

From “God of the World” to “God of the Heavens”: From the *Mishneh Torah* to *The Guide of the Perplexed**

Eliezer Hadad

Herzog College; eliezer.hadad@mail.huji.ac.il

■ Abstract

Maimonides opened almost all of his books with the verse “in the name of the Lord, the God of the world” (Gen 21:33). This verse describes the nature of Abraham’s calling, which Maimonides interprets, both in the *Mishneh Torah* and in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, as an effort to persuade others to abandon their idolatrous perceptions and affirm the uniqueness of God. There is, however, a difference between the way Maimonides describes Abraham and his calling in the *Mishneh Torah* and their portrayal in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the former, Abraham is presented as a philosopher; in the latter, as a biblical prophet. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides’s description of Abraham revolves around a verse that describes the “God of the world”; in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides adds verses in which Abraham mentions “heaven.” In this article, I shall examine these differences and suggest that they represent developments and shifts in Maimonides’s own philosophical position.

■ Keywords

Maimonides, Abraham, creation, preexistent world, principles of faith

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■ Introduction

The issue of Maimonides's true position on whether the world was created or preexistent is one of the most complicated problems arising from the study of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, sparking debates among the work's readers and commentators from the Middle Ages until present day.¹ While Maimonides himself presents only three possible positions on the subject (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.13), commentators have offered four possibilities as to the philosopher's true opinion: 1) Some have claimed that Maimonides accepted the notion of creation ex nihilo;² 2) some have argued that Maimonides's position is similar to that of Plato, i.e., that the world was created from preexistent matter;³ 3) some have argued that Maimonides adopted Aristotle's position that the world is eternal;⁴ 4) and, finally, some have argued that he maintained a skeptical position.⁵ Scholars of Maimonides have developed various methods to arrive at his true opinion. In this article, I would like to bring evidence in favor of the first position by comparing passages in Maimonides's halakhic work, the *Mishneh Torah*, that discuss the biblical Abraham, to those discussing the patriarch appearing in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

¹ See Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 5 (1986) 23–69 (Hebrew). For further comments on the attitudes of the medieval commentators, see Lawrence Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy," *HTR* 70 (1977) 233–56.

² Šem-Tob, 'Efodi, Abarbanel, and Mordekai Yoffe. See also Julius Guttmann, "Das Problem der Kontingenz in der Philosophie des Maimonides," *MGWJ* 83 (1939) 406–30; Israel Ravitzky, "The Question of a Creation or Primordial World in the Philosophy of Maimonides," *Tarbiz* 35 (1966) 333–48 (Hebrew); Kaplan, "Maimonides on Prophecy," 248; Roslyn Weiss, "Maimonides on the End of the World," *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–1993) 195–218; Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Daniel Davis, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 26–42.

³ See Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (ed. Isadore Twersky; 3 vols.; Harvard Judaic Monographs 2, 5, 8; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 1:16–40; Norbert Samuelson, "Maimonides' Doctrine of Creation," *HTR* 84 (1991) 249–71; Tamar Rudavsky, *Time Matters: Time, Creation, and Cosmology in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000) 30–37. See also Alfred L. Ivry, "Maimonides on Creation," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990) 115–37 (Hebrew). Ivry imputes to Maimonides an essentially Platonic position in which there is no preexistent matter, yet there is "something" that is not an entity but also not nothing. In my opinion, Ivry's labyrinthine formulations belie a variation on the notion of preexistent matter.

⁴ Ibn Tibbon (see Aviezer Ravitzky, "Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the Guide," *Da'at* 10 [1983] 19–46 [Hebrew]), Narbonne, and Caspi. See also Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the Guide of the Perplexed," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: Free Press, 1952) 38–94; Warren Zev Harvey, "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle," *HTR* 74 (1981) 287–301.

⁵ Shlomo Pines, "The Limitation of Human Knowledge According to al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (ed. Twersky) 1:82–109; Avraham Nuriel, "The Question of a Primordial or Created World in the Philosophy of Maimonides," *Tarbiz* 33 (1964) 372–87 (Hebrew); Michael Zvi Nehorai, "The Manner in which Maimonides Expressed His Views on Creation," *Da'at* 37 (1996) 119–26 (Hebrew); Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

The relationship between the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide of the Perplexed* is a puzzle in and of itself. Some regard the *Mishneh Torah* as an unphilosophical book intended for the masses and therefore not worthy of philosophical analysis. In recent years, however, a growing number of scholars have argued that the work does indeed contain philosophical content. I accept the position that the *Mishneh Torah* is written for “everyone, the elite as well as the masses” and therefore also contains important philosophical information.⁶ Since, however, the *Mishneh Torah* was completed almost ten years before the *Guide of the Perplexed*, at a time when Maimonides expended most of his energy on his halakhic writings, it reflects a less mature position. Only with the writing of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, when Maimonides was directing all his efforts to engaging directly and deeply with philosophical issues, did he present a more mature philosophical position regarding the origins of the world.

Maimonides opened “almost all of his books” with the verse “in the name of the Lord, the God of the world” (Gen 21:33).⁷ This verse describes the nature of Abraham’s calling, which Maimonides interprets, both in the *Mishneh Torah* and in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, as an effort to persuade others to abandon their idolatrous perceptions and affirm the uniqueness of God. Maimonides’s use of this epigraph seems to indicate that he envisioned his books as a continuation of Abraham’s original calling.⁸ There is, however, a difference between the way Maimonides describes Abraham and his calling in the *Mishneh Torah* and their portrayal in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the former, Abraham is presented as a philosopher; in the latter, as a biblical prophet. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides’s description of Abraham revolves around a verse that describes the “God of the world” (*‘el ‘olam*); in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides adds verses in which Abraham mentions “heaven.” In this article, I shall examine these differences and suggest that they represent developments and shifts in Maimonides’s own philosophical position.⁹

⁶ See Warren Zev Harvey, “The Mishneh Torah as a Key to the Secrets of the Guide,” in *Me’ah She’arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky* (ed. Ezra Fleischer et al.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001) 11–28, at 12–14.

⁷ *The Laws of the Palestinian Talmud* (ed. Saul Lieberman; Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 13; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1947) 5 n. 7 (Hebrew). Warren Zev Harvey also notes the opening to Maimonides’s Arabic *Treatise on Logic*, which according to one manuscript begins with the Arabic expression *Bismillah rab al-‘alamīn* (In the name of the Lord, God of the world). See “[Yehuda] Liebes’ *Sefer Yetzira*: Between Parmenides, Nietzsche, and Maimonides,” in *And This for Yehuda: Studies Presented to our Friend, Professor Yehuda Liebes, on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. Maren R. Niehoff, Ronit Meroz, and Jonathan Garb; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute; The Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, Hebrew University, 2012) 17–27, at 24 n. 47 (Hebrew).

