

IN MEMORIAM
HERBERT A. DAVIDSON
(25.V.1932–28.IV.2021)

JOSEP PUIG MONTADA
COMPLUTENSE UNIVERSITY OF MADRID



Herbert Alan Davidson was born on May 25, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts; his father was born in the United States and his mother had emigrated from Russia. He graduated in Semitics and Philosophy from Harvard University in 1953 and earned the degrees of Master of Arts in 1955 and of Doctor of Philosophy in 1959, from the same university. Harry A. Wolfson (1887–1974) an eminent scholar of Greek, Christian, Jewish and Muslim philosophies, was his professor and adviser and decisively influenced his academic life.¹

Professor Davidson wrote his PhD dissertation on the Catalan Jewish philosopher-theologian Abraham ben Isaac Shalom (d. 1492), whose main work, *Neveh Shalom*,² was a collection of homilies dealing with the basic tenets of philosophy and theology: being, God's unity and incorporeality, the Divine attributes, the creation of the universe, the human intellect, man's immortality, etc. Abraham Shalom embraced Maimonides' doctrines and defended him against the criticisms made by Hasdai Cresques and others. In his book, *The Philosophy of Abraham Shalom: A Fifteenth-century Exposition and Defense of Maimonides* (University of California, 1964), Davidson analyzed the thought of Abraham Shalom, his development, and his sources. Although Davidson admitted to me that Shalom was not an original thinker, he added that we should not overlook that he belonged to the last chapter of the Iberian Jewish community, a chapter that began with the riots in 1391 and ended with the expulsion in 1492. Under trying

¹ I thank Michael Fishbein, Emeritus at UCLA, for his constructive comments.

² *The Dwelling of Peace*, first printed in Venice, Di Gara 1574.

circumstances, Shalom and other thinkers accomplished the revival of Jewish scholarship in the land of Sefarad.

From 1961 through 1966, Davidson was assistant professor at the University of California at Los Angeles. His second major publication dates from the period of his post-doctoral stay at Harvard (1959–1960), although it was printed in 1969: *Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium Medium in Porphyrii 'Isagogen' et Aristotelis 'Categorias'*, (Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi, Corpus Commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelem. Versio Hebraica, vol. 1, a). Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America.³

Professor Davidson put his thorough command of Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Latin to work for the critical edition of Averroes' Middle Commentaries on the *Isagoge* and the *Categories*. The edition is a masterpiece of philological thoroughness and a valuable resource for the study of Averroes' logic.

In 1966, he was appointed Associate Professor, and in 1972 Professor at the same university, retiring in 1994 to become Professor Emeritus. During his tenure he delivered seminal works on two issues essential to medieval philosophy, in addition to many articles. One issue is the creation of the universe, its eternal or temporal character, and the other is the human intellect and its modalities. In 1987, Oxford University Press published *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*. As the first term of the title indicates, the book focuses on the proofs (rational arguments) produced by Muslim and Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. Davidson presented the texts in their original languages and analyzed the proofs clearly and precisely.

The other work is *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (Oxford University Press, 1992). The style changes as proofs are difficult to produce in such a subject matter, so that theories were developed to explain how intellectual knowledge is possible and how the human intellect is part of the universe. Davidson painstakingly examined the Greek antecedents and then the contributions by three major Islamic philosophers.

After his retirement in 1994, Davidson concentrated his efforts on Maimonides, whose Renaissance follower, Abraham Shalom, had been object of his research for the PhD. I dare to say that he felt deeply identified with Maimonides for their profound love for Judaism and for their rational attitude interpreting its legacy. *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford University Press, 2005), a densely argued but eminently readable work of 567 pages, describes in detail Maimonides' life, education, interests, and, most importantly, his intellectual output. Throughout the work, the reader notices

³ Complemented by his own English translation: *AVERROES, Middle commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, The Mediaeval Academy of America–University of California Press, Cambridge, MA–Berkeley, CA 1969 (Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevii, 79).

Davidson's empathy with the Rambam. In my review of the book, I summarized Davidson's contribution and views; now I want to highlight again his view that philosophy and Law had been once a unity for Maimonides.⁴

Six of Professor Davidson's shorter articles on the Rambam were collected in the volume *Maimonides the Rationalist*, (Liverpool University Press, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011). Scholarly articles provide an opportunity to deal in depth with selected issues, as these six articles and three additional chapters do. I think that the last article, which gives the name to the volume, crowns his research on Maimonides: Maimonides had to face a large amount of rabbinic literature that he thoroughly knew, and he complained that most readers took the texts literally. Davidson refers to a passage of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*,⁵ the Judeo-Arabic *Sirāj*, and quotes broadly:

When the literal meaning of a piece of Aggadah contains something impossible, perspicacious readers are confident that the Aggadah has an inner meaning, and they search it out.⁶

Davidson admired Maimonides' strenuous efforts to liberate contemporary Judaism from the literal reading and update it to the intellectual standards of the Islamic seventh century (twelfth century C.E.), but he recognized that the efforts made by the Rambam to interpret Aggadah often resulted in farfetched explanations. As for the prohibitions and pieces of advice found in the Halakha, Davidson remarks that Maimonides found many justifying reasons according to his scientific standards, but that he also had to ignore some Talmudic recommendations. Davidson saw that the project was valid only under temporally limited circumstances:

His rationalistic enterprise was valiant, intriguing, and I would submit, admirable, but the philosophic and scientific pillars on which it rested have crumbled. A new marriage of a wholly rational picture of the universe with traditional Jewish religious thought would seem to be possible only, oxymoron though it may be, through a sturdy act of faith.⁷

These are Davidson's final words for the chapter and the book *Maimonides the Rationalist*. He shared with the Rambam a profound, sincere Judaic faith and a confidence in the human reason. The Rambam had tried to bring together

⁴ *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval*, 12 (2005), p. 291–295.

⁵ *Mishnah 'im perush Rabenu Moshe ben Maimon*, ed. JOSEPH D. KAPACH, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1963–1964.

⁶ HERBERT A. DAVIDSON, *Maimonides the Rationalist*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2011 (Library of Jewish Civilization), p. 279.

⁷ DAVIDSON, *Maimonides the Rationalist*, p. 298.

Rabbinic wisdom and Aristotelian philosophy; Davidson admired his endeavor but recognized the shortcomings, and saw that a « sturdy act of faith » would be required for our contemporary approach.

In 2016, Davidson suffered a stroke, but he fought back and continued to engage in research. On October 4, 2017, he wrote to me that he had finished an article « deflating possible Almohad influence on Maimonides ». ⁸ On January 1, 2018, he emailed: « My recovery from the stroke is close to complete as far as my arm is concerned, but I am very disappointed with the recovery of my leg. The larger part of the day I spend walking and exercising ». However, on September 7, 2018, his daughter emailed me for him: « I had a medical reversal and am not very well ».

Professor Davidson died on April 28, 2021, in Los Angeles and is buried in Israel on the Mount of Olives. He is survived by his wife Kinneret Bernstein, their two daughters and sons-in-law, and grandchildren. זיכרונו לברכה.

⁸ HERBERT A. DAVIDSON, *Maimonides and the Almohads*, in CHARLES H. MANEKIN, DANIEL DAVIES (eds.), *Interpreting Maimonides. Critical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge–New York 2019, p. 6–25.