Maimonides Against the Trinity: Implications for Contemporary Dialogue with Jewish Religious Thought

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Abstract: Dr. Downey is the president/director of Tzedakah Ministries, which seeks to reach Jewish people with the gospel of Jesus, the Messiah. She is the author of *Paul's Conundrum* and the first woman to receive a PhD in apologetics from Liberty University (2016). In "Maimonides against the Trinity" she points out the continuing influence that one of the most noted of Jewish philosophers, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), continues to hold over Jewish thought. Nevertheless, it is still possible for the Jewish people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

According to the Joshua Project regarding the unreached spiritual condition of the Jewish people, 96.8% of the estimated 14.7 million Jewish people in the world today are separated from a personal relationship with Jesus the Jewish Messiah.[1] On many levels, this should be perceived as implausible when one realizes that the Christian faith is predicated on the Old Testament (aka Hebrew Scriptures or Tanakh) and that Jesus himself was Jewish. The overwhelming majority of the Jewish people today, however, do not accept the Messiahship of Jesus nor acknowledge the possibility of such Christian concepts as the Trinity and the Incarnational deity of Jesus.[2]

Therefore, a place to begin the study of why modern/Rabbinic Judaism, which is clearly different than the Judaism of the Old Testament, would reject the identity of Messiah Jesus must include the evaluation of early Jewish theologians and scholars who were the most vocal in rejecting Jesus' divinity and deity. This paper, therefore, will examine the life, thought and legacy of one of the most prominent Jewish scholars and rabbinical forces in Judaism—Moses

[1] "Jews," Joshua Project; accessed 24 October 2018; available online at http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-clusters.php?peo2=197. Please note that there is an ongoing debate within the circles of Jewish evangelism and missiologists as to whether this number itself is optimistic; however, and because there is no concrete number, I will allow this number to stand even though it is exceptionally optimistic.

[2] Rick Halpern, *Choose Life: A Counter-Missionary Study Guide* (Atlanta: Torah Atlanta, 2002), 25-33, 36-37; Samuel Levine, *You Take Jesus, I'll Take God: How to Refute Christian Missionaries* (Los Angeles: Hamorah Press, 1980), 69-70, 77-81; and Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, *What Christians Should Know about Jews and Judaism* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 259-268.

Maimonides (1135-1204).[3] It should be acknowledged that while the "official separation" began much earlier than Maimonides' times, I will argue that it reached its greatest fruition in the life and teachings of the twelfth century scholar, whose teachings continue to influence and block the Gospel message from the Jewish people in the twenty-first century.

For there is a disconnect between Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism in relationship to the identity of Jesus due to what will be described in this paper as Maimonides' "un-God concept." This disconnect, which I can only fleetingly begin to begin to identify here, needs to be evaluated in order to bring the truth of Messiah Jesus and the second member of the Godhead, to the people for whom He first came (Mt. 10:1-28, esp. v.6; 23:13-37; Rm. 1:16). Therefore, and in the closing section of the paper, I will also briefly begin to unpack an apologetic method which will counteract the theological error of Maimonides and diminish the arguments against the Messiahship and Deity of Jesus.

This error is found not only in his monumental work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, in which he writes: "Know that the negative attributes of God are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate as we have already shown… Then I shall show that we cannot describe the Creator by means except by negative attributes,"[4] but it also runs throughout all his other writings.

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[3] Ilil Arbel, *Maimonides: A Spiritual Biography* (New York: The Crossroad, 2001), 12, 176; George H. Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 415-421; and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know about the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 175-177.

[4] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 148.

Brief Biographical Sketch

Moshe ben Maimon was born c. March 1135/38 in Córdoba, Spain[5];however, the legacy and history of Jews in Spain had long preceded this son of Sephardim(ic) Jewry. Indeed, some will attempt to date the arrival of Jews in Spain to the time of the Babylonian Diaspora (i.e., Obadiah 20) but most assuredly to the times of the Roman Diaspora.[6] Maimonides himself attempted to trace his family's lineage in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* back at least seven generations and, according to Joel Kraemer, believed in the Obadiah 20 legend.[7]

In fact, and as I stood under the beating Spanish sun in the heat of an Andalusian summer in 2015, it was not difficult to imagine a Moses running the streets of the Jewish section of Cordoba towards home and his daily rabbinical studies with his father/teacher.[8] I could imagine

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[5] Abram Leon Sachar, *A History of the Jews*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965), 178; George C. Papademetriou, "Moses Maimonides' Doctrine of God," *Philosophia* vol. 4 (January 1974): 306-307; Bokser, *The Legacy of Maimonides*, 2 and Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, 175. Some of the preliminary biographical information was also completed in a paper I did during my MATh experience at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Therefore, see also, Amy Karen Downey, "Maimonides' *Via Negativa*: The Unknowable Nature of God as a Response to the Christian Doctrine of the Incarnation," a research paper for Philosophy of Religion (PHREL 413), (Fort Worth: SWBTS, April 2005): 1, 3. Albert van der Heide, "'Their Prophets and Fathers Misled Them': Moses Maimonides on Christianity and Islam," in *The Three Rings; Textual Studies in the Historical Trialogue of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Barbara Roggema et al., Publications of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht ns, 11 (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), 35, provides the anecdotal story that Maimonides was born on the 14th of Nisan (i.e., Passover) which will play an important role in the legacy of Rambam throughout time.

