

MAIMONIDES' DISAGREEMENT WITH 'THE TORAH' IN HIS INTERPRETATION OF JOB

Maimonides is celebrated in Jewish intellectual history both as a bold innovator and vigorous champion of rabbinic tradition. The tensions implied by this combination emerge in his reading of Job in *The Guide of the Perplexed* III.22-23, particularly where he seems to take issue with the Torah itself. Though somewhat of an overstatement, this apparent disagreement reveals much about Maimonides' endeavour to find his own voice within the Hebrew literary tradition.

Maimonides' analysis of Job

Against the backdrop of his own philosophical discussion of divine providence (*Guide* III.17-18), Maimonides opens his analysis of the story of Job by defining it as a 'parable (*mathal*, i.e., fictional tale) intended to set forth the opinions of people concerning providence'.¹ He immediately goes on to say that although this specific story is fictional, it addresses a distressing – and recurring – reality, 'that a righteous and perfect man ... [is] stricken – without his having committed a sin entailing this – with great and consecutive calamities with respect to his fortune, his children and his body' (*Guide* III.22, p. 486).² Within the biblical tale, this account

¹ On Maimonides' view of Job as fiction, see Sh. Rosenberg, 'איוב משל היה', in D. Rappel, ed., *מחקרים במקרא ובחינוך מוגשים לפרופ' משה ארנד* (Jerusalem 1996) 146-158; M. Greenberg, 'איוב, היה או לא היה: סוגיה בפרשנות ימי הביניים', in M. Fishbane and E. Tov, eds, *Sha'are Talmon. Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake, IN 1992) 3*-11*; A. Nuriel, 'Maimonides on Parables Not Explicitly Identified as Such', *Da'at* 25 (1990) 85-91 (Hebrew); M. Cohen, 'A Philosopher's *Peshat* Exegesis: Maimonides' Literary Approach to the Book of Job and Its Place in the History of Biblical Interpretation', *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 15 (2005) 213-264 (Hebrew). Although Maimonides draws support from the rabbinic statement 'Job did not exist and was not created but was a *mashal*' (bBB 15a), that opinion is actually rejected in the Talmud; see M. Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi*, Leiden 2003, 189f.; see also below, n. 35.

² English citations of the *Guide* in this paper are from Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago 1963), according to section, chapter and page. Citations of the Judeo-Arabic original are from Moses Maimonides, *מורה נבוכים: דלאלה אלהאירין*,

of Job's suffering (Job 1-2) sets the stage for the ensuing dialogues with three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who endeavour to rationalize his predicament (Job 3-31). For Maimonides, each of these fictional characters represents another philosophical view, which he constructs by selecting key verses from their speeches, resulting in the following³ four positions:

1. *Job* concludes from his suffering that God ignores human affairs, allowing the righteous to suffer the same fate as sinners: 'It is all one; therefore I say, "He destroys the blameless and the guilty". When suddenly a scourge brings death, He mocks as the innocent fail' (Job 9:22-23).⁴

Unlike their unfortunate companion, the friends each seek a way to preserve the notion of divine providence notwithstanding Job's suffering.

2. *Eliphaz* maintains that God rewards and punishes people according to their actions and thus concludes that Job's suffering must be deserved: 'Your wickedness is great and your iniquities have no limit' (22:5). To reconcile this argument with Job's manifest righteousness, Maimonides points to an earlier speech (4:17-18) in which Eliphaz argues that no human being – even the most righteous – can ever be absolutely blameless before God and that 'the deficiencies for which we deserve punishment ... are hidden from our perception' (*Guide* III.23, p. 493).
3. *Bildad* was willing to accept Job's innocence by suggesting that his suffering may have been intended to increase his reward in the next world: 'If you are blameless and upright, He will protect you ... Though your beginning be small, in the end you will grow very great' (8:6-7).
4. *Zophar* argues that God's actions need not conform to human conceptions of justice or reason since they are the product of His unfathomable will: 'Would you discover the mystery of God? Would

ed. and trans. [Hebrew], J. Qafih, Jerusalem 1972, whose translation I have consulted along with: *Maimonides: The Guide of the Perplexed*, (Hebrew) trans. M. Schwarz, Jerusalem 2002.

