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**A JEW AND HIS MILIEU: ALLEGORY, POLEMIC, AND JEWISH  
THOUGHT IN SEM TOB'S *PROVERBIOS MORALES* AND  
*MA'ASEH HA RAV***

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AND JEWISH THOUGHT IN SEM TOB'S  
*PROVERBIOS MORALES* AND *MA'ASEH HA RAV***

**by**

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Knowledge is a deadly friend  
When no one sets the rules.

King Crimson, "Epitaph"

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JEWISH THOUGHT IN SEM TOB'S *PROVERBIOS*  
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In this dissertation, I describe social, economic and political relations between Jews and Christians in medieval Europe before presenting the intellectual and religious context of Jewish life in Christian Spain. The purpose of this endeavor is to provide the framework for analyzing two works, one in Hebrew and one in Castilian, by the Spanish Jewish author Sem Tob de Carrión (1290- c.1370). Proverbios morales (1355-60), the Castilian text, is important to the Spanish literary canon because it is one of the first works of Semitic sapiential literature to be transmitted, in the vernacular, to a Christian public. However, it has generally been read by scholars of medieval Hispanic literature in isolation from his Hebrew writings. Given that Ma'aseh ha Rav (c. 1345) reveals essential aspects of his thought structure and intellectual milieu not found in Proverbios morales, it should be required reading for a thorough understanding of his worldview.

In the Hebrew work, I draw parallels between the polemical language used by Sem Tob and historically documented ideological conflicts that took place among Jews in late medieval Spain and Provence. Because it is written in a style that involves the weaving together of biblical quotations and allusions, the polemical language must be read in relation to the biblical contexts to which these allusions refer. When analyzed in this way, allegory pertaining to the ongoing dispute among Jews about philosophy and scriptural interpretation, and rebuttals of Christian truth claims, become apparent. Additionally, kabbalistic references and messianic allusions lend the work an esoteric character that sharply distinguishes it from Proverbios morales. This analysis of Ma'aseh ha Ray is used as a basis for comparing rabbinic and philosophical concepts that appear in both works. The general movement from opposition to unity that characterizes each text, and the ubiquitous “golden mean,” link the two works conceptually, and underscore Sem tob’s preoccupation with harmonizing contradictions on both the spiritual and social levels of existence. This aspect of his thought reflects the general intellectual climate of his milieu, which is characterized by the blending, or intertwining, of the main doctrines of medieval Judaism--philosophy, mysticism, and Talmudic-traditionalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Proverbios morales (1355-1360), one of the only extant works in Castilian written by a medieval Spanish Jewish author, has been read by scholars in relation to the historical circumstances of medieval Spain, other Christian, Jewish, and Arabic works in the sapiential genre, and biblical writings such as Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. Rarely has an attempt been made to understand the text in conjunction with Sem Tob's Hebrew works, or in light of the intellectual context of Spanish and Provençal Jewry. Several scholars take Ma'aseh ha Rav (c. 1345) into consideration in their analyses, but they address only a small fraction of the spiritual and intellectual conflicts and discourses that were a vital component of the cultural life of the Jewish communities. For this reason, I have chosen to approach the subject of Sem Tob's two most important works from the vantage point of social, intellectual, and religious discourse within the Jewish community itself rather than from the perspective of Christian-Jewish conflict. Indeed, many scholars have already interpreted Proverbios morales as a response to, or reflection of, deteriorating social conditions between Christians and Jews in fourteenth-century Castile. While many of their arguments are valid, Proverbios morales is better understood when read in relation to Sem Tob's Hebrew writings, and to other Jewish works of the time period that reflect the ethos of medieval Spanish Jewry.

Ma'aseh ha Rav (also called "The Battle of the Pen and the Scissors"), Sem Tob's Hebrew *maqama*, is a complicated piece of writing that requires intense scrutiny in order to be correctly understood. While it has been characterized as a light satire of traditional debates between pen and sword by some scholars, certain elements that Sem Tob

introduces, such as the pen as host of the Almighty, allusions to significant allegorical passages in the Bible, and indirect references to heated religious controversies, suggest that the work can be read on several levels. This way of viewing the text is congruent with the Jewish hermeneutical tradition, which allows (and indeed calls) for plurality of meaning, sometimes even contradictory ones, in the interpretation of biblical words and verses.<sup>1</sup> While Ma'aseh ha Rav is not an expressly religious text, Sem Tob was a rabbi; therefore he would have been highly trained in biblical exegesis and Talmudic dialectics, which inform his world view. Moreover, allegory, polysemy, ambiguity, and word play are encountered in much Jewish literature of medieval Spain, characteristics which lend themselves to multiple levels of interpretation rather than to one definitive meaning.

Indeed, several Sem Tob scholars have already interpreted Ma'aseh ha Rav in this manner. Clark Colahan (1977) for example, maintains that it is a political allegory about a near catastrophic event that almost destroyed the Castilian Jewish community in the years before Sem Tob completed the work, while Sanford Shepard (1978) speculates that it reflects the polemical exchange between Jewish authors and the apostate Abner de Burgos who, after converting to Christianity in 1320, became one of the most virulent anti-Jewish propagandists in medieval history. In my view, Ma'aseh ha Rav is not an allegorization of a specific historical event or polemical exchange, but a reflection of myriad discourses that were vital during their time in the Jewish community, the most

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<sup>1</sup> Azzan Yadin (2003), in his study of polysemy in the school of Rabbi Ishmael, analyzes the rabbinic gloss on Psalms 62:12 and Jer. 23:29, which introduces “the notion of a polysemic abundance from the word of God, a plurality of meanings generated from a single verse” (2-3). Also, Frank Talmage (1999) affirms that the polysemous nature of Scripture was long accepted in Judaism: “Tradition spoke of ‘seventy faces (*panim*) of the Torah,’ the concept of ‘faces’ being found in Islamic exegesis as well” (319).

prominent one being that between conservative rationalists or traditionalists and philosophical extremists. Satire, religious allegory, and allusions to Kabbalah are also present in the work, which attest to the multi-faceted nature of medieval Hebrew literature, and the depth and complexity of Sem Tob's thought and style of writing.

Proverbios morales, because it was written in Castilian, and possibly because of differences in the target audience, does not contain all of the above elements. It is a more straightforward and pragmatic work that was not intended to be read figuratively or allegorically (except for several verses in the beginning and ending sections). Like Ma'aseh ha Rav, though, certain passages can be interpreted on different levels, according to the biblical, rabbinic, and philosophical training of the reader, and his/her aesthetic sensibilities. The central poetic device structuring the work is antithetic parallelism, or the play of oppositions, which reveals Sem Tob's indebtedness to Arabic debate literature.

Because of the overriding themes of the instability and unpredictability of life, and Sem Tob's seeming inability to arrive at a conclusive interpretation of the phenomenal world, except that it is constantly changing, many scholars, have argued that Sem Tob held a relativistic world view.<sup>2</sup> While he is influenced by relativistic strains of thought that have their origin in the Mediterranean world, the predominant view that relativism characterizes his outlook on life ignores the context of his Hebrew writings and Jewish intellectual and hermeneutic traditions that allowed for different interpretations of both

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<sup>2</sup> Some of these scholars are Sanchez Albornoz (1956), Antonio Portnoy (1958), Walter Mettman (1960), Nelson Orringer (1972), and Agustín García Calvo (1974). See Zemke (1997), pp. 109, 110-11, 114, 118, 132, 135, 142, 145, 147-49, 151, 157, 170, 189, 208, 217, 222, 227-29, for a complete list of authors who have written about relativism in PM.

*Halakha* (Jewish law) and *Aggadah* (legend). Indeed, the Sages of the Talmud often contradict one another and present differing sides of an issue. Sem Tob, like his forebears, did not run from contradiction and could conceive of multiple perspectives on a same social or existential problem; for his aim was not to formulate a systematic philosophical solution to the paradoxes of human life, but to help his contemporaries make sense of and be at peace with the uncertainties, contradictions, and brutal realities that the phenomenal world often presents.

Another important aspect of Proverbios morales that concerns my study is its target audience and the social function of the work. Because it was written in Castilian and dedicated to a Christian king from whom Sem Tob asked to be repaid a loan, it is generally considered that it was primarily intended for a Christian audience. However, the discovery of a codex in Cuenca from 1492, MS Cu, which was taken by dictation from the memory of a prisoner of the Inquisition who was accused of apostasy and heresy for reading prohibited Jewish writings, attests to the long oral tradition of the poem and the important role it played in the Jewish and Converso communities. MS C, the *aljamiado* manuscript (Spanish language text written with Hebrew letters), is additional evidence that it was not necessarily intended for Christians. Moreover, it is quite possible that the brief passages referring to the Christian kings Alfonso XI and Pedro I were added to a previously composed text.<sup>3</sup> These manuscripts, and the scant evidence regarding the

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<sup>3</sup> Zemke states: “One could propose the hypothesis that Shem Tov wrote the corpus for an implied destinator of equal or lesser social power, i.e., a Jewish audience, and redacted occasional passages—essentially the poetic prologue and epilogue (stanzas 1-7, 47-56, 57-69, 708-725)--in order to accommodate a performance before a noble Christian audience” (*A Sermon Addressed* 206).

target audience for the text, gives me reason to believe that the social function of Proverbios morales was not primarily to win the monarch's favor so as to obtain protection for the Jews, as is generally assumed. Given the content of the work and its relation to intellectual, social, and religious discourses among Jews, it is more likely that it was written as a non-dogmatic moral and philosophical guide to redress ethical and existential dilemmas that were causing rifts in the social cohesion of the Jewish community. My analysis of Ma'aseh ha Rav strengthens this point of view, as the *maqama* reflects in a more direct way than Proverbios morales polemics among Jews, and Sem Tob's concern for the unity and spiritual salvation of his people.

In order to establish the framework for analyzing Ma'aseh ha Rav and Proverbios morales in light of the intellectual and social context of fourteenth-century Judeo-Hispanic culture, I begin with a broad summary of the historical circumstances of Christian Spain and the Jewish community's relationship to the dominant culture. This includes a description of economic, political, and social conflicts between Jews and Christians, and a brief history of anti-Semitic thought in northern and southern Europe. While the focus of the dissertation as a whole is not on Jewish-Christian relations, a thorough treatment of Sem Tob's works must take into consideration Christian social, political, and theological hostilities since they undoubtedly affected his outlook on life.

In chapter two, I discuss literary influences on Ma'aseh ha Rav and Proverbios morales, such as Arabic debate literature and the *adab* style, give a critical review of recent and past scholarship on Sem Tob's works, and present detailed descriptions of both texts in order to provide the non-Spanish or non-Hebrew speaking reader with

enough information to be able to follow the thread of my arguments in chapters four and five of the dissertation.

In Chapter three, I set the stage for the analysis of Proverbios morales and Ma'aseh ha Rav by describing both the predominant streams of thought in Jewish medieval Spanish and southern French culture, and the controversies and discourses that defined Jewish intellectual and religious life of the era. I also give a synopsis of the main philosophical questions that were being addressed in elite rabbinic and rationalist circles in order to situate concepts and ideas found in Sem Tob's works within their proper intellectual context.

Chapter four begins with an analysis of Ma'aseh ha Rav in light of another Hebrew *maqama* of the time period, "Ish ha Dat ve-ha Filosofo" (The Religionist and the Philosopher), which is contained in Yitzchak Pollegar's polemical work Ezer ha Dat 'Support of the Faith' [1335]. While Ma'aseh ha Rav is more satirical and ambiguous than Pollegar's *maqama*, there are many conceptual parallels between them, and both are written in the *musiv* style.<sup>4</sup> Since Ezer ha Dat pre-dates Ma'aseh ha Rav by only ten years, it is a valuable source of information about ideological disagreements among fourteenth-century Jews, and the types of issues that concerned them.

In the rest of the chapter, I take other sources into consideration, such as historically documented polemical exchanges between adversaries in the Maimonidean controversy of the fourteenth century (which involved disagreement about the role philosophy should

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<sup>4</sup> This style is characterized by the stringing together of biblical verses throughout a text. Sometimes they were meant to be read in accordance with their original meaning, while at other times they were used to suit the poetical exigencies of the text.

play in Jewish education), and records of a little known political revolt in the Barcelona Jewish community that resulted in a shift in spiritual authority from courtiers, whose religious ideal was philosophical rationalism, to Torah scholars and merchants. These conflicts, and the language employed by the participants, reveal much about the internal dynamics of the Jewish intellectual elite, and the ways in which biblical contexts were used to fortify ideological positions. Since Sem Tob's *maqama* is replete with biblical and Talmudic allusions, it is essential to read both historical scholarship, and primary Hebrew texts of the time period in order to understand the ways in which medieval Jews manipulated the language of the Torah to suit the needs of the moment.

In chapter five, I begin by presenting some of the ways in which Jewish sages and philosophers responded to existential quandaries such as the suffering of the just, divine providence, and reward and punishment, since these issues are addressed by Sem Tob in Proverbios morales. I then compare how rabbinic and philosophical concepts are used in both works in order to elucidate the conceptual unity between them, and to give the reader a better sense of the spiritual and ethical principles that inform Sem Tob's worldview. Since Ma'aseh ha Rav and Proverbios morales are directed towards different audiences, and are written in Hebrew and Castilian respectively, concepts and themes appear in different guises in each work. In Ma'aseh ha Rav, for example, the rabbinic underpinnings of Sem Tob's thought are more apparent. His deft manipulation of Talmudic and biblical sayings and verses shows him to be not only a master of the written word, but a highly trained rabbinic scholar. Moreover, an esoteric strain of thought reveals itself in some of the passages, which suggests a possible sympathy for



mystical ideas and concepts. Only with difficulty can one detect these resonances in Proverbios morales, as the work serves a different function and was written with a broader and less rabbinically educated public in mind.

Despite these major differences, certain pivotal concepts and principles, such as the golden mean and the golden rule, unite Proverbios morales and Ma'aseh ha Rav. The humanitarian teachings of Hillel, for example, are apparent in both works, as well as the more philosophically inspired teachings of Maimonides. Concepts such as evil, goodness, and unity are also axiomatic in Ma'aseh ha Rav and Proverbios morales; however, they are articulated in accordance with the differing purposes and intended audiences of each work. In Ma'aseh ha Rav, goodness and evil have teleological consequences and are expressed in relation to Jewish law and custom, while in Proverbios morales, these concepts are framed in a quasi philosophical/literary prose that is more secular and pragmatic in orientation. To give an example, the concept of excess in Ma'aseh ha Rav is expressed figuratively through the negative example of the scissors, and is associated with the controversy surrounding philosophy and scriptural misinterpretation, as I argue in chapter four. In Proverbios morales, the same concept is articulated in a straightforward manner, and serves a didactic, rather than a polemical function, relating to the problems of materialism and greed. Additionally, the concept of unity appears in both works, but is expressed in entirely different ways. In Ma'aseh ha Rav, the imagery of unification is highly metaphorical and has eschatological and messianic connotations. In Proverbios morales, in contrast, it serves an existential rather than a religious function. The axiological primacy of the concepts of unity and excess in

the two works, though, tells us much about the social and spiritual concerns of the Jewish community of the time period.

To conclude, this analysis and exploration of Proverbios morales and Ma'aseh ha Rav is intended to provide a more informed reading of both works, and to elucidate aspects of medieval Judeo-Hispanic intellectual life that will enrich our understanding of medieval Spanish culture. This period of time, which was one of the most creative in Jewish history, merits our attention for what it can tell us about the important cultural symbiosis that took place in Christian Spain and southern France when Greek and Arabic philosophy were made accessible to a broader public through the enterprise of translation. Additionally, works like Proverbios morales and Ma'aseh ha Rav shed light on the kinds of internal and external literary battles Jews waged in response to the changing social and intellectual climates. It is hoped that this study, which focuses primarily on the internal intellectual dynamics of the Jewish community, will give Hispanists a broader sense of the cultural diversity of the time period and the complexity of medieval Judeo-Hispanic thought.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Sem Tob ben Yitzchal Arduziel (1290-1370), also known as Santob de Carrión, was a Jewish author and rabbi who was born in the prosperous Castilian province of Palencia. The fourteenth century, the period in which he flourished as a writer, was a time of transition for Spanish Jewry and marks the beginning of the decline of Jewish life on the Iberian Peninsula. Before the tragic turn of events in the late fourteenth century in medieval Iberia, Jews co-existed in relative peace and prosperity with their Christian compatriots. This period of tolerance enabled Jews to devote their energies to intellectual and literary pursuits, as well as mystical exploration. Indeed, from the Jewish Golden Age in Muslim Spain until the fifteenth century in Christian Spain, Jewish culture flourished in remarkable ways that enriched the cultural heritage of Western Europe. Hundreds of scientific and philosophical texts that were translated by Jews into Hebrew and Latin from the Arabic were disseminated throughout Europe, fomenting new modes of thinking in the universities. Jews also developed their own unique philosophical thought, termed “rationalism,” which was directly inspired by Arabic/Aristotelian philosophy. Rationalism, the religion of the Torah (as interpreted by rabbinic scholars), and mysticism were the three modes of thought that informed Jewish cultural creativity of the era. Sem Tob’s works, being situated within this cultural paradigm, reflect both the intense intellectual and spiritual exploration that characterize the period, and the tension fraught world of Castilian Jewish life a century before its dissolution.

While the focus of this dissertation is on Proverbios morales and Ma'aseh ha Rav in relation to Jewish thought and intellectual controversies within the Jewish community, a discussion of the Spanish Christian political, social and economic landscape in which Jews lived will precede an analysis of these works. Jews, being a maligned ethnic group in medieval Europe, had to contend with specific issues pertaining to minority cultures, many of which can be detected in Proverbios morales and Ma'aseh ha Rav. Because Sem Tob's world view, or that of any author for that matter, is informed not only by the specific community to which he/she belongs, but by the broader social forces that invariably shape and delimit cultural expression, I present in this chapter a broad summary of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in medieval western Europe, political, economic, and social conditions in thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries Spain, Christian laws regulating Jewish conduct, and economic life as encoded in Alfonso X's Siete Partidas.

### **Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaic Sentiment in Western Europe in the Middle Ages**

The scholars Robert Chazan, Jeremy Cohen, Gavin Langmuir, and Robert Moore offer differing perspectives on the origins of persecution and anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages in western Europe. Chazan and Moore look to the eleventh and twelfth centuries as the period in which persecutory patterns in European society began to emerge. Chazan argues that societal circumstances and ideational legacies interacted in such a way in the twelfth century as to produce a shift in mainstream perception of Jews (Chazan xi; Moore 5). Moore, in contrast, addresses broader patterns of persecution. He claims that despite the intellectual and spiritual vitality of the twelfth century that set the stage for the

efflorescence of European thought, deliberate and socially sanctioned violence began to be directed against out-groups during this time; out-groups being defined as those whose race, religion, or way of life was not acceptable to the dominant culture (5). According to him, Europe, as it was undergoing a process of reclassification in 1100, began casting Jews, heretics, lepers, and male homosexuals as enemies of society (Moore 99).

Jeremy Cohen is of the opinion that the shift away from the Augustinian paradigm towards Jews and Judaism in the thirteenth century is responsible for increasing anti-Semitic attitudes. According to Saint Augustine (354-430), Jews were to be tolerated in Christian society as a reminder of the events of the Bible and of Christian truth. While Jews were to remain in a state of humiliation as a punishment for their sin until they accepted Jesus as the messiah, they were still seen as having a role in the redemptive process of humanity. As long as this maxim was pursued as official Church policy, the assumption that Jews belonged in Christendom underlay all decrees and provided the theological bedrock of Jewish survival in medieval Christian Europe (J. Cohen, *Friars* 21).

In the thirteenth century, Cohen maintains, Dominicans and Franciscans sought to implement a new Christian ideology with regard to Jews that differed considerably from Augustine's stance (14). From Augustine until the twelfth century, Christian theologians castigated the Jewish sages from Jesus' time for not recognizing Jesus as the messiah.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As Cohen explains, "the anti-Jewish polemic of Augustine and his early medieval successors was generally limited to an attack upon the Jews' obstinate and incorrect interpretation of the Old Testament, which led to a denial of the divinity and messianic nature of Jesus. Because the Jewish community served a positive purpose for the Church,

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), though, differed in opinion and taught that the sages did in fact recognize Jesus yet crucified him anyway. The idea that the disbelief of the Jews derived not from ignorance but from a deliberate defiance of the truth cast Judaism in a new, more sinister, light that invariably influenced Christian views about the role Jews should play in Christian society.

Attacks on the Jewish religion on the grounds of the Talmud also marked a novelty in anti-Jewish polemics. Pedro Alfonso (1033-1109), a prominent Jew from Spain who converted in Huesca, was one of the first Christian polemicists to use the Talmud against his former coreligionists. Indeed, as Jewish converts to Christianity became more numerous and allied themselves with anti-Judaic elements of the Church, this trend became more pronounced. Converts' knowledge of rabbinics, Talmud, and Hebrew were used as a weapon against the Jews, and proved to be very efficacious in undermining the morale of the Jewish community. Pedro Alfonso's arguments, though, were not as hostile as those of later polemicists, such as Nicholis Donin and Pablo Christiani, the converts behind the Paris and Barcelona Disputations of 1240 and 1263 respectively. These two men armed Christian friars with evidence from the Talmud, however distorted it may have been, to discredit and denigrate the Jewish religion. In the case of Donin in the Paris Disputation, the Talmud was shown to be blasphemous, whereas in the Barcelona Disputation, it was used to prove the truth of Christianity (J. Cohen, *Friars* 165). In both cases, though, the Talmud was used as a weapon and paved the way to the

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Augustine and those who followed him had no reason to challenge the legitimacy of its existence in Christendom" (*Friars* 21).

portrayal of Jews as heretics of their own religion and therefore undeserving of toleration in Christian societies.

It must be noted, however, that the attacks on the Talmud did not merely express the animus of vindictive converts. While they may have aided in seriously undermining the Jewish religion in the Christian world, they were motivated by Christian ideology and theology. Pablo Christiani's assailment of Judaism, for example, cannot be fully understood without examining the magnum opus of Raymond de Peñafort's school's mission to the Jews, which was written by Pablo's confrere and associate Raymond Martini. Martini, who believed that the Jews of the Talmud had abandoned both reason and God, identified them with the eschatological force of evil named Magog who adhered to the cult of the devil (J. Cohen, *Friars* 147). Just as Pablo had done in 1263, he argued that contemporary Jewry had broken away from its heritage of the divinely revealed faith of the Bible, and that Talmudic Judaism constituted a willful rejection of God's ordinance (to the Hebrews). According to Martini, therefore, the Jews had no positive function in Christendom anymore (156). This approach (i.e. that of Peñafort and Martini) can be viewed as a sophisticated development of the stance taken at the Paris Disputation, and it is generally agreed upon that the Barcelona Disputation of 1263 is a marker of a definite and drastic change in the attitude of the Church towards rabbinic Judaism (165).

Gavin Langmuir concurs with J. Cohen in that a serious change in attitude towards the Jews occurred in the thirteenth century, though he traces the origins of certain types

of hostility as dating back to the mid twelfth.<sup>6</sup> This unusual earlier hostility, which he defines as “chimeria” or irrational accusations, arose in part because of the fact that religiosity in the Christian West began to present itself in empirical terms; that is to say, non-rational beliefs were increasingly expressed as empirical truths. The discrepancy between observable reality and religious dogma occasioned a new kind of doubt--termed “rational empirical” by Langmuir—which then gave rise to crises of faith that ultimately led to the creation of heretical movements (113). Groups that preferred to radically modify the non-rational beliefs that had been instilled in them since childhood rather than suppress their ability to think for themselves were labeled heretics (126). Others dealt with doubt by suppressing their conclusions about observable reality, a defense mechanism that causes delusional thinking, to use a modern psychological term.

Because Jews were seen as an inferior out-group, it was easy to displace fear and hostility onto them, which had the effect of obscuring the true nature of the social problems that threatened society. This phenomenon, known as scapegoating, is a well-documented social occurrence. In the case of medieval peoples, the obsessive focusing on unrealistic or external components of an out-group who were perceived as a social menace may have served to keep in-group members from recognizing the discrepancy between their stated values and their actual behavior. Additionally, it may have

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<sup>6</sup> In Langmuir’s analysis, as with all of the others, it is necessary to distinguish between northern and Mediterranean Europe. Until the eleventh century there was little popular anti-Judaism in the Mediterranean, possibly because a significant and diversified Jewish population had existed there as long as Christianity and because southern Europeans were familiar with peoples with different physiological characteristics (60, 345). Even though his research mainly addresses northern European anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism eventually migrated southward, as is well known, and had a prior history in Visigothic Spain.



functioned to inhibit awareness of the real menace whose recognition would invariably weaken belief in the values and unity of the in-group (Langmuir 332).

What Langmuir claims is different about hostility against Jews as opposed to other out-groups in the Middle Ages is the fact that Jews were subjected not only to xenophobia, but also to chimerical accusations that had no basis in truth and almost always led to violence. Xenophobia is so common a reaction against out-groups that objectivity is the exception, whereas chimeria has never been continually present, has not been directed against many out-groups, and is dependent upon historical circumstances (342). Why, one might ask, were Jews subjected to these kinds of accusations?

According to Langmuir's theory, chimeria was primarily directed against groups that had certain cultural or physiological characteristics that they would not or could not change (342). In the case of Jews, it was religion, and with Black peoples, skin color. These characteristics, however, were only important to in-groups when they desired to exploit out-groups (342). Exploited out-groups in the Middle Ages are divided into three separate categories: 1) Peasants, who belonged to the same society and broadly the same culture as their exploiters; 2) outsiders who didn't originate in the society of the exploiters, but whose distinct cultural characteristics were amenable to change;<sup>7</sup> and 3) those who did not belong to the same culture as the exploiters and differed in cultural or physiological characteristics that they could not or did not want to change (as stated above). Even though members of the third out-group may have assimilated many of the

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<sup>7</sup> Two examples are slave societies that gradually abandoned their cultural distinctiveness and merged with the less exploited and higher classes of society, and conversos, who abandoned their religion (Langmuir 344).

characteristics of the in-group, their distinctiveness remained patent (345). Moreover, this group's status was institutionalized as fundamentally inferior in contrast to the institutionalization of a contingent or conditional inferiority in the case of the first two categories (346). Langmuir explains: "the prerequisite for the institutionalization of a status of fundamental inferiority is that the original exploitation of members of the out-group and the judgment that they are inferior have been directly associated in the minds of members of the in-group with the particular and unchanging characteristics that distinguished that out-group from all other out-groups," and Jews, as is well known, were originally considered to be inferior because of their disbelief in Christ and adherence to Judaism (346). Furthermore, once the status of fundamental inferiority takes hold, it downgrades to a status of essential inferiority, which means that a people is deemed inferior by nature. This is the point at which xenophobia can turn into chimeria (irrational accusations). Chimerical accusations then gain social acceptance through rumor and are used in literature, art, and other cultural mediums of expression. In this way, they become deeply rooted in the culture.

One important example of how chimerical accusations became culturally embedded is the hagiographical work of Thomas of Monmouth, the Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich, begun in 1150 and completed in 1173. Thomas based his story on the testimony of a converted Jew named Theobald who claimed, under interrogation, that the Jews of Spain assembled every year in Narbonne to arrange for the annual ritual sacrifice of a Christian child in order to show contempt for Christ (who had made them slaves in exile), and to obtain their freedom and return to Israel (Langmuir 224-25).

Important to note is that Thomas, writing six years after the death of William, could impose his own interpretation of the wounds without fearing contradiction (230). His claim of death by crucifixion, which would have been impossible to determine given the decay of the body, marks the first recorded charge of this kind against the Jews (232).<sup>8</sup> Despite the irrationality of his allegation, the myth of ritual murder by crucifixion was encoded in this literary text and disseminated throughout Christendom. Even though Monmouth was not a great man and did not solve any important theological or philosophical problems, he was an influential figure in the formation of Western culture and his manipulation of religious symbols had deadly consequences for Jews for generations to come (234).

The second type of ritual murder accusation that first appears after 1235 was that Jews killed Christian children to acquire the blood they needed for their rituals or medicine. This type of accusation originated in England and then spread throughout the continent (Langmuir 240). Even though popes prohibited accusations of Jewish ritual blood shedding, churchmen were not prone to exculpate Jews from these kinds of charges. Middle level clerics played a major role in creating and disseminating both crucifixion charges and later blood accusations (260, 278).<sup>9</sup>

In Spain, we find chimerical accusations in the Milagros de Nuestra Señora (written between 1246-1252) of the cleric Gonzalo de Berceo, an astute propagandist whose aim

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<sup>8</sup> The charge was first recorded in 1150 by Thomas.

<sup>9</sup> The ecclesiastical hierarchy was very close to the popular masses because of such things as public sermons and other forms of predication; therefore it was very effective as an agent of anti-Semitism and was responsible, in large measure, for the hardening attitude toward the Jews (Monsalvo 215).

was to translate Latin miracle stories into the vernacular in order to indoctrinate illiterates with Christian ideas and anti-Jewish polemic.<sup>10</sup> His Milagros are based on earlier Latin compilations of Marian miracle stories, but are by no means mere translations.<sup>11</sup> While the original arguments are respected in his version, alterations are clearly evident in the description of situations, the intensification of the good and evil traits of the characters, and the highly emotional colloquial language (Baños LV).

Berceo's literary style, which is a type of narrative poetry termed "Mester de Clercía," was an effective way of gaining the confidence of an illiterate public that had respect for the written word but were not versed in Latin (Gerli 17).<sup>12</sup> Like sermons, its goal was education and persuasion, albeit in a more learned vernacular. Indeed, it is thought that Berceo's Milagros were meant to attract, instruct, and entertain the devoted masses that stopped at the monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla on their way through the Camino de Santiago, the evidence for which lies in the emotional tone, *juglaresque* formulas and appeals to listen in the Milagros, and in the competition between monasteries for riches and prominence that led them to devise creative ways to attract pilgrims (Gerli 23-24).

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<sup>10</sup> Gonzalo de Berceo was born in the Riojan hamlet of Berceo and associated throughout his life with the nearby monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla.

<sup>11</sup> Anselmo de San Saba's compilation of miracle stories (late eleventh, early twelfth centuries) is considered to be an important source for later writers like Berceo. He most likely became familiarized with them in his travels throughout Europe. "El niño Judío" is counted among the miracles that San Saba compiled (Baños XLIV).

<sup>12</sup> The *Mester de Clercía*, a school of poetry pertaining to the clergy, originated in the thirteenth century in northern Castile. It marks an important development in Spanish letters in that the vernacular, rather than Latin, was used to express religious themes. This style was also utilized in profane writing, but its primary purpose, aside from dignifying the romance language, was to make learned writings of a religious nature accessible to a broader public (Baños xi-xii).

One of the most hostile anti-Jewish miracle stories that Berceo presents in his collection is “Cristo y los judios de Toledo.”<sup>13</sup> In this “miracle,” a congregation of Christian worshippers hear the voice of the Virgin Mary, who tells them that the blind and deaf Jewish people are engaging in a ritual recreation of the crucifixion of her son:<sup>14</sup>

“Otra vez crucifigan al mi caro Fijuelo,  
non entendrié ninguno cuánd gran es el mi duelo;  
críasse en Toledo un amargo majuelo,  
non se crió tan malo nunca en esti suelo.” (vs 420)

The archbishop then incites the congregation to go to the houses of the important rabbis of the city in order to find the committer of the alleged crime:

“Vayamos a las casas -esto no lo tardemos-  
de los rabís mayores, ca algo hallaremos;  
desemos las yantares, ca bien las cobraremos;  
si non, de la Gloriosa mal rebtados seremos.” (vs 425)

Upon arriving at the house of the most honorable rabbi, they find a large waxen effigy of Christ that the Jews have been mutilating: “Fallaron enna casa de raví más honrado, un grand cuerpo de cera” (vs 427). Those present are thereby captured, imprisoned, and put to death. The miracle concludes with the *exemplo*: “Qui a Sancta María quisiere afontar, como éstos ganaron assín deve ganar,” which serves to renew in the minds of Christians the association of the Jews with the crucifixion of Jesus.

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<sup>13</sup> Fernando Baños considers this miracle story to be the most anti-Semitic in that the Jews are castigated collectively as a religious and ethnic group rather than as individuals (100).

<sup>14</sup> Fernando Baños’ edition of the Milagros is used in the following verses.

Alfonso X's Cantigas de Santa María (c. 1252), which include the same miracle stories as the Milagros of Berceo, are much different in tone. For example, while Berceo's Virgin Mary in "Los judíos de Toledo" denigrates the Jews in five emotionally charged verses, Alfonso has her say relatively little in comparison: "Ay Dios, ay Dios, qué grande y probada es la perfidia de los judíos que a mi hijo mataron, siendo de los suyos, y aún no quieren paz con Él" (Filgueira Valverde). Additionally, in Berceo's version, the culprits are rabbis who are found in the house of the most honorable rabbi of the city. In Alfonso's *cantiga*, in contrast, the mob simply goes to the Jewish Quarter: "Entonces todos, corriendo raudos, se fueron yendo hacia la judería y hallaron—no os mentimos—una imagen de Jesucristo a la que iban a herir los judíos" (F. Valverde). While it is still a heinous literary characterization of the Jews, it is less vehemently anti-Semitic in that rabbis, the spiritual leaders of the Jewish community, are not singled out as criminals.

In effect, the different tone of Alfonso X's (1221-1284) Cantigas de Santa María (c. 1252) bears out Cohen's conclusions about the new mendicant ideology regarding Jews. Alfonso, as opposed to Berceo, represents courtly culture, which was not as hostile to the Jewish people. Moreover, Alfonso, as king, was responsible for the governance and wellbeing of the Jews, who paid taxes directly to him. He also employed Jews in his administration and as translators in his various book projects. Therefore, it is not surprising that his Cantigas are presented in a more factual manner and are less charged

with emotion.<sup>15</sup> Berceo, in contrast, belonged to the ecclesiastical order, and is considered by some to be the most efficacious ecclesiastical propagandist of thirteenth-century Spain (Dutton 140). Even though we don't know what the direct consequences were of the negative characterization of Jews in his miracle stories, we do know that they helped contribute to the widespread belief in the types of irrational accusations that Langmuir describes.<sup>16</sup> From this difference in the portrayal of Jews in the miracle stories of Berceo and Alfonso, however, we see that perceptions about them differed according to which strata of society one belonged.

### **Political, Economic, and Social Context**

In addition to irrational attitudes and gross superstitions about Jews, economic, political, and social issues provided fertile ground for the development of anti-Semitic sentiment in the Middle Ages. As previously stated, before the thirteenth century, Catholic theology, based on Augustinian thought, demanded that Jews be tolerated in western Christendom. By the time of Innocent III's papacy (1198-1216), though, the Church was no longer as protective of the Jews. The Christian scriptural warrant of minimal yet permanent acceptance of Jews as a religious society was becoming badly undermined by thirteenth-century developments such as Christian knowledge and

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<sup>15</sup> They also include more references to the Old Testament, and were meant to be sung in celebratory praise of Mary rather than to incite ardent pilgrims.

<sup>16</sup> Another example of an ecclesiast who incited the masses against the Jews is the Dominican Giordano de Rivalto (1260-1311), one of the greatest mendicant preachers of thirteenth-century Europe. He claimed that he witnessed a miracle in which the boy Jesus rallied Christians to slaughter 24,000 Jews (J. Cohen, *Friars* 239). The cause of the massacre was that of a Jewish father castigating his son for converting to Christianity, exactly the same theme as that portrayed by Berceo in "El judiezno." Rivalta also preached that Jews persisted in crucifying Jesus by abusing drawings and carvings of him, the theme of "Cristo y los Judios de Toledo" (240).

misunderstanding of rabbinic Judaism,<sup>17</sup> the stigmatizing of the Jews as usurers, the increasing exclusionism of Christendom, and the culmination of the centralizing papacy (Burns 50-52).

