

LOGIC TO INTERPRETATION: MAIMONIDES' USE OF AL-FÂRÂBÎ'S
MODEL OF METAPHOR

Maimonides' interests in language and interpretation converge in the exegetical sections of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, in which he often invokes the notion of metaphor (Ar. *isti'âra*; Hebr. *hash'alah*), a concept defined in various ways by different intellectual streams current in his day. Two parallel models of metaphor emerged in the so-called logical tradition of Arabic learning and Quranic hermeneutics, while a completely different one was formulated by Arab experts on poetry.¹ Jewish exegetes in Muslim lands naturally applied the hermeneutic model of metaphor to Hebrew Scripture.² Adopting a more unique stance, Moses ibn Ezra sought traces of the poetic model in biblical verse.³ Not surprisingly, Maimonides drew his conception of metaphor from al-Fârâbî's logic, as earlier scholars have noted.⁴ Yet, as we shall demonstrate, he tailored the Farabian model of metaphor to suit his philosophical exegetical program.

The linguistic categories used in the *Guide* are defined explicitly in the *Treatise on Logic*, a work that relies heavily on al-Fârâbî and is thought to have been written by Maimonides in his youth.⁵ Chapter thirteen of

¹ See W. Heinrichs, 'Literary Theory: The Problem of Its Efficiency', in G.E. von Grunebaum, ed., *Arabic Poetry: Theory and Development* (Wiesbaden 1973) 30-33; idem, *The Hand of the Northwind: Opinions on Metaphor and the Early Meaning of Isti'âra in Arabic Poetics* (Wiesbaden 1977).

² See P. Fenton, *Philosophie et exégèse dans le Jardin de la métaphore de Moïse ibn 'Ezra* (Leiden 1997) 258-374.

³ See M. Cohen, 'Moses ibn Ezra vs. Maimonides: Argument for a Poetic Definition of Metaphor (*isti'âra*)', *Edebiyât* 11 (2000) 1-28.

⁴ See A. Hyman, 'Maimonides on Religious Language', in J.L. Kraemer, ed., *Perspectives on Maimonides* (New York 1991) 177-182.

⁵ See I. Efros (ed. and trans.), *Maimonides' Treatise on Logic: The Original Arabic and Three Hebrew Translations* (New York 1938). The traditional attribution is challenged by H. Davidson, 'The Authenticity of Works Attributed to Maimonides', in E. Fleischer, e.a., eds, *Me'ah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky* (Jerusalem 2001) 118-125. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to decide this matter, we should note that the parallels between the *Treatise* and the *Guide* in the concepts of metaphor are unmistakable. Even if Maimonides did not write the *Treatise*, our study shows how he used the Farabian definitions presented therein.

the *Treatise* discusses the phenomenon of a word with more than one meaning, called *al-ism al-mushtarik* (Hebr. *ha-shem ha-meshuttaf*), an 'equivocal' (lit. 'shared') term.⁶ Six sub-types of equivocality are defined in this chapter, of which two concern us now. Sometimes the meanings of an equivocal term are independent and their shared name is merely coincidental, yielding *al-ism al-mahd al-ishtirāk*; (Hebr. *ha-shem ha-meshuttaf ha-gamur*), 'the absolutely equivocal term',

a term said of two things,⁷ between which there is nothing in common to account for their common name, like the term *ʿayn* said of an eye and a spring of water.⁸

As described in *Guide* I:56; 131,⁹ the two things 'have in common only the name and nothing else'.¹⁰

Metaphor, *al-ism al-mustaʿār* (Hebr. *ha-shem ha-mush'al*), 'the borrowed name', another sub-type of equivocal term, is

⁶ See Hyman, 'Religious Language', 175-179; S. Rosenberg, 'Signification of Names in Medieval Jewish Logic' (Hebr.), in Y. Meltzer, ed., *Language, Thought, Society* (Jerusalem 1978) 105-144.

⁷ Ar. *dhatain* (lit. 'essences'). Elsewhere (see, e.g., below, p. 108), Maimonides speaks of different meanings (*maʿānin*) that share a single term. In this respect, he reflects the confusion of sense and reference in Arabic linguistics, see C.H.M. Versteegh, *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking* (Leiden 1977) 154-159; see also I. Zwiep, *Mother of Reason and Revelation: A Short History of Medieval Jewish Linguistic Thought* (Amsterdam 1997) 94-97. Later Hebrew logicians distinguished between ענין (meaning) and דבר (thing; Rosenberg, 'Signification', 111).

