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MAIMONIDES ON THE UNITY AND INCORPOREALITY OF GOD

By HARRY A. WOLFSON, Harvard University

THE OPENING CHAPTER on the *Mishneh Torah* is a sort of commentary on the following three commandments: (1) "I am the Lord thy God" (Exod. 20: 2); (2) "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20: 3); (3) "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6: 4). In his comment on the first of these three commandments, which he takes to be basis of the doctrine of the existence of God, he sketches briefly his philosophic arguments for the existence of God, with implications also for his unity and incorporeality,¹ of which he later gave a more fully and more systematic presentation in his *Moreh Nebukim*.² In his comment on the second of these three commandments, he simply says that the denial of polytheism, which this commandment enjoins, together with the belief in the existence of God, enjoined by the preceding commandment, constitutes "the great fundamental principle upon which every other commandment depends."³ As for his comment on the third of these three commandments, which contains the doctrine of the unity of God, I shall discuss it here more or less fully, pointing out the hidden logic of its structure and the cryptic philosophic allusions in its wording.

His comment on this commandment begins with the following statement: "This God is one: He is not two nor more than two but one in the sense of there not being anyone among existent individuals whose oneness is like His oneness."⁴ By this he means to say that this commandment is

¹ *Yesode ha-Torah* I, 1-6.

² *Moreh Nebukim* II, 1-2.

³ *Yesode* I, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.* I, 7.

not a mere restatement in positive terms of what is negatively stated in the commandments "Thou shalt have no other gods before me;" it means something more than that. The term "one" in its application here to God is unlike the term "one" in its application to other beings, and similarly the terms "two and more than two," the negation of which is implied here in the term "one," are unlike the terms "two and more than two" the negation of which is implied in the term "one" applied to other beings, and therefore this positive commandment means more than the negative commandment.

He then goes on to explain how the use of the term one here in its application to God is unlike its use in its application to other beings. First, having in mind what Aristotle calls "one in species,"⁵ by which is meant the application of the term one to many distinct individuals, say Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, on the ground that they all share in the same species, namely, manhood, he says that "God is not one after the manner of the oneness in species, which comprises many individuals,"⁶ that is to say, God is not described as one simply on the ground that He shares with other gods in the same species, namely, Godhood. Second, having in mind Aristotle's statement that, "when pieces of wood are made one by glue," they are to be described as one "in virtue of their being continuous,"⁷ and may thus be described as "one piece of wood or one body,"⁸ despite the fact that "a body" is that which is "divisible according to quantity in three directions ($\tau\rho\iota\chi\eta$),"⁹ he says that "God is not one after the manner

⁵ *Metaph.* V, 6, 1016b, 31-32.

⁶ *Yesode* I, 7. Cf. Maimonides' own definition of species as that which "comprises a number of individuals" (*Millot ha-Higgayon* 10.

⁷ *Metaph.* V, 6, 1015b, 36-1016a, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.* 1016a, 7-9.

⁹ *Ibid.* 1016b, 27-28. The expression "divisible according to quantity ($\kappa\alpha\tau\grave{\alpha}\ \tau\grave{o}\ \pi\omicron\sigma\omicron\nu$)" is used here by Aristotle in contrast to what he would call "divisible according to form ($\kappa\alpha\tau\ \epsilon\iota\delta\omicron\varsigma$)." Cf. *ibid.* 1016b, 23. By the divisibility of a body "according to quantity" Aristotle means its actual breaking up into parts, whereas by the divisibility of a body "according to form" he means its being subject to such intellectual distinctions as matter and form, genus and specific difference.

of the oneness of a body, which is divisible into parts,"¹⁰ the conclusion being that the scriptural doctrine of the unity of God excludes from God any divisibility into parts into which a body is quantitatively divisible.

Thus, this positive commandment differs from the negative commandment in two ways: First, the negative commandment could be taken to mean that, while other gods are prohibited, there do exist other gods who share with God in His divinity, differing from Him only as individuals of the same species differ from each other; this positive commandment, however, in which the expression "the Lord is one" is taken to mean that God is not one in species, is a denial of the very existence of other gods conceived as sharing with Him in His divinity. Second, in the negative commandment only other gods are prohibited; in this positive commandment, the "two and more than two," which are indirectly prohibited by the use of the term "one," refer not only to two and more than two other gods but also to two and more than two parts into which God, if conceived as a body, would be divisible. In other words, this positive command to believe in one God prohibits indirectly not only the belief in a plurality of gods but also the belief in a plurality of parts within the one God—parts analogous to the quantitative parts of a body.

These two meanings of the positive command to believe in the oneness of God, he goes on to show, are mutually implicative, its meaning that there are not many gods which share in a common species implies that God is not a body and its meaning that God is not a body implies that there are not many gods sharing in a common species. First, having in mind Aristotle's statement that "all that are many in number

¹⁰ *Yesode* I, 7. In the Hebrew expression here the terms מחלקות and קצוות are used synonymously in the sense of "parts," as has been shown by D. Baneth in his paper לטרמינולוגיה הפילוסופית של הרמב"ם in *Tarbiz* 6 (1935), p. 30, n. 1—and this despite the fact that the Aristotle's statement, which I have shown to be reflected in Maimonides' statement here, contains a term which means "three directions."

