

**Ibn Sahula's Tale of the Egyptian Sorcerer:  
A Thirteenth Century Don Yllán**

David A. Wacks  
University of Oregon

The tale of Don Yllán and the Deán of Santiago (*ejemplo* 11 in Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor*) has a Hebrew language analogue, written in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, that has eluded Hispanists completely for centuries.<sup>1</sup> This *exemplum* is an excerpt from the *frametale* of Isaac ben Solomon ibn Sahula (b. 1244), *Mešal Haqadmonī* (=MQ), or 'Tale of the Ancient One.' It was written in Castile in approximately 1281, toward the end of the reign of Alfonso X of Castile and Leon (r. 1254-82).<sup>2</sup> MQ is a wide-ranging work of rhyming prose interspersed with poetry in the style of the *maqāma*.<sup>3</sup> Its narrative framework contains fables and poetry as well as discourses on such topics as astrology, medicine, and optics.<sup>4</sup> Appearing in part 4, "On Humility," Ibn Sahula's *exemplum* of the Egyptian Sorcerer is interpolated in a discussion between two characters, the Dove and the Crow, as a negative example of one who did not respect the learning of his elder.<sup>5</sup>

In Ibn Sahula's tale, a young man from Jerusalem travels to Egypt in search of instruction in the magic arts. He finds a sorcerer who agrees to teach him, but the young man's insolence toward the former prompts the sorcerer to put him to the test. This comes in the form of an illusion in which the youth imagines he arrives in a foreign land where he rapidly climbs the ranks at court, eventually becoming king and fathering a male heir. At this point the illusion is dispelled and the young man realizes he is back in the sorcerer's home, back to the day of their first meeting. The young man's remorse for his error is apparently genuine, and the sorcerer agrees to keep him on as apprentice for one year.

The excerpted translation by Scheindlin (in rhyming prose) and the complete one by Loewe (in verse) are both couched in English poetic values, and as a result are more accessible to the general reader. Because my aim in this translation is to lay bare the logic and literary character of the medieval Hebrew text for the medieval Hispanist, I preserve all the figurative language of the original, even when it strikes the reader of English or Spanish as awkward. The more obscure passages are annotated. Biblical allusions are rendered in italics and documented (following OT versification). I work from the edition of Zemorah, and indicate the pagination of his edition in brackets for easy reference to the Hebrew text.

### Translation

[Zemorah 194] ...just as the old mage did, when the wind of intelligence blew over him and he lifted himself up over the Hebrew in his rebellion, when the latter did not hasten to honor him,

<sup>1</sup> This despite having been first translated into English in 1983 by Raymond Scheindlin.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Sahula was a poet, scholar and kabbalist who may have lived in Guadalajara (Habermann, *Sahula*). For further biographical information, see Loewe's introduction to his English translation of MQ (xvi-xxi).

<sup>3</sup> On the *maqāma* genre, see Drory, Brockelmann, and Habermann, "Maqama".

<sup>4</sup> For a textual history, see Loewe's introduction to his English verse translation. I cite Zemorah's edition; translations of Ibn Sahula's text are mine. There is as yet no Spanish translation.

<sup>5</sup> Before telling the story, the Crow notes that one must demand respect by judiciously demonstrating one's powers (194).

and did not harken to the sound of his glory. And he showed him a great and awesome thing that never was and never will be.<sup>6</sup>

The Dove said: “By your goodness, my pure-hearted friend, how was the matter?”

And he said: There was in Zion a certain handsome young man who studied the way of rhetoric; he was advanced in all fields of knowledge, for he set his heart upon all learning. But he still sought to study the subject of magic. So he searched, but did not find the *terafim*,<sup>7</sup> for magic was forbidden to the chosen people, to the dwellers of Jerusalem and to the man of Judea. But the young man saw how the desire [to learn magic] touched his heart, and how his search would prove impossible in the land of the *tsvī*.<sup>8</sup> So he took a certain quantity of his money, and went down to Egypt and lived there. And just as he arrived in the city, his plans dawning, he noticed an old man sitting there, thinking and plotting. He [the old man] raised his eyes and saw the stranger [the young man], radiating light, every bit of him attractive, dressed in linens. And the old man asked him what his plans were, where he was going and whence he came.

He said to him: “I am a Hebrew, who bears witness [to my God], from Bethlehem in Judea.”

The old man said: “Sir, please come with me; pour out your needs upon me.”

And so he went with him and he brought him to his house and courtyard, gave his donkey something to eat. And they washed their feet and ate and drank, and afterwards their mouths drank of conversation. [Zemoraḥ 195]

The old man said: “It is the duty of all men who love learning to choose to dwell with older men of integrity. This is how we strive to act wisely and ethically: by cleaving to the Good, inviting the stranger into one’s home, honoring him willingly, speaking to him from the heart, comforting his pain and his anger, setting him on the path of righteousness, according to one’s knowledge and discretion; but this cannot happen without knowing his thoughts and ideas, and to which matters he turns his face.<sup>9</sup> Only according to each man’s way can you advise him and help him to reach his goals more effectively, and lead him to peaceful waters.

