

Maimonides the Rationalist by Herbert A. Davidson.
The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2011.

Moses Maimonides (Rambam) is considered by many Jews to be one of the greatest men to bestride the pages of Jewish history. He was a polymath, renowned in a number of fields, and the impression he made on the Jews of his time, and continues to make, is undiminished by the passage of centuries since his death in 1204. Because he was such a multi-faceted man - doctor, philosopher, halakhist, letter writer, communal leader and more, it is true to say that many Jews have seen in him what they wanted to see and have found aspects of his persona to amply justify their characterisation.

That Maimonides is far from the blank canvas that some assert is clear to those who have studied even a small part of his writings, but that does not stop the assertion from being repeated.

In *Maimonides the Rationalist*, Herbert A. Davidson, author of the definitive biography of Maimonides published in 2004, sets out to investigate various aspects of Maimonides the Philosopher, and to ascertain whether the title of rationalist, that some ascribe to the Rambam, is actually deserved. The book is written with the forensic quality that those familiar with Professor Davidson's writings would expect and is divided into nine sections in which Davidson reaches some fascinating conclusions: The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation; The First Two Positive Commandments; Maimonides' Knowledge of the Philosophical Literature in his Rabbinic period; Maimonides' *Shemonah Perakim* and Alfarabi's *Fusul Muntaza'a*; Maimonides' Knowledge of the Philosophical Literature in his Later Period; Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge; A Problematic Sentence in *Moreh Nevukhim*, ii.24; Maimonides' Ethical System; Maimonides the Rationalist.

For those whose perspective on the Rambam's greatest and most controversial work of philosophy, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, is limited, the chapters on Rambam's knowledge of the philosophical writings of his own and earlier times, contain some surprises, not least in Davidson's convincing assertion that Maimonides' knowledge of this material was nowhere near as secure and broad as might be imagined.

But what makes the book so fascinating, for me at least, is Davidson's confident and substantiated statements about the nature of Maimonides' own religious faith, the assertion that he was indeed a rationalist, and his view that a satisfactory balancing of the core teachings of Jewish thought with a rational picture of the universe may be achieved not by reasoning but by a 'sturdy act of faith'.

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