[6] David Nieman, "Sefarad: The Name of Spain," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* vol. 22, no 2 (April 1963): 128-32; Norman Roth, "The Jews in Spain at the Time of Maimonides," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1989), 1; John Gray, "The Diaspora of Israel and Judah in Obadiah v. 20," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* vol. 65, no. 1-2 (1953): 53-59; and Martin A. Cohen, "The Sephardic Phenomenon: A Reappraisal," *American Jewish Archives* vol. 44, no. 1 (1992): 3, 9-10. Cohen utilizes the New Testament texts as a source material when he writes (p. 9), "By the middle of the first century, however, the Jews had apparently attained sufficient importance to induce Paul of Tarsus, who had been preaching his message to Jews in many other parts of the Greco-Roman world, to consider a visit to the Iberian Peninsula."

[7] Joel L. Kraemer, "Moses Maimonides: An Intellectual Portrait," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11 and Halbertal, *Maimonides*, 16.

[8] Sherwin B. Nuland, Maimonides, (New York: Nextbook, 2005), 30-33; Arbel, *Maimonides*, 15. See also, Edward Hoffman, *The Wisdom of Maimonides: The Life and Writings of the Jewish Sage* (Boston: Trumpeter, 2008), 6. Arbel and Nuland conflict on the paternal/fraternal relationship between Maimonides and his father. Arbel presents an idealized portrait of the relationship while Nuland is perhaps more honest about the unique dynamic present between father and son. Nuland perhaps built his perception of the strained relationship between father and son from the work of A. Benisch who wrote in a quite literary manner of the scholar's early years of being less than an admirable student in his nineteenth century work. A. Benisch, *Two Lectures on the Life and Writings of Maimonides* (London: Wertheim, Aldine Chambers, Paternoster Row, 1847), 2-4.

him running past the Mezquita de Córdoba, one of the great mosques of twelfth century Sephardic Spain, which runs parallel to the Jewish Quarter. I could imagine him seeing the opulence that was Islamic Spain while running to the much simpler life of the Jewish Quarter of Córdoba.

The young Moses ben Maimon (aka Maimonides or Rambam) was changed by that experience in Córdoba—even though he was forced to flee with thousands of other Spanish Jews when the Almohad Muslims not only reclaimed Spain for Allah but also sought to reinforce a stricter version of Islam that was non-conducive for Jewish and Christian safety just as he was reaching his Bar Mitzvah years.[9]

The years in Morocco and North Africa until his final destination in Egypt can be described in many ways for Maimonides as his "wilderness" years. While many of the fleeing Sephardic Jews of Spain chose to travel north to Europe, Moshe's father chose the less traveled route into the heart of Islamic territory.[10] This travel to and through North Africa exposed Rambam on an intellectual and personal level to the Golden Age of Islamic Thought and the writings of Ibn al-Farabi (aka Ibn 'Arabī) and Al Ghazali. Writings that I will argue impacted his "God-Scholarship" as will be shown later in this paper.[11] Sadly, the question of whether the rumors that Maimonides went through a false conversion to Islam for personal safety's sake during this time period will have to wait for another paper and another day.

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[9] Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, 174; Bokser, *The Legacy of Maimonides*, 2; and Sachar, *A History of the Jews*, 178-79.

[10] Benjamin R. Gampel, "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Medieval Iberia: *Convivencia* through the Eyes of Sephardic Jews," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, ed. Vivian B. Mann et al. (New York: George Braziller and the Jewish Museum, 1992), 21.

[11] Lenn E. Goodman, "Maimonides and the Philosophers of Islam: The Problem of Theophany," in *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication, and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, ed. B. H. Hary, et al (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 282-83

Maimonides and family arrived in the land of Egypt in c.1165 after sojourns in Morocco, North Africa, and Palestine. He remained the rest of his life in the land of the ancient Pharaohs surviving religious controversies, familial calamities, and political upheavals; however, as Mark R. Cohen notes, he always considered himself a Sephardic (aka Spanish) Jew and a pilgrim longing for home in Andalusia.[12] Upon the family's arrival in Egypt, the original plan was for Rambam to be permitted to occupy himself with Torah and Talmudic studies while his younger brother financially provided; this all changed when David died while traveling abroad in c.1169/1173.[13] Maimonides' ability as a doctor, and the long-standing practice of the Fatimid Dynasty to employ Jewish medical experts, eventually brought him into the circle of the last Caliph of the ruling Fatimid, Al-Adid, and ultimately as the court physician for the Emperor Saladin and his son Al-Afdhal after the Fatimid Dynasty fell.[14]

We also know that Maimonides additionally appeared to serve as "Chief Rabbi of Cairo" in two separate periods from c.1171 to 1177 as well as from 1195 to his death in 1204 with the ha-Levi serving in the role in the intermediate period.[15] We can also ascertain from documents found in the Cairo Genizah that Maimonides was often sought after for decisions (*Responsa)* on

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[12] Mark R. Cohen, "Maimonides' Egypt," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1989), 21. See also, Halbertal, *Maimonides*, 16.