³ What follows is a summary of *Guide* III.23, p. 491-494, as outlined by J. Levinger, 'Maimonides' Exegesis of the Book of Job', in B. Uffenheimer and H. Graf Reventlow, eds, *Creative Biblical Exegesis*, Sheffield 1988, 81-88.

⁴ Biblical references in this paper are from *The Holy Scriptures: The New Jewish Publication Society Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, Philadelphia 1985.

you discover the limit of the Almighty? Higher than the heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know?’ (11:7-8).

What did Maimonides think of these opinions? To assess Job’s theory, he turned to rabbinic tradition:

You know the dictum of the Sages that this opinion of Job’s is most unsound ... They say (bBB 16a): ‘Job denied the resurrection of the dead.’ They also say of him: ‘He began to blaspheme.’ (*Guide* III.23, p. 492)

While the three friends seem to hold the doctrinal high ground, a different portrait emerges from the conclusion of the tale of Job. With the original interlocutors deadlocked, a new character, Elihu, enters the fray and criticizes their failure to discover a true and cogent theory, which he proceeds to impart (Job 32-37), after which Job receives two divine visions (Job 38-41) that inspire his contrite response: ‘I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know ... Therefore I recant and relent’ (42:3-6). The Lord then turns to Eliphaz: ‘I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right (נכונה) as did my servant Job’ (42:7). Confirming Elihu’s criticism, God repudiates the views of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, but also implies that Job, by contrast, ‘spoke ... what is right’, which is at odds with the assessment that ‘this opinion of Job’s is most unsound’. Responding to this anomaly, Maimonides records that ‘the Sages ... say, “A man is not to be blamed for [what he does when] suffering,” meaning that he was excused because of his great suffering’ (bBB 16a; *Guide* III.23, p. 492). But the great philosopher rejects this solution, insisting on a more rigorous standard: Job’s blasphemy may be excusable, but cannot be deemed correct. Maimonides explains instead that Job is credited for ‘speaking what is right’ because he renounced his erroneous view (*ibid.*).⁵

Maimonides’ debate with the Talmud reveals a fundamental divide between two approaches to the book of Job. The talmudic mitigation of Job’s sinful speech implies that the interlocutors must be evaluated ac-

⁵ This explanation is offered by Abraham ibn Ezra in his commentary on 42:7 (appearing in the Rabbinic Bible [*Miqra’ot Gedolot*]), which may have been Maimonides’ source; see below, n. 29.

cording to a religious-moral standard. The French talmudist-exegete Rashbam thus explains that the three friends are blameworthy because they criticized Job (rather than for doctrinal error), whereas Elihu is spared from divine wrath because he consoled the righteous sufferer.⁶ But Maimonides, deeming clarification of the doctrine of providence to be the purpose of Job, assumes that Scripture employs an analytic standard to evaluate the interlocutors.

True to this standard, Maimonides deems the opinions of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar incorrect, whereas Elihu is 'the most perfect among them in knowledge', having reached the correct view on providence, which is also naturally found in the divine vision (*Guide* III.23, p. 494f.). Guided by his doctrine of esotericism, however, the great philosopher argues that an exposition of this view would be harmful to the uneducated masses, and therefore was concealed by the author of Job.⁷ Maimonides likewise offers little more than veiled hints at its content, though it seems reasonable to assume that it matches his own doctrine that 'providence is consequent upon the intellect' (*Guide* III.17, p. 474).⁸ On this view, adapted from Greco-Arabic philosophical sources,⁹ divine protection extends only to human beings who have attained a measure of intellectual perfection and direct their thoughts toward God: 'Providence watches over everyone endowed with intellect proportionately to the

⁶ Rashbam evidently took נבונה to mean *ethically and religiously appropriate*; see M.Z. Segal, 'איוב', *Tarbitz* 13 (1942) 75; M. Cohen, Review of S. Japhet, 'The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on the Book of Job', *AJS Review* 27 (2003) 131f. Rashbam on Job 42:7 appears in the Rabbinic Bible in the final section of Rashi's commentary on Job (which was completed by Rashbam); see S. Japhet, *The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on the Book of Job* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2000, 16f., 445.

