

Original Article

Moses Maimonides (Mūsā ibn Maymūn), a Jewish Philosopher, Theologian and Physician: His Life and Works, an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: Mūsā ibn Maymūn (Maimonides) is a well known Jewish philosopher, theologian and physician. He was born in Qurṭuba (Cordova) in 1153 where he was tutored in various fields of knowledge, including theology. He later moved to Fās, Morocco and then Acre, Palestine. He finally settled in Cairo, Egypt, where he became a physician in the court of Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and the leader of the Jewish community in Cairo.

Mūsā ibn Maymūn's major books of medicine and philosophy were written in Arabic. His major theological work, the *Mishneh Torah*, was fourteen volumes in length and remains a major source of Jewish theology and law to this day.

Mūsā ibn Maymūn is a prime example of Islam's tolerance and high respect for science and scientists. Non-Muslims were given the full opportunity to flourish, achieve and be appointed to high places in Muslim countries. This represents the true spirit of Islam.

Key Words: Maimonides, Mūsā ibn Maymūn, Jewish theology, history of medicine, Islamic medicine, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn

Introduction

Over thirty-five books and hundreds of articles have been published in the United States and Europe on the life and works of Moses Maimonides.¹⁻³ It is high time that Muslim physicians and scholars— especially those of us who have elected to emigrate and become citizens of the United States and western

Europe—learn more about Ibn Maymūn. It is nowadays even more imperative than ever before that we highlight not only the great spirit of tolerance and respect of other faiths that prevailed under Islamic

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A portrait of Moses Maimonides.

rule at the time of Ibn Maymūn but also the benevolent nature of Islamic culture and civilization. For it was under Islamic rule and jurisdiction that rabbi and physician Mūsā Ibn Maymūn was able not only to excel in the field of Medicine but to vastly contribute to Jewish theology.

The earliest known biography of Maimonides is the famous book '*Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* (Sources of information on the generations of the physicians) by the noted medical biographer Ibn Abī Usaybi'a (1203-1270 CE), himself a physician and an

acquaintance of Maimonides's son Abraham.⁴

Mūsā ibn Maymūn was born in Qurṭuba (Cordova) the capital of Al-Andalus (Islamic Andalusia) in 1135. His father and mentor was a well-known scholar and judge in the Jewish community that flourished there. In Arabic, the language he employed in most of his writings, Maimonides refers to himself as Abū `Imrān Mūsā ibn `Ubayd Allah ibn Maymūn. In Hebrew he is known as RAMBAM which stands for Rabbi Moses Ben Maimun.

Beginning in the second half of the eighth century CE, two rival centers of knowledge emerged in the Islamic world, the Eastern Caliphate of the Abbasids with Baghdad as its capital and the Western Caliphate of the Umayyads with Qurṭuba as its capital. Two schools of philosophy and medicine subsequently developed, the Eastern school of Al-Rāzī (Rhazes) and Ibn Sīna (Avicenna) and the Western school of Ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar) and Ibn Rushd(Averroes).⁵⁻⁷

Maimonides was thoroughly tutored in Qurṭuba in the fields of mathematics, astronomy and astrology, medicine, philosophy, theology and Jewish studies. Ibn Maymūn was a student of two distinguished Cordovan Muslim scholars; Abū Marwān ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar; 1091-1162) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes 1126-1198). Maimonides repeatedly refers to his Cordovan mentors in several of his Medical writings as "the outstanding elders in the land of al-Andalus."⁵

Qurṭuba was conquered by the al-Muwahḥidūn (Almohades) in 1148. The Maymūn family fled their persecution to the city of Fās (Fez) in Morocco in 1160. There, Ibn Maymūn studied Jewish theology under the famous rabbi Judah ha-Kohen. Around 1165 the family sailed to Acre, Palestine. Their sojourn in Palestine was brief, and they finally settled in Fustāṭ (old Cairo), Egypt.

When his brother David, a jewel merchant, perished in the Indian Ocean, Ibn Maymūn turned to medicine to earn his livelihood in order to sustain himself and his brother's family. Maimonides's endeavors in his new occupation proved successful, and within a short time he attracted the attention of the Islamic Chief Justice, Vizier al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil al-Baysani, who

utilized his services and introduced him to the court of al-'Aḍīḍ , the last of the Fatimid rulers of Egypt. Al-Mālik al-Nāṣir Sultan Salahuddin Al-Ayubi (Saladin) took control of Egypt around 1169 and successfully united Muslims to victory in the famous battle of Hittin in 1187. His army captured Bayt al-Maḳdis (Jerusalem) later that same year.^{5,8}

Maimonides was introduced to Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and became a prominent court physician. In addition, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn appointed him leader of the Jewish community in Egypt. Maimonides' reputation was so great that he was invited to be the personal Physician of King Richard II (Richard the Lion-Hearted), the king of England, who was participating in the Third European Crusade. It is said that King Richard had heard about Maimonides from Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's brother al-'Ādil. Ibn Maymūn declined the invitation and elected to stay in Ayyubite Egypt. In Egypt, Ibn Maymūn built a busy and successful private medical practice. He would fulfill his duties as court physician to the Sultan and his family in the mornings and attend to his clinic patients in the afternoons. On Saturdays (Sabbath), Ibn Maymūn would attend to the needs of the Jewish community in Cairo as the appointed head Rabbi. It is said that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn had eighteen physicians in his service, eight Muslims, five Jews, four Christians, and one Samaritan.⁹ Several historians agree that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's stellar performance as a leader in the battlefield was matched only by his legendary tolerance. Following his capture of Jerusalem from the Europeans in 1187, he allowed Jews to worship in the city even before he allowed his own Muslim people. This noble act was reminiscent of another incident that had taken place in Jerusalem over five hundred years before that, when another great Muslim leader, the second Khalifa `Umar, elected to take his prayer mat away from a Christian church for fear that some of his followers might one day claim it as their own place of worship. Both leaders certainly displayed vision, wisdom and a true understanding of the core of the Islamic faith.⁸⁻¹⁰