[13] Chris Lowney, *A Vanished World: Medieval Spain's Golden Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 146; Nuland, *Maimonides*, 93-94; Max Meyerhof, "Jewish Physicians under the Reign of the Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt (967-1171 C.E)," *Medical Leaves* (1939): 138; Ahivai Shivtiel, "The 'Contribution' of Maimonides to the Cairo Genizah," *'Ilu, Revista de Ciencias de las Religionas* 2004): 97; Cohen, "Maimonides' Egypt," 25; Kraemer, "Moses Maimonides," 27; and Bokser, *The Legacy of Maimonides*, 2.

[14] Steven Harvey, "Maimonides in the Sultan's Palace," in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel L. Kraemer, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 47; Meyerhof, "Jewish Physicians under the Reign of the Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt," 131-38; Bokser, *The Legacy of Maimonides*, 2; and Lowney, *A Vanished World*, 146.

Jacob Lavinger, "Was Maimonides 'Rais al-Yahud' in Egypt?" in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 84, 92; and Kraemer, *Maimonides*, 222-23.

a variety of difficult Biblical and Talmudic decisions. In fact, S. D. Goitein compares Maimonides' *Responsa* work to that of being a "chief justice."[16]

Any individual who is still being discussed and written about eight hundred years after his death in 1204 and apocryphal burial in Tiberias, Israel, will have such words as legacy, controversy, and mystery attached to his name.[17] Maimonides is no exception. Controversial in his time—Yes. Controversial today—Yes. Yet the influence of the Sephardic Jewish scholar who spent a great deal of his formative years fleeing from Spain across North Africa to Egypt cannot be denied. Joseph Telushkin notes his influence on both on both Christian and Muslim thought to the point that the United Nations hosted a conference in 1985 to honor and celebrate the 850th anniversary of his birth.[18] Writing in 1957, Jacob Minkin correctly notes: "His appeal is universal. The only Jewish scholar whose prestige and influence extend far beyond the confines of his own people, Christian and Moslem theologians recognized—and disputed with—him."[19] It is his influence on modern Jewish thought and the souls of Jewish people, however, that is of particular interest and concern to this paper. For while there is merit and validity to the Jewish adage, "From Moses to Moses there were none were like Moses," the missing presence of Messiah Jesus in the phrase should cause us all to pause in great concern.

Maimonides' Anti-Trinitarian Writings – A Brief Examination

Before this paper dives into a brief consideration of Rambam's anti-Trinitarian views, the following explanation of his theological hermeneutics should be spelled out as well. According

[16] S. D. Goiten, "Maimonides as Chief Justice: The Newly Edited Arabic Originals of Maimonides' Responsa," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* vol. 49, no. 3 (January 1959): 191-204. See also, Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, 378-80; Halbertal, *Maimonides*, 47 and Shivtiel, "The 'Contribution' of Maimonides to the Cairo Genizah," 95-97.

[17] Kraemer, "Moses Maimonides, 47. I utilized the word apocryphal here as there is a tomb that is alleged to hold the body of the rabbi; however, and while many make pilgrimage to the burial site, there is no concrete proof that Rambam is actually buried in this location.

[18] Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, 178.

[19] Jacob S. Minkin, *The World of Moses Maimonides* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957), 14.

to Ilil Arbel, Maimonides divided the Jewish people into three groups as it related to understanding Torah and the meaning of *Olam Haba* ("the world to come" or what Christianity would call heaven/the afterlife)—literalists, non-literalists but avoiders of deeper study, and allegorists who sought out the deeper meaning of the text.[20] As will be illustrated further, Maimonides ultimately was an allegorist in all his views, and not just regarding the afterlife, in much the same way as was the Latin Father Origen. Rambam wrote in his introduction to the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, "Altering the *Oral Law* in any way is equally as well a manifestation of false prophecy, even if the prophet is ostensibly supported by a literal interpretation, as opposed to its **actual meaning**" (emphasis added).[21]

