chapter 1

life and works

Unlike most medieval Jewish philosophers, about whom very little is known, Maimonides provided future generations with ample information about himself in letters and documents; many of these documents have been preserved in part in the Cairo Geniza, a repository of discarded documents discovered over a century ago in the Ben Ezra synagogue of Fustât (Old Cairo) where Maimonides lived. From these snippets of texts, scholars have been able to reconstruct at least some details surrounding Maimonides' life. He was known by several names: his original Hebrew name Moses ben Maimon; his Latinized name Maimonides; the Hebrew acronym RaMBaM, standing for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon; his Arabic name al-Ra'is Abu 'Imran Musa ibn Maymun ibn 'Abdallah ('Ubaydallah) al-Qurtubi al-Andalusi al-Isra'ili; the honorific title "the teacher [*ha-Moreh*]"; and of course "the great eagle."

In this chapter I provide a brief synopsis of Maimonides' intellectual biography, against the backdrop of twelfth-century Spain and North Africa. Recent biographies by Kraemer and Davidson have provided us with a detailed reconstruction of Maimonides' life, drawn from Geniza fragments, letters, observations by his intellectual peers, and comments by Maimonides himself.[1] We shall consider, ever so briefly, important philosophical influences upon Maimonides; scholars have explored in great detail which philosophers – Greek, Jewish, and Arabic – were most influential upon his intellectual development. I will then discuss Maimonides' major philosophical works, most of which we shall examine in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Maimonides' Life

Moses ben Maimon was born in Cordova, Spain in 1135/8 and died in Cairo in 1204. Cordova was at this time the capital of Andalusia (Muslim Spain) and the most affluent city in Europe. Under the Spanish Umayyads (756–1031), and in particular under the reign of enlightened Caliph 'Abd ar-Rahman III, Jews and others experienced a cultural flourishing. The Jewish Quarter where Maimonides lived was located close to the Great Mosque and the royal palace in the southwestern section of the city. Under the caliphate, there developed a

Jewish intellectual elite that emphasized a synthesis of traditional Jewish learning with secular knowledge. As noted by Kraemer, the courtiers were men for whom the Arabic ideal of *adâb*, a system of cultured refinement, was fundamental in their educational program. The exemplar of the cosmopolitan and cultured courtier, learned in the secular sciences and in Jewish lore, set a precedent for Maimonides. Maimonides' father was himself an accomplished rabbinic scholar and judge. We know nothing about his mother, although we do know that he had a brother, David, whom he adored, and probably more than one sister.

However, the Andalusian environment was soon to fall apart. Muhammad ibn Tûmart (ca 1080–1130) founded the fundamentalist Almohad movement in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, and he fought to restore the original faith of Islam as based on the Qur'an and the Sunna (Islamic law). The Almohads united North Africa and Andalusia under a single empire, and Jews were no longer welcomed in this environment. Many Jews ostensibly converted to Islam. One of Maimonides' earliest biographies, found in a Muslim biographical dictionary of al-Qiftî (a man who was friends with Maimonides' favorite student), notes that Maimonides himself converted to Islam, publicly "living the life of a Muslim, reading the Quran and reciting Muslim prayers, until he was able to put his affairs in order. He then left Spain with his family, traveled to Egypt, and reassumed the identity of a Jew" (Davidson 2005, 17). Scholars have found reason, however, to question the veracity and reliability of Qiftî's information; some historians have accepted the account of Maimonides' purported conversion to Islam, while others have rejected it.[2]

When the Almohads invaded Andalusia and occupied Cordova in 1148, the Maimon family left Cordova, wandering from place to place in Andalusia. During these years, Maimonides commenced his studies. He started with astrology, which he later rejected as useless. He became interested in astronomy as well, as an aid in fixing the religious calendar. During this period he studied with students of the Islamic philosopher Ibn Bâjja, as well as with a son of the astronomer Jâbir ibn Aflah. During this period he wrote several early books, including his *Treatise on the Art of Logic* and a primer on the calendar (*Ma'amar ha-'ibbur*).

Maimonides wrote during the height of twelfth-century Andalusian Aristotelianism. The most important names in this school were Abû Bakr ibn Bâjja (Avempace, d.1139), Ibn Tufayl (d.1185) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d.1198). Although both Maimonides and Averroes were born in Cordova and wrote during the same time period, we have no record of an encounter between them. Nevertheless, Maimonides knew of Averroes' works and recommended them to his own pupil Joseph ben Judah, as well as to his translator Samuel ibn Tibbon. Scholars have noted the many similarities between Maimonides and Averroes. Kraemer points out that both were descendants of venerable Andalusian families of scholars. Both were outstanding jurists and physicians, both mastered the sciences and philosophy, both embraced a naturalistic Aristotelianism, both emphasized that the Law summons us to study philosophy. The writings

of both Averroes and Maimonides were soon translated into Latin, and introduced Aristotelianism to the Latin scholastics.

In 1160 the Maimon family settled in Fez for roughly five years. It was in Fez that Maimonides wrote his *Epistle on Forced Conversion*, in reaction to a rabbinic decree to accept martyrdom rather than submit to Islam. Maimonides urged his fellow Jews to remain clandestine Jews, to continue to pray and observe the commandments in light of forced conversion. During this period, Maimonides also continued his medical studies and, according to his later comments on this period, presumably received some clinical training.

