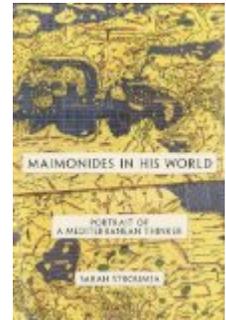




**Sarah Stroumsa.** *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker.*  
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*Maimonides in His World* is a collection of essays that taken together present an intellectual portrait of Maimonides as a “Mediterranean thinker.” What they share in common, aside from the wide-ranging erudition and graceful style of their author, is the methodological assumption that Maimonides is best understood within his broader intellectual circles, from the specific milieu of twelfth-century Andalus, North Africa, and the Mediterranean basin, to the general world of medieval Islam. As a specialist in that world’s religion and philosophy, Stroumsa attunes her ear to whatever parallels may illuminate Maimonides’ statements and doctrines, not only in philosophy and medicine, but also in law and religion. For the author, the image of Maimonides as essentially a rabbinic Jew who is open to external wisdom fails to capture his standing as an intellectual in the medieval Islamic cultural world. So, Maimonides’ understanding of Elisha ben Abuya’s heresy is better accounted for by his (assumed) acquaintance with the heresy of Ibn al-Rawandi, who figures prominently in Muslim theological lit-

erature, than by his knowledge of Jewish sources (p. 47). Even Maimonides’ famous dictum “Listen to the truth from whoever says it” is considered by the author to be “a commonplace among the learned, and Jewish scholars were no exception” (p. 12).

Of course, the search for philosophical parallels and influences on Maimonides is hardly novel. But Stroumsa’s Maimonides is a denizen of an extraordinarily broad intellectual universe, on account of his education, travel, and life under four different Islamic dynasties, not to mention his self-attested reading habits and powers of retention. The author assumes that “*a priori*, therefore, and until proven otherwise ... [Maimonides] was generally familiar with major books of his period, both those that circulated in the West and those he could read in Egypt” (p. xii). Occasionally this assumption leads dangerously close to circularity, as when Stroumsa claims that “this assumption *in itself* allows us to uncover places where Maimonides’ statements indeed reveal his familiarity with these works” (emphasis added). If textual ev-

idence favors the likelihood that Maimonides was familiar with a certain work, it is unnecessary to make the *a priori* assumption that he was familiar with all major books of his period.

That assumption is typical of the “Jerusalem school” of Maimonides scholarship associated with the work of Shlomo Pines and some of his students. Pines emphasized the importance of viewing a medieval Jewish thinker within his natural, historical context, and his work sparked, *inter alia*, an expansive search for parallels and influences in non-Jewish writings. Such a search has proven to be often suggestive, occasionally exhilarating, but, in this reviewer’s opinion, rarely convincing. Recently, Herbert Davidson has questioned not only the extensive claims of influence on Maimonides, but also the breadth of Maimonides’ familiarity with science, culture, and religion. Stroumsa responds to Davidson several times in the present book. Where Davidson sees Maimonides making inaccurate generalizations based on incomplete knowledge, Stroumsa sees deliberate simplifications for the sake of the argument (p. 35). For Stroumsa, Maimonides’ account of the doctrines of the Kalam, or of the Sabians, becomes understandable when it is realized that he is concerned more with the phenomenology of religion than with the history of religions. So, for example, the same rationale why the Israelites continued to worship the Deity through sacrifices--divine accommodation--applies to why Muslims continued to prostrate themselves before the Kaaba in Mecca (pp. 110-111). This implies either that God promulgates laws to both Jews and Muslims, or at least that both religions develop according to the same underlying principles.

Stroumsa’s portrait is most compelling in the chapter on Maimonides and Almohadism. During his formative years, Maimonides not only lived under Almohad rule, but according to contemporary Muslim historians (whose testimony the author accepts), converted to Islam and practiced outwardly its tenets. Stroumsa argues that Mai-

monides’ law code, innovative in the Jewish legal tradition, follows Almohad legal methodology, which is to present a conclusion concisely based on legal principles, without following the circuitous history of the argumentation. Moreover, his penchant for including theological principles in his legal works, unprecedented and seldom followed in the Jewish legal tradition, also has Almohad precedent in Ibn Tûmart’s law code, a point made earlier by I. Heinemann. In theology Maimonides follows the Almohads’ rigid rejection of anthropomorphism and makes it a key principle of his thought, classifying this rejection as a foundation of the Torah that even the multitude must accept. Unlike Averroes, who is very strict about revealing philosophical allegorization to non-philosophers, Maimonides finds it occasionally an obligation. Stroumsa also suggests that Maimonides’ military conception of the messiah who spreads monotheism by the sword may be influenced by the frequent military campaigns of the Almohads. Heinemann already connected Maimonides’ ruling that obligates Jews to force idolaters to choose between accepting the Noahide laws or death with contemporary Muslim notions of *jihâd*; Stroumsa does not consider this particular question, or in what way the Jewish warrior king emulates Almohad models. She does mention in an earlier chapter that the Almohad rulers restricted the dwelling of Christian merchants to the port cities; this is reminiscent of Maimonides’ banning idolatrous merchants from even temporary residence within lands over which Jews possess control (A.Z. 3:8). In any event, the “Almohad connection” continues to be an interesting avenue of scholarly exploration, though highly speculative.