⁸ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. Yosef Kafih; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1987) 3 n. 1 (Hebrew); Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (SUNY Series in Jewish Philosophy; Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999) 30.

⁹ Masha Turner devoted two articles to the description of Abraham in the writings of Maimonides. In her opinion, Maimonides presents him as a philosopher who evolved from Aristotelianism to Platonism. In doing so, he laid the foundations for Moses’s prophecy, which renewed the belief in the

■ Abraham in the *Mishneh Torah*

Maimonides's famous account of humanity's deterioration—from monotheism to idolatry—appears at the beginning of the laws of idolatry. Following this description, Maimonides explains how Abraham realized the errors of his contemporaries and felt compelled to correct their misguided positions. A careful analysis of Maimonides's words yields a distinction between Abraham's own comprehension and the teachings he relayed to others. This is how Maimonides describes the course of Abraham's intellectual development, from his weaning until the age of forty:

After Abraham was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: "How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself." He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in aught. He was submerged in Ur of the Chaldees, among silly idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshiped idols, and he worshiped with them. But his mind was busily working and reflecting until he had achieved the way of truth, apprehended the correct line of thought,

1. and knew that there is One God,
2. that He governs the celestial sphere,
3. and created everything,
4. and that among all that exist, there is no god besides Him.

He realized that men everywhere were in error, and that what had caused their error was that they worshiped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished from their minds. Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator. (*Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkot 'abodat kokavim* 1.3)¹⁰

According to Maimonides's account, it seems that Abraham's apprehension went through several stages. In his youth, he is described as an Aristotelian philosopher who questioned the pagan worldview, relying on the Aristotelian demonstration of God's existence from the perpetual rotation of the spheres. Underlying this proof is the assumption that the world is eternal.¹¹ However, it seems that the sentence that concludes this passage ("Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator") refers to another, deeper form of attainment achieved later in Abraham's life. Between the first and final stage are four perceptions of God and one conclusion

creation of the world. See "The Portrayal of Abraham the Patriarch in the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Da'at* 57 (1996) 181–92 (Hebrew); eadem, "Abraham Our Father in the Thought of Maimonides," in *The Faith of Abraham: In the Light of Interpretation throughout the Ages* (ed. Moshe Hallamish, Hannah Kasher, and John Silman; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002) 143–54 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ *A Maimonides Reader* (ed. Isadore Twersky; New York: Behrman House, 1972) 73. All translations from the *Mishneh Torah* were taken from this book with minor changes.

¹¹ See Harvey, "Mishneh Torah as Key," 18–19. See also Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (YJS 22; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 225–26.

regarding the reason for the errors of Abraham's contemporaries. The third perception ("and created everything") goes beyond the Aristotelian perception and presupposes the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, or, at the very least, creation from preexistent matter.¹² Maimonides dubs this recognition "the way of truth" and "the correct line of thought."

Abraham's attempts to reform the views of his contemporaries are also described as unfolding in two stages. In the first stage, Maimonides describes Abraham's quarrel with the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees, and in the second stage his teachings during his journey from Haran to the land of Canaan. In Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham is presented as a Jewish Socrates, undermining a king's sovereignty by raising philosophical arguments and calling for the destruction of pagan icons:¹³

Having attained this knowledge, he began to refute the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees, arguing with them and saying to them, "The course you are following is not the way of truth." He broke the images, and commenced preaching to instruct the people

1. that it is not right to serve any one but the God of the world, to whom alone it was proper to bow down, offer up sacrifices, and make libations, so that all human creatures might, in the future know Him;
2. and that it was proper to destroy and shatter all the images, so that the whole people might not err like these who thought that there was no god but these images.
3. When he had prevailed over them with his arguments, the king (of the country) sought to slay him. He was miraculously saved and emigrated to Haran. (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilḳot 'abodat *koḳabim* 1.3).¹⁴

Abraham recognized the connection between human practice and beliefs.¹⁵ Therefore, he did not limit himself to a purely philosophical discourse, but rather

¹² Warren Zev Harvey believes that this stage in Abraham's development reflects the metaphysical proof of Avicenna, as it is explained by Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah*, Hilḳot yesodey hattorah 1.4. See Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought 6; Amsterdam: Gieben, 1998) 47–48, 60–65; idem, "Maimonides, Crescas, and the Parable of the Castle," in *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought* (ed. Racheli Haliva; Studies and Texts in Scepticism 5; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018) 167–72. Sara Klein-Braslavy believes that the verb *bara'* can imply any one of the three opinions cited in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.13. I find her claim unconvincing. See the appendix at the end of this article. See Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: R. Mas, 1987) 89–90 (Hebrew); eadem, "Maimonides' Interpretation of the Verb *Bara'* and the Creation of the World," *Da'at* 16 (1986) 40–41 (Hebrew).

¹³ The story of Abraham parallels that of Socrates. Abraham raises doubts about the fundamental beliefs of his society, undermining the authority of the regime and resulting in his persecution. However, unlike Socrates, he escaped with his life. See Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," *Social Research* 8 (1941) 488–504.

¹⁴ *Maimonides Reader* (ed. Twersky), 73.

¹⁵ See for example: "You know from what I have said that opinions do not last unless they are accompanied by actions that strengthen them, make them generally known, and perpetuate them

called upon his contemporaries to modify their customs as well—to direct their sacrificial rites to the “God of the world.” This would instill recognition of God among the people. At the same time, Abraham called for the destruction of idols lest they lead the people astray.

The second stage described is Abraham’s journey from Haran to Canaan. This culminates with the creation of “the house of Abraham”:

He then began to proclaim to the whole world with great power and instruct the people

1. that the entire universe [world] had but One God
2. and Him it was right to worship.

