

Book Review

**Manekin, Charles H. and Daniel Davies  
eds., *Interpreting Maimonides:  
Critical Essays*<sup>1</sup>**

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The medieval intellectual culture is a vast landscape inhabited by towering minds like Moses Maimonides. Maimonides was a complex and prolific intellectual figure. As a Jewish scholar, he was conversant in Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic languages and was well at home with intellectual skirmishes with his Jewish and Islamic counterparts. The range of Maimonides' intellectual depth and breadth cannot be overstated as shown by his impact on the writings and debates which shaped the cultural atmosphere of Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. This book presents a way to critically engage the medieval thinker from various perspectives over a span of 14 chapters (an introduction and 13 essays) that comprise this opus.

In his portrait of Maimonides, Herbert A. Davidson ("Maimonides and the Almohads") depicted the Jewish thinker as a mind well steeped in the writings of Averroes, Avicenna as well as al-Ghazali not to mention the well revered *Corpus Aristotelicum*. Very much like Aristotle himself, Maimonides was a person whose fascination with science was matched only by his passion for and interest on other cerebral pursuits. This he displayed at a very tender age leading to a career dedicated to learning medicine, mathematics, and astronomy along with the studies of the Jewish religious and legal texts. Among his very early works which sealed his scholarly reputation were the *Book of Commandments* and the *Misneh Torah*. An important aspect of Maimonides' oeuvre was the ease and seamless maneuver with which he moved from theology to philosophy and other secular sciences. His magnum opus, *Guide of the Perplexed* is the best demonstration of this intellectual dexterity. Maimonides viewed the relationship between theology and other disciplines, especially, philosophy, in terms of their organic unity, a position he shared with the almohads, his purported influencers.<sup>2</sup> The close affinity between Maimonides and the

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 266pp.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

almohads led some scholars to infer the possibility of a kind of an intellectual transference between them, with the almohads at the helm. Davidson challenged this view by acknowledging some degree of almohads' influence but only to a point Maimonides was willing to accommodate it. This is a point similarly endorsed by Y. Tzvi Langermann ("Al-Ghazālī's Purported "Influence" on Maimonides: A Dissenting Voice in Trending Scholarship") in his discussion of Maimonides' intellectual kinship with al-Ghazali. One can indeed make a case for an al-Ghazalian influence on Maimonides, wrote Langermann, but only with established and clear standards that define the nature and extent of influence.<sup>3</sup> This is an important matter to consider, as far as Langermann is concerned, not just to preserve the philosophic originality of both thinkers but also to sharpen the readers' understanding of the specific contexts which simultaneously connected and disconnected the cultural tapestry characteristic of the Judeo-Arabic world. Understanding this Judeo-Arabic context is crucial, particularly, in coming to terms with Maimonides' more contentious views like his attitude towards women and the Gentiles. As Hannah Kasher ("Maimonides on the Intellects of Women and Gentiles") pointed out: "The status of women and gentiles in Maimonides's thought is not necessarily exclusively the product of his personal perspective...their status already established to a large degree in Jewish law" and hence "are not the product of his independent ruling."<sup>4</sup> Given this limitation, scholars are encouraged to look into the consequences of Maimonides' perspectives on women and gentiles rather than inquire about his explicit attitude towards them.<sup>5</sup>

Maimonides proved himself to be an original mind in his various treatises but perhaps no other work serves a testament to this more pronounced and more emphatic than his best-known opus, *Guide of the Perplexed*. It is important to note that the *Guide* is a theological work which showcases Maimonides' philosophic acumen. This exceptional ability to employ a philosophic medium to construct a theological treatise resonates with the same practice attributed to Thomas Aquinas who was himself a fond reader of the Jewish master. The *Guide* was Maimonides' attempt to sort out the philosophic and theological questions drawn from the Jewish scriptures. And as in Aquinas' career, it was in such theological opus that Maimonides consolidated his legacy as one of the formidable Jewish philosophic authorities. An account of this philosophic achievement was rendered by James T. Robinson in his discussion of Maimonides' Platonic reading of the Genesis' story about Jacob's ladder ("On or above the Ladder? Maimonidean and anti-Maimonidean Readings of Jacob's Ladder"). Maimonides' attempt

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ibid.*, 48-49.

to dissect the complex and esoteric passages of the Jewish scriptures like the Jacobine episode is but one of the many hermeneutic explorations one can find in the *Guide*. This sorting out, in true Maimonidean fashion, does not aim at the removal of interpretive entanglements usually found in reading the sacred texts but the demonstration of both the usefulness and limits of speculation in addressing such problems. As explained by Kenneth R. Seeskin (“What the *Guide of the Perplexed* Is Really About”): “We may conclude, as Maimonides does, that the *Guide* is not intended to resolve every difficulty. Nor is it to set forth a complete exposition of every subject in a manner appropriate to a textbook. ‘For my purpose,’ Maimonides tells us, ‘is that the truths be glimpsed and then again concealed.’”<sup>6</sup> For Sara Klein-Braslavy (“Reading the *Guide of the Perplexed* as an Intellectual Challenge”), it was its ability to introduce new ways of understanding the thorny scriptural questions it is trying to resolve that makes the *Guide* a compelling and interesting read (“Reading the *Guide of the Perplexed* as an Intellectual Challenge”). These questions include problems that range from the ritual (Yehuda Halper’s “Jewish Ritual as Trial in the *Guide of the Perplexed*”) to the scriptural (Charles H. Manekin’s “Maimonides on the Divine Authorship of the Law”) to the highly metaphysical (Daniel Davies’ “Divine Knowledge and Providence in the *Guide of the Perplexed*”).

The *Guide of the Perplexed* is without a doubt the definitive piece of work which secured Maimonides’ legacy as one of the most original Jewish thinkers and influential philosophic figures of the medieval period and beyond. With this in mind, it is important to note an important clarification offered by David Wirmer regarding the audience of the *Guide*. Wirmer explained that the perplexed were neither the hoi polloi nor the unarticulate but the “perfect men” for whom it was primarily written. Maimonides, as Wirmer wrote, reached out to them not because they were in error “but because they see the problems and are hence undecided and confused” (“The World and the Eye: Perplexity about Ends in the *Guide of the Perplexed* iii.13 and iii.25.”)<sup>7</sup> From its wide circulation in the Middle Ages (Diana di Segni’s “Early Quotations from Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed* in the Latin Middle Ages”) down to the contemporary period, the *Guide* continues to inspire varieties of readings among scholars of medieval antiquity and Jewish thought. A fine example of a contemporary Maimonidean scholar is Shlomo Pines who bared two variants of reading Maimonides, the Averroist and the Spinozist; the former may be read in his Introduction to his own English translation of the *Guide* in 1963 and the latter, in his classic paper, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

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Maimonides” published in 1979 (Josef Stern’s “The Agendas of Shlomo Pines for Reading the Guide of the Perplexed from 1963 to 1979”). Another equally imposing Maimonidean expert is Leo Strauss, the acknowledged Maimonidean authority of the twentieth century. Strauss’ influence among contemporary scholars on Maimonides was so far-reaching Warren Zev Harvey described it as “paralyzing” (“How to Begin to Study Strauss’s ‘How to Begin to Study the Guide of the Perplexed’”).<sup>8</sup> Harvey seems to say, that after Strauss, no scholar today can say or write anything about Maimonides that has not been discussed or disclosed by Strauss himself. This claim, while extremely flattering to Strauss, is disproved, nonetheless, by the very existence of this collection of essays, all bearing witness to the inexhaustibility of the perplexity that Maimonides continues to inspire among scholars to this day.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.