Rambam himself refers to this metaphor concept as "Secrets" as it relates to the "Aggadic Drashos": "It is thus improper for a scholarly person to reveal what he knows of the Secrets, unless it is to one who is greater than, or at least equal to, him. For, if he reveals it to an unknowledgeable person, even if this person will not discredit it, he will still not appreciate it properly."[22] Therefore, Rambam's allegorical views in *Commentary on the Mishnah* will allow him and the rabbi alone to establish a God, a Messiah, and a Judaism that reflects himself and not the God who is there. As it relates to what could be called his magnum opus *Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines wrote further: "There is a question whether the *Guide* was meant to be an apologetic attempt to render religion intellectually respectable by exposing the limitations of human reason; or, alternatively, whether it meant to demonstrate that religion has a purely

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[20] Arbel, *Maimonides*, 84. See also, Marc D. Angel, *Maimonides: Essential Teachings on Jewish Faith and Ethics: The Book of Knowledge and the Thirteen Principles of Faith, Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012), 150. Angel does not go into the explicit detail that Arbel does; nevertheless, the general concept is present.

[21] Maimonides, *Maimonides' Introduction to the Talmud: A Translation of the Rambam's Introduction to His Commentary on the Mishna* (trans. Zvi Lampel); (Brooklyn, NY: The Judaica Press, 1998), 50.

[22] Maimonides, *Maimonides' Introduction to the Talmud*, 151.

practical use."[23] I argue that in many ways, this was Maimonides' ultimate attempt—not to clear up the confusion for the rabbinically perplexed but to establish his own map/guide so that his stamp would forever mark the face of Modern Judaism.

Joel Kraemer describes Rambam's *Guide of the Perplexed* as the final volume of what might be called "the third stool leg of Rabbinic Judaism" around 1190 when the rabbi was fifty-two and exhausted after completing a five year writing journey.[24] It is different from both the first two legs—*Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*—in two distinct ways: (1) it serves as more of a series of letters between Maimonides and a student, Joseph ben Judah (aka Joseph ibn Aknin) and (2) its purpose was to reveal to his student, who he believed was capable of understanding, "the hidden meanings of Scripture and the metaphysical tradition" behind the text.[25]

Ivry punctuates the overarching thrust of Maimonides' purpose of *Guide of the Perplexed* with this not so succinct but yet still important paragraph from his article in Seeskin's *Cambridge Companion* to the rabbi's life:

> Maimonides' first concern in the *Guide* is to educate the reader how to read the Bible. He does so forcefully and dogmatically, for the first seventy(!) chapters of the book. This section of the *Guide* is primarily devoted to an unorthodox hermeneutic of the biblical text. Maimonides' basic conviction is that the canon is

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[23] Shlomo Pines, "Maimonides," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1967), 130. See also, Jonathan Ray, "The Reconquista and the Jews: 1212 from the Perspective of Jewish History," *Journal of Medieval History* 40:2 (2014): 170.

[24] Kraemer, "Moses Maimonides," 40.

[25] Charles H. Manekin, "Belief, Certainity and Divine Attributes in the Guide," in *Maimonidean Studies*, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York: The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, 1990), 133; Daniel H. Frank, "The Elimination of Perplexity: Socrates and Maimonides as Guides of the Perplexed," in *Autonomy and Judaism: The Individual and the Community in Jewish Philosophical Thought*, ed. Daniel H. Frank, SUNY Series in Jewish Philosophy, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 130-35; Halbertal, *Maimonides*, 65; Arbel, *Maimonides*, 152-55; Nuland, *Maimonides*, 131-35; Kraemer, *Maimonides*, 361-66; and Kraemer, "Moses Maimonides," 40-41. Manekin uses forms of the word "apprehend" a great deal in his article. Perhaps the best example is found in this statement—"Yet because Maimonides singles out the inability of the ignorant to approach an apprehension of the divine essence, one may infer that the learned *can* approach this apprehension." Frank takes a slightly different approach to the instruction for Joseph ben Judah as he sees Maimonides first wanting to temper the upstart student. In other words, "tear him down so that he can build him up" into the mold of who Rambam wants him to be.

> not to be taken literally when it speaks of God. In as thorough a manner as possible, Maimonides removes every human and personal aspect of the Deity, every attribute by which He is conceived and depicted.[26]

Ivry goes on to explain his view as to why Rambam chose to take this path which agrees to a limited but not complete extent with my original perspective as well—"…predicating attributes of God introduces **plurality** and corporeality into the unique simplicity of God, thereby returning Judaism to the pagan world from which it came" (emphasis added).[27] I agree with Ivry on Maimonides' concern about the issue of a plurality but I argue that it is more related to the Christian and Trinitarian concern of Jesus as God the Son than a return to paganism "from which it came."

There is no evidence in Maimonidean thought that he viewed Judaism as coming from pagan roots; however, there is ample evidence throughout Rambam's writings that he was concerned about Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, he would, as Ivry would argue, believed he needed to turn "the historic God of Israel into an ahistoric Deity."[28] José Martínez Delgado proposes a unique and viable approach that Maimonides might have taken to develop this allegorical hermeneutic—a Biblical/Talmudic lexicon that undergirds his arguments and concepts based upon his Andalusian roots/history.[29] Such an approach would have fit in comfortably with his view that Andalusian Jewish scholarship was superior and allowed him to affirm the non-corporeal status of God without demeaning the historical uniqueness of God that Ivry proposes.

