

correct beyond doubt. They are conclusions drawn from the plain meaning of the text.

The precise date of the messianic advent cannot be known. But I am in possession of an extraordinary tradition that I received from my father, who in turn received it from his father,²¹³ going back to our early ancestors who were exiled from Jerusalem, as the prophet testified: *and the exiles of Jerusalem that are in Spain* [Obad. 1:20].²¹⁴ The tradition is that a covert indication lies in the prediction of Balaam to the future restoration of prophecy in Israel. Incidentally,²¹⁵ it may be stated that there are other verses in the Torah that contain cryptic indications in addition to their simple meaning. For example, the word *rdu* in the remark of Jacob to his sons: *go down . . . there (rdu shamah)* [Gen. 42:2] has the numerical value of 210 and contains a hint as to the length of Israel's stay in Egypt.²¹⁶ Likewise, the statement of Moses our teacher: *Should you, when you have begotten children and children's children and are long established in the land . . .* [Deut. 4:25]²¹⁷ embodies a reference to the duration of Israel's stay in the land of Israel, from the time of their arrival to the exile in the time of Yehoiakin, that is, 840 years, corresponding to the numerical value of the word *vnoshantem*²¹⁸ (and are long established). We find many others like them.²¹⁹ By this method of cryptic allusion it was transmitted to me that Balaam's statement: *Jacob is told at once (ka'et), yea Israel, what God has planned* [Num. 23:23],²²⁰ contains a veiled hint as to the date of the restoration of prophecy to Israel. The sentence means that after the lapse of an interval equal to the time that passed from the six days of creation to Balaam's day, seers will again tell Israel what God has planned. Now Balaam uttered his prediction in the thirty-eighth year after the Exodus, which corresponds to the year 2485 after the creation of the world, for the Exodus took place in the beginning of the year 2448.²²¹ It is doubtless true that the reappearance of prophecy in Israel is one of the signs betokening the approach of the messianic era, as is stated: *After that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy. . .* [Joel 3:1].²²² This is the most reliable tradition concerning the advent of the Messiah. I call it reliable, although I have admonished against it, and strictly prohibited blazoning it abroad, lest some people deem it unduly

postponed. I have already apprised you concerning it, but God best knows what is true.²²³

Your statement that the time of the advent of the Messiah is indicated by Jeremiah, who said: *It is a time of trouble for Jacob, but he shall be delivered from it* [Jer. 30:7],²²⁴ is incorrect. For it must refer to the war of Gog and Magog, which will take place some time after the oncoming of the Messiah.²²⁵ Some of the supposed signs, such as the Gate of Cerson and others, are very doubtful.²²⁶ Some are wrongly ascribed to the sages, while others owe their origin to figures of speech and enigmatic sayings which should not be literally taken.

IV

You write that a certain man in one of the cities of Yemen pretends that he is the Messiah.²²⁷ As I live, I am not surprised at him or at his followers, for I have no doubt that he is mad, and a sick person should not be rebuked or reproved for an illness brought on by no fault of his own. Neither am I surprised at his votaries, because they were persuaded by him owing to their sorry plight, their ignorance of the importance and high rank of the Messiah, and their mistaken comparison of the Messiah with ibn Mahdi,²²⁸ whose rise they are witnessing. But I am astonished that you, a scholar who has carefully studied the doctrine of the rabbis, are inclined to repose faith in him.²²⁹ Do you not know, my brother, that the Messiah is a very eminent prophet, more illustrious than all the prophets after Moses? Do you not know that a false pretender to prophecy is to suffer capital punishment for having arrogated to himself unwarranted distinction, just as the person who prophesied in the name of the idols is put to death? For God says: *But any prophet who presumes to speak in My name an oracle which I did not command him to utter, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet shall die* [Deut. 18:20].²³⁰ What stronger evidence exists than his very pretensions to be the Messiah that he is a liar?

