



*a guide to*

# THE GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED

A Reader's Companion to  
Maimonides' Masterwork

LENN E. GOODMAN

A GUIDE TO  
*THE GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED*

*This page intentionally left blank*

A Guide to  
*The Guide to  
the Perplexed*

**A READER'S COMPANION  
TO  
MAIMONIDES'  
MASTERWORK**

Lenn E. Goodman

**STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**  
Stanford, California

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

© 2024 by Lenn E. Goodman. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of Stanford University Press.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Goodman, Lenn Evan, 1944- author.

Title: A guide to the Guide to the perplexed : a reader's companion to Maimonides' masterwork / Lenn E. Goodman.

Description: Stanford, California : Stanford University Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023020619 (print) | LCCN 2023020620 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781503629530 (cloth) | ISBN 9781503637474 (paperback) | ISBN 9781503637481 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204. Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn. | Judaism—Early works to 1800. | Jewish philosophy—Early works to 1800. | Philosophy, Medieval—Early works to 1800.

Classification: LCC BM545.D35 G659 2024 (print) | LCC BM545.D35 (ebook) |

DDC 181.06—dc23/eng/20230504

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023020619>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023020620>

Cover art: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

# Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	vii
<i>Two Notes to the Reader</i>	ix
Introduction	i
<b>PART I <i>Building Blocks</i></b>	
1 Setting the Scene	13
2 Learning	31
3 Cairo	53
4 A New Life	67
5 Believing	72
<b>PART II <i>The Work of the Guide</i></b>	
6 Defining the Issues	103
7 Problematics	120
<b>PART III <i>Esoterics</i></b>	
8 The Esoteric Style	167
9 Not Philosophy?	171
10 Breadcrumbs	189
Conclusion: The <i>Guide</i> Today	207
<i>Notes</i>	215
<i>Bibliography</i>	241

*This page intentionally left blank*



## Abbreviations

B.	The Babylonian Talmud
b.	ben or ibn, son of
BYU	Brigham Young University
CM	Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DK	Hermann Alexander Diels and Walther Kranz, <i>Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> (6th ed., 1952)
ED	Saadiyah, <i>K. al-Mukhtār fī 'l-Amānāt wa 'l-'tiqādāt</i> (familiarly known as <i>Sefer Emunot ve-De'ot</i> )
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
HUP	Harvard University Press
J.	The Jerusalem Talmud
JHP	<i>Journal of the History of Philosophy</i>
JLA	<i>Jewish Law Annual</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
JSQ	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>



JTS	Jewish Theological Seminary of America
<i>K.</i>	<i>Kitāb</i> (Book)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LL	Littman Library of Jewish Civilization
M.	The Mishnah
<i>MT</i>	Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah</i>
<i>NE</i>	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
OUP	Oxford University Press
<i>PAAJR</i>	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
<i>SGA</i>	<i>Studia Graeco-Arabica</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Sefer ha-Mitzvot</i> (Maimonides' Book of the Commandments)
SUNY	State University of New York
UC	University of California

## Two Notes to the Reader

Biblical passages quoted here follow the versions used in the Goodman-Lieberman translation and commentary of the *Guide*. They are set in italics rather than set off by quotation marks. The modified King James–y diction used helps disambiguate pronoun reference and the like. It also helps remind readers that the biblical text is already ancient to the Rambam and his contemporaries. Maimonides' creative and insightful readings and paraphrases stand out by the typically more informal, conversational tone he favors in the *Guide*. The slight contrast in the rendering of his biblical landmarks and prooftexts allows his insightful glosses and paraphrases to show up as neither arbitrary nor trivial as he lays out his understanding of the biblical texts he seeks to open up to his reader.

References to the works of Plato and Aristotle here are to the Stephanus and Bekker texts, respectively. The *Guide* itself is cited by part and chapter, and/or by the pages of Munk's classic edition, by part and page number, recto or verso. Thus III 51 refers to Part III, chapter 51 of the *Guide*; and 2.67b refers to Part 2, page 67 verso in Munk's edition. Munk page numbers are shown throughout the Goodman-Lieberman translation for those who wish to consult the Judaeo-Arabic text.

