

mashal-hash'alah dichotomy. Even when admitting that anthropomorphic depictions of God can be understood on two levels, he avoids classifying them as *meshalim*.¹²³ because the language of a *mashal* has only one meaning, the *zālūr*, which conjures up an image that, in turn, represents the *bāqin*. By classifying anthropomorphic depictions of God as *shemot meshuttafīm*, *mush'alim* and combinations thereof, Maimonides makes the non-corporeal meaning the correct one, whereas the literal reading—though intended for the uneducated—is actually mistaken. Unlike Bahya and Kimhi, who permit some people to believe in divine corporeality, Maimonides could not grant semantic validity to the literal sense.¹²⁴ Once a person graduates to the more sophisticated level, the *Guide* offers the single correct construal of the language.

4.2.3 A Scientific Reading of the Account of Creation

Pointing to a rabbinic tradition that *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, i.e., the Account of Creation, is an esoteric matter,¹²⁵ Maimonides posits that the facts of creation can be revealed from Scripture only through a non-literal reading of Gen 1:1–2:3. His exegesis of this biblical text, which

¹²³ One passage in the *Guide* seems to be an exception to this rule: Maimonides' discussion revolving around the rabbinic dictum "Great is the power of the prophets, for they liken the form to its Creator" (I:46:102–03), where he uses the term *mashal* (Heb. *mashal*). But this exception proves the rule: everywhere else in the *Guide*, he analyzes anthropomorphic depictions of God using the terms *isti'ara* (Heb. *hash'alah*) and *ishtivak* (Heb. *shittuf*). Moreover, when using *mashal* in I:46, Maimonides describes the rabbinic view of anthropomorphism, not necessarily his own. Given that the Rabbis devise even more blatant anthropomorphic depictions of God than those in Scripture, he probably felt that the *mashal* mode best expresses their attitude. In fact, Harvey (1996:57–60) detects a note of criticism in Maimonides' presentation, which would support our claim that he viewed their *mashal* approach as less than optimal. On Maimonides' use of the term *mashal* in *Mishneh Torah*, see above, n. 114.

¹²⁴ This is reflected in his theory of translation (see chapter 2.1.5): unlike *meshalim*, which may be translated literally, he argues that *shemot mush'alim* must be translated according to their metaphorical sense, as in Sa'adia's *Tafsir*, even though this forfeits the pedagogical benefit of the original Hebrew.

¹²⁵ *Guide*, introduction (cited below). He cites the rabbinic source of his approach again in II:29:347. Relying on the same rabbinic tradition, Maimonides also seems to take the Garden of Eden story (Gen 2:4–3:24) non-literally, as well as the subsequent account of the "generations of man" (Genesis 4–5); see below, n. 127. His exegesis of these sections is analyzed in detail by Klein-Braslavy (1986). We limit our discussion to the creation story in Gen 1:1–2:3, which illustrates the tension between Maimonides' two modes of non-literal exegesis; see below.

is motivated by a desire to reconcile it with Aristotelian physics,¹²⁶ can be found in *Guide* II:29–30 and other passages scattered throughout the *Guide*. These have been collected by S. Klein-Braslavy in her monograph *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* [Hebrew] (1987), in which she pieces together Maimonides' line-by-line analysis of this biblical text. We rely on her comprehensive work with one exception: the precise mode of non-literal exegesis Maimonides employs. Although Klein-Braslavy regards this as an example of a *mashal* in Maimonides' view, we side with the position—articulated by Abarbanel and adopted by S. Rosenberg—that Maimonides specifically avoids characterizing this section as a *mashal*.¹²⁷ As we demonstrate below, Maimonides' analysis here manifests his philological exegesis and sheds light on his motives for distinguishing between it and the *mashal* mode.

The author of the *Guide* prefaces his commentary with "two preambles of general import":

¹²⁶ See Klein-Braslavy 1987:65–67, 136. In this respect, Maimonides followed in the footsteps of Sa'adia (see Brody 2000:82–83 and below, n. 136) and Abraham Ibn Ezra (*Jesod Mora* 78–80; below, n. 134), who had both interpreted the biblical account of creation in light of Greco-Arabic scientific learning.