He went from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom, calling and gathering together the inhabitants till he arrived in the land of Canaan. There, too, he proclaimed his message, as it is said: “And he called there on the name of the Lord, God of the world” (Gen 21:33). When the people flocked to him and questioned him regarding his assertions, he would instruct each one according to his capacity till he had brought him to the way of truth, and thus thousands and tens of thousands joined him. These were the persons referred to in the phrase, “men of the house of Abraham.” Abraham implanted in their hearts this great doctrine, composed books on it, and taught it to Isaac, his son. (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilḳot ‘abodat koḳabim 1.3)¹⁶

“The house of Abraham” is comprised of those who “hold his doctrine and religion.”¹⁷ These were individuals who were persuaded by his arguments and accepted his call “in the name of the Lord, the God of the world,” which included the “great principle” that “there is one God for the whole world” and the corollary that “unto Him it is proper to render service.” It is possible that during this second stage, Abraham took a more moderate approach; no longer demanding that idols be destroyed, he instead offered a positive message to worship the “God of the Universe.” The expression *‘el ‘olam* according to this paragraph refers only to the fact that the world has a single transcendent deity. So it seems that Maimonides interprets the word *‘olam* here as world, not as it is used in the Bible to connote time (“eternity”).¹⁸

among the multitude. For this reason we are ordered by the law to exalt this day, in order that the principle of the creation of the world after nonexistence be established and universally known in the world through the fact that all people refrain from working on one and the same day” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.31). Maimonides also attributes this insight to idolaters. See *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.37, and see also Eliezer Hadad, “Act as a Designer of Consciousness: Wittgensteinian Comments on Maimonides’ Philosophy,” in *The Halakhah as Event* (ed. Avinoam Rosenak; Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2016) 256–94 (Hebrew).

¹⁶ *Maimonides Reader* (ed. Twersky), 73–74.

¹⁷ *Responsa of Maimonides* (Yehoshua Blau edition; 4 vols.; Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1960) 2:314, responsa 164.

¹⁸ See Joel Kraemer and Josef Stern, “Shlomo Pines on the Translation of Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1998) 13–24. See also Pines’s translation in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. Shlomo Pines; 2 vols.; Chicago:

It is striking that in his description of both stages of Abraham's mission, Maimonides never claims that Abraham taught others that the world was created or that God is the governor (*manhig*) of the sphere. Abraham deemed it adequate to call for the recognition of a single God who should be treated as the exclusive object of one's worship. According to this, Maimonides's Abraham taught others the correct relationship between God and the world, but not the biblical or Aristotelian conceptions of the deity.

■ Abraham in the *Guide of the Perplexed*

As mentioned, a different depiction of Abraham is offered in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Throughout this book, Maimonides claims that Abraham apprehended the idea that God created the world, and even relayed this knowledge to his contemporaries:

He who received a great overflow, as for instance *Abraham*, assembled the people and called them by the way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped. Thus Abraham taught the people and explained to them by means of speculative proofs

1. that the world has but one deity,
2. that He has created all the things that are other than Himself,
3. and that none of the forms and no created thing in general ought to be worshipped.

This is what he instructed the people in, attracting them by means of eloquent speeches and by means of the benefits he conferred upon them. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.39)¹⁹

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.29, Maimonides presents an account of Abraham's mission that parallels the one appearing at the beginning of *Hilkot 'abodat kokabim* in the *Mishneh Torah*. The story of Abraham's debate with his contemporaries is described twice, first as presented in the Sabian book *The Nabatean Agriculture* and then according to his own understanding:

and they say literally what follows: When Ibrahim, who was brought up in Kutha, disagreed with the community and asserted that there was an actor other than the sun, various arguments were brought forward against him. In these arguments they set forth the clear and manifest activities of the sun in what exists. Thereupon he, they mean *Abraham*, told them: You are right; it is like an axe in the hands of carpenter. Then they mention a part of his

University of Chicago Press, 1963) 2:282 n. 4, and Shamma Friedman, *Studies in the Language and Terminology of Talmudic Literature* (Asuppot umevo'ot ballashon 16; Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2014) 3–42 (Hebrew).

¹⁹All translations from the *Guide of the Perplexed* are taken from the Pines edition with minor changes (italicized text is from the edition unless bracketed). The Judeo-Arabic source which served as the basis for this edition was that of Salomon Munk with the additions of Issachar Joel (Jerusalem, 1930–1931).

argumentation, peace be on him, against them. At the conclusion of the story they mention that the king put *Abraham* our father, may peace be upon him, into prison, and while in prison, he persevered for days and days in arguing against them. Thereupon the king became afraid that he would ruin his polity and turn the people away from their religions and banished him toward Syria after having confiscated all his property. This is what they relate. You will find this story set forth in this manner in “The Nabatean Agriculture.” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3.29)

This account describes only one of Abraham’s arguments against his contemporaries—that the sun is not a god, but rather a vessel in God’s hands, “like an ax in the hand of the carpenter.” As in the *Mishneh Torah*, Abraham is described here as a Socrates of sorts, persecuted by the king for his treasonous claims. However, unlike the account in the *Mishneh Torah*, here Abraham’s departure for Canaan features no miracles.

In Maimonides’s second description, however, Abraham is not described as a philosopher. As in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides draws a distinction here between the content of Abraham’s own attainment and the ideas which he preached to others:

However, when the pillar of the world grew up and it became clear to him

1. that there is an incorporeal deity
2. that is neither a body nor a force in a body
3. and that all the stars and the spheres were made by Him [*maṣnū ‘ātihi*], and he understood that the fables upon which he was brought up were absurd, he began to refute their doctrine and to show up their opinion as false; he publicly manifested his disagreement with them and called *in the name of the Lord, God of the world* [Gen 21:33]—both

1. the existence of the deity
2. and the creation of the world after nonexistence by that deity being comprised in that call. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3.29)

In this account, Abraham comprehends God’s transcendence and incorporeality. God is not, however, described as the governor (*manhig*) of the spheres, but rather as creator of stars and the spheres themselves. I believe that by mentioning the stars, Maimonides is indicating that the basis for Abraham’s comprehension was not the Aristotelian proof, but rather the very evidence offered by Maimonides to demonstrate that God is the creator of the world.

■ Maimonides’s Evidence for the Creation of the World

Maimonides presents his evidence against the notion of a preexistent world in two places in the *Guide of the Perplexed*: 2.19 and 2.22. In the first passage, his purpose is to explain “by means of arguments that come close to being demonstration, that what exists indicates to us of necessity that it exists in virtue of the purpose of One who purposed” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.19). This evidence negates Aristotle’s

position, but not that of Plato.²⁰ In 2.22, he begins to offer “my proofs and my preference in favor of the world’s having been produced in time,” that is, proofs that negate Plato’s conception as well.²¹

In 2.19, Maimonides adduces as evidence the irregular quality of the heavens. Some spheres move from east to west and some from west to east. Some spheres are fast and some slow. There are fast spheres that are under the slow sphere and vice versa. Each planet has its own sphere and its own unique motion, while all the fixed stars are in the same sphere and move in unison. The conception of a created world, which attributes intention to God, offers a more plausible explanation for these irregular elements than the Aristotelian worldview. After noting the irregularity that characterizes the direction and speed of the various spheres, Maimonides adds that the existence of the stars is a “fact that makes even more clear than what has been said” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.19).²²

Maimonides attributes to Aristotle the claim that the matter that composes the heavens is different from that which composes the earth,²³ establishing this distinction on the basis of the different types of motion that exist in each. The fact that the motions in the heavens are circular while those in the sublunar world are linear indicates the existence of two different types of matter.²⁴ Later in the same chapter, Maimonides concludes that according to this principle, the matter of the

²⁰ In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.20, Maimonides explicitly states that the creation of the world by divine intention contradicts Aristotle’s view of its necessary existence.