⁷ On the concealment strategy Maimonides here attributes to Scripture – and adopts himself, see L.S. Kravitz, 'Maimonides and Job. An Inquiry as to the Method of the *Moreh*', *HUCA* 38 (1967) 151. On his esotericism in general, see *Guide*, introduction, 6–10, 15–20; L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Glencoe, IL 1952, 38–94. The notion that the author of Job concealed the correct view on providence is dependent on Maimonides' understanding of this work as fiction (i.e., a *masnal*); see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 191f.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of this Maimonidean doctrine, see Ch. Raffel, 'Providence as Consequent Upon the Intellect. Maimonides' Theory of Providence', *AJS Review* 12 (1987) 25–72. On Maimonides' attribution of this doctrine to Elihu and the divine vision, see Rosenberg, 'איוב משל היה', 153f.; Raffel, 'Providence', 53–56; for an opposing view, see H. Kasher, 'Job's Image and Opinions in *Moreh Nevukhim*', *Da'at* 15 (1985) 81–87 (Hebrew).

⁹ Although Maimonides specifically mentions Plato and Alfarabi in connection with this view (see below), it can also be traced to Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias; see *Guide* III.18, p. 476; Pines, *Guide*, lxxv–lxxvii, lxxxix–lxxx.

measure of his intellect. Thus providence watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God' (*Guide* III.51, p. 624). This explains why Maimonides comments on the biblical depiction of Job: 'The most ... extraordinary thing about this story is the fact that knowledge is not attributed in it to Job. He is not said to be wise or comprehending ... Only moral virtue and righteousness in action are ascribed to him' (*Guide* III.22, p. 487). For the author of the *Guide*, this implies that he was not subject to God's protection.¹⁰ Maimonides thus resolves the dilemma posed by Job's suffering by limiting the applicability of providence considerably.¹¹

Maimonides vs. 'the Torah'?

In aligning his theory with Elihu, Maimonides bolsters its authority in contrast to other views on providence known to him, which he identifies with the other interlocutors:

The opinion attributed to Job is in keeping with the opinion of Aristotle; the opinion of Eliphaz is in keeping with the opinion of our Law (שריעתנו; i.e., the Torah¹²); the opinion of Bildad is in keeping with the doctrine of the *Mu'tazila*, the opinion of Zophar is in keeping with the opinion of the *Ash'ariyya*. (*Guide* III.23, p. 494)

¹⁰ See Laks, 'Inquiry', 155.

¹¹ Later in the *Guide* he makes this point in connection with the further limitation that even 'an individual endowed with perfect apprehension ... is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God', but not 'when he is occupied with something else'. Maimonides thus posits 'that all ... excellent and perfect men whom one of the evils of this world befell, had this evil happen to them during such a time of distraction'. This ultimately enables him to resolve 'the great doubt that induced the philosophers to deny ... divine providence ... for their proof ... was the fact that excellent and good men experienced great misfortunes' (*Guide* III.51, p. 624f.).

¹² Arabic شريعة (שריעה) refers to Islamic canonical law; 'our *shari'ah*' thus means Jewish canonical law, rooted in the Torah; see: J.L. Kraemer, 'Naturalism and Universalism in Maimonides' Thought', in: E. Fleischer, et al., eds, *Me'ah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, Jerusalem 2001, 49-51. Elsewhere Maimonides uses other terms to speak of the Torah (Pentateuch, or Scripture in general): 'the books of prophecy' (כתב אלנובה); 'the book of God and the books of our prophets' (כתב אללה); 'the Torah of Moses our master' (תורת משה רבנו); Hebrew in the Arabic text of the *Guide*. See below, nn. 14, 17, 19, 23, 24.

As the author of the *Guide* goes on to state, 'These were the ancient opinions concerning providence', as he indeed clarified in III.17, the chapter devoted to this topic.¹³ Of particular interest for our purposes is his presentation there of the Torah view, namely that

all human circumstances are according to the deserts (אסתחקאק; merit, justice) ... and that among us only those deserving punishment are punished. This is what is stated literally in the Torah of Moses our Master (נצח בה תורת משה רבנו),¹⁴ namely that everything is consequent upon the deserts; and the community of our scholars¹⁵ also speak in accordance with this opinion. For this you will find them saying explicitly: 'There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity.'¹⁶ (*Guide* III.17, p. 470)

But this creates an obvious problem: if Eliphaz was scolded by God 'for not [speaking] ... what is right', how can Maimonides attribute to him 'the opinion of our Law' and himself proceed to embrace a different view? Can we conclude from this alignment of the opinions in Job that Maimonides took the liberty of disagreeing with the Torah?¹⁷

