

From Technique to Consciousness: Notes on the Development of Esoteric Writing in Twelfth-Century Jewish Thought

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Abstract

During the twelfth century, Jewish thinkers began using an esoteric technique in their writing, concealing their views under a textual cover. In fact, they created two meanings for the text: one overt and one covert. The article argues that they did so unreflectively at first, without signs of awareness. A consciousness of esoteric writing took shape during the twelfth century and the article shows how, with this growing awareness, concealment techniques became richer.

Should a theological or philosophical text written within a religious context necessarily be consistent? Should it be free of contradictions? Certainly not, and especially when it deals with issues the thinker considers abstract, loaded, touching on the most delicate questions of true faith and transcending easily understandable matters. The contradictions of authors who have produced outstanding works may be assumed to be deliberate rather than due to negligence since, from these writers' perspective, they are directly concerned with immortality or, God forbid, with annihilation and disappearance. These are issues that determine whether humans will reach communion with God or be rejected and estranged. Tensions and sensitivities prevalent in the religious world only further ambiguous writing.

In this article, I examine strains and inconsistencies deliberately used by considering several techniques of inconsistencies and intentional contradictions in twelfth-century Jewish thought, particularly in the writings of Judah Halevi and Maimonides. I intend to show how esoteric writing moved from the reality of a work based on contradictions to one that explicitly details its own contradictory nature. In other words, I want to show how esoteric writing shifted from practice to consciousness. I will first remark briefly on the characteristics of esoteric writing in the Middle Ages.

Introduction

Findings of studies on esoteric writing in medieval Jewish thought enable us to re-examine this literary and philosophical issue from a more mature and even reflective perspective. It may now be possible to present the elements of esoteric writing as reflecting a consciousness and then examine to what extent this consciousness is evident not only in discussions on metaphysics or the pinnacle of faith but also in those focusing on the actual use of an esoteric style. I will detail below a series of methodological rules that further understanding of esoteric writing in the Middle Ages.

Characteristics

Deliberately inconsistent writing is one instance of layered writing, whose features I have detailed elsewhere as follows:

- 1) The text has more than one meaning or connotation.
- 2) The text has an “external” meaning,” which appears suited to it at first glance, and an “inner” meaning or meanings.
- 3) The text includes explicit declarations about, or hints at, the inner meaning or meanings. At least in the former case, the text is “reflective,” that is, aware of its many meanings. When declarations or hints are present, the reader assumes that the author intentionally attempted to point to the esoteric layer and endorsed a “dual” style of writing.
- 4) If an explicit declaration or hints to inner meanings are present, the text has an “encoded meaning.” In the absence of declarations or hints about an inner meaning, the text has a “hidden meaning.”
- 5) An act of interpretation and explication of the text’s inner meaning or meanings is required.
- 6) The reader grasps the text’s “external” meaning immediately and intuitively. The reader’s standing, interests, and so forth can be analyzed, but this analysis is reflective, whereas exposing the inner

meaning requires the reader to “correspond with” or engage in a dialogue with the text.¹

In this article, I deal with the development of a consciousness of esoteric writing in twelfth-century medieval thought, and specifically with two important thinkers who set paradigms for such writing — Judah Halevi and Maimonides. Scholars have already dealt in depth with the connection between these two thinkers,² and I will now attempt to examine additional links that developed in the wake of their writing style.

Why relate to a text as a source of secrets to begin with? The reasons for displays of inconsistencies in a medieval text are the following:

1) Reasons rooted in the text’s image

How did exegetes view the holy texts that they interpreted — Torah, Midrash, and Aggadah? Many related to the text as a secret code. In their view, divine revelation or rabbinic intuitions yielded texts that, in and by themselves, demand an interactive reader. The giver of the Torah, as it were, expected its recipients to go on interpreting its secrets. The heavenly source was important; Aristotle’s writings, for example, were not always perceived as secret codes.

2) Realistic reasons

a) The contents are contingent on a type of experience (intellectual or mystical) that cannot be described consistently such as for example a visionary or ecstatic experience. The

1 Dov Schwartz, “Multilayered Writing: Preliminary Notes,” in *Reflections on Booklore: Studies Presented to Prof. Avidov Lipsker*, ed. Yigal Schwartz et. al (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2020), 523–43 [Heb]. See also Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

2 Howard Kreisel, “Judah Halevi’s Influence on Maimonides: A Preliminary Appraisal,” *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 95–121; Daniel J. Lasker, “Love of God and Sanctification of the Name According to Rabbi Judah Halevi and Maimonides,” in *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein*, ed. Uri Ehrlich, Howard Kreisel, and Daniel J. Lasker (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2008), 293–302 [Heb]; Dov Schwartz, *Clash of Paradigms: Medieval Science and Jewish Theology* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2018), ch. 3 [Heb].

thinker then conveys his impressions in conflicting or contradictory modes.

b) Agnosticism. Writers sometimes contradict themselves because they remain undecided or skeptical, as evident in the suggestion of various approaches without a true attempt to combine them or prioritize them.

3) Didactic reasons

c) Systematic study is inappropriate in some fields, which require a dialectic perspective that is at times built as thesis-antithesis. One instance is the theory of negative attributes.³

d) There are realms of knowledge that are intrinsically difficult because they require a previous background in a specific area such as, for example, the sciences. Authors, therefore, contradict themselves so that those lacking the appropriate background will keep away from the work.

4) Political Reasons

e) The contents themselves are not necessarily hard to grasp but are liable to be perceived as potentially threatening to religious belief. Authors, therefore, contradict themselves —

i) To avoid being perceived as committed to some assumption and thereby endangering themselves.

ii) To preclude harming the faith of naïve individuals.