have matter,"¹¹ that is to say, only bodies can be numbered, and also having in mind the philosophic principle formulated by himself later in his *Moreh Nebukim*, namely, that bodiless beings can be numbered only when they are related to each other as causes and effects,¹² he argues that, "if there were many gods [among which was included our God], then they would [all] have to be bodies, for things which are subject to number and at the same time are equal with reference to [the origin of their] existence [that is, they are not related to each other as causes and effects] cannot be differentiated from each other [in order to be subject to number] except by accidents which accrue to bodies,"¹³ Second, having in mind the view subsequently advanced by him in *Moreh Nebukim* that Aristotle's proof of the incorporeality of the Prime Mover from the eternal continuous circular motion of the celestial spheres could similarly be used as a proof for the incorporeality of the one God when even the continuous circular motion of the celestial spheres is assumed to be created,¹⁴ he argues: "If the Creator were a body. . . His power would be finite. . . but. . . the power of God is infinite and incessant, seeing that the celestial sphere is continuous in its motion, and so, since God is not a body, there cannot accrue to Him any of the accidents of bodies whereby He could be differentiated from any other god. Therefore, there cannot be but one God," and the oneness of this one God is, of course, as before, not a oneness according to species. It is unity in the sense of its inclusion of incorporeality, he triumphantly concludes, that is meant by the commandment, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."¹⁵

So far, however, his proof for the incorporeality of God is based only upon the implication of his initial assumption that the term "one" predicated of God in the commandment of

¹¹ *Moreh* II, Itrod., Prop. 16.

¹² *Yesode* I, 7.

¹³ *Moreh* II, 2.

¹⁴ *Yesode* I, 7.

¹⁵ *Metaph.* XII, 8, 1074a, 33-34.

the unity of God is unlike the term one in its predication of other beings. But what scriptural evidence is there for this initial assumption? In answer to this question, Maimonides, of course, does not quote any scriptural verse explicitly stating that the term "one" predicated of God in the commandment is unlike the term one in its predication of other beings. But he quotes three scriptural verses in which the one God of the commandment is described in terms which imply incorporeality and consequently, by his preceding reasoning, the term "one" predicated of God in the commandment is unlike the term one in its predications of other beings. Having in mind Aristotle's definition of place as "the boundary of the containing body, at which it is in contact with the contained body,"¹⁶ which means that no body can be contained at the same time by more than one body and hence cannot be at the same time in more than one place, he quotes the verse, "The Lord thy God is in heaven above and upon the earth beneath" (Deut. 4: 39) and argues that, if God were a body, He could not be at the same time "in two places,"¹⁷ that is, both in heaven and upon the earth. Second, having in mind Aristotle's statement that "figure" (σχῆμα: شكل), such as straightness and curvedness, is a species of the category of the accident of quality,¹⁸ which thus belongs to a body, he quotes the verse (Deut. 4: 15), "You saw no manner of figure (תמונה),"¹⁹ from which he wants us to infer that God is not a body. Third, without the aid of any philosophy,

¹⁶ *Phys.* IV, 2, 212a, 5-6.

¹⁷ *Yesode* I, 8.

¹⁸ *Categ.* 8, 10a, 11-16; cf. Arabic translation of the *Categoroes* in *Organon Aristotelis in Versione Arabica Antiqua*, ed. Badawi, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Yesode* I, 8. I have translated the Hebrew *temunah* in Maimonides' quotation here of Deut. 4: 15 by "figure" rather than by "likeness" for the following reason. Maimonides himself in *Morah* I, 3, p. 18, 1. 6, explains the meaning of *temunah* in Deut. 4: 25 and 4: 15 by the Arabic *shahl*, which in the Arabic translation of the *Categoroes* is used as a translation of the Greek σχῆμα, "figure," in the passage quoted in the preceding note. It is to be noted, however, that the term *temunah* in both Deut. 4: 25 and Deut. 4: 15 is translated in

he derives from the verse, "To whom will you liken Me, that I should be equal?" (Isa. 40: 25), that "if God were a body, He would be like other bodies."²⁰ Of these three arguments, only the third, it will have been noticed, is based exclusively on a scriptural verse. Thus his purely scriptural evidence that the oneness of God in the commandment includes incorporeality is based upon the scriptural teaching of the unlikeness of God to other beings.

Maimonides has thus arrived at the conclusion that the mandatory command to believe in the unity of God includes also a mandatory command to believe in His incorporeality. Then, having in mind the Talmudic saying that "anyone who worships an idol is a heretic,"²¹ and evidently taking this to include anyone who, while not actually worshipping an idol, "acknowledges (מודה)," as he says, "that idolatry is true"²² and evidently, also, taking the acknowledgment of polytheism to be the same as the acknowledgment of idolatry, he includes among his five classes of heretics "anyone who says that there are . . . two or more [gods] and anyone who says that there is one God but that He is a body and possesses a figure (תמונה)." ²³

With this rigid conception of the incorporeality and unity of God, Maimonides takes up the question of the many corporeal terms and terms implying corporeality by which God is described in Scripture. Among the terms mentioned by him are included the terms "living" and "knowing"²⁴—terms which are usually included in what was known in Mus-

the Septuagint by *ὁμοιωμα*, in Onkelos by *demut*, and in Saadia by *shibh*, all of which mean "likeness."

²⁰ *Yesode* I, 8.

²¹ *Abodah Zarah* 26b.

²² *Akum* II, 6.

²³ *Teshubah* II, 7.

