

*“The Scholar Rabbi Levi”—
A Study in Rationalistic Exegesis*

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Introduction

The Medieval Jewish rationalists, of whom Ralbag was perhaps the quintessential, have often had great difficulty reconciling their rationalistic doctrines with much of the Written Torah, and even more so with a great deal of rabbinic exegesis of that Torah. This essay is divided into two main parts, discussing these two questions: Which Biblical passages and rabbinic aggadot did the rationalists find problematic, and how, given their deeply held convictions in the perfection of God and His wisdom and their great respect for Hazal and their wisdom, did they ultimately resolve these conflicts? We analyze these issues primarily through the lens of Ralbag’s extensive exegetical work, in particular his Commentary to the Pentateuch.¹

¹ Ralbag’s Commentary to the Pentateuch, in addition to being much longer, more robust and comprehensive than most of his commentaries to other books of the Bible with which I am familiar, such as his commentaries to the Early Prophets, is also frequently much bolder and more radical than the latter works. I do not know why this should be so, and I have not seen it remarked upon, but this may be the reason that his commentaries to the Prophets and Writings have been frequently printed in the standard editions of the *Mikraos Gedolos*, but not in those on the Pentateuch, to the point that I have often met people who know the Ralbag only as the author of a standard commentary on portions of the Prophets and Writings, but are completely unaware that he has also composed a much more voluminous, and in my view, much more important, commentary to the Pentateuch! [Needless to say, such people are generally also unaware of the existence of his “Wars of the Lord,” one of the most important (and notorious) philosophical works in Judaism.]

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Since we will be preponderantly discussing Ralbag's writing and ideas, a brief introduction to the man is in order. This is not the place for a full biographical sketch, and in any event, surprisingly little is actually known about his life; the interested reader is directed to Seymour Feldman's introduction to his translation of Ralbag's *Wars of the Lord*, for a recent, comprehensive summary of the available information and references to the previously published scholarship. We shall suffice with briefly giving the measure of the man: world-class, if not particularly original, astronomer and mathematician,² celebrated Biblical exegete, radical and controversial Aristotelian philosopher, respected Talmudist, and above all, a deep believer in Rabbinic Judaism (albeit in his somewhat unconventional understanding of it). In the final analysis, the best description of him remains this somewhat ambivalent one by Rivash, who classes him alongside Rambam in greatness, but laments that philosophy has led him even further astray from the truth than it had his great predecessor and mentor, and uses both of them as object lessons in the dangers of such study:

And the scholar Rabbi Levi of blessed memory, he, too, was a great Talmudic scholar, and he composed a beautiful commentary to the Pentateuch and to the books of the prophets, and he followed in the footsteps of Rambam, of blessed memory. But he, too, had his heart led astray by those wisdoms [i.e., science and philosophy] far from the way of the truth, and he

² Ralbag's astronomical prowess has been famously commemorated by a lunar impact crater named for him: "Rabbi Levi"; see <[http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Rabbi_Levi_\(crater\)](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Rabbi_Levi_(crater))>. While Ralbag has not been the subject of nearly as much scholarly study as his great intellectual inspiration Rambam, as we note later in this essay, there does exist a still considerable body of literature on the man and his work (primarily the latter—remarkably little is known of his biography). A bibliography, *Bibliographia Gersonideana*, begun by Gad Freudenthal and continued and supplemented by Menachem Kellner, is available here: <<http://hcc.haifa.ac.il/Chairs/Wolfson/>>. I am indebted to Prof. Kellner and Shlomo Sprecher for bringing this to my attention. I take this opportunity to thank the latter and Rabbi Asher Benzion Buchman for reading a draft of this essay and providing many valuable suggestions for its improvement.

contradicted the words of the Rabbi, our master Moshe of blessed memory [Rambam] in several matters, such as God's knowledge of future contingent events,³ and the standing still of the sun for Yehoshua and the retrograde movement of the shadow;⁴ he has written words that are prohibited to hear. Similarly with regard to the remaining of the soul [after death] and to providence with respect to the punishment of villains in this world, as he has written all this in his book that he has called⁵ "Wars of the Lord."

And now every man should make an a fortiori argument with regard to himself—if the feet of these two kings did not remain on the straight path in several matters, their honor remaining in place, even though they were great ones of the world, how shall we stand, we who have not seen luminaries with respect to them...⁶

Part I - Rationalistic Problems with the Torah

While some rationalist Rishonim have themselves given systematic criteria for the acceptance or rejection of the literal meanings of Biblical or aggadic passages,⁷ I believe that from a somewhat different perspective, we can categorize the rationalist motivations for the rejection of these straightforward readings into several categories:

- Conflicts with specific rationalistic assumptions

³ See Responsa of Rivash #118.

⁴ Ralbag's understanding of these episodes is the subject of the Appendix to this essay.

⁵ It is possible, although certainly not compelling, that the apparently superfluous word "called" (Heb. "קראו") is a veiled allusion to the barb cast at Ralbag by various (later) critics that his magnum opus should more properly be titled מלחמות נגד השם.

⁶ Responsa of Rivash, end of #45, my translation.

⁷ See, e.g., R. Yedayah HePenini (HaBedarsi)'s famous *כתב התנצלות* in defense of the study of philosophy, in Responsa of Rashba I:418, s.v. ואמנם ויחזק הקדמה, and R. Avraham b. HaRambam's *ל"ל דרשות רז"ל* s.v. מאמר על דרשות רז"ל, and R. Avraham b. HaRambam's *אומר*, available here: <<http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/agadot/hagada1-2.htm>>.

- Apparently gratuitous introductions of the supernatural
- Apparently gratuitous deviations from פשט⁸
- Narratives that are apparently inconsistent with a scientific, rationalistic world-view without seeming to invoke a miraculous, Divine intervention

Conflicts with Specific Rationalistic Assumptions

Rationalistic presuppositions, of course, are often grounds for the rejection of the simple reading of the Torah itself, independent of any aggadic commentary thereto. A rejection of the פשוטו של מקרא on such grounds, however, will quite often entail a concomitant rejection of the Rabbinic exegesis of the passage in question, since the Rabbinic exegetical tradition is frequently even less compatible with a rationalist world-view than the basic text of the Written Torah itself.

A classic example of this is Ralbag's firm insistence on the impossibility of the cessation of the sun's and moon's motion at Givon and of the sun's retrogression in the episode of the *צל המעלות* involving King Hizkiyahu and the prophet Yeshayahu, alluded to, as we have seen, by Rivash. Ralbag's various analyses of these narratives are archetypal examples of his philosophical, exegetical and literary styles; our discussion of them has been relegated to the Appendix⁹ due to its length.

Ralbag is even willing to reject aggadic statements that he considers to violate fundamental dogmas of Judaism. In the following remarkable passage, he apparently categorizes a view held by at least some *amoraim* as "a profound falsehood, from which every religious person¹⁰ should flee," and he concludes with a ringing endorsement of an independent philosophical analysis, and a concomi-

⁸ Throughout this essay, I have not translated the terms פשט and דרש, since an accurate translation would require a more detailed analysis, and moreover, the very meaning of the words is among the questions discussed here.

⁹ Available from the *Hakirah* website at <www.Hakirah.org/Grossman_12_Appendix.pdf>.

¹⁰ Alternatively, "intelligent person."

tant rejection of an unquestioning intellectual subservience to the authority of Hāzal and an insistence on their fallibility:

And that which it says “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant...” this is a creation and the establishment of a natural characteristic, not a commandment, and the reliable evidence of this is that which it says at the conclusion of the matter “And it was so.” And the manner of this creation was that He established a human capacity for the flora to supply him with nourishment, even though their nature is very far from his. And He similarly established this capacity for other fauna.

And with this we resolve a problem that arises from this [Biblical] statement, viz., it is clear from analysis and from the Torah that the Divine Will is immutable, but it might be thought that this narrative necessarily implies that God’s Will changes, with respect to His commandments, since it may be thought that God, Blessed be He, forbade with this statement Adam from eating meat and subsequently permitted it to Noah, with the statement “Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat,” and this is a profound falsehood, from which every religious person¹¹ should flee. And some of our sages of blessed memory have said this in a Midrash.