Medical Writings

A total of ten works of Ibn Maymūn (all written in Arabic) have been well preserved and authenticated.⁵⁻⁷

1. *Al-Mukhtaṣarāt* – The Extracts

These are a carefully selected compilation of the works of Galen. The extracts were quite popular and used as a “digest” of Galen’s work.

2. *Fuṣūl Mūsā fī al-Ṭibb*–The Medical Aphorisms of Moses

This book, composed between 1187 and 1190, was perhaps the most popular of Ibn Maymun’s medical compositions. It consists of 25 chapters which include over 1,500 aphorisms. In these he quotes Galen plus several Muslim writers such as Ibn Zuhr, al-Tamīmī, Ibn Wāfid, Ibn Riḍwān, and al-Fārābī. The book was translated from Arabic to Latin and Hebrew.

3. *Sharḥ fuṣūl Abūqrāṭ* – A Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates.

This work included his commentary on the works of Hippocrates as translated into Arabic by Hunain Ibn Ishaq. It was divided into seven books.

4. *Fī al-jimā’* – On Coitus/Intercourse.

Two treatises were written on sexual hygiene and aphrodisiac remedies. The longest of the two was written at the request of al-Muẓaffar ibn Ayyūb, Sultan of Hama, Syria (1172-1192).

5. *Fī al-bawāsīr*–On Hemorrhoids.

Composed in 1187 on the management of hemorrhoids.

6. *Maqāla fī al-rabw* – A Discourse on Asthma.

Written in 1190, it outlines symptoms, treatment, and prevention.

7. *Kitāb al-sumūm wa al-mutaḥarriz min al-adwiya al-qattāla* – A Book on Poisons and Protection against Lethal Drugs.

Written in 1198 at the request of Ibn Maymun’s benefactor, the Judge Vizier al-Fāḍil. It discusses organic and inorganic poisons, their toxicity, antidotes, and remedies as well as general advice on emergency measures.

8. *Sharḥ asmā’ al-‘uqqār* – A Commentary on the Names of Drugs

This work, which was cited by Ibn Abī Usaybi’a, was only recently discovered in the library of the Aya Sofia in Istanbul. It contains 2,000 names of drugs listed alphabetically in Arabic.

9. *Fī tadbīr al-siḥḥa* – On the Regimen of Health (Figure 1)

Ibn Maymun wrote this work at the behest of al-Mālik al-Afḍal Nūr al-Dīn `Ali, the son of Salahuddin, who died in 1193. Nūr al-Dīn succeeded his deceased father as king of Egypt.

10. *Maqāla fī bayān ba’d al-‘a`rād wa al-jawāb`anhā* – A treatise in elucidation of some symptoms and the response to it

This treatise, like the Regimen, was written at the request of King al-Afḍal ibn Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Unlike the Regimen, it is not a discourse on a general topic such as the regimen of health, but rather a compilation of detailed and often elaborate answers to specific questions posed by the ailing prince to his famous and trustworthy physician.

All of Ibn Maymūn’s medical works were written in Arabic, the language of science and medicine of his age. The last two treatises are available in original manuscripts at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Maimonides’s Works in Jewish Theology

Ibn Abī Usaybi’a referred to Ibn Maymūn as “*al-Ra’īs Mūsā*,” as he was the head (*Ra’īs*) and Rabbi of the Jewish community in Egypt, a position to which Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn appointed him. Ibn Maymūn was soon recognized as an authority on Jewish law and its interpretation.

His first major religious work was commentary on the Mishnah written in 1168. His medical practice notwithstanding, Maimonides continued to pursue his religious and philosophical studies, and in 1180 he wrote his major religious work, the Mishneh Torah, in which he organized, edited, summarized, and codified the immense collection of laws, customs, opinions, and regulations found in existing Jewish scripture. This work of fourteen books remains one of the major sources of Jewish theology and Jewish laws until today.^{6,7}

In 1190 he completed the *Dalālat al-hayrīn* (The Guide to the Perplexed), considered the crown of his philosophical achievements. In it, he tried to reconcile Jewish thought with Aristotelian philosophy.

Summary and Conclusions

Moses Maimonides (Mūsā ibn Maymūn) was an outstanding physician and scholar, a superb clinician and a prolific writer with everlasting contributions to medicine, philosophy and humanity. He was a fine product of a great Islamic civilization.

It behooves us as Muslims not only to study the life and legacy of Ibn Maymūn but to take pride in it as a shining example of the spirit of tolerance inherent in Islam. This fact has enormous relevance and germane significance in this day and age where we find ourselves in the midst of a tide of misinformation and misunderstanding of Islam fueled by some in the West who are ignorant of the true nature of Islam, on one hand, and by the acts of a tiny minority of misguided Muslims who have adopted a false interpretation of Islam based on distorted self-righteousness and a skewed tunnel vision on the other hand.

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Figure 1. Scan of first page of the published edition of *Fī tadbīr al-siḥḥa*. Courtesy of Dr. Fred Rosner.

