
Maimonides: On Asthma. A Parallel Arabic-English Text Edited, Translated, and Annotated by Gerrit Bos

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Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) was a paramount figure in Medieval Hebrew culture not only as a jurist, a theologian, and a philosopher, but also as a physician. Although his interest in medical art seems to have begun rather early in his youth while he was in Morocco, he apparently practiced, and even taught, medicine during the last 30 years of his life while he was in Fustat (near Cairo): in this period, there is evidence that he arose to a high rank as a court physician of some notables—first, of Saladin’s counselor and vizier, al-Qadi al-Fadil, and then of Saladin’s son and successor, al-Malik al-Afdal. True, his reputation as a good physician, although suggested by the high esteem he attained at the Egyptian court and affirmed by Medieval Islamic and Jewish sources, was not accepted by everybody: some Arabic sources of the 13th century (the bibliographer Ibn al-Qifti, the philosopher ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi) speak of Maimonides as an excellent theoretician of medicine; but add that he was an unskilled, sometimes indecisive practitioner who avoided prescribing a treatment without consulting other colleagues, and a social climber.

As a matter of fact, at least nine medical treatises in Arabic are commonly ascribed to Maimonides. The minor ones are short monographs on specific illnesses (asthma—that edited in this volume—hemorrhoids, and troubles concerning sexual intercourse), as are his systematic accounts of diet, hygiene, and pharmacology (poisons and drugs). Most of the major treatises are commentaries or ‘re-writings’ of famous works of ancient Greek medicine. They include a compendium of Galen’s writings, a commentary on Hippocrates’ *Medical*

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Aphorisms, and a series of ‘medical aphorisms’ (the so-called *Moses’ Medical Aphorisms*) which, though seemingly Maimonides’ own, is in reality mostly inspired by Galen’s works.

The dependence of Maimonides’ medical works upon ancient and medieval Arabo-Islamic sources and Galen in particular, has been stressed by many scholars. Such dependence is evident in the case of the treatise *On Asthma*. The historical importance of this treatise is due more to its fortune as a transmitter of Greek and Arabic medicine to late medieval Europe (it was translated thrice into Hebrew and twice into Latin between 1200 and 1400), than to its role as a witness of original medical doctrines propounded by Maimonides himself. As a matter of fact, it is not a systematic treatise on asthma, but, according to Bos, a ‘regimen of health’ explicitly written for a particular asthmatic, one of Maimonides’ influential clients, who is not clearly identified in the text. Moreover, the original Arabic text is preserved in only three manuscripts which (apart from one that includes only ten paragraphs of the text written in Arabic characters) are in Arabic written in Hebrew characters, as was usual among Medieval Jews living in Islamic countries. Therefore, its contents as well as its manuscript tradition would lead one to think that *On Asthma* was not written for a wider Muslim and Christian Arabic public—as is supposed by many scholars including Bos himself—since they could find more original treatments of this subject in their own scientific literature. Apart from its ‘courtly’ occasion, *On Asthma* appears to have been read mostly by a Jewish public, for which Maimonides’ medical works typically ‘vulgarized’ some elements of Greek and Arabic medical theory and practice.

That this was indeed the role played by *On Asthma* in the history of medieval medical doctrines on this subject is confirmed by a survey of the contents of the book. First, as I have said, it is not a systematic treatise on asthma. Apart from a specific passage on asthma in the introduction, where a short description of its causes is found (in paragraph 2, Maimonides describes it as ‘a defluxion that descends from the brain at certain times of the year, but mostly in winter’), and chapters 11–12, where a therapy for asthma and a list of drugs for curing it is given, most of the text (87 of 111 pages in Bos’ English translation) deals with general questions of diet and hygiene, where references to asthma appear to be very circumscribed and inserted into more general expositions. Chapter 1 is a general

introduction to a healthy way of life as the best way for treating chronic diseases in general (among them, asthma); chapters 2–7 deal with the appropriate consumption of foods and drinks, with special (but not exclusive) regard to who is suffering from asthma; chapters 8–10 are devoted to the importance and role of air, psychological factors, evacuation, sleeping, as well as sexual intercourse, in a healthy regimen, especially for the asthmatic patient; and, finally, chapter 13 is a collection of many medical notes, aphorisms, and observations (mostly quotations from many authors, with some observations by Maimonides himself) about several subjects, where asthma is not even hinted at. The structure of the work can be traced back to the ancient and medieval doctrine of the ‘six non-natural things’, that is, the six external factors influencing human health (air, food and drink, movement and rest, emotions, sleeping and waking, excretion and retention—to which Maimonides adds sexual intercourse).

