

GUIDE 1:65 THE WORD OF GOD

This chapter, like the last, is a late lexical chapter. The terms under consideration are “saying” and “speaking,” *omer* and *dibbur*. The terms are synonymous and homonymous, since they are interchangeable, and since both possess the same set of three entirely different meanings. Michael Friedlander explains the purpose of this lexical chapter in the current sequence of Guide chapters:

“That is, if a person is convinced that even the attributes of existence and unity are not predicated of God, in the ordinary sense of these terms, because every notion of a real attribute is inadmissible in reference to Him, he need not be told that speech, as an attribute, is inadmissible; for many would admit the attribute of existence and unity, and would still reject that of speech. Some of the Mohammedan Theologians considered the Word of God as an attribute co-existing with Him from eternity to eternity. According to the theory of some Jewish philosophers, [by contrast] the Word of God emanated from Him, as all His other acts, and on that account it cannot be considered as an [eternal] attribute of God. Although the Divine Word, or the Torah, is said in the Talmud and the Midrash to have existed two thousand years anterior to the creation of the universe, it was believed to be a thing created and limited in time.” (note 1, *ad loc.*)

The Arabic for “word” or “speech” is *kalam*. *Kalam* came to be the name generally applied to Muslim theology. In the last six chapters of this section of the Guide, Maimonides systematically attacks *Kalam* theology. It is precisely on the issue of the *word* of God, and how the *Kalam* understood it, that Maimonides directed his strongest criticism. This issue is also the target of his *attribution* chapters (Guide 1:51-60. See my notes below on *Wolfson* and on *The Uncreated Qur’an*).

SYNOPSIS OF THE CHAPTER

Since, in the chapters devoted to the rejection of the divine attributes, we had gone so far as to reject existence and unity as eternal attributes of God in their ordinary significations, it is no stretch to realize that the divine word cannot be an eternal Logos. That is to say, the divine word does not exist as an eternal separate soul imbued with the forms of all things, which God needs as an instrument to effectuate creation (See my essay on Logos, Guide 1:21). Maimonides then shows that the words for speech, *amar* and *dibbur*, both carry three meanings: verbal speech, thought, and will. Only the two latter meanings apply when *amar* and *dibbur* occur in the divine context in scripture. He then produces a plethora of proof-texts for these definitions, more than would be needed to support them. He employs these citations to show us the difference between Mosaic prophecy and the prophecies of other seers, and to show how divine thought differs from human thought. The point is that we ascribe thought and will to God only because we borrow them from human experience. We have no experience of direct unmediated creation by our thoughts and volitions alone, and so we say that God “commands” these things, in the same way that a person commands an action. Conversely, from our vantage, it is through such “words” that the divine “voice” inspires us. Nonetheless, ultimately, it does not matter whether this inspiration comes from a voice that we actually heard or from a sound that emerged in our prophetic dreams and trances.

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See explanation of my methodology in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide”.

OMER, DIBBUR (SAYING, SPEAKING) HOMONYM

1. Verbal speech
2. Thought
3. Will

Of these three definitions, only the last is attributable to God in any sense. I come to this because only the last two citations for “will” relate to God. All the rest of Maimonides’ proof-tests relate to human speech, thought or will. Whenever the Bible says that God “speaks,” we must discover the metaphorical meaning for that term. That meaning is *will*. God wills things to exist, but in doing so, His will is only Himself, not a separate entity. Even when *dibbur* is supposed to represent divine thought, Definition 2, Maimonides frequently maintains that for God, thought and will are synonyms (See, A. Ivry, “Providence, Divine Omniscience, and Possibility,” 184, note 32, in *Maimonides, a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Buijs, 1998).

When revelation brings speech to the prophets, God creates this utterance. This is the *dibbur ha-nivra*, the counterpart to the created light, the *or ha-nivra* (See my comments to the last chapter). Maimonides shares this notion of a *created utterance* with Saadia Gaon (*Book of Knowledge and Belief*, 2:12). It is their version of the Logos, except that God creates it. This *created utterance* is the intermediary, the active intellect, which brings revelation to the prophets. The active intellect as created emanation is the unique doctrine of medieval neo-Platonized Aristotelianism. This created word is the Torah. Since God creates the revelation (*haskama umateinu sh’hatora brua, ha-kavana b’kakh ki divaro ha-myukhas lo nivra*), it follows that the prophecy is not merely from the prophet’s own imagination (*m’et ha-shem hem, lo m’hekra daatam v’raionam*), but has a peculiar existence of its own.

