

## MAIMONIDES AND AQUINAS AS INTERPRETERS

The Development of Philosophical, Biblical Exegesis

The quest for a systematic, coherent account of revelation began as soon as diverse existential experiences came into tension with the unique and seemingly univocal promise of revelation. Persecution and exile seemed to defy the fundamental principles of the Torah. The defeats, loss of kingdom, and constant humiliations suffered by the 'chosen people' at the hands of idol worshippers challenged not only the belief in the omnipotence and omniscience of God, but also the beliefs in creation, providence, and prophecy. The personal loving relationship between God and his people depicted in the early biblical stories required refinement by the post-exilic prophets, receiving its most comprehensive treatment in the Book of Job. Thus, the separation between the physical and spiritual ecumene necessitated intellectual reflection on the Bible and led to the first attempts at biblical exegesis.

Two major currents are evident in early Jewish biblical interpretation, Hellenistic-philosophical and rabbinic.<sup>30</sup> Despite great dissimilarities between them, both approaches manifest an absence of a unified doctrinal systematization and hence lead to no single accepted tradition.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, irrespective of whether or not Philo had exerted any philosophical influence on later Jewish thought, no such influence can be discerned in the biblical exegesis, prior to Maimonides. The absence of a systematic or philosophical unity evident in pre-Maimonidean interpretation, however, does not signify an anti-intellectual tendency in early Jewish thought. Rather, scholarly pursuit and the acquisition of knowledge were seen as the vehicle for human perfection as early as the pre-Maccabean period.<sup>32</sup> The polysemy of the Torah not only became an early commonplace of Jewish thought but also led directly to the concomitant truism regarding its hierarchical levels of meaning, accessible to progressive degrees of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, despite later attempts to separate radically between the letter of the Torah and its more profound layers of meaning and to legitimize this practice by reference to the revered scholars of the tradition,

the various levels of meaning are understood to be interrelated until the thirteenth century. In fact, the more speculatively inclined the interpreter was, the more concerned he<sup>34</sup> was with establishing a relation between the external and the internal levels of meaning, rather than with invalidating the former. Sa'adia Gaon, the tenth century Iraqi thinker composed works ranging from a philosophical commentary on creation, through a biblical dictionary and an Arabic translation of the Bible, to a work that develops principles of biblical interpretation in the light of reason.<sup>35</sup> Abraham Ibn 'Ezra, whose religious piety has been doubted and whose philosophical thought has been considered often to approach pantheism,<sup>36</sup> was also a cautious biblical commentator who, as exegete, commented on his text verse by verse and "limited his horizon to the text or to the immediate context, especially if his intention was, at least in principle, to make his text express what, in his opinion, it signified literally."<sup>37</sup>

The preceding brief overview of the Jewish tradition of biblical interpretation clearly suggests that, apart from the strictly legal teachings of the Torah and the Talmud of which the possible interpretations are limited, Maimonides inherits an exegetical tradition that is neither systematic nor dogmatic, but rather can be characterized as an attitude of *open* reverence to the text as a living historical tradition.<sup>38</sup> In his systematic explanations of Jewish teachings, both legal and philosophical, Maimonides' main concern is to establish the truth contained in the Torah through a clearer articulation, rather than to adhere reverentially to a word that is seemingly unfitting and, hence, may lead to perplexity. Just as the Sages openly and vigorously disagreed with one another in their interpretations of the Torah,<sup>39</sup> so Maimonides disagrees with authorities, both past and present, when he deems it necessary. Rather than demonstrating a radical break with a dogmatic tradition, the very fact of questioning, even in its most vehement expression, exhibits Maimonides' firm membership in the Jewish tradition.

Christian biblical exegesis can be said to originate with Christ's rebuke of Jewish literalism. The distinction between the law of the heart and the law of the members, which is repeated often in the New Testament<sup>40</sup> and is reinforced by the understanding of the Old Testament as a prefiguration of the New, led to a heightened interest in interpretation and necessitated its systematization, especially when faced with the Jewish denial of the validity of the new teachings. In addition, from its very inception, Christianity had to contend with the competing claims to universal truth of both Greek philosophy and the mystery cults, whose accounts seemed to rest upon spiritual principles similar to its own and whose possession of a physical ecumene supported their claims even if they belied their spiritual substance. Thus challenged by those who shared in its monotheism, on the one hand, and by those who seemed to share in its spiritual claims, on the other, Christianity had to develop rapidly an approach to interpretation that took both into account. It is not surprising, therefore, that

Christian biblical exegesis adopts philosophical language from the beginning.

Since its challenge to Judaism rested upon the distinction between the letter and the spirit of revelation, the first principle of Christian exegesis immediately called for an account of the relation between the two aspects of language as layers of meaning. Against its philosophical background, it was inevitable that the account of the relation between letter and spirit initially would be associated and then closely linked to the understanding of the relationship between body and soul. Given the Alexandrian, Neoplatonic roots of Christian biblical exegesis, the separation of the literal or carnal meaning from the spiritual resulted in the diminution of the value of the letter; just as the body was the necessary tomb of the soul from the confines of which it strove to be liberated, so the exegete strove to free the spirit of Scripture from its necessary literal garb. Although the letter was rarely discarded completely, its importance became evident progressively as Christian exegesis developed its own synthesis of rabbinic and philosophic (Philonic) interpretation.<sup>41</sup>

This development culminated with Augustine, who “gave the letter a concrete chronological reality which it had never had before. . . . Augustine accepted the historical truth of the letter more wholeheartedly than St. Jerome. We must believe in the fact; then and then only may we seek its spiritual meaning.”<sup>42</sup> The fact, however, must be understood in its historical context. When the context is changed, as in the case of customs, or when the letter seems to conflict with charity, the literal meaning must be discarded.<sup>43</sup> Augustine’s sensitivity to the nature of language, to the distinction between sign, signifier, and signified, led to a keen awareness of the immanent possibility of error and, hence, to a development of a language theory and a hermeneutic that not only dominated the Middle Ages, but also did not meet its equal until the twentieth century. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine clearly designated four levels of meaning—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical; he outlined the causes of error; he enumerated tools for their remedy; and finally, he set norms for instruction. For all that, Augustine’s sensitivity to language and his openness to non-Christian traditions did not extend to the Hebrew language of the Old Testament to which he preferred the Greek Septuagint.<sup>44</sup> It is noteworthy that Augustine’s instruction concerning the Hebrew language is the only one completely disregarded by later Christian exegetes.<sup>45</sup>