“And now, since you have honored me with your arrival, and chosen me for a friend and companion for you, since you have this very night wandered into my home and sat at my table, let me hear the treasures of your heart and your journey. Please, show me your ways, that I might know you and find favor in your eyes. I will advise you according to my counsel, and I will crown you with my crowns.” [Zemoraḥ 196]

The young man said: “Actually, the wise man spoke the truth in his counsel, and held forth in his discourse. All men need to seek advice from the mouth of the elder and the counselor, even one who is enlightened and a master of rhetoric. One cannot profit without good advice, especially one who is a guest [i.e., in a foreign land], a wanderer who has left his home, whose learning is delayed in his migration to a strange land. And now I will bare [to you] my private thoughts, [and you will see] if the road ahead suits me:

“I was living in Zion, [a place] like rushing waters in a desert, where I dedicated my soul to learning rhetoric, and my heart saw wisdom and knowledge. But when I sought to study something of the topic of magic, and the power that it brings, I could find no answer in my city,

---

<sup>6</sup> This is a formula, a sort of disclaimer used by medieval Hebrew authors to introduce fictional events. On the problem of fictionality in medieval Hebrew texts, see Drory.

<sup>7</sup> i.e., ‘what he was looking for’. The reference is to Gen 31:35, when Rachel hides the *terafim* (probably household idols, much like the household *santos* of Hispanic Caribbean tradition).

<sup>8</sup> i.e., ‘the land of beauty’. The word *tsvī* can mean either ‘stag’ or ‘beauty, excellence,’ and refers here metonymically to the land of Palestine.

<sup>9</sup> i.e., ‘his interests.’

no call and no response. And so I thought to learn it *in one of the unwallled cities*.<sup>10</sup> Thereupon I departed from the land of the *tsvī*,<sup>11</sup> now I have come to seek fulfillment of my wants *from every magician, astrologer, and Chaldean*.<sup>12</sup> And now, if you would do right by me, since I have traveled away from my country, show me if a man, expert in these things, is to be found! *Let whatever come upon me!*<sup>13</sup> Let the bride price and the gifts [that I must buy] have no limit! I'll give anything they ask, so long as they bestow their glory upon me and teach me, and tell me their words of wisdom!"

[Zemorah 197] Said the old man: "*Since you have comprehended the expanse of the land*,<sup>14</sup> and have spent the night in the protection of tents,<sup>15</sup> since in your coming here to seek out knowledge you have disappeared from the eyes of those who dwell in your land, *I will take up the burden*.<sup>16</sup> I will teach you to raise up your wisdom –on this road you will walk, and I will show you the essentials of the magic arts, of evil and idolatry, as these arts are to me a profession, as they were to my father and his fathers before me."

The young man listened to his words, and they were laughable in his sight. He thought to himself thoughts, that the old man's intelligence was corrupt, and he said to himself: "It must be nothing else that he is misled by *the wine of his divan*<sup>17</sup> that has set his heart dancing.<sup>18</sup> He covets my wealth and my power; his desire is to trick me, with all my smarts and savvy.

And he said to him: "May you find your reward from God, and may you exchange your words for song and a crown! But since you are speaking as one with an incurable and bitter soul, with broken spirit, I do not wish to make your yoke heavier, nor to trouble you. *Since this wisdom [I seek] is great, and it calls out*<sup>19</sup> like the serpent. Therefore, my desire is to seek out a young man of my age who will tell me of it and explain it to me. He will ask you about it to my satisfaction, to build up and draw out speech.<sup>20</sup> And you will help him and aid him in your goodness. As for me, I am your servant.

And the old man knew that the young man did not trust in the former's wisdom, nor did he respect his intelligence. He made a vow to himself: "before I go into a room or a tent, before I go up to the bed of my divan, I will show him my wisdom and my knowledge. I will demonstrate to him my power, savvy and intelligence. [The old man], understanding his deception, made his voice pleasant. He turned his face and said to him: "stay the night, and in the morning, I will show you a man whose intelligence knows no limit. He will teach and instruct you, and I will as well.

The young man found these ideas to be good. He bowed low<sup>21</sup> and said:

<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel 38:11. An "unwalled city" is unprotected, an easy target for plunder. The young man intends to plunder knowledge of the magic arts.

<sup>11</sup> See note 8 above.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel 2:10. Nebuchadnezzar assembles his magicians, astrologers, and Chaldeans [i.e., soothsayers] to command them to recount and interpret a disturbing dream he has had, threatening to kill them if he cannot. When they reply that they cannot, Daniel receives a vision from God and is able to fulfill Nebuchadnezzar's request. The reference is an ironic reminder that true knowledge is not to be gained from magicians, but rather from God himself.

<sup>13</sup> i.e., 'come what may,' or even 'bring it on!' (Job 13:13).

<sup>14</sup> i.e., 'traveled a great distance' (Job 38:18).

<sup>15</sup> i.e., spending the night in a tent, not a house (as one does when traveling).

<sup>16</sup> Psalms 55:23.

<sup>17</sup> i.e., 'by the wine he has been drinking on his divan' (Song of Songs 1:12).

<sup>18</sup> i.e., 'that has motivated him to this.'

<sup>19</sup> Proverbs 8:2.

<sup>20</sup> i.e., 'to pick your brain.'

<sup>21</sup> Literally, 'he bowed to his nose,' meaning he bowed low enough to touch his nose to the ground.

