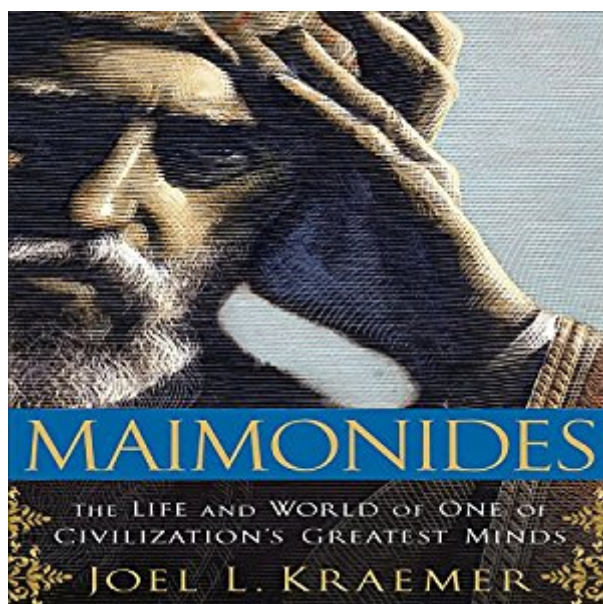


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Maimonides: The Life And World Of One Of Civilization's Greatest Minds



Synopsis

This authoritative biography of Moses Maimonides, one of the most influential minds in all of human history, illuminates his life as a philosopher, physician, and lawgiver. A biography on a grand scale, it brilliantly explicates one man's life against the background of the social, religious, and political issues of his time. Maimonides was born in Córdoba, in Muslim-ruled Spain, in 1138 and died in Cairo in 1204. He lived in an Arab-Islamic environment from his early years in Spain and North Africa to his later years in Egypt, where he was immersed in its culture and society. His life, career, and writings are the highest expression of the intertwined worlds of Judaism and Islam. Maimonides lived in tumultuous times, at the peak of the Reconquista in Spain and the Crusades in Palestine. His monumental compendium of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, became a basis of all subsequent Jewish legal codes and brought him recognition as one of the foremost lawgivers of humankind. In Egypt, his training as a physician earned him a place in the entourage of the great Sultan Saladin, and he wrote medical works in Arabic that were translated into Hebrew and Latin and studied for centuries in Europe. As a philosopher and scientist, he contributed to mathematics and astronomy, logic and ethics, politics and theology. His Guide of the Perplexed, a masterful interweaving of religious tradition and scientific and philosophic thought, influenced generations of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish thinkers. Now, in a dazzling work of scholarship, Joel Kraemer tells the complete story of Maimonides's rich life. MAIMONIDES is at once a portrait of a great historical figure and an excursion into the Mediterranean world of the twelfth century. Joel Kraemer draws on a wealth of original sources to re-create a remarkable period in history when Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions clashed and mingled in a setting alive with intense intellectual exchange and religious conflict. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

In this era of turbulent change, we need to savor the spiritual wisdom of people who thrived in such eras before us. In January, during Interfaith Heroes Month, Daniel Buttry wrote a short tribute to the 12th-century Maimonides among 31 short profiles in his book, "Interfaith Heroes." Buttry's summary remains a pretty good snapshot of this towering figure: "Maimonides was one of the greatest Jewish thinkers ever, producing foundational philosophical works on Judaism. ... He also was known for the breadth of his thinking and scholarship. He wrote medical works in Arabic ... and he worked diligently to reconcile scientific teachings with the teachings of his faith. ... Because Maimonides was open to diversity and was knowledgeable about many different streams ... he was able to weave together ancient Greco-Roman, medieval Arab, Jewish and Western cultures while retaining clear and cogent roots in his own Jewish faith." In short: This is a guy we need to consult today in our own period of cultural upheaval! Dr. Joel Kraemer has spent 60 years of his own life studying Maimonides—including many years Dr. Kraemer devoted to learning the languages that Maimonides himself mastered. Fortunately, Dr. Kraemer's lifelong pursuit of the great sage has ended in the gift of this eye-opening exploration of Maimonides' life, work and wisdom. This book could not have come at a better moment. If you like to dive into challenging, in-depth biographies, like David McCullough's "

Maimonides lived from 1135 to 1204, first in cities of Spain, then travelled to Morocco & Palestine and finally settling in Cairo Egypt, where he eventually became the undisputed leader and principal teacher of the Jewish community of Egypt. As Jewry's main 'dude', modern term, in terms of legal authority and philosopher, he was humane and tough minded, a comfort to Jews and the main disciplinarian of heresy. He wrote that it was incumbent upon a Jew restricted in practice of his worship to depart to another location, as he himself had been repeatedly forced to do at the hands of the Almohads, a fundamentalist Islamic group that took control of the Spanish peninsula in 1148 and gave non-Muslims the choice of conversion or death. Echoes of what is happening in our times. But he also said, "If a man asks me, Shall I be slain or utter the formula of Islam?" I answer "Utter the formula and live." Maimonides transformed Judaism, composing its Thirteen commandments of faith. The celebrated 12th commandment, "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah,

and though he tarry, i will wait daily for his coming - he entered popular consciousness. His "Guide for the Perplexed" written in Arabic and finished in 1190, further recast Judaism, offering a philosophical interpretation of the Scriptures far removed from the conventional readings of his, and our own, times. Today, Maimonides stands for an austere doctrinal Judaism, the severe reprimand of all forms of idolatry and the combining of Jewish learning with secular science and Aristotelian philosophy (by way of Islamic intellectuals such as Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushid and others).

Outside of students of religion and philosophers, the only ones who can be expected to know the name Maimonides are those youngsters who attended Hebrew School. The great 12th-century thinker composed a "ladder of charity" that ranks his preference from best (helping the individual find a job so he may take care of himself) to worst (giving begrudgingly). Since Jews are taught at an early age about the importance of charity, it's a perfect fit. And that's pretty much it, which is a shame for someone who would have been called a Renaissance man had he been born a couple of centuries later. Scholar, philosopher, doctor, astronomer, poet: Maimonides apparently mastered many disciplines during his lifetime. I say "apparently" because, as well researched as Joel L. Kramer's new biography obviously is, something seems to be lacking. He spends much more time on "the world" aspect and less on "the life." Despite the depth of Kraemer's epic, he acknowledges, "where there are gaps in Maimonides' life, they are often filled with legend and surmise so that his life is surrounded by myth." Indeed, no sooner does the author mention his birth than he expounds on Cordoba and the surrounding regions, Andalusian Jewish culture and the educational methods of the day. There are gaps in the biographical data that he seeks to fill, with mixed results. Much of Maimonides's world is fascinating, as Kramer explains the day-to-day routines, the political and royal machinations, the exultations and hazards of long-distance travel. As a Jew, Maimonides seems to have come out better than his co-religionists (although it seems he converted, as many were forced to do in those tenuous times, it was to Islam rather than Christianity).

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