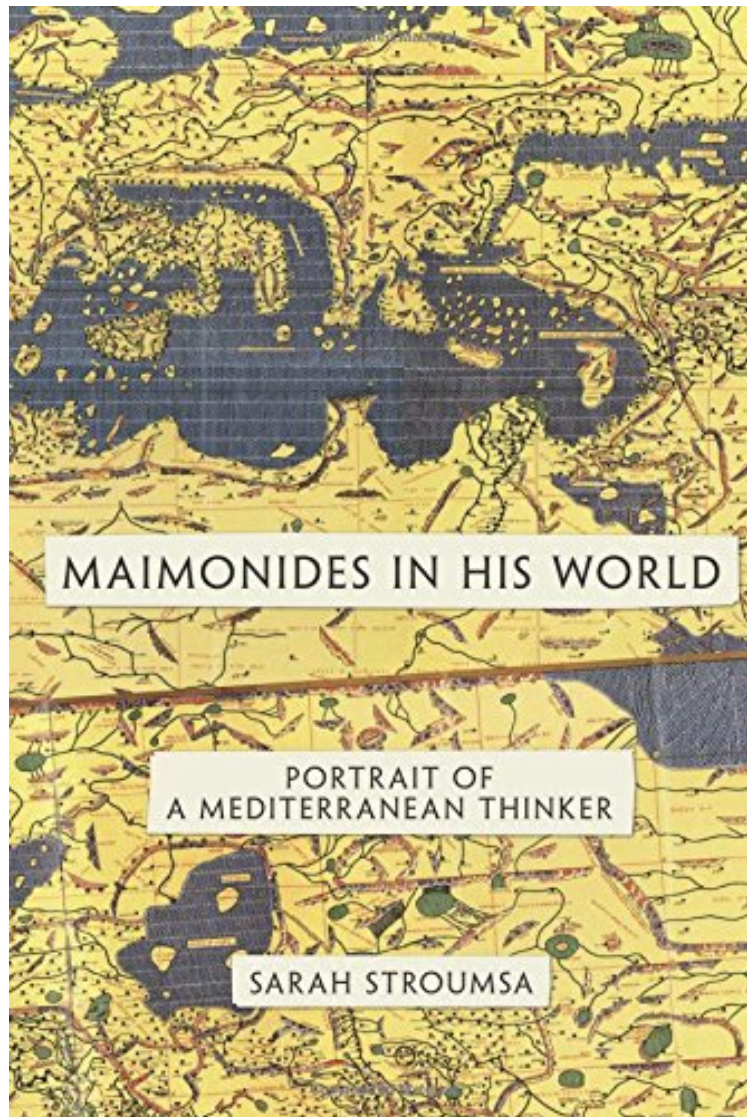


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Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)

Sarah Stroumsa

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Sarah Stroumsa : Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker (Jews, Christians, and

Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World):

