

## An Alternative Approach to Maimonides' Contradictions

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**Abstract:** A contrast between an external meaning and inner profundities is a central assumption of much scholarship about medieval Jewish thinkers, and about Maimonides in particular. His introduction to *The Guide for the Perplexed* is the locus classics often cited in support of what has become known as “esoteric” readings of medieval philosophy. It contains unusual instructions for how to read the *Guide*. Among them is a warning to be on the lookout for inconsistencies that the author deliberately builds into the text. These contradictions have been invoked in order to support an enormous variety of interpretations, from those that see Maimonides as a mystic to those who consider him a skeptic, and many others besides. Most of these approaches purport to be revealing Maimonides’ “true belief” about some theological or philosophical doctrines and claim that it is hidden beneath an orthodox veneer that is more acceptable to the masses. In contrast, those who claim that Maimonides was sincere when he argued for the positions that he explicitly defends tend either to ignore the contradictions or to play down their peculiarity by likening them to writing styles used by other philosophers. In this paper, I argue that while the inconsistencies in question are an important aspect of his esoteric techniques, they are not connected with a hidden philosophical opinion, nor do they arise from his dialectical method of writing. Instead, they are among the strategies

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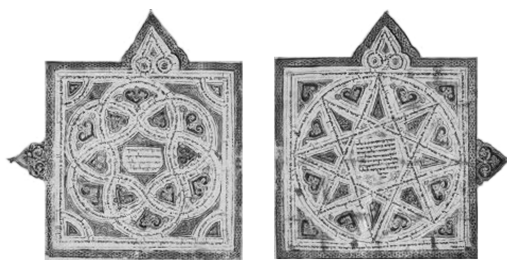
that Maimonides uses to explain some particularly obscure biblical passages. Maimonides' "real opinion" need not be conflated with what he conceals when he employs contradictions. It is therefore possible both to respect Maimonides' own declaration to be writing esoterically by carrying out discussions that are inconsistent with each other and also to take his philosophical and theological arguments at face value. Doing so allows the reader to approach the *Guide* in ways akin to those generally used to clarify and explain similarly great philosophical works and, thereby, to appreciate the originality of its arguments without devaluing their acuity.

**Key Words:** Maimonides, Esoteric Writing, Biblical Exegesis, Ezekiel (prophet), Medieval Cosmology

Great religious literature possesses hidden depths. A sacred text held to be relevant down the ages must be considered to bear significance that had remained previously undetected, even by the audience to whom it was originally addressed. People belonging to societies of a certain period will not share the sensibilities of those living centuries later and will have different reference points for understanding the same books. Nevertheless, a sacred text should not simply reproduce widespread beliefs but ought to be able to challenge them too.<sup>①</sup> The rabbinic tradition has always approached the Hebrew Bible as though it teems with inner worlds of significance. It could be likened to a stream of lava, with a visible outer crust underneath which flows an ever-changing torrent of messages. Without recognizing that the Torah is not an ordinary, straightforward book, it might even be considered nonsense. There are occasions on which the literal sense is obviously false, metaphors or other figures of speech, and others on which the apparent meanings of different passages or verses conflict with one another. For example, God is reported to say that "nobody can see me and live" (Ex. 33:20) but is also said to speak with Moses "face to face" (Ex. 33:11). Conscious of the many apparent conflicts between the literal meaning of scripture and what they held to be

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<sup>①</sup> Kenneth Seeskin articulates the issues involved in reading sacred texts in *Thinking about the Torah: A Philosopher Reads the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2016), 1-13.



true, medieval Jewish philosophers distinguished between the external, manifest sense of the text and its internal, hidden meaning, and they tended to argue that the inner meaning teaches scientific truths.<sup>①</sup> A contrast between an external meaning and inner profundities has also become a central assumption of much scholarship about these thinkers, and about Maimonides in particular. His introduction to *The Guide for the Perplexed* is the locus classicus often cited in support of what has become known as “esoteric” readings of medieval philosophy. Moshe Halbertal writes, for example, that “Maimonides’ works are the most important esoteric teachings of the philosophical movement in the Middle Ages.”<sup>②</sup> Along with other books, the *Guide* seems to include several layers of meaning with different, sometimes opposing, messages. Many think that, in the deeper levels, Maimonides hints at secret beliefs that he pretends to reject. He is said to present a surface belief acceptable to the masses for political reasons and an inner, secret belief accessible only to the elite.

In the context of these discussions, esotericism is not simply the attempt to write works for a select group of initiates. Scholars also take into account methods used to write in ways that intentionally conceal the meaning, often using misdirection, and the reasons that authors are said to write in such ways. This article focuses on a particular aspect of the esotericism that Maimonides practices, that of intentional contradictions. The *Guide* can be said to be esoteric in various ways and this one is particularly important because assumptions concerning how to interpret it color scholars’ interpretations. Contradictions are often said to be used in order to hide heterodox theological or philosophical opinions. I will argue that they can be explained in a different way. They can be seen to be part of Maimonides’ strategy to hide aspects of his exegesis of obscure biblical passages. In light of this argument, his esoteric practices need not be taken to mean that his real philosophical and theological

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① In this way, they were able to defend the text’s truth and relevance but at the cost of falling into what would today be considered anachronism. Hence Spinoza’s famous critique of Maimonides in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115.

② Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Philosophical Implications*, trans. Jackie Feldman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 49.

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opinions are anything other than those for which he explicitly argues, even though he does not communicate all his ideas in a straightforward manner.

It is undoubtedly true that there are different strata in the *Guide*, and to many other Jewish texts from the period. How to uncover them is, however, a matter of great dispute and no little emotion. The *Guide* is presented as a replacement for face-to-face, oral teaching, and Maimonides uses a variety of techniques, including some familiar from earlier Arabic writers, like scattering pieces of information around the work that readers need to piece together. Like his contemporaries, he wrote in ways that both test and train readers, and also enable him to avoid lavishing philosophy on those who are unworthy. But in Maimonides' case, there seems to be something exceptional. As Halbertal explains, in esoteric literature, the very existence of that which is most secret is kept hidden, at least to all but a few but Maimonides announced that there are secrets in both the Torah and in his *Guide*.<sup>①</sup> In truth, he built on rabbinic traditions that had already warned against teaching certain matters in public. A Mishna that Maimonides references several times in the *Guide* warns that “one does not expound matters of forbidden sexual relation to three people, the Account of the Beginning to two, or the Account of the Chariot to one, unless to someone who is wise and understands independently.”<sup>②</sup> These are some of what Maimonides terms “secrets of the Torah” that cannot be taught in public. He therefore writes, “I have never ceased to be exceedingly apprehensive about setting down those things that I wish to set down in this treatise. For they are concealed things; none of them has been set down in any book, written in the religious community in these times of exile, the books composed in these times being in our hands.”<sup>③</sup>

The *Guide's* subject is “the science of the Law in its true sense”<sup>④</sup> and

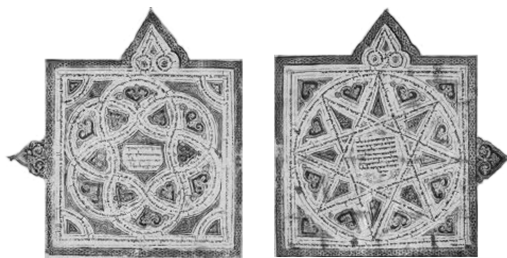
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① Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 5. However, Arthur Melzer has shown that other authors have also announced their own esotericism. See Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11-24.

