

Lecture 2: Reading Hebrew Scripture as a Philosophical Text
CAU 2023 — Scott MacDonald, Cornell University

Maimonides

Excerpts from: *Guide of the Perplexed* (tr. Shlomo Pines [Univ. Chicago Press, 2001])

Epistle Dedicatory

5 . . . When thereupon you read under my guidance texts dealing with the art of logic, my hopes fastened upon you, and I saw that you are one worthy to have the secrets of the prophetic books revealed to you so that you would consider in them that which perfect men ought to consider. Thereupon I began to let you see certain flashes and to give you certain indications. Then I saw that you demanded of me additional knowledge and asked me to make clear to you certain things pertaining to divine matters, to inform you of the intentions of the Mutakallimun in this respect, and to let you know whether their methods were demonstrative and, if not, to what art they belonged. As I also saw, you had already acquired some smattering of this subject from people other than myself; you were perplexed, as stupefaction had come over you; your noble soul demanded of you to find out acceptable words. Yet I did not cease dissuading you from this and enjoining upon you to approach matters in an orderly manner. My purpose in this was that the truth should be established in your mind according to the proper methods and that certainty should not come to you by accident. . . .

20 . . .

[Introduction to the First Part]

The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy. . . . [T]he purpose of this Treatise and of all those like it is the science of Law in its true sense. Or rather its purpose is to give indications to a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief — such a man being perfect in his religion and character, and having studied the sciences of the philosophers and come to know what they signify. The human intellect having drawn him on and led him to dwell within its province, he must have felt distressed by the externals of the Law and by the meanings of the above-mentioned . . . terms, as he continued to understand them by himself or was made to understand them by others. Hence he would remain in a state of perplexity and confusion as to whether he should follow his intellect, renounce what he knew concerning the terms in question, and consequently consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law. Or he should hold fast to his understanding of these terms and not let himself be drawn on together with his intellect, rather turning his back on it and moving away from it, while at the same time perceiving that he had brought loss to himself

and harm to his religion. He would be left with those imaginary beliefs to which he owes his fear and difficulty and would not cease to suffer from heartache and great perplexity.

This Treatise also has a second purpose: namely, the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such. Hence an ignorant or heedless individual might think that they possess only an external sense, but no internal one. However, even when one who truly possesses knowledge considers these parables and interprets them according to their external meaning, he too is overtaken by great perplexity. But if we explain these parables to him or if we draw his attention to their being parables, he will take the right road and be delivered from this perplexity. That is why I have called this Treatise *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

50 **I.71** – Know that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters that have existed in our religious community have perished because of the length of the time that has passed, because of our being dominated by the pagan nations, and because, as we have made clear, it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people. . . .

55 Now if there was insistence that the legalistic science of law should not, in view of the harm that would be caused by such a procedure, be perpetuated in a written compilation accessible to all the people, all the more could none of the *mysteries of the Torah* have been set down in writing and be made accessible to the people. On the contrary they were transmitted by a few men belonging to the elite to a few of the same kind. . . . This was the cause that necessitated the disappearance of these great roots of knowledge from the nation. For you will not find with regard to them anything except slight indications and pointers occurring in the *Talmud* and the *Midrashim*. These are, as it were, a few grains belonging to the core, which are overlaid by many layers of rind, so that people were occupied with these layers of rind and thought that beneath them there was no core whatever.

As for that scanty bit of argument regarding the notion of the unity of God and regarding what depends on this notion, which you will find in the writings of some Gaonim and in those of the Qaraites, it should be noted that the subject matter of this argument was taken over by them from the Mutakallimun of Islam and that this bit is very scanty indeed if compared to what Islam has compiled on this subject. . . .

As for the Andalusians among the people of our nation, all of them cling to the affirmations of the philosophers and incline to their opinions, in so far as these do not ruin the foundation of the Law. You will not find them in any way taking the paths of the Mutakallimun. . . .

75 Know also that all the statements that the men of Islam . . . have made concerning

these notions are all of them opinions founded upon premises that are taken over from the books of the Greeks and the Syrians who wished to disagree with the opinions of the philosophers and to reject their statements. . . . Thus there arose among them this science of kalam. They started to establish premises that would be useful to them with regard to their belief and to refute those opinions that ruined the foundations of their Law. When thereupon the community of Islam arrived and the books of the philosophers were transmitted to it, then were also transmitted to it those refutations composed against the books of the philosophers. . . .

