Introduction

1  Biography

Moses Maimonides, known under his Arab name as Abū ʿImrān Mūsā ibn ʿUbayd-Allāh ibn Maymūn and under his Jewish name as Moshe ben Maimon, was not only one of the greatest Jewish philosophers and experts in Jewish law (halakhah),¹ but an eminent physician as well. Born in Cordoba in 1138,² he was forced to leave his native city at the age of thirteen years because of the persecutions by the fanatical Muslim sect of the Almohads and the policy of religious intolerance adopted by them.³ After a sojourn of about twelve years in southern Spain, the family moved to Fez in the Maghreb. Some years later, probably around 1165, they moved again because of the persecutions of the Jews in the Maghreb, this time to Palestine. After a short sojourn of some months in this country the family moved on to Egypt, and settled in Fusṭāṭ, the ancient part of Cairo. It was here that Maimonides started to practise and teach medicine next to his commercial activities in the India trade.⁴ Thus he

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² While traditionally his date of birth is set at 1135, Maimonides himself wrote in 1168, in the colophon to his Commentary on the Mishnah, that he was then in Egypt and thirty years old; Goitein, “Moses Maimonides, Man of Action,” p. 155, argued on the basis of this that the actual year of his birth should be put at 1138; see as well Leibowitz, “Maimonides: Der Mann und sein Werk,” pp. 75–76.

³ Following Graetz, Geschichte der Juden, vol. 7, p. 265, it is generally assumed that the family left Cordoba in the year 1148 when the city was conquered by the Almohads. Accordingly, Maimonides was ten.

⁴ Goitein, “Moses Maimonides, Man of Action,” p. 163, has shown that Maimonides was already involved in this trade before his younger brother David perished in a shipwreck in 1169, and that he still had a hand in it in 1191 when he was practising as a physician.
became court physician to Saladin, sultan of Egypt, as he was a protégé of al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, Saladin’s chief administrator, who brought many physicians to serve Saladin and the royal entourage. Later on he became court physician to the Sultan al-Malik al-Afdal, after the latter’s ascension to the throne in the winter of 1198–1199. It is generally assumed that Maimonides died in 1204. The theory that for some years he served as Ra’īs (Head) of the Jewish community is disputed. While Davidson argues against it, Friedman argues in favor of it and according to Kraemer Maimonides did serve as Head of the Jews from September 1171 until 1173 to secure for the Jewish communities a favorable position with the Ayyubids who had replaced the Fatimids as the ruling dynasty. According to some sources he served a second time in the 1190s, possibly between 1198–1199.

2 Medical Works

Maimonides was a prolific author in the field of medicine, composing ten works considered as authentic. These ten works consist of the following major compositions: 1. Sharḥ fuṣūl Abuqrāṭ (Commentary on Hippocrates’ Aphorisms). 2. K. al-sumūm wa-l-taḥarruz min al-adwiya al-qattāla (On Poisons and the Protection against Fatal Drugs). 3. Fuṣūl Mūsā fī l-ṭibb (Medical Aphorisms). 4. Mukhtaṣarāt li-kutub Jālīnūs (Compendia from the Works of Galen). The following treatises are considered minor works: 1. K. fī l-jimāʿ (On Coitus) written at the request of an anonymous high ranking client. 2. Fī tadbīr al-ṣiḥḥa (On the Regimen of Health), written at the request of al-Malik al-Afdal. 3. Maqāla fī bayān al-aʿrād wa-l-jawāb ʿanhā (On the Causes of Symptoms), probably written after 1198 for...