② M. *Hag.* 2:1.

③ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), I: Introduction, 16.

④ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, I: Introduction, 5.



Maimonides does not attempt to make it accessible to everyone. There is therefore no question that the *Guide* is in some sense esoteric. Halbertal argues that the esotericism of the philosophers is philosophy itself. Accordingly, Maimonides identifies “the Account of the Beginning” with physics and “the Account of the Chariot” with metaphysics, thereby indicating that philosophical disciplines constitute the internal meanings of the secrets mentioned in the Mishna.<sup>①</sup> However, the esotericism at issue in this article, cannot only require that philosophy should be kept away from the masses, because a need to address a limited audience would not require unfamiliar strategies. Many philosophical texts are sufficiently difficult as to be impenetrable to the field’s outsiders. It would have been enough to write using philosophical jargon and to avoid explaining all of the terms or fleshing out all of the arguments. How many people who have not had the necessary training would be able to follow a paper in advanced particle physics? Maimonides would not have needed to develop a new method to communicate his ideas if hiding philosophy was his sole intention; he could simply have used those of his predecessors. As is well known, Aristotle’s books are difficult to understand and seem to contain inconsistencies. In antiquity and the middle-ages, such inconsistencies gave rise to a tradition of attempting to harmonize Aristotle with himself.<sup>②</sup> Today, it is generally accepted that those books that have come down to us were originally something like lecture notes rather than polished treatises, and this accounts for a good deal of the difficulty we encounter when trying to decipher his works. Medieval readers commonly thought that Aristotle wrote in such a way intentionally, just as they sometimes did themselves, for the sake of testing and training readers.<sup>③</sup>

Maimonides agreed that philosophy is not appropriate for the masses.

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① See, e.g., Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, I: Introduction, 6.

② This attempt has been dubbed the “lesser harmony” by Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 15. The “greater harmony” is the attempt to harmonize Aristotle with Plato. For a briefer account, see Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92-136.

③ See Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 256-260.

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However, he seems to be doing something more than simply using the same strategies as other philosophers or teaching philosophy in an esoteric way. At the end of his introduction to the *Guide*, he outlines seven different reasons that contradictions or contrary statements appear in books. He then says that two of them led him to introduce, on purpose, such statements into the *Guide*. “Divergences that are to be found in this Treatise are due to the fifth cause and the seventh. Know this, grasp its true meaning, and remember it very well so as not to become perplexed by some of its chapters.”<sup>①</sup> The fifth cause serves a pedagogical function. Maimonides explains that teachers often explain something in a simple way in order to make it easy to understand. Later, when a student is more advanced, a teacher might explain in greater detail and in a way that appears to oppose the earlier lesson. Rather than the fifth, it is the seventh cause that is generally called upon to support an esoteric interpretation. It reads as follows.

The seventh cause. In speaking about very obscure matters, it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others. Sometimes, in the case of certain dicta, this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise whereas, in another place, necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting<sup>②</sup> the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the inconsistency<sup>③</sup> between them; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.<sup>④</sup>

What are the implications of this seventh cause (hereafter “seventh contradiction”)? Herbert Davidson maintains that there are none because Maimonides makes no use of it.<sup>⑤</sup> The fact that he warns readers to expect to encounter inconsistencies therefore requires explanation. Davidson argues that Maimonides may simply have changed his mind. Unlike authors today, he

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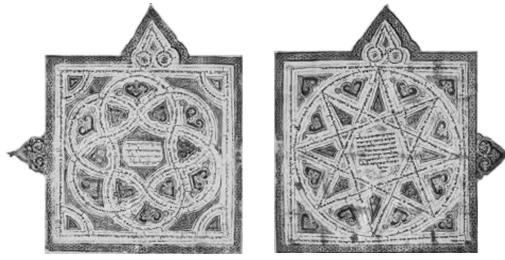
① Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, I : Introduction, 20.

② This term can also mean “contrary to” or simply “incompatible with”.

③ Pines renders this “contradiction”, which is a possible translation.

④ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, I : Introduction, 18.

⑤ Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 391.



explains, Maimonides did not write or revise the introduction after completing the entire book. The *Guide* is in three parts that were each distributed on completion and the fact that Maimonides set out planning to employ a certain method does not show that he ended up putting it to use. Moreover, Davidson writes that he has not found any instance of this kind of contradiction in the *Guide*: “As for contradictions due to the necessity of hiding very recondite matters from the multitude, I have not met a single instance in either the exegetic or philosophic sections of the *Guide for the Perplexed* which meets Maimonides’ specifications—an instance where he might be seen to deploy tactics in order to conceal an intentional contradiction from the multitude at all costs.”<sup>①</sup>

Most scholars who explicitly make reference to the seventh contradiction think that it is present in some form. Even so, not all argue that it conceals an opinion that could be considered heterodox. For example, Kenneth Seeskin associates it with philosophical works that are written in dialectical fashion, as the *Guide* clearly is.<sup>②</sup> Subsequently, Yair Lorberbaum also claimed that it is an expression of dialectic.<sup>③</sup> He takes it in a different direction from Seeskin, however, by suggesting that Maimonides is forced to use dialectic in order to gesture towards things that cannot be put into words. He claims that Maimonides believed that certain matters escape verbal articulation and that uncertainty concerning them must be concealed from the masses. However, perhaps owing to their very nature, he is unable to explain what these matters are.<sup>④</sup>

① Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, 391.

② Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 180. Seeskin’s response to Strauss is highly recommended even though I disagree with the particular point about the seventh contradiction.

③ Yair Lorberbaum, “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics, and Esotericism in Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 711-750.

④ Yair Lorberbaum, “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics, and Esotericism in Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*,” 748. Lorberbaum’s interpretation could be considered an example of “mystical esotericism”, concerning which, see note 1 on page 275 below. Contra Lorberbaum, Maimonides does not hide the fact that some of his theological positions are supported by dialectical rather than demonstrative arguments and, therefore, are not certain. See, for example, Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, III : 21, 485: “No demonstration at all can be obtained with regard to these great and sublime notions.”