A more careful reading of the *Guide* reveals that such a conclusion is unwarranted. To begin with, we must understand his remark that 'the opinion of Eliphaz is in keeping with the opinion of our Law' in light of the above-cited passage from III.17, where the simple calculus of reward and punishment is said to be 'stated literally in the Torah of Moses our Master', and embraced by 'the community of our scholars'. While these

¹³ This convenient correspondence opens Maimonides to the criticism (leveled, e.g., by Gersonides on Job 8:20 [commentary, in the Rabbinic Bible]) that he projected philosophical opinions current in his day onto the biblical text.

¹⁴ See above, n. 12.

¹⁵ bShab 55a. On this translation, see below, n. 20.

¹⁶ bShab 55a. Admittedly, Maimonides simplifies the complex talmudic discussion of this maxim; see Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, 'אפודי, שם טוב, ו', עם שלשה פירושים ... אפודי, שם טוב, ו', קרשקש, Jerusalem 1960, III.25a.

¹⁷ In theory, one could suggest that the book of Job dissents from the 'orthodox' doctrine of providence expressed in 'the Torah of Moses', in other words, that there is an internal contradiction within the Holy Scriptures themselves; see M. Pope, *Job, The Anchor Bible* series, vol. 15, New York 1973, LXXVII-LXXVIII. But Maimonides would not have entertained this solution, since he viewed all of Scripture as a harmonious work. Consider, e.g., his interchangeable references to 'the Torah of Moses', 'the books of prophecy' and 'the law [שריעה]' (above, n. 12).

two factors would appear to affirm its validity, a different picture emerges from their juxtaposition in the introduction to the *Guide*. There Maimonides specifies that this work is not intended for scholars of *halakhah*, but rather for those who have studied science and philosophy, which prompted them to question the validity of Scripture.¹⁸ For them the author promises to demonstrate that such ‘perplexities’ result from an incorrect reading of the ‘books of prophecy’ (כתב אלנוה) and ‘the Law’ (אלשריעה)¹⁹ according to their ‘external’ (ט’אהר) sense, i.e., a literal reading, which he will replace with a different, ‘internal’ (באטן) sense as the correct interpretation (*Guide*, introduction; 5f.). But those lacking a scientific background – even if well versed in rabbinic literature – would not be disturbed by even the most unreasonable implications of a literal reading of Scripture and *Midrash*: ‘an ignorant one from among the community of rabbis (ג’מהור אלרבאנין)²⁰ ... devoid of any knowledge of the nature of being, does not find impossibilities hard to accept’ (*Guide*, introduction; 9f.). Such readers therefore have no need for the re-interpretations offered in the *Guide*. Indeed, in the spirit of the political philosophy of his day, Maimonides maintained that the literal sense must form the belief system of the general populace, leaving the deeper sense for the scientifically educated elite.²¹

Maimonides’ remark that the simple doctrine of just deserts stems from a literal reading of the Torah and is accepted by the ‘community of our scholars’ (ג’מהור אהבארנא)²² thus suggests its incompatibility with

¹⁸ Strauss, *Persecution*, 38ff., 92ff., observes that this remark is intended to exclude the audience of *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides’ great work of *halakhah* (*al-fiqh*).

¹⁹ Here Maimonides apparently distinguishes between the Pentateuch and the remainder of Scripture; see above, n. 12.

²⁰ Though Pines here renders ‘an ignoramus among the multitude of Rabbanites’, I follow Qafih, מורה נבוכים, 9 (and n. 60): הסכל מצבור הרבנים. Maimonides here is not referring to the uneducated masses (who would not be reading the *Guide*), but rather to rabbinic scholars knowledgeable in *halakhah*, but ignorant of science. (Schwarz, *Guide*, 15, likewise takes ג’מהור to mean rabbis [רבנים], not Rabbanites, i.e., followers of the Rabbis. See also below, n. 22.)

²¹ See S. Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides*, Jerusalem 1996, 15–30 (Hebrew).