²¹ See Davidson, “Maimonides’ Secret Position,” 27–34.

²² For the relation between this argument and al-Ghazali, see Mark Steiner, “A Note on Maimonides and al-Ghazali, Leibniz and Clarke,” *Iyyun* 67 (2019) 256–58 (Hebrew).

²³ Aristotle, *Cael.* 1.2–3, 268a–270b; 1.3, 270b20–24. For a description of Aristotle’s few comments on the subject and the divergent possibilities encountered by his commentators, see Ruth Glasner, “The Question of Celestial Matter in the Hebrew Encyclopedias,” in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy: Proceedings of the Bar-Ilan University Conference* (ed. Steven Harvey; Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought 7; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2000) 313–15. Al-Farabi used two different terms to indicate the matter of the earth (*māddah*) and the matter of heaven (*mawḏūʿ*), because the latter is never in a state of potentiality. As opposed to Aristotle, al-Farabi maintained that the spheres were composed of both matter and form. In some of his writings, however, he notes that each sphere can have only one form, its spirit, in contrast to matter in the sublunar world that can change forms. See Janos Damien, *Method, Structure, and Development in al-Fārābī’s Cosmology* (IPTs 85; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 206–10. Following in the wake of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, Maimonides maintained that despite the essential difference between the matter of the heavens and the matter of the earth, the spheres nevertheless contain matter and form. In his opinion, the different directions of the various spheres’ movements reflect their different forms. Maimonides further believed that the circular motion of the spheres indicates that they are living beings with a soul, in contrast to the straight movement of the elements, which indicates that the source of their movement is nature, not a soul (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.4). Again, this does not, according to him, negate the existence of forms in the spheres.

²⁴ Stern, *Matter and Form*, 280–81, was puzzled by this conclusion. In his view, the different movements of different spheres forced Maimonides to conclude that their forms are different but not their matter. Abarbanel, however, explained that the linear motion common to all the sublunar elements indicates one kind of matter while the circular motion common to all the celestial spheres indicates another. At the same time, the distinct directions in which the different elements move

spheres must be distinguished from that of stars as well. While the spheres rotate, the stars are immobile, embedded within the spheres. It follows that the stars are composed of a “very different” type of matter (2.19).²⁵ Maimonides argues that the conjunction of the star with its sphere, despite the great divergence between the types of matter of which they are composed, supports the claim that they were connected by the One’s intention and not by necessity.

Maimonides points to two further irregular characteristics of stars which are difficult to ascribe to sheer necessity. The distribution of stars in the heavens is uneven; while some celestial regions are devoid of stars, others are dense with them. Furthermore, it is difficult for an approach predicated on the idea of necessity to explain why the star is connected to a sphere at a specific location, despite the fact that there is no difference between one point in a sphere and another. It seems that the issue is not just one of irregularity but also of randomness or, at the very least, arbitrariness. The notion that God purposely designated places for the stars within their spheres is thus the more coherent explanation for these celestial phenomena; only with great difficulty can they be ascribed to necessity.

This irregularity in the heavens indicates that there were other options for organizing them differently. Hence, God “particularized” precisely the possibility we see in front of our eyes, so it must be explained as an expression of intention. This is not just a decision between possibility and reality, but a decision between different unique possibilities of reality. Although there is some reason for the uniqueness chosen, it does not appear to be a necessary reason, but a “sufficient condition” that does not negate other logical possibilities of existence.

The *Kalam* used the “particularization” way to prove that God had a will. They argued that the randomness found in the world proves that God “particularized” by his will some possibilities out of several options. For example, the fact that there are flowers of different colors proves that he particularized for each flower its unique color, although it could have a different color.²⁶ Maimonides rejected the claims of the *Mutakallimun* for “particularization” from the randomness revealed

(up and down) indicate different forms and the distinct directions and speeds in which the spheres move indicate their different forms.

²⁵ Maimonides rejects al-Farabi’s claim that the difference between the matter of the spheres and that of the stars is a minor one: the former being transparent while the latter is not. He criticizes him for referring only to the difference in transparency between the stars and the spheres and not to the difference in motion. Šem Toḥ Ibn Falaquera noted a contradiction between Maimonides’s assertion that one must distinguish between the matter of the spheres and that of the stars, and his discussion appears in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.26. In this latter chapter, Maimonides seems to accept the position of the *tanna* R. Eliezer that the matter of heavens and what is within them (= the stars) is the same. See Šem Toḥ b. Joseph Ibn Falaquera, *Moreh ha-Moreh* (ed. Yair Shiffman; Meqorot leḥeqer tarbut yišra’el 7; Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001) 268.

²⁶ *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.74. See Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) 433–44; Herbert A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation, and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 154–203.

on earth, because he understood it as an expression of the matter of the earth that does not allow the full realization of the forms. In contrast, it is impossible to explain the irregularity of the heavens because of their matter, since the heavenly matter does not prevent the form from being fully expressed. Therefore the most obvious explanation for the irregular aspects of the heavens is through intention and not through necessity.²⁷

As mentioned, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.22, Maimonides brings evidence to support not only the claim that creation was a purposeful act of God, but also that it was performed *ex nihilo*, i.e., without any preexistent matter. His evidence is based on the weaknesses of the emanation scheme proposed by some philosophers. Because all agree “that anything but a single simple thing should proceed from a simple thing” and “that what first proceeded from God was constituted by a single simple intellect only,” the theory of emanation was required to explain how a multifaceted reality could emerge from an undifferentiated God (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.22). The main argument was that the first intellect that emanated from God is composite because it intellectualizes both God and itself. That is why two things emanate from it; its intellectualization of God leads to the emanation of another intellect, and its intellectualization of itself, a sphere.²⁸

