

Aggadah in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*

Warren Zev Harvey

The topic of Maimonides' use of aggadah in the *Mishneh Torah* is huge and complicated, and I shall not attempt to do it justice here. I intend merely to discuss three interrelated aggadic themes in the *Mishneh Torah*: (1) Abraham, the Castle, and the Celestial Sphere; (2) The Secrets of the Chariot as Metaphysics; and (3) Moses's Prophecy and Miriam's Leprosy. The first theme concerns physics, the second metaphysics, and the third prophecy.

I. Abraham, the Castle, and the Celestial Sphere

As the Bible begins with the story of the creation of the world, so Maimonides' code of Law, the *Mishneh Torah*, begins with four chapters on the Account of the Beginning (*ma'aseh bereshit*) and that of the Chariot (*ma'aseh merkabah*), which he identifies with physics and metaphysics respectively. Chapters 1 and 2 of *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* treat of metaphysics (God and the separate intellects), while 3 and 4 treat of physics (the celestial spheres and the sublunar realm of four elements). Together they are called by Maimonides "the *pardes*" (*Yesode ha-Torah* 2:12; 4:10-11, 13; cf. *bHagigah* 14b), that is, the garden or paradise. It would be a mistake, however, to say they treat of philosophy and not law, for they also treat of law – and indeed, primarily law. The four chapters of the *pardes* contain the first five of the 613 commandments of the Law: to know God (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6); not to imagine other gods (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7); to know God's oneness (Deut 6:4); to love God (*ibid.*, 6:5); and to fear God (*ibid.*, 6:13).

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In *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 1:1-7, it is taught that the fulfillment of the first three of these commandments requires the use of Aristotle's proof of the Prime Mover based on the perpetual or eternal motion of the heavenly spheres (*Physics*, VIII, 5-6, 256a-260a; *Metaphysics*, XII, 6-7, 1071b-1073a). It requires, in other words, a profound knowledge of physics. One observes that the sphere revolves perpetually (*ha-galgal sobeb tamid*), and infers that it must have a mover of infinite power (for only such a mover could cause perpetual motion), and since the mover is of infinite power it must be incorporeal (for infinite power cannot subsist in a body), and if it is incorporeal it must be One (for plurality is in matter).

In *Hilkhot 'Abodah Zarah* 1:3, the young Abraham (or Abram) is portrayed as coming to know God by means of this very same Aristotelian physical proof. It is reported there that soon after he was weaned, he began to wonder, "How is it possible that this sphere moves [*noheg*] perpetually unless it has a Governor [*manhig*]?" Here Maimonides builds on a midrash found in *Genesis Rabbah* 39:1 (and parallels). In this midrash, Abraham is compared to a traveler who arrives at an illumined castle [*birah doleket*], and exclaims: "Could you say this castle has no governor [*manhig*]?" Similarly, continues the midrash, Abraham said: "Could you say this world has no Governor [*manhig*]?" Maimonides' Abraham substitutes "sphere" for "world," and asks in effect: Could you say *this sphere* has no Governor? By this small substitution, Maimonides transforms a rabbinic aggadah into an Aristotelian aggadah. This Aristotelian aggadah not only gives new meaning to the old rabbinic aggadah, but also adds an Abrahamic dimension to the first three commandments of *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah*.¹

1 See my *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1998), 46-48. On Abraham's knowing God soon after being weaned, see *ibid.*, 63-64. While the phrase "*birah doleket*" is interpreted by Maimonides and others as meaning "an illumined castle" (and thus the midrash concerns the proof from design), others have interpreted it as "a castle aflame" (and thus the midrash concerns the problem of evil). The latter meaning seems

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II. Secrets of the Chariot as Metaphysics

Toward the end of the fourth chapter of the *pardes*, Maimonides makes the following statement (*Yesode ha-Torah* 4:13):

The subjects of these four chapters on these five commandments are what the early Sages called “*pardes*.” As they said, “Four entered the *pardes*” [*bHagigah* 14b]. Although they were great ones of Israel and great scholars, not all of them had in them the power to know and apprehend all these things thoroughly. And I say that one ought not to stroll in the *pardes* unless one has one’s belly full with bread and meat. Now, “bread and meat” mean to know the forbidden and the permitted, and so forth, concerning the other commandments. Even though these things were called by the Sages “a small thing,” for they said “A great thing is the Account of the Chariot and a small thing is the debates of Abbaye and Raba” [*bSukkah* 28a; cf. *bBB* 134a], it is nonetheless proper that they precede them, for they settle a person’s mind first. Moreover, they are the great good that the Holy One, blessed be He, has caused to overflow for the settlement of the world, so as to inherit the life of the world to come. It is possible for all to know them – adult and minor, man and woman, one with a broad intellect and one with a narrow intellect.