¹²⁷ Abarbanel (comm. on *Guide* I:7) thus writes:

Undoubtedly, everything mentioned in the Account of Creation that was created in the six days (Genesis 1) is neither symbol (*surah*) nor allegory (*mashal*). [but rather] it is entirely literal (*ki-peshuto*). . . . However, since he saw that after the creation of [all] things in the six days [Scripture] introduces another account that begins "And the Lord God created man[. . .] (Gen 2:7)," the master [i.e., Maimonides] maintained that the creation mentioned a second time and all of the other matters [of the Garden of Eden] and the history of mankind are allegory (*mashal*) and were written so that [we] could learn true knowledge from them.

Abarbanel recognizes that Maimonides seems to have read the account of the Garden of Eden and subsequent history of mankind in Genesis 4–5 by way of *mashal* (although this is not stated explicitly in the *Guide*; see Nuriel 1990:86–87). But Abarbanel insists that the initial account of creation is "entirely literal" according to the great philosopher. That formulation might appear to be overstated (as Rosenberg 1981:121 notes) because Maimonides does reinterpret the language of the Account of Creation. However, as we will see below, the author of the *Guide* reinterprets Genesis 1 through philological analysis invoking his notions of *shittuf* and *hash'alah*, whereas Abarbanel means to say that the author of the *Guide* refrained from applying his *mashal* mode here (see below, p. 220). (Radak likewise avoids classifying Genesis 1 as a *mashal*; see below, n. 155.) In demonstrating that Maimonides avoids his *mashal* mode in this biblical section, as he likewise does when analyzing biblical anthropomorphic depictions of God, we solve the problem Klein-Braslavy raises about the stated ratio between the two types of *mashal* defined in the introduction to the *Guide*; see above, n. 9.

(1) Not everything mentioned in the Torah concerning the Account of Creation is to be taken in its external sense (*ẓāhir*), as the vulgar imagine.

(2) The prophets use in their speeches equivocal terms and terms that are not intended to mean what they indicate according to their first signification . . . (II:29;347–48)

Maimonides here avoids the term *mashal* and mentions only his linguistic notion of *shemot meshuttafim* (equivocal terms), the dominant category in his interpretation of Gen 1:1–2:3, which manifests a style of direct philological exegesis.

Without going through every detail of his analysis, which Klein-Braslavy has already done, we cite some illustrative examples. Maimonides begins his commentary, addressing Gen 1:1 (“בראשיתו”, God created the heavens and the earth”), by distinguishing between the Hebrew terms *התחלה*, *beginning* in a chronological sense, and *ראשיתו*, *principle or origin* in a logical sense.¹²⁸ Adopting the Aristotelian view that “time belongs to the created things,” he reasons that the first moment of creation cannot be placed chronologically since it occurred before time could be measured.¹²⁹ This explains Scripture’s choice of the term *ראשיתו* here, prompting Maimonides to comment:

The true translation of this verse is: “In the origin, God created what is high and what is low.” This is the translation that fits in with creation in time. (II:30;348–49)

To support his analysis of the remainder of the verse, he cites a rabbinic exegetical rule:

The Sages have explicitly stated in a number of passages that the word *אֵשׁ*, figuring in the verse, *אֵשׁ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵשׁ הָאָרֶץ* (lit. the heavens and the earth), has the meaning *with*.¹³⁰ They mean by this that He created together with the heavens all that is in heaven and together with the earth all that is in the earth. . . . Accordingly, everything was created simultaneously; then gradually all things became differentiated. (Ibid.; 350)¹³¹

¹²⁸ He cites Hos 1:2 as a proof-text for his understanding of *התחלה*. For his analysis of *ראשיתו*, he observes that it derives from: *ראש* (head, “the principle [organ] of living beings” (II:30;348).

¹²⁹ See Klein-Braslavy 1987:228–35.

¹³⁰ See BT *Pesahim* 22b; BT *Hagigah* 12a; *Beveshit Rabbah* 1 (p. 12). See Klein-Braslavy 1987:135.