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More commonly, Maimonides is said to have contradicted himself in order to conceal that he holds heterodox views that he is unwilling to express openly. The name most readily associated with this reading is Leo Strauss.<sup>①</sup> Strauss argued that an inherent conflict between religion and philosophy lies at the heart of western thought. He claimed that the conflict between them is key to the *Guide*: “Its first premise is the old Jewish premise that being a Jew and being a philosopher are two incompatible things.”<sup>②</sup> While Strauss’s name is often cited in support of hidden heresies, important aspects of the theories that underpin his own readings are not always shared by scholars who employ his hermeneutics. For our purposes, the relevant point is that identifying contradictions in the *Guide*, as in other philosophical texts, becomes key to deciphering the author’s real beliefs. When a reader identifies two apparently incompatible views in the *Guide*, it is often said that Maimonides actually believed only one of them and he includes the opposing view in order to conceal his real opinion.<sup>③</sup> Strauss writes, “The duty of the interpreter is not to explain the contradictions, but to find out in each case which of the two statements was considered by Maimonides to be true and which he merely used as a means of hiding the truth.” In Dov Schwartz’s typology, there are three general reasons advanced to explain why Maimonides might hide his views.<sup>④</sup> One is that they could damage the public’s beliefs and therefore harm society, since the masses need to believe falsehoods in order to persuade them to act well. Political regimes depend on fictions. Arthur Melzer dubs this “protective esotericism.”<sup>⑤</sup> The second is that they are hidden in order to secure the philosopher’s own safety, since those who teach ideas unpopular with the masses or the religious authorities would be in danger of suffering persecution. In Melzer’s nomenclature, this is “defensive esotericism.” The third reason is

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① Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 60-78.

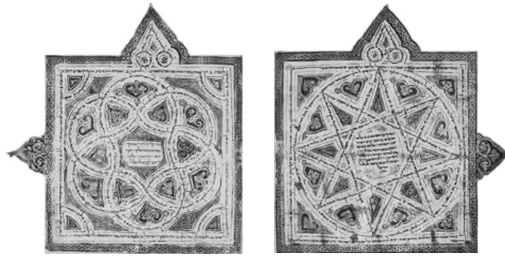
② Leo Strauss, “How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” in Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), xiv.

③ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 69-70.

④ Dov Schwarz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 15. [Hebrew]

⑤ Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, 4.





that the subject matter itself either prevents clear exposition or, for didactic purposes, benefits from obscure presentation.<sup>①</sup>

A glance at the secondary literature reveals that these kinds of methodologies have been called upon to support a dizzying array of interpretations and claims. They cannot all be mentioned here but a couple of examples will give a taste of the variety of competing views. One of the major apparent inconsistencies discussed by scholars is between seemingly different accounts of God's nature. On the one hand, Maimonides is well known for his teaching about negative attributes, which holds that terms attributing properties cannot be used of God. Instead, the most proper way to refer to God is by negating the privations of perfections. For example, "God is omniscient" should be recast as "God is not ignorant". On the other hand, he devotes a chapter to explaining that God is intellect, which seems to run counter to such negative attributes. Shlomo Pines writes that Maimonides might not have recognized the opposition between the consequences of the different positions he takes but, "In this particular case this point of view would amount to a grave and, in my opinion, very implausible accusation of muddle-headedness directed against Maimonides."<sup>②</sup> Carlos Fraenkel argues that Maimonides' true position is that God is intellect which, he argues, renders God immanent rather than transcendent. God's transcendence should be taught to the masses while God's immanence is part of his "esoteric teaching."<sup>③</sup> Alternatively, Alvin Reines drew the distinction between Maimonides' doctrines of God's transcendence, on the one hand, and God's omniscience on the other, and claimed that Maimonides' real position is expressed by his doctrine of negative

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① Melzer considers the didactic aspect and calls it "pedagogic esotericism". Schwarz runs it together with what could be termed "mystical esotericism" as both stem from the subject matter itself. "Mystical esotericism" is not included among the strategies that Melzer attributes to philosophers. Melzer also discusses "political esotericism", meaning the attempt to use philosophy to reform society. It is not to be confused with the way "political philosophy" is used in scholarship on Maimonides, which refers to Schwarz's first two reasons.

② Shlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction: The Philosophical Sources of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), xcvi.

③ Carlos Fraenkel, "Maimonides' God and Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2006): 208.

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attributes.<sup>①</sup> Yet another view, expressed by Hannah Kasher, asserts that Maimonides considers it impossible to decide between the two positions that Pines articulates but that, since they express a tension inherent to religious thought, they should both be affirmed despite conflicting with one another.<sup>②</sup> Expanding on Pines' observation, that there appear to be four different doctrines about God in the *Guide*, Zev Harvey has argued that the *Guide* is even more complicated because it includes a far greater number of alternative viewpoints than an inner "philosophical" stance and an explicit "religious" one.<sup>③</sup>

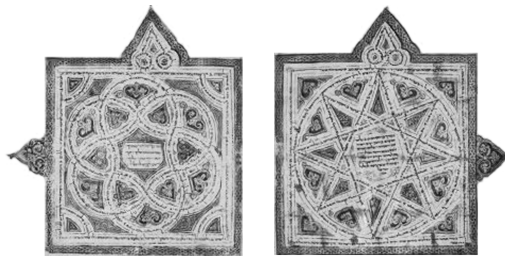
In the above cases, Maimonides is not said to affirm a position that he apparently rejects but, rather, to reject a position that he explicitly espouses in favor of another that he also professes. The claim is that Maimonides affirms two opposing positions even though they contradict one another. Given that they seem to be contradictory, he should not be permitted to hold both to be true. Therefore, only one of them reflects his real opinion. In other instances, the apparent ruse is even starker because, so scholars have claimed, he actually believed a view that he openly repudiates. The most famous example is the creation of the world. Maimonides outlines three different points of view that believers in God hold. Firstly, followers of the Mosaic Law claim that the world was created *de novo* and *ex nihilo*, which is to say that the world is not pre-eternal and there was an absolute beginning to time. Secondly, Plato and his school argued that there was no beginning to time, and that matter is everlasting, as the very notion of such a genesis is absurd. However, Plato allowed that God can fashion matter in different ways according to the divine

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① Alvin Reines, "Maimonides' True Belief concerning God," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, eds. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 24-35.

② Hannah Kasher, "Self-Cognizing Intellect and Negative Attributes in Maimonides' Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 461-472.

③ Warren Zev Harvey, "How Leo Strauss Straight jacketed Research on the Guide in the Twentieth Century," *Iyyun* 50 (2001): 387-396 [Hebrew]. Harvey develops this further in "How to Begin to Study Strauss's 'How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*,'" in *Interpreting Maimonides*, eds. Charles Manekin and Daniel Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 228-246. For Pines' identification of four views, see "The Philosophical Purport of Maimonides' Halachic Works and the Purport of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, eds. Yovel and Pines (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 13, n.12.



will, so while the world was created at a certain time, it was preceded by something else. Thirdly, Aristotle agreed with Plato that time never began and that matter is eternal but disagreed inasmuch as he argued that the world in its present state is also eternal, having neither beginning nor end. Although Maimonides defends the first view, which is that the world is created both *de novo* and *ex nihilo*, many scholars argue that his real opinion was different.<sup>①</sup> Harvey has written a number of brilliant articles arguing that Maimonides' real opinion accords with that of Aristotle.<sup>②</sup> Tamar Rudavsky claims that Maimonides introduces contradictions between his attitudes toward Plato and Aristotle in order, ultimately, to indicate that he secretly adheres to Plato's opinion over the others.<sup>③</sup> Besides these stances, Sarah Klein-Braslavy and Alfred Ivry assert that Maimonides affirmed none of the three opinions. Klein-Braslavy instead claims that he suspended judgement about the matter<sup>④</sup>, while Ivry proposes a fourth position that Maimonides held secretly<sup>⑤</sup>.