Maimonides in effect divides here the 613 commandments of the Law into two groups of unequal worth. He asserts that metaphysics and the five commandments concerning it, which he has identified with the Account of the Chariot, are “a great thing,” while the other 608 commandments, designated by the celebrated legal debates of the amoraim Abbaye and Raba, are “a small thing.” Although the other 608 commandments are “a small thing,” they should chronologically precede metaphysics, for they are necessary for social and political stability (“the settlement of the world”) and may be understood by all,

to be the intent of the original midrash. See Paul Mandel, “The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited,” *Prooftexts* 14 (1994), 267-84.

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regardless of age, sex, or intellect. The commandments of the *pardes* grant one eternal life, but the other commandments provide the conditions necessary for entering the *pardes*.

Whereas Maimonides teaches that everyone may understand the 608 commandments, he stresses that understanding the *pardes* is rare. The rabbinic story cited ("Four entered the *pardes*") teaches that four great rabbis entered the *pardes*: one looked and was injured, one looked and died, one "cut down the plantlings," and only one, Rabbi Akiba, entered in peace and exited in peace. The difficulty of understanding the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, that is, physics and metaphysics, is noted by Maimonides also in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, introduction:

We have mentioned [in our legal compilations] that the Account of the Beginning is identical with natural science [=physics] and the Account of the Chariot with divine science [=metaphysics]... You should not think that these great secrets are fully and completely known to anyone among us... Among us, there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light... That is the degree of the great one among the prophets [Moses], to whom it was said, "But as for thee, stand thou here by Me" [Deut 5:28]; and of whom it was said "that the skin of his face sent forth beams" [Exod 34:29].²

Knowledge of the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot is thus unusual and extraordinary, and the highest knowledge of these secrets was that of Moses. In *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 7:1, the archetypal prophet is described as entering the *pardes*. This prophet is Moses.³

2 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. Shlomo Pines; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 6-7.

3 See Yaffa Hartom, "A Commentary to the Seventh Chapter of Maimonides' *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah*" (Hebrew) (master's thesis, Tel-Aviv University, 1984), 82: "The only prophet who fits the description of the prophet in 7:1 is Moses our Teacher!"

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Maimonides' identification of metaphysics with "a great thing" and the 608 non-metaphysical commandments with "a small thing" establishes the supremacy of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*. It is based on his interpretation of the following aggadic passage found in *bSukkah* 28a and *bBaba Batra* 134a, and quoted here from *Sukkah*:

Our Rabbis taught. Hillel the Elder had eighty disciples: thirty of them were worthy that the *shekinah* rest upon them, as for Moses our Teacher; and thirty of them were worthy that the sun stand still for them, as for Joshua bin Nun; and twenty were ordinary. The greatest of them was Jonathan ben Uzziel. The least of them was Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai. They said of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai that he did not forgo Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, *halakhot*, *aggadot*, the minutiae of the Law, the minutiae of the Scribes, *a fortiori* arguments and analogical arguments, calendrical computations and gematrias, the speech of the ministering angels, the speech of the demons, and the speech of palm-trees, fullers' parables and fox fables, a great thing and a small thing. "A great thing" is the Account of the Chariot [*ma'aseh merkabah*]. "A small thing" is the debates of Abbaye and Raba. ... Now, if the least of them was so great, how much more so was the greatest! They said of Jonathan ben Uzziel that when he would sit and occupy himself with the study of the Law, every bird that flew above him was immediately burnt.

This aggadic passage does not offer a clear proof for Maimonides' assertion that the Account of the Chariot is metaphysics and "the debates of Abbaye and Raba" are the 608 non-metaphysical commandments. There is no evidence in it at all concerning the identity of the Account of the Chariot. As for "the debates of Abbaye and Raba," there is some evidence in it indicating that they are *not* to be identified with the 608 non-metaphysical commandments; for since the rubrics "Mishnah," "Talmud," and "*halakhot*" would seem to designate those commandments, "the debates of Abbaye and Raba" would seem to designate something else, e.g., amoraic dialectical fireworks that would

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not impress a great tanna like Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai.⁴ Nonetheless, Maimonides' adroit interpretation of the passage has its own compelling force. His interpretation gives tannaitic authority to his own Aristotelian view concerning the relationship between metaphysics and the practical commandments.

