

An extended treatment of Jewish thought & practice by Moses Maimonides. He attempts to resolve the conflict between religious knowledge & secular. Heavily influenced by the Neo-Platonized Aristotelianism (finds expression in certain Islamic circles); it departs from Aristotelian thought by emphasizing limits of human knowledge & the questionable foundations of significant parts of astronomy & metaphysics. While a letter written to an advanced student who can't decide whether to follow philosophy or the teachings of his religion, it is a commentary on biblical terms that seem to ascribe corporeal qualities to God, an uncompromising defense of negative theology, an extended critique of the kalam, a systematic treatment of creation, prophecy, & providence, & a theory of jurisprudence.

The Guide of the Perplexed (1190 AD)

BOOK 1: THESIS AGAINST ANTHROPOMORPHISM:

- A. Heresy present among unlearned Jews who assume God possess corporeal or positive attributes.
- B. Meticulous case of more than 20 chapters whereby he takes Hebrew attribute & claims it is a homonym; its usage is describing a physical entity that is completely different from when describing God. God cannot be described in any positive terms, but rather only in negative conceptions. God is incorporeal.
- C. After explaining why philosophy and mysticism are taught late in Jewish tradition & only to a few, Maimonides cites many examples of what he sees as the incapability of the masses of understanding these concepts. Thus, approaching them with a mind that is not yet learned in Torah and other Jewish texts can lead to heresy & the transgressions considered the most serious by Maimonides.
- D. Chapters 73–76 is an extended exposition & criticism of a number of principles & methods identified with the schools of Jewish Kalam & Islamic Kalam, including the argument for creation ex nihilo & the unity & incorporeality of God. While he accepts the conclusions of the Kalam school (because of their consistency with Judaism), he disagrees with their methods & points out many perceived flaws in their arguments.

BOOK 2: DOCTRINE OF CREATION:

- A. An Aristotelian exposition of physical structure of the universe w/ a spherical earth in centre, surrounded by concentric HeavenlySpheres.

(1) Though Aristotle's view of eternity of universe is rejected, Maimonides uses his proofs of existence of God & his concepts such as the Prime Mover. (2) Maimonides connects the Heavenly Sphere with the concept of an angel (essentially th same thing) The *Spheres* are essentially pure Intelligences who receive spiritual essence from the Prime Mover. This energy overflows from each one to the next & finally reaches earth and the physical domain. While unique in Judaism, this concept of intelligent spheres of existence appears in Gnostic Christianity as *Aeons*, having been conceived at least eight hundred years before Maimonides.
- B. Debate: universe eternal or created. merits of the debate whether the universe is eternal or created. While Aristotle's theory of the eternity of the universe is seen as the best, philosophically, divine Revelation is necessary to determine matter.
- C. Brief exp. of Creation as outlined in Genesis & eschatological theories end of the world.
- D. A description of the language & nature of the prophetic books of the Bible

BOOK 3: THE HARMONIOUS LIFE:

- A. An exposition of the mystical passage of the Chariot found in Ezekiel (cf. Merkabah mysticism)
- B. Explanation of the basic mystical concepts via the Biblical terms referring to Spheres, elements & Intelligences.
- C. Moral aspects of the universe:

(1) Problem of evil (people responsible because of free will), trials, & tests (especially those of Job and the story of the Binding of Isaac) as well as other aspects traditionally attached to God in theology, such as providence & omniscience: (1) Evil has no positive existence, but is a privation of a certain capacity & does not proceed from God; (2) Evils are mentioned in Scripture must be explained allegorically. (3) all existing evils, with the exception of some which have their origin in the laws of production & destruction & which are rather an expression of God's mercy, since by them the species are perpetuated, are created by men themselves.
- D. Gives reasons for the 613 mitzvot, the 613 laws contained within Torah. Maimonides divides these laws into 14 sections - the same as in his *Mishneh Torah*. However, he departs from traditional Rabbinic explanations in favour of a more physical/pragmatic approach.
- E. Culminated with the commandments, Maimonides conclude w/ notion of the perfect & harmonious life, founded on the correct worship of God. The possession of a correct philosophy underlying Judaism (as outlined in the *Guide*) is seen as being an essential aspect in true wisdom.

"As to His essence, the only way to describe it is negatively. For instance, He is not physical, nor bound by time, nor subject to change, etc. These assertions do not involve any incorrect notions or assume any deficiency, while if positive essential attributes are admitted it may be assumed that other things coexisted with Him from eternity." Unrestrained anthropomorphism and perception of positive attributes is seen as a transgression as serious as idolatry, because both are fundamental errors in the metaphysics of God's role in the universe, and that is the most important aspect of the world.

Book 2: "But as Maimonides recognizes the authority of Aristotle in all matters concerning the sublunary world, he proceeds to show that the Biblical account of the creation of the nether world is in perfect accord with Aristotelian views. Explaining its language as allegorical and the terms employed as homonyms, he summarizes the first chapter of Genesis thus: God created the universe by producing on the first day the "reshit," or Intelligences, from which the spheres derived their existence and motion and thus became the source of the existence of the entire universe."

Book 2: The second major part of the book is the discussion of the concept of prophecy. Maimonides departs from the orthodox view in that he emphasizes the intellectual aspect of prophecy. According to this view, in Biblical times, when God still revealed himself through prophecy, it was possible to combine logic and intelligence with a knowledge of God through the tradition (i.e. the Written and Oral Torah) in order to achieve a certain level of prophecy. Maimonides outlines 13 levels of prophecy, with that of Moses being the highest and subsequent lower levels remove the prophet as the source, allowing prophecies through increasingly external and indirect factors such as angels and dreams. Finally, the language and nature of the prophetic books of the Bible ar described. Chart adapted largely from *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "Maimonides."