Alfred L. Ivry, "The *Guide* and Maimonides' Philosophical Sources," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64.

[27] Ivry, "The *Guide* and Maimonides' Philosophical Sources," 64.

[28] Ibid.

[29] José Martínez Delgado, "Maimonides in the Context of Andalusian Hebrew Lexicography," *Aleph* 8 (2008): 15-16, 27. See also, Joseph P. Cohen, "Figurative Language, Philosophy, and Religious Belief: An Essay on Some Themes in Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Studies in Jewish Philosophy: Collected Essays of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy, 1980-1985*, ed. Norbert Max Samuelson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 374-79.

There are three primary pieces of evidences that Rambam sought to develop an anti-Trinitarian apologetic in his writings. One is the development of his well-known Jewish approach to the *via Negativa* (Negation Theology). The other is his response to the Christian monophysite John Philoponus and the third I hinted at in the beginning of this paper. While we are aware of Negation Theology because of the Christian thinkers Anselm and Thomas Aquinas, the identity of John Philoponus is a bit of a mystery even to many Christian historians. Therefore, this paper will begin with him.

John Philoponus (c.490-575) was born in Egypt and became a Christian scholar who was highly influenced by the writings of Plato and Aristotle. He also came of age during the height of the Chalcedonian controversy which revolved around the person and nature of Jesus.[30] What is most enlightening about Philoponus' biography was written in the abstract to L. S. B. MacCoull's article: "His intention was to provide the nascent Coptic church with a powerful set of tools for argument, with which Egyptian Monophysites could defeat their Chalcedonian opponents."[31] This serves to bring out a point and a further reality—the view of the Monophysites was apparently still available to the Cairo rabbi as evidenced by this statement in the *Guide*: "they [Greek and Syrian Christians] commenced by putting forth such propositions as would support their doctrines, and be useful for the refutation of opinions opposed to the fundamental principles of the Christian religion."[32]

Therefore, what is Monophysite Christology? John Philoponus sought to create a Trinitarian system that was untenable to basic Christian thought. Uwe Michael Lang correctly

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[30] L. S. B. MacCoull, "A New Look at the Career of John Philoponus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 49, 50, 59; Lionel R. Wickham, "John Philoponus and Gregory of Nyssa's Teaching on Resurrection—A Brief Note," in *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der Christlichen Spätantike*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Christoph Klock (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 205; and Uwe Michael Lang, "Notes on John Philoponus and the Tritheist Controversy in the Sixth Century," *Oriens Christianus* 85 (2001): 23-24.

[31] MacCoull, "A New Look at the Career of John Philoponus," 47.

[32] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I, ch. 71 (191).

refers to this concept as Tritheism—three natures, three substances, three godheads—because of the confusion of how Jesus "could become flesh apart from the Father and the Spirit."[33] For even while Rambam might have had other exposures/explanations for the Trinity, this was the explanation that he rebutted in the *Guide* and why he could write in such dismissive terms about it: "When the opinions of John the Grammarian [Philoponus], of Ibn Adi, and of kindred authors on those subjects were made accessible to them, they adopted them, and imagined they had arrived at the solution of important problems."[34]

This paper can only analyze negation theology from the Jewish (Maimonidean) perspective, and the best modern definition is the one provided by Diane Lobel who describes it as the following: "Negative theology is built on the premise of the unknowability of God: we can only make statements about what God is not; we cannot ultimately know what God is. Negative Theology belongs to two spheres: the sphere of epistemology—what can we know?—and the sphere of discourse—what can we say?[35] Lobel also acknowledges that at the core of Rambam's negation is a fear of the Trinity if one seeks to find the knowable in God—"Nevertheless, one can represent God falsely by endowing Him with essential attributes, which is no different from the Christian affirmation of the Trinity. This position leads one on a dangerous road away from monotheism."[36]

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[33] U. M. Lang, "Patristic Argument and the Use of Philosophy in the Tritheist Controversy of the Sixth Century," in *The Mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Fathers of the Church: The Proceedings of the Fourth International Patristic Conference, Maynooth, 1999*, ed. Vincent Twomey and Lewis Ayres (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2007), 86, 88. See also, Christophe Erismann, "The Trinity, Universals, and Particular Substances: Philoponus and Roscelin," *Traditio* 63 (2008): 287 and L. S. B. MacCoull, "John Philoponus and the Composite Nature of Christ," *Ostkirchliche Studien* 44 no. 2 – no. 3 (September 1995): 199-200.

[34] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I, ch. 71 (191).

[35] Diana Lobel, "'Silence Is Praise to You': Maimonides on Negative Theology, Looseness of Expression, and Religious Experience," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 76, no. 1 (2002): 25.