30 of 30 people found the following review helpful. This is an excellent evaluation of Maimonides' thinking. By Israel Drazin Sarah Stroumsa, a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel, agrees with S. Pines, the translator of Moses Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, and writes that she "assumes medieval Jewish philosophy to have been shaped by the surrounding culture and impregnated by it." Stroumsa calls Maimonides "cosmopolitan," a person who belongs to more than one subculture, who interacted with each with "insatiable intellectual curiosity." She shows how the Maimonidean concepts fit the philosophies expounded in the areas that Maimonides inhabited, in Spain, Morocco and Egypt. While this idea might bother some xenophobic and ultra-nationalistic Jews who insist that all Jewish ideas are original and inspired by God, it would not have bothered Maimonides (1138-1204) himself, for Maimonides wrote that the truth is the truth no matter what its source. Maimonides mentioned frequently that he read everything he could find on a wide variety of subjects, including paganism, and that he based his ideas in large part upon the teachings of the ancient pagan Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Aristotle also influenced the general Muslim Mediterranean culture where Maimonides lived; therefore Stroumsa's thesis is certainly correct. She presents her thesis clearly and interestingly and with a wealth of detail. Stroumsa discusses Maimonides' views on subjects such as paganism, life after death, resurrection, Jewish heresies, human perfection, history, astronomy, astrology, medicine, the philosopher as a political leader and other subjects. For example, Stroumsa states that Maimonides agreed with his contemporary Muslim philosopher Averroes (1128-1198), as well as with Abraham ibn Ezra and other Jewish thinkers who lived before him, that the Torah speaks in different ways, saying different things, to the three levels of society: the uneducated multitude, the theologians and the philosophers. Theologians rely on Scripture and seek to rationalize the Bible with selective ideas from science, but only those discoveries that support their view of Scripture. Maimonides considered Saadiah Gaon a theologian. Philosophers, such as Averroes and Maimonides - as well as earlier Jewish thinkers such as Philo and Abraham ibn Ezra - rely on science and explain the Bible based on reason; if Scripture seems unreasonable - such as the story of a snake talking to Eve - they interpret the biblical episode as a parable. Stroumsa compares these ideas with those of Muslims who lived near Maimonides. Another example is Stroumsa's discussion of Maimonides' view of medicine. Maimonides heaped abuse in strong language on people who relied on God to cure them rather than use medicines. He called such talk "ravings." Yet, he felt that doctors must know more than medicine. Thus he down-graded and insulted the philosophical qualities of two "philosophers" by saying that they are "only a physician." Stroumsa shows how other philosophers of the area had the same ideas. Maimonides was an accomplished doctor. Ibn Abi Usaybi'a said Maimonides "could cure the heavenly bodies from their chronic ailments," meaning remove the spots off of the moon. Yet, Stroumsa writes that he was reasonably cautious and preferred "to work with other physicians (generally Muslims)" and "would not rely on his own opinion alone." Stroumsa recognizes that because of his immense intellect, Maimonides was an elitist; however, he and many Muslim thinkers of his time were convinced that some fundamentals ought to be taught to people belonging to all levels of society. Thus, he wrote the famous thirteen principles of Judaism for the general population. His main idea is that people should know that God has no human body. This now generally accepted principle conflicted with the general Jewish view of the time, and Maimonides was severely criticized for teaching it. Thus, Stroumsa offers her readers a clearer presentation of Maimonides' thoughts on a wide variety of subjects by showing how his teachings mesh with those of his contemporaries.

While the great medieval philosopher, theologian, and physician Maimonides is acknowledged as a leading Jewish thinker, his intellectual contacts with his surrounding world are often described as related primarily to Islamic philosophy. Maimonides in *His World* challenges this view by revealing him to have wholeheartedly lived, breathed, and espoused the rich Mediterranean culture of his time. Sarah Stroumsa argues that Maimonides is most accurately viewed as a Mediterranean thinker who consistently interpreted his own Jewish tradition in contemporary multicultural terms. Maimonides spent his entire life in the Mediterranean region, and the religious and philosophical traditions that fed his thought were those of the wider world in which he lived. Stroumsa demonstrates that he was deeply influenced not only by Islamic philosophy but by Islamic culture as a whole, evidence of which she finds in his philosophy as well as his correspondence and legal and scientific writings. She begins with a concise biography of Maimonides, then carefully examines key aspects of his thought, including his approach to religion and the complex world of theology and religious ideas he encountered among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even heretics; his views about science; the immense and unacknowledged impact of the Almohads on his thought; and his vision of human perfection. This insightful cultural biography restores Maimonides to his rightful place among medieval philosophers and affirms his central relevance to the study of medieval Islam.