The papacy, reaching the height of its ecclesiastic and political power under Innocent III, proved to be particularly detrimental to the Jews in the thirteenth century. During this time, older decrees that negatively affected the status of Jews were expanded upon and enforced, which had the effect of socially isolating them more than they had been in the past (Marcus 137). In the 4th Lateran Council of 1215, convened in Rome by Innocent III, strict decrees were issued against the Jews. They were not permitted to charge excessive interest on loans, were forbidden from exercising authority over Christians, and were ordered to wear different clothing than Christians in order to render them easily identifiable (Baer I: 101).<sup>18</sup> As Mark Cohen notes, “because special attire was also prescribed for abhorrent groups such as prostitutes, Christians could not help but consider the Jews’ special sign as also a mark of degradation and exclusion” (111). We must keep in mind, though, that sanctuary laws were also promulgated in order to maintain clear boundaries between social classes. This was the case in the *cortes* of Jerez of 1268. The new wealth of the kingdom, accumulated through the process of conquest and repopulation in the thirteenth century, created a new market where luxury items were more attainable to those who could not have previously afforded them. As a result, boundaries between social classes became more ambiguous (Monsalvo 210). The

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<sup>17</sup> See beginning of chapter.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that secular rulers responded unevenly to the new decrees depending on what suited them most. For more on the meanings of markers of difference, see Nirenberg, chapter 5, in Communities of Violence.



landowning nobility reacted to this situation by petitioning for laws that marked differences between the high and low nobility, such as limiting the types of jewels and the quality and color of fabric that different social classes could wear. Hence, the segregation of the Jews of Castile during this time, who were of an inferior social status, can also be viewed as stemming from the nobility's generalized fear of the blurring of class boundaries (219).

#### Usury and tax collecting

Jewish money lending has a long history in medieval Europe and merits attention since its association with corruption and greed has stigmatized the Jewish community for centuries. It must be noted, though, that money lending was more common a profession in northern Europe than in Spain. In Spain, only a minority of wealthy and cultivated Jews served as tax collectors and royal financiers. Since this group was the most visible and had the most influence at court, it is often assumed that all other Spanish medieval Jews engaged in this profession in some form or another. Petty Jewish moneylenders did exist, although the majority of Jews in Spain earned their livelihood through trade, handicrafts, and the sale of produce from their fields and vineyards (Baer I: 360).

The Jews, who first came to Europe as long distance merchants, arrived on northern European soil via trade routes that linked first the pre-Islamic and then the Islamized Orient with Italy, southern France, and the Eastern Germanic regions (M. Cohen 79). When they settled in Christian lands, their relation to commerce caused the predominantly sedentary, rural societies in northern Europe to regard them with suspicion. This was due, in part, to the early church fathers' disapproval of the

accumulation of wealth, especially of wealth generated by profit gained through commerce (77, 80). This phenomenon, combined with the stigma of being “Christ killers,” created an uneasy atmosphere for Jews. Paradoxically, though, they were accepted in Europe precisely because of the utility of their mercantile presence. Secular rulers eased the tension somewhat by protecting them, although once the European economy started expanding in the beginning of the twelfth century and official Church prejudice against trade mellowed, Christian traders in northern Europe began squeezing out their Jewish counterparts. One way they did this was by excluding them from commercial guilds because “of their inability to swear the required Christian oath of initiation” (82). Jews, therefore, had to direct their energies to other professions. In northern Europe, money lending at interest was one of the only options available to them and was permitted due to the need for loans that accompanied the growth of commercial expansion. Secular rulers continued supporting the Jews in their financial endeavors, but it was mainly to ensure that their flow of taxable income was maintained. This proved to be a double-edged sword, however, given that Christian debt to Jewish moneylenders, which violated the principle that no Jew should have power over any Christian, fueled animosity towards both Jews and the Crown. Indeed, Christian borrowers were well aware of the fact that governmental endorsement of Jewish money lending was just a way to keep the royal coffers filled at the expense of Christian pockets. Thus anger towards the Crown sometimes translated into hostility and violence towards the Jews, who served as an escape valve for their frustration.<sup>19</sup> As Guido Kisch maintains, “there is some truth

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the subject of how violence towards Jews was used as a front and escape

to the remark that usury secured for the Jews official protection at the price of public detestation” (qtd. in M. Cohen 329).<sup>20</sup>

In medieval Iberia, as in northern Europe, money lending also has a long history as a stereotype of Jewish economic activity, although nothing was further from the truth (Ruiz 69). There, Muslims and Jews engaged in a wide range of economic endeavors, of which money lending was but one (69-70). Baer notes that in medieval Castile, the occupations of tax-farmer and royal financier were limited to a small upper stratum of elite Jews which, “to the outside eye, appeared representative of the entire Jewish population” (I: 201). Moreover, Jewish tax farmers and royal financiers only affected a limited number of Christians, mainly the urban elites and royal officials with whom they organized tax collection (Ruiz 70). This was not necessarily the case with petty money-lenders, though, who came into contact with a wider range of people--mainly the lower and middling classes-- “who were in great need of immediate small loans and willing to pay usurious rates” (71). When these borrowers were unable to pay back their loans, they often had their farms confiscated and auctioned off by judicial agents in order to ensure payment of outstanding debts to Jews (71).<sup>21</sup> Ruiz argues that “it was precisely this type of transaction that fed popular rancor against Jews,” which is one of the reasons why anti-

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valve for Christian dissatisfaction with royal policies, which most often could not be changed, see Nirenberg (1996). See also Robert Moore (1987), p. 117, who argues that the more Jews were excluded from other occupations and forced into dependence on princes, the more they were targeted in movements against princely or seignorial power.

<sup>20</sup> Guido Kisch, Jews in Medieval Germany: A Study of Their Legal and Social Status, 2nd ed. New York: Ktav, 1970.

<sup>21</sup> The documented confiscations referred to above pertain to fourteenth-century northern Castile. It is known that Jews had recourse to local authorities in order to enforce terms of loans and to collect outstanding debts (Ruiz 71).

Jewish sentiment manifested itself most violently among the lower social groups (71).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the antagonism that grew between the wealthy elite Jews and the Christian urban elites was no small matter. Competition for mercantile and lending prospects, mistrust of Jews' tax exempt status in the cities, and wealthy Jews' proximity to the royal court were additional factors that agitated social relations between Jews and Christians in thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries Castile.

To give an example of the conflictive nature of relations between the urban oligarchy, the nobility, and Jewish financiers during the reign of Alfonso X of Castile, we need only look to the case of the *almojarife* Don Çag de la Maleha.<sup>23</sup> His good fortune came to an end because of an uprising of the feudal nobility, which had been in a state of unrest since 1270 (Baer I: 126).<sup>24</sup> The King, in an effort to quell the disorder, ordered Çag de la Maleha's arrest and imposed an exorbitant tax on all the Jews of the kingdom. By 1275, after the suppression of the uprising, the Jewish officials were restored to power at court, although just a few years later, Çag and the Jewish community of Castile suffered another blow. In 1278, a sum of money that Çag de la Maleha was ordered to

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<sup>22</sup> It must be noted that Jews were not alone in lending money on interest in Castile. Ruiz maintains: "Christians did the same, often in association with Jews serving as fronts for their activities" (71).

<sup>23</sup> The duties of the Jewish *almojarifes* of Castile are described well by Yitzchak Baer: "A handful of Jews, mostly residents of Toledo, organized the administration of taxes and other finances for the entire kingdom. They made all the necessary expenditures out of the royal treasury. They paid the salaries of the knights, supplied food, clothing and arms to the armies in the field, and took care of the needs of the royal household. They undoubtedly also exerted an influence upon economic legislation" (I: 122). Whereas in Aragon, Jews were being forced out of these positions by the end of the thirteenth century, "the social and political character of Castile permitted Jews to function in these capacities through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" (I: 120).

<sup>24</sup> Among the feudal nobility's demands were the abolition of harbor tolls and special imposts (Baer I: 126).

forward to the army and navy (which were besieging Algeciras), was confiscated by the Infante Sancho who used it for his own purposes. The King again blamed the Jews, but this time don Çag was hanged and the Jewish tax farmers imprisoned. All suffered a bitter fate except for one who converted to Christianity (I: 130).

While Alfonso, in this case, persecuted the Jews because of pressures arising from the feudal nobility,<sup>25</sup> the ruling elites of the cities proved to be a more persistent enemy (Monsalvo 211). They were constantly demanding, through the *cortes*, that the king take away many of the Jews' privileges, one of which was that of royal tax farming/financiering. Hence, in order to quell any growing resentment towards the Crown in his kingdom, he may have felt it necessary to scapegoat Don Çag and the other Jewish financiers. Most certainly, the situation put Alfonso in a difficult position given that the Crown was obligated to both protect the Jews and please the populace. His decision to hang don Çag and imprison the tax collectors did gain him some popularity, although it only lasted a few years (211).

### Las Siete Partidas

Alfonso X's law code Siete Partidas (finished between 1256 and 1265), serving as a source of information about how relations between Jews and Christians were regulated in medieval Castile, offer a perspective on Jewish-Christian relations different from that of the accounts of the experiences of the Jewish *almojarifes* and tax collectors. We must keep in mind, though, that the Siete Partidas do not reflect the King's personal or societal context in the same way that the documentation of events which transpired in Alfonso's

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<sup>25</sup> Other pressures include anti-Jewish popular sentiment and the Church (Monsalvo 211).

own time do, given that most of the items in the code “break no new ground but serve as a conduit for established patterns already on display in Canon law” (Burns 53). However, they are still an invaluable source of information, and reveal the ways in which attitudes about Jews were encoded in legal texts.<sup>26</sup>

As stated above, the Siete Partidas do not mark a great novelty in Jewry law. The laws pertaining to Jews in it are based on prior Christian legislation, such as the Theodosian Code (compiled between 429 and 438),<sup>27</sup> which is the foundation of Jewry law in Latin Christendom. In this Code, Jewry law is a mixture of tolerance (an inheritance from polytheistic Rome), and intolerance (the exclusivity of Christian monotheism).<sup>28</sup> Title 5 of Book 16, for instance, impugns Jews along with heretics as enemies of the Christian faith, calling both groups a pestilence and a contagion “if they should spread,” while Title 8 perpetuates features from old Pagan-Roman toleration, recognizing the legitimacy of Judaism and guaranteeing Jewish freedom of worship (M. Cohen 32).

Many parts of the Theodosian Code concerning Jews were incorporated into the Siete Partidas. For example, laws stipulating the protection of Jews from wanton assault on their persons and property, and the license to repair synagogues that were falling into

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<sup>26</sup> Even though the Siete Partidas were written during the lifetime of Alfonso, it had been thought that they remained inoperative until 1348. Recent research, though, reveals that the Partidas had the force of law immediately as an outgrowth and amplification of the *Especulo* promulgated in 1254 (Burns 47).

<sup>27</sup> The Theodosian Code incorporates Roman Imperial legislation dating from the beginning of the Christian period.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Cohen notes that the “gods and their respective peoples” in polytheistic societies were better able to tolerate the existence of other belief systems. See Under Crescent and Cross, page 32.

ruin both originate in the earlier Code. Negative injunctions found in the Siete Partidas that were influenced by the Theodosian Code are the prohibition of intermarriage between Jews and Christians, and the forbidding of Jewish ownership of Christian slaves. This last injunction reflects the growing Christian concern in the Middle Ages that Jews not have power over Christians. Subsequent prohibitions, such as the forbidding of Jews from holding public office and requiring them to wear a special badge, were inspired by this same fear.<sup>29</sup>

The Justinianic Code, compiled at the beginning of the sixth century, carried over entire sections from the Theodosian Code intact. It is basically a revision of the Theodosian Code and “reflects a hardening of attitudes characteristic of this period of tension and enhanced fear of heresy” (M. Cohen 35). The Justinianic Code, however, was not known in the West until the revival of the study of Roman law at the end of the eleventh century, and was not as influential in southern Europe, where continuity with the Roman past was stronger than in the north (Remie Constable 21; M. Cohen 36). This factor contributed to an environment for the Jew that was considerably more secure than it was in northern Europe (M. Cohen 36).

The most significant pronouncement of ecclesiastical Jewry law is known as the papal bull *Sicut Judeus* of the early twelfth century.<sup>30</sup> It specified what the twelfth-century Church deemed to be the Jews’ rights, including “freedom from forced baptism,

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<sup>29</sup> It must be noted, though, that Canon law was not equally enforced among secular rulers, as they tended to pick and choose according to the needs of the day.

<sup>30</sup> This was the first systematic policy statement by medieval popes regarding Jews. It was frequently reissued and in 1234 was incorporated into the authoritative Canon law in the *Decretals* of Pope Gregory IX (1227-41) (Burns 53; M. Cohen 37).

protection of persons and property from unwarranted assault, the unimpeded right to practice Judaism, and the inviolability of Jewish cemeteries” (M. Cohen 37). In short, it is the papal assertion, anchored in Roman law and mediated into medieval Christianity by Pope Gregory IX, of Jews’ and Judaism’s right to protection and toleration (37). Its theological rationale is founded in the thought of Saint Augustine, who wrote that Jews were allowed a place in Christendom as “witnesses” to the events of the Bible, and as players in the redemptive process of Christianity.<sup>31</sup>

This papal assertion figures prominently in the seventh *Partida* of the Siete Partidas.<sup>32</sup> Alfonso begins by invoking the Augustinian paradigm that Jews are permitted to live in Christian lands as witnesses to Christian truth and as persons condemned to serve as eternal captives for the killing of the Christian savior:

E la razon por que la elesia e los emperadores e los reyes e los otros principes sofrieron a los judios beuir entre los cristianos es esta: por que ellos biuiessen como en catiuerio pora siempre et fuesse remembrança a los omnes que ellos uienen del linaje daquellos que crucificaron Nuestro Sennor Jhesu Christo. (qtd. in Carpenter, *Alfonso X* 28)

Even though this tenuous acceptance is generally considered to be “tolerant” by many modern scholars who study Christian-Jewish relations in medieval Spain, Alfonso’s perspective is lacking the more benign counter doctrine preached by Francis of Assisi who saw the crucifixion as occasioned by the sinfulness of all the descendents of Adam

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<sup>31</sup> Saint Augustine also expounded the theory that Jews were condemned to remain in perpetual bondage to Christian kings.

<sup>32</sup> The seventh *Partida* concerns both Jews and Muslims and is located in the category of crime.



(Burns 51). In Assisi's paradigm, the historical personages involved were merely "a screen for the real culprits, namely, ourselves" (51). Nevertheless, Alfonso also believed that Jews should be treated with kindness and compassion, and allowed them to live according to their own customs and religious beliefs.

The emphasis on both kindness towards and humiliation of the Jews sets the stage for much ambiguity in the interpretation of the seventh *Partida*. In this section, a variety of laws proscribe relations between Jews and Christians, and determine how Jews should behave both socially and legally in a Christian society. Themes that emerge are who is a Jew (Law I), how Jews should live among Christians (Laws II and III), how synagogues are to be treated (Law IV), tolerance of Jewish customs (Law V), the administration of justice when problems arise between Jews and Christians, protection of converts and how they are to be regarded (Law VI), punishment of Christian converts to Judaism (Law VII), regulation of social relations between Jews and Christians (Law VIII), sexual boundaries and the administration of penalties when these are transgressed (Law IX), prohibitions concerning who Jews are allowed to hire as servants (Law X), and markers of identification (Law XI). The laws that humiliate and marginalize are II, III, VIII, IX, X and XI. Law II, addressing ritual murder accusations, parallels irrational accusations made against Jews in Berceo's *milagro* "Cristo y los judíos de Toledo." The actual law forbids Jews to leave their quarter on Good Friday to impede them from robbing and crucifying Christian children, or in place of children, humiliating waxen images of Christ on a cross:

. . . E porque oymos dezir que en algunos logares los judios fizieron e fazen el dia del uernes santo remembrança de la passion de Nuestro sennor Jhesu Christo en manera de escarnio furtando los ninnos e poniendolos en cruz o faziendo ymagenes de cera e crucificandolas quando los ninnos non pueden auer . . . (qtd. in Carpenter, *Alfonso X* 29)<sup>33</sup>

As commented earlier, ritual murder and crucifixion accusations were circulating in northern Europe starting around the middle of the twelfth century with Thomas of Monmouth's The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich.<sup>34</sup> The inclusion of this theme in the Siete Partidas illustrates that soon afterwards, the accusations were drifting southward and embedding themselves in Spanish soil. However, there is some skepticism expressed regarding their veracity. The wording of Law II: “. . . E porque oymos dezir . . .” demonstrates that the accusations were still just rumors, not yet proven “fact,” as they were thought to be by many northern Europeans. Nevertheless, the mere mention of ritual murder and crucifixion charges in the Siete Partidas and in Berceo and Alfonso's versions of “Cristo y los judios de Toledo” reveals that gross superstitions about Jews had either made their way into the minds of the general populace, or were

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<sup>33</sup> “. . . and because we heard that in some places the Jews reenacted derisively--and continue to do so-- on Good Friday the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, stealing children and placing them on a cross, or forming waxen images and crucifying them when children are unavailable. . .” It is possible that this part of law II was included at the behest of ecclesiastical officials who were circulating rumors of this nature.

<sup>34</sup> Carpenter notes that after the infamous case of William of Norwich, the indictment then surfaced in France in 1171 and Germany in 1235 (*Alfonso X* 65). On the Iberian Peninsula, the first notice we possess of the charge of ritual murder appears in the thirteenth-century literary debate “Disputa de un cristiano y un judío.” Soon after it appears in Alfonso X's Cantigas de Santa María (c. 1252) and Gonzalo de Berceo's Milagros de Nuestra Señora (1246-1252), as mentioned previously (65).

being insinuated into their minds by church officials whose agenda was to propagate anti-Jewish sentiment.<sup>35</sup>

In Law III, Jews are restricted from holding any office that might give them power over Christians. Indeed, for centuries the threat of Jewish power over Christians and potential Christians was a major irritant to the Catholic Church. The negative language used to justify such limitations, though, did not originate in the Siete Partidas. In Spain, this kind of legislation dates back to Visigothic rule of the seventh century. Canon III of the Sixth Council of Toledo (of the year 638), for example, stipulates that “the highest authority in the kingdom shall not ascend the royal throne until he shall have sworn . . . not to permit [the Jews] to violate the Catholic Faith” (Remie Constable 22).

Additionally, Law X of the *Lex Visigothorum* of 653 effectively disempowers Jews by denying them the right to testify against Christians:

If a lie discovered before men both renders its perpetrator infamous and incurs a sentence of condemnation, how much the more should not one found defective in regard to the divine Faith be utterly excluded from giving testimony? Deservedly therefore Jews, whether baptized or not baptized, are forbidden to give testimony in court. (23)

While in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Christian kings in Spain were relatively tolerant of Jews, we still see in Law III of the Siete Partidas a continuation of

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Burns is of the opinion that the admonitions against abusing waxen images of Christ and crucifying Christian children were included in the Siete Partidas in order to curb popular action against Jews (54). Furthermore, it is important to note that despite the prevalence of the charge of ritual murder throughout Europe, it never received papal endorsement. The failure of the various popes’ attempts to discredit the slanderous accusation reveals the popular nature of the indictment (Carpenter, *Alfonso X* 65).

this type of hostility. In it, Alfonso maintains that Jews, having once been honored and privileged, lost that status for dishonoring Christ:

Mas porque ellos fueron desconnoscientos a aquel que los auie onrrados e preuilegiados, e en logar de fazerle onrra, desonrraronlo, dandol muy auiltada muerte en la cruz, guisada cosa fue e derecha que por tan grand yerro e maldad que fizieron, que perdiessen la onrra e el preuilegio que auien. (qtd. in Carpenter, *Alfonso X* 30)<sup>36</sup>

However, this ordinance (Law III),<sup>37</sup> which would have prevented Jews from serving as tax farmers, was not enforced because the Crown was still too dependent on the expertise of Jews in matters of international trade and finances. Or, better said, it was enforced or disregarded according to the needs of the moment.<sup>38</sup>

In Laws VIII and X, regulations are stipulated that limit social contact between Jews and Christians, and prohibitions regarding attempts at conversion to Judaism of Christian or non-Christian servants and slaves are clearly laid out. Jews are expressly

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<sup>36</sup> “But they rejected Him who had granted them honors and privileges, and instead of honoring Him, they scorned Him, putting Him to death most shamefully on the cross. It is reasonable and proper, therefore, that as a consequence of the great error and evil that they committed they should lose the honors and privileges they once held” (trans. Carpenter 30).

<sup>37</sup> Law III restricts Jews from holding any office that would give them power over Christians.

<sup>38</sup> In 1302, for example, King Ferdinand IV decided that it would not be advisable to discontinue farming out taxes to the Jews or to forego their services despite petitions by Christian courtiers to remove them from those positions. Even when old rivalries flared up between Christian and Jewish courtiers, Ferdinand still supported the Jews because he knew that if the ordinance were carried out, the Jews would be financially ruined and therefore unable to pay their taxes to him (Baer I: 308).

forbidden to hire Christian domestic servants,<sup>39</sup> are not allowed to share meals or wine in the homes of Christians, and are prohibited from going to the same bathhouses. Indeed, delimiting social contact between Christians and Jews was one of the earliest and most characteristic objectives of legislation regulating the two groups (Carpenter, *Jewish-Christian* 61). The Church took the lead in this endeavor because it was deemed necessary to “eliminate any occasion whereby Christians might be induced to accept Judaism” (61). Given that it was also in the interest of Jewish authorities to maintain as separate an existence as possible from Christians, it is unlikely that this law met with much resistance. As is well known, Jews have their own dietary laws that distinguish between clean (kosher) and unclean (*treyf*) foods, and laws prohibiting intermarriage, which further restrict their social interactions with non-Jews. Nevertheless, the same restrictions do not always mean the same thing across time and cultures.<sup>40</sup> For Christians, the prohibitions regarding servants reflect the traditional stance of the Church, which deemed it degrading for Christians to be in servile positions to Jews. The restrictions regarding the sharing of meals and wine is a bit more ambiguous. One possible explanation for it is the fear of ethnic contamination since the sharing of food and wine in

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<sup>39</sup> Alfonso’s permission to Jews to employ Christian field laborers reflects his desire to protect Jewish landowners, as they were important for the taxes they contributed to the royal treasury (Carpenter, *Alfonso X* 67). Additionally, protection of Jewish landowners “was a means by which Alfonso sought to control the ever-encroaching nobles who were likely to absorb the estates of displaced Jews” (88-89).

<sup>40</sup> While Jews also feared ethnic contamination, there were specific Biblical laws forbidding them to engage in such behavior. On the contrary, in Christianity, there are no Biblical injunctions that prohibit Christians from eating the food or sharing the wine of non-Christian peoples.

the home can lead to conviviality and sexual cohabitation.<sup>41</sup> Another possibility is that Jewish dietary laws offended Christians because of the superiority that such rules imply. Hence, Christians may have elaborated their own laws in order to counter the imagined insult.<sup>42</sup> This interpretation is in accord with the fact that Jewish existence in Christian lands was predicated on a status of inferiority, therefore any implied superiority on the part of the Jews would have met with resistance and contempt.<sup>43</sup>

Laws IX and XI enforce sexual boundaries between Jews and Christians. While law IX threatens Jews who have sexual relations with Christian women with the death penalty, law XI attempts to prevent such illicit behavior by ordering Jews to wear a special sign so that they are clearly recognizable. Indeed, by the thirteenth century, the fear of sexual intercourse came to justify the most extensive attempts at segregation undertaken by the medieval Church (Niremberg 133). Due to the physical similarities between Jews, Christians, and Moors, an emblem of difference was deemed necessary to distinguish Jews as such. This marker of sexual boundaries, sometimes referred to as the

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<sup>41</sup> Carpenter gives the same explanation: “Although Alfonso does not state the rationale for proscribing Jewish-Christian repasts, it is likely that the prohibition is based on a concern with unrestricted conviviality leading to illicit relations between the two groups” (*Alfonso X* 86).

<sup>42</sup> Carpenter maintains that in this section, Alfonso may be attempting “to eliminate an implicit insult to Christianity arising from the Jews’ rejection of biblically unclean or ritually unfit viands” (*Alfonso X* 86). Indeed, because Christians viewed their religion as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, dietary laws were no longer considered relevant. The fact that Jews still observed these laws, therefore, would have been regarded as stubbornness and willful rejection of Christian truth.

<sup>43</sup> For a more complete analysis of law VIII, see Dwayne Carpenter (1983).

“Jew badge” law, was encoded in the 4th Lateran Council in 1215 and carried over to the Siete Partidas several decades later.<sup>44</sup>

Implicit in the remaining laws (I, IV, V and VI) is the theologically justified ethical paradigm of Saint Augustine that Jews be tolerated in Christian society.<sup>45</sup> This injunction remained the bedrock of all decrees regarding Jews for centuries. In Spain, it remained the working paradigm for much longer than in northern Europe, as the expulsions of the Jews from England and France in 1290 and 1306, respectively, make clear. Some scholars maintain that the paradigm began to shift in Spain in the thirteenth century, although laws such as these in the Siete Partidas, and the fact that Jews were protected by the Castilian kings for most of the thirteenth century and on into the fourteenth, would seem to put it at a later date.

The first law (I), which stipulates who is a Jew and why they are to be tolerated in Christian society, accepts Jews as members of Christian society, albeit as a marginalized ethnic group. Laws IV and V are a reflection of the papal bull *Sicut Judeus*, in which Jews’ rights are specified.<sup>46</sup> Alfonso shows respect towards the Jewish religion in law IV by allowing synagogues to exist and to be repaired, although he forbid the construction of new ones unless given permission.<sup>47</sup> Law V grants Jews the freedom to pray and rest on

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<sup>44</sup> For a different interpretation of this law, see A. Cutler in “Innocent III and the Distinctive Clothing of Jews and Muslims,” Studies in Medieval Culture 3 (1970): 92-116. He argues that the distinction was imposed not to prevent sexual intercourse but to humiliate minorities.

<sup>45</sup> Dwayne Carpenter argues that justice, not acceptance or understanding, is the essence of tolerance in the medieval period (qtd. in Burns 48).

<sup>46</sup> See pages 30-31.

<sup>47</sup> Alfonso considered the synagogue to be a place where God is praised, therefore Christians were not allowed to desecrate them in any way.

the Sabbath, and guarantees justice in the case of Christian harassment or violence against them. To prevent Christians from taking the law into their own hands, Alfonso specifies that conflicts with Jews be brought to court and proven in a trial. Law VI stipulates that Jews not be converted by force, stating that this kind of service is not pleasing to God: “Fuerça nin premia non deuen fazer en ninguna manera a ningund judio por que se torne cristiano . . .” (qtd. in Carpenter, *Alfonso X* 33).<sup>48</sup> Conversion through good example and the words of the sacred scriptures is advocated: “. . . mas con buenos exiemplos e con los dichos de las Santas Escripturas e con falagos los deuen convertir a la fee de Nuestro Sennor Jheso Christo . . .” (33). Also included in law VI is an admonition to Jews to do no harm to other Jews after they have been baptized. If a Jew is found guilty of killing a convert, he/she is to be burned alive. If only harm is done, then it is up to the Christian judges to administer justice as they see fit.

In regards to the character of Alfonso X and his own actions, what he is primarily remembered for are his contributions as a patron of the arts and sciences. One of his major achievements was his promotion of a school of translation in Toledo in which he collaborated with Jews in the translation of Arabic and Hebrew manuscripts into Latin and Castilian. Because he openly surrounded himself with Jews in his court, it is generally thought that he was a benevolent and tolerant king; yet not all scholars agree with this assessment of his character. Baer, in contrast to Carpenter (who regards Alfonso as notably tolerant of Jews’ religious practice and economic livelihood), notes a

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<sup>48</sup> “Neither force nor compulsion in any form may be used to induce a Jew to become a Christian” (trans. Carpenter 33).



sinister element to Alfonso's personality (Carpenter, *Alfonso X* 104; Baer I: 129).<sup>49</sup> He suggests that the existence of Jews in the service of the Castilian court was not motivated by Alfonso's innate sense of justice. Rather, it was traditional state policy and served the interests of the country. Nevertheless, while we can never be certain of his motivations, we do know that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Castile are characterized by a tone of harmony between Jews and Christians, and can be viewed as an example of "convivencia" (i.e. beneficial, though sometimes conflictive, coexistence).<sup>50</sup>

### The Cortes

The *cortes* have been described as "representative assemblies acting as a check on royal power and sharing legislative functions with the king," and also as "a mere consultative body, submissive to the king's will" (Ruiz 95).<sup>51</sup> They originated from both the surviving political and social institutions of the Visigothic monarchy and from new elements in the feudal milieu of León and Castile (Ruiz, *City and Realm* 95).<sup>52</sup> Before 1188 there was the *curia regis* or council of noblemen and high clergy who assisted the king in the government of the realm. With the admission of the non-noble representatives of the cities to the council, the *cortes* came into being (95). The non-noble

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<sup>49</sup> Baer is referring to the end of Alfonso's reign, particularly to the Çag de la Maleha case mentioned in the first half of the chapter.

<sup>50</sup> This Spanish term signifies "living together" and was coined by Americo Castro. It also may designate harmonious coexistence, although, as Nirenberg argues, it has only "acquired this meaning among certain historians who have romanticized the concept" (8). There is no reason why it cannot also mean conflictive coexistence.

<sup>51</sup> These are just a few of Ruiz's examples of the now dated debate about the function of the *cortes* summarized by L. García de Valdeavellano in Curso de historia de las instituciones españolas. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1968.

<sup>52</sup> The original source for this information is Vladimir Piskorski's monograph, Las cortes de Castilla en el período de la edad media a la moderna (1188-1520), first published in Russian in 1877 (Ruiz 95).

representatives, generally referred to as urban procurators, presented to the king a list of petitions which he granted or denied according to his own political needs (96). The petitions themselves are a clear graph of the problems affecting the realm from the late thirteenth century onwards (95). From these petitions and the decision of the king to grant or deny them, we can learn much about the king's and the urban elite's attitudes toward Jews.

Beginning with the years 1295 through 1325, which encompasses Sem Tob's youth and early adulthood, we see a period of political instability that continued until Alfonso XI took the throne. Due to the fact that Fernando IV and Alfonso XI were in their *minoridades* during this time (and therefore not in control of the kingdom), Jews experienced a lack of royal protection that allowed anti-Jewish pressures from the *cortes* to grow.<sup>53</sup> These pressures consisted of petitions that called for the dismissal of Jews from official positions in the royal court, the removal of civil jurisdiction from the Jewish community, the denial of Jews' right to own land (and thus earn their livelihood through agriculture), and the discontinuance of the privilege accorded to them of collecting the royal rents and serving as landlords (*arrendadores*). In effect, the intention of the procurators was to destroy the financial security of the Jewish community, a feat that was not accomplished until the end of the fourteenth century.

Alfonso XI's control of the kingdom after 1325 is reflected in the absence of sessions in the *cortes* between 1329 and 1339. Not surprisingly, this was a better time for

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<sup>53</sup> Another indicator of instability is the frequent meeting of the *cortes* during this time. This was detrimental to the well being of the Jewish community given that they depended so heavily upon the equilibrium of the kingdom and the protection of the monarch.

the Jews since they enjoyed more royal protection. However, while maintaining the traditional policy of protecting the Jews financially, Alfonso did pass petitions that called for the segregation of the Jewish minority. “Convivencia” was restricted in that Jews were not allowed to live in the same houses as Christians nor serve as nannies to Christian children (and vice versa), and external differentiation between Jews and Christians was insisted upon in a clear way for the first time.<sup>54</sup> Despite the push to socially isolate Jews, Alfonso rejected the measures that would have kept them from serving in the royal court and from collecting the royal rents. He did prohibit usury, though, in the *cortes* of Alcalá in 1348; yet with the stipulation that Jews be allowed to possess properties in the countryside to compensate for their loss of income (223). Here we see Alfonso towing the traditional line of the Castilian monarchs: the denial of any measure that would inhibit Jews’ ability to pay the enormous taxes that helped the monarchy to maintain its financial independence.<sup>55</sup>

After the death of Alfonso XI in 1348, the Jews experienced a short period of peace and prosperity from 1350 to 1360 during the reign of Pedro I, who followed in the footsteps of his predecessor. During this time, when Sem Tob was writing Proverbios morales (1355-1360), the Jews found strong protection in the monarchy. New

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<sup>54</sup> This measure reflects the eleventh law of the seventh *Partida* in the Siete Partidas. The sign the Jews were ordered to wear is called the “roela,” already mentioned in this chapter.

<sup>55</sup> One of the differences in the development of representative institutions in Castile from those in other parts of Europe is that the Castilian monarchs had sources of income totally independent of the consent of their subjects. Of these, one was the booty from the reconquest. A second source of income was from the wool trade; and the third was the huge taxes paid by the Jews until 1492. In this way, the crown of Castile depended less on the willingness and loyalty of its subjects on financial matters than its northern counterparts (Ruiz, *City and Realm* 100).

synagogues were constructed, such as *El Tránsito* (1357-58) in Toledo, despite prohibitions in the law codes.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, an inscription in praise of the king can be found in this important synagogue: “El gran Monarca, nuestro señor y nuestro dueño el rey don Pedro; ¡Sea Dios en su ayuda y acreciente su fuerza y su gloria y guárdela cual un pastor su rebaño” (qtd. in F. Cantera Burgos 232). In the *cortes*, Pedro’s need of the Jewish financiers caused him to contain the tide of popular anti-Semitism, although he did cede to petitions that did not affect their financial interests, such as measures regarding segregation of Jews from Christians. In this course of action, he maintained the fundamental paradigm of Christian/Jewish relations in medieval Castile. In general, though, his favorable attitude toward the Jews proved to be a double-edged sword because of the popular anti-Jewish hostility it provoked.

When Pedro’s stepbrother, Enrique of Trastámara, came onto the political scene around 1360, bringing with him a civil war, a shift in Jewish-Christian relations occurred. The aforementioned procurators took advantage of Enrique’s anti-Semitic propaganda campaign and were able to pass anti-Jewish legislation more easily than before. However, this only lasted until he consolidated his power in 1367. Once he was firmly seated in the throne, he found he could not do without the collaboration of the Jews and resorted to the same basic policy of royal protection of the Jewish community as the kings that preceded him. Despite this surprising about-face, Enrique’s new role as protector of the Jews could not contain the already heightened anti-Semitism in Castilian

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<sup>56</sup> The original name of the synagogue, which was built by Samuel Ben Meir Ha-Levi (c. 1320-1360), is not known. Samuel, who served as advisor and treasurer to King Pedro I, died in prison after being accused by the king of taking part in a conspiracy against him.

society that he himself helped to generate by using it as a propagandistic device in the civil war against Pedro. The war served as a conduit for those energies and created a propitious setting for the resurgence of subterranean hostilities.

