

## 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?<sup>1</sup>

Moshe Narboni is a fourteenth century Jewish philosopher (d. 1362) whose surname derives from the Provençal city of Narbonne, an *'ir va'em 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.

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1 A Summary of Narboni's life and work may be found in my entry, "Moses ben Joshua (Ben Mar David) of Narbonne," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Keter Publishing, Jerusalem, 1972, xii: 422–423. For greater detail, cf. Maurice R. Hayoun, *La Philosophie et la Théologie de Moïse de Narbonne*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1989; and see Gitit Holzman, *The Theory of the Intellect and Soul in the Thought of Rabbi Moshe Narboni, Based on his Commentaries on the Writings of Ibn Rushd, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajja and al-Ghazali* (Hebrew, PhD. Dissertation, Hebrew University, 1996), pp. 1–24.

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 *Maqāsid al-falāsifa*, "The Intentions of the Philosophers," and on Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, in which commentary he inserted comments on Ibn Bājjā's *Tadbīr al-mutawahhid*, "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,"<sup>2</sup> 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*.<sup>3</sup>

Narboni actually incorporated much of this Middle Commentary into his own lengthy *Ma'amar bi-Shelemut ha-Nefesh*, the "Treatise on the Perfection of the Soul";<sup>4</sup> 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 'al Shi'ur Qomah*, the "Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomah*;" *Shi'ur 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

3 Cf. Alfred L. Ivry, ed. and trans., *Averroës Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press 2002.

4 Moses of Narbonne, *Ma'amar bi-Shelemut ha-Nefesh*, (*Treatise on the Perfection of the Soul*) ed. Alfred Lyon Ivry (Hebrew), The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem, 1977.

5 Cf. Alexander Altmann, ed. and trans., "Moses Narboni's Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomah*," *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 225–288.