Simona Gronemann

The Story of *Meshal Haqadmoni*

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The Story of *Meshal Haqadmoni* and its Extant Copies in 15th Century Ashkenaz

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Cover Illustration: A three generation scene from the Munich copy of Meshal Haqadmoni; Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Heb.107, fol.79v.

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Preface

The present volume is a study of two Jewish communities, removed from each other in time and space, but connected by a book. It is also a study of that book and what it can tell us about the seemingly different cultures of these communities within their respective settings. We are dealing, on the one hand, with the Sephardi community in Castile at the end of the 13th century and, on the other hand, with the Ashkenazi community in southern Germany during the 15th century. The book is the moralistic treatise, in the form of fables, entitled *Meshal Haqadmoni*; it was written in Sepharad, but its earliest extant copies – five illuminated manuscripts and an incunabulum – were produced nearly two centuries later in Ashkenaz.

Our study attempts to trace the relationship of the text and its author – Ibn Sahula – not only to their own social, ideological and historical background, but also to those of the community in which the much later copies were produced. With regard to the latter, our study also examines extensively the illustrations appearing profusely in these manuscripts and relates them to the surrounding culture of so-called popular art and its long history. We shall also shed some light on the inter-relationships between the five manuscripts and on the circumstances of their production – again in terms of the illustrations.

Among the questions to be addressed are:

1. What was the background and motivation for writing this book of fables?
2. How do the cycles of illustrations in the extant manuscripts relate to the narrative cycles prevalent in the German cultural milieu of that era?
3. Possible relations among all the extant manuscripts, with particular attention to the illustrations and to the estimated dates and venues of their production.
4. What can we elicit from the manuscripts about the degree of interaction of Jews with their surrounding culture?
5. What is the significance of the phenomenon of a Sephardi secular text resurging a hundred and seventy years later within the social and cultural framework of 15th century Ashkenazi Jewry?

Information about the book of *Meshal Haqadmoni* and its manuscripts that may be gleaned from published research so far answers only some of the questions and this – only in a fragmentary manner. For example, various publications refer each to just one or another of the manuscripts; many others deal mainly or solely with issues in the text. My goal here was to present the subject in a comprehensive manner, augmenting it in light of my original research and widening its scope to include the historical, cultural and art-historical background. I hope that I succeeded and that, as a result, also the reader's scope will be widened.

Simona Gronemann
July, 2019
Hod Hasharon

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This book is dedicated to Prof. Aliza Cohen Mushlin, my guide and mentor, from whom I have learned all there is about illuminated manuscripts and who encouraged me to write this book. Next comes my husband, Dr. Uri Gronemann, who edited the book and contributed his many insights with patience and love. It is his book as much as it is mine. My most sincere thanks are extended to Prof. Sarit Shalev Eyni for her constant encouragement and sound advice.

I would also like to extend my thanks to all the librarians in the numerous libraries I have visited in Europe – in particular Dr. Effinger of the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Dr. Fabian at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, Dr. Fumagalli from the Biblioteca-Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, the manuscripts department at the Staatsbibliothek Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, and the Department of Oriental Collections of the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

Last but not least I would like to thank my children Yuval and Ophra who watched with love as I endeavored on my doctoral dissertation and who encouraged me now to undertake the present book.

Simona Gronemann
July, 2019
Hod Hasharon

Introduction

Meshal Haqadmoni (*Fables of the Ancient* or *Fables of a Distant Past*[1]) is a Hebrew book of fables, written in Spain in 1281 by Isaac ibn Sahula. None of the copies produced in Spain survived. One hundred and fifty years later five copies of the book, accompanied by illustrations, surfaced in southern Germany and within the German-Jewish (Ashkenazi) community of northern Italy. These are the only manuscript copies that are still extant, beside two incunabula printed and illustrated at the end of the 15th century. The latter gave rise to successive printed editions.

