

Biblical Miracles and the Universality of Natural Laws *Maimonides' Three Methods of Harmonization**

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Although several comprehensive and important studies on Maimonides' conception of miracles have appeared in recent years, there is still no consensus with regard to the fundamental question: Did Maimonides himself believe in supernatural miracles? The answers differ widely. Some scholars unhesitatingly hold he did.¹ Others claim he secretly denied the reality of supernatural miracles.² And still others argue that Maimonides indeed believed in the possibility of miracles, but held that they did not necessarily occur.³

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¹ J. Heller, "Maimonides' Theory of Miracles, in: A. Altmann (ed.), *Between East and West*, London 1958, pp. 112–127.

² See Joseph ibn Kaspi's view in *Three Early Commentators on the Guide [of the Perplexed]*, Jerusalem 1961 (Heb.; photographic repr.), p. 10: "Perhaps the Master's opinion is that the recounting of the miracles recorded in the Torah and the Prophets is included in the Seventh Cause, as Solomon said, 'There is nothing new beneath the sun' [Eccl 1: 9], as he discussed at length in Chapter 29 [of Part I], which should be consulted." And cf. A. J. Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Miracles," *HUCA* 45 (1974), pp. 325–361. For a similar view see also H. Kreisel, "Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *JQR* 75 (1984), pp. 325–361.

³ M. Z. Nehorai, "Maimonides on Miracles" (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 9 (1990) (*S. Pines Jubilee Volume*), pp. 1–18.

One might argue that Maimonides presented two different positions in regard to miracles: an exoteric position, in harmony with popular beliefs; and an esoteric one, more in keeping with the naturalistic denial of biblical miracles. The exoteric position was for public consumption, while the esoteric was what he really believed. As we intend to show, there are indeed certain writings in which Maimonides stresses the popular view. For example, in the *Epistle to Yemen*, he speaks of the supernatural aspect of the miracles to be wrought by the Messiah, for he was trying to wean his correspondents away from false Messiahs.⁴ The tenor of his *Essay on Resurrection* is similar, as there he was being careful to avoid the accusation that he did not believe in physical resurrection, which is of course a supernatural event *par excellence*.⁵

However, can one uphold the assumption that Maimonides did not believe at all in biblical reports of past events that were at variance with the laws of nature? This assumption is based on the statement that Maimonides held an esoteric position for which there is no evidence in his writings. Although this statement is not unreasonable, it raises a problem in the context of Karl Popper's criteria: it can be neither refuted nor corroborated. On the other hand, the interpretation proposed below will be based on a close reading of the text, and it will not contradict the basic principle that God does not alter the laws of nature. The implication is that Maimonides was indeed trying to play both teams: to remain faithful to Aristotelian naturalism, but at the same time to admit that certain exceptional events – as few as possible – had indeed occurred, as reported in the Bible.

Consideration of Maimonides' attitude to miracles has also brought up the subject of the relationship between miracles and other aspects of Maimonides' theology: what is the relationship between the idea of God as Creator of the universe through His will and the occurrence of events that contradict natural causality? Does the phenomenon of prophecy involve a miraculous dimension?

⁴ See A. Halkin and D. Hartman, *Epistles of Maimonides*, Crisis and Leadership, Philadelphia 1985, pp. 91–149.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 209–292.

Does Divine Providence include miraculous events designed to save the worthy from natural calamities?

It may appear at first glance, that these questions should be answered in the affirmative. Nevertheless, it would seem that this linkage is not absolutely necessary. If miracles are at all possible, they indeed testify to the fact of Creation, demonstrate divine involvement in prophecy and prove the existence of individual Providence. But the faith in a God Who creates, inspires prophets and watches over His creatures does not require the existence of miracles. Although their existence is indeed possible only if we assume that the universe was created,⁶ the converse is untrue: we may believe in creation without assuming the reality of miracles. Similarly, the existence of prophecy does not require miracles, though Maimonides does present an analogy between the possibility of miracles and the possibility that God might withhold prophecy from a person otherwise worthy of it.⁷ Maimonides' theory of Providence, too, does not necessitate a reversal of the natural order.⁸ Hence, even if one holds that Maimonides did not believe in the reality of miracles, this has no bearing on his views in these three contexts.

Moreover, there is a prominent tendency in Maimonides' works to underplay the supernatural: The "sign or portent" that prophets should give as proof of their authenticity does not have to be "a change in the way of the world";⁹ it will suffice if they foretell

⁶ See *Guide of the Perplexed* II: 25; all references below will be to the Arabic edition of Y. Qafih, Jerusalem 1972, or to the English translation by S. Pines, Chicago 1963.

⁷ *Guide* II: 32 (p. 36). On the relationship between prophecy and miracles see L. Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy," *HTR* 70 (1977), pp. 233–256. See also H. Kreisel, "The Verification of Prophecy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy" (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1984–85), pp. 1–6. In the future I hope to devote a special study to the differences between Maimonides' views on this question in the Commentary on the Mishnah, *Sefer ha-Mizvot* and *Mishneh Torah*.

⁸ See Z. Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon and Maimonides' Theory of Providence," *HUCA* 11 (1936), pp. 341–366.

⁹ See his Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishnah, in *Hakdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, ed. Y. Shailat, Jerusalem 1992, p. 29. See also *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 10: 1.

natural events, "such as plenty and famine, war and peace, and the like."¹⁰ Maimonides curtails the supernatural dimension in many other contexts as well. He denies the miraculous nature of eschatological events.¹¹ He argues that certain events reported in the Bible and understood as miracles did not actually happen: the she-ass spoke only in Balaam's consciousness,¹² the "miracle" of the fleece took place only in Gideon's dream.¹³ The description of the sun that did not set is apparently attributed to a subjective sensation of joy due to military victory.¹⁴ The youths that Elijah and Elisha revived were apparently only clinically dead,¹⁵ and the miraculous terms applied to certain events in the Torah are due merely to the use of hyperbole and figurative language.¹⁶

Maimonides' intent seems clear: to moderate the supernatural element in biblical miracles. He in fact declares this quite explicitly in his *Essay on Resurrection*:

My endeavor, and that of the select keen-minded people, differs from the quest of the masses. They like nothing better and in their silliness, enjoy nothing more, than to set the Law and reason at opposite ends, and to move everything far from the explicable. So they claim it to be a miracle, and they shrink from identifying it as a natural incident, whether it is something that happened in the past and is recorded, or something that predicted to happen in the future. But I try to reconcile the, on the Law and reason, and wherever possible consider all things as of the natural order. Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then I feel forced to grant that this is a miracle.¹⁷

Indeed, on various occasions Maimonides admits that the Bible describes events at variance with "the possible natural order," that

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 10: 3.