Maimonides contrasts his Logos with the Logos of Islam, which is the Qur’an. The Qur’an is the “inlibrated” eternal uncreated word of God (See my comments on 1:21. “Inlibrated” is Wolfson’s coinage meant to contrast with the *incarnated* Logos of Christianity in John 1:1). Even though God *expresses* his will in the Torah, the Torah, by contrast, is not eternal. It is a divine creation.

When God creates anything, whether it is the world, or man, or the created word, He does it by “willing” it. Thus, if God wants something it automatically exists. The “wanting” part of the sentence is merely a verbal concession to human experience, for God does not change as man does when He wants to make something. We understand this by saying that God *commands* something to exist. Maimonides demonstrates that when God “commands” there really is no speech or command involved. His proof is that when God said, “Let there be light,” He *said nothing*, because speech must have an audience and none had been created yet. “God said, Let there be light” really means, “God *willed*, Let there be light.” Indeed, as *Pirkei Avot* 5:1 already pointed out, the ten utterances of creation are really just one divine will (which, according to *Avot*, the Torah divides into ten to create a system of reward and punishment). Unlike human will, divine will is itself the divine action.

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

Maimonides usually does not quote just for his ostensible point. These quotes tell a more complex story. Thus, the first two quotes tell us more than that *omer* and *dibbur* mean verbal speech. They intimate the difference between the prophecy of Moses and that of other prophets.

“And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, *Moses spake (yedabber)*, and God answered him by a *voice (kol)*.” (Exodus 19:19)

In Guide 2:33, Maimonides says that at Sinai, “Moses alone was addressed by God.” According to him, the *kol* contained the undifferentiated noise that the people at Sinai heard, as well as the clear message to Moses from God Himself. Moses, the one who carries the word, is the *intermediary*. By contrast, Maimonides’ second quote is about all the other prophets:

“And Pharaoh *said (va-yomer)* unto Joseph, I have dreamed a dream, and [there is] none that can interpret it: and I have heard say of thee, [that] thou canst *understand a dream (ti’shma khalom)* to interpret it.” (Genesis 41:15)

(Pines, Friedlander and Schwarz all say that “And Pharaoh said” refers to Exodus 5:5, but I follow Kafih who says the proof-text is Genesis 41:15, which is the prior, and therefore preferable quotation.) The KJV has Pharaoh saying to Joseph “thou canst *understand* a dream.” The KJV is already an elucidation, since the word translated as “understand” is *ti’shma*, meaning, “you can hear” a dream to *interpret* it. The point is that what is “spoken” and “heard” is the prophetic “communication,” the *dibbur ha-shem*, not a corporeal utterance that men can hear. Non-Mosaic prophets all require an *intermediary* to transmit the divine revelation to them. In this case, Pharaoh’s *dream* is the intermediary between God and Joseph, once it had passed through Joseph’s mind. It is a created “word,” not something Pharaoh dreamed up himself. His revelation came via the active intellect, which sometimes favors far lesser men with the lowest level of inspiration (Guide 2:45). This intermediary is the same notion as the *sefira malchut* in Jewish esotericism, i.e. the tenth emanation. Maimonides calls this intermediary the “created voice,” “created light,” “angel,” “*ishim*,” etc. He says that “there is no difference” whether man learns of that will by one of these means or another (*beyn sh’noda b’kol nivra o sh’noda b’derekh m’darkhei hanavua asher n’varam*).

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

Definition 2 is *thought* in the mind of man. Maimonides subtly sends a negative message through the next four proof-texts. The train of ideas in these passages is that *human thought* begins as “vanity,” which leads to “perversity,” resulting in God’s abandonment, and, ultimately, to thoughts of murder. I recall the Yom Kippur prayer *Maaseh Eloheinu*, which contrasts the will of God with the thought of man: “The work of God! He saves from the grave, those borne by him;...The work of man! His thoughts are of mischief (*m’zima*).”

“Then *said (v’amarti)* I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I *said (v’dibbarti)* in my heart, that this also [is] vanity.” (Ecclesiastes 2:15)

Maimonides begins with two quotations from the same verse in Ecclesiastes. The ostensible point is that “I said” means “I thought.” This passage employs forms of both *omer* and *dibbur* to mean thought. Such thought of men, when devoid of God, is pointless *vanity*.

