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## ELEAZAR ASHKENAZI ON THE LONGEVITY OF THE ANCIENTS

**A**mong the many spiritual and intellectual innovations that arose in the Jewish Middle Ages, none sparked such heated controversy as the attempts made by certain rabbis and scholars to synchronize classical Jewish precepts and texts with the teachings of Greek philosophy. The towering figure—he who bestrode the nexus of Jewish law and theology like a colossus—was Maimonides. By bringing revelation and reason into harmony (how, and with what aim, remain contentious topics), Maimonides shaped the religious horizons and literary expression of countless writers for centuries; indeed, he still does.

Beyond modeling a mastery of Greco-Arabic thought with exceptional acumen, Maimonides endorsed the radical proposition that knowledge of science and philosophy was essential for a true understanding of scripture and for worship of God in its purest form. These and cognate teachings could generate fervid scholarly clashes and, at times, broader controversies in the Jewish public square. Witness the battle over Maimonideanism that engulfed Europe's Jewries in the 1230s, which saw intra- and intercommunal bans, charges of heresy, and the writings of Maimonides being denounced to the Inquisition and burned.<sup>1</sup>

Though Maimonides wrote no running biblical commentaries, his influence on the interpretation of scripture was immense, with many later commentators drawing on a repertoire of exegetical techniques and

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<sup>1</sup> For a convenient overview of major controversies, see Raphael Jospe, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Academic Studies Press, 2009), 558–569. For the controversy of the 1230s in relation to the features enumerated here, see Azriel Shohet, “Concerning the First Controversy on the Writings of Maimonides” [Hebrew], *Zion* 36 (1971), 45–52.

principles set forth in his *Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>2</sup> The aim of their exertions was to effect a congruence between the divine word and what they deemed to be finalities of science or permanent features of the natural order. A common technique for achieving this outcome was allegorical exegesis in cases where scripture seemed to describe things that were “impossible” according to science. Another was to develop naturalistic readings of events that scripture presented as the work of miraculous divine intervention in the world.

One work that exemplifies late medieval Jewish rationalism at its limit is *Tzofenat Pane'ah* (*Revealer of Secrets*; hereafter *Revealer*), a Torah commentary by the almost entirely unknown fourteenth-century scholar Eleazar Ashkenazi ben Nathan HaBavli. Composed around 1370, likely in one of the Byzantine precincts of eastern Mediterranean Jewry, *Revealer* carries on a tradition of exegetical and theological rationalism in which Maimonides and Abraham ibn Ezra are the dominant figures.<sup>3</sup> To put this thought more contemporaneously, *Revealer* is emblematic of an especially resolute version of premodern *Torah u-Madda*.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the beginning of his work Eleazar sets forth his interpretive credo with unabashed candor. When the biblical plain sense departs from rational truth, he says, the commentator's duty is to “disencumber” the verses of their plain sense so that “they comport with the truth, since our Torah is truth and does not contradict the truth.”<sup>5</sup> In fulfilling this task, Eleazar often devises interpretations bearing a distinctive stamp. This side of *Revealer* is handsomely illustrated by Eleazar's handling of a crux that bedeviled writers of many stripes but proved especially vexing for rationalists: the extraordinary lifespans of the antediluvian patriarchs. Most famous

<sup>2</sup> The literature on Maimonidean biblical scholarship is voluminous. See, e.g., the bibliography in James T. Robinson, “Philosophy and Science in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Bible” in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 460–461, n. 28. Some think that the *Guide* itself is best understood as primarily a work of biblical exegesis; see, e.g., Arthur Hyman, “Maimonides as Biblical Exegete” in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, ed. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn E. Goodman, and James Allen Grady (State University of New York Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Lawee, *Rashi's Commentary on the Torah: Canonization and Resistance in the Reception of a Jewish Classic* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 130–149, where evidence is adduced for *Revealer*'s likely eastern Mediterranean provenance.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of another example of highly assertive fourteenth-century rationalist biblical scholarship (from where the formulation in this sentence is drawn), see Haim Kreisel, “The Torah Commentary of R. Nissim Ben Mosheh of Marseilles: On a Medieval Approach to Torah u-Madda,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 10 (2001), 20–36.

