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Moses Maimonides' On Hemorrhoids and the History of Textual Reception

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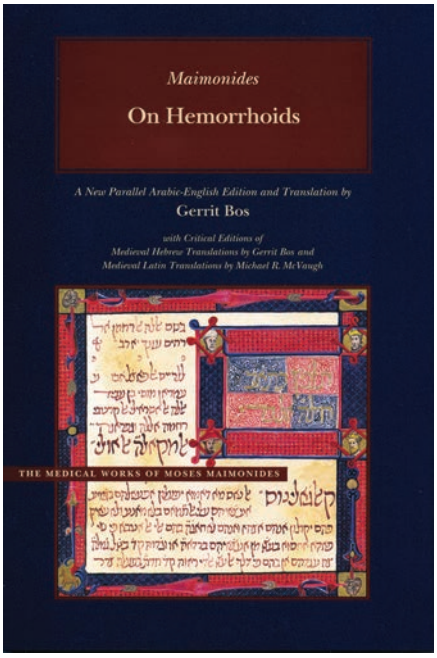
Moses Maimonides' *On Hemorrhoids* and the History of Textual Reception

by D. Morgan Davis

There are unpleasant topics, and then there are Unpleasant Topics. The latest volume to appear in the Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, *On Hemorrhoids*, seems the perfect occasion to modestly avert our attention from the actual subject of the book and consider instead the question of its reception. When referring to the reception history of an antique text, scholars have in mind the journey the text has taken. During its long life, what paths have a given text traveled, so to speak? By this we mean not just where has a given physical document turned up, but also where and by whom were the words and ideas it contained copied, translated, paraphrased, summarized, or argued with? Information was precious in the premodern age. The painstaking work required to hand copy or translate texts of any significant length ensured that only those writings that were in real demand received such attention.



So it is perhaps with some surprise that we open the pages of a work like *On Hemorrhoids* to discover that "this treatise was popular in Jewish circles and also aroused interest in non-Jewish circles" (p. xv). How do we know this? Because it exists in so many copies and translations. The Arabic version alone has survived in no fewer than 10 manuscripts (some of these are Judeo-Arabic versions, meaning in the Arabic language, but written with Hebrew characters). Furthermore, the text was translated into Hebrew and Latin in the years just after its composition. There are three different Hebrew translations and two Latin translations. The first Hebrew translation is attributed to Samuel ibn Tibbon (c. 1150-c. 1230)—a contemporary of Maimonides who practiced medicine and wrote philosophy in southern France. The other two translations—one by an unidentified author, the other by Zerahyah Ben Isaac Ben Shealtiel Hen—apparently survive in only one extant manuscript each.

As for the Latin versions, one—apparently prepared by Giovanni da Capua around 1300 in Rome—was based on Zerahyah's Hebrew translation. The second—independently executed by Armengaud Blaise in southern France at nearly the same time—was based on the Arabic.

This latest volume from the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative compiles for the first time under one cover *all* of these various recensions and translations (Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin) of the text Maimonides wrote and adds to them an authoritative English translation of the Arabic, deftly rendered by series editor Gerrit Bos.

Why all of this attention to collecting and publishing so many versions of this document? In part the answer is that each version represents another chapter in a story that weaves together the patterns of thought and the communities of practice that animated the human landscape of the Middle Ages. By careful attention to who copied whom, how technical terms were translated or even transferred from one language to another, and even how such texts were physically preserved, scholars can gain a richer understanding of the intellectual milieu of southern Europe and North Africa in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

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