²² I have diverged from Pines’ translation here (‘the multitude of our scholars’; compare Strauss, *Persecution*, 84: ‘the general run of our scholars’) following Qafih, מורה נבוכים, 512, n. 57, and Schwarz, *Guide*, 478, n. 25 (who also points out the parallel to ג’מהור אלרבאנין in the introduction to the *Guide* [above, n. 20]). As they observe, Maimonides here does not intend to speak of the masses (generally perceived as ignorant), but rather of the majority (community) of rabbinic scholars.

philosophical speculation, which would require a more nuanced theory. And indeed, when first presenting 'the opinion of our Law' regarding providence, he announces:

I shall let you know about it what has been literally stated in the books of our prophets²³ and is believed by the community of our scholars; I shall also inform you of what is believed by some of our latter-day scholars; and I shall also let you know what I myself believe about this. (*Guide* III.17, p. 469)

For Maimonides, the 'opinion of our law' is itself subject to interpretation. After mentioning the opinions of the 'community of our scholars' and 'some of our latter-day scholars' (see below), he proceeds to his own view: 'As for my own belief with regard to ... divine providence ... I rely on ... what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God and the books of our prophets'²⁴ (*Guide* III.17, p. 471). Maimonides, too, maintains that good and bad befall man according to what is justly deserved (אסתחקאק), based on the verse 'All His ways are just' (Deut. 32:4). But he revises the condition for such worthiness: instead of a simple calculus of good deeds, intellectual perfection is the vehicle through which man merits divine providence (*Guide* III.17, p. 471). Having thus reset the parameters of human excellence, he can adduce biblical proofs for his view:

With regard to providence watching over excellent ones (אלפצ'לאא) and neglecting the ignorant, it is said: 'He guards the steps of his faithful, but the wicked perish in darkness ... (I Sam. 2:9) ... The fact that some individuals are preserved from calamities, whereas those befall others, is due ... to their perfection and deficiency ... With regard to providence watching over the excellent ones it is also said ... 'The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous' (Ps. 34:16)

²³ נצת בה כתב אנביאינא; see above, n. 12.

²⁴ כתאב אללה וכתב אנביאינא; see above, n. 12. Maimonides' language here evokes his hermeneutical axiom – characteristic of the Andalusian *peshat* tradition – that equates the meaning of a text with its author's intent (קצד); see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 324ff.; J. Stern, 'Philosophy or Exegesis: Some Critical Comments', in N. Golb, ed., *Judaeano-Arabic Studies*, Amsterdam 1997, 216-224. This notion has been challenged in modern literary theory, which deems it 'the intentional fallacy'; see R.W. Stallman, 'Intentions', in A. Pre-minger et al., eds, *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton 1974, 398-400.

... The [biblical] texts that occur with regard to this notion are so numerous that they cannot be counted. (*Guide* III.18, p. 475f.)²⁵

Far from disagreeing with the Torah, Maimonides formulates what he believes to be its correct interpretation.

For the great philosopher, a correct interpretation of Scripture must not only address the language of the text, but also conform to the dictates of reason and science.²⁶ In support of his understanding of the biblical doctrine of providence he thus observes that it matches the theory that Alfarabi attributed to Plato, prompting him to remark: ‘Consider how ... the correctness of what all the prophets, may peace be upon them, have said concerning individual providence ... follows necessarily from the point of view of speculation (נִטְיָ; i.e., reason)!’ (*Guide* III.18, p. 476). Moreover, the deciding factor in favour of Maimonides’ concept of providence is not the numerous verses that express it in his view, but rather the fact that it ‘is less absurd (lit. less disgraceful²⁷) than the preceding opinions and nearer than they to intellectual reasoning’ (*Guide* III.17, p. 471). While he happily exposes the bizarre implications that burden the *Mu‘tazilite* and *Ash‘arite* doctrines (III.17, p. 468f.), Maimonides does not do so for the popular rabbinic doctrine that he also rejects. But a discerning reader will complete the argument from his analysis of Eliphaz, who is identified with that view because he offers the biting explanation for Job’s suffering, ‘Your wickedness is great and your iniquities have no limit’. Yet in light of Job’s manifest righteousness, Eliphaz had to resort to the sophistry of arguing that his suffering is deserved because of some other ‘deficiencies ... hidden from our perception’. The contradiction

²⁵ I am indebted to Prof. David Shatz for helping to clarify Maimonides’ two-step strategy here. First he defines human excellence mandated by Scripture as intellectual perfection, which stems from his philosophical outlook. After making this assumption, Maimonides can readily find genuine biblical proofs for God’s special providence over the ‘excellent ones’.