<sup>5</sup> Russian State Military Archive, MS 707/3/6, shelf-mark II, 8 (hereafter RGVA = *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv*), fol. 18v.

was Methuselah, whose years approached a millennium, but the extended lives of those such as Methuselah's grandson Noah were equally defiant of empirical experience. For those seeking to read the Torah in a way that preserved the phenomena of the observable world, the chrono-genealogies of Genesis 5 presented a seemingly intractable challenge.<sup>6</sup>

Eleazar tackles this challenge in an excursus that, while following a path trodden by his rationalist forerunners, steers the discussion in unexpected directions. Most startling is the notion that the account of the extraordinary ages of the ancients should not be taken literally because it comprises a case where the Torah imparts “imprecise narrative hyperboles” found in the sources that inform the narrative. Accompanying this claim is Eleazar's idea that, at least when it came to figures “prior to the time of the flood,” Moses “passed over” these embellishments “because of the length of time that had elapsed.” Let this very partial precis suggest some of the novelties in which *Revealer* generally abounds—novelties that Eleazar often delivers with disarming nonchalance.

Below is an English translation of Eleazar's presentation on the longevity of the ancients. Before providing a brief orientation in this excursus, however, we will engage in one of our own, the better to appreciate the precarious path that this text traveled in order to reach us at all.

*A Brand Plucked from the Fire:*

*From Medieval Crete to Nazi-Looted War Trophy in Russia*

*Revealer* was never a best-seller. It survives in a single manuscript made in Crete by a scribe named Ephraim ben Shabbetai HaMelammed in 1399.<sup>7</sup> The only later commentator to cite the work—to my knowledge—is the famous turn-of-the-sixteenth-century scholar Isaac Abarbanel, though he does not do so by name.<sup>8</sup> As for efforts to trace the whereabouts of Ephraim's version of *Revealer* from the time of its creation in Crete, they draw a blank until the later nineteenth century, when, having traveled from Istanbul to Vienna, this manuscript joined the vast library-in-the-making

<sup>6</sup> The fullest study is Daniel J. Lasker, “The Longevity of the Ancients – Faith and Reason in Medieval Jewish Thought” [Hebrew], *Dine Israel* 26–27 (= *Mordechai Friedman Jubilee Volume*, ed. Aryeh Edrei and Vered Noam) (2010), 49–65.

<sup>7</sup> See the colophon in RGVA, 133v.

<sup>8</sup> Abarbanel's awareness of *Revealer* was noted and partially documented in an article originally published in 1887 by Avraham Epstein: “*Ma'amar al Hibbur Tzofenat Paneah*” in *Kitvei R. Avraham Epshtein*, ed. A.M. Haberman, 2 vols. (Mossad Harav Kook, 1949), 118, and the examples cited on 117–118, nn. 2–4; 127 n. 9. Epstein in turn cited an earlier observation to this effect by Adolf Jellinek. The full extent of Abarbanel's use of *Revealer* remains to be determined.

of the Polish-born bibliophile and rabbinic scholar Avraham Epstein.<sup>9</sup> In an article devoted to the work, Epstein stressed that he had seen no scholarly mention of the work and its author, nor had he heard of its presence in any other library.<sup>10</sup> In subsequent decades, leading Judaic scholars (Steinschneider, Posnanski, and so forth) did take sporadic notice of the work. More importantly, Solomon Rappaport, a young rabbi associated with various Jewish educational institutions in Vienna, made photostats of the first 29 of the manuscript's 129 folios.<sup>11</sup> He carried them with him when he fled the city for London in 1938, a year of horrors in which Viennese Jewry suffered its first depredations in the wake of the Anschluss and then Kristallnacht.

*Revealer's* ups and downs from Epstein's death in 1918 through Rappaport's flight in 1938 can only be surmised, albeit with a high degree of certainty.<sup>12</sup> After spending time in Vienna's Israelitische Theologische Lehranstalt, a rabbinical and teachers' seminary that purchased Epstein's manuscripts, *Revealer* moved to the library of the Viennese Jewish Religious Community (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde) in 1926.<sup>13</sup> The community's premises were destroyed during Kristallnacht. Still, the Nazis took care not to harm the library, whose holdings were soon thereafter requisitioned and shipped to Berlin. When the German capital came under bombardment in 1943, a vast trove of Jewish cultural treasures was scattered to safer locations, eventually to be discovered by soldiers from the Red Army. After the war, these treasures joined millions of archival, library, and museum collections, Jewish and otherwise, that were hauled off to Moscow and placed in a "Special Archive" established for this purpose.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the Archive remained secret. Indeed, *Revealer*, like similar holdings, was deemed a secret military document

<sup>9</sup> Epstein reports that Raphael Nathan Rabinovitch, best known as the author of *Dikdukei Soferim*, was the conduit for the manuscript's arrival in his collection, the stamp of which ("Bibliothek A. Epstein") appears in faded ink at the top of fol. 4r.