The family left Morocco on April 4, 1165, traveling east to the land of Israel. The ship arrived, after a fierce storm at sea, at Acre. The family remained in Acre until May 1166 when they left for Egypt. During this period Maimonides made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where they remained for three days. Maimonides' memory of that trip was so searing that he swore to revisit the memory yearly:

> I vowed to observe these two days as strict fast days for myself, my family and all my household, and to order my descendants to keep these fasts also in future generations and to give charity in accordance with their means. I further vowed to observe the tenth of Iyar in complete seclusion and to devote the day to prayer and study. On that day, God alone was with me on the sea; so upon the anniversary of this day, I wish to be alone with God and not in the company of man, unless I am compelled to.
>
> (Twersky 1972, 3)

Maimonides and his family arrived in Fustât (Old Cairo) in 1166, after a brief stay in Alexandria. They settled in the Mamsûsa Quarter of Fustât, a neighborhood that had both Christian and Muslim residents as well as Jews. Three Jewish communities coexisted in Fustât: the sectarian Karaites, as well as two Rabbanite communites, Iraqians and Palestinian, each with its own synagogue. The Synagogue of the Palestinians, called the Ben Ezra Synagogue, has survived and is still standing; it contains a store chamber of documents and manuscripts, known as the Cairo Genizah, that are still being reconstructed by scholars. During the first five years of Maimonides' stay in Fustât, he had access to Ismâ'îlî writings and lectures. The Ismâ'îlî were an Islamic sect that emphasized esotericism and apophatic theology, according to which nothing positive can be attributed to God, only negative attributes. Scholars have emphasized the importance of these doctrines to the later development of Maimonides' thought, in particular in Maimonides' theory of negative predication, which draws upon both Neoplatonic and Ismâ'îlî strands.[3] During this period Maimonides wrote his celebrated *Mishneh Torah*.

Shortly after Maimonides' arrival in Egypt (1171–2), Saladin became sultan over Egypt and founded the Ayyûbid dynasty. Maimonides had in Fustât a patron, Al-Qâdî al-Fâdil al-Baysani (1135–1200), who was a scholar in his own right. He collected many books of Arabic thought, some of which presumably

Maimonides read and studied. Maimonides followed his patron in supporting Saladin; Al-Qâdî al-Fâdil soon became Saladin's chief administrator, which turned out to be beneficial for Maimonides as well. Maimonides became "Head of the Jews" (*ra'îs al-yahûd*) in 1191. As Head of the Jews, Maimonides took on the highest judicial authority in the Jewish community: he appointed chief judges, had broad communal responsibilities, and functioned as respondent to legal inquiries from Jewish communities in Egypt and elsewhere. We have available many of the legal decisions, or halakhic responsa, that Maimonides handed down. During this period Maimonides married into a prominent Egyptian family. Although we do not know his wife's name, we do know that she came from the family of a government official, and that the union was well regarded. His only son Abraham ben Moses (1186–1237) was born when Maimonides was close to 50 years old; we don't know whether he had any daughters. Abraham studied with his father, learning philosophy and medicine; Abraham's first love, however, was his devotion to Sufism, which some scholars suggest may have influenced Maimonides in later life.

In 1172 Maimonides wrote an epistle to the Jews of Yemen who were contending with forced conversion. The letter was addressed to Jacob son of Nethanel al-Fayyûmî who had written on behalf the Yemenite community. In order to address a larger audience, Maimonides' response to Nethanel was written in Arabic. The purpose of the letter was to provide hope, as well as an explanation for the animus between Muslims and Jews. Maimonides saw the agony of the Yemenite Jews as a prefigurement of the coming of the Messiah.

It is not clear how Maimonides supported himself during the period before 1177. From what we can tell, his brother David supported the extended family by trading, often traveling the trade routes by sea; as Maimonides writes in a letter, his brother "would conduct business in the marketplace and earn money, while I sat in security" (L 230). One of the most difficult events during this period (1177) was David's drowning while on the way to India, leaving a young daughter and widow in Maimonides' care. Suffering both a mental and physical breakdown, Maimonides was overwhelmed with depression that he describes in poignant terms:

> The most terrible blow which befell me . . . was the death of the most perfect and righteous man, who was drowned while traveling in the Indian Ocean. For nearly a year after I received the sad news, I lay ill on my bed struggling with fever and despair. Eight years have since passed, and I still mourn, for there is no consolation. What can console me? . . . My one joy was to see him. Now my joy has been changed into darkness; he has gone to his eternal home, and has left me prostrated in a strange land.
>
> (Twersky 1972, 4–5)

Maimonides notes that when David died, he had with him a large sum of money belonging to the family (L 229–30). After 1177, Maimonides took upon

himself the financial responsibility of supporting the family, presumably through medicine. Maimonides' major work *The Guide of the Perplexed* was written between 1185 and 1190, followed by many of his medical works.

