

## CHAPTER 13

# REVELATION, METAPHYSICS AND HISTORY

**R**eligion, according to Maimonides in the *Guide*, has two objects: the love and the fear of God. The love of God is the result of the truths taught in the Law of Moses, and especially the truth of God's existence and activity; while the fear of God is produced by the practices prescribed in the Law. There are thus religious acts as well as religious knowledge. The religious acts are disciplinary and educative. They train the soul to reverence. Religious knowledge tells us about the subject of that reverence, and inclines the mind to love.

The sanctions of the Law are thus for the purpose of spiritual education: the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. It is not, however, its end. Its end is the love of God which is its own end; and the love of God is promoted by knowledge, and in particular of the facts of nature. Science and morals therefore are not antithetical. They are both paths to the one great aim. But they are not alternatives. They run together. We have to tread them both; and we can do this because they are together the domain of the rational soul which is God's likeness in man. It is by our intelligence that we are linked with God. And this intelligence is the light which, Maimonides declares (quoting the Psalmist's: 'In thy light shall we see light'), is given by God to man. It is the light by which we see him and he sees us. It is a revelation, but a revelation of reason.

Thus again the essence of the matter is already in the Bible.



It is only for its mechanics that we need turn to the Greeks. The Greeks, and indeed science in general, give us the 'how'. The Bible has always had the 'what'. The Greeks offer only a terminology and a technique.

The technical help found in this matter not only by Maimonides and his school (following his Arab predecessors) but by the whole medieval world, is derived from Aristotle's theory of the 'active' and 'acquired' and 'potential' intellect; of which we need here note only the conception that human thinking as a fact of our lives (that is, not thinking in general but this and that act of thought of this and that individual man) cannot be understood unless it is seen as the result of a process set in motion by the existence of thought in its perfection and self-completion, that is, the thought of God. This holds not only of thinking. The whole changing world is what it is because in and by virtue of its imperfection and incompleteness, it is moved spontaneously towards the completeness and perfection of God. God is thus the centre of all action, the source of all movement, and the initiator of all thought. In the final analysis the world is a world not of pushes but of pulls; or, rather, of one great pull. But the pull is not exerted, it is only excited, from without. The real pull lies within. It is the pull of the lover towards his beloved, a phrase which might have been taken from the Song of Songs in the Bible, but is in fact from the Metaphysics of Aristotle. Hence Maimonides can quote with great effect the ambiguous phrase of the Bible, 'He made each thing for its (or, His) own sake.' The 'love' of Aristotle is not too far from the 'goodness' of the first chapter of Genesis. They both deny the conception of a blind mechanism. Ours is a world of change which follows a determinate pattern. It strives towards an absolute which is realized in time.

Here lay for the medieval expounders of Judaism the special value of Aristotelian doctrine. It is this that explains its victory over Platonism. The framework it offers is neither a relativism which is repugnant to all religion nor an absolutism which sets its sights too high for mortal man. Its good is not 'separate' or



'in heaven' but is being worked out on earth. It thus allows room for morals, for science, and—what is so important for Judaism—for history.

The possibility of a purely rational religion, a religion deduced from *a priori* premisses, has often been canvassed, never achieved; for the sufficient reason that, however we may make it appear, religion is not metaphysics. Metaphysics is an enquiry into the broadest aspects of the real, and is thus ultimately a reasoned account of the completely possible. Religion, in the western tradition at least, expresses the total reaction of man to his concrete environment in time and space, and affirms touch with the completely actual. The metaphysical scheme must find place for, and include, religion. Religious truths must be defensible at the bar of metaphysics. But the two, though interdependent, are different. The one is philosophy, the other (in a wide sense) history.

For religion is concerned with the here and now. There is a world and there is a humanity, and both have a determinate character. The fact that these exist and display specific characteristics and activities constitutes history, and thus religion cannot be dissociated from history.

Maimonides tells us that he insisted on the possibility of miracle in order to allow for the idea of creation. We also find in him a constant insistence on the religious originality of Abraham. In previous literature the patriarchs are somewhat shadowy figures. In Maimonides we find a pre-eminence given to them, and particularly to Abraham, and a detailed emphasis laid on the spiritual quality of Moses. Thus, according to the *Guide* (iii, 51), the three patriarchs and Moses attained the highest knowledge and love of God. They enjoyed the continual presence of Divine Providence. They were as near to God as is possible for man. And their aim both for their own people and for humanity at large was to lead them on the same path to the same end.



