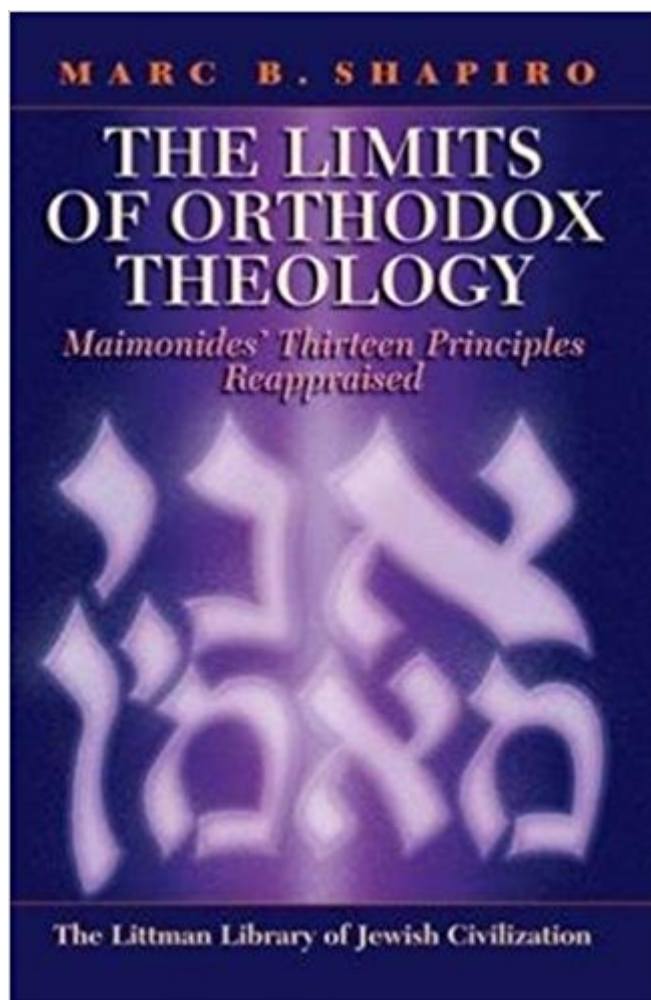


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# Limits Of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised (Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization)



## Synopsis

It is commonly asserted that Maimonides' famous Thirteen Principles are the last word in Orthodox Jewish theology. This is a very popular notion, and is often repeated by scholars from all camps in Judaism. Yet such a position ignores the long history of Jewish theology in which Maimonides' Principles have been subject to great dispute. The book begins with a discussion of the significance of the Principles and illustrates how they assumed such a central place in traditional Judaism. Each principle is then considered in turn: the reasons underlying Maimonides' formulations are expounded and the disputes that have arisen concerning them are discussed in detail. Marc B. Shapiro's authoritative analysis makes it quite clear that the notion that Maimonides' Principles are the last word in traditional Jewish theology is a misconception, and that even Maimonides himself was not fully convinced of every aspect of his formulations. Although structured around Maimonides' Principles, this book can also be seen as an encyclopedia of traditional Jewish thought concerning the central issues of Jewish theology. The diversity of opinion in Jewish tradition on such issues as God, Creation, and the Revelation of the Torah is sure to surprise readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'Inspiring and breath-taking ... highly recommended.' Yisrael Dubitsky, Association of Jewish Libraries Newsletter 'Marc Shapiro puts an explicit contemporary context on this remarkable collection of sources that disagreed with one part or other of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles ... By

showing the extent to which past authors disagreed with those Principles, Shapiro seeks to debunk assertions by contemporary writers that place those Principles at the core of Orthodox belief ... the work is astonishing in its range. Shapiro uses his daunting biographical abilities and his considerable skill as a writer to present his material-well-known and obscure-cogently and entertainingly. To the reader interested in the limits of the theological imagination of Jews, it is not likely to be soon rivalled.' Gidon Rothstein, AJS Review 'A courageous and meticulously researched book that straddles two worlds-that of abstract scholarship and of practical religious vision ... The real tour de force of the book is the enormous amount of material he musters to make his case.' Bradley Shavit Artson, Conservative Judaism 'Combines remarkable erudition with clarity of vision.' Menachem Kellner, Edah Journal 'His research is exhaustive, almost encyclopedic, and it is highly convincing ... his aim is truly constructive and his tone is passionately concerned.' Erin Leib, Jerusalem Report 'This exhaustive yet readable study ... is astonishingly well researched ... a polemical work of considerable erudition, which will find a broad audience.' Harvey Belovski, Jewish Chronicle 'Ground-breaking ... As Shapiro so clearly demonstrates in this landmark work, the need is not only for theological discussions, but for theology.' Miriam Shaviv, Jewish Quarterly 'Shapiro's book is doubly remarkable: it is at the same time a commentary on Maimonides' Thirteen Principles, and a successful summary of the central themes of Jewish theology, offering deep insight into what the blurb calls traditional Jewish thoughtA".' Stefan Schreiner, Judaica 'Articulate and thought-provoking ... This book is no less important on social than on scholarly grounds. Shapiro presents his stance with great passion, giving readers the sense that he is involved in a truth spreading mission. His passion appears to me justified and legitimate, since abstract theology is indeed an essential element in the shaping of current Orthodox society, particularly in Israel but also outside it. In sum: this book provides scholars with a justification for a view that most of them had already sensed and accepted and opens up to a broader intellectual public a path to understanding Jewish philosophy.'