Maimonides continued to devote himself to both the community and his intellectual needs. In 1191 he wrote a letter to his disciple Joseph ben Judah, for whom he composed the *Guide*, complaining about his schedule:

> I inform you that I have acquired in medicine a very great reputation among the great, such as the chief Qadi, the prince . . . As for the ordinary people, I am placed too high for them to reach me. This obliges me continually to waste my day in Cairo visiting the [noble] sick. When I return to Fustât, the most I am able to do, for the rest of the day and night, is to study medical books, which are so necessary for me. For you know how long and difficult this art is for a conscientious and exact man who does not want to state anything which he cannot support by argument and without knowing where it has been said and how it can be demonstrated. This has further resulted in the fact that I find no time to study Torah; the only time I am able to read the Bible is on Saturday. As for other sciences, I have no time to study them at all and this distresses me very much . . . I have not yet found the time to read [Aristotle's] books.
>
> (Twersky 1972, 6)

In a letter of 1199 written to Samuel ibn Tibbon, translator of the *Guide* from Judaeo-Arabic into Hebrew, Maimonides attests to his harried schedule:

> God knows that in order to write this to you, I have escaped to a secluded spot, where people would not think to find me, sometimes leaning for support against the wall, sometimes lying down on account of my excessive weakness, for I have grown old and feeble . . . I attend to my patients, write prescriptions . . . I converse and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue, and when night falls, I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak.
>
> (Twersky 1972, 7)

Maimonides seems to have devoted himself seriously to medicine in the later years of his life, after the composition of his theological and philosophical works. Some of these medical works were translated into Hebrew and Latin, and contributed to his fame as a physician. According to his grandson David, Maimonides died on December 13, 1204. Maimonides is supposedly buried in Tiberias, although we cannot be sure where his body actually resides.

Philosophical Influences

Maimonides' works fall into three broad categories: rabbinics (*halakha*), philosophy, and medicine. Little is known about Maimonides' educational situation

or teachers. Presumably he received a rabbinical education from his father, although there we have no actual evidence. Nor do we have much information about how and from whom he learned philosophy. Maimonides does mention, in the context of astronomy, having met the son of the Islamic astronomer Ibn Aflâh of Seville; he also mentions having read texts under the guidance of a student of the renowned Spanish Arabo-Islamic philosopher Ibn Bâjja (d.1138). But Maimonides does not mention a single teacher from whom he explicitly learned philosophy. In fact, it is possible that he was largely self-taught in both rabbinics and philosophy. In the case of medicine, Maimonides does in fact list some of his teachers, and tells us that he studied medicine when in his twenties in Andalusia, before arriving in Egypt. He is clearly influenced by the works of the famous Greek physician Galen: Galen is cited most often in his medical works, and he calls Galen the greatest physician ever to have lived (MA 25.59:433).

Maimonides did not consider philosophy prior to Aristotle worthy of the title of "genuine philosophy." And yet it is not clear what his sources of Arabic Aristotelianism were. Whereas in the areas of rabbinics and medicine Maimonides took the trouble to study and familiarize himself with the primary sources, such does not seem to be the case with respect to the philosophical corpus. Many references can be found in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* to Aristotelian examples and texts, most of which can be traced to Arabic authors. He mentions at the end of the *Commentary* that he was studying "other sciences," that is, non-Jewish sciences, in particular the works of Galen and Ptolemy. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides provides a section with detailed astronomical calculations that employ data very similar to astronomical tables compiled by the Arabic astronomer al-Battâni. Davidson concludes that "by the age of forty [Maimonides] was thus familiar with the contours of medieval Arabic Aristotelian philosophy, he had studied other sciences, and he was well-versed in mathematics and astronomy" (Davidson 2005, 98).

By the time he wrote his major philosophical work *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides demonstrates more intimate knowledge of Aristotle. In the *Guide*, Aristotle is the philosopher named most frequently. That Maimonides held Aristotle in the highest esteem is evidenced in the following passages from his letter to his translator Samuel ibn Tibbon:

> (1) The writings [words] of Aristotle's teacher Plato are in parables and hard to understand. One can dispense with them, for the writings of Aristotle suffice, and we need not occupy [our attention] with the writings of earlier [philosophers]. Aristotle's intellect [represents] the extreme of human intellect, if we except those who have received divine inspiration.
>
> (2) The works of Aristotle are the roots and foundations of all works on the sciences. But they cannot be understood except with the help of commentaries, those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, those of Themistius, and those of Averroes.
>
> (Marx 1934–5)

Several passages in the *Guide* attest to Aristotle's eminence. In *Guide* 1.5, Maimonides describes Aristotle as "the chief of the philosophers" (GP 1.5:29). In *Guide* 2.14 Maimonides says he will only pay attention to Aristotle, "for it is his opinion that ought to be considered" (GP 2.14). Maimonides calls attention to the "depth of Aristotle's penetration and to his extraordinary apprehension" (GP 2.19). And in *Guide* 1.5 Maimonides emphasizes Aristotle's willingness to investigate very obscure matters, noting that in the case of such obscure matters (e.g. celestial mechanics), one must be tentative (GP 1.5).

Maimonides appears to have read at least some of Aristotle's works in translation, and compares, in one of his letters to Ibn Tibbon, the merits and quality of several translations. He names five of Aristotle's books by name: the *Physics*, *On the Heavens*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, and *Metaphysics*, and quotes directly from the first four works. In his *Medical Aphorisms* Maimonides quotes extensively from Aristotle's two works *History of Animals* and the *Generation of Animals*. But many of Maimonides' purported Aristotelian references turn out, instead, to rely on Arabic summaries of Aristotle. It is also interesting to note that no mention is made of Aristotle's *De Anima*, a much studied and influential treatise on psychology and the intellect, although he clearly read al-Fârâbî's commentary on the *De Anima*. Perhaps by this point in his life he simply did not have the time or the energy (as evidenced in the letter above) to engage in serious study of Aristotle. Nor is there any evidence that he read first hand the very Aristotelian commentaries that he recommended to his student Joseph, namely the works of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and Averroes. Although other philosophers are mentioned (Plato, Plotinus, Epicurus, John Philoponus, Euclid), there is no evidence that he actually read them.

