Traces of Maimonides’ Book of Prophecy in His Exegesis of Exodus 33:18

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Maimonides’ exegeses of Exodus 32:12-34:8, Moses’ dialogue with God in “the cleft of the rock,” thread through his corpus from his Commentary on the Mishnah, through the Mishneh Torah, and into the Guide of the Perplexed. His interpretation appears in his “7th fundamental” of faith, and is the climax of his “Eight Chapters.” It is central to the first chapter of the Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah. Much of the beginning of the first book of the Guide might be summarized as an explication of this biblical narrative and its terms. Furthermore, readers of Maimonides from the medievals to the moderns have understood these exegeses as essential to Maimonides’ position on the limits of human knowledge.1 Hannah Kasher comprehensively analyzed and compared the different exegeses in Maimonides’ different works,2 but without fully addressing their implications for a theory of his epistemology, critical or otherwise. Pines, though he refers to the exegesis, neglects most of its instances.3 In his magistrial “Introduction to the Code of Maimonides,” Isadore Twersky established incontrovertibly the philosophical importance of the Mishneh Torah. Warren Zev Harvey as well has demonstrated the utility of the

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Mishneh Torah in understanding the Guide.⁴ In light of this holistic view of Maimonides’ literary output, I will closely read Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah 1:10, while integrating aspects of the exegeses in the Guide and Commentary on the Mishnah. The account in the Mishneh Torah is marked by extensive use of allegory. I will thus address Maimonides’ use of allegory, and its surprising overlap with his epistemology.

Warren Zev Harvey writes that “[i]n the Mishneh Torah, the philosophic doctrines of Maimonides are presented in a nonphilosophic, highly simplified but nondeceptive form.”⁵ The following passage of the Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah 1:10, is at least a partial exception to the above rule. Maimonides uses a convoluted allegory to illustrate a philosophic explanation of a biblical allegory; he layers allegory upon allegory. He further divides this “two-tiered” allegory into two parts: Moses’ question, and God’s answer. Indeed, in Maimonides’ autograph manuscript of the Mishneh Torah, there is an blank space in the middle of the line between these passages.⁶ To determine the nature of Maimonides’ allegory, I turn to his categorization of biblical allegories. In the introduction to the Guide, Maimonides discusses two types of allegory, one in which all aspects of the allegory correspond to its philosophical reading, and one in which the details do not perfectly match the interpretation.⁷ Although Maimonides refers there to biblical allegory, his categories surely apply to all allegories, even, or especially, those of his

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own hand. Thus, it behooves us to determine what the nature of Maimonides’ own parable is. Do the details of his parable correspond to their philosophical meaning? A thorough disentangling of the metaphor will reveal that, while all its aspects have their corollaries, they are not all explicitly identified in the Mishneh Torah.

In Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah 1:9, following his discussion of God’s incorporeality and the descriptions of God in the Bible, Maimonides writes the following:

ואמתת הדבר אין דעתו שלאדם יכולה لتحقيقו ולחקרו

Maimonides denies the possibility that the human intellect can apprehend or investigate God’s essence. In that case, asks Maimonides in 1:10,

מה הוא זה שביקש משה רבנו להשיג כשאמר "הראני נא את כבודך" (שמות לג,יח)?

What is the knowledge that Moses requested?