²⁴ *Yesode* I, 11-12. Maimonides uses here the term *חכמה* as synonymous with the term *דעת* or *דיעה* used by him later in II, 10 and both these terms are used by him as the equivalents of the Arabic *علم*, "knowledge." Cf. Baneth, *art. cit.*, s. v.

lim and Jewish philosophy of that time as the problem of divine attributes.²⁵ With regard to all these terms, he first makes the general statement that they are not to be taken literally, quoting in support of this the Talmudic saying, "The Torah speaks according to the language of men."²⁶ But then he takes up especially the attributes "living" and "knowing," quite evidently using them as an example of all the attributes. With regard to knowledge and to attributes in general he makes the following statements:

First, having in mind Ghazālī's rejection of the philosophic view quoted by him in the name of Avicenna, that "God does not know other things by first intention, but He knows His essence as the principle of the universe and from this follows His knowledge of the universe by second intention, for... it is in conceivable that He should know His essence as principle of that which is other than Himself, without that other entering into His knowledge by way of implication and necessary consequence,"²⁷ he reaffirms the philosophic view by saying: "Because God knows Himself and discerns His greatness and glory and essence, He knows all and nought is hidden from Him²⁸... Hence God does not discern the creatures and know them by reason of themselves, as we know them; He knows them by reason of Himself. In fine, it is because He knows Himself that He knows all, for the All is dependent upon Him for its [coming into existence and its continuance of] existence."²⁹

Second, having in mind the view of the Muslim Attributists that in God there exist eternal attributes which are other (*ghayr*) than God and different (*ḥilāf*) from God³⁰ and super-

²⁵ Cf. *Moreh* I, 53; Saadia, *Emunot ve-De'ot* II, 4.

²⁶ *Berakot* 31b.

²⁷ *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* VI, 24, p. 174, II. 5-8 (ed. Bouyges).

²⁸ *Yesode* II, 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.* II, 10.

³⁰ Ibn Ḥazm, *Fīṣal* II, p. 126, II. 22-24; IV, p. 207, II. 7-10 (ed. Cairo, 1317-27).

added (*zā'idah*) to God³¹ and also having in mind their defense of this view, through their spokesman Ghazālī, by contending that the unity of god does not mean absolute simplicity,³² he says: "God discerns and knows His essence [and thereby He knows other things], and [whatever] He knows is not in virtue of a knowledge extraneous to Himself, as is the case in our knowing, for, in our case, we and our knowledge are not one and the same, whereas, in the case of God, He and His knowledge and His life are all one and the same in every respect and from every aspect."³³

Third, having in mind that among the Attributists some expressed their belief in attribute by a formula of the type of "God is living in virtue of life and He is knowing in virtue of knowledge,"³⁴ and having also in mind the stock Mu'tazilite argument against attributes, which, as stated by Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā', reads: "He who posits an eternal thing (*ma'na*) and attribute (*ṣifah*) posits two gods,"³⁵ he says: "If God were living in virtue of life and knowing in virtue of knowledge, there would be many gods, He and His life and His knowledge."³⁶

Fourth, having again in mind Ghazālī's rejection of the philosophic principle that "God is the knower and the knowledge and the known, and that all the three are one,"³⁷ he says: "God is one in every respect and from every aspect and in every sense of unity, from which it follows that He is the knower and the known and the knowledge itself, all the three being one."³⁸

Thus under the guise of his discussion of the terms "living"

³¹ Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat*, p. 181, I. 3 (ed. Guillaume); Averroes, *Kashf*, p. 56, II. 3 and 7 (ed. Müller).

³² *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* VII, p. 193, II. 2-4.

³³ *Yesode* II, 10.

³⁴ Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat*, p. 181, II. 1-2.

³⁵ *Idem*, *Milal*, p. 31, I. 19.

³⁶ *Yesode* II, 10.

³⁷ *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* I, 15, p. 31, II. 3-9; IV, 43, p. 182, I. 12 - p. 183, I. 4; XIII, 15-16, p. 232, I. I. II - p. 234, I. 4.

³⁸ *Yesode* II, 10.

and "knowing" Maimonides was dealing in his *Mishneh Torah* with what was technically known in Islam as the problem of attributes. The terms "life" and "knowledge," as I have shown elsewhere,³⁹ constituted one of the several pairs of attributes which formed the subject of discussion at the beginning of the problem of attributes. As in Judaism, and as also in Islam, there was no native reason for the rise of a doctrine like that of attributes and as the special external reason which had given rise to the problem of attributes in Islam, namely, the influence of Christianity,⁴⁰ did not exist in Judaism, Maimonides, like all the Jewish philosophers of the Arabic period before him, came out against attributes and thus, like all those Jewish philosophers of that period before him, he aligned himself with the Muslim Mu'tazilites.

But here three questions arise in our mind.

First, from Maimonides' inclusion among heretics "anyone who *says* that there is one God but that He is a body and possesses a figure" are we to infer that a heretic is only he who actually *says* that God is a body? Suppose, then, a person who does *not say* that God is a body but he happens to be one of those whom Maimonides describes as "the multitude" who cannot conceive in their mind of the existence of anything that is not a body⁴¹ and hence cannot help but think of God as a body, would he be a heretic?