A different story emerges when we turn to Islamic philosophers.[4] Maimonides had clear regard for the works of al-Fârâbî, Ibn Bâjja, Avicenna, and Averroes. Al-Fârâbî is the Arabic philosopher most cited in the *Guide*, and clearly a thinker whom Maimonides read carefully and held in high esteem. Abu Nasr al-Fârâbî (870–950) was considered the "second Aristotle," because of his numerous treatises and commentaries upon Aristotle's works, and he evinced a great influence in many fields of medieval Jewish philosophy, including logic, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and jurisprudence. We shall see that Maimonides is very much influenced by al-Fârâbî's conception of philosophy. He wrote to Samuel ibn Tibbon that there was no need to study any other logical texts other than those of al-Fârâbî, since "all that he wrote" was "full of wisdom" (Marx 1934–5, 379). In his *Book of Letters* and other works, al-Fârâbî argued that religion is subordinate to philosophy, seeing the former as a tool or "handmaiden" for the latter: this theory has important repercussions for the relation between religion and philosophy. Berman has argued that Maimonides was more influenced by al-Fârâbî than was anybody else in the medieval world; that while others read al-Fârâbî, "no one else in a major work attempted to apply this theory in detail to a particular religious tradition" (Berman 1974, 155). In al-Fârâbî's view, philosophy represents the highest of the

disciplines, flanked on one side by dialectic and on the other side by religion, jurisprudence, and theology.[5]

Other influential philosophers include Ibn Bâjja, Ibn Sînâ, al-Ghazâlî, and Ibn Rushd. Ibn Bâjja is referred to five times in the *Guide*. Although an important philosopher in his own right, Avicenna (Ibn Sînâ 980–1037) played a less obvious role in Maimonides' thought. Avicenna was extremely influential upon Jewish philosophers prior to Maimonides, and Maimonides states in his letter to Ibn Tibbon that Avicenna's books, although subtle and difficult, are "useful" and should be studied (Marx 1934–5, 380); nevertheless Maimonides does not make explicit use of his works. Recent scholars have only begun to explore traces of Avicennian ideas in Maimonides' writings (Harvey 2008). Al-Ghazâlî (1058–1111) is not explicitly mentioned by Maimonides either, although scholars are beginning to explore possible influences.[6] Ibn Tufayl (d.1185), a popular philosopher best known for his philosophical allegory about a boy growing up on a secluded island (*Living Son of the Watchful* [*Hayy ben Yaqzan*]), may have had a slight influence upon Maimonides, although the jury is still out. Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126–98) represents a tantalizing case study. Maimonides held Averroes in high regard, telling Ibn Tibbon not to read Aristotle's works without the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and Averroes (Marx 1934–5, 378). As noted above, both Averroes and Maimonides embraced a naturalistic Aristotelianism, and both emphasized the importance of philosophy. Yet scholars have yet to determine explicit evidence of Averroes' influence.

How extensive was Maimonides' knowledge of Islamic Kalâm? The Kalâm theologians were a school of Islamic thinkers who presented a strict and rigorous interpretation of the Qur'an. Followers of Kalâm were called Mutakallimûn, and were divided into two main schools of thought: the Mu'tazilites, a moderate branch of Kalâm that emphasized human freedom, and became known as "the partisans of justice and unity," and the Asharites, who emphasized God's unknowability, and God's power over human action. In the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, composed when he was 30 years old, Maimonides mentions several Kalâm positions briefly and rejects them. By the time he wrote the *Guide*, in his fifties, Maimonides refers to the Kalâm much more extensively. Four chapters in the *Guide* are devoted to Kalâm arguments for the creation of the world and existence. Maimonides distinguishes among different Kalâm schools of thought and provides extensive details of their positions. And yet, as recent scholars have demonstrated, the accuracy of his accounts is questionable at best. This raises a tantalizing but unanswerable question: what sources provided Maimonides with his acquaintance with Kalâm thought? Davidson has suggested that possibly Maimonides was extrapolating what he inferred to be Kalâm principles from their proofs, rather than having actual knowledge of their texts.[7]

Interestingly enough, medieval Jewish philosophers are not quoted in Maimonides' philosophical works. With the exception of Isaac Israeli (ca 855–ca 955), Saadia Gaon (882–942), and Ibn Tzaddiq (d.1149), no Jewish

philosophers are mentioned by Maimonides. This does not mean that he did not read Jewish philosophers, and scholars are exploring hints that he might have been influenced by the works of Judah Halevi, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Abraham ibn Daud, among others.[8] But Maimonides does not mention them by name, nor does he recommend their works to his disciples.

Early Works

One of Maimonides' earliest works (1157–8) was a treatise on the calendar (*Ma'amar ha 'ibbur*). This was a practical guide, with straightforward calendrical tables. By 1166 he was working on a more comprehensive guide, *Laws of the Sanctification of the Moon*, which became the eighth treatise of the *Book of Seasons* in the *Mishneh Torah*. In this work of 19 chapters, he analyzed the numerical values of both astronomical and calendrical phenomena. His short *Treatise on the Art of Logic* most likely dates from this early period as well.[9] The treatise is addressed to a Muslim and is an introductory work drawing heavily on al-Fârâbî's logic. In the fourteenth (final) chapter he discusses the logic of the philosophical sciences.