“Thine eyes shall behold *strange women (zarot)*, and *thine heart shall utter (v’livekh ydabber)* perverse things (*tahpukhot*).” (Proverbs 23:33)

Rashi explains, “When you will become drunk, it will burn in you and entice you to ogle harlots.” *Zarot* is the feminine plural of “strange” or “stranger,” but rabbinic tradition took it as synonymous with *zonot*, the usual word for harlots in Proverbs. Prurient references in Maimonides support his understanding that we cannot express creation *ex nihilo* except through the metaphor of procreation. It is also possible to understand *zarot* as a reference to idolatry, *avoda zara*, i.e., “strange service.” Maimonides quotes this passage to show that our reliance on the creative power of our unaided thought leads us to deify our imaginings.

“[When thou saidst], Seek ye My face; *my heart said (amar)* unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not Thy face (*al ta’ster panekha*) [far] from me; put not Thy servant away in anger: Thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.” (Psalms 27:8-9)

The Psalmist refers back to Sinaitic revelation, when the people, terrified by what they saw and heard, begged Moses to receive the revelation in their stead. The Psalmist also recalls that Moses sought God’s face, “Thy face, Lord, will I seek,” but was only given the revelation of the “back” (cf. my comments on Guide 1:21). Thus, even Moses only *learns* of the work of God—He cannot achieve knowledge of or unity with the essence of God. What troubles the Psalmist is the irresistible desire of the human heart for the essence of God, which it can never know. This desire leads (in verse 9) to *hester panim*, the “hiding of the face,” which is the abandonment of man by God (*al ta’ster panekha*). The message, once again, is that unaided human thought displaces God.

“And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau *said (va-yomer)* in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob: And these words of Esau her elder son were told to Rebecca...” (Genesis 27:41-42)

Since Esau only *thought* about killing Jacob, the Rabbis ask who told Rebecca his plans. Rashi, following the Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 67:9, explains that divine inspiration told her what Esau was thinking “in his heart,” i.e., she got the information through prophecy. Nevertheless, this prophecy was “told” to her, which means that it came to her through an intermediary, the active intellect. What Esau “said in his heart” connects to the previous proof-texts. The vain perversity of man’s unaided thought leads to God hiding His face when man plots murder. This bridges to the next group of three proof-texts for Definition 3, where the human *will* leads in each case to thoughts of murder:

Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“And Ishbibenob, which [was] of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose spear [weighed] three hundred [shekels] of brass in weight, he being girded with a new [sword], *thought (lit., said—va-yomer)* to have slain David.” (2 Samuel 21:16)

The Bible never again mentions Ishbibenob. He was Goliath’s brother (Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 95b). The quote shows that “saying” sometimes means “willing.” His *will* is to *murder* David. Similarly:

“And he said, Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? *Intendest (sayest—omer)* thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian? And Moses feared, and *said (va-omar)*, Surely this thing is known.” (Exodus 2:14)

Rashi thinks “sayest thou,” implies that Moses slew *by speech*, that is, by verbally invoking the Tetragrammaton (Midrash *Tanchuma, Shemoth* 10). Maimonides would not favor this interpretation since we do not invoke the name for our own purposes. Rather, “saying” means intending, willing. “Sayest thou to kill me” means: is it Moses’ *will* to kill the Jew? Note also that when Moses “*said*, Surely this thing is known,” he is really only thinking, not speaking.

“But all the congregation *bade (said—va-yomru)* stone them with stones. And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel.” (Numbers 14:10)

This comes after the spies have returned with their terrifying report of giants in the land of Israel. “Said” to stone them, means *intended* to stone them. They would have stoned the spies Joshua and Caleb had the glory of the Lord not appeared in the Tabernacle before all of the Jews. The appearance of the glory of the Lord alerts us to the question of whether this was a *physical* manifestation (see last essay, below).

At the end of the chapter, there are two more proof-texts for Definition 3, “will,” but now they concern the “speech” of God, not of man. Note that no proof-text for “thought” is about divine thought.

“By the *word (bidvar)* of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth (*u’v’ruakh piv*).” (Psalms 33:6)

Maimonides quotes the entire verse but breaks it into two quote-shards by inserting the word *kmo*, i.e., “like” in the middle, meaning that the first clause of the verse is “like” the second clause. He explains:

“‘His mouth,’ and ‘the breath of his mouth,’ are undoubtedly figurative expressions, and the same is the case with ‘His word’ and ‘His speech.’ The meaning of the verse is therefore that they [the heavens and all their host] exist through His will and desire.”