²⁶ As Strauss, *Persecution*, 83, notes, the widespread view of providence ‘is based on the literal sense of the Bible’, whereas Maimonides’ opinion ‘is in accordance with the intention of the Bible, i.e., with its hidden or secret meaning. For ... [it] brings into harmony the intelligible view with the literal sense of the Bible’.

²⁷ אִקְל שְׁנֵאָה. Although Pines translates this expression literally, I follow Schwarz, *Guide*, 480, n. 46, in rendering it contextually. As Schwarz notes throughout his translation (see, e.g., *Guide*, 476, nn. 15, 17), Maimonides uses the Arabic term שְׁנֵאָה in the sense of *an absurdity*.

here is plain: how could imperceptible sins at the same time be great wickedness and limitless iniquity?

We can now see what Maimonides accomplished by identifying Eliphaz with 'the opinion of our Law'. He capitalizes on the book of Job to personify two competing interpretations of Scripture. Though the doctrine of just deserts for good and bad deeds represents a literal reading of the Torah, the Lord Himself reveals that it is inadequate when He scolds Eliphaz, thus rejecting the traditional doctrine that 'There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity' along with the *Mu'tazilite* and *Ash'arite* views on providence. Elihu's triumphant appearance in the book of Job, according to Maimonides, beckons us to discover a more nuanced interpretation that is 'less absurd ... and nearer than they to intellectual reasoning'.

Implications for Maimonides' biblical exegesis: Saadia's precedent

Hardly disagreeing with the Torah on the matter of providence, the author of the *Guide* reinterprets it in accordance with his scientific and philosophical outlook. To a modern ear, perhaps, this would seem to be an artificial distinction.²⁸ Yet, within Maimonides' medieval intellectual framework – which accepted the authority of Scripture implicitly – the parameters of biblical interpretation included an endeavour to reconcile God's revealed word with the world discernable to man through science and reason. Indeed, this endeavour characterizes the venerable Babylonian-Iberian exegetical tradition that permeated the great philosopher's twelfth-century Andalusian culture.²⁹ With respect to divine providence

²⁸ As argued by Benedict de Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes, New York 1951, 114–118.

²⁹ Maimonides' extensive use of Talmud and Midrash to interpret Scripture in the *Guide* belies his profound debt to the exegetical works of authors such as Saadia, Hayyuj, Ibn Janah, Ibn Chiqitilla and Ibn Bal'am; see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 13f., 98n. The many parallels with his older contemporary Abraham ibn Ezra (see, e.g., above, n. 5) may suggest influence on Maimonides, but certainly demonstrate their shared intellectual heritage; see I. Twersky, 'Did R. Abraham ibn Ezra Influence Maimonides?' [Hebrew], in I. Twersky and J. Harris, eds, *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth Century Jewish Polymath*, Cambridge, MA 1993, 21–48 [Hebrew Section].

and its hermeneutical implications, the precedent of Saadia seems to have been particularly significant for Maimonides.³⁰

To begin with, Maimonides evidently had Saadia in mind when speaking of ‘some of our latter-day scholars’ who diverged from the view that ‘There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity’, arguing that ‘sometimes misfortunes befall an individual not because of having sinned before, but in order that his reward should be greater’ (*Guide* III.17, p. 471). Identifying the source of this version of ‘the opinion of our Law’, he comments: ‘Some of the latter-day Geonim, may their memory be blessed, have heard it from the *Mu‘tazila* and have approved of it and believed it’ (*ibid.*). Aiming to undercut this view, Maimonides observes that ‘there is no text in the Torah expressing this notion. For you should not be led into error by what is said about “putting to trial” (נסיון), as when “God put Abraham to a trial” (Gen. 22:1)’ (*ibid.*).³¹ This pre-emptive rejoinder points to Saadia, who indeed invoked the *Mu‘tazilite* notion in his Genesis commentary to explain the ‘binding of Isaac’ episode.³² Although Maimonides rejects Saadia’s opinion, he deemed it important to cite the precedent of an earlier medieval Jewish scholar who recognized the need to draw upon Greco-Arabic philosophy to augment the simple calculus of reward and punishment that emerges from a literal reading of Scripture.