¹¹ On this topic see A. Ravitzky, "To the Utmost of Human Capacity: Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah," *Perspectives on Maimonides*, ed. J. L. Kraemer, Oxford 1991, pp. 221–256.

¹² *Guide* II: 42 (p. 389).

¹³ *Ibid.* II: 46 (p. 406).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* II: 35 (pp. 368–369), and see N. Nehorai, "Stand Still, O Sun, at Gibeon" (Heb.), *Da'at* 32–33 (1994), pp. 97–101; D. Schwartz, "Did the Sun Actually Stand for Joshua? A Chapter in the Theory of Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy" (Heb.; to appear).

¹⁵ *Guide* I: 42 (p. 92); but cf. *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 8: 1.

¹⁶ *Guide* II: 47 (pp. 407–409).

¹⁷ *Epistles of Maimonides* (above, n. 4) p. 223.

is, "miracles." This admission demands an explanation as it seems to involve a contradiction: how can one hold that the natural order of things is preserved while at the same time admitting the possibility of exceptions? As we shall see, Maimonides proposes different explanations on various occasions, all grappling with the principle which seems to clash with the reality of miracles. In the commentary to the Mishnah, when the principle at stake is the characterization of the Divine will as a primordial will, contrary to the view of the *Kalam*, Maimonides cites the Rabbinical dictum that miracles were provided for in the very creation of the universe. In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, when postulating that the natural order is a persistent, eternal one, Maimonides explains miracles as merely temporary violations of natural laws. In *Treaties on Resurrection* he repeats this explanation, seeing the resurrection of the dead, too, as just such a temporary violation. Finally, in his *Epistle against Galen*, miracles are described as accelerated natural processes or extreme physical changes.

Methodologically speaking, the subsequent discussion is based for the most part on a technique of "close reading." Maimonides' position will be examined on two levels: the synthetic view, looking at Maimonides' characteristic conception in general terms, will be accompanied by an interpretative study, considering the different contexts in which the problem of miracles is treated. Indeed, as Maimonides came back to the problem several times in his works, which were written over many years, certain differences between these separate contexts may be unavoidable.

1. Miracles as Embedded in Creation

Commentary to the Mishnah

The first serious discussion of miracles may be found in Maimonides' introduction to Tractate Avot (*Shemonah Perakim*), in the eighth chapter, which deals with human nature.¹⁸ Discussing the problem

¹⁸ "Eight Chapters," in R. L. Weiss and C. E. Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, New York 1975, pp. 83-95. Arabic source in *Shailat* ed. (above, n. 7).

of free will, Maimonides considers the implications of the argument that any action man chooses to perform is done in accordance with the Divine Will (Arabic: *al-mashī'a*).¹⁹ This brings him to the topic of the Divine Will in general, and he continues:

The dialectical theologians²⁰ disagree with this. I have heard them say that volition with respect to each thing takes place one moment after another, continuously. We do not believe that; rather, volition occurred during the six days of Creation, and [since then] all things act continuously in accordance with their natures. As [Solomon] said: What was is what will be [Eccl. 1: 9]; what has been done is what will be done [*Ibid.* 3: 15]; there is nothing new under the sun [*Ibid.* 1: 9]. Therefore the sages insisted that there was a prior volition [Arabic: *al-mashī'a*], during the six days of Creation, for all the miracles which deviate from custom and which have come about or will come about as has been promised. At that time the natures of those things were determined in such a way that what has taken place in them would take place. When it takes place at the time it is supposed to, something new is presumed to occur, but that is not so. They expounded at length upon this subject in *Midrash Qobelet* and in other places.²¹ One of their sayings concerning this subject is: The world goes along according to its custom [Avodah Zarah 54b]. In all that they say, peace be upon them, you will always find they avoid positing volition in each particular thing and at each particular moment.²²

Thus, Maimonides disagrees with the "theologians" as to the relationship between Divine Will (volition), things and time. The philosophers of the *Kalam* argued for a particularistic relationship: Divine Will acts independently on each thing and in each and every unit of time. The alternative approach offers two interrelated arguments:

a) a theological argument, according to which the Divine Will acted on one occasion: "Volition occurred during the six days of Creation";

¹⁹ On the Divine Will see A. Nuriel, "The Divine Will in More Nevukhim" (Heb.), *Studies in Maimonides (Likkutei Tarbiz V)*, Jerusalem 1985, pp. 370–392.

²⁰ That is, the philosophers of the *Kalam*. For a detailed account see H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Cambridge, MA, 1976.

²¹ See *Kobelet Rabba* 1: 3, 3: 17.

²² *Eight Chapters* (above, n. 18), p. 87.

b) a cosmological argument, according to which things act continuously as dictated by their intrinsic natures: "All things act continuously in accordance with their natures."

Maimonides cites proof-texts from the book of Ecclesiastes for the cosmological argument: "What was is what will be, etc." As the view is confirmed by Scripture and presented as collective ("we do not believe that..."), it follows that the Sages, too, believed that "all things act continuously in accordance with their natures." The Sages were faced, therefore, with the textual problem of explaining "all the miracles which deviate from custom," whether in the past (on the evidence of the Bible?) or those promised for the future.

The Sages insisted that the theological argument that confines the action of the Divine Will to "the six days of Creation" alone was also applicable to miracles. The cosmological argument, according to which the nature of all things is determined once and for all, also implies that all future events are embedded in those things: "The natures of those things were determined in such a way that what has taken place in them would take place." Ontologically speaking, historical events in the present are merely phenomena determined in the past. Maimonides, on the other hand, points out the error of those observers who believe that a given event is new: "When it takes place at the time it is supposed to, something new is presumed to occur, but that is not so."²³ Thus the "miracle which deviates from custom" is not in essence distinct from a natural event: both take place in accordance with the preordained nature of things.

Subsequently, commenting on the actual text of Tractate Avot, Maimonides explains the relevant rabbinic adage *ad loc.*,²⁴

²³ M. Z. Nehorai (above, n. 2, p. 8) has interpreted the last words, "but that is not so," as Maimonides' rejection of the Rabbinic view. To my mind, however, they should be understood as a rejection of the view that "something new is presumed to occur."

