Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Rambam) was the most eminent Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages. His most famous books are: an Arabic commentary to the Mishnah, a Hebrew law code, the Mishneh Torah ("Repetition of the Law"); and the Arabic philosophical work, The Guide for the Perplexed. Maimonides, who was born in Cordova in 1135, was compelled when still a lad to flee from Spain because of the persecutions of the fanatical Almohades. After a series of misfortunes and wanderings in northern Africa and Palestine he finally settled in Egypt, in Fustat-Cairo, in 1165, where he became a court physician.

The extracts from his letters that follow give a clear picture of the man and his activity. The first letter below is an answer to Joseph ibn Djabir of Bagdad who had written to Maimonides for enlightenment on certain questions. Ibn Djabir, who knew only Arabic, could not consult Rambam's Hebrew code, the Mishneh Torah. The second letter is in answer to Samuel ibn Tibbon of southern France, who was translating the Guide for the Perplexed into Hebrew and wished to come to Egypt to visit the famous philosopher. Both of these letters were originally written in Arabic.

1. Maimonides' Letter to Ibn Djabir, about 1191.

"I have set the Lord always before me."

We have received the letter of the honored and esteemed elder, the disciple Joseph ben Abul-Kheir (may his soul find rest in paradise) who is known as Ibn Djabir. He mentions in it that he is an ignorantus in Jewish things. However, it is clear to us from his letter that he is making a strong effort to study Jewish lore and that he is busying himself considerably with our Arabic commentary to the Mishnah, although he does not understand the code that we have written, that is to say, the Mishneh Torah, because it is in Hebrew. He also mentions that he has heard of certain scholars—may God protect them—who are there in Bagdad and who have attacked us in those things which he mentions and he wishes to
answer them. [The gaon of Bagdad, Samuel ben Ali, attacked the
views of Maimonides on resurrection.] Ibn Djabir also entreats us
to write to him in order to help him in his studies and this we now do.
First let me tell you—may God maintain your worth and add to
your success—that you are not an ignoramus but our disciple and
friend, and so is every one who strives to cleave to the study of the
Torah even though he understands but one verse or one law. It
makes no difference whether one understands it through the Hebrew
or Arabic or Aramaic: the thing is to understand the subject matter
in whatever language it be, and this is even more true of commen-
taries and codes. The important fact is that you should busy your-
self learning. Of any man who neglects his study or has never learnt
anything it is said [Numbers 15:31]: “He has despised the word of
God.” Likewise any one, even though he be a great scholar, who
is too lazy to increase his learning, fails to fulfill the positive com-
mandment to study the Torah. This is as important as all other
commandments put together.

In general I would like to tell you that you ought not underesti-
mate yourself nor despair of attaining perfection. There were great
scholars who began to study when they were already advanced in
years and became what they were. [Tradition says Akiba, died about
132 C.E., was forty years old when he began to study.]

You ought to learn this section of the book in the original Hebrew
in which we have composed it, for it is not hard to understand and
very easy to learn. And after you have trained yourself in one part
you will understand the entire work. [Ibn Djabir is advised to learn
Hebrew from the Mishneh Torah and to use this code to solve his
difficulties.] Under no circumstance do I desire to translate it into
Arabic, for then all of its charm would be lost.

As a matter of fact I now wish to translate my [Arabic] com-
mentary to the Mishnah and the Book of Proceps into the Holy
Tongue. Surely then I will not translate this code into Arabic. Don’t
even ask it of me. [Maimonides wanted to preserve Hebrew as the
Jewish national tongue.] At all events you are my brother. May
God aid you and favor you with true perfection and treasure up for
you the happiness of this world and the next.

Moses, the son of Maimon, of blessed memory.

II. Maimonides’ Letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon, 1199

Only the Blessed Creator of the World knows how I have been
able to write this letter to you! I have had to run away from my
fellow-men, isolating myself in some hidden nook. At times I have
even had to lean for support against the wall, at other times I have
had to write lying down on account of my excessive weakness, for
my bodily vigor is sapped. I am pretty well advanced in years. [He
was now 64 years old.]

But with respect to your wish to come here to me, I cannot but
say how greatly your visit would delight me, for I truly long to
commune with you, and would anticipate our meeting with even
greater joy than you, although I am worried about your taking such
a dangerous sea trip. [Storms and pirates were the dangers.]

Yet I must advise you not to expose yourself [to the perils of
the voyage], for beyond seeing me, and my doing all I could to honor
you, you would not derive any advantage from your visit. Do not
expect to be able to confer with me on any scientific subject for
even one hour, either by day or by night, for the following is my
daily occupation:

I dwell in Fustat, and the Sultan resides at Cairo [originally a
suburb of the older Fustat]: these two places are two Sabbath days’
journeys distant from each other. [A Sabbath day’s journey is two
thousand paces.] My duties to the ruler [the regent al-Afdal, son
of Saladin] are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day,
eary in the morning; and when he or any of his children, or any
of the inmates of his harem, is indisposed, I dare not quit Cairo, but
must stay during the greater part of the day in the palace.

It also frequently happens that one or two of the royal officers
fall sick, and I must attend to their healing the entire day. Hence,
as a rule, I repair to Cairo very early in the day, and even if nothing
unusual happens, I do not return to Fustat until the afternoon.
Under no circumstances do I return earlier. Then I am almost dying
with hunger. I find the antechambers filled with people, both Jews
and Gentiles, important and unimportant people, theologians and
bailiffs, friends and foes—a mixed multitude, who await the time of
my return.

I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, go forth to my
patients, and beg and entreat them to bear with me while I partake
of some slight refreshment, the only meal I take in the twenty-four
hours. Then I go forth to attend my patients, write prescriptions and
directions for their several ailments. Patients go in and out until
nightfall, and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two
hours in the night [eight o’clock] or even later. I converse with,
and prescribe for them while lying down on my back from sheer
fatigue; and when night falls, I am so exhausted, I can scarcely speak.
In consequence of this, no Israelite can speak with me or have any private interview with me, except on the Sabbath. On that day, the whole congregation, or at least, the majority of the members, come to me after the morning service, when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week; we study together a little until noon, when they depart. Some of them return, and read with me after the afternoon service until evening prayers. In this manner I spend that day. I have here related to you only a part of what you would see, if by God's aid you were to visit me.

Now, when you have completed for our brethren the translation you have commenced—and now that you have begun this good work you ought to finish it—I beg that you will come joyfully to visit me, but not with the hope of deriving any advantage from your visit as regards your studies; for my time is very limited.

May your happiness, my dear son and pupil, increase and grow great, and may salvation be granted to our afflicted people. Written by Moses, the son of Maimon, the Sephardi ['Spaniard'] of blessed memory, on the 8th of Tishri, 1511 according to the Seleucid era [September 30, 1192]. Peace!

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STUDIES

(see also no. 88)


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(see also no. 75)