### The Civil War

The civil war waged by Enrique of Trastámara (the bastard son of Alfonso XI), against his half-brother Pedro I, the legitimate heir, reveals important aspects of Jewish-Christian relations and brings to light the variegated shapes that anti-Semitism/anti-Judaism could assume in medieval Castile. The conflict began around the same time Sem Tob was writing Proverbios morales (1355-60), and is alluded to in the penultimate verse: “Las gentes de su tierra, todas a su serviçio traiga, e aparte guerra d’ella, e mal bolliçio [conflict, revolts]” (vs. 724). The third, fourth and fifth verses, which are dedicated to the memory of Alfonso XI, and other sections of Proverbios morales that refer to the king, express well the importance of the monarchy to the Jewish community.<sup>57</sup> The fact that Jews were the property of the king and dependent upon him for their physical and economic well being explains Sem Tob’s concern about the incipient turmoil.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Verses 711-712 also express the dependence of the Jews on the king and their hope that he will protect them: “Con el bueno trebeja e al malo empoja (defeat); defiende la oveja e la cabrilla coxa/ del lobo e del zebro. ¿Por qué alongaremos? Al noble rey don Pedro estas mañas veemos.”

<sup>58</sup> A statement made by Rav Moses Hacohen of Tordesillas in his polemical work Ezer ha-Emunah (1375) illustrates the political tension of the period as well as the relationship of the Jews to the Crown: “. . . for our lives and welfare depend on the wellbeing of the state under whose government we live. What more convincing example could there be than that which you have seen with your own eyes, for when one king departed and another seized his throne, many communities were banished and many Jews were put to

During the decade of 1350-1360, the Jews enjoyed significant protection from the monarchy. However, when factions began to emerge among the nobility, the situation of the Jews began to change. The conflict between polarized factions of the nobility, who were divided between Pedro and Enrique, destabilized the kingdom and marked the beginning of the crisis that would terminate in civil war. The pro-Pedro faction consisted of a portion of the nobility, certain sectors of the *pequeña nobleza*, and Castilian bourgeois financiers and businessmen (*comerciantes*). Jews, who were included in the last category, supported Pedro from the beginning of his reign.<sup>59</sup> They also occupied important positions in the *hacienda regia*, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the Christian community (Monsalvo 231). The faction of the nobility that supported Enrique had been dissatisfied with the monarchy since the time of Alfonso XI. Their disenchantment was due, in large part, to Alfonso's inability to compensate for their losses during the mid-century crisis.<sup>60</sup> Pedro's continuation of many of Alfonso's policies and his push to centralize power and establish preeminence over the nobility also did not sit well with them.

Within this context of inter-nobility conflict and dissatisfaction, anti-Semitism was utilized as a convenient anti-monarchical propaganda weapon, given the Jews' loyalty and proximity to Pedro. However, not much provocation was needed to arouse the pre-

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death by torture and were deprived of all of their possessions and were like lost sheep . . ." (qtd. in Baer I: 374).

<sup>59</sup> Some scholars see in Pedro's alliances with the commercial class a "segunda revolución burguesa de la Edad Media" (Monsalvo 235).

<sup>60</sup> During the mid fourteenth century, a recession occurred that caused the nobility to suffer a decrease in income. The Black Death, which was ravaging Europe at the same time, intensified the economic crisis and contributed to a demographic recession (Monsalvo 228-29).

existing hostilities of the urban elites and the popular classes. For this reason, and as a result of the general havoc the war wreaked on the cities, the Jews suffered great losses during the civil war, amid such disastrous events as pogroms, massacres, assaults, and economic sanctions.<sup>61</sup> Some scholars are of the opinion, though, that the majority of violence against Jews was committed by mercenary soldiers from England and France who fought on the side of Enrique (Valdeon 46). Even so, the heavy fines that Enrique required the Jews to pay did much damage to their communities and left them in a miserable economic state.

Regarding the meaning and purposes of hostility directed against Jews in the civil war, it is important to distinguish between the anti-Semitism so closely associated with the nobles in Enrique's camp and that of the popular masses. According to Monsalvo, the anti-Semitism of these two social groups took different trajectories. While popular anti-Semitism acquired a violent and radical character, that of Enrique's camp was social/political in nature and served exclusively as a vehicle to discredit the king (235). Indeed, once the war was over and his power consolidated, he turned into a defender of the Jews, relatively speaking, in the face of other forces and channels of anti-Judaism (243).<sup>62</sup> However, this fact does not exonerate him from the part he played in disseminating hatred towards Jews and Judaism in the second half of the fourteenth century. His reign, which began in 1369 after Pedro I was killed in battle, marks a

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<sup>61</sup> According to some estimates, as many as 8000 Jews were killed, mainly after Enrique's entrance into Castile in 1366 during the civil war (Monsalvo 237).

<sup>62</sup> Because Enrique II needed the collaboration of the Jews in his new kingdom, he sought to avoid their economic ruin. Hence, he ended up maintaining a position identical to that of other Castilian monarchs who preceded him (Monsalvo 240).

turning point in the history of Christian-Jewish relations in Castile. The war he initiated wrought ruin and demoralization in the Jewish communities and intensified already existing currents of anti-Semitism. Less noticeable changes also followed in its wake, such as the trend in publicistic Christian writings toward secular anti-Semitism, a phenomenon that was hardly manifest in the Middle Ages before that time (Baer I: 368). Moreover, the blame that was increasingly cast upon the Jews for the country's misfortunes helped contribute to the mass mentality that paved the way for the unprecedented violence which was to come.

### The Beginning of the End

In 1378, just over a decade after the civil war, conditions for the Jews took a dramatic turn for the worse when Fernando Martínez began preaching religiously fanatic sermons in Sevilla filled with vulgar anti-Semitism. He incited the populace to raze Sevilla's twenty-three magnificent synagogues to the ground, and urged that Jews be confined to their own quarters to prevent them from having social contact with Christians (Baer II: 95). In his sermons, he also vaguely hinted that the king and queen would not punish those who attacked the Jews (II: 96). On several occasions the Jews appealed to the royal court for help, although the monarchy proved itself incapable of quelling the unrest that emerged from this popular religious movement. The violence, which broke out in full force in 1390, spread from Andalusia to the rest of Castile, resulting in either massacres or forced conversions.

In the aftermath of this event, the king sent out commissions of inquiry and levied fines upon the municipalities in order to recover losses to the royal revenues. He also



sent out a notice that the government “would not tolerate such shameful deeds because hitherto the kings had always protected the Jews” (Baer II: 97).<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the general impotency of the king to live up to his promise may be due to the fact that the violence occurred in the days of interregnum, after the death of King John I of Castile, when the crown prince was still a minor. As mentioned previously, Jews fared worse in periods when the monarchy was weak. Moreover, it was impossible to seize the rioters themselves since they represented such a wide spectrum of social classes (II: 99).

In effect, the violence and mass conversions of 1390-1391 signal the end of the peaceful coexistence of Jews and Christians in medieval Castile. By 1391, religious fanaticism had so permeated all classes of Spanish society “that the beastliness of their behavior passed all but unnoticed” (Baer II: 110). Jewish communities all over Spain were destroyed or impoverished as rioters marched on the Jewish quarters. Forced baptism was also inflicted on many Jews, an action that the monarchy generally did not approve of but felt obliged to accept (110).

While the data is too scanty to describe the situation of the Jews of Castile after the pogroms of 1391, the absence of literary sources for that period suggests, according to Baer, spiritual aridity (II: 117). He maintains that the large and leading communities, like Sevilla, Toledo, and Burgos, were destroyed not only by the violence of their enemies, but by moral deterioration as well (Baer II: 117). However, it is known that the Jews’ material circumstances improved a bit once King Enrique III attained his majority. He carried out the same policies towards them as his predecessors, entrusting the Jewish

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<sup>63</sup> Jews were the property of the king in medieval Spain and any attack on them was considered to be an attack on the interests of the monarchy.

courtiers, who had not been killed, converted, or dismissed from their posts, with important functions in the fiscal administration of the state (118). The task of the material rehabilitation of the Jewish community, though, was complicated by religious tensions relating to the mass conversions. Division and conflict ensued between those who remained steadfast in their faith and those who converted to Christianity. Jewish religious zealots sought the cause of apostasy in the philosophical views of the converts, who came from the wealthy and cultured classes, and contrasted them with the “humble men and women whose simple faith withstood the test” (131). The antagonism between religious zealots and philosophers, however, has a long history dating back to the time of Maimonides (1134-1204). In Chapters three and four, this issue will be explored in depth in relation to Ma’aeh ha Rav and other works of the period since it constitutes one of the major divisive forces in the Jewish communities of Spain.

### **Chapter summary**

The manifestations of anti-Semitism in medieval Castile are multiple. We see it in violent collective aggression against the Jewish community, legislative pressure in the courts, intellectual and doctrinal attacks against Jews, and chimerical accusations based on irrational religious beliefs. Regarding the courts, legislative pressure on the part of the urban procurators determined the juridical status of the Jews, established norms for relations between Jews and Christians, and put limits on Jews’ political and economic activities.<sup>64</sup> The intellectual and doctrinal attacks are evidenced in the debates and

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<sup>64</sup> The procurators are non-noble representatives of the cities. They presented lists of petitions to the king, which he granted or denied according to the political needs of the times.

controversies of the epoch, such as the Disputations, and in the polemical writings of Christians and Jewish converts to Christianity. Their purpose was to convince Jews of both the truth of Christianity and the falseness of Judaism, and to undermine Jews' faith in their belief system. Chimerical accusations, such as the ones made by Thomas of Monmouth in The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich, spread far and wide throughout medieval Christendom and became culturally embedded in Christian societies through literature, art, and oral tradition.

The causes of anti-Semitism in fourteenth-century Castile are multiple as well, and include socio-economic events such as periods of bad crops, bad weather, widespread hunger,<sup>65</sup> the Black Death,<sup>66</sup> social instability (i.e. the intensification of the fight between different social classes), demographic and economic crises, and political instability.

Albeit, the immediate factors would not have had such a deleterious effect on the Jewish *aljamas* if a negative discourse about Jews did not already exist. As David Nirenberg cogently argues, inherited discourses about minorities acquired force only when people chose to find them meaningful and useful (6).<sup>67</sup> According to this theory, sectors of the

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<sup>65</sup> These were some of the factors that contributed to the demands in the *cortes* for the remission of debts owed to Jews.

<sup>66</sup> The Black Death, which arrived in Castile around 1348, negatively affected the state of the Jews of Europe. It was rumored that the deaths were due to an international conspiracy of Jewry to poison Christendom, and that the leaders of the Jewish metropolis of Toledo had initiated the plot. In German lands, thousands of Jews were butchered as a result of the rumors. In Spain, the Black Death was accompanied by public disorders that were directed against the *juderías* of Barcelona, Aragón and Tarragona. There is little documentation of the effects of the pestilence in Castile, but surely the news of the unrest reached the Jewish communities of Castile, whose rights and privileges were so precariously dependent on tranquility and social order (Shepard, *World and Words* 16)

<sup>67</sup> Nirenberg adds that these discourses were even reshaped by the choices people made about them (6).

Christian population chose to participate in the anti-Jewish dialogue when they could achieve something by doing so. For example, the poorer classes, unable to pay back loans made to them by Jewish moneylenders, utilized anti-Semitic stereotypes in order to slander those whom they felt were oppressing them. The urban oligarchies, who were in direct competition with the elites of the Jewish community for economic prospects and positions in the *Corte*, found it advantageous to manipulate the discourse as a means to restrict Jewish economic activity and to remove them from coveted positions. In contrast, the nobility, who were less affected by the economic crises, were motivated to participate in anti-Jewish rhetoric for purely political reasons. A case in point is the civil war, in which anti-Semitic propaganda was utilized in order to undermine Pedro's reputation as a suitable monarch. Finally, the monarchy, which was the official protector of the Jews, had little reason to cultivate anti-Jewish sentiment. The huge taxes the Jews paid to the royal treasury were a major source of income, therefore it was not in the king's best interests to sabotage their financial activities and fan the flames of hatred.

As for the origins of the anti-Semitic discourse, scholars have offered differing theories. Some take a *longue duree* approach, meaning that events are read less within their local contexts than according to a teleology leading to the Holocaust (Niremburg 5). In other words, instead of emphasizing local or individual opinions about minorities, they focus on collective images, representations, and stereotypes of the "other" (5).<sup>68</sup> Robert

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<sup>68</sup> For a different reading on discourses about minorities, see D. Niremburg, who contests theories about anti-Semitism that stress collective beliefs transmitted to the present day. While admitting the existence of a negative discourse about minorities, he argues that the almost orthodox view among scholars that cataclysmic violence across the centuries

Moore, Gavin Langmuir, and Jeremy Cohen adhere to this approach, to greater and lesser degrees, although each fixes the origin of the discourse to a different event and time period, as explained in the beginning of the chapter. To briefly summarize, Jeremy Cohen argues from the premise that new developments in Christian thought in thirteenth-century Europe altered the Augustinian paradigm that had previously secured Jews' existence in European society. According to him, this was accomplished by the combined efforts of mendicant missionaries of the Dominican and Franciscan orders who instilled a more pernicious image of the Jew in the minds of medieval Europeans. The main source of the problem was the defensiveness of the thirteenth-century Church that sought to control and regulate human thought. Any group that detracted from the organic unity of Christian society was deemed heretical.

Moore links the rise of a persecuting mentality to a process of social reclassification in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in which named categories such as *manichee*, Jew, leper, sodomite, and so on, were created, which entailed social, religious and political discrimination (99). He maintains that this process continued to develop through the centuries and became an integral part of the character of European society. Like Nirenberg, though, he argues that the groups and people who carried out persecution did not merely embody collective beliefs and sentiments, but acted out of personal interests that may have conflicted with those of others and the wider social consensus (Moore 107).

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against Jews in Europe can be linked to modern-day anti-Semitism overlooks the fundamental interdependence of violence and tolerance in the Middle Ages (7).

Langmuir posits that the increasingly empirical nature of religiosity (i.e. the tendency to express non-rational beliefs as empirical truths) in the Christian west in the thirteenth century gave rise to a new kind of doubt, which he terms “rational empirical.” In order to maintain the integrity of their belief system, many Christians were compelled to suppress their knowledge about the nature of observable reality, which produced delusional thinking. Delusional thinking led Christians to unconsciously distort both perceptions of phenomena in the natural world and human phenomena, such as the characteristics of ethnic or religious groups whose beliefs contradicted their own. Since Jews were an out-group and embodied religious doubt in their rejection of the Christian messiah, they served as a convenient receptacle for Christian delusional thinking. Once this process took hold, accusations against Jews became increasingly irrational and led to host desecration, crucifixion, and ritual murder charges. The accusations then became culturally embedded through the mediums of art, literature and oral transmission, which had deadly consequences for Jews for centuries to come, the most notorious being the Holocaust.

Finally, Robert Chazan traces the negative shift in the discourse about the Jews to the twelfth century. He views it as the result of new societal circumstances combined with Christian religious uncertainty and the subsequent need to repulse all beliefs that were thought to be a spiritual threat.<sup>69</sup> According to his theory, Christian uncertainty took the form of aggressive Christian missionizing, which is reflected in the shift in focus in

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<sup>69</sup> Chazan makes clear that we cannot do justice to an historical investigation without taking into consideration both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of anti-Semitism and understanding it “in terms of both contemporary societal patterning and prior ideational legacy” (*Medieval Stereotypes* xi).

Christian polemical writings from the validation of “key truth claims for Christian believers to driving home to the Jews the hopelessness of their circumstances” (*Christians, Muslims and Jews* 180).<sup>70</sup> His argument has much in common with that of Jeremy Cohen, although Chazan focuses more directly on the texts that comprise the polemical exchange between Jews and Christians. Also, he points out the danger in relying exclusively on the role of traditional Christian thinking in providing the explosive negative stereotypes that led to Jews being the target of intense societal hostility (*Medieval Stereotypes* xi). Such investigations assume that the Christian stance towards Judaism has remained relatively stable over the ages (xi). To the contrary, Christian perceptions of Jews did change according to time and circumstance, as we have seen through the ideational legacy of anti-Semitism and the accompanying social, economic, and political events in this chapter.

It is my hope that this general overview of the ways in which social, political, legal, and economic issues converged with the negative discourse about Jews renders a more complete picture of the social tapestry of the time period in which Sem Tob lived. While the focus in the upcoming chapters is on the intellectual context of the Castilian Jewish community, discourses among Jews were inevitably shaped to some degree by Christian perceptions about Jews and the political and economic landscape. Indeed, social conflicts in the *aljamas* were often a product of the division of classes and the economic difficulties of the epoch; however, they mostly took the form of conflictivity in the

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<sup>70</sup> This assault on the Jewish sense of future hasn’t been adequately studied, in Chazan’s opinion, and we have yet to bring to light the effects it had on Jews of the later Middle Ages.

philosophical domain (Monsalvo 208). Currents of thought that were doctrinally and ideologically antagonistic competed with each other and contributed to either the strengthening or dissolution of the coherence of the community (208). These spiritual and intellectual tensions are reflected in Ma'aseh ha Rav, Proverbios morales, and Yitzchak Pollegar's Ezer ha Dat, which is why they are excellent sources of reference for understanding the internal dynamics of fourteenth-century Jewish Castilian intellectual life.



## CHAPTER TWO

### CRITICAL REVIEW AND DESCRIPTION OF PROVERBIOS MORALES AND MA'ASEH HA-RAV (THE RABBI'S TALE)

The poet-rabbi Sem Tob ben Yitzhak Arduziel (1290-1370), also known by his Spanish name Santob de Carrión, was born in the prosperous *aljama* of Carrión de los Condes in the Castilian province of Palencia in the last decade of the thirteenth century. The time period in which he lived marks the last gasp of Jewish intellectual creativity in Spain and the beginning of the demise of the vibrant cultural symbiosis between Jews and Christians in medieval Iberia. His well known Castilian work, Proverbios morales (1355-60),<sup>71</sup> expresses the anxiety that preceded this demise, as well as universal themes such as the paradox of the human condition and the relativism of man's understanding of the temporal world. While appreciated and valued for the profundity of its moral and ethical message, the primary importance of Proverbios morales lies in the fact that it is one of the few extant literary works written in the vernacular by a medieval Spanish Jew, and is, moreover, the first adaptation of Semitic sapiential thought into the Castilian language. In addition to Proverbios morales, Sem Tob wrote several Hebrew works, the most sophisticated among them being his *maqama* Ma'aseh ha Rav (The Tale of the Rabbi,

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<sup>71</sup> The edition of Díaz-Más and Carlos Mota is utilized in this dissertation unless otherwise indicated.

1345),<sup>72</sup> also known as “The Battle between the Pen and the Scissors.” This text has not been sufficiently addressed by Spanish medievalists, presumably because of the language barrier;<sup>73</sup> however, it is essential reading for those who want to better understand Sem Tob’s thought structure and social milieu. Sem Tob’s other Hebrew literary productions include the Vidui Gadol (Great Confession),<sup>74</sup> the *baqashah* Yam Qohelet (Sea of Ecclesiastes),<sup>75</sup> several *pizmonim*,<sup>76</sup> and Mitsvot Zemaniyot (1330).<sup>77</sup> These lesser works are liturgical in nature and demonstrate a religiously devout side of Sem Tob that is less apparent in Proverbios morales.

While little is known about Sem Tob’s life, we glean from several verses in Proverbios morales (henceforth PM), and from Sem Tob’s dedication of the work to the Castilian king, that he had some relation to the Court during the reign of Alfonso XI (1312-1350).<sup>78</sup> A poem dedicated to Sem Tob, written by his contemporary Joseph ben

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<sup>72</sup> Ma’aseh ha Rav is written in the *musiv* style, which is a literary technique characterized by the insertion and stringing together of biblical quotations throughout a text. It was common among Jewish authors in the medieval period.

<sup>73</sup> There are now several translations of Ma’aseh ha Rav in the English language. See Clark Colahan’s “Santob’s Debate: Parody and Political Allegory,” *Sef*, 39 [1979], and Sanford Shepard’s Shem Tov, his World and his Words.

<sup>74</sup> The Vidui Gadol is a confessional poem still read during the *musaf* service on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) in some Sephardic congregations. While the formula for Hebrew confessional poems dates back to the sixth century, Sem Tob’s *viddui* evidences a distinct personal style that differentiates it from others of its category.

<sup>75</sup> *Baqashot* are songs in the form of exhortations that were sung in the synagogue by the congregation (Zemke 28). This one still remains unedited.

<sup>76</sup> In the Sephardic tradition, these penitential poems were sung during the *amidah* portion of the synagogue service (Zemke 30).

<sup>77</sup> Sem Tob’s translation of Israel Israeli’s Arabic commentary on the liturgy “Seasonal Duties.”

<sup>78</sup> In vs. 7, Sem Tob refers to a debt the king owes him: “Como la debda mía, que a vós muy poca monta, con la cual yo podría bevir sin toda onta”; and in the last verse of PM, he reminds Alfonso’s son Pedro, the new king, of the debt that is still pending: “E la

Sasson, provides additional evidence for this assumption: “En sus manos porta el cetro de gobernantes y se extiende sobre todo el Reino de España” (qtd. in Shepard, PM 10).

Another poem dedicated by Sasson to the poet-rabbi suggests that Sem Tob may have been affected by a persecution of the Jewish community during the end of Alfonso’s reign (sometime after 1336): “cuando llegaron rumores de que había ordenado el rey que nos apresaran y después envió escrito diciendo lo contrario” (Shepard, PM 11; Díaz Más y Mota 35; Llubera 2). Information Sasson gives in his poems regarding Sem Tob’s involvement in husbandry, however, is not to be taken literally, according to Díaz Más y Mota, who are of the opinion that the verse referring to this occupation (“es tan eficaz en la cría de ganado como en la versificación”) is placed in a metaphorical context (qtd. p. 35). Indeed, when using PM as a source of information about Sem Tob’s personal life, care must be taken to distinguish between the poetic and autobiographical “yo” (Díaz Más y Mota 30). While it is likely that Sem Tob was not among the extremely wealthy, given his request to be repaid a loan that would help him to live with more ease,<sup>79</sup> one cannot deduce from other verses in the body of the text that he was living in poverty, as there is no evidence that they are autobiographical in nature.<sup>80</sup> We can, however, be reasonably certain of his status as a rabbi. Sem Tob’s vast Talmudic and biblical

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merçed qu’el noble, su padre prometió, la terná, como cumple, al Santob el judío” (vs. 725).

<sup>79</sup> See note 8 page 2.

<sup>80</sup> “Si vendí mi ganado por mengua de çevada, el de rezién llegado non piensa d’esto nada:/ quiere que su cavallo buen aparejo falle. Yo, con vergüença, callo, paseando por la calle/ Por ver algunt vezino si me querrá dar paja- a troque d’algunt vino; reçelando baraja” (vss. 536-539). The implication is that Sem Tob does not have the money necessary to take care of his live stock.

knowledge, as evidenced in both PM and Ma'aseh ha Rav, attests to a thorough and elite rabbinic education. Other sources, such as the Marqués de Santillana (1398-1458)<sup>81</sup> and the epigraphs of manuscripts M and E of PM, corroborate this assertion (30).<sup>82</sup> It should be noted, though, that the term “rabbi” signifies a moral and intellectual formation rather than a religious post in a hierarchy of Jewish officials.<sup>83</sup> Those who were trained as rabbis were highly versed in scripture and Law (Talmud) and were viewed as guides and teachers by the community (30, note 22).

There is also a high probability that Sem Tob was educated, at least to a certain extent, in philosophy and the sciences, as he mentions these disciplines in verses 331 and 623: “Los sabios muy granados que omre deseava, filósofos onrados que veer codiçiaba/ . . . El plazer de la siençia es complido plazer; obra sin rependença es la de bien fazer.” Moreover, he was born into the fourth phase of the heated polemic between rationalists (who abided by a philosophical ethic) and traditionalists (who rejected foreign wisdom) that increasingly divided Jews of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; hence, there is no doubt that he would have been familiar with the arguments of both sides of this

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<sup>81</sup> Don Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marques de Santillana, born in Carrión de los Condes, mentioned Sem Tob in his “Prohemio e carta a don Pedro, Condestable de Portugal” (written between 1444 and 1449): “Concurrió en estos tiempos un judío que se llamó rabí (rabbi) San To; escribió muy buenas cosas, e, entre las otras, proverbios morales, en verdat de asaz comendables sentençias. Púselo en cuento de tan nobles gentes por grand trobador, que, así como él dize en uno de sus proverbios: ‘non vale el açor menos por nasçer en vil nío/ ni los exemplos buenos por los dezir judío’” (qtd. in Díaz Más y Mota 17).

<sup>82</sup> Díaz Más y Mota note that the testimony of the Marqués de Santillana is especially trustworthy since it is possible that he came into contact with people who personally knew Sem Tob (30).

<sup>83</sup> Some rabbis did occupy official posts in their communities, but this was not the case with all rabbis.

polemic. However, because of the difficulty in categorizing Sem Tob's thought into any one of the dominant intellectual trends, one can deduce that he was not a rigid adherent to either traditionalism or rationalism. It is more likely that he was an eclectic thinker who, like other Jewish scholars of his times, sought to harmonize conflicting tendencies in Jewish thought. This harmonizing trend is evident in both PM and Ma'aseh ha Rav, and reflects the spirit of fourteenth-century Jewish intellectual culture. Indeed, both texts evidence a progression from polarization to unity, and demonstrate Sem Tob's equal concern for the spiritual and social well being of his community. While his works may not be counted among the greatest of Judeo-Hispanic literary achievements, he served as a voice of conscience for his people, edifying, consoling and entertaining both Christians and Jews in a rare tone of self-reflection that distinguishes him as an author of universal import.

### **Literary Influences on Proverbios Morales and Ma'aseh ha Rav**

One of the major literary influences on PM and Ma'aseh ha Rav (henceforth Ma'aseh) is Arabic, and possibly Christian, debate literature. Being a Jewish writer living at the crossroads of Arabic, Hebrew and Castilian literary traditions, Sem Tob undoubtedly encountered debate literature in all three languages-- either by way of translation or in the original. Hence, without reasonable familiarity with Arabic literary conventions, the reader of PM and Ma'aseh runs the danger of mistaking aspects of the form of Sem Tob's thought for his personal experiences and views about reality.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Given that a comprehensive analysis of this subject has already been undertaken by Clark Colahan in "Santob's Debate between the Pen and the Scissors," I will present a brief summary of this tradition and leave the reader with references for further inquiry.

However, the fact that elements of debate literature recur in what he wrote in other genres provides, according to Colahan, “a firmer basis for assuming they were congenial to his thought and vision of the world” (8). Indeed, PM and Ma’aseh are representative the sapiential and the *maqama* genres respectively, yet both contain systematic inversion of imagery and the juxtaposition of contradictory maxims and exempla, techniques common to Arabic debate literature that have their origin in the *munazara* tradition.

The *adab* style, a predecessor to the *munazara*, dates back to the ninth century with the Persian author al-Jahiz. It began as a simple technique involving the writing of essays either in praise or criticism of a subject, and gradually evolved into a more complex and abstract debate form in which personified ideas took the place of the author’s voice (46).<sup>85</sup> In these debates, the purpose was not to establish the truth of one side of an argument or the other, as it was in European debates, but “to combine or harmonize opposites, to find unity in apparent duality” (Ewald Wagner qtd. in Colahan 24). In some cases, the sole purpose was to show off one’s ability to manipulate rhetoric and technique, as sophistication in literary style was highly valued in and of itself in Arabic culture. In the *addad* genre, for example, which also preceded the fully developed form of the *munazara*, the writer attempted to create as many cases as possible of two words appearing in close proximity that had the same sound but opposite meanings (47). This technique is abundant in PM, Ma’aseh, and other Hebrew literature of medieval Spain.

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<sup>85</sup> Colahan conjectures that this later development may have been influenced by Greek schools of rhetoric that taught the technique of dialectical reasoning through opposition of ideas (48).

The most common subjects in the first *munazarat* were rivalry between cities and rivalry between pen and sword.<sup>86</sup> The latter subject is similar to debate between arms and letters in European literature. From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, the topics of Arabic debate became more diverse and more geared toward the display of rhetorical mastery, although in some cases it became more didactic and drew closer to fable literature (Colahan 50). The *maqama*, the genre to which *Ma'aseh* belongs, generally displays the former tendency (i.e. rhetorical mastery). It was invented by the Persian writer al-Hamadhani in the tenth century A.D., and was primarily used as a vehicle to exhibit literary virtuosity, such as the writing of passages that could be read forwards and backwards (52). When debate was involved, impressive arguments were made on both sides, similar to the *munazarat* (52). The formal characteristics of *maqamat* are alternating sections of rhymed poetry and prose, opposing arguments amplified by series of parallelistic comparisons, and a narrative framework (54).<sup>87</sup> Writers of *maqamat* also frequently interspersed biblical or koranic verses (depending on the religion of the author) throughout a text.<sup>88</sup> In Hebrew *maqamat*, these verses were used not only to create surprising effects and ingenious word plays, but also to elicit associations in the minds of readers to the biblical stories, symbols, and proverbs that lived in the

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<sup>86</sup> Because the debates were dedicated to a particular person, the outcome was normally decided in favor of the social class to which that person belonged. In debates between military and administrative talent, both were in the end demonstrated to be of equal value if the debate was dedicated to a political ruler (Colahan 49).

<sup>87</sup> This second feature is also characteristic of PM, which connects it to the debate genre.

<sup>88</sup> According to Zinberg, verses from the Koran that were woven into Arabic *maqamat* had little relationship to the subject. Rather, they were used as a stylistic device to display literary virtuosity (173).

consciousness of the people (Zinberg 175).<sup>89</sup> That is to say, biblical allusions were employed in a way that both enriched the language of the text and expanded meaning beyond the literal context.

The most important representative of the *maqama* genre in relation to Sem Tob's works is the twelfth-century Catalan Jewish writer Judah ben Solomon al-Harizi. Al-Harizi mostly translated into Hebrew Jewish and Muslim works written in Arabic, although he later regretted having devoted so much of his time to Arabic literature and therefore began to promote the Hebrew language (Colahan 71). His most famous work, the Tahkemoni, is a collection of fifty *maqamat* modeled on those of al-Hariri.<sup>90</sup> While he retains the formal elements of al-Hariri's structure and style, he includes more examples of the fully developed debate (72). In the twelfth and forty-second *maqamat* of the Tahkemoni the opponents are generosity and miserliness, a theme treated in both Ma'aseh and PM. The fortieth *maqama*, a debate between a pen and a sword, is considered to be the most direct literary influence on Ma'aseh. Sem Tob's debate is much longer, though, and he uses the image of the scissors in place of the traditional sword. Other major differences are the tone of self-reflection and the direct personal style, which one encounters in all of Sem Tob's writings. Indeed, the element of self-

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<sup>89</sup> Zinberg maintains: "The medieval Jewish poets very skillfully employed in their creative efforts the wealth of Biblical symbols, images, expressions, legends, and proverbs that lived in the consciousness of the people . . . With a mere allusion to a biblical personality or story . . . the writer could often obtain the most brilliant effects, eliciting in the reader unforgettably clear images, colorful and sharp impressions" (175).

<sup>90</sup> Al-Hariri was a famous Muslim poet from Basra who wrote during the eleventh century. Colahan maintains that "his collection of fifty *maqamat* was an immediate classic and over the centuries came to be considered the greatest work in Arabic after the Koran" (50).



reflection is what differentiates debate in Sem Tob's works from those that preceded him.<sup>91</sup>

The *altercatio*, the name for the Latin form of debate literature, written by men educated in the theological atmosphere of scholasticism, originally had a didactic and moralizing character (Colahan 29). Its early form, the *conflictus*, "is characterized by opponents that are abstractions or personified things" (29). In the *conflictus* and the *altercatio*, scriptural passages and theological ideas were used by both sides to defend their positions, but as the Latin form of the genre came to the end of its evolution (around the thirteenth century), it was subjected to parody (29). Scriptural passages came to be used humorously and the accusations hurled by the opponents more obscene and abusive (31). An early example of the *altercatio* in Spanish is Disputa del alma y cuerpo (twelfth century). In this poem the narrator's soul and body argue, after death, over who is to blame for the state of perdition in which they find themselves.<sup>92</sup> In the course of the debate, theological arguments are made by both opponents in a didactic attempt to get the reader to reflect on his or her sins.

A later Spanish example of the *altercatio* in which parody is more evident is Razón de amor con los denuestos del agua y el vino (1205).<sup>93</sup> In this poem, which has two parts that seem not to relate very well, the water and wine abuse one another with increasingly

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<sup>91</sup> Perry notes that while the element of reflection in PM derives from the influence of Ecclesiastes, the autobiographical "I" that speaks is a new development. In his opinion, it is a precursor to the genre of the autobiography which preceded the modern novel (*Jewish Wisdom* 5-6)

<sup>92</sup> Some scholars consider the origin of this theme to be Talmudic, since the Talmud contains the earliest known debate between the body and the soul.

<sup>93</sup> This poem is based on the Latin *Denudata veritate*.

vulgar descriptions of their qualities and uses.<sup>94</sup> To end the dispute, a theological argument is made asserting the superiority of the water based on the greater importance of baptism (which employs water), than communion (which employs wine). Despite the didacticism of the ending, the demonstration of the superiority of one side over the other is not the focus of this work (Colahan 34).<sup>95</sup> The allegorical meaning of the debate itself takes precedence over who is the winner.

Some similarities between Sem Tob's debate and Razón de amor are the emotional expressiveness of the language (which Americo Castro once coined the "vitalist" style), and the humoristic way in which the opponents hurl abuse at one another. These literary correspondences could indicate a possible indirect influence of vernacular forms of Latin debate on Sem Tob's works, although the date of Ma'aseh does not fall at a time in which there is much record of imitation of European forms of debate literature in Castile (Colahan 44). However, Provençal literature, which incorporated European debate forms in which abstractions are the opponents, is a possible source of influence on the Tahkemoni (43). Al-Harizi was a wandering poet who earned his living through his writing and is known to have been in Provence during the classic period of Provençal poetry. Hence it is quite possible that Sem Tob was influenced indirectly by European forms of debate through al-Harizi's famous work.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> For a summary of interpretations of the poem, see Gómez Redondo, pp. 221-224.

<sup>95</sup> Fernando Gómez Redondo states in his Poesía Española that there is nothing like *Razón de amor* in the European literary tradition, despite the fact that elements of it can be easily connected to concrete sources (222).

<sup>96</sup> "The setting and the aesthetic purpose of the Arabic and the Provençal literary debates were similar enough to make influence of one on the other quite natural" (Colahan 87).

As previously noted, Ma'aseh ha Rav is a *maqama* in the tradition of Arabic, and possibly Provençal, debate literature, whereas PM belongs to the genre of wisdom literature. While PM contains elements of debate, it is primarily characterized by the sapiential style in which proverbs, aphorisms, exemplum and maxims are strung together artistically in order to convey simple and abstract truths. Aside from the Arabic debate genre explained above, influences on Proverbios morales include standards of Biblical wisdom literature such as *Pirkei Avot* and Ecclesiastes, as well as later collections of maxims and proverbs written by Jewish and Arabic authors, such as Hunain's Apothegmata, Mubassir ibn Fatik's Muhtar al-Hikam, Ibn Gabirol's Mibhar ha-Peninim and Ibn Hasdai's Ben ha-Melek (Llubera 4). There are also verses that may derive from Samuel ibn Nagrela's Ben Misle, Bahya ibn Paquda's Kitab al-Hidaya ("Duties of the Heart"), Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, and possibly Pedro Alfonso's Disciplina Clericalis (4). Even though many passages in PM are not original, as is the case with medieval literature in general, it should be noted that Sem Tob's unique expressiveness and the way in which the material is organized makes it an important contribution to world literature and conveys much about the social and spiritual circumstances of fourteenth-century Castile.