“Blessed is God, may his praises never end, who has put me on the path of truth.”

And the two sat for an hour chatting. They were still talking when the old man sent for beverages, in order to trick the youth and to deceive him. He took [Zemoraḥ 198] the cup in his hand and drank the wine until his thirst was quenched.

Then he said to the youth:

“Drink and forget your troubles. Then you will lie down and *your sleep will be sweet to you.*”<sup>22</sup>

So the youth drank, and his thoughts became different. He got up and walked to his bedroom. As he was walking, the old man set a trap before him: the youth looked and saw a well in the middle of a field, a place where the old man’s workings lay in wait for him. The trap grabbed his leg and broke, and the youth fell into the limed trap and tumbled down. The well was dry; there was no water in it. *He lifted his heart in his hands,*<sup>23</sup> and yelled and roared over his deceit. *When he saw the anguish of his soul,*<sup>24</sup> *he spent the whole night in darkness,*<sup>25</sup> and his back was given to blows.<sup>26</sup>

In the morning he saw a door *in the far corner of the well,*<sup>27</sup> and wept to himself over it.<sup>28</sup> He opened it and walked outside, stunned from his pain and oppression. He found a garden full of trees and bushes, flowers, and apple trees as large as palms, great and tall. It was like God’s own Garden of Eden, and a great river ran around it. Upon observing its praiseworthiness and beauty, or in eating its fruits, *a foolish man would become intelligent.*<sup>29</sup>

He praised God in observing its delights, all manner of fruits old and new, forgot his poverty and his tribulations, and did not worry about work. He went over to the edge of the garden *and stood in the corner.*<sup>30</sup> He raised his eyes and saw a bridge, built in a straight line, and lo, two towers painted in red, built straight and true. The young man stood and marveled, wondered at the sight. [Zemoraḥ 199] He said to himself: “I’ll run and cross the bridge, *just like a vulture that swoops down!*”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps in going I’ll find somewhere to stay in this renowned and lively city.” And so he went running and quickly hurried across the bridge.<sup>32</sup> On the other side he found a great city, perfect in its beauty, with streets in it, and markets full of all kinds of artisans, row after row of them. He arrived at one market so large and so impressive that anyone walking by it would stop and stare, for in it were sold all the beautiful and pleasing goods one might want:

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 31:25.

<sup>23</sup> i.e., ‘he became emotional.’ Lamentations 3:41.

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 42:21.

<sup>25</sup> Psalms 88:7.

<sup>26</sup> i.e., ‘he took a beating,’ in the more general sense of ‘he suffered through a horrible night.’

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 14:15.

<sup>28</sup> i.e., ‘he was so relieved he burst into tears.’

<sup>29</sup> Job 11:12. The full reference is “a foolish man will become wise when a wild ass’ colt is born a man”, as in the English expression “when pigs fly”. The implication is that the young man thinks himself intelligent, but is actually foolish and deluded.

<sup>30</sup> Psalms 118:22.

<sup>31</sup> The image is from Deut. 28:49, describing how the Assyrians attacked the Hebrews. The idea is that he is about to swoop down on his prey (the study of magic). Ibn Sahula’s choice of language is deliberate—he is characterizing the youth as foolhardy and acquisitive.

<sup>32</sup> Literally, ‘he threw himself.’

*emeralds, onyx and jade.*<sup>33</sup> There the scribes were sitting, *each man under his sign,*<sup>34</sup> each one amongst his peers. The youth was cheered at the sight, happy to see such a thing.

One scribe, standing by his post, upon seeing the youth's *beauty and his glory,*<sup>35</sup> called out to him and said:

"Who are you, and where are you going? The mere sight of you sends darts of love into one's heart!"<sup>36</sup>

The youth replied: "I am a man of Zion, a resident of Jerusalem, who fears God in Heaven. I have come to Egypt to seek out knowledge of the magic arts, *both the little owl and the great owl.*"<sup>37</sup>

The scribe laughed at his words. He called out to his friends, the other scribes: "Do you know of a city by the name 'Jerusalem,' [Zemarah 200] or of a traveler seeking wisdom in the land of Egypt?"

They answered: "to this day we have not heard of such a strange and wondrous thing!"

He [the scribe] said: "Here is a traveler come from a wide and spacious land, whose *light and oven*<sup>38</sup> are in Jerusalem."

The scribes marveled at his words, and even more so at his glory and his beauty. They said to him: "Do you know anything on the matter of calligraphy, inscription or writing?"

He replied: "I have learned that it is a wonderful thing, filled with goodness." And he recited into their ears the following two strophes:

Have pity on me, the traveler who seeks isolation,  
*Who measures out in his hand*<sup>39</sup> *scorn and the waters of bitterness;*<sup>40</sup>  
 Who is a wonder for having carved a temple from the stone of wandering,  
 But who only wound up saddened, for affliction laughed at him.

The scribes were astonished at the eloquence of his speech, amazed at his reply. The leader of the scribes, *who had judged him worthy,*<sup>41</sup> took him and brought him to his home. He showed him the house of his spices<sup>42</sup> and threw him a banquet of delicacies and of *spiced wine from the juice of pomegranates.*<sup>43</sup> The members of the scribes' guild all gave him presents and brought him precious things. Everyone sat around him and delighted in his words. The guest stood in his

<sup>33</sup> This reference (Ex. 39:13) is from a description of the Tabernacle where the Hebrews kept the Ark of the Covenant that held the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The idea is that the youth sees the market as his Ark, the place where he will find a way to learn the magic arts; this amounts to accusing the youth of idolatry.

