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**Title** “The Glory of God Is Intelligence”: A Note on Maimonides

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**Abstract** This article compares statements by the Jewish philosopher Maimonides and the Latter-day Saint prophet Joseph Smith concerning the corporeality of God.

# “THE GLORY OF GOD IS INTELLIGENCE”: A NOTE ON MAIMONIDES

Raphael Jospe

In a series of four lectures at Brigham Young University on the role of intellect in Judaism and the idea “that we serve God through the use of our minds,”<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner borrowed the university motto for his title essay, “‘The Glory of God Is Intelligence’: A Theology of Torah-learning in Judaism.” Neusner correctly and perceptively called attention to the parallel between the traditional Jewish emphasis on the centrality of developing the mind and learning—specifically learning Torah—and this seminal Latter-day Saint value, based on Joseph Smith’s statement in Doctrine and Covenants 93:36, “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth.”<sup>2</sup>

Neusner explains the parallel as follows:

Religions say the same thing in different ways. Let us ask, when Judaism states, “The study of Torah—revelation—outweighs all else,” and when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints says, “The glory of God is intelligence,” what is it that the two affirm about the nature of the human being and of God? The answer begins in the scripture *Let us make man in our likeness*. Judaism maintains that that part of man which is like God is not the corporeal, but the spiritual, aspect of man.

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1. Jacob Neusner, *The Glory of God Is Intelligence: Four Lectures on the Role of Intellect in Judaism* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), xii.

2. Revelation at Kirtland, Ohio, 6 May 1833.

Man is made in God's image. And that part of man which is like God is the thing which separates man from beast: the mind, consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Neusner's focus and discussion are, appropriately, based on the ideas of classical rabbinic Judaism. In the Middle Ages, however, we find an even closer parallel in the thought of Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). His *Guide of the Perplexed*, which aims at showing a student perplexed by the apparent contradictions between philosophical, scientific truth and the Torah, arising from a literalist reading of scripture and rabbinic tradition, opens with a discussion of the term *zelem* (Genesis 1:26–27), usually translated as the “image” in which God created the human being. In Maimonides' analysis, *zelem* refers not to a physical resemblance (for which there are other Hebrew words) but to “the natural form, I mean to the notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance and becomes what it is,”<sup>4</sup> in other words its essential nature. Maimonides continues: “That which was meant in the scriptural dictum, *let us make man in our image*, was the specific form, which is intellectual apprehension, not the shape and configuration.”<sup>5</sup>

Even more remarkable is another statement by Maimonides, part of which is almost exactly paralleled by Joseph Smith's phrase. The Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1 states: “Whoever has no regard for the honor of his creator is worthy of not having come into the world.” In his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Maimonides explains “the honor of his creator”:<sup>6</sup> “This means whoever has no regard for his intellect, for *the intellect is the glory of God. (w'al-`aql hu kevod adonai).*”<sup>7</sup>

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3. Neusner, *Glory of God*, 2.

4. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1:22.

5. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:22.

6. My thanks to my friend and learned colleague Professor Menachem Kellner for calling my attention to this passage in Maimonides' *Commentary to the Mishnah* and for suggesting that I follow up on it. He has translated the Maimonidean passage in question in his essay “Maimonides' Commentary on *Mishnah Hagigah* II.1: Translation and Commentary,” in *From Strength to Strength: Lectures from Shearith Israel*, ed. Marc D. Angel (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1998), 101–11.

7. Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, trans. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1964), 2:378, emphasis added. In the Judeo-Arabic original, Maimonides

In an earlier article, I discussed various similarities and differences between Jews and Latter-day Saints.<sup>8</sup> It seems to me that the parallel between statements by Maimonides and Joseph Smith is an instructive case in point. Jacob Neusner has written, also in a publication of Brigham Young University,<sup>9</sup> about rabbinic corporealist conceptions of God, which, he maintains by comparative citations, are similar to Latter-day Saint belief in a physical God.

Maimonides, of course, vehemently argued to the contrary, as is immediately evident from his understanding of the divine *zelem* in which humans were created as the essence or natural form and not as a physical resemblance. The whole thrust of Maimonides' work, both as a rabbinic codifier of *halakhah* (Jewish law) and as a philosopher, was to educate Jews away from corporealist beliefs and to sublimate biblical and rabbinic anthropomorphisms as metaphor. The third of Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles" (found in his Judeo-Arabic *Commentary to the Mishnah* and intended for a popular readership)<sup>10</sup> is "the negation of corporeality from [God], namely that this One is not a body."<sup>11</sup> The denial of any of these principles, Maimonides

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uses the Hebrew phrase *kevod adonai* for "the glory of God." The Arabic *'aql* and Hebrew *sekhel* can be translated as "intellect," "intelligence," or "reason." For a discussion of Maimonides' use of the expression *kavod*, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 189–98, 209–15.

8. Raphael Jospe, "Jews and Mormons: Similarities and Differences," in *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 401–21.

9. Jacob Neusner, "Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God," *BYU Studies* 36/1 (1996–97): 7–30; also his "The Case of Leviticus Rabbah," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, 27 March 1990*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 1:332–88.

10. Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin, chap. 10, 5:195ff. A partial English translation is found in Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 401–23.

11. For important studies of the "Thirteen Principles" and of contemporary Jewish problems with them, see Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006); and Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004).

claims, constitutes heresy and warrants removal from the Jewish community.

In his *Code* (written in Hebrew and also intended for a popular readership), Maimonides categorized as a heretic (*min*) a Jew, however pious in his or her observance of the Torah, who affirms that there is one God but that God has a body.<sup>12</sup> Later, in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (written in Judeo-Arabic and explicitly intended only for the intelligentsia), Maimonides asserted that a person who believes in a corporeal God is worse than an idolater.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Maimonides insisted not only that all biblical and rabbinic anthropomorphisms are to be understood metaphorically, but that the rabbis themselves affirmed and insisted on noncorporealist readings of these passages. If Neusner is correct that the Talmudic rabbis believed in a corporeal God,<sup>14</sup> then Maimonides was a phenomenally successful ideological revolutionary in the history of Judaism. If Maimonides is correct, that his view was always the true (albeit esoteric) stance of the rabbis, then by his own standards he was a great educator, but no ideological revolutionary.

The consistent and virtually universal Jewish affirmation today, and for hundreds of years, of noncorporealist conceptions of God and metaphorical understanding of biblical and rabbinic anthropomorphisms are testimony to Maimonides' success, one way or the other, in sublimating Jewish belief.

The remarkable parallel between the statements of Maimonides and Joseph Smith—"Intellect is the glory of God" and "The glory of God is intelligence," respectively—is thus, once again, an example of the fundamental similarities and differences between Jews and Latter-day Saints. But the meaning, for virtually all Jews since Maimonides (and many before him), radically differs from Latter-day Saint conceptions of God.

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12. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Repentance 3:7.

13. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:36.

14. See Neusner, "Conversation in Nauvoo," 25.