

Maimonides after 800 Years

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The past year will be remembered in the world of Jewish scholarship as the year of the eagle, that is to say the Great Eagle, the epithet by which Maimonides has been known over the centuries. 2004 marked the 800th anniversary of his death. Numerous academic conferences around the world have taken place in order to commemorate this occasion and to make further contributions to understanding the man and his writings. These writings, particularly Maimonides' legal treatise, the *Mishneh Torah* and his philosophical-theological treatise, *The Guide of the Perplexed* continue to excite the intellect and the imagination of countless Jews and many non-Jews today, perhaps more than in any other period of history. The number of publications devoted to Maimonides' thought in the last few years has reached astronomic proportions. In the wake of the 800th anniversary many more books will soon appear. Yet for all this scholarly activity the question still arises, and at times I am in fact asked the question, whether after 800 years is there still something *significantly* new to be said about Maimonides or that remains to be done for an appreciation of his thought. Is not the torrent of current scholarship simply contributing to the margins of understanding his thought, essentially repeating the insights or echoing the activity of previous generations of scholars while providing a number of embellishments and emendations? This occasion is a good opportunity to offer my subjective appraisal of what are some of the milestones of Maimonidean scholarship in the past few years, ones that will leave a sharp imprint in my estimation on subsequent studies in the years to come.¹

For all the stress in the academic world on original research, no activity has been more important for disseminating and studying a philosopher's thought than that of translating. If not for the work of Maimonides' younger contem-

¹ Giuseppe Veltri has published a review of four recent works on Maimonides in *EJJS Newsletter* 15 (October 2004), pp. 79–82. In the remarks that follow I will emphasize the particular significance of three of the works he has reviewed. For practical considerations I will not discuss in this essay scholarship involving Maimonides' legal writings, though many of the conferences rightfully juxtaposed his legal thinking with his theological-philosophical thought. Recent contributions in this area include new translations and editions of Maimonides legal works, such as Isaac Shailat's new critical edition of *Mishneh Torah: Sefer ha-Madda, Sefer Zera'im* (Maale Adumim: Birkat Moshe, 2004), his new edition and Hebrew translation of Maimonides' commentary to Mishnah Avodah Zarah and Horayot (Maale Adumim: Birkat Moshe, 2003), and Menachem Kellener's English translation of *The Book of Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). The extensive scholarship on Maimonides' legal writings deserves a separate treatment.

porary, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, who translated the *Guide* into Hebrew, Maimonides' impact on Jewish thought, indeed on Western thought, would have been negligible. Already in the Middle Ages the majority of scholars who read the *Guide*, commented on it, argued with it and incorporated its ideas into their own thought did so solely on the basis of the translation of Ibn Tibbon or that of his contemporary Judah al-Harizi. Even the Latin translations were made from the Hebrew translations. Anyone who has worked at translating the classics of the past knows how difficult this task is and how much scholarship one must possess in order to produce a good translation. Even today translations not only allow students to study and appreciate works that otherwise would remain for them closed books, they also serve as the basis for much of the scholarly literature written on them. In Maimonides' case, if it were not for the English translations of Michael Friedlander, and more important Shlomo Pines, the current torrent of scholarship on the *Guide* in English would probably be a bare trickle. It should be further noted that even if one has a solid knowledge of Hebrew, the medieval Hebrew translations are extremely difficult for today's students to understand. For this reason there can be little doubt that the single most important contribution to Maimonidean scholarship in recent years is Michael Schwarz's Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (Tel-Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002). Not only is Schwarz's translation, made directly from Munk-Joel's Arabic edition, exceptionally accurate, it is also wondrously literate. Even oblique passages in Maimonides' theological *magnum opus* suddenly become lucid. Moreover, in the tradition of Salomon Munk's majestic French translation of the *Guide* Schwarz has added copious notes containing explanations of terms and ideas and providing extensive bibliographical references to the relevant scholarly literature. This translation in effect offers a detailed running commentary on the treatise, and has already become an indispensable resource for all Maimonidean scholars. If this was the only work of recent scholarship on Maimonides, it would suffice us.² In this context another recent translation of the *Guide* deserves mention, namely Mauro Zonta's Italian translation (Torino: UTET, 2003). This is the first Italian translation made directly from the Arabic and should make Maimonides' work more accessible to Italian scholars, further increasing the circle of the next generation of his students.

² In academic circles Schwarz's translation is sure to replace the Hebrew translation of Joseph Kafih that has been of tremendous value to a generation of students and scholars, and should continue to be consulted. Certainly no individual has done more to make the masterpieces of Judaeo-Arabic civilization available in Hebrew. Mention should also be made of Kafih's invaluable commentary on the *Mishneh Torah*.