But in these things and those similar to them, we do not look to the author of a statement, as the Master, the [author of the] *Guide* has taught us, but we rather proceed according to what is reasonable based on the root principles of the Torah and analysis. And it is clear that we are not obligated in the belief of everything that our Sages of blessed memory have said, for we find contradictions among their statements. And we therefore do not rule out the possibility of incorrect statements in their discussions of these matters.¹²

¹¹ Alternatively, “intelligent person.”

¹² Commentary to Genesis 6:29-30, p. 71. All selections from the Commentary to the Pentateuch on Genesis and Exodus are from the *Birkat Moshe / Ma’aliyot* (Ma’aleh Adumim) edition; selections from later in the Pentateuch are from the Mossad HaRav Kook edition. All translations of Ralbag’s commentaries are my own. In the face of the classic translator’s dilemma, I have generally chosen accuracy over elegance and style, and I

Another example of Ralbag's rejection of a position of Ḥazal is his classic interpretation of the episode of Balaam and his talking ass as having been merely a prophetic vision, and not an actual occurrence. He acknowledges that Ḥazal, in a well-known Mishnah, do indeed understand the narrative literally:

There are very difficult questions with this narrative: first, how is it possible for an ass to see an angel of God, which cannot be seen by one who is not a prophet... and if we say that God, Blessed be He, performed this as a miracle, it may be asked, what purpose was there for this miracle? The intention of this was merely for the angel to tell Balaam that he had ventured forth "as an adversary," if Balaam's intention was to curse the nation, and this being the case, why did the angel not first appear to Balaam with his unsheathed sword in hand, since this would achieve the intended goal of God, Blessed be He, without requiring the origination of this incredible miracle, i.e., that the ass should see an angel of God.

And if we say that the מלאך was actually a prophet, the problem remains, for what purpose was it necessary to originate the miracle of the ass speaking, and we can also not say who this prophet may have been. Also, how is it possible that neither the Moabite dignitaries nor Balaam's youths saw him, for it is not mentioned here that he was seen by anyone else, except for the ass and subsequently Balaam, and it is clear that God, may He be elevated, does not originate miracles without purpose...

And the opinion of our masters of blessed memory is that the narrative is literal, and they therefore stated that the mouth of the ass is among the items created at twilight.¹³

But what appears to us, according to the true root principles which are apparent from the words of the prophets and from analysis, is that this narrative is something that occurred to Balaam in a prophetic vision, like the matter of Hosea's taking of Gomer the daughter of Devlaim and the rest of the continuation of that narrative, which is necessarily something that ap-

have placed a premium on being as literal, and preserving as much of Ralbag's characteristic style, as reasonably possible.

¹³ Heb. בין השמשות. *Avos* 5:8.

peared to him in a prophetic vision, and not an actual occurrence.¹⁴

Ralbag proceeds with a lengthy and detailed explication of the Biblical text according to this assumption, carefully explaining where the narrative transitions into a description of Balaam's dream, and where it returns to the real world.¹⁵

One of the best-known cases of rationalistic reinterpretation of Biblical episodes is Rambam's and Ralbag's insistence, motivated by their Aristotelian assumptions about the nature of angels, that numerous narratives in the Pentateuch and Prophets apparently involving human interaction with angels (מלאכים) either are descriptions of visions, or else involve human messengers, i.e., prophets, rather than angels.

Even something so central and fundamental to Judaism as the narrative of the giving of the Torah at Sinai proved extremely difficult for the medieval rationalists to accept at face value. They believed that prophecy was not simply a gift by the grace of God, but rather a scientific phenomenon, governed by "natural" laws that render utterly impossible its experience by one with insufficiently developed intellectual and moral character. How, then, could the masses (the rationalists were nothing if not elitist) possibly have heard the voice of God?

This problem was already discussed, in spectacularly opaque fashion, by Rambam,¹⁶ and a century later we find a troubled rationalist posing the question to Rashba, who, not being a committed rationalist, was perfectly willing to simply reject the premise of the question and insist that God can do whatever He wants.¹⁷

Ralbag, on the other hand, cuts the Gordian knot by simply maintaining that the masses did not actually experience any sort of

¹⁴ Hosea Ch. 1. Commentary to Numbers 22:21 p. 125.

¹⁵ Rambam (*Guide to the Perplexed* II:40) had already declared that the episode was merely a prophetic vision, but Ralbag fleshes this out in great detail, with painstaking attention to the text.

¹⁶ *Guide* II:32-33.

¹⁷ Responsa IV:234. I have discussed the various opinions of Rambam, Ralbag, Rashba, and his correspondent (R. Shmuel HaSalmi) in my article "On Divine Omnipotence and its Limitations," *Hakirah* Vol. II, pp. 160-1.

prophecy, but merely heard a miraculously produced, *acoustic* version of God's words in His dialogue with Moshe:

Now, the Israelites were not fools that they should desire that God Himself should speak to them, for that was impossible for them, but they rather wanted that there should be miraculously originated from God, may He be elevated, that which would inform them the will of God without them hearing this from the mouth of Moshe, as they recognized the matter of the commandment of Shabbat from the Manna before they heard it from the mouth of Moshe.¹⁸

And there was also originated there another wonder, for Moshe was speaking with God, may He be elevated, and when he would receive via prophecy an answer from God, may He be elevated, there was originated then the perceptible sound of words, heard by all Israel, and it became clear to them that God, may He be elevated, was speaking with him. And the origination of the sound of words in the absence of the organs of speech is to us as the origination of the snake from the staff, and this, since the existence of the sound of speech is not in and of itself impossible, but it is impossible in nature for it to originate without its organs, and its origination was therefore miraculous.¹⁹

The theological ramifications of this are profound. It is commonly assumed that, as famously and eloquently explained by Rambam,²⁰ the giving of the Torah was a unique phenomenon, in which the entire nation experienced direct communion with God, and that this constituted something much more than the "mere" mass witness of miracles that had preceded it.

Now while it is true, as we have intimated before, that Rambam's own position on the Sinaitic experience is tantalizingly unclear, Ralbag, as we have seen, is perfectly transparent on the subject—the Jewish masses most certainly did *not* experience direct

¹⁸ Commentary to Exodus (Explanation of the words and some of the passages of the narrative) 19:8, p.312.

¹⁹ Ibid. 19:19, p. 317. See also the Appendix for further discussion of these passages.

²⁰ *Mishneh Torah* (ed. Shabsi Frankel) *Yesodei HaTorah* 8:1-2.

prophetic communion with God. Indeed, he deems the very idea so utterly preposterous that even the Jews themselves could not possibly have been so foolish as to request such a thing! What they did experience, he asserts, was nothing more than a purely physical, acoustic phenomenon, which, while unquestionably miraculous, seems to have been qualitatively no different from all the other miracles which they had witnessed and would continue to witness, which Rambam has insisted are not absolutely conclusive, allow for the continuation of "הרהור ומחשבה," and cannot extirpate "דופי" from the heart, since they can be effected via "לאט וכשור"! Ralbag has apparently thus demolished what Rambam considers the foundation of our belief in the Torah and of prophecy in general.

Apparently Gratuitous Introduction of the Supernatural

While even the most radical of the great Jewish medieval rationalists (of whom I am aware) fundamentally accepted God's omnipotence, and His consequent ability to violate the natural order with the performance of miracles,²¹ the rationalists nevertheless evince an almost visceral distaste for these departures from the natural order, as eloquently expressed here by Rambam:

My endeavor, and that of the select keen-minded people, differs from the quest of the masses. They like nothing better and, in their silliness, enjoy nothing more, than to set the Law and reason at opposite ends, and to move everything far from the explicable. So they claim it to be a miracle, and they shrink from identifying it as a natural incident, whether it is something that happened in the past and is recorded, or something predicted to happen in the future. But I try to reconcile the Law and reason, and wherever possible consider all things as of the natural order. Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then I feel forced to grant that this is a miracle.²²

²¹ I am taking them at their word, as opposed to the Straussian reading of Rambam, for example.

²² *Statement on the Resurrection of the Dead*, translation of Abraham Halkin, in "Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership" (JPS, 1993), p. 223.

