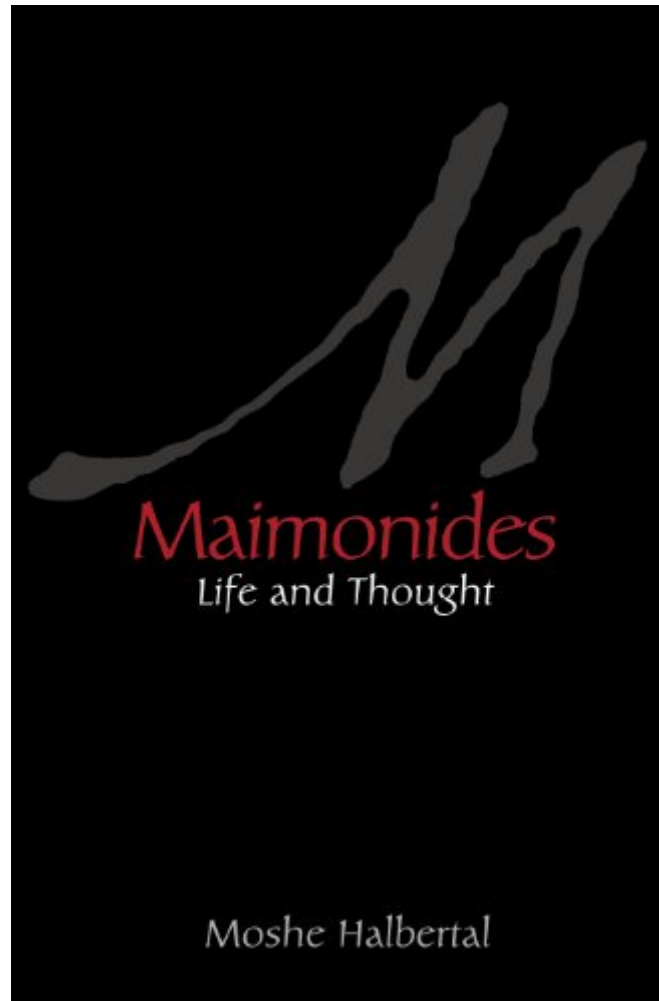




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Maimonides: Life And Thought



Synopsis

Maimonides was the greatest Jewish philosopher and legal scholar of the medieval period, a towering figure who has had a profound and lasting influence on Jewish law, philosophy, and religious consciousness. This book provides a comprehensive and accessible introduction to his life and work, revealing how his philosophical sensibility and outlook informed his interpretation of Jewish tradition. Moshe Halbertal vividly describes Maimonides's childhood in Muslim Spain, his family's flight to North Africa to escape persecution, and their eventual resettling in Egypt. He draws on Maimonides's letters and the testimonies of his contemporaries, both Muslims and Jews, to offer new insights into his personality and the circumstances that shaped his thinking. Halbertal then turns to Maimonides's legal and philosophical work, analyzing his three great books--Commentary on the Mishnah, the Mishneh Torah, and the Guide of the Perplexed. He discusses Maimonides's battle against all attempts to personify God, his conviction that God's presence in the world is mediated through the natural order rather than through miracles, and his locating of philosophy and science at the summit of the religious life of Torah. Halbertal examines Maimonides's philosophical positions on fundamental questions such as the nature and limits of religious language, creation and nature, prophecy, providence, the problem of evil, and the meaning of the commandments. A stunning achievement, Maimonides offers an unparalleled look at the life and thought of this important Jewish philosopher, scholar, and theologian.

