

The Guide for the Perplexed on Creation

Introduction

By Rabbi Dr. Meir Triebitz

Since Rambam's declaration in his famous introduction to the *Guide* that he is going to deliberately contradict himself in order to hide secrets of the Torah from the unenlightened reader, the true position of Rambam emerged as the 'Holy Grail' of virtually every commentator. As one prominent scholar puts it, "It would be difficult to point to any other problem in the history of Jewish philosophy which has so absorbed scholars and fascinated their curiosity, both in the Middle Ages and in recent generations".²⁰¹ Moreover, the history of Maimonidean commentary frequently reads like a virtual intellectual history of Judaism whereby each commentator attributes to Rambam the philosophical vogue of his respective era. Nowhere is this more manifest than in the chapters of the *Guide* which deal with creation. Rambam's discussion of this central issue is replete with all types of contradictions, vague statements and various sorts of innuendos, all of which were

²⁰¹ Ravitsky, 'The Secrets of Maimonides between the 13th and 20th Centuries'

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meticulously picked up by the various commentators. Major Medieval commentators, such as Ibn Tibon, Moshe Narboni and Ibn Kaspi were of the opinion that although Rambam states clearly that the position of the Torah is that God created the world *ex nihilo*, he was in secret, an Aristotelian who believed in the eternity of the universe. These Medieval philosophers felt that the *Guide* was intended to demonstrate how the truths of the Torah reduced to those of Greek philosophy. In modern times, scholars such as Shadal, Pines and Strauss were of the opinion that Rambam's hidden message is that Judaism cannot be reconciled with philosophy. While the minds of the masses are put to rest that the contradictions between philosophy and Torah can be resolved, the true position of Rambam is that one cannot be both a believing Jew and admit to the truth of Greek thought. In essence, both forms of interpretations are none other than descriptions of the position of the interpreters themselves. Ibn Kaspi, Ibn Tibon and Narboni were religious Jews who believed in the truth of Greek philosophy and that this truth could be resolved with the religious truth of the Torah. Strauss and Pines, on the other hand, were secular Jews who no doubt believed that the Torah has no relevance to the modern conception of truth.

For the 'medieval commentators of contradiction'²⁰² the purpose of contradiction in the *Guide* is to distinguish 'revealed truth' from a 'hidden truth'. For them, the 'revealed truth' of the Torah, based upon tradition and prophetic revelation, is coming to exclude the sacrilegious beliefs of the philosophers. The 'hidden truth' is that Greek philosophy constitutes the hidden teaching of the Torah. Hence the two truths are in fact reconcilable. For the modern commentators²⁰³, contradictions are coming simply to distinguish between false assertions and true assertions. As Strauss writes in his essay 'the Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed':

²⁰² i.e. Kaspi, Ibn Tibon and Narboni

²⁰³ such as Pines and Strauss

The duty of the interpreter is not to explain the contradictions but to find out in each case which of the two statements was considered by Maimonides to be true and which he merely used as a means of hiding the truth.²⁰⁴

Further on in the same essay, Strauss writes that:

All important contradictions in the *Guide* may be reduced to the single fundamental contradiction between the true teaching based on reason, and the untrue teaching, emanating from imagination.²⁰⁵

The assumption of Strauss, that the contradictions of the *Guide* are to distinguish truth from falsehood, must be questioned and brought to task. Let us look at the crucial passage in the Introduction which is the source of all the controversy.

The seventh reason [for contradiction] arises from the necessity to discuss very deep issues which must be partly revealed and partly hidden. Sometimes it is necessary on the basis of certain statements to understand these issues based upon a certain a priori assumption, and sometimes it is necessary to understand the issue based upon a contradictory a priori assumption. It is important that the masses not be aware in any way of the contradiction. The author must take every precaution to hide the contradiction²⁰⁶.

Rambam is not claiming that having two contradictory premises necessarily implies that one is true and the other is false. He is simply stating that certain issues are of such orders of complexity that they cannot be understood completely on the basis of the set of self-consistent assumptions. It may be that two assumptions are both true, relative to different perspectives. The reason that the masses

²⁰⁴ *Persecution and the Art of Writing* p. 69

²⁰⁵ *ibid.* p. 73

²⁰⁶ Introduction to the *Guide* Schwartz ed. p 22. authors translation.

