
Maimonides: Medical Aphorisms. Treatises 1–5. A Parallel Arabic-English Edition Edited, Translated, and Annotated by Gerrit Bos

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This is the second volume to appear in the new series The Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, edited by Gerrit Bos (chair of the Martin Buber Institute for Jewish Studies, University of Cologne).¹ Immediately after the publication of the present volume, there appeared a new biography of Maimonides by Herbert A. Davidson [2005]. Davidson’s work contains many innovative suggestions and conclusions about Maimonides, some of which [2005, 429–483 esp.] concern Maimonides’ work as a physician and should be taken into account here.

Moses Maimonides (who, according to Davidson, was born between September 1136 and September 1138, and died on 12 December 1204) was a paramount figure in Medieval Hebrew culture: he practiced medicine full-time during the last decades of his life, while he was in Fustat (near Cairo). As Davidson argues, Maimonides, who wrote in Arabic, composed most of his medical works from 1191 onwards, when he had completed his writings as a jurist, a theologian, and a philosopher. Davidson lists ten authentic medical writings: these include short monographs on specific illnesses; systematic treatises on diet, hygiene, and pharmacology; as well as a number of commentaries on, or reworkings of, texts by Hippocrates and Galen. There are two other works of uncertain attribution on sexual intercourse and on the length of life.

¹ The first volume was a critical edition and annotated English translation of Maimonides’ *On Asthma* [see Bos 2002], which I reviewed for this journal [see Zonta 2004].

As I have already observed in reviewing Bos' edition of Maimonides' *On Asthma*, the dependence of Maimonides' medical works upon ancient sources, and upon Galen in particular, is both evident and well known. It seems that Maimonides used to write down a number of texts in notebooks consisting of patchworks of quotations from Greek authorities (taken from Medieval Arabic translations of them) which were interspersed with his own brief observations usually introduced by the formula 'Says Moses'. Among these notebooks, there are his unpublished compendia of 21 of Galen's medical writings; and, in my opinion [see Zonta 2004b], a compendium of Aristotle's zoological works,² the ascription of which to Maimonides may be confirmed by internal evidence, also belongs in this genre. Now, it should be noticed that very similar features, although not totally identical, are found in the medical aphorisms, mostly inspired by Galen's works, which have now been published in Bos' edition.

The *Medical Aphorisms*, the longest of Maimonides' medical works after the still unpublished compendia of Galen's books, is comprised of 25 treatises of uncertain date. Bos [xx] suggests that treatises 1-24 were composed in an early period of Maimonides' activity as physician and writer (up to 1185); Davidson [2005, 446], however, seems to suppose a later date, since he affirms that the author was working on them 'by 1188'. In any case, treatise 25 seems to have been written in the latest period of Maimonides' life. As affirmed by Maimonides himself in the introduction to his work [2-4], he intended to combine in this treatise short passages taken from approximately 90 of Galen's texts.³ These passages, which are sometimes quoted literally and sometimes paraphrased, are combined with a few quotations taken from later Arabic authors (e.g., the famous physicians Ibn Zuhr and Ibn Wafid) as well as with Maimonides' own comments, and ordered according to their contents. In Davidson's opinion, the *Medical Aphorisms* are a sort of 'medical code', which may be compared to the 'law code' Maimonides composed for Jewish religious tradition. Rather skeptically, Davidson [2005, 452] affirms that 'despite its limitations, the *Medical Aphorisms* is a convenient distillation of Galen's self-indulgently verbose writings on medicine'. In reality, however, it

² This compendium, by the way, includes passages of medical interest.

³ See pp. 131-139 to compare the list of passages from Galen's books found in treatises 1-5 of the *Medical Aphorisms*.

is an encyclopaedia of Galen's medical thought, where each treatise deals with a part of it. Thus, treatises 1–3 cover anatomy, physiology, and pathology; treatises 4–6, symptomatology or the signs of illnesses; treatises 7–14, etiology or the causes of illnesses; treatise 15, surgery; treatise 16, gynecology; treatise 17, hygiene; treatises 18–20, diet; treatises 21–22, pharmacopoeia or the making of medicines; treatises 23–25 concern Galen's works as such, studying some of their singularities and even criticizing some of their statements and doctrines [see Bos' overview on p. xxi]. What is interesting about the quotations of Galen found in the *Medical Aphorisms* is that some of them have a remarkable utility in reconstructing some of his lost works, or in correcting misreadings found in the extant Arabic and Greek tradition of his writings. Bos, who is going to study these fragments in forthcoming articles, points out [xxi–xxii] that in treatises 7 and 16 of the *Medical Aphorisms* Maimonides transmits passages of two Galenic works, *De motibus manifestis et obscuris* and the commentary on Hippocrates' *De mulierum affectibus*, which are not found in Greek; the same is true of a passage of Galen's *De instrumento odoratus* [cf. 17, lines 19–25].