While St. Gregory’s exegesis embodied the teachings of Augustine, his emphasis on the moral and spiritual senses of the Bible set these as the focus for succeeding exegetes until the thirteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Although Augustine emphasized the importance, indeed necessity, of secular learning for interpreting the Bible, the decline of learning in the West limited the early medieval scholar to the few tools available to him, restricting the development of biblical exegesis. Abiding by another Augustinian dictum about the utility and immediate applicability of biblical wisdom and, as it was, closely associated with the monastic

schools, medieval biblical interpretation is *de facto* more Gregorian than Augustinian, with the letter of Scripture discarded more often than it is heeded. The renaissance of learning in the twelfth century that witnessed the revival of lay education also led to the separation between scholar and monk.<sup>47</sup> Greater sophistication led to the keen awareness that “[t]o despise the literal sense is to despise the whole of Scripture”<sup>48</sup> since the literal sense does not represent the word alone, but also its meaning without which no further explanation is possible. Notwithstanding the progressive systematization of interpretation and the limitations it placed upon possible excess, the moral and spiritual senses continued to be the focus of the exegete, whose understanding of God and the universe is still Augustinian and, hence, rests upon a fundamental separation of body and spirit. Only with the rediscovery of Aristotle can Christian biblical exegesis overcome the distrust of the letter. The essential relations between body and soul, one of the principles of Aristotelian philosophy, and the impossibility of human knowledge apart from the sensible universe which it teaches made possible a systematic philosophical interpretation of the Bible that could reunite its letter with its spirit.<sup>49</sup>

Although Aquinas is heir to a tradition of interpretation more systematic and more defined than Maimonides’, Beryl Smalley’s *Study of the Bible* makes abundantly clear that it is not a rigidly fixed tradition. Despite the emphasis on the spiritual meaning of Scripture, the Christian tradition before Aquinas is greatly varied, with no two writers manifesting full agreement except on fundamental doctrinal decrees. Consequently, like Maimonides, Aquinas heeds the letter of the tradition only when he deems it to be the best and clearest expression of the truth contained in the Bible. And it is precisely in this practice that he is also following the tradition. Rather than a dogmatic adherence to authority, Aquinas’ exegesis is reverential to its spirit, that is, to the pursuit of truth.<sup>50</sup> Following Augustine’s teachings, Aquinas fully avails himself of secular knowledge and puts it at the service of Scripture, not only because he wishes to exploit philosophy, but especially because he believes in the fundamental unity of truth.

#### Maimonides’ and Aquinas’ Approaches to Interpretation

The voice is Plato’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Aristotle.

My paraphrase of Genesis 27:22 is an abbreviated description of both the ‘method’ and substance of Maimonides’ and Aquinas’ approach to interpretation. Since truth is one and error the cause of multiplicity,<sup>51</sup> since language and comprehension are historically conditioned, and since the concurrence between sign, signifier, and signified is problematic, it is both fitting and desir-

able to combine whatever available tools there are in order better to understand the singular truth. Consequently, both Maimonides and Aquinas perceive a consonance of ends, that is, an essential compatibility, not only between Plato and Aristotle, but also between philosophy and revelation.

Whereas Smalley claimed that the Aristotelian influence on biblical study and its consequent recognition of theology as a speculative science resulted in a desirable liberation of theology from exegesis and vice versa,<sup>52</sup> it seems to me that this recognition changed these disciplines and modified their relations rather than radically separated them. Moreover, it seems to me that, in the case of both Maimonides and Aquinas, we cannot and ought not draw rigid boundaries delimiting their individual writings or subjects. Both Maimonides and Aquinas can be viewed as examples par excellence of medieval philosophical exegesis precisely because they combined the best tools of the exegete, the philosopher, and the theologian.<sup>53</sup>

The importance of the intimate relations between the fitting (*conveniens*) modes of interpretation and understanding for both Maimonides and Aquinas cannot be exaggerated.<sup>54</sup> Both thinkers preface every single work with a statement designating its purpose, its audience, and above all, the proper procedure required by the subject matter in general; both preface new subjects within each work; and each dedicates a section of his *magnum opus* to the question of interpretation.<sup>55</sup> Had many of their interpreters been as careful when reading them, most of the controversies surrounding their thought would not have seen the light of day. Likewise, as will become clearer in the discussion of Job in the following chapter, paying closer attention to their letter can resolve many seeming disagreements, both methodological and substantial, between Maimonides and Aquinas and consequently can facilitate comparative studies of their thought.<sup>56</sup>

Two major, closely related, broad questions merit close attention when focusing upon Maimonides' and Aquinas' writings as interpretations, namely, the nature of individual expositions and the relations between distinct works. The general tendency in Maimonidean scholarship has been to distinguish radically between his 'legalistic exoteric' works and the 'esoteric' *Guide of the Perplexed*, and in the latter work, the exoteric from the esoteric layers of meaning, especially in those subjects designated by him as secrets of the Torah.<sup>57</sup> In fact, reflecting this radical division, Maimonidean scholarship is polarized to such an extent that the scholars at each extreme often seem to be discussing two different thinkers. At one end are those scholars, who, themselves unable to harmonize faith and reason, project their skepticism onto Maimonides and read him as a prudent dissimulator of his true opinions.<sup>58</sup> Those maintaining this position often read Maimonides as an Aristotelian philosopher in all realms except for political philosophy, where he is understood to follow al-Farabi's Plato.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, apart from *The Treatise on [the Art of] Logic*, a very