<sup>10</sup> Epstein, "Ma'amar," 120 and 118 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> On Rappaport, see Sonia Grober, "Solomon Rappaport: Present and Past" in *Essays in Honour of Salo Rappaport: On the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Glenda Abramson (South African Jewish Trust, 1985), iv–x.

<sup>12</sup> The work merited an entry during this period in A.Z. Schwarz, *Die hebräischen Handschriften in Österreich* (K.W. Hiersemann, 1931), 30–31 (no. 44).

<sup>13</sup> The community's stamp appears in several places in the manuscript, including its opening folio (4r).

<sup>14</sup> *Manuscripts and Archival Documents of the Vienna Jewish Community Held in Russian Collections: Catalogue*, comp. K. A. Akinsha, et al. (Rudomino, 2006), 12–13.

that, as such, remained inaccessible for half a century following its arrival in the Russian capital.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Solomon Rappaport, having found refuge in South Africa, published in 1965 an edition of *Revealer* based on the photostats that he had rescued. It contained Eleazar's commentary on Genesis 1–22; that is, weekly readings from “*Bereshit*” through “*Vayyera*.” In so doing, Rappaport emphasized that he was making accessible “the only existing remnant of the book.”<sup>16</sup> Aside from the very partial segment of the original preserved in this edition, it suffered from limited circulation. Still, this small slice of *Revealer* did come into the hands of a few scholars, though none gave it more than fleeting attention.<sup>17</sup>

The sentence of oblivion pronounced on the full version of *Revealer* might have remained permanent were it not for the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to greater openness and the absorption of works in the secret Special Archive into the Russian State Military Archive (RSMA).<sup>18</sup> Still, only one who stumbled on a 2006 Russian catalog could have known that the single witness to *Revealer* in its totality had survived the war.<sup>19</sup> The work's restitution to some natural habitat is another matter. As the decades-long legal battle conducted by Chabad-Lubavitch to recover the

<sup>15</sup> Ekaterina Oleshkevich, “Tracing the Private Archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson” in *Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis?* (École nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques, 2019), [4]. Available at [www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/notices/68748-tracing-the-private-archive-of-rabbi-yoseph-yitzhak-schneerson](http://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/notices/68748-tracing-the-private-archive-of-rabbi-yoseph-yitzhak-schneerson).

<sup>16</sup> *Zafenath Paneach: Commentary of Eleazar Ashkenazi Ben Nathan Ha-Bavli (14th Century), on the Pentateuch*, ed. Shlomo Rappaport (Kayor, 1965), ii. The cited passage appeared in italics, underscoring the urgency that he attached to what might otherwise seem an obscure and essentially antiquarian undertaking and perhaps alluding to a sense of ever-so-slight moral victory in making this surviving remnant available. Rappaport's edition is available at <https://hebrewbooks.org/7429>. Rappaport mentions his inquiry to the Institute of Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem that yielded no indication of the manuscript's whereabouts. He describes the manuscript—in a Hebrew note below an image of one of the photostats (on an unpaginated page printed opposite the English table of contents that is missing from the online edition)—as having “disappeared at the time of the Nazi Holocaust in Austria.”

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 343, who observed that *Revealer* was full of “decidedly intellectualist allegories.”

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed history, see David E. Fishman, Mark Kupovetsky, and Vladimir Kuzelenkov, eds., *Nazi-Looted Jewish Archives in Moscow: A Guide to Jewish Historical and Cultural Collections in the Russian State Military Archive* (University of Scranton Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, 2010). The original version of this work was published in Russian in 2005.

<sup>19</sup> *Manuscripts*, 99.

“Schneerson Collection” shows, cultural riches of the Jewish people held captive in the RSMA are likely to remain in this state.<sup>20</sup> Still, Eleazar’s sole surviving work can now be accessed. The publication of an excerpt in English seems an apt way to celebrate this development and to open a window on an in some ways representative and in other ways highly distinctive specimen of medieval Jewish rationalist biblical scholarship.