²⁴ See E. E. Urbach, *The Sages. Their Concepts and Beliefs*, transl. I. Abrahams, Jerusalem 1975, p. 112.

distinguishing between the natural event and the miracle:

Ten things were created at twilight: the mouth of the Earth, the mouth of the well, the mouth of the she-ass, the rainbow, the manna, the rod, the shamir, the script . . . I have already informed you, in the Eighth Chapter, that they [=the Sages] did not believe that the Divine Will acts anew at each particular moment, but that when the things were first created it was embedded in their nature that whatever shall be done with them shall indeed be done, whether that thing is such as is done always – and that is the natural thing, or whether it takes place only infrequently – and that is the miracle.²⁵

Maimonides first repeats the two arguments: the Sages do not hold with the renewal of Divine Will, and all events as a whole were predetermined at Creation, both natural and miraculous. The defining feature of the miracle is its low frequency, as against the persistence of the natural event.²⁶ Now Maimonides gives examples of things in which miraculous events are embedded:

He therefore stated that on the sixth day it was fixed in the Earth that it would engulf Korach and his band, and in the well that it would produce water, and in the she-ass that she would speak, and so on. While “the script” is the Torah that was written before Him, may He be exalted, and “the writing” is the letters upon the tablets . . .

In other words, when the work of Creation was completed, in the twilight of the sixth day, ten exceptions were imprinted, as it were, on the nature of the ten things listed in the Mishnah. But Maimonides raises a further objection – and immediately settles it:

But if all the miracles were placed in the natures of those things from the six days of Creation, why were these specific ten singled out? You should know that they were not singled out in order to say that there is no miracle placed in the nature of things since the six days of Creation other than these. Rather, [the Mishnah] said that these alone were made at twilight, while other miracles were placed in the nature of the thing in which they were performed from the beginning of its being made.

²⁵ *Maimonides' Commentary on Avot*, Arabic and Heb. transl. ed. by Y. Shailat, Jerusalem 1994, p. 101, Avot 5: 5.

²⁶ The definition of miracle in fact agrees with the Aristotelian definition of chance (*Physica* 196b), which Maimonides cites in *Guide* II: 20 (p. 312): “The fortuitous things do not occur either always or in the majority of cases.”

Maimonides' query concerns the list of miracles given here, which of course does not include all the miracles. He answers: the list does not cover all the exceptions "placed" in things at the time of Creation. While the ten miracles in this special group were "prepared" in this way at the very last stage of Creation (at twilight of the sixth day), all others were implanted in the relevant things "from the beginning of their being made." And Maimonides goes on to give more particulars, probably following the Midrash in *Beresheet Rabba* 5: 4:

For on the second day, when the waters were divided, it was placed in their nature that the Red Sea would be split for Moses and the Jordan for Joshua, similarly for Elijah [2 Kings 2: 8] and Elisha [*Ibid.* 2: 14]. And on the fourth day, when the Sun was created, it was placed in it that it would stand still at a certain time, as commanded by Joshua. And similarly with regard to other miracles, save only these ten – these were placed in the nature of those things at twilight.

At the same time Maimonides offers no explanation of the difference between the two groups of miracles, those placed in the natures of the things from their very creation and those placed there just before the completion of Creation.²⁷ In sum: in the Commentary to the Mishnah Maimonides embraces the Rabbinic resolution of the problem of miracles: Miracles are rare but not supernatural phenomena, provided for in advance at Creation.

Guide of the Perplexed

Maimonides discusses the problem of miracles²⁸ in the chapters of *The Guide of the Perplexed* devoted to the question of the eternity or createdness of the universe. Before that, however, he already expresses his disagreement with the Aristotelian assumption that the natural order has always existed and that it will necessarily continue to exist in the future. Indeed, Aristotle insisted

... that this whole higher and lower order cannot be corrupted and abolished, that no innovation can take place in it that is not according to its nature, and

²⁷ See Ha-Meiri's query *ad loc.* in *Bet Habchira*, Commentary on the Ethics of the Fathers by Menachem haMeiri (Heb.), New York 1944, p. 176.

²⁸ The main part of the discussion appears in *Guide* II: 29 (pp. 345–346).

that no occurrence that deviates from what is analogous to it can happen in it in any way. He asserts – though he does not do so textually, but this is what his opinion comes to – that in his opinion it would be an impossibility that will (Arabic: *mashī'a*) should change in God or a new volition (Arabic: *irāda*) arise in Him [It is] impossible that a volition should undergo a change in Him or a new will arise in Him. Accordingly it follows necessarily that this being as a whole has never ceased to be as it is at present and will be as it is in the future eternity.²⁹

Maimonides agrees that God will never change the laws of the universe:

It is as if he [= Solomon] said that the thing that is changed, is changed because of a deficiency in it that should be made good or because of some excess that is not needed and should be got rid of. Now the works of the deity are most perfect, and with regard to them there is no possibility of an excess or a deficiency. Accordingly they are of necessity permanently established as they are, for there is no possibility of something calling for a change in them. He has also, as it were, stated an end for what has come to exist or given an excuse for what changes, saying in the final part of the verse: And God hath so made it, that they should fear before Him [Eccl. 3: 14] – he refers to the production of time in miracles He, may He be exalted, desires that that which exists should continue and that its various parts should be consecutive to one another He means that all His works – I mean to say His creatures – are most perfect³⁰

Both Aristotle and Maimonides, then, are agreed that the laws of nature are eternal. But there are certain differences that as will be seen later, are not independent:

1. Aristotle takes an extreme position, brooking no exceptions: “No occurrence that deviates from what is analogous to it can happen in it in any way.” This approach denies any possibility of miracles, as will become clear below. Maimonides himself cites the book of Ecclesiastes, according to which the “innovation” inherent in a miracle is designed so that “they should fear before Him.”

²⁹ *Guide* II: 13 (p. 284). See Ravitzky (above, n. 9), p. 252. We cannot here take up another question that has troubled many scholars, as to whether Maimonides indeed disagreed with Aristotle's views on the eternity of the universe. For a comprehensive bibliography of the question see J. J. Dienstag, “Creation in Maimonides – Bibliography” (Heb.), *Da'at* 32–33 (1994), pp. 247–268.

³⁰ *Guide* II: 28 (pp. 335–336).