*This page intentionally left blank*

A GUIDE TO  
*THE GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED*

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Introduction

Moses Maimonides, called the Rambam in traditional Jewish circles—using a scribe’s convenient acronym of his Hebrew name, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon—is known in English language texts as Maimonides, the Greek patronymic reflecting the impact of his writings in Latin translation. His name in Arabic, Mūsā bin Maimūn, signals his fame among Muslim scholars. He was born in Cordoba in 1138<sup>1</sup> and died in Cairo in 1204. Tradition has it that he is buried in Tiberias. Even in Cordoba, which he and his family had to leave when he was a child, a handsome, if fanciful, statue of a seated man honors his youthful presence. Indeed, he continued decades after the family’s exile to call himself *ha-Sefardi*, “the Spaniard” in Hebrew, never losing his links to Andalusia and its heritage in philosophy, the sciences, and Jewish law. But more on that later.

His own contributions link those fields: Maimonides was a master in the sciences pursued by the learned in his day, especially geometry, astronomy, and logic. His writings reveal skill and clarity in argument—and, what often matters more, insight in choosing premises, analyzing assumptions, and synthesizing seemingly disparate positions. A practicing physician, he wrote ten Arabic medical works, some in multiple volumes, and all in the Galenic tradition of scientific medicine. His medical works are exemplary of the most up-to-date standards of medical theory and practice, notable for their care with terminology and for eschewing the astrological assumptions and excursions that sometimes attach themselves to Galenic works and even to those of Galen himself.

As for Halakhah, Maimonides would become the most formidable exponent of Jewish law to arise since the completion of the Talmud, guided by his conviction that *all* of God's laws must make sense and directly or indirectly serve human needs. For God, of course, has no needs but gave the Torah, as its name implies, for the guidance of His people. Beyond his role as a foremost Jewish jurist, today universally acknowledged and acclaimed, readers of the Rambam's *Guide to the Perplexed* will readily observe that he was a penetrating reader of biblical and rabbinic poetics, whether he found it in the form of metaphor, allegory, or homiletic symbolism.

Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (Book of the Commandments, *SM*), written in Arabic, catalogs the 613 mitzvot that rabbinic tradition held the Torah to contain. His listing (not the only one to be attempted) opens with *I am the LORD thy God* (Exodus 20:2), placed first among the positive mitzvot, and *Thou shalt have no other God before me* (20:3), first among the negative. These two precepts, as the Rambam saw it, bear prescriptive force, as they must if they are to ground every other biblical norm. They are not mere affirmations of fact, as though God's existence made no demands on us. For Maimonides, recognition of God's unique ultimacy anchors His moral and legislative authority. But the recognition that these two mitzvot call for is no arbitrary fiat. Rather, as Maimonides sees it, these two items in the Decalogue speak directly to reason, articulating, as he will argue, a pair of core truths, an axiom and its corollary, that Moses voiced for Israel at Sinai and that all those present grasped for themselves in the measure of their understanding (II 33, 75a).

The *K. al-Sirāj*, or Book of the Lamp, Maimonides' Arabic commentary on the Mishnah, tracks the six Orders of that ancient halakhic code. It includes the celebrated Eight Chapters, his introduction to Pirkei Avot, the well-known gathering of the rabbinic sages' teachings, which typically express ethical and edifying maxims. Often studied on its own, given the ethical focus of the remarks from the Sages collected in Mishnah Avot, the Eight Chapters elicits from the Torah a scheme of virtue ethics designed to help us better our character. By so doing it lays the foundation needed if we are to reach our highest goal and attain the deepest and purest form of worship: active and passionate knowledge of God.

