

Aristotelian Eternity of the Universe

1. Rambam: *Guide for the Perplexed* II:25

We do not reject the Eternity of the Universe, because certain passages in Scripture confirm the Creation; for such passages are not more numerous than those in which God is represented as a corporeal being; nor is it impossible or difficult to find for them a suitable interpretation. We might have explained them in the same manner as we did in respect to the Incorporeality of God. We should perhaps have had an easier task in showing that the Scriptural passages referred to are in harmony with the theory of the Eternity of the Universe if we accepted the latter, than we had in explaining the anthropomorphisms in the Bible when we rejected the idea that God is corporeal. For two reasons, however, we have not done so, and have not accepted the Eternity of the Universe. First, the Incorporeality of God has been demonstrated by proof: those passages in the Bible, which in their literal sense contain statements that can be refuted by proof, must and can be interpreted otherwise. But the Eternity of the Universe has not been proved; a mere argument in favour of a certain theory is not sufficient reason for rejecting the literal meaning of a Biblical text, and explaining it figuratively, when the opposite theory can be supported by an equally good argument. Secondly, our belief in the Incorporeality of God is not contrary to any of the fundamental principles of our religion: it is not contrary to the words of any prophet. Only ignorant people believe that it is contrary to the teaching of Scripture: but we have shown that this is not the case: on the contrary, Scripture teaches the Incorporeality of God. If we were to accept the Eternity of the Universe as taught by Aristotle, that everything in the Universe is the result of fixed laws, that Nature does not change, and that there is nothing supernatural, we should necessarily be in opposition to the foundation of our religion, we should disbelieve all miracles and signs, and certainly reject all hopes and fears derived from Scripture, unless the miracles are also explained figuratively. The Allegorists amongst the Mohammedans have done this, and have thereby arrived at absurd conclusions. If, however, we accepted the Eternity of the Universe in accordance with the second of the theories which we have expounded above (ch. xxiii.), and assumed, with Plato, that the heavens are likewise transient, we should not be in opposition to the fundamental principles of our religion; this theory would not imply the rejection of miracles, but, on the contrary, would admit them as possible. The Scriptural text might have been explained accordingly, and many expressions might have been found in the Bible and in other writings that would confirm and support this theory. But there is no necessity for this expedient, so long as the theory has not been proved. As there is no proof sufficient to convince us, this theory need not be taken into consideration, nor the other one; we take

the text of the Bible literally, and say that it teaches us a truth which we cannot prove; and the miracles are evidence for the correctness of our view.

2. Rabbi Yehuda Alfakher: *Iggeret Kena'ot Kovetz Teshuvot HaRambam* Leipzig 1859 2a (translation *Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* p. 120)

מפני שהיתה כונתו שלא לשנות מנהגו של עולם, למען העמיד התורה עם חכמת היונית יחד לחבר את האהל להיות אחד. ודימה היות הראשונה עם השנייה כשתי טפרים תאמי צביה - והיתה תאניה ואניה ולא נשא אותם הארץ לשבת יחדו להיות כשתי אחיות - כי לא כנשים המצריות העבריות - זאת התורה אומרה, לא כי בני החי ובני המת וכעסותה צרתה גם כעס בעבור הרעימה כי צרה שמה אני שלום וכי אדבר המה למלחמה.

Because it was his intention not to change the way of the world, in order to reconcile the Torah with Greek philosophy to couple the tent together so that it might become one whole. And he imagined that the one could live with the other like two fawns, twins of a gazelle (Shir HaShirim 4:5, 7:4). And there was mourning and moaning (Yishaya 29:2, Eichah 2:5) and the land could not support them staying together (Bereishit 13:6), to be as two sisters, because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women (Shemot 1:19). To this does the Torah say; No, the live one is my son, and the dead one is yours! (Melachim 1 3:23) And her rival taunts her, to make her miserable, for rival is her name. I am all peace, but when I speak, they are for war (Shmuel 1 1:6).

