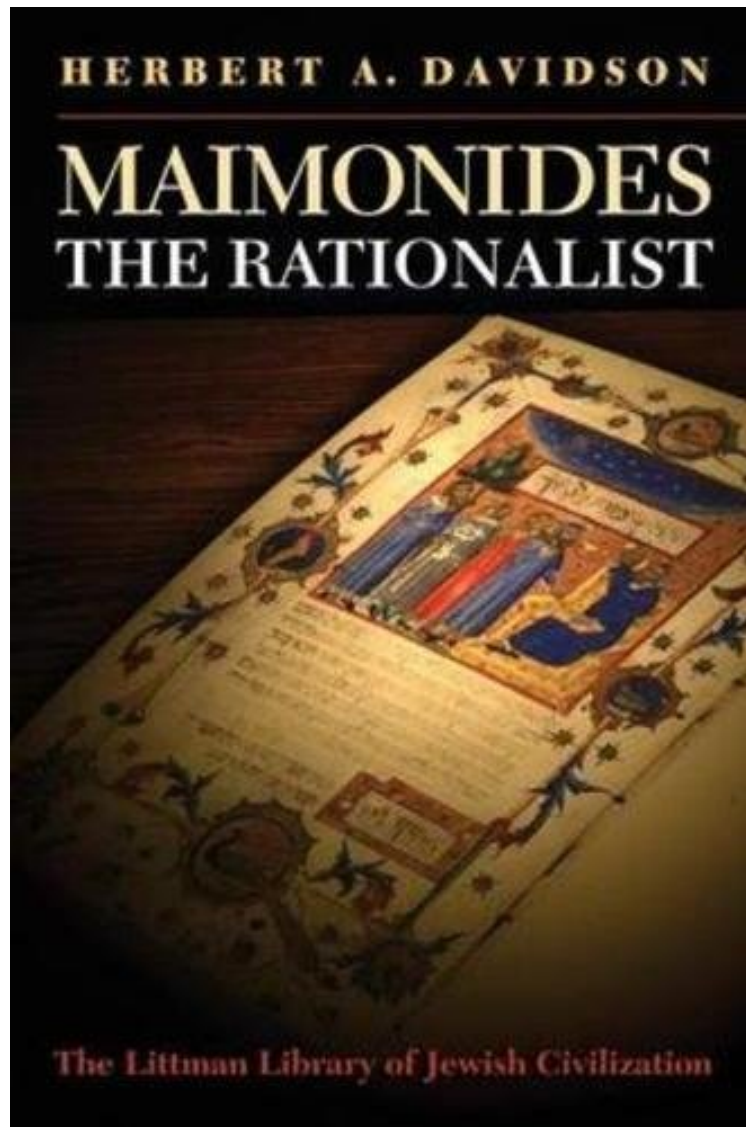


## Maimonides the Rationalist (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

*Herbert A. Davidson*

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**Herbert A. Davidson : Maimonides the Rationalist (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Maimonides the Rationalist (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization):

1 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A Thoroughly Modern Maimonides By Rebecca Weiss We ordered this book to be reviewed within the pages of our magazine, the Jewish Review of Books, alongside two other recent books reexamining Maimonides and what he has to say to us today. We couldn't get it from the publisher in time, but came to the rescue. The reviewer, Professor Lawrence Kaplan, writes in part, "As Davidson notes, Maimonides' proofs

of the existence, unity, and incorporeality of God, dependent as they are on obsolete medieval scientific premises, have "turned to sand." Yet Maimonides' method of dialectical argumentation, his scrupulous setting forth of the competing views on theological issues and weighing their pros and cons in the absence of certain knowledge, which constitutes the bulk of the Guide, still has much to teach us. When Josie Ashkenazi, the protagonist of Dara Horn's recent boldly titled novel, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, is kidnapped in Cairo and held captive by Muslim terrorists with only a French translation of the Guide for a companion, she becomes absorbed by Maimonides' dialectical discussion of the various opinions on divine providence. I doubt if his proofs for God's existence would have similarly held her attention." (Complete review available on the Jewish Review of Books website with free registration.)