<sup>34</sup> Numbers 1:52. The reference is to the armies of the Hebrews assembled under the banners of their tribes.

<sup>35</sup> Proverbs 20:29.

<sup>36</sup> The *topos* of the poet smitten with love for the young boy is common in medieval Hebrew poetry (Roth).

<sup>37</sup> The two animals figure in a list of those prohibited as food to the Israelites in Deut. 14:16. The youth is again portrayed as seeking out the forbidden. The choice of "little owl and great owl" also carries the sense of 'great and small,' that is, 'everything.' It was common in medieval Castilian (which Ibn Sahula spoke, being a resident of Guadalajara in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century) to use such binaries as 'town and country' or 'Moors and Christians' to denote 'everywhere' or 'everybody.'

<sup>38</sup> i.e., 'his hearth and home' (Isaiah 31:19).

<sup>39</sup> Isaiah 40:12.

<sup>40</sup> Job 34:7.

<sup>41</sup> Esther 2:9.

<sup>42</sup> i.e., 'his luxurious home.'

<sup>43</sup> Song of Songs 8:2.

appointed place, exulting in *his command of poetry*,<sup>44</sup> and wrote them a couple more lines, in order to give sight to the eyes of the blind:<sup>45</sup>

As for he who longs for the moment to drink old wine, and  
To eat at God's banquet awaits;  
Let him see the food laid out at the house of this prince;  
And the old wine in his grapes.

The men were amazed at the calligraphy of his hand, and the eloquence and beauty of his poetry. They said:

“Such a man is worthy of the court; there is [Zemoraḥ 201] *his profit and his fortune!*”<sup>46</sup> *They brought him inside the house of the king*,<sup>47</sup> saying:

“*Lift up your feet from desolation*,<sup>48</sup> and you will see a *quick-quilled scribe*,<sup>49</sup> he shines like the brilliance of the firmament, this man who comes before us today! *Here he is standing outside our wall!*<sup>50</sup> The King sent for him to be brought, and the youth readied himself to go in. He came in, this beloved man, and prostrated himself before the King, *who extended toward him his golden scepter*.<sup>51</sup> The scribes sat declaiming the praises of the youth, on his left and on his right. Then they addressed the King in Aramaic, into the ears of every fellow and associate:

“Here is a man who has in him an extraordinary spirit, who shall be much sought-after in the service of the King. He is fit to be prime minister due to the wisdom and intelligence in his heart, in which resides the spirit of the Holy God!”

The king, after considering their reasoning, placed gifts before them, but increased the gifts of the youth and the presents of the beloved young man, whose rewards were tenfold. Then the king made a request to him, *a grave vision*.<sup>52</sup> to preside over the scribes of the court, and stand guard over them, and to be head of all the men of his peace,<sup>53</sup> *prefect over all his wise men*.<sup>54</sup> [Zemoraḥ 202] And the man said:

“No my lord, it is not my desire to reside in this land, as I did not leave my land to seek honor, nor to work in the court of the King. The truth is, I went out to seek wisdom and to increase my power. For as men of wisdom and understanding have said not to look for wealth or fame. They have said: ‘kings and fire are similar in the workings of their might; use them if you can distance yourself from them, for they burn you if you draw near to them.’”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Language usually applied to David as “chief of stringed instruments.” Psalms 4:1.

<sup>45</sup> i.e., ‘in order to enlighten them’ (Isaiah 42:7).

<sup>46</sup> Ironic reference to Ecclesiastes 10:11, which states: “there is no profit for the master of language;” i.e., for the flatterer, charmer, or the eloquent man.

<sup>47</sup> Verbatim from 2 Kings 7:11.

<sup>48</sup> i.e., ‘be happy!’ Psalms 74:3.

<sup>49</sup> Psalms 45:2 and Ezra 7:5.

<sup>50</sup> Song of Songs 2:9.

<sup>51</sup> Esther 5:2 and 8:4.

<sup>52</sup> Isaiah 21:2.

<sup>53</sup> Literally, “his associates.”

<sup>54</sup> Said of Daniel (2:48) when he is made Prefect of Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.

<sup>55</sup> This aphorism is found also in the *Disciplina Clericalis* of Petrus Alfonsi (trans Quarrie. 149). In Appendix 2 to his English translation of Ibn Sahula, Loewe cites sources in Ibn Gabirol's *Muḥtār aj-jawāhir* (Choice of Pearls) and the more immediate *Sepher sheqel haqodesh* by Joseph Qimḥi (748 n 38).

Said the King: “They have written true and honest words, and they have said: ‘Trust in the Creator and his law, depend on the King and his works, befriend wise men, and all will be well and good.’

“They have also said: ‘The King and Faith are brothers, both anointed with holy oil. All the world depends only on the two of them. One is so close to the other that *not even air can come between them.*’”<sup>56</sup>

“Also: ‘Do not live in a city without a capable king, a fair and effective magistrate to rule over it, a wise and qualified physician, a river, and a market.’