Moshe Halbertal highlights Maimonides' originality when he explains how



innovative the *K. al-Sirāj* is in treating the Mishnah independently, as no mere springboard to talmudic study but the backbone of Halakhah.<sup>2</sup> Maimonides' seven years' labor in preparing his commentary—much of it undertaken in conditions of hardship, exile, and persecution—aimed to bring the Talmud's "chaos," as Halbertal puts it, into systematic order, finding reason and principle in the Mishnah's ritual, penal, civic, and public laws. Maimonides apologizes for any errors his commentary might contain, since parts of it were composed on shipboard or on the road. He continued throughout his life to revise and emend his findings based on his maturing judgment and deeper study. In a letter, he explains how he'd needed to correct passages where he'd followed too closely the lead of the Geonim, as the spiritual leaders of "Babylonian" Jewry were called.<sup>3</sup> Remarkably, the Rambam's own fair copy of this work has survived, and almost all of it has been published, showing the hundreds of revisions that reflect his growing mastery and authority in Halakhah as a body of law kept alive by organic but not radical change (II 49, 84b; III 25, 57ab).

In one revision that sheds light on what Menachem Kellner and David Gillis call his universalism, Maimonides sets aside the mishnaic dictum (M. Bikurim 1.4) that in bringing first fruits to the Temple, a proselyte does not recite the ritual declaration thanking God for the land *the LORD promised our fathers* (Deuteronomy 26:3). God had promised Abraham that he would be *the father of many nations* (Genesis 17:5). So *pace* many of the early Sages, and rejecting his own prior view (but following the Jerusalem Talmud), Maimonides holds—as he ruled in his responsum regarding the status of Obadiah the Proselyte—that a convert, as an adopted child of Abraham, makes the same blessings as any other Jew. As Isaiah said, *One shall say, "I am the LORD's and another call himself by Jacob's name"* (44:5).<sup>4</sup>

The Mishnah commentary paved the way for the fourteen-volume code of Jewish law that Maimonides boldly called *Mishneh Torah* (hereafter *MT*), using the traditional title of Deuteronomy, where the Torah's laws are restated. The work, unprecedented in scope and unequalled in conceptual penetration, codifies the full range of Halakhah, tracing rabbinic prescriptions to their biblical roots, setting the entire halakhic edifice on its intellectual foundations,<sup>5</sup> spelling out its moral and spiritual aims, and purging the Talmud's frequent repetitions, digressions, obiter dicta, and asides. Even citations are omitted,

along with the byplay of debate and dissent across the centuries that sets the Sages in conversation with one another.

The backgrounds of debate and deliberation can clarify the intentions of a law. But they may also leave key issues unresolved. The Talmud and the literature spilling from it can appear a seething cauldron. But where another code might draw sharp crystals from such a supersaturated solution, Maimonides finds a living organism, integrated by the clear purpose of the whole: to better the lives of all Israel by enhancing the people's material well-being, improving their relations, refining their character, and opening up doorways to the realization of the affinity to God that all human beings share, the affinity attested when Genesis affirms that mankind, male and female, are created in God's image (1:27). To Maimonides, that means that all human beings are blessed with reason and the power to perfect it and so come to know God and emulate His goodness.<sup>6</sup>

Although it tracks the major sections of the Mishnah, the Talmud is not tightly thematic. But the very act of codifying a body of law is pregnant with a key premise of legal rationalism, that laws serve purposes. For it is by their purposes that legal prescriptions are most usefully marshaled for practical and intellectual use. In the Yale Judaica Series translation, the *MT* is called simply *The Code of Maimonides*. But in Jewish traditional circles, where it remains a key halakhic reference and a focus of extended, even devotional, study, it is often called the *Yad Hazakah*, or the *Yad* for short, echoing Deuteronomy 26:8: *With a strong hand and an outstretched arm did the Lord bring us forth from Egypt*. For the numerical value of the letters of the word *yad* (hand) is fourteen, recalling the work's fourteen volumes. The epithet sidesteps calling the work by the same name as Deuteronomy.<sup>7</sup> But *strong hand*, a phrase well known from its appearance in the Passover Hagaddah, also reflects the confidence readers gained from the work's reliability—and its power in rendering halakhic rules intelligible. A law whose purposes are understood can be intelligently observed, interpreted, elaborated, refined, explained, justified, even cherished. In the same spirit, Maimonides ends his *Guide to the Perplexed* by laying out the warrants he sees for every class of biblical mitzvot, first in general terms and then, when he feels able, in more specific detail. The guiding principles he finds—grouped under the three headings of material, moral, and spiritual/intellectual well-being—are the distillate of his extended and sensitive studies of Halakhah.<sup>8</sup>