early work that is also his least original, they do not consider any of Maimonides' works to be properly philosophical, the *Guide* being a theological work and thus dialectical rather than demonstrative.<sup>60</sup> At the other end are scholars whose respect for the master is so great as to diminish seeming inconsistencies in Maimonides' writings by justifying a problematic position as, in fact, consistent with a traditional interpretation.<sup>61</sup> The graduated middle in Maimonidean scholarship is occupied primarily by mitigated versions of the two positions outlined above and by scholars evaluating Maimonides' thought through a Neo-Kantian lense,<sup>62</sup> with the notable exception of those scholars who attempt to read Maimonides with as little 'prejudice' as possible.<sup>63</sup> It is hardly surprising that both polarized positions often agree that there are two Maimonides, a theologian and a philosopher: the former Maimonides represents the 'we' of the tradition, the latter upholds the 'I' of the philosopher that is expressed rarely, and always in a veiled form, precisely because the 'I' and the 'We' positions often conflict.<sup>64</sup> Nor is it surprising that those scholars attempting to withhold preconceptions, or cognizant of their 'biases', see Maimonides' works as complementary rather than contradictory, although, at times, 'falling short' of the philosophical consistency and rigor promised by him.<sup>65</sup>

The diversity of readings encapsulated above is neither unwarranted nor readily resolvable. The most controverted subjects, those designated by Maimonides as secrets of the Torah, are also those subjects exceeding demonstrative reasoning, according to him.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Maimonides does not elaborate a systematic theory of knowledge (let alone an epistemology) by means of which the interpreter can develop a comprehensive account adequate for bridging knowledge reached by demonstration and revealed knowledge without engaging in extensive interpretation. Consequently, the interpreter's philosophical 'biases' cannot be left out of the interpretation entirely.

Maimonides, in contradistinction to his interpreters, describes the relation between the exoteric and the esoteric layers of meaning and, hence, of interpretation as that of an apple of gold to the filigreed casing protecting it and insists not only that revealed non-demonstrative knowledge is true and that some revealed knowledge is superior to the philosophic, but also that demonstrative reasoning is a prerequisite for prophetic knowledge. In addition to his discussion of interpretation in the *Guide*, the content of Maimonides' other writings gives the lie to an understanding of Maimonides as a prudent writer of fiction. A brief look at the 'Book of Knowledge', the Preface to his most legalistic (hence 'exoteric') *Mishneh Torah*,<sup>67</sup> either should dissipate such a radical distinction among his works or, indeed, lead to dangerous perplexity. Under principles of the Torah, Maimonides discusses not only the unity, the simplicity, and the incorporeality of God, but also composition, the four elements, the soul as the human form, the spheres, and the relation between the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot. Admittedly, the discussion of each



topic is brief, pre-philosophical or propaedeutic; nevertheless, no subject is concealed, notwithstanding its difficulties. Consequently, it seems to me that by heeding Maimonides' letter as well as his spirit, by attempting to understand and uphold the *intentio auctoris*, and by granting a coherence to the latter, if not always to the former, it is possible to discover a multifaceted account of knowledge consistent with Maimonides' thought that can reconcile apparent contradictions, understand real ones and can, in fact, harmonize two modes of cognition. As will become evident in the following chapters, Maimonides' account of providence affords the starting point for such an attempt.

Although the terminology differs, Thomistic scholarship manifests a tendency to a twofold division similar to the one found in Maimonidean scholarship. That is, the *Summa Theologiae*, especially I<sup>a</sup> Pars and I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, and the commentaries on Aristotle are the texts upon which the philosophers focus, whereas the biblical commentaries are seen as the almost exclusive domain of the theologians;<sup>68</sup> the philosophers interpreting Aquinas as a Christian Aristotelian, the theologians primarily as a Christian Neoplatonist.<sup>69</sup> In addition, certain works, especially commentaries such as *De Divinis Nominibus* and *De Hebdomadibus*, are neglected almost entirely because they do not lend themselves easily to classifications within either disciplinary approach since, although they are primarily philosophical, they are also clearly Neoplatonic.<sup>70</sup> Given these tendencies to divide Aquinas' writings, it is not surprising that Thomistic scholars generally can be distinguished into those who are predominantly Aristotelian and 'metaphysicians' who recognize Neoplatonic elements in Aquinas' thought. In contradistinction, Aquinas recalls his biblical commentaries as often as he refers to the Philosopher, the *Platonici*, and so on.<sup>71</sup>

An additional difficulty arising out of Aquinas' writings and leading to conflicting interpretations surrounds the status of the commentary. The general question raised is whether the commentator's own thought ever is evident in his expositions on the thoughts of others. This question becomes more critical when the text commented upon is a revealed text, especially when Aquinas designates the exposition as a literal one, as he does in the case of Job. Those scholars who claim that the expositor's own voice cannot be discerned in commentaries thereby indirectly also judge the work philosophically insignificant and delimit its sphere of interest to historical evidence. In judging the expositor to function only as a glossator or a literal translator in the strictly Modern, post-Reformation sense, they also contradistinguish the works into distinct, unrelated disciplines.<sup>72</sup> However, the opinion that an exposition is more than merely a translation into present day idiom is not devoid of difficulties. For if one accepts the validity of the claim that an expositor, in this case Aquinas, *de facto*, "oversteps the explanation of the word of God" for spiritual purposes, despite his insistence that "the literal sense alone be adhered to,"<sup>73</sup> it remains to be asked what "spiritual purpose" can be in tension with the "word of God,"

what criteria can be used to distinguish the “word” and “spirit” of divine revelation when Aquinas denies such a radical distinction, except one imposed by the interpreter?<sup>74</sup>

The resolution of these problems can be found first by heeding Aquinas’ letter, second by paying closer attention to historical evidence, and finally by interpreting his works according to his own instructions. First, I shall address the former questions since these can be resolved by direct evidence and without interpretation; subsequently I shall treat the question of interpretation in the following section, when outlining Maimonides’ and Aquinas’ approaches.