3. Rabbi Yehuda Alfakher: *Iggeret Kena'ot Kovetz Teshuvot HaRambam* Leipzig 1859 p. 1d (translation *Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* p. 120)

ועוד שיש בו לענין הקדמות שאלו נמצא עליה מופת ברור לארסטו בחוק ההגיון ומשפטו, היה יכול להוציא מקרא מעשה בראשית מידי פשוטו ופורט על פי הקדמות פרטי כאשר עשה לענין צלם ודמות מפני שמורה פשוטי הגשמות - וכן כל מקרא שיבוא המופת על הפכו אין שומעין לו כדרכו

Furthermore there is the concept of eternity. If clear proofs would be found for Aristotle, using laws of logic and sense, he would be able to remove Scripture's references to creation from its literal meaning and explain based on eternity, as he did to the concepts of 'image and form of God' because they imply physicality. Similarly any words of Scripture that would be contradicted by proofs would be removed from its simple meaning.

4. Ibid.

כל מופת שלם צריך עיון גדול עד מאד מפני שפעמים יתערב בו דבר מתעה מאותה חכמה שקרנית שנקרא בלשון יון סופיסטיקה ובהתחברות אליו יעשה מרמה ללכוד חכמים בערמה.

Every complete proof requires great examination because sometimes there are mistakes mixed in with it, from that false philosophy which is called in Greek 'sophistry'. If we attach ourselves to it it becomes a trap to ensnare the wise with cunning.

5. Rivash (Rav Yaakov ben Sheshet): *Meshiv Devarim Nechochim* 1969 p. 68
ll. 33-39 Translation *Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* p.
121-2

ותהי האמת להם זלות ודעת הוללות וסכלות ושימושו לשונותם מותר ודבר שפתיים וסימן הכסיל גילוי השנים. וזה חחלם לפרוץ גדרים ויחפאו על יחוד. דברים כי למדו חכמת בני יון ואנשי הודו ובהם יחשבו גם הם כי כל תועבת יחווה אשר עשו לאלהיהם לא אבע"א ימושו מפיחם ספרי חכמיהם ויתערבו בגרם וילמדו מעשיהם ויחשבו לבנות בחכמה עיר ומגדל להם ואם יעלה שועל ופרץ את חומת אבניהם. וכמעט אבדה תורה מבנים כי גמר חסיד כי פסו אמונים והגיע העת שאמרו רבוי ע"ה עתיד. תורה שתשכח מישראל אוי מי יחיה משומו אל.

And the truth was for them a base thing and wisdom – madness and folly... This is how they have begun to break down barriers and imputed things to the Lord for they have studied the wisdom of the Greeks and the Indians, and they too are counted among them for every act abhorrent to the Lord have they performed for their gods. The books of their scholars do not budge from their mouths and they mingle with the nations and learn their ways and think to build with science a city and a tower for themselves. If a fox climbs it he will breach their stone wall (Yirmiya 49:7). The Torah has all but vanished from sons for the faithful are no more, the loyal have vanished (Tehillim 12:2).

6. Rabbi Yehuda Alfakher: *Iggeret Kena'ot Kovetz Teshuvot HaRambam*
Leipzig 1859 p.2a

יאמר נא קמחי ששמו צמח בלי יעשה קמח, מתי נתנו מקראי קדש להדרש במדות חכמת היונית וילכו אחרנית ומתי נחה ארס על אפרים ותעלה. ותצא מרכבה ממצרים לא כן הדבר כי מציון תצא תורה ודבר י"י מירושלים:

Tell me now, Kimche, whose name is a plant but does not make flour, since when were the holy verses permitted to be explained using the logic of Greek philosophy to lead them backwards? When did the poison come to Ephraim to cure him? Did a chariot go out from Egypt? This is not how it is supposed to be. Rather "from Tzion will come forth Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem."