The point is that God does not require a *creative word* or any other intermediary to effectuate His creative will. See my note below, *Wolfson on the Word of God*.

“And Joshua *wrote* these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that [was] by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the *words (imrei)* of the Lord which He *spake (dibber)* unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.” (Joshua 24:26-27)

These are Joshua’s last words. Since the verse uses both the words (*imrei*) and the speech (*dibber*) of God in the same context, they are synonymous. The word of God that Joshua refers to is the actual revelation given to Moses at Sinai. There were no verbalized words since God willed the prophecy in thought to Moses. Moreover, that part which Joshua *wrote* was “witnessed” by a stone that “heard” the words. Obviously, no stone witnesses or hears a speech. The passage means that God communicated His will as a command to the people so clearly that even a stone “understands” it. This command is God’s *created communicative word*. See note below.

In summary, we learn from these quotes that the words “speaking” and “saying” mean intending and willing, especially when used by God. Additionally, we learn that Moses prophesied without mediation, while all other prophets received their revelation from an intermediary. Sometimes the prophet’s intermediary is in the form of a created voice. Whatever the form, it is the active intellect emanated from God. This same emanation is the ongoing source of the creation of souls and the emanation of forms into unformed matter, and the Bible represents this process by images of procreation. We do not explain this publicly due to the law of Mishnah *Hagiga*. One reason for this law is that our unaided thought leads to “perverse things.”

WOLFSON ON THE WORD OF GOD

In the following compressed sentence, Harry Austryn Wolfson sums up a thousand years of lore on the *dibbur hashem*, but it needs to be unpacked:

“A view like that of Saadia and Halevi, consisting of a denial of an *uncreated word*, an affirmation of a *created communicative word*, and a denial of *created creative word*, is to be found in Maimonides.” (*Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy*, Harvard, 1979, p. 111, my emph.)

What he means is that the main tradition in Jewish philosophy had a unified view of the meaning of divine speech in its threefold manifestation in medieval thought.

The problem, he explains, arose when Jews in the Middle East learned that the Christians and the Muslims entertained the concept of an eternal *word*, and that this word manifested itself as the pre-existent uncreated Christ or Qur’an, respectively. This reminded them of their rabbinic tradition that the word of God, in the sense of the Torah, was also pre-existent, but, by contrast, God created this word. According to Wolfson, Midrash *Konen*, a late minor Midrash, (cited in *Repercussions*, p. 86 from Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*) expresses the concept of a Torah that precedes the world, in terms that could be a repercussion of a contemporary Muslim account. The Midrash (elaborating on Jerusalem Talmud *Shekalim* 6:1 49d) states:

“Should you say it (the Torah) was written down on a book, the answer is: no animal and beast were as yet created from whose skin a parchment could be made upon which to write. Should you say it was written on silver or gold or any other metals, the answer is: none of these was yet created or smelted or mined. Should you say it was written on wood, the answer is: no trees were yet created in the world. On what, then, was it written? It was written with black fire upon white fire and it was tied to the arm of God, for it is said, ‘At His right hand was a fiery law unto them’ (Deuteronomy 32:2).”

Wolfson says, “If we assume that the Midrash *Konen* was composed in Palestine when it was already under Muslim rule, then its elaboration on what the pre-existent Torah could not be may taken to be aimed at a conception of the pre-existent Qur’an...held by a certain Muslim sect.” That Muslim sect’s commentary stated, “the separate letters, and the bodies written upon, and the colors in which the writing is executed, and everything between the two covers, are pre-existent *eternal*.” (*Repercussions*, p.86)

With this background in mind, Wolfson says that when Saadia, Ha-Levi and Maimonides agreed on the “denial of an *uncreated word*,” it meant that the Torah is not a Logos pre-existently eternal with God, like this concept of the existence of the Qur’an. They denied this because it would have meant that God was in partnership with another power worthy of worship. As for the appearance of an eternal uncreated Torah in Midrash *Konen* and a few other places, Wolfson reviews the outstanding Jewish spokesmen of the early middle ages up through Maimonides and finds that none of them take this assertion literally.

When Wolfson says that they agreed on “an affirmation of a *created communicative word*,” this means that God created a supernal Torah that communicates law to the prophets in their prophetic state. This supernal Torah is the active intellect. Later, Maimonides will explain this process of prophecy (Guide 2:36). This *created communicative word* may also be the created emanation that “communicates,” so to speak, souls into ensouled beings.