### *Background and High Points*

Before presenting the text from *Revealer*, it will be helpful to highlight a few of its main contextual elements and striking teachings. As with many themes in *Revealer*, to say nothing of the work’s overall agenda, the place to begin to gain orientation into Eleazar’s account of the longevity of the ancients is Maimonides’ *Guide*.

Maimonides discussed the challenge posed by this longevity in *Guide* II:47, a chapter that began with the observation that the “greater part of the prophecies of the prophets proceeds by means of parables.” Among the diverse forms of figurative speech employed by prophets, Maimonides called attention to exaggerations and hyperboles. The rabbinic sages had long ago proclaimed the existence of such tropes in scripture, he notes, when they said that “the Torah speaks in exaggerated language” (*leshon havai*).<sup>21</sup> By way of illustration, the Talmud summoned the description of “large cities with walls sky-high” in Deuteronomy (1:28). Maimonides mentions this verse and other passages, including Amos’ description of the “Amorite” as one “whose height was like the height of the cedars” (2:9). Understood according to their “precise” or usual meaning, such statements generate “incongruities.” For this reason, Maimonides thought it crucial to distinguish things uttered by prophets in a “hyperbolic and exaggerated” manner from statements intended in a “precise and exact” way.<sup>22</sup>

Yet drawing that distinction could be difficult, with the lifespans recorded in Genesis 5 proving a case in point. Maimonides raises them as an instance where an ascription of hyperbole might be considered, but

<sup>20</sup> For “Agudas Chasidei Chabad of United States v. Russian Federation, the Russian Ministry of Culture and Mass Communication, Russian State Library and Russian State Military Archive,” see Talya Levi, “Russia and the Stolen Chabad Archive,” *Georgetown Journal of International Law* 46 (2015), 915–946. The Schneerson Collection contains a library that was nationalized during the Bolshevik Revolution and the private archive of Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, which was looted by the Nazis and seized by Soviet troops.

<sup>21</sup> *Hullin* 90b; *Tamid* 29a.

<sup>22</sup> *Guide* II:47 (Pines translation, 407–409).

proves to be wrongheaded. As for the phenomenon itself, he suggests two explanations. Perhaps the exceptional longevity was the result of a regimen of good nutrition and the like—that is, traced to natural causes. Alternatively, it should be chalked up to a miracle. In all events, Maimonides adds a novel qualification: only those to whom the Torah ascribes extended lifespans enjoyed this dispensation while the other antediluvians “lived lives that had the natural and usual duration.”<sup>23</sup>

If Maimonides minimized the breach in the natural order posed by antediluvian longevity, some latter-day followers eliminated it by means of creative interpretation. Moses ibn Tibbon, son of the Arabic-to-Hebrew translator of the *Guide* Samuel ibn Tibbon, took it as a given that, as per Genesis 6:3, a human lifetime could last no longer than 120 years. His solution to the centuries ascribed to the antediluvians was to take them in reference to the “endurance of the kingdom” and ways of life that they established.<sup>24</sup> Put otherwise, the figures in question established regimes and political-social mores that endured for centuries after their founders’ demise. The later southern French writer, Levi ben Avraham of Villefranche, supplied a variation on this theme, suggesting that the *names* of each of the antediluvian “heads of clans” remained “stamped on the generations that came after” for the number of years stated.<sup>25</sup>

For his part, Eleazar matter-of-factly announces that the lifespans of the ancients “were similar to the lifespans of people today.” His elaboration is graphic. Humankind’s earliest exemplars were neither “radiant like the sun” nor “hard as bronze,” but were of “flesh and blood and of the seed of woman and her menstrual blood.” To explain the lifespans reported in the Torah, Eleazar ventures his idea that they reflect ancient sources that came to Moses in the form of “imprecise narrative hyperboles” (*ha-guzmot ha-sippuriyim ha-bilti medukdakim*). While adopting Maimonides’ teaching on hyperbolic figures in prophetic speech, Eleazar boldly applies it to seemingly straightforward factual accounts in Genesis. (This part of his exposition might be said to anticipate the claim in a recent work of Orthodox Jewish theology that sees the books of the

<sup>23</sup> *Guide* II:47 (Pines, 2:408). Not everyone found Maimonides’ ideas persuasive, with Nahmanides going so far as to call them “words of wind.” See his comment on Gen. 5:4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ma’amar ha-Taninim* in *Kitvei R. Moshe ibn Tibbon: Sefer Pe’ah; Ma’amar ha-Taninim; Perush ha-Azharot le-R. Shelomo ibn Gevirol*, ed. Haim (Howard) Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Yisrael (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 241.