The main fault that Maimonides finds in this conception is the argument that matter can be created by an intellect through an emanatory process: “How can the intellects be a cause for the procession of the spheres from them? And what relation can there be between matter and that which being separate has no matter at all?” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.22). Since the spheres are material beings, it is not clear how they could emerge from an intellect separated from matter. Moreover, because

²⁷ Stern, *Matter and Form*, 148–59, 280–86, devoted an extensive discussion to this evidence. He concludes that God as a “particularizer” is the same as God as “the necessarily existent in virtue of itself” which serves as a cause for the contingent world. Maimonides’s use of the word “particularizer” indicates that there is some incomprehensible reason for the world’s existence. Maimonides takes the term “particularizer” itself from the *Mutakallimūn*, but he imbues it with the meaning of the proof of Avicenna. It is unclear why Maimonides claims that “particularization” makes an explanation predicated on intention preferable to one based on necessity. Maimonides does not use the term “particularizer” to characterize God as the cause of the contingent world, but to characterize God as the cause of heaven “in this fashion” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.20), implying that the heavens could exist in other configurations. According to Stern’s understanding, Maimonides is actually reiterating Avicenna’s position. According to my suggestion, however, Maimonides is moving away from Avicenna’s demonstration in the direction of that of the *Mutakallimūn* (demonstration from the heavens but not from the earth). See Ömer Mahir Alper, “Avicenna’s Argument for the Existence of God: Was He Really Influenced by the Mutakallimūn?” in *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam* (ed. Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman; IPTS 56; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 129–41; Peter Adamson, *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 170–89. On Maimonides’s discussion of this proof, see Davidson, *Proofs*; Josef Stern, “Maimonides’ Demonstrations: Principles and Practice,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2001) 47–84.

²⁸ See Arthur Hyman, “From What is One and Simple Only What is One and Simple Can Come to Be,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (ed. Lenn E. Goodman; Studies in Neoplatonism 7; Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 111–35.

a sphere contains two types of matter—that of the sphere itself and that of the fixed stars—their formation is difficult to account for: “Now if this comes about in virtue of a procession, we cannot but require for this compound a composite cause, the procession of the body of the sphere being occasioned by one of its parts and that of the body of the star by the other” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.22). According to Maimonides, it is also possible to distinguish between the matter of the illuminating stars and the matter of the dim stars—a distinction which contrasts with Aristotle’s method. Since according to Plato, God is the cause of matter’s existence (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.13), all these questions apply to him as well.

It follows that the irregularity that inheres in the heavens demonstrates the “purpose of One who purposed”—negating Aristotle’s view—while the fact that spheres and stars are comprised of different kinds of matter negates Plato’s view. If so, of the three conceptions that Maimonides cites, only the creation of the world *ex nihilo* remains tenable. Thus, it seems that wherever Maimonides uses verses that describe God’s relationship not just with the world, but specifically with the heavens, this alludes to the notion of creation *ex nihilo*. Having found philosophical evidence for this idea in the unique relationship between God and the spheres, Maimonides saw such verses as scriptural support for his conclusions.²⁹

■ God of the Heavens

Maimonides attributes this understanding to the prophets of Israel and to Abraham before them:

For this reason you will find that all the prophets used the stars and the spheres as proofs for the deity’s existing necessarily. Thus in the traditional story of Abraham, there occurs the tale, which is generally known, about his contemplation of the stars. Again *Isaiah*, calling attention to the conclusions to be drawn from the stars, says: *Lift up your eyes on high, and see: who has created these? and so on* [Isa 40:26]. *Jeremiah* says similarly: *He made the heavens. Abraham* says: *The Lord, the God of the heavens* [Gen 24:7]. And the chief of the prophets says: *Who rides upon the heaven* [Deut 33:26], an expression we have explained. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.19)

Although Maimonides ascribes his description of Abraham to “tradition,” he nevertheless adduces as evidence a verse from the Pentateuch uttered by Abraham—not his call “in the name of the Lord, God of the world” as in the *Mishneh Torah*, but rather the words, “the God of the heavens.”³⁰ This latter verse is not mentioned at all in the *Mishneh Torah*, and it is clear that it was selected because it evokes the

²⁹ See Charles H. Manekin, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Maimonides: Earlier vs. Later Writings,” in *Maimonides: Conservatism, Originality, Revolution* (ed. Aviezer Ravitzky; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2008) 1:297–316 (Hebrew); idem, “Divine Will in Maimonides’ Later Writings,” *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008) 189–222.

³⁰ This expression is used twice by Abraham, at Gen 24:3 and Gen 24:7. It seems that Maimonides quotes the second verse that mentions only the heavens without the earth.

unique association between God and the heavens, as opposed to the relationship between God and the world as a whole.³¹ In doing so, Maimonides transforms the image of Abraham from a philosopher who relies on the concept of eternity to a biblical prophet who preaches creation *ex nihilo*. Per Maimonides's approach, every prophet is also a philosopher, and therefore, Abraham also relies on evidence. However, instead of relying on the proof of the spheres' constant rotation, Abraham relies on Maimonides's proof of the irregularity in the heavens.

Therefore, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, as opposed to the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides uses another verse spoken by Abraham to establish the claim of a created world. He mentions the verse "Maker [*qoneh*] of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:22), and through it establishes his claim that Abraham believed the world to be created. After stating that the idea of creation is one of the foundations of the "Law of Moses our master," he remains faithful to the position expressed elsewhere in the *Guide of the Perplexed* that Abraham adopted this view and made it public:

It was *Abraham our father, peace be on him*, who began to proclaim in public this opinion to which speculation had led him. For this reason, he made his proclamation *in the name of the Lord, God of the world* [Gen 21:23]; he has also explicitly stated this opinion in saying: *Maker of heaven and earth* [Gen 14:22]. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.13)

According to Maimonides, the language of some verses is clearer than others when it comes to this issue. The verse "in the name of the Lord, God of the world" reflects the general fact that Abraham disseminated the idea of creation. The verse, "Maker of heaven and earth," however, points "explicitly" to creation. It seems that the basis for this distinction is whether or not a verse uses the word "heaven." "Heaven" alludes to the evidence from the irregular nature of the cosmos that indicates the "purpose of One who purposed." Maimonides apparently believed that the phrase "in the name of the Lord, God of the world" includes a reference to the idea of creation, because the verse "Maker of heaven and earth" preceded it. Having realized that the character of the heavens indicated that they had been formed through deliberate intention, Abraham "called *in the name of the Lord, God of the world* [Gen 21:23]—both the existence of the deity and the creation of the world in time by that deity being comprised in that call" (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3.29).