7. Rabbi Yehuda Alfakher: *Iggeret Kena'ot Kovetz Teshuvot HaRambam*
Leipzig 1859

אדות דברי הריבות אשר בשערנו, בקנאת לתורת צורנו בשמענו מקצתם זקנים ונערים, מפרסמים דברים חדשים מקרוב באו לאשערום אבותם כו' להרוס הקבלות, ולמשול משלים בדברי התורות, להפך למשל ולהבל, מעשה בראשית ותולדות קין והבל ובשאר הכתובים בתורה, ושמענו מפי המעתיק אשר גלה כל מה שמכסה הרב זצ"ל שהיה אומר בפני רבים על תורתנו כל הספורים משלים וכל המצות הנהוגות וכאלה עצמו מספר, שמעתי מלעייגים על דברי רבותינו, וכשמעי הדברים האלה נבהלתי כו' והתווכחתי עמהם פעמים רבות והייתי בעיניהם כמתעתע וכו'.

Regarding the arguments within our gates, and our zealousness for the sake of Torah of our Rock; We hear what some of the young and old people are saying. They announce new things that our ancestors never dreamed of, in order to destroy our tradition. They make analogies out of words of Torah and turn everything into metaphor and remove its meaning. For example the

story of creation or the story of Kayin and Hevel, and the other stories of the Torah. We have heard publicly from the copyist who revealed all the things that the Rav (of blessed memory) used to hide about our Torah – that all the stories are metaphors and all the mitzvot which we do, and similar things like that. I heard them mocking the words of our Rabbis. When I heard these things I was shocked etc. I fought with them many times, even though I am like a fool in their eyes.

Corporeal God

8. Rambam: *Mishne Torah* Hilchot Teshuva 3:7

חמישה הן הנקראין מינים: והאומר שיש שם ריבון אחד, אלא שהוא גוף ובעל תמונה

Five categories of people are called heretics.... Someone who says that there is One God but that He is physical and has form

9. Raavad ad loc.

Why does he call this person a heretic? Many greater and better people than he followed this line of thought, based on what they saw in the Biblical verses, and even more so in what they saw in the words of aggada which confuse the intellect (*de'ot*)

10. Rambam *Iggeret Techiyat HaMeitim* (cited in *Torah Shleima* Yitro p. 297)

שכבר פגשתי אדם שהיה נחשב שהיה מחכמי ישראל, וחי השם, יודע היה דרך משא ומתן במלחמתה של תורה, לפי מחשבתו מנעוריו, והוא היה מסופק, אם השם גשם בעל עין־דורגל בנימעיים כמו שבא בפסוקים, או אינו גוף. אמנם אחרים שפגשתי מאנשי קצת ארצות פסקו לגמרי שהוא גוף והחזיקו לכופר מי שהיה מאמין חילופו וקראותו מין ואפיקורוס. והבינו דרשות רבות על פשוטיהן. וכיוצא בזה שמעתי על קצת אנשים שלא ראיתי.

[I] met a man who was considered a wise man amongst the Jews, and he certainly knew the ways of give-and-take in the learning of Torah... Yet he was uncertain whether God is physical, having an eye, a hand, a foot or intestines as it states in the verses or whether He is not physical. Others that I met in certain lands held with certainty that He has a physical body, and considered someone who believed the opposite as a heretic.... They understood many of the derashot literally. And I heard this also about some that I haven't seen."

11. Rambam *Iggeret le-Pasia* (cited in *Torah Shleima* ibid.)

שמור נפשך מאד מדברי רוב חבורי אנשי צרפת היא פרנצייה כו' בשומם הבורא יתברך מדרס לשונם בספרם, ובזכרם הבורא יתברך בכל שעה באותם הדברים המגשימים הבורא יתברך עלוי רב וגדול מדברי הכופרים חלילה לו.

Guard your soul well from the words of the majority of the French authors from Provence... who make God impure through their language, when they mention the Creator, blessed is He, constantly in all their books, using terminology which gives physical form to the Creator, blessed is He, how great and terrible are the words of the deniers, who to them."