The structure of this passage shuttles between allegory and philosophy. Maimonides first explains the simple philosophic meaning of the request: to know the truth of God’s existence. This fits perfectly with Maimonides in the Guide. In Guide 1:4, Maimonides discusses the term “sight,” quotes the verse in Exodus 33:18, and concludes that it refers to intellectual comprehension, and not ocular sight. In Guide 1:64 and 3:13, he defines God’s “glory” as God’s essence, and in both of these passages he quotes Exodus 33:18 as a proof. Thus, Maimonides in the Guide would translate the verse as “Let me have an intellectual comprehension of Your
essence,” a request virtually synonymous with “knowing the truth of God’s existence.” But from this philosophical exactitude Maimonides slides into a description of the knowledge of human faces. The knowledge desired in the allegory is of one person whose face is seen and whose image is imprinted internally, such that said person is separated in his viewers understanding from other people. This allegory is much more anthropomorphic than the original verse, which only spoke of seeing glory. Furthermore, the very nature of the understanding seems different; the philosophical knowledge of God’s true existence is, presumably, a product of intense intellection. In contrast, the recognition of a human face is instantaneous and effortless; indeed, most humans recognize thousands of faces without even being aware of it. Here, however, Maimonides may be preemptively hinting at one of the explanations forwarded by Hasdai Crescas, who asks in Or Hashem 1:3:1 how Moses, the great philosopher, could ask for something as impossible as comprehension of God’s essence. Among his answers, he suggests that Moses may have believed that, while intellectually impossible, God’s essence could be understood miraculously. Likewise, Maimonides’ allegory implies that Moses did not request an intellectual comprehension, but rather an instant recognition of God’s essence, something bordering on the miraculous. This may be further hinted to in Guide 1:21. After describing Moses essential inability to comprehend God’s essence, Maimonides writes:

כששכלו של כל אדם שלם מידבק بما שטעמו להיות מושג, והוא מבקש השגתו אחרת מעבר לה - השגתו תשתבש או תאבד, כפי שיבואר בפרק מפרקי ספר זה; אלא אם כן תלווה אליו עזרה אלוהית, כפי אמר:

וְשַׂכֹּתִי כִפֶּרֶךְ עָבָרֶיך (שם, שם, 22).

8 For more on this and Crescas’ other explanations see Warren Zev Harvey, “Rabbi Hisdai Crescas,” (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2010), pp. 95-96.
Moses may have hoped for such “divine help” to avoid erring in his comprehension. Indeed, in Chapter 7 of Maimonides’ “Eight Chapters,” Maimonides states that the recognition of “the back” of a person is one marked by the possibility of confusion and error. Moses, as a human, was susceptible to this type of error, but prayed to be spared it.

A further aspect of the recognition of human faces, according to Maimonides, is that its essential purpose is to distinguish one person from another. In Maimonides’ allegory, one first recognizes a face, and then one is able to differentiate it from others. In the biblical allegory, the order is reversed; Moses wants to be able to distinguish God from the other existents, and thus to recognize the truth of God’s existence. Presumably, the other existents here refer to the separate intellects and other components of creation. Thus, this latter part of the allegory, and its reversed application, wholly contradict the ease of recognition we mentioned earlier; it would seem that Moses reaches knowledge of God’s true existence through philosophical exertion, by determining the difference between all existents and God.9

God does not agree to Moses’ proposal, whether it for miraculous or philosophical comprehension, and informs him of his essential limitation:

והשיבו ברוך הוא שאין כוח בדעת האדם بحي הוא מחובר מגוף ונפש, להשיג אמיתת דבר זה על בריו.

God replies in that negative that, as Moses is a physical as well as an intellectual being, he cannot comprehend fully the truth of God’s existence. Moses’ epistemological limitation comes from his physicality. This bipartite limitation is found repeatedly in Maimonides’ other

9 Perhaps, Moses’ process of cognition here mirrors the structure of Yesodei HaTorah itself, which progresses from an initial knowledge of God prescribed in the first two chapters, through the physics and metaphysics of chapters 3-4, and culminating in prophecy in chapters 7-10.
exegeses of this narrative.\textsuperscript{10} I will only bring one less obvious example. In Guide 1:3, Maimonides, in his explanation of the word “picture,” remarks:

The conclusion that Moses gained comprehension of God’s truth is startling, as Maimonides makes clear in various places that Moses could not comprehend God fully, if at all. The verse, however, and Maimonides’ reformulation, is in the future tense. This solves the contradiction; Moses’ comprehension will be posthumous. Upon Moses’ physical death, this last veil of the body no longer stands between him and full vision of God.

