

Gentrain Unit 6, Maimonides, April 11, 2013 Dr. Cindy Ausec

Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon) 1138-1204

- Achieved fame as a physician and wrote medical treatises
- The leading rabbinic authority of his time
- First Jewish scholar to attempt to introduce articles of faith to Judaism
- Greatest Jewish philosopher of the medieval period and is still widely read today

Life

- Born to a distinguished family in Cordova, Spain in 1138
- Almohad invasion in 1148 – family forced to move to Fez, Morocco
- Moved to Egypt in 1166 and settled in a section of Cairo (Fustat). Physician to the Grand Vizier Al Qadi al Fadil, then to Sultan Saladin
- Died in 1204 after working himself to exhaustion

Important Works

- *Commentary on the Mishnah* – Based on the oral tradition of rabbinic interpretation of the Torah. Contains the first attempt to introduce articles of faith to Judaism
- *Mishneh Torah*
  - 14 volume compendium of Jewish law; established him as the leading rabbinic authority of his time
  - Systematizes all of the commandments of the Torah, and tries to show that every part of Jewish law serves a rational purpose
- *Guide of the Perplexed*

*Guide to the Perplexed*

- Contains Maimonides' most extensive philosophic discussions
  - Goes beyond a literal reading of the *Torah* – interpreting the *Torah* as having two levels of meaning: one for the educated and one for the average worshipper
  - Because he rejects a literal interpretation – the work was banned in some rabbinic circles
- Influenced by Neo-Platonized Aristotelianism
- Style is written speech - a letter written to an advanced student, Joseph ben Judah
- Two purposes
  - To make the *Torah* respectable to philosophy and philosophy compatible with the law.
  - To explain obscure parables in Scripture and point out that they are parables, thereby delivering the educated reader from perplexity
- Judaism is based on a particular philosophy
  - The patriarchs introduced philosophy to Israel before the Greeks – Patriarchs had a “metaphysical knowledge of God”
  - Records of such teaching were destroyed when Israel went into exile
  - Maimonides is reintroducing the Jews to the teaching of their own tradition
- In the introduction to the *Guide* in Jewish tradition:
  - What was taught under the guise of *ma'aseh bereishit* (the account of the beginning) is what Greek thinkers taught as physics (or natural science)

- What Jewish tradition taught under the guise of the *ma'aseh merkava* the account of Ezekiel's chariot is what the Greek thinker taught under the guise of metaphysics (divine science)

#### Divine Attributes

- *Torah* speaks in the language of ordinary people who have a need for anthropomorphic descriptions of God
  - Bible often suggests that a prophet, or in one case the elders of Israel saw God (Exodus 24:10, Numbers 12:8, Isaiah 6:1-3, Ezekiel 1:26-29)
  - Maimonides counters (*GP* 1.4) saying that the kind of seeking involved is intellectual rather than visual – as when one sees their way to the solution of a math problem
  - When it says that God spoke to a prophet it means that they came to understand what God wants
  - To believe in a corporeal God is idolatry

#### God and the Via Negative

- God is not comparable to anything else: He is one person, one number, one idea
- No plurality of faculties, moral dispositions, or essential attributes in God
- To say that God is the wisest or most powerful thing is to imply that God's wisdom or power bears some likeness to our
  - Thus Maimonides' appeal to negation: "God is powerful" should be taken as "God is not lacking power" but better as "God does not lack power or possess it in a way that makes it comparable to other things"
- Attributes of action. God is:
  - Merciful to the extent that the order of nature exhibits merciful characteristics
  - Angry to the extent that the order of nature is harsh toward things that do not take proper care of them selves
  - The point is not that God possesses emotions similar to our own but that the effects of God's actions resemble the effects of our own

#### Commandments

- 611 of the original 613 commandments in the Torah are all means to fulfill the first two: A belief in God and rejection of idolatry
- All Jewish law (the commandments) aims at two things: the improvement of the body and the improvement of the soul