11. Rav Saadiah Gaon: *Emunot ve-De'ot* (translated Alexander Altmann in *Three Jewish Philosophers* Atheneum, New York 1969. p. 78)

When I came to deal with the subject of the Creator, I found that people rejected this whole inquiry,... others again go so far as to picture Him as a body; others, while not explicitly describing him as a body, assign to Him quantity or quality or space or time, or similar things, and by looking for these qualities they do in fact assign to Him a body, since these attributes belong only to a body. the purpose of my introductory remarks is to remove their false ideas, to take a load from their minds, and to point out that the extreme subtleness which we have assigned to the nature of the Creator is, so to speak, its own warrant, and the fact that in our reasoning we find the notion of God to be more abstract than other knowledge shows that reasoning to be correct.... As to those who wish us to imagine God as a body, they should wake up from their illusions. Is not the conception of the body the first stage arrived at in our pursuit of knowledge?

12. Ohr Zarua in *Sanhedrei Gedolah le-Maseches Sanhedrin* (Jerusalem, 1972), volume 5, section 2, p. 116-118

Rabbeinu Moshe [ben Maimon] wrote in chapter 3 of *Hilchot Teshuva* that five [categories of] people are called heretics. His words are outside the opinion of the Talmud. Even though logic dictates, and the simple reading of the Tanach, that God has no physical body or form, as the verse states, "To whom can you compare God, and what image can you describe for him?" (Yishaya 40:18).... And this is also known by all wise people. But someone who errs and doesn't descend to the depths of the matter, and understands the verses literally, and holds that God has an image is not called a heretic. If that were true why did the Torah not publicise this fact [that God has no body], and why did the Sages of the Talmud not make it known explicitly?... Rather it must be the case that they were not stringent about this. Rather a person should believe in God's unity according to their intellect.... As Moshe Rabbeinu said, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Hearing in this context means accepting based on received tradition... And the Sages of the Mishna and the Talmud did not involve themselves with this, but accepted it as a tradition and with faith. They didn't teach to investigate the matter... There were many of the holy Sages of the Talmud, from whom comes the Torah, who didn't set their hearts to contemplate the nature of God, but simply accepted the verses according to their simple meaning, and based on this naiveté they thought that God has a body and an image. Heaven forbid that we should call such

people heretics.

13. Rav Moshe Taku *Ketav Tamim* p. 64

He [Rav Saadiah] writes in his book (section 2): Everything is a metaphor, for the Creator has no physicality. He has no speech, no walking or movement. He feels no pain, nor happiness... He writes that when the [Tanach] says, "The hat of salvation is on His head", "the eyes of the Eternal, your God", "You cried in the ears of the Eternal", "The mouth of God", "God will shine His face", "The hand of God", "God said to His heart", "Bow to His footstool", these are all metaphorical expressions, similar to when it says "the heavens speak of the Glory of God"...

14. Rav Moshe Taku *Kesav Tamim* p. 65-66

The books of Rabbi Moshe bar Maimon follow in a similar way... "Since God is not physical or corporeal it is clear that none of the physical things could happen to him, not combination nor separation, not talking, nor speech like a human speaks. All the things that are written in the Torah and the prophets are all analogies and metaphors." (*Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:5).

15. Rav Moshe Taku *Kesav Tamim* p. 85

A wise person will understand that according to the reasoning and intellect of those 'outside' viewpoints that we mentioned above, one must deny the statement of the Rabbis (*Bereishit Rabba* 88) that: "I will be faithful for them' - for three thousand years before the creation of the world God created the Torah and was looking in it and learning it." According to their words that there is no movement or motion and no speech all the words of the Torah and of our Rabbis must be analogies and metaphors. Heaven forbid that anyone with a soul within his body should believe in what they say, to lessen the honour of our Creator, and to deny the greatness of what our Rabbis have told us! They have also written, "Does He sit on an exalted and high throne? Originally was it possible for Him without a throne and now He need a throne? Furthermore anyone who sits on a throne has the throne surrounding him, and we can't say such a thing about the Creator, about Whom it says that He fills the heavens and the earth." These are [their] words of blasphemy, that He doesn't need the throne! They have forgotten... what the Men of the Great Assembly established in our prayers, "To God who sits ... on the seventh day He ascended and sat on His throne of glory..." We see that He created the world and sat on the throne of glory, and not that He created other forms and sat them on the throne. Such a form was never created and these are words of blasphemy.