To sum up: all the first Mutakallimun from among the Greeks who had adopted Christianity and from among the Moslems did not conform in their premises to the appearance of that which exists, but considered how being ought to be in order that it should furnish a proof for the correctness of a particular opinion, or at least should not refute it. And when such a fantasy held good, they assumed that what exists corresponds to that form and started to argue in order to establish the truth of the assertions from which are taken the premises that show the correctness of their doctrine or that at least do not refute it. . . .

[Men of later periods] are not aware . . . that their predecessors toiled to establish the truth of what they desired to establish as true and to refute what they desired to refute because of the harm that would come if this were not done — even if it were after a hundred propositions — to an opinion whose recognition as correct was desired by them.

******When I studied the books of these Mutakallimun, as far as I had the opportunity — and I have likewise studied the books of the philosophers, as far as my capacity went — I found that the method of all of the Mutakallimun was one and the same in kind, though the subdivisions differed from one another. For the foundation of everything is that no consideration is due to how that which exists is, for it is merely a custom; and from the point of view of the intellect, it could well be different. Furthermore, in many places they follow the imagination and call it intellect. Thus when they propound the premises that we will let you hear, they found by their demonstrations the [affirmative] judgment that the world is created in time. And when it is thus established that the world is created in time, it is likewise undoubtedly established that it has a maker | who has created it in time. Then they adduced arguments in favor of the inference that this maker is one; whereupon, basing themselves upon his being one, that he is not a body. This is the way of every Mutakallim from among the Moslems in anything concerning this subject. Thus also do those belonging to our community who imitate them and follow their ways. While the ways in which they adduce the arguments in favor of the inference as to, and propound the premises with regard to, the establishment of the temporal creation of the world or to the refutation of its pre-eternity, differ from one another, the universal thesis of all of them consists in the first place in the affirmation of the temporal creation of the world. And by means of its temporal creation, it is

established as true that the deity exists.

Now when I considered this method of thought, my soul felt a very strong aversion to it, and had every right to do so. For every argument deemed to be a demonstration of the temporal creation of the world is accompanied by doubts and is not a cogent demonstration except among those who do not know the difference between demonstration, dialectics, and sophistic argument. As for those who know these arts, it is clear and evident to them that there are doubts with regard to all these proofs and that premises that have not been demonstrated have been used in them. The utmost power of one who adheres to a Law and who has acquired knowledge of true reality consists, in my opinion, in his refuting the proofs of the philosophers bearing on the eternity of the world. How sublime a thing it is when the ability is there to do it! And everyone who engages in speculation, who is perceptive, and who has acquired true knowledge of reality and does not deceive himself, knows that with regard to this question — namely the eternity of the world or its temporal creation — no cogent demonstration can be reached and that it is a point before which the intellect stops. . . .

Now if this is the state of this question, how can we take the doctrine of the temporal creation of the world as a premise upon which we found the existence of the deity? For in that case the existence of the deity would be doubtful. One would have to say that if the world were created in time, there would be a deity; and if it were eternal, there would be no deity in existence. . . . [A]ccording to me the correct way, which is the method of demonstration about which there can be no doubt, is to establish the existence and the oneness of the deity and the negation of corporeality through the methods of the philosophers, which methods are founded upon the doctrine of the eternity of the world. This is not because I believe in the eternity of the world or because I concede this point to the philosophers; but because it is through this method that the demonstration becomes valid and perfect certainty is obtained with regard to those three things: I mean the existence of the deity, His oneness, and His not being a body — and all this without making a judgment upon the world's being eternal or created in time. Thereupon, when these three great and sublime problems have been validated for us through a correct demonstration, we shall return to the question of the creation of the world in time and we shall enounce with regard to it all the argumentation that is possible.

If you are one of those who are persuaded by what the Mutakallimun say, and if you believe that the demonstration with regard to the creation of the world in time is correct, bravo for you. If, however, it is not demonstrated in your opinion, and if you take over from the prophets, through obeying their authority, the doctrine that it was created in time, there is no harm in that. . . .