When Wolfson says that they agreed on the “denial of a *created creative word*,” he refers to the belief of some Muslims in “the word of God in the sense of the word ‘Be’ (Ar.: *kun*) with which God created the world” (*Repercussions*, 91; *Kalam*, 145; Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, trans., L.E. Goodman, 134). The supposition of a “created creative word” was their answer to how the completely incorporeal God created a corporeal world. By contrast, the Jewish philosophers all held to the miracle of *ex nihilo* creation, dispensing with the need for any other power. Instead of the creative word “Be,” they posited the divine will, understanding that the will could not be a separately subsisting entity from God.

Thus, in our chapter, Maimonides explains that God did not utter such a *creative word* since speech requires an audience, and there was none at the time of creation. Apparently, even the creative word “Be” would have required an audience to hear it.

Still, we fail to understand how just *wanting* something could bring it to be without some intermediate action or command. But this is just a shortcoming of our corporealized imaginations. God has the power to create just by *wanting* something to occur. His will is itself His action.

THE UNCREATED WORD IN THE QUR’AN

The notion of the Qur’an as the uncreated word of God was controversial in early Islam. The controversy began as an academic dispute but became a violent political struggle (Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, Columbia Univ., 1970, 78-79, and see Schwarz, footnotes 3, 4 and 15 *ad loc.*). Both sides thought of the Qur’an as the “preserved tablet” (*al-lawh 'l-mahfuz*) kept in heaven before its revelation to Muhammad (see next chapter, Guide 1:66). The dispute turned on whether the theologians took the divine attribute of speech as an “essential” attribute or merely an “action” attribute. The essentialist theologians understood the divine word to be eternal with God, while their opponents took it as a non-eternal creation. The Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma’mūn, who was part of the latter group, made the doctrine of *created* Qur’an the law for his empire. In 833, he instituted an inquisition, the *Mihnah*, to enforce that law. The violence of this inquisition led to a reaction. Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780 – 855), who suffered physically under this inquisition, led this reaction. He opposed every attempt to make intellectual sense of Islamic dogma. Majid Fakhry tells of one unsuccessful but paradigmatic attempt to introduce a moderate approach to Ibn Hanbal:

“Ibn Hanbal’s stand on this question is illustrated by his reaction to the otherwise moderate approach to the question of the creation of the Koran of a leading theologian of the period, al-Hussain al-Karābīsī (d. 859), who, despite his accredited sound learning, we are significantly told, inclined toward scholastic theology. Having declared on one occasion that whereas the Koran, as the speech of God, is uncreated, its words, as recited by readers, are created, he submitted his view to Ibn Hanbal for his verdict. Ibn Hanbal declared it to be a heresy (*bid’ah*). Perfectly willing to modify his stand, al-Karābīsī then

declared both the Koran and its written and spoken words uncreated. Incapable of being appeased by such latitude, Ibn Hanbal declared the latter view equally heretical, thereby underscoring the futility and perniciousness of the very inquiry into the nature of the Koran, that the ancients, he maintained, had so piously avoided.” (p. 79)

In our chapter, Maimonides makes an important statement about God relative to this Muslim controversy. While explaining that God does not employ voice or sound, he proceeds to elaborate that neither does He have:

“...a soul in which the thoughts reside, and that these thoughts are things superadded to His essence (*v'lo sh'hu italei baal nefesh sh'khakako ha-inyanim b'nafsho*); but we ascribe and attribute to Him thoughts in the same manner as we ascribe to Him any other attributes.”

Schwarz, note 15, explains this statement as a denial of one theory of the uncreated Qur'an as “intellectual speech” subsisting in the mind of God:

“Perhaps Maimonides' purpose here is to deny the position of the Muslim theologian Al-Baqillani (d. 1013). The *Mutazila* (the sect of theologians who accepted the Qur'an as created) was opposed by those who held that it was eternal and uncreated (the *Ashariya*). Some of them exaggerated to the point of absurdity that the voice of the Muslim reading the Qur'an was also uncreated, and even the paper and the ink on which it was written were eternal and uncreated. To resolve the apparent absurdity, Al-Baqillani produced the Asharite solution that the Qur'an was the “intellectual speech” (*dibbur ha-nefesh*) of God which was *eternal*, and these thoughts were *conceived* (*hitgalmutam*) in the *created* form of the actual book of the Qur'an.” (My trans.)

