

# Review of New Book on Maimonides

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Dr Irene Lancaster PhD PGCE is an expert on Abraham ibn Ezra (born Tudela Spain 1089, murdered by Crusaders near London in 1164) and has founded a number of academic courses in the UK on Hebrew, Jewish Studies and Jewish history. A noted scholar and author, she also chairs the UK based Broughton Park Jewish Christian Dialogue Group,

## Biography of author

Dr Daniel Davies PhD is from Manchester, UK. After studying at Yeshivat ha-Kibbutz ha-Dati in Israel, he read Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Birmingham and pursued postgraduate work at Cambridge University. He has written extensively on the history of philosophy and theology.

His first book on Maimonides, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed* (OUP, 2011), received an honorary mention from the Jordan Schnitzer Book Awards.

Together with Charles Manekin, he edited *Interpreting Maimonides* (CUP, 2020). He has worked as a Research Associate in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unity at Cambridge University Library, at the University of Hamburg, and at Bar-Ilan University.

At present, he is a visiting researcher with the Averroes Edition project housed at the Thomas Institute of the University of Cologne. He is currently translating Abraham Ibn Daud's *Exalted Faith* and preparing an edition and translation of *New Heavens* by Isaac Abarbanel.

## Review of book

Daniel Davies, *Maimonides*. Cambridge: Polity, 2024. Hardback £55, Paperback £17.99, ebook £16.99.

Polity's Classic Thinkers series aims to provide serious introductions to "the greatest thinkers of history." Daniel Davies's contribution on Maimonides is a high-level presentation of the Rambam's treatment of major philosophical themes.

It focusses mostly on doctrines that are common to the Abrahamic faiths and continue to be discussed today by theologians and by scholars of medieval thought. It is not merely an introduction, however, but a serious contribution to scholarly debates about how to interpret Maimonides, in particular his *Guide*.

Davies addresses highly contested questions in ways that are both original and sensibly grounded in Rambam's text. Studies often divide between layers of the *Guide* and, inspired by the many works of Leo Strauss, including *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (The Free Press, 1952; reissued Chicago, 1988), claim that Maimonides' true beliefs are 'esoteric', meaning that they are hidden behind simplistic, 'exoteric' religious doctrines.

Such studies often justify their approaches by noting that Maimonides says he intentionally contradicts himself. They argue that philosophical understandings of things like the creation of the world differ from religious ones. Maimonides' 'exoteric' opinion that the world is created is therefore contradicted by his 'esoteric', real opinion that it is eternal.

Rather than following this well-trodden path seeking out hidden heresies, Davies instead focusses on explaining the arguments that Maimonides sets out. In the final chapter, after an excellent thumbnail sketch of the reception of Maimonides' work in subsequent centuries, Davies offers a methodological defense. He claims that the contradictions do not hide real philosophical beliefs but are part of the Rambam's strategy of hiding his interpretation of Ezekiel's famous chariot vision. Furthermore, Davies's interpretations of the issues themselves show that Maimonides's supposedly 'exoteric' arguments are not simplistic and dogmatic but are philosophically serious.

Generally, the book stands out for its philosophical approach. It focusses on explaining the arguments and the assumptions behind them, trying to clarify why Maimonides and others of the period found them compelling.

For example, why did they speak about parts and faculties of the soul? What questions were they trying to answer when they said that everything in the world is composed of matter and form?

It also addresses the issues arising from some of Maimonides' arguments in ways that make them accessible and relevant to philosophers today. For example, Davies is able to explain why talk about 'possible worlds', (which is currently a common way of framing the difference between 'necessary' and 'possible') fails to capture what Maimonides means when he writes that God is a necessary being.

Furthermore, after explaining how Maimonides presents his negative theology and arguments about religious language, Davies addresses problems that have been raised by philosophical theologians in recent decades to the idea of God's necessity. In doing so, he is able to clarify and defend it.

This book is philosophically sophisticated, but its amenable style is attractive for the serious reader, whether specialist or non specialist. It is open and inclusive, and it fully deserves Yitzhak Melamed's blurb, which states that it is "one of the best works of Jewish philosophy of recent times."

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