Maimonides' aim in his great code was to marshal the rules, norms, and principles of Halakhah as "a transparent, accessible system." That system had grown, and its written corpus had become, as Halbertal puts it, "an uncontrollable organism, laden with disputes and fragmented give and take recorded in Aramaic, a language not used in daily life." History had made its structuring principles somehow remote. One who labored to master it "could not be assured of the ability to extract practical legal rulings from the Talmudic morass. He would always remain justifiably concerned that he had failed to understand the complex debate, that he had chosen wrongly among the wealth of opinions . . . that he had missed a reference to his subject elsewhere in the Talmud, in some remote, unrelated context—a distinct possibility, given the Talmud's free-wheeling structure—and that the overlooked reference might have fundamentally changed the picture."<sup>9</sup>

Maimonides' goal was to introduce order that would allow the body of Halakhah to function as a living and perspicuous system, giving students, scholars, and those in need of practical rulings clear and dispositive guidance. "I have been zealous on behalf of the LORD God of Israel," he wrote, "seeing a nation lacking a true and comprehensive book of its own laws and lacking true and clear beliefs. I acted for God's sake alone."<sup>10</sup> Ideas were crucial from the outset. For Halakhah lays out a way of life, but its norms reduce to an empty game unless anchored in understanding—practical and moral, intellectual and spiritual.

Halakhah, for Maimonides, would not remain a morass. Looming before him at the outset, its magnificent disorder may have resembled more a mountain than a swamp. But with the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and *SM* under his belt, he faced the Law with a sense that he could be the man equipped to master it—and so help others, mapping its every foothold of practical or theological relevance. This task he saw as critically necessary:

For the purpose intended in the collation of the Talmud has been aborted and lost. The object of today's scholars is only to kill time in talmudic disputing, as if the point were just to hone their skills in debate. That was not the original intention. Debates and disputes arose only incidentally, when words seemed to allow one person to read them one way and another to read them differently, and each mounted arguments to show that his reading should

prevail. But the prime intent was just to make known what must be done or avoided in this case and others like it. My object was to go back to the original intent, to make the demands of Halakhah easy to remember and, indeed, understand. For its norms had gotten lost in the welter of debate. I left all the rest for those more disposed to such an exercise.<sup>11</sup>

There had been prior essays toward a halakhic code, but none was complete or systematic. Among those earlier codes, Maimonides especially admired the pioneering work of Isaac al-Fāsī (1013–1103), who had come to Andalusia after forty years of halakhic work while living near Fez, as the surname by which he is known announces. Al-Fāsī became head of the yeshiva at Lucena, near Cordoba, in 1089, soon after completing his code, sometimes called the “Little Talmud.” His students included the poet/philosopher Judah Halevi (ca. 1075–1141) and Halevi’s lifelong friend Joseph Ibn Migash (1077–ca. 1141), who succeeded al-Fāsī at Lucena and was the teacher of Maimonides’ learned father. But not since Judah the Patriarch and his colleagues compiled the Mishnah, Maimonides wrote, had anyone set out the full range of Halakhah.<sup>12</sup> And the body of law registered in the Mishnah had grown immensely in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds and in the forests of discussion that spread within and beyond them.