2. Maimonides attributes the future permanence of the natural order to the Divine Will ("He, may He be exalted, desires that that which exists should continue and that its various parts should be consecutive to one another"), while Aristotle explains the eternity and permanence of the universe to the fact that God has no renewed or changing will.³¹ According to Aristotle, the premise "[It is] impossible that a volition should undergo a change in Him or a new will arise in Him" necessarily implies that the universe is necessary, has always existed and will always exist.

Further on, Maimonides explains various biblical passages on the basis of the principle that the natural order is permanent in the future too. Eschatological prophecies, he argues, do not describe a world with changed laws of nature. Statements as to a new, eschatological world order ("new heavens and a new earth") should be understood not as changes in nature, but as a metaphor for days of unbounded joy. He nevertheless mentions an alternative interpretation, from *Bereshit Rabba* (1: 18), according to which the earth and the heavens will indeed be renewed ("to mean what people think it means"). But that does not imply a recreation of the universe:

For it is possible that he means that the nature that will necessitate in time the states of existence that have been promised, is created since the six days of the Beginning. And this is true.³²

Though this interpretation is not the same as that offered by Maimonides himself, he does not reject it outright, as it may be reconciled with the assumption that all future events are based on the laws of the creation, that "nothing new will be produced in any respect or from any cause whatever."³³ Both the Bible and the

³¹ See M. Turner, "Divine Will in The Guide of the Perplexed" (Heb.), Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 1995.

³² *Guide* II: 29 (p. 345).

³³ See also Abraham bar Hiyya, *Sefer Megillat ha-Megalle* (Heb.), Berlin 1924, pp. 56–57.

Sages, he asserts, believe that

[The] passing-away of this world, a change of state in which it is, or a thing's changing its nature and with that the permanence of this change, are not affirmed in any prophetic text or in any statement of the Sages either [You] constantly find as the opinion of all Sages and as a foundation on which every one among the Sages of the Mishnah and the Sages of the Talmud bases his proofs, his saying: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1: 9), and the view that nothing new will be produced in any respect or from any cause whatever. . . .³⁴

Judging from the sweeping formulation of the text ("any prophetic text . . . any statement of the Sages . . . every one among the Sages . . .") it would seem that Maimonides is concerned to deny any authoritative or traditional basis for the conception that nature may undergo any radical changes at the End of Time.

Maimonides now grapples with the central problem of miracles. And once again, alongside his own solution (see below) he refers to the Rabbinical explanation:

The Sages . . . have made a very strange (*gharība*) statement about miracles, holding the view that miracles too are something that is, in a certain respect, in nature. They say that when God created that which exists and stamped upon it the existing natures, He put into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred. According to this opinion, the sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and thereupon a certain thing is effected according to what was put into its nature when first it received its particular impress. If this statement is as you will see it, it indicates the superiority of the man who made it and the fact that he found it extremely difficult to admit that a nature may change after the Work of the Beginning or that another volition (Arabic: *masbī'a*) may intervene after that nature has been established in a definite way [All] this serves to avoid having to admit the coming-into-being of something new.³⁵

That is to say: when the natural order was established, future changes were already imprinted on that order.³⁶ These changes – the miracles – will be revealed to the people by a prophet, shortly before they take place.

³⁴ *Guide* II: 29 (p. 344).

³⁵ *Ibid.* (p. 345).

³⁶ See Abraham bar Hiyya (above, n. 31), p. 16.

However, we have already pointed out the difference between Maimonides' references to the Rabbinical solution in his Commentary to the Mishnah and in the *Guide*. In the former source it was cited without reservation. Here, after delineating one solution, which Maimonides explicitly identifies as his own ("That is my opinion, and that is what ought to be believed"), he describes the Sages' explanation in rather dubious terms: "a very strange statement," "all this serves to avoid..." all terms that seem to imply certain reservations. The Arabic original translated by Pines is "very strange."³⁷ The adjective *gharīb* is used in the *Guide* in both positive³⁸ and negative³⁹ senses. In any event, it is striking that he chooses to describe the Sages' view as "very strange"! Perhaps the answer to this question may be found in Maimonides' citation of the relevant passage in *Bereshit Rabbah* 5: 4:

Rabbi Jonathan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, imposed conditions on the sea: [to wit], that it should split before Israel... Rabbi Jeremiah, son of Elazar, said: The Holy One, blessed be He, imposed conditions not only on the sea, but on all that was created in the six days of the Beginning.... I commanded the sea to split; the fire not to harm Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; the lions not to harm Daniel; and the fish to spit out Jonah....⁴⁰

One explanation for Maimonides' use of the adjective "strange" may be that this account includes strongly mythological elements: God posed conditions (or issued commands) to the sea, the fire,

³⁷ Judah Halevi, too, refers to this passage from Tractate Avot (5: 5) in *Sefer ha-Kuzari* 3: 73, as "another passage whose literal sense is absurd," arguing that the ten exceptional cases were determined by the primordial will. It seems that Judah Halevi did not necessarily agree with the notion expressed in the passage, since he himself interpreted at least some of the "ten things" created at twilight as an entirely new creation. See H. A. Wolfson, "Judah Halevi on Causality and Miracles," *Meyer Waxmann Jubilee Volume*, Chicago – Jerusalem 1966, pp. 137–153.

³⁸ See *Guide* 1: 1 (p. 23): "Now man possesses as his proprium something that is *very strange*, as it is not found in anything else that exists under the sphere of the moon, namely, intellectual apprehension." See on this topic A. Nuriel, "The Use of the Term *Gharīb* in the Guide of the Perplexed" (Heb.), *Sefunot* 5 (1991), pp. 137–144.

³⁹ As when Maimonides begins *Guide* 1: 2 (p. 23) with the words, "Years ago a man propounded as a challenge to me a *curious* objection," and goes on to reject the objection entirely.

⁴⁰ *Guide* II: 29 (pp. 345–346).

the lions, the fish.⁴¹ In fact, he proposes a naturalistic interpretation of the passage, blunting the edge of its "strangeness":

[He] seems to consider that it was put into the nature of water to be continuous and always to flow from above downwards except at the time of the drowning of the Egyptians; it was a particularity of that water to split.⁴²

Thus, the mythologically inclined description of the dialog between God and the sea ([God] imposed conditions on the sea... commanded the sea") is given a natural explanation ("it was put into the nature of water").