In the twelfth century, and probably already in the eleventh (at least in the thought of R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol),⁴ works were written that do not read as consistent treatises due to their contradictions and incongruities. This topic has been discussed at length; I intend to examine the stance that their authors adopted toward these writings, as clarified below.

3 See J. A. Buijs, "The Negative Theology of Maimonides and Aquinas," *Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1988): 723–38.

4 See Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002), ch. 1 [Heb].

Esoteric Consciousness

The concept of esoteric consciousness refers to the author confronting his own self, his work, and his style, and then evaluating them. This consciousness conveys the author's self-reflection. The subject turns her thoughts and ideas into an object and, in some cases, even criticizes it. The question that concerns me in this article is whether a consciousness of esoteric writing did indeed develop in the twelfth century. Were thinkers aware of their conceptual and literary activity? I will argue that they were. True, not all of them displayed a reflective consciousness. Judah Halevi wrote in an esoteric style but he was not reflective and did not discuss the goals and efficacy of esoteric writing. Medieval commentaries of *The Kuzari* written in Provence in the circle of disciples of R. Shlomo b. Menachem (Prat Maimon) did not relate to it as an esoteric work either.⁵ There was no esoteric interpretive tradition of *The Kuzari*, then. As for R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol's exegesis of Scripture, only remnants of it are available; therefore, we do not know for sure whether it was a reflective work. By contrast, the works of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and of Maimonides attest to them as esoteric thinkers. They consciously related to themselves as adopting an esoteric style, meaning that they developed an esoteric consciousness.⁶ Their medieval commentators also related to them as writers of esoteric texts and, in this way, they created a tradition of esoteric interpretation.

I open with Abraham ibn Ezra. In the introduction to his biblical commentary, this enigmatic thinker noted five hermeneutical approaches. In the third one, he describes commentators who adopt secrets that the texts cover up, that is, allegorical interpretation. He does not relate to himself, but rather hints at concrete figures or actual models of esoteric exegesis:

5 See Dov Schwarz, *Commentary on the Kuzari: Hesheq Shelomo by R. Shlomo ben Yehuda of Lunel — Annotated Critical Edition* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2007), Introduction [Heb].

6 See Dov Schwartz, "The Philosophical Interpretation of Ibn Ezra's Fourteenth Century Commentary on the Torah," *Alei Sefer* 18 (1995-1996): 71-114 [Heb]; Howard Kreisel, Editor-in-Chief, *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra: The Earliest Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's Torah Commentary* (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2017) [Heb].

The third approach is the way of darkness and gloom. It lies outside of the circle. This is the approach of those who invent secret explanations for everything in Scripture. They believe that the laws and statutes of the Torah are riddles. I will not expend much time answering them for, “they are people who do err in their heart” (Psalms 95:10). The fact of the matter is that the laws of the Torah do not disagree with what is right. They are correct in one thing, viz., that every precept, be it minor or major, must be weighed in the scale of one’s heart wherein the Eternal has planted some of his wisdom. Thus if there appears something in the Torah that is intellectually impossible to accept or contrary to the evidence of our senses, then we must search for a hidden meaning [sod]. This is so because intelligence is the basis [yesod] of the Torah.⁷ The Torah was not given to ignoramuses. Man’s intelligence is the angel which mediates between him and his God. Thus anything in the Torah which does not contradict reason we must explain literally, take as it is written, and believe that it is so. We should not grope walls as the blind do, and interpret verses according to our subjective needs. Why should we turn what is evident into mysteries? Now if there are places with two meanings both of which are clearly true, one referring to the body and the other to the mind such as “circumcision of the flesh,” and “uncircumcised of heart,” and if there is a secret meaning to the tree of life, they are to be taken literally as well. Now if anyone cannot accept what I have said, if he be wise let him open his eyes. In nature, too, we find things that serve more than one purpose, such as the nostrils, the tongue, and the legs that serve two purposes.⁸

7 Ibn Ezra used *sod* and *yesod* in the title of his book on the reasons for the commandments, *Yesod Mora ve-Sod Torah*. These two terms are linked in the opening of the poem by Solomon Ibn Gabirol, “*Lekha hevion ha-'oz ha-sod ve-ha-yesod*.” For an English translation, see *A Crown for the King*, trans. David R. Slavitt (New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2: “Yours is the secret of secrets: your love of creation, the yearning of all the forms for material being, your love, that is, of your creatures, of us.”

8 *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch*, trans. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver (New York: Menorah, 1988), “Introduction,” 10–11 (including references for the Scriptural interpolations). See also Irene Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Introduction to the Torah*, London/New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2003), 158–62.

In this passage, Ibn Ezra refers directly to Christians as having interpreted the religious law allegorically.⁹ Their flaw is being a multitude, that is, ignorant. And yet, allegorical interpretation, which seeks secrets in the text, is not flawed per se so long as it is based on reason. Furthermore, the implication of Ibn Ezra's claim is that rationalist exegesis is possible so long as it does not hinder the authority of the divine command and focuses on the reasons for the commandments. Ibn Ezra further added that reason (*sekhel*) is comparable to an angel who somehow mediates between humans and God. He is thereby hinting at the existence of an esoteric tradition of interpretation that Christians had distorted. As we know, Ibn Ezra himself authored a book dealing with the mysteries underlying the reasons for the commandments (*Yesod Mora*).

Maimonides adopted a similar approach. Not only in the introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed* but already in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides deals openly and at length with the esoteric style and its hermeneutical significance. In the introduction to *Pereq Heleq*, he notes that the wise speak in riddles. In the introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed*, he notes, particularly regarding physics and metaphysics, "For this reason, all the Sages possessing knowledge of God the Lord, knowers of the truth, when they aimed at teaching something of this subject matter, spoke of it only in parables and riddles."¹⁰ As shown below, Maimonides adopted the comparison of rationality with an angel linking God and humans.