The seventh contradiction has also been used to argue for other general approaches to Maimonides. David Blumenthal employs it to substantiate his view that Maimonides was a "rationalist mystic" who privileged mystical experience over knowledge.<sup>⑥</sup> Josef Stern suggests that Maimonides could have

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① Some of the medieval commentators also thought that Maimonides did not really believe in the position he presents as that of the Law. For parallels between medieval and modern interpreters, see Aviezer Ravitsky, "The Secrets of Maimonides: Between the Thirteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159-207.

② See, for example, W. Harvey, "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1989): 287-301. Harvey draws attention to the importance of the seventh cause of contradictions in 287 n. 2. Too many articles to list here have been written by numerous authors arguing in favor of this view.

③ Tamar Rudavsky, *Maimonides* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 68-74.

④ Sarah Klein-Braslavy, "The Creation of the World and the Interpretation of Genesis i-v," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, eds. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 65-78.

⑤ Alfred Ivry, "Maimonides on Creation," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 115-137 [Hebrew].

⑥ David Blumenthal, "Maimonides: Prayer, Worship, and Mysticism," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 7.

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deployed it to conceal a level of skepticism over the human goal.<sup>①</sup> Others mention the contradiction as part of Maimonides' general strategy of esoteric writing and claim that his aim is to offer various options without decreeing which is correct. For example, Moshe Halbertal suggests that the *Guide* contains four different, incompatible world views and "leaves multiple possibilities open to the reader," since Maimonides did not wish to dictate which of them to accept.<sup>②</sup>

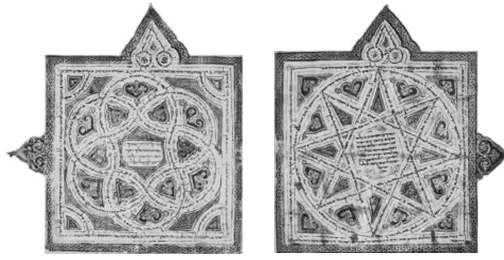
Although the seventh contradiction is used to support such kinds of esoteric interpretations, the question of contradictions need not be conflated with that of Maimonides' real opinions about the issues outlined above, and I believe it to be a mistake to do so. At least, the case has to be made that they are what Maimonides has in mind when he outlines the various reasons that contradictions appear in texts. Since the *Guide* is esoteric in other ways as well, it remains possible for readers to detect different kinds of hints at a hidden philosophical belief. Contradictions are not the only devices that can be called upon to suggest that Maimonides is hiding his true, secret philosophical or theological views. Nevertheless, it is a major hermeneutical tool. However, there is good reason to think that Maimonides introduces inconsistencies of the seventh sort into the *Guide* for different purposes altogether. I will argue below that he attempts to keep something from "the masses" by employing conflicting ideas in his biblical exegesis rather than in his theological or philosophical arguments. First, however, it is worth reporting how Maimonides says the contradictions are generally put to use in other texts.

Maimonides continues his introduction by identifying the books in which each of the different kinds of contradictions appear. He says that the seventh appears in midrashic and aggadic literature and leaves open the question of whether it appears in the Bible, writing as follows: "Whether contradictions due to the seventh cause are to be found in the books of the prophets is a matter for speculative study and investigation. Statements about this should

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① Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 77.

② Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought*, trans. Joel Linsider (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 357.



not be a matter of conjecture.”<sup>①</sup> Aside from the *Guide*, then, there are other texts in which the seventh contradiction can be found.<sup>②</sup> Notably, however, it is not employed “in the books of the philosophers, or rather of those who know the truth.”<sup>③</sup> The seventh contradiction is not to be understood as if it is a strategy used in philosophical works generally. When Maimonides raises the question about its presence in the prophetic books, but declines to offer an answer, he leaves it up to the reader to think the issue through. His exegesis provides a starting point that can help us work out what he is indicating. In order to do so, then, the first step must be to study that exegesis. As mentioned above, my contention is that it is possible to identify the seventh contradiction in Maimonides’ treatment of some biblical passages. In particular, I argue, the use to which Maimonides puts the seventh contradiction can be seen in his explanations of the passages that the Mishna cited above mentions, the Account of the Beginning<sup>④</sup> and the Account of the Chariot.<sup>⑤</sup> The “obscure matters” can therefore be identified as particularly

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① Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, I: Introduction, 19.

② In order to defend the interpretation I advance below, that the seventh contradiction is reflected in biblical exegesis, it is worth responding to Shalom Sadik, who objected to my argument in the following way: “One of the main problems with Davies’s (2011) interpretation (especially pp. 16-21) of the seventh contradiction is that he explains it as an imitation of the Sages’ methods. By contrast, Maimonides does not mention the existence of contradictions in the Sages’ words, nor does he say that he writes using educational contradictions in his halakhic books.” *Shalom Sadik, Maimonides: A Radical Religious Philosopher* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2023), 44, n. 74. Although I would not claim that Maimonides is imitating the sages in using the seventh contradiction, he quite clearly states that they employ it too. Indeed, Sadik himself says so on p. 51 n. 86. Sadik does not engage with the argument further or explain what he takes the other problems to be. Should I adopt the methodology Sadik advocates in his book, I could conclude that by contradicting himself while remaining silent on the thesis, he indicates that he secretly agrees with my argument. His comment about “educational contradictions” has no bearing on the matter. The only other attempt that I am aware of to refute my claim was made by Edward Halper, concerning which see note 2 on page 288 below.

③ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, I: Introduction, 19.

④ Maimonides dedicates II: 30 to exegesis of the Account of the Beginning. Concerning his explanations there, see Sarah Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: A ḥvah, 1978)[Hebrew]; Sarah Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis: A Study in Maimonides’ Anthropology* (Jerusalem: Daf-Ḥen, 1986)[Hebrew].

⑤ For a detailed explanation of Maimonides’ interpretation of the biblical Account of the Chariot, see my *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106-154.

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recondite scriptural passages.

The deepest secret of the Torah, as mentioned above, is the Account of the Chariot, and the term derives from a vision depicted in chapters 1 and 10 of Ezekiel.<sup>①</sup> These passages are difficult to understand. The author relates seeing a man atop a chariot pulled by four beasts, or living creatures. The creatures all face in different directions and each moves forward, but they do not thereby distance themselves from one another. I also mentioned above that Maimonides identifies the Account of the Chariot with metaphysics. However, after piecing together his interpretation of Ezekiel's vision, it turns out to include a good deal of physics as well. The term "Account of the Chariot" therefore seems to have multiple meanings in Maimonides' work. It stands for the biblical passages, which is its surface meaning. The inner meaning is metaphysics. But in Ezekiel's version it is not restricted to metaphysics.<sup>②</sup>