Maimonides began his first major work, *The Commentary on the Mishnah*, in Fez around 1161, and published it in Egypt in 1168. The Mishnah is a compendium of Jewish law compiled by Rabbi Judah the Prince (*ha-Nasi*) around 200 CE. It contains six "orders," divided into sixty-three tractates, each of which is further divided into chapters and subdivisions. This work became the basis for legal discussions in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud. Maimonides' commentary reproduced the entire text of the Mishnah with a commentary written in Judaeo-Arabic, and later translated into Hebrew. In this work he proclaimed his aim, namely to simplify and synthesize the content of the Mishnah. Three major introductions were incorporated into his commentary: a long introduction to the entire Mishnah; an introduction to the tenth chapter of tractate *Sanhedrin*, known as *Pereq Heleq*, in which he set out the thirteen articles of faith; and a prelude to the tractate *Avot* (*Pirqe Avot* or *Ethics of the Fathers*) known as *Eight Chapters* (*Shemona Peraqim*) in which he set out his views on ethics.

In the introduction to tractate *Sanhedrin* (Chapter 10 of the Babylonian Talmud) called *Pereq Heleq*, Maimonides outlined the fundamental principles of Judaism. The section in *Sanhedrin* starts with the words "All Israelites have a share in the world to come . . ." Maimonides used this text as an opportunity to articulate the necessary and sufficient criteria for somebody's being included among the "Israelites." He laid out thirteen principles that every Israelite is expected to accept. These thirteen principles are reducible to three broad categories: (1) God – His existence, unity, incorporeality, eternity, and prohibition of idolatry; (2) the Law – prophecy, uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy, Divine origin of the written and oral law, and the eternity and immutability of the Law; and (3) theodicy – Divine omniscience, Divine retribution, coming

of the Messiah, and resurrection. The comprehensiveness and cohesiveness of this creed has been debated endlessly among subsequent generations of Jewish philosophers and scholars.

Maimonides' introduction to tractate *Avot* (*Eight Chapters*) gave him an opportunity to incorporate Greek ethical precepts into his *Commentary*. The two stated purposes of this work are to validate the tradition that has been handed down through generations, and to elucidate the ethical teachings of the sages. In this introduction, Maimonides attempts to provide the underlying rationale of the rabbinic moral dicta. This work contains Maimonides' exposition of the doctrine of the Aristotelian mean. The last chapter contains an affirmation of human freedom, and the rejection of any view (astrology, predestination) that might undermine human choice. Following Aristotelian thought in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Maimonides argues that without freedom of choice, there can be no ethics.

Major Works

Mishneh Torah

Maimonides' major works are undoubtedly the *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the years 1168–78 (or 1180) Maimonides compiled his monumental compendium of Jewish law, known as the *Mishneh Torah* (*Repetition of the Torah*). Maimonides chose to write in the Hebrew of the Mishnah, rather than the Hebrew of the Bible, in order to emulate the original author of the Mishnah. To this end, he reworked many of the Talmudic passages (written in Aramaic) into an eloquent Hebrew. His organization of the laws in this work was designed to make it easy for the student to learn the laws by memory. The organization of the text was similarly conceived for simplicity, and Maimonides arranged all the main topics in the Talmud into separate books, each containing from three to ten treatises. The very process of classification carried with it an underlying set of assumptions and philosophical view. Maimonides did not distinguish practical from theoretical discussions in the Mishnah, and insisted on presenting both as of immediate relevance. He thus reintroduced into the corpus many sections that authorities had previously ignored. One of Maimonides' main aims was to unify the areas of law and philosophy, praxis and theoria. We thus find in the *Mishneh Torah* many philosophical comments and insights, as well as an emphasis upon the inherent rationality of the Law itself. With this work, his reputation as a legal (halakhic) authority was established; the *Mishneh Torah* became the benchmark for all subsequent writing on Jewish jurisprudence.[10] One important philosophical section of this work is the first book, *The Book of Knowledge* (*Sefer ha-Maddah*), which sets forth the foundations of Jewish belief. This first book of the *Mishneh Torah* is divided into five treatises: Foundations of the Law, Ethical Qualities, Torah Study, Idolatry, and Repentance.[11] Maimonides clarifies

at the start of the work that his main concern is science and the study of nature, the foundation of his restoring Judaism as a "religion of reason and enlightenment" (Kraemer 2008a, 326).

The Guide of the Perplexed

Maimonides composed his major philosophical work *The Guide of the Perplexed* between the years of 1185 and 1190. The work is written in Judaeo-Arabic, that is, in Arabic using Hebrew letters. The dedicatory epistle describes the circumstances surrounding the composition of the work. Maimonides tells us that an individual named Joseph ben Judah ibn Shimon had travelled from Morocco to Egypt, hoping to study philosophy with him. Maimonides accepted Joseph as a student and the two studied together for several years (1182–84/5), focusing on astronomy, logic, and philosophy. When Joseph departed (not having accomplished his full course of study), Maimonides wrote the *Guide* for him and other similar students. Maimonides specifies several purposes of the work. The first is to explain the meanings of difficult terms appearing in the prophetic books, while the second is to explain obscure parables in these works. More generally, Maimonides tells us that his overall purpose is to remove perplexity on the part of intellectually sophisticated readers who are committed to reading Scripture in light of philosophical ideas. His work is written to enable such a reader to understand the often hidden meanings to be found in scriptural texts. In the second part of this introduction, Maimonides outlines in great detail the ways in which his work should and should not be read. He is quite explicit that, like the Scriptures, the *Guide* contains a multitude of hidden secret meanings, and that only the philosophically astute individual will be able to decode Maimonides' true views on philosophical topics such as creation, prophecy, and metaphysics. In the next chapter we shall discuss in greater detail the methodological constraints introduced by this work.