As we shall see later, Maimonides actually proposed a different solution to the problem of miracles. At the same time, he praised "the superiority" of the originator of the Rabbinical interpretation, not so much because of the solution proposed but because of his awareness that he was dealing with a problematical issue, whose "extreme difficulty" stems from two problems:

- a) cosmological problem: "that a nature may change after the work of the beginning";
- b) theological problem: "that another volition may supervene after that nature has been established in a certain way."

It will be remembered that the theological difficulty was uppermost in the Commentary to the Mishnah, as the discussion of miracles dealt with the nature of the Divine Will, contra the *Kalam*. In that context Maimonides stressed that the Sages rejected the view "that volition with respect to each thing takes place one moment after another, continuously" (Introduction to Tractate Avot), or "that the Divine Will is renewed at each particular moment" (commentary to Avot 5: 5). Here, however, Maimonides speaks of "another volition," that is, of the possibility of a change in the Divine Will, its replacement by another will. This version of the problem agrees with the "subtle" (Arabic: *daqīq*) argument

⁴¹ For the creation of the sea and nature in general cf. *Guide* 1: 68 (p. 159); for the fish see *Ibid.* 2: 48 (p. 411). Maimonides himself holds that "commandments are not given to beasts and beings devoid of intellect" (*Ibid.* 1: 2 [p. 24]).

⁴² *Ibid.* 2: 29 (p. 345).

concerning Divine will outlined in Maimonides' argument with Aristotle and his followers.⁴³ The conclusion from this argument is that a non-material being "may wish one thing now and another thing tomorrow" without that constituting "a change in its essence." However, the discussion as we have it in the *Guide* revolves primarily around the cosmological difficulty, as it is concerned with the question of whether the laws of nature are eternal.

Thus, Maimonides cites the Rabbinical solution as an alternative to that proposed by himself, treating it with some sympathy. Such citation of alternative solutions, or additional legitimate solutions, alongside Maimonides' own solutions may be found elsewhere in the *Guide*, in various contexts. Another example appears, as will be remembered, in the present chapter: besides Maimonides' own explanation that any innovation in the future universe is but a metaphor, he adds the Sages' view that such "innovations" were all predetermined at Creation. It would seem that he adds an alternative legitimate interpretation as one way of precluding a third interpretation. The alternative is sometimes an existing traditional solution,⁴⁴ perhaps more acceptable to certain readers. In the present context, Maimonides adds the Rabbinical interpretation of miracles, probably in order to refute the commonly believed notion of miracles – "that a nature may change after the work of the beginning" – in any possible way.

In sum: in the Commentary to Tractate Avot, Maimonides remains faithful to the Mishnah and in no way distances himself from the traditional, Rabbinical interpretation. In his independent treatise, however, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, though citing the Sages' view and expressing his positive evaluation, he does not identify with it. As we shall see later, he offers his own, alternative solution. Perhaps it is not insignificant that when citing the Sages Maimonides refers his readers to *Bereshit Rabbah* and *Kobelet Rabbah* (= *Midrash Kobelet*), not mentioning the passage in Avot, as if he finds it more convenient to express his reservations with respect to the Midrash rather to the canonical Mishnah.

⁴³ *Guide* 2: 18 (p. 301).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., his attitude to Onkelos' interpretations in *Guide* 1: 21 (p. 49), or the explanation of the "created lights" in *Ibid.* 1: 5 (p. 31).

2. Miracles as Temporary Exceptions to Natural Law

As we have seen, the Rabbinical resolution of the miracle problem, as outlined in Maimonides' Commentary to the Mishnah, reappears in the *Guide*. There, however, Maimonides first proposes his own solution. He begins by describing two hypothetical possibilities:

(1) that the universe as a whole should disappear or that a different universe should materialize ("the passing-away of this world, a change of the state in which it is"), or

(2) that some phenomenon should undergo a permanent change ("a thing's changing its nature and with that the permanence of this change").

Tradition, Maimonides asserts, does not require the realization of either possibility: they "are not affirmed in any prophetic text or in any statement of the Sages either." Nevertheless, there are stories of miracles in the Bible. Indeed, Maimonides does not discount the possibility

(2a) that some thing might change its nature, but that change would not be permanent. For in his view a temporary change in a thing's nature does not create a new law, a change in the natural order.

He elaborates:

I have said that a thing does not change its nature in such a way that the change is permanent merely in order to be cautious with regard to the miracles. For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, and the pure and noble hand became white without a natural cause that necessitated this, these and similar things were not permanent and did not become another nature. But as they, may their memory be blessed, say: The world goes its customary way [Avodah Zarah 54b]. This is my opinion and this is what ought to be believed.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Guide* 2: 29 (p. 344).

In other words, miracles do not affect the rules that Maimonides has laid down, as they are in agreement with argument (2a). One can similarly explain the difference between Maimonides' position and Aristotle's rejection of the reality of miracles. In this connection Maimonides had argued previously:

On the other hand, the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it – that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything – destroys the Law (Arabic: *al-shari'a*) in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out, unless – by God! – one interprets all the miracles figuratively too, as was done by the Islamic internalists (Arabic: *ahl al-bâtin*); this, however, would result in some sort of crazy imaginings.⁴⁶

A world that exists of necessity maintains its natural order *in toto*: “no nature changes at all, and . . . the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything.” Whoever believes this cannot possibly believe in supernatural miracles. The only interpretation of miracles open to such a person is allegorization, as indeed done by a certain Islamic school,⁴⁷ which thereby reduced things to absurdity.⁴⁸

Maimonides himself accepts both the permanence of natural laws and the possibility of a particular, temporary change. The world is indeed eternal *a parte post*, he argues, but it is the outcome of Divine Will:

[We] believe that what exists is eternal *a parte post* and will last forever with that nature which He . . . has willed; that nothing in it will be changed in any respect, unless it be in some particular of it miraculously . . .⁴⁹

Thus, Maimonides does not share the Aristotelian total rejection of changes in nature: temporary modifications of the normal order of things are possible. This being so, certain biblical miracles may be explained in the simplest possible way: “the rod was turned into

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 2: 25 (p. 328).

⁴⁷ See Pines' comment *ad loc.* (p. 328 n. 1).

⁴⁸ See J. I. Gelmann, “Maimonides' ‘Raving’,” *Review of Metaphysics* 45 (1991), pp. 309–328.