The fables of *Meshal Haqadmoni* carry moralistic and ethical messages relevant to the medieval world of the 15th century. The protagonists in the fables are, alternately, humans and animals and the quite elaborate story of each fable is replete with observations about their nature and with scientific treatises. The book is written in the form of a maqama (poetic rhymed prose)[2] and its language is highly flowery, yet with style and idioms deeply rooted in the bible. The book is structured as an introduction, a preface and a main body, which is divided into five parts, each part dealing with a particular quality or virtue. The first part is in praise of Wisdom, the second – in praise of Penitence, the third – in praise of Sound Counsel, the fourth – in praise of Humility and the fifth – in praise of Reverence.[3]

In the introduction, the author tells about himself and about the purpose of the book and its five-part structure. The preface (actually entitled "Preface to the First Part") constitutes a framing story, in which the author is cast as a warrior in an epic battle against his adversaries – Goliath the Philistine and his four Midianite friends – who try to dissuade him from his moral dedication and from writing the book. Accordingly, each of the five parts is presented as a dialog between the author and an adversary (serving as a devil's advocate); first the adversary tells a fable and argues that it denies the subject virtue, then the author counters with another fable and a concluding lesson that affirms the virtue.

It is not known whether the copy that was brought to Germany and could serve as a prototype for the manuscripts was illustrated. However, all extant copies of the book contain illustrations, embedded in the text and accompanied by rhymed captions, which, in all probability, were originally penned by the author.

The extant copies

The five manuscripts of *Meshal Haqadmoni* are identified throughout the present book according to the libraries in which they are presently housed. They are listed here – each with its library signature, with its surmised place and date of inception and with its abbreviation as used throughout this book:

– Oxford, Bodleian Library Opp.154 (Germany, 1450) [abbreviated to **Oxford1**]

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1 Quoting Raphael Loewe, *Meshal Haqadmoni*

2 On this literary genre and Jewish Arabic poetry see: Pagis, *Hidush u. Masoret*, 199-211; Habermann, Maqama; Dory, Rina , "The Maqama," in: *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, Maria Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, Michael Sells (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 2000, 190-210.

3 The names of the parts are based on Loewe's *Mashal Haqadmoni*.

– Munich Miscellany, Munich, Bavarian State Library, Cod. Heb.107 (Germany, before 1458) [abbreviated to **Munich**]
– Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Can Or. 59(Italy, 1470–1480) [abbreviated to **Oxford2**]
– Milano, Ambrosiana Library, MS. X 112 sup. (Italy, 1483) [abbreviated to **Milano**]
– The Israel Museum, MS.180/51 (as part of a bound volume of several books, named "Rothschild Miscellany"), (Italy, 1470–1480) [abbreviated to **Rothschild**]

All the physical details concerning the five extant manuscripts are presented in the annexed catalog.

Also considered in this book is the first Incunabulum, i.e. early printed edition, with woodblock illustrations (two similar copies of which are still extant):

– Jerusalem, Jewish National and University Library, R18 = 86 A 590 (printed by Gershom Soncino, Brescia, ca.1491) [abbreviated to **Ed.1**].

As will be shown, all these copies were scribed (or printed) and illustrated during the second half of the 15th century for members of Ashkenazi Jewish communities – the earlier two copies in southern Germany and the later ones in northern Italy. The illustrations in four of the five manuscripts are loosely composed colored pen-drawings and in one (*Rothschild*) – carefully executed painted miniatures. While the manuscripts are generally in thematic and iconographic accord, they differ from each other in some iconographies and, mostly, in style.

Scholarship

Several scholars have considered the text of *Meshal Haqadmoni*.

