

ABSTRACT

Meshal Haqadmoni was written by Isaac ben Shlomo ibn Sahula in Castile, Spain in 1281. It captivates the heart with its rich content and variety, and enthralls the eye with the beauty of its drawings and illuminations. Its all-encompassing content offers the reader fables and stories, humans and anthropomorphic animals, debates, scientific discussions, a great deal of morality, as well as comical anecdotes and wonderful illustrations.

A survey of the research shows that few have focused on this complex and unique book. The current work examines *Meshal Haqadmoni* as a book of debate, morals and counsel, disguised as amusement literature. The current work opens with a historical survey of Europe and particularly of Spain in the thirteenth century, in order to situate the book in the context of its time and place.

The first chapter of the current work addresses five issues that comprise an introduction to the entire book: A. The important junctures in the life of Isaac ibn Sahula, Spanish poet, intellectual and kabbalist. B. The objectives and virtues of *Meshal Haqadmoni*, as presented in the author's preface. Ibn Sahula's preface serves as a window into the entire book. It contains thematic references to the book's central ideas such as repentance, redemption, consolation and the pursuit of wisdom. In the preface, the author also describes the artistic devices that he employs in the book, in particular the fables and illustrations. He also speaks of the structure of the book. C. An attempt to define the book in light of the definitions of the maqama genre in literary research. There is also a discussion of the book's Romantic elements, which interweave marvelous supernatural features and surprise twists, as evinced in the enigmatic characters of Goliath (in the preface), the man of God and the five cynics, and the anthropomorphic animals. D. An examination of the book's target audience,

based on the author's preface. E. A survey of the various editions of the book (manuscripts and printed editions) and the status of research.

The second chapter of the current work discusses the book's structural features, including the five-part structure and the division of each part into two. The book consists of five sections (wisdom, repentance, proper counsel, humility and reverence), in each of which there is a debate between the author and one of five cynics. These cynics are referred to by the Hebrew term *maqshe*, which means a questioner, or "devil's advocate", who despises and ridicules good character traits. In the first part of each section the cynic raises arguments condemning the trait discussed in that section, and in the second part the author responds and praises it. In each section, the cynic's questions and the author's answers are composed of stories and fables interwoven with one another in various ways, such as the box format of a story within a story. Humans tell stories about animals or humans, and animals tell stories about humans or animals. In this chapter of the current work, the frame story is also presented and the role of the poems within the structure of the book is examined, as well as the place of the stories and fables and the way they are interwoven. Additionally, the opening and closing formulas of the stories and the structural connections between the sections are addressed.

From this analysis we find that the author employed structural principles borrowed from the amusement literature of other cultures, such as the Indian Panchatantra and Kalila and Dimna, and the Arabic Tales of Sindebar (Sinbad) and the stories in Arabian Nights.

The deciphering and analysis of the structure also reveal the structural and thematic affinities between the book's sections. The main focus of the book is man. This finding reinforces the author's declaration in the preface that he wishes to write a book of morality and counsel in an amusing form in order to arouse his people, console them and bring them to repentance. In order to achieve his moral, religious and didactic goals, the author cloaks his messages in amusing and exotic trappings that will draw the reader's heart toward the objective: repentance and reverence for God.

The third chapter of the current work focuses on the tools used by ibn Sahula to achieve his objectives, and on the background of the "polemic atmosphere" that prevailed in Christian Spain in the thirteenth century. Ibn

Sahula employs conventional artistic devices as part of the polemic battle waged in his book: The opening poem as an instrument for disputation, as well as biblical paraphrasing, debate, contrast and scientific discussions.

Debate is both a literary device and a literary genre in the book. The entire book is built on the debate between the author and the five cynics, and in each story there is a confrontation between two contrasting characters that serve to represent the author and the cynic. The disputing characters in the book are shaped by contrast. The tendentious biblical citations that the author places in their mouths contribute both to the development of the debate and to the development of their characters. From the way that biblical paraphrasing is used we learn that both parties to the debate are proficient in the Jewish sources, and that ibn Sahula knows how to use his biblical knowledge in the service of his objectives. These debates are reminiscent of the disputations between the Jews and the Christians, and especially between Jews and apostates, who were proficient in the Jewish sources, but often used biblical proofs that were taken out of context.

Scientific discussions hold a position of honor in *Meshal Haqadmoni*. Their role is to teach the reader wisdom and morality. Their purpose is to present the cynics as boors, in contrast to the wisdom of the author. The scientific discussions are placed in the mouths of the characters that represent the character and worldview of the author. The characters that represent the cynics, on the other hand, speak of only one science – astrology – which was a controversial subject in the thirteenth century. The author seeks to denounce the worship of the stars and to praise reverence for God as part of his quest to return his readers to the Jewish sources and consequently to bring them to repentance.

The fourth chapter of the current work is devoted to the nature of the fable and to the animal fables in the book, which are one of its main amusement devices. Ibn Sahula forms the animals in the fables in a unique fashion that has no parallel in previous fable literature. He bestows upon the animals Jewish characteristics and Jewish lineage: the hart prays and is a pious kabbalist; the ram is righteous and humble; the fish is wise and loyal and has illustrious lineage, being the great-grandson of that honorable fish that swallowed Jonah. The Judaizing of the animals in the fables makes the book

into a unique Jewish work that serves the author's objective of writing an original Hebrew book as an alternative to gentile amusement literature. The animal fables are also both a polemic tool and a mechanism for concealing ideas and messages that the author cannot write in an overt fashion, such as criticism of the monarchy and of the Jewish community's leadership, and perhaps also criticism of Christian society.

