

PHILOSOPHY AND OCEAN VOYAGES

by Scott Michael Alexander

I have always been fascinated by the effect that Maimonides' brother David had on his philosophy, but now have a different perspective on it.

We know that Maimonides was supported by his brother's commercial adventures, probably in the gemstone trade. After David's death Rambam had to seek honest employment, since he did not believe in taking money for rabbinical work (“*The Torah shall not be a spade to dig with*”--*Avot*). We know that he went into medicine, and ran the royal's hospital at the Palace in Cairo.

But it seems that this was not directly remunerative, as he probably could not directly bill the Vizier. More likely, the connections made there assisted his takeover of the jewelry business, which he probably continued to run through subalterns after David's disaster at sea.

We also know that he did not want his brother to go on the last voyage, having a premonition of disaster, but that his brother went anyway. I have actually seen, at a local museum exhibit, the *Geniza* letter where he tried to warn his brother off. We know that Maimonides sunk into a yearlong bed-ridden depression over the loss.

In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he refers to sea voyages several times, mostly in the context of the workings of providence and divine justice. His conclusion, more or less, was that you cannot blame these things on God. The wise man, who is in tune to some extent with the “active intellect,” would be protected from such disasters, just because of such knowledge. He would have refrained from the voyage.

I was listening this morning to Peter Adamson's wonderful *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*. This was his podcast on the Latin church fathers.

Lactantius, 240-320 CE, in his *Divine Institutes*, had a pithy series of remarks on the philosophy of sea voyages.

(See: *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, p. 153, online at <https://books.google.com/books?id=Gx5pLg7XzUQC&pg=PA153&lpg=PA153&dq=lactantius+danger+of+taking+a+ship+voyage&source=bl&ots=W9ZWXoHcQh&sig=oxVboH4oct7Uk9Sm6RhtJXmbHS&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CCcQ6AEwBGoVChMI74qm0Lz5yAIVjEsmCh2geAIC#v=onepage&q=lactantius%20danger%20of%20taking%20a%20ship%20voyage&f=false>)

Lactantius was involved in a critique of the pagan philosophic account of justice. His opponent, Carneades, had made the claim that if you have a wise man and a fool on a sinking ship, and one plank between them, the wise man will seize the plank to save his life, and that is justice.

Lactantius, in Adamson's phrase, retorted: what was the wise man doing on a ship in the first place? (I'm no fan of Lactantius, but given the manifest dangers involved in ancient shipping, he had a point).

“First of all, I deny that it can in any way happen that a man who is truly just should be in circumstances of this kind; for the just man is neither at enmity with any human being, nor desires anything at all which is the property of another. For why should he take a voyage, or what should

he seek from another land when his own is sufficient for him....Doubtless he will be delighted with foreign merchandise ...[He] who does not know how to seek gain, is satisfied with his mode of living...."

Still, a few paragraphs later, Lactantius concedes *arguendo* that the wise man could have taken the voyage. Still, he refuses to concede that, being wise, and possessing the virtues of justice and charity, this wise man would refrain from making the ultimate sacrifice:

"I am not unwilling to confess he will rather die than put another to death. Nor will justice, which is the chief good of man, on this account receive the name of folly. For what ought to be better and dearer to man than innocence? And this must be the more perfect, the more you bring it to extremity, and choose to die rather than detract from the character of innocence. *Etc.*"

We, who so many of our relatives were confronted by such horrible choices, should, *im yiretz ha-shem*, be spared them.

But getting back to his original point about the wise man not taking the voyage, perhaps Rambam has something like that at the back of his mind, balanced by the need to keep the family jewelry operation afloat, pun intended. Whether he could have been directly aware of Lactantius' text, which I find implausible, the notion could have still been in the air in Maimonides' day: that the choice to go to sea in the first place is our own responsibility.

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