[36] Lobel, "Maimonides on Negative Theology," 27.

It is now time to consider the third reason why Moses ben Maimon was so opposed to the Trinity and that is the influence of Islam in his thinking. In using primary sources such as *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, Albert van der Heide argues that according to Maimonides Muslims are true monotheists as opposed to Christians whose Trinitarianism "always confused the other monotheists."[37] Additionally, Alfred L. Ivry relates a series of Islamic philosophers and scholars that Maimonides was not only influenced by in his writing of *Guide of the Perplexed* but also recommended as secondary resources to one of his translators Samuel ibn Tibbon as good scholarship material.[38]

Pines will argue that Rambam's basic premise of epistemology that "the divine science, with regard to whose object matter no certainty is possible for man" was perhaps influenced by al-Farabi's *Commentary on the Ethics* as much if not more than as by the thought of Aristotle.[39] The concept of epistemology and the idea of the true knowledge of God is the cornerstone of all of Maimonides' work but none more so than his *Guide of the Perplexed*. Aydogan Kars points the plethora of sources—early Greek but most importantly Islamic—who "intersect and crystallize in Maimonides' critical philosophy."[40] He points out that both al-Farabi and Maimonides allow for "no [sense of] potentiality for God" and "positive ascriptions in reference

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[37] van der Heide, "'Their Prophets and Fathers Misled Them,'" 43-46.

[38] Ivry, "The *Guide* and Maimonides' Philosophical Sources," 59-64; Yair Shiffman, "The Differences between the Translations of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* by Falaquera, Ibn Tibbon and Al-Harizī, and Their Textual and Philosophical Implications," *Journal of Semitic Studies* XLIV/1 (Spring 1999): 47; Alfred L. Ivry, "Strategies of Interpretation in Maimonides' 'Guide of the Perplexed,'" *Jewish History* vol. 6, no. 1/2, The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume (1992): 113-16; and Joel L. Kraemer, "How (not) to Read the Guide of the Perplexed," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (January 2006): 359.

[39] Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph A. Buijs (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 109. See also, Emil L. Fackenheim, "The Possibility of the Universe in Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Maimonides," in *Essays in Medieval Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Studies from the Publications from the American Academy for Jewish Research*, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1977), 303-34. Fackenheim takes the argument that Maimonides imbues Al-Farabi's concept of creation and builds upon it.

[40] Aydogan Kars, "Two Modes of Unsaying in the Early Thirteenth Century Islamic Lands: Theorizing Apophasis through Maimonides and Ibn 'Arabī," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* vol. 74, issue 3 (December 2013): 265.

to God are nothing but implicit profanity and blasphemy"; however, Rambam did not go as far as al-Farabi in delimitedness of God.[41]

In relation to Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Amira Eran writes a rather compelling case that Maimonides garnered some of his views regarding both his views of the resurrected body and the incorporeality of angels from the teachings of this Islamic scholar.[42] Ultimately, Eran writes that Al-Ghazali's views gave Rambam "a cover in his struggle against the naïve interpreters of the Torah."[43] I would argue that this Islamic philosopher gave the Cairo rabbi another rationale for his attempt to create a God that was distant, inaccessible, and impossible to become the Incarnate Messiah Jesus. Indeed, Medieval Islam influenced and continues to influence Judaism in ways that no one could have anticipated.

Implications for Contemporary Dialogue/Apologetics

As I begin this final section that has stretched literally across two millennia, it is important to bring the focus back to the original question. My original question was whether a Sephardic rabbi who was forced from his Spanish home as a child required/encouraged/ implored/cajoled the Jewish people to abandon the possibility of a personal, intimate relationship with the God of Judaism because of a fear that it also would lead them to a personal relationship with the Jewish carpenter known as Jesus of Nazareth. I have briefly sought to show through a historical pilgrimage of Moshe ben Maimon's own life and writings and the subsequent consequences of the Cairo rabbi's teachings on Modern Judaism that the answer is yes.

There is no possible way adequately to develop a full apologetic to Rambam's teachings in this paper; therefore, I will seek to only respond to his anti-Trinitarian views in my conclusion

[41] Kars, "Two Modes of Unsaving in the Early Thirteenth Century Islamic Lands," 267, 268, 269.
[42] Amira Eran, "Al-Ghazali and Maimonides on the World to Come and Spiritual Pleasures," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* vol. 8, no. 2 (2001): 137-43.
[43] Eran, "Al-Ghazali and Maimonides on the World to Come and Spiritual Pleasures," 138.

and this begins by bringing Biblical Judaism back to the Jewish people. There are many arguments as to how to do so, but since I am the presenter at the moment, I am going to present only two.

