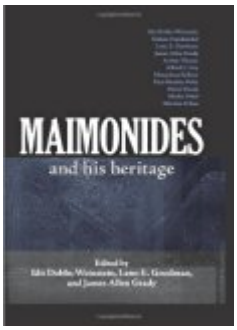
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn E. Goodman, James Allen Grady, eds.. *Maimonides and His Heritage.* SUNY Series in Jewish Philosophy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. 241 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7914-7655-0.

Reviewed by Oliver Leaman

Published on H-Judaic (June, 2010)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

This collection is one of the many that emerged in this millennium with the eight hundredth anniversary of Maimonides' death in 1204. The trouble with these occasions is that some of the collections of essays clearly represent material that authors had lying around for a fair time without being able to find it a suitable home, and then suddenly an anniversary comes round and it is time for cupboard clearing. So a general comment worth making right from the start is that there is little surprising in this collection and that the better essays are on the whole versions of already existing material by the same authors. There is nothing wrong with that of course in an age where recycling is urged on us all, but it makes for a rather dour collection. It also raises the issue of what the point of these types of collections is, who reads them if anyone, and whether they are really worth pursuing.

There are two unusual essays in this book that do try to set off on a new direction: Gideon Freudenthal's piece on Solomon Maimon and Martina Urban's on Schocken's anthologies on Maimonindes in 1930s Germany. In his discussion of Maimon, Freudenthal identifies Maimonides as a mystic, and this seems to follow from Freudenthal's interpretation of Aristotelianism as basically mystical, since it identifies the knower with the known and knowledge itself. This would certainly have surprised Aristotle, since he thought he was pointing out that in knowledge there needs to be some link between the different parts of the epistemic process for knowledge to eventually emerge, which is some way from what we normally call mysticism. Maimon initially took on this rather strange interpretation, but later changed his mind, and quite why we should care is beyond me. Freudenthal at no stage suggests why we should be interested in Maimon's views, either his earlier or later ones. This is a shame since perhaps Maimon had got hold of some unusual angle on Maimonides that deserves to be considered and perhaps he ended up believing that the only real knowledge we can have is mathematical knowledge, which would have struck Maimonides as too restrictive but not obviously

on the wrong track. This could have been used to help us understand what Maimonides thought of as ultimate human knowledge by contrast, but is not.

The other novel chapter, on the style of the anthologies of Maimonides published by Schocken during the Nazi era, argues that Maimonides is explicated in terminology within the system of thought that was then in favor, while simultaneously he was subversively taken to argue against it. Since the conservative ethos of the time had a language all its own, it was not difficult to employ it in explaining Maimonides, while at the same time Urban argues that the intention was to undermine the Fascist meanings given that language by applying it to what clearly had an entirely different sort of meaning. Now, she is impressed, as we should all be, by the amount of Jewish scholarship that appeared during this terribly difficult period for Jews, and in fact there was quite a bit of publishing on Jewish topics during the thirties, perhaps because Jews were restricted in where they could get material published. But it is very difficult to accept her interpretation of what was going on. It is far more likely that Jews, like everyone else, used the current idioms of theoretical thought in their work. It is not as though Martin Heidegger was without his Jewish admirers, either then or subsequently! The idea that something exciting and subversive was going on here is far-fetched, as is the idea that readers of anthologies on Maimonides would look for little clues in the precise wording of the translations and the commentaries that could be taken to be subtle digs at the Nazi state, and hence would feel uplifted in their struggle to survive in the very hostile environment of that state.

Two chapters raise interesting issues. One on Yeshayahu Leibowitz by Paul Mendes-Flohr does a good job in showing how that unusual Israeli thinker made use of Maimonides to support the program of refining the language of Judaism. Anyone who has read Leibowitz's work on Maimonides would appreciate how central it is to the former's idiosyncratic views of religion and politics. One of the themes of this collection of essays is that everyone has his own Maimonides. This is pursued by David Novak who wonders how far today we can be Maimonideans, and he replies that we cannot reconstitute precisely the way of thinking of his period, but we can continue to use at least some of the general principles that Maimonides defended.

The rest of the chapters are not exciting. Menachem Kellner thinks that Maimonides was opposed to anthropomorphism, and Arthur Hyman that the ***Guide of the Perplexed*** is a commentary designed for Jews. Moshe Sokol writes about the different kinds of joy that are involved, according to Maimonides, in different festivals. Alfred Ivry argues that Maimonides was a philosopher, and that he did not believe in an individual form of immortality. Lenn E. Goodman tells us that Maimonides was enthusiastic about medicine, and thought it was not just a matter that concerned us physically but also spiritually. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein points out that Maimonides and Benedict de Spinoza are often in agreement, especially in their suspicion of language. Both disapproved of theologians and theology, and they shared a rather similar philosophical psychology. None of these theses would startle anyone who knows something about Maimonides, and one wonders why they need to be explained yet again for an audience that is surely well aware of them.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

Citation: Oliver Leaman. Review of Dobbs-Weinstein, Idit; Goodman, Lenn E.; Grady, James Allen, eds. *Maimonides and His Heritage*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2010.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29449