This view of the Qur'an as an eternal “intellectual speech,” is just a camouflaged version of the eternal Logos as partner with God. That is why Maimonides so strongly opposed the concept, denying that God had such a “soul” in which “thoughts reside.”

IS THERE A PHYSICAL “CREATED VOICE” OR A “CREATED LIGHT”?

The major Jewish intellectual leaders rejected this attributist notion of an eternal word of God inliterated in the Torah, since they understood that God has no partners.

However, the prophetic works frequently feature what seems like a real word or a real light, and these statements could neither be ignored nor explained away as metaphors. (On all of this, including most of the quoted material below, see Wolfson, *Kalam*, 274-276, and *Repercussions*, 87-113.)

This interpretive tradition goes back, at least, to Philo, who read the statement in Exodus 19:19 about God's “voice” to mean that “At that time God wrought a miracle of a truly holy kind by bidding an invisible sound to be created in the air,” by which he meant an audible, articulate voice. But by “invisible” he meant that this voice was incorporeal. Nonetheless, the Mutazilites of the early Kalam, like Nazzam (c. 775 – c. 845), who were, perhaps influenced by Philo, made his incorporeal “voice” into a physical body. As a Mutazilite, Nazzam argued that this voice was created rather than eternal, thereby distinguishing it from the incarnated “Word” of the Christians. He wrote, stressing both the physicality and the createdness of this voice, that “The Word of the Creator is a body, and this body is a sound which is articulate, composite, audible, and it is the work of God and His creation” (*Kalam*, 274).

This was precisely the view of Saadia Gaon (882-942), who said, “The real meaning of the term ‘speech’ (*al kaul : ha-dibbur*) implied in this expression (‘The Lord spoke’) is that God created a word (*kalām : dibbur*) which he conveyed through the medium of the air to the hearing of the prophet and the people” (*Emunot v'Deot*, 2:12, 128, Rosenblatt, Yale 1976, cf., *Comm. on Sefer Yetzira*, 4:1). Saadia claimed that when this voice is

created, a corporeal light is also created:

“God has a special light which He creates and makes manifest to the prophets in order that they may infer therefrom that it is a prophetic communication emanating from God that they hear. When one of them sees this light he says, ‘I have seen the Glory of the Lord’...When they beheld this light they were unable to look upon it on account of its power and brilliance...”

Moses asked for divine aid to see this light (“the Glory”), but God covered him “until the first rays of this light had passed, because the greatest strength of every radiant body is contained in its initial approach.” After that, according to Saadia, God removed the covering so that Moses could see “the back of the light” (Rosenblatt, 130).

Yehuda Halevi (1075-1141) agreed, though he entertained a slight reservation. Still, he refused to make the “word” a symbol for will or intention, but accepted that it was a real word or sound. “We do not know how the [divine] intention became corporealized so that it became a word which struck our ear....so that the air which touched the prophet’s ear assumed the form of sounds which conveyed the matters to be communicated by God to the prophet and the people.” He immediately covers himself by making this reservation, “I do not maintain that this is exactly how these things occurred; the problem is, no doubt, too deep for me to fathom” (*Kuzari*, 1:89 and 1:91, p. 63, Hirschfeld trans., Schocken 1971). But this reservation did not stop him from saying that God “adapted the air to giving the sound of the Ten Commandments and formed the writing engraved on the tables” (2:6, p. 87). He even dresses it in scientific language, “The Glory of God is that *fine substance* (*ha-guf ha-dak*) which follows the will of God, assuming any form God wishes to show the prophet....including the Glory which the prophet’s eye could bear” (4:3, p. 211).

Bakhyia ibn Pakuda (c. 1050- c. 1120) wisely steered clear of this discussion, merely referring his readers to Saadia’s writings (*Hovot*, 1:10, v.1, 129, Feldheim 1996). Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164) rejects the whole idea. He explains that the “voice” does not refer to a corporeal voice but to “the true speech of which the speech of the mouth is a likeness.” Ibn Ezra’s *dibbur* is not a created word in the air, but an intellectual “true speech.” It is an entirely internal realization, which God causes the prophet to discover by his own reason (*Repercussions*, 106-107. Strongly *contra*: Isaac Husic, *A History of Jewish Philosophy*, 191, JPS, 1944).

Maimonides made a number of statements more or less directed to this subject, some of which I have canvassed below, though there are undoubtedly more. They replicate the positions of his predecessors, but it is hard to say which he adopts.