Nevertheless, although Moses remains composed of both intellect and body, God grants him a certain degree of understanding. Here begins the second part of Maimonides’ allegory, layered onto God’s allegorical response to Moses:

Moses comprehends “of” the truth of God’s existence, but not its entirety. This partial understanding was “the division of God in his intellect from the other existents.” The existents, as we mentioned, presumably refer to all created entities but God, including the separate

\textsuperscript{10} See Chapter 7 of Maimonides’ “Eight Chapters.” See also Maimonides’ “7\textsuperscript{th} fundamental” in the Introduction to Pereq Heleq, however, where Moses seems to have no such physical limitation. Kasher offers explanations of this contradiction in “Commentaries,” pp. 252-253.

\textsuperscript{11} This and all other selections from the Guide follow Michael Schwartz’s Hebrew translation of The Guide of the Perplexed, Tel Aviv University Press, \url{http://press.tau.ac.il/perplexed/}. 
intellects. Maimonides implies that it was particularly God that Moses could not comprehend, whereas the intellects were in his grasp. This description is seemingly paradoxical; if Moses learned to distinguish between God and the other existents, in what sense was his understanding lacking? Following the sequence in the previous passage, we can understand that while Moses could differentiate between God and other existents, he somehow still could not conceive of God’s essence. In Guide 1:38, and at greater length in 1:54, Maimonides forwards that the limited understanding granted Moses was knowledge of God’s actions and descriptors. However, Kasher notes that Maimonides extends the allegorical person’s “back” to include their “body and clothes.” This implies that the meaning of God’s “back” in the Mishneh Torah is anything other than God’s “face.” What would this be? The allegory in Yesodei HaTorah repeatedly understands God’s “face” to be “the truth of his existence.” There is no such explicit corollary to God’s “back.” However, that which exists besides God’s “face,” that which is different from God, are the other existents. Maimonides seems to say that Moses knows God by a process of

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12 See the gloss of David Arama ad locum, that “its interpretation is that the recognition of the difference between God and the angels, even though they too are not physical.” As detailed in Yesodei HaTorah 2, the angels are for Maimonides the separate intellects. This reading contradicts Pines’ “critical epistemology,” as it presumes ability to understand the separate intellects.

13 In Guide 1:37 Maimonides presents, in addition to the understanding of God’s “face” as God’s essence without intermediaries, Onkelos’ position that it refers to created beings that are “before” God. In 1:21, in his account there of God’s response, he again brings Onkelos’ translation and supports his position that God’s “glory,” at least in this context, is a created entity. Pines, in “The Limitations of Human Knowledge,” 92, highlights Maimonides’ extended account of Onkelos’ translation as an indication that it represents his esoteric “critical epistemology,” as even created metaphysical existents are beyond his comprehension. See Harvey, “Maimonides' Critical Epistemology and Guide 2:24,” 214-218, for further commentaries who consider that Maimonides accepted Onkelos’ position. Kasher, in several places in “Commentaries,” among them pp. 256, 258, 264, 267-268, proffers an alternate approach, by which Maimonides’ presentation of Onkelos intends to satisfy those who cannot fully appreciate the philosophical allegory and adhere stubbornly to biblical anthropomorphic literalism.

14 Kasher, 256
elimination; by knowing all other components of reality, Moses knows to distinguish from them that which he does not know, from God. But this interpretation is not explicit in the Mishneh Torah, and we are left to know, appropriately, much more about what Moses knew than what he did not.

How can we account for the contradictions and missing components of Maimonides’ allegory in the Mishneh Torah? Why are Maimonides’ allegory, his philosophic reading, and the biblical narrative, so tangled? The answer may be in another riddle, in a book that Maimonides never finished. At the end of the exegesis in the 7th chapter of the Introduction to the Ethics of the Fathers, Maimonides promises further explanation of Moses’ dialogue with God in a future work, the “Book of Prophecy.” The nature of the Book of Prophecy, as well as other, similar books Maimonides abandoned, is described most extensively, uncoincidentally, in Maimonides’ “7th fundamental,” on the superiority and uniqueness of Moses’ prophecy, in the Introduction to Perek Helek:

