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## Of Scorpions, Vipers, and the Assassin's Drug

Twelfth-century Cairo was a vibrant place. The legendary Saladin, who had recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187, had established himself there and was actively transforming it from a royal resort into a cosmopolitan center of power, commerce, learning, and culture. A pious Muslim, Saladin chose for his physician at court a Jew who had been twice exiled—first from his hometown of Cordoba, Spain (Andalusia), and then again from Fez, Morocco (al-Maghreb)—by the fanatical Almohad regime of Northwest Africa.

Under the patronage of the famous sultan, Maimonides, in addition to practicing medicine at court and among his own clientele, led a Jewish congregation as their rabbi, and wrote and taught on a variety of subjects. His philosophical and religious treatises, including his interpretation of the Torah and his famous *Guide for the Perplexed* are classics that are widely read and studied to this day. Lesser known are the medical treatises he wrote; but these too hold an interest for those today seeking glimpses into the past.

The medical works of Maimonides are a window into the world of premodern medicine,

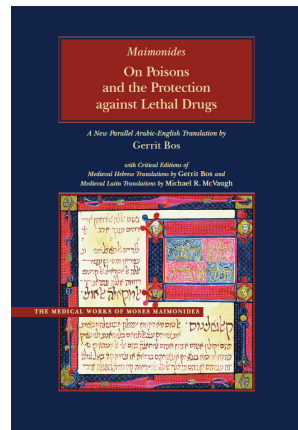
describing the physical ailments not only of kings and rulers but also of common folk from every walk of life. The various diagnoses, remedies, and procedures Maimonides details connect him to a medical tradition that reaches as far back as the Greek physician Galen (d. 216) and continues right into the early modern period—centuries during

which the basic models and methods of medicine changed very little. These were the days of humors black, white, red, and yellow; of vapors and elixirs; of leeching and bloodletting; of methods variously benign and barbaric. Some of what Maimonides prescribed seems little different from the herbal or therapeutic remedies used by many today; others, thankfully, have long since been abandoned.

When the sultan's counselor, al-Fā'il, requested a summary from Maimonides of preventatives and remedies that laypersons could consult in order to overcome the effects of various toxins without having to resort to (and wait on) a physician, Maimonides obliged with a treatise he subtitled *On Poisons and the Protection against Lethal Drugs*. Writing in Arabic, the language of learning in his day, Maimonides divided his work into two parts: the first deals with the treatment of various animal bites, including scorpions, bees and wasps, serpents, mad dogs and domesticated ones; the second deals with the treatment of ingested poisons, with particular interest in poisons used by assassins. It might not come as a surprise that the ruling elites were interested in such matters, but why would they be concerned to make such information available to the public at large? An earthy excerpt from the second part of the book seems laden with inference on this question. Maimonides writes:

We find that some men are assassinated by [their] women by means of the food [they take] and die after one day or some days, or suffer from what is far worse than death, namely suppurating elephantiasis, which results in the limbs falling off.

In every city I passed through I have seen some men suffer from [this illness]. And what I and others have heard about it is too much to be summed up [here]. Those senior physicians whom I met told me in their own name and that of their teachers that they had looked into this matter thoroughly and carefully until they learned from those adulterous women



Gerrit Bos near the statue of Maimonides in Cordoba, Spain.  
Photograph by D. Morgan Davis.

themselves what [substance] they had used to assassinate so-and-so, and their stories are well known. (*On Poisons* 2.4.83–84)

Such details collapse the centuries that separate us from Maimonides and allow us a glimpse, however mean, into the lives of the common people of his time. It seems that marriage could be a fraught enterprise in the Middle Ages, too!

*Maimonides: On Poisons and the Protection against Lethal Drugs* is the latest title to be released in The Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, a series of primary texts and translations prepared by Gerrit Bos at the University of Cologne and published under the auspices of the Maxwell Institute's

Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. This volume also features the scholarly work of Michael R. McVaugh of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who has edited the Latin translations of *On Poisons* that were made in the centuries after Maimonides by Europeans seeking to preserve his knowledge for their own time. Angela Barrionuevo oversaw the production editing of this volume at the Maxwell Institute. The book will carry the Brigham Young University Press imprint and will be distributed by the University of Chicago Press. ♦

By D. Morgan Davis

Associate Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative

## Preview of Forthcoming FARMS Review

Readers awaiting this year's first number of the *FARMS Review* (vol. 21, no. 1) will be rewarded with a deep lineup of reviews and other essays on the Book of Mormon. Sure to heighten anticipation is a promised peek at Terryl Givens's in-press volume from Oxford University Press: *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*. Chapter 2, "Themes," will be featured in its entirety—a substantial excerpt from the 152-page work that will fill an important gap in Oxford's popular Very Short Introduction series. *Review* readers will enjoy other Book of Mormon-related fare as well: a literary interpretation of the death of Laban; a debunking of myths about the miraculous printing of the 1830 edition; a look at the record's literary sophistication in light of a biblical hermeneutic that grants legitimacy to repetition and allusion; and reviews of the seminal works *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, by

John W. Welch, and the six-volume *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, by Brant A. Gardner.

In the area of biblical studies are two responses to British biblical scholar Margaret Barker's recent book *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*. Like her previous studies, this one is attracting the attention of Latter-day Saints who have found much of importance to consider in her exploration of Christian origins and her reconstruction of a "temple theology" traceable to Solomon's temple. Rounding out the *Review* are an assessment of Hugh Nibley's economic views related to the law of consecration, a refutation of one antitheist's attempted demolition of the Bible, a reprinting of eminent historian Martin E. Marty's 1989 lecture at Westminster College on the usefulness of the religious past, an editor's introduction by Daniel C. Peterson, and other assorted offerings now taking shape for publication later this summer. ♦

## Blossoming with Books: Syriac Manuscripts from the Egyptian Desert

The birthplace and spiritual heart of Christian monasticism is the Nitrian Desert of Egypt and the long, shallow valley of Scetis (Wadi el-Natrun). It was to here, from the fourth century onwards, that Macarius the Great and other of the sainted desert fathers retreated from the world, devoting their lives

to worship and prayer. While some monks chose to live in isolation as hermits, many others banded together to establish the first monasteries, building churches for worship and libraries for study.

These monastic libraries collected many manuscripts and the dry climate of Egypt preserved them well. In fact, most of the premedieval Christian manuscripts we have today come from Egypt. While many texts were written in Greek or Egyptian (Coptic), monks of all nations flocked to Egypt and