

Moses Maimonides (1138-1204)

- Known in Hebrew as Moshe ben Maimon or the Rambam (an acronym)
- Regarded as the greatest Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages
- Influenced by:
 - Aristotle’s works
 - Neoplatonism, such as the doctrine that we can only grasp what “the One” is not
 - Muslim commentaries on Aristotle
- Both widely admired and widely criticized:
 - Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) agreed that we cannot know what God is, only what God is not, but drew more moderate conclusions than Maimonides
 - Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677) joined Maimonides in rejecting the view of divine providence as God’s actively taking care of individuals, rewarding them and punishing them, but criticized him for accepting the creation of the world and the possibility of miracles
 - Isaac Newton (d. 1726) studied Maimonides extensively; agreed that God is absolutely one and transcendent, also that Scripture contains riddles accessible only to the intellectual elite
- Still influential as a proponent of negative theology and an interpreter of rabbinic Law

Life and Works

Born in Cordova (Spain) in 1138, educated in Torah and Talmud by his father. His family left Cordova to avoid forced conversion, made a home in Morocco, then had to move again because of a controversial rabbinic ruling by Maimonides' father. They eventually settled in Cairo, where Maimonides studied medicine and served as court physician to Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt and its territories. He refused to earn a living from his learning in Judaic law. Maimonides died in Cairo in 1204.

Among the Writings of Maimonides:

- A treatise on logic
- Ten medical treatises
- Many works on rabbinic law, esp. the *Mishneh Torah* ("The Law in Review," ca. 1185), 14 volumes written in Hebrew, systematizing and showing the rational purposes of Talmudic and post-Talmudic laws
- The *Guide of the Perplexed* (completed 1190), written in Arabic but widely circulated in Hebrew translations
- A *Treatise on Resurrection* (published 1191), written in answer to the charge that he
- did not believe in physical resurrection

The Disputed Role of Dogma

What, if Anything, Must a Jew Believe?

- According to rabbinic Judaism, anyone whose mother was a Jew was also a Jew. The emphasis was on following the Law, not having specific beliefs
- Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishnah* represented a significant change. He formulated 13 principles that Jews ought to believe, including God's existence, unity (oneness), and incorporeality, plus the preeminence of Moses among the prophets and the future coming of the Messiah
- The 13 principles were controversial at the time and still are. Most Orthodox Jews take them to be obligatory. On the opposite side, liberal Jewish thinkers sometimes reject the very idea of religious dogma as a corruption of Judaism. Some argue that *awe* of God is central to Judaism, but awe is possible for someone who rejects the idea of God as a supernatural being
- Debate continues about whether Maimonides himself accepted some of the principles, at least in the form ordinary people would interpret them. Examples: divine retribution for evil and the resurrection of the dead

The Guide of the Perplexed: Problems of Interpretation

- The work is written for religious believers with extensive education in both philosophy and the Law, *not* for “the vulgar” or mere “beginners in speculation”
- The *Guide’s* overall purpose (p. 152) is to relieve the confusion of educated believers about whether they must renounce the very foundations of the Law in order to follow their intellects
- Maimonides emphasizes both the limits of *all* human understanding of divine things and the additional limits of “the vulgar.” He argues that some truths cannot be fully understood (only “glimpsed”), and other truths are presented in Scripture in ways that only well educated intellectuals can comprehend. The same passage, then – a “riddle” or parable – is often designed to be interpreted differently by “the multitude” and “the perfect” (p.155)
- The problem of *esotericism*: to what extent does the *Guide* itself have a concealed message? According to Leo Strauss, the *Guide’s* hidden message is that philosophy and revealed religion are in irreconcilable conflict. Others argue that Maimonides saw only a conflict between philosophy and a naïve, excessively literal reading of Scripture

The Central Idea: God Is Utterly Unique

- We can know *that* God exists, *that* God is “one,” *that* God is incorporeal, etc., but we cannot know *what* God is. God is the ultimate *Other* – far more alien than any of the creatures of science fiction
- Hence the general problem with learning about God from reading Scripture: *The Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man* (p. 162)
- Thought Experiments
 - Try imagining (forming a mental image of) something incorporeal. If you insist, on the basis of Genesis, that humans are made in God’s “image,” explain how we can be made in the image of anything with no physical attributes whatsoever
 - Try merely describing something incorporeal
 - If you say that this being is *good*, meaning by “good” some nonphysical quality, you are implying that it actually has qualities. This is false, because *God is “one,”* not a composite or “multiplicity”
 - Even if all you say is “God exists,” or “God is a being,” you are using the word “exists” (or “being”) equivocally – because the meaning of these words comes from your experience with created things, but all created things are composite and exist only contingently (or “accidentally”), not *necessarily*