

History of Medicine

MAIMONIDES*

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In a recent article on Galen in this section, it was pointed out that the blind acceptance of the teachings of Hippocrates and Galen was a prime cause for the lack of scientific medical progress in Europe for hundreds of years. When we shift the scene to the Middle East, we find that during what is called the Dark Ages in Europe, a Golden Age of philosophic speculation and scientific ferment was taking place. In the famous medical school of Ebn Rashoud in Egypt, a student named Abou-Amram Mousa ben Maimon Abou-Amram ben Abd-Allah was embarking on his career to become the court physician to the Vizier Al-Afdal and to the magnificent Sultan Saladin. The science of medicine would attain new heights as the result of this man's insights into the functioning of the entire human organism. His observation that a healthy psyche is essential for a healthy body caused one Arab poet and Qadi, al Said ibn Sena al Mulk to write later:

'Galen's art heals only the body.

But Abu-Amram's, the body and the soul.'

Another Arab poet called him the Phoenix of his century in the field of medicine.

Mousa ben Maimon's approach to the medical art was a very rationalistic one at the time when amulets, magic potions, and mystical incantations were considered to be valid medical treatment by an overwhelming majority of common folk. He argued against these on the basis that they had no demonstrable efficacy in curing disease or affecting one's future. Today we would tend to belittle the contribution of this man, who, as court physician in Cairo in the 12th century, vituperated against the prevailing belief in astrology, and its application as valid medical science. We think it a small contribution indeed for someone to rail out against arrant nonsense; our vantage point of 20th century civilization with its immense technological enlightenment renders this disparagement especially easy. It is somewhat useful to remember, however, that no matter how impressive our technological development may be, it does not always exclude the irrational: Zodiatics, of Radio City Station, New York, is a corporation which has programmed electronic computers to set up and analyse astrological charts. They promise to tell you precisely 'how the stars are projecting their influence on *hea'th, love, sex, family, finance, and partners*—the vital aspects of your daily life'.

Mousa ben Maimon, or Moshe ben Maimon, or Maimonides, was born in Cordova, Spain, in 1135 and died in Cairo, Egypt, in 1204. His fame is based mainly on his preminent stature as a medieval philosopher and Jewish theologian. His magnum opus is the *Mishnei Torah*, a religious guide based on the Talmud. Feeling the need to prove the principles there set forth were confirmed by Aristotelian philosophy, he composed his famous sequel *Dalalat a'-hairin*, 'The Guide for the Perplexed,' which was

composed in Arabic but written in Hebrew characters. His fame and theological authority among the pious are reflected in the popular saying: 'From Moses to Moses there was none like Moses'.

Among his medical writing are treatises on melancholia, poisons and antidotes, asthma, haemorrhoids, and hygiene. His 'Glossary of the Names of Drugs' was the standard pharmacopoeia of his time. In his 'Poisons and Antidotes' Maimonides explained that the effects of a poison are produced by its absorption into the blood; in his work, 'Haemorrhoids', he advocated a modified diet, local application of oils, and surgery in severe cases; in his 'Medical Aphorisms', he demonstrated inconsistencies and contradictions in some of Galen's assertions; in his 'Asthma', he stressed the importance of diet and climate; in his 'Regimen Sanitas', he expostulated upon the interrelationship between body and mind, and their relationship to personal hygiene. He recommended bodily activities, such as games, for promoting metabolism; called attention to the benefit of ventilation, fresh air, and sunshine; and pointed out the superiority of prevention over cure of disease. In his work on sex, he warned against over-indulgence in coition, especially for the aged and those afflicted with heart ailments; prohibited sexual congress immediately after meals before the food was digested, or at a time when one is hungry, thirsty, fatigued, or intoxicated; and found aids to cure psychic impotence and priapism. Some of his remedies were based on the canon of the renowned Arab physician Avicenna.

Maimonides the philosopher and theologian devoted many years of his life to the art of medicine, which he considered to be a lofty and most honourable art, the study of which should be undertaken only by men of the highest moral and ethical calibre. As a Jewish scholar flourishing in an ebullient Arab intellectual milieu, Maimonides was a prime example of the Jews who, in the words of S. Munk, '*partagent incontestablement avec les Arabes le mérite d'avoir conservé et propagé la science philosophique pendant les siècles de barbarie, et d'avoir exercé, pendant un certain temps, une influence civilisatrice sur le monde européen*'.

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