In Mishna Torah, *Ysodei* 8:3, Maimonides makes a statement that appears to support the idea of a created word heard by physical ears. Attacking false prophets who would change the Torah, he said:

“But with our eyes we saw, and with our ears we heard the divine voice even as he (the claimant to prophecy) also heard it (*ele b’eineinu raionua u’v’azinu shmanua kmo sh’shma hu*). To what may this be compared? To persons testifying in the presence of a man concerning an incident, which he saw with his own eyes, and [they are] denying that it took place as he saw it. He will surely not accept their statement, but will be convinced that they are false witnesses.” (This is essentially the same result as in Guide 2:33: “The Israelites heard, on that occasion, a certain sound...” In Commentary on the Mishnah, *Sota*, 7:42, 8:41, the “voice” is in Hebrew.)

Despite all this, while Maimonides’ statement in our chapter carefully acknowledges the positions of his great rabbinic predecessors, he does not commit to any of them. He says:

“The two terms (*amar* and *dibbur*), when applied to God, can only have one of the two last-mentioned significations, viz., he wills and he desires, or he thinks, and there is no difference whether the divine thought became known to man by means of an actual voice (*b’kol nivra*), or by one of those kinds of

inspiration (*m'darkhei navua*) which I shall explain further on (Guide 2:38). We must not suppose that in speaking God employed voice or sound (*b'otot v'kol*), or that He has a soul (*baal nefesh*) in which the thoughts reside (*sh'ykhaku ha-inyanim b'nafsho*), and that these thoughts are things superadded to His essence (*nosef al atzmuto*); but we ascribe and attribute to Him thoughts in the same manner as we ascribe to Him any other attributes (*k'yakhas kol ha-pa'ulot*)."

When Maimonides said "there is no difference" whether the created voice or some other kind of prophetic inspiration made the divine will known to the prophet, he countenances both the Saadia/Halevi created voice and ibn Ezra's opposed "true" intellectual "speech" without deciding against either well established position. God, evidently, could do either, and since Maimonides did not have scientific proof against the notion of the physical *dibbur*, he was unwilling to deny its existence. His main concern, in any event, was to destroy the notion that this "word" is a pre-eternal Logos existing with God ("that He has a soul in which the thoughts reside" as forms inscribed therein).

Obviously, God, who is incorporeal, had not "employed (physical) voice or sound," but that statement should not be taken as a rejection of Saadia's claim that He could create such a physical voice or light, which the prophets call "Glory." On several previous occasions, Maimonides says that if you believe this, it is an acceptable belief, which I do not interpret as a note of disapproval. I think he meant exactly what he says: he acknowledges the views of his sophisticated predecessors but does not declare his own mind on the subject.

Still, in Guide 2:45, where he carefully distinguishes the forms of non-Mosaic prophecy into eleven categories, all of the visionary and auditory phenomena he lists are dreams and visions, not physical sense data.

The strongest statement of Maimonides' view on the issue may be in Guide 1:5, but even this is not very clear.

Guide 1:5 is the continuation of 1:4, which is the lexical chapter for several words meaning "sight," *ra'a*, *hibit*, and *khaza*. He held that these words have a literal meaning of visual sight, as well as a figurative meaning of intellectual comprehension. In 1:5, he condemned the Elders of Israel for interpreting a vision of the throne of God in a corporeal manner, when they should have recognized it as a purely intellectual demonstration of the noetic forces behind creation (the sapphire bricks should have been taken as the *materia prima*). His conclusion was that "wherever, in a similar connection, any one of the three verbs mentioned above occurs, it has reference to intellectual perception, not to the sensation of sight by the eye: for God is not a being to be perceived by the eye."

Nonetheless:

"It will do no harm (*ayn nizek b'kakh*), however, if those who fall short of attaining that degree toward which we endeavor to raise him (Friedlander note 2, p. 47; *ekhad m'meuti ha-hasaga sh'lo l'hagia l'draga zu sh'anu rotzim l'alot elea*) should refer all the words in question to sensuous perception (*hasagot hushim*), to seeing lights created [for the purpose], angels, or similar beings."

