THE GROUNDWORK

CHAPTER 11

MIRACLE AND ORDER

There is nothing original in the basic ideas of the medieval Jewish philosophers; every one of them derives, through the Arabs, from the Greeks. Such originality as the philosophers have, lies in the use they made of the ideas and in the boldness with which they used them. Yet here too they were barely original. Their crucial novelties are to be found in their Moslem predecessors. What they have to say about Moses and the prophets harks back to their forerunners' account of Muhammed and the Kuran.

Yet for all that, and perhaps ultimately because of that, philosophical Judaism, especially in its Maimonidean form, deserves serious study. It brought together two views of life, the Greek and the Hebraic, which are often supposed to stand in absolute contrast with one another; and its great achievement lies in the practical demonstration that they are not in principle incompatible. Nor was this result a momentary *tour de force* or a unique contribution of one or another solitary thinker. It seems rather to represent a well-founded and a well-tested satisfaction of a permanent need of the human mind. The resulting system, compacted by many generations, was a genuine unity, a philosophic religion planted firmly in a religious philosophy.

Its effect within Judaism was decisive, though it aroused an opposition which was as violent as it was prolonged. Yet it survived in the very vocabulary of its opponents and moulded

their very weapons of attack. When the controversies died down and the controversialists were forgotten, the one sure fact that emerged was that, however the merits of the argument may be held to have run, the Judaism of the philosophers had become the norm.

It has been said that the Synagogue sings theology and prays metaphysics. This is a palpable exaggeration but an excusable one. For it is certainly true that some of the favourite hymns of the Synagogue, to this day and in all communities, are the work of the philosophers and their followers. English readers may remember the 'Hebrew song' sung by George Borrow when, in the course of his journeys for the Bible Society in Spain, he found himself at night in a boat off Tangiers in the company of some African Jews. 'I lifted up my voice', he writes (chap. liv), 'and chanted Adun Oulem' [Adon Olam]:

Lord of the world, He reigned alone
While yet the universe was naught.
When by his will all things were wrought,
Then first His sovran name was known.

And when the All shall cease to be,
In dread lone splendour He shall reign.
He was, He is, He shall remain
In glorious eternity.

For He is one, no second shares
His nature or his loneliness;
Unending and beginningless,
All strength is His, all sway He bears.

He is the living God to save,
My Rock while sorrow's toil endure,
My banner and my stronghold sure,
The cup of life whene'er I crave.

I place my hand within His palm
Before I sleep as when I wake,
And though my body I forsake,
Rest in the Lord in fearless calm.

(I quote it not in Borrow's version, which is somewhat uncouth, but in that of Israel Zangwill.)

This 'song' is one of the best known Synagogue hymns. It is a summary statement of Judaism's doctrine of God and man's relation to him; but its formulation is philosophical and its general character Maimonidean. It stands at the beginning of the morning service next to another less familiar hymn which I offer in the version of Nina Salaman:

Now at dawn I seek Thee,
Refuge, Rock sublime;
Set my prayer before Thee in the morning,
And my prayer at eventime.

I before Thy greatness
Stand and am afraid;
All my secret thoughts Thine eye beholdeth
Deep within my bosom laid.

And withal what is it
Heart and tongue can do?
What is this my strength, and what is even
This the sprit in me too?

But indeed man's singing
May seem good to thee;
So I praise thee, singing, while there dwelleth
Yet the breath of God in me.

This is the work of Solomon Ibn Gabirol who ante-dates Maimonides by a full century and was not an Aristotelian but a Platonist. And there were many others. The best known of the

Synagogue poets is the third of our trilogy of an earlier chapter, Judah Hallevi (above, pp. 103 ff.); and Hallevi, although in theory an opponent of the philosophers, was, like his master, the Moslem Al-Ghazali, himself a philosopher as the last book of his anti-philosophical Khuzari attests. Thus it would seem that Maimonides was only the greatest of a galaxy of thinkers strongly and influentially represented in the central tradition of Judaism and deriving philosophically from Plato and Aristotle; a fact which suggests that perhaps Hebraism and Hellenism, or, as we may well call them, the Bible and the Greeks, are not opposed to one another irreconcilably.

We are faced at once with a primary contrast. The Bible would seem to rest on miracle, 'Greek Wisdom' on science and natural law.