The need Maimonides addressed lay not in the realm of praxis alone. The intellectual need was in some ways even greater, given the varying sophistication of the Sages (and their audience) and the oblique and elliptical modes of rabbinic discourse, heavily reliant on allegory, parable, and dialogue, often allusive and presumptive of immediate and intimate familiarity with Scripture and with the full range of rabbinic dicta and homilies, and chary of overt confrontation with the issues of theology. Yet despite the rabbinic habits of obliquity and indirection, values and ideas are prominent anchors and aims in Halakhah, not least in its claim to divine authority. Nor, as Baḥyā Ibn Pāqūdah explained, can one adequately observe the Torah’s prescriptions if one does not understand their aims and observe them with appropriate intent.<sup>13</sup>

Heralding the clarity of mind that Maimonides brought to all his work, from his efforts to rationalize the nomenclature of *materia medica* to his very early work defining key terms and stating basic rules of logic, *MT* flies proudly on its masthead a line from the Psalms, quoted, with characteristic verve, in the

medieval manner to elicit a facet of meaning not salient on the surface: *Then shall I be unabashed to scrutinize all Thy commandments* (119:6). The challenge Maimonides took up is to see and set before his readers the good sense in the Mosaic laws, which God Himself had promised would be plain to the nations of the world:<sup>14</sup> *Follow and keep them. For this is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all these laws and say, "What a wise and discerning people is this great nation!" For what nation is so great as to have the divine so near as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call upon Him, and what nation is so great as to have laws and rules as just as this entire Torah that I give you this day!* (Deuteronomy 4:6–8).

Maimonides' goal in the *Mishneh Torah* was to render Halakhah accessible to all who might need it. That, he says, is why he wrote the work in mishnaic Hebrew, not biblical Hebrew or Aramaic—nor in Arabic, opaque to most European Jews.<sup>15</sup> He treasured Torah study and devoted much of his waking and working life to it. But he did not consider such study life's purpose or highest goal. The Torah was given as a guide to life for Israel in every generation (1.13b), but life itself is for living actively and thoughtfully. The Torah aims to show us how best this can be done (2.84b). A lifetime spent conning over halakhic debates without seeing a resolution to them was not a life well spent. Our moral goal, as Maimonides stresses, is to perfect our character in acts of kindness. Our intellectual goal, to know God,<sup>16</sup> is best attained by seeing the expressions of God's grace and wisdom in nature. The two goals join hands in a virtuous circle, good character pointing implicitly toward God and kindness and generosity inspired, in turn, by ever clearer and sharper awareness (even in the midst of an active life) of God's constant presence (I Introduction, 4a; III 51, 125a–126b).<sup>17</sup>

Some of the Rambam's contemporaries worried that the *Mishneh Torah*, as the title he gave it allowed them to suspect, was meant to *be* the Halakhah (rather than represent it). Pinḥas ben Meshullam, chief Jewish judge of Alexandria, a man of Provençe, voiced the fear that Maimonides aimed to replace the Talmud—hence his failure to name his sources.<sup>18</sup> “God forbid!” Maimonides replied in a lengthy letter. He did teach al-Fāsi's code and other rabbinic works. He wrote the *MT*, in the first instance, he declared, as his own aide-mémoire but then to help others navigate the Talmud's depths—and learn the sentence of the Law.

Halbertal gives Pinḥas's question a full hearing and ultimately confirms

the Rabbi's fears.<sup>19</sup> Those fears, we can say, partly with the aid of hindsight and partly with an appreciation of Maimonides' own history and practice, seem a bit overwrought. But Maimonides clearly did aim to displace talmudic study as a way of life. If that is what Rabbi Pinḥas feared, his fears were not groundless: Maimonides did not celebrate the aim of spending one's life wandering in the woods of talmudic speculation and disputation. The *Misneh Torah* was and remains a practical reference, giving every Jew access to the halakhic rulings needed to guide decision-making. It also enabled every committed reader to see and appreciate the conceptual and moral roots and implications of Jewish law as an integrated system. But Halakhah was itself a guide, not a world to live in. Obscurantism and the life bred by it were not precious to the Rambam.