In the introduction to *Pereq Heleq*, Maimonides refers to three approaches or classes vis-à-vis rabbinic parables.¹¹ The first are the multitude who believe in aggadot literally, out of admiration for the sages. The second — made up of those who engage in experiential fields (medicine or astrology) — believe in aggadot literally and present their authors as primitive. Maimonides refers to them angrily as "an accursed class."¹² The third class is made up of those who believe in the depth dimension intimated in Aggadah and adopt the

9 Ibid., 159.

10 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 8 (henceforth *Guide*).

11 For other aspects in the description of the classes, see, for example, Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), 155–57 [Heb].

12 J. Abelson, "Maimonides on the Jewish Creed," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 19 (1906), 36 (English translation of Maimonides' introduction to *Pereq Heleq*).

esoteric style. As for the emergence of esoteric consciousness in Maimonides' early texts and its relationship with the *Guide*, two remarks are in place:

1) Between sage and perfect sage.

The description of the esoteric discourse's meaning to the perfect sage involves a latent tension. On the one hand, the esoteric discourse is a characteristic of one who has attained or is close to attaining optimal perfection. This discourse, then, is a condition of his being one of the "great savants," such as King Solomon, "the wisest of men,"¹³ who wrote the Book of Proverbs. On the other hand, the esoteric discourse is a necessary component for all those involved in intellectual pursuits, "for the theme of the speech of men of learning consists entirely in matters of the highest import. But they are put in the form of riddle and parable."¹⁴ The esoteric component of the sciences follows from their very nature and, therefore, engaging in them inevitably brings with it the style as well. The necessity of an esoteric component in every sage, however, is not unequivocal. Maimonides probably held that only perfect sages truly understand the esoteric style and adopt it often. Should he say so explicitly, however, he would lead everyone else to desist from dealing with aggadot and he did not wish to hinder the lively concern with the rabbinic endeavor.

2) Between negation and tolerance.

Let us reconsider the description of the classes. Whereas the introduction to *Pereq Heleq* presents the second class in entirely negative terms and sharply criticizes its members, the introduction to the *Guide* brings a parallel (though not entirely overlapping) list of the classes and displays a more tolerant attitude toward the second one: "He can take the speeches in question [rabbinic homilies] in their external sense and, in so doing, think ill of their author and regard him as an ignoramus — in this there nothing that would upset the foundations of belief."¹⁵ Maimonides is referring here to "a perfect man of virtue," that is, to a wise man, whereas in the introduction to *Pereq Heleq*, the reference is to one who is wise in his own perception.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 37.

15 *Guide*, "Introduction to the First Part," 10.

If only they trained themselves in knowledge so as to know how necessary it is to use the appropriate speech in theology and in like subjects which are common to both the uneducated and the cultured, and to understand also the practical portion of philosophy, it would then be clear to them whether the Sages¹⁶ were really men of wisdom or no, and the significance of their assertions would be comprehensible to them.¹⁷

In both descriptions, the second class refers to individuals who disparage the rabbinic sages, claiming that they had not been perfect in their knowledge of the sciences. The descriptions differ, however, in their portrayal of the members of this class. In the introduction to *Pereq Heleq*, they have experimental interests and do not deal at all with the theoretical sciences. By contrast, in the *Guide*, Maimonides emphasized that one who is involved in the theoretical sciences, even when mistaken in the interpretation of rabbinic aggadot, can be tolerated since he is at least a learned person and may be directed to the suitable course.

These two comments attest to the presence of an esoteric consciousness in Maimonides already in his youth, meaning that the style and the concealment were for him deliberate pursuits worthy of discussion, imitation, and application. This consciousness is powerfully revealed in the introduction to the *Guide* and woven into the description of this work's purpose.¹⁸ I discuss this consciousness below in greater detail and will now briefly present the attitudes that emerged in the study.

The Political Dimension

Scholars have dealt with esoteric writing in the medieval era mainly in political terms, and the thinker most associated with this perspective was Leo Strauss. His conservative political approach led him to conclude that modern theories could also be applied to the

16 Meaning rabbinic sages [*Hazal*]. This term appears in Hebrew in the original version, as opposed to *cUlamā'*, which translates the next appearance of the term *hakhamim*.

17 Abelson, "Jewish Creed," 36.

18 See Schwartz, *Clash of Paradigms*, 135–44.

Middle Ages.¹⁹ Strauss argued that the secret hidden in the writings of medieval thinkers who followed Platonic tradition was political in nature. According to these thinkers, the proper political regime was that of the city, and this regime was tied to the faith of the multitude and to the modes of its presentation by spiritual leaders. Shlomo Pines continued and radicalized this approach, which was criticized by scholars such as Herbert A. Davidson.²⁰ The nature of the contradictions in the *Guide* and their meaning have occupied many.²¹ Aviezer Ravitzky presented a comprehensive discussion of these hermeneutical approaches and claimed that, for medieval sages, the secret of the *Guide* was the pinnacle of the sciences whereas for the scholars mentioned the secret is the presentation of revelation as a “noble myth.”²²

I argued that Strauss’ approach has two directions although apparently he took only one into account. The disputes about the sciences that took place during the thirteenth century show that rationalists can be no less extreme and zealous than conservatives and, therefore, writing that challenges the authority of scientists can don an esoteric cover.²³ In fact, Strauss himself pointed to such a principle. When he claimed that *The Guide of the Perplexed* is a Kalām work, he should have foreseen the warranted implication — Maimonides attacked the Kalām and distanced himself from them so as not to be identified by his rationalist colleagues as a theologian.