⁸ Arabic text in I. Efros, ed., 'Maimonides' Arabic Treatise on Logic', in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 34 (1966) 35-36 (Hebrew section). Translations of the *Treatise* are my own; compare English and medieval Hebrew translations in Efros (1938 ed.), above, n. 5. This definition resembles al-Fārābī's in M.T. Dānīsh Pazhūh, ed., *Mantiqiyāt al-Fārābī I* (Qum 1987) 91-92; F.W. Zimmermann (tr.), *Al-Fārābī's Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* (London 1981) 228-229.

⁹ References to the *Guide* are cited according to section and chapter, followed by page number in S. Pines (tr.), *Moses Maimonides: The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago 1963), the English translation we adopt with slight modifications.

¹⁰ The modern definition of 'homonymy'; see R. Steiner, 'Sa'adia Vs. Rashi: On the Shift from Meaning-Maximalism to Meaning-Minimalism in Medieval Biblical Lexicology', *JQR* 88 (1998) 257.

a term that refers to a certain thing in the original coinage¹¹ of the language; and it properly denotes (lit. 'is fixed on') that thing. Next,¹² another thing is at times designated by it; but it does not properly denote (lit. 'is not fixed permanently on') that second thing. For example, the term *asad* ('lion'), normally posited of (lit. 'fixed on') one of the animal species, is used to denote a courageous man; and similarly, people calling a generous man *bahr* ('the sea'). Terms like these are frequently used among poets.¹³

A metaphor has only one proper meaning, assigned in the 'original coinage of the language', which implies, by contrast, that the two meanings of the absolutely equivocal term co-existed at that original state¹⁴ and would require separate dictionary entries. The borrowed metaphorical usage is temporary; the term 'lion', for example, is 'borrowed' to mean 'a courageous man'; but this *ad hoc* usage – based on a perceived similarity between the man and a lion¹⁵ – does not achieve the status of a dictionary definition. This temporariness makes metaphor conjure up an image (e.g., of a lion or the sea), which explains its appeal to poets.

These definitions illuminate Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide*, in which he reveals his aim of reconciling Scripture with reason by explicating biblical terms that are equivocal (*mushtarika*; Hebr. *meshutafim*) and metaphorical (*musta'âra*; Hebr. *mush'alim*).¹⁶ When taken in their

¹¹ The Arabic root *w-d-'* in relation to language is used to indicate creation ('coining') of words, either 'naturally' or by 'agreement' (Maimonides cites Gen. 2:20 to support the latter view in *Guide* II:30; 357-358); see A. Dotan, 'Sa'adia Gaon on the Origins of Language' (Hebr.), *Tarbiz* 65 (1996) 237-249.

¹² Ar. □'Π is rendered by medieval Hebrew translators as דך דחא (is 'later'), indicating diachronic development. See below n. 19.

¹³ Arabic text in *Treatise*, Efron (1966 ed.) 37. This resembles al-Fârâbî's definition; see Cohen, *Poetic Definition*, 11.

¹⁴ Something al-Fârâbî says explicitly in his definition of *ishtirâk* (see reference above, n. 8).

¹⁵ The *Treatise* does not explicitly stipulate similarity as a condition for metaphor (as al-Fârâbî does; see reference above, n. 13), but it can be inferred by contrast with the absolutely equivocal term, the two meanings of which 'share nothing in common'. Compare also *al-ism al-manqûl*; see below.

