



Maimonides (Jewish Encounters)

Sherwin B. Nuland

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Moses Maimonides was a Renaissance man before there was a Renaissance: a great physician who served a sultan, a dazzling Torah scholar, a community leader, a daring philosopher whose greatest work—*The Guide for the Perplexed*—attempted to reconcile scientific knowledge with faith in God. He was a Jew living in a Muslim world, a rationalist living in a time of superstition. Eight hundred years after his death, his notions about God, faith, the afterlife, and the Messiah still stir debate; his life as a physician still inspires; and the enigmas of his character still fascinate.

Sherwin B. Nuland—best-selling author of *How We Die*—focuses his surgeon's eye and writer's pen on this greatest of rabbis, most intriguing of Jewish philosophers, and most honored of Jewish doctors. He gives us a portrait of Maimonides that makes his life, his times, and his thought accessible to the general reader as they have never been before.

Maimonides (Jewish Encounters) Details

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From Reader Review Maimonides (Jewish Encounters) for online ebook

Mary says

This was a brief look into life in the Middle Ages.

Phil says

I'm reading a biography of Maimonides. Who? WTF? (I'm rating it three stars because I'm not done yet.)

He was a tenth century Jewish scholar, perhaps the most important Talmudic scholar in history. He lived in Spain, Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, all over. In those days Jews kept on the move because a place could turn Hitlerish pretty fast. He was Sephardic, meaning swarthy, and spoke Arabic. He was a great Jewish Aristotelian scholar as well. His writing imposed rationality on belief, searching for a scientific and moral point of view in religion.

As with most things, when I read something a thousand years old I realize--"those people were as smart as us, if not smarter." We are insanely arrogant to think we know more about how to live than Buddha, or Aristotle, or Jesus, or Maimonides.

Here's a couple of cool things. When he arrived in Alexandria in 1127, the Egyptian dynasty was crumbling. Guess what happened? They had a civil war involving Sunnis and Shiites. Those crazies were doing the same thing then.

The Jews had a similar split, in Egypt at the time. (The author estimates 1% of Egypt was Jewish based on letters and commentaries that are still preserved.) There was a group of Jews called Karaites. They are still around in small numbers in Israel today. They believe the Old Testament is the only word of God. Whereas most Jews love and read the Torah--the 2500 years of scholarly commentary on the Bible.

In the same way today's Shiities deny oral tradition. They only believe the written Koran. The Sunnis observe a scholarly oral and written tradition. To kill each other over literary interpretation is nonsense. Of course, I would say that since I'm with the oral tradition crowd. I think when you say that a religion is a book--as opposed to a community of believers in a living system of belief--you miss out on good opportunities.

So this battle, call it a battle between "strict constructionists" and "living document-ists" predates the battles over the US constitution by two thousand years. I take great comfort in problems that are long-standing and unresolvable. It means we must find balance between two extremes.

Here's Maimonides on free will-----

"Were not man master of his own life, it would be useless, absolutely in vain, for man to study, to instruct, for man to learn an art as it would be entirely impossible for him, on account of the external force compelling him to gain certain knowledge or to acquire a certain characteristic. Reward and punishment would be pure injustice, both as regards man toward man, and as between God and man. The theory that all is preordained is therefore positively unsound, contrary to reason and common sense, subversive of the fundamental principles of religion, and attributes injustice to God (far be it from Him). In reality, the undoubted truth of the matter is that man has full sway over all his actions. If he wishes to do a thing he does it, if he does not wish to do it, he need not, for there is no external compulsion controlling him. There, God properly

commanded man, saying 'See I have set before thee this day life and the good, or death and evil. Therefore choose life.'"

I'm down with Maimonides. Also cool. He wrote about Palestine. He hated it. It was hot, desolate, filled with marauding bands of Christian soldiers of fortune working in private militias--kind of like Blackwater washouts. Or else rich Jewish merchants who had no taste for Biblical scholarship. And Moslem peasants. Change the names and teams and many things are still the same.

Michale says

I really appreciated Nuland's assertion that no matter how brilliant he was, Maimonides was a medieval physician bound by the knowledge of his time. While Heschel wrote of him as a man whose true passion was the life of the mind, Nuland spends more time discussing the exigencies of life that made the Rambam turn to medicine to earn a living after his brother David's death. Still, it is hard to get a sense of the real person when these biographers' basic approach to their subject is "we are not worthy."

Sam Berner says

A really handy introduction to Rambam as a physician and a human being, ahead of his time, humane and yet still very medieval. None of the humbug that you usually get about him in the other biographies. Maybe because it is written by another doctor?

Joe Wright says

Now I know why Khedron wants to be a doctor.