The (Jewish medieval) rationalist attitude is that even though the existence of the miraculous in general is undeniable, we only grudgingly accept the supernatural character of any particular event, and grant it only when absolutely compelled to do so.

While one might argue “in for a penny, in for a pound,” that once God can, and at least occasionally does, violate the natural order, it is not really theologically significant, in principle, whether he does so rarely or frequently, there is nonetheless the tendency to avoid introducing the supernatural except where one is absolutely compelled to do so.

An additional argument against the gratuitous introduction of the miraculous into Biblical narrative is the argument from silence; the Torah informs us of relatively few overt miracles, and those it does mention are often of a fairly modest and local nature, and it nevertheless places great stress and emphasis on them. If greater and more magnificent miracles have indeed occurred, why is the Torah silent about them?

The most famous example of this line of reasoning is Ibn Ezra's²³ and Ralbag's²⁴ notorious rejection of the aggadic assertion that Yokheved was born 'בין החומות', i.e., during Ya'akov's family's entry into Egypt;²⁵ they argue that the same Torah that places such great emphasis on the birth of Yitzhak to a ninety-year-old mother would certainly have made explicit the details of Yokheved's biography, insofar as they imply that she bore children (Aharon and Moshe) at the age of one hundred and thirty. As Ralbag explains:

And we have rejected [the possibility that] Yokheved's birth occurred between the walls, during Ya'akov's entry into Egypt, for if this was so, this wonder would have been even greater than the wonder that occurred to Sarah, and the Torah would not have remained silent from mentioning this clearly, in accordance with its custom to publicize the matter of wonders. For when they exited Egypt, that was the conclusion of four hundred and thirty years from the time of the Prophecy of Between the Halves, which occurred when Avraham was

²³ Commentary to Genesis 46:23.

²⁴ Commentary to Genesis 46:15, p. 517, and see below.

²⁵ *Sotah* 12a and elsewhere.

eighty-five years old, as we have mentioned in *Parshat Lekh Lekha*. [For if the Jews resided in Egypt for two hundred and ten years, as they of blessed memory have said, then Yokheved would have been one hundred and thirty years old when she bore Moshe, and this is something exceedingly strange. And according to the calculation that we have accepted, she would have been at least one hundred and forty-five years old when she bore Moshe.] And according to this calculation Yokheved would have been one hundred and forty-five years old when Moshe was born, and when she bore Aharon she was one hundred and forty-two, and this is all exceedingly strange.

And it is possible that Yokheved was born to Levi at the end of his life, and that Levi was about fifty years old when they entered Egypt, and according to this Yokheved would have been born about eighty-seven years after their arrival in Egypt, and Yokheved would have been, according to this calculation, about fifty-eight years old when she bore Moshe, and this is not strange. And it is also possible that this prophecy, which we have placed as the beginning of the calculation [of the four hundred and thirty years], was experienced by Avraham some time, not more than ten years, prior to the affair of Hagar.²⁶

He concludes by revealing his explanation for the benefit of the propagation of this myth among the masses:

And it is appropriate that you should know, that that which our teachers, of blessed memory, said that she was born between the walls, they said this in the way of *שרש*, to benefit the masses and to establish in their hearts the great ability of God, may He be elevated, to perform wonders.

We shall discuss this further below, in the section "*דרך דרש*."

Another example of Ralbag's citing the argument from silence as conclusive evidence against the occurrence of a particular miracle is his outright dismissal of Hazal's suggestion that the sun stood still for Moshe Rabbeinu, just as it did for Yehoshua,²⁷ which we discuss in the Appendix.

²⁶ Commentary to Exodus, beginning of Chapter 2, pp. 12-13.

²⁷ See *Ta'anit* 20a and *Avodah Zarah* 25a.

A remarkable example of Ralbag's utter intolerance for gratuitous violations of the natural order is his attempt to explain away the Torah's apparent description of Lot's wife's transmutation into a pillar of salt. The villainy of Sodom and Gomorrah may have been egregious enough to warrant their Divine, miraculous annihilation, but whatever the precise characteristic of Lot's wife's sin, how are we to understand her consequent fate? It is clearly not the general approach of God to punish sinners in such an extraordinary way!

Ralbag resolves this difficulty with a brilliantly innovative re-reading of the narrative, a tour de force in פשט, which has the additional benefit of explaining, in a natural and organic way, the reason behind the dire admonition of the מלאכים²⁸ against rearward gazing, with its attendant consequence of destruction:

And when [the מלאכים] brought [Lot] outside, they told him to hasten to run so that he would be saved, and he should not gaze rearward so that he should not tarry from fleeing, and he should not remain anywhere in the Plain, since the entire Plain would be destroyed, but he should escape to the nearby mountain so that he should not be destroyed. ...

And when the sun shone, Lot arrived at Zoar. And when he was there, God precipitated upon Sodom and Gomorrah, through his prophets, in a wondrous manner, brimstone and fire in the belly of that land, in such a way that these cities, and the entire Plain and all the cities' inhabitants and the flora, were overturned, with nothing remaining.

And Lot's wife gazed rearward, and she was destroyed with them, and then that Land became like a pillar of salt, from the intensity of the conflagration that occurred there.²⁹

A casual reader of Ralbag's comments is apt to miss the סכינא that Ralbag is applying to the verse in question:

²⁸ Throughout our discussion of this passage, I have left the word מלאכים untranslated, since it is generally understood as 'angels,' whereas Ralbag himself understands it as 'prophets,' as we discuss below in the section "Reinterpretation."

²⁹ Commentary to Genesis (Explanation of the passages of the narrative) 19:17, pp. 266-7.

ותבט אשתו מאחוריו ותהי נציב מלח:³⁰

Lot's wife looked back [lit., "behind him"], and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.³¹

The above translation (from the *New JPS Translation*) follows the straightforward reading of this verse, to which we are all accustomed, that *she*, i.e., Lot's wife, turned into a pillar of salt. Ralbag, however, understands the Torah to be saying that Lot's wife tarried (and not merely glanced) behind, and was therefore swept up in the general destruction that enveloped the entire Plain, and that *it*, i.e. the Plain, became a נציב מלח!

Ralbag is well aware of the innovative nature of his reading, and he is quite frank about his motivation:

And we have also not agreed that the phrase "and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt" refers to Lot's wife, for God, may He be elevated, does not perform miracles except for the benefit that people should fear His presence, and there was no one there to see this miracle, and it therefore appears to us that the phrase "and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt" refers to the land of Sodom and Gomorrah, for with the overturning of that place, brimstone and salt appeared there, and it was therefore like a pillar of salt.³²

Apparently Gratuitous Deviations From פשט

The definition of פשט, and the motivations for its study, are major topics in and of themselves, but from the perspective of the theme of this essay, we note merely that there is in general a strong connection between classic rationalism and פשט. This convergence reaches its ultimate expression in the exegesis of Ralbag, who is both the most systematically radical of any major *Rishon*, and at the same time, exhaustively literal-minded, sometimes even to the point of pedantry.

³⁰ Genesis 19:26.

³¹ This translation, as well as all others of Biblical verses, is from the *New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia / New York, 5748 / 1988).

³² Ibid, at the end of the discussion, p. 268.

A little known but fascinating example of Ralbag as פשטן is his rejection of the standard interpretation of the דור הפלגה narrative as a classic tale of sin and punishment. After all, the Torah makes no mention of any sin, and indeed God does not even seem angry with the builders of the tower, but merely intent on foiling their design, which is not at all His typical reaction to sin, intended or committed. Ralbag concludes that there was indeed no sin here at all, and that God's motivation was actually to ensure the dispersal of humanity in order to guarantee its survival in the event of a major catastrophe. Here is his explanation of the narrative:

And men said to one another that they would construct a very tall building of bricks and mortar, in such manner as to be long lasting, for bricks are not destroyed by either fire or water. And they would thereby accomplish two benefits according to their thought: First, to make for themselves a 'name,' i.e., that their name would be ascribed to that tower, so that it would be said that "this tower was built by the first men who branched out from Noah in the manner of their branching out from him, and there would thus remain a remembrance of the original ones. Second, this would guard them from dispersing across the face of the whole land, in the course of seeking desirable places to reside, for the production of the flora which are necessary for man, for they would see the building from afar, due to its height, and they would take care not to distance themselves from it a great distance, and they would thus accomplish that they would all be gathered in one place of the land, and this would also be attained through their constantly adding to the building of that city, as their numbers increased.