Both in the *Summa* and in *Quodlibet* VII Aquinas states clearly that the three senses distinct from the literal are all contained within the literal sense and are dependent upon it.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, he maintains that the literal sense does not manifest a correspondence between the signifier and the object signified, but rather is a sign of the latter’s substance, “[f]or when scripture designates the arm of God, the literal sense is not that there is a corporeal member of this kind in God, but that which is signified by this member, namely, the operative power.”<sup>76</sup> The testimony of William of Tocco, repeated by Bernard Gui in the *Vitae Sancti Thomae de Aquino*, both provides historical evidence supporting and explaining Aquinas’ exegetical procedure and brings his approach to exposition into the sharpest focus: “He wrote . . . on Job *ad litteram* which no doctor had attempted to explain literally on account of the profundity of the literal sense which no one was able to discover.”<sup>77</sup> Both the text quoted from the *Summa* and Aquinas’ witness suffice to overcome the gulf between the aforementioned positions. The inadequacy of language for representing incorporeal concepts and objects necessitates the explanation of the full range of meanings contained in the letter of the Bible.<sup>78</sup>

### Interpretation as a Philosophical Practice<sup>79</sup>

Prior to an examination of Maimonides’ and Aquinas’ specific approach to interpretation, a few preliminary remarks are called for in order to guard against interpreting the terminology that this inquiry requires according to its modern connotation.

As Gadamer points out, the conceptual history of hermeneutics makes evident that with respect to knowledge, the opposition between theory and practice is an odd modern phenomenon, “for the classical opposition ultimately was a contrast within knowledge, not an opposition between science and its application.”<sup>80</sup> For Aristotle, whose definition of philosophy is accepted generally by both Maimonides and Aquinas, both theoretical and practical philosophy involve, indeed are, practice. Only with the modern conflation of practice with production is practice no longer understood as the actualization of life, since production is defined by set *necessary* rules, the application of which



requires only the acquisition of a skill. However, for premodern philosophers, in contradistinction to animal life, which is actualized by an externally determined necessity, the actualization of human life is characterized by the choice and freedom consequent upon understanding or the intrinsically determined human act. When this definition is applied to interpretation, and hermeneutics is understood to belong to philosophical practice, as it is by Maimonides and Aquinas, it cannot connote simply the application of set rules to a clearly defined topic. Rather, it implies judgment about the fittingness of general principles and their subsequent, continuous adaptation to particular contexts that are not immediately evident. Moreover, since the specific context is not immediately apparent, the principles informing philosophical interpretation themselves are the result of theoretical practice. When the given text is a commentary on another difficult text, in particular a biblical one, great caution must be exercised by the modern reader. We cannot assume that we can understand a given text of either Maimonides or Aquinas by a direct application of the general set of rules articulated in their *magna opera*, nor by the application of a combination of those rules with the rules specific to the topic under consideration. Least of all can we assume, if we heed either thinker, that a one-to-one correspondence between rules and text can ever be found. Rather, we must accept that, in each instance of articulation, distinct judgments occurred that are implicit in the text. Consequently, prior to unraveling the range of meanings embodied in a given articulation, we must attempt to understand the nature of the judgment involved in its composition. Indeterminate as such an approach may be, the task is not as awesome as it initially seems. First and foremost, the fundamental, or more precisely guiding, principles informing medieval philosophy are defined explicitly; Maimonides and Aquinas were no exception to the general rule. Second, both thinkers are quite explicit when their interpretation of general principles departs from those of the respective traditions by which they are informed.<sup>81</sup> Hence, the interpretation of these texts demands of the modern reader the suspension not so much of judgment as of disbelief. The last 'rule' is important when dealing with any text written in an idiom either occluded by the progressive "Westernization" of philosophy or, in the West, no longer in practice; it is especially relevant when dealing with concepts "discredited" by modern science and discarded by philosophy, as is the case with many biblical ideas, if understood literally. Rather than providing their readers with the definitive doctrine, both Maimonides and Aquinas are instructing them by example in the practice of interpretation as a philosophical activity.

The Preface to the *Guide* is Maimonides' *apologia* for composing the work. As such, it is an occasion for the author not only to justify the need for the work, delimit its scope, designate its audience, and so forth, but most important, it allows him to express his own opinions as yet unhindered by the limits of a given subject. The Preface is written as a personal communication to an

absent student whom Maimonides had instructed previously, in person, and hence whose preparation for advanced instruction he could assess, as well as for the few other students who meet the same requirements.<sup>82</sup> Although no rules are outlined in the Preface, by explicitly stating the conditions prerequisite to the study of the *Guide*, Maimonides not only delimits its audience clearly and informs the generic 'student' about the nature of the work, he also counsels caution. In fact, Maimonides clearly criticizes undue haste and disordered procedure, thereby indirectly rebuking Joseph and those who have taught him without due preparation. "As I also saw, you had already acquired some smattering of this subject from people other than myself; you were *perplexed*, as stupefaction had come over you; your *noble* soul demanded of you to *find out acceptable words*."<sup>83</sup>

However, responsibility for Joseph's perplexity cannot be attributed to his other tutors and to him in an equal measure. Whereas they are not said to possess noble qualities, Joseph is said to possess a noble soul, a soul capable of attaining wisdom by nature. Having been able to discern the impropriety or undesirable nature of the *words* used to instruct him, Joseph's noble soul as well as Maimonides' repeated counsel should have curbed his unruly desire for knowledge.<sup>84</sup> "Yet I did not cease dissuading you from this and enjoining upon you to approach matters in an orderly manner. My purpose in this was that the truth should be established in your mind according to the proper methods and that certainty should not come to you by accident."<sup>85</sup>

From Maimonides' address to Joseph as rabbi,<sup>86</sup> as well as from statements about his piety, we learn that, prior to seeking Maimonides' help, he has studied the Torah and the Talmud and hence already had attained the rank of 'jurist' and held true opinions on the basis of authority.<sup>87</sup> We also learn that he has studied the *art* of Kalam. In itself, this preparation would not have qualified him for further study, had he not exhibited in addition a strong desire and longing for speculative knowledge. Moreover, according to Maimonides, the strong desire for knowledge is not necessarily proportionate to the capacity for it and, hence, must be tested through instruction in the preliminaries to the natural sciences, that is, in mathematics. Although guidance was necessary in the preliminary stages of study, once the capacity proved to be equal to the task, the student could be left to pursue it alone, "knowing where [he] would end."<sup>88</sup> Having established the student's capacity for mathematics, astronomy, and logic, Maimonides cautiously began to reveal to him the secrets of the prophetic books by means of "certain flashes" and "certain indications." However, despite Joseph's desire, Maimonides did not judge these preliminaries to suffice for full instruction in divine subjects nor for the determination of the nature of the art of Kalam. The order of study outlined thus far, the progressive mastery of these subjects, and a strong desire for additional knowledge are clearly the 'tools' prerequisite to reading

the *Guide*; however, these are not the principal reasons for its composition, a specific type of perplexity is.