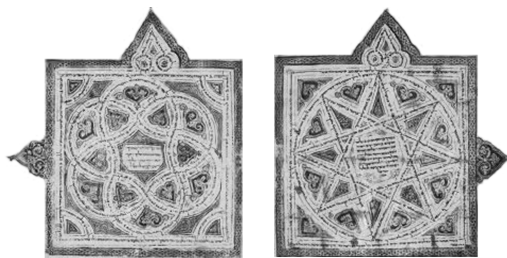
Ostensibly, Maimonides' commentary on the chariot visions appears in the first seven chapters of the *Guide's* third part. These seven chapters are extremely enigmatic. Maimonides explains Ezekiel's strange vision through hints and "chapter headings," and he does so by demanding much of his readers. He asks "what stratagem can I use to draw attention toward that which may have appeared to me as indubitably clear, manifest, and evident in my opinion, according to what I have understood in these matters?"<sup>③</sup> In order to follow the Mishna's advice, he has devised a way to make sure that only those who are "wise and capable of independent understanding" can follow them. He drops hints that allude to other parts of the *Guide*, often to comments in the earlier parts that are nothing more than asides, or to other books that students are expected to study on their own initiative. At the end of these seven chapters dedicated to the chariot vision, he writes as follows: "We have thus given you also in this chapter such chapter headings that if you combine the headings there will emerge from them a whole that is useful with

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① In these chapters, Maimonides also considers Isaiah 6. James A. Diamond explains that there is a connection with Jacob's ladder as well in *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 119 ff.

② Alternatively, one could argue that metaphysics is assumed in physics, so there is no need to insist that the inner meaning of the chariot vision be delineated so strictly.

③ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, III: Introduction, 415.



regard to this theme. If you consider all that we have said in the chapters of this Treatise up to this chapter, the greater part or the entirety of the subject in question, except for a few slight details and repetitious speech, whose meaning remains hidden, will become clear to you.”<sup>①</sup>

Maimonides uses multiple methods to present his exegesis of these passages, and they enable him both to “conceal some parts and to disclose others.” As illustration, a few examples will suffice. For the first case, consider some cryptic remarks he makes about verse 28, which closes Ezekiel’s opening chapter and the vision.

*And the appearance of the rainbow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.* The matter, the true reality, and the essence of the rainbow that is described are known. This is the most extraordinary comparison possible, as far as allegories<sup>②</sup> and similitudes are concerned; and it is indubitably due to a prophetic force. Understand this.

Maimonides says nothing more at all about this verse. Readers need to be able to work out what he indicates. There is no doubt, says Maimonides, that the rainbow is depicted because of a prophetic force. Of course, as it is a prophetic vision, Maimonides could simply be reporting that fact. The implication would be that it did not take place in external reality but, rather, in the prophet’s imagination. However, he might also be hinting that the rainbow is an allegory for prophecy. In order to understand why, the reader needs to know the accepted science behind rainbows and, also, to be able to compare it to prophecy. Maimonides does not provide any further guidance; he simply states that rainbows are known but does not explain anything about them. For the purposes of our comparison, what is important is that the sun is constantly shining and that the rainbow’s presence depends on the disposition of the air that the rays reach. It occurs when sunlight hits air that has a certain level of humidity. A change in the air rather than a change in the sun brings about the

<sup>①</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, III : 7, 430.

<sup>②</sup> Pines uses “parables” rather than “allegories”.

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phenomenon. Maimonides holds that prophecy occurs when a person has perfected her intellect, especially if she has a strong imaginative faculty.<sup>①</sup> When someone reaches the required level, prophecy automatically ensues. In this context, it is relevant that Ezekiel's verse compares the rainbow to "the likeness of the glory of the Lord." Maimonides explains that the word "glory" can have several meanings. One of them, when it is used to refer to God's glory, is the intellectual overflow.<sup>②</sup> Like the sun, the agent intellect is always active. Metaphorically, it can be said to be permanently shining. It causes prophecy when the material that it reaches is prepared in the appropriate way. Like a rainbow, prophecy does not occur through a choice of the agent but through a change in the patient.

In this elliptical fashion, Maimonides indicates that the verse symbolizes prophecy. It is also one of several ways in which he intimates that Ezekiel's vision contains hints meant to communicate its prophetic nature, such as drawing attention to the date on which and the river by which the vision occurred.<sup>③</sup> Maimonides' dual strategy of disclosing some matters but concealing others is even clearer in his exegesis of some of the vision's other elements. For example, he associates the four beasts that pull the chariot with the superlunar spheres, although he never explicitly says so. Instead, he offers a series of pointers that readers need to piece together both with other parts of the *Guide* and with their own scientific knowledge. By doing so, it becomes possible to understand that Maimonides considers Ezekiel's vision to be a depiction of the cosmos.

For the next example, bear in mind Maimonides' instructions: "If you wish to grasp the totality of what this Treatise contains, so that nothing of it will escape you, then you must connect its chapters one with another; and when reading a given chapter, your intention must be not only to understand

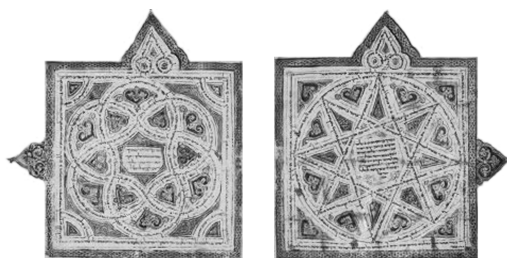
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① For a thorough account of Maimonides' view of prophecy, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 128-315.

② For a discussion of how Maimonides interprets the "glory of the Lord" and other related terms, see Esti Eisenmann, "The Term 'Created Light' in Maimonides' Philosophy," *Daat* 55 (2005): 41-57. [Hebrew]

③ See Daniel Davies, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed*, 111-115.





the totality of the subject of that chapter, but also to grasp each expression<sup>①</sup> that occurs in it in the course of the speech, even if that word does not belong to the intention of the chapter.”<sup>②</sup> To take one instance of the way Maimonides scatters the information across different parts of the *Guide*, he draws attention to the fact that the beasts are depicted with two human hands:

He states that he saw four living creatures and that every living creature among them had four faces, four wings, and two hands. As a whole, the form of each creature was that of a man; as he says: They had the likeness of a man. He also states that their two hands were likewise the hands of a man, it being known that a man’s hands are indubitably formed as they are in order to be engaged in the arts of craftsmanship.<sup>③</sup>

Two features are relevant to the present point. Firstly, there are two hands. Secondly, Maimonides says that the fact that they are human indicates that they are connected with handicrafts. In view of these hints, and the advice to connect chapters together, readers are prompted to cast their minds back to one of the *Guide*’s earlier chapters. Maimonides had explained that four kinds of forces proceed from the sphere to the sublunar world and that they are “of two species. For they cause either the generation of all that is generated or the preservation of what is generated... this is the meaning of ‘nature,’ which is said to be wise, having governance, caring for the bringing into existence of animals by means of an art similar to that of a craftsman, and also caring for their preservation and permanence.”<sup>④</sup> The implication of Maimonides’ hint about a connection between the beasts’ two hands and the two purposes of “an art similar to that of a craftsman” is clear. There are two species of forces, symbolized by the two hands, and their activities resemble handicrafts, symbolized by the fact that the hands are human. The beasts’ hands represent two ways in which the spheres influence the terrestrial world, viz., causing generation to take place and keeping things that are generated in existence.