<sup>25</sup> Levi also explained antediluvian longevity naturalistically as part of his involved discussion of the topic. See *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*, ed. Haim Kreisel (World Union of Jewish Studies, 2004), 318–326.



Tanakh as “works in which a degree of embroidery and rhetorical embellishment is layered upon a base of fact.”)<sup>26</sup>

There is more. Eleazar believes that Moses was aware of exaggerations in his sources, but that he chose to ignore them when recounting events “prior to the time of the flood” since they occurred so long before. By contrast, Moses did take pains to be precise when recording events nearer to his own day. In the continuation, Eleazar suggests that the casual approach taken by Moses to exaggerations in his sources reflected the reason for his inclusion of genealogical data in the Torah in the first place, which reflected a religious rather than historical aim. In particular, these data buttressed the “belief in creation” by informing readers that the time that elapsed between the world’s creation and the Israelites standing in the wilderness “was close to three thousand years.” Without saying so, Eleazar reprised another teaching of Maimonides, this one concerning seemingly “useless” stories in the Torah.<sup>27</sup> As an example, Maimonides cited “the branching out of tribes from Noah and of their names and dwelling places.” Justifying these genealogies, Maimonides explained that they in fact subserved a lofty purpose in keeping with the first of two aims that explained the presence of any story in the Torah: to supply a “correct notion of an opinion that is a pillar of the Law.” In the case of genealogies, they helped to undergird belief in the world’s creation at a time when it could easily have lapsed as primordial humanity diffused into multiple nations and tongues. Since Adam’s creation was contemporaneous with the world’s creation, humankind’s Adamic point of origin yielded an absolute chronology of world history. By buttressing awareness of this origin, the genealogies helped to instill the idea of the world’s creation.<sup>28</sup>

That Moses should have bent his narrative efforts in this manner may, Eleazar anticipates, be a cause for astonishment but he urges readers not to “view with contempt” the deployment of partially inaccurate chrono-genealogies as part of what Eleazar calls a “noble ruse” (*tabbula nikhbedet*) aimed at instilling belief in creation. Though the precise meaning of this possibly original coinage is far from transparent, readers of Ibn Tibbon’s translation of the *Guide* would easily recognize the term *tabbula* as one laden with meaning. Though generally referring to an arti-

<sup>26</sup> Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Maggid Books, 2020), 24.

<sup>27</sup> See Josef Stern, “Maimonides on ‘Useless Stories’ in the Bible” in *A Tribute to Hannah: Jubilee Book in Honor of Hannah Kasher*, ed. Avi Elqayam and Ariel Malachi (IDRA, 2018), 61–89.

<sup>28</sup> *Guide* III:50 (Pines, 2:613–614).



fice or device, in its Tibbonite usage the term could carry a connotation of dissembling with the needs and welfare of the multitude in mind. It was in this sense that *tabbula* (and its synonym *orma*) achieved notoriety in Maimonides' account of the "ruse" aimed at weaning Jews from the institution of animal sacrifice, which he depicted as a primitive form of ancient pagan worship, towards higher forms of devotion such as prayer and contemplation.<sup>29</sup> Eleazar adds the adjective "noble" to the noun *tabbula*, yielding a term with distinctly Platonic overtones that puts him in step with Maimonidean teachings on the need to accommodate limitations of ordinary believers. One can infer that the genealogies in Genesis, put in the service of buttressing belief in the world's creation, partake of the educative function of public prophets as described by Maimonides, whose mission requires them to develop ways of imparting true or necessary beliefs to the non-philosophical multitude.<sup>30</sup> On this point, however, Eleazar does not show his full colors.

*Text of Eleazar's Excursus:*

*"Their Lifespans Were Similar to the Lifespans of People Today"*<sup>31</sup>

The recounting of the hidden secrets extends up to this point.<sup>32</sup> Starting from here, it recounts the history of the generations as they were born and were known to the lord of prophets [Moses] by tradition. The name of the first man known in the world was Adam. He was 130 years old when he fathered a son after his likeness and image; namely, Seth (cf. Gen. 5:3), who was a righteous and wise man like him. Adam lived 800 more years after that, according to tradition, undoubtedly fathering more

<sup>29</sup> *Guide* III:32 (Pines, 2:525–531). A classic discussion is Shlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction: The Philosophic Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Guide*, lxxii–lxxiv.