Stroumsa weighs in on the recent debate over Maimonides’ authorship of the *Treatise on Logic* by proposing a novel reading of a phrase in the biographical entry on Maimonides by the historian Ibn al-Qiftî. Al-Qiftî writes that when still in al-Andalûs Maimonides “mastered mathematics and *shadda min ashyâ*’ of logic.” The phrase left un-

translated is usually understood either as “emphasized/concentrated on matters of logic” or, if “*shadda*” is read “*shadâ*,” “acquired a smattering of logic.” Stroumsa dismisses the first reading as “unusual” and the latter reading as inconsistent with Maimonides’ view in the *Guide* that views mastery of logic a prerequisite of science. Since she finds the term “*shadda*” to mean “binds a book,” she proposes to read the phrase as “composed or compiled [a work] on some elements of logic” (p. 128), i.e., the *Treatise on Logic*. And since al-Qiftî is referring to the Andalusian period of Maimonides’ life, this supports the conjecture of Joseph Derenburg (not “Julius,” p. 27) and Moritz Steinschneider that the *Treatise on Logic* is an early work. Yet this reading of *shadda* is not unproblematic, aside from its highly unusual sense. For one thing, al-Qiftî refers to Maimonides’ works later in his entry, only after he has described his life. For another, the contrast in the proposed reading between “mastering mathematics” and “composing an elementary book on logic” is odd; either one of the two readings above is preferable on that point. But in any event, there is no reason to assume that Maimonides required a mastery of *all* of the divisions of logic so early in his educational career. Maimonides displays knowledge of Alfarabi’s short treatises on several works of the Organon in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, his first major work, but references to some of the Alfarabi’s longer commentaries are only found in the *Guide* and the *Medical Aphorisms*. This may be due to the nature of the respective works, but it also may be that the knowledge of logic required to begin the study of philosophy was less than the mastery of mathematics required for the study of astronomy. The “smattering of logic” to which Ibn al-Qiftî refers, if the word is emended, could have included Alfarabi’s short treatises. Even if the word is not emended, it is compatible with what we know of Maimonides’ views on the study of logic.

The book concludes with an examination of Maimonides’ views on immortality and the resur-

rection of the dead. With respect to the former, the author attempts to chart out a position that differs both from Pines, who thought that Maimonides was skeptical about the human ability to achieve immortality, and from Davidson, who takes him at his word. Stroumsa first suggests that Maimonides doesn’t have a “single true belief” on the subject (p. 165), but she then allows that he is generally confident about immortality, although, like Avicenna, he expresses himself poetically. As for resurrection, Stroumsa provides an important reconstruction of the debate in the East on the basis of her reading of works by Maimonides, his student, Joseph Ibn Simeon (which she has edited), and the Gaon Samuel b. Ali. She argues persuasively that Maimonides’ *Treaties on Resurrection* should be read more as a response to Joseph’s arguments against the Gaon, then to the Gaon himself, whose treatise, according to Stroumsa, was known to Maimonides through Joseph’s *Epistle of the Silencing*. In her reading Maimonides is disturbed by Joseph’s attempts to “play the *mutakallim*” (p. 176) and to present what appears to be at first glance a more “philosophical” and less traditional position on resurrection. Like Averroes, Maimonides rejects this sort of quasi-philosophical interpretation of traditional doctrine, viewing resurrection instead as an “article of faith” that is to be devalued and distinguished from the immortality of the intellect (p. 183). The difficulty with this interpretation is that Maimonides, unlike Averroes, composed an entire treatise in defense of resurrection. True, unlike the Gaon, he does not attempt to provide a pseudo-naturalistic interpretation of physical resurrection. But in the *Treatise* he also argues against its allegorical interpretation by some early readers of the *Mishneh Torah* mentioned in the former’s introduction. Given that rabbinical tradition and consensus is unequivocal on the literal understanding of physical resurrection, and that the sense of text requires it, there is nothing left but to accept the doctrine, and make that acceptance palatable, by an appeal to the nature of divine

will and miracles. His defense of a supernatural view of miracles and his canons of allegorical interpretation in the *Treatise* are more reminiscent here of Alghazali than Averroes.

But the importance of *Maimonides in His World* lies less in the specific claims of parallels than in the challenge it presents to the conventional portrait of Maimonides. If nothing else, the author demonstrates that knowledge of the world which Maimonides inhabited allows us to draw a new and fascinating picture of a personality we thought we knew well. The accuracy of that picture will no doubt be debated for some time to come.

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