

THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED

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*but the earth hath He given to the sons of man.*¹¹ I mean thereby that the deity alone fully knows the true reality, the nature, the substance, the form, the motions, and the causes of the heavens. But He has enabled man to have knowledge of what is beneath the heavens, for that is his world and his dwelling-place in which he has been placed and of which he himself is a part. This is the truth. For it is impossible for us to accede to the points starting from which conclusions may be drawn about the heavens; for the latter are too far away from us and too high in place and in rank. And even the general conclusion that may be drawn from them, namely, that they prove the existence of their Mover, is a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects.¹² And to fatigue the minds with notions that cannot be grasped by them and for the grasp of which they have no instrument, is a defect in one's inborn disposition or some sort of temptation. Let us then stop at a point that is within our capacity, and let us give over the things that cannot be grasped by reasoning¹³ to him who was reached by the mighty divine overflow so that it could be fittingly said of him: *With him do I speak mouth to mouth.*¹⁴ That is | the end of what I have to say about this question. It is possible that someone else may find a demonstration by means of which the true reality of what is obscure for me will become clear to him. The extreme predilection that I have for investigating the truth is evidenced by the fact that I have explicitly stated and reported my perplexity regarding these matters as well as by the fact that I have not heard nor do I know a demonstration as to anything concerning them.

CHAPTER 25

Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the *Torah* according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces

11. Ps. 115:16.

12. In Ibn Tibbon's translation the passage has a different meaning: "The general proof from them is that they indicate the existence of their Mover, but the knowledge of other matters concerning them cannot be reached by human intellects."

13. *qiyās*. 14. Num. 12:8.

or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.

Two causes are responsible for our not doing this or believing it. One of them is as follows. That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively, for it is known that such texts are of necessity fit for figurative interpretation. However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments. This is one cause.

The second cause is as follows. Our belief that the deity is not | a body destroys for us none of the foundations of the Law and does not give the lie to the claims of any prophet. The only objection to it is constituted by the fact that the ignorant think that this belief is contrary to the text; yet it is not contrary to it, as we have explained, but is intended by the text. On the other hand, the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it—that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything—destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out, unless—by God!—one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic internalists;¹ this, however, would result in some sort of crazy imaginings.

If, however, one believed in eternity according to the second opinion we have explained²—which is the opinion of Plato—according to which the heavens too are subject to generation and corruption, this opinion would not destroy the foundations of the Law and would be followed not by the lie being given to miracles, but by their becoming admissible. It would also be possible to interpret figuratively the texts in accordance with this opinion.

1. *ahl al-bāṭin*. In Arabic *bāṭin* may mean “the internal sense.” The Ismāʿīlī and similar sects are often designated as *ahl al-bāṭin*. An allegorical interpretation of the Qurʾān was part of their faith.

2. Cf. II 13.

And many obscure passages³ can be found in the texts of the *Torah* and others with which this opinion could be connected or rather by means of which it could be proved. However, no necessity could impel us to do this unless this opinion were demonstrated. In view of the fact that it has not been demonstrated, we shall not favor this opinion, nor shall we at all heed that other opinion, but rather shall take the texts according to their external sense and shall say: The Law has given us knowledge of a matter the grasp of which is not within our power, and the miracle attests to the correctness of our claims.

Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish. Thus it might be said: Why did God give prophetic revelation to this one and not to that? Why did | God give this Law to this particular nation, and why did He not legislate to the others? Why did He legislate at this particular time, and why did He not legislate before it or after? Why did He impose these commandments and these prohibitions? Why did He privilege the prophet with the miracles mentioned in relation to him and not with some others? What was God’s aim in giving this Law? Why did He not, if such was His purpose,⁴ put the accomplishment of the commandments and the nontransgression of the prohibitions into our nature? If this were said, the answer to all these questions would be that it would be said: He wanted it this way; or His wisdom required it this way. And just as He brought the world into existence, having the form it has, when He wanted to, without our knowing His will with regard to this or in what respect there was wisdom in His particularizing the forms of the world and the time of its creation—in the same way we do not know His will or the exigency of His wisdom that caused all the matters, about which questions have been posed above, to be particularized. If, however, someone says that the world is as it is in virtue of necessity, it would be a necessary obligation to ask all those questions; and there would be no way out of them except through a recourse to unseemly answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the external meanings of the Law with regard to which no intelligent man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their

3. It seems grammatically more correct to interpret the Arabic word “sh.b.h.” as being *shubah*, the plural of *shubha*, “an obscure passage,” rather than as *shibh*, a singular meaning “analogy.” Ibn Tibbon’s translation and that of Munk, which conforms to it, seem to be based on the second interpretation.

4. I.e., if He wished us to accomplish the commandments and not to transgress the prohibitions.

external meanings. It is then because of this that this opinion is shunned⁵ and that the lives of virtuous men have been and will be spent in investigating this question. For if creation in time were demonstrated—if only as Plato understands creation—all the overhasty⁶ claims made to us on this point by the philosophers would become void. In the same way, if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void, and a shift to other opinions would take place. I have thus explained to you that everything is bound up with this problem. Know this. |

CHAPTER 26

I have seen a statement of *Rabbi Eliezer the Great*, figuring in the celebrated *Chapters*¹ known as *Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer*, which is the strangest statement I have seen made by one who follows the Law of *Moses our Master*. Hear the text of the statement he made. He says:² *Wherefrom were the heavens created? From the light of His garment. He took some of it, stretched it like a cloth, and thus they were extending continually, as it is said: Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment. Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.*³ *Wherefrom was the earth created? From the snow under the throne of His glory. He took some of it and threw it, as it is said: For He saith to the snow, Be thou earth.*⁴ This is the text of the statement made there. Would that I knew what that *Sage* believed. Did he believe that it is impossible that something should come into being out of nothing and that there must necessarily be matter out of which that which is generated is produced? Did he for this reason seek to find *wherefrom were created* the heavens and the earth? However, whatever results from this answer, he ought to be asked: *Wherefrom was the light of His garment created? Wherefrom was the snow under the throne of glory created? Wherefrom was the throne of glory itself created?* If, however, he wished to signify by *the light of His garment* an uncreated thing and similarly by *the throne of glory* something uncreated, this would be a great incongruity. For he would have admitted thereby the eternity of the world, if only as it is

5. I.e., the affirmation of the eternity of the world a parte ante. 6. Or: incoherent.
 1. *Peraqim* in Hebrew. 2. Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer, III.
 3. Ps. 104:2. 4. Job 37:6.