<sup>30</sup> Aviezer Ravitzky, "Maimonides: Esotericism and Educational Philosophy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 300–323.

<sup>31</sup> The translation, which adds paragraphing and punctuation, is based on the original in RGVA, fol. 27v–28r, an annotated Hebrew version of which appears in my "Imprecise Hyperboles' and A 'Noble Ruse': Antediluvian Longevity and the Patriarchal Narratives of Moses in Eleazar Ashkenazi's *Revealer of Secrets*," *AJS Review* (forthcoming). The translation closely tracks an initial version prepared by Mr. Yisrael Gale.

<sup>32</sup> By calling his work "Revealer of Secrets," Eleazar indicates his aim to plumb the Torah's esoteric meaning. He deems the opening four chapters of Genesis to be especially replete with "hidden secrets" (*ha-sodot ha-tzefunot*; this phrase is mistranscribed, then further distorted by a typographical error, in Rappaport's edition of *Tzofenat Pa'neah*, 29). He mainly decodes the profundities in these opening chapters in terms of their allegorical signification.

sons and daughters, and so too did Seth.<sup>33</sup> Their lifespans at that time were similar to the lifespans of people today, no less and no more. At that time, they were not radiant like the sun nor hard as bronze, but were of flesh and blood and of the seed of woman and her menstrual blood, “just as we do here today” (Deut. 12:8). However, regarding those singular individuals who are mentioned, all of whom were righteous men of repute, it is possible, as tradition has it, that they lived exceptionally long lives by way of a miracle and wonder, just as you will find today, in our own times, a person who lives longer than any other individual from the people of his generation by way of a wonder.<sup>34</sup> But in truth, we have neither seen nor heard of an individual from among those in our generation prolonging life beyond 120 years.

The words of Abraham ibn Ezra imply that these elders were the heads of clans, not that they lived that long themselves.<sup>35</sup> The words of the master and guide [Maimonides] when he goes into these matters, such as the ages of these elders or the size of the body of the giants, imply that they are all imprecise hyperboles, similar to “[large cities with] walls sky-high” (Deut. 1:28), “[a tower with] its top in the sky” (Gen. 11:4), “we seemed like grasshoppers” (Num. 13:33), “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8, and so forth), “my little finger is thicker than my father’s loins” (I Kings 12:10; II Chron. 10:10), and “the earth split at the sound” (I Kings 1:40), and the like.<sup>36</sup> Rather, you should firmly grasp the fundamental rule that one ought not to believe that a thing [in scripture] that diverges from nature is according to its plain sense unless

<sup>33</sup> The fact that Adam lived 800 years after fathering Seth, as well as his begetting of additional sons and daughters, are both explicitly stated in Gen. 5:4. In this case, then, “tradition” apparently refers to information recorded in the scriptural record.

<sup>34</sup> One may surmise, here as elsewhere in *Revealer*, that Eleazar uses the term “wonder” (*pele*) in a way that refers to rare occurrences within the boundaries of the natural order.

<sup>35</sup> Eleazar uses the expression found in Levi ben Avraham (above, n. 25). The idea is absent from Ibn Ezra’s writings.

<sup>36</sup> As noted, Maimonides went out of his way to exclude the longevity of the ancients from the list of scriptural passages to be chalked up to hyperbole. Similarly, Maimonides presents the bedstand of the giant Og, said to be nine cubits long and four cubits broad “by a man’s forearm” (Deut. 3:11), as a text to be understood according to its *prima facie* sense, even as it seemingly yields a bed, and person, of impossible size. In that case, Maimonides’ solution was to read it literally but to understand that the Torah referred not to a giant’s cubit, but rather to one belonging to “an average person.” See *Guide* II:47 (Pines, 2:408). While one cannot rule out that Eleazar misread or mis-remembered Maimonides, other possibilities can also be entertained, including the prospect that he took Maimonides to “imply” something different from what the “words of the master and guide” stated on the surface.

it occurred by way of a wonder and miracle in a time of need. Even then, that wonder will not persist, but will revert to its natural state.<sup>37</sup> Consider Abraham and Sarah's astonishment and their laughter at their having a child at the ages of 90 and 100 (Gen. 17:17; 18:12) unless God were to make it happen by way of a miracle, to do the will of those whom He loves. Even so, Sarah never gave birth again afterwards. How someone who heard this would laugh! Would he not be astonished and deride [the notion of] these elderly people having a child in such advanced old age?<sup>38</sup> Noah, who was [still alive] at the time of Abraham and Sarah, fathered three sons when he was 500 years old (Gen. 5:32), and nobody laughed at that at all.