Maimonides' contributions to science, particularly to the field of medicine, do not stand at the forefront of his cultural legacy. This is probably the reason why they have not received the treatment they deserve until recently. The groundbreaking studies of Gad Freudenthal, Tzvi Langerman and Tony Levy, among others, is changing the picture and enabling us to appreciate another important dimension of Maimonides' thought. In this area mention must be made especially of Gerrit Bos' ambitious project of editing Maimonides' medical writings, all of them written in Arabic, and translating them into English. Recently published by him are the first part of the *Medical Aphorisms* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2004) and *On Asthma* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2004).

Another area in which important new strides are being made is in the appreciation of the diverse influences exercised on Maimonides' philosophic thought. If most previous studies focused on the influence of the Islamic Aristotelian philosophers, and much more work remains to be done in this area, the current trend is to show the strong impact made on his thought by other bodies of literature, even though Maimonides was often silent in acknowledging their influence or even displayed a negative attitude to them. This includes, for example, the works of earlier Jewish medieval thinkers such as Bahya Ibn Paquda, Judah Halevi, Abraham Ibn Ezra and Abraham Ibn Daud, as well as the writings of the Moslem theologians, the *mutakallimun*, and even the ideology of the *almohades* who conquered and forcibly converted the Jews of Andalusian Spain. The list of scholars working in this area is extensive. More effort is also being devoted recently to drawing a more detailed and accurate picture of the influence exerted by Maimonides' thought in the period following his death, particularly among his followers in Provence, Italy and Spain, as well as his influence on Latin Christian scholastics and mystics. In the former area one should single out Yair Shiffman's new critical edition of Shem Tov Ibn Falquera's *Moreh ha-Moreh* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001). In the coming years many more editions, currently being worked on, of the writings of Maimonides' disciples, such as Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Moses of Salerno and Levi Ben Abraham, as well as studies of their thought should become available. This will provide us also with a better understanding of how Maimonides was interpreted by those closest to him in time. As for Maimonides' influence on non-Jewish thinkers, mention should be made of Yossef Schwartz's Hebrew book, *"To Thee is Silence Praise": Meister Eckhart's Reading in Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed* (Tel Aviv: Alma, 2002), and G6rge Hasselhoff, *Dicit Rabbi Moyses, Studien zum Bild von Moses Maimonides im lateinischen Westen vom 13. bis 15. Jahrhundert* (W6rzburg: K6nigshausen & Neumann, 2004).

In keeping with the contemporary *Zeitgeist* Maimonides' relation to mysticism, if not his transformation into a mystic, has also been the subject of much scholarly attention. Bar-Ilan University devoted an entire conference to this area and many of the other conferences on Maimonides contained papers on this subject. The possible influence of Sufi thought on Maimonides is a theme that has been explored in the studies of Paul Fenton. Both Moshe Idel and Elliot Wolfson have delved into Maimonides' relationship to earlier Jewish mystical thought as well as his subsequent influence on the works of the kabbalists. Isadore Twersky had voiced the view that the sharp lines often drawn between Jewish philosophy and Jewish mysticism deserve to be blurred. It is becoming increasingly clear that there was in fact a far greater exchange of ideas between members of both "camps" than previously assumed. Maimonides may well be the most important figure to stand on the crossroads of these two movements.

With recent studies Maimonides' life is also coming into sharper focus. Particularly noteworthy is Mordechai Akiva Friedman's Hebrew book, *Maimonides, The Yemenite Messiah and Apostasy* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2002). In light of all these developments it is only fitting that a number of the world's leading Maimonidean scholars have undertaken to give us a new holistic look at Maimonides based on original research and incorporating the fruits of the past generation of scholarship. Most recently published is Herbert Davidson's *Moses Maimonides: The Man and his Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). All Maimonidean scholars eagerly await Joel Kramer's work to offer us an additional view on this subject.

For all that has been described till now, much if not most of contemporary scholarship continues to focus on the same areas that have preoccupied eight centuries of Maimonidean scholars, namely his theological views – e.g., creation, miracles, divine knowledge, providence, prophecy, the divine law, human perfection and ultimate reward. Inseparable from these issues is the problem of the manner of Maimonides' presentation, that is to say, how one should read the *Guide*. More specifically, does this work in fact present Maimonides' true views in an esoteric manner, and if so, how are his views to be discerned. These issues continue to be the ones most vociferously debated by scholars. While we may claim in truth that we possess far more insights into these issues than did Maimonides' earliest readers, we are no closer to reaching a consensus on them today than they were. Leading scholars continue to present Maimonides' thought in diametrically opposing ways. It is perhaps for this reason that *The Guide of the Perplexed* continues to retain its freshness after all these centuries.