In the Preface, Maimonides indicates but does not elaborate upon the causes of perplexity. From his remarks about the preliminary nature of mathematics and from his certainty about its conclusions we know that by themselves the natural sciences do not lead to dangerous doubt. These subjects require *merely* the acquisition of an art, a skill, in order to ensure their proper pursuit. We also learn from the Preface that inordinate haste, untimely pursuit, and improper instruction in divine matters are the causes of that type of perplexity which is the principle reason for the composition of the *Guide*. Maimonides also alludes to a relation between the intentions and the methods of the Mutakallimun and the perplexity of the student. This type of perplexity originates in the inquiry whether their methods are demonstrative and what the nature of their *art* is. The art of Kalam, then, is distinct from the arts propaedeutic to philosophy.

The Preface is the occasion to pose the problems, it is not the appropriate context, however, for their resolution. In a manner of speaking, the entire *Guide* is a preparation for the resolution of questions set out in the Preface, as well as the active acquisition of the virtue required for the continued pursuit of these and similar questions.<sup>89</sup> Only upon reading, and rereading the text does one become aware of the fact that the central or most difficult problem posited in the Preface is also the problem least apparent. The relative obscurity of the problem cannot be attributed to prudent intent at dissimulation; rather it exhibits responsible pedagogical caution. Since the intended audience of the *Guide* are the perplexed who are potentially, rather than actually wise, and who are seeking certainty, questioning the limitations not only of the demonstrative methods, but especially of all language as well as of natural human reason, could lead only to greater perplexity and hinder the actualization of any degree of knowledge. Prior to raising these type of doubts in the minds of the perplexed, the prudent teacher both begins to dissolve minor doubts and establishes primary principles for inquiry into more obscure subjects. The introduction to Book 1 and the lexicographical chapters constitute the preparatory stages for overcoming the perplexity consequent upon the first confrontation between philosophy and revelation through recourse to the teachings of both traditions.

The opening lines of the Introduction immediately identify the origin of perplexity as the radical ambiguity of language and thereby indicate that all instances of perplexity are also instances of error about language.<sup>90</sup> The opening statement is thus also an indication that adherence to the letter of the *Guide* will lead to error. That is, the opening statement discloses that the practice of interpretation can never be separated from "theoretical philosophy," if *theory* is to remain philosophical. Having succinctly cautioned the reader, Maimonides outlines first the two particular reasons that lead to perplexity and hence neces-

sitated the composition of the treatise, refines his previous definitions of the audience, and defines the nature of their perplexity. Second, he exemplifies the types of difficulties encountered in parables simultaneously as he carefully uses the parables themselves for their explication. Third, he enumerates the seven causes of contradictory statements found in books. In addition to reiterating the principles of study outlined in the Preface, the Introduction is essentially a justification for the seemingly disordered nature of the *Guide*. Given the ambiguous nature of language in general and of prophetic speech in particular and given the necessarily parabolic form of prophecy, the pious, philosophically apt person initially perceives a contradiction between the teachings of philosophy and the teachings of the Torah taken in their literal sense, a contradiction that casts doubt upon the truth of both. Lacking proper guidance, the potentially perfect person is forced to abandon the teachings of either discipline, to become skeptical, and thereby, forsake the possibility of actual perfection or understanding. According to Maimonides, aiding even one such human being in times of spiritual decay is an act performed for the sake of Heaven.

Since the perplexity in question occurs only to the potentially wise, the resolution of apparent difficulties must proceed in a manner proportionate to their intellectual capacity. However, since the vulgar may chance upon the book, it is necessary to proceed with greater caution than had the instruction taken place in private; faced with 'strange' notions, their inability to withstand ambiguities as well as to recognize their ignorance may be detrimental to *them*.<sup>91</sup> Simultaneously however, when caution is exercised, when great care is taken with language, the vulgar too will benefit from the composition.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, since the perplexity arises out of the nature of biblical speech and since biblical speech does not proceed *more geometrico*, the *Guide* will resolve difficulties best by proceeding in a similar manner. This "method" is pedagogically most expedient both because it follows biblical prudence, which counsels great caution in disclosing divine matters, and because it follows philosophical prudence, which teaches by developing the capacity for the pursuit in the student, rather than indoctrinating true opinion.

Having outlined first the extent of the difficulties, and having explained that much of the truth contained in prophecy cannot be expressed clearly by recourse to the language and methods of the natural sciences, Maimonides next mentions the limitations of human reason for apprehending divine science. At the same time, he assures the reader that, not only are divine and natural science consonant, but also true knowledge of the former is subsequent to and consequent upon knowledge of the latter. Thus, although by means of revelation the believer may possess true opinions about divine subjects, nevertheless he or she can understand them only after gaining knowledge of natural science. That is why God decreed that the Bible commence with the Account of the Beginning, and the philosophers begin their study with physics.