### **Critical Approaches**

John Zemke (1997), in his exhaustive bibliography on current and past scholarship on the works of Sem Tob, has noted that disparate ideological interpretations characterize both PM and Ma'aseh, with a trend towards historical reductionism in the twentieth century (233). He cautions that "conclusions about a historical person made on the basis

of fictional writings and unsubstantiated by other sources is flawed and unreliable” (230). His approach, however, is historical, but in the sense of “focusing on what is knowable from the text itself as opposed to the conjectural conjunction of two items relatively proximate in space and time but lacking any demonstrable nexus.”<sup>97</sup> Following his admonition, yet unable to resist the temptation of historiographic analysis, I contribute to the body of literature on Sem Tob by reading Ma’aseh in light of polemics among Jews in fourteenth century Spain and Provence before analyzing bound concepts that appear in each work. Before delving into this terrain, which is the subject of the following chapters, a summary of past and current criticism on PM and Ma’aseh is presented so as to give the reader a broader angle from which to view Sem Tob’s writings.

#### Proverbios morales

In the linguistic arena, Kantor and Polit analyze the lexical, syntactic and semantic organization of PM. They first dismantle the mechanism of parallelism, which by Kantor’s definition occurs when two major semantic-syntactical units are placed side by side in order to compare or oppose corresponding ideas (110).<sup>98</sup> According to these scholars, parallelism is essential to understanding the structure of the work because it reflects the nature of the Semitic mentality and serves as a vehicle through which to express ideas that are not easily conveyed by a more direct style.

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<sup>97</sup> Quoted from an email exchange with the permission of John Zemke.

<sup>98</sup> Parallelism has also been described as a correspondence of one thing to another, in the sense of equivalence, contrast or opposition (Berlin 2). It must be noted that parallelism is a central characteristic of the biblical style, on which medieval Hebrew is based. Hence all medieval Jews who were versed in Hebrew would have been familiar with it.

Polit explains Sem Tob's use of the parallelistic techniques of reiteration<sup>99</sup> and variation<sup>100</sup> in PM. He also introduces the concept of "perspectivism," a stylistic feature closely related to parallelism (Polit 9).<sup>101</sup> The conscious conceptual flexibility that perspectivism entails has led some scholars to the conclusion that Sem Tob was essentially a relativist, yet there is much debate around this assumption. Kantor notes that in the medieval period the dialectic play with *opposita* was a common model in scholastic thought and learning, employed mainly as a rhetorical device. In the Semitic tradition, however, it seems to reflect a way of perceiving worldly values as reversible (116). Additionally, she posits that the relativistic aspects of PM may be inspired by a practical tenet of Jewish thought that advocates the adaptation of behavior to circumstances (116). Polit admits a strain of relativism in the work as well, although he maintains that it ultimately progresses towards ontological certainty of absolutes such as God, good works, and *saber* (knowledge).

Colahan and Pienda, in a joint article, focus on the philosophical undercurrents of PM as a way to gain insight into the mentality informing Sem Tob's works. They argue that there are points of contact between PM and the Greek philosophical schools of Heraclitus, the sophists, the skeptics and the stoics (55). These schools had a practical, rather than metaphysical, approach to philosophy, and viewed the world in a relativistic

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<sup>99</sup> Reiteration is the development of a thought through a series of illustrations that express it in a variety of situations.

<sup>100</sup> Variation is the repetition of the same thought or pronouncement by using a variety of terms.

<sup>101</sup> This is found to occur when several perspectives of the same situation are presented to the reader; or, as Polit maintains, when a multiplicity of motivations are attributed to one act, or when one act is shown to have multiple effects (11)

light (Colahan & Pienda 56). Moreover, they formed part of a larger picture of wisdom literature that was shared by other civilizations, such as the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Hebrews (56). The Book of Ecclesiastes, which directly influences Sem Tob's thought, also belongs to this tradition in its kinship with the Greek skeptics (56).

The *adab* style, which Colahan addresses in his doctoral dissertation, is treated in this article as an additional philosophical influence.<sup>102</sup> Its origin in Basra and Baghdad in the ninth century, during a time when there was much cross-cultural influence, suggests to the authors that relativistic thought may arise as a result of the experience of being exposed to different ways of perceiving the world. It can be argued that this was the case with the Jews of medieval Spain.

A. Castro (1952) and Jaques Joset (1973) look to the future rather than the past in their approach to Sem Tob, seeing in PM a precursor to the new mental and philosophical outlook of the renaissance (Joset in Zemke, 140).<sup>103</sup> Joset argues that the idea that life and mankind are subject to constant change, or alternation, with no fixed rules except for the belief in God and the primacy of wisdom, contrasts sharply with the prevailing medieval philosophical principle of stasis, or *fixisme* (Joset in Zemke 135). He then illustrates how the concept of alternation forms a dialectical philosophical system based on the reversibility of worldly values (136). In this system, the intellection of everything

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<sup>102</sup> He defines it as "a wide ranging sort of essay on matters of both speculative and applied philosophy characterized by skillfully balanced argumentation on both sides of an issue" (47).

<sup>103</sup> The description of Joset's thought is based on Zemke's summary of "Opposition et réversibilité des valeurs dans les Proverbios Morales: approche du système de pensée de Santob de Carrión," in *Hommage au professeur Maurice Delbouille*, ed. Jeanne Wathelet-Willem, 1973.

depends upon circumstances, and the only avenue of escape lies in wisdom, which is an aspect of divinity (136, 139).

Castro notes the expression of lived individual experience, as opposed to abstract thought in PM, and has coined the term “Spanish vitalism” to describe this phenomenon. Castro has also identified *autognosis* (the exploration of self) as a trait characteristic of Spanish Jewish literature. He argues that the focus on the personal, changing, and particular characteristics of human experience, which is so abundant in PM, was trumped in Spain by the lifeless and abstract ascetic thought of Seneca (Castro 164). According to Castro, if the Semitic thought of Spanish Jewry had not been ignored for so long, it may have ultimately led to a creative and vital integration of oppositions (170).

Studies that focus on Sem Tob’s worldview in relation to the historical circumstances of fourteenth-century Castile include those of Rodríguez Puértolas (1978) and Cañas Murillo (1990). These two scholars read PM as a response to the flagrant social unrest in fourteenth-century Castile and as an expression of Jewish anxiety over deteriorating relations with the Christian community (Zemke 146, 219).<sup>104</sup> In a similar vein, Sanford Shepard (1978) posits that the work is a response to the new Christian threat--increasingly hostile polemical attacks against Judaism--that were fueled by Christian friars of the Dominican and Franciscan orders, and apostates such as Abner de Burgos.<sup>105</sup> Expanding on Yitzchak Baer’s hypothesis that Sem Tob was one of Abner’s

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<sup>104</sup> See chapter one for more on this subject.

<sup>105</sup> Abner de Burgos was a rabbi whose inner conflict around the question of the suffering of the Jews led him to a determinist position regarding fate, which included the belief in planetary influences. After converting to Christianity around the year 1320, he wrote many anti-Jewish polemical works that are filled with hostile invectives against his

adversaries, he argues the case for the existence of a polemic in various passages of PM involving the question of determinism. According to Shepard, Sem Tob's view that there is no causal relationship between the divine realm and *fortuna* [good and bad luck] can be read as a contestation to Abner's astrological determinism and belief that success in the world, and peace of mind, are signs of divine favor (*World and Words* 44). Shepard also identifies Abner as the *astroso* 'wretched person' to whom Sem Tob writes his empty *carta de tijeras* 'scissors letter' (32).<sup>106</sup>

Joel Klausner (1965) also reads PM in light of historical circumstances. His approach is unique in that it takes into consideration social factors within the Jewish community that did much to damage the cause of Judaism, such as unscrupulous financial transactions on the part of powerful Jewish courtiers. Additionally, he situates PM within its intellectual context, highlighting both the influence of Maimonides' "Thirteen Articles of Faith" on Sem Tob's thought, and the polemic between Jewish philosophers and Talmudic-traditionalists. Using the "Commentator's Prologue" to PM as evidence, he argues that Sem Tob was an enlightened rationalist who knew how to distinguish between real and pseudo philosophy.<sup>107</sup> This speculation is problematic, though, given that the prologue only appears in manuscript M.<sup>108</sup>

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former coreligionists. Baer wrote that it was he who fathered the ideology of apostasy that, two generations after his death, wreaked havoc and ruin upon Spanish Jewry (I: 330).

<sup>106</sup> *Astroso* here could also be referring to a person who believes in astrology, as Abner did. The verse reads: "Un astroso cuydava/ y por mostrar que era/ sotil, yo le enviava/ escripto de tiserá" (v. 40).

<sup>107</sup> Klausner draws this conclusion from the anonymous commentator's re-emphasis on Sem Tob's belief in the importance of scientific knowledge. He states: "It is hardly likely



## Ma'aseh ha Rav

Criticism on Ma'aseh ha Rav is sparse compared to that on PM, due in part to the fact it was written in Hebrew. Even in the fourteenth century, the work would not have been very accessible to the masses of the Jewish population since Castilian, not Hebrew, was the spoken language of Jews living in Spain. PM, in contrast, was written in Castilian in a more direct and simple literary style, which suggests that it was intended for a wider audience.<sup>109</sup> In Ma'aseh, Sem Tob employs the *musiv* style, which requires a reader who can recognize the biblical and rabbinic quotations and allusions that are so abundant in the text.<sup>110</sup> Adding to the complexity of the language, authors of *maqamas* would intentionally alter meaning by changing letters or words in biblical or rabbinic citations so that they could be interpreted in two different ways. This ambiguity makes Ma'aseh difficult to translate, which has resulted in widely divergent interpretations.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, interpretations of Ma'aseh depend on how one translates passages that contain double meanings, and how biblical and rabbinic allusions in the text are understood.

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that a commentator whose purpose was to interpret the verses of Santob would have written this statement had not Santob been similarly disposed in thought" (784).

<sup>108</sup> While Perry (1987) arrived at the conclusion that the author of the prologue wrote for Jews and from the perspective of a Jew, Díaz Mas & Mota disagree. They maintain that the types of errors found in the text of the prologue makes Jewish authorship unlikely (245). Other evidence they adduce that contradicts Perry's opinion is the commentator's use of the Latin title for Song of Songs, and reference to the *espíritu Santo* as an inspiration for knowledge, which is a Christian conceptualization (245).

<sup>109</sup> It should be noted that there is a manuscript of PM in *aljamiado* (texts written in Castilian but with Hebrew script). This means that it was produced by a Jew for dissemination by or among literate Jews, proving that PM was not only directed towards the Christian population. Indeed, most literate Jews of the time period wrote and read Castilian in Hebrew script. The fact that PM is one of the only known extant works written in Castilian by a medieval Spanish Jew makes it very unique.

<sup>110</sup> The stringing together of biblical and/or rabbinic quotations in a literary text defines the *musiv* style. The intention is to create a meaning that is different from the one intended in the original source and to display rhetorical skill. See beginning of chapter.

<sup>111</sup> John Zemke, in his *Annotated Bibliography*, has commented that the divergent interpretations of *Ma'aseh* testify to its ambiguity (230).

In twentieth century interpretations of *Ma'aseh*, scholars have generally tended towards historical reductionism in that they presume that Sem Tob's main intention was to defend Castilian Jewry against the campaigns of religious apostates or persecutors. This interpretation still prevails "despite the absence of any explicit statement in the poem to that effect or empirical corroboration" (Zemke 232).<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the political allegory and polemics some scholars see hidden behind the fanciful language are very difficult to prove because allusions to real people and events, if there are any, are deftly veiled. Nevertheless, the work does function on more than one level. While on the surface it is a satire of the traditional debate genre between pen and sword, underneath it appears to contain a more profound message to the Jewish community.

To summarize a few interesting scholarly investigations, Clark Colahan posits that *Ma'aseh* is a political allegory based on historical circumstances involving the machinations of a poor knight, Gonzalo Martínez de Oviedo, who rose in power with the help of his Jewish patron, Joseph de Ecija, whom he later betrayed. Colahan astutely builds his argument using historical documentation that corroborates his claim that the scissors symbolize the evil Martínez, and the pen the righteous Jews. According to his findings, though, there are too many inconsistencies in the text to interpret the work as a true allegory. His thesis, nevertheless, is credible given the timing of the events surrounding the Martínez affair.

A brief summary of the historical events upon which Colahan bases his argument is as follows: Around 1335 Gonzalo Martínez entered the king's service as a protégé of the

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<sup>112</sup> The scholars Zemke is referring to are Baer, Klausner, Orringer, Shepard and Colahan (232).

Jewish *almojarife* (fiscal administrator) Don Joseph de Ecija.<sup>113</sup> As Martínez grew envious of his Jewish master, he persuaded King Alfonso XI to sell him both Don Joseph and another Jewish courtier, Don Samuel ibn Wakar,<sup>114</sup> in order to confiscate their wealth so as to finance a war against the Moroccan king.<sup>115</sup> His justification for such a barbaric act was that the Jews were an accursed people undeserving of high position or toleration: “¡They are a rebellious lot without utility or benefit! ¡Our lord, the king, goes out to war against his enemies while they eat and drink in their houses! ¿What benefit is there in letting them reside peacefully in your kingdom?” (Verga 87).<sup>116</sup> Wakar and Ecija were then imprisoned and tortured to death.

Soon after this incident, Gonzalo Martínez was elevated to head of the Order of Alcántara. Emboldened by his success, he decided to utilize the occasion to destroy all of Castilian Jewry. His plan was to first annihilate the Jewish courtiers and then the rest of the Jewish community. In order to carry out this nefarious deed, he told the Jewish notables that the king demanded from them a great sum of money that they would never

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<sup>113</sup> The summary of events involving Martínez and the Jews is derived from chapter four of Colahan’s doctoral dissertation, Yitchak Baer’s History of the Jews of Christian Spain, and a Spanish translation of Sefer Shevet Yehuda (“La Vara de Yehuda”). This text was written in the first half of the sixteenth century by Solomon ibn Verga, a Jewish author who converted to Christianity after the decree of 1492. He lived in Spain until 1506 (the date of a well known massacre of conversos), and spent the remainder of his life in Italy and Turkey (José Cano, *Vara de Yehuda* 11).

<sup>114</sup> According to Shevet Yehuda (ed. 1991), Ecija was a powerful Jew who the king entrusted with the collection of tributes (83). He assisted the king in all of his services (“todos los servicios del monarca los atendía Yosef”), and was considered to be second to the king and first among his people (83). Samuel ibn Wakar was an astronomer and physician to the king. According to Steinschneider, he is the author of the book La Medicina Real Castellana con métodos prácticos, written in Arabic (José Cano, note 14).

<sup>115</sup> Sales of this type were common in the Middle Ages, as the Jews were considered to be property of the Crown.

<sup>116</sup> My translation.

be able to pay. While feigning to mediate, he secretly plotted “to destroy them root and branch” (Baer I: 356). The Jews managed, though, to come to terms with the king, thereby escaping this particular menace.<sup>117</sup>

In 1339, however, Gonzalo tried one more time. After his success in defeating the Moroccans in battle, he thought he would be able to convince the king to carry out his plan of confiscating the Jews’ wealth before expelling them from the kingdom. Fortunately for the Jews, the king, under the influence of his mistress Doña Leonor de Guzmán, sent an emissary to arrest Gonzalo on the battlefield on charges of conspiracy.<sup>118</sup> Gonzalo, refusing to submit, took refuge in a tower and insulted the king (Ibn Verga 89). The king, in a rage, imprisoned all of Gonzalo’s brothers, and then had their possessions (and those of Gonzalo) confiscated and deposited in the royal treasury. Immediately afterwards, Alfonso ordered his men to attack Gonzalo in the tower in which he had taken refuge. Gonzalo’s archers responded in kind, killing a swordsman of the king. Infuriated, Alfonso put an end to the matter by smoking Gonzalo out of the tower. He was then brought to justice and sentenced to death by strangulation. The Jews, ecstatic over Gonzalo’s defeat, celebrated throughout the country and enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity for the following eight years.

According to Colahan, Sem Tob’s *maqama* can be read as a reflection of the above events. On his own admission, however, the allegory falls apart in the last few passages

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<sup>117</sup> According to Ibn Verga, some of the councilors (*allegados*) of the king admonished Gonzalo saying: “In this occasion, it is not good advice, because the custom of Castile and its kings has been to love and protect the Jews; who will listen to you in this matter?” (88). [My translation].

<sup>118</sup> According to Baer, Doña Leonor’s brother was on bad terms with Gonzalo. This is the reason given for her intervention (I: 358).

of *Ma'aseh* (where the scissors are declared essentially good and deserving of reward). The scissors, which were previously used as a metaphor for the machinations of the evil Martínez, come to represent the functioning of the Jewish community. The two blades serve a positive role in that they cut out from their midst that which threatens their unity. Colahan, in an attempt to explain this discrepancy, speculates that Sem Tob may have been trying to mislead hostile readers, or simply inverting the imagery in the tradition of Arabic debate literature. Given that both of these propositions are somewhat unlikely, he concludes that allegory is only woven into the fabric of the *maqama* in parts, and that not until the end of the work can the reader catch a glimpse of more than a few threads of political commentary (152).

Sanford Shepard, like Colahan, reads the work as reflective of contemporary historical circumstances, but to him, it is an allegorical polemic directed against Abner of Burgos, a well-known and influential apostate who, after his conversion to Christianity in 1321, became a fanatical persecutor of his own people. Shepard maintains that Abner's former Jewish associates, those to whom he directed his letters, considered his reasoning to be faulty and his polemical methods ill adapted to an adequate treatment of the subject he was addressing: the obsolescence of Judaism and the truth of Christianity (*World and Words* 33).<sup>119</sup> Hence the scissors, being an improper instrument of writing, could possibly symbolize Abner's misuse of logic (32).

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<sup>119</sup> Abner's primary adversary was Isaac Pollegar, a former friend from youth who belonged to the rationalist school of thought. Pollegar's polemical response to Abner is recorded in his Hebrew work Ezer ha Dat (Support of the Faith).

Another facet of Shepard's interpretation is the association of the scissors with the kabbalistic conception of sin: "sin is either a separation, a discontinuation of union, or something that enters a relationship for which it is not made" (*World and Words* 37).<sup>120</sup> The conclusion of the *maqama* accords with this conception in that, when separate, the two blades of the scissors are in a position to do harm, but when united, all is well.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, Abner, in his conversion to Christianity, would surely have been viewed by his Jewish contemporaries as entering a relationship for which he was not made, and his polemical attack against his former Jewish friends and associates would have been viewed as a violation and a discontinuation of union.

Nini and Fruchtman, in their assessment of Ma'aseh, question whether to interpret the work literally or allegorically. While warning against the latter, they ponder why the work was completed during the ten days preceding *Tisha b'Av* (the day commemorating the destruction of the second Temple), which are called *yamei ben metzarim*. This raises an important question for them because during these ten days, Jews are forbidden to engage in any kind of entertaining activity.<sup>122</sup> Hence, why would Sem Tob choose precisely this period of time to complete his *maqama*? One answer they propose is that *yamei ben metzarim*, along with the images of the frozen ink, the broken pen, and the freezing cold day are metaphors for the moral and spiritual decay of the Jewish community during that time. Additionally, they postulate that the scissors may symbolize

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<sup>120</sup> The Zohar, a Kabbalist mystical text written in Castile in the thirteenth century, became an integral part of Jewish religious cosmology after its dissemination.

<sup>121</sup> The image of unification has very strong messianic connotations that will be dealt with later on.

<sup>122</sup> *Yamei ben metzarim* precede *Tisha b'Av* (the 9th of Av), a day of fasting and mourning.

the powerful and wealthy Jewish leaders who controlled the cultural and spiritual life of the community, and that the pen represents the declining stature of Torah scholars who were at an earlier time considered to be the rightful leaders of the community. Whether or not this was Sem Tob's intention is only a conjecture, but the authors consider the possibility worthy of investigation.

In my opinion, Sem Tob is responding to the historical conditions by subtly countering Christian truth claims, bolstering Jewish identity, and directing veiled criticism towards other Jews who were seen as a danger to the Jewish community.<sup>123</sup> Whether or not he is addressing a specific person is an interesting question, but one which has so far proven elusive. Nevertheless, there will be as many interpretations of Ma'aseh as there are readers given the ambiguity of the Hebrew language and the complexity of the style. This aspect of the work makes it endlessly fascinating, and will most likely engage scholars for years to come.

#### **Description of Ma'aseh ha Rav**<sup>124</sup>

The edition of Ma'aseh ha Rav used in this study is that of Maya Fruchtman and Yehuda Nini (1980). Other editions are those of Rabbi Eleazar Ashkenazi of Mitz, Germany (1859), and Chaim Schirrmann, who published only a portion of the text in his work Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Provence (1956). Ashkenazi's edition, which was copied in un-pointed Rashi script, contains an abundance of errors and is considered to be

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<sup>123</sup> These subjects will be addressed in chapter four.

<sup>124</sup> Henceforth, all biblical translations are from Tanach: The Stone Edition.

less reliable than that of Shirmann (Nini & Fruchtman 21-22).<sup>125</sup> A full English translation of Ma'aseh can be found in Sanford Shepard's Sem Tov: His World and his Words (1978). However, because it preceded the publication of Nini and Fruchtman's edition, which contains extensive commentary on the many biblical and rabbinic citations and allusions, the translation of certain words and phrases may be unreliable. My description and partial translation of Ma'aseh is meant to remedy some of these errors, and to complement Shepard's translation, which for the most part is clear and accurate.

Lines 1-14

Sem Tob opens his *maqama* with a few verses justifying his decision to write with the scissors, claiming that the people and the grandees lured him to the task. He then launches into a poem in which he describes the incomparable beauty and eloquence of the form of words written with scissors: "I did not write it [the letter] with ink and pen, but with a two edged sword, to lift it up for generations to come, to be a song of praise" (lines 11-12).<sup>126</sup> Sem Tob's boasting in this part of the *maqama* may strike the modern reader as highly inflated and narcissistic, yet this was a rhetorical feature of Arabic and Hebrew poetry of the Middle Ages in Spain.

Lines 15-40

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<sup>125</sup> Rashi is a thirteenth-century French Torah scholar who created his own unique script. Without vowel points, it is more difficult to translate ancient and medieval Hebrew texts because in Semitic languages, words that are derived from the same root may have the same or similar spellings that can only be read correctly if one is thoroughly familiar with the language and its context.

<sup>126</sup> In note 1, Shepard states that the expression used for "two-edged sword" is a reference to the split point of the reed pen (*World and Words* 114). It is, however, a reference to the two blades of the scissors (Nini & Fruchtman 39, note 11).



The physical conditions of the day are described, which transition into praise of the pen. The hard freeze and strong wind have turned everything into ice. People are confined to their homes, rendering communication and socializing impossible. The author laments that he has no one with whom to commune. To remedy his loneliness, he turns to his pen, which he values above human friendship and likens to an instrument of God.

Lines 41-96

The special qualities of the pen are enumerated: “The pen reads the unannounced thoughts of my heart without my leave. He beholds and copies the designs of my meditations. Without ears he hears each secret reflection and without eyes he seeks out every secret vision . . . “ (lines 44-46).<sup>127</sup> The author then likens the pen to a nail that holds men’s thoughts in place on paper, thus preventing them from “moving and wandering” and getting lost through the passage of time (line 60). The biblical citation from Vayikra 27:10 (“It cannot be exchanged or replaced,” line 62),<sup>128</sup> referring to the sanctification of time, space, persons and objects, demarcates the pen as an instrument of God (Milgram 2376).<sup>129</sup> Messianic qualities are also attributed to the pen, such as the ability to gather the exiled.

Lines 97-126

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<sup>127</sup> Shepard’s translation.

<sup>128</sup> This biblical citation (Vayikra 27:10), which is not noted by Shepard in his translation, is repeated again in line 538. It plays an important part in my interpretation of Ma’aseh because of the fact that Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret of Barcelona used it in one of his polemical letters regarding philosophical interpretation of the Bible (see chapter 4).

<sup>129</sup> The verse, in its biblical context, refers to Jewish law concerning vows and animal tithes. For more on this subject, see Jacob Milgram’s commentary on Leviticus in The Anchor Bible (2001).

Sem Tob describes his attempts to dip the pen in the inkwell. Because the ink has frozen, the pen breaks when dipped, rendering it useless. This part marks the beginning of the dialogue between the author and his pen, in which he expresses disdain and contempt for the instrument that has betrayed him.

Lines 127-202

The righteous pen responds to the author's attack with indignation. It is deeply offended and defends its position, stating that the author has no right to accuse it, for it has been a loyal servant and has demanded no recompense. To prove its point, it gets the author to dip his finger into the inkwell. The result is a cut and a broken fingernail. Sem Tob laments his harsh words and admits that the pen was speaking truthfully, for who, he asks, would have thought that the frost would affect all the utensils of the household?

Lines 203-271

Sem Tob continues his narration in first person. He gets up to look out the window and wonders whether the sun or freezing cold will triumph. As he is sitting alone, without helpmate or friend, a voice comes to him proposing a solution. The voice proclaims that there is no need to despair because of the temporary uselessness of the pen. Another utensil exists, made of iron, which is better and stronger than ten pens. Sem Tob is elated and hurries to begin writing his epistle with the scissors. The letters he creates are beautiful in form and without comparison. In his excitement, he writes a short poem describing the condition of the pen and ink, and how this situation was the catalyst for learning how to write with the scissors. He then praises God for not having abandoned him in this crisis; for God makes everything beautiful in its right time, and with

intelligence, exchanges pens.<sup>130</sup> More praise is then bestowed upon the scissors, and it is decided that the pen will be ashamed when it sees the work they have wrought.

Lines 272-316

The next part begins with a poem addressed to a friend who has beseeched the author to compose a letter for him with scissors. The theme of love and betrayal seems to be only tenuously related to the broader theme of the debate. The main connection lies in the fact that it is written with scissors.<sup>131</sup>

The author continues to praise the scissors, as well as poetry in general. Poetry is compared to the voice of Jacob, while the physical act of writing is likened to Esau. An interesting word play is found in lines 279-281. Sem Tob takes the root of the verb “to do” (*asah*) and creates three different meanings with it: *osav* (maker), *ma’asav* (deeds) and *Esav* (Esau). Such word play is typical of the *addad* genre, which had a marked influence on Sem Tob’s literary style.

In lines 276-303, the scissors are portrayed as containing the spirit of God. They are compared to the work of the Prophet [Moses] who, through the spirit of God, engraved the stone tablets. The point being made is that the scissors, which cut and engrave, do not rely on ink to function, as the pen does. This fact is used as proof of their superiority.

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<sup>130</sup> In Hebrew, the word for time and pen sound alike. With ingenuity, Sem Tob has exchanged the *tav* for *tet*, thus changing the meaning of an Arabic prayer: “With wisdom he changes the time and the seasons” to “With wisdom he changes pens” (Nini & Fruchtmann 56).

<sup>131</sup> Soledad Gibert Fenech discovered fragments of a love letter written with scissors in Arabic from the mid fourteenth century in the *Diwan* of Ahmad ibn Jatima, a writer from Almerian, Spain. She did not know of any oriental or western antecedents to this style of writing (211).

In lines 305-316,<sup>132</sup> the author employs mystical language to describe the scissors' spiritual qualities.<sup>133</sup>

Our writing is more wondrous than any letter with ink and pen, or any colorful embroidery . . . Sometimes it is white and sometimes black-<sup>134</sup> it takes off one form and puts on another- at times *its head is in the clouds* (Job 20:6)- and shines [meziv]<sup>135</sup> like a wheel making itself a gallery *above the expanse* (Ezek. 1:15-16, 26).<sup>136</sup> *The Most High sent forth His voice* (Samuel II 22:14)- and *it was beautiful in its grandeur* (Ezekiel 31:7) . . . I am the pinnacle of thought [ruach]/ I am form [tzura] without matter [homer], and without body, I am spirit [ruach]/ My vehicle is in the heavens and *I glide on the wings of the wind* [ruach] (Psalms 18:11).

The scissors also boast that their writing is more spiritual than that of the pen since the letters they create are composed of air, rather than ink.

Lines 317-349

In this section, the debate heats up and an undercurrent of polemic becomes apparent. The pen, furious in the face of the arrogance of the scissors, rises up in anger to

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<sup>132</sup> The italics indicate the parts of the biblical verses that Sem Tob utilizes in the text.

<sup>133</sup> Shepard, in his translation of this part of the text, only notes the biblical allusion to Ezekiel 1:15-16.

<sup>134</sup> The mention of white and black writing occurs twice in the text, and may be a kabbalistic reference (See chapter four).

<sup>135</sup> The term *meziv* (shines) in line 307 is from the kabbalist text the Zohar (Nini & Fruchtman 61, note 307).

<sup>136</sup> The entire verse from Ezekiel reads: "Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne there was the semblance of a human form." Ezekiel, it should be noted, is the biblical text from which *merkavah* mysticism draws its inspiration (see chapter three for a discussion of this topic).

condemn them. The pen asks the scissors who it was that brought them to the work of the heavens, a work unsuitable for such a menial utensil:

Who brought you to the work of the heavens, a work that is not yours! *But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways above your ways, and My plans above your plans* (Isaiah 55:9).<sup>137</sup> I turn to the scroll with kindness and compassion, while you pluck out its eyes. (lines 323-327)

It then proclaims that the scissors have strayed from their proper framework and unlawfully entered the domain of their friends (Torah scholars), who are unquestionably more qualified to perform work of a more spiritual nature.<sup>138</sup>

Line 335 opens with a verse from Isaiah 10:1 (in italics): *Woe to those who inscribe inscriptions of falsehood and who write fraudulent documents* and cause sorrow all the day long . . .” In Isaiah, the condemnation is of the corrupt leaders of the Israelites who were subverting the cause of the poor and needy among the people, while in Ma’aseh, the scissors are accused of writing evil writs and causing sorrow and grief. Because of the polemical language and allusion to Isaiah’s prophetic condemnation, a question that arises is whether or not Sem Tob was using the scissors as a subterfuge for a real target, which may have been the Jewish aristocracy or courtier class.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> In the verse in Isaiah, God is speaking.

<sup>138</sup> Shepard translates vv. 333-334 as “If you are spinning a spider’s web, it does not fit the framework” (v’im lifros resheth nidrashtem -- asher hu mitzudim v’kharashim – v’khalonei sh’kufim atumim? – v’im korei akbish te’erogu, ya’an me’misgarotehem hazuvim yakharogu?) These same lines can also be translated in the following manner: “If it is a spider’s web you are spinning, the flies are going to get away because it does not fit the framework.” In both versions, the meaning has to do with the spinning of subtle arguments that are not to the point, or that do not convince.

<sup>139</sup> This subject will be addressed in chapter four.

In the verses that follow, the pen berates the scissors for their slowness, for it wearies the hearts of those who wait for their letter.

Lines 350-390

More harsh criticism of the scissors is meted out in relation to the theme of secrecy and disclosure. The pen maintains that blessing can only be found in things that are hidden from the eye; hence the scissors are declared defective since their writing is exposed for all to see. If the scissors' letter is folded and rolled up like a scroll, it will be destroyed and rendered useless, since the words have no support. Their letter is then compared to a city that has been breached:

Your letter is full of great moral shortcomings, obvious to everyone. The secrets came out even though wine did not enter.<sup>140</sup> Don't you know that *blessing can only be found in things that are hidden from the eye?* (Ta'anit 8, 2), for if you fold her or roll her up, she will be destroyed. *All who admired her despise her* (Lam. 1:8).

Your writing has no merit. Her letters have no strength on which to stand, for they are suspended on nothingness. Your letter, therefore, will always remain exposed and naked, *like an open city without walls* (Proverbs 25:28), (lines 350-360).

The pen, continuing its angry tirade against the scissors, accuses them of acting like a foolish woman: "*Her mouth opened to the ignorant* (Proverbs 31:8), her secrets and defects exposed for all to see" (line 360).<sup>141</sup> In their act of revealing too much, they

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<sup>140</sup> Wine generally causes people to say more than they should. The scissors, though, reveal too much even without wine.

<sup>141</sup> This line (360) is taken from Proverbs 31:8 ("Speak up for the dumb . . ."). Sem Tob cleverly changes the meaning by changing the order of the words so that it reads: "Her mouth opened to the ignorant," referring to the flawed content of the scissors' letter. In

destroy all that they set out to establish (lines 365-66): “All that you plotted to keep secret will become revealed, *Destroy! Destroy! Down to its very foundations!* (Psalms 137:7).”<sup>142</sup>

In line 367, the pen condescendingly announces that it is going to reduce its exposition on the matter to the level of the intelligence of the scissors. The scissors are then reminded, yet again, that their sin is public knowledge. A humoristic description ensues describing the way in which scissors writing destroys the face of the paper: “Like fanged beasts your teeth are let loose on the scroll . . . You pluck the words from its heart and leave it full of holes . . . ” (lines 369-372). The pen, in indignation, declares that its principles are not like those of the scissors. It reinforces its position with an allusion to *Pirkei Avot*, which is meant to distinguish the standards of a righteous person from those of a *rasha* (evil person): “It is not my custom to behave that way, for my rule is that of *hasid* (pious man), *what is mine is hers and what is hers is hers* [Pirkei Avot 6,10],” (lines 372-374).<sup>143</sup> The medieval Jewish reader would have been able to infer the rest of the verse: “*what is yours is mine*” (i.e. the standard of a *rasha*).<sup>144</sup> In other words, the scissors are being accused of taking more than their share.

The pen proceeds to praise its own writing in that it is guarded from the vision of the eye. It can be sent by its master to a foreign land safely hidden and concealed, unlike

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Proverbs, however, the verse concerns the moral imperative to care for the ignorant, unfortunate and needy.

<sup>142</sup> The accusation is that the scissors are destroying all the secrets.

<sup>143</sup> The idea is this: if I say “what is yours is mine,” I am a *rasha*. If I say “mine is yours and yours is mine,” I am foolish. If I say “mine is yours and yours is yours,” I am a *tzaddik* (righteous person).

<sup>144</sup> This *mishnaic* saying (from *Avot*) would have been known by most literate Jews.

a letter written with scissors. Why compare truth to things of no significance, the pen asks. A slanderer (the scissors) goes around revealing secrets while a faithful person (the pen) conceals them: “*How can straw be compared to grain?* (Jer. 23:28). *A base fellow gives away secrets, but a trustworthy soul keeps a confidence* (Proverbs 11:13),” (lines 389-90).

In the next few verses [391-394] the pen continues to berate the scissors for disclosing what should be concealed. It then praises itself for its modesty, faithfulness, and ability to conceal (by folding itself up). Then, in some of the strongest invective against the scissors found in Ma’aseh, the pen calls the scissors “vile” (*bnei nabal*) and vows to expose the nakedness of their writing.<sup>145</sup> Their despicable actions (taking more than their share of the paper) will come back to haunt them, causing their letter to become as moth eaten clothing: “Your actions are despicable, and will cause the scroll to become like moth eaten clothes that will rot. You are not satisfied with what is yours but must take more (of the paper), until it is consumed and decayed. But you return empty and athirst.” The pen’s letter, in contrast, is sated with favor and full of the Lord’s blessing: “*I give generously and end up with more* (Proverbs 11:24). Nothing can be weighed against my writing,” (lines 396-399).

Lines 401-440

The scissors go on the defense, telling the pen that without iron, the material the scissors are made of, the pen would not even have come into existence: “For we are a

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<sup>145</sup> *Bnei Nabal* refers to the story of Nabal in Samuel I. Nabal was a wealthy Calebite who had many sheep and goats but was a hard man and an evildoer, one who pays back evil for good. The fact that King David encountered him shearing his sheep makes Sem Tob’s reference a clever allusion to the scissors.