Among those who, ever since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70, thought of halakhic study as a way of life—and indeed the ideal way of life—Rabbi Pinḥas's worries have persisted to this day, marked by concerns about the omission of citations from the *MT* and its elision of ancient debates. Nothing said here will stanch the wound still throbbing at the site of the Roman conquest, when rabbinic study and the liturgy it bred displaced the spiritual life once centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. But in matters of Halakhah, Maimonides, we can say, seems never to fly naked: He never substitutes mere personal opinion for well-precedented, well-grounded halakhic judgment. Rabbinic scholars who probe the internal consistency and external groundings of the rulings recorded in the *MT*, long topoi of halakhic scholarship, consistently find halakhic foundations for them, often anchored in rather deeper and more faithful understanding of the ancient texts than lesser readers have reached. Given Maimonides' vast learning and his access to some texts no longer extant, Jacob Dienstag writes, it would be “an endless task” to trace all his sources. But despite eight-and-a-half centuries of critiques invited and intensified by its prominence, the *Yad Hazakah* retains a commanding place as a halakhic work.<sup>20</sup>

The *Guide*, like Maimonides' Code, shows his deep respect for tradition. But in the *Guide*, the focus shifts from practice and precept to theory and theology. The division of the house, tellingly, intensifies between those in love with philosophy as the love of wisdom and those insensitive to it or allergic to it. Where the *Yad* seeks order, intelligibility, and principle in Halakhah, the *Guide* turns to Aggadah, the vehicle that bears the themes of Jewish theology lightly rather

than dogmatically, in midrashic, homiletic fancy, its narratives, providing a setting for the doxological precepts of the Torah in much the way that Jewish praxis and the Jewish ethos find their roots in the biblical mitzvot.

Not least among the miracles made possible by the Judaic reliance on narrative and midrash is that the Torah, in its broadest sense (which, for traditionalists, includes the rabbinic literature), can teach without dogmatism. It does so, as Maimonides is at pains to make clear, partly by its poetry and partly by the symbolism embedded in its ceremonial practices—although here, in the ritual laws that the Torah uses to make institutions of ideas, there are sanctions. Just as he wrote the *Mishneh Torah* to make Halakhah accessible to human understanding, it was to discover to his reader the rationality of the Torah's ideas that Maimonides, making a new start in 1185 after setting aside two earlier exploratory and explanatory projects,<sup>21</sup> wrote the *Guide to the Perplexed*.



*This page intentionally left blank*

PART I

# Building Blocks

*This page intentionally left blank*

## ONE

### Setting the Scene

Jews had lived in Iberia since antiquity. Indeed, some locate Tarshish, where Jonah hoped to flee (1:3), in southern Spain, as far as possible across the Mediterranean from the port of Jaffa, where the reluctant prophet put to sea. After defeating Carthage (in the third century BCE), Rome ruled Spain. Jews seem to have lived in Iberia at least by the first century of the Common Era, their numbers swelling after Bar Kokhva's defeat in 135. In time they prospered, but as Rome Christianized, serious efforts were made to obliterate Iberian Judaism. Persecution continued under the Visigoths and intensified when their rulers abandoned Arianism and turned Catholic (in 589). Onerous taxes, invidious laws, expulsions, forced conversions, pogroms, expropriations, and seizure of children for baptism persisted down to 711, when an army of Muslim Arabs and Berbers invaded and made Andalusia their own. Many Jews saw the invaders as liberators and aided the Islamic forces, who left Cordoba in Jewish hands and collaborated with Jews in Granada, Malaga, Seville, and Toledo. Jews were now *dhimmīs*, subject to special taxes and discriminatory laws, enforced with varying degrees of severity. But the contrast with Christian oppression made Muslim Spain a magnet to Jews.

The rise of Islam in the seventh century had brought ethnic Arabs and, in time, their non-Arab clients and vassals to military and political prominence and dominance. The once mighty Persian Empire fell to Muslim Arab

armies, as did some of the richest Byzantine provinces. Egypt, Syria, North Africa, and southern Spain were Islamized. In the Muslim East, the first four “Rightly Guided” caliphs, lieutenants to Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam (ca. 570–632), were succeeded by Arab dynasts, the Umayyads, with their capital in Damascus. Then came the ‘Abbāsīd Revolution, fanned by nascent Shī‘ite legitimism and ethnic resentments, when the denizens of Persian provinces and newly conquered lands in Central Asia found that accepting Islam did not always put them on equal footing with the Arab conquerors. The Umayyads were overthrown in 750.