Second, again, from Maimonides' inclusion among heretics "any one who *says* that there are... two or more [gods]" are we to infer that a heretic is only he who actually *says* that there are two or more gods? Suppose, then, one who actually says that there is only one God but also says that the God, who is one, possesses attributes, would he be a heretic? Indeed Maimonides reproduces with approval the Mu'tazilite argument to the effect that a belief in attributes

³⁹ Cf. my paper "The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity," *Harvard Theological Review*, 49 (1956), 1-18.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴¹ *Moreh* I, 46, Arabic ed. Joel, p. 66, 11. 15-19; *Ma'mar Teḥiyyat ha-Metim*, *Ḳobeṣ* II, p. 8c; ed. Finkel, § 11.

implies a belief in many gods,⁴² but still, while he does indeed repeat this statement of the Mu'tazilites, he does not use it in the same sense. As used by the Mu'tazilites, it means literally many gods, for as can be shown,⁴³ their criticism is based upon the view that eternity means deity, a view which they adopted from the Church Fathers, who adopted it from Philo. Maimonides, however, who rejects the view that eternity means deity,⁴⁴ uses the charge that attributes imply many gods only in a negative sense, namely, that they imply a denial of the unity of God, and this because they imply corporeality, which to Maimonides is tantamount to a denial of unity. But the implication of corporeality in attributes is, according to Maimonides, to be arrived at only by philosophic reasoning, which sees in the assumption of any intellectual distinction in God a divisibility implying corporeality; it is not directly contained in the scriptural denial of corporeality, which, according to Maimonides, as we have seen above, denies only the divisibility of God into quantitative parts like the quantitative divisibility of a body. The question therefore is whether one who professes the unity of God, but asserts that God has attributes, is a heretic or not.

Third, in view of the fact that Maimonides' inclusion of the belief of the incorporeality of God in the belief of His unity ultimately rests on the scriptural teaching of the unlikeness of God to other beings, suppose, then, a person who, mindful of the scriptural denial of likeness, resorted to the device of some Muslims, who, mindful of a similar denial of likeness in the koran (42: 9; 112: 4), said that God is a body unlike other bodies,⁴⁵ would he be a heretic?

⁴² *Yesode* II, 10.

⁴³ To be discussed in my forthcoming work *The Philosophy of the Kalam*.

⁴⁴ To be inferred from his comment on Plato's theory of a pre-existent eternal matter in *Moreh* II, 13, as compared with Tertullian's argument against it in *Adversus Hermogenem* 4.

⁴⁵ *Moreh* I, 76 (2); cf. Asha'arī, *Maḳālāt*, p. 33, II. 10-11; p. 208, I. 1 (ed. Ritter); Averroes, *Kashf*, p. 60, II. 13-15.

An answer to the first question may be derived from Maimonides' own discussion of the mandatory command to believe in the unity of God and the prohibitive command not to believe in many gods.

The commandment enjoining the belief in the unity of God which reads, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6: 4) is paraphrased by Maimonides in his *Sefer ha-Miṣvot*, written originally in Arabic, simply as "a command which imposes upon us the belief (אמונת: אעתקאד) in the unity [of God]." ⁴⁶ but in his *Mishneh Torah*, written in Hebrew, it is paraphrased by him more precisely as a command ליהדר, ⁴⁷ which literally means "to unify Him," but, by analogy of the term מיהדים in the statement "and we unify (מיהדים) His name twice daily, saying, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one'," ⁴⁸ it really means to declare His unity by the recitation twice daily of the verse which begins with the words "Hear, O Israel." Thus the command to believe in the unity of God, legally, does not mean merely to believe in one's heart that God is one; it means to declare openly, by word of mouth, that God is one.

Similarly the commandment prohibiting polytheism, which reads, "Thou shalt have no other god before Me" (Exod. 20: 3), is paraphrased by Maimonides in Arabic simply as "a prohibition which prohibits us from believing (האמין: אעתקאד) in a deity besides god." ⁴⁹ In Hebrew, however, it is paraphrased by him more precisely as a command that "one is not to cause to come up (יעלה) into his thought that there is another deity besides the Lord." ⁵⁰ That the Hebrew word יעלה here is to be taken as the causative *hif'il* rather than the intransitive *kal* is quite evident from his subsequent statement that "whoever

⁴⁶ *Sefer ha-Miṣvot*, Positive 2. However, at the end of his discussion of this commandment, Maimonides explains that it means "the confession (ההודאה: אלאקראר) of unity and the belief therein."

⁴⁷ *Yesode*, Preface, Commandment 3.

⁴⁸ *Canticles Rabbah* 7, 11 (on 2: 6).

⁴⁹ *Sefer ha-Miṣvot*, Negative 1.

⁵⁰ *Yesode*, Preface, Commandment 2.

causes to come up (המעלה) into his mind that there is another besides this God, violates a prohibition, as it is said, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before Me'.⁵¹ What the expression "causes to come up into his mind" means here may be gathered from what Maimonides says with regard to the acknowledgment of idolatry, with which, as we have seen, the acknowledgment of polytheism is identified by him.⁵² Now with regard to the acknowledgment of idolatry he says that "he who acknowledges (מודה) that idol-worship is true, even if he does not worship an idol, is committing the sin of reviling and blaspheming the honored and the revered name of God," adding that "the same laws and regulations apply to both the idolater and the blasphemer."⁵³ But inasmuch as legally one is not a blasphemer unless he blasphemes the name of God by spoken word,⁵⁴ we may conclude that the prohibition of acknowledging idolatry as true means the acknowledgment of it as true by spoken word. Again, inasmuch as to Maimonides the acknowledgment of polytheism as true is the same as the acknowledgement of idolatry as true, we may conclude that the acknowledgment of the existence of "two or more [gods]," which he describes as heresy, must be an acknowledgment by spoken words. Finally, inasmuch as the heresy which attaches to the acknowledgment of the corporeality of God is derived by Maimonides, as we have seen, from a Talmudic statement which he understood to mean that he who only acknowledges idolatry, without actually worshipping an idol, is a heretic and, inasmuch as such an acknowledgment must be by spoken words, we may conclude that the heresy which he attaches to the acknowledgment of the corporeality of God must also be by spoken words.