How odd is your remark about this man, that he is renowned for his meekness and a little wisdom. Do these characteristics make him a Messiah? You were beguiled by him because you have not considered

the preeminence of the Messiah, the manner and place of his appearance, and the marks by which he is to be identified. The Messiah indeed ranks above all prophets after Moses in eminence and distinction, and God has bestowed some gifts upon him that he did not bestow upon Moses, as may be gathered from the following verses: *He shall sense the truth by his reverence for the Lord* [Isa. 11:3]; *The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him* [Isa. 11:2]; *Justice shall be the girdle of his loins* [Isa. 11:5].²³¹ God has conferred upon him six appellations in the verse: *For a child has been born to us, a son has been given us. And authority has settled on his shoulders. He has been named "the Mighty God is planning grace; the Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler" (Pele, Yoetz, El, Gibbor, Aviad, Sar-shalom)* [Isa. 9:5].²³² He continues to magnify him, and declares: *You are My son; I have fathered you this day* [Ps. 2:7].²³³ All these statements demonstrate the superiority of the Messiah to all the descendants of Adam.

Transcendent wisdom is a *sine qua non* for inspiration. It is an article of our faith that the gift of prophecy is vouchsafed only to the wise, the strong, and the rich. Strong is defined as the ability to control one's passions.²³⁴ Rich signifies wealthy in knowledge. Now if we dare not put trust in a man's pretensions to prophecy if he does not excel in wisdom, how much less must we take seriously the claims of an ignoramus that he is the Messiah. That the man in question is untutored is evident from the order he issued to the people to give away, as you state, all their possessions for eleemosynary purposes. They did right in disobeying him, and he was wrong inasmuch as he disregarded the Jewish law concerning almsgiving. Scripture says: *But of all that a man owns, be it man or beast or land of his holding, nothing that he has proscribed for the Lord may be sold or redeemed* [Lev. 27:28]. The rabbis explain, in their comment on this verse, "part of all that he owns, but not all that he has."²³⁵ The sages accordingly set bounds to the bounty of the beneficent in an explicit ruling, which reads: "He who is inclined to be liberal with the poor, may not part with more than a fifth of his possessions."²³⁶ There is no doubt that the reasoning that led him to claim that he is the Messiah induced him to issue a command to his fellowmen to give away their property and distribute it to the poor. But then the affluent would become destitute and vice

versa. According to his ordinance it would be necessary for the *nouveaux riches* to return their recently acquired property to the newly impoverished. Such a regulation, which would keep property moving in a circle, is the peak of folly.

As to the place where the Messiah will make his first appearance, He informs us that he will first present himself only in the land of Israel as is stated: *He will suddenly come to His temple* [Mal. 3:1].²³⁷ As to the how of his advent, nothing at all will be known about it before it occurs. The Messiah is not a person concerning whom it may be predicted that he will be the son of so-and-so, or of the family of so-and-so. On the contrary, he will be unknown before his coming, but he will prove by means of miracles and wonders that he is the true Messiah. In allusion to his mysterious lineage, God says: *Behold a man whose name is the Shoot, and who shall shoot up* [Zech. 6:12].²³⁸ Similarly Isaiah, referring to his arrival, implies that neither his father nor mother, nor his kith and kin will be known, for he will grow, by his favor, like a sapling, like a root out of arid ground [Isa. 53:2].²³⁹ After his manifestation in Palestine, Israel will be gathered in Jerusalem and the other cities of Palestine. Then the tidings will spread to the East and to the West until it will reach Yemen and those beyond you in India, as we learn from Isaiah: *Go, swift messengers, to a nation far and remote, to a people thrust forth and away . . . which sends out envoys by sea, in papyrus vessels upon the water* [Isa. 18:2].²⁴⁰ The redemption will not be reversed so that it will appear in distant lands first, and ultimately reach Palestine.²⁴¹

What the great powers are that all the prophets from Moses to Malachi ascribe to the Messiah may be inferred from various statements in the twenty-four books of Scripture. The most significant of them is that the report of his advent will strike terror into the hearts of all the kings of the earth, and their kingdoms will fall; neither will they be able to war or revolt against him. They will neither defame nor calumniate him, for the miracles he will perform will frighten them into complete silence. Isaiah refers to the submission of the kings to him in the verse: *Kings shall be silenced because of him* [Isa. 52:15].²⁴² He will slay whom he will by the word of his mouth, none will escape or be saved, as is written: *He shall strike down a land with the rod of*

his mouth [Isa. 11:4].²⁴³ Revolution and war in the entire world, from East to West, will not cease at the beginning of the messianic era, but only after the wars of Gog and Magog, as was indicated by Ezekiel.²⁴⁴