Not far from ancient Babylon and Ctesiphon, once the glory of the defeated Persian Empire, the ‘Abbāsīds built their capital on the Tigris, calling it the City of Peace. The ancient name, however, stuck: Baghdad became a metropolis. Umayyad stragglers were ruthlessly hunted down. But Umayyad claimants in North Africa managed to establish a regime of their own in Spain. Its greatest ruler, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912–961), united the fractious country, declared himself caliph, and pushed back Christian and Shī‘ite threats to his rule.

## Classics

The early ‘Abbāsīds saw the cultural heritage of the fallen Iranian Empire and the Byzantine provinces as priceless spoils of war. Muslim monarchs and notables sponsored the extensive translation of Greek classics into Arabic, preserving ancient works and creating, on the fallen nurse log, a new literature unlike anything known in Europe before the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> The sciences and practical arts of ancient Greece and the lands to the east were eagerly assimilated and their disciplines cultivated and enlarged. To the learned, the industrious, and the entrepreneurial, the wealth of foreign sciences, arts, and lore was too valuable a resource to ignore. Muslims learned the art of papermaking from Chinese war prisoners in 752, and as early as the third century, Central Asians had been making high-grade stock from cotton rags rather than use the mulberry fiber favored in China.<sup>2</sup> From India, the newly Islamicate peoples gleaned worldly wisdom from the fables of the *Panchatantra*. They mastered advanced techniques of sericulture and ceramics in the great cities of the Silk Road. And there, too, at Balkh (the former Bactria, conquered by Muslim armies in the

mid-seventh century), the debates of Muslim missionaries with local erudites of Sarāstivādin Buddhism first conceived the dimensionless atoms distinctive of the early schools of Islamic theology,<sup>3</sup> whose views Maimonides will challenge in his robust defense of natural causality (I 51, 58b; I 73).

Greek medicine, architecture, engineering, and astrology were among the arts prized by the conquerors. Hundreds of works were translated into Arabic under Islamic patronage, often by Christian scholars whose knowledge of Greek gave them entrée to the newly accessed treasure house of truth. The earliest interest was in practical arts like medicine and mechanics, but the appetite for learning broadened swiftly, and understanding of what counts as practical varied widely and expanded rapidly. Knowledge of mathematics and astronomy was clearly critical for merchants, builders, architects, and engineers, just as anatomy, physiology, and botany were for physicians. But command of logic was critical for anyone locking horns with Greek-trained Christian clerics in Alexandria or Damascus. And logic verged into metaphysics when debate was joined with Christian theologians who had long sparred with one another in turning Aristotle's *Categories* to account in debates about the Trinity. Formal study of grammar and lexicography proved vital in interpreting the Qur'an, not least for converts new to Arabic. But equally vital were new methods of history-writing advancing beyond the anecdotal entertainments and genealogical lore of Arabia. Chronicles, annals, and biographical dictionaries were written. Before long, there were thematic universal histories seeking cultural wisdom as well as practical and diplomatic lessons from the past.<sup>4</sup>

Works of practical value were soon seen to be inseparable from their framework and foundations in theory: Astrology, in demand for calculating horoscopes and siting new cities, needed astronomy. A monumental achievement was the ninth-century translation of the *Syntaxis Mathematica* of Ptolemy (ca. 100–ca. 170), known well to Maimonides and still named today by its Arabic title, *Almagest*. One group of Christian translators made over into Arabic (often via an intermediate Syriac draft) some 129 Greek works of Galen (129–216/7), the great medical writer and sometime physician to Marcus Aurelius. Maimonides tracks Galen's medical contributions and cites him regularly in the *Guide* on philosophical as well as anatomical issues, welcoming his wisdom but disagreeing when he finds him wanting or unfriendly to the Torah (I 73, 106b,