As to this my method, it is as I shall describe to you in a general way now. Namely, I shall say: the world cannot but be either eternal or created in time. If it is created in time, it undoubtedly has a creator who created it in time. For it is a first

intelligible that what has appeared at a certain moment in time has not created itself in time and that its creator is other than itself. Accordingly the creator who created the world in time is the deity. If, however, the world is eternal, it follows necessarily because of this and that proof that there is an existent other than all the bodies to be found in the world; an existent who is not a body and not a force in a body and who is one, permanent, and sempiternal; who has no cause and whose becoming subject to change is impossible. Accordingly he is a deity. Thus it has become manifest to you that the proofs for the existence and the oneness of the deity and of His not being a body ought to be procured from the starting point afforded by the supposition of the eternity of the world, for in this way the demonstration will be perfect, both if the world is eternal and if it is created in time. For this reason you will always find that whenever, in what I have written in the books of jurisprudence, I happen to mention the foundations and start upon establishing the existence of the deity, I establish it by discourses that adopt the way of the doctrine of the eternity of the world. The reason is not that I believe in the eternity of the world, but that I wish to establish in our belief the existence of God, may He be exalted, through a demonstrative method as to which there is no disagreement in any respect. Thus we shall not cause the true opinion, which is of immense importance, to be supported by a foundation that everyone can shake and wish to destroy, while other men think that it has never been constructed. This method is particularly justified in view of the fact that these philosophic proofs concerning the three problems in question are derived from the nature of existence that can be perceived and that is not denied except with a view to safeguarding certain opinions.

The proofs of the Mutakallimun, on the other hand, are derived from premises that run counter to the nature of existence that is perceived so that they resort to the affirmation that nothing has a nature in any respect. In this Treatise, when speaking of the creation of the world in time, I shall devote for your benefit a chapter explaining to you some proof for the creation of the world in time. For I reach the goal that every Mutakallim desires, without abolishing the nature of existence and without disagreeing with Aristotle with regard to any point he has demonstrated. . . .

I have already let you know that there exists nothing except God, may He be exalted, and this existent world and that there is no possible inference proving His existence, may He be exalted, except those deriving from this existent taken as a whole and from its details. Accordingly it necessarily behooves one to consider this existent as it is and to derive premises from what is perceived of its nature. . . .

[Introduction to Part II]

Of the twenty-five premises that I have put before you in the form of a preface, some become manifest with very little reflection and are demonstrative premises and first intelligibles or notions approaching the latter, as may be seen in the epitome we have made of their orderly exposition. Others require a number of demonstrations and premises leading up to them. However, all of them have been

given demonstrations as to which no doubt is possible. With regard to some of them, this has been done in the Book of "Akroasis" [Aristotle's *Physics*] and its commentaries; with regard to others, in the Book of *Metaphysics* and its commentary. I have already made it known to you that the purpose of this Treatise is not to transcribe the books of the philosophers and to explain the most remote of the premises, but to mention the proximate premises that are required for our purpose. I shall add to the premises mentioned before, one further premise that affirms as necessary the eternity of the world. Aristotle deemed it to be correct and the most fitting to be believed. We shall grant him this premise by way of a hypothesis in order that the clarification of that which we intended to make clear should be achieved. . . .

This is the premise that Aristotle constantly wishes to establish as true. Now to me it seems that he does not affirm categorically that the arguments he puts forward in its favor constitute a demonstration. The premise in question is rather, in his opinion, the most fitting and the most probable. . . . [T]o me it seems that the premise in question is possible — that is, neither necessary, as is affirmed by the commentators of the writings of Aristotle, nor impossible, as is claimed by the Mutakallimun.

II.13 – There are three opinions of human beings, namely, of all those who believe that there is an existent deity, with regard to the eternity of the world or its production in time.

The first opinion, which is the opinion of all who believe in the Law of Moses our Master, peace be on him, is that the world as a whole — I mean to say, every existent other than God, may He be exalted — was brought into existence by God after having been purely and absolutely nonexistent, and that God, may He be exalted, had existed alone, and nothing else — neither an angel nor a sphere nor what subsists within the sphere. Afterwards, through His will and His volition, He brought into existence out of nothing all the beings as they are, time itself being one of the created things. For time is consequent upon motion, and motion is an accident in what is moved. . . . This is one of the opinions. And it is undoubtedly a basis of the Law of Moses our Master, peace be on him. And it is second to the basis that is the belief in the unity [of God]. . . .