- 19 See Raimondo Cubeddu, *Leo Strauss e la filosofia politica moderna* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1983); Heinrich Meyer, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, und ‘Die Begriff des Politischen’: Zu einem Dialog unter Abwesenden* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1988); Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Macmillan, 1988); Alan Udoff, ed., *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rinner, 1991)
- 20 See Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82–102; Herbert A. Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992/1993): 49–103.
- 21 See, for example, Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 47–90.
- 22 Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Secrets of the *The Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 181.
- 23 Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment*, Introduction.

Maimonides actually presented a “philosophical Kalām” contrary to the Muslim one.

Strauss began to deal with the diverse techniques of esoteric writing in his seminal work “Persecution and the Art of Writing.”²⁴ He pointed to inconsistencies and contradictions and to the use of approaches pinned on logical arguments in order to confuse the lay reader. The question is whether Strauss exhausted the variety of esoteric techniques and, moreover, to what extent he interpreted them successfully. I turn now to additional techniques adopted in the twelfth century in attempts to conceal the author’s true view.

Alternatives

The Kuzari is an esoteric work, as attested by the author’s vague allusion that “the wise will understand” featuring in *The Kuzari*’s frame story, as well as from explicit contradictions and inconsistencies within the book.²⁵ Besides the use of direct contradictions that I have pointed out elsewhere,²⁶ I claim that Judah Halevi used unique models of contradictions that are not found in the work of other twelfth-century authors, possibly attesting to his awareness of the radical potential of contradictions and inconsistencies.

Between Pantheism and Philosophy

A unique model of contradictions used by Halevi was to point to, as it were, two equivalent alternatives. Further on in the discussion, however, we learn that he endorsed only one of them. I showed Halevi’s use of this technique when dealing with the sin of the golden

24 Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research* 8 (1941): 488–504.

25 See, for example, Shlomo Pines, “Note sur la doctrine de la prophétie et la réhabilitation de la matière dans le Kuzari,” *Mélanges de Philosophie et de Littérature Juives* 1-2 (1956-57): 253–60; Yohanan Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah Halevi, The Kuzari, and the Evolution of His Thought*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995); idem, “The Literary Aspect of the Kuzari,” *Daat* 32-33 (1994): 53-65 [Heb]. See also Aryeh Leo Motzkin, “On Yehuda Halevi’s ‘Kuzari’ as a Platonic Dialogue,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1978): 209–19 [Heb].

26 See Dov Schwartz, *Messianism in Medieval Jewish Thought*, trans. Batya Stein (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 42–56.

calf, where he presented two possible explanations — one astrological and the other that viewed it as a holy object with special qualities. According to Halevi's younger contemporary, Abraham Ibn Ezra, both these models function in the *Urim and Thummim* (the stones in the breastplate of the High Priest). Later in the discussion, however, Halevi determines that the calf was built following the astrologers' counsel. The holy object theory, claiming that the calf reflected the survival anxieties of the desert dwellers, is more easily defensible than astrology, all the more so since the latter is deterministic. Clearly, then, Halevi endorsed the astrological option.²⁷

Esoteric Writing and Polemic

I have argued that the esoteric drive behind Halevi's writing follows from the placement of *The Kuzari* under the rubric of polemical literature.²⁸ The polemic was against idolatry and against the Western religions, but was directed mainly against philosophy and rationalism as a tool of religious verification. Esoteric writing strengthens the model that Judah Halevi wishes to protect. I present here a further example of the alternatives model from *The Kuzari* IV: 3 and will examine its polemical implications. On the one hand, in the discussion on the attributes that opens Part Two of *The Kuzari*, Halevi presents a model of negative attributes. On the other hand, in the discussion that opens Part Four, Halevi presents experience and the intuitive approach or, in brief, prophecy, as successful paths to the divinity.²⁹ Halevi thereby managed to reject rationality as a tool for understanding the attributes, that is, to show that rationality has no positive attainments while revelation does create a connection between humans and God. The intermediate discussions, pointing to the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its Torah, were thus meant

27 *The Kuzari*, I: 96–97, 67–70. See Dov Schwartz, *Studies on Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought*, trans. David Louvish and Batya Stein (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1–9.

28 See notes 25–26 above.

29 On the difference between the theory of attributes in these two parts of *The Kuzari*, see David Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre in der jüdischen Religionsphilosophie des Mittelalters von Saadja bis Maimuni* (Gotha: F. A. Perthes, 1877), 165 ff.

to prepare the ground for a perception of prophecy as knowledge of the divine.³⁰

In the discussions in Part Four, Halevi again presents two alternatives relating directly to the attributes:

If we reflect on the attributes [*al-ṣṣafāt*] which are essential whether they be taken in metaphorical or real sense) such as: living, omniscient, almighty, omnipotent, guiding, arranging, giving everything its due, wise and just, we shall find nothing resembling God more closely than the rational soul — in other words, the perfect human being.³¹

Halevi adopted here the model of God's five positive attributes (unity, life, power, knowledge, and unlikeness) that had already appeared in the second treatise of Saadia Gaon's *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. Halevi replaced unity and unlikeness with will and providence, and also added justice.

The positive attributes were presented in Halevi's approach as two alternatives — real or metaphorical. At the beginning of Part Two, as noted, Halevi showed that only negative attributes are valid regarding divine power and, therefore, he could not have argued that the positive attributes are perceived as real (*ḥaqīqah*). Only in this way, however, could he point to reason's failure to establish the foundations of faith and that it attains only negation. Clearly, then, the positive attributes are stated only metaphorically. So why did he present these as two legitimate alternatives? First, he could not present the positive attributes as the only option since that would undermine the polemical claim about reason's weakness. Second, Halevi wanted to show that accepting revelation immediately dismisses the rationalist threat and the positive attributes can then be included, even if only as an identical representation of the divine essence.