① Pines translates “expression” (*lafz*) as “word”.

② Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, I : Introduction, 15.

③ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, III :2, 417-418.

④ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II :10, 272.

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Again, Maimonides does not spell out the connections but relies on the reader's ability to decipher a puzzle.

The previous quotation is taken from a series of chapters in the *Guide*'s second part that are also aimed at explaining Ezekiel's vision. In the case of these chapters, Maimonides does not explicitly say that they are useful for deciphering the chariot, but he prefaces them with a reminder that his purpose in writing the *Guide* is not to teach science but, instead, to expound the prophetic books and, in particular, the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot. This brief interlude is too long to reproduce here but it is crucial, and Maimonides says that it "is like a lamp illuminating the hidden features of the whole of this Treatise."<sup>①</sup> He specifies that he does not aim "to give a summary and epitomized description of the disposition of the spheres, or to make known their number."<sup>②</sup> And when writing about these and other scientific ideas, "The reason why I mentioned, explained, and elucidated that matter would be found in the knowledge it procures us of the *Account of the Chariot* or of the *Account of the Beginning* or would be found in an explanation that it furnishes of some root regarding the notion of prophecy or would be found in the explanation of some root regarding the belief in a true opinion belonging to the beliefs of the Law."<sup>③</sup>

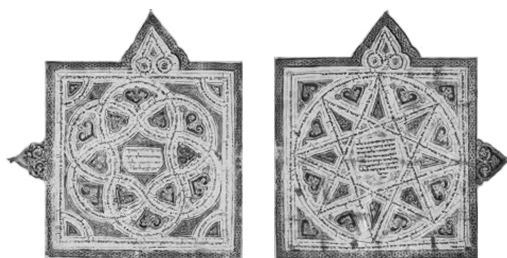
Maimonides has drawn attention to the importance of the subsequent chapters for his interpretation of scriptural passages. They are particularly crucial for deciphering his exegesis of Ezekiel's depiction of the chariot so the seven chapters in part three, dedicated to that vision, contain many hints toward these chapters in the second part. The chapters include much information about the spheres and the way they influence our world. One of them states that many people used to believe that the planets are arranged differently to how they were thought in Maimonides' time to be ordered. He then says that this enabled them to count four animated spheres, which is to say that there are four spheres with stars, and an all-encompassing sphere that

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① Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 2, 253.

② Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 2, 253.

③ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 2, 254.



has no star.<sup>①</sup> Together with all Maimonides' hints concerning how to interpret features of the four beasts in Ezekiel's vision, it is clear that he takes them to represent the superlunar spheres and that Ezekiel therefore counted four.

Many medieval commentators on the *Guide* thought that, in attributing the four-sphere theory to Ezekiel, Maimonides indicates that Ezekiel made a scientific error. Whereas he appears to say that the theory is only improbable, he may still consider it a mistaken theory. The commentators thought that Maimonides attributed another mistake to Ezekiel, that the spheres' motions make a sound. Maimonides never cites verses 24 and 25 of the vision. They read as follows: "When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai, a tumult like the din of an army. When they stood still, they would let their wings droop. From above the expanse over their heads came a sound. When they stood still, they would let their wings droop." In these verses, Ezekiel says that the beasts make a sound so, since the beasts are supposed to represent the spheres, in Maimonides' explanation, Ezekiel seems to be indicating that the spheres make a sound. Maimonides never openly says so. Instead, he explains that this was a common opinion, shared by many people, including ancient philosophers such as Pythagoras and his followers.<sup>②</sup> He says that some of the Sages of the Talmud also held that the spheres make music because they thought that the spheres are fixed and the stars revolve, rather than the other way around. And he explains that affirming the sounds of the spheres depends on this belief but that, since Aristotle proved that the spheres revolve and the stars are fixed in them, this view ought not to be accepted. Maimonides sees no problem in accepting Aristotle's opinion over that of the rabbis and finds support in the Sages themselves being open to astronomical views of the surrounding nations. Given that, on Maimonides' interpretation that the beasts represent the spheres, Ezekiel also seems to mention the sounds of the spheres, commentators thought that he implies that Ezekiel was among those who believed, wrongly, in the Pythagorean theory. Again, though, Maimonides only hints at his interpretation.

<sup>①</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 9, 268-269.

<sup>②</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 8, 267.

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This four-sphere theory constitutes an entire view about the way in which parts of the cosmos interact with each other. Maimonides explains that he conceived a new theory that, he says, “I have not seen explicitly stated by any philosopher,”<sup>①</sup> in which each of the four spheres has a particular connection with one of the sublunar elements. “While the four spheres having stars have forces that overflow from them as a whole toward all the things subject to generation, these spheres being the causes of the latter, each sphere is also specially assigned to one of the four elements.”<sup>②</sup> Maimonides then proceeds to explain the relationships between the spheres and the way in which they influence the sublunar world, which is the world of generation and corruption. Such an overflow can occur both through the intermediary of the intelligences and through the physical spheres themselves, and Maimonides states that “the stars act at some particular distances. I refer to their nearness to or remoteness from the center or their relation to one another. From there astrology comes in.”<sup>③</sup> He then finishes these chapters by saying that the prophets figuratively apply this “overflow” to God, in order to indicate the intellectual aspect through which humans cognize.

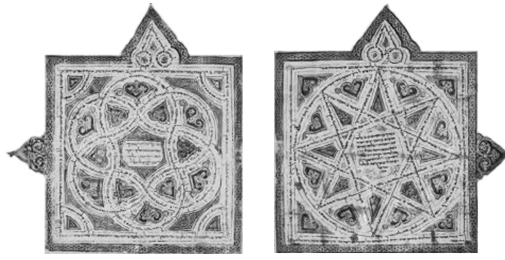
Let us now return to the seventh contradiction. Maimonides’ exegesis of these “very obscure matters” contains ways in which he conceals some parts and discloses others. As yet, however, there is no sign of an inconsistency that he might be trying to conceal. By attending to alternative accounts that Maimonides gives of the spheres, it becomes possible to detect an incompatibility between ideas that form the basis of his explanation of Ezekiel’s view and those that are at the basis of others in the *Guide*. The opposed premises can therefore be seen to be alternatives concerning the universe’s constitution. To take a simple example, Maimonides generally assumes that there are nine spheres, which is the orthodox view of his day, and that the sublunar elements are moved by the motion of the sphere and the light of the stars, views opposed to those espoused in the chapters expounding the four-

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① Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 10, 269.

② Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 11, 270. Maimonides specifies that this is “what occurred to me” after recognizing the apparent connections between the moon and water and between the sun and fire.

③ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 12, 280.



sphere theory.