The *Guide* is divided into three parts. The first part deals primarily with issues associated with a philosophical conception of God: in the first 50 chapters, Maimonides offers philosophical interpretations of terms found in Scripture that attribute to God corporeality. He then provides a more general discussion of Divine predication, and how attributes about God must be understood. Subsequent chapters deal with divine names (61–64), the divine essence (68), and God's relation to the world (69–72), concluding with a critique of Kalâm arguments for the unity, existence, and incorporeality of God (71–76). Part II starts with Maimonides' own arguments for the existence of God (1). He then turns to issues of philosophical cosmology (2–12), creation (13–31), and prophecy (32–48). In the final part of the *Guide*, Maimonides addresses the cluster of problems connected with theodicy and providence (8–24), moral theory and reasons for the commandments (25–50), and ultimate perfection and happiness (51–54). Many of these topics receive treatment in his other more philosophical works as well.

Less than 10 years after the publication of the *Guide*, Maimonides' admirers asked Samuel ibn Tibbon, who lived in Lunel, France, to make a translation from Judaeo-Arabic into Hebrew. Ibn Tibbon studied the original work carefully, providing clear annotations, and consulting the author whenever he encountered translation difficulties. On November 30, 1204 (14 days before Maimonides' death in Fustât), the translation was completed and immediately disseminated throughout Provence, northern Spain, and Italy. Almost immediately, however, opposition to the work sprang up. Ibn Tibbon himself was denounced, and the work was burnt in Paris and elsewhere by Jewish legal authorities who feared the views contained in the work. But within a century, the *Guide* emerged from the opposition even more influential than before. Numerous commentaries were written in an attempt to penetrate the depths of the work. The *Guide* entered the Christian scholastic world through a second, less literal translation by al-Harizi. A Latin translation was undertaken during the thirteenth century, and was read by Alexander of Hales (d.1245), William of Auvergne (d.1248), Albertus Magnus (d.1280), and Thomas Aquinas (d.1274), among others. Aquinas studied the *Guide* carefully and quoted it regularly in his discussions of creation and divine attributes (see Rubio 2006).

Letters and essays

After his arrival in Egypt in 1167, Maimonides' fame grew not only as a medical specialist, but as a religious and spiritual leader as well. Jacob ben Nethanel al-Fayyûmi wrote on behalf of the Jews of Yemen, whose existence was being threatened by a fanatical Muslim movement. Al-Fayyûmi requested from Maimonides advice on how to respond to the suffering of the community, especially in light of the pressure to convert to Islam. He also asked Maimonides for specific information regarding the coming of the Messiah. Maimonides gave his ruling on these questions in 1172, in his *Epistle to Yemen*, urging al-Fayyûmi to disseminate the letter widely "in order to strengthen the people in their faith and put them on their feet" (EY 131). The *Epistle* thus represents Maimonides' response to a community in crisis, battered by outside forces, tempted by conversion and apostasy. Because Maimonides felt the desperation of the Jews of Yemen, he was particularly compelled to respond to their need. As Hartmann points out, the letter is written with the express purpose of strengthening a community in its battle against hostile surrounding forces. The tone and substance of the epistle express the anger and bitterness of a leader who felt called upon to support a community that was disillusioned and shattered by the world in which it lived (EY 151). For this reason, it is important to keep in mind the *Epistle*'s intended audience and its response to a crisis situation, rather than treating it as a philosophical statement. Maimonides' outbursts against Islam and Christianity, his attacks on Jesus ("may his bones be ground to dust") and Muhammad ("the madman"), must all be understood in this context.

The *Letter on Astrology* was addressed to the rabbis of southern France. These rabbis had written a letter to Maimonides in which they articulated their

worries about the pernicious implications of astrological determinism upon their adherents. The underlying philosophical issue, to which Maimonides devotes the most attention both in the *Letter* and in the *Guide*, concerns the relation between natural astrology and its judicial implications. In other words, from the very real influence of the celestial beings (sun, moon, stars, and planets) upon the natural world (e.g. growth of plants, ocean tides, etc.), can we infer a further influence upon human life and action? And furthermore, can these influences be calculated by means of horoscopes? It is this set of issues that directly affects theories of Divine Providence, retribution, and free will. The very fact that Maimonides was called upon to legislate upon this issue is evidence of the popularity of astrology among twelfth-century Provençal Jews.

The *Essay on Resurrection* is the most personal of Maimonides' works, and contains a response to attacks upon his views on the afterlife and the world to come. The attacks were precipitated by comments he had made in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and the *Mishneh Torah* suggesting that Maimonides did not include the resurrection of bodies in his conception of the "world to come." Maimonides' opponents identified the world to come with the resurrection of the dead, whereas it appeared that Maimonides himself considered resurrection as only an ancillary step in the final process of immortality. In fact, statements in Maimonides' works give credence to this latter interpretation: in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, his position appears to be that while bodies of the righteous will be resurrected at some future time, they will not live forever, but will give way to ultimate intellectual perfection in the guise of immortality of soul. A similar point is made in the *Mishneh Torah* (H. Teshuba 3.5–6). In response to this position, Rabbi Samuel ben Eli, principal leader of the Baghadi rabbinic academy, wrote a 20-page treatise in Arabic, in which he laid out a veiled criticism of Maimonides. Maimonides' own student Joseph ben Judah entered the controversy and clashed several times with Samuel ben Eli, ultimately sending to his teacher Maimonides a copy of Eli's attack. Maimonides' rejoinder, the *Treatise on Resurrection*, was published in 1191 in response to Rabbi Samuel ben Eli's attacks.