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must be protected from awareness of such contradictions might simply be because they lack the sophistication of thought to accept such truths. As a result, they might come to reject the entire belief because of its lack of clarity and precision. It is for this reason that Rambam writes in chapter 26 of section I that the Bible employed anthropomorphic images of God. The philosophical notion of monotheism and Divine incorporeality would have seemed incomprehensible to the uneducated and drive them towards atheism.

For most people, theological issues must be presented and thought of in black and white terms. Only sophisticated minds can appreciate irreducible dichotomies and multi-layered depths. Contradictions for Rambam are natural consequences of the exceedingly difficult and ultimately impossible task of comprehending Divine truths. The masses, however, must not be made aware of these contradictions because it will only confuse them and convince them of the futility of the whole enterprise.

If we return to the issue of creation, we find clear evidence that the contradictions to be found in Rambam's discussion of the eternity of the world versus creation *ex nihilo* cannot possibly be understood as implying that one position of the two is true and the other false. At the end of chapter 30 of section II Rambam states that there are four words which are used in Scripture to connote Divine creation; *Barah* (ברא); *Assah* (עשה); *Kannah* (קנה) and *Kel* (א-ל). *Barah* refers to creation *ex nihilo* (בריאה יש מאין). *Assah* refers to the creation of the particular forms of things, while *Kel* refers to God's perfection in comparison to His creation. When he explains the meaning of the term *Kannah* Rambam writes:

It says *Kannah* (literally 'possess') because He, may He be exalted, has dominion over them (His creations) just as a master has over his slaves. For this reason He is also called 'The Lord of all the earth' (Joshua 3: 11 and 13) and the Lord (Exodus 23: 17, 34: 23). However, as there is no Lord

without there being something possessed by Him, and this tends toward the road of the belief in the eternity of a certain matter...” (section II chapter 30).

We see clearly, then, that Rambam understood that there are contradictory terms in Scripture itself with respect to creation. *Kannah* implies the eternity of creation, whereas *Barah* is creation ex nihilo. Now Rambam has informed us in his introduction that contradictions in the prophetic Scriptures are either due to the third reason, namely that one verse is literal and one figurative, or due to the fourth reason, that either a stipulation which cannot be made in one verse is placed in the other, or that the topics are different in the different places, giving the appearance that the two verses contradict each other, although there is really no contradiction. Since Divine possession is clearly not a metaphor, we would have to conclude that the contradiction between *Barah* and *Kannah* is only apparent. We then are forced to conclude, as I have already indicated, that the contradictions to be found in the *Guide* between the position of eternity and the position of creation ex nihilo were not regarded by Rambam to be contradictory, but rather reflected different aspects of viewpoints of our understanding of God’s relationship to the creation. Rambam, therefore, clearly saw creation ex nihilo and eternity as only apparently contradictory but not mutually exclusive.

It is instructive to note where the above passage explicating the four Scriptural terms for creation appears. In the beginning of chapter 30, Rambam presents the clear position of the Torah, that God created the world from nothing. He then goes on to write that various statements to be found in the Sages which speak about the existence of time or other worlds before the account of creation in the Bible are to be ignored for they are based upon the Greek philosophy of

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eternity, which the Torah rejects. After a lengthy chapter in which Rambam offers a combination of literal and philosophical interpretations of the opening two chapters of Genesis, he concludes, without any seeming thematic continuity, with the discussion of Biblical terms denoting creation. The statement that *Barah* “tends” to eternity is stated almost parenthetically without any connection to the discussion at hand. Clearly this is an apparent contradiction which Rambam might have felt would go unnoticed except for the most alert reader.

Rambam’s position that the two contradictory beliefs in creation ex nihilo and eternity must both be maintained requires explanation. It must be that these two theories are themselves consequences (or necessary requirements) of two philosophical positions which Rambam himself felt cannot both be dispensed with. In chapter 25 of section II, Rambam regards creation ex nihilo as essential for the possibility of miracles, the selection of the Jewish people, the privileging of prophets and the giving of the Torah. On the other hand, in chapter 1 of section II, the eternity of the universe is an axiom used in his proof of God’s non-corporeality and is explicitly listed as the twenty sixth axiom in his introduction to the section. Clearly, then, eternity of the universe was essential to maintain monotheism. God’s free will (and hence man’s free will) and incorporeality are the two pillars of the *Guide* and Maimonidean thought in general. The problem is that these two beliefs lead to two contradictory theories of creation. This is the central philosophical problem which faced Rambam and he dealt with it through his method of contradiction.