III. Moses's Prophecy and Miriam's Leprosy

The "four differences" between Moses's unique prophecy and the prophecy of the other prophets are expounded by Maimonides in his Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to *Perek Helek*, 13 Principles of the Law, principle 7, and subsequently in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 7:6.⁵ The two passages are similar, and the latter reads in places like a Hebrew translation of the former. However, there are significant differences between them. One such difference concerns the interpretation of Numbers 12.

In the passage from the Introduction to *Perek Helek*, Maimonides lists the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy as the seventh of the thirteen Principles of the Law. He writes that Moses transcended his body and became "intellect alone," and God spoke with him "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8). The expression "mouth to mouth" is borrowed from God's rebuke to Aaron and Miriam after their "speaking against Moses" regarding the Cushite woman he had married (*ibid.*, 12:1-2). Maimonides

4 See Isadore Twersky, "Some Non-Halakic Aspects of the *Mishneh Torah*," in Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 112-13; *idem*, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 493-95. According to Twersky's survey of the medieval literature, the view that the "debates of Abbaye and Raba" refer to amoraic debates is the "consensual" or "standard" explanation, and Maimonides' interpretation is "unprecedented." Twersky, surprisingly, seems to endorse Maimonides' interpretation, when he lauds it as reflecting "a crushing literalism."

5 Cf. Maimonides, *Guide*, II, 45, p. 403.

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also cites God's previous words to Aaron and Miriam: "If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord do make Myself known to him in a vision [*mar'ah*], I do speak with him in a dream [*halom*]. Not so my servant Moses" (ibid., 12:6-7). He explains that all the other prophets prophesied in a vision or dream, but Moses's prophecy was without the intermediacy of the imagination. He does not attempt to explain the connection between the remarks by Aaron and Miriam regarding Moses's Cushite wife and God's dictum about the unique prophecy of Moses, and also does not attempt to explain Miriam's being punished with leprosy (ibid., 12:9-15).

In *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 7:6, Maimonides again stresses that Moses's prophecy was not by means of an intermediary, and similarly quotes God's words to Aaron and Miriam, "mouth to mouth I speak with him" (Num 12:8). He refers also to God's words to them, according to which Moses's prophecy, unlike that of the other prophets, was not "in a dream or in a vision" (cf. ibid., 12:7). However, he adds a new and important detail, and this detail explains the connection between the remarks by Aaron and Miriam regarding Moses's Cushite wife and God's dictum about the unique prophecy of Moses, and it also helps to explain Miriam's dramatic punishment.

The important new detail added by Maimonides in *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 7:6 is that Moses, unlike the other prophets, was compelled by his prophecy to separate himself from his wife. Maimonides explains Moses's special chastity by citing God's instructions to him: "Go say to them, 'Return ye to your tents.' But as for thee, stand thou here by Me" (Deut 5:27-28). All the other prophets, he comments, returned to their wives after prophesying, but Moses remained with God and did not return to his wife or to any manner of corporeality.⁶ Moses's skin, Maimonides adds, "sent forth beams" (cf. Exod 34:29).

⁶ See Michal Aharoni, "Between *Kedeshah* and *Mekuddeshet*" (Hebrew) (master's thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989), 77-79.

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God's charge to Moses, "But as for thee, stand thou here by Me," and Moses' description as having his skin send forth beams, are both mentioned later in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, introduction, in the passage about the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot quoted above.⁷

The theme of Miriam's leprosy is developed by Maimonides in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Tum'at Tsara'at* 16:10:

"Leprosy" [*tsara'at*] is a term predicated equivocally... Thus, the whiteness in a man's skin is called "leprosy"; the falling off of some hair from the head or the beard is called "leprosy"; and a change of color in garments or in houses is called "leprosy." Now this change in garments and in houses, which Scripture equivocally calls "leprosy," is not a natural phenomenon [*eno mi-minhago shel 'olam*], but was a sign and a wonder among the Israelites to warn them against slanderous speaking [*leshon ha-ra'*]. ...

On this matter the text of the Law admonishes: "Take heed in the plague of leprosy... Remember what the Lord thy God did unto Miriam by the way" [Deut 24:9]. That is to say, consider what befell Miriam the prophetess, who spoke against her brother, even though she was older than he and had nurtured him on her knees and put herself in jeopardy to save him from the sea. Now she did not speak in blame of him, but erred in that *she equated him with other prophets*... Nonetheless, she was immediately punished with leprosy. How much more then does this apply to wicked and foolish people who are profuse in speaking great and boastful things! Therefore, it is proper that he who would direct his way aright should keep far from their company...