*chariotry of iron* (Joshua 7:8). And as for you, *will you become a patron?*” (Isaiah 3:7).<sup>146</sup> The implication is that because of the pen’s poverty, it is not fit to be a communal leader.

In contestation to the pen’s previous mockery of the scissors’ slowness, the scissors remind the pen that it took the prophet Moses himself forty days and nights to complete the Ten Commandments on the mountaintop. Furthermore, they maintain that if a prophet were now among us, he would surely resort to the same kind of writing as the scissors (i.e. engraving).<sup>147</sup> The scissors then proceed to turn the pen’s argument about the superiority of secrecy on its head by associating concealment with shame and disgrace.

The scissors end their speech with a poem summarizing their previous arguments. In the last line [440], a reference is made to the wisdom of the author whose dexterity enables him to change from pen writing to scissors writing at will.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> The verse to which Sem Tob alludes concerns Isaiah’s prophecy about the low moral state of the Israelites. No one wants to assume the responsibility of becoming a leader, substantiating their refusal by claiming they have no economic base upon which to help the community: “When a man will grasp his relative, a member of his father’s house, [saying] ‘You have a garment! Become a benefactor for us; and let this obstacle [of poverty] be [under the control of] your hand!--He will swear on that day, saying, ‘I cannot become a patron, for in my house there is neither bread nor garment. Do not make me a benefactor of the people!’” (Isaiah 3: 6-7). Shepard notes the reference to Joshua 7:8 concerning chariotry of iron, but not the allusion to Isaiah 3:7.

<sup>147</sup> Shepard translates lines 425-426 thus: “If you are a prophet of the Lord among us . . .” (92). However, the line should read: If a prophet were now among us . . .” The confusion stems from the fact that the word for “you” (*atah*, beginning with the letter *aleph*) and “now” (*atah*, beginning with the letter *ayin*) sound alike. In Nini and Fruchtmann’s edition, *atah* begins with *ayin* (69).

<sup>148</sup> The last words of line 440, *m’shaneh ha etim*, are a play on words from an Arabic prayer praising God for changing the seasons (Nini & Fruchtmann 71). The similarity of

Lines 441-482

The pen retorts with a Talmudic principle that translates loosely to “the more you say the less weight your words have.”<sup>149</sup> It then proceeds with an argument that reverses the values of strength and weakness. The pen, quoting from Isaiah 40:29, proclaims that God gives strength to the weary, and that the war is not won by the valiant (Kohelet 9:11).<sup>150</sup>

The following is my own direct translation of lines 445- 461, which I deem necessary since this section is important to my general argument. Also, there are a few discrepancies between my and Shepard’s interpretation of several of the Hebrew verses. The pen continues: “The truth is I am soft and smeared with ink. As I go out to stroll and the ink flows from my mouth, *I regard iron as straw* (Job 41:19), *and with the sound of those overcome* (Ex. 32:18), that bronze is as rotted wood. And if I am not able to dip in the ink but once in a jubilee, it is because water leaked from the sea of ink, stolen by the heat or aridity. When you saw this, you were overjoyed. When disaster strikes you, I also will laugh and sneer in the face of your fear. Alas, it will come quickly. *When the iron becomes blunted and destroys the face of the scroll* (Eccl. 10:10),<sup>151</sup> I will speak

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the words for seasons and pens in Hebrew allows Sem Tob to change the meaning simply by switching the final *tav* to *tet*.

<sup>149</sup> From Tractate *Minachot*, 89:A

<sup>150</sup> These ideas are interesting in that the Jews were in a position of weakness in the face of a powerful Christianity. In order to maintain their identity as a people, it was necessary to find creative ways to diffuse Christian truth claims. It is possible that these verses serve that purpose.

<sup>151</sup> Shepard translates this line as “For when the iron is blunt and no longer damages the face of the paper . . .” (*World and Words* 93). It is an allusion to Kohelet 10:10: “*If an*

arrogantly and with conceit. If the screw upon which you turn again and again is severed, *and the bundle is separated*,<sup>152</sup> and *disgrace wraps you like a robe*,<sup>153</sup> then you will be of no help or benefit. But all of this is just prattling, words that have no value, which neither add nor detract. Nor are they obligatory or righteous, for it is obvious and well known that there is no substance to our polemic. *It is not dependent upon your audacity or my weakness* (Eccl. 10:17), or on your valor or my feebleness.<sup>154</sup> *And your power, what is it to me?* (Job 30:2).”

In the ensuing verses, the pen questions the value of their argument, and accuses the scissors of transgressing its boundary. It then proclaims that their master is so wise that he can not only use a thing for a purpose other than that for which it was created, but can alter the customs of the world according to the needs of the hour.<sup>155</sup> Since the pen is temporarily useless and the ink frozen, the need of the moment called for a creative solution. Yet, the pen declares, just because the scissors were taken out of their nature and used for writing this one time cannot serve as evidence that writing is a profession for which they are qualified: “A thing like this has never happened before, and cannot be taken as evidence- Your heart was seduced by a net of engraved images (literally, silver

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*axe is blunt and one has not honed the edge*, nevertheless, it strengthens warriors. Wisdom is a more powerful skill.” Sem Tob utilizes the part in italics, but changes the *lo* (not) to *la* (a direct object pronoun referring to the scroll), thus changing the meaning somewhat: “Im ke’heh ha-barzel-- ve’hu la panim keelkel . . .” (lines 452-53).

<sup>152</sup> He is referring to the two halves of the scissors. The image is from *Psalms* 109:29.

<sup>153</sup> Shepard translates the Hebrew *ba’shna* in line 456 as “sleep,” but Sem Tob was actually quoting, almost word for word, from *Psalms* 109:29: “My accusers shall be clothed in shame, wrapped in their disgrace as in a robe.”

<sup>154</sup> Shepard translates *be’shti* of line 461 as “drinking,” whereas in Nini and Fruchtman’s edition, it signifies weakness or feebleness.

<sup>155</sup> This is referring to the scissors, which the author used for a purpose other than shearing.

filigree work) that is not yours.<sup>156</sup> *You were raised up* (Isaiah 66:12)<sup>157</sup> - and you [have the audacity] to call yourself the king's scribe? *Don't you know that the minority viewpoint does not prevail? It is the custom to follow the majority,*" (lines 468-473).<sup>158</sup>

Sem Tob concludes with a panegyric to himself for being able to utilize both pen and scissors as writing instruments: "*It is best to grasp the one and not let go of the other* - for only *he* (Sem Tob) *who fears God performs them all* (Eccl 7:18)," (lines 475-477).<sup>159</sup> However, he vows that from now on, the scissors will only be used for shearing sheep.

Lines 480-82 consist of a short poem in which Sem Tob proclaims that he undertook this endeavor (scissors writing) in order to insult and revile an insignificant

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<sup>156</sup> Shepard translates *maskiyot* as mansions. The term, however, is from Proverbs 25:11 and signifies intricate filigree work. In the introduction to the first part of Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides' describes it thus: "The term *maskiyyoth* denotes filigree tracteries; I mean to say tracteries in which there are apertures with very small eyelets, like the handiwork of silversmiths . . . The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes . . . For he says that in a saying that has two meanings--he means an external and an internal one--the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver" (12).

<sup>157</sup> This line (*ki al tzad tena'se'u*) literally means "you will be carried on the side." It concerns the prophecy of Israel's future redemption: "For thus said Hashem: Behold I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a surging stream, and you will suckle; you will be carried on the side and dandled on the knees." Clearly, Sem Tob is taking the verse out of context and using it for a different purpose; however, the implication is that the scissors have been pampered and elevated.

<sup>158</sup> Shepard's translation is used here. It is a reference to *Baba Baitra* 150-160, a Talmudic tract.

<sup>159</sup> In the verse cited from Ecclesiastes, Sem Tob adds *ve'hu levado* (for he only), referring to himself.

man upon whom it is not worth wasting ink.<sup>160</sup> He also states his wish to enlighten him by means of the letter.<sup>161</sup>

Lines 483-494

In order to resolve the dispute, the pen proposes the idea of getting an objective observer to decide which of the two is the true instrument for writing. The pen considers this a better option than leaving it to their master to judge, since he may end up abandoning them both.<sup>162</sup> The plan is to get a poor but learned man from the market place to willingly come to their home. Then, without being told a word about the competition, he will be instructed to utilize each household object according to its purpose.

Lines 495-532

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<sup>160</sup> Nini & Fruchtman comment in note 480 that what the author wishes to convey (in lines 480-482) is that the purpose of the letter is not the workmanship involved, but the will to humiliate the person who is to receive it since he is not deserving of a letter written with ink (72).

<sup>161</sup> Shepard's translation of line 480 reads: "You have indicted yourself with your own words . . ." (93). However, Nini and Fruchtman interpret the sentence as expressing the author's desire "to bring wisdom into the heart of the man" (72): "ve'ki-dvarkhem emet ken, ki katavo enosh, bin etkhem hu ish katavo." The significance of the word *enosh* here is somewhat unclear.

<sup>162</sup> The pen's fear of not being chosen is evoked by an allusion to Genesis 48:17, in which Jacob chooses Ephraim over Menasseh as the recipient of the higher blessing, even though he is not the first-born: "When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it wrong; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's," (JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh). Jacob objected and gave the higher blessing to Ephraim since he would become the greater nation.

The scissors approve of the plan, so the pen goes out to the marketplace to look for a humble wise man who is skilled in the art of plotting.<sup>163</sup> When the pen finds someone who embodies these qualities, he greets him with exaggerated praise and beseeches him to help resolve a heated contention.<sup>164</sup> The man replies that he will do anything, even tread thorn bushes barefoot for the sake of peace.

The pen then leads the man to the house and asks him to examine all of the objects and utensils he sees before him, and to use each one according to its kind.<sup>165</sup> The man, doing as he is told, finds a menorah and puts wicks in it, then proceeds to sew his pants with a needle and thread. When he finally finds the pen, he writes with it all afternoon. Upon encountering the scissors, though, he trims his hair and mustache, and cuts his fingernails. The pen, observing this, is overjoyed and declares out loud: “Enough, you are the witness! May the Lord reward you for all you have done for us.”<sup>166</sup> Drunk with emotion, it twirls around and belittles the scissors. The scissors, ashamed and trembling, do not reply.

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<sup>163</sup> One of the Hebrew words (*me'zima*) Sem Tob uses to describe the type of knowledge this man should have translates to planning/plotting. Not only should he be wise, but clever and astute as well. This description accords well with his conception in PM of the real man: “El omre que es omre” (v. 421). To Sem Tob, the acquisition of spiritual wisdom is the purpose of life, but men in the world must also be clever, astute, and always on the alert.

<sup>164</sup> The words Sem Tob uses here to describe the contention are especially strong: “Your intervention will put an end to overwhelming strife, and will stop murder and the spilling of blood” (lines 501-502).

<sup>165</sup> The phrase “to use each one according to its kind” derives from Deuteronomy 14:14. It is an allusion to the laws of *kashrut* (permitted and forbidden foods).

<sup>166</sup> “You are my witness” is taken from Isaiah 43:10: “My witnesses are you- declares the Lord- My servant whom I have chosen.” Isaiah is referring to the Israelites, who are being vindicated after harsh condemnations in the preceding chapters. This quote clearly identifies the pen as the suffering servant of Isaiah.

The section ends with a verse from Exodus 32:12 that describes the sound Moses hears in the camp of the Hebrews when he returns from Mount Sinai. Joshua thinks it is the cry of war but Moses informs him that it is *not the sound of the tune of triumph, or the sound of the tune of defeat*, but the sound of song, i.e. the song the Hebrews were singing as they were fashioning the golden calf. In the biblical story, when Moses witnesses this spectacle, he lashes out in anger and sets terror over the people. Sem Tob uses the same words in line 531 to describe the terror the pen sets over the scissors after it wins the competition. One can speculate that the allusion to this verse reflects the historical context in that the class of Jews who controlled the spiritual and cultural life of the community were, metaphorically speaking, worshipping calves of gold.<sup>167</sup>

Lines 532-545

After the pen's victory, it prepares a banquet for its friends "on the day in which God saved it from all of its enemies," (lines 533-534). During the banquet, the congregation and the pen rise up when they hear the voice of the king and his minions decree that everyone deposit their tools/utensils,<sup>168</sup> all of which have been assigned a specific function determined by the Almighty.<sup>169</sup> The king declares:

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<sup>167</sup> In this scenario, the scissors could represent those Jewish courtiers who were not serving God or their community in the way proscribed by the Torah.

<sup>168</sup> Shepard gives line 536 a different translation: "Each man attended to his tools" (*World and Words* 95). Nini and Fruchtmann specify that the line is taken from Isaiah 10:28. The English translation (in italics) is: "[Sennacherib] has come to Ayyath and passed through Migron, *he deposits his belongings* at Michmas."

<sup>169</sup> Most likely, the king is a symbol for God here. The word *melekh* (king) and *malkhuyot* (kingdom) are often used in the Hebrew prayer book as metaphors for God and His kingdom.

No one shall seize the craft of his neighbor, for their works have been assigned from the beginning of creation.<sup>170</sup> Nor *may anyone exchange or substitute* one work for another (Leviticus 27:10). Nor shall *a woman put on a man's apparel, or a man wear a woman's clothing . . .* (Deut. 22:5), (lines 537-539).

The implication here is that the pen, which represents Torah, cannot be exchanged for something of inferior value.

The utensils then return to their stations, and the voice reassures everyone that the order established concerning their proper use will never be altered. An era of peace is ushered in as a result of this decree that is to last for forty years.<sup>171</sup>

Lines 545-586<sup>172</sup>

In first person narration, Sem Tob informs the reader that he has sat down to write pleasant words, as is his custom. He then extols the virtues of the pen; yet this time, his description verges on the messianic. The pen is humble and pious, it gathers the scattered and the exiled (by way of inscription), and does not seek fame, power or glory. The words that usher from its mouth are never perverse or crooked and its only desire is to

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<sup>170</sup> Shepard's translation.

<sup>171</sup> Sem Tob alludes to Judges 3:11 here. The context of the Biblical verse is the problem of the Israelites' adoption of the customs and gods of the native peoples as they settled the land of Israel. This so angered the Almighty that He caused them to be subjected to the people of Aram-naharaim for eight years. When they cried out, though, God had mercy on them and sent a deliverer who prevailed over the king of Aram. The land experienced peace for forty years as a result. It is possible that Sem Tob is drawing a parallel between the situation of the Jews in antiquity and that of his own times, i.e. conversion and adopting the ways of other peoples.

<sup>172</sup> In the last few pages of the *maqama* I directly translate from the Hebrew rather than summarize because of the importance of this section to the historical context.



increase Torah wisdom. It is also said of the pen that it inspires hope.<sup>173</sup> Its advantage over all other planted trees is revealed and well known; no tree in God's garden compares to it in beauty and stature (Ezekiel 31:8).<sup>174</sup>

Lines 559-567 are cryptic in that they refer to things made of wood that serve a specific function but whose existence is futile: "on the day that it [the tree] was sundered from its roots it was *beaten and bruised*."<sup>175</sup> It was of no use until it was sliced, *pierced from all sides* (Proverbs 7:23), and fashioned with steel into tables, chairs, doors, arks and other objects. These are dead things, *devoid of sense, and lacking in discernment, like a hut in an untended field*.<sup>176</sup> Their beginning is forced labor and *their fate is to perish for*

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<sup>173</sup> Line 554-555, "for there is hope for a pen" (*ki yesh le'et tikvah*), is an intentional wordplay on Job 14:7 (the words for pen [*et*] and tree [*etz*] in Hebrew are very similar): "For there is hope for tree: [Even] if it is felled it can still renew itself, and its branching will not cease."

<sup>174</sup> The author is likening the pen to a tree in *Gan Eden* (The Garden of Eden). While in Ezekiel, the tree represents Assyria, in *Ma'aseh*, the tree that outshines all the others is a metaphor for Torah (the pen), which is the only tree that renews itself. The other trees that Sem Tob refers to in the following lines are cut down and crafted into objects for human use.

<sup>175</sup> Song of Songs 5:7 (the italics indicate the part used by Sem Tob): "They found me, the enemy watchmen patrolling the city; *they struck me, they bloodied me* wreaking God's revenge on me. They stripped my mantle of holiness from me, the angelic watchmen of the wall."

<sup>176</sup> Deuteronomy 32:28: "For they are a folk devoid of sense, lacking in all discernment." Those "devoid of sense" is referring to the nations who would attribute Israel's destruction to their own power and might rather than to God. The line that follows [565] likens the dead wooden objects to "a hut in an untended field" (Isaiah 1:8), after which Isaiah condemns his people for sinning and thereby causing the desolation of their homeland. It is possible that Sem Tob is indirectly commenting on the troubled state of Castilian Jewry.

*eternity.*<sup>177</sup> *A flame will dry up its tender branches* (Job 15:30), and *it will be consumed by fire* (Isaiah 9:4).”<sup>178</sup>

In contrast, the pen’s future is better than its beginning because its youth is continually restored. Even if it is cut and its form altered, its shoots will never dry up, for it possesses eternal life:<sup>179</sup> “When it was cut from its trunk (*gizah*) its essence came into the world, and at the moment it was removed from its place, the spirit of God began to fill it.”<sup>180</sup> *And when the glory of its branches was removed* (Isaiah 10:33),<sup>181</sup> the spirit of life entered its nostrils. A mouth was given to it like a man’s so it could express itself and run from line to line. It is a well-known fact that the lips of the pen guard Torah knowledge, and Torah will be sought from its mouth because it is a host of the Almighty,” (lines 574-582).

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<sup>177</sup> Numbers 24:20: “A leading nation is Amalek, *but its fate is to perish forever.*” It is of interest that Sem Tob chose a verse that immediately follows Balaam’s blessing of Israel. Balak had hoped that Balaam would damn Israel, but instead he blessed her three times. In the blessing, Balaam prophesied the fall of Edom, Amalek, the Kenites and Asshur, and the triumph of Israel.

<sup>178</sup> It is noteworthy that the following verse in Isaiah (9:5) refers to a messianic redeemer: “For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us, and the dominion will rest on his shoulder; the Wondrous Advisor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, called his name Sar Shalom (Prince of Peace).”

<sup>179</sup> The description of the pen in this passage is a metaphor for the survival of the Jewish people from generation to generation.

<sup>180</sup> Nini and Fruchtman note that this line is an allusion to the prophecy of Isaiah regarding the future messiah (78): “A staff shall emerge from the stump of Jesse and a shoot will sprout from his roots. The spirit of Hashem will rest upon him—a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of council and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of Hashem (11:1-2).” Clearly, this part of Ma’aseh reflects Sem Tob’s (and the Jewish community’s) hope for a messianic redeemer, and perhaps belief that they were living in messianic times. See chapter four for more on this subject.

<sup>181</sup> For an interpretation of this verse, see chapter four, p. 37.

In the last few lines of this section, Sem Tob informs the reader that further description of the merits of the pen are recorded in Chronicles (Sefer Divrei ha-Yamim). He concludes with a reminder about the distressing conditions of the day: “A harsh day of cold and snow-- a terrible day of ice,” (lines 585-86).

Lines 586-607

In spite of the pen’s victory, the author vows not to forget the benefit of the scissors. He will remember them eternally because of the good things they have done for him. On the day that he (Sem Tob) cried out, they answered.<sup>182</sup>

My own direct translation follows from line 589 to the conclusion of the *maqama* [line 618]: “My soul delights in remembering them (the scissors) in the holy tongue and in the language of the people,<sup>183</sup> for their ways are righteous. May the complaint of the one who fails in their use fall upon his own soul. *His mischief will recoil upon his own head; his lawlessness will come down upon his own skull* (Psalms 7:17), because he separates and disturbs the peace by causing brothers to move apart. For not in vain did the composer (of the *maqama*) *bring them* (the two blades of the scissors) *closer one to another*,<sup>184</sup> and repair them in order to fulfill what is called *iron sharpening iron*,<sup>185</sup> by

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<sup>182</sup> In line 598, Sem Tob creates a play on words by leaving out the *aleph* in the verb “to cry out,” making it look like the noun “cold.” This gives the sentence two possible translations, i.e. the one given above, and the following: “On the cold day they (the scissors) came to my aid.”

<sup>183</sup> It is likely that Sem Tob is alluding to the verses about the scissors in PM.

<sup>184</sup> Ezekiel 37:17. The words from Ezekiel found in this line of the *maqama* [594-95] are referring to the coming together of the stick of Ephraim and the stick of Judah (i.e. the unification of the House of Israel, which was scattered among the nations). Whereas in Ezekiel, the two sticks will be joined to form one metaphorical tree (*etz*), in Ma’aseh, the two blades come together to form one pen (*et*), (Nini and Fruchtman 79, note 595).

<sup>185</sup> “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the wit of his friend” (Proverbs 27:17).

taking scripture out of its plain sense meaning. *There they will be struck with terror*,<sup>186</sup> as it is said, *how good and pleasant it is that brothers dwell together* (Psalms 133:1).

Therefore, those who terrorize, let them be terrified, and those who separate, let them be separated, and *do to them according to their wickedness* (Deuteronomy 19:19).<sup>187</sup> For such persons *shall be cut off from their people* (Leviticus 18:29).<sup>188</sup> All the deeds of the scissors are just, let them be judged by their ways.<sup>189</sup> Let the violence of the one who comes to separate them fall upon his own head. The scissors' desire is not to do evil, although to regain their unity, they will cut off that which comes between them. Do to

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<sup>186</sup> Psalms 14:5 and 53:6. The two psalms where the words “there they will be struck with terror” are found are nearly identical, except for several verses. Given the ambiguity of line 597, I include here Proverbs 14 with the hope that the biblical context will shed light on the significance of the verse in *Ma’aseh*:

“For the conductor, by David. The degraded one says in his heart, “There is no God!” They have acted corruptly and abominably [in their] action; there is no doer of good. From heaven Hashem gazed down upon mankind to see if there exists a reflective person who seeks out God. Everyone has gone astray, together they have become depraved; there is no doer of good, there is not even one. Do they not realize—all those evildoers, who devour my people as they would devour bread, who do not call upon Hashem—[that] *there they will be struck with terror*, for God is with the righteous generation? You shame the poor man’s counsel, that Hashem is his refuge. O, that out of Zion would come Israel’s salvation! When Hashem restores the captivity of His people, Jacob will exult, Israel will rejoice.”

<sup>187</sup> While Sem Tob does not incorporate every word from the verse in Deuteronomy, he clearly alludes to it: “You shall do to him as he schemed to do to his fellow. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst.”

<sup>188</sup> “For if anyone commits any of these abominations, the people doing so will be cut off from among their people” (Leviticus 18:29). From the nature of the Biblical allusions and citations in this part of the *maqama*, it is probable that Sem Tob is targeting a person, or a group of people, whom he considers to be corrupt.

<sup>189</sup> Shepard translates lines 601-02 as: “He (the scissors) is condemned by the judge,” which does not make sense given that the scissors are declared *yashar* (upright) in the first part of the same sentence. Nini & Fruchtman find the word *mishpat* (judgement) in Exodus 26:30, where it signifies “custom” or “ways”; therefore, in lines 601-02, I translated the first instance of *mishpat* as “custom” and the second as “judged,” since the context lends itself to this interpretation.

him as he has done to his fellow. *In the way that he measures, so shall they measure him* (Tosefa Sutta 4,1).”<sup>190</sup>

“The scissors greatly desired to stand together. In order for the two halves to be one, they will cut in two whomever comes between them.”

Lines 606-618

“Thanks to God who gives strength to the weary and wisdom to the simple minded. Who gives understanding to the cock, and to young boys knowledge and cleverness. Wisdom was with me in this rhymed prose (*melitzah*),<sup>191</sup> until I equaled Solomon. And without pen or ink, the entire letter was written and sealed. In the last third of the month of *Tammuz*, it was completed. In the 105th year of the 6000th millenium since the creation of the world. And I, Sem Tob ben Yitzchak wrote this not with my own wisdom nor with the wisdom of others-- *but from the mouth of Av Shalom that order was issued* (Samuel II 13:32). *The hand of the Lord came upon me saying:*<sup>192</sup> why do you fall? Rise up and do something the likes of which has never been done since the coming of the Torah. *He gave me the strength to do it, He who gives might to the weary.*<sup>193</sup> Perfect and complete (*tam ve'nishlam*).”

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<sup>190</sup> Shepard inexplicably does not include this line in his translation.

<sup>191</sup> In line 610, Sem Tob refers to his work as a *melitzah*, which Nini and Fruchtman define as the traditional Semitic literary style of “beaded” prose, i.e. prose strung together in a rhymed pattern (23).

<sup>192</sup> The allusion to Ezekiel 3:22 and 7:1 here suggests that Sem Tob considered himself to be influenced by the spirit of prophecy.

<sup>193</sup> The last line of the *maqama* [618] alludes to Isaiah 40:29: “He gives strength to the weary, and grants abundant might to the powerless.”

### Description of Proverbios Morales<sup>194</sup>

The following description of PM is meant to help the reader unfamiliar with medieval Spanish thought or literature better assimilate the main ideas and themes of the text, and to provide an abbreviated version that can be used as a supplement to the Spanish or English editions. All citations from the text are from the edition of Paloma Díaz-Más & Carlos Mota (1998), unless otherwise indicated.

Introductory verses 1-69:

The first 69 verses of PM begin with praise of the king and a petition to Alfonso XI that he repay the debt owed to the author. Sem Tob then praises God and comforts himself with the thought that people's sins can never be greater than God's forgiveness. This theme is amplified with a series of *exempla*.

Shifting to the theme of the distressing nature of the world, Sem Tob states one of the main tenets of his world view: there will always be vile people concerned only about their own welfare with whom honorable people will always have to contend. Hence, the ethically minded must be constantly on guard. An indirect criticism is then leveled against ignorant persons in positions of power: dead, useless materials float to the surface in water, while the most valuable treasures sink to the bottom where they remain hidden. The imagery of scales is used to make the same point: empty or vacuous things rise, while substantive or weighty objects sink.

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<sup>194</sup> The way my description of PM is organized is based on Gonzalez Llubera's division of the text into thematic units.

Sem Tob then reproaches a vile man on whom he wishes to waste no ink. This same theme is found in Ma'aseh and will be discussed in the next chapter.

Autobiographical information is given about the conditions in which Sem Tob finds himself. We learn that his financial circumstances are not optimal, that he is hoping to gain some profit by writing, and that he has spent a certain amount of time in service of the royal court but was discharged for some reason. Inner conflict is expressed in his worry that exposing his views may incur wrath, yet he decides it is better to speak than to remain silent.

The introduction concludes with a topos also found in *Libro de buen amor*.<sup>195</sup> He declares that even though he comes from a *mal nido* (“unsavory nest,” i.e. Jewish ethnicity), Proverbios morales is still worth reading. He also compares himself to other Jews who have served in the court, proclaiming that he is not of lesser value: “Que non só para menos que otros de mi ley/ que ovieron muy buenos, donadíos del rey” (v. 57).<sup>196</sup>  
I: vv. 70-111

The ways of the world and the relativity of our judgments about it.

There is an inverse to every situation, therefore it is hard to be absolutely certain about anything. A set of amplifications illustrates how people view a same object or situation differently. This idea is then applied to the natural world. One example involves the way in which the heat of the sun makes fish tender yet hardens salt. Wind can extinguish a candle because of the weakness of the flame, whereas it causes a large

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<sup>195</sup> “Non val el açor menos por nasçer de mal nido/ nin los enxemplos buenos por los dezir judío” (v. 64).

<sup>196</sup> I am not less worthy than others of my Law, who received very generous gifts from the king (my translation).

fire to increase in strength. A few more *exempla* that prove the opposite point are given, such as how the wind does not have a destructive effect on things that are weak and flexible, like grass, but can topple trees, which are much sturdier. The main point is that the forces of nature are beneficial or destructive depending on the circumstances in which they arise; hence our judgment of natural phenomena is relative.

The second aspect of the main theme is the arbitrariness of fortune. Sem Tob, referring to Ecclesiastes and Job, teaches that fortune is not dependent upon intelligence or wisdom, as sometimes ignorant and evil people fare far better than the wise.<sup>197</sup> However, he is not distressed by this fact due to his understanding that this is the way the (social)<sup>198</sup> world operates.<sup>199</sup> He also reminds the reader that there is no knowledge without fear of God. God's goodness, the king's service to his people, and good works are the only absolutes in a relative world.

Ecclesiastes is the source for Sem Tob's conclusion to this section: "Suma de la razón: es muy gran torpedat lebar toda sazón por una egualdat,/ mas tornarse a menudo com el mundo se torna: bezes ser escudo e a vezes açcona" (vv. 110-111): (It is foolish to

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<sup>197</sup> "I have seen everything during my futile existence: sometimes a righteous man perishes for all his righteousness, and sometimes a wicked man endures for all his wickedness" (Eccl 7:15). In the case of Job, the question is registered as a complaint: "Why do the wicked live, become powerful and even amass fortunes?" (Job 21:7). All biblical translations henceforth are from Tanach: The Stone Edition.

<sup>198</sup> One must distinguish between the social world and the cosmic order in PM. The social world is unstable and relative according to Sem Tob. However, there is a higher order that is permanent and unchanging. Morality, ethics and wisdom fall into this category. While wisdom does not protect one from misfortune, it is viewed as an aspect of the divine.

<sup>199</sup> "Que faz bien a menudo al torpe; e al sabio, mal, e al entendido—aquesto non me agravio" (v. 97): Sometimes the world treats the ignorant well, and the wise and intelligent badly—about this I have no complaint. (All translations of PM are mine unless otherwise noted).



behave the same way in every situation, for we must be able to adapt to changing circumstances. Sometimes one must be a sword and at other times a shield).<sup>200</sup>

II: vv. 112-123

All good habits have their limit. Once this limit is passed, the good that comes from it is lost.

III: vv. 124-134

Everything has a reverse side. There is no beauty without ugliness, peace without war, day without night, heat without cold etc . . . This should come as a consolation because without experiencing the negative aspects of existence, we would not be able to appreciate the positive. Only God has no opposite.

IV: vv. 135-162

The proper use of generosity.

“Por la gran mansedad, a omre follarán,/ e por la crueldat, todos lo aborreçran;” (v. 135).<sup>201</sup> Through generosity, man acquires knowledge, yet when it is used excessively, it leads to poverty. The overly generous man is like a candle. In giving to others, he burns himself out. For this reason, it is only appropriate for kings to be excessive in their use of this trait because they have copious financial resources. For others, moderation is

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<sup>200</sup> “Do not be overly righteous or excessively wise. Why be left desolate. Be not overly wicked nor be a fool. Why die before your time? It is best to grasp the one and not let go of the other; he who fears God performs them all” (Eccl. 16-18). Perry notes the allusion to Ecclesiastes 3:1: “Everything has its season (*sazón*), and there is a time for everything under the heaven” (*Prov. Morales* 117).

<sup>201</sup> People will take advantage of the man who is too kind and gentle, while excessive cruelty breeds hatred.

recommended. The source of this idea is Ibn Hisam (12th century): “Non seas tan dulce que te coman, ni tan amargo que te escupan” (Shepard, *Prov. morales* 108).<sup>202</sup>

V: vv. 163-212

How to approach work and profit.

Sem Tob begins with the maxim that rest cannot be gotten without agitation, which work inevitably entails. In order to have peace, one must first be a warrior. Prudence is advised only in so far as it does not lead to inaction. In the realm of work, prudence and level headedness have their limits. A certain amount of *locura* (imprudence) is needed in order to venture out and take risks. Self-doubt will only cause one to fear new adventures. Moreover, in a world that doesn't follow the straight path, self-doubt can lead to misery. Whatever the outcome, it is better to take risks than to never have made the attempt. People must realize that they cannot have one side of the coin without the other. Whoever fails to understand this will get a double portion of whatever it is they fear.

The opposing perspective is that hard work causes people to lose their vitality. Sem Tob offers no solution to this dilemma yet reminds us that work keeps us beyond reproach and is for our benefit. God gave us intelligence so that we should lack nothing, yet He derides those who think that their success is due to their own discernment.<sup>203</sup> Even though intelligence does not necessarily bring success or keep suffering at bay, he consoles us with the idea that dedicating ourselves to an occupation frees us from blame.

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<sup>202</sup> Don't be so sweet that they eat you, and so bitter that they spit you out.

<sup>203</sup> Sem Tob is not implying here that success comes as a divine reward. We know this because earlier in the work (v. 97) he states that he has seen the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper.

In the last variation on the theme of work, the consequences of laziness are addressed. Those who want to refrain from exertion fall into disgrace, which has the effect of increasing agitation and decreasing peace of mind. The idea is that too much or too little of a good thing is harmful, a theme that runs throughout the text.<sup>204</sup>

VI: vv. 213-242.

The importance of guarding against envy and greed.

Verses 213-214, which teach that one should guard oneself from vices such as greed, anger and envy more than from an enemy, express Sem Tob's conceptual understanding of evil. He does not conceive of evil as an external force existing outside of our selves, but as resulting from ignorance and the misuse of our common humanity.<sup>205</sup> To eradicate it, he advocates self-scrutiny and reflection. A series of amplifications illustrate how envy and greed operate, the main idea being that the more we have, the more we covet.<sup>206</sup> There are two types of people in the world: those who covet but never attain what they are looking for, and those who have what they need but are never satisfied. Wealth and poverty are subjective. True wealth consists of being satisfied with what one has, while greed impoverishes.

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<sup>204</sup> This is the "golden mean" of Aristotelian origin.

<sup>205</sup> The main verse in PM that expresses this view of evil is 650: "Del mundo mal dezimos, e en él otro mal/ non ha si non nós mesmos, nin vestiglos nin ál."

<sup>206</sup> Verses 230-31, and 242 have parallels in the Proverbios rimados of the Hispano-Arabic poet and mystic Ibn Luyun of Almeria (14th cent.): "Si el hombre con poco se contenta, sube de condición, y si codicia, se rebaja," and "Sigue en todo el justo medio, y no te desmandes a los extremos; que los extremos son error," (qtd. in Shepard, *Prov. morales* 124).

The section concludes with yet another variation on the value of work.<sup>207</sup> When we have more than we need, we become a slave to our belongings out of fear of losing them. Work then becomes a source of grief. To avoid this dilemma, we should always follow the golden mean, i.e. moderation in our habits and tendencies.

VII: vv. 243-269

In these verses Sem Tob tells of a phenomenon that is especially odious to him: the rise of those who achieve success dishonestly. His thoughts on the unfairness of it all lead into an anecdote about a disciple who asks a *sabio* (wise man) why he refuses to engage in business transactions. The *sabio* responds that it is not worth the effort because business success is a result of luck, not intelligence. If he were to achieve success, he would not derive any satisfaction from it anyway given that the pursuit of wealth only increases the desire for more. Furthermore, wealth causes one to want to give, but in giving, one no longer has.<sup>208</sup>

Sem Tob concludes that good works constitute true wealth. They can never be lost or stolen and remain with their owner even after death. Moreover, they lend honor to the family name. Material wealth unethically gained leads to misery.

VIII: vv. 270-296

The virtues of peace, companionship, humility, and patience are extolled. Improperly controlled anger and arrogance are condemned. Examples are then given that concretize these traits. The poor are likened to dishonored princes, while the wealthy

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<sup>207</sup> This is an example of what some scholars have termed “perspectivism.” Throughout *Proverbios morales*, Sem Tob gives various perspectives on a same theme, which lends the work a relativistic quality.