We find, then, that the technique of alternatives accompanies the esoteric discussion in *The Kuzari* and the esoteric model is also part

30 I deal with this question at length (except for the alternatives model) in *Concealment and Contradiction*, 62–67.

31 Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken, 1964), IV: 3, 209. In the original version — Judah Halevi, *Al-Kitāb Al-Khazarī*, ed. D. Z. Baneth and H. Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), 156, lns. 16–19.

of the book's literary style through a tendentious presentation of hierarchies.

Connecting Chapters

The most outstanding representative of esoteric writing in the twelfth century was Maimonides, and not only because of his unique genius. Apparently, the *Guide* became the paradigm of esoteric writing also due to the consciousness it developed. Maimonides explicitly notes the method he used in this work in the introduction to the book; despite the various interpretations of the concealment methods detailed in it, this remains a masterpiece of esoteric writing. I will now review several aspects in the introduction to the *Guide* in order to highlight the esoteric consciousness. The main discussion, however, will focus on Maimonides' presentation of a speaker and rhetorician using an esoteric style.

The Importance of the Style

In the introduction, Maimonides examined the verse "apples of gold in settings [*maskiyyoth*] of silver" (Proverbs 25:11), and expanded at length on the "settings" and on the "silver." He thus clarified to the reader that the concealing cover is extremely important and the external meaning "contains wisdom that is useful in many respects."³²

32 *Guide*, "Introduction to the First Part," 12. Maimonides then focused on methods of concealment at the expense of contents in his well-known illustration from Jacob's ladder ("In this text, the word 'ladder' indicates one subject; the words 'set up on the earth' indicate a second subject; the words 'and the top of it reached to heaven' indicate a third subject ..." and so forth). Whereas in the introduction he notes the symbols without paying any attention to their meaning, in the text of the *Guide* he considers the meaning of the ladder at length. In other words, he clarifies that the introduction deals solely with the esoteric method, and that is the concern of esoteric consciousness. On Jacob's ladder, see, for example, Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Maimonides' Commentary on Jacob's Dream of the Ladder," in *Moshe Schwarcz Memorial Volume [Bar-Ilan Annual 22-23]*, ed. Moshe Hallamish (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987), 329-49 [Heb]; Dov Schwartz, "The Separate Intellects and Maimonides' Argumentation," in *Between Rashi*

He never mentions the “gold.” The focus on the method is thus crucial, indeed the center of the discussion. The method is revealed as consciousness. Maimonides strongly emphasizes this determination, seemingly contradicting the “Instruction with Respect to this Treatise” at the end of the introduction, where he writes:

I adjure — by God may He be exalted! — every reader of this Treatise of mine not to comment upon a single word of it and not to explain to another anything in it save that which has been explained and commented upon in the words of the famous Sages of our Law who preceded me. But whatever he understands from this Treatise of those things that have not been said by any of our famous Sages other than myself should not be explained to another; nor should he hasten to refute me, for that which he understood me to say might be contrary to my intention. He thus would harm me in return for my having wanted to benefit him and would “repay evil for good” ...³³

God, may He be exalted, knows that I have never ceased to be exceedingly apprehensive about setting down those things that I wish to set down in this treatise. For they are concealed things; none of them has been set down in any book — written in the religious community — in these times of Exile ... How then can I now innovate and set them down?³⁴

One of the issues the scholarship considers is Maimonides’ attitude to the Jewish thought that preceded him and, in fact, his “thundering silence” regarding constitutive works of Andalusian thought such as *Meqor Hayyim* (*Fons Vitae*) by Ibn Gabirol, *The Kuzari* by Judah Halevi, and Ibn Ezra’s exegetical endeavor and his book *Yesod Mora*.³⁵ These statements, however, are mutually contradictory. In the first passage from “Instruction with Respect to this Treatise,” Maimonides argues that there is a tradition of Jewish thought, and the issues where he continues his predecessors can be studied and taught. In the second

and Maimonides, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 59–92.

33 *Guide*, “Introduction with Respect to the Treatise,” 15.

34 *Ibid.*, 16.

35 See above, note 2. Shlomo Pines addresses this question in his “Translator’s Introduction,” which deals with the philosophical sources of Maimonides.

passage, however, Maimonides notes that all he writes in the “Instruction” are “concealed things” lacking any tradition of thought. Regardless of whether the secrets of the sages were lost in the ordeals of exile or some still remained, Maimonides clearly acknowledges in the first passage an Andalusian tradition of interpreting secrets, which he denies in the second.

This contradiction can be better understood in light of the *Guide*’s aims as attested by its author. The book has a “negative” goal — to warn about the Kalām and to draw a distinction between theological and philosophical truth — and a “positive” one — to decipher prophetic parables and deal with the secrets of the Torah and the sciences requiring concealment (physics and metaphysics).³⁶ The first passage, dealing with a tradition of thought, relates to the negation of the Kalām. In twelfth-century pre-Maimonidean Jewish thought, we find Aristotelian inclinations. By contrast, the second passage relates to the secrets of the Torah; Maimonides sees himself as a pioneer in this regard and, indeed, as initiating a tradition. He related to Andalusian thought, then, as a constructive trend in its abdication of Muslim theological thought patterns, but held that they had not truly initiated a proper tradition of thought. Obviously, this was not a consciousness of self-innovation *ex nihilo*. Maimonides certainly held that the secrets had been conveyed by the rabbinic sages but, until the *Guide*, no proper tradition of decoding had emerged and he traced a path for the *Guide* to follow.

The introduction in which Maimonides numbered the causes of contradictions definitely reflects the esoteric consciousness. At times, the impression is that Maimonides himself strove for a consciousness anticipating the modern one. For example, a precise examination will find that the significant difference between the sixth and seventh contradiction is that the sixth has no awareness of concealment and is therefore mistaken, whereas the seventh does show awareness of the need to hide these matters from the multitude.