¹³¹ In addition to the linguistic comment about the term *אֵשׁ*, Maimonides cites

In his analysis of the next verse, Maimonides invokes his notion of equivocality:

אֵרֶץ is an equivocal term, used in a general and a particular sense.¹³² In a general sense it is applied to all that is beneath the sphere of the moon, I mean *the four elements*. In a particular sense it is applied to one element, the last among them, namely *the earth*. A proof of this is the verse, “And the *אֵרֶץ* was unformed and void. . . .” (Gen 1:2), [whereas] afterwards it says: “And God called the dry land *אֵרֶץ*” (Gen 1:10). . . . [since] wherever you find [Scripture] saying “God named something thus,” he does this in order to differentiate between it and the other idea equally signified by the term. For this reason I have interpreted for you the verse [Gen 1:1] as follows: “In the origin God created what is high and what is low.” Hence, *אֵרֶץ* mentioned in the first place is “*what is low*”¹³³—I mean to say [all of] the four [sublunar] elements—whereas the *אֵרֶץ* of which it is said, “and God called the dry land *אֵרֶץ*,” is the element earth alone. (II:30;350–351)

Next, Maimonides applies his philological method to identify the four sublunar elements (earth, water, air and fire) in Gen 1:2,¹³⁴ which reads:

And the earth (*אֵרֶץ*) was unformed and void
And *הַטֶּמֶל* (lit. darkness) was above the deep
And the *רוּחַ* (lit. spirit) of God
hovered above the *מַיִם* (water).

Two of the elements can readily be identified: BH *מַיִם* normally means *water* and Maimonides identified *אֵרֶץ* as *earth* in the preceding passage based on Gen 1:10.¹³⁵ But the remaining two elements pose greater challenges. He construes “the *רוּחַ* of God” (otherwise rendered *the spirit of God*) as *air* based on biblical parallels such as Num 11:31, “And there went forth a wind (*רוּחַ*) from the Lord.”¹³⁶

other rabbinic sources to support this reading. His heavy use of rabbinic sources, typical of his analysis of the creation story, would have been foreign to Andalusian *peshat* exegetes such as Abraham Ibn Ezra; see above, n. 1.

¹³² A sub-type of equivocality, see chapter two, n. 27.

¹³³ This analysis of the BH term *אֵרֶץ* actually strengthens Maimonides’ reading by allowing it to stand independently of the rabbinic rule regarding the term *אֵשׁ*.

¹³⁴ Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Yésod Myra* 79–80, manifesting a similar agenda, likewise lists the four elements and identifies them with corresponding terms in Gen 1:1–2.

¹³⁵ There is a slight contradiction in Maimonides here: above he seems to interpret *אֵרֶץ* in Gen 1:2 as all four elements together. But the context suggests that there he is actually referring to the term *אֵרֶץ* in v. 1.

¹³⁶ This analysis is not original to Maimonides; a similar reading is offered by Sa’adia (comm. on Genesis, Zucker ed., 29 [Ar]: 214 [Heb.], who likewise rendered

He accomplishes the more difficult task of finding a reference to “the elemental fire” in this verse by arguing that BH הַשֶּׁךְ is an equivocal term, which means both *darkness* and *fire*. He cleverly—though tenuously—derives this from a biblical parallel:

“Thou didst hear his words out of the midst of the fire (אֵשׁ)” (Deut 4:36)
 “You heard the voice out of the midst of the הַשֶּׁךְ ” (Deut 5:20).¹³⁷

Having shown that each key term in Gen 1:2 can be construed to signify another one of the elements, Maimonides concludes: “the elements are mentioned according to their natural position; namely, first the earth, then the water that is above it, then the air that adheres to the water, then the fire that is above the air” (II:30;351).¹³⁸

While one might debate Maimonides’ conclusions, his method of reading is clear: he uses philological analysis to reveal the various meanings of the equivocal terms in this text, and scientific knowledge enables him to fix their contextually appropriate meaning.¹³⁹ This leads Abarbanel to comment that Maimonides analyzes this entire section literally (*ki-peshuto*) and not by way of allegory (*mashal*; above, n. 127). But what does Maimonides mean in his first “preamble” that “not everything . . . in the Account of Creation is to be taken in its external sense (*zāhir*; Heb. *peshuto*) as the vulgar imagine”? The confusion arises because the Arabic term *zāhir* is not the same as Abarbanel’s Hebrew term *peshuto*, by which he means the contextually indicated, non-allegorical sense of the text (see above, 1.1.4). On the other hand, Maimonides uses the term *zāhir* in the sense of an *incorrect reading* resulting from a “superficial glance” (לְגַלְיָהּ

Genesis 1 according to the notions of physics prevalent in the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition (above, n. 126).

