Maimonides is celebrated in Jewish intellectual history both as a bold innovator and vigorous champion of rabbinic tradition. The tensions implied by this combination emerge in his reading of Job in The Guide of the Perplexed III.22-23, particularly where he seems to take issue with the Torah itself. Though somewhat of an overstatement, this apparent disagreement reveals much about Maimonides’ endeavour to find his own voice within the Hebrew literary tradition.

Maimonides’ analysis of Job

Against the backdrop of his own philosophical discussion of divine providence (Guide III.17-18), Maimonides opens his analysis of the story of Job by defining it as a ‘parable (mathal, i.e., fictional tale) intended to set forth the opinions of people concerning providence’. He immediately goes on to say that although this specific story is fictional, it addresses a distressing – and recurring – reality, ‘that a righteous and perfect man … [is] stricken – without his having committed a sin entailing this – with great and consecutive calamities with respect to his fortune, his children and his body’ (Guide III.22, p. 486). Within the biblical tale, this account

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of Job’s suffering (Job 1:2) sets the stage for the ensuing dialogues with three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who endeavour to rationalize his predicament (Job 3-31). For Maimonides, each of these fictional characters represents another philosophical view, which he constructs by selecting key verses from their speeches, resulting in the following four positions:

1. Job concludes from his suffering that God ignores human affairs, allowing the righteous to suffer the same fate as sinners: ‘It is all one; therefore I say, “He destroys the blameless and the guilty”’. When suddenly a scourge brings death, He mocks as the innocent fail’ (Job 9:22-23).

Unlike their unfortunate companion, the friends each seek a way to preserve the notion of divine providence notwithstanding Job’s suffering.

2. Eliphaz maintains that God rewards and punishes people according to their actions and thus concludes that Job’s suffering must be deserved: ‘Your wickedness is great and your iniquities have no limit’ (22:5). To reconcile this argument with Job’s manifest righteousness, Maimonides points to an earlier speech (4:17-18) in which Eliphaz argues that no human being – even the most righteous – can ever be absolutely blameless before God and that ‘the deficiencies for which we deserve punishment … are hidden from our perception’ (Guide III.23, p. 493).

3. Bildad was willing to accept Job’s innocence by suggesting that his suffering may have been intended to increase his reward in the next world: ‘If you are blameless and upright, He will protect you … Though your beginning be small, in the end you will grow very great’ (8:6-7).

4. Zophar argues that God’s actions need not conform to human conceptions of justice or reason since they are the product of His unfathomable will: ‘Would you discover the mystery of God? Would...