Thus, according to Maimonides, one is not included among his five classes of heretics, unless he actually *says* that he

⁵¹ *Ibid.* I, 6.

⁵² Cf. text between nn. 22 and 23 above.

⁵³ *Akum* II, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* II, 7.

believes in many deities and also unless he actually *says* that God is a body.

As for the second and third questions, a partial answer to them may be derived from a responsum written by Maimonides to the prorelyte Obadiah, in which he says as follows: "The Muslims are not [what is legally called] idolaters [and polytheists]: idolatry has long been cut off from their mouth and from their heart. They attribute to God a unity in the true sense of the term, a unity to which there is no reproach.⁵⁵ By "Muslims," as may be gathered from the context, he means the generality of orthodox Muslims. Now the generality of orthodox Muslims believed that God possessed attributes. Moreover, while most of the orthodox Muslims believed that God is not a body and that similarly his attributes, though real things and other than God, are not bodies, there were some Muslims in good orthodox standing, such as those whom Averroes describes as "The Ḥanbalites and their many followers," who believed that "God is a body unlike other bodies"⁵⁶ and by the same token they believed that attributes are also bodies unlike other bodies. It is both these types of orthodox Muslims that are described by Maimonides as not being polytheists and as having a true conception of the unity of God. This quite clearly shows that from a strictly legally religious viewpoint non-Jews who professed that God is one but that he possesses attributes and similarly non-Jews who professed that God is one but that he is a body unlike other bodies are not polytheists. But the question still remains whether the same ruling would apply also to Jews who, while professing the unity of God, profess also that God has attributes or that God is a body unlike other bodies.

An answer to this question in both its phases is to be found in the *Moreh Nebukim*.

I shall deal first with that phase of the question which

⁵⁵ *Teshubot ha-Rambam* 160 (Ḳobeṣ p. 34d), 369 (ed. Freimann, p. 335).

⁵⁶ Averroes, *Kashf*, p. 60, II. 14-15.

relates to the assertion by a Jew that God, who is one, is a body unlike other bodies.

Likeness between God and other beings, according to Maimonides, is implied only when the same term, which is predicated of God and of other beings, is used either in a univocal (*mutawāṭī'*: *muskam*) sense or in an ambiguous (*mushakkik*: *mesuppak*) sense. There is no implication of likeness between God and other beings if the same term is predicated of them in an equivocal (*mushtarak*: *meshuttaf*) sense,⁵⁷ for any term predicated of God equivocally is, according to Maimonides, in meaning, the negation of the opposite of that term and, in form, the affirmation of the identity of that term with the essence of God and hence unlike the same term predicated of other beings. Thus, for instances, if the term "knowing" is used equivocally, then the proposition "God is knowing" is, in meaning, the negation of ignorance but, in form, it is the affirmation of knowledge that is identical with the essence of God and hence unlike the knowledge of any other being.⁵⁸ In the case of the term "body," however, Maimonides would not allow its predication of God even when used in an equivocal sense, and this, as he says, is for the following reason: "The prophetic books have never applied to God even metaphorically anything that is considered by ordinary people as an imperfection or that is conceived by one as being incompatible with God, though such a term is not different from those other terms which are used in those books as descriptions of God."⁵⁹ The term body, which includes the term matter, is taken to imply imperfection, according to Maimonides, not only by "the prophetic books" but also by the philosophers.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Moreh* I, 56.

⁵⁸ Cf. my paper "Maimonides on Negative Attributes," *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, 411-446.

⁵⁹ *Moreh* I, 47, p. 70, II. 9-II, cf. pp. 439-440 in my paper referred to in the preceding note.

⁶⁰ *Moreh* I, *Introd.*, p. 8, I. 27 - p. 9, I. 3; I, 17; III, 8, p. 309, I. 24 - p. 310, I. 9.

Thus, according to Maimonides, on the basis of the mere scriptural teaching of the unlikeness of God, one should be allowed to predicate of God the term "body," with the qualification that he is unlike other bodies plus the understanding that the term body is used in an equivocal sense. He is against its predication of God only on the ground of the observed fact that Scripture avoids applying to God terms with any implication of imperfection, even with the understanding that those terms are to be taken in non-literal sense, and "body" to him is a term which implies imperfection.

The same inference may also be drawn from his criticism of some of the Muslim Mutakallimūn who tried to prove the incorporeality of God from His unlikeness to other beings, which is taught in the Koran in the verses "Nought is there like Him" (42: 9) and "There is none equal with Him" (112: 4).⁶¹

His chief arguments against this proof for incorporeality are two. His first argument is evidently from the viewpoint of the Mutakallimūn themselves, who believe that all terms are predicated of God in an ambiguous sense, that is, according to a difference of degree. Speaking, then, for these Mutakallimūn, Maimonides says that they could refute this proof by arguing that there is no likeness between God and created bodies, for created bodies "are not like God in every respect"⁶² and so, conversely, God is not like them in every respect, that is to say, there is always some degree of difference in the likeness between them. In fact, it is to these Mutakallimūn that, as can be shown, he refers at the beginning of his work where he speaks of certain anonymous "people" who thought that God is a body, but is "the greatest and most splendid [of bodies],"⁶³ that is to say, the term body is applied to God in an ambiguous sense. The second argument is from his own viewpoint, according to which all terms are predicated of God in

⁶¹ *Moreh* I, 76 (2)

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 160, II. 18-19.