And because God, may He be elevated, saw that the gathering of man in a single place of the land is undesirable for the survival of the human species, for it is possible that destruction may befall a particular portion of the land, either from earthquake and overturning, from the formation of gas in the belly of the land, or from a strong wind which dismantles mountains and breaks boulders, or from hailstones, or from a flood of water, and that which resembles these destructive causes, and if the entire human species would be in one place of the land, it would be possible for it to be destroyed with the destruction of that portion of the land, and it was therefore ne-

cessary for man that he should be dispersed throughout all habitable areas, so that his species should survive, and when destruction befalls one place, the species will survive in the remainder.

And God, may He be elevated, attempted to foil their plan, and He gave them, to each family, by miraculous means, a desire to innovate a language that that family would speak, and as this situation continued, the later [descendants] remained unable to understand any language except the language of their family, and this was a cause for the unraveling of the agreement from those families, and they separated [from each other] across the face of the whole land, and they ceased to continue the building of the city in the manner upon which they had agreed.

And God, may He be elevated, did this from Providence upon the human species, to secure its survival, and it is clear that it was done for this purpose, even if it is not mentioned, for it is undoubtedly the case that God, may He be elevated, would not attempt to confuse the languages without purpose.³³

In this case, Ralbag does not even acknowledge the traditional interpretation; indeed, he goes so far as to insist that his reason for God's action *must* be correct, since there is no other *possible* motive for God!

'Unscientific' Narratives

As we have discussed earlier, rationalists tend to assume that the world is fundamentally governed by scientific, rationalistic principles, and that deviations from this norm are the exception rather than the rule. While the great Jewish medieval rationalists³⁴ certainly do accept the occurrence of miracles, we have seen that they stipulate that the miracles must not be gratuitous and must be clearly acknowledged and emphasized by the Biblical text; narratives that

³³ Commentary to Genesis (Explanation of the passages of the narrative) 11:3-8, pp. 184-5.

³⁴ Including Rambam, whom I take at his word, as per the traditional Jewish understanding of his views, as opposed to the view popular among some modern academics.

seem to casually imply a world that follows rules other than those indicated by science and human observation are problematic.

One such instance that perplexed Ralbag is the mysterious suggestions of Sarai and Raḥel that their husbands marry their maidservants in order to somehow solve the problem of their infertility.³⁵ Ralbag proposes one of the most curious and entertaining exegeses that I have ever seen; he suggests that they suspected that their infertility may have been due to their being overweight, and their encouragement to their husbands to take a second wife was a masochistic attempt to psychologically induce weight loss:

And the cause of this has not been explained to us, for if this matter was to beseech from God, may He be elevated, that He give her issue by way of Particular Providence, then prayer to God, may He be elevated, would have been more appropriate, and [also] the effort [to secure] the cleaving to them of Divine Providence.

And apparently the intention was to reverse her [biological] temperament in such a way that conception would be possible for her, for you already know that corpulence and fleshiness is a cause for the diminution of seed, and if conception was being prevented from Sarah and Raḥel for this cause, it would then be possible for them to gain benefit from this, for women who are the wives of the same man are necessarily צרות to each other, and it occurs from this wondrous pain to them when their maidservants say something against them, along [with the fact that] they suffer more when they say [something] against them since they are their maidservants. And the strong effect that they experience from this will perhaps be a cause for the reduction of the corpulence and fleshiness that was the cause of the prevention of conception by her, along [with the fact that] this would also yield a benefit to establish issue for their husbands—were it to be that they were unfit for conception—and they therefore chose this method of paining themselves over

³⁵ Genesis 16:1-2 and 30:1-3.

other things that they might have suffered from. This is what currently appears to me in this.³⁶

Another seemingly unscientific assumption of the Torah that perplexed Ralbag is the idea implicit in several Biblical passages that the implementation of a direct census can cause plague. The Torah warns direly against such a census, implying that plague may be the result,³⁷ and indeed, King David is described as having “sinned grievously” by having “numbered the people,” and is punished by God’s sending a pestilence that kills 70,000 people.³⁸

Nowhere does the Torah give us the slightest explanation of its objection to direct censuses, or to its linkage between them and plague. Ralbag struggles:

We find that the counting of men is a cause of plague, in that which is mentioned in the matter of David when he commanded the general of the army Yoav to count Israel, and we do not know exactly what is the cause of this. And it seems that this matter relates to the matter of the evil eye. And the cause of the damage which is found in it, according to what I think, is that certain excess vapors which nature expels [from the body] leave through the eye, to the extent that the philosopher has related, that a new mirror, if a woman shall gaze into it during her period, there shall appear in it a blood-stain whose mark shall remain there for a perceptible period of time, and these vapors can possibly kill some people because they are poisonous to them, and due to the ease of their becoming affected by them.

And this is, according to what I think, the cause of the plague that is a consequence of the census, and therefore some of the counted men will die as opposed to others, due to a difference of nature between the recipients who are affected by this. And it is clear that the eye is the limb that is most damaged from this poisonous gaze, and the damage comes via it to the brain due to its proximity to it, and for this cause you will find that

³⁶ Commentary to Genesis (Explanation of the passages of the narrative) V 16:1-2, pp. 231-232.

³⁷ Exodus 30:11-12.

³⁸ II Samuel Ch. 24.

they were not concerned if the items that were counted were parts of the people, e.g., their fingers, for it is not the nature of those limbs to be damaged by this action. You will find this in that which they would do when they cast lots [to determine] who would do each of the various services that were done in the Temple, according to that which is explained in *Yoma*, that each one would extend his finger, and they would count the fingers and did not worry about this, for the entire danger is when the gaze is upon the face, for in it are locations through which these vapors can pass easily, and be transported to the brain, e.g., the eyes, due to the ease with which they can be affected, and the nose and the ear since they are open to the brain, and since the Torah has said “that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled,” we have learned from this that it is not appropriate to count them directly, so that a plague shall not befall them. And this is why Shaul counted the nation with sheep, i.e., that each one would bring a sheep and the sheep were the ones that were counted, and another time he counted them with stones,³⁹ i.e., that each one would bring a stone, and the stones were counted. And in this matter David erred when he commanded Yoav to bring him the tally of the counting of the nation.⁴⁰

The first benefit is to remove [i.e., avoid] the consequences of a census to the counted men, and God, may He be elevated, therefore commanded Moshe that when he counts them in this first counting, each man should give the redemption of his soul, to guard them from the plague. And it is explained in *Parshas Eleh Pekudei* that this was the procedure in this first enumeration. But in the other countings that were counted during Moshe’s days they did not give half-shekels, for you will find that in them the counting was merely by the number of their names, i.e., that merely the names were counted, not the men. And from this place it will be clear that this matter is not a commandment that applies to all their countings, and therefore

³⁹ The reference is to I Samuel 11:8 "ויפקדם בבזק." The commentators differ over the meaning of the word בזק; Ralbag follows the opinion that it means “stone[s].”

⁴⁰ Commentary to Exodus (Explanation of the words and some of the passages of the section) 30:12, pp. 366-7.

Shaul counted Israel once with sheep and once with stones, in order not to count them directly, as we have explained, for when they are counted in this fashion there will not occur that which can bring about a plague among those who are counted. And this was David's error when he commanded [Yoav] to count Israel, for they counted them directly, and it was appropriate that he avoid this, so that there should not be a plague among them when they are counted. And we have not found that David was then commanded that they should bring half-shekels to halt the plague, and this is a sign that this is not a commandment that applies for [all] generations, but we still learn from it that plague befalls the counted due to the counting when they are counted directly, and this was so due to the cause of the eye that governs in each of the counted individuals, as we have explained in our explanation of these passages. And from this place we have learned it is appropriate that the counting should be by counting the people themselves, but it is possible that their names be counted, or with sheep or with stones or with similar things.⁴¹

Ralbag's logic is not entirely clear; he seems to be arguing that plague can be a purely naturalistic consequence of the direct counting of men, and that this constitutes the reason for God's warning against doing so. This implies that the danger is logically *prior* to the prohibition. The passage in Samuel, however, seems inconsistent with this, since there the plague is clearly presented as a Divine punishment for David's moral lapse in counting the Jews directly, to the extent that he was presented with a choice of various punishments. But this clearly implies that the plague was logically *consequent* to the prohibition! Perhaps Ralbag means that once we have established a moral concern against counting (because of the recklessness involved, due to the purely naturalistic risk of plague), the plague may now occur *either* as a purely naturalistic consequence of the counting *or* as Divine retribution for the infraction, the latter being the case in the narrative of David's counting.