"Stroumsa considerably broadens our understanding of Maimonides's Graeco-Arabic sources. . . . Stroumsa does a fine job in bringing to life the Mediterranean setting in which Maimonides encountered this ideal, and tried to direct it towards the heart of Judaism. She challenges scholars of Jewish and Muslim thought to look beyond the artificial

confines of their disciplines, and raises intriguing questions about the fluid intellectual boundaries of Jewish identity."--Carlos Fraenkel, Times Literary Supplement"Fascinating."--David Nirenberg, London of Books"The book is well written, presenting its dense material in an accessible way. Though there are many quotations in Arabic, nothing essential is left untranslated or unexplained. Stroumsa makes her points forcefully and persuasively, positioning Maimonides as a thinker of great importance to Muslims as well as to Jews."--Pinchas Roth, AJL Newsletter"Sarah Stroumsa's erudite and accessible Maimonides in His World . . . is an exceptional work of critical scholarship that remains readable and relevant beyond the ivory tower. Indeed, its true significance might be found among a more general readership. . . . In the future conversations that are sure to ensue about Maimonides' place in contemporary Jewish life, Stroumsa's portrait will be a most welcome, indispensable guide."--Shai Secunda, Talmud Blog"Stroumsa is an intellectual historian whose mastery of her material is impressive on many levels. . . . Maimonides in His World . . . is a book that will be considered required reading for anyone who works on Maimonides' life and thought. Stroumsa's scholarship is much too good for anyone in the field to ignore."--Kenneth Seeskin, Shofar"The book delves into even more detail to discover many of Maimonides' innovations and the way in which they were enabled. Critical to Stroumsa's reading of Maimonides is her insistence that it is impossible to understand any of his texts without taking into account the scholarship of the Arabo-Islamic thinkers of his day."--David Shasha, Huffington Post"[T]he methodological underpinnings of Stroumsa's approach are rock-solid and eminently worthwhile. Stroumsa is never strident or lacking in critical self-reflection. For every bold position she stakes out, she raises the contra-indications and gives them their due. In trying to understand the personal biography, the intellectual, the theologian, the scientist, and the halakhic authority, Stroumsa has conceived the richest portrait yet of 'The Great Eagle.'"--Ronald C. Kiener, Journal of the American Oriental Society"Stroumsa brings her strengths as a scholar of Arabic thought to bear on Maimonides' biography and life's work."--Marc Herman, Sephardic HorizonsFrom the Inside Flap"Stroumsa paints a richly documented, nuanced portrait of Maimonides as a bold, open thinker whose sometimes revolutionary conception of Judaism draws freely from the multiple philosophical, theological, scientific, and ideological currents of his contemporary Mediterranean world. This intellectual biography covers the full range of Maimonides' writings, from law and philosophy to polemics and medicine, exposing novel and unexpected sources, for example, in Islamic theology and Almohad thought. Stroumsa points scholars in new directions for future study of the greatest Jewish figure of the Middle Ages."--Josef Stern, University of Chicago"A stimulating, absorbing read. Stroumsa is a valuable and unique voice in a lively complex of debates about this extraordinary thinker. Her fundamental point--that Maimonides must be understood as a well-read and active participant in a diverse multiconfessional culture--is emphatically confirmed by sheer accumulation of data and clever argument."--Everett K. Rowson, New York University"This is a serious piece of scholarship filled with many very fine insights. Sarah Stroumsa is a leading scholar in Judeo-Arabic studies, and one of those whose writings I value most."--Steven Harvey, Bar-Ilan UniversityFrom the Back Cover"Stroumsa paints a richly documented, nuanced portrait of Maimonides as a bold, open thinker whose sometimes revolutionary conception of Judaism draws freely from the multiple philosophical, theological, scientific, and ideological currents of his contemporary Mediterranean world. This intellectual biography covers the full range of Maimonides' writings, from law and philosophy to polemics and medicine, exposing novel and unexpected sources, for example, in Islamic theology and Almohad thought. Stroumsa points scholars in new directions for future study of the greatest Jewish figure of the Middle Ages."--Josef Stern, University of Chicago"A stimulating, absorbing read. Stroumsa is a valuable and unique voice in a lively complex of debates about this extraordinary thinker. Her fundamental point--that Maimonides must be understood as a well-read and active participant in a diverse multiconfessional culture--is emphatically confirmed by sheer accumulation of data and clever argument."--Everett K. Rowson, New York University"This is a serious piece of scholarship filled with many very fine insights. Sarah Stroumsa is a leading scholar in Judeo-Arabic studies, and one of those whose writings I value most."--Steven Harvey, Bar-Ilan University