The work itself is in three parts: a preamble in which Maimonides acknowledges how the public might have been confused about his position; the body of the work, in which Maimonides defends himself against the charge of disbelief in resurrection; and a postscript, in which he explores reasons why the Bible itself does not contain references to resurrection. Maimonides' tone throughout the work is acerbic, sarcastic, and bitter; the reader cannot help but note the deep anger and resentment at having to respond publicly to what he regards as a ridiculous accusation. Hartmann suggests that, in a way, this treatise represents an acknowledgment of failure: the very fact that the Jewish community was determined to hold on to a notion of bodily resurrection, despite all of Maimonides' attempts to instill in them an ideal of personal immortality, was "a sign that all that he had tried to accomplish as a Jewish leader and educator might have failed" (Halkin and Hartmann 1985, 249). Does this essay represent, then, as Hartmann suggests, the painful acknowledgment of the ultimate

futility of the philosopher's "return to the cave"? If so, then it serves in part at least as a commentary on Maimonides' assessment of his own life and achievements. We shall have ample opportunity to explore these issues in subsequent chapters.

Medical writings

After the composition of his theological and philosophical works, Maimonides devoted himself more seriously to medicine and composed ten medical treatises between 1190 and 1204. Scholars in recent years have turned to these works for additional information on Maimonides' views about medicine, scientific method, and the relationship between medicine and philosophy. Some of these works were translated into Hebrew and Latin, and contributed to his fame as a physician. In these works, Maimonides often mentions contacts with physicians in the Maghreb (see *On Asthma* 12.9–10). Maimonides did have a strong knowledge of the medical works of Galen, al-Râzî, Avicenna, and others. By the tenth century all of Galen's medical treatises existed in Arabic; from then on, literate Jewish, Muslim, and Christian physicians based their ideas primarily on the works of Galen and, through Galen, on the works of Hippocrates. Lieber notes that the interfaith unity of medicine was made possible by the fact that it was essentially untouched by theological considerations. Religious works are rarely invoked in the context of medical discussions, either by the pagan Greeks or by the medievals (Lieber 1993, 21).

While Maimonides quotes Galen primarily, he occasionally quotes Hippocrates and other Greek medical writers, and occasionally refers to Muslim physicians. The majority of his treatises consist of "reports" written in response to a particular patron. Around 1195 he wrote the report known as the *Regimen of Health* in response to a letter from the dissipated Sultan al-Afdâl (Saladin's eldest son), who requested Maimonides' medical opinion regarding his constipation, poor digestion, and depression. Maimonides' response, based on Galen's famous work on regimen (*De Sanitate Tuenda*), offered a detailed set of instructions or way of life to be followed by the Sultan. Following a second request from the Sultan, Maimonides wrote on his behalf *On the Causes of Symptoms*, in which he offers yet another health regimen. In this work Maimonides advocates both music and wine to counteract the Sultan's depression, even though both were forbidden to Muslims under Islamic law. Maimonides claimed in this work that, when sick, a person may contravene the law in order to take advantage of treatment. He might have been reflecting the Jewish ruling that saving a life (*piku'ah nefesh*) takes precedence over any religious ruling, in which case curing the Sultan's depression would require equally dire measures.

Maimonides wrote other treatises as well, treating such topics as sexual difficulties, hemorrhoids, asthma, and poisons; these treatises were for the most part based on Galen's *Canon*. His work *On Asthma* was written for a person of high rank (whose name we do not know) and comprises a regimen of

health for his patient. Maimonides knew that asthma, like many other recurring diseases, was almost impossible to cure, and so he advocated a sensible health regimen that would at least lead to good health (*On Asthma* 1.1). He also warned his patient against invasive treatment, claiming that "the errors of the physicians are much more frequent than their correct [prescriptions]" (*On Asthma* 13.19). In this work he also mentions the "six non-naturals" that, in addition to the four humors, are wont to influence a person's physical health. These six non-naturals are mentioned already in Galen: the surrounding air; food and drink; movement and rest; emotions; sleeping and waking; excretion and retention. To these six non-naturals Maimonides interestingly added a seventh, sexual intercourse (*On Asthma* 1.7).

Maimonides' most important and popular medical work was his *Medical Aphorisms* (*Fusûl Mûsâ*), a work whose purpose was to transmit Galen's ideas in summary form. This work was repeatedly reprinted in Hebrew, as well as in Latin translations. It consists of 25 chapters, each consisting of brief paragraphs, devoted to specific medical topics. It has been characterized as a medical equivalent of the *Mishneh Torah* in that it offers a summary and compendium of over 90 of Galen's works (Langermann 2008). The first chapter is concerned with physiognomy, the second with the four humors, etc. In the long final chapter, Maimonides presents his "doubts" regarding various of Galen's comments. In this chapter he deals with about fifty inconsistencies found in Galen's works, and concludes with a polemic against one of Galen's religious interpolations having to do with the doctrine of creation.