¹⁶ Introduction; 5. The label 'equivocal' here evidently refers to absolute equivocality, since it is presented as an alternative to another sub-type of equivocality, namely metaphor, and Maimonides goes on to enumerate 'amphibolous terms', a third sub-type of equivocality, later in this passage (see Hyman, *Religious Language*, 180).

original or most physical sense, these terms create 'perplexities', for example, by implying that God has a human form. To arrive at a correct interpretation, Maimonides composes a dictionary of biblical equivocal and metaphorical terms in the first fifty chapters of his *Guide*, in which the imprint of the *Treatise* definitions is unmistakable. For example, in his entry on the term אָנַן , Maimonides writes:

Its first coinage is to connote (1) a wing of the living things that fly. Thus: 'Any winged fowl that flieth in the heaven' (Deut. 4:17). Subsequently it was applied metaphorically [*ustu'ira*; Hebr. *hush'al*; lit. 'was lent'] to (2) the extremities and corners of garments. Thus: 'Upon the four corners [lit. 'wings'] of thy covering' (Deut. 22:12). Afterwards it was applied metaphorically [*ustu'ira*] to (3) the farthest ends and extremities of the habitable parts of the earth, which are remote from the places where we live. Thus: 'That it may take hold of the ends [lit. 'wings'] of the earth' (Job 38:13). (*Guide* I:43; 93)

Just as described in the *Treatise*, Maimonides here presents the 'original coinage' of this term and proceeds to explain how it was 'lent' to different meanings, yielding its metaphorical usages.

But the similarity belies an important difference because the metaphorical usages cited here have become standard in Biblical Hebrew,¹⁷ a phenomenon typical of 'metaphorical' usages cited in the *Guide*,¹⁸ and noted by Maimonides himself in one case:

This [metaphorical] use became so frequent in the [Hebrew] language and so widespread that it has become as if it were the original meaning.¹⁹ (*Guide* I:30; 64)²⁰

¹⁷ They are cited, e.g., in *Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius: Hebrew-English Lexicon* (=BDB) without the label 'figurative'.

¹⁸ See examples cited below, n. 23.

¹⁹ This formula clearly expresses diachronic development; see H. Blanc, 'Diachronic and Synchronic Ordering in Medieval Arab Grammatical Theory', in J. Blau, S. Pines, M.J. Kister, S. Shaked, eds, *Studia Orientalia Memoriae D.H. Baneth Dedicata* (Jerusalem 1979) 161-162.

²⁰ Maimonides specifies this about a particular metaphorical usage of BH אָנַן (lit. 'to eat') in order to make the further claim that it subsequently generated other metaphorical derivations.

By contrast, the *Treatise* stipulates that the metaphorical meaning is only temporary and does not achieve a status equivalent to the original meaning. In other words, the term has a single proper meaning, from which the metaphorical one must always be derived.²¹ But the *Guide* presents metaphorical meanings as alternatives to the original literal one. Rather than beginning with the literal sense and adjusting it where required, the reader must initially choose between a number of equally viable meanings.

In the *Treatise*, *al-ism al-musta'âr* is a vital or 'live' metaphor, but in the *Guide* this technical term connotes *dead metaphor*, i.e., one used so often that it is not perceived as such and functions as a literal expression. This type of metaphor was defined by al-Fârâbî and appears in chapter thirteen of the *Treatise* as another type of equivocal term, *al-ism al-manqûl* (Hebr. *ha-shem ha-ne'etaq*; lit. 'a transferred term'):

a term, of which the original designation in the original coinage of the language is to indicate a particular meaning (*ma'na*). Next, it was later (*ba'da dhalika*) transferred to designate another meaning either because of some resemblance between the two meanings, or without resemblance. And that word properly denotes (lit. 'is permanently fixed on') both equally: the one from which it was transferred and the one to which it was transferred.²²

Although this type of term originally had only one meaning, it now is 'fixed on both [meanings] equally', in contrast to the *ism al-musta'âr*, which 'is not fixed permanently on' the metaphorical sense (see above). The derived sense of an *ism al-manqûl* is independent of the original one and must therefore be indicated separately in the dictionary. The examples given in the *Treatise* are Arabic grammatical terms: *nasb* (accusative; lit. 'to raise') and *wazn* (nominal form; lit. 'weight'), which, when used in their technical sense, no longer depend on their original literal sense.

²¹ Compare Rashi's rule: 'the interpreter must adjust (*yetaqen*) the language according to the context' (comm. on Ex. 14:31); see Steiner, 'Sa'adia Vs. Rashi', 238-250.

