

THE ANCIENT PERIOD

PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA

Philo is often referred to as the first Jewish philosopher⁷. He lived in Egypt in the first century. At this time, Jews were surrounded by Greek (Hellenistic) culture. Philo, deeply influenced by Greek philosophy, (especially Plato), attempted to understand the Torah using the "glasses" provided by Greek views. He interpreted Biblical passages allegorically, showing that behind the seemingly straightforward stories lay deep philosophical truths.

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

"THE KUZARI"

The Kuzari was written by Judah HaLevi, a great Jewish poet and philosopher who lived in Spain about 1075 and 1141. HaLevi worked on the Kuzari for twenty years. The book is an attempt to show the superiority of Judaism primarily over Aristotelian Philosophy, but also over Christianity and Islam. The literary framework of the Kuzari is that of a king who invites an Aristotelian philosopher, a Christian, Muslim and Jew to discuss their various beliefs. The majority of the book is devoted to the dialogue between the king and the Jew.

Although HaLevi writes in a philosophical mode, drawing on logic and rationalistic arguments, he actually claims that religious experience is superior to theoretical reasoning. He does not deny the importance of philosophical thought and he holds Aristotle in high regard. However he claims that religious truth is gained through prophecy and the direct experience of God.

According to HaLevi, Jews must be taught to follow the laws of the Torah as this is how they will experience God's presence, not through philosophical arguments as to His existence. Interestingly enough, this case for subjective experience as opposed to philosophical explanations is presented through philosophical argumentation! HaLevi expresses in his book his belief that the Jews have a particular spiritual sense, and that the land of Israel embodies a unique spirituality not found elsewhere.⁸

⁷ A two-volume book on Philo's teachings is "Philo", by Harry Aystryn Wolfson

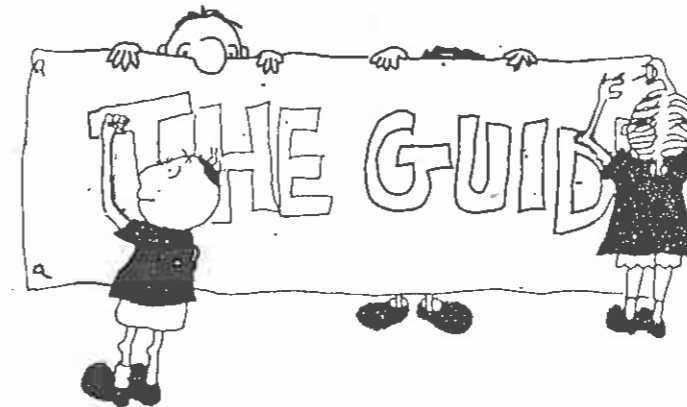
⁸ An English translation of "The Kuzari" was edited by Hartwig Hirschfeld, and an abridged version may be found in Isaak Heineman's "Three Jewish Philosophers".

"GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED"

This work, written by Maimonides, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (the Rambam) around 1200, is generally accepted as the most important Jewish philosophical work of the medieval period, indeed, many say of all times⁹. We mentioned Maimonides previously, when discussing Jewish legal literature, and specifically, his Mishneh Torah. In this book, Maimonides enters an entirely different realm. Here he has different aims, is writing to a different audience and writes in a different style. Maimonides wrote in Egypt, in an intellectual climate which was highly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy. The Muslim philosophers surrounding him were much involved with trying to understand and interpret Aristotle's thought. Maimonides shared this goal, yet he focused on trying to reconcile Aristotle's thought with traditional Jewish sources, primarily the Torah. It must be stressed that Maimonides' goal was not to teach philosophical thought, but rather to help those believing Jews who were 'perplexed' and troubled by the apparent contradictions between general philosophy and Jewish teachings.

As Maimonides explicitly states, the 'Guide to the Perplexed' is addressed primarily to an intellectual elite. Knowing that his writings may lead to heresy and disbelief, as they raise difficult theological questions, he writes in an obscure manner, so that only those who are up to the task will read and understand his work.

In the Guide, Maimonides relates to central concepts such as God, Prophecy, Creation, and the End of Days. Maimonides was a great rationalist and believed that all of these concepts could be understood through logic and the use of reason. He also offers a philosophical interpretation of the Torah, showing that the Torah is a rational book, which speaks in the language of metaphors to convey philosophical ideas.



In its time, the Guide was controversial. Three leading Rabbis in France denounced it to the Dominicans, who headed the French Inquisition. They burnt the books. Despite this, the work greatly influenced the subsequent course of medieval Jewish philosophy as well as much of modern Jewish thought. The influence of Maimonides is apparent in the writings of many contemporary Jewish thinkers across the spectrum of Jewish life and thought.

⁹ A very good translation of "Guide to the Perplexed" is a two-volume paperback by Shlomo Pines