This is the way of the company of the scornful and wicked. In the beginning, they multiply vain words... Then they go on to speak in blame of the righteous... Then they become accustomed to speak against the prophets and to discredit their words... Then they go on to speak against God and to deny the very root of religion [*koferim ba-ikkar*]...

⁷ Above, n. 2.

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But the conversation of the decent and the righteous in Israel is none other than words of the Law [*torah*] and words of wisdom [*hokhmah*].⁸

Miriam's sin, which brought upon her the punishment of leprosy, was, according to Maimonides, her equating Moses with the other prophets. In other words, she denied the seventh of Maimonides' thirteen Principles of the Law. The biblical text of course does not say expressly that Miriam equated Moses with the other prophets, but records only that she spoke with Aaron "against Moses" regarding his Cushite wife. Maimonides, however, is developing a widespread aggadic tradition, according to which Miriam gossiped with Aaron "against Moses," relating that he had separated himself from his wife.⁹ The connection between Moses's denying conjugal rights to his wife and Miriam's equating him with the other prophets is made explicitly in the following text in *Sifre Numbers*, 99:

And [Miriam and Aaron] said, "Hath not the Lord indeed spoken only with Moses? Hath He not spoken also with us?!" [Num 12:2]. "Did not He speak with the Patriarchs, and they did not separate themselves from being fruitful and multiplying! *Has he not spoken also with us*, and we did not separate ourselves from being fruitful and multiplying!"

Miriam did not acknowledge that Moses's purely intellectual prophecy was distinct from that of all the other prophets, including Aaron and herself, and consequently did not understand that his separation from all material things, including sex, was a corollary of his special prophecy.

In this exegetical tour de force, Maimonides has provided a fascinating new reading for Numbers 12, has given new meaning to the rabbinic aggadah concerning Miriam and Aaron's gossiping about

8 Cf. James A. Diamond, "Maimonides on Leprosy," *JQR* 96 (2006), 95-122.

9 *Tanḥuma* (ed. Buber), *Metsora*, 6, 10; *Sifre Numbers*, 99; and parallels.

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Moses's denying sex to his wife, and has provided the hitherto missing connection between this aggadah and Numbers 12:6-8. He has also secured additional scriptural support for his doctrine that Moses's prophecy was purely intellectual.

In insisting that Miriam "did not speak in blame" of Moses, Maimonides follows his midrashic sources.¹⁰ Miriam, we may assume, was sincerely concerned about her brother's marriage, and wanted only to help. However, Maimonides' accusation that she erred regarding the seventh Principle of the Law is grave. His subsequent comments about "the way of the company of the scornful and wicked," while not made in reference to her, bear an unmistakable insinuation. If Miriam "spoke against" Moses, denying his unique prophecy, she was but one step away from the denial of God.¹¹ It is difficult to overestimate the cardinal importance that the dogma of Moses's unique intellectual prophecy held for Maimonides.

IV. Conclusion

The three aggadic themes in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* discussed above all concern the *pardes*. The first two themes concerned the two subjects of the *pardes*: the Account of the Beginning (physics) and the Account of the Chariot (metaphysics). The third theme concerned the excellent human being who entered the *pardes*, mastered its subject matter, and prophesied. It was by virtue of his scientific prophecy that the Law was given.

With regard to each of the three themes, Maimonides took a rabbinic aggadah and developed it in a radical way. His creative aggadic

10 An *a fortiori* argument similar to Maimonides' is found in *Sifre Numbers* 99 and *Tanḥuma* (ed. Buber), *Metsora*, 6, 10.

11 See also the cryptic passage on Numbers 12:9 in *Guide*, I, 24, p. 54; and cf. I, 36, p. 82, where it is asserted that the phrase "God's wrath was kindled" is used only with respect to idolatry. Amazingly, at *Guide*, III, 51, pp. 627-28, Maimonides himself equates Miriam and Aaron with Moses!

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interpretations advanced his identification of the *pardes* with physics and metaphysics, and his portrayal of Moses's prophecy as purely intellectual. He added a new philosophical dimension to the aggadic motifs, and a new aggadic dimension to the philosophic motifs. Above all, he taught artistically and emphatically that the Law is founded on Reason.