Nevertheless, Maimonides exposed his esoteric consciousness not only in the introduction to the *Guide* but also throughout the book, which singles out this work from other esoteric writings. This is the topic of the discussion that follows.

36 See Schwartz, *Clash of Paradigms*, 135–44.

Consciousness

Maimonides presented in the *Guide* a rare description of the use of esoterism and even pointed to the contents that were hidden. He clearly describes how a biblical figure (Elihu) uses a concealment technique. Maimonides, as it were, is an “outside” onlooker, and he describes the ways this biblical figure hid its contents. This is a distinctly reflective portrayal of esoteric writing that enables us to trace the concealment techniques used in the *Guide*.

Maimonides ascribed esoterism to the biblical figure Elihu. Various scholars have tracked the meaning of Satan in Maimonides’s commentary on Job. Abraham Nuriel clashed with Sara Klein-Braslavy on the question of whether the esoteric method includes the figure of Satan.³⁷ He suggested identifying the first Satan (who appears in the first chapter of Job) with chance, and the second Satan with privation.³⁸ Nuriel appears to have been right since Maimonides argued that the first Satan, unlike the second, has permanence. This permanence means that “they [the sons of God] exist as subject to His order in what He wills.”³⁹ Hence, the first Satan is concerned with chance (such as blindness or congenital leprosy), which cannot be corrected. The second Satan is concerned with privation, which can be corrected since it is a “positive” component of existence and, due to it, the object moves toward perfection. Other scholars have focused on Job as a parable and on the identification of the various characters,⁴⁰ but not on the esoteric consciousness that Maimonides affords us a glimpse of here.

37 See Sara Klein-Braslavy, “Identification of Nahash and Smael in the Guide of the Perplexed,” *Daat* 10 (1983): 12 [Heb]; Avraham Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 114 [Heb]. See also Shalom Rosenberg, “Job Was a Parable: Philosophy and Literary Interpretation,” in *Studies in Bible and Education in Honor of Prof. Moshe Arendt*, ed. Dov Rappel (Jerusalem: Touro College, 1996), 146–58 [Heb].

38 Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed*, 115–16.

39 *Guide*, III: 22, 488.

40 See, for example, Joel Laks, “The Enigma of Job: Maimonides and the Moderns,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1964): 345–64; Leonard S. Kravitz, “Maimonides and Job: An Inquiry as to the Method of the *Moreh*,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 38 (1967): 149–58; Hanna Kasher, “Job’s Image and Opinions in Maimonides,” *Daat* 15 (1985): 81–87; Mordechai Cohen, “The Literal Interpretation of a Philosopher: Maimonides’ Literary Approach to the Book of Job and Its Place in the History of Biblical Exegesis,” *Shnaton: Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 15 (2005): 213–64 [Heb].

Esoterism as consciousness seems to emerge in Elihu's speech. This time, esoterism is not only textual but also rhetorical and, paradoxically, is open — Maimonides describes a speech recorded in the Book of Job, a speech marked by esoteric dimensions:

Thereupon another opinion supervenes, namely, the one attributed to Elihu. Hence, he is considered by them as superior. For it is mentioned that he was the youngest among them in point of age and the most perfect among them in knowledge. He started to reprove Job and to tax him with ignorance because of his having manifested his self-esteem and because of his not being able to understand how misfortunes could have befallen him though he performed good deeds. For he had expiated at length on the goodness of his actions. He also described the opinions of [Job's] three friends on providence as senile drivel; and made extraordinary speeches that are full of enigmas, in such a way that if someone considers his discourse, he wonders and thinks that he does not in any respect make an addition to what was said by Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, but merely repeats the different terms and with amplifications the notions contained in their speeches. For he does not go beyond blaming Job, ascribing the attributes of justice to God, describing His wonders in the universe, and stating that He, may He be exalted, does not care either for the obedience of those who obey or for the disobedience of those who disobey. Now all these notions had been expressed by his companions. However, when you consider the matter, the additional notion that he introduced will become clear to you; this notion is the one that is intended; it had not occurred before to one of the others. Together with that notion, however, he says all they have said, just as each of all the others — namely, Job and his three friends — repeats, as I have mentioned to you, the notion expressed by another among them. This is done in order to hide the notion that is peculiar to the opinion of each individual, so that at first it occurs to the multitude that all the interlocutors are agreed upon the selfsame opinion; however, this is not so.⁴¹

41 *Guide*, III: 23, 494–95.

The sage, then, is also a rhetorician; he expands on details known to everyone to obscure and conceal his innovations. Outwardly, he is like the other speakers. Closer scrutiny, however, will reveal the difference — his words hide other contents. Elihu is unlike the other speakers. They represent the views of the multitude whereas he represents the view of the most perfect in knowledge, as Maimonides describes him at the opening of this passage. In the introduction to *Pereq Heleq*, as noted, Maimonides claimed that the sage speaks in parables, meaning he does not disclose his views and hides them under a cover. Since the speakers in the Book of Job represent the views on providence that were suggested in Chapter 17, as Maimonides explicitly mentions there, then these views — including the one in the Torah — do not reflect the view of the sage.