⁴⁹ *Guide* 2: 29 (p. 346).

a serpent, the water into blood, and the pure and noble hand became white" – it should be noted that all these miracles happened to Moses, the only prophet who, according to Maimonides, performed miracles for the benefit of a non-selective audience.⁵⁰

Now Maimonides had previously explained that in Aristotle's view miracles are impossible. If, then, miracles did indeed take place, as attested by Scripture, their very occurrence constitutes a refutation of the eternity (*a parte ante*) of the world. In that context Maimonides does in fact appeal to this argument: "and the miracle attests to the correctness of our claims."⁵¹ However, this proof involves a certain difficulty:

For all miracles are certain in the opinion of one who has seen them; however, at a future time their story becomes a mere traditional narrative, and there is a possibility for the hearer to consider it untrue. It is well known that it is impossible and inconceivable that a miracle last permanently throughout the succession of generations so that all men can see it. Now one of the miracles of the Law, and one of the greatest among them, is the sojourn of Israel for forty years in the desert and the finding of the manna there every day. . . . All these are manifest visible miracles. Now God . . . knew that in the future what happens to traditional narratives would happen to those miracles. . . . Therefore all these fancies are rebutted and the traditional relation of all these miracles is confirmed through the enumeration of those stations, so that men to come could see them and thus know how great was the miracle constituted by the sojourn of the human species in those places for forty years. . . . For the same reason Joshua cursed him who would ever build up Jericho, so that this miracle should subsist permanently. For whoever would see the wall sunk in the ground, would clearly understand that such cannot be the aspect of a demolished building, but that this building sank through a miracle.⁵²

Thus, Maimonides suggests the following explanation for the particulars of the Children of Israel's sojourn in the desert. He first presents a general argument, stating that only those actually present are certain that a miracle has occurred; for others it is merely a story that can be "considered untrue". Nevertheless, the miracle itself is a transitory event. Thus, even though the miracles

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 2: 35 (pp. 368–369).

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 2: 25 (p. 329).

⁵² *Ibid.* 3: 50 (pp. 615–616). On the miracles in the desert as proofs see Saadya Gaon, *Emunot ve-De'ot*, Intr. 6.

in the Sinai desert were "manifest" and "visible," in the future, whoever was not present might doubt their reality. The biblical narrative was designed, therefore, to confirm their truth. For the same reason, Joshua perpetuated the miracle of the collapse of Jericho's walls by forbidding the reconstruction of the city. One should recall that Maimonides, in *Mishneh Torah*, argued in connection with the miracles in the desert

... that a person who believes on the basis of signs is imperfect in his belief.... All the signs that Moses performed in the desert were performed because they were needed, not as proofs of his prophecy. It was necessary to drown the Egyptians – He split the sea for them and sank them in it. They needed food – He brought down manna....⁵³

What Maimonides is saying here is that the miracles were performed to fulfill certain needs, not to serve as proofs; for even those actually present might suspect that some kind of illusion was involved. In the *Guide*, however, he assumes that miracles are indeed dependable for those who witnessed them; doubts may arise for those who knew of them only by word of ear. One might perhaps try to make fine distinctions: As Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah* is discussing the reason for the miracle, he argues that if it had been performed as a proof, it would still have been open to doubt. In the *Guide*, however, he is dealing with the nature of narratives that recount miracles after their occurrence; miracles leading to salvation may later serve additionally as proofs of God's greatness.

In sum: Maimonides proposes in *The Guide of the Perplexed* two explanations that enable one to posit the reality of the biblical miracles, despite the permanence of the laws of nature. He himself believes that in a miracle a substance does not change its nature. Together with this solution, however, he cites the Rabbinical position, already referred to in his commentary to the Mishnah, according to which the natural order imprinted in Creation also included miracles.

⁵³ Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 8: 1.

Essay on Resurrection

Maimonides' *Essay on Resurrection* was an avowedly apologetic work: it was written expressly in order to refute charges that he denied the physical resurrection of the dead. The main thrust of the essay is that one should believe in the possibility that the dead may be physically resurrected and granted a further life. This resurrection is a miracle; so that if miracles are possible, so is the resurrection of the dead.

Miracles are made possible by the following distinction: There is a difference between what is "rationally inconceivable", such as the corporeality of God, and what is "naturally unlikely", which includes miracles.⁵⁴ If one accepts this distinction, one can draw the following conclusions. Maimonides argues that the plain meaning of Scripture, whether in regard to corporeality or miracles, is contrary to the intellect: biblical texts referring to God in bodily terms contradict the philosophical principle that God is incorporeal; while accounts of supernatural events are also contrary to the intellectual understanding of the world as governed by permanent laws. Maimonides' first solution is in the nature of a compromise: biblical descriptions of God as possessing a body are to be understood in a metaphorical sense; and that is the basic aim of the *Guide*.⁵⁵ However, while this interpretation offers a complete, radical solution to the problem of corporeality, as it deals with something that is "rationally inconceivable", the reduction of miracles to events consistent with nature is only partial. It leaves unexplained events inconsistent with a possible natural order, unless one explains them as having actually occurred nevertheless: "Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then I feel forced to grant that this is a miracle".⁵⁶

Maimonides' *Essay on Resurrection* ends, *inter alia*, with the admission that there exist miracles that occur "in the realm of the

⁵⁴ See *Epistles of Maimonides* (above, n. 4) p. 228. The Arabic text was published by Y. Shailat, *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, I, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 333–334.

⁵⁵ See *Guide*, Introduction, p. 5.

⁵⁶ See *Epistles of Maimonides* p. 223.

naturally impossible" while others "may occur in the realm of the naturally possible".⁵⁷ As far as the first category is concerned, Maimonides explains the conditions under which such events are nevertheless counted as miracles despite their apparent impossibility. His explanation of the second category is similar to that given in the *Guide*. It will be remembered that there Maimonides defined such exceptional miracles as temporary phenomena, "a thing does not change its nature in such a way that the change is permanent."⁵⁸ The point is that such exceptions "were not permanent and did not become another nature"; thus the principle of the permanence of the laws of nature was not violated.⁵⁹ In the *Essay* we read, similarly:

... That the miracles in the naturally impossible class will not last at all, nor will they tarry or remain with their features.... Because of this fact, which I have altered you to, I refuse to accept the duration of an unnatural situation, as I have explained in this essay.⁶⁰

Indeed, Maimonides had written even before that: "... I shun as best I can changes in the physical world... happenings that come as miracles and do not become permanent at all".⁶¹ Among these "happenings that come as miracles" are the resurrection of the dead, which is also a temporary phenomenon: the dead, though risen from their graves, will of necessity return to them.