On its face, Maimonides' "those who fall short" seems like a direct condemnation of the Saadia/Halevi view of the created light and the created voice. Kafih comments:

"This (passage) refers to the high intellectual level which merits seeing this vision, where the seer abstracts the content of the vision from that which was visually sensed, recognizing that the sensual content was the created light, which he merited to see. It appears to me that Maimonides' intent in these remarks (when he referred to 'those who fall short...') was directed to what Saadia Gaon had written in *Emunot* 2:10 and 2:12.... but that this was no defect in belief since (by lights and angels) there is no physicality conceived about God (*sh'ayn ha-gashma klapei maala*); nonetheless, we understand more than those on this lower level." (Notes 31-32, p. 24, my trans.)

I think Kafih's interpretation is correct as far as it goes, but to better understand Maimonides we have to recognize that he is really saying two things. The first is that it is impermissible to relate any sensation or sense object to God. Second, we may take literally any sensual description of angels or created lights in scripture, since they are not directly about God. We, who have read the Guide to this point, should be able to understand that these created entities represent the action of the active intellect as translated by our imagination. Additionally, we should grasp that certain types of apparently sensed phenomena, such as the people "seeing" "thunder" at Sinai (Exodus 20:18) must obviously refer to intellectual perception, since sound cannot be seen (Guide 1:46).

Nonetheless, in Guide 1:21, which I have described as the hidden lexical chapter on *kol* (voice/sound), Maimonides does note the possible existence of a physical *kol ha-nivra* in carefully reserved language:

"Or, again, you may believe that there was, in addition, an apprehension due to the (physical) sense of hearing; that which 'passed before his face' (Exodus 34:6) being the voice which is likewise indubitably a created thing. *Choose whatever opinion you wish*, inasmuch as our *only* purpose is....(to show that) God...is not a body and it is not permitted to ascribe motion to Him." (Pines' trans., p. 51, my emph.)

Thus, again, Maimonides carefully avoids affirming a physical *dibbur ha-nivra*. He does this because it is a distraction from the point he wants to make about the created character of the imaginative visions of the prophets, that those visions should be understood on the abstract level. Nonetheless, he does not entirely reject that such a miracle as a physical created utterance could have occurred, just as he refuses to reject the miracle of resurrection (*Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead*), or the miracle of creation *ex nihilo*.

A remarkable confirmation of his conservatism on this issue comes from his son, R. Abraham. Commenting on Exodus 19:19, "Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice (*b'kol*)":

"Our sages have concurred that this voice was created, but it is associated with Him, like the divine glory....Others have challenged this, saying, 'You believe that God spoke to Moshe without an intermediary (*emtsai*), and that this was the distinction between him and other prophets, as it says, *mouth to mouth* (Numbers 12:8) and *face to face* (Deuteronomy 5:4). But if the sound and words He used for communication were created, they certainly cannot stand alone; they need a physical entity to convey them, such as wind (*al yedei geshem nosei lo o ruakh o zulato*). If so, that physical entity (*ha-geshem nosei la-dibbur*) carrying the speech is a medium between God and Moshe, like the angel that mediates between God and the other prophets!' To answer this, I would need to enter a 'narrow strait' and boldly advance to a complex matter in which I am truly inadequate; it is a secret of the Torah. However, I cannot avoid providing some general principles (*rashei p'rakim*) about this: You should understand that when the message comes to a living being (i.e., an angel), it receives it in its spirit (*b'nafsho*) and then explains it to another (i.e., the prophet).... When we say that God spoke to Moshe without an intermediary, it means that although He spoke through a [created physical] medium (*bara oto ytalei bi'shat ha-dibbur b'geshem nosei lo*)...the [physical] medium (*she'oto ha-geshem*) does not possess its own spirit or intellect like an angel does. This explanation should suffice for a thoughtful person, but not for a fool, who should not be taught such a secret in any case." (*The Guide to Serving God*, 583-585, trans. Y. Wincelberg, with facing page Hebrew from Jud. Arabic. English parentheses are the translator's, brackets are mine, to emphasize how Rabbi Wincelberg softens the physicality of the "voice," which is readily apparent in the Hebrew. R. Abraham's main intent was to retain the notion of an un-ensouled "intermediary," to affirm that Moses had no "intermediary," all the while admitting that there had to be some miracle wind which brought the "voice" to him, a position he could not conceivably have taken had his father had a strong secret contrary position on this major passage from Exodus.)

In this period, before the *Zohar* sundered the unity of spiritual and cosmological perspectives, Maimonides shows, once again, that he remains an ancient rather than a modern thinker, not completely allegorizing the *dibbur ha-nivra* in the manner of Abraham Ibn Ezra's "true intellectual speech."