pleasures of corporeal senses” (I 2), there is no account in Maimonides of sin rooted in desires of the flesh, in concupiscence. The disobedience was not for Adam and Eve the discovery of sexuality for the first time or even of illicit sex. Adam and Eve were commanded to be fruitful and multiply in Gen. 1:28. When Adam sees Eve in Gen. 2, he utters a most erotic response to her: “Here is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” He does not say, “Here is my intellectual partner”, “Here is my economic companion”, but “Here is my bone and flesh.” The emergent perplexity of Gen. 3 in Maimonides’s account is: Why would the creatures who are made in the image of God, with excellent intellects, not be craftier than the serpent and see through his deceptive terminology? Had Adam and Eve not learned philology? The only reason given in the text is that a law was given in Gen. 2 and the purpose of that law was to protect and serve the faculty of reason. The one law was to protect reason from becoming absorbed in opinions. In God’s good creation, there was a mutually supportive relation between law and reason. Justice in the political and moral community was necessary to the right functioning of reason, and vice versa. The one law that God had given was to prevent the weakening of reason and the diminishment of the quality of their knowing. Thus, according to Genesis, the rational and the political life of man are connected through the necessity of law, at least one law. That the law was to support reason

is the main link between the corporeal and the spiritual. Philosophy cannot deny its connection to community, to man's political nature, nor can the city claim it has no need for philosophy. We are both rational and political creatures and we cannot have one without the other, so Genesis teaches.

Maimonides is not finished his study of biblical terms in these first two chapters of Part I of the *Guide*, nor is he finished with the explanation of the meaning of biblical passages and illusive biblical parables. There is no question, however, that his examination of the precise meaning of terms and of the distinction between the apparent and the interpreted meaning of terms are essential to the explanation of the teachings of the Bible. His account of the ways in which terms can be used equivocally is remarkably similar to Averroes. Like Averroes, the philosophical art or arts that Maimonides brings to the examination of biblical texts are necessary for the elucidation of Scriptural texts and they are not used for their critique or for dismissal as primitive. Philosophic science and religion are mutually supportive.

Conclusions

Averroes and Maimonides did not practice such remarkably similar ways of introducing us to the study of Scripture simply because they were raised at a certain time, or in a particular city or even a specific civilization, though we ought to acknowledge that two of the most illustrious figures of the past one thousand years pertaining to the study of philosophy and law emerged from this Arabic-speaking, Islamic civilization. They did have a common teacher in Aristotle whose account of equivocal terms and his distinguishing of them from other usages, begins in the first chapter of his *Categories* and continues throughout his entire *oeuvre*.²⁰ It is no coincidence that Averroes and Maimonides write substantial commentaries on Aristotle's logical works and they use his logical arts in their commentaries on all of the sciences. Averroes produces extended commentaries, sometimes multiple commentaries, on most of the treatises of Aristotle. Contrary to many of the Enlightenment thinkers, however, who developed a certain anti-religious criticism of the core texts of religion, as we noted in Kant's reading of Gen. 1-3, Averroes and Maimonides utilize the best philosophical science in their respectful explanations of the aims of Scriptural texts for their respective religious communities. Averroes and Maimonides do not endeavor to destroy the building blocks of community, and religion above all else is the introduction of a theological-political set of inquiries and teachings pertaining to human communities. The topic of right laws is essential to these two sons of Córdoba, not because theology does not matter, but because we have had, as Averroes and Maimonides teach us about their worlds, many attempts to arrive at the knowledge of God by ignoring or omitting what the knowledge of justice and virtue can and should be like. Religion easily becomes other-worldly, and although those who advocate a return to "spiritual" religion may be well meaning, truth can also easily be a product of our imaginations. It is certainly with renewed interest and with the learning of the rational arts that we can return again, with the assistance of

²⁰ Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, translated with notes and a glossary by J. L. Ackrill, Clarendon Aristotle Series, J. A. Ackrill, general editor, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

Averroes and Maimonides, to the proper reading of religious texts. We often turn initially to the commentaries of Averroes on Aristotle's natural or metaphysical sciences without recognizing the immense investment Averroes has in the right exposition of true religion and its necessary place in the political order of our cities. Averroes's *Decisive Treatise* was never translated into Latin and thus the evaluation in Europe of the intention of his philosophy was at least incomplete, if not inaccurate.²¹ We also often turn initially to Maimonides's *Guide* to see what Jewish philosophy might be like, perhaps if we seek an alternative to religion, without realizing that the *Guide* itself is a Jewish book written for righteous Jews who want to understand the true science of the Law. Moreover, we may fail to notice that the majority of Maimonides's writings, the *Mishneh Torah* for example, are extensive expositions of the laws of Judaism, though utilizing the same philosophical arts as are used in the *Guide*.

Neither Averroes nor Maimonides were adverse to ranking religions even as they were not against evaluating and ranking political communities in respect to their accounts and practices of justice.²² Averroes defended Islam as the highest ordering of man and as the source of man's greatest happiness both in this world and the next, and Maimonides did the same for Judaism. For both writers philosophy and Law are essential. In his *Eight Chapters* Maimonides summarizes his treatise with a quotation from King Solomon who says "Indeed, without knowledge the soul is not good" (Proverbs 19:2) and Maimonides says that this statement is the aim of all of the Law.²³ In a similar manner Averroes affirms the necessity of both philosophy and Law in the marvelous statement which I quoted at the beginning of this paper, that is, "the law and wisdom are milk sisters and lovers by essence and instinct."

²¹ Alain de Libera in Pour Averroès in Averroès, *L'Islam et la reason, Anthologie de textes juridiques, théologiques et polémiques*, traduction de Marc Geoffroy, précédée de Pour Averroès par Alain de Libera, (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), p. 9.

²² Averroès, *Appendix: Averroès' Defense of the Philosophers as Believing in Happiness and Misery in the Hereafter*, in the *Decisive Treatise*, pp. 43-46.

²³ Moses Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, edited by Raymond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth, (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), p. 64.

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