⁶³ *Ibid.* I, 1, p. 14, II. 10-11.

an equivocal sense, that is, in a sense according to which terms predicated of both God and created beings are alike only in sound but not at all in meaning. Arguing then from his own viewpoint and describing that argument as "more telling," he contends that, even if it is admitted that there is no likeness between God and other beings, God can be described as a body, provided one uses the term body in an equivocal sense, so that there is absolutely no likeness between the term body predicate of God and the same term predicated of created beings.⁶⁴ His closing remark, "would that I knew how this vulnerable view [that is, that God is a body] can be refuted by these queer methods of theirs which I have made known to you,"⁶⁵ shows that he did mean his argument to be a mere argument *ad hominem* but that he really believed that the mere denial of likeness, such as found in Scripture, does not lead to a denial of God's being a body, if the term body is used in an equivocal sense and, especially, if its use in that sense is explicitly emphasized by the qualifying phrase "unlike other bodies."

Here, then, we have evidence that for a Jew the mandatory command to believe in the unity of God, which is taken by Maimonides to include a denial of the corporeality of God, may be satisfied by denying that God is a body like other bodies. Accordingly, when in his *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides condemns as heretic "anyone who says that there is one Lord but that He is a body and possesses a figure;" he means thereby only one who says that God is a body like other bodies which possess a figure; anyone who says that God, who is one, is a body unlike other bodies and use the term body in an equivocal sense is not, legally, a heretic.

I shall now take up that phase of the question which relates to the assertion by a Jew that God, who is one, possesses attributes.

That religiously the denial of corporeality and the denial of

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* I, 76 (2), p. 160, II. 21 ff.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 161, II. 9-10.

attributes are not of equal standing is brought out by Maimonides in a passage in which he shows howt these two denials are to be taught differently to two different types of people.

“With regard to the remotion of corporeality as well as the removal of likeness and passivity from God,” he says, “it is a matter which must be made clear and explained to everyone according to his capacity and its acceptance, on the authority of tradition, must be taught to children, women, illiterates, and those of subnormal intelligence, just as they are taught to accept on the authority of tradition that God is one, that he is eternal, and that none but he is to be worshipped.” He then goes to say that, if, after having accepted this doctrine, they become perplexed as to the meaning of terms implying corporeality and passivity and likeness by which God is described in Scripture, they should be told that all such terms are used in a metaphorical sense, in a sense unlike the sense in which the same terms are used in describing other beings. Mentioning especially the terms “existence,” “life,” and “knowledge,” terms which Muslim attributists usually include in their lists of attributes, he says that all these unsophisticated people are to be taught on the mere authority of scriptural tradition that these terms are predicated of God in an equivocal and not in an ambiguous sense, adding that the equivocal use of these terms has also been demonstrated by arguments derived from “the natural sciences.”⁶⁶ He then goes on to say that, if these unsophisticated people claim that they cannot understand what all these metaphorical and equivocal interpretations of a scriptural text mean, they should be told: “The interpretation of this text is understood by scholars; as for you, all you have to know is that God is not a body and is free of bodily passion . . . that he is not to be likened to any other thing . . . that the words of the prophets are true and have an interpretation.” The urgency of such instruction to unsophisticated people is finally explained by

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* I, 35, p. 54, I. 28-p. 55, I. 7; p. 54, II. 2 20.

him on the ground that "it is not meet that [for the want of instruction] one should become set in the belief that God is corporeal or in the belief that He is anything pertaining to bodies any more than it is meet that [for the want of instruction] he should become set in the belief that there is no God or that in association with God there is another god or that a being other than He may be worshipped."⁶⁷

His statement about the teaching of the denial of attributes reads briefly as follows: "As for the discussion of attributes, namely, how they are to be negated of God and what the meaning is of those terms which are attributed to Him. . . they are matters which are not to be discussed except in chapter-headings, as we have mentioned, and also only with an individual described [by us above as possessing certain qualifications, among which is included training in various plutsophic disciplines]."⁶⁸

The contrast between the denial of corporeality and the denial of attributes is quite clear. That God is not a body and that terms implying corporeality by which God is described in Scripture should not be taken literally must be taught to everybody on the authority of mere scriptural tradition and must be accepted implicitly by those so taught. The denial of attributes, however, is to be taught, evidently by means of rational demonstration, to individual students who have already received preliminary training in certain prescribed philosophic disciplines. But, it will be noticed, no mention is made of the need of an implicit acceptance on the part of the student of his master's rational conclusion as to the denial of attributes. The denial of attributes is thus not regarded by Maimonides as being, legally, included in the mandatory command to believe in one God and consequently the assertion of a belief in attributes is not regarded by him as heresy.