⁴¹ Ibid. (Benefits) Part I #1, p. 431.

Part II – Resolutions

In the first half of this paper we have presented the various sorts of problems that rationalists such as Ralbag encountered with the straightforward narratives of the Torah and the Midrashim of Hazal. We shall now consider the various sorts of resolutions he utilizes.

There are a number of different exegetical techniques that Ralbag uses to reconcile seemingly problematic Biblical passages and rabbinic statements with his staunchly held rationalist beliefs:

- Allegorization
- “Visionization”
- Reinterpretation
- Rejection
- "דרך דרש"

Allegorization

Rabbi Menasheh Lehman claims:

There are hints that Ralbag followed in the footsteps of the Jewish philosopher Philo (Yedidia) of Alexandria, who saw in many of the anecdotes of the Torah allegories that are impossible to explain according to פשט. For example, he explains the anecdote of the serpent in the Garden of Eden as an allegory and a metaphor: ...

It is interesting that Ralbag thus preceded the foremost sage of the *Mussar* movement. One hundred years ago, R. Yisrael Salanter, of blessed memory, wrote in the *Epistle of Mussar*: “Man is bound by his intellect and (bound) [free] by his imagination”; he, too, saw in the imaginative faculty something greatly harmful to man.⁴²

⁴² Introduction to Mossad HaRav Kook’s edition of Ralbag’s Commentary on the Torah, p. 10; my translation.

I believe that this is a serious error; as I noted above, Ralbag is actually among the most literal minded of Biblical exegetes. Indeed, other than the creation narrative, I cannot think of *a single other instance* of allegorization in Ralbag's commentary; it is *only* the Creation narrative, which is so markedly different from the Torah's more typical narratives, that he feels compelled to interpret allegorically.

“Visionization”

For want of a better word, I coin the awkward neologism “visionize” to mean “the interpretation of a narrative passage as describing a dream or prophetic vision, rather than events actually occurring in the physical world.” We have already seen one example of this in Ralbag's understanding of the conversation between Balaam, his ass and the Angel; another is his remarkable interpretation of Ya'akov's nocturnal struggle with the mysterious “man,” a *tour-de-force* of rationalistic exegesis combining biology and psychology, physics and metaphysics, and the mundane and the lofty:

And Ya'akov arose on that night and transported his wives and children and maidservants and all his possessions across the ford of the Yabok, after he first crossed himself to see the depth of the water and to test it, and [to ascertain] the point best suited for crossing, and Ya'akov remained alone to transport some of his possessions which had remained there, and he slept there, and an angel of God appeared to him in a prophecy as though he were a man, and due to his great attachment to him and the closeness of his [spiritual] level to him, it seemed to him that he wrestled with him, and Ya'akov also saw this wrestling because of the preoccupation of his imagination with the matter of Esav and his planning to devise stratagems to defeat him, were he to arise against him to smite him, for they only show a man the thoughts of his heart.

And the duration of the wrestling extended until daybreak, for the time had then arrived that Ya'akov would awaken, according to his custom, and it seemed to him that he wrenched his hip at its socket in the course of wrestling with him, and he said to Ya'akov that he should send him [on his way], for the day had broken and the time had arrived that it was appropri-

ate for Ya'akov to turn to his affairs, but Ya'akov did not agree to release the tie between them unless he would bless him, and the angel then said to him that he would no longer be called Ya'akov but rather Yisrael, for he had striven with angels of God, may He be elevated, to the extent that his level was close to theirs, and his strength was not wearied in this, and he would also strive with men and not be defeated, and this was an additional promise to Ya'akov, that Esav would not defeat him...

And when he awoke, Ya'akov called the name of that place Penuel, [for] I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved, and the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip, because of what had befallen him, and the Sons of Israel were therefore commanded at Mount Sinai that they should not eat the portion of the thigh muscle which is on the socket of the hip, but that of it which is elsewhere was not prohibited to them to eat, and this commandment was to publicize this wondrous prophecy that Ya'akov experienced, that from his great cleaving which he had to the angel, this event befell him, for the belief in prophecy is among the cornerstones of the Torah...⁴³

And we have decided that this wrestling was during [Ya'akov's] sleep, for it is impossible for an angel of God to appear to a man in this manner when he is utilizing his corporeal faculties, and the Rav HaMoreh has already informed us that in many places, the mention of the prophecy occurring in a dream or vision has been omitted, in reliance on the fact that every prophecy is of this character, and it therefore does not mention in this place that this prophecy was in a dream or vision.

And if a doubter shall raise a doubt against us and say, how is it possible that this effect upon him should remain from this, that he was limping on his thigh when he awoke? We say to him that we consider this possible for one of two causes: The first cause is that we see the influence on the faculties of the soul of the imagined [notions] that a man has during sleep, for these imagined ideas activate the faculties of the soul some acti-

⁴³ Commentary to Genesis 32:23-33, pp. 411-2.

vation, and so you will see that a man will dream that he is sleeping with a woman and he will see semen, as if this activity actually occurred while awake, and so will you find that a person will dream that he is falling from a high place and because of this his limbs will move during his sleep a strong and wondrous movement, and this is very clear from the senses, and for this cause it is possible that when he saw in his dream that the socket of his hip was wrenched, [a corresponding physical motion] befell him so that there remained an effect in that place from the movement that had then befallen him, and it is therefore possible that it occurred that he found himself limping on his thigh when he awoke.

And the second cause is that the imagination is sometimes aroused from events that affect a man during sleep, and the physicians therefore draw strong inferences on the nature of a sickness from the dreams of the sick one. For example, if the sleeper touches something cold, he will dream that he is in cold water, or that snow or frost or that which is similar to this has descended upon him, and if the sleeper shall touch something hot, he will dream that he is in fire or that the sun is beating upon him, and that which is similar to this, and this is something about which there is no doubt, for the senses testify to this. And for this cause you will find, that when the excess of seed shall become strong in a man, and become aroused to leave, he will dream that he is sleeping with a woman, and from this exact cause, when a person develops some pain during sleep, he will dream that he has been struck in that place due to a quarrel that he had with another man in his dream, and this type of phenomenon occurs frequently, according to the perception of our senses. And this being the case, it is possible that it befell Ya'akov, due to the labor that he had labored in the transportation of all that was his across the river, that he had developed a pain in the socket of his hip during his sleep, and because of this, it appeared to him in his prophetic dream that he wrestled with the man and that he wrenched the socket of his hip when he wrestled with him.

And according to what we have mentioned, there were three causes for the wrestling that appeared to him during sleep: the first is the strength of the cleaving that he had with this angel, the second is the occupation of his thought while awake to de-

vise stratagems to defeat Esav if he arose against him to smite him, and the third is the pain that he developed during sleep in the socket of his hip.⁴⁴

Note that the question with which Ralbag is forced to contend, why Ya'akov suffered a physical injury in connection with a purely psychic experience, was first raised by Ramban against Rambam:

And so too says [Rambam] in the matter of “and a man wrestled with him,” that it was all in a prophetic vision, and I do not know, why was he limping on his hip upon awakening?⁴⁵

We shall later discuss another apparently literal narrative that Ralbag claims was actually a prophetic vision, God's appearance to Moshe in the burning bush.