I start with a bare statement of Maimonides: 'Moses our teacher was not believed in by the Israelites because of the signs which he wrought. Whoever believes because of signs has doubt in his heart.' In support of it Maimonides points obliquely to the passage in Deut. xiii in which we are warned against an over-ready acceptance of miracle. The false prophet, too, we are told there, might work a miracle; but that does not make his prophecy the less false. Our criterion is the nature of the message, not the paraphernalia of its presentation. And from the point of view of the nature of the message, an accompanying miracle is neither here nor there. Like any other support it is a sign not of strength but of weakness. If a man lean on it, it will go into his hand.

We reach a similar conclusion from another side. The Biblical God is omnipotent and omnipresent. He is the immediate cause of everything and of every event. Yet his actions are not capricious. It is he who introduced order, determined the measures of the earth, set bounds to the sea and land. The first act of creation was the bringing of light into the waste and void. What God made by his power, he established by his wisdom.

Thus for the Bible, too, the world of nature is a world of order; the sea may rage but it cannot pass its bounds. And nature here includes animate nature as well: 'The stork and the crane know their appointed times.' This universal order of nature, for the Bible itself, constitutes an exemplar for man. The sluggard should go to the ant and learn wisdom, man should follow the ass in recognizing his master's crib. The appeal in either case is to the primacy, and necessity, of order and law.

We may go further and say that the existence of law is the pre-supposition of miracle. If all were miracle, there would be no miracle. The very idea of miracle would be meaningless. In order that miracle should have meaning, it must stand out against a background of law.

In a word, miracle is a 'sign', and a sign of control. It is an indication of who is master. Hence the more that control is admitted, the more the existence of God is acknowledged and the less is miracle required. Miracle is a part of an 'interim' belief-world. It is only requested by a doubting generation; that is, a generation not fully persuaded of the universal control exercised in nature by God.

It thus appears that the acceptance of miracle is an index rather of unbelief than of belief. Belief through a sign is belief which is imperfect. And it is dangerous. It rests on a credulousness which is an easy prey to any new wonder of any false prophet who may arise at any time to lead it astray.

But the possibility of miracle remains, as it must in any theism. To the divine power all things (or should we not say rather most things: Can God change the past? Cause two and two to make five? The medievals abound with such puzzles) are possible. Within the bounds of reason God *can* do anything, but it does not follow that he *does*. His actions are the workings of wisdom, which means intelligible order. Thus God's wisdom is manifested in the regularities of nature, not in the arbitrary intervention of irregularity. Miracles in the sense of the upsetting of the regularities of nature can, but do not, happen.

And this, says Maimonides, is all that is required by religion. Religion is satisfied by the affirmation of the *possibility* of miracle: it does not demand its actuality. And so Maimonides takes one Biblical miracle after another and shows how they can be disposed of, a favourite device being to declare them as having happened in a prophetic dream. When Ezekiel says that he was taken by the hair of his head from Babylon to Jerusalem, it is not unnatural to suppose that the journey took place in a dream. Similarly with other miracles, if no natural explanation can be found for them.

This procedure is violent, but Maimonides does not say that it must be adopted, that this is how in fact the apparent miracle happened. He says: This is how it may be *held to have* happened; this is how it *may have* happened or *appeared to have* happened. Our faith is troubled: we are perplexed, we do not know where to turn. Maimonides offers a possibility. Not that miracles are in principle impossible. If God is God, then in principle he can do all things. But the real miracle of the universe lies in the fact that God made it a *uni*verse: one world, one truth, one law.

Maimonides's position is noteworthy in that it is not dogmatic. It is heuristic, a searching for a possible way out. The solution offered is rather a suggestion than a solution. It is certainly not mandatory. If we wish to believe that Ezekiel's journey through the air (an angel holding him by the hair of his head) took place in actual fact, we may do so. *But if we cannot*, there is no need to give up the Bible because of that. The message of the Bible is not dependent on the mechanics of propulsion or a prophet's method of locomotion. Belief in natural order, however, is of a different kind. That, for religion, is vital. For religion is the attachment to the permanent, and an ordered nature is our best witness to the existence of the permanent.

It does not follow that the order of nature we know—or think we know—is in fact the order of nature. Nature has in it many things which to our present ideas appear strange. But present

strangeness is no argument; and Maimonides has many wise words on the foolishness of blind subservience to any scientific theory which happens to be current. Indeed, one of the heartening things in Maimonides is his recognition of the temporary character of scientific hypothesis and his independent attitude towards some of the favourite theories of the science of his day. Nature, he seems to say, may still have its surprises; and he quotes with approval Rabbinical sayings about things created on the evening after the sixth day and about certain wonders already embodied in the structure of things from the beginning. These are the happenings which, becoming manifest at a certain point of time, appear to us miraculous, the miracle lying rather in the time than in the fact of their manifestation. But all this is detail. The essential position stands clear. With the possibility of miracle vindicated, the religious claim is satisfied, and our path is open to the really important thing, the acceptance of science in the sense of the systematic enquiry into the structure of the natural world.