Nevertheless, the *Essay* introduces a new element compared with the *Guide* – a teleological cause for the temporariness of miracles:

For if they persist, they would open the way to suspicion. If the rod remained a serpent, the uncertainty would be entertained that it had been originally a serpent, so that miracle is achieved by its return to rod.... so also: "and the daybreak the sea returned to its normal state" [Exodus 14: 27].⁶²

The emphasis here is on the epistemological aspect of the miracle: miracles will generally be better proofs if nature reverts to its

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁵⁸ *Guide* 2: 29 (p. 345).

⁵⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁰ *Epistles*, p. 232.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

normal order, so that it is obvious to the observer that the event was indeed "in the naturally impossible class". In the *Guide* Maimonides argued differently when treating the use of miracles as proofs:

It is well known that it is impossible and inconceivable that a miracle lasts permanently throughout the succession of generations so that all men can see it For the same reason Joshua cursed him who would ever build up Jericho, so that this miracle should subsist permanently. For whoever would see the wall sunk in the ground, would clearly understand that such cannot be the aspect of a demolished building, but that this building sank through a miracle.⁶³

The notion conveyed here concerning the perpetuation of miracles is different from that implied by the *Essay on Resurrection*:

If in the incident of the followers of Korah, the ground had burst asunder, and stayed open for good, the miracle would be challenged. In fact, the miracle was completed when the ground returned to its former condition.⁶⁴

One might, indeed, reconcile the two statements by supposing that in the *Guide* Maimonides is addressing his readers in the present, who require permanent, lasting evidence; while in the *Essay on Resurrection* he is speaking of the audience to the miracle itself.

But we can say more. Maimonides in this *Essay*, discussing the primary role of miracles, speaks of "... happenings that come as miracles and do not become permanent at all, so that they occur out of necessity or to confirm prophecy".⁶⁵ The notion of a supernatural event designed "to confirm prophecy" is in conflict with Maimonides' statement in *Mishneh Torah* that such miracles are not good proofs for the authenticity of a prophet, as it might be suspected that they were performed "by illusion and sorcery." Therefore, "all the signs that Moses performed in the desert were performed because they were needed, not as proofs of his prophecy." The Red Sea was split in order to drown the Egyptians; Korach and his band were swallowed up as a punitive measure for

⁶³ *Guide* 3: 50 (p. 616).

⁶⁴ *Epistles* p. 232.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

their blasphemy.⁶⁶ Thus, the primary role of miracles was not "to accredit a prophet": the prophet does not have to perform a sign that departs from "the way of the world."⁶⁷ But in the *Essay on Resurrection* we read that this was indeed one function of supernatural miracles.

A similar view, again different from that expressed in the *Guide*, is propounded in another work intended for a popular audience, the *Epistle to Yemen*. In that work that Messiah is described as a miracle worker who impresses the whole world:

But he will prove by means of miracles and wonders that he is the true Messiah... for the miracles he will perform will frighten them [The kings of the nations] into complete silence.⁶⁸

In *Mishneh Torah*, however, we read:

Do not think that the King Messiah will have to perform signs and portents and innovate things in the world or revive the dead or the like; that is not so.... For [in the case of Bar-Kokhba] the sages required of him neither sign nor portent.⁶⁹

Once again, there may be a difference between *a priori* (the Messiah will not *have to* perform miracles) and *a posteriori* (the Messiah having performed miracles); but the different emphasis is quite striking.

In sum: Maimonides in his *Essay on Resurrection* repeats the explanation given in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, according to which miracles are temporary occurrences, after which nature resumes its normal course. In the former work, however, we have the added argument that the temporary nature of the miracle reinforces its epistemological force: the natural order subsisting before and after a supernatural event highlights its exceptional and miraculous nature. This difference agrees with the reasoning of the *Essay* that such supernatural events are designed to serve as evidence.

⁶⁶ Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 8: 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 10: 1.

⁶⁸ *Epistles* p. 125.

⁶⁹ Hilkhot Melakhim 11: 3. And cf. Ravitzky (above, n. 9), pp. 250–253.

3. Miracles as Accelerated Natural Processes

Yet another interpretation of supernatural miracles may be found in what is probably a later work, the *Epistle against Galen* included in Maimonides' *Medical Aphorisms* (*Pirkei Moshe*). The specific context is a statement of Galen that the hair of the eyebrows does not grow beyond a certain length, which sparks off a discussion of God's omnipotence. Galen rejects four viewpoints on this subject, which he ascribes to Moses. Maimonides insists that three of the four viewpoints are misattributed, only the fourth – which is in fact correct – being rightly ascribed to Moses. Galen is referring to the thesis "that all things are possible with God, and if He wishes to instantly create a horse or an ox from the dust, He can do so."⁷⁰ The same would apply to such biblical miracles as the conversion of the rod into a snake or dust into lice. In other words, the background to the discussion of miracles in the *Epistle against Galen* is again mainly textual: Moses described certain events in the Torah as "something which is outside its normal and permanent nature."

Maimonides begins with an exposition of his view of Creation. God first created the primordial matter, from which the four elements were then formed: fire, air, water and earth. The universe was then made up of these elements. It is therefore feasible that God should accelerate the course of nature:

[Something] which usually exists in specific degrees and always under specific conditions appears contrary to these habitual conditions and is instantaneously transformed, like the transformation of the staff into a snake, of dust into lice, of water into blood, of air into fire and the venerable holy hand of Moses turning white as snow, all of which occurred instantaneously.⁷¹

The four elements can be converted in a natural process, gradually ("in specific degrees"), into entities made up of them. The conversion of dust to lice or water to blood, etc., is simply an

⁷⁰ *The Medical Aphorisms of Moses Maimonides' Medical Writings*, transl. F. Rosner, Haifa 1989, p. 438. Arabic original according to Moshe b. Maimon, *Iggerot*, translated by J. Kafih, Jerusalem 1972, pp. 148–167.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

acceleration of a natural process. This very solution may in fact be found in al-Ghazali's *Tabāfut al-Falāsifa*:

And also the bringing back to life of the dead and the changing of a stick into a serpent are possible in the following way: matter can receive any form, and therefore earth and the other elements can be changed into a plant, and a plant, when an animal eats it, can be changed into blood, then blood can be changed into sperm, and then sperm can be thrown into the womb and take the character of an animal. This, in the habitual course of nature, takes place over a long space of time, but why does our opponent declare it impossible that matter should pass through these different phases in a shorter period than is usual, and when once a shorter period is allowed there is no limit to its being shorter and shorter, so that these potencies can always become quicker in their action and eventually arrive at the stage of being a miracle of a prophet.⁷²

Al-Ghazali is thus describing the following process:

Dust (other elements) → plant → (eaten by animal)

→ blood → sperm → (in womb) → animal.