Reinterpretation

Ralbag occasionally reinterprets statements of H_{azal} that seem, *prima facie*, to be antithetical to the rationalist endeavor, realigning them with rationalist tenets. A classic example occurs in the context of his discussion of the mysterious three visitors to Avraham and Lot. Unlike Rambam, who interprets the entire episode as a prophetic vision,⁴⁶ akin to his and Ralbag's aforementioned understanding of Ya'akov's wrestling bout, he believes that the events of narrative actually did occur, and that the three visitors were actually (human) prophets:

And they were prophets, perhaps Shem and Ever—if they were indeed prophets as our masters, of blessed memory, have related of them—or others who were prophets in that era. And they are therefore called מלאכים in the context of Lot, for the prophet is called מלאך, as we have mentioned in the narrative of Hagar the Egyptian. But they are not called in the context of Avraham but “men,” for they were not sent unto him, since he himself was a prophet, but that which they informed him of

⁴⁴ Ibid., end of Ch. 32, pp. 414-415.

⁴⁵ Commentary to the Torah, beginning of *VaYeera*'—my translation.

⁴⁶ See the Commentary, at the end of the “Explanation of the passages of the narrative,” for Ralbag's “many causes” for rejecting Rambam's view.

the matter of Sarah's childbirth was an announcement to Sarah, not to Avraham, and they therefore said to him, before relating this promise, "where is Sarah your wife?," for the words were addressed to her.

Also, in the context of Avraham it is not appropriate for them to be called מלאכים, since they had not experienced prophecy many times to the extent that they could be appropriately called in the context of Avraham מלאכים. For Avraham, due to his great [spiritual] stature, had experienced prophecy many times, and it is therefore not correct in his context for a prophet to be described as a מלאך of God unless he experiences prophecy many times, just as it is not said about a man that he is the servant of so-and-so because he has served him once or twice, but we say [rather] that he has served him. It is correct, however, to describe him as his servant when he serves him constantly. But in the context of Lot, who had never experienced prophecy, a prophet can be described as a מלאך, even if he has only experienced prophecy once or twice. And they have said in Genesis Rabbah: "Avraham whose power was well—they appeared to him as men, but Lot whose power was poor—they appeared to him in the form of מלאכים."⁴⁷

The simple reading of the concluding Midrash would seem to be the assertion that the different spiritual statures of Avraham and Lot resulted in correspondingly different perceptions of the מלאכים, which might imply that they were no ordinary men, but angels. Ralbag, however, apparently understands it to be referring merely to the semantic applicability of the term מלאך, and not to any difference between Avraham's and Lot's perceptions of them.

Rejection

Many quills have been broken and much ink has been spilled over the question of the fallibility of Hāzal. Ralbag certainly was willing to declare Hāzal mistaken, even about crucial matters of theology, as we have seen in his remarkable rejection of their assumption of

⁴⁷ Commentary to Genesis 18:2, pp. 246-7.

an antediluvian prohibition against the consumption of animals.⁴⁸ What I have not seen mentioned, however, is that Ralbag goes far beyond this, and holds the remarkable view that even *prophetic visions* sometimes contain factual, scientific-philosophical errors!

And He took him outside in a prophetic vision, to gaze at the heavens, and He said to him that just as one cannot count the stars, due to their multitude, so, too, shall his descendants consist of such a multitude that they will not be [able to be] counted.

And the number of stars was not known in the days of Avram, and therefore the imagination showed him, during the prophecy, the matter of the multitude of stars, as a metaphor for the extreme multitude that God, may He be elevated, promised him would be the fate of his descendants.

And so too will you find that Yehezkel saw during his prophecy that the spheres have sounds, due to what he believed in this matter, as the Rabbi, the author of the *Guide* has mentioned, for it is not required that the prophet should possess all the true views in the area of the mysteries of existence.⁴⁹

Ralbag generally maintains that prophets are not omniscient, and are even susceptible to error:

⁴⁸ We have also seen his rejection of their literalist interpretation of the narrative of Balaam's talking ass and their assertion that the sun stood still for Moshe as it did for Yehoshua.

⁴⁹ Commentary to Genesis (Explanation of the words of the narrative) 15:5, pp. 222-4. This radical position is also adopted by Ralbag's younger contemporary, R. Moshe of Narbonne (the "Narboni") in his *Commentary of the Narboni to the Book Guide to the Perplexed* (Vienna 1852), Section III end of Ch. 7, available <<http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=31594&st=&pgnum=104>>. The Narboni considers this an unprecedented idea: "I have not seen any discussion of it by any of the scholars, neither those whom I have seen and spoken to face to face, nor any of the earlier ones whose books have reached me." It is interesting that Abravanel does not seem to have noticed these comments of Ralbag; in his critique of Rambam's interpretation of the Chariot, he cites (and criticizes) Narboni's comments, but not those of Ralbag (*Commentary to the Guide*, at the end of Part III, טענות לקוחות מטבע "מהאברבנאל לחלק שלישי מהמורה: טענות לקוחות מטבע (הכתובים ימאנו מה שפירש הרמב"ם במרכבת יחזקאל").

And one may question: what benefit was there to the sons of Yosef in their being counted as two tribes, with respect to the inheritance of the land? For their inheritance was equal, according to the number of their heads, as it says, “with larger groups increase the share, with smaller groups reduce the share”!⁵⁰

The resolution to this problem in my view is, as I say, that it is possible that it was hidden from Ya‘akov that which the Torah would establish in this matter, and he thought that the division would be to the tribes equally, for many things are hidden from the prophets. Do you not see that the sale of Yosef was hidden from Ya‘akov, and so, too, said Elisha, “and the Lord has hidden it from me”?⁵¹

It is important to note that where Ralbag rejects a view of Ḥazal, he often implies that he does not necessarily believe that this is their *consensus* view. In several of the examples we have cited,⁵² he suggestively characterizes the rejected view as that of “some” [קצת] of Ḥazal, and in his notoriously radical reinterpretation of the שמש דום בגבעון דום passage, although he does reject a literalist view of Ḥazal that a similar marvel was performed by Moshe, he also cites various other statements of Ḥazal as *supporting* his stance. On the other hand, Ralbag does seem willing to reject a view of Ḥazal even where it is apparently the consensus view, and he has no basis for assuming the existence of a dissenting view, such as in the case of Balaam’s ass.

⁵⁰ Numbers 26:52.

⁵¹ Kings II 4:27; commentary to Genesis (Explanation of the words and some of the passages of the narrative) 48:5, p. 532. See the continuation of Ralbag’s discussion for other resolutions to his problem.

⁵² The antediluvian prohibition against eating meat and the sun standing still for Moshe Rabbeinu.

דרך דרש

Ralbag occasionally dismisses statements of Ḥazal that he considers implausible by asserting that they are "דרך דרש." It is not entirely clear what he means by this.

We have seen Ralbag's terse explanation for Ḥazal's claim that Yokheved was born "בין החומות":

And it is appropriate that you should know, that that which our teachers, of blessed memory, said that she was born between the walls, they said this in the way of דרש, to benefit the masses and to establish in their hearts the great ability of God, may He be elevated, to perform wonders.

This is breathtaking and disturbing; Ralbag is claiming that Ḥazal told a *deliberate untruth*, albeit in the didactic service of a greater truth. He takes a similar approach in the course of his explanation of the sweetening of the bitter waters via the agency of a piece of wood (although his comments here are not quite as stark as in the previous case):

"[A]nd the Lord showed him a piece of wood." They have said, in the Mekhilta, that it was a bitter [type of] wood. And they have said this to teach [or show] that it was via a miracle that the bitter waters were restored to sweetness, and not in the natural way. And this is something inherently true, i.e., that this matter was via a miracle...

But what appears to us is that this [type of] wood had some capacity for matter of the sweetening of water, but that it was not of the sort for it to be possible to accomplish this wondrous feat, i.e., the sweetening of all the water of that spring, but if it could have sweetened the water, it would have sweetened a very small quantity...

[He subsequently brings other examples of this, and he concludes:]

And in general, all the miracles that God, may He be elevated, performs, He accompanies them with causes which will result in the minimization of strangeness with respect to nature, and

we have already explained the cause of this in the sixth book of “The Wars of the Lord.”⁵³

Lying, and the Stylistic Differences between Rambam and Ralbag

As noted above, I find this position of Ralbag profoundly disturbing. Is the deliberate utterance of untruths (sometimes called “lying,” not to put too fine a point on it) really legitimate just because the ultimate purpose is the promotion of correct dogma? Do the means justify the ends?

