Could Maimonides Get into Rambam's Heaven?

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Once a religion specifies the distinct beliefs that constitutes its theology, a new question must be answered: are all these beliefs equal in significance? Moses Maimonides was the first Jew to raise this question, and his answer is explicit: there are thirteen specific teachings of the Torah which stand on a plane all their own.¹

Rambam makes this claim in his commentary on the Mishneh, which opens with the words, "All Israelites have a share in the world to come...."² Rambam thus makes clear that he views that text as a presentation of the dogmas of Judaism. Rambam lays down thirteen discrete beliefs as the dogmatic foundation of the Jewish faith. These may be summarized as follows:

1. That God exists
2. That God is one
3. That God is incorporeal
4. That God is ontologically prior to the cosmos
5. That God alone may be worshiped
6. That prophecy occurs
7. That Mosaic prophecy is superior to all others
8. That the Torah was given from heaven
9. That the Torah will never change nor be exchanged
10. That God knows individuals

² Sanhedrin X.1.
11. That the righteous will be rewarded and the evil punished
12. That the messiah will come
13. That the dead will be resurrected

Rambam does not himself present a list (as I do here) but a discussion of these ideas. He cites proof-texts from the Written Torah and in some cases sketches the outlines of a philosophic proof of the truth of the dogma. The entire discussion is a lengthy essay written originally in Arabic. Rambam’s principles are better known in the Jewish world in the form of two poetic summaries: *Yigdal* and *Ani Ma’amin*, found in most prayer books. The first of these has become part of the liturgy in many Jewish communities.³

After he finishes presenting his principles, Rambam makes the following statement:

When all these foundations are perfectly understood and believed in by a person he enters the community of Israel and one is obligated to love and pity him and to act towards him in all the ways in which the Creator has commanded that one should act towards his brother, with love and fraternity. Even were he to commit every possible transgression, because of lust and because of being overpowered by the evil inclination, he will be punished according to his rebelliousness, but he has a portion of the world to come; he is one of the sinners of Israel. But if a man doubts any of these foundations, he leaves the community of Israel, denies the fundamental, and is called a sectarian, *epikoros*, and one who ‘cuts among the plantings.’ One is required to hate him and destroy him. About such a person it was said, ‘Do I not hate them, 0 Lord, who hate thee?’ (Psalms 139:21).

Rambam’s statement of his principles occurs at the end of a passage in which he defines the terms appearing in *Mishnah Sanhedrin* X.1 (“All Israelites have a share in the world to come . . .”). One term alone remains undefined: “Israelite.” He appears to have posited his principles here at least in part in order to define the term “Israelite.” An Israelite is a person who affirms the thirteen principles.⁴

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