In the last section of the Introduction Maimonides enumerates seven causes for contradictions (and/or apparent contradictions) found in all books, briefly explains their causes, and classifies them according to their literary loci

1. Numerous differing opinions are cited without explicit mention of their varied sources. This type of contradiction occurs in the Mishnah, the Baraitoth, and the Talmud.
2. The author cites two of his own opinions despite the fact that the latter opinion has superseded the former. This type of contradiction occurs in the Talmud.
3. Statements that should be understood in their internal sense are taken literally. This type of contradiction occurs in the prophetic books.
4. A stipulation has not been stated explicitly in its logically appropriate place out of some *necessity*. This type of contradiction also occurs in the prophetic books and, consequently, together with the third cause it constitutes the stated purpose of the Introduction.
5. Given that understanding proceeds from sensible apprehension to the intelligible, pedagogical *necessity* dictates that subjects should be taught in an ordered manner, each stage requiring a distinct mode of discourse and distinct language. This type of contradiction occurs in the books of the philosophers or, rather, those who know the truth.
6. Carelessness of the writer. This type of contradiction is the most frequent, it is found in most texts and commentaries excluding the ones mentioned previously, but including some of the Midrashim and the Haggadah.
7. In speaking about very obscure matters it is *necessary* to conceal some parts and 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 the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.<sup>93</sup> This type of contradiction also occurs in the Midrashim and the Haggadah.

Whereas the Sages, according to Maimonides, sought to resolve contradictions found among commandments and prohibitions that concern only conduct, Maimonides' purpose is to identify verses that seem to be in conflict with commonly held opinions and beliefs. Whereas the Sages examined univocal proscriptions, Maimonides examines ambiguous teachings. Moreover, whereas the Sages were concerned with moral conduct that, as will become evident, does not pertain directly to the final human end—intellectual perfection—Maimonides is concerned with true or false opinions and beliefs about speculative subjects or subject that pertain to final perfection and belong to the "mysteries of the Torah."<sup>94</sup>

The order in which Maimonides posits the deliberate causes of contradictions exhibits both a close relationship between them and a progressive development from simple general statements to more specifically complex ones. Properly speaking, these causes do not constitute four distinct causes of contradictions as such, but rather indicate different aspects of two causes that lead to two types of contradictions underlying perplexity.

The third cause simply draws attention to the general nature of biblical discourse that, excluding the strictly legal and historical books, uses metaphor, similitude, and parable; its purpose is to express a simple general statement of fact, namely, that prophetic discourse is comprised of several layers of ambiguous meaning. These may constitute either real contradictions or contrarities.

The explanation of non-univocal discourse begins with the enumeration of the fourth cause where it is stated that implicit speech and suppressed premises are the result of some yet to be unspecified necessity.<sup>95</sup> Only with the fifth and seventh causes does Maimonides identify the nature of the necessities to be both pedagogical and epistemic. With respect to the fifth cause, it is important to note that, although Maimonides does not identify it explicitly or implicitly as a cause of contradictions present in the Bible and despite its obvious Aristotelian origin,<sup>96</sup> his statement that it occurs in the books of "those who know the truth" as well as the pedagogical and epistemic import of the necessity pertaining to the fifth cause, justify the conclusion that it can be found in prophetic discourse. For prophecy, in Maimonides' view, is the paradigmatic mode of knowing, a knowledge that is subsequent and superior to the philosophical. Whereas the fifth cause points to the pedagogical necessity that pertains to a single audience, the seventh, which presupposes all the previous reasons for contradictory statements, directly addresses the necessity for deliberate concealment from the vulgar. Thus, the two types of closely related necessities that emerge from Maimonides' enumeration are (1) an internal one that is consequent upon the obscure nature of the subject and (2) an external one that is the result of the intellectual capacity of the audience. Likewise, there emerge two types of contradictions, one real and the other apparent, that do not correspond directly to the necessities but rather result from both simultaneously, only in different degrees.

Real contradictions occur when the subject matter is so obscure that it not only exceeds demonstrative reasoning, but also does not permit consistent accounts among the different orders of discourse about that subject nor in some cases any coherent account even within a single order. The most glaring examples of real contradictions directly addressed in the *Guide* are found in Maimonides' investigations of questions such as (a) the origin of the universe, (b) prime matter, and (c) divine attributes, all of which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.



Real contradictions are the ones outlined in the seventh cause, where the subject matter is described as *very* obscure. Although apparent contradictions, too, result from the obscurity of the subject matter, they can be resolved with progressive understanding. Unlike real contradictions, however, the resolution of apparent contradictions is possible only because the conclusions of one order of discourse serve as the primary premises for the following one.<sup>97</sup> Examples of apparent contradictions can be found in different discussions<sup>98</sup> about distinct faculties of the composite human soul, such as the material and the actual intellect, and are abundant in all discussions of principles that can serve as both physical and metaphysical premises. These contradictions are addressed in the third, fourth, and fifth causes.

Prior to addressing the question whether the seventh cause of contradiction occurs in the prophetic books, and Maimonides' reluctance to attribute it to them, it is important to underline the fact that Maimonides' theory of biblical language is a consequence of his theory of cognition, a theory that presupposes a distinction so great between the intellectual capacities of the vulgar and those of the elite as to require something akin to an ontological difference. He also states explicitly that the *Guide* was written exclusively for the elite although it was written in such a way as to preclude the possibility of vulgar understanding of the mysteries of the Torah, one of which, as pointed out above, is the contradictory nature of some prophetic parables. It is for the latter reason that the *Guide* includes contradictions of the seventh type, those deliberately intended to conceal.<sup>99</sup>

In the concluding section of the Introduction, where he identifies the correspondence between contradictions and the books in which they are to be found, Maimonides seems to contradict an assertion made in a preceding section about prophetic parables. Whereas in the former he states: "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 not be a matter of conjecture,"<sup>100</sup> in the latter he distinguishes between two types of prophetic parables:

In some of these parables each word has a meaning, while in others the parable as a whole indicates the whole of the intended meaning. In such a parable very many words are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent or to conceal further the intended meaning; hence the speech proceeds in such a way as to accord with everything required by the parable's external meaning.<sup>101</sup>

The second type of parable seems to satisfy the conditions specified in the seventh cause; the parable is expressed in such a manner as to simultaneously

provide a coherent exoteric account, and thus communicate a true opinion about the subject, and to conceal the esoteric meaning “by all means.” In both instances, Maimonides does not suggest that there is no real conflict either between the esoteric and exoteric account or between one parable and another. However, as will become evident, this contradiction, too, may be only apparent. Above all, in both statements, by drawing attention to the great difficulty inherent in understanding biblical parables, Maimonides cautions against hasty interpretations and conjectural classification.