<sup>208</sup> Perry’s edition was consulted for the interpretation of verse 259 (*Prov. morales* 144).

have honor, but are miserable and tormented (*lazrados*). The arrogant wealthy person has such a big ego that he cannot even fit his head through the door. If he only knew the world and himself better he would not behave in such a way.

The above theme is expanded and true nobility and its reverse, *villeza* (despicability), are addressed.<sup>209</sup> When a man of noble character is wealthy, he is simple and moderate. When he is poor, he is content and takes his poverty in stride. In contrast, the *villano* (wicked person) is arrogant and disdainful of the poor and complains bitterly when his luck is out. Sem Tob concludes that the rise of one evil person in the community is worse than the loss of ten good ones.<sup>210</sup>

IX vv. 297-325

Guidelines for ethical conduct.

The Golden Rule is stated: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Verses 299-304 remind the arrogant and wealthy that they have nothing to boast about, for we all come from a filthy place and will eventually be eaten by worms.<sup>211</sup> Harsh criticism is then directed against this same group for their abuse of power and wealth.

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<sup>209</sup> Sem Tob is not referring to hereditary nobility as in the caste system, but to nobility as a character trait.

<sup>210</sup> Díaz-Más and Mota (173) comment that “to rise” (*levantarse*) is used here in the sense of the attainment of power: “Peor es levantarse un malo en la gente/ mucho más que perderse diez buenos, ciertamente” (v. 293).

<sup>211</sup> The idea that the womb is a dirty place was a commonality in the Middle Ages. Note Solomon Ibn Gabirol’s maxim in *Mivhar Peninim* (12th century): “Me maravillo de que ufanes habiendo pasado por el camino de la orina [of the father] y de la sangre [of the mother],” (qtd. in Shepard, *Prov. Morales* 133).

Verses 313-321 express the inverse of the golden rule: people will do unto us just as we do unto others (a Jewish twist on karma).<sup>212</sup> The moral is that those who engage in lying and corruption in order to attain power or wealth will gain only temporary benefit, as our deeds always come back to haunt us. It is noteworthy that verses 298-321 use the informal *tú*, as if Sem Tob were directing his condemnations toward someone whom he knew personally.

Switching back to third person singular, he insists that our habits and customs determine our fate. Indeed, in Sem Tob's general world view, people are responsible for the choices they make and humanity is responsible for its own evil--a view which accords with the Jewish belief in free will. He concludes that a man's nature is revealed by his gift, his messenger, and his letter (what he writes).

X: vv. 326-346

Wisdom and learning.

There is no treasure as great as wisdom. The attainment of it is the real source of contentment in this world, not wealth or social status.<sup>213</sup> The book is Sem Tob's symbol par excellence of wisdom. No less than twelve verses are dedicated to it (vv. 328-339).<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> It is possible that Sem Tob is alluding to the Jews of the elite courtier class who were known for their arrogance and disdain for the poor. This social problem is well documented and corroborated by several primary sources. See Baer, chapter 6 (vol. 1) for more on this subject.

<sup>213</sup> This idea is prevalent in both rationalist and kabbalist medieval Jewish thought. Rationalists believed that man's reward in the afterlife is in proportion to his intellectual attainment. In Jewish mystical thought, wisdom is an attribute of divinity.

<sup>214</sup> The fact that the terms *sabios* (wise men), *saber celestial* (celestial knowledge), and *buena glosa* (commentaries on the Torah) are used in these verses suggests that Sem Tob was referring to rabbinic and biblical knowledge. However, he could also be alluding to philosophical works since philosophers (*filosofos onrrados*) are praised in verse 331.

The *omre torpe* (ignorant man) is the polar opposite of the person who seeks wisdom. Sem Tob likens him to a beast: “El omre torpe es la peor animalia que ha en mundo” (v. 341). The little intelligence he has above that of animals is spent on deception and evil deeds. Wisdom, he concludes, is man’s best friend, while ignorance is his worst enemy.

XI: vv. 347-381

Concepts of truth and falsehood.

The principle of justice is introduced, which is the foundation of Sem Tob’s ethical code: “E el juizio es la piedra çimental; de todas estas tres él es la que mas val” (v. 360). Justice, truth and peace maintain the world, but justice is the most important of the three because it makes possible the discovery of truth, which leads to friendship and peace. Justice is imparted through the king, though God is its ultimate source.<sup>215</sup>

The discussion of truth and justice leads to a description of the qualities a good judge must embody (14 verses). The main obstacle to justice is *codiçia* (greed). When a judge is ruled by *codiçia*, truth is distorted.

Sem Tob’s conclusion to this theme exemplifies the importance of personal responsibility: “El ofiçio del omre es emprestada joya, e la buena costumbre es cosa

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<sup>215</sup> Perry maintains that Deuteronomy 1:17 inspires much of Sem Tob’s thought on judgment and justice (*Prov. Morales* 160): “You shall not show favoritism in judgment, small and great alike shall you hear; you shall not tremble before any man, for the judgment is God’s; any matter that is too difficult for you, you shall bring to me and I shall hear it.”

propia suya” (The office of man is a borrowed jewel [a gift from God], and right conduct is his own responsibility).<sup>216</sup>

XII: vv. 382-400

There are three things that destroy a community, three ailments from which there is no cure, and three distressing situations in which persons of high moral stature are loath to find themselves. The destruction of a community is caused by ignoring wise council, neglecting to use weapons of self-defense when they are needed, and the possession of wealth without expending it. The three incurable afflictions are poverty accompanied by laziness, the ill will of the envious, and the sickness of the elderly. The three most distressing situations involve persons of integrity who are forced, out of necessity, to serve the ignorant, corrupt and foolish. They suffer more than anyone else because they cannot live in accordance with their lofty principles.<sup>217</sup>

XIII: vv. 401-427

There are only two types of people who are completely happy in this world: the morally despicable person who has no desire to reform his behavior, and the dimwitted man, who in his great stupidity never imagines that he can be reduced to poverty.<sup>218</sup> The

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<sup>216</sup> Perry identifies Honein II.1.22 as the source for this verse: “[Correct] opinions are the gifts of God, and good habits are one’s own acquisitions” (161). Díaz Más Y Mota give a different translation of Honein (187, note 379b): “Las cualidades del espíritu son regalo de Dios, pero las morales son bienes que uno adquiere por sí mismo” (The qualities of the spirit are a gift from God, while moral qualities are one’s own acquisitions).

<sup>217</sup> Most of the verses in this section have parallels in Bocados de oro, Ibn Gabirol’s Selección de perlas, Honain, and Ibn Hasdai’s Ben ha-Melehk ve-ha-Nazir (Díaz-Mas y Mota 187-190).

<sup>218</sup> Note the different value poverty has in the Jewish tradition as compared to the Christian. The first line of verse 423 expresses this idea more clearly: “Omre pobre,



second type lives happily because he is unaware of the wheel of fortune and its arbitrary ways. The wise person, in contrast, is never truly content no matter how well things go for him because he is cognizant of the instability of fortune. The world, like the sea, unpredictably changes from one state to another: “Torna sin detenença la mar mansa muy brava-- e el mundo espreçia oy al que ayer loava” (v. 419). Hence, the real man (“El omre que es omre,” v. 421), whether rich or poor, is never free from worry. On the other hand, those who possess nothing will have no fear of loss: “El que por llano anda, non tiene que descender; el que non tiene nada, non reçela perder” (v. 416). Whereas the higher the status, the greater the fall.

The section concludes with the theme of envy. While we are alive, we are never fully recognized for our true worth because others are envious of our achievements. Then when we die, the praise given is often exaggerated since there is no reason to envy the dead.

XIV: vv. 428-469

The subject of secrecy is addressed in verses 428-438.<sup>219</sup> A general maxim is stated, teaching that the best way to guard oneself from error is to never do in secret that which we would be ashamed to do in public. An exposition follows on why it is best not to reveal secrets even to close friends. The idea is that friends can turn into enemies, or may reveal the secret to a third party, in which case it would become public knowledge:

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preçiado, non es más que el muerto . . .” (The poor esteemed man is no more than a dead person . . .).

<sup>219</sup> It should be noted that the concept of secrecy is addressed in relation to the social world in PM. In Ma’aseh, in contrast, concealment and disclosure are associated with scripture and knowledge.

“Enxemplo es çertero que lo que saben tres, ya es pleito plaçero: Sábelo toda res” (v. 437).<sup>220</sup>

In keeping with his tendency to express inner conflict, Sem Tob reflects, in verses 439-445, on the contradictions inherent in speech and action, i.e. it is very easy to write and talk about good conduct but difficult to practice. He concludes that even though one may be a hypocrite, it is better to write than to abstain from it since there is the chance that someone may benefit.

The next six verses (446-451) instruct that it is more important to be on guard against the desire to harm an enemy than against the enemy himself, since engaging in destructive behavior is more injurious to us (in a moral sense) than the harm the enemy can inflict.<sup>221</sup> Hence, before directing our energies outward towards an external threat, we must put our own house in order.<sup>222</sup>

The last part of this section treats the subject of the written versus the spoken word. We must be careful about both because unwise use of the tongue and pen can have disastrous consequences. Between the two, the written word can do the most harm

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<sup>220</sup> “It is certain that whenever three people have found out a secret, it is already public knowledge.” The ideas in this part have parallels in Honain, Ibn Gabirol and Disciplina clericalis (Díaz-Más y Mota 196, note 131 a-b).

<sup>221</sup> The moral is that we should guard ourselves against groundless hatred and the violent behavior it inspires.

<sup>222</sup> Perry notes the extreme caution advised by Sem Tob when considering offensive action: “This is one of no less than seven modifiers, all reinforcing the idea that such action is only a last resort” (*Prov. Morales* 170).

because it can reach farther and penetrate deeper. Moreover, it has a longer shelf life. In contrast, spoken words are easily forgotten and can be distorted.<sup>223</sup>

XV: vv. 470-523

The short duration of worldly pleasures and the value of true friendship.

Corporal pleasures and pleasure from material things decrease with time, therefore we must look to the spiritual for enduring fulfillment. Friendship can provide this fulfillment as long as understanding is present. The best friend one can have is a *sabio* (wise person) who delights us with his wisdom and understanding. The false friend is described mainly in terms of the quality of his speech. The person who deceives with flattery and speaks badly of others is to be avoided. Whoever wants to learn about true friendship should look to the example of the scissors. An analogy is drawn between the blades of the scissors and two friends whose sole desire is to be united. When someone comes between them causing separation, they cut him in two in order to be together. Hence the scissors, in their pure loyalty and devotion, do harm not out of vengeance, but out of love. When united they are incapable of harm.<sup>224</sup>

In verses 492-501, Sem Tob compares the physical and divine aspects of human beings: “El omre de metales dos es cofaçionado; metales desiguales, uno vil e otro onrado:/ el uno terrenal, en él bestia semeja; otro, çelestial, con ángel le apareja” (vv.

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<sup>223</sup> Proverbs 18:21, which is the probable origin of these verses, states that life and death are in the power of the tongue.

<sup>224</sup> In *Ma'aseh*, the scissors are criticized and accused of usurpation; however, in the end of the *maqama*, the two blades are likened to friends who desire to be united.

492-93).<sup>225</sup> A dualism in his thought system is evident here, in that he views our animal (physical) nature as the source of all corruption and evil, and our divine nature as the source of all that is good. Understanding is a divine quality that likens man to the angels and distinguishes him from animals and inanimate objects.

XVI: vv. 524-561

Opposing perspectives on companionship and solitude are presented. Solitude is likened to death while good companionship is lauded as one of the most valuable treasures life can offer.<sup>226</sup> In accordance with the debate style of argumentation, Sem Tob dedicates thirty-five verses to the exceptions to this rule, one of which is the burden of having to entertain insensitive and boorish guests. When they overextend their welcome, solitude is desirable: “Çierto es par de muerte la soledat, mas tal compa  on como este . . . estar solo m  s val” (v. 560).<sup>227</sup> He concludes that it is better to seclude oneself in the mountains amidst poisonous snakes than suffer the company of unwanted guests.

XVII: vv. 562-619

The valuation of things (*cosas*) in the temporal world and the merits of speech and silence.<sup>228</sup>

Verse 563, which states that people value a thing highly when they don’t have possession of it and disdain it once obtained, is indicative of the relativity of all human

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<sup>225</sup> “Man is composed of two unequal elements, one vile and the other honorable: In the first, earthly, man is like a beast; in the second, celestial, he is similar to the angels.”

<sup>226</sup> The idea that solitude is akin to death can be found in Talmud Babl  , *Ta’anit*, 23a: “O vida en sociedad o muerte” (D  az-Mas y Mota 211).

<sup>227</sup> “Solitude is like death, but it is better to be alone than to suffer [this type] of companionship.”

<sup>228</sup> “Cosas” refers to anything in the temporal world, be it objects, customs, or attitudes. Good deeds, God, and justice are excluded from this category.

judgments. Sem Tob affirms that everything has its time and place, be it beautiful or ugly, yet what is most highly valued, in terms of customs, is moderation (*lo comunal*). This idea leads into a debate between the relative merits of speech and silence.<sup>229</sup> First, silence is praised.<sup>230</sup> Some of the main arguments are as follows: People derive more benefit from listening than speaking; once something is said it cannot be retracted; and it is better for the person who is not endowed with much wisdom to stay silent so as not to make a fool of himself. If *sabios* did not speak, though, wisdom would be lost. Their skillful reasoning is a widely revered talent that brings good fortune.

The common notion is then proffered that speech, or understanding, is the main quality that distinguishes human beings from animals.<sup>231</sup> However, we are reminded that since those who reason poorly outnumber those who reason well, speech can be more dangerous than silence. In the end, speech is deemed the superior of the two since it can praise silence. The moral is that one can find in every custom and in every person both praiseworthy and repugnant qualities. In the realm of the temporal, there are two sides to everything.

XVIII: vv. 620-649

As if to prevent the reader from getting too discouraged about the realities of the world, Sem Tob reminds us of two customs that are absolute and have no opposite.

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<sup>229</sup> The influence of the *adab* style is notable in this section.

<sup>230</sup> The ideas in this section have parallels in Proverbs, *Bocados de oro*, Honain, *Selección de perlas*, and other medieval Hebrew, Castilian and Catalan texts of the Middle Ages (Díaz-Mas y Mota 216-219).

<sup>231</sup> See Díaz-Mas y Mota (221) for more on the origins of this idea.

These are knowledge and good works.<sup>232</sup> Knowledge brings endless pleasure to those who seek it. The wise man is aware that material abundance can dissipate or be taken away, therefore he does not put his trust in wealth: “ca el grant bien se puede perder sin culpa de ombre e el saber no-l defiende el signo de ser pobre” (v. 626).<sup>233</sup> Good works and wisdom, though, are eternal.

In the following verses, Sem Tob reflects on the uncertainty of the world. The world, which constantly changes like the sea, can offer no security: “Cámbiase como el mar de ábreço a çierço. Non puede omre tomar en cosa d’él esfuerço”(v. 630).<sup>234</sup> Consequently, status and position are also subject to change. Indeed, the wheel of fortune does not distinguish between high and low, as Sem Tob illustrates in verse 632: “Toda vía por cuanto la rueda se trastorna, el follado çapato yaz igual de corona.”<sup>235</sup> All are subject to its arbitrariness. Men of understanding, therefore, do not rejoice in the suffering of others because they know the same could happen to them.

The one thing we can put our trust in is God’s mercy, although we usually do not understand the good He does. In order to redress this perceived misunderstanding, Sem Tob explains that God makes abundant the things that are essential to life, such as water,

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<sup>232</sup> “Sin tachas son falladas dos costumbres señeras; amas son igualadas, que non han compañeras:/ la una es el saber, la otra bien fazer. Cualquier d’estas aver, es complido plazer” (vv. 620-21): There are only two customs found that do not have any defect; the two are equal, and have no companions (opposites): the one is knowledge, and the other good works. Having either one of these is a complete pleasure.

<sup>233</sup> “Through no fault of his own this great good can be lost, and his knowledge will not save him from the fate of being poor.”

<sup>234</sup> “It changes like the sea, from south wind to north wind. Man cannot put his confidence in anything of this world.”

<sup>235</sup> “In as much as the wheel of fortune makes complete turns, the worn out shoe lies equal to the crown.” (The topic is the equalizing power of fortune, Díaz-Más y Mota 227).

bread, air and iron. Non-essentials such as gold are scarce because they are superfluous.<sup>236</sup> This idea balances his prior reflections on the uncertainty of the world.

While we may never be entirely free from worry, we can rest assured that God is an absolute good, and that He has supplied us with the basic necessities for life.

XIX: vv. 650-684

The unity of the world, time, and the body.

This part is very important in that it encompasses the main tenets of Sem Tob's philosophical outlook. First, it should be noted that the "world" that he refers to in these verses is not the world of social opinion, but the world of natural phenomenon.<sup>237</sup> Since the workings of nature entail generation and corruption (i.e. death), and therefore suffering, people attribute evil to it. However, the natural world is indifferent. It cannot love, hate, become angry or jealous, or favor one person over another: "El mundo non tien ojo, nin entiende fazer a un omne enojo e a otro plazer" (v. 651).<sup>238</sup>

Interestingly, we also find out (somewhat surprisingly after Sem Tob's excursus on the variable and unstable nature of the world) that the [natural] world in fact does not change.<sup>239</sup> Time, the body, and the world are unities and are therefore immutable.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> This idea has its origins in Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed 3:12. As Perry notes: "This proof of God's goodness, based on the need to distinguish between man's true needs and his superfluous desires, derives entirely from Maimonides' discussion in his Guide 3:12, and, indeed, is almost a literal translation" (189). See chapter five for a more complete discussion of the subject.

<sup>237</sup> A distinction must be made between the different meanings the term "mundo" has in PM. It can either refer to the world of social opinion or the natural world.

<sup>238</sup> "The world does not have eyes, it cannot have the intention to anger or to please."

<sup>239</sup> This paradox has already been noted by Perry in his edition of Proverbios morales (191).

Human emotions, though, are in constant flux and cause us to project our own realities onto the world. Evil, therefore, does not exist in natural phenomenon or God, but in the conflictive nature of our minds: “Del mundo mal dezimos, e en él [God] otro mal, non ha si non nós mesmos, nin vestiglos nin ál” (v. 650).<sup>241</sup> When our actions are motivated by greed and envy, we become the most dangerous beings on earth. Animals are content once their cravings are satisfied and do not seek to do harm. Humans, in contrast, are insatiable. Their voracious appetite not only causes them to endlessly kill and plunder, but they derive pleasure from the suffering of others.<sup>242</sup>

XX: vv. 685-705

The verses in praise of the pen recall the Arabic *adab* style, referred to earlier in this chapter, and have parallels in Arabic literature. The pen is extolled as a loyal servant who works without expecting recompense and who carries out the will of its master without having to be given orders: “Cosa maravillosa e milagro muy fuerte: sin yo dezir cosa faze mi talante” (v. 691). The only nutrition it requires is a little bit of ink in its tip, which it selflessly spits back onto the scroll: “nin quier ningún manjar comer, sinon la boca un poquillo mojar en gota de agua poca” (v. 700).

Verses 697-704 are nearly exact translations from Ma’aseh ha Rav. In Ma’aseh, however, the description of the pen is more laden with symbolic connotations.

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<sup>240</sup> Perry comments that “oneness or sameness of ‘mundo’ means that it does not change, is never different from itself, in contrast to man’s mutability” (*Prov. morales* 191).

<sup>241</sup> “We see evil in the world, and also in the Creator, but this evil is in ourselves, not in fantastical monsters, nor elsewhere.” Sem Tob takes a psychological approach to evil, which contrasts with the magical thinking and superstitions of the time period.

<sup>242</sup> The idea that the envious person is only satisfied when somebody else suffers a loss has parallels in Honain and Bocados de oro (Díaz Más & Mota 235, note 676a).



XXI: vv. 706-707

Short poem on the satisfaction of the word “no.” It does not seem to have much relation to the rest of PM.

XXII: vv. 708-725

There are two things that maintain the world: law and the king.<sup>243</sup> A good king protects the weak, upholds law, wields power with moderation, and keeps war and uprisings at bay. He should rule with wisdom and prudence, and use his power to crush arrogance and foolishness. Pedro I, to whom this section is dedicated, embodies these qualities, according to the author.

Before concluding the work, Sem Tob alludes to the political situation that was brewing as a result of the conflict between Pedro I and his half brother Enrique I, and expresses the hope that peace can be restored and conflict averted: “Las gentes de su tierra todas a su serviçio traiga, e aparte guerra d’ella, e mal bolliçio” (v. 724).<sup>244</sup> In the last verse, Sem Tob makes the request that Pedro pay back the debt owed to him by his father, Alfonso XI, referring to himself by name and religion: “E la merçed qu’el noble,/ su padre prometió,/ la terná, como cumple,/ al Santob el Judío” (v. 725).<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> The same idea is expressed in Ibn Gabirol’s Selección de perlas (Díaz-mas & Mota 242, note 720a).

<sup>244</sup> “All The people of his land, to his [the king’s] service bring, and banish war and tumult from it.”

<sup>245</sup> “And the payment/favor (*merçed*) that your noble father promised, he will honor it, as is rightful, to Santob the Jew.” Díaz Más & Mota and Perry are of the opinion that “merçed” is a reference to the debt mentioned in the beginning of the work (243, note 725a; *Prov. morales* 196, note 2669).

## CHAPTER THREE

### STREAMS OF THOUGHT IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY JUDEO-HISPANIC CULTURE

Within the Jewish religion, there have always existed differing streams of thought. In antiquity these differences sometimes resulted in the creation of new sects, such as the Essenes,<sup>246</sup> and later in the eighth century, the Karaites.<sup>247</sup> In the Middle Ages, Judaism was able to withstand major ruptures despite radical divergences of opinion regarding scriptural interpretation. There are several reasons for this. One is the cohesive social fabric that united Jews both within their own communities and across regional and “national” boundaries. The minority status of Jews in the diaspora necessitated this cohesion, as it was essential in providing protection against increasingly hostile external threats. It has also been suggested that the traditional Jewish notion of faith as a “non-cognitivist ‘trust in God,’ rather than as a propositional affirmation or denial” prevented major divisions and accounts for the relatively few charges of heresy found in this period

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<sup>246</sup> This religious sect was based in Palestine at the close of the Second Temple period. They were close to the Pharisees in religious outlook but had their own specific beliefs and customs. They believed in the immortality of the soul and in reward and punishment but not in physical resurrection. They opposed slavery, private property, and animal sacrifice. Celibacy was common, but some married to perpetuate the species (*Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* 639).

<sup>247</sup> This Jewish sect originated in the eighth century in and around Persia. In contrast to rabbinic Jews, the Karaites do not accept the oral law (Talmud) as binding. Because they were not very influential, the rabbis avoided confrontations with them until the tenth century. The raging verbal dispute between these two groups came to an end in the twelfth century when Judah ibn Ezra utilized his secular authority in Castile to suppress them. Despite the controversy, many Karaite scholars studied with the rabbis and were influenced by them (*Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* 1107-1108).

(Rudavsky, *Impact of Scholasticism* 346). The focus on conduct over creed in Judaism also contributed to the reduction in the level of friction in intra-Jewish religious conflicts. For this reason, philosophically radical thinkers who continued to observe the ritual obligations were immunized from condemnation by the synagogue or court (267). Despite the limitations on intellectual freedom that orthodoxy presupposes, emphasizing observance over belief afforded Jewish thinkers a modicum of liberty in expressing new ideas and concepts. The period that saw the greatest effervescence of cultural activity is referred to as the “Golden Age” of Hebrew philosophy (begun in 1204 with the translation into Hebrew of Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed), during which a rich fabric of innovative intellectual and mystical thought was produced.<sup>248</sup> It is to this creative period of cultural fermentation that we will now turn so as to give the reader a map into the complex world of ideas that Jews inhabited in the Middle Ages in Christian Spain and southern France. Indeed, without a basic understanding of the intellectual panorama of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, it is difficult to discern the layers of meaning in Ma’aseh ha Rav, or the ways in which both works reflect and address the intellectual and spiritual concerns of the Jewish community.

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<sup>248</sup> The “Golden Age” lasted for approximately three centuries until the expulsion in 1492. The creation of an indigenous Hebrew philosophical culture is what sets it apart from the philosophical Judaism of Muslim lands is (Manekin 350-51). Philosophical discourse in the Hebrew language was spurred on by the tremendous translation movement--from Arabic to Hebrew--that took place primarily in Provence during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

## General Overview

Jewish thought in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries moved in three broad streams: Talmudic-traditionalism, rationalism, and Kabbala (mysticism). The Talmudic-traditionalist (or revelationist) found his/her faith in the Torah and did not need to be convinced of the truth of scripture by empirical arguments. The empiricist, or rationalist, in contrast, asked questions, weighed arguments, and needed proofs in order to be convinced (Sarachek 266). Kabbalists, on the other hand, while not being anti-intellectualists, were dissatisfied with the rigid Talmudism and rationalism of the times. They sought to plumb the depths of Judaism in a new way without having to resort to Greek thought or other foreign philosophies (130). While the philosophers pursued knowledge through examination and contemplation of natural phenomena, the mystic kabbalists sought to obtain divine knowledge through the names and powers of God as discoverable in the ten spheres, the Hebrew alphabet, and the numbers (131).<sup>249</sup> One of the advantages the kabbalist movement had over rationalism was that it could not be condemned as un-Jewish or leading to religious decline. Sarachek has noted that “Kabbala . . . denoted the legitimate legacy of the past, whereas *philosophia* was always an alien concept” (133-134). Both kabbalists and philosophers, though, found the Talmud too confining and therefore took their exploration of Judaism to a deeper, more esoteric level. The divisions between these three groups, however, are not so easily

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<sup>249</sup> The ten *sefirot* are the emanation of God’s own powers. The term originated in The Book of Creation (*Sefer Yetzira*), where it refers to ten ideal numbers that function, along with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as the building blocks of the universe (Tirosh-Samuelson 225).

discernible. Rationalist philosophers and traditionalists were sometimes also kabbalists, while kabbalists were often adepts in philosophy. Indeed, conflicts between kabbalists and rationalists were minimal until the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>250</sup> During Sem Tob's time, the main ideological conflict was between Talmudist-traditionalists and rationalists, and revolved around the issues of Jewish education and scriptural interpretation.

### Rationalism

Rationalism arose first in Islamic Spain with the great Jewish scholar and physician Moses Maimonides (1134-1204).<sup>251</sup> Given that religion and secular culture were not mutually exclusive in the Judeo-Arabic and Muslim cultures in medieval Andalusia, it is not surprising that it was there that the first attempts were made to reconcile demonstrated philosophical/scientific truth with the Torah, which is the basis of rationalism. Maimonides' main premise was that scientifically based truth necessarily agrees with religion, yet only those who were intellectually prepared could aspire to arrive at this level of understanding. Aristotelian logic, according to Maimonides and the Jewish philosophers who came after him, contained the key to unlocking the esoteric meaning of scripture. Not all of Aristotle's views were adopted, though.<sup>252</sup> Maimonides,

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<sup>250</sup> While the kabbalists often did not agree with the rationalist approach to religion, they were not in the front ranks fighting against it in the thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth centuries (130).

<sup>251</sup> Maimonides is the most important and influential Jewish philosopher of all times. After him and because of him, Jewish philosophers argued interminably about the nature of divine language, divine providence, and the nature and scope of prophecy and the human good (Frank 146).

<sup>252</sup> Daniel Frank maintains that Maimonides was "not an Aristotelian on account of any agreement with Aristotle on substantive issues, but rather on account of his creative use,

at least outwardly, espoused belief in the creation of the world ex-nihilo, and argued for the superiority of prophecy over philosophy.<sup>253</sup> He was, though, the point of departure for Maimonides' philosophical positions. Aristotle's discourse, argument forms and philosophical vocabulary are what allowed him to give such a definite shape to the canonical problems besetting Judaism in the twelfth century (Frank 146). Indeed, no Jewish thinker before him had subjected Jewish belief to such a rigorous analysis. Maimonides' use of common sense and science to move Judaism away from literalism toward greater spirituality and intellectualism is his major contribution to Jewish culture.

Maimonides' subjection of Judaism to the dictates of logic and science, however, did not come without casualties, one of which was miracles. Agreeing with Aristotle, he saw the orderly and complex workings of the universe as a sure sign of the existence of the Deity, therefore he did not regard miracles as necessary validations of religious truth. According to many, though, the denial of miracles can lead to the exclusion of any religiously meaningful role for God in the happenings of the cosmos and in human affairs (Langermann 172). Confronted with this problem, Maimonides claimed that God permitted certain deviations in the fixed rules which govern the working of the universe; yet these deviations were few and far between for him, as he only recognized those miracles which could be discerned over a long period of time, such as the biblical account of the forty years in the desert and the accompanying manna (172). Some scholars

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and adaptation, of Aristotelian categories and argument forms 'for his own purposes,' the main purpose being of course the explication of his own religious tradition"(145).

<sup>253</sup> Aristotle believed in the eternity of the world. Because his thought is not based on a revelationist religious tradition, he had no reason to think that prophecy was superior to philosophy.

maintain that he became more receptive to the idea of miracles as he matured, though this statement remains unqualified.<sup>254</sup>

An important aspect of Maimonidean thought that reveals social divisions in fourteenth-century Spanish Jewish culture is the intellectual elitism with which it was imbued. This elitism was part and parcel of the medieval Jewish mindset, as there was no concept of democracy when it came to education in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the ignorant masses are referred to deprecatingly as *am ha-aretz* (people of the land) in medieval Hebrew literature. They were deemed simpletons incapable of penetrating the hidden mysteries of the Torah. Maimonides, in concealing these hidden truths in his famous philosophical work Guide for the Perplexed,<sup>255</sup> was in part abiding by the age old rabbinic prohibition to conceal metaphysical truths from the unworthy.<sup>256</sup> His elitism went further, though, as “he had very little regard for preachers who stressed the literal meaning of scriptures and of the rabbinic legends” (Sarachek 12). His policy not to accept salary or fees for his rabbinical work and the slur that cast upon those who did, along with his sharp criticism of unsophisticated orthodox rabbis scattered here and there

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<sup>254</sup> Langermann claims that Maimonides’ view of miracles, more than his stance on any other issue, underwent a clear shift over the years. Admitting that he is making a broad generalization, he states: “It is my view that the youthful Maimonides, impressed by the success of the scientific enterprise, favored naturalistic explanations of the events considered to be miraculous by Jewish tradition . . . As he matured, however, Maimonides became more receptive to the need for miracles as well as their possibility. Doubts and uncertainties . . . dampened his enthusiasm for the unlimited explanatory power of natural philosophy” (*Maimonides and the Sciences* 172-73).

<sup>255</sup> Guide for the Perplexed is the single most important Jewish philosophical work ever written. Maimonides’ intention was to harmonize the contradictions between Judaism and Arabic Aristotelian philosophy.

<sup>256</sup> This theme runs throughout medieval Jewish philosophy and literature, and even occupies several pages in Ma’aseh ha Rav.

in his writings, may have been factors that angered his detractors, adding fuel to their general dissatisfaction with his rational theology (272). After all, Maimonides was an intellectual aristocrat, while the anti-Maimonists, as a class, “were often poor and led restrictive lives” (272).<sup>257</sup> This class division should not be overlooked when contemplating the inter-Jewish religious conflicts of the time period.

Techniques Maimonides’ employed in the Guide to conceal metaphysical truths from the literal minded masses include mentioning certain views in passing and not in their proper context or order, introducing deliberate contradictions, and the use of pseudo-synonyms and equivocal terms (Kreisel 250; Ravitsky, “Secrets of Guide” 205).<sup>258</sup> He himself warned that “the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradictions,” and that the author must use “some device to conceal it by all means” (Ravitsky 160). It was the task of the designated reader to make the connections between ideas scattered throughout the chapters, overcome the intentional interruptions of the discussion, and make sense of the unsystematic structure and use of ambiguous terms (162). Some scholars lauded the lengths to which Maimonides went in order to conceal his views, while others criticized him, but most were in agreement in their understanding of the esoteric/exoteric character of the text (172).<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> The social and economic divide between traditionalists and philosophers bears upon the long and drawn out dispute over Maimonidean thought, which is dealt with in the following section of this chapter.

<sup>258</sup> These techniques are relevant to the subject at hand because they reveal an interesting facet of the sephardic medieval mind and shed light on the ways in which ideas were conveyed in medieval Jewish literature.

<sup>259</sup> Joseph ben Todros Halevi Abulafia (1170-1244) criticized Maimonides’ efforts to conceal his views from all but the intellectual elite. He considered it an abuse of the



## The Controversies over Maimonidean Rationalism

After Maimonides' death in 1204 and the translation of his philosophical work Guide for the Perplexed into Hebrew, conflicts over his views became even more heated than they were in his own lifetime.<sup>260</sup> The seed of the first conflict, which occurred while he was still alive, originated in his use of Aristotle to bring Judaism up to date on the dictates of logic.<sup>261</sup> This approach became a problem for many of the Talmudist-traditionalists because they believed that the Torah contained all the knowledge necessary for mankind, and that "explorations into the learning of other people and other languages was an affront to the God of Israel and His revealed law" (Sarachek 10).<sup>262</sup> Their conviction that faith presides over reason conflicted with the Maimonists' argument that when reason contradicts faith, an attempt must be made to bring the two into harmony. This need to unify biblical truths with science was the overriding concern of most Jewish philosophers of the fourteenth century, an endeavor that is reflected in Ma'aseh ha Rav and Proverbios morales, albeit in an indirect manner.

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biblical saying [Proverbs 25:2]: "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing" (Ravitsky, "Secrets of Guide" 171).

<sup>260</sup> This is important to note because of the all-pervasive influence of the conflict in Jewish intellectual life. He himself anticipated that people would object to his Guide "because it dared to expose their absurd views" (Sarachek 11).

<sup>261</sup> In the Middle Ages, the Aristotelian philosophy that Jews imbibed was mostly filtered through Arabic Aristotelians. Averroes (Ibn Rushd), the famous Arabic philosopher from Muslim Spain who was a contemporary of Maimonides, exerted a profound influence on Jewish thinkers in the medieval period.

<sup>262</sup> The anti-Maimonists were not against all of Maimonides' works, as he also wrote his Mishneh Torah and Commentary to the Mishneh that were unanimously accepted into the Jewish canon. His Guide, though, was considered a potential source of danger.

The second and third Maimonidean conflicts occurred in the thirteenth century, when rationalism was growing by leaps and bounds.<sup>263</sup> This period of time is considered to be the most eventful in medieval European history. Ancient learning and philosophy were being cultivated in both the Jewish and Christian worlds, and the universities were teeming with excitement over the popularity of Aristotle (Sarachek 2). At the same time, radical changes in the civil, social and ecclesiastical organization of European countries were taking place, which precipitated the spread of heretical movements in the Christian world (2). The Albigensians, who rejected hell and resurrection, were being condemned, along with the Cathari, who denied miracles and explained away the wonders of the Bible (5-6). The anti-Maimonist agitation roughly corresponds to this general intolerance towards any progressive thought, although surprisingly, and to the credit of the harmonizers within the folds of Judaism, it did not result in sectarianism. Even though the Talmud-traditionalists feared philosophy would lead Jews away from Judaism, there was still a diversity of views regarding certain interpretations of scripture, which were not to be taken as heretical (8). Some Talmudists even had decided predilections for secular learning (8). In general, though, the Jewish authorities in Spain either exalted exclusive study of scripture and Talmud and condemned philosophy, or sought to blend the two (8).