²² Efros, *Treatise* (1966 ed.) 37. Compare al-Fârâbî's definition in *Mantiqiyât al-Fârâbî* I, 91-92; Zimmermann, *Al-Farabi's Commentary*, 227-228. As Zimmermann (227n.) observes, *manqûl* is a more literal translation of Greek *metaphora* (is 'moving beyond'; 'transfer') than *isti'âra*, the indigenous Arabic term for metaphor.

dence) is derived from *the seeing eye*, as Maimonides notes later in this entry. In using the label ‘equivocal’, he hides this derivation and implies that the three meanings are independent.²⁵ His reason for doing so becomes clear once we recognize that *isti‘âra* in the *Guide* follows the *manqûl* model. Diachronically, *al-ism al-manqûl* resembles *al-ism al-mustâ‘âr*, because both originally had just one meaning and acquired their second meanings only at a later point. But synchronically, *al-ism al-manqûl* is equivalent to *al-ism al-mahd al-ishtirâk*,²⁶ because in the current state of the language there is no active link between their different meanings. This seems to be Maimonides’ point: in the current state of the language, *providence* is an independent meaning that can be applied directly without going through the original literal sense, *the seeing eye*.

Why did Maimonides conflate the three Farabian categories so carefully delineated in the *Treatise*? He could have stated openly, for example, that פֶּן in Jer. 39:12 is a *shem mush’al* as defined in the *Treatise*, i.e., a vital metaphor, and that its meaning as *providence* depends on the literal sense, *eye*. The theological benefit of avoiding that path becomes apparent when Maimonides goes on to argue:

It is according to this metaphorical sense (*isti‘âra*) that it is said of God in every place: עֵינַי (lit. ‘mine eyes’) and לִבִּי (lit. ‘my heart’) shall be there perpetually’ (1 Kings 9:3), [meaning] *My providence and My will*, as we have set forth before.²⁷ (*Guide* I:44; 95)

Having presented *providence* as an independent definition of פֶּן, Maimonides indicates that it can be applied to God without activating the literal sense, which would conjure up an image of His eyes. He treats verses that speak of God’s פָּנִים (face) in a similar fashion in *Guide* I:37, where he explains, for example, that ‘Abraham was still standing לפני (lit. ‘in the face of’) God’ (Gen. 18:22) means *in God’s presence*. By equating that use of פָּנִים with its use as an ‘adverb of time’ (above, p. 109) he

²⁵ This conclusion, in fact, was drawn (incorrectly) by as great a Maimonidean scholar as Y. Qâfih in his gloss on this passage.

²⁶ As al-Fârâbî notes explicitly (*Mantiqiyât al-Fârâbî* I:92; Zimmermann, *Al-Farabi’s Commentary*, 228–229).

²⁷ See *Guide* I:39; 88–89.

implies that a reader should not think – even momentarily – about God's 'face' any more than one would think of a face in the expression 'לפנים in Israel' in Ruth 4:7.²⁸

It would thus appear that Maimonides manipulated al-Fârâbî's linguistic categories in order to devise a distinctive approach to the problem of biblical anthropomorphism. A simple application of the *Treatise* model of *isti'âra* would have allowed for a biblically-based poetic image of God with a face, eyes, a heart, and even wings.²⁹ Indeed, *isti'âra* in the *Treatise* is presented as a poetic technique because it conjures up imagery associated with the literal sense. But Maimonides was uncomfortable with the prospect of imagining God in human form, which is just a short step away from believing that God has a human form, a heresy in his view.³⁰ He therefore played down the poetic implications of biblical anthropomorphism, as we see in a literary observation he makes concerning the Ten Commandments being written by 'the אצבע (finger) of God' (Ex. 31:18). This expression conjures up a picturesque image of God's handiwork,³¹ but Maimonides argues that it is simply an idiom equivalent to other, more prosaic Hebrew expressions and that Scripture could just as well have said that the Ten Commandments were 'written by the will of (בְּחַפְזֵי) God' (*Guide* I:66; 160).³² By ignoring the special poetic charm of the anthropomorphic biblical locution, which he would re-interpret in any case, Maimonides reveals his preference for theological and philosophical propriety over literary sensitivity.