Reception of Maimonides' Works

The complex story of the reception of Maimonides' works has been traced by many scholars. Let me mention just some of the highlights of what have come to be known as the Maimonidean controversies. Not surprisingly, rabbinic leaders even before Maimonides' death were threatened by what they saw as an attack on Jewish belief. One issue had to do with anthropomorphic descriptions of God found in Scripture. We shall discuss in the next chapter Maimonides' attempt to move Jews away from a literal reading of these descriptions to a more philosophically nuanced reading. A second issue had to do with resurrection of the dead, which, as we have noted above, holds tremendous theological implications for theories of retribution. Another issue centered around Maimonides' contention that all the commandments had rational explanations. Controversy swirled around the naturalistic doctrine of prophecy and miracles as well. These controversies mirrored similar controversies in the fourteenth-century scholastic world, during which period the Christian Church had to accommodate Church teachings with the new and threatening philosophies of Aristotle and Averroes.

The controversy over Maimonides' works commenced in the East, with an argument over the legitimacy of traditional Jewish institutions (Drews

2004, 119). The publication of the *Mishneh Torah* enabled Jews to consult a systematic compendium of Jewish law themselves, and so, not surprisingly, the rabbinic academies were opposed to Maimonides' encroachment upon their authority, which they saw as undermining the institutional foundations of Judaism. This controversy resulted in the Gaon of Baghdad's challenge that Maimonides did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. After Maimonides wrote his *Treatise on Resurrection*, in which he pointed out that the doctrine of resurrection was already included in his thirteen articles of faith, the controversy died down.

But other controversies arose in its wake. The second stage of controversy arose in Provence and spread to northern France and Spain. Provence had an influx of both Sephardi Jews from Andalusia who brought with them from Spain the rich traditions of Arabic philosophy, and Ashkenazi Jews from northern France who were more interested in traditional rabbinic learning. The Ashkenazi Jews worried that the essence of Judaism was in danger of being overrun by secular learning, as epitomized by philosophy. This second stage was set off by Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier's ban on the study of Maimonides' philosophical works (both the *Guide* and the *Book of Knowledge*, the first book of the *Mishneh Torah*). A counter-ban was then proposed by the scholars of Lunel, which was a center of Maimonidean scholarship. We see then two opposing camps: that of Rabbi Solomon, which opposed philosophical study and in particular the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and the scholars of Lunel who were in favor of pursuing philosophy. The thirteenth-century Jewish philosopher Nahmanides tried to reconcile the two camps, but failed in his attempts. Scholars have traced these two stages of the controversy to social and political upheaval within organized Jewish society, as well as to interactions with the Christian Church during this period. The second stage of the controversy ended violently, with the anti-Maimunists bringing the Christian Inquisition into the picture, resulting in the subsequent burning of Maimonides' works by the Church (Drews 2004, 127). It is worth noting that during this same period, a similar controversy raged among scholars at the University of Paris, leading to the famous 1277 condemnations of the works of Aristotle and Averroes by Bishop Tempier. The third ban occurred around 1288/9, leading to another round of bans and counter-bans. In this third stage only the works of Greek philosophy were banned, not those of Maimonides. In fact, however, the study of scientific and philosophical works continued throughout this period.

Yet another area of study has centered around Maimonides' impact upon scholastic thought. Scholars have noted Maimonides' important influence upon Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and other Latin scholars. In a recent study, Hasselhoff has argued that Maimonides' influence upon thirteenth-century scholastic thought was quite extensive, encompassing "philosophy, astronomy, questions of Christian hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible and medicine" (Hasselhoff 2002, 20). This story of Maimonides' incorporation into scholastic thought has yet to be fully documented.

notes

1 I am very much indebted to recent biographies of Maimonides by Kraemer (2008a), Davidson (2005) and Stroumsa (2009) for details of Maimonides' life and writings. Kraemer has also included an extensive (online) bibliography in conjunction with his biography.
2 See Kraemer (2008a, 116–25) for extensive discussion of this controversial point. Kraemer himself supports the view that Maimonides did for a time convert to Islam.
3 For further discussion of these influences on Maimonides, see Kraemer (2008a, 156–8); see also Ivry (1986); Ivry (1991).
4 For a detailed discussion of the impact of Islamic philosophy upon Maimonides, see Pines (1963); Pessin (2005); Zonta (2007).
5 See al-Fârâbî's description of philosophy in Lerner and Mahdi (1963).
6 Al-Ghazâlî is a particularly interesting case, and scholars have recently paid closer attention to possible influences of al-Ghazâlî upon Maimonides. Davidson has suggested some striking similarities between al-Ghazâlî and Maimonides. See for example Eran (2001); Davidson (2005).
7 On this, see Davidson (2005); see also Pines (1963); Pessin (2005).
8 See Eran (1994); S. Harvey (1992).
9 Scholars have debated whether or not the *Treatise on the Art of Logic* is an authentic work. Davidson (2005) has argued that the work is not by Maimonides, but Kraemer and others offer compelling arguments to consider the work as written by Maimonides (see Kraemer (2005, pp. 69–71); Kraemer (2008a) deals extensively with this issue and concludes that the work is authentic.
10 See Kraemer (2005, 5ff.) for extensive discussion of the importance of this work.
11 Note that al-Ghazâlî began his theological work *Revivication of the Religious Sciences* with a *Book of Knowledge* as well. Franz Rosenthal suggests that Maimonides' *Book of Knowledge* owes "its title, its being, and its place to the attitude of Muslim civilization toward knowledge." See Rosenthal (1970, 96).

further reading

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