Since the enumeration of the deliberate contradictions clearly indicates that the purpose of many of them is not concealment, two related questions arise: (1) whether or not all deliberate acts of concealment are intended to hide real contradictions, be they biblical or philosophical, and (2) whether real contradictions reflect two conflicting accounts of reality so that the true philosophical one ought not be revealed. The latter question is especially significant to Maimonides’ “negative theology” since biblical discourse not only employs positive attributes in general, but also predicates corporeal and anthropomorphic attributes of God. Consequently, Maimonides’ choice of a radical *via negativa* is either consequent upon philosophical reflection upon the biblical narrative itself or its outright rejection. From some of my previous comments, it should be evident that I do not think that this is the case. It seems to me that Maimonides suggests that neither do all instances of concealment hide real contradictions nor do real contradictions primarily reflect the notorious conflict between philosophy and revelation. Rather, the instances of real conflicts between philosophy and revelation, all of which are reducible to the difference between understanding of the “ultimate form”<sup>102</sup> of the universe as the Creator God and as the Aristotelian first cause, are reflections of the limitations of natural human reason to apprehend certain metaphysical truths. On the other hand, the real contradictions occurring within the Bible and the *Guide* are manifestations of both the limits of natural reason and the limitations of language to adequately account for the prophetic apprehension of these truths as well as for differences between degrees of prophetic perfection.<sup>103</sup> It should be noted here that some philosophical discourses, especially Neoplatonic ones, should probably be included within the category of the prophetic. In other words, at least with respect to metaphysical discourses that directly address the divinity, the real contradictions between philosophy and revelation are found in the books of the Philosopher par excellence, whom, I think, Maimonides considered to manifest the perfection of natural reason, but no more. Aristotle’s status as the paradigm of natural perfection only is significant not only with respect to his *Metaphysics*, but also in relation to his *Physics* since, according to Maimonides, the impossibility of providing a clear exposition extends even to the principles of natural science. of which the true reality cannot be deduced from their composite physical modes of existence.<sup>104</sup>

The major principle of interpretation to be derived from the Preface and the Introduction, and repeated throughout the *Guide*, also exhibits Maimonides' debt to Aristotle. Following Aristotle's *dictum* that "it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits,"<sup>105</sup> Maimonides does not seek demonstrative proofs where these are inappropriate; namely, in divine science and in subjects the principles of which are derived therefrom. In a manner of speaking, Maimonides interprets Aristotle's *dictum* to signify that philosophical interpretation begins where demonstration ends. He states that, excluding ignoramuses, no one disagrees about truths known through demonstration. Rather, the less the subject admits of demonstration, the greater the disagreement. "The things about which there is this perplexity are very numerous in divine matters, few in matters pertaining to natural science, and non-existent in matters pertaining to mathematics."<sup>106</sup> Throughout the *Guide*, when he attempts to interpret subjects that cannot be explained by means of demonstration, Maimonides appeals to two different criteria of knowledge. First, that contrary opinions should be posited as hypotheses to be accepted or rejected by recourse to the type of doubts attached to them.<sup>107</sup> Second, with respect to opinions contrary to the foundations of the Torah, the authority of revelation, especially the prophecy of Moses and Abraham, ought to be accepted.<sup>108</sup> In a context where oppositions occur between the philosophic and the revealed understanding of creation, Maimonides refers to Aristotle as "prince of the philosophers," whereas the prophets are depicted as "the pillars of the well being of the human species."<sup>109</sup> However, the criteria for judging whether an account is true are set neither by authority nor by the number of doubts attaching to an opinion, but rather by the degree of its congruence with what exists. Consequently, it seems that Maimonides is evaluating the degree of knowledge ensuing from non-demonstrative explanations, prophetic or philosophic, according as they conform to what exists, that is, to knowledge gained from the study of natural science, a knowledge that includes a recognition of its limits.<sup>110</sup> These criteria for establishing truth posit not so much the superiority of revealed knowledge to philosophic knowledge or vice versa, as their respective spheres.<sup>111</sup> More significant for us, it sets up a real relation between them as two modes of cognition that can be evaluated without revelation and thus resolve the tensions, and of course false perplexity, between them. Consequently, it can be maintained that revealed knowledge, like the Torah, "although it is not natural, enters into what is natural."<sup>112</sup>

Maimonides never abandons the "principles" outlined in the Preface and Introduction. However, it cannot be overemphasized that these are general guidelines only; they do not constitute a method but rather manifest the virtue of interpretation and, hence, are adapted in a fitting way to the text and the context.

If Maimonides' style of writing is very complex, at times too complex, ambiguous and inelegant, and if inadvertently it can promote perplexity, rather than resolve or explain it, Aquinas' style is 'deceptively' simple and consequently may lead the reader to interpreting his thought with less rigor than it requires. A clearer exposition of difficult texts, such as *De Hebdomadibus* and *De Divinis Nominibus*, is hard to conceive. At the same time, however, it is as difficult to understand how Aquinas was able to extract from the text the coherent interpretation that he puts forth. In the light of *De Divinis Nominibus*, Chenu's conclusion that Aquinas, in fact, appropriates as his own the texts upon which he comments is far more plausible than O'Reilly's.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, Aquinas' Prefaces, both to individual works and to each topic, in themselves, do not suffice for deriving his methodological principles since, apart from general guidelines, he derives the appropriate principles from the specific text and context. Consequently, the tendency evident in Thomistic scholarship to divide the works, and the overconcentration on the *Summa Theologiae*, can result in erroneous, because partial, interpretations of Aquinas' thought. Notwithstanding, given the sheer volume and diverse nature of Aquinas' writings, the *Summa* provides the best starting point for determining the nature of Aquinas' interpretation, both because it is a mature work and because it attempts to address methodologically most of the problems encountered in earlier works. As such, the *Summa* can outline diverse positions on given disputed questions, draw upon conclusions reached in previous comprehensive discussions of these questions and thereby, refer the readers to these contexts. Beginning with the principles derived from the *Summa*, supplementing them with a number of Prefaces from diverse works, and briefly analyzing their application in distinct contexts, we can provide a coherent account of Aquinas' approach to interpretation.