Understanding of the Divine Person of Messiah

It should be noted that there is not a monolithic belief structure among the almost fifteen million Jewish people living in the world today but most of them, at least those who hold to a belief in a form of God, will state that they hold to Maimonides Twelfth Principle regarding the Messiah: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and even though he may tarry, nonetheless, I wait every day for his coming." Mayim Bialik, actress on *The Big Bang Theory*, who also holds a Ph.D. in neuroscience, states this about her Modern Orthodox belief about the Messiah and the Messianic Age: "The concept of a messiah is a general … notion that we are partners in making the world better, in moving the world forward. The Messiah is progress, participation, suiting up and showing up for life."[44]

This is the enigma that Maimonides presents for Modern Jewry. How does one respond to his categorical statements, especially as they relate to the identity and purpose and person of the Messiah? Maimonidean defenders claim that one cannot continue to be a "good Jew" if one abandons the Rambam's definition of who can and cannot be Messiah.[45] Reform Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles affirms a Messianic belief but one with a definite Maimonidean twist:

> Today the Messiah must represent an ideal of peace whose fulfillment lies in our own hands. The age of magic formulas or mitzvot flipping the eschatological

[44] Daphna Berman, et al., "What Does the Concept of Messiah Mean Today? (Interviews)," *Moment Magazine* (March-April 2012); accessed 27 February 2016; available online at http://www.momentmag.com/what-does-the-concept-of-the-messiah-mean-today/. I have a subscription to this magazine; however, I thought it might prove invaluable for the opinions of the other interviewees to be accessible as well.

[45] Schwarzchild, "The Messianic Doctrine in Contemporary Jewish Thought," 139. Interestingly, Schwarzchild goes against modern Jewish exegesis of Isaiah 53 and allows for a Messianic interpretation; however, he treads very lightly over the passage itself (p. 248-49).

> switch is past. The nobility in the messianic vision is to live so that when the Messiah comes, we will no longer need him. That may prove beyond our powers, in which case, quite literally, God help us.[46]

Rabbi Phillip Sigal belonged to the Conservative Jewish denomination; but he also struggled with the person and purpose of the Messiah. He acknowledges that apocryphal literature which pre-dates Jesus presents a Messianic figure quite different than Rambam's figure—including the concept of a pre-existent figure and a Divine Messiah. While Rabbi Sigal would never acknowledge the truth of Messiah Jesus, he would accede:

> When one takes into consideration the long-continuing tradition of a pre-existent Messiah which requires incarnation at the appropriate time, and the various pre-Christian strands that point to an idea of divine conception and the Isaac allusions it might be considered reasonable to hypothecate that this, as in other facets of Christology expressed in the New Testament, we are dealing with elements of Judaic theology and not with original post-separation Christian concepts or Hellenistic philosophical encrustations.[47]

Therefore, Maimonides' definition is not as status quo in a historical or theological sense within Judaism as presumed, yet many choose Rambam's status quo over Redeemer Jesus:

- Rabbi Shlomo Riskin—"The Messiah is not a deus ex machina, a superman who flies down from the sky. He's not even himself the great redeemer. The Messiah requires the backdrop of a world ready to receive him and to redeem itself. That's what we are waiting for, and that's what we must prepare for. Someone who claims to be the Messiah when there's not peace on Earth cannot be the Messiah."
- Rabbi Shmuley Boteach—"We need one person who will coalesce all of these disparate efforts of humanity into one powerful stream. Imagine the Messiah as a person of great wisdom, great learning, saintly authority, who could convince the world that war solves nothing. Once peace and harmony are established, the biggest beneficiaries are the Jews, because we've been the objects of so much violence throughout history."
- Professor Harris Lenowitz—"Wherever there's a problem, there could be an answer. And the messiah is the biggest answer to the biggest single question: "Does God care about me?" We are lonely—Jews in particular—and we have long had evidence that God didn't care about us or our grandparents. And so

[46] Daphna Berman, et al., "What Does the Concept of Messiah Mean Today? (Interviews)," online.

[47] Phillip Sigal, "Further Reflections on the 'Begotten' Messiah," *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983): 221-33 (esp. 231).

we create a messiah who is somehow heroic when we are fallible; with the Messiah, fear is of an entirely different order."

- Shalom Auslander (author and former Orthodox)—"I think [the concept of the Messiah] is as personally useful and globally destructive as it's ever been. It works for individuals because it gets them through the day but when it starts becoming a way that you live your life and dictating what you do and what other people should do, people tend to kill each other. If there is a messiah I suspect he's laughing his ass off at us."[48]

The Jewish people have lost faith in the idea of the Messiah. Much of the blame I believe can be laid at the feet of Rambam. His distant God has created a distant Messiah. The Christian faith has a relational God and a personal Messiah and this is the longing of the Jewish heart. Miracles, something else that Maimonides' teachings deny, have been lost to them and so I ask: Can we not show them that the miracle of Messiah is indeed a possibility after all? This can be done by returning the Jewish people to a Biblical Judaism via asking them to confront the Messiah whom Rabbi Sigal was so terrified to face

Incarnation

A few years ago, I was returning from a trip to Israel when I was pulled aside for special screening. The young woman who had just finished her two years in the IDF and had now been assigned to Ben Gurion Airport was lovely, friendly, and typical of most young native Israelis, an agnostic. After a five-minute inspection of my suitcase and determining that I was not a threat, she still had to remain with me until I was released to my gate. We began to discuss (intentionally on my part) my relationship with Messiah Jesus as deity/divine and she became fascinated to learn that not all Christians were Catholic because she was under the impression that this was a requirement.