¹³⁷ Maimonides goes on to explain why, in fact, fire is called הַשֶּׁךְ , a term originally coined to signify a lack of light, i.e., darkness. See Klein-Braslavy 1987:138–43, who argues cogently that this is an example of a *shem mush’al* in Maimonides’ classification; she also cites commentators that criticized his far-fetched analysis.

¹³⁸ Since הַשֶּׁךְ (= fire according to Maimonides) is actually mentioned before וְהָאֵרֶץ (= air) in Gen 1:2, Maimonides makes the following additional comment:

In view of the specification of the air as being “over the face of the waters” ($\text{עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם}$), [the] הַשֶּׁךְ [i.e., fire] that is “upon the face of the deep” ($\text{עַל פְּנֵי הַדְּהַם}$) is indubitably above the וְהָאֵרֶץ .

In other words, by specifying that the air is above the waters after having said that the fire is above the water, Scripture (according to Maimonides) indicates that the air is *directly* above the water and that the fire is above *both*.

¹³⁹ This resembles Sa’adia’s method of fixing the accurate meaning of “ambiguous terms”; see Steiner 1998:215–20.

אֵשׁ ; II:30;353) by uneducated people unaware of both science and Scripture’s use of equivocal terms, which Maimonides reveals in his second “preamble.”

By the same token, in Gen 1:1–2:3 (unlike a normal case of *shemot mush’alim* and *meshuttafim*), the “mistaken” reading of the masses is hardly accidental; it

is [written] in equivocal terms so that the multitude might comprehend them in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation, whereas the perfect man, who is already informed, will comprehend them otherwise. (Introduction; 9)

In this passage, which is reminiscent of Maimonides’ approach to anthropomorphism (as explained above, p. 215), the great philosopher argues that Gen 1:1–2:3 is a text that can be interpreted in two ways. But it is important to observe precisely how Scripture accomplishes this in his view. In his comment, “not everything . . . in Account of Creation is to be taken in its external sense,” Maimonides implies that some—perhaps even most—of the language is understood correctly and fully when taken in its most obvious sense. In other words, this section is not even completely composed of equivocal terms and it certainly is not a *mashal*. It was sufficient for Scripture to strategically deploy only a few equivocal terms—in a section otherwise composed of literal language¹⁴⁰—to create a text that can be read on two levels.¹⁴¹

Yet when first making the claim that the biblical account of creation is not meant literally, Maimonides seems to speak of the *mashal* mode:

The Account of Creation . . . as we have made clear, is natural science. But because of the greatness and importance of the subject and because our capacity falls short of apprehending the greatest of subjects as it really is, we are told about those profound matters . . . in *meshalim* and riddles and in very obscure words. As the sages, may their memory be blessed, have said: “It is impossible to tell mortals of the power of the Account of Creation. For this reason Scripture tells you obscurely ($\text{סֵתַם לָךְ הַבְּחִינִים}$): ‘In the beginning God created’ and

¹⁴⁰ I.e., terms that are distinct (*mutabayyina*) rather than equivocal (see chapter two, n. 15). Other Judeo-Arabic authors referred to this type of language as *muhkam*, i.e., literal language that is not subject to reinterpretation; see above, p. 141.

¹⁴¹ Maimonides, in fact, identifies just a few key equivocal terms in Gen 1:1–2:3, implying that the remainder of this section requires no special philosophical elucidation; see Klein-Braslavy 1987:64–65; 175–79, 196–200.

so on."¹⁴² They thus have drawn your attention to the fact that the above-mentioned subjects are obscure (סְתוּמָה). (Introduction; 9)

On this basis, Klein-Braslavy (1987:65) draws the conclusion that Gen 1:1–2:3 is, in Maimonides' view, a *mashal*. Though the inner meaning of this account "is natural science," as Maimonides states, "it is not written in scientific language"; instead, "Scripture expresses philosophical truths in . . . image-laden, symbolic language" (Klein-Braslavy 1987:22–23). This, Klein-Braslavy continues, conforms with Maimonides' theory of prophecy, according to which "the prophet uses . . . his imaginative faculty [to] . . . grasp intellectual truths that have first been wrapped in concrete, graphic images, i.e., through *meshalim* and riddles" (1987:23).