Once the unity and intelligibility of nature are accepted, we are brought in awe at the feet of the divine throne. The study of nature is the prelude to worship. I quote the simple statement of the Code:

'As man considers the wonders of creation and observes the greatness of God's acts and sees the incomparable and unsearchable wisdom displayed in them, he is brought at once to love and praise and exalt, and he is filled with great yearning to know God, his soul thirsting (in the words of the Psalmist) for God, the living God. And as he ponders these things, he falls back and trembles and knows himself in his smallness and insignificance, standing ignorant and imperfect before perfect wisdom: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him?"'

Maimonides then proceeds to a brief account of Aristotelian physics, with the preface: 'And so I offer some broad principles of the divine work in the world so as to open the way for the

intelligent man to the love of God, since it is through this study that you may learn to know him who spoke and the world came into being.' It is thus science, the sober study of the regular order of nature, which is the door to religion. For knowledge calls to knowledge; and it is through the exercise of the mind on the knowledge given in nature that we draw near to the knowledge of God.

With science in this sense—science as the grasp of the intelligibilities of nature—Maimonides contrasts the pseudo-science of the theology of his day. The theologians, in their anxiety to vindicate the majesty of God, denied both the intelligence of man and the intelligibility of nature. Nature for them was not an ordered plan pointing to a purposeful origin or a unity manifesting the unity of the Creator. It was a succession of separate miracles. No one thing was intrinsically connected with any other. There were no continuous entities with continuous and interrelated activities, no regularities or chains of causation; and if there appears to be a stable world in which effects proceed from causes, it is appearance only, due to the benevolent activity of God who is thus—they said—manifested immediately in all actions and all things.

This view of the world, akin in many ways to that associated with some of the varieties of modern existentialism, is what in the history of European thought is known as Occasionalism; and Maimonides's rebuttal is both a vindication of common sense and a re-statement of his own theological attitude. God's real glory, he declares, lies in the creation of a world which does not need his constant interference, and in the creation of men in his own intelligent likeness. The universe is a genuine unity, even (he says boldly) an organic unity, like a living human body. And it is even more. It is a unity manifesting intelligence and expressing purpose. We do not know what that purpose is, although it is not ourselves: 'What is man that thou art mindful of him?' But we can be sure that purpose there is, for purpose and intelligence go together.

Man through the study of nature can recognize that intelligence. For man is formed in the likeness of the divine intelligence; and what we call science is the use of our human intelligence in order to track out in nature the ways of the divine intelligence. The fact that, in some measure, we find these ways shows that we are on the right road.

When we find them, we are stirred to reverence; and as we link effects and causes and recognize their source, we are moved to love. The love of God springs from the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of God from the knowledge of nature:

> *Happy is he who lives to understand. . . .*
> *For knowledge is delight; and such delight*
> *Brings love.*

Ultimately, this is the reason why we base ourselves not on miracle but on order. It is in the one order of nature that we glimpse the one God.

But God is manifested not only in the order of nature; and we must consider the other order (if indeed it be another), the order of morals. We thus pass from the realm of logic to that of ethics to discuss Maimonides's view of moral law.

But we should bear in mind the great conclusion which emerges from the discussion of order in nature. Religion is now in principle at peace with science. From now on 'wisdom' is seen to include not only the text of Scripture and the tradition of the elders, but also the book of nature and its interpretation by the human mind. From this gain it was in Judaism never dislodged; and however much afterwards individual scholars and teachers may have disapproved of the 'accursed Greek learning', it remained an integral part of Judaism. It had come to stay. Philo and others of the Greek-writing world disappeared; the wonderful rhetoric of the Book of Wisdom was unknown or forgotten. But Maimonides could be neither ignored nor forgotten. He had written not only the Guide for the Perplexed but also the admirable Commentary on the Mishnah

and the indispensable Code, the Repetition of the Law; and from the day when he put into the Code the Book of Knowledge with its summary of the science of the age, respect for science and the work of the human mind became, in spite of all opposition, an overt part of the religious heritage of Judaism, and a notable feature in the life of Jewry.[1]

[1] Below, pp. 210 ff.