“A king should rule so as to inspire strong confidence, and to ensure that all his laws are enforced, as they are the ladder of his success. He should not overlook minor disputes and administrative details, for all these could hold him back from aggrandizing his elevation. [Zemoraḥ 203] He should honor the words of every prophet and seer, and to please his creator with his works. He should be pleasant and beloved by his servants, *always making himself available to them.*<sup>57</sup> He should be *kind and humble,*<sup>58</sup> discerning, of broad intellect and pure understanding. He should help the fallen and have pity on them, *and comfort mourners.*<sup>59</sup> When angry he should not pour out his wrath, nor stir up his anger. If the spirit of lust should beckon to him, he should use his wisdom to take refuge *in the Valley of Shaveh,*<sup>60</sup> the valley of the king who rules his soul and his desires as he rules his nation, *the sheep of his pasture.*<sup>61</sup>

He continued: “A king is bound to speak to the *tsivyonim,*<sup>62</sup> they should be camped in the dwelling place of his glory.<sup>63</sup> He should build up the position and glory of the learned, *the anointed priests whom he entrusts.*<sup>64</sup> And so I have heeded these teachings, and therefore I have prospered and become great. These are the strategies of my governance, the honor and glory of my greatness. Therefore I have desired to hear your words, to heed your sayings. So now you really know, and have really heard. For the king whose will is in accord with these sayings and derives his standing from them is worthy of his subject, who will rejoice in his glory. Every man of wisdom and knowledge *will make himself known to him.*<sup>65</sup> So now, stay by my side and do not fear for your job. Know that your tent is secure.<sup>66</sup> I will give you riches and honors; I will multiply your gold and silver tremendously, for there is not in my land any scholar whom I have not made great, no sage whom I have not honored. I have sought out words of wisdom, and become enlightened from all my learning. And *you are a man, my equal,*<sup>67</sup> one to prosper my way. I will cause you to dwell among my brothers and companions, my *good friends and intimates.*<sup>68</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Job 41:8.

<sup>57</sup> Literally, ‘let him be steadfast in showing his face’ (Isaiah 3:9).

<sup>58</sup> Numbers 12:3.

<sup>59</sup> Job 29:29.

<sup>60</sup> Genesis 14:17.

<sup>61</sup> Psalms 95:7.

<sup>62</sup> Hebrew obscure. Scheindlin renders it as “the poor” (179), Loewe (473 n 43) translates it as ‘pleasant ones’, but emends *hatsranim* (‘courtiers’) derived from the Hebrew *hatser*, ‘court’.

<sup>63</sup> i.e., ‘they should have access to him.’

<sup>64</sup> Numbers 3:1.

<sup>65</sup> Numbers 12:6.

<sup>66</sup> i.e., ‘your position is secure.’ The idea harkens back to nomadic life; if one’s tent is secure, and there is nothing threatening the encampment (inclement weather, wild animals, hostile people), one does not have to move.

<sup>67</sup> Psalms 55:14.

<sup>68</sup> Psalms 55:14.

The man considered the King's words and his speech, how he had chosen him for his companion. And he said:

"I will serve you for a year, in good faith, from the first to the last of the year."

He said to him:

"Stay by my side, [Zemora 204] increase my beauty and my splendor, and by virtue of your intelligence I would have you serve me. *I will lead you away; I will bring you to my mother's house*<sup>69</sup> where you will teach me." And the young man stood by him with a willing and peaceful soul,<sup>70</sup> until the year was completed.

The King rejoiced in the words of his intelligence, and *he came to his throne*<sup>71</sup> and took delight with him in proverbs and parables, the kind that make one want to draw near to Judaism: poetry and prose, esoterica, wise sayings, and wit. Anecdotes, riddles, and tales.<sup>72</sup> And they spent the year in pleasant conversation, the type that brings one closer to God. Then the man said: "Send me to the place of my desire, and I will go to my home and my land."

And the King ordered that he be given fine and valuable treasures, lots of gold and fine gold as well. And he said: "Please do not leave me, now that you have gotten to know my home and land; stay with me another year, to your honor and glory."

And he said: "*Also in this thing I have accepted you*,<sup>73</sup> since I have found favor in your eyes. *But let not the King delay in his kindness, that he not let his servant go*.<sup>74</sup> And he served him another year, with a kind and honorable soul.<sup>75</sup> And they occupied themselves with matters of law, to understand and to teach: literal and figurative explanations, general and particular applications, commentary and opinion, *Talmud* and *Gemara*.

And they spend the second year studying powerful wisdom that conquers the heart, and the Thirteen Rules used to study the Torah.<sup>76</sup> And the man said: "Do not make me late, since now you know my works!"<sup>77</sup>

And the King ordered that he be given riches and wealth, some on chariots and some on horses.<sup>78</sup> And he said to him:

"How will you leave and go far away? To a distant land? Here my soul is bound to your beautiful soul, and so now let us make a pact, a lasting one: I will give you my daughter for a wife, along with a generous dowry! You will rule in my stead, [Zemora 205] so that my name will be remembered, for I have no male child, and *my pains are stirred up*.<sup>79</sup> Your wisdom will bring a remedy for my sickness, it will shore up my strength and bring peace upon me, for I have no desire for any other king or prince. Truly my wish is for your honesty and your intelligence, your wisdom and your loyalty. For loyalty is capital in kingship, and wisdom the root of

<sup>69</sup> Song of Songs 8:2.