The fifth chapter of the current work attempts to investigate the originality of the book and its sources. In his preface, the author states that one of his reasons for writing the book is his objection to the Jewish yearning for translated amusement literature of other cultures.¹ He seeks to return the people to their Jewish sources and to offer the book as an alternative to the tempting literature of other nations. This cultural-nationalistic motive leads him to declare that his book is original and is not influenced by other literary traditions.

Nevertheless, there are quite a few foreign motifs in the book, which are integrated into the polemic debate that the author conducts against the influences of gentile culture and literature on the Jews of his time. There are many structural and formal influences from non-Jewish amusement literature in the book. Thematically, there are also concepts and motifs that have parallels in the literature of other cultures, although it is difficult to identify entire stories in the book that are adapted from these sources.

The sixth chapter of the current work presents *Meshal Haqadmoni* as a reflection of the condition of Spanish Jewish society in the second half of the thirteenth century. A literary analysis of the book reinforces the opinion of researchers who believe that the book reflects the social and historical reality of the Jews in Spain during the author's lifetime, including social and moral problems in the Jewish community, its internal disputes and disputations with Christians. The scathing criticism of the contemporary society alternates between two main tracks:

A. Internal community tensions – The book reflects the social and moral problems of the Jewish community, such as the disparities between the Jewish aristocracy and the community itself, the privileges

1 *Meshal Haqadmoni*, pp. 5, 7.

held by the Jewish aristocracy and issues concerning the authority of the community. There is also social criticism against officeholders, such as the *parnas*, who headed the community and was feared by both the public and the rabbinical court judges. Criticism is also extended to those individuals who embody undesirable social phenomena, such as butchers, swindlers, hypocrites, informants, those who pretend to be pious, wise and humble, those who rebel against the monarchy, and those who deny the resurrection of the dead or the coming of the Messiah. The stories reveal ibn Sahula's desire to correct the faulty social morality of the Jewish society of his day.

B. Echoes of Judeo-Christian relations – The government and the monarchy are among the dominant topics in the book. In the first section and the fifth section, this topic is addressed in the stories and fables told by the cynic and the author: “The Tale of the Fool,” “The Lion and his Friends, the Hart and the Fox” (First Section), “The Great Unlucky King” and “The Tale of the People of Luz” (Fifth Section). An analysis of these stories reveals criticism against the king who rules with a heavy hand and is cruel to his subjects. Nevertheless, the author takes a clear stance in accordance with the accepted historiosophic outlook in medieval times that one did not rebel against the monarch. One had to find a way to reach a compromise with the king, and if this was not possible, the only option was to emigrate.

There is also marked criticism of heretics, “those who pull on their foreskins,”² apostates and people who do not believe in the coming of the Messiah or the resurrection of the dead. These last two issues, the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead, were central to the Jewish-Christian debate. They are also connected to the author's position regarding exile, national redemption and going to live in the Land of Israel. In light of this, and in light of the fact that in the thirteenth century an extensive quantity of literature, called “victory literature,” was produced by Jews against Christians, *Meshal*

2 A reference to Hellenized Jews in the second century BCE who tried to reverse their circumcision.

Haqadmoni appears to be a kind of “victory book” in the guise of amusement literature.

The seventh and final chapter of the current work discusses the revealed and hidden messages in the book. The revealed message concerns good character traits and the principle of “wisdom begins with the fear of God,” as is evident from the stories and fables. The concealed aspect can be detected in the title of the first section (Wisdom) and in the title of the fifth section (Reverence), and even in the name of the book: *Meshal Haqadmoni* is a “hidden citation” from 1 Samuel 24:13-14 – “Let the Lord judge between me and thee and the Lord avenge me of thee; but my hand shall not be upon thee. As the proverb of the ancients (*meshal haqadmoni*) says, ‘Wickedness proceeds from the wicked, but my hand shall not be upon thee.’” This verse contains a hidden note of optimism and perhaps a hope for a better future, or at least for righteous judgment. The author also expresses his position on subjects that preoccupied his contemporaries, such as the question of divine justice – why evil befalls the righteous and the wicked prosper; repentance and the rectification of character traits; exile, redemption and going to live in the Land of Israel. There are also kabbalistic references concealed in the various layers of the book.

Ibn Sahula uses a technique of encoded writing throughout the book, concealing moral and social philosophies within it. Under the guise of amusement literature he presents his positions on the cultural, religious and national polemic of his time. Encoded writing like his was a common technique among philosophers and kabbalists, as well as among authors living in exile under foreign rule. Religious and national ideas are disguised in stories and fables. The book concludes with a clear and unequivocal declaration from Ecclesiastes:

“The end of the matter, when all is said and done: Fear God and keep His commandments³ / Write words of integrity and faith / Fear of God is wisdom and turning away from evil is understanding”.⁴

סוף דבר הכול נשמע את האלהים ירא ואת מצוותיו שמור / כתוב יושר דברי אמונה /
הן יראת ה' חכמה וסור מרע בינה.

3 Ecclesiastes 12:13.

4 Job 28:28; *Meshal Haqadmoni*, p. 305.

Whether out of necessity, to disguise his sharp words, or whether out of a desire to attract as wide a readership as possible, the author chose to be innovative specifically in the amusement aspect of his book. Ibn Sahula introduced two novelties: the first is in the animal fables – the characters of the animals in the fables have Jewish characteristics; and second – in the illustrations. *Meshal Haqadmoni* was the first secular Hebrew book in which the author included illustrations in the body of the text. This extraordinary book was very popular among medieval Jewish readers. This is evident from its widespread circulation and the number of editions copied and published in the generations after the author's death, even until the present day.