I do not believe that this man who has appeared among you possesses these powers. You know that the Christians falsely ascribe marvelous powers to Jesus the Nazarene, may his bones be ground to dust, such as the resurrection of the dead and other miracles. Even if we granted this for the sake of argument, we should not be convinced by their reasoning that Jesus is the Messiah. For we can bring a thousand proofs from Scripture that it is not so even from their point of view.²⁴⁵ Indeed, will anyone arrogate this rank to himself unless he wishes to make himself a laughing stock?

In sum, had this man acted presumptuously or disdainfully, I would deem him worthy of death.²⁴⁶ The truth seems to be that he became melancholy and lost his mind. In my opinion, it is most advisable, both for your good and for his, that you put him in iron chains for a while, until the gentiles learn that he is demented. After you have blazoned and bruited abroad the intelligence concerning this man among them, you may release him without endangering his safety. If the gentiles gain knowledge about him after he has been locked up by you, they will taunt him and pronounce him irrational, and you will remain unmolested by him. If you procrastinate until they learn of this affair of their own accord, you will most likely incur their wrath. Remember, my coreligionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins God has hurled us into the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us, as God has forewarned us: *Our enemies themselves shall judge us* [Deut. 32:31].²⁴⁷ Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase, and hate us as much as they.²⁴⁸ Therefore, when David king of Israel of blessed memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, envisaged the future tribulations of Israel, he bewailed and lamented their lot only in the kingdom of Ishmael, and prayed on their behalf for their deliverance in the verse: *Woe is me, that I live with Meshekkh, that I dwell among the clans of Kedar* [Ps. 120:5].²⁴⁹ Note the distinction between Kedar and the children of Ishmael, for the Madman is of the lineage of the children of Kedar, as they readily admit.²⁵⁰ Daniel also alludes to our humiliation and degradation *like the dust in*

threshing [2 Kings 13:7],²⁵¹ suffered only at the hands of the Arabs, may they be speedily vanquished, when he says: *And it made fall to the earth some of the host, yea of the stars, some of which it trampled* [Dan. 8:10].²⁵² Although we are dishonored by them beyond human endurance, and have to put up with their fabrications, we yet behave like him of whom the prophet said: *But I am like a deaf man, unhearing, like a dumb man who cannot speak up* [Ps. 38:14].²⁵³ Similarly, our sages instructed us to bear the prevarications and lies of Ishmael in silence. They found it in a cryptic allusion to this attitude in the names of his sons, Mishma, Dumah, and Massa,²⁵⁴ which have been interpreted to mean *listen, be silent, and endure*. We have acquiesced, both young and old, to inure ourselves to humiliation, as Isaiah instructed us: *I offered my back to the floggers, and my cheeks to those who tore out my hair* [Isa. 50:6].²⁵⁵ All this notwithstanding, we do not escape this continued maltreatment and pressure, which well-nigh crush us. No matter how much we suffer and elect to remain at peace with them, they stir up strife and sedition, as David describes: *I am all peace; but when I speak, they are for war* [Ps. 120:7].²⁵⁶ Most certainly therefore if we start trouble, and claim power from them absurdly and preposterously, we surely give ourselves up to destruction.

I shall now succinctly narrate several episodes to you, subsequent to the rise of the Arab kingdom, from which you will derive some benefit.²⁵⁷ One of these is the exodus of a multitude of Jews, numbering hundreds of thousands from the East beyond Isfahan, led by an individual who pretended to be the Messiah.²⁵⁸ They were accoutred with military equipment and drawn swords, and slew all those that encountered them. According to the information I received, they reached the vicinity of Baghdad. This happened in the beginning of the reign of the Omayyads.²⁵⁹

The king then said to all the Jews of his kingdom: "Let your scholars go out to meet this multitude and ascertain whether their pretensions are true, and he is unmistakably your expected one. If so, we shall conclude peace with you under any conditions you may prefer. But if it is dissimulation, I shall wage war against them." When the sages met these Jews, the latter declared: "We belong to the children of the district beyond the River."²⁶⁰ Then they asked them: "Who instigated