<sup>70</sup> i.e., 'willfully and without regrets'

<sup>71</sup> Job 23:3.

<sup>72</sup> Here Ibn Sahula might as well be describing his own text. His purpose in writing the *MQ*, according to his introduction, is to inspire enthusiasm for Hebrew learning by recasting the wisdom and wit of the Arabs and Greeks in Hebrew (ed. and trans. Loewe 8-19).

<sup>73</sup> Genesis 19:21.

<sup>74</sup> Paraphrased from Exodus 28:5: Moses agrees to lift the plague of flies with the caveat that Pharaoh not change his mind about letting the Israelites go free.

<sup>75</sup> i.e., 'in a spirit of kindness and respect.'

<sup>76</sup> Rabbi Ishmael's thirteen exegetical principles (Jacobs).

<sup>77</sup> i.e., 'now that I have made myself available to you for two years, let me go my way!'

<sup>78</sup> i.e., 'of all kinds' (Psalms 13:8). See above, n 37. Alternately: "The King ordered that he be given riches and wealth, teams of chariots and teams of horses" (trans. Scheindlin 180).

<sup>79</sup> Psalms 39:3.



princedom. And intelligence is paramount to knowledge, by which all wisdom becomes known. And righteousness is the foundation of all good works, by which kings rule *and princes govern justly*.<sup>80</sup> The wise man has spoken of this in an esteemed dictum, and this is the form of the parable.<sup>81</sup>

The world is an orchard ruled for the polity;  
 The polity is a power legitimized by law;  
 The law is a form of governance guarded by the wise;  
 The wise is a king upheld by good counsel;  
 Good counsel is a shepherd to whom the men of the army answer;  
 The army are helpers supported by wealth;  
 Wealth are riches harvested by the masses;  
 The masses are workers who are supported by uprightness;  
 Uprightness is the balance of righteousness,  
 The empowering of good works,  
 The salvation and praise of the world,  
 The light of the land and those who dwell in it.

And you are a man blessed by God, who gladdens my heart and mind, because trustworthiness is your foundation, and wisdom the root of your learning. And intelligence is the place of your pasture, uprightness the light of your salvation. Every princely honor befits you; you deserve even the throne! God has chosen you to be chief and prince over all my subjects. *And you will be doubly married to me today*.<sup>82</sup> I have found a pledge<sup>83</sup> for my daughter and therefore for my kingdom, and you will rule over my house.

The man said: “*Who am I and what is my life*,<sup>84</sup> my wishes and desires, that I should be the king’s son-in-law? I am a nobody, a drifter. The king said: “I do not wish for dowries and gifts, but rather for learning and knowledge. And now, hurry up and fulfill my request, do my bidding, for *day is short and work is long*,<sup>85</sup> and bound fast by the ropes of my desire. [Zemora 206] And the man said: “I will also do this thing you have said. I will trust and murmur in the shade of your words, and defer, for your sake, my heart’s fondest plans and my ideas. For you have found favor in my eyes.”

And the King increased his wealth and his retinue, and made ready a feast for all his chiefs and his servants, and spoke in their ears enthusiastic, admiring, and uplifting words of his love for the man. And his rhetoric was good in their eyes, as was the knowledge of his lips. And everyone, rich and poor,<sup>86</sup> accepted him as their lord and king. And the King gave him his

<sup>80</sup> Proverbs 8:15.

<sup>81</sup> i.e., ‘and this is how it goes.’ This framing mechanism recalls the final line of each *exemplo* of Juan Manuel’s *Conde Lucanor*: “E la estoria deste exemplo es ésta que se sigue:” which has been understood to indicate a miniature in the original manuscript, however missing in extant manuscripts (82 n 39).

<sup>82</sup> Samuel 18:21. In the original text, Saul offers to marry David to his second daughter, Michal. David was originally interested in his first daughter Merav, who had been promised to another man, so Saul offered his second daughter, saying, ‘you will be married to *number two* today.’ Ibn Sahula adapts the meaning of the Hebrew *šayim* (cardinal number 2) to fit the double purpose of the young man’s wedding to his daughter: 1) to marry his daughter, 2) to serve as heir to his throne.

<sup>83</sup> i.e., ‘a man betrothed to my daughter.’

<sup>84</sup> Samuel 18:25. This is David’s response to Saul’s offer of marriage to his daughter Michal.

<sup>85</sup> See *The Mishnah* 2:15. The saying is attributed to Rabbi Tarfon.