Saadia’s *Mu‘tazilite* solution to the problem of the righteous sufferer plays a prominent role in his commentary on Job. As Maimonides would do two centuries later, Saadia identified the biblical interlocutors with philosophical positions on providence: Job argued that God brings suffering for no reason other than His will alone; Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar adhered to the simple calculus of reward and punishment in this world; Elihu, whose opinion was confirmed in the divine vision to Job, finds what Saadia deems to be the true philosophical explanation for blameless suffering, i.e., that it enhances reward in the world to come.³³ The strong

³⁰ In what follows, I take issue with Pines, *Guide*, cxxxi–cxxxiv, who minimizes the influence of Saadia (and Jewish philosophers in general) on Maimonides; compare Twersky, ‘Influence’, 21, 40f.

³¹ He acknowledges a precedent in the rabbinic concept of ‘sufferings of love’ (bBer 5a; *Guide* III.17, p. 470f.).

³² See M. Zucker, ed. and (Hebrew) trans., *Saadya’s Commentary on Genesis*, New York 1984, 398ff. Maimonides refutes this reading of the ‘binding of Isaac’ episode in *Guide* III.24, p. 497f.

³³ See R. Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, New York 2004, 17–42.

influence of Saadia's approach in Maimonides' Andalusian intellectual milieu is attested, for example, by its adoption in Abraham ibn Ezra's Job commentary.³⁴ While Maimonides might be said to have reached a fuller and more nuanced philosophical analysis of the speeches of the five interlocutors, Saadia's distinctively philosophical hermeneutical model undeniably served as his template.³⁵

Perhaps the most fundamental expression of Saadia's influence can be seen in the very axiom of the *Guide* that Scripture must be interpreted in conformity with reason. While admitting that the biblical text must initially be understood according to its 'external' or obvious sense (ט'אדר), Saadia boldly argued that if such a reading contradicts sense perception or reason then one must seek an alternative non-literal interpretation to insure that 'that biblical text be brought into accord with the senses and the intellect' (עאד ד'לך אלמכתוב אלי מואפקה אלמחסוס ואלמעקול).³⁶ This axiom, which was highly influential in the subsequent tradition,³⁷ is evident also in Maimonides' discussion of providence, which he concludes with the remark: 'This is the opinion that to my mind corresponds to the intelligible and to the texts of the Law', as opposed to the other opinions that 'lead to an absolute confusion and to contesting the intelligible and to opposing what is perceived by the senses' (*Guide* III.17, p. 474).

Without denying Maimonides' bold originality in devising a new approach to divine providence within Jewish tradition, we must also acknowledge his debt to Saadia, who created the theoretical framework that made it possible. Unsatisfied with the doctrine of providence emerging from Scripture, Saadia turned to Arabic philosophy for a different

³⁴ See Abraham ibn Ezra's epilogue to his Job commentary (printed in the Rabbinic Bible), where he outlines the philosophical views expressed in the book following Saadia's pattern. See also above, n. 5.

³⁵ For a more detailed comparison between Saadia and Maimonides on Job, see Cohen, 'A Philosopher's *Peshat* Exegesis', 243-253. Here we should mention that both Saadia and Ibn Ezra, like almost all other medieval authors, assumed that Job is a historical work, following the talmudic conclusion on this matter (above, n. 1). Maimonides is thus truly original in his reading of this work as a literary fiction.

³⁶ See Zucker, *Saadya's Commentary*, 18 (Ar.), 191 (Hebrew); see also R. Brody, 'The Geonim of Babylonia as Biblical Exegetes', in M. Sæbø et al., eds, *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, vol. II/2, Göttingen 2000, 80f.

³⁷ Echoes of Saadia's principle reverberated in the writings of Samuel ben Hofni Gaon, Judah ibn Bal'am, Moses ibn Ezra and Abraham ibn Ezra; see Cohen, *Three Approaches*, 39-42, see also see also P. Fenton, *Philosophie et exégèse dans le Jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn Ezra*, Leiden 1997, 266-309.

view, for which he found biblical precedents. It was in this spirit that Maimonides draws upon Greco-Arabic philosophy to devise a theory of providence that harmonizes the text of Scripture with the dictates of reason. For Maimonides, as for Saadia, this agreement confirms that he has accurately ascertained ‘the intention of the book of God and the books of our prophets’.³⁸

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