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Provides a wide-ranging overview of the various aspects of Maimonides worldview

By Ben Rothke

Aside from biblical Moses, no single individual has had more of an impact on Judaism than Moses Maimonides. 800 years after his death, the works of Maimonides are still studied and analyzed, and highly relevant. Maimonides wrote extensively, and his three major works are: the Commentary on the Mishnah, *Mishneh Torah*, and the most important work of medieval Jewish philosophy, and arguably all Jewish philosophy: *The Guide of the Perplexed*. As a scholar, his influence touches every aspect of Judaism. Be it law, philosophy, ethics, and more. One aspect of his that permeated all of his writing was his rationalist world-view.

In *Maimonides the Rationalist* (Littman ISBN-13: 978-1904113584), author Herbert Davidson, Professor Emeritus in the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures department at UCLA, provides a comprehensive outline of the various aspects of Maimonides worldview. Of the 9 chapters in the book, 6 of them have been previously published, with a few of them going back decades. Of the following, chapters 3, 5 9 are new:

1. The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation
2. The First Two Positive Divine Commandments
3. Maimonides' Knowledge of the Philosophical Literature in his Rabbinic Period
4. Maimonides' Eight Chapters and Alfarabi's *Fusul Muntazaa*
5. Maimonides' Knowledge of the Philosophical Literature of his Later Period
6. Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge
7. A Problematic Sentence in *Guide for the Perplexed*
8. Maimonides' Ethical Systems
9. Maimonides the Rationalist

The book provides the reader with a good understanding of the multi-faceted scholar that Maimonides was. Not just a scholar and philosopher, Maimonides was a physician, scientist, and leader of the Jews of Egypt. An interesting point Davidson makes is that while Maimonides generally preferred to take a rationalist perspective, he didn't necessarily reject the possibility of miracles (which are clearly not a rational possibility), rather he maintained that the intellectual elite, in contrast to the general populace, tried to minimize rather than maximize divine intervention in the world. In a number of the essays, Davidson shows how a number of Maimonides proofs of God's existence, unity, and the nature of his incorporeality were based on medieval scientific arguments that have since been disproved. This does not minimize the importance of his writings, given that the bulk of the writings are still highly relevant. Davidson notes that the Arabic-Aristotelian picture of the universe, which Maimonides embraced as the most philosophically and scientifically reputable, lent itself to his rationalist enterprise. The author closes with the observation that Maimonides' rationalist enterprise was valiant and intriguing. But the philosophical and scientific pillars on which it rested have since crumbled. He notes that a new marriage of a wholly rational picture of the universe with traditional Jewish religious thoughts would seem to be possible only, oxymoron it may be, thought a study act of faith. The book provides the reader with a wide-ranging overview of the various aspects of the often complex worldview of Maimonides. For the serious reader, *Maimonides the Rationalist* will certainly enhance their understanding, and increase their appreciation of one of the greatest Jewish minds in history.

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. This is a thought-provoking look at Maimonides, the great philosopher

By Israel Drazin

Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) criticized most people in his monumental *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:51 when he wrote that "He who thinks about God and talks about him at length without scientific knowledge...does not truly talk about God and think about Him. For what he has in his imagination and talks about...is merely a figment of his imagination." Maimonides was convinced that Bible study alone cannot help people understand God. God can only be understood by studying and knowing the laws of nature, the sciences, and using scientific knowledge to become all that a person is capable of becoming and helping other people. Religion based on faith without using intellect is not real religion. Humans are distinguished from animals, vegetables, and inanimate objects by their intellect, and they have a duty, if they really want to be human, to use it, and not sit passively in pietistic contemplation, inadequate study, and prayer. Know God

Maimonides and others emphasized that the first biblical command is to know God, and since it is impossible to know God's essence, people must learn how He acts. This is the meaning of Moses' experience in Exodus 33:17-23 where the Israelite leader beseeched God to reveal information about Himself. God responded that people can't fathom the divine, but they can see His back after He passes; meaning, the impact of the laws of nature that God created. Maimonides felt that the patriarch Abraham also understood God by studying the laws of nature. Maimonides wasn't alone in having this opinion. There are rabbinical Midrashim, elaborating stories about the Bible, which depict Abraham discovering God by studying the heavens.