<sup>86</sup> See n 37 and n 78 above.

daughter for a wife, bringing out his most precious stone.<sup>87</sup> *And the nation of the land rejoiced and the city was peaceful,<sup>88</sup> its breaches repaired, for it had been about to fall down.<sup>89</sup>* Then they all gathered round to praise him. [Zemoraḥ 207]

And they spent the days feasting and rejoicing, in peace and tranquility. And the man built himself a great mansion, *with all the finest craftsmanship,<sup>90</sup>* and laid out a well at the center of his courtyard, to top off its beauty and its magnificence. And he built a great mansion for his wife, such *that pleased the eyes and caused them to rejoice,<sup>91</sup>* with its tower and peak in the sky. And in her beauty, he forgot his father's house and his land. He rejoiced in the wife he had taken, and his wife became pregnant and gave birth to a son. And he said: *"a son has been born to gladden me,<sup>92</sup>* to be a leader of my people. *And he was called by the name 'Obed.'<sup>93</sup> And she was in Khezīb when she gave birth to him.<sup>94</sup>* And the boy grew and was weaned. *And he put on a great feast and gave a tax break to the cities,<sup>95</sup>* and distributed gifts. And on that day he stood at the opening of his tent,<sup>96</sup> in his dignified courtyard, enjoying an excellent book. And the child ran by, and plunged down into the well and fell. *He collapsed, bowed down, and fell.<sup>97</sup>* And the man was moved by voice of the boy, who had journeyed away from him and toward to dead of the world. And he said: "How I wish I could trade my life for yours, and to go with you!" And he quickly went down the well after him, his strong arm shattered.<sup>98</sup> And he sought out but did not find the child. *And his heart was moved as the trees of the forest are moved by the wind.<sup>99</sup> And he looked this way and that,<sup>100</sup>* [Zemoraḥ 208] *and went forth weeping.<sup>101</sup>* And he saw the magician, his host,<sup>102</sup> *in his majesty and his glory.<sup>103</sup>* And he said to him: "Why do you cry and pour out tears?"

He said: *"Because the day of fear and trembling has come upon me,<sup>104</sup>* to destroy me and my son together!"

He said: "From where did you ever get a son? *Do not be like the horse or the mule, who have no understanding.<sup>105</sup>* All of your deeds are vanity, sorrow and troubles!"

<sup>87</sup> i.e., his daughter is his most precious stone.

<sup>88</sup> 2 Kings 11:28 and 2 Chronicles 23:21.

<sup>89</sup> Psalms 60:4.

<sup>90</sup> Isaiah 2:16.

<sup>91</sup> Ezekiel 24:25.

<sup>92</sup> Ruth 4:17. This is a reverse pun on the original language, 'a son has been born to Naomi.' The name "Naomi" comes from the same root as the word 'to please'.

<sup>93</sup> Ruth 4:17. The name Obed means 'servant,' just as Arabic names such as 'Abd al-Rahmān and 'Abdallāh ('Servant of the Merciful' and 'Servant of God').

<sup>94</sup> Genesis 38:5. One might translate this as 'Liarstown,' or perhaps 'Fibbsville.' The deceptive go-between in Judah ibn Shabbetai's *Minhat Yehudah, Soneh Hanašīm* (Offering of Yehudah, Misogynist) is similarly named *Kozbī*, from the same Hebrew root כזב (cognate with Arabic كذب, giving كاذب, 'liar'). See Rosen (167) and Hamilton (211-54).

<sup>95</sup> Esther 2:18.

<sup>96</sup> i.e., 'at his door.'

<sup>97</sup> Psalms 10:10, said of the helpless victims of the wicked man.

<sup>98</sup> i.e., 'his will broken,' or even 'worried to pieces.'

<sup>99</sup> Isaiah 7:2.

<sup>100</sup> Exodus 2:12. Said of Moses before he kills the Egyptian.

<sup>101</sup> Psalms 126:6.

<sup>102</sup> The Hebrew 'āspīz, is a latin loan word, cognate with the Spanish *huésped* ('guest' in Modern Spanish, but 'host' in Old Spanish).

<sup>103</sup> Psalms 68:34.

<sup>104</sup> Job 4:14.

<sup>105</sup> Psalms 32:9.

And the man said: Am I not the *repairer of breaches*?<sup>106</sup> One feared by the kings of the land? I took the daughter of a great king to wife! *I have found a ransom for my life!*<sup>107</sup> And I have by her a fine son, *beautifully formed and beautiful to look at!*<sup>108</sup> The boy was weaned recently and he was hopping around *on a reed staff*<sup>109</sup> and *he fell in to the clay,*<sup>110</sup> and became mired in the mud. He probably *did not reach the bottom of the cave*<sup>111</sup> before he *died, or was injured, or disappeared*<sup>112</sup> altogether! Therefore *I cry over the difficulty of my day,*<sup>113</sup> *and weep over my troubles.*<sup>114</sup> And here I am, wandering in my suffering, *crying out like a woman in labor,*<sup>115</sup> drying up like a blown leaf. *For I will follow my son into Sheol, mourning.*<sup>116</sup>

The Egyptian said to him: “Do not suffer, stand up straight, come back to your heart<sup>117</sup> and relax. *For this too is vanity and chasing the wind.*<sup>118</sup> All these things you have told me about, all these days you have lived, and all these great and grandiose deeds, were nothing but an instant. Here in my hand is the cup from which you drank, the wine of stumbling that you drained. This I have done to make you understand my wisdom and tell of it, *so that you might see and understand.*<sup>119</sup>

The man was upset at his speech and his utterance, but was again in awe of him. He said to him: “I give up! There is no man like you among sorcerers, who blows the wind of enchantment. And there is no one like you in all the arcane sciences!” *God has shown you all of this,*<sup>120</sup> you have the right of the firstborn, and there is power and greatness in your hand. To see that our reasonings are no more than the *wings of ostriches!*<sup>121</sup> All these reside in the dwelling of your desire;<sup>122</sup> *for one drinks and swallows, and it is as if they never were!*<sup>123</sup> And now, I will serve you with all my power, for *in all these things is the life of my spirit!*<sup>124</sup> So take me in and enrich my life; do not scold me. Rather, guide me with your trust, and I will walk with your truth.”