An inference to the same effect is to be drawn also from

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55, II. 7-5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54, II. 20-28; cf. *ibid.* I, 34, Third Cause.

his chapters on attributes. In the first of these chapters, there occur the following five statements:

1. "Just as it is impossible that God should be a body, so it is impossible that He should possess an essential attribute."⁶⁹

2. "As for him who believes (חאמין: אעתקאר) that God is one but possesses many attributes, he says (אמר: קאל) by his spoken word that God is one but believes Him in his thought to be many."⁷⁰

3. "This is like the saying of the Christians: God is one but also three and the three are one."⁷¹

4. "So also is the saying of him who, despite his remoteness of corporeality [from God] and his belief in [His] absolute simplicity, says that God is one but possesses many attributes and that He and His attributes are one."⁷²

5. "When thou... shalt become a possessor of understanding... thou shalt then be one of those who form a concept (יציר: יתצור) of the unity of God and not one of those who say it with their mouth but form no concept of it in their mind and are thus of the kind of people of whom it is said: Thou art near their mouth, and far from their reins [Jer. 12: 2]."⁷³

The first thing to find out about this passage is whether the *Attributist* who is the target of his criticism is Muslim or Jewish. For while the "thou" in statement 5 is quite evidently addressed by Maimonides to his prospective Jewish reader, it is not quite certain whether the "he who" in statements 2 and 3 and the "one of those" in the expression "not one of those" in statement 5 refer to a Jewish or to a Muslim *Attributist*, for references to various types of Muslim *Attributists* abound in these chapters on attributes. Let us then try to find out whom Maimonides had in mind by these anonymous references in this first chapter on attributes.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* I, 50, p. 75, II. 6-7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, II. 7-8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, II. 8-9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, II. 9-11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, II. 16-20.

A cue to the identity of the Attributist criticized here by Maimonides is to be found in his description of that Attributist as one who, "despite his remoteness of corporeality [from God] and his belief in [God's] absolute simplicity," maintains that "God is one but possesses many attributes." Now this description does not fit Muslim Attributists, for Muslim Attributists, through their spokesman Ghazālī, deny that the unity of God means absolute simplicity.⁷⁴ And this is the crux of the problem on which they differ from the Muctazilites. Indeed, they admit that God is incorporeal, or that his corporeality is unlike any other corporeality, but they deny that the denial of corporeality implies simplicity and hence a denial of attributes. Exactly whom Maimonides had in mind in his criticism here is not clear. In the literature on the subject, as far as I know, there is no mention of anyone who believed in the simplicity of God and, despite this belief, insisted upon the belief in attributes. Maimonides quite evidently is not arguing here against any particular proponent of attributism. He is discussing here the problem theoretically, trying to show to his Jewish readers that on the assumption of the belief that the unity of God means simplicity, there can be no belief in attributes, and that consequently no Jew who believes in absolute simplicity of God can believe in attributes.

The "he who," then, in statements 2 and 3 and the "one" in "not one of these" in statement 5 is a Jew, and one and the same Jew. Now in statement 4, this Jewish Attributist is described as "he who *says* that God...possesses many attributes" and similarly in statement 5 he is told that with his growth in understanding, he will be "not one of those who *says*" that God has many attributes. Consequently statement 2, despite its reading, should be taken to mean: "As for him who *believes* [and hence also *says*] that God is one but possesses many attributes, he *says* by his spoken word that he is one but *believes in his thought* to be many," to whom later in

⁷⁴ Cf. above at n. 32.

statement 5 the verse, "Thou art near their mouth, and far from their reins" is applied. Now, since, according to Maimonides, as we have seen, one is not included among his five classes of heretics unless he actually *says* that God is many, the Attributist here who, by *saying* that God possesses many attributes, is described as being one who only "*believes in his thought*" that God is many, is not included by Maimonides in his five classes of heretics.

Finally, the same inference may be drawn from Maimonides' comparison of the Jewish would-be Attributist to Christian Trinitarians.

In Islam, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was objected to on two grounds. On purely religious grounds, it was charged with being polytheistic. This charge was already raised against it in the Koran, in such verses as "Say not Three. . . God is only one God" (4: 169) and "They are infidels who say, God is the third of the three, for there is no God but one God" (5: 77). According to the testimony of John of Damascus, the Muslims called the Christians *ἑταιριασταί*, "associators,"⁷⁵ a term reflecting the Koranic term *mushrikūn*, which is used for what we call polytheists. Following this common Muslim charge of polytheism against Christianity, Maimonides similarly characterizes the Christians as idolaters, that is, polytheists.⁷⁶ On philosophic grounds, the doctrine of the Trinity, with its assertion both that God is one and that God consisted of three persons each of whom is to be called God, was charged with being an infringement on the Law of Contradiction.⁷⁷ Now in his statement about the Trinity, it will be noticed, the objection implied is that it is an infringement on the Law of Contradiction and not that it is poly-

⁷⁵ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus* 101 (PG 94, 768 B).

⁷⁶ *ʿAkum* IX, 4. Were it not for Muslim influence, there is reason to believe that Maimonides, like rabbis in Christian countries, would not have characterized Christians as idolaters and polytheists.

⁷⁷ This argument against the Trinity is reproduced by Yaḥyā b. ʿAdī in his apologetic treatises. Cf. A. Périer, *Petits Traités Apologétiques de Yaḥyā Ben ʿAdī*, p. 46, I. 7 - p. 47, I. 7; p. 64, II. 6-7.

theistic. The question is, why did he not use against it the religious objection of its being polytheistic?

Then, there is also a question with regard to his statement about the Jewish would-be attributist, whom he describes here as believing that the unity of God means absolute simplicity. Now, according to Maimonides' own view, on the strict basis of scriptural teaching, the unity of God means simplicity only in the sense that it excludes any division into parts into which a body is quantitatively divisible.⁷⁸ Absolute simplicity, in the sense of exclusion of the logical destruction of genus and specific difference, is based purely on philosophic reasoning. Why then does he have to assume here that his Jewish Attributist believes that the unity of God means absolute simplicity?