[48] Daphna Berman, et al., "What Does the Concept of Messiah Mean Today? (Interviews)," online. I recognize that Auslander's wording is perhaps shocking; however, I argue that it is invaluable to the point being made in this chapter and section,

However, such concepts as the Incarnation and the divinity/deity of Jesus are difficult concepts for many Christians fully to grasp as well. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the physical descendants of Judah (as, of course, was Jesus), especially given the misinformation coming from Rabbinic Judaism, would truly struggle with the idea of Incarnation.[49] In one of the most and transparent Jewish admissions of the struggle, Michael Wyschogrod points to two historical causes for this tension among his own people: (1) the continuing fear remaining from the pre-Babylonian captivity days of becoming polytheistic and (2) the drumbeat influence of Maimonidean teachings. Additionally, Wyschogrod admits that Rambam's influence has hampered the debate regarding Incarnational issues in Judaism today.[50] This issue of the Incarnation is crucial for Jewish people today because it is not simply the question of whether Jesus could be Messiah but whether or not Jesus could be God Himself.[51]

Elliot Wolfson also acknowledges the existence of what one would call in Christian circles theophanies in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as recognition of those events in rabbinic traditions.[52] Therefore, the concept of a non-*via Negativa* God is not impossible with Judaism but

[49] Randi Rashkover, "The Christian Doctrine of the Incarnation," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et al., Theology in a Postcritical Key, eds. Stanley M. Hauerwas and Peter Ochs (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 254. See also, David S. Shapiro, "Possible Deus Homo?" *Judaism* vol.. 32, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 358-65. Shapiro allows for no possibility for an incarnational interpretation of Hebrew Scripture texts and immediately goes to rabbinic views.

[50] Michael Wyschogrod, "A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation," *Modern Theology* 12:2 (April 1996): 199-202.

[51] Michael Wyschogrod, "Incarnation," *Pro Ecclesia* vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 208.

[52] Elliot R. Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensy et al., Theology in a Postcritical Key, eds. Stanley M. Hauerwas and Peter Ochs (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 239-54. See also, Esther J. Hamori, "Divine Embodiments in the Hebrew Bible and Some Implications for Jewish and Christianity Theologies," in *Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies: Bodies, Embodiment and Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim (London: T & T Clark International, 2010), 161-83. Hamori takes the basic argument of Wolfson and elevates to a higher educational level. She acknowledges the theophanies present in the Hebrew Scriptures and considers the relevance that these moments have for the incarnational discussion. She attempts not to take sides in the issue but acknowledges that it "invites a vitality in choosing to leave open to God all possibilities."

allowable.[53] Therefore, while Christianity is not anthropomorphic in formulation, it is interesting that Wolfson sees such a possibility in existence.

Dr. Wolfson has stumbled upon the truth of the Incarnation. Jesus is the Incarnate God and He is living embodiment of Torah as well. John 1:1 tells us this basic truth—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Such a truthful stumbling by the Jewish people is still possible today as it was for one of the most prominent Jewish scholars of the second century—Simeon Ben Zoma. According to Samson Levey, the *Babylonian Talmud* changed their lofty status of Ben Zoma from being a genius to heretic or insane. By all accounts, this change over allusions to the possibility of a virgin giving birth and statements that one could assume are Trinitarian to nature. While references to Simeon Ben Zoma are still found in the Talmud, they are found almost in quiet whispers because many do not want to believe someone like Simeon could believe in the Incarnational truth of Messiah Jesus; but, by all accounts he did. And it is still possible for Jewish people to believe as well.[54]

[53] Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 135-43. It should be noted that Sommer has what appears to be a kinship with Wellhausen and his thought that I cannot affirm; nevertheless, this section of his work is interesting and enlightening. What is especially intriguing is his affirmation that many Jewish scholars must admit that Maimonidean Judaism is a "strained nature of hermeneutic thought" and that to follow to the nth degree Rambam would require "the creation of a new religion whose earliest sacred document would be found in the tenth-century C.E. philosophical writings of Maimonides' predecessor, Saadia Gaon." I would agree with Sommer to an extent but state Rambam would want the document to begin with the *Mishneh Torah* alone.

[54] Samson H. Levey, "The Best Kept Secret of the Rabbinic Tradition," *Judaism* 21.4 (Fall 1972): 454-69.