The advantage in this description of Maimonides, as noted, is that he himself hints to the secret matters that Elihu tried to conceal from the listeners who represent the multitude. True, he did not expressly refer to them and left room for the understanding reader to hypothesize but at least pointed to the direction of the concealment. The two secret matters are:

1) “That which he expresses parabolically when he speaks of the intercession of an angel” (according to Job 33:23). The angel, by way of a parable, saves humans from distress, and Charles Touati has already noted that most medieval exegetes identified the angel with reason.⁴²

2) “He also makes an addition — prior to speaking of this notion — by beginning to describe the how of prophecy.” Elihu, then, hinted that prophecy, which is tied to the perfection of reason, also implies providence over prophets, “proportionate to their degree in prophecy.”⁴³

42 Charles Touati, “Les deux théories de Maïmonide sur la Providence,” in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Sigfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (London/Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 337. See also Charles M. Raffel, “Providence as Consequent upon the Intellect: Maimonides' Theory of Providence,” *AJS Review* 12 (1987): 25–72.

43 *Guide*, III:18, 475; Touati, “Les deux théories,” 337.

So what is Elihu's view according to Maimonides? In order to answer this question, a re-examination of the views on providence presented in the *Guide* III:17-18 is required. Maimonides noted that he would cite five opinions on providence but a further review reveals seven, and it is the addition of these two that is at the focus of esoteric writing. The table below presents the views formulated in Chapter 17 and their parallels in Chapter 23:

	Opinion	Book of Job	Content
1	Epicurus	---	There is no providence; all is chance
2	Aristotle	Job (explicitly)	Personal providence over separate intellects and spheres. In the sub-lunar world, there is providence only over species.
3	Ash ^c ariyya	Zophar (explicitly)	Everything is predetermined and there is no room for choice ("He has willed this"). ⁴⁴
4	Mu ^c tazila ⁴⁵	Bildad (explicitly)	Everything is subject to a rigorous weighing of reward and punishment ["wisdom"], if not in this world, then in the world to come.

44 *Guide* III: 17, 467.

45 Maimonides added to the Muctazila "some of the later Gaonim, may their memory be blessed," intending Saadia Gaon by this reference. Maimonides' view on this approach of the Muctazila is conveyed in the method of connecting chapters. Only in the *Guide* III: 24, when he deals with the concept of the trial, does Maimonides clarify that a view that delays reward and punishment to the world to come entails "injustice." He does not explain why he considers the approach of the Muctazila morally flawed, but the answer seems clear. Maimonides had already noted in his early writings and in the *Code* that only the intellect remains after death, meaning that all that endures is the scientific knowledge the individual has accumulated. If so, the Muctazila behave immorally and delude the faith community with vain promises. On immortality in Maimonides' thought and its sources, see, for example, Dov Schwartz, "Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality: A Comparative Study," in *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Ronald L. Nettle (Chur: Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers 1995), 185–97; Sarah Stroumsa, "True Felicity: Paradise in the Thought of Avicenna and Maimonides," *Medieval Encounters* 4 (1998): 51–77; Amira Eran, "Al-Ghazali and Maimonides on the World to Come and Spiritual Pleasures," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8:2 (2001): 137–66.

5	Torah	Eliphaz (explicitly)	Humans have choice and animals have will. Human actions are subject to a rigorous weighing of reward and punishment, including reward in the world to come [“the Mu ^t azila also hold this opinion”]. ⁴⁶
6	Maimonides (Chapter 17) ⁴⁷	---	Providence over humans only because they, by definition, have reason while providence over animals is only over species. Humans have choice. Their actions are subject to a rigorous weighing of reward and punishment.
7	Maimonides (Chapter 18)	Elihu (hinted)	Providence over humans is proportionate to the level of their reason.

Henceforth, then, it can be stated that Elihu’s view resembles that of Maimonides (7) in the *Guide* III: 18. The angel notes that providence depends on human reason. Maimonides presents here the acquisition of rational knowledge as actual providence, as salvation when in distress. Salvation, however, is only relevant regarding the supreme apprehensions or intellectual communion, “However, this does not continue always, there being no continuous intercession going on forever.”⁴⁸

Elihu’s speech, as noted, is a kind of laboratory allowing a glimpse into the ways and contents of concealment. And yet, although Elihu has acquired knowledge, his speech includes only sublunar phenomena. Maimonides refers to the following verses:

46 *Guide* III: 17, 468.

47 This view is conveyed ambiguously. On the one hand, Maimonides states “As for my own belief with regard to this fundamental principle, I mean divine providence, it is as I shall set it forth to you.” On the other hand, he then proceeds to rely on “what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God and of the books of our prophets.” And then goes on: “This opinion, which I believe, is less disgraceful than the preceding opinions and nearer than they to intellectual reasoning” (*Guide* III, 17, 471). In any event, the will of animals does not appear in the Torah opinion and, therefore, the distinction is in the reward to animals, which is not part of the Torah opinion.

48 *Guide*, III: 23, 495.

In a moment they die; at midnight the people are shaken and pass away, and the mighty are taken away by no human hand. For his eyes are upon the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps. There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves. For he has not appointed a time for any man to go before God in judgment. He shatters the mighty without investigation, and sets others in their place.⁴⁹

Maimonides comments on them:

Thereupon he [Elihu] begins to confirm this opinion and to make clear its method by describing many natural circumstances, such as his describing thunder, lightning, rain, and the blowing of the winds. He combines this with many subjects belonging to the circumstances of animals — I mean an outbreak of pestilence referred to in his dictum, “In a moment they die...” the occurrence of great wars referred to in his dictum, “He shatters the mighty...” and many other such circumstances.⁵⁰

Maimonides sought to emphasize that Elihu’s discourse related only to meteorology but not to the spheres and certainly not to the separate intellects. He limited Elihu’s discourse solely to sublunar events, for two reasons. The first is that the sage does not share supralunar knowledge with the multitude because they are incapable of grasping it. Job’s companions are not counted among the wise, and therefore Elihu insistently concentrated on secrets that can be talked about. The second reason is that Maimonides wanted to hint that the discourse on providence is not a component of the scientific worldview. It makes no statement about developments in the universe in general but only about the material world.