Notwithstanding Maimonides' obvious dependence on Galen, it appears from some examples reported by Bos [xxii–xxv] that

he proves himself to be an independent and critical physician who tries to eradicate prejudices and dictated dogmas in medicine, even if they originate with a physician as famous as Galen. [xxv]

According to Bos [15], this is valid not only for the contents of treatise 25, which was especially devoted to a philosophical critique of Galen's work, but for other treatises as well: for instance, Bos quotes treatise 1.34, in which Maimonides criticizes Galen for not giving a reason for, or resolving doubts about, voluntary actions (speaking, screaming, walking, and so forth) performed by men while they are asleep or being absentminded.

There is no doubt that the success and popularity of the *Medical Aphorisms* in Late Medieval medicine in Europe, both among Christian and Jewish physicians, was due to Maimonides' ability to adapt Galen's medical thought to his readers' requirements in didactic, concise, simple, and clear texts. As for the Latin tradition, Bos [xxv] reports the commonly accepted opinion that the *Medical Aphorisms*

was translated into Latin in the 13th century; and that one version of this translation was from the hand of John of Capua, a well-known translator from Hebrew into Latin, who was active in Rome around 1300. However, it should be pointed out that, according to a very recent study of the Medieval tradition of Maimonides' writings, the only Latin translation of the *Medical Aphorisms* made in the Middle Ages was not by John of Capua, but by an anonymous translator who worked in France (possibly in Paris) or in Italy around 1400 [see Hasselhoff 2004, 288–289, 327]. As for the Medieval Hebrew tradition, there were two translations: that by Zerahya Ḥen prepared in Rome in 1277, which was mostly read among Italian Jewish readers; and that by Natan ha-Me'ati, also written in Rome between 1279 and 1283, which won success in Spain and in France. (One would be led to suspect that there is a relationship between the two translations, since they were made in the same place and approximately in the same period; but so far as I know no scholar has seriously inquired into this up to now.)

Gerrit Bos' projected series of seven volumes devoted to the *Medical Aphorisms* (this is the first one of them) will contain the first complete critical edition of the Arabic text, and the first complete and annotated English translation based upon the original. This fact is very important, since until now the contents of the *Medical Aphorisms* were known only through Suessmann Muntner's defective, non-critical edition in 1959 of Natan's Hebrew translation, as well as through Muntner's and Fred Rosner's English translation of that edition in 1970 (revised by Rosner in 1989).⁴ Bos' edition is based mainly on the Arabic text found in the ms. Gotha (Erfurt-Gotha, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek), Or.1937, but the critical apparatus includes variant readings [xxix–xxxi] from the other five Arabic manuscripts held in European libraries.

Here too, Bos' scholarly competence and philological and editorial skill emerges from his work: as I have written in the case of *On Asthma*, 'Bos' work is a very valuable and indispensable tool for a better knowledge and understanding of Maimonides' medical writings,' and the same is true for the *Medical Aphorisms*. So I will conclude

⁴ See pp. xxviii–xxix, 79–88 for Bos' observations on Muntner's and Rosner's errors in these works.

with some circumscribed observations about the methods followed in producing this edition.

Apparently, this edition does not include a detailed comparison of the Hebrew tradition (as happened in the edition of *On Asthma*), probably because in this case the original Arabic texts have been regarded as sufficiently well-transmitted. (The only exception is treatise 2.8, which is lost in the whole Arabic tradition and has been published by Bos [28–29] according to one manuscript of Zerahya’s Hebrew translation that has been compared in some points to Natan’s.) It should also be noticed that Galen’s quotations in Maimonides have been compared to the corresponding passages of the Arabic translations of Galen only in some cases (the quotations from *De locis affectis*, *De usu partium* and the commentary on Hippocrates’ *De aere aquis et locis*), probably because the manuscripts or critical editions of these works were easier to find. However, a comparison of all the writings of the Arabic Galen quoted by Maimonides (50 texts, mostly in manuscripts, for treatises 1–5) would have been almost impracticable; and the accurate comparison made by Bos is, in any case, a good ‘specimen’ of such an enormous work. Let us hope that in the future Bos’ edition will be supplemented by a ‘stemma’ of the mutual relationship between the Arabic manuscripts and the Medieval Latin and Hebrew translations. This would be useful for a still better understanding of the history of this important text, surely one of Maimonides’ most read writings in the Middle Ages.

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