It may be argued that the elitist Maimonideans did, indeed, condone this; has not Leo Strauss explained to us the schizoid nature of Rambam himself, with his reconstruction of the exoteric and esoteric Rambam? My response to this is twofold. First, Strauss’s interpretation of Rambam is hardly uncontroversial; Isidore Twersky has argued powerfully for the unity and coherence of his thought. Moreover, and this is a point crucial for a proper understanding of Ralbag, which may perhaps have not been sufficiently emphasized by scholars, one of the most striking differences between Rambam and his great admirer and follower Ralbag is in exactly this area. One of the primary reasons for the endless fascination with Rambam, of both modern scholars and more traditional yeshiva students, is precisely the tantalizing difficulties ever apparent to the student of his works; one clearly and constantly sees greatness, but at the same time, is constantly faced with serious and knotty problems standing in the way of a proper understanding of his true intent. This is true across his variegated oeuvre, and is the consequence of many factors: the differences in tone and style among his different works; his simultaneous great faithfulness to, on the one hand, but often startling apparent deviations from, on the other hand, the text of the Talmud (or at least, our standard editions of it); his often masterful and lyrical rhetoric, which has both the merits and the defects of poetry—the gain in emotional and inspirational power is offset by an accompanying loss in scientific precision; and, of course, his often frustratingly ambiguous phrasing and

⁵³ Commentary to Exodus 15:25, pp. 259-60.

contradictory passages, which can sometimes seem so artfully evasive and perplexing that we are convinced that they are deliberately crafted that way, as per his comments in the Introduction to the *Guide*:

There are seven causes of inconsistencies and contradictions to be met with in a literary work...

Seventh cause: It is sometimes necessary to introduce such metaphysical matter as may partly be disclosed, but must partly be concealed: while, therefore, on one occasion the object which the author has in view may demand that the metaphysical problem be treated as solved in one way, it may be convenient on another occasion to treat it as solved in the opposite way. The author must endeavor, by concealing the fact as much as possible, to prevent the uneducated reader from perceiving the contradiction...

Any inconsistency discovered in the present work will be found to arise in consequence of the fifth cause or the seventh. Notice this, consider its truth, and remember it well, lest you misunderstand some of the chapters in this book.⁵⁴

As Leo Strauss famously understands this: “Contradictions are the axis of the *Guide*”:

To sum up: Maimonides teaches the truth not plainly, but secretly, i.e., he reveals the truth to those learned men who are able to understand by themselves and at the same time he hides it from the vulgar. There probably is no better way of hiding the truth than to contradict it. Consequently, Maimonides makes contradictory statements about all important subjects; he reveals the truth by stating it, and hides it by contradicting it. Now the truth must be stated in a more hidden way than it is contradicted, or else it would become accessible to the vulgar; and those who are able to understand by themselves are in a position to find out the concealed statement of the truth. That is why Maimonides repeats as frequently as possible the conventional views which are suitable to, or accepted by the

⁵⁴ *Guide to the Perplexed, Preface* - translation of Michael Friedlander, available here: <[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Guide_for_the_Perplexed_\(Friedlander\)/Introduction#Introductory_Remarks_on_Method](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Guide_for_the_Perplexed_(Friedlander)/Introduction#Introductory_Remarks_on_Method)>.

vulgar, but pronounces as rarely as possible contradictory unconventional views. Now a statement contradictory to another statement is, in a sense, its repetition, agreeing with it in almost every respect and differing only by some addition or omission. Therefore we are able to recognize the contradiction only by a very close scrutiny of every single word, however small, in the two statements.

Contradictions are the axis of the *Guide*. They show in the most convincing manner that the actual teaching of that book is sealed and at the same time reveal the way of unsealing it. While the other devices used by Maimonides compel the reader to guess the true teaching, the contradictions offer him the true teaching quite openly in either of the two contradictory statements. Moreover, while the other devices do not by themselves force readers to look beneath the surface... the contradictions, once they are discovered, compel them to take pains to find out the actual teaching. To discover the contradictions or to find out which contradictory statement is considered by Maimonides to be true, we sometimes require a higher degree of understanding by oneself than does the recognition of an obvious contradiction.⁵⁵

While there is certainly much to dispute about Strauss's paradoxical and rather perverse insistence that precisely those views that Rambam seems least to be endorsing are actually his real opinions, we still have the indubitable underlying fact that Rambam often *is* a magnificent morass of contradiction and confusion.

Ralbag, on the other hand, is a marvelous study in contrasts on every one of the aforementioned issues. There is a unity of tone and temper across all of Ralbag's writing with which I am familiar; whether he is discussing Halachah, practical philosophy, theoretical philosophy or Biblical exegesis, his attitude is remarkably constant, virtually always maintaining the same dry, cool dispassionate tone of the scientist. Unlike Rambam, whose language sets a lofty standard for Hebrew prose style, Ralbag reads like a school textbook;

⁵⁵ Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed, in Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays," Joseph A Buijs ed. (Notre Dame Press, 1998), pp. 45-9.

what he loses in literary appeal and scintillation, he gains in clarity and scientific precision. We nearly always know exactly where we stand with Ralbag; he is dry, and often prolix to the point of tedium, but this is the price we pay for his extraordinary lucidity.⁵⁶ We may agree, disagree, be unpersuaded, or absolutely horrified with what we read, but we will generally know exactly what he is telling us.⁵⁷

Whatever the relative merits or defects of his style, it definitely renders him less interesting to the scholar; Ralbag is just much less intriguing, and there is simply less for the scholar to do.

And so I find it surprising, as well as disturbing, that Ralbag, who represents clarity, straightforwardness and accuracy, is apparently endorsing manipulative dissembling in the name of public education.

Another case in which Ralbag dismisses (at least as a matter of serious exegesis) a statement of Ḥazal as דרש דרש is his reinterpretation of the verse:

ויפן וירד משה מן-ההר ושני לחת העדת בידו לחת כתובים משני עבריהם
מזה ומזה הם כתובים:⁵⁸

⁵⁶ The striking contrast between the styles of Ralbag and Rambam has, of course, not escaped the notice of scholars; here is how the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* puts it <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gersonides/#MajWor>>: “As Isaac Husik has pointed out, Gersonides ‘has no use for rhetorical flourishes and figures of speech... the effect upon the reader is monotonous and wearisome.’ His style has been compared to that of Thomas Aquinas and even of Aristotle in its use of a precise, technical vocabulary which eschews examples. In contradistinction to Maimonides, who introduced allegory, metaphor, and imprecise language into his work to convey the ambiguity of the subject matter, Gersonides saw it as his function to elucidate the issues as clearly as possible. Gersonides is the first Jewish philosopher to use this analytic, scholastic method.”

⁵⁷ But see Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Israel: Bar-Ilan University, 2002), Chapter 5, p. 144–181. I am indebted to Shlomo Sprecher for bringing this discussion to my attention.

⁵⁸ Exodus 32:15.

While Ḥazal apparently understood this to mean that the engraving cut all the way from the obverse to the reverse of the tablets, as expressed by Rav Ḥisda's celebrated statement:

Rav Hisda said: the *mem* and the *samekh* of the tablets were miraculously suspended.⁵⁹

as explained by Rashi:

For their engraving was from both sides, therefore the other letters had some place of attachment, but the *mem* and *samekh* were in midair.⁶⁰

Ralbag rejects this, instead understanding the verse to mean that the engraving was done independently on each side.

They, of blessed memory, have said that the writing was engraved in such a way that the engraving penetrated to the latter side, and they therefore said that the *mem* and *samekh* of the tablets were miraculously supported. And this is דרך דרש.

But according to the פשט it appears that the writing was upon both sides, the obverse and the reverse, not that the writing on one side penetrated to the other, for the concept of "writing" does not apply to that which penetrates to the opposite side, for the letters will then be reversed, and this is self-evident.⁶¹

Ralbag dismisses Ḥazal's understanding as "דרך דרש" without explaining precisely what he finds implausible about it. While his objection may be merely the point he subsequently makes about the implication that the writing would have appeared backward on the reverse side and so could not properly be called writing at all, it is also possible that he was motivated by more serious philosophical objections to the suspension of matter in midair in violation of the law of gravity.⁶²

⁵⁹ BT *Megillah* 2b-3a. All translations of Talmudic passages and commentators are my own.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 3a, s.v. בנס.