The fourth conflict (1302-1305), which is the most relevant to a discussion of Sem Tob's works, no longer centered around the legitimacy of Maimonides' philosophical

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<sup>263</sup> In the second conflict (1230-1232), the French anti-Maimonists managed to get the Christian authorities involved in their dispute, which resulted in the official burning of the Guide. Many of the French Jewish conservatives later expressed deep regret for their complicity (Sarachek 268). The third kindling of wrath against Maimonides' Guide and philosophical literature occurred in 1290, at the time when Kabbala was becoming more influential.

views since by that time he had already gained unanimous acceptance by the Jewish community. Rather, this conflict involved the question of whether education for the Jew should be restricted to the Bible and Talmud, or could include profane studies in early youth (Sarachek 269). The problem arose when it became known that a small group of radical Provençal rationalists were publicly teaching allegorical interpretations of scripture in synagogues, lecture halls, and wedding gatherings. Conservative rabbis, alarmed by this development, considered it to be a danger to the “citadel” of Judaism; for they viewed the philosophers’ use of foreign wisdom as the main vehicle for biblical interpretation to be an exploitation of scripture. Moreover, because philosophy was so all pervasive, they feared it would usurp the traditional teachings of Judaism and eventually lead to the abandonment of the precepts (170).

To get a better grasp of the issue, one must look back to the views of influential rationalist philosophers from the preceding century, such as Samuel ibn Tibbon (1150-1230), Isaac Albalag (fl. c.1300), and Jacob Anatoli (1194-1256). Even though these men had incited the ire of conservative orthodox rabbis about seventy-five years prior to the fourth phase of the conflict, their writings were still referred to by fourteenth-century rationalists. Ibn Tibbon, who was one of Maimonides’ foremost esoteric interpreters, became a target of criticism for interpreting Ezekiel’s visions figuratively rather than literally, and for teaching and making public his esoteric insights into the great mysteries of the creation story and the chariot vision.<sup>264</sup> Anatoli, who had no sympathy for rabbis who limited their intellectual inquiry to hair-splitting Talmudic arguments, went even

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<sup>264</sup> The traditionalists regularly denounced the exposition of these secrets because they regarded it as sacrilegious.

further by reducing the Jewish patriarchs to philosophic types. Alabalag, a believer in the doctrine of the two-fold truth,<sup>265</sup> stretched the limits by exceeding Maimonides' teachings about creation, drawing from scripture the hypothesis of the world's eternity (Sarachek 190).<sup>266</sup> Fourteenth-century rationalist free thinkers, mostly in Provence, followed the lead of these trail blazers by daring to reveal esoteric teachings that were traditionally concealed from the public, and by allegorizing scripture.<sup>267</sup> Because of this new trend, conservatives of France and Spain began to turn against philosophy and tried to limit its influence by imposing a ban on the study of Greco-Arabic philosophical texts before the age of twenty-five.

Leading the initiative to impose the ban was the conservative French rabbi Abba Mari ben Moses.<sup>268</sup> He lived in Provence, where the Talmudist and philosophical streams of thought clashed with a particularly strong force in the early fourteenth century. While admitting it was not a widespread phenomenon, his intention was to rescue Judaism from the menace of the allegorists and secularists before it got out of hand (Sarachek 196).

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<sup>265</sup> According to this theory, which was developed by Christian theologians, there are two sources of knowledge: philosophical thinking and prophetic intuition [or revelation] (*Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* 1962). It was frowned upon by the synagogue because Jews generally were either harmonizers of religion and philosophy, or refuted Aristotelian teachings (Sarachek 190).

<sup>266</sup> Maimonides ultimately refuted Aristotle's teaching about the eternity of the world, although there always remained doubt as to what he really believed. This teaching, because it threatened the Jewish doctrine of creation ex-nihilo, was one of the reasons the traditionalists feared the influence of philosophy.

<sup>267</sup> While allegory was not foreign to Judaism, these rationalists used it in a way that was considered by many to be a perversion. Midrashic and Geonic writings contain allegories of scripture, but they have a Jewish basis and motive and are national and pietistic (Sarachek 172).

<sup>268</sup> Abba Mari, while not an opponent of Aristotle, regarded him as handicapped due to a lack of divine inspiration, and for solely relying on the evidence of the senses (Sarachek 197).

Abba Mari was not against Greek philosophy per se, but regarded it as a danger because it rejected creation and divine guidance of man's life (197). He drew a sharp distinction between the sciences and metaphysics, arguing that mathematics, astronomy, physics and medicine served a useful purpose (and therefore could be studied), while metaphysics was dangerous and impractical, and advised against by the Talmudic sages (198).<sup>269</sup>

In order to gain support for the proposed ban, Abba Mari enlisted the aid of the acclaimed rabbi of Barcelona, Solomon ibn Adret (Rashba). Even though Adret fought against putting sciences and metaphysics into the course of studies for young people, he was not a reactionary (Sarachek 200). He was familiar with Jewish rational theology and had a relatively open mind (200). Adret's decision, therefore, to back Abba Mari cannot necessarily be attributed to religious intolerance; rather, it was in the interest of protecting Judaism against the excesses of Jewish philosophers who used Greek thought as their primary vehicle for scriptural interpretation. His participation in the anti-Maimonidean controversy of 1290 in the defense of the Maimonist Hezekia of Damascus speaks of his intellectual affinities, which is important to note so as to give an idea of the nuances of opinion among the participants of the debate.<sup>270</sup>

In Provence, the opposition to the proposed ban was led by Jacob ben Makhir (also known as Don Profiat: 1230-1312), an astronomer, translator, physician, and antagonist

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<sup>269</sup> The Talmud also warns against lecturing on the chariot vision and the creation story, themes about which the more progressive rationalists wrote.

<sup>270</sup> Understanding the positions of the rationalists and traditionalists in this phase of the debate sheds light on the arguments of the pen and scissors in Ma'aseh ha Rav.

of the traditionalists.<sup>271</sup> He appealed to the intelligence of the Jewish community, maintaining that since Jews purported to be a wise and understanding people, they “must uphold their reputation by being familiar with worldly wisdom,” while at the same time being critical of it and distinguishing between its good and bad elements (Sarachek 218). Furthermore, Makhir denied that Jews were interpreting scripture allegorically or as mere metaphor. He himself knew of no one who did so. Indeed, the Provençals on his side argued that the heretical situation complained about was not as widely prevalent as it seemed, and was mainly due to the chicanery of Abba Mari (219). They suggested that if there was heresy, it should be treated on an individual basis and not as a general ban (219). The most the conflict was managing to accomplish, according to their point of view, was to disturb the solidarity of French Jewry and incite Jew against Jew.

One of the great southern French Talmudic scholars, Menahem ha-Meiri of Perpignon (1246-1306), who favored secular studies only after the Talmud had been mastered, also spoke out against the ban after a long period of silence. He condemned both the Barcelona ban and expressed disfavor of the Montpellier counter ban.<sup>272</sup> Even though both sides solicited his support, he regarded the traditionalists “as acting the part of inquisitors and trouble makers” (Sarachek 243). He believed, like Ben Makhir, that “a

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<sup>271</sup> Makhir’s translations from Arabic to Hebrew include works by Euclid, Averroes, and Al-Ghazzali. His astronomical tables, composed in 1300, were translated into Latin and used by Dante in his Divine Comedy.

<sup>272</sup> After the Barcelona ban was proclaimed in 1305 on the study of Greco-Arabic works on physics and metaphysics before the age of twenty-five, a counter ban was issued in Montpellier against those who would not teach the seven sciences and metaphysics to youth, and who spoke derogatorily of Jewish philosophers. Ibn Adret, though, never went so far as to issue a ban in southern France because it was not in his jurisdiction and he did not want to incite the hostility of the French Jews.

liberal education would increase the admiration of the world for the Jews,” and that “both faith and reason were essential to enable man to reach his highest development” (244).

The blame should not be laid on scientific and philosophical writings but on the uncomprehending reader. Most of the rationalist preachers who were perverting scripture, he claimed, really knew very little of natural science or metaphysics, for they were gleaning their information from Jewish sources primarily, such as Anatoli and Maimonides. He suggested, therefore, that the ban might be better directed against the extravagant teachings of the rationalists than against Greco-Arabic philosophy (245).

Another champion of the opposition was Jedaiah Bedersi (1270-1340), the greatest Jewish poet of Provence. He wrote a letter in defense of philosophy to Ibn Adret entitled *Iggeret Hitnatzelut* (“apologetic letter”), in which all the pros and cons of the conflict are summarized. His opinion was that the progressives were guilty not of heresy but of “indiscretion in spreading publicly ideas that should be reserved for the discriminating few” (Sarachek 252). What shocked him most about the conflict was the loss of fraternal spirit that had formerly existed among Provençal Jewry, and the disruption of solidarity among the Spanish Jews (252). This hatred only created more misery for the Provençals, who were already suffering from political troubles. Ironically, the Jews were to be expelled from France shortly thereafter.

On the conservative end of the spectrum, some traditionalists in Provence, aside from Abba Mari, did endorse the ban and assure Adret of their loyalty; yet they had little effect because their political and social influence was less than that of the rationalists. Among this faction was the rabbi of Avignon, who was anxious to introduce the ban in

order to protect his community from philosophy so as to prevent it from becoming “like an invaded city without a wall” (Sarachek 225).<sup>273</sup> Another supporter was En Duran, Abba Mari’s lieutenant in Montpellier, who believed that although the heretics were few, “it was the duty of the community to weed them out in the same way that it would remove a social evil or alleviate distress” (249). He thought that philosophy could accompany Judaism “when properly groomed,” but in general regarded Greek writings as “a parched field” rather than a “*pardes*” (paradise), as it was commonly referred to by philosophers (247). He also attacked the rationalists’ intellectual rendering of redemption, arguing that if perfection of the intellect were required to attain it, then the unlearned but pious man would be no better off than the brute and could not expect reward or immortality (248).<sup>274</sup> A less extreme supporter of the ban, Mordecai ben Isaac, grandson of David Kimhi [Redak] (1160-1235),<sup>275</sup> held that “the prohibited subjects were advisedly banned because they became a burden and vexation to the learner” (Sarachek 240). The problem of the harmony between faith and reason, he argued, was too difficult to resolve without having the proper knowledge and skill in sifting through the principles of both philosophy and religion (240).

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<sup>273</sup> This same expression can be found in Ma’aseh ha Rav in an accusation the pen makes against the scissors.

<sup>274</sup> The southern French Jewish rationalist elites claimed, along Maimonidean grounds, that philosophic inquiry was a necessary prerequisite for the immortality of the soul. They believed that “only the intellect acquired as a result of philosophic comprehension survives death” (Stern 294). Ibn Adret found these notions to be patently absurd [i.e. that there is a religious imperative to study physics and metaphysics and that immortality depends directly upon intellectual comprehension] (296).

<sup>275</sup> David Kimhi participated in the first Maimonidean controversy as a supporter of Maimonides.



Despite the partisanship in the controversy, there were many who refused to take sides for personal or political reasons, or because they feared havoc would result from an open break between the two factions (Sarachek 181). Even Ibn Adret desired a harmonious resolution that would be fair to both sides. This is evident in his cautious approach to meddling in the affairs of his Provençal brethren. After finally being convinced by Abba Mari to join ranks, it took him three years before taking action. He took Provençal public sentiment into account, though, which was unfavorable, therefore the ban was never proclaimed there.<sup>276</sup>

Some say that the failure of the traditionalists was due to the character of Abba Mari. He had many enemies in his hometown of Montpellier as well as throughout the country, and was not as cultured as some of his more formidable opponents, such as Jacob ben Makhir and Solomon of Lunel (Sarachek 263). We get a sense of the problematic nature of Abba Mari's personality in Ibn Adret's warning to him to not fight his opponents using foul methods: "A man like you who covenanted with God to bring back many from sin should have the proper motives and do the proper deeds" (qtd. in Sarachek 222). Additionally, Bonifas Vidal, a Jewish dignitary who had previously sided with Ibn Adret, argued that Abba Mari's contentious conduct called forth his censure: ". . . lest the spark of friction . . . blaze forth in a disastrous conflagration" (qtd. in Sarachek 238). From pleas such as these by dignitaries and scholars to address the situation in a

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<sup>276</sup> The ban was proclaimed in Barcelona in 1305, prohibiting the study of Greco-Arabic philosophical works to students under the age of twenty-five for a fifty year period.

spirit of fraternity, we can see the forces of cohesion at work.<sup>277</sup> The conflict, however, remained unsettled and dragged on for years, as there were always divergences of opinion regarding the role philosophy should play in Jewish education.<sup>278</sup> This is why the same arguments and themes appear in later works of the first half of the fourteenth century, such as Policar's "Debate Between a Youth and an Old Man" in Ezer ha Dat (Support of the Faith) and, as I argue in chapter four, Sem Tob's Ma'aseh ha Rav.

### **Philosophy in Fourteenth-Century Spain and Provence**

The flourishing of philosophy and the sciences among Jews in Christian Spain and France was made possible by the translation movement of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries in Provence. The large numbers of Andalucian Jews who emigrated to southern France in the twelfth century introduced into French Jewish culture a tradition of scientific and philosophical enquiry that had previously been non-existent. With time, they translated a staggering amount of learning in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, ethics, physics and metaphysics into Hebrew from Greek, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic.

One of the most important influences on Jewish philosophers from northern Spain and southern France, aside from Maimonides, was the great Spanish Muslim philosopher

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<sup>277</sup> It must be noted that part of the fear of schism present among many of the participants has to do with the tragic ending of the Maimonidean controversy of 1230-1232. After the burning of the Guide, there was such extreme regret and dismay that it was later regarded by all sides as a grievous wrong. It is certain that the Jewish scholars and dignitaries involved in this new phase of the conflict wanted to avoid a similar conclusion, hence an effort was made to exert more restraint in their dealings with the opposing faction. Moreover, it was not in the interest of Jews, who were a minority within an increasingly hostile Christendom, to stand divided.

<sup>278</sup> It is thought that the ban, which was proclaimed for Spain in 1305 after having been approved by the majority of Jewish dignitaries in Barcelona, insulated Spanish Jewry from the more radical forms of biblical interpretation that flourished in Provence. In Provence, the conflict ended abruptly with the expulsion of the Jews in 1306.

Averroes (1126-1198).<sup>279</sup> He, like Maimonides, believed that the perfection of the intellect through philosophical speculation was the only way to arrive at a true understanding of divine revelation, and that esoteric philosophical truths should be concealed from the public because of the danger they posed to the faith of the ignorant. Because Averroes adhered to a more naturalistic interpretation of Aristotle than Maimonides and held heterodox views on religious philosophy, his name came to be associated with religious unorthodoxy.<sup>280</sup> For example, he believed in the idea of collective human immortality rather than individual, rejected the neo-platonic doctrine of emanation (holding instead that the world is eternal), and did not subscribe to the idea of an individual human soul that is subject to reward and punishment in the hereafter (Pines, *Encyclopedia* 950, 952).<sup>281</sup> These views were not overly problematic for Jewish religious scholars since he was primarily a commentator on Aristotle; however, this changed once Jewish philosophers began to turn to him as a source of theology.<sup>282</sup>

Some of the important Jewish philosophers of the fourteenth century who approached religion from an Aristotelian-Averroistic perspective are Gersonides Levi ben

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<sup>279</sup> Averroes is primarily known as a commentator on Aristotle's works, but also wrote a commentary on Plato's *Republic*, short treatises on the relationship of philosophy, religion, and society, and numerous medical writings. Some of the issues he addressed were creation (i.e. the eternity of the world), God's knowledge of particulars, and the possibility of individual immortality.

<sup>280</sup> The influence of Averroes was at its peak in the fourteenth century and was beginning to extend not only into the province of religious philosophy, but into other literary genres as well (Harvey, *Arabic into Hebrew* 269).

<sup>281</sup> "...Averroes developed the doctrine of the unity of the material intellect in all human beings, from which it follows that human immortality is collective rather than individual" (Pines, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 950).

<sup>282</sup> Jewish philosophy underwent a radicalization as a result of the dissemination of his thought.

Gershon (1288-1344),<sup>283</sup> Isaac Policar (d. c. 1330),<sup>284</sup> Joseph ibn Caspi (1279-1340),<sup>285</sup> Moses Joshua Narboni (b. end of 13<sup>th</sup> - d. c.1362)<sup>286</sup> and Joseph ben Abraham Waqar (fl. first half of 14<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>287</sup> [Abner de Burgos, also included in the list of important philosophers, is in a different category due to his conversion to Christianity and anti-Aristotelian stance].<sup>288</sup> The kinds of metaphysical questions they addressed include divine providence, divine foreknowledge, free will, God's knowledge of particulars, the suffering of the just, reward and punishment, and, in some cases, the eternity of the world

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<sup>283</sup> Gersonides is often considered to be the greatest Jewish philosopher after Maimonides. He was also a Talmudist and accomplished man of science. His most important philosophical work is Wars of the Lord (*Milhamot Adonai*), finished in 1329.

<sup>284</sup> Policar's famous work Defense of the Faith (*Ezer ha Dat*) contains a lengthy rebuttal of Abner of Burgos' astrological views.

<sup>285</sup> Caspi was a commentator, philosopher and grammarian. Of his known works, the most important are two commentaries on Maimonides' Guide. "His daring conclusions evoked the opposition of many rabbis who regarded his views as heretical" (*Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* 411).

<sup>286</sup> This philosopher, translator and physician left Perpignan in 1344 and lived in several Spanish towns. In 1349 he was forced to flee from Cervera, with the rest of the community, because of anti-Jewish persecution. His most important work is Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed, which is analyzed from a strictly Aristotelian-Averroistic point of view.

<sup>287</sup> Waqar, who was in the service of the Castilian court and enjoyed great renown, tried to reconcile philosophy and religion in his work Discourse of Conciliation Between Philosophy and Religion.

<sup>288</sup> Abner de Burgos, one of the foremost enemies of the Jewish faith, converted to Christianity in 1320. He was a doctor, philosopher, Torah scholar, and ardent devotee of astrology. He wrote in Latin, Castilian and Hebrew. The best known of his works is Mostrador de justicia, a tractate dedicated to proving the truth of Christianity and undermining Jewish belief. His most formidable opponents in the Jewish community were Moses Narboni, Isaac Policar and Ibn Caspi. Policar engaged in an extended debate with Abner, which is recorded in his work Ezer ha Dat. It has also been suggested by Yitzchak Baer that Sem Tob was an opponent of Abner. Sanford Shepard (1978) has addressed this issue in detail.

and the political necessity of not revealing this to the vulgar.<sup>289</sup> In order to later relate their philosophical views to ideas found in Sem Tob's works, a general summary of these questions follows.

### Divine Providence and Free Will

Divine providence, which is affirmed in the Torah as extending to every human individual, is closely related to the topic of God's knowledge of particulars. If God does not know particulars, as Aristotle claimed, how could He have any influence over individual people's lives? Gersonides, in trying to reconcile demonstrated truth with the Torah, addressed this question. He asked whether or not there is divine providence for existing beings, and if so, what it is in particular for human beings (Sirat 283). While Maimonides affirmed the consistency between contingency and divine foreknowledge,<sup>290</sup> asserting that "God in a single act knows all particulars," Gersonides (whose position was closer to that of Aristotle) claimed that an omniscient, immutable deity cannot know changing particulars (Rudavsky, *Time Matters* 129).<sup>291</sup> Gersonides, however, did not entirely adopt the Aristotelian view. He believed that divine providence extends to some

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<sup>289</sup> The philosophical questions addressed in this chapter are only treated summarily. For an in depth review, see C. Sirat and Frank & Leaman, ed.

<sup>290</sup> In Jewish medieval literature, there were two main solutions to the problem of divine foreknowledge: compatibilism and incompatibilism. Compatibilists affirmed the consistency between contingency and divine foreknowledge. Incompatibilism had two strains: indeterminism and determinism. The determinist position was that human actions are ultimately determined by God's knowledge of all events past, present and future. The indeterminist, in contrast, simply believed that God does not know future contingent events. Indeterminism and determinism had few adherents in Jewish philosophy because both solutions undermined other basic tenets of Jewish belief, such as prophecy and the doctrine of reward and punishment. Compatibilism, therefore, was the dominant position (Rudavsky, *Time Matters* 99).

<sup>291</sup> It has been posited that Gersonides was influenced by Avicenna, who maintained that God's knowledge only extends to the domain of genera and species (133).

individuals, such as prophets, in virtue of their individual nature, and that God knows particulars insofar as they are ordered and defined (Sirat 294). In other words, God is like a sociologist who knows that a certain proportion of the population of a certain country will commit suicide during the coming year, yet does not know which individuals will do so (Sirat 295).

Another important facet of Gersonides' philosophy is free will. The issue of free will became a topic of great concern to Jewish philosophers in the fourteenth century for three reasons: the increased significance of astrology, the fact that contingent futures were at the time an object of a quarrel in the Christian universities, and, most importantly, the anti-Jewish polemics of the convert Abner de Burgos (Sirat 320). Abner, a former Jewish scholar who adhered to a theory of strict astrological determinism, became a hostile propagandist of the Catholic faith, using his vast erudition in rabbinics and philosophy to attack his former coreligionists, who responded to him with veiled polemics of their own.<sup>292</sup> His treatise on determinism, in which he states “‘the possible’ does not exist, but only ‘the inevitable,’ since everything is predestined,” is what instigated the debate about free will (Narboni qtd. in Sirat 309). His argument, similar to that of Gersonides (but arriving at the opposite conclusion), is that a God who is perfect and complete (i.e. omniscient) must have foreknowledge of past, present and future. Hence, if human action were free, He could not have this foreknowledge and would

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<sup>292</sup> The polemics were partially veiled because of the danger inherent in openly attacking Christian beliefs in the fourteenth century.

therefore be deficient.<sup>293</sup> These ideas, based on Pauline and Augustinian doctrines of predestination, went directly against the Judeo-Arabic Aristotelian paradigm which affirms the existence of free will and contingency in the universe.<sup>294</sup> Moreover, the view that determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility is deeply ingrained in the Jewish tradition (Manekin 373).

Isaac Policar, who engaged in a lengthy polemic with Abner, refuted his ideas in the form of a dialogue between a sage and an astrologer in Ezer ha Dat. He wrote: “As for what you have said, that my will is determined without my being aware of it, that all my acts are necessarily fixed and decided in advance without my thought, my reflection, or my council taking a real part in their production, this is contrary to all our visible experience and destroys the nature of [the contingent] as it has been placed in it” (qtd. in Sirat 320). It has also been suggested that Gersonides’ affirmation of human liberty was made in response to Abner’s determinism (Sirat 308). While both believed in astral causality, Gersonides thought that humans, because of their rational faculties, could occasionally freely choose to leave the causal nexus (Manekin 371). According to his theory, it is “up to humans, with the aid of the divine law, to control their base impulses, and to choose according to reason” (372). Here he is philosophically in agreement with

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<sup>293</sup> Gersonides, like Abner, claimed that God’s foreknowledge and contingency are incompatible. He became an indeterminist, though, insisting that God cannot have foreknowledge of all that occurs because of the fact that contingency exists in the universe.

<sup>294</sup> It has been argued that the polemic between the Jewish philosophers and Abner is just as much a debate between the Judeo-Islamic and scholastic worldviews as it is an anti-Jewish religious polemic.

Maimonides, who asserted that on account of our very humanity, we are free to choose between good and evil and are therefore responsible for all of our actions (Frank 151).

#### Suffering of the Just and Reward and Punishment

Another philosophical query that assumed great importance for fourteenth-century Jewish philosophers--in large part because of Abner's hostile polemics--was the suffering of the righteous. Abner, before his conversion to Christianity, had been haunted by the question of why the Jews, who were appointed by God in the Torah to be His chosen people, were in such a state of misery. How, he asked, could a just god allow both the good and bad among them to suffer alike? The answer he adopted was the typical Christian argument that the Jews brought their suffering upon themselves by rejecting the Christian Messiah and by stubbornly refusing to accept the truth of Christianity. Jewish philosophers, having to defend themselves against this Christian truth claim, felt compelled, and sometimes forced, to offer their own philosophical explanation to this dilemma.<sup>295</sup> One of the most common responses was that put forth by Maimonides. He posited that providential care and insulation from the vagaries of fortune were primarily a function of intellectual insight and knowledge of God rather than of moral virtue (Frank 152).<sup>296</sup> In his gloss on Job in Guide for the Perplexed, for example, he explains that Job's pain and troubles are not a punishment for his sins, but the result of his ignorance of the

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<sup>295</sup> Of course, the question of the suffering of the righteous has a long history in the Jewish tradition, dating back to the Book of Job. It assumed heightened importance, though, in the wake of Abner's hostile polemics.

<sup>296</sup> A version of this view can be found in Proverbios morales.



ways of the world and misunderstanding of divine providence (*Guide* III: 22, 23).<sup>297</sup> So long as Job only knew God by tradition, “in the same manner as religious people generally know him,” he held erroneous opinions and did not comprehend the true nature of divine providence. As soon as Job acquired wisdom, though, he came to understand that knowledge of God, not imaginary goods such as health, wealth, riches and children, is the true source of felicity (*Guide*: III: 23).

Joseph ibn Caspi’s gloss on Job is similar to that of Maimonides in that both adhere to a purely rationalistic interpretation of his plight. Caspi perceived Job as a righteous man who had reached the level of wisdom and understanding called “the fear of God and the turning away from evil” by fulfilling all of the commandments (by way of authoritative tradition), but had not arrived at the other type of wisdom called “and do good,” which is found in the commandments of the heart [the intellectual commandments] (Mesch, *Mystics* 97).<sup>298</sup> Therefore, while Job had committed no wrongdoing, he had not attained the perfection of the intellectual soul. For this reason,

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<sup>297</sup> The exhortations of Job’s friends in response to his grief offer the traditional Jewish explanation of reward and punishment, which stipulates that those who act well receive reward, while those who act wickedly are punished. Maimonides summarizes their simplistic views without fully subscribing to them: “When a wicked and rebellious person is seen in prosperity, it may be assumed for certain that a change will take place; he will die, or troubles will afflict him or his house. When we find a worshipper of God in misfortune, we may be certain that God will heal the stroke of his wound” (*Guide* III: 23).

<sup>298</sup> Ibn Caspi explains the three types of *mizvot* (commandments): commandments of the tongue, of action, and of the heart. The commandments of the tongue and action have political and moral underpinnings, but the purpose of man is found in the fulfillment of the commandments of the heart (the intellectual commandments). While the masses are satisfied with fulfilling the commandments of the heart on the basis of traditional authority alone, the philosophers seek to understand them with the intellect, which leads to true knowledge of God (Mesch, *Mystics* 96).

God did not save him from all of his troubles. In an imaginary dialogue between God and Job in Caspi's work "Shulhan Kesef," God tells Job " . . . These sufferings that I brought upon you were both punishment and penalty for your deficiencies since you did not struggle to ascend to the perfection of these men [Abraham and Moses], peace be on them."<sup>299</sup> The good things I brought to you were reward and compensation for your perfection" (qtd. in Mesch 97). In other words, Job's predicament is entirely due to his lack of engagement in intellectual endeavors. When he finally does fulfill and understand the intellectual commandments, he arrives at the level of prophecy, which is the highest level human beings can attain.

In summary, Maimonides and Ibn Caspi offer a very esoteric reconceptualization of reward and punishment that is not entirely dependent upon righteousness or obedience to traditional authority. While moral behavior is important, it does not guarantee relief from suffering. Abner de Burgos' conceptualization of reward and punishment, in contrast to that of the Aristotelians, is based on the supposition that good deeds bring peace of mind and well being while bad deeds cause suffering. We shall see in chapter five how Sem Tob's conceptualization of this issue corresponds more with that of Maimonides and Ibn Caspi, and contests the commonsensical notion that righteousness protects one from the vagaries of fortune.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> This work, also called "Shorter Commentary on Job" is found in Asarah Kele Kesef, I, 172.

<sup>300</sup> The truth-claim that peace of mind and political well-being are the result of good conduct was increasingly used by Christians in the Middle Ages to undermine Jewish belief.

## The Jewish Mystical Tradition

The Middle Ages in Spain and Provence is one of the richest periods of mystical creativity in Jewish history. It produced what is known as Kabbala,<sup>301</sup> the esoteric tradition that was passed down orally through the generations until it was set to writing in the late twelfth century in Provence.<sup>302</sup> This tradition, which was viewed positively by most Iberian philosophers, was considered to be revealed knowledge that perfects and completes human reason (Tirosh-Samuelson 218). Even though kabbalists approached metaphysical realities differently than the Aristotelian influenced philosophers, the two movements were closely intertwined in Jewish intellectual history. Indeed, there was no sharp dichotomy between the two streams of thought among the intellectual elite. Both rationalists and kabbalists made theoretical inquiries “about God, the origin and structure of the universe, and the place of humans in the order of things” (251). Both traditions were also esoteric in nature and confined to an elite minority of highly educated rabbis and scholars.

Rationalists and kabbalists, though, did have several major disagreements. These pertained to the way divine knowledge is obtained, the nature of revelatory experience, and the precise meaning of the received tradition (Tirosh-Samuelson 251). The philosophers, who privileged the intellect as the main vehicle for interaction with God, thought that the hidden meaning of divine revelation was accessible to human reason. They also believed that the commandments (*mitzvot*) could be understood rationally and

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<sup>301</sup> Kabbalah means “that which is received.” It is an apt term, as Jewish mysticism was primarily transmitted orally to those who were ready to receive it.

<sup>302</sup> Tirosh-Samuelson maintains that they were recorded in writing at this time in order to curb the spread of Maimonides’ intellectualist rendering of rabbinic Judaism (220).

were for the betterment of the human social order. The kabbalists, in contrast, maintained that the esoteric dimension of Judaism was not accessible to reason and could only be known through divine revelation to those chosen by God (221).<sup>303</sup> Moreover, they affirmed that the commandments serve a redemptive (rather than a social) function, which is to restore the imbalance in the godhead and to perfect and redeem human nature. Therefore, redemption, or the “world to come,” from the kabbalistic point of view, is within reach of the common people and can be attained through piety and performance of the *mitzvot*. From the perspective of the philosophers, it is attainable mainly to those who arrive at a true knowledge of God through intellectual striving.<sup>304</sup> This difference of opinion regarding the purpose of the commandments is one of the most significant between the two groups, given that observing Jewish law is something any Jew can do despite education or intellectual endowment. It should be noted, though, that most philosophers admitted the inability of philosophy alone to bring about human salvation, a view that was developed in the context of intense polemics with Christianity (246).

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<sup>303</sup> It should be noted that a strain of Kabbala (prophetic Kabbalah) existed that was more closely tied to Maimonidean philosophical ideals of intellectual perfection. Abraham Abulafia (1241- d. after 1291), its originator, incurred the enmity of rabbis because of his prophecies of imminent redemption and alleged messianic pretensions. Solomon ibn Adret, who was opposed to Abulafia, did not consider his teachings to be part of the authentic esoteric tradition.

<sup>304</sup> The “world to come,” or immortality, according to Maimonides and most rationalist philosophers, was attained as a result of the actualization of the human intellect through the understanding of true opinions about God. Because the masses were deemed incapable of intellectually grasping the truth, Maimonides made a concession for them by guaranteeing that their portion of the “world to come” could be attained by simply affirming his “Thirteen Principles” of faith (Mesch, *Mystics* 88). There is much debate, though, about whether the philosophers actually believed this. Mesch argues that Ibn Caspi did not think that the non-intellectual affirmation of the principles of Judaism as defined by Maimonides gained the masses a share in the “world to come” (96).

## Origins of Kabbala

Kabbala has its origins in two esoteric traditions: *merkavah* mysticism and *ma'aseh bereshit* (the account of creation). *Merkavah* mysticism is based on Ezekiel's vision of the chariot in the Book of Ezekiel (1:1-26), and involves a metaphorical, ecstatic ascent to the chariot. The mystic who achieves this vision experiences "the enthronement and elevation" of himself to "the status of the highest angel in the celestial retinue" (Wolfson 460). There was also an esoteric discipline referred to as *ma'aseh merkavah*, which is distinguished from *merkavah* mysticism in that it involved mainly the exposition of the scriptural account of the chariot with no accompanying mystical praxis. However, the distinction between the exegetical mysticism of the rabbis (*ma'aseh merkavah*) and the experiential mysticism of the ascent (*hekhalot*) mystics is not so obvious. Even though the exegetical variety did not involve heavenly ascent to the throne, that criterion alone, argues Wolfson, "is not sufficient to remove all forms of ecstasy and mysticism from the rabbinic figures who cultivated an interest in the chariot" (457). In other words, *merkavah* mysticism was not exclusive to the kabbalists. The mystical tradition, like the philosophical, pervaded the religious context of medieval Spanish Jewry to such a degree that its influence can be detected not only in kabbalistic texts, but in philosophy, rabbinics and popular genres as well.<sup>305</sup> Indeed, by the fourteenth century, Kabbala was so widespread that the people, as well as many scholars, came to regard it as the true expression of Judaism (Sirat 274).

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<sup>305</sup> Sem Tob's *maqama*, for example, contains several allusions to Kabbalah.

Regarding the mystical praxis in the *hekhalot* texts of the *merkavah* tradition,<sup>306</sup> two central elements can be detected: “the mystical ascent culminating in a visionary experience, and the adjuration of angels achieved through various magical techniques” (Wolfson 459). The seeing of the divine is the “distinctive quality of the mystical adept,” the culmination of which is a direct vision of the divine glory or power (459). In order to attain this vision, the mystic had to embark on an inner journey, which in esoteric kabbalistic terminology, involved spiritually passing through the seven heavens and the first six palaces of the seventh heaven, followed by entry into the seventh palace wherein the throne was located (460).<sup>307</sup> The mystic was then “enthroned,” by virtue of which he could see that which was normally hidden from human perception (460-61).

The other esoteric tradition that informs Kabbala is called *ma’aseh bereshit* (the account of creation). Sefer Yetzira (Book of Creation), dated anywhere from the third to the ninth centuries, belongs to this tradition, and was written as “an elucidation of some of the problems in the Genesis creation story and as an instruction in creative magic” (Blumenthal 45).<sup>308</sup> While some parts of it belong to the environment of *merkavah* mysticism, its main theme is the mechanics of creation. The mechanics of creation, or divine creativity, in Sefer Yetzira is intricately connected to the combination of the Hebrew letters. Letter symbolism has always been a major component of the Jewish mystical tradition, but in Sefer Yetzira, they are treated as “the material stuff of reality”

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<sup>306</sup> These are texts belonging to the *merkavah* tradition, such as Pirkei Heikhalot (Chapters on Ascent), of which only fragments have survived.

<sup>307</sup> This feat would be accomplished in a trance-like state.

<sup>308</sup> There were three different redactions of Sefer Yetzira, all of which share the view that “the means of divine creativity are the 32 paths of wisdom that comprise 10 primordial *sefirot* and the 22 Hebrew letters” (Wolfson 463-64).

(Wolfson 465). The work tells us that God created letters from “spiritual air” and used them as an artisan to build the world (Blumenthal 19). Once humans acquire wisdom and spirituality, they too can use the same tools and elements to create. This magic, though, is not to be interpreted as a coercing of God into doing the will of man. Rather, it was considered to be a parallel, but lesser use of the same power, permitted only when practiced by a rabbi with the prerequisite spiritual and moral qualities; for it was believed that the rabbi, when pious and knowledgeable, shared part of God’s power (Blumenthal 45-46).