*And he stayed with him for several days,*<sup>125</sup> studying the language and literature of the Chaldeans.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Job 4:14. i.e., ‘the one who gets things done.’

<sup>107</sup> Job 33:24.

<sup>108</sup> Genesis 39:6, said of Joseph.

<sup>109</sup> A ‘reed staff’ is a flimsy, unreliable staff that is said to split, piercing the hand of one who leans on it (2 Kings 18:21 and Isaiah 36:6). Already in Ezekiel (29:6), it is used metaphorically for something unreliable or to describe a person who foolishly misplaces his trust. The idea is that the child’s staff, like everything else in the man’s hallucination, appears sound but is shoddy, and that the child, representing the man’s earthly accomplishment, rests on a flimsy foundation.

<sup>110</sup> Psalms 40:3.

<sup>111</sup> Daniel 6:25.

<sup>112</sup> Exodus 22:9, Jacob speaking of Joseph after his brothers cast him into the pit and reported his death.

<sup>113</sup> Job 30:25.

<sup>114</sup> Psalms 55:3.

<sup>115</sup> Isaiah 42:14.

<sup>116</sup> Genesis 37:35, said by Jacob of Joseph when he learns of his alleged death. Sheol is the afterworld.

<sup>117</sup> i.e., ‘come back to your senses.’

<sup>118</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:17.

<sup>119</sup> Ezekiel 40:4.

<sup>120</sup> Genesis 41:39, said to Joseph by Pharaoh after the former correctly interprets the latter’s dreams.

<sup>121</sup> Job 39:11. Ostriches cannot fly, therefore their wings are useless.

<sup>122</sup> i.e., ‘all these powers are at your command.’

<sup>123</sup> The original language (Ovadiah 1:16) refers to the transitory nature of earthly comforts; here the young man marvels at the verisimilitude of the sorcerer’s illusion, which has caused in him a sort of epiphany.

<sup>124</sup> i.e., ‘all your teachings are my passion’ (Isaiah 38:16).

<sup>125</sup> Genesis 27:44.

## Works Cited

- Alfonsi, Petrus. Trans. P.R. Quarrie. Ed. Eberhard Hermes. *The Disciplina Clericalis of Petrus Alfonsi*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- Brockelmann, Carl, and Charles Pellat. "Makama". *The Encyclopedia of Islam CD-Rom Edition v. 1.0*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999.
- Drory, Rina. "The Maqama". Eds. María Rosa Menocal, Michael Sells, and Raymond P. Scheindlin. *The Literature of Al-Andalus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000. 190-210.
- Jacobs, Louis. "Hermeneutics". Ed. Geoffrey Wigoder. *Encyclopedia Judaica CD-ROM Edition, v. 1.0*. Jerusalem: Judaica Multimedia, 1997.
- Juan Manuel. Ed. Alfonso I. Sotelo. *Libro de los enxiemplos del Conde Lucanor e de Patronio*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1998.
- Habermann, Abraham Meir. "Maqama". Ed. Geoffrey Wigoder. *Encyclopedia Judaica CD-ROM Edition, v. 1.0*. Jerusalem: Judaica Multimedia, 1997.
- . "Sahula, Isaac ben Solomon abi". Ed. Geoffrey Wigoder. *Encyclopedia Judaica CD-ROM Edition, v. 1.0*. Jerusalem: Judaica Multimedia, 1997.
- Ibn Sahula, Isaac. "The Sorcerer". Trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin. Ed. Mark Jay Mirsky. *Fiction*. New York: Dept. of English, City College of New York, 1983. 168-84.
- . "The Sorcerer". Trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin. Eds. David Stern and Mark J. Mirsky. *Rabbinic Fantasies*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. 295-311.
- . Ed. and trans. Raphael Loewe. *Meshal Haqadmoni: Fables From the Distant Past*. 2 vols. Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004.
- Rosen, Tova. "Sexual Politics in a Medieval Marriage Debate". *Exemplaria* 12.1 (2000): 157-84.
- Roth, Norman. "'Deal Gently With the Young Man': Love of Boys in Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Spain". *Speculum* 57.1 (1982): 20-51.
- The Mishnah*. Trans. Herbert Danby. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1933.
- Trachtenberg, Joshua. *Jewish Magic and Superstition*. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

---

<sup>126</sup> Daniel 1:4. When the Kingdom of Judea is overrun by the Chaldean King Nebuchadnezzar, he orders that the children of the Judean elite come to court to be educated as Chaldeans (and not in their own tradition). This is a very early example of institutionalized colonialism. Given this association, Ibn Sahula is condemning the study of magic. Throughout the tale, he uses biblical language with negative associations to characterize the young man's pursuit of the magic arts. This position was typical of the orthodox Judaism of the time. For Biblical and Rabbinic prohibitions of sorcery, see Trachtenberg 19-22.