16. Rav Moshe Taku *Ketav Tamim* p. 64

My complaint against *Sefer Emunot* is that he comes using *chochma chitzonit* (external wisdom – philosophy) and increases sins by leading the people from complete fear of God and [causing them to] think about things, until they no longer know [the foundations] upon which they are standing. He strengthens the hands of those astrologers who have impure thoughts in their hearts against the Talmud of our Rabbis, which is a complete Torah, and he strengthens their idle chatter.

17. Rav Saadiah Gaon: *Emunot ve-De'ot* p. 37

We affirm then that there exist three sources of knowledge: (1) the knowledge given by sense perception; (2) the knowledge given by reason; (3) inferential knowledge... We have found many people who reject these three Roots of Knowledge... But we, the Congregation of the Believers in the Unity of God, accept the truth of all the three sources of knowledge, and we add a fourth source, which we derive from the three preceding ones, and which has become a Root of Knowledge for us, namely, the truth of reliable Tradition. For it is based on the knowledge of sense perception and the knowledge of Reason, as we shall explain.¹... As to the knowledge of Reason, we hold that every conception formed in our mind (Reason) which is free from defects is undoubtedly true knowledge, provided we know how to reason, complete the act of reasoning and guard against illusions and dreams.

18. Rav Saadiah Gaon: *Emunot ve-De'ot* p 43-44

It may be objected: 'How can we undertake to pursue knowledge by means of speculation and inquiry with the object of attaining mathematical certainty seeing that our people reject this manner of speculation as leading to unbelief and the adoption of heretical views?' Our answer is that only the ignorant speak thus... Another objection is that the greatest of the Sages of Israel prohibited this, and particularly the speculation on the origin of Time and Space, when they declared, 'Anyone who looks into four areas [of rational thought] – it would be better that he had never come into the world; what is above, what is below, what came before and what came after.' Our answer is this: it cannot be thought that the Sages should have wished to prohibit us from rational inquiry seeing that our Creator has commanded us to engage in such inquiry in addition to accepting the reliable Tradition. Thus He said, "Know you not? Hear you not? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood the foundation of the earth?" (Yishaya 40:21).... The reader of this book should know that we inquire and speculate in matters of our religion for two reasons: (1) in order that we may find out for ourselves what we know in the way of imparted knowledge from the Prophets of God;

¹ Rav Saadiah Gaon *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* translated Alexander Altmann in *Three Jewish Philosophers* Atheneum, New York 1969. p. 36

(2) in order that we may be able to refute those who attack us on matters connected with our religion. For our Lord (be He blessed and exalted) instructed us in everything which we require in the way of religion, through the intermediacy of the Prophets after having established for us the truth of prophecy by signs and miracles. He commanded us to believe these matters and to keep them. He also informed us that by speculation and inquiry we shall attain to certainty on every point in accordance with the Truth revealed through the words of His Messenger. In this way we speculate and search in order that we may make our own what our Lord has taught us by way of instruction.

19. Rav Yishaya di-Trani: *Sefer Nimukei Chumash le-Rabbi Yishayah di-Trani*

Rashi explains that man is made in the image of God. But in Bereishit on the verse “let us make man in Our image” Rashi explained that it was in the image prepared for him. Why did he not explain in the image of God literally? The answer is that certainly man is not made in the image of the Creator... The reason he explains here ‘in the image of God is that when God appears to people He takes on the form of a person. But the image of God is not known.