It is possible that just as the picture of Moses painted by Arabistic Judaism may have been in emulation of the figure of Muhammed, so Maimonides's picture of Abraham may have been influenced by the desire to show that the essence of religion was already mature in the father not only of Isaac, the patriarch of the Jews, but of Ishmael, the traditional ancestor of the Arabs. But already the early sages (like the Fathers of the Church) noted that Abraham (Gen. xxvi, 5), in 'obeying God's voice and keeping his charge', kept his 'commandments and statutes and laws'. He kept the whole Torah, declared one; that is, both the written and the smallest detail of the oral, said another. Whatever the source of the idea however, it is in itself worthy of remark. Sinai only re-affirmed and restored the ancient faith.

Thus we may say, in the words of the old saying but with a different denotation, *tria mirabilia fecit Dominus*: God worked three wonders. The first is that of the creation: and the wonder of creation is that there should be a determinate physical world at all. The second is that of Abraham; and the wonder of Abraham is that by the use of reason man can find God. The third is that of Sinai; and the wonder of Sinai is that there should be a covenant of holiness between God and a whole people. These are *mirabilia* (wonders) rather than *miracula* (miracles). They are not contraventions of the order of nature but wondrous events which as a fact took place in nature.

These appear to be the minimal data on which Maimonides's account of Judaism can be based. They are not metaphysical, that is, deducible from 'first principles' the rationality of which is self-evident; but rather what may be called history: fact as fact, reasonable but not rational.

It is on history in this sense, and not on metaphysics, that Maimonidean Judaism may be said to rest. It accepts philosophy, as it accepts science, with an understanding of its limitations. These arise from the fact that we are creatures, not the Creator, and are confined within a created world. Yet philosophy has its grandeur. It is the activity of thinking which is the



likeness of God within us; and its exercise is the highest worship of which our nature is capable.

History implies purpose, and the world process for Judaism is purposeful. For the Greeks, history is irrelevant; and when it is admitted, it is seen in the image of a recurrent wheel: the Saturnian age is to return, the great order of the centuries be born again; the old wars will repeat themselves; Achilles will go to Troy again and drag another Hector round the walls, while the Trojan women will re-live the same cycle of expectation and disappointment, of dashed hopes and realized fears. And so it will be again and again in the prolonged and painful sequence which constitutes the meaningless play of the world.

But it is not so for the Bible. The Bible's tale is different. It is a tale of purpose and education. History has its ups and downs but it is yet history. If it has more downs than ups, it is man's fault; if more ups than downs, it is to man's credit. Man and his efforts mean something. His will and intention can produce real change.

And not man in the abstract. It is not universal man but individual men who, through their actions, count. If religion is spiritual education, history is its scene, and the individual person contributes, for better or for worse, of his own.

We may recall Maimonides's quaint rewriting of the early Bible story (above, pp. 93 f.). The idea is sufficiently plain: the life of individual men, the life of individual families, the life of a whole people, the life of all peoples, are knit together in one vast interdependent spiritual stream. Abraham, Moses, the people 'with the knowledge of God', are instruments appointed for the dissemination of the one truth.

Yet, as one looks at Maimonides's account of his hero Abraham and its many earlier parallels in Midrashic literature, there appears no mention of any special outpouring of the spirit. Abraham is presented as a reasoner, not as the recipient of a special revelation. He sees no visions, hears no voices. His mind is filled with the knowledge and love of God, and what he



holds in himself he tries to give to others; but just as he tries to spread that knowledge and love—we are following Maimonides—by proof and logical suasion, so he was himself led to them by proof and logical suasion. Nor does Maimonides say anything about signs and wonders. Abraham does not seek to convince by miracle any more than he was himself convinced by miracle. He was convinced by thinking. He used his intelligence. He grasped the fact that idolatry is foolish and illogical. He *understood* the truth of the unity of God.