Creation

Herbert A. Davidson, a highly respected professor at UCLA and author of other books about Maimonides, takes the side of scholars who maintain that Maimonides did not ascribe to the currently held view that God created the world out of nothing, but agreed with Aristotle that God formed the world out of preexisting matter. This view doesn't threaten religion. It was the understanding of many rabbis, Christian clergy, Muslim Imams, and

philosophers. The Bible itself reports, before describing God's acts, that the world was "unformed" in Genesis 1:2. Maimonides also states that God didn't form the world over a six day period. He can do so instantaneously, and this is what He did. This was also the view of many ancients. It is like a farmer who sows seeds at one time, but the seeds yield their fruit on different days. Philosophy and Law But, not surprisingly, many rabbis, other clergy, and scholars, sticking with the tradition they were taught, usually as children, are uncomfortable with such ideas and dislike Maimonides' emphasis on philosophy. They claim that Maimonides's true opinions are found in his legal code, the Mishneh Torah, which outlines all of the commandments that the rabbis found either explicit or implicit in the Torah. Remarkably, some go so far as to assert that Maimonides wrote his philosophical Guide for ignorant Jews who hadn't the sense to understand Torah. However, Davidson points out, as many others recognized before him, that the legal code is filled with Maimonides' philosophy, in every book. Non-Jews Many of these same people also think that a pious God-fearing Jew should not read non-Jewish writings. Maimonides was appalled at such a misguided elitist notion. He wrote in his Shemonah Perakim, his medical books, and other places: "Listen to the truth from whoever speaks it." Maimonides revealed that he didn't always identify the non-Jewish sources of some of his ideas because if he named the non-Jewish source it would lead narrow-minded readers to assume that the statement is something evil. Thus not only is it wrong to contend that one should not read non-Jewish writings, Maimonides felt it is an obligation to read truth wherever it is found. Davidson points out that many of the Greek and Muslim ideas that Maimonides incorporated into his philosophy are ideas that Maimonides felt God wants people to know and do. How much did Maimonides know? Davidson's contribution in this respect is to analyze Maimonides writings during various periods of his life. He shows, in his opinion, how Maimonides read some non-Jewish philosophical works later in life and did not incorporate these ideas until that time. He says that Maimonides did not read Aristotle, his favorite philosopher, when he wrote his early writings. He also contends that Maimonides' view of Kalam, Muslim theology, which Maimonides disliked, was flawed because he hadn't read enough on the subject when he described it. Davidson also shows which books Maimonides undoubtedly read. Some readers may disagree. They might argue that the absence of references, explicit or implicit, of philosophers in his early writings was due to his desire to be generally more subtle about philosophical ideas in his early rabbinical writings. Ethics Davidson appears to understand, as I do, that Maimonides felt that a true intellectual does not make decisions based on morality, but on a careful analysis of acts, although he does not use my sources. As I point out in "Maimonides teaches that intellectuals should not be moral" in my website [...], Aristotle's and Maimonides' famous "Golden rule" is a simplistic guide that can help the general population, who are unaccustomed or unable to reason-out problems. The Golden Rule of always taking the middle path, except regarding modesty and anger, is an easy guide for them. But intellectuals should analyze all the facts of every situation, and they will see that it frequently makes good sense to avoid the middle path. Davidson writes that Maimonides prefers "'rational virtues,' that is, the `conceiving of intelligible thoughts that give rise to correct views.'" He also writes that Maimonides "repeatedly belittled moral virtue." Other Views Davidson makes it clear, as do many but not all scholars, that Maimonides did not believe that angels and demons exist, the word "angel" refers to a force of nature, such as a wind or rain. God certainly doesn't need helpers. Maimonides also reads many parts of the Bible as allegory, for it is unnatural, for example, to imagine a speaking serpent or mule, or a fish swallowing a human who survives in its belly for several days. He also was unafraid to say that the ancient rabbis, who did not receive their ideas from God, lived in a culture that had little scientific information, did not know everything, and were frequently wrong. Thus some rabbinical ideas are legally binding, while others are simply advice, and still others wrong. However, it must be remembered that despite his great intelligence and deeper understanding, his "meticulousness in performing the ritual acts was rooted in a deep-seated attachment to Jewish tradition." Summary Davidson contributes much to the understanding of the Great Eagle, as Maimonides was called, for Maimonides soared high above the general population in intelligence. Davidson's especial contribution is his analysis that perhaps Maimonides did know as much in his youth as he did in later life when he had opportunity to read more. He notes correctly that many of Maimonides' ideas are based on the science of his day, a science that we know was wrong, such as the existence of a sphere called the active intellect that influences the earth. Davidson concludes from this fact that therefore much of Maimonides' ideas crumble when the false scientific underpinning is swept aside, and his philosophy is out of date. Some readers may disagree with this conclusion. They may realize that Maimonides' intelligent ideas do not need to stand on ancient science. They may say that today's thinkers will agree with the Great Eagle that people should rely on their intellect not faith, beliefs, or traditions; that people have a duty to understand nature to improve themselves and society; prophecy is not a divine communication, but the use of a person's intellect, a phenomenon that can and indeed should exist today; demons and angels do not exist; everyone, of every religion, and creed must be respected and listened to; superstition should be shunned; and people should develop themselves and avoid decisions based on simplistic moral notions, but on a careful and thorough analysis of facts.