³¹ Stern, *Matter and Form*, 150–51, maintained that in this paragraph, Maimonides left open the possibility of two proofs from the heavens: one from the constant rotation of the spheres as proposed by Aristotle, and one from the irregularity in the spheres' rotation, Maimonides's own proof. It should, however, be emphasized that Maimonides explicitly refers to differences in the spheres' motions and the fact that the stars are embedded within them. Similarly, Maimonides chooses the verse spoken by Moses, "Who rides upon the heaven," as a support for his proof of creation predicated on the structure of the heavens. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.70, Maimonides interprets this verse as pointing mainly to God's transcendence, but he also incorporates the idea that the spheres rotate by virtue of will. This interpretation may refer mainly to differences in the direction of the spheres' rotations and velocities, rather than the location of the stars within the spheres. See Stern, *Matter and Form*, 169–70.

Maimonides refers to these verses once again in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30, in his discussion of the four expressions—*bara'* (to create), *'ašah* (to make), *qanah* (to acquire, possess), and *'el* (God)—all of which are used when the Pentateuch associates the heavens with God. The first two expressions are taken from the prophecy of Moses, the last two from Abraham:

Among the things you ought to reflect upon are the four words that occur with reference to the relation between the heaven and God. These words are *baro'* [to create] and *'ašoh* [to make] and *qanoh* [to acquire, possess] and *'el* [God]. It says: *God* [‘elohim] *created* [*bara'*] *the heaven and the earth* [Gen. 1:1]. And it says: *In the day that the Lord God made* [‘ašot] *earth and heaven* [Gen. 2:4]. It says also: *Possessor* [qoneh] *of heaven and earth* [Gen. 14:19; 22]. And it says: *God* [‘el] *of the world* [Gen. 21:33]. And: *The God* [‘elohey] *of the heaven, and the God* [‘elohey] *of the earth* [Gen 24:3]. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.30)

It seems that here also Maimonides is alluding to the idea that the proofs for creation referred to in the Pentateuch relate to the unique character of the heavens. Although the first three expressions are demonstrated by the citation of one verse, in his illustration of the expression *'el*, he cites two, both spoken by Abraham: “*God* [‘el] *of the world* [Gen 21:33] and *The God* [‘elohey] *of the heaven, and the God* [‘elohey] *of the earth* [Gen 24:3].” It seems that his purpose is to emphasize that the word “world” in this verse reflects the special relationship between God and the heavens. The expression “God of the world” should be understood as an abridged form of the more explicit expression, “the God of heaven and the God of the earth,” and therefore also points to the divine intention evinced by the heavens.

Later in the same chapter, discussing the exact meaning of each expression, Maimonides mentions the two verses again. This time, however, he only quotes part of the second verse—that part which relates to the heavens:

As for the expressions, *the God* [‘elohey] *of the heaven* and also *God of the World* [‘el ‘olam], they are used with respect to His perfection, may He be exalted, and theirs. He is *'elohim*—that is, He who governs—and they are those governed by Him [*hākim wahiya maḥkūmah*], not in the sense of domination—for that is the meaning of *qoneh* [possessor]—but with respect to His rank, may He be exalted, in being and in relation to theirs. For He is the deity and not they—I mean heaven. Know this. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.30)

The term “God” (*'el*) points to a divine attribute that can be gleaned from observation of the world. Maimonides calls this the “relationship between governor and governed,” but immediately qualifies this statement by explaining that this relationship should not be understood in its ordinary sense, “but with respect to His rank, may He be exalted, in being and in relation to theirs.” In other words, the expression indicates the absolute dependence of the contingent existence of the world on the necessary existence of God. However, at the same time, this expression also precludes a direct relationship between God and the world because of the

unbridgeable gap that divides them. God's attribute of existence is not "an accident attaching to what exists" (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1.57), but rather "something" identical to his essence.³² Maimonides rejects the use of attributes that indicate a direct relationship between God and the world; even existence itself cannot be used as a common denominator to define such a relationship. The expression *'el 'olam* therefore reflects the continued and perpetual "relationship" between God and the world even after creation. It expresses the absolute transcendence of God from the world on the one hand, and the absolute dependence of the world on God on the other.³³

If so, this divine name (*'el*) is completely neutral regarding the question of whether the world was created or preexistent. Nevertheless, this does not negate the conception of creation that Maimonides reads into these verses; even after creation, God is transcendent and the world dependent upon him. Maimonides explicitly states in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.25 that the verses of the Pentateuch allow for different interpretations and the interpretative decisions regarding their meaning are not solely predicated on Scripture itself. Nevertheless, the combination of the verse "the God of heaven" with Maimonides's view that God has not only wisdom but also will, leads to the conception of creation as the basis of Abraham's approach.

In my opinion, we can use a similar approach to explain Maimonides's understanding of another biblical term that describes God's relationship to the world—"possessor" (*qoneh*):

With reference to them, it says *qanoh* [acquire, possess], because He, may he be exalted, has dominion over them just as a master has over his slaves. For this reason He is also called *the Lord* [*'adon*] *of all the earth* [Josh 3:11, 13] and *the Lord* [*ha'adon*]. However, as there is no *Lord* [*'adon*] without there being something *possessed* [*qinyan*] by Him, and this tends toward the road of belief in the eternity of a certain matter, the term *baro* [*'create*] and *'asoh* [*make*] are used with reference to them. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30)

Here, too, the expression *qoneh* points to a certain characteristic of the world that demonstrates its relationship with God. This relationship is neutral regarding the question of creation or eternity; it refers to God's enduring relationship to the world even after its creation. This expression seems to reflect the idea that God is the governor (*manhig*) of the world, i.e., the first efficient cause for the motion of the spheres. The term *qoneh* in its primary sense "tends toward the road of belief in the eternity of a certain matter," since it presumes the existence of the heavens, describing God as their governor but not their creator.

Because it is possible to err and ascribe to the verb *qanoh* the connotation of an eternal world, the Torah added the terms "create" and "make" in reference to the heavens to emphasize that the world was indeed created *ex nihilo*. Here, too, the use

³² In this interpretation, Maimonides adopts the proof articulated by Avicenna. See above, nn. 12 and 27.