It seems that Moses, blessing be upon him,<sup>39</sup> passed over these imprecise narrative exaggerations prior to the time of the flood because of the length of time that had elapsed. As the time [that he was recounting] drew closer, he became more precise in his recounting of their affairs and years. It was not his intention to recount the detailed activity of each and every generation. Only with respect to the activity of the patriarchs who were prophets does he detail their deeds and is he precise regarding the truth of their affairs, like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their wives, children, and families. Consider, when he mentions Esau and Ishmael, how he refers to their chieftains in a jumble with extreme abridgment and their emplacements and happenings without detail until he comes to mention Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. At that point, he is precise regarding all the particulars of their activities. His intention was to limit the matter to the reception of what was imperative for his [the reader's] knowledge, the better to abridge the book's words as much as possible. Thus, his [Moses'] intention was not to narrate the entire history of the families from Adam until Noah or to detail their lives, but only to make known the number of years that had passed from [the time of] Adam until his own time. All this was required to instill belief in creation and to make it known that the time that elapsed between [the world] being

<sup>37</sup> *Guide* II:29 (Pines, 2:345): "A thing does not change its nature in such a way that the change is permanent"; *Guide* III:50 (Pines, 2:616): "It is impossible [...] that a miracle lasts permanently throughout the succession of generations." In his *Treatise on Resurrection*, Maimonides describes his determination to "flee" any understanding that requires "the changing of the order of creation" (*Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Yitzhak Shailat [Ma'aliyot, 1987–1988], 1:331 [Arabic], 362 [Hebrew]).

<sup>38</sup> An emended reading (adding "*lo*") yields: "How could someone not laugh and not be astonished...."

<sup>39</sup> This benediction, which is added to (and even used in place of) references to Moses several times in the passage, is omitted in what follows.

## TRADITION

created and the Israelites standing in the wilderness was close to 3,000 years.

Do not be amazed by or view with contempt this noble ruse by which he [Moses] intended to give credence to<sup>40</sup> belief in [the world's] creation. Consider that all calendars of the times and the signs<sup>41</sup> of each nation are precise from the time that their affairs and their books of wisdom became known, like the dating of the era of contracts from the time of Aristotle and Alexander [the Great],<sup>42</sup> the calendar of the Uncircumcised from the time of Jesus son of Miriam, and the calendar of the Ishmaelites—all of these are in agreement, as can be seen from accurate astronomical tables. This has been wholly constant from the time of David and Solomon until today. With respect to the age of the world, however, great confusion has befallen all of the nations, even as they all believe in creation. Do not the Uncircumcised date the world at more than 6,800 years while the Ishmaelites are in possession of ancient books of the Sabians dating [the world] back 5,000 years, since the ancients were perplexed about the creation of the world? See the third part of the *Guide [of the Perplexed]*, chapter 38, et cetera.<sup>43</sup> That is the reason why Moses was constrained to tell us the number of years that had passed from the time of creation until our time. This was a great fundament and a tremendous need. Therefore, his intention was not to be precise with respect to the years of each individual, but [to record them] only in a general manner. So it seems to me.

<sup>40</sup> *Le-ametz*; the original likely read *le-amet*.

<sup>41</sup> *Simanehem* (correcting Rappaport, who reads *zemanehem*). Just what is meant by this term in relation to all calendars is unclear. It may reflect Eleazar's application of the sort of mnemonics used to calculate Jewish festivals to the festivals of other nations.

<sup>42</sup> *Ta'arikh ha-shetarot*; that is, Seleucid-era dating beginning in 312 BCE around a dozen years after the death of Alexander the Great.

<sup>43</sup> The point of reference is unclear, although the obvious one is *Guide* III:29, where Maimonides notes that the Sabians (upon whom the Muslims rely, according to Eleazar) were not only "confused" about creation, but denied it altogether, believing "in the eternity of the world, since in their opinion heaven is the deity" (Pines, 2:515).