But Maimonides' analysis of Gen 1:1–2:3 hardly reflects the *mashal* mode, which would not require the exegetical investment that he makes to support his reading philologically. The language of a *mashal* is symbolic because it retains its literal sense and generates a graphic image. Maimonides' analysis of the creation story, on the other hand, is presented as the single correct construal of the language, which supplants the simple, vulgar reading. Just like anthropomorphism, which the masses may also misunderstand, the text of Gen 1:1–2:3 will be correctly understood by the educated, without recourse to an intermediate *zāhir*. As rendered by Maimonides, the language of this section is scientific, not symbolic.¹⁴³ It therefore seems that he uses the term *mashal* in the introduction in a non-technical sense, to signify the notion of an esoteric text. The term *mashal* appears along with other terminology (אלהמהאל ואלהלמא ובאמר מבהמא נדא; "[in] *meshalim* and riddles"¹⁴⁴ and in very obscure words") to translate the rabbinic definition of the Account of Creation as סְתוּמָה (obscure), which Maimonides cites to demonstrate its status as an esoteric text, not its method of interpretation.

What benefit accrues from taking the philological approach rather than simply classifying Gen 1:1–2:3 as a *mashal*? Maimonides may have devised his more involved strategy in order to claim that the language of this biblical section directly conveys its scientific content

¹⁴² *Battā Midrashot* I:251. (Schwarz here notes a slight discrepancy between the published text of this Midrash and Maimonides' citation.)

¹⁴³ Moreover, most of the language of Gen 1:1–2:3 is meant to be understood according to its "external sense" (see above, n. 141); it thus symbolizes nothing.

¹⁴⁴ Compare the Hebrew hendiadys *mashal ve-hiddah* above, n. 60.

without activating the imagination. Although an imaginative account of creation might not—by itself—be problematic (as anthropomorphic depictions of God are), its deployment in the Pentateuch would be less than desirable for Maimonides, who insists that Moses prophesied only through his intellect, without using his imaginative faculty (above, p. 136). Moses thus would have received the account of creation in scientific terms rather than through a picturesque dramatization. Klein-Braslavy (1987:23), who believes that Maimonides viewed Gen 1:1–2:3 as a *mashal*, was thus forced to conclude that this section

is not a direct expression of Moses' prophetic perception, but rather a composition that he composed after receiving his prophecy, in which he gave his pure conceptual understanding its special linguistic garb that it has in the Torah.

As Klein-Braslavy (1987:23, n. 16) observes, this contradicts Maimonides' view that the Pentateuch is a transcript of Moses' prophecy. But once we recognize that Maimonides avoids his *mashal* category in analyzing Gen 1:1–2:3 and instead shows its language can be understood scientifically without activating the imagination, then this text—as recorded in the Pentateuch—can be taken as "a direct expression of Moses' prophetic perception."¹⁴⁵ When construed according to Maimonides' analysis, it indeed expresses Moses' "pure conceptual understanding."

4.2.4 Reinterpreting Prophetic Supernatural Depictions

Guide II:29 is devoted to biblical verses that would seem to indicate dramatic and lasting changes in the natural order, which Maimonides reinterprets because they contradict his scientific beliefs.¹⁴⁶ Noting that this tendency is prevalent in Isaiah's prophecies, the author of the *Guide* comments:

¹⁴⁵ This solution applies only to Gen 1:1–2:3, but not to the subsequent accounts of the Garden of Eden and the "generations of man," which Maimonides, admittedly, interprets as *meshalim* (above, n. 127). Those texts thus activate the imagination and would seem incompatible with Maimonides' claims about Moses' prophecy.

¹⁴⁶ He articulates these scientific beliefs in II:29:344–46. These beliefs, he argues, are shared by the Rabbis and Aristotle; see *MT, Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:1–2; *Treatise on Resurrection*, Shailat ed., 331 (Ar.) 362 (Heb.).