



## A Guide for the Perplexed

*Moses Maimonides*

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## **A Guide for the Perplexed** Moses Maimonides

Moses Maimonides was one of the foremost intellectuals of medieval Judaism. He became physician to Sultan Saladin (1137/8-1193), the famous Islamic military leader. While in Cairo he wrote many volumes on Jewish legal tradition and philosophy. He is best known for his lexicographic works in logic and his piece on the relationship of reason to religion, *A Guide to the Perplexed*. Like his Islamic counterpart, Averroes, Maimonides considered philosophy and religion to be mutually supportive. He also thought more attention should be paid to making Judaism consistent with rational thought.

Through the "Guide of the Perplexed" and the philosophical introductions to sections of his commentaries on the Mishna, Maimonides exerted a very important influence on the Scholastic philosophers, especially on Albert the Great, St. Thomas, and Duns Scotus. He was himself a Jewish Scholastic. Educated more by reading the works of the Arabian philosophers than by personal contact with Arabian teachers, he acquired through the abundant philosophical literature in the Arabic language an intimate acquaintance with the doctrines of Aristotle, and strove earnestly to reconcile the philosophy of the Stagirite with the teachings of the Bible. The principle which inspired all his philosophical activity was identical with the fundamental tenet of Scholasticism: there can be no contradiction between the truths which God has revealed and the findings of the human mind in science and philosophy. Moreover, by science and philosophy he understood the science and philosophy of Aristotle. In some important points, however, he departed from the teaching of the Aristotelean text, holding, for instance, that the world is not eternal, as Aristotle taught, but was created *ex nihilo*, as is taught explicitly in the Bible. Again, he rejected the Aristotelean doctrine that God's provident care extends only to humanity, and not to the individual. But, while in these important points, Maimonides forestalled the Scholastics and undoubtedly influenced them, he was led by his admiration for the neo-Platonic commentators and by the bent of his own mind, which was essentially Jewish, to maintain many doctrines which the Scholastics could not accept. For instance, he pushed too far the principle of negative predication in regard to God. The Scholastics agreed with him that no predicate is adequate to express the nature of God, but they did not go so far as to say that no term can be applied to God in the affirmative sense. They admitted that while "eternal", "omnipotent", etc., as we apply them to God, are inadequate, at the same time we may say "God is eternal" etc., and need not stop, as Moses did, with the negative "God is not not-eternal", etc.

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