The “Book of Prophecy” which Maimonides intended to write was to be an explanation of the philosophically difficult passages in the Bible. It was to combine highly subtle, esoteric matters through the use of allegory, among other things. Maimonides uses hyperbolic language to discuss the length and complexity of this work. Why was it not written? Maimonides was not a
man averse to composing gargantuan, superhuman books. In the introduction to the Guide, Maimonides explains:

Maimonides remarks that his proposed method would just “exchange detail for detail of the same kind,” i.e. exchange one allegory for another. This is precisely what Maimonides does in the Mishneh Torah! In order to explain the philosophic import of a biblical allegory, he crafts one of his own. Shimon Ravidovitch, in discussing the Book of Prophecy and similar aborted compositions of Maimonides, cryptically comments that Maimonides “sufficed with what he mentioned of these matters in the Mishneh Torah.”¹⁵ I would forward that, at least in Maimonides’ exegesis of Exodus 33:18, the style of the Book of Prophecy is preserved most authentically in the Mishneh Torah, to a lesser degree in the Commentary, and almost not at all in the Guide. Certainly, the Guide contains many allegories, but whether or not there are any “two-tiered” allegories, or Maimonidean allegories explaining biblical allegories, requires a comprehensive survey of the Guide beyond the scope of this essay. Whether this distribution of allegorical style is consistent throughout Maimonides’ corpus, it does hold true in the instance of Maimonides’ exegesis of Exodus 33:18.

Kasher comments that the contents of the “book of prophecy” were presumably integrated into the Guide.  

As Maimonides himself says in his introduction,

Perhaps, but as Ravidovitch remarks, the purposes of the two works, and, consequently, their styles, were quite different. The Mishneh Torah, as Maimonides says in the introduction, was intended to be written clearly such that the laws would be clear to “small and large” alike. His Commentary on the Mishnah was also a book for the public. However, the Guide was intended for the philosophic initiate, whereas the Book of Prophecy was to be for the masses. Thus, in sharp distinction to the exegeses in the Mishneh Torah and the Commentary on the Mishnah, his account of Moses’ dialogue with God in Guide 1:54, and in all other instances in the Guide, starkly lacks any allegorical language. The secrets that he clothes with allegory in his books for wide audiences stand naked in the Guide. But even within his “popular” books there are gradations. While in the Mishneh Torah allegory is tightly woven with philosophic reading, in his introduction to the Ethics of the Fathers in the Commentary on the Mishnah the two are separated. First, Maimonides explains the philosophic import of the biblical verses, and only then elaborates with the allegory. Perhaps this difference in style is attributable to Maimonides’ continued work on the Book of Prophecy in the time between the composition of the Commentary and the Mishneh Torah; his ability to construct complex allegory improved.

If Maimonides began the writing of his Book of Prophecy already at the time when he had composed the Commentary to the Mishnah, and had abandoned it as impossible by the time

16 Kasher, p. 252.
he started writing the Guide, it would stand to reason that he was composing it contemporaneous to the work that lies between these two, the Mishneh Torah. Understanding the connection between these works explains the allegory found in Yesodei HaTorah 1:10. Maimonides became aware later in life that applying philosophic allegory to biblical allegory was impossible; reveal too much, and the allegory is useless. Too little, and it is incomprehensible. It would seem that the allegory in the Mishneh Torah borders on the abstruse. Are we then to conclude that Maimonides’ allegory of Moses’ dialogue with God in the Mishneh Torah is a failure? I would prefer to say, on a paradoxical note Maimonides may or may not have appreciated, that it was a success by its failure. On first reading, the allegory really does seem to convey the philosophic message Maimonides intended. It is only close reading and extrapolation that reveals its layers of contradiction and its missing pieces. In this sense, it is clear enough for the masses to understand, but complex and contradictory enough to convey to the philosophically minded the essential inaccessibility of knowledge of God. Moses’ inability to understand God is, fittingly, the missing piece in the allegory in Mishneh Torah. While Maimonides would reject this method of literary demonstration in the Guide, the traces of the Book of Prophecy in the Mishneh Torah tantalize with their cryptic concision and resonant silences.