Al-Ghazālī, Averroes and Moshe Narboni
Conflict and Conflation

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Two of the three persons my contribution has brought together need no introduction to the readers of this volume. Al-Ghazālī is the one whose millennial anniversary is being commemorated, and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) is his celebrated adversary, the philosopher who wished to render al-Ghazālī’s “Incoherence of the Philosophers” incoherent. But who is Moshe Narboni?

Moshe Narboni is a fourteenth century Jewish philosopher (d. 1362) whose surname derives from the Provençal city of Narbonne, an ‘ir vaʾem beyisrael, a site of Jewish learning and scholarship in the Middle Ages. Moses, or Moshe, however, who is known in Latin as Maestre Vidal Bellsom, or Blasom, was actually born in Perpignan, and lived there until 1344. It was there that Narboni – as we shall call him – studied a full complement of Jewish texts: the Bible and rabbinic literature, as well as Jewish philosophy, besides medicine and Islamic philosophy. It is most probable that he studied the Muslim falāsifa through Hebrew translations of their work, though he may have had some Arabic as well as some Latin. He did not know Scholastic philosophy, however, and it was the luminaries of Islamic and Jewish thought of the tenth to twelfth centuries who circumscribed his intellectual horizons.

Narboni moved to Spain in mid-life, and lived in various cities there amidst the disturbances caused by warfare and the Bubonic plague. He fled Cervera together with the Jewish community in 1349 due to anti-Jewish attacks, leaving behind his possessions and books. Nevertheless, he continued writing, projecting an image of an oecumenia of shared learning and belief among Jews and Muslims.

Narboni was particularly captivated by the work of Averroes and Maimonides, and inserted them into all his philosophical studies. He wrote supercommentaries on Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle’s logic, physics, metaphysics, cosmology and psychology, and towards the end of his life wrote a major commentary on Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed. Narboni had studied Maimonides’ work since the age of 13, enabling him to reference the Guide frequently, well before he wrote his commentary on it.

In addition to his supercommentaries on Averroes, Narboni wrote a commentary on al-Ghazālī’s Maqāṣid al-falāsifa, “The Intentions of the Philosophers,” and on Ibn Ṭufayl’s Hayy ibn Yaqẓān, in which commentary he inserted comments on Ibn Bājja’s Tadbīr al-mutawaḥḥid, “The Regimen of the Solitary.” An early commentary on a short work of Averroes, “The Treatise on the Hylic Intellect,” also known as the “Treatise on the Possibility of Conjunction,” shows that Narboni had fully grasped Averroes’ radical teaching on that subject, as intimated in Averroes’ Talkhīṣ kitāb an-Nafs, his Middle Commentary on (Aristotle’s) De anima.3

Narboni actually incorporated much of this Middle Commentary into his own lengthy Maʾamar bi-Shelemut ha-Nefesh, the “Treatise on the Perfection of the Soul”; introducing into it as well much of Averroes’ “Treatise on the Possibility of Conjunction.” In his treatise, Narboni refers as well to Maimonides’ Guide and to a number of al-Ghazālī’s texts.

Two major, if smaller, treatises that Narboni wrote deserve special mention for their relevance to issues close to his own time. The first is an early composition called Iggeret ʿal Shiʿur Qomah, the “Epistle on Shiʿur Qomah;” Shiʿur Qomah designating an anthropomorphically imagined deity of immense proportions, encompassing the cosmos and paradoxically affirming God’s indescribability. As it has been shown, Narboni wrote this epistle in an attempt to reconcile the sefirot of the kabbalists with the celestial spheres of the philosophers.5

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2 Cf. Kalman Bland, ed. and trans., The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary of Moses Narboni, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982.