Perhaps more crucially, the belief that the spheres produce music could undermine, or at least compromise, some of the evidence that Maimonides marshals in favor of his arguments for creation. Whether or not God creates through will and purpose is said to be the crux of the disagreement regarding creation. Now, Maimonides says that the idea that the spheres revolve and the stars are embedded in them, which was said to be incompatible with the music of the spheres, is a basis for the arguments that God creates through purpose. He writes, “To my mind, there is no proof of purpose stronger than the one founded upon the differences between the motions of the spheres and upon the fact that the stars are fixed in the spheres.”<sup>①</sup> Maimonides explains that “The entire sect of Pythagoras believes that these bodies emit pleasant sounds having, though mighty, the same proportion to each other as that obtaining in musical melodies.”<sup>②</sup> When the spheres are held to produce sounds, the distances between them are said to be constant and ordered. Aristotle related that the Pythagoreans supposed “the whole heaven to be a musical scale and a number.”<sup>③</sup> He also explained that, in the Pythagorean view, “their speeds, as measured by their distances, are in the same ratios as musical concordances; they [therefore] assert that the sound given forth by the circular movement of the stars is a harmony.”<sup>④</sup> Maimonides questioned both the explanatory power of systems purporting to describe the heavens and also the idea that the spheres are ordered in a way that is accessible to human reason. He argues at length that there is no way to explain these motions on the basis of Aristotle’s assumptions. The fact that the heavenly motions appear so complex and inexplicable is taken to be evidence that God creates through purpose.<sup>⑤</sup> In contrast, the four-sphere theory seems to simplify the heavenly motions in order to fit into certain ideas about how the cosmos is configured. If Ezekiel’s understanding of the cosmos involves the four-sphere theory and belief that the

① Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 19, 310.

② Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, II : 8, 267.

③ Aristotle, *Meta.*, 986a1.

④ Aristotle, *De caelo*, 290b20-23.

⑤ I explain Maimonides’ arguments for creation in *Maimonides* (Cambridge: Polity, 2024), 61-88.

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spheres make sounds, it is possible that he does not accept the evidence that Maimonides uses to assert that the world is created through will and purpose and is, therefore, created *ex nihilo*.<sup>①</sup>

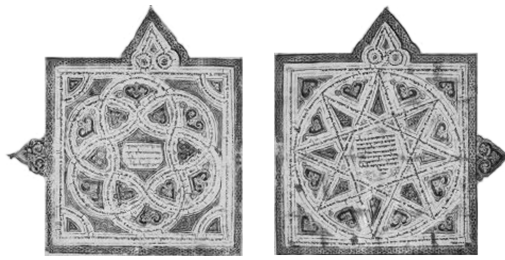
Overall, then, there are times at which the discussion proceeds on the basis of certain ideas that Maimonides uses to explain Ezekiel's vision, and other times at which it proceeds on the basis of others that oppose the inner meaning he ascribes to that vision.<sup>②</sup> The masses should not be able to detect the inconsistency between the inner meaning of Ezekiel's vision and other parts of Maimonides' writings. There seems to be many aspects to the "device" he uses to make sure that the inconsistencies cannot be detected by "the masses," from hints to demanding prior scientific knowledge and independent thought. In these ways, he explains his interpretation "in such away that anyone who heard that interpretation would think that I do not say anything over and beyond what is indicated by the text, but that it is as if I translated words from one language to another or summarized the meaning of the external sense of the speech."<sup>③</sup> He says that the way that he presents his exegesis reaches "the ultimate term that it is possible to attain in combining utility for everyone with abstention from explicit statements in teaching anything about this subject, as

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① If this reconstruction is correct, those claiming that Maimonides actually held to Aristotle's view could draw on Maimonides' exegesis of Ezekiel to indicate that he is actually criticizing his own arguments in favor of creation.

② In order to avoid a misunderstanding reported by Edward Halper in a book review, it is worth stressing that the theory attributed to Ezekiel is not the only one in the *Guide*. "Daniel Davies, 'Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed,'" *Philosophy in Review* 32 (2012): 150-153. Halper writes that this argument is incorrect because "it would leave Maimonides without any account of how God exercises agency in the physical world." However, if one account about the way in which the heavens are configured and interact with the sublunar world is mistaken, another can still be right. In response to Halper, then, it suffices to quote briefly from the reviewed book: "there are at least two different cosmological systems present in the *Guide*, both of which Maimonides appears to consider acceptable. One seems to be Maimonides' own position and is probably also that of the law, while the other is one with which he disagrees." *Method and Metaphysics*, 24. Halper also claims that this reading means that Maimonides is not hiding Ezekiel's teaching but, instead, his own criticisms of Ezekiel. Again, this is not the case. It is clear that Maimonides is hiding what he takes to be Ezekiel's teaching and Ezekiel's mistakes are part of what is hidden. The particular question of the concealed inconsistency does not exhaust the issues of concealment as a whole.

③ Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, III: 416.



is obligatory.”<sup>①</sup>

As Maimonides regularly reminds readers, the Mishna forbids expounding the chariot, so the vision as a whole is hidden. However, our question is why the particular inconsistency generated by the seventh cause of contradictions is kept secret, not merely why the exegesis as a whole is presented in such an opaque fashion. Given that the chariot vision is generally held to be the deepest of the Torah’s secrets, it makes sense for Maimonides to conceal the conflict between Ezekiel’s depiction of the cosmos and the picture that he generally assumes to be true. It seems that, in Maimonides’ view, some of the prophetic understandings of the deepest secret of the Torah is not as deep as might be thought. Additionally, if the inconsistency indicates that Ezekiel made mistakes, or that Ezekiel denied the evidence that Maimonides uses to argue for creation, it would be obvious why Maimonides sees the need to keep the disagreement from the masses.<sup>②</sup> Awareness of the opposition between the different pictures would lead to a suspicion that there is a problem with one of them. Elsewhere, I have suggested that he may have associated Ezekiel’s world view with doctrines of a school of thought that he did not generally accept, that of the *Brethren of Purity*. If this is so, he would not have wished to communicate that this view has some support from the prophet Ezekiel.

What are the ramifications of this interpretation for how Maimonides and other medieval philosophers should be read? Our question is not whether the *Guide* is esoteric. It clearly is, since it is obviously not aimed at the masses. Instead, the disagreement concerns a particular kind of esotericism: whether or not Maimonides secretly rejects arguments that he advances while hinting that he accepts other arguments for positions that he explicitly rejects. Followers of this kind of esoteric reading often appeal to Leo Strauss’s authority and refer to his account of contradictions as key, as I mentioned earlier in this essay. Even Strauss’ opponents tend to admit that he might have

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<sup>①</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide*, III: 416.

<sup>②</sup> In the above mentioned review by Edward Halper, he writes that this interpretation of Ezekiel “clearly strikes a major blow at Jewish tradition.” While I do not agree with his assessment, the fact that an academic philosopher reacts in such a way, even today, illustrates *one* of the reasons that Maimonides couched his commentary in such obscure ways.