The mythology of creation, treated only summarily here, is important to keep in mind when attempting to understand the significance of the act of writing in Ma’aseh ha Rav. In the Jewish mystical tradition, as evidenced in the content of Sefer Yetzira, the Hebrew language is not only a means of communication, but also “an operational agent destined to produce being” (G. Vajda qtd. in Blumenthal 6). This may help to explain Sem Tob’s vital concern with the issue of the misuse and misappropriation of language in Ma’aseh ha Rav. The correlation between letters and spirit in some parts of the *maqama* is an indication of his conceptualization of the creative potency of the written word. Significantly, the verbs Sem Tob employs to illustrate the scissors’ manner of writing in Ma’aseh ha Rav (hewing and engraving) are the same ones that describe God’s activities in Sefer Yetzira. These verbs are metaphors for creative activity and would have been familiar to initiates of the mystical tradition. The idea that letters are the tools of divine creativity, however, is not confined to kabbalistic texts. Letter symbolism is also found

in normative rabbinic sources, which attests to the acceptance of kabbalistic theological constructions by the culture at large.

### The Zohar and Fourteenth-Century Kabbalist Trends

The Zohar, composed in the late thirteenth century, captured the religious intellect and imagination of vast segments of the educated Jewish community and became the “third Bible” of the Jews, second in importance to the *Tanach* and Talmud (Blumenthal 101).<sup>309</sup> It incorporates certain themes of the creation story and *merkavah* mysticism, and is primarily concerned with the mythic dimensions of Judaism, the inner life of the Deity, and the human ability to affect God (Tirosh-Samuelson 223). Moses de Leon (d. 1305), its chief author, mingled two currents of Kabbala-- that of Gerona and the Kabbalah of the “Gnostics” of Castile-- to create his own brand of interpretation and homiletics (Scholem 57-58). While his kabbalistic interpretation reflects the actual religious situation of the times, he left out certain fundamental problems of contemporary Jewish thought such as the meaning of prophecy, and questions of predestination and providence (58).<sup>310</sup> Nevertheless, he presented a deep and broad symbolic view of Judaism, which was very daring in an age when kabbalists were still hesitant to expose their secret

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<sup>309</sup> The Zohar, which is considered to be the chief product of Spanish Kabbalah, consists of biblical, rabbinic, pietistic, philosophical, and kabbalistic motifs that are woven into a colorful fabric (Tirosh- Samuelson 224). Its beginnings are very different from Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed in that it scarcely elicited any interest except among a small group of men who “in loosely organized conventicles” strove for a new mystical understanding of Judaism (105). It was not until the fourteenth century that it became popularized.

<sup>310</sup> The existence of divine providence is never questioned in the Kabbalah. According to G. Scholem, “the idea of providence is identified in the Kabbalah with the assumption that there exists an orderly and continuous system of government of the cosmos, carried out by the Divine Potencies - the *Sefirot* - which are revealed in this government” (382).



knowledge (58).<sup>311</sup> This same ambivalence concerning the disclosure of secrets is shared with the philosophers, as both groups were determined to protect their privileged knowledge from misinterpretation and misapplication (Tirosh-Samuelson 252).<sup>312</sup>

Several decades after the writing of the Zohar, Kabbalah became popular and spread through most of the communities of Spain and beyond. With this expansion, different mystical trends mingled with one another, and attempts were made to harmonize them (Scholem 61). Efforts were also made to seek a compromise between philosophy and Kabbalah, a tendency that originated among the Spanish kabbalists of the period. Some examples can be found in the works of several early fourteenth-century authors. Isaiah ben Joseph of Tabriz, a Persian Jewish writer inspired by Spanish Kabbalah, wrote Hayyei ha-Nefesh (Life of the Soul) (1324), which is part of the strain that attempted to combine philosophy and Kabbalah in what Scholem terms “a more or less radical way” (63). Joseph Shalom Ashkenazi, a Kabbalist who migrated to Spain in the fourteenth century, linked Kabbalah with Aristotelian metaphysics and natural philosophy, “showing how even abstract philosophical concepts could be given a mystical content” (63). The previously mentioned Joseph ben Abraham Waqar of Toledo dedicated his life’s work to unifying Kabbalah, philosophy and astrology. In his work (written in Arabic) A Synthesis of Philosophy and Kabbalah, “he set down the views of the philosophers, the kabbalists, and the astrologers, evaluated their ideas according to their

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<sup>311</sup> Kabbalah was mostly an oral tradition until the twelfth century. It is said that it was put into writing mainly to counter rationalism, and in order to assure the preservation of the tradition.

<sup>312</sup> Sem Tob dedicates many verses to the theme of secrecy and disclosure in Ma’aseh ha Rav, a subject that we will return to later.

relative merits, and tried to establish a basis common to them all” (63). This trend, though, did not persist with the same intensity in the late fourteenth century and afterwards, possibly due to the influence of contemporary events and the persecutions of 1391.

Antagonism to the Kabbalah and its claims can also be found in works of the time period (Scholem 66). Some of the early fourteenth-century opponents to Kabbalah are the Talmudist Menahem Meiri of Perpignan and the philosopher Isaac Policar of Burgos, already mentioned in this chapter. Isaac Policar went so far as to write a tractate against Kabbalah, which is included in his polemical work Ezer ha-Dat. He considered kabbalists, pre-determinists, astrologers, and believers in magic and miraculous tales to be enemies of “true” religion. His position, though, is unique among fourteenth-century Jewish philosophers. Most, to some degree, lent credence to both astrology and Kabbalah. However, it is important to note that resistance to mysticism did exist, and formed part of the dialectic among the three dominant streams of Jewish thought of the fourteenth century.

## **Conclusion**

The main streams of Jewish thought in fourteenth-century Spain and Provence are Talmudic traditionalism, mysticism (Kabbalah), and rationalism.<sup>313</sup> The traditional orthodox view is represented by those who held the belief that faith presides over reason, and that all the knowledge necessary for human redemption is contained in the books of

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<sup>313</sup> Astrology was one of the great doctrines of reference for Jewish philosophers of the fourteenth century, yet due to limitations of time, a discussion of it is omitted. See Colette Sirat, chapters 3 and 8, for an exploration of the topic.

the Torah and the oral law. The kabbalists, while strictly observant of Jewish law, reinterpreted scripture in more mythical and symbolic ways, and engaged in mystical practices in order to achieve knowledge of and union with the divine. The rationalists, like the kabbalists, were not content with traditional orthodoxy, therefore they sought to deepen their understanding of scripture through subjecting it to the dictates of Aristotelian logic and reasoning. When reason contradicts scripture, they argued, an attempt must be made to bring the two into harmony. Even though these three groups each had their own unique perspective about the correct interpretation of scripture, there was considerable overlap between them. Most Talmudic scholars were familiar with philosophy and may even have been kabbalists themselves, while many philosophers had a keen interest in Kabbalah and considered it to be a perfection and completion of human reason. Nevertheless, relations between rationalists, kabbalists and Talmudists were often fraught with tension, evidence of which can be found in the literature and debates of the time period.

In the beginning of the fourteenth century, a heated debate, which had its origins in the conflicts over Maimonidean rationalism, arose between the rationalists and the traditionalists concerning the role philosophy should play in Jewish education. This conflict took place mainly in Provence, where rationalists with a radical bent were interpreting scripture allegorically and publicizing their views in wedding gatherings, synagogues, and lecture halls. A prominent but not well liked Provençal rabbi, Abba Mari, raised the battle cry and enlisted the aid of the leader of Spanish Jewry--Solomon ibn Adret--to pronounce a ban on the study of Greco-Arabic philosophy for students

under the age of twenty-five. His efforts were not successful, as the Provençal rationalist contingent of Jewish scholars was too powerful and progressive to allow the traditionalist faction to ruin the cherished philosophical tradition they zealously guarded. Adret did pass the ban in Spain, however, which may have had the effect of sheltering Spanish Jewry from the more secular forms of philosophical speculation in which the small group of Provençal rationalists were engaging.<sup>314</sup>

Despite the attempts to limit access to non-Jewish philosophical works, the Judeo-Arabic philosophical tradition so permeated Jewish culture that it continued to flourish (albeit to a lesser degree) until the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492. Jewish thinkers, influenced by Aristotle and Arabic Aristotelian commentators, continued exploring metaphysical questions such as the nature of divine providence, the suffering of the just, divine foreknowledge, free will, God's knowledge of particulars, and the origin of the world. Most Jewish philosophers considered themselves to be interpreters of Maimonides, therefore these questions were answered in line with his rationalist philosophy, with some divergences of opinion. All privileged the intellect as the main vehicle for interaction with God, and generally believed that the possession of theoretical knowledge was a sufficient condition for human felicity and the immortality of the soul.<sup>315</sup>

Kabbalah introduced a more pious and mystical element to Jewish thought, which balanced the overly intellectualist emphasis of the rationalists. While the rationalists'

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<sup>314</sup> The extent to which Spanish Jewry was sheltered from the radical forms of philosophical speculation is not known.

<sup>315</sup> This was especially the case with Gersonides and Narboni (Manekin 354).

God is abstract, impersonal and detached, the God of the kabbalists is personal, conscious and engaged. Indeed, Zoharic tradition teaches that the behavior of man can directly influence “the stability of the mixture of God’s conflicting impulses” (Blumenthal 182). Sin, for example, which is conceived of as a misuse of divine energy in the Zohar, “causes blockages and imbalances in the divine flow” (156). Prayer and proper conduct, in contrast, have a stabilizing effect. To the philosophers, proper conduct is necessary on the road to perfection, but does not guarantee protection from suffering. Sin is equated with ignorance, and the greatest evil is the failure to attain intellectual perfection (Kreisel 269). Kabbalists also viewed human life as an arduous attempt to attain perfection, yet for them, this is achieved through the performance of the commandments rather than the study of philosophy.

Another noteworthy intellectual trend of late thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries Spanish Jewish culture is the attempt to harmonize philosophy and religion. Maimonides was the first Jewish scholar to make a systematic effort to bridge the gap between faith and reason, but it is not until later that we see this trend appear in more popularized forms of Hebrew literature. One early example of it can be found in Shem Tob Joseph Falaquera’s work Iggeret ha-Vikuach (Letters on Discussion),<sup>316</sup> in which a scholar and pious religious man debate the merits and liabilities of philosophical investigation by Jews.<sup>317</sup> Isaac Pollegar’s fourteenth century *maqama*, “Debate between a Youth and an

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<sup>316</sup> The work, which addresses the issue of “the permissability and desirability of philosophical investigation by Jews,” is directed towards readers who are qualified for philosophical study but inexperienced (Harvey, *Falaquera’s Epistle ix*).

<sup>317</sup> Falaquera (c. 1225- c. 1295) was a Spanish Jewish philosopher, translator, and Hebrew poet.

Old Man” in Ezer ha Dat (1335), follows the same line of reasoning and dialogue format, indicating the continuing importance of the issue and the spiritual/intellectual inclinations of the period. While it is doubtful that Sem Tob was a pure rationalist in the manner of Pollegar, he was, like him, a thinker who sought to harmonize divergent ways of approaching truth. In this vein, I argue in chapter four that Ma’aseh ha Rav is a work inspired by this intellectual trend, and that some parts of the debate between the pen and scissors parallel that between the philosophically inclined youth and the traditional religionist in Ezer ha Dat.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METAPHOR, ALLEGORY, AND POLEMIC IN MA'ASEH HA RAV

Ma'aseh ha Rav (1335), Sem Tob's Hebrew *maqama*, has received little scholarly attention yet merits serious consideration in the field of Spanish literature given the importance of Proverbios morales to the Hispanic literary canon. In order to fully grasp the ideas contained within PM, it must be studied in relation to his other Hebrew works, and to the cultural milieu in which he lived. As commented in chapter two, scholars have mostly studied Ma'aseh ha Rav from the perspective of conflictivity between Christians and Jews. These readings, which focus on political and religious allegory in relation to the Christian context, have greatly contributed to our understanding of the text. However, in order to avoid over simplification, more attention must be paid to the political, religious and intellectual context of the Jewish community. Without having an adequate understanding of polemics and discourses among medieval Jews, it is difficult to decipher the many layers of meaning in Ma'aseh ha Rav (henceforth Ma'aseh), and the possible allegorical intentions of the author.<sup>318</sup>

While Sem Tob does not explicitly state allegorical intent, the unusual content of Ma'aseh, together with the pervasiveness of the allegorical style of writing, make it likely

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<sup>318</sup> Frank Talmage, in an illuminating study on allegory in medieval Hebrew literature, states that allegorical writing and interpretation in the Islamic-Jewish world of medieval southern Europe was not just a hermeneutic mode, but a state of mind, a way of constructing the world, and "was used in a variety of ways as abundant as its metaphors" (Talmage 110).

that it was meant to be read on several levels.<sup>319</sup> Read literally, Ma'aseh is a humorous debate between two utensils vying for status as the author's preferred instrument for writing, and parodies traditional debates between pen and sword. On a metaphorical level, it can be interpreted as an allegory of the debate between philosophy (or pseudo philosophy), and traditionalism.<sup>320</sup> The social conflict involving Jewish courtiers, who generally lived by a rationalist ethic and were regarded as morally corrupt by their more humble contemporaries, also appears to be reflected and allegorized in Ma'aseh. Additionally, messianic and prophetic themes are woven into the fabric of the *maqama*, creating a richness, complexity, and depth of language that modern readers are generally not accustomed to. Since it is a difficult task to interpret a work like Ma'aseh, given the lack of empirical evidence to support claims of allegorical and polemical intent, I will begin with an analysis of several of the discourses of the time period.

Sanford Shepard, in his work Shem Tov: His World and his Words, offers a key to understanding the religious discourse underlying the debate between the pen and the scissors. He argues that Abner de Burgos' dangerous misreading of scripture, which led to his apostasy, is what compelled Sem Tob to write Ma'aseh. To support his argument, he refers to Sem Tob's *baqashah Yam Kohelet*, in which Sem Tob maintains that Ecclesiastes rightly interpreted poses no danger to faith, yet in the hands of the inept

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<sup>319</sup> Talmage adds that secular literature of the time period often contained allegory: "even the fifteenth century rhymed prose narrative of Don Vidal Benvenist, the Romance of Ephraim and Dinah, an unabashedly scatological piece, is declared by its author to be not just a cheap piece of entertainment . . . but also *amaestramento*, moral and psychological truths, couched in their present garb only to draw and hold the interest of prurient youth" (110). Talmage also claims that the *maqamat* of Judah al-Harizi and Isaac ibn Sahula contain allegory even though they only allude to the didactic nature of their works.

<sup>320</sup> See chapter two for a description of the conflict between philosophy and orthodoxy.



(who are likened to spreaders of slander and false statements), it is subject to misjudgment (34).<sup>321</sup> Because Abner had read Ecclesiastes deeply and come to an erroneous interpretation of the text,<sup>322</sup> Shepard posits that the *rakhil* (slanderer) mentioned in both Yam Kohelet and Ma'aseh is referring to him (34).<sup>323</sup> This is not an unfounded assumption given that Abner used his vast erudition in rabbinics and philosophy to slander and inform on his former coreligionists. In one such instance in 1332, he denounced the Jews to the Christians for having an allegedly anti-Christian prayer in the “Amidah” of their *siddurim* (prayer books).<sup>324</sup> He also misappropriated scripture by extracting passages from the Torah and Talmud to use as proofs of the fulfillment of Christian prophecy (34). The problem, however, of the misappropriation of scripture in the context of medieval Judaism is a broad and complex subject that cannot be limited to the issue of apostasy. Other Jewish philosophers, such as Samuel ibn Tibbon,<sup>325</sup> for example, wrote philosophical commentaries on Ecclesiastes that had been subject to sharp criticism by traditionalists. Furthermore, accusations of slander are found in numerous debates between Jews in the fourteenth century over issues such as the

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<sup>321</sup> Shepard adds: “For Sem Tob, an indefinite knowledge of the text of Ecclesiastes engenders a perilous hearsay, the merchandise of a perilous rumormonger who perverts the truth, wittingly or unwittingly, and twists the minds of all those who fall under his influence, seduced by the sweet fragrance of the collection of wisdom” (*World and Words* 34).

<sup>322</sup> Pollegar’s debate against astrology in Ezer ha Dat, which is directed against Abner, illustrates the ways in which he misread the text.

<sup>323</sup> In Ma’aseh, the pen accuses the scissors of slander for revealing secrets.

<sup>324</sup> The allegedly anti-Christian passages were in reference to the “Prayer Against Heretics,” which is found in the *Amidah* [silent standing prayer] in the central portion of the daily synagogue service (Shepard, *World and Words* 33).

<sup>325</sup> Tibbon was criticized for explicitness regarding the disclosure of secrets, a theme addressed in Ma’aseh.

legitimacy of philosophical study in the educational curriculum, and allegorical interpretation of scripture. To gain an understanding of the nature of the arguments made by both sides, Isaac Pollegar's Hebrew work Ezer ha Dat (Defense of the Faith) is an excellent point of reference since it was written only ten years before Ma'aseh.<sup>326</sup>

### **Ezer ha Dat, Ma'aseh ha Rav, and the Discourse between Philosophy and Religion**

Ezer ha Dat, a polemical work that addresses the most common spiritual problems of the day, has never been translated into a western language. This is surprising because its author, Isaac Pollegar, was a notable rabbi, philosopher, and Torah scholar who possessed a vast erudition in Talmud, Torah, and almost every branch of science then cultivated. Not much is known about his life, but his work reveals him to have been a profound scholar with wide attainments, in touch and sympathy with the busy life around him (Belasco iv). In contrast to most of the other philosophers of the fourteenth century, he argued against both astrology and Kabbalah, characterizing those doctrines as enemies of the true religion. He was, however, a harmonizer of faith and reason in the strictest Maimonidean sense, and a good example of the cautious Jewish scholar who ardently believed in Aristotelian science, yet took a moderate approach towards its application to Judaism.

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<sup>326</sup> Ezer ha Dat was written between 1335 and 1345. Pollegar's other works are Musar Banim (a work of moral edification for youth), Haveratenu be-Hachashot ha-Etztaginut (a refutation of astrology), Iggeret ha Harefut (a work written in response to Abner de Burgos' Minhat Kenaot), and commentaries on Genesis, Ecclesiastes, and Psalms (Belasco iv).

In this work, we get a rare glimpse into the Jewry of the first half of the fourteenth century.<sup>327</sup> We meet kabbalists, astrologers, sages, renegades, miracle mongers, magicians, philosophers, ignoramuses, pseudo philosophers (*mitfalsafim*), fanatic religionists and apostates.<sup>328</sup> All are described in vivid Hebrew in the *melitza* style, interspersed with poetical passages that enliven the prose.<sup>329</sup> While the majority of the work is dedicated to refuting doctrines that the author considers to be antithetical to true religion, he also addresses some of the most important philosophical questions of the day, such as the nature of prophecy, God's knowledge of particulars, the world to come (*olam ha ba*), free will, reward and punishment, and the suffering of the righteous.<sup>330</sup> Part two, a *maqama* entitled "Ish ha Dat ve-ha Filosofo" (The Religionist and the Philosopher), addresses the issue of faith and reason, and is similar in style to Ma'aseh.<sup>331</sup> In it, Pollegar presents an old man (*zaken*) who represents the Talmudic-traditionalist point of view, and a philosophical youth who wishes to prove to the *zaken* that his opinions about

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<sup>327</sup> Belasco summarizes the array of ideological beliefs depicted in Ezer ha Dat by Pollegar: "Judging from *Ezer ha Dat*, the Jewry of Pulgar's day was a busy one, with its contending parties, from the extreme on the one hand of the deniers of all faith to the opposite, i.e. those that believed childishly in imposture of every description. Arranged between in endless gradations were the careful, cautious men, holding fast to the faith and religious practices they had received from their elders, but holding on also with equal tenacity to the study of natural science" (vi).

<sup>328</sup> The apostate is Abner de Burgos, who is represented by the astrologer. To mention his name and refer to him directly would have been too dangerous.

<sup>329</sup> This same style is used by Sem Tob in Ma'aseh. Both authors exhibit what Americo Castro called "Spanish vitalism," i.e. highly expressive language characterized by a reflective tone.

<sup>330</sup> The subject of Abner de Burgos' astrological determinism is addressed in part three (the debate between an astrologer and a wise man). In it, Pollegar quotes from Kohelet profusely, which recalls Proverbios morales and Sem Tob's defense of free will.

<sup>331</sup> Since "Ish ha Dat ve-ha Filosofo" fits within the *maqama* genre, Shepard believes that Sem Tob possibly used it as a model for *Ma'aseh* (World and Words 32).

philosophy are misguided. Both the youth and the *zaken* believe that their approach to religious truth is the only valid path, which prompts a heated dispute that recalls the vehemence of the quarrel between the pen and the scissors in Ma'aseh. The *zaken* angrily accuses the youth of abandoning the principles of Judaism to follow after foreign atheistic wisdom, while the youth condescendingly chastises the *zaken* for neglecting his intellect. Both the traditionalist and philosophical positions are presented with fairness, and in the end, a judge, who is brought in to deliberate in the matter, declares that philosophy and religion do not contradict one another, and that both are necessary for man to fulfill his purpose in life. Another shorter debate, which follows the same line of reasoning as the first, occurs when the *maggid* (narrator) returns to his city. When he arrives at the gates, he is accosted by a fanatical traditionalist who accuses him of sinning for trying to come to a general agreement between philosophy and Torah. The *maggid* responds eloquently with a logical argument about the harmony between faith and reason, to which the traditionalist concedes and admits defeat. Pollegar closes the *maqama* with a poem in praise of God, who mercifully “illuminates the concealed mysteries of science and the intellect.”

While exact parallels cannot be drawn between Sem Tob's *maqama* and “Ish ha Dat ve-ha-Filosof” (henceforth “Ish ha Dat”), there is a certain resonance between the two works that helps to situate Ma'aseh in its proper intellectual context. The two authors, though, had very different purposes for writing. Pollegar, being a philosopher, wrote with the intention of educating his Jewish readers about the merits of philosophical reasoning and the inherent harmony between faith and reason. He was also on a mission to disavow

his public of occluding ideas about religion, such as magic, astrology, and miracles. Sem Tob, in contrast, was a poet and non-dogmatic moralist who seemingly had little interest in theoretical reasoning. Moreover, his intentions are harder to decipher, as he is a less didactic author than Pollegar. Nevertheless, both men lived in exactly the same time frame, in the same region of Spain (Castile), and were influenced by the same intellectual paradigm (Judeo-Arabic Aristotelianism). For this reason, concepts found in both works will be contrasted in order to shed light on possible allegorical content in Ma'aseh, and to supplement the general analysis of the historical context.

Pollegar and Sem Tob both begin their debates with a short poetic prologue explaining their reasons for writing. Pollegar's stated intention is to instruct the ignorant, teach the virtues of wisdom, and to guide the perplexed, who are often, because of insufficient training of the intellect, seduced by weak ideas. The main thrust of the work is the defense of philosophy and the need to prove that theoretical reasoning does not contradict the principles of the Jewish faith. Sem Tob's purposes are less clear. All we are told is that the people and the grandees lured him to the task of showing "the manner of making pieces and fragments by cutting with iron."<sup>332</sup> However, his unstated intention seems to be to heal a rift that has divided sectors of the Jewish community; probably that between the rationalist elite, whose allegorical interpretations of scripture were thought by many to be leading to a dissolution of religious values, and the pious and traditional Jews who felt that philosophy and secularism were undermining the role of Torah

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<sup>332</sup> Shepard's translation.

scholarship.<sup>333</sup> Sem Tob's declaration that he composed his *maqama* not with pen and ink, but with a two edged sword (*be-tzir herev shte peiyot*),<sup>334</sup> can be used to support this argument in that philosophical speculation, like a two edged sword, was believed to carry a significant benefit and risk.<sup>335</sup> It could bring one closer to the true meaning of scripture or lead one astray, depending on the moral virtue and natural intelligence of the person who engaged in it. The assertion at the end of Ma'aseh that whomever fails in their use are themselves to blame lends credence to the idea that the scissors represent a type of reasoning that can be used for good or for ill.<sup>336</sup>

Sem Tob's liturgical works, the absence of any direct references to philosophical theories in his writings, and his subtle but obvious defense of Jewish tradition and piety in Ma'aseh ideologically place him on the moderate end of the spectrum regarding the

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<sup>333</sup> It is also likely that Ma'aseh contains an embedded polemic against an informer or a specific person who was perverting scripture through faulty and manipulative interpretation and reasoning.

<sup>334</sup> Shepard maintains that *shte peiyot* (two mouths) is a reference to the split point of the reed pen because of the fact that the more familiar phrase for two edged (*shte pifiyot*) is not used. However, in a footnote, Nini and Fruchtmann state that the expression refers to the scissors (39). We find the expression "two edged sword" in two places in the Tanakh: Psalms 149:6 and Proverbs 5:4. In Psalms, *herev pifiyot* is used, while in Proverbs, it is *herev peiyot*. Sem Tob is following the usage of Proverbs. The context is that of a father giving advice to his son about "foreign" women. He says in 5:3-4: *For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey; her mouth is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword*. It should be noted that in "Ish ha Dat," the *zaken* speaks of philosophy as if it were a whore.

<sup>335</sup> In *Ish ha Dat*, Pollegar uses the Hebrew word *gazar* ("cutting") to denote the taking of wisdom from a foreign source. This is significant because the scissors are accused of cutting from the scroll (which implies taking scripture out of context), and seeking a type of wisdom that is not their own.

<sup>336</sup> The passage reads: "My soul delights in remembering them [the scissors] in the holy tongue and in the language of the people, for their ways are righteous. May the complaint of the one who fails in their use fall upon his own soul. His mischief will recoil upon his own head; his lawlessness will come down upon his own skull; because he who comes to disquiet the tranquil separates brother from brother" (lines 589-594).

conflict between philosophy and religion. However, his decided interest in the acquisition of wisdom and learning, and allusions to Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed in PM do not suggest the narrow-minded conservatism of Talmudic traditionalism, which is so well described in "Ish ha Dat."<sup>337</sup> Most likely Sem Tob was an eclectic Jew, with rationalist, kabbalist and traditionalist sympathies,<sup>338</sup> who was well aware of the dangers philosophy posed to those who were not intellectually prepared.<sup>339</sup> The Judge's criticism of philosophical poseurs in "Ish ha Dat" illustrates how fourteenth-century Jews perceived this threat:

Their knowledge is like straw that is easily scattered by the wind. They are the people who hear stories from the philosophers but do not themselves study it directly, hence they know only superficial things. If they are youths who do not have a solid moral foundation, they become foolish non-believers. When they begin to study logic, they end up with all sorts of whimsical and mistaken ideas . . . They end up scorning Judaism and speaking insolently about the wisdom of our

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<sup>337</sup> In verses 483 to 503 in PM, we learn of the exceedingly high value Sem Tob places on the pursuit of knowledge. Also in v. 331, he explicitly mentions philosophers: "Los sabios muy granados que omre deseava/ filósofos honrados que veer codiciava."

<sup>338</sup> There is some evidence in Ma'aseh that Sem Tob was a kabbalist. The imagery in lines 380-381 ("black upon white, white upon black") comes from the *midrash konen*, which inspired Isaac the Blind (one of the first Provençal kabbalists) to write the following: "The form of the written Torah is that of the colors of white fire, and the form of the oral Torah has colored forms as of black fire. And all these engravings and the not yet unfolded Torah existed potentially, perceptible neither to a spiritual nor to a sensory eye..." (qtd. in Scholem 49). The description of the pen's letter as being folded and concealed may also relate to this imagery: "She [the scroll] can be folded quickly in the palm, like a bundle of myrrh- black upon white, white upon black, as a finger upon a finger, locked up and guarded from sight..." (lines 379-382).

<sup>339</sup> Sem Tob's comment in Yam Kohelet makes it sufficiently clear that he was concerned about the problem of the misinterpretation of scripture by philosophical poseurs.

sages because they do not know how to differentiate between religion and philosophy. Therefore they will be cast out and cut off from the community of Adonai. *They will perish by the sword* (Job 36:12) and *their vigor will dry up like a shard* (Psalms 22:16), for they have slandered the wisdom of the Torah. They have put the *drashot* (homiletical interpretations), the *hagadot* (legends), and the stories and riddles to shame in the eyes of women and children, and have instructed simpletons in the ways of knowledge and reasoning (*me'zima*). And in addition, they have revealed the secrets. This is not a place of wisdom.<sup>340</sup>

This position, common among both philosophers and moderates alike, is based on Maimonides' admonition that Jews must first satiate themselves with "the substantial foods of Judaism before strolling in the fragrant garden" (Sarachek 238).<sup>341</sup> It also reflects the attitude of most of the articulate proponents of rationalism, who usually described themselves as the center party waging war on two fronts: "against the extreme allegorists or really untrained philosophers who seemed to be, willy nilly, paving the way for the destruction of religious tradition . . . and against the unswerving literalists who seriously complicate religious commitment and do violence to the requirements and essentials of faith . . ." (Twersky, *Provençal Jewry* 205).

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<sup>340</sup> [All translations of "Ish ha Dat" are my own]. It is significant that the judge speaks these words rather than the *zaken*. While the youth and the *zaken* represent aspects of Pollegar's thought, they are presented as extremes. His real position is that of the judge, who believes that both approaches to truth are valid and should be reconciled. *Mitfalsafim*, however, are regarded as dangerous because they are not proficient in either tradition and therefore lead people astray.

<sup>341</sup> "Garden" (*pardes* in Hebrew) was used by Jews as a metaphor for philosophy in the Middle Ages. Maimonides, because of his grounding in the oral and written law, was considered by most to be impervious to the errors of metaphysics (Sarachek 199).



While Sem Tob was not a harmonizer of faith and reason in the strictest Maimonidean sense, as was Pollegar, he is clearly seeking in Ma'aseh (and PM) to effect a reconciliation between ideological extremes. The symbolic value of the pen and the favor Sem Tob bestows upon it, however, suggest that he leaned towards the side of religion.<sup>342</sup> Indeed, the different levels on which the pen can be read reveal a religiously devout side of Sem Tob that is not as evident in PM. While on a surface level, the pen is simply the author's cherished instrument for writing, on a deeper level, it personifies Sem Tob's (or the Jewish community's) conception of the ideal Torah scholar. Most importantly, though, it serves as a metaphor for the redemptive message of the Hebrew Bible, on which the hopes and aspirations of the Jewish people lay. In lines 63-75, for example, Sem Tob extols the pen in words reminiscent of the suffering servant of Isaiah.<sup>343</sup>

Its blessed leg walks in modesty. Wherever it steps, pleasantness follows . . . It stitches from one side of the scroll to the other . . . and with love it nourishes the lines. It eats but not to satiety, and drinks, but not to drunkenness. Its only purpose is to irrigate the book and to spit back what it takes, retaining nothing for itself.

(lines 63-75)

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<sup>342</sup> Given Sem Tob's status as a rabbi, it is likely that he would have argued the case for religion. However, this still does not qualify him as a conservative traditionalist in the medieval Jewish sense of that term. Most conservative rationalists and philosophical centrists would also have argued for the superiority of religion over philosophy

<sup>343</sup> Shepard has commented that the usual boasting and self-praise of the pen in Arabic and Hebrew literature is altered by Sem Tob in both PM and Ma'aseh. Rather than personifying the grandiosity of the man of letters, the pen is described as a faithful and humble servant, reminiscent of the suffering servant of Isaiah (*World and Words* 78).

Extolled again in even more inspired language near the end of the *maqama*, he writes: “The pen is humble and pious, it gathers the exiled [by way of inscription], and does not seek fame, power, or glory. The words that usher from its mouth are never perverse or crooked and its only desire is to increase Torah wisdom” (lines 547-552).

Finally, in lines 574-582, which are an allusion to Isaiah 11:1-2, the pen is established as a messianic redeemer:

When it was cut from its trunk, its essence came into the world and God filled it with His spirit wherever it went. A mouth was given to it like a man’s so it could express itself and run from line to line. It is a well-known fact that the lips of the pen guard Torah knowledge and Torah will be sought from its mouth because it is a host of the Almighty.<sup>344</sup>

We know Sem Tob intends his public to infer the messianic reference because the verses from Isaiah to which he alludes announce the emergence of a ruler of Davidic provenance endowed with the divine attributes required to fulfill the ideal of bringing about a just order.<sup>345</sup> This divine dispensation, however, is temporarily on hold, as the pen has ceased to function. The harsh freeze and terrible wind have frozen the ink and caused the pen to break in the inkwell when dipped. The author, angered at the uselessness of his cherished instrument for writing, chastises the pen, but later apologizes after it proves its innocence.

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<sup>344</sup> It should be noted that the metaphorical value of the pen in *Ma’aseh* is quite different from that in Judah al Harizi’s *Tahkemoni*, where the pen represents any kind of written expression. Harizi’s treatment of the pen is more influenced by traditional Arabic debates between pen and sword, which is not surprising since he lived a century before Sem Tob and modeled his work on the *maqamat* of al Hariri (see chapter three).

<sup>345</sup> This just order in Isaiah entails a world in which “the poor and powerless can enjoy equal rights with the wealthy and powerful,” and the abolishment of “war and all manifestations of violence” (Blenkinsopp 263).

Then, while ruminating over the situation of not being able to write and having no one with whom to speak, a voice comes to Sem Tob proposing the solution of writing with scissors. The voice describes the scissors as two friends working in unison (lines 231-235):

They are like twins, *dashing to and fro like flares* (Eze. 1:14). *Each one helps the other, saying to his fellow, "Take courage!"* (Isaiah 41:6). Together they ride, like brothers. In your hand there are two--they are the scissors. That is what the scissors are! Two shafts of iron yet one, *for two are better than one* (Eccl. 4:9).

Of interest is the fact that Pollegar, in "Ish ha Dat," uses the same verse from Ecclesiastes to bolster his argument that philosophy and religion are two halves of the same truth:

"They will be united all the days of their marriage, without guile or deceit, like two young gazelles, equal in their loveliness. *For two are better than one* (Eccl. 4:9)."<sup>346</sup> The idea of unification, which appears again at the end of Ma'aseh, resonates with rather than parallels, the concept as it is expressed in "Ish ha Dat": "The scissors greatly desired to become one, and that nothing would come between their blades. For the two to become one, they will cut whoever comes between them into two" (lines 606-607).<sup>347</sup> Indeed, the juxtaposition of Sem Tob and Pollegar's metaphorical representations of unity indicates a

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<sup>346</sup> The judge is speaking.

<sup>347</sup> In PM, Sem Tob uses the scissors as a metaphor for friendship: "Quien buena ermandat aprender la quisiese, e buena amizdat usar sabor obiese/ siempre meter debía mientes en las tigeras, e de ellas aprendería muchas buenas maneras/ que cuando meto mientes, cosas tan derecheras, non fallo entre las gentes, como son las tigeras: parten al que las parte, e non por se vengar/ sinon con gran talante, que han de se legar/ como en río quedo, el que's metió entr'ellas, entró, e el su dedo metió entre dos muelas/ quien mal recibió d'ellas, él mesmo se lo busca, que de su grado d'ellas, non buscarién mal nunca" (vv. 514-519).

certain philosophical affinity between the two authors. Sem Tob, like Pollegar, seeks to reconcile two ways of interpreting scripture or of viewing the world, and condemns those who stray too far from accepted norms. Pollegar, as already stated, declares that the *mitfalsafim* (pseudo philosophers who spread false knowledge) should be cut out from “the community of Adonai,” while Sem Tob decrees the same for those who create discord through their incorrect use of the scissors. Hence, while both authors attempt to reconcile oppositions, they set limits to what is theologically and philosophically acceptable. Both of these tendencies are representative of the harmonizing spirit of fourteenth-century Judeo-Hispanic intellectual culture, and are also present in PM.

The