Maimonides then turned to show that the fact that Job sided with Aristotle does not mean he was a philosopher or a scientist like Aristotle. Quite the contrary, Job’s knowledge was confined to the material world up to the sphere of the moon and, therefore, his grasp was limited. Job needed Elihu to gain access to the way of truth. Note that Maimonides answered here two questions touching on God’s answer to Job out of the whirlwind, that is, to Job’s prophecy:

49 Job 34: 20–24.

50 *Guide*, III: 23, 495–96.

1) What was the divine answer to Job? How did this answer relate to his circumstances and to the issue of providence at stake here?

2) What is the relationship between God's revelation and the speeches of Job's companions? Ostensibly, Job's prophecy is entirely detached from the discourse and the considerations on providence that were considered in the course of the *Guide* up to that point.

To answer these two questions, consider Maimonides' exegesis of God's revelation to Job out of the whirlwind:

Similarly you will find that in the prophetic revelation that came to Job and through which his error in everything that he had imagined became clear to him, there is no going beyond the description of natural matters — namely, description of the elements or description of the meteorological phenomena⁵¹ or description of the natures of the various species of animals, but of nothing else. For what is mentioned therein in the way of a description of the firmaments and the heavens and Orion and the Pleiades occur because of their influence upon the atmosphere;⁵² for He draws his attention only to what is beneath the sphere of the moon. Elihu too derives his warnings from various species of animals.⁵³ For he says, “He teacheth us from the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wise from the fowls of heaven.” In this speech He dwells at the greatest length on a description of Leviathan, who is a combination of corporeal properties divided between the animals that walk, swim, and fly.⁵⁴ The purpose of all these things is to show that our intellects do not reach the point of apprehending how these natural things that exist in the world of generation and corruption are produced in time and of conceiving how the existence of the natural force within them has originated them. They are not things that resemble what we make. How then can we wish that His governance of, and providence for, them, may He be exalted, should resemble our governance of, and providence for, the things we do govern and

51 Meaning the atmosphere.

52 Not the constellations in the spheres.

53 Meaning that not only Job dealt with sublunar beings but so did Elihu.

54 Leviathan then, is not a monster or some exceptional animal but a generic term for animal features.

provide for? Rather is it obligatory to stop at this point and to believe that nothing is hidden from Him, may He be exalted. As Elihu here says: “For His eyes are upon the ways of man, and He seeth all his goings. There is no darkness, nor shadow of death, where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves.” But the notion of His providence is not the same as the notion of our providence; nor is the notion of His governance of the things created by Him the same as the notion of our governance of that which we govern. The two notions are not comprised in one definition, contrary to what is thought by all those who are confused,⁵⁵ and there is nothing in common between the two except the name alone. In the same way, our act does not resemble His act; and the two are not comprised in one and the same definition. Just as natural acts differ from those of craftsmanship, so do the divine governance of, the divine providence for, and the divine purpose with regard to, those natural matters differ from our human governance of, providence for, and purpose with regard to, the things we govern, we provide for, and we purpose. This is the object of the Book of Job as a whole.⁵⁶

We can now answer the questions that Maimonides implicitly poses in the discussion. First, Maimonides found a common denominator between God’s revelation out of the whirlwind and Elihu’s speech: both deal with knowledge in general and with knowledge of the sublunar world in particular, clarifying the connection between Job and Elihu as well as the answer to Job. Divine providence differs from human providence, and they only share a name. Why? Because divine providence depends on the acquisition of knowledge, whereas human providence is rooted in action and deeds. Maimonides intimated this when he noted that the difference between divine and human providence is equivalent to the difference between natural acts and those of craftsmanship, since providence based on knowledge is natural whereas human providence is rooted in action.

The discussion on Job, then, is a classic example of the connection of chapters. The issue of providence cannot be understood

55 *Tahayyara*, in *Dalālat al-Ḥa’irīn*, ed. Salomon Munk and Issachar Yoel (Jerusalem: Yunovits, 1931), 360, ln. 20. This is one of the places where Maimonides points to the perplexity he hints at in the book’s title.

56 *Guide*, III: 23, 496–97.

solely from Chapters 17 and 18. We must proceed to Chapter 23, compare the chapters, and then grasp Maimonides' view. Only a move like that will clarify that Maimonides indeed rejected "the view of our Torah" since the view of Eliphaz was perceived as equivalent to that of the multitude and Elihu's true view was perceived as opposed to that of Eliphaz.

The question now is why Maimonides presented two views in his own name when, clearly, his true view is formulated only in Chapter 18. That, however, is an issue for separate discussion, but connecting chapters appears to me as less significant than Maimonides' analysis of Elihu's speech. This reflective analysis of esoteric writing clearly points to the ways of concealment according to Maimonides himself.

Conclusion

Maimonides was well aware of writing and the discourse it evokes. In that sense, he was among the first rationalists to adopt a reflective approach to the style of writing. In this article, I attempted to show that Maimonides was aware of the esoteric consciousness. Its inklings, found in the writings of Judah Halevi and Ibn Ezra, became a consciousness in Maimonides. The discussion on providence and Job is a classic model not only of a reflective esoteric consciousness but also of a method of connecting chapters that is mentioned in the introduction to the *Guide*. Only from Chapters 22-23 in Part III of the *Guide* can we understand Chapters 17-18. We can then understand that the view of the Torah in Chapter 17 is not the correct view, and in Chapter 23 it is clear that this view is also immoral. In any event, Maimonides powerfully strove to an esoteric consciousness on this matter, without precedent in the thought of Judah Halevi and Ibn Ezra. In this sense, esoteric writing in the twelfth century proceeds from an esoteric technique to an esoteric consciousness.

Translated from the Hebrew by Batya Stein.