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Customer Reviews

In Cordoba, Spain, is a statue of Moses ibn Maimon, Maimonides, for he was born in that Andalusian city during the cosmopolitan Golden Age of Sefarad. The common language was Arabic, even when written in Hebrew letters. The science of experimentation was yet centuries to come but Aristotle and Galen and other Greek thinkers, translated by Muslim scholars, yet offered logic and some understanding of nature, structure, function, and causality. The philosophical Maimonides offered science and knowledge as a key religious path leading to awe and love or compassion. He attacked superstitions, talismans, and causative incantations and any anthropomorphic conception of God, even in use of personal pronouns, as de facto idolatry. He took the Babylonian Talmud and the body of subsequent traditions and created essentially a practical, categorized moral and legal handbook, the Mishneh Torah, separating core teachings from doubtful or obsolete interpretations. Moreover, his Guide to the Perplexed, because of its ambiguity, became a religious map with four interrelated paths whose philosophical, skeptical, mystical, or orthodox approach would depend on an individual's education and provisional predilection. Maimonides had a deep understanding and respect for people's psychological needs, even if contrary to scientific logic. Author and scholar Moshe Halbertal's book provides a penetrating look into the mind of this great religious thinker. While some of the sections discussing the Mishna Torah become tedious and turbid by its detail legal analysis and historic comparisons of wisdom, the later examination of the Guide to the Perplexed is stunningly clear and comprehensive. The book examines Maimonides' views on evil and its personal, legal, and biological forms; on destiny of individuals and of species; on cosmic origins; on miracles versus logic and knowledge; on divine punishment and reward for governance and social order versus personal spiritual developmental gains and blocks; and on love and awe as steps toward perfection and experiencing the divine. The medieval mind and social outlook is revealed yet the reader also finds modern thinking and connections to the later Jewish philosopher, Spinoza. I grew up hearing about Maimonides without actually knowing anything about his great writings. Halbertal fills that void with an insightful book. Maimonides now become relevant to my own religious pursuits.

Professor Halbertal has offered an intriguing book on Maimonides. The book itself can be divided into three parts: his biography, his legal work and The Guide. As to the biographical part, it gives a clear overview of Maimonides' life. At times, it becomes reductive, but one can figure that out as one reads it. His part on the law is the best part of the book. Professor Halbertal teaches law and it shows through clearly as he explains the originality of Maimonides' thought in this area as Maimonides seeks to reorganize concisely for philosophic purpose. The weakest part of The book is his section on The Guide. The Guide is a maze. Maimonides made it so intentionally. One should attempt to read it as Maimonides requires. Instead, professor Halbertal provides his own grid consisting of four types of analysis. They are: a skeptical reading, a mystical reading, a conservative reading and a philosophic reading. These types of reading only go so far since they are not Maimonides' way of reading. They also tend to simplify a richness found in the text itself which is undeserved but understandable. Perhaps, my biggest complaint about this section on The Guide concerns Philosophy. Though I do not believe that Professor Halbertal meant it, the text comes off as though Maimonides provided a doctrine. To me, it seems that Maimonides was teaching a way to think scientifically and not to accept things on authority including himself. It is clear enough that Maimonides is a radical thinker going to the roots. It also appears to me that he seeks those who may surpass him in careful thinking. This review should not be read disrespectfully. It is clear that Professor Halbertal has great love and respect for Maimonides. He shows great learning and I have learned much from this book. For those interested, I would urge finding additional readings concerning The Guide's literary character as a means to enter the text. Here one may begin to see how Maimonides writes to unpuzzle it. There is nothing like reading The Guide except perhaps Torah as Maimonides suggests.

Moshe Halbertal has written the definitive account of the Rambam. Halbertal has placed all of his works in the context of the Rambam's own biography which in itself is fascinating. I did not appreciate that the Rambam was a refugee from a young age, and this feeling of being an 'outsider' had an important influence on his works. Halbertal has an incredible capacity to explain esoteric and difficult language in clear and simple language. Philosophic concepts are easily understood. For example his explanation of 'will' and 'wisdom' (the world was created ex nilo as opposed to being eternal) and what the broader implications this has for the Rambam's thought is made easily understandable to the lay person. At the end of the book, one is left with a real appreciation of the Rambam's brilliance and his attempt to develop a new philosophic approach to Rambam. However, at the same time, he leaves it still open as to who the real Rambam was and leaves us with 4

possible approaches. The old simplistic approach to the Rambam advanced by the likes of Leo Strauss who thought that there was a great chasm between the Rambam of the Mishneh Torah and the Rambam of Moreh Nevuchim strikes me as remarkably unsophisticated after reading this book.

Of the four or five books I've read devoted to Maimonides this is the most comprehensive and the best of the lot. While scholarly it is quite readable for the intelligent reader. Most illuminating is Halbertal's treatment of the esoteric, of Maimonides' approach to Jewish mysticism, proposing possible answers to questions I've had for some time and compounded with each new read until now. Halbertal is a great mind and a beautiful writer, clear and precise.

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