In 1955 Stern (Rationalists and Kabalists in Medieval Allegory) dealt with the strife between rising Kabalist movement and the maimonidian rationalists. He proceeds to compare between certain protagonists in Meshal Haqadmoni and their counter parts in the Spanish court.[4]

In 1997 Schirman (The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France (Hebrew)) discussed the text of Meshal Haqadmoni comprehensively, while placing it within the context of coeval Sephardi poetic texts.[5]

In 2004 Loewe (Meshal Haqadmoni, Fables from the Distant Past) offered an extensive annotated edition with English translation of the entire text.[6]

In 2011 Cuffel (IbnSahula's Meshal ha-qadmoni as Restorative Polemic) wrote about the ways in which ibnSahula drew upon philosophy, medicine, astrology, and animal lore, to polemicize against Christians and Muslims and to castigate the Jewish aristocracy.[7]

In 2016 Offenberg (On a Pious Man, Adulterous Wife and the Pleasure of Preaching to Others) wrote about the story, appearing in the book, of the adulterous wife and the behavior of her pious husband.[8]

To the best of my knowledge, no research has been published on the illustrations of the extant copies, except for three studies of the Rothschild Miscellany as a whole, namely Narkiss, 1983 (Index of Jewish Art); Bauer-Eberhardt, 1984 (Die Rothschild Miscellanea); Mortara-

4 Stern, Rationalists, 73-86. See chapter I.
5 Schirmann, Haim, *Hebrew Poetry.*
6 Loewe, *Meshal Haqadmoni*
7 Cuffel, Restorative Polemics, 179-182
8 Offenberg, On a Pious Man, 103-125

Ottolenghi, 1989 (The Illuminations and the artists).[9] Thus the research reported in the present book is the first one that considered all five extant manuscripts of *Meshal Haqadmoni*, with their illustrations, in a comprehensive and comparative manner.

The plan of this book

The story of *Meshal Haqadmoni* and its extant copies will be told here in a sequence of varying perspectives. We start with a historical review, in which we consider the relations of the book to its original environment in Spain and its possible route to Germany. Then we provide a review of the rich literary and artistic culture in 15th century Germany that surrounded the production of the copies. This is followed by close examination of the illustrations in the subject manuscripts and their relationship to that culture, as well as the relations among the manuscripts themselves, drawing conclusions about their origins. Finally, based on our findings, we discuss the reasons and circumstances for the adoption of the book by the Ashkenazi community of that era.

The chapters of the book are organized according to that sequence and to the several themes that dominated the research. Here is their preview:

Chapter I provides a historic background of *Meshal Haqadmoni* and its author.

Chapter II presents the general cultural context of the manuscripts – in terms of texts and illustrations in German popular literature and art.

Chapter III deals with the art-historical context of the illustrations of each of the *Meshal Haqadmoni* manuscripts – the geographic origin of their individual artistic styles, the pictorial origin of their various compositions and motifs and the visual sources of individual iconographies.

Chapter IV discusses the group of manuscripts as a whole – comparing between them, assessing their mutual relationship and hypothesizing about a possible prototype. It concludes with an analysis of the unique illustrations that stand out among their counterparts.

Chapter V attempts to draw some insights from our investigations. In its first – art-historical – part it reviews and further discusses the relations between the two earliest manuscripts and the pictorial sources at the disposal of their illustrators. It then postulates the sources that could have served the artist of the prototype in the early decades of the 15th century. The chapter also sheds light on the process of copying manuscripts.

The second – historical – part of the chapter discusses the possible ways by which a copy of the *Sephardi Meshal Haqadmoni* was adopted in Germany and summarizes the findings in the previous chapters regarding the ties between Sahula's text and that of German popular literature. This chapter also hypothesizes the conditions under which the book came to be illustrated and owned by Ashkenazi Jews.

Pervading much of the discussion throughout the chapters of the present book are the many aspects of secular book production in late medieval Europe. These aspects encompass –

- the sources, within and outside Europe, of textual material, including those from preceding eras;
- interaction between the texts and the readership, with its varying cultural and socio-political needs;
- the book illustration industry and its relation to surrounding popular art; and
- the relation of the above-mentioned textual and artistic aspects to coeval Jewish cultural tradition and needs.

9 Mortara-Ottolenghi, Illuminations, 127-251; Narkiss and Sed Rajna, IJA-III – Rothschild; Bauer-Eberhardt, Rothschild-Miscellanea, 229-237