(ג) ועל עסקי המשיח, שהגיעו אליכם דברים משמי - לא כך היה המעשה, ולא במזרח היה באספהאן, אלא בתימן עמד איש - לדבר זה¹ כמו שנים ועשרים שנה - ואמר שהוא שליח מישר דרך לפני מלך המשיח², ואמר להם שהמשיח שם בארץ תימן, ונתקבצו לו³ אנשים הרבה יהודים וערביים, והיה מסוכב⁴ בהרים. וכתבו לי אחינו שבתימן כתב גדול, יודיעו לי⁵ משפטו ודרךו, וחדושי⁶ שחדש להם בתפלות, ומהו⁷ אומר, ואמרו שקבר ראו מנפלאותיו כך וכך, ושאלו לי על זה. והבנתי מכל הדברים שאותו האיש העני - חסר דעת, וירא שמים⁸ היה⁹ אבל אין חכמה בו¹⁰ כלל, וכל שאומר¹¹ שעשה או שנראה על ידו - שקר וקזב. ופחדתי על היהודים ששם¹², וחברתי להן כמו שלש קנדריסין¹³ בענין המשיח וסמניו וסמני הזמן שינראה בו, והזהרתי אותם שיזהירו לזה האיש שמא יאבד ויאבד קהלות¹⁴. כללו של דבר - לאחר שנה נתפש, וברחו כל הנלוים עליו. ואמר לו מלך מן⁹ הערביים שתפשו: מה זה עשית¹⁵? אמר לו: אמת עשיתי, ובדבר ה' עשיתי. אמר לו: מה המופת¹⁶ שלך? אמר לו: תחתך ראשי ואני אחיה. מיד אמר לו: אין לך אות גדול מזה, ונדאי אני וכל העולם אאמין ואדע¹⁷ כי שקר נחלו אבותינו. מיד הרגו לאותו עני, תהא מיתתו כפרה לו ולכל ישראל, ונענשו¹⁸ היהודים ברב המקומות ממון. ועד עתה יש שם חסרי הדעת¹⁹ יאמרו: עתה יתיה ויעמד. כך היו הדברים. ואם שמעתם שהגיע כתבי לפאס - שמא אותן הדברים ששלחתי לתימן העתקו והגיעו לפאס.

1. נ"א (מ'לדבר'): יש לדבר היום. 2. נ"א (מ'מלך'): המלך המשיח. ונ"א (מ'לפני'): למשיח. 3. נ"א: אליו. 4. נ"א: מסכב. 5. א: לו. 6. נ"א: וחדושו. 7. נ"א: ומה שהוא. 8. נ"א: השם. 9. נ"א: לית. 10. נ"א (מ'חכמה'): בו חכמה. 11. נ"א: מה שאומרים. 12. נ"א: אשר שם. 13. נראה שצ"ל: שלושה. נ"א (מ'שלוש'): שלוש ארבע קונדרסים. ונ"א: שלוש או ארבע קונדרסין. ונ"א: קונדרים. ע' לעיל עמ' ע"ו. 14. נ"א: הקהילות. 15. נ"א: שעשית. 16. נ"א (מ'מה'): ומה האות. 17. נ"א (מ'אמין'): נאמין ונדע. 18. נ"א: וענשו. ולפי"ז נראה שיש לקרוא לעיל: הרגו לאותו עני. 19. נ"א: דעת. 20. נ"א (מ'בענין'): שלכם. ונ"א: שלכם

שורה 3 ואמר שהוא שליח מישר דרך וכי - ע' לעיל עמ' ע"ז הערה 2.
שורה 19 ואם שמעתם שהגיע כתבי לפאס - בכ"י אוקספורד 2425 מצויה איגרת מזויפת, ששלח, כביכול, הרמב"ם לפאס, ובה מדובר על משיח שעמד באספהאן, ר' להלן עמ' תרצ"ג. אם אמנם זיוף זה קדום - ולא נעשה בעקבות דברי הרמב"ם באיגרתנו - ייתכן שהוא הוא אשר הגיע שמעו לפרובנס, והרמב"ם לא ידע עליו.