Should this process become shorter, it would follow that dust could instantly become an animal, thus permitting the reality of such phenomena as the resurrection of the dead or the conversion of the staff into a snake. The considerable resemblance indicates that al-Ghazali's work was presumably known to Maimonides – at least, when he wrote the *Epistle against Galen*.⁷³

Nevertheless, Maimonides is not content with this explanation, pointing out that there is another kind of miracle:

[Something] is produced which cannot be produced according to the nature of this world, such as manna, the condition of which was hard so that it could be ground and bread (crumbs) made therefrom but which melted and flowed (as a liquid) when the sun warmed it, as well as all the other miraculous occurrences pertaining to the manna described in the Torah.⁷⁴

Manna in itself is an exceptional entity: a hard solid that can be turned into a liquid by the heat of the sun. And Maimonides adds,

⁷² Translated in S. Van Der Berg (trans.), *Averroes' Tabāfut al-Tabāfut*, London 1978, p. 327 (534).

⁷³ On al-Ghazali and Maimonides see Pines in his Introduction to the translation of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, p. cxxviii.

⁷⁴ *Epistle against Galen*, Rosner ed., p. 442.

without going into detail, that other miraculous things happened to the manna. At any rate, according to the example mentioned, the miracle of the manna apparently involved radical physical changes, by virtue of which it must be seen as absolutely supernatural: "[Something] is produced which cannot be produced according to the nature of this world."

It will be remembered that in the Commentary to the Mishnah Maimonides dealt with miracles while disputing the *Kalam* theory of Divine Will; in the *Guide*, the point of departure was the rejection of Aristotle's doctrine of the eternity *a parte ante* of the universe. His treatment in the *Epistle against Galen* is also polemical: he again disputes the eternity of the world, accusing Galen of ambiguity on this point:

[Upon] which of the two basic and fundamental rules does he build this allegation and ordain this judgment? Is it according to the belief in the eternity or the viewpoint of the creation (of the world)?... [Examine] well how he confuses things which are consequences of the doctrine of the creation of the world with things that are consequences of the doctrine of the eternity of the world, and how he considers this all to be a single belief and one viewpoint...⁷⁵

Maimonides himself argues that the reality of miracles attests to the truth of creation; therefore, "the perception of a miracle by someone who sees this wonder is a decisive proof of the creation of the world."⁷⁶ A belief in the eternity of the world would contradict the very possibility of supernatural events:

Therefore, it is impossible to him [=a believer in the eternity of the world] that a material whose nature is not to be created instantly should be created instantly [=the conversion of the staff into a snake], and no condition of the existing conditions in the upper and lower heavens can change from its natural one [e.g., the formation of manna].

Indeed, the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the world does not permit the Creator to be active in any way in nature:

[He] who says the world is eternal in this manner (believes) that God, blessed be He, has no renewing wishes or novel desires, and there is nothing in existence

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 444–445.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

that might possibly be dependent on His ability and (Divine) Will so that, for example, He could not bring us rain on one day and withhold it on another day, according to His will....⁷⁷

The implication from this account is that Maimonides himself does believe that God can indeed "bring us rain on one day and withhold it on another day, according to His will." Nevertheless, this ability is conditional on the possibility of renewal in the Divine Will. Now, in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides also pointed out that the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the world denies the possibility of a renewed Divine Will: "[In] his opinion it would be an impossibility that will should change in God or that a new volition should arise in Him."⁷⁸ Later on in that work, however, Maimonides is at pains to explain that he, too, does not attribute a changing will to God, and he refers to his dispute with the *Kalam*, which permits the Divine Will to be renewed. Now he was attacking the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the universe with all its implications, simultaneously ridiculing Galen's attempt to form an impossible synthesis.

Conclusion

Maimonides, as we have seen, deals with the problem of miracles in different ways in different books. He is consistent, however, in one respect in all his discussions of the problem, he limits the wondrous, supernatural element of miracles.

In the early works, such as the Commentary to the Mishnah and *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides is polemicizing with various viewpoints typical of the *Kalam*: the thesis of the *Ash'arīya* that Divine Will may renew itself, thus allowing constant divine involvement in the world; and the argument of the *Mu'tazila* that a prophet's authenticity is founded on supernatural portents. He stresses the notion of an eternal will, pointing out with the help of Talmudic sayings that this notion provides an adequate basis for the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

⁷⁸ *Guide* 2: 13 (p. 284).

possibility of miracles. At the same time, he warns us that miracles should not be seen as proofs and were not performed to that end.

The tenor of *The Guide of the Perplexed* is different. Here Maimonides' thrust is aimed at Aristotle and his doctrine that the world is eternal *a parte ante* and moreover exists necessarily as it is. On the contrary, argues Maimonides, a temporary change may occur in a specific phenomenon, and this change is what we call a miracle. The *a posteriori* use of miracles as proofs is legitimate; indeed, miracles were recounted in the Bible so that later readers, not present on the original occasion, would also believe that they had happened. In the *Essay on Resurrection* Maimonides again describes miracles as temporary departures from nature, adding, however, that the temporary element is necessary in order to confirm their miraculous, supernatural character. This addition is consistent with the statement in the same work that supernatural miracles may also occur to authenticate prophecy.

Finally, in the *Epistle against Galen* Maimonides explains how God might bring about a drastic change in the natural order. In the course of a diatribe aimed against the doctrine of the eternity of the world, he insists that the omnipotent deity is able to accelerate the natural process or to create objects with diametrically opposed physical qualities.

Maimonides' different explanations of the nature of supernatural miracles attest to his constant grappling, throughout his works, with the problem: How can one believe that miracles actually occurred, as described in the Bible, while at the same time postulating the permanence and persistence of the laws of nature?