The Prologue to the *Summa*, like the Preface to the *Guide*, is Aquinas' *apologia* wherein he outlines his justification for composing the work. In the first paragraph, Aquinas designates forthwith the audience of the work and its purpose. He states that, since the text is composed for instructing beginners in orthodox truth, it will teach them those things that belong to the Christian religion in a manner fitting for the instruction of beginners.<sup>114</sup> Aquinas adds that these beginners are impeded in their study by the diversity of texts written on the subject. These texts have hindered study rather than facilitated it, first, since they utilize a multiplicity of unnecessary questions and arguments; second, because they either pursue the topic in accordance with the expository requirements of books or treat it as an occasion for disputation, rather than proceed in the order appropriate for teaching the subject; and third, through frequent repetition they produce both distaste and confusion in their audience.

At first glance, Aquinas' designation of the audience and purpose of the *Summa*, seems to offer no occasion for disagreement. A reflective pause, how-

ever, brings into relief a question about the identity of the *incipientes* that continues to occupy Thomists without agreement among some of the most notable ones.<sup>115</sup> Although the Preface does not provide sufficient information about the intellectual preparation of the audience and although it is only a posteriori that one can reach a judgment about it, nevertheless, it seems to me that the Preface does provide *some* clues about the audience, when it is read in its historical context.

Since the purpose of the *Summa*, according to Aquinas, is to rectify a condition occasioned by the multiplicity of writings and the careless methods used for instruction in Christian truth and since Aquinas' use of the imperfect tense indicates that he is depicting a specific existing condition rather than a perennial one, it seems to me that he is describing the general state of mind, *fastidium et confusionem*, already present in the would-be student of the *Summa*. That is, irrespective of whether Aquinas is criticizing the methods of teaching in the classroom or the methods of writing, the students to whom he is addressing the *Summa* are assumed to have studied some things about the subject prior to reading this text.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, after reading the I<sup>a</sup> Pars with its constant references to Aristotle, it seems clear that Aquinas' audience, at least in the I<sup>a</sup> Pars and the I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, are beginners in theology, rather than in learning.<sup>117</sup>

If my conclusion is correct, then the audience of the *Summa* are the Christian equivalent of the audience of the *Guide*; they are expected to have studied the Bible and the tradition, on the one hand, some logic, physics, and metaphysics, on the other. Like Maimonides' students they are confused or perplexed because of their inadequate previous instruction. Moreover, these students are the few, handpicked intellectual 'elite' of Christendom who have been deemed worthy of such a lofty pursuit.<sup>118</sup> Only to an informed, but confused student can Aquinas speak about sacred doctrine "briefly and clearly,"<sup>119</sup> thus clarifying problematic questions simultaneously as he demonstrates the proper approach to interpretation through the very activity of interpretation.

Although Aquinas does not designate it as such, question one is the general introduction to the entire *Summa*, since it is the attempt to determine the nature and the proper questions of sacred doctrine, as well as to delimit its scope. Article one reinforces the conclusion reached above about the nature of the audience, first, since only to a learned audience can Aquinas quote both Scripture and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the same context (especially when discussing *sacra doctrina*) without hesitation. Likewise, only a well-prepared student would gain from, rather than become confused by, the generic distinction posited by Aquinas between philosophical theology and the theology of sacred doctrine.<sup>120</sup> This distinction presupposes sufficient knowledge of philosophy, which assumes both an understanding of its composite parts and an understanding of the objects constituting its distinct orders of discourse. Moreover, the distinction between philosophical theology and sacred theol-

ogy according to genus, which also sets up a relation between them as species of knowledge, presupposes an understanding of genus, species, relations, and difference, since as species of knowledge they cannot be related as contraries.<sup>121</sup> The generic difference between philosophical theology and the theology of sacred doctrine is rooted in the difference between the respective media through which they are known, the light of natural reason and the light of divine revelation. Although sacred doctrine receives its primary principles from revelation, being first and foremost a speculative species of knowledge, it also requires both the principles and the methods of philosophy and addresses some of its questions. Theology, like every other branch of knowledge, does not discard prior true principles, but rather supplements them with its own. Like metaphysics, divine science can argue convincingly about its principles only with one who concedes some of them. However, since first principles are not subject to demonstration, if none of the first principles are admitted, divine science (and metaphysics) can prove its principles only by refuting the opposing view.<sup>122</sup> In addition to receiving its primary principles by means of revelation, divine science can be distinguished from philosophical science through the greater unity of its object since its certainty about the final end of human life unifies both speculative and practical knowledge. Rather than conflicting with the truth of philosophy, divine science is the wisdom that completes it; being free from error, it gives philosophy the certitude it lacks and succeeds in overcoming philosophy's unresolved difficulties.

As Maimonides explains in the Introduction to the *Guide*, so Aquinas, throughout the introductory question to the *Summa*, repeatedly emphasizes that the limitations of natural human reason make revelation necessary owing to the supranatural final human end, to which all other ends of human life are subordinate and by which they are ordered. The understanding of the correlative nature of all human ends to the final end overturns the Philosopher's apparently sharp separation between moral and intellectual virtue, practical and theoretical reason. However, these limitations can be understood only once natural human reason has been actualized fully. The way of philosophy is not only expedient, but also necessary for the theologian. Insufficient or inadequate preparation for theology results in inadequate books and methods for teaching sacred doctrine.

By first outlining the nature and general scope of theology, Aquinas habituates the student in the attitude necessary for its pursuit. Subsequently, he can turn his attention to its fundamental text, Sacred Scripture, in order to formulate the principles specific to biblical interpretation. First, he outlines two principle causes for the metaphorical language evident in Scripture; second, he explains the nature of the relations between its four senses.

Since the inherent order of human cognition requires that knowledge proceed from sensible perception to intelligible apprehension, it was fitting