What one has done, others can do; but if we cannot gain wisdom by our own efforts, we can at least accept it when it is offered to us. The 'Torah of Moses', Maimonides writes in a letter to the favourite pupil to whom he addressed the *Guide for the Perplexed*, 'which is from God above, makes straight every created being and shows him truth, and is for all the peoples as well as for us'; and he added a special Hebrew distich to the *Guide* which form its concluding sentences:

*Near indeed is God to each one who calls,  
If he calls in truth and turns to him.  
He is found by every seeker who looks for him,  
If he goes straight to him and turns not aside.*

I have made some play throughout these chapters on philosophical Judaism of an antithesis between the Bible and the Greeks. But the phrase contains an unbalance of terms: the Bible is a book, the Greeks a people. Yet the unbalance suggests a consideration which is of crucial importance in an approach to the understanding of Judaism: whereas the Greeks made philosophy, it is the Bible (or rather the 'Torah', that is, the Bible as selected and interpreted in the tradition) which made the Jews. The Torah is not the product of the Jews as philosophy is of the Greeks. It is the Jews which are a product of the Torah. Maimonides's own view indeed might be expressed by saying that the Jews are not so much a product as a function or instrument of the Torah. For the Jews are the bearers of a



message about the nature of God and his requirement from man, and it is the message which matters. A letter should not be confused with the postman.

In Maimonides's view, just as the basic fact of life is that *God* made man in *God's* likeness, so the basic sin is that of anthropomorphism, that is, *man's* imaging God in *man's* likeness. Here lies the distinctive difference between the Bible and the Greeks. It is not that between miracle and order, interest and morality, revelation and the reliance on reason. In the eyes of philosophical Judaism, these are not final or irrevocable oppositions. On the contrary, they do not exist except at a low level and on a superficial view. The root difference between them is that between the creation of man by God and the creation of gods by men. The latter is idolatry ('Oh senseless man who cannot possibly make a worm,<sup>1</sup> and yet will make gods by dozens!'). The former is what, rightly or wrongly, the West has learned from Judaism to call religion.

Maimonides followed his rejection of anthropomorphism with the general principle that progress in religious understanding lies with the systematic falsification of positive qualities attributed to God. This 'negative theology' does not mean negative religion but the call for restraint in religious statements. It is a renewal of the old protests of the Biblical prophets; and its lesson is that of the prohibition of the making and worship of graven images: we durst not bind God to human measures. The highest reality can be measured only by itself.

The language of idolatry is myth. That there are remnants of myth in the Hebrew Bible and the later literature is evident. The question is whether they are of the essence or whether, as was maintained by Maimonides, they are only pictorial images adapted to the weaker understanding or residual traces of positions long outworn. As such they are in his view to be progressively eliminated, not further encouraged or elaborated afresh. They may be a useful prop to the immature (above,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, p. 141.



p. 168). But they are 'Aggadah', suggestive only, not constitutive or prescriptive.

But Judaism is more than the austere invitation to renounce easy aids in religious thinking; it is also the summons to a difficult morality: and it is in its firm grasp of this fact that philosophical Judaism shows itself the legitimate heir of Deuteronomy and Isaiah. Idolatry has many forms but it is primarily the worship of the created, not the creator; and the human behaviour consequent on it is the ego-centric going astray after the desires of man's own heart and eyes. Judaism, the monotheistic worship of the one creator, sees a standard beyond man and fixes a norm. The detail of this standard are the laws of conduct. They are in a sense means but means which are already part of the goal itself, not provisional devices to be dispensed with at convenience or at the promptings of an alleged necessity. They are not expedients but commands.

Myth describes its gods in terms of man because for it man is the measure and centre. For Judaism the measure and centre is God; and far from describing God in terms of man, Judaism describes man in terms of God. The God of Judaism, as Maimonides saw so clearly, is not an object for description. He is the one and unique describing subject; and he describes man as created in his likeness, thus patterning man on the divine.

But this description cannot be factual. It is ideal. It is not of man as he is but as he can and should be. In myth, the gods imitate man. In Judaism, man imitates, or rather is *called upon to imitate*, God. The ideal comes to man as an imperative: 'Be ye holy for I the Lord your God am holy.' But this imperative, as Maimonides recognized (above, p. 119), is not one precept among the other precepts of the Law. It is the Law, that is, Judaism, itself.