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Marc B. Shapiro holds the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Scranton, Pennsylvania. A graduate of Brandeis and Harvard universities, he is the author of *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884-1966* (1999), also published by the Littman Library, and is editing the collected writings of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, the first volume of which appeared in 1998, and the second in 2003.

The title of the book represents a straw man that the author sets up to challenge the idea that the 13 principles of Maimonides, as presented in the introduction to *Perek Chelek*, are somehow the be-all and end-all of Jewish "philosophy" and a set-in-stone test of one's ideological purity as an observant Jew. The fallacy of the initial premise is known to those "in the know" - ie educated Jews who know quite well that the 13 principles have both a lot of wiggle room and are not true barrier

material. Nevertheless, the analysis of divergent opinions as to most of the principles is first rate; The author relies on a full array of classic rabbinic material along with more recent academic writings to tame and temper the Master's writings and to show how and why they've always drawn criticism. Combined with the classic "Perfect Faith" by Bleich, this book would work as the core of a worthwhile course on the subject - either at the college level or within an ambitious synagogue adult education curriculum

Maimonides asserted that anyone who rejected his Thirteen Principles was a heretic who has removed himself from the Jewish people- yet most of these Principles were at one time or another rejected by leading rabbis both before and after Maimonides. For example, Shapiro writes that even the view that "the Torah in our hands is exactly the same as the Torah that Moses presented to the Children of Israel" has been widely disputed. To be sure, pre-Reform Jews universally accepted the Torah as Divine and as roughly the same as the original text. But Shapiro asserts that historically there have been minor deviations in Torah scrolls, and that even today nine letters in Yemenite Torahs differ from those in those used by the rest of Jewry. Shapiro also cites numerous medieval commentators' assertions that some non-halakhic portions of the Torah, although true and divinely inspired, were written by Joshua or Ezra rather than Moses. Shapiro also asserts that some of the Principles were arguably contradicted even by Maimonides' own later writings. A minor quibble: Shapiro's discussion would have been clearer if he had put Maimonides' own language in his book as an appendix.

I can't add much that hasn't been said in the other 5 reviews already posted. This is a serious scholarly (very very well footnoted etc) treatment of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles discussing what "traditional" (well recognized/accepted by the orthodox Jewish community) commentators (as well as Maimonides in other writings) have said about them. Worthwhile reading for those concerned with theology as defined by the 13 Principles. As another poster said, I too would have liked the original text of the 13 Principles to have been printed in the book for handy reference.

Great book! Would recommend to anyone. Great erudition and clearly written. I liked that Shapiro didn't go off interpreting the material (unlike Kellner), and only presented it for the reader to understand. His best book no doubt.

MIND-BLOWING BUY IT NOW YOU WON'T REGRET IT IN A MILLION YEARS ;)

Excellent a must read!

In one of his major works, Maimonides included his list of thirteen principles which he considered the basic tenets of the Jewish faith. Deniers of these principles, in his words, are heretics. Contrary to common opinion, throughout the ages many respected Jewish scholars disagreed with Maimonides. In fact, Maimonides himself was inconsistent in his writings in this regard. Shapiro lays these arguments out clearly and logically with considerable footnoting and referencing, occasionally boldly challenging the writings of several modern day thinkers. Additionally, Shapiro touches upon several related issues such as the difference between authorities in Jewish law (poskim in halachah) and Jewish theologians, bemoaning the dearth of the latter group of thinkers in modern Orthodoxy. I read the book from cover to cover in several hours (which is very unusual for me) and subsequently decided to read it a second time, devoting more time to a concurrent reading of the cited sources in their original texts. Shapiro's writing style is light enough to enjoy but heavy enough to convince even the most conservative (Orthodox) readers of his points. During my read, I couldn't help but wish Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (perhaps the foremost expert on Maimonides of our generation) were alive to react to the issues raised by Shapiro, particularly the apparent inconsistencies in Maimonides' works. To my knowledge, this is the only text devoted solely to this topic and joins other groundbreaking works by the same author. Scholars and lay people interested in Maimonides or Jewish theology will read this text.

This book demonstrates that the Thirteen Articles of the Jewish Faith as formulated by Maimonides are not as clearly defined or accepted in traditional writings as many believe. It is a fascinating and important analysis.

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