In order to implement this preference exegetically in the *Guide*, Maimonides used the well-known term *isti'âra* but infused it with a new content found in al-Fârâbî's *manqûl* model. As al-Fârâbî explains, *manqûl* is a process by which existing words are used in new ways to fill

²⁸ This is the general tenor of the lexicographic chapters in the *Guide*. For an exceptional case, in which Maimonides insists that the literal sense of a *shem mush'al* remains active, see *Guide* I:70; 171-173 (my thanks to Dr. Robert Eisen for this observation). See also below, n. 36.

²⁹ His analysis of the metaphorical usages of the term כנף (above) enables him to reinterpret Ruth 2:12, '...the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge' (I:43; 94).

³⁰ See *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 3:7 and *Guide* I:35.

³¹ Compare Psalms 8:4, 'the skies, the work of Your fingers (אֲצַבְעֵי־יָדְךָ)'. Not surprisingly, Saadia, in his *tafsîr*, does not translate the grossly anthropomorphic term here; see below, n. 37.

³² A coinage based on Is. 53:10 and 1 Sam. 15:22.

gaps in the lexicon.³³ This category thus entails normal, non-poetic speech, and is not intended to conjure up imagery.³⁴ By placing terms such as פנים, כנה, עין and אצבע in this category, Maimonides implies that their derived meanings are independent of their original physical ones. In other words, they function synchronically as completely equivocal terms, the various meanings of which 'have in common only the name and nothing else'.³⁵ By instructing his reader to simply plug in their non-physical meanings listed in his dictionary, Maimonides undercuts the imaginary poetic depictions of God they might evoke.³⁶

Maimonides in the *Guide* follows a path pioneered by Saadia in his biblical translation, the *tafsîr*, which essentially eradicates the anthropomorphic depictions of God.³⁷ But Saadia's drastic method, which drew heavily on Quranic hermeneutics, had fallen out of favour by the twelfth century. The poet-exegete, Moses ibn Ezra appreciated biblical anthropomorphism as a literary technique, as did others in the Andalusian tradition, most notably Bahya and Judah ha-Levi.³⁸ Following this path, Abraham ibn Ezra insisted on preserving its literary integrity and deemed

³³ *Mantiqiyât al-Fârâbî* I, 91; Zimmermann, *Al-Farabi's Commentary*, 228.

³⁴ *Al-Fârâbî (Mantiqiyât al-Fârâbî* I, 92; Zimmermann, *Al-Farabi's Commentary*, 231) states that *manqûl* is used by scientists to coin language for speaking about newly discovered things and concepts, as opposed to *isti'âra*, which is used in poetry.

³⁵ See above, p. 105. Maimonides' preference for speaking of God in absolutely equivocal terms is explicit in his attempt to create his own philosophical account of God (Hyman, *Religious Language*, 182-183). He criticises philosophers who employ other types of equivocal terms, which liken God to man; see H.A. Wolfson, 'Maimonides and Gersonides on Divine Attributes as Ambiguous Terms', in M. Davis, ed., *Mordechai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume* (Cambridge, MA 1953) 515-530.

³⁶ Maimonides seems to adopt a different tone in his analysis of the dictum, 'The Torah speaks in the language of man', in *Guide* I:26, 47-48; see chapter four of my forthcoming book, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Leiden).

³⁷ See M. Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation* (Leiden 1997) 88-89. Although Maimonides was not a biblical translator, we can infer that he would approve of Saadia's technique from his positive assessment of Onkelos, who employs a similar one. See *Guide* I:48; M. Klein, *Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Targumim of the Pentateuch* (Hebr.), (Jerusalem 1982) 24-28. On the affinity between Saadia and Maimonides, see S. Rawidowicz, 'The Problem of Anthropomorphism According to Saadia and Maimonides' (Hebr.), *Hebrew Studies in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem 1969) 171-223.

³⁸ Rawidowicz, 'Anthropomorphism', 182-188.

Saadia's approach unfaithful to the sense of Scripture.³⁹ Rejecting these theologically permissive trends, Maimonides fashioned a new, philosophically pure interpretive approach by drawing upon the conceptions of metaphor in al-Fārābī's logic.

Mordechai Z. Cohen
Yeshiva University, New York

³⁹ See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on Gen. 1:3, Psalms 2:4; see also Cohen, *Three Approaches*, chapter one.