The answer to these questions is, I imagine, as follows. Maimonides wanted to show that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the belief in attributes are open to the same objection. Now of the two objections to the doctrine of the Trinity, the religious one could not apply to the belief in attributes, for Maimonides, in his responsum to Obadiah the proselyte has already decided that legally the Muslims who believed in attributes were not polytheists⁷⁹ and he saw no reason why he should not extend the same legal decision to a Jew who believed in attributes. Similarly the philosophic objection to the doctrine of the Trinity could not apply to the belief in attributes, if the Jew who professed it did not believe that the unity of God meant his absolute simplicity, for Maimonides could not but agree with Ghazālī's contention⁸⁰ that the belief in attributes is not objectionable if the unity of God is not assumed to mean absolute simplicity. And so what did Maimonides do? He made the Jewish Attributist believe in the absolute simplicity of God, whereby, like the Christian Trinitarians, he laid himself open to the objection that he was infringing upon the Law of Contradiction.

⁷⁸ Cf. above at nn. 9 and 10.

⁷⁹ Cf. above at n. 55.

⁸⁰ Cf. above at n. 32.

Thus, again, according to Maimonides, a Jew who says that God is one but possesses attributes is not to be included among his five classes of heretics. Consequently, his opening statement (statement 1) that, "just as it is impossible that God should be a body, so it is impossible that He should possess an essential attribute," only means that it is logically impossible; it does not mean that the assertion of attributes, like the assertion of corporeality, is heresy.

The upshot of our discussion here is that within each of such beliefs as the incorporeality and the unity of God and the denial of attributes Maimonides draws a line of demarcation. To assert of God, who is one, that he is a body unlike other bodies, wherein the term body, predicated of God, is used in an equivocal sense, is, according to Maimonides, not heretical, but still he is opposed to the predication of the term body of God even with that qualification. Again, the true unity of God, according to Maimonides, means absolute simplicity, but still Muslims who deny that the unity of God means absolute simplicity are said by him to have an irreproachable belief in one God and similarly Jews who deny it are not heretics. Then, also, the assertion of attributes, according to Maimonides, is incompatible with the belief in the unity and incorporeality of God, and he even says that it is tantamount to the assertion of a belief in many gods, but still he says that Muslims who assert a belief in attributes have an irreproachable belief in the unity of God and are not to be regarded as polytheists and similarly Jews who assert a belief in attributes are not heretics.

For all these seemingly paradoxical views, we are going to show, there is a good reason. Underlying all these lines of demarcation drawn by Maimonides within all these beliefs is the fact that matters of belief, just as matters of action, are included under the traditional 613 commandments,⁸¹ and consequently matters of belief are to be treated like matters of action. Now in matters of action a line of demarca-

⁸¹ *Sefer ha-Miṣvot, Shoresh 9.*

tion, rigidly defined by law is, drawn between what one is required to do and what one is not allowed to do. So also in matters of belief, according to Maimonides, a line of demarcation, rigidly defined, must be drawn between what one is required to believe and what one is not allowed to believe. Again, in matters of action, a distinction is made between what is "along the line of legal requirement (שורת הדין) and what is "beyond the line of legal requirement" (לפנים משורת הדין).⁸² So also, in matters of belief, according to Maimonides, a distinction is to be drawn between what may be called "along the line of required belief" (שורת האמונה) and what may be called "beyond the line of required belief" (לפנים משורת האמונה). Then, again, in matters of action, that which is "beyond the line of legal requirement" is called "a rule of piety" (מדת חסידות).⁸³ So also, in matters of belief, according to Maimonides, that which is "beyond the line of required belief" is to be called "a rule of piety," but, in the case of matters of belief, the "rule of piety," according to him, is to include what may be called "the rule of philosophic speculation" (מדת העיון הפילוסופי).⁸⁴

In accordance with these conceptions of his with regard to the lines of demarcation that are to be drawn within anything pertaining to religious belief, Maimonides has arrived at the conclusion that, even though by the strict requirement of scriptural belief one is allowed to say that God, who is one, is a body unlike other bodies, provided the term body is used in an equivocal sense, still by the rule of piety one is not to apply the term body to God even with the addition of that qualifying phrase and with the use of the term body in that sense, inasmuch as Scripture never describes God by terms connoting imperfection, and body is one of such terms. Conversely, even though by the rule of philosophic speculation the belief in the unity of God is to mean absolute simplicity,

⁸² *Mekilta, Amalek* 4 (ed. Lauterbach, II, p. 182).

⁸³ *Baba Meši'a* 52b; Maimonides, *De 'ot* I, 5; *Abadim* IX, 8.

⁸⁴ Cf. expression עיון פילוסופי in *Moreh* II, 1.

still those who deny this have an irreproachable conception of the belief in the unity of God, inasmuch as, on the basis of the strict requirement of scriptural belief, the unity of God excludes only that divisibility into parts which is analogous to the quantitative divisibility into parts to which a body is subject. Similarly, even though by the rule of philosophic speculation the belief in attributes is incompatible with the belief in the absolute unity of God, which philosophically implies corporeality, still those who assert that God, though one, possess attributes are not polytheists nor deniers of the unity of God, inasmuch as, on the basis of the strict requirement of scriptural belief, the belief in attributes is not incompatible with the belief in the unity of God.