

‘IBN MAYMŪN’ OR MOSES MAIMONIDES

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IBN MAYMŪN

ABU ‘Imran Mūsa B. ‘Ubayd Allah B. Maymūn Al-Kurtubi (known as Moses Maimonides), born in Cordova in the year 529 Hidjira (1134 A.D.), lived there until he became 14, and died in Egypt in the year 601 A.H. (1204 A.D.). He grew up in a rich and prestigious family and received his early education at the hands of eminent Arab and Moslem scholars like Ibn Rushd (Averroes). When the ‘Al-Muwahhidūn’ dynasty (Al-Mohad) took over in Cordova he left to the Maghrib city of Fās. His journey ended in Egypt during the reign of the Fatimide Caliph ‘Al-‘Āded’.

Although ‘Ibn Maymūn’ had studied medicine and pharmacy long before he left **al-Andalus** he seemed to have practised them only after he settled down in Egypt where his contributions in these two fields guaranteed him great renown.

Some science chroniclers thought that **Ibn Maymūn** has embraced Islam when he was in ‘**Maghrib**’, then apostatised after he settled in Egypt. We believe the story is far from true.

In his book "**Ta'riḫ al-Hukāma'**" (History of Scientists) 'Djamal Al-Dīn al-Kifti' relates another story : "Moses Maimonides was Andalusian by birth, and a Jew by religion. He studied past sciences in **al-Andalus** and excelled in mathematics. He also studied and mastered medicine but had no strong motive to practise it there. When '**Ibn Ali al-Kūfī**', the Berber, took over in '**Maghrib**' he ordered that all Jews and Christians should leave his territories within a fixed time, otherwise they had to submit to his own sovereign rule. Consequently, only people who found it difficult to move with their families and belongings or because of old age chose to stay. Moses Maimonides pretended to embrace Islam and concealed his unbelief until he could arrange for his leave to Egypt. There, when he settled down with his family among his fellow Jews in the city of **Fuṣṭat** he revealed his religion."

After his arrival to Egypt in the year 560 Hidjira (1166 A.D.) he worked at first in trade then as physician. After he became famous he entered the service of Sultan Saladin, then became the Court Physician of his son '**al-Malik al-Afdal Nour al-Dīn**' who took power in Egypt in the year 593 Hidjira (1198 A.D.).

To quote Mohammad Zohair al-Baba in his book "**Tarikh wa Tashree' wa Ādāb al-Saydala**" (History, Legislation and Moral Code of Pharmacy):

"**Ibn Maymūn** was born of a rich, Jewish, influential family — studied science and philosophy at the hands of Moslem scholars especially '**Ibn Rushd**'. When he was fourteen Cordova was taken over by Almohads. His family left to southern **Andalus**, then to the city of **Fās** on her way to Palestine. During the reign of Sultan Saladin, the Ayyubid, he settled in Egypt where he worked at first in trade, then

professed medicine and entered the service of the Sultan and his successors of the same dynasty.”

In his book ‘Sharh Asmā’ al-‘Ukḳakir’ (Explanation of the Names of Drugs) Moses Maimonides depended upon four important books on medicaments. He classified drugs alphabetically. His explanation of drugs varied from few words to complete paragraphs.

George Ḳanawati tells us in his book ‘Tarikh al-Ṣaydala wa al-‘Ukḳakir Fi al-‘ahd al-Ḳadīm wa al-‘aṣr al-Waseet’ (History of Pharmacy and Drugs in the Old and Medieval Ages) that Moses Maimonides has explained in the introduction to his book ‘Sharh asma’ al-‘ukḳakir’ the object behind its writing. He quotes him ‘My object is to explain the names of drugs known and available to us and used in the literature of our medical profession. Of simple drugs I mentioned only those which have different names in different languages or even in the same language, for a drug may be given different names by people of the same mother tongue.’ “As to widely spread medicines they are known to physicians by only one name, Arabic or non-Arabic, and so they are not included in my book, for my aim is not to give definitions of the properties of drugs or of their uses but to explain their synonymous meanings.”

Moses Maimonides gave much attention to the psychological state of man and its reflection upon his physical health. He won much fame until he became Court Physician to ‘al-Malik al-Afdal’ B. Sultan Saladin the Ayyubid. His treatise called ‘al-Afdaliyya’ on the psychological conditions of man is “one of the best in psychiatry” as stated by Mohammad Zohair al-Baba in his book referred to earlier.

Max Meyerhof studied Moses Maimonides thoroughly as part of his interest in Islamic legacy especially medicine and

pharmacy. He translated Moses' book (Explanation of the Names of Drugs) into French and had it published in Cairo in the year 1940.

On the other hand, Moses wrote philosophical treatises considered offending to Islam. His main work in this field '**Dalālat al-Hā'irin**' (Guide of the Perplexed) was famous among his contemporaries. The Arab and Moslem scholars denounced the work as misleading.

In his book 'The History of Medicine, its Morals, and Outstanding Figures' Ahmed Shawkat al-Shatti says 'Moses Maimonides' fame did not come from his contributions to medicine and pharmacy but from his attempt to conform belief to demonstration and religion to philosophy. However, his book 'Guide of the Perplexed' which included theories to bring Greek and Arabic philosophy nearer to religious teachings did not appeal to many scholars who sarcastically called the book "Misguiding of the Perplexed".

Moses Maimonides used to urge his pupils to study contemporary and past Arab and Moslem scholars. His advice to eminent Jewish philosophers was to study **Ibn Rushd (Averroes)**, **al-Farabi**, and **Ibn Sina (Avicenna)**. His exact words to his co-religionists came as follows : "I refer you to no books in Logic other than those of **Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī**, the philosopher." Hence it was no coincidence or mere yearning for perfection that the most devoted adherents of Averroes were the Jewish philosophers and that Maimonides' contributions can only be best understood in the context of Averroes' works to which they owe their greatest ideas.

In his time life in al-Andalus came to be hard and many prominent Arab and Moslem scholars like '**Ibn al-Bayṭār**, **Ibn Rushd**, Maimonides himself and others were obliged to leave **al-Andalus** for the eastern part of the Arab and Islamic world

in search for a more favourable intellectual climate. Therefore the flame of thought started to die down and so the spirit of learning.

On this point we quote Sami Khalaf Hamarna in his book **'Fehrest Mahtootat Dar al-Kutub al Zaheriyya'**, a chapter on (Medicine and Pharmacy):

'The scope of cultural research narrowed, the flame of intellectual and philosophical progress died down and the creative spirit of learning faded away. Many genius Andalusian scholars like Moses Maimonides, the philosopher, (1135 — 1204 A.H.) and Ibn al-Baytar, the herbalist, found it better to leave for the eastern part of the Arab world like Egypt and Syria in search for a more liberal and safer atmosphere. But this does not obscure the fact that **al-Andalus** was still at the time and during the thirteenth century and after an important centre for the transfer of Arabic culture and sciences into Latin whence the west received with much yearning and great appreciation and which helped to kindle the awakening spirit of thought and subsequently the Renaissance in Western Europe.'

HIS WRITINGS

'**Ibn Maymūn**' spent more than thirty years in writing books. He wrote in philosophy, Islamic theology, medicine, and pharmacy. A list of his writings can be taken from biographical works such as **'Ta'rikh al-Ṣayḍala wa al-Uḳḳakir'** (History of Pharmacy and Drugs) by George Kanawati and **'Uyūn al-anbā' fi Ṭabaqāt al-Atibbā'** (Important Information on Generations of Physicians) by Ibn Abi Usaybi'a.