³³ *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.52, 56. Regarding this paradox, see Stern, *Matter and Form*, 279.

of the verbs “create” and “make” does not contradict the verb “possess” but rather serve to illuminate its meaning. Indeed, the verse in its entirety, “Possessor [*qoneh*] of heaven and earth” (Gen 14:19, 22), also alludes to the unique character of the heavens—their materiality and their display of intention. Both of these indicate a created world. This interpretive assertion is already made earlier in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.13 and it does not contradict the statement made in 2.30. At most, it can be seen as a contradiction of the fifth cause enumerated in the introduction to the *Guide*, that one must first offer a general statement and only after a more detailed explanation.

■ The Thirteen Principles of Faith

Thus the differences between the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide of the Perplexed* reflect Maimonides own intellectual process vis-à-vis the proofs for God’s existence. When he wrote the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides did not find the philosophical proof for the creation of the world convincing. The Aristotelian proof was a solid evidentiary foundation for God’s unity and incorporeality, but it was predicated on the notion of a preexistent world. Therefore, Maimonides described Abraham as a philosopher who taught others to recognize the One God, but who did not demand that they recognize the creation of the world. Apparently, because the creation of the world was a philosophically problematic position, Maimonides did not include it within the principles of the Torah as described in the *Mishneh Torah*.³⁴

About ten years later, having completed his imposing halakhic compendium and thus able to invest more time and energy on philosophical issues, Maimonides would reach important conclusions regarding the issue of creation versus eternity. When he wrote the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides formulated a philosophical proof predicated on the irregular character of the heavens, thus strengthening the claim that the world was indeed created by God. Having found this evidence, he offered a new portrayal of Abraham: now he is a prophet who has discovered the concept of creation and has taught it to humanity. Maimonides found a basis for this in those verses where Abraham explicitly mentions the relationship between God and heaven. Therefore, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides added that the creation of the world is one of the main principles of the Pentateuch. Furthermore, after writing the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he returned to his *Commentary on the*

³⁴ See *Hilkot yesodey hattorah* 1.1–7; *Hilkot tešubah* 3.7; Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 54–61. He rejects various explanations to account for the omission of creation from the thirteen principles. He concludes that Maimonides wanted to include only those principles that do not require a complete understanding of God and that are absolutely necessary. Creation is included in the secrets of Torah and is not necessary for the observance of commandments and, therefore, was not included as a principle.

Mishnah and added the principle of creation *ex nihilo* in the form of a marginal note appended to the fourth principle.³⁵

Of course, one could argue that this move indicates Maimonides's exoteric position. But it seems to me that Maimonides's over-dedication to a seemingly marginal detail, as a change in the center of gravity of the verses on which Abraham relies, reinforces the argument that this should be seen as an expression of his true position.

■ Appendix: The Verbs *Bara'* (to Create) and *'Asah* (to Make)

Sara Klein-Braslavy has analyzed Maimonides's interpretations of the verbs "create" and "make" and concluded that they are ambiguous. In her opinion, Maimonides believed that the verb *bara'* (to create) could imply any one of the three approaches presented in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.13 (creation of the world from nothing, the eternity of matter as maintained by Plato, and the eternity of the world as maintained by Aristotle). This does not mean that the use of the verb *bara'* in the specific context of the creation account of Genesis 1 is ambiguous. Nevertheless, in her opinion Maimonides hints at this ambiguousness in his commentary to the first verse of the creation account, and therefore did not reach a final decision on this issue.³⁶

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.13, Maimonides is careful to define the opinion of "the Law of Moses our Master" of creation as bringing into existence "after having

³⁵ "Know that a foundation of the great Torah of Moses is that the world is created: God formed it and created it after its absolute non-existence. That you see me circling around the idea of the eternity of the world is [only] so that the proof of His existence will be absolute as I explained and made clear in the Guide" (Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Tractate Sanhedrin, "Pereq Heleq"; translation from Kellner, *Dogma*, 54). This note appears in the margins of Maimonides's autograph copy (MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Poc. 295: <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/b7e0b998-0a85-4a30-851f-58d67be5247d/surfaces/a77b5292-7188-46bb-84c5-f4ebb43b26fd/>). See Kellner, *Dogma*, 240 n. 211, regarding the identification of the manuscript that contains the note. It is interesting that Maimonides did not see fit to add a similar note in his *Mishneh Torah*.

³⁶ See Klein-Braslavy, *Story of Creation*, 86–90. I find her proof from Maimonides's interpretation of the verse "who forms the light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil" (Isa 45:7) to be convincing. However, the way she draws the meaning of the Hebrew verb *bara'* from Maimonides's use of the Arabic verb *halaqa* seems to me to be forced. In my opinion, Maimonides did indeed think that the verb "create" carried only two meanings, not three. Nuriel, "Question," has argued that Maimonides referred to God using the title of *al-bari'* (the Creator) in passages in the *Guide of the Perplexed* in which opinions are presented that are contrary to creation, while this title does not appear in passages referring to creation. In Nuriel's opinion, this phenomenon indicates that Maimonides interpreted the verses of creation according to the concept of eternity. Beyond Ravitzky's criticism ("Question of a Creation") of this approach, I think that it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. Maimonides accepted almost all of Aristotle's conclusions about the relationship between God and the world after his creation, as he explicitly states in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.25 (see also Kaplan, "Maimonides on Prophecy," 253). Therefore, use of the title "Creator" does not contradict most Aristotelian positions. To the contrary, Maimonides wished to emphasize that, unlike the *Mutakallimun*, his conception of creation entails (almost) no change to Aristotle's conception of the relationship between God and the world after it was created.

been [the] purely and absolutely nonexistent” (*ba’da al-’adam al-mahḍ al-muṭlaq*). In contrast, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.30, which refers to the verse of creation in Genesis, he defines the verb as “bringing into existence out of nonexistence” (*ijād min ’adam*) (not “after” but “out of,” not “the nonexistent” but “nonexistent,” and without the adverbs “purely and absolutely”). These changes indicate, in her opinion, that Maimonides intentionally chose a polysemous expression in order to imply that the verb “created” in this verse is ambiguous and to indicate that he is uncertain whether the world is created or preexistent.³⁷

Klein-Braslavy, however, does not account for the fact that Maimonides concludes 2.13 by clarifying the opinion of “the Law of Moses and Abraham our Father,” using the exact same words:

For the purpose of every follower of the Law of Moses and Abraham our Father or those who go the way of these two is to believe that there is nothing eternal in any way at all existing simultaneously with God; to believe also that the bringing into existence of a being out of nonexistence (*ijād al-mawjūd min ’adam*) is for the deity not an impossibility (*min qabīla al-mumtana’*).³⁸

It is clear from context that the expression “out of nonexistence” (without “after,” “the,” or “purely and absolutely”) does not refer to preexistent matter but rather to creation *ex nihilo* because “there is nothing eternal in any way at all existing simultaneously with God” and because he needed to determine that it is not “an impossibility.” Therefore, it seems that Maimonides did not distinguish between the phrase “after having been [the] purely and absolutely nonexistent” and its shortened variations “after nonexistence,” “out of the nonexistence” and “out of nonexistence.” All express the same idea: creation *ex nihilo*.³⁹

³⁷ Klein-Braslavy, *Story of Creation*, 81–84.