Jegdsw says

An interesting book about both Maimonides as doctor and philosopher and the time he lived in. Author writes extremely well.

Ben Shibe says

In the prologue the author says he was overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of his subject and the scholarship surrounding him. He begged his editor to assign the task to someone else up to the challenge. After that buildup, I was surprised to find a simple little history book which touched only lightly on the vast complexity he had alluded to. I can't decide whether the clear, simple depiction of Maimonides belies a great achievement of scholarship, having sifted a complex topic down to its essence (as he implied it must) or was just a cursory review of a man warranting a much more complex analysis.

Avinoam Foonberg says

Although the book gave some interesting anecdotes about Maimonides, its lack of references allows it to only make precarious claims. The book outlines his life corresponding to his major writings, but its main focus is the life of Maimonides and not the texts he wrote. If you want a brief outline of an attempt to formalize the life and development of Maimonides as a person without any deep reflection on his philosophical and theological writings, then you might enjoy the book. I can't really speak about the section dealing with Maimonides medical writings since I don't really know much about the topic (and since there are no sources, I can't really take his word for it either). I find this to be an odd approach to Maimonides since we really don't know that much about his life, but we have a ton of sources to help us understand his philosophical, theological and medical positions.

In the last chapter of the book Nuland makes a claim tantamount to saying that Maimonides is not so much remembered in the Jewish world for his writings as much as he is remembered as a leader of his community and a promoter of the continuation of Judaism. As someone who grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community, I have never encountered anyone who made such a claim about Maimonides, nor have I ever encountered any in writing (excluding this book). When one pronounces Maimonides name, most people think of the Guide for the Perplexed, and when one calls out Rambam (acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) one usually thinks of the Mishnah Torah, as well as the commentary on the mishna and Perek Chelek. Maimonides has had an enormous influence on Judaism, and arguably more than any other single individual. The texts he wrote seem to have, in my opinion, a paramount importance to his influence of Judaism. Although I find it to be an interesting thesis, the claim that Maimonides had more impact on generations of Jews as a inspirational Jewish leader as opposed to a theological, it seems to be unfounded in my opinion.

Shira says

I was a bit put off at his asking whether one must be a scholar to be able to put oneself in the place and time of the Rambam, to really understand him without being emmersed in the totality of the tradition, and without being a scientist. I think this is to miss the point of what emphathy can be? Yet he poses important questions, and I think he has very valid points regarding the over three hundred year long tradition of Jewish boys being encouraged to become doctors in particular. Interesting points on the learning of Jewish and Islamic doctors versus the lack thereof in the Christian world at the time.

Todd says

This is a great introduction for the non-technical Jewish reader and non Jewish general to one of the greatest minds the world has ever produced.

Marginalia2 says

A fascinating look at a man who invigorated, intrigued. exasperated people. A good introduction to some of his thoughts. Knowing his background and understanding the setting and time of his writings gives me a greater understanding of Jewish writings.

Susan says

Our study group at Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El, having completed reading the Mishnah over the past decade is embarking on a mission to read Rambam's epic work, Mishneh Torah. This biography of Maimonides by Sherwin Nuland was selected as introductory material. By a physician, about a physician, it is well written, interesting and very readable. New info: The Physician's Prayer commonly attributed to Maimonides apparently was not composed by him, after all.

Grady McCallie says

Years ago, perhaps in college, I read part of the Guide of the Perplexed. In one passage, the author - Moses Maimonides (1138 - 1204) - presents the striking image of silver filigree encasing a golden apple, offering it as a metaphor for the way good writing, beautiful in its own right, cradles an even more valuable substantive message. [*ed: note that this is wrong - see the comment thread below*] As I read other parts of the Guide, I often felt I could perceive only the filigree, while the golden apple itself eluded me. So, it was a joy to find this short (200 pages) biography and introduction to Maimonides and his works.

For someone looking to learn about Maimonides, this book is a marvelous place to start. Sherwin Nuland is a surgeon and historian of medicine, and he approaches Maimonides - who was himself a successful practicing doctor - with a clear grasp of that side of the sage's professional life. Nuland provides context, describes Maimonides' education, and discusses his three major religious and philosophical works: his Commentary on the Mishnah, the Mishnah Torah, and the Guide of the Perplexed. Nuland presents Maimonides as a man gifted with an extraordinary power to absorb and synthesize information from widely disparate sources, fitting it all into a coherent (if deeply personal) framework. Nuland himself writes with simplicity and clarity. In his prologue, he says, "[t]o understand this little volume of mine, no previous knowledge of Moses ben Maimon or of his era is required, nor of philosophy, medicine, Judaica or academic methods." And yet, anyone reading this brisk biography will be hard pressed not to learn a useful quantity of each along the way.