Second, as Maimonides himself admits in paragraph 4 of his introduction, a substantial part of the text consists in quotations, sometimes explicit and literal, mainly from Galen¹ but also from Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Paulus of Aegina, Abu Bakr al-Razi (Rhazes), Abu Marwan Ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar), al-Farabi and so on, where these quotations are often interspersed with Maimonides’ own personal observations.² Non-declared self-quotations, that is, passages identical to those in other works by Maimonides, are very often found as well. Indeed, there are passages, especially in chapters 5 and 8 of *On Asthma*, that are similar or identical to sections of *The Regimen of Health*, Maimonides’ own treatise of diet and hygiene. Moreover, paragraphs 50–51 of chapter 13 are very similar, if not literally identical, to a passage of chapter 31 of part 1 of Maimonides’ well-known philosophical masterwork, *The Guide of the Perplexed*. If these quotations were drawn from those works to be inserted into the *On Asthma*—and not vice versa—it would follow that the work, which is not dated, was

¹ Bos has identified literal references to Galen’s *De sanitate tuenda*, *De alimentorum facultatibus*, *In Hippocratis de alimento*, *De bonis malisque sucis*, *De symptomatum causis*, *De usu partium*, *De compositione medicamentorum secundum locos*, *In Hippocratis epidemiarum*, *De methodo medendi*, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, as well as to some works that are wrongly ascribed to Galen in the medieval Arabic tradition.

² The self-quotations are sometimes introduced by the formula, ‘Says the author’, and are frequent in Maimonides’ medical writings.

written in the last years of Maimonides' life (around 1200), since *The Regimen* is usually dated to 1198 and *The Guide* was completed by the end of the 12th century.

Until now, the contents of the *On Asthma* were known only through Suessmann Muntner's 1940 edition (revised in 1965) of one of the medieval Hebrew translations (that by Samuel Benveniste, probably a physician who worked for the Aragonese prince Don Manuel and lived around 1350), as well as through Muntner's (1963) and Fred Rosner's (1994) English translations which are based upon Benveniste's. Gerrit Bos' book contains the first edition of the Arabic text of this work, and is the first complete and annotated English translation based upon the original—which accounts for its importance and usefulness. Moreover, it should be noticed that the edition has been made with remarkable philological accuracy. As explained in the concise but dense translator's introduction [xxiv–xlvi], the Arabic text, as preserved in the ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, hébreu 1211 (the most complete one), and partially in two mss. in Gotha and New York, has obvious copyists' errors and many substantial lacunas.³ Bos has chosen to complete these lacunas by publishing the corresponding passages of what he considers the more faithful of the three medieval Hebrew translations, that by Joshua Shatibi from Xativa (written in the period 1379–1390 and preserved in two mss.), rather than by trying to reconstruct the lost Arabic original of these passages (as it has been done in similar cases such as Maurice Bouyges' 1938–1952 edition of the Arabic text of Averroes' *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, for example). In the critical apparatus, only significant variant readings from the Hebrew translations (by Shatibi, by Benveniste, and by an anonymous translator possibly working in the 13th century whose version is preserved in a unique manuscript in Jerusalem), as well as from the two Latin translations (by Armengaud Blaise, 1294, in Montpellier, and by John of Capua, around 1300, in Rome), have been taken into consideration. At the end of his edition, Bos adds a very interesting comparison of some significant passages that have been erroneously rendered in one or more of the three Hebrew translations, or in the previous English

³ The main lacunas are: from the end of the introduction to the end of chapter 1, paragraphs 1–7 of chapter 3, paragraphs 1–4 of chapter 6, paragraphs 7–10 of chapter 9, paragraph 44 of chapter 13.

translations by Muntner and Rosner, which Bos regards as ‘corrupt and unreliable’ [113–122]. He also supplies a list of additional notes to the English translation that point out some relevant aspects of the medical doctrines found in the text as well as some passages of the sources employed in it [23–138], and a general bibliography of texts cited as well as of modern editions and translations of Maimonides’ medical writings [139–150].

Only some short observations about single points and aspects of Bos’ work are in order. On p. xxxvi, for instance, Bos states that ‘it cannot be known for certain whether Samuel Benveniste was the translator, whether this Samuel Benveniste was indeed the physician who served Don Manuel, or whether he was also the translator of Boethius’ *De consolatione philosophiae*.’ It seems to me that, if the first and second points are both true (and indeed they may well be, since in some manuscripts there is a marginal note ascribed to ‘Samuel Benveniste the translator’, as highlighted by Bos himself on pp. xxxv and 135), the third cannot be true, since the ‘Samuel Benveniste’ who translated into Hebrew the *De consolatione* from a Catalan paraphrase of it worked in 1412 [see Zonta 1998]. Moreover, it results from Bos’ analysis of variant readings that all three Hebrew translations of the *On Asthma* were made from Arabic, not from Latin or from some Romance language, although this is not clearly stated by the editor. In general, it is regrettable that Bos has not tried to establish the mutual relationship, if any, between the five medieval translations of the work and the Arabic text, or to suggest a tentative stemma of the manuscript tradition.

To sum up, Bos’ work is a very valuable and indispensable tool for a better knowledge and understanding of Maimonides’ medical writings. Let us hope that the second volume of the series, Complete Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, including the edition of the two Latin translations of *On Asthma*, as well as lexical studies and glossaries on the Arabic, Hebrew and Latin texts, will appear soon. We would only suggest that the three Hebrew translations (including that by Benveniste, whose edition by Muntner appears to be inadequate) be published as well, so that scholars can have a complete set of materials available to determine the way in which Maimonides’ medical works were read and employed in medieval Jewish culture.

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