³⁸ This conclusion, I believe, also stems from other sources. The contrast between “generated from some being” and “created from nothing” (*al-mubtada’ min ’adam*) (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.17 [trans. Pines, 297]) proves that it is creation *ex nihilo* being referred to here. The same holds true for the expressions: “according to our opinion and our doctrine of the production in time of the world as whole after [the] nonexistence” (*ba’da al-’adam*) (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3.13 [trans. Pines, 450–51]) and “according to our opinion—produces all the things that are other than itself after they have been nonexistent” (*ba’da al-’adam*) (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3.20 [trans. Pines, 428]).

³⁹ I found no place in the *Guide of the Perplexed* where the term “nonexistence” (עֲדָה, *’adam*) is used to refer to matter, although of course it is a quality associated with matter. Ivry, “Maimonides on Creation,” 133–34, treats this inconsistency as evidence for his approach that the phrase “[the] purely and absolutely nonexistent” (*al-’adam al-mahḍ al-muṭlaq*) does not mean absolute nonexistence but “something” between existence and non-existence. Having precisely articulated his view, Maimonides later allowed himself to express the idea in a less precise and more popular fashion. Ivry also denies the accuracy of the distinction between “after” and “from” (*ibid.*, 130 n. 45). While I accept that Maimonides is indeed inconsistent on this point, in my opinion all of these expressions indicate absolute nothingness. Ivry admits that his interpretation is predicated on a philosophical perspective which regards the creation of the world *ex nihilo* an impossibility (*ibid.*, 134). Julius Guttmann, “Das Problem der Kontingenz,” argued that Maimonides’s central philosophical innovation

Klein-Braslavy offers a similar argument to explain Maimonides's understanding of the verb *'asah* (to make).⁴⁰ Maimonides explained that the verb refers to "the specific forms that were given to them [to heaven and earth]—I mean their natures" (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.30). In Klein-Braslavy's opinion, Maimonides understands that the verb *'asah* does indeed indicate the giving of natural forms, but because all of creation was performed through a single action, all verbs in the creation account must be interpreted as belonging to this one action. Therefore, just as *'amar* (to say) and *'asah* (to make) denote a single action (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1.12) of giving matter its form, so too *bara'* and *'asah* represent the same action. In her opinion, this identification reinforces the claim that *bara'* does not denote creation from nothing but merely the act of giving forms to matter.⁴¹

I believe that this argument is begging the question; it denies in advance the attribution of more than one outcome to God's single act. Maimonides's approach to creation acknowledges different expressions of wisdom and will in the world, although both are clearly identical with God's unity. Therefore, the argument that the entire world is created in one action does not negate the possibility of divergent effects. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.52–53, Maimonides explains that divine actions should be understood not as descriptions of God himself but rather as descriptions of his effects upon the world. His words indicate that despite the multitude of divine actions that are evident from the world, all of them must be understood as results of the same cause, since the essence of God is one and has no multifariousness.⁴² That which is manifest in the world as various actions is hidden in the simple unity of God. Therefore, the verbs "create" and "make," while based

was to offer a view that lay between those of the *Mutakallimun* and Aristotle vis-à-vis the extent of impossibilities.

⁴⁰ Klein-Braslavy, *Story of Creation*, 96–99.

⁴¹ She mentions the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.30, in order to prove that *bara'* (to create) and *'asah* (to make) are identical verbs. Maimonides argues that since "the Lord [*'adon*] of all the earth" (Josh 3:11, 13) connotes creation from eternal matter, the Pentateuch added the verbs "create" and "make" to negate such a view. In other words, they share a single meaning. It should, however, be noted that this shared meaning relates to the shared negation of eternal matter and not complete synonymy. See Klein-Braslavy, *Story of Creation*, 98.

⁴² Maimonides illustrates this argument through one fire that produces many different results. "An instance of this is fire: it melts some things, makes others hard, cooks and burns, bleaches and blackens. Thus if some man would predicate of fire that it is that which bleaches and blackens, which burns and cooks, which makes hard and which melts, he would say the truth. Accordingly he who does not know the nature of fire thinks that there subsist in it six diverse notions, by means of one of which it blackens, whereas it bleaches by means of another, cooks by means of a third, burns by means of a fourth, melts by means of a fifth, and makes hard by means of a sixth—all these actions being opposed to one another, for the meaning of any one of them is different from that of any other. However, he who knows the nature of fire, knows that it performs all these actions by virtue of one active quality, namely, heat. If, however, such a state of affairs exists with respect to a thing acting by virtue of its nature, it exists all the more with respect to one who acts through will, and again all the more with respect to Him, may He be exalted, who is above every attributive qualification" (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1.53).

on the same “relationship” between God and the world, express different aspects of this relationship. *Bara’* refers to creation ex nihilo; *’asah*, to the giving of forms.

Moreover, Maimonides maintains that *’amar* and *’asah* in the creation account are also to be understood as identical. At the same time, he interprets the words “saying” (*’amirah*) in the creation account as a way to denote “will or volition” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1.65, 67). If “said” and “made” are the same, then it follows that “made” denotes divine will just as much as “saying.” The more precise identification between the verse “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made” (Ps 33:6) and “the work of your fingers” (Ps 8:4) made in *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.66 with respect to the heaven and the stars leads to the chapter discussed above that pertains to this verse:

Regarding the dicta: [*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars*] which you have established [konantah] [Ps 8:4]; have spread out [tippeḥah] the heavens [Isa 48:13]; who stretches out the heavens [Ps 104:2], the terms used therein are included in the verb to make [*’asoh*]. (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.30)

The formation of the moon and the stars, which is more compelling evidence of divine intention, is therefore alluded to in the description of the making of the heavens, and is an expression of God’s will as expressed in the verse “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made” (Ps 33:6). Therefore, *bara’* indicates the creation of the world ex nihilo, *’asah* indicates the giving of forms both in heaven and in earth, and *’amar* indicates the dimension of the willful aspect which is particularly evident in the giving of forms in heaven.