Maimonides was not the first rabbinic scholar to take an interest in philosophy, but he was unique in being a towering figure in both areas. His law code, the Mishneh Torah, stands with Rashi's commentary on the Babylonian Talmud as one of the two most intensely studied rabbinic works coming out of the Middle Ages, while his Guide for the

Perplexed is the most influential and widely read Jewish philosophical work ever written. Admirers and critics have arrived at wildly divergent perceptions of the man. We have Maimonides the atheist or agnostic, Maimonides the sceptic, Maimonides the deist, Maimonides the Aristotelian, the Averroist, or proto-Kantian. We have a Maimonides seduced by the blandishments of 'accursed philosophy'; a Maimonides who sowed the seeds that led to Spanish Jews' loss of faith and mass apostasy and who was therefore responsible for the demise of Spanish Jewry; a Maimonides who incorporated philosophical elements into his rabbinic works and wrote the Guide for the Perplexed not to propagate doctrines to which he was personally committed but in order to rescue errant souls seduced by philosophy; a Maimonides who was the defender of the faith and defined the articles of Jewish belief for all time. In his own estimation, Maimonides was neither exclusively a dedicated philosopher nor exclusively a devoted rabbinist: he saw philosophy and the Written and Oral Torahs as a single, harmonious domain, and he believed that this view was similarly fundamental to the lives of the prophets and rabbis of old. In this book, Herbert Davidson examines Maimonides' efforts to reconstitute this all-embracing, rationalist worldview that he felt had been lost during the millennium-long exile.

'Not surprisingly, this book is a major contribution to Maimonidean studies and to the history of medieval Jewish philosophy generally.' Aleph 'Davidson contributes much to the understanding of Maimonides ... recommended for all students of Maimonides and religious thought.' Stephen D. Benin, Religious Studies About the Author Herbert A. Davidson is Professor of Hebrew Emeritus and Research Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of *The Philosophy of Abraham Shalom*, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation, and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, and *Moses Maimonides, The Man and His Work*, and editor of a medieval Hebrew translation of Averroes' *Middle Commentary on the Isagoge and Categories* (and translator of the English edition of this).