The second opinion is that of all the philosophers of whom we have heard reports and whose discourses we have seen. They say that it is absurd that God would bring a thing into existence out of nothing. Furthermore, according to them, it is likewise not possible that a thing should pass away into nothing; I mean to say that it is not possible that a certain being, endowed with matter and form, should be generated out of the absolute nonexistence of that matter, or that it should pass away into the absolute nonexistence of that matter. . . .

[Second] is the belief of Plato. For you will find that Aristotle in the "Akroasis"

relates of him that he, I mean Plato, believed that the heaven is subject to generation and passing-away. And you likewise will find his doctrine plainly set forth in his book to Timaeus. But he does not believe what we believe. . . . For as for us, we believe that the heaven was generated out of nothing after a state of absolute nonexistence, whereas he believes that it has come into existence and has been generated from some other thing. This then is the second opinion.

The third opinion is that of Aristotle, his followers, and the commentators of his books. He asserts what also is asserted by the people belonging to the sect that has just been mentioned, namely, that something endowed with matter can by no means be brought into existence out of that which has no matter. He goes beyond this by saying that the heaven is in no way subject to generation and passing-away. His opinion on this point may be summed up as follows. He thinks that this being as a whole, such as it is, has never ceased to be and will never do so; that the permanent thing not subject to generation and passing-away, namely, the heaven, likewise does not cease to be; that time and motion are perpetual and everlasting and not subject to generation and passing-away; and also that the thing subject to generation and passing-away, namely, that which is beneath the sphere of the moon, does not cease to be. I mean to say that its first matter is not subject in its essence to generation and passing-away, but that various forms succeed each other in it in such a way that it divests itself of one form and assumes another. He thinks furthermore that this whole higher and lower order cannot be corrupted and abolished, that no innovation can take place in it that is not according to its nature, and that no occurrence that deviates from what is analogous to it can happen in it in any way.

II.15 – My purpose in this chapter is to make it clear that Aristotle possesses no demonstration for the world being eternal, as he understands this. Moreover he is not mistaken with regard to this. I mean to say that he himself knows that he possesses no demonstration with regard to this point, and that the arguments and the proofs that he sets forth are merely such as occur to the mind and to which the soul inclines. . . . Aristotle cannot be supposed to have believed that these statements were demonstrations, for it was Aristotle who taught mankind the methods, the rules, and the conditions of demonstration.

II.16 – . . . I shall explain to you what I believe with regard to this question. After that I shall give proofs for what we desire to maintain. I say then with regard to all that is affirmed by those Mutakallimun who think that they have demonstrated the newness of the world, that I approve of nothing in those proofs and that I do not deceive myself by designating methods productive of errors as demonstrations. If a man claims that he sets out to demonstrate a certain point by means of sophistical arguments, he does not, in my opinion, strengthen assent to the point he intends to prove, but rather weakens it and opens the way for attacks against it. . . .

Now inasmuch as this is true in my opinion and inasmuch as this question — I mean to say that of the eternity of the world or its creation in time — becomes an open question, it should in my opinion be accepted without proof because of prophecy, which explains things to which it is not in the power of speculation to accede. . . .

II.22 – Everything that Aristotle has said about all that exists from beneath the sphere of the moon to the center of the earth is indubitably correct, and no one will deviate from it unless he does not understand it or unless he has preconceived opinions that he wishes to defend or that lead him to a denial of a thing that is manifest. On the other hand, everything that Aristotle expounds with regard to the sphere of the moon and that which is above it is, except for certain things, something analogous to guessing and conjecturing. All the more does this apply to what he says about the order of the intellects and to some of the opinions regarding the divine that he believes.

II.25 – Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the *Torah*, according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. . . .

Two causes are responsible for our not doing this or believing it. One of them is as follows. That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively, for it is known that such texts are of necessity fit for figurative interpretation. However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments. This is one cause.

The second cause is as follows. Our belief that the deity is not a body destroys for us none of the foundations of the Law and does not give the lie to the claims of any prophet. The only objection to it is constituted by the fact that the ignorant think that this belief is contrary to the text; yet it is not contrary to it, as we have explained, but is intended by the text. On the other hand, the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it — that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything — destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out.