⁶¹ Commentary to Exodus *ibid.*, p. 402.

⁶² See my discussion of this point in "On Divine Omnipotence and its Limitations," *Hakirah*, Vol. 2, p. 159 n. 18, available at <<http://www.hakirah.org/Vol%202%20Grossman.pdf>>.

Another example is Ralbag's approach to the Talmudic opinion that Moshe postponed the originally scheduled date of the giving of the Torah by a day:

We have learned: On the sixth of the month were the דברות given to Israel. R. Yosi says: on its seventh. Rava said: all agree that they arrived at the Sinai Desert on the first of the month... and all agree that on Shabbat was the Torah given to Israel... they disagree over the fixing of the month; R. Yosi holds that the month was fixed on the first day of the week, and on the first day of the week he said nothing to them due to the weakness caused by the travel. On the second day of the week, he said to them ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים. On the third he said to them the commandment of הגבלה; on the fourth they did פרישה... We ask: וקדשתם היום ומחר —this is difficult according to R. Yosi. R. Yosi would answer: Moshe added one day on his own, as we learn: Three things did Moshe do on his own, and God agreed with him—he added one day on his own...⁶³

Ralbag categorically rejects this notion as a factual description of what occurred, explaining that Hāzal here utilized דרש to construct a formal, hermeneutical proof of a halachic principle:

And in general, the date of the giving of the Torah was fixed by God, may He be elevated, to occur on the fiftieth day after the first [day] of Pesah, for on this date God, may He be elevated, commanded that there should be the Feast of Weeks, and it is therefore not possible that God, may He be elevated, should intend one date and Moshe should independently add and alter the matter to a different date. But our Masters have said this על צד הדרש, to derive from this place the law of [a woman who] emits semen, as is mentioned in Tractate Shabbat.⁶⁴

Here is a case where Ralbag does not dismiss an Aggadic claim outright, but explains that it is an exaggeration:

⁶³ BT *Shabbas* 86b–87a

⁶⁴ Commentary to Exodus (Explanation of the words and some of the passages of the narrative) 19:15, pp. 315-6.

And the thickness of the golden arks [i.e., the outer and inner arks composing the Holy Ark] is not known, but it was at least of perceptible thickness so that they would have a proper permanence. And it is not possible that the thickness of the golden arks was a hands-breadth, as our Masters, of blessed memory, have said,⁶⁵ for it is not possible that [even] one of these arks could have been completed out of all the gold that is mentioned in *Eleh Pekudei*, that was done [i.e., contributed] for the work, and this will be clear to one who has analyzed geometry with a minimum of analysis. But our Masters, of blessed memory, have said this to teach [or show] that these arks did actually have a perceptible thickness.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ See BT *Yoma* 72b, and see Responsa of Tashbaz III:70.

⁶⁶ Commentary *ibid.* (Explanation of the words and some of the passages of the section) 25:11, p. 249. Ralbag's basic argument, that all the gold collected for the Tabernacle would not have sufficed for the construction of the Ark, were we to accept as literal Ḥazal's statement about the thickness of the component arks, is used in reverse by Professors Abraham Yehudah Greenfield and Nathan Aviezer, in their paper "How Much is a Cubic Cubit?", available at <<http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/teruma/gra.html>>, to deduce that even Rav Ḥayyim Na'eh's relatively small figure for the length of the Amah is still too large:

"The unit of weight used in the Torah is the "shekel by the sanctuary weight," and a talent equals three thousand shekels (Ex. 38:25-26). The weight of the shekel is known. Extensive Torah literature on the topic shows that there was a consensus among the *geonim* and the *rishonim* that the "shekel by the sanctuary weight," as mentioned in the Torah, weighed 14 grams. Later, the Sages added 20% to the weight of the shekel required for performing certain commandments, such as the redemption of first-borns, but this addition does not pertain to the shekel by the sanctuary weight, mentioned in the Torah. Hence, a talent or *kikkar* (= 3000 shekels) weighed 42 kilograms...

The dimensions of the ark cover are given explicitly in the Torah and the Gemara: a slab of pure gold, 2.5 cubits long, 1.5 cubits wide (Gen. 25:17) and one handbreadth (Heb. *tefab*) thick (*Sukkah* 5a). Aside from certain instances that do not pertain to the ark cover, there are six handbreadths in a cubit (*Kelim* 17:10). Therefore, the volume of the ark cover was 0.625 cubic cubits.

In order to calculate the weight of the ark cover, we need to know the length of a cubit. Of the three views mentioned above, we begin our discussion with the shortest proposed length, i.e., 44 centimeters. According

to this length for a cubit, simple computation ($44 \times 44 \times 44 \times 0.625$ cc) shows that 0.625 cubic cubits of ark cover equals 53,000 cubic centimeters. Based on the specific weight of pure gold (19.3 grams per cubic centimeter), it turns out that the weight of the ark cover ($53,000 \times 0.0193$ kilogram) was 1030 kilogram (over a ton of gold!), which equals 24.5 talents (at 42 kilogram per talent). This result is perfectly reasonable, considering that the total amount of gold used in making the Tabernacle was 29.2 talents. In other words, the ark cover required slightly more than 80% of the total amount of gold in the Tabernacle. This result supports the assumption made above that by far the greatest proportion of gold was required to make the ark cover.

Now we shall look at the other views regarding the length of the cubit. If we assume that a cubit is 48 centimeters long, it turns out that the volume of the ark cover (0.625 cubic cubits) equals 69,000 centimeters, whose weight in gold would be 1330 kilogram, which equals 31.7 talents of gold. Since this is more than all the gold used in the Tabernacle (29.5 talents), clearly a cubit must be less than 48 centimeters long. According to the measurement given for a “large cubit,” the contradiction is even more pronounced. If a cubit were 58 centimeters long, the volume of the ark cover would be 122,000 cubic centimeters, weighing 2250 kilogram, which equals 56 talents, i.e., almost twice as much as the total amount of gold in the Tabernacle. The conclusion as to the length of the cubit is thus perfectly clear.”

In a footnote, the authors mention a possible flaw in their argument:

“The only way of resolving this contradiction with respect to the “large cubit” is to assume that the ark cover was hollow, or that the weight of the ark cover is not related to its external measurements. However, there is no support for such an assumption in the literature on the Torah.”

The professors, however, are simply mistaken. Rav Shimon b. Zemah Duran makes *exactly* this suggestion, based on the very problem under discussion:

ובענין הכפורת טפח נוכל לתקן כי לא היה זה העובי אלא בדפנות אבל כל הכפורת היתה דקה ... [ו]נוכל לומר שהיתה הכפורת עובי דפנותיה טפח כדי שיתקיים לנו לא ירדה שכינה למטה מעשרה ובאמצע היתה דקה לתקן הקושיא הגדולה היאך אפשר להיות מזה הזהב המועט כל זה העובי בכפורת זה נראה לנו לתקן בזה להעמיד דברי המקובלים (שו"ת תשב"ץ חלק ג' סימן ע')

And regarding the cover being [only a] hands-breadth [thick] we can solve [the problem of the insufficient gold, by suggesting] that the aforementioned thickness was only in the walls, but the entire cover was thin... and we can say that the cover, the thickness of its walls was a hands-breadth, so that we can sustain [the rule stated by Hāzal that] “the *Shek-hinah* never descended below ten [hands-breadths]”, but in the middle it

Conclusion

While Ralbag never embarks on a programmatic endeavor to reinterpret Hazal in light of his radical, rationalist world-view, we nevertheless see throughout his commentaries a consistent attempt to bring the teachings of the Sages he revered in line with the Aristotelian *weltanschauung* of whose basic correctness he was certain. While many of his particular concerns are no longer relevant to us, due to the obsolescence of the Aristotelian system in which he worked, the basic, if unacknowledged, tension he faced, and the various approaches that we have seen him utilize to resolve it, are certainly as apposite today as they were seven centuries ago. ❧

was thin, to solve the great difficulty, how was it possible for there to be from this small quantity of gold all this thickness in the cover. This is what appears to us to solve this, to sustain the words of the receivers of the tradition. [My translation]