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a point when applying Straussian readings to the *Guide*. For example, in a scathing assessment of a series of Strauss's major techniques, Adrian Blau writes, "I have argued that these alleged practices are not as plausible as Strauss implies, except perhaps for writers like Maimonides."<sup>①</sup> In another critique of Strauss's methodology, published in the *New York Review of Books*, Myles Burnyeat argued that Strauss began with the *Guide* and proceeded "under Maimonides' guidance, to project the medieval tension between reason and revelation back into antiquity so as to make Plato and Xenophon suffer a 'persecution' that no ordinary historian has ever heard of."<sup>②</sup> Burnyeat's article generated a heated discussion in the pages of subsequent issues. One of the responses was written by Robert Gordis and was sympathetic to the critique of Strauss. However, Gordis disagreed with Burnyeat's contention that Strauss built on Maimonides. Gordis claimed that Strauss misread the *Guide*, and "projected his frustration upon Maimonides."<sup>③</sup> Burnyeat replied, after citing the seventh contradiction, that "Strauss certainly has more to go on here than he has with Plato. But I should be only too happy to have a critic like Gordis take me through the *Guide* explaining in detail how and where Strauss has got it wrong."<sup>④</sup> Similarly, in a positive review of a book by Kenneth Seeskin about Maimonides' view of creation, Roslyn Weiss concludes that "Seeskin's book provides a valuable exploration and a deft defense of Maimonides's argument for creation. It is doubtful, however, whether the book sufficiently engages the esotericist reading to be ultimately convincing."<sup>⑤</sup>

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① Adrian Blau, "Anti-Strauss," *The Journal of Politics* 74 (2012): 151.

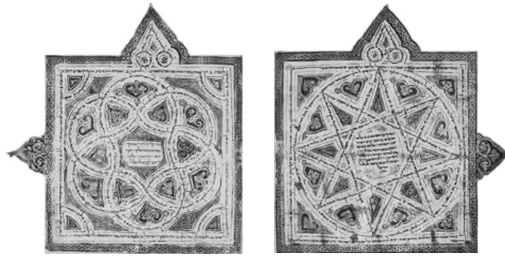
② Myles Burnyeat, "Sphinx Without A Secret," *New York Review of Books* (30th May 1985): 30-36. Note that the title is taken from a short Oscar Wilde story about someone who tried to exude an air of mystery but did not really have anything to hide. Pretending to secrets can itself hide the fact that one is concealing nothing. Oliver Leaman suggests that al-Fārābī may have used a similar ruse. Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222.

③ Joseph Cropsey, Harry V. Jaffa, Allam Bloom, et al., "The Studies of Leo Strauss: An Exchange," *New York Review of Books* (10th October 1985). <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/10/10/the-studies-of-leo-strauss-an-exchange/> (accessed April 2024).

④ Ibid.

⑤ Roslyn Weiss, "Kenneth Seeskin. Maimonides on the Origin of the World," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2007): 739





Maimonides presents a special case. Melzer writes that he is both so open about his own esoteric practices and also so obscure in other regards “that people incline to think that anything is possible with him.”<sup>①</sup> As the contradictions are a major tool used to support the sorts of esoteric readings at issue, any ‘anti-esotericist’ interpretation of the *Guide* needs to account for them more convincingly than has so far been done. If this paper’s suggestion is plausible, and the inconsistencies hidden by the seventh contradiction are connected with Maimonides’ explanation of Ezekiel, a solution to the problem raised by the presence of such contradictions can be distinguished from the question of Maimonides’ real opinions about theological and philosophical doctrines. It is therefore no longer necessary either to accept that Maimonides contradicted himself in order to hide a heterodox theological belief, to play down the peculiarity of the problem of contradictions, or to disregard it altogether. Instead, the inconsistencies that he describes in the seventh contradiction can be understood to be those that obtain between different “inner” meanings of various biblical passages. Contradictions do not have to be the “axis of the *Guide*”<sup>②</sup> around which the entire work rotates and through which Maimonides’ philosophy is revealed. Instead, they can be limited to a particular aspect of the *Guide* and his philosophical arguments can be assessed in their own right.

Of course, even if the interpretation I have advanced is plausible, there may still be other ways to explain the seventh contradiction. However, an interpretation that invokes the seventh contradiction in order to support such an “esoteric” reading should be able to explain how the contradiction identified in the *Guide* fits Maimonides’ description. Besides, even without the contradiction’s support, one can still argue that an opposition between religious and philosophical ideas, or between orthodox and heterodox doctrines, are key to the *Guide*. Other literary devices are also often employed to locate hidden meanings. But such a reading would have to be justified by more than simply appealing to the inconsistencies that Maimonides says he will use. Furthermore, I think that readers ought to be far more circumspect about

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① Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, 30.

② Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 74.

# JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

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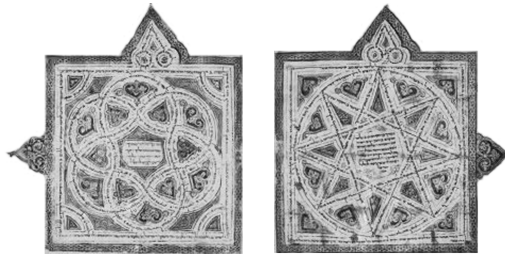
asserting that an apparent inconsistency is really a contradiction, or that Maimonides himself considered it so. Often, statements that seem at first sight to conflict are not necessarily opposed to one another when examined in more detail. Philosophical discussions regularly consider questions generated by exactly such a problem. A classic example from the history of Western philosophy is articulated by Boethius, who sets up the following problem.<sup>①</sup> Everything that exists is good inasmuch as it exists. What pertains to something inasmuch as it exists, pertains to it substantially. Therefore, (1) good pertains to all existing things substantially, which is to say that they are substantial goods. However, (2) only God is a substantial good. (1) opposes (2). Adopting the methodology of contradictions, we can ask whether we ought to deny either that God is the only substantial good or that things are good inasmuch as they are substances. Boethius denies neither; nor do others who considered the problem. Instead, they try to reach a deeper understanding of what is meant by these statements.<sup>②</sup> Such attempts are often automatically ruled out in the case of Maimonides. If the proper way to understand him is to ask which of two apparently contradictory statements is his real opinion, there is no need to think about whether they are really contradictory or whether there is another way to understand what he is driving at. Instead of asking whether or not the “contradictory positions” can be reconciled, which would require philosophical analysis, the scholar’s task becomes one of deciding which of them was Maimonides’ “true position” and which was a sop to the masses. Shalom Sadik has recently restated the procedure: “Where one perceives contradictions in his words, the reader or researcher should try to see which of the contradictory positions is correct and which was written for political and educational reasons only.”<sup>③</sup> This popular approach facilitates many different interpretations of Maimonides’ real message, whether it is

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① See “Appendix: Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus*,” in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 299-304.

② For a brief account of the history and centrality of this problem in medieval thought, see MacDonald’s introduction to the volume, which deals with related issues, “Introduction: The Relation between Being and Goodness,” in *Being and Goodness*, 1-28.

③ Sadik, *Maimonides*, 173



supposed to be radical, traditional, or wary of either. The *Guide* therefore takes its place in the canon of sacred Jewish texts, with underlying messages that support a reader's own claims and that can be judged independently of the surface meaning. However, it is rendered of severely limited interest to the history of philosophy. If his contradictions can be understood in the way I propose, the arguments in the *Guide* can be considered in their own right. The *Guide* might then be less amenable to being used as a springboard for constructive theological readings but I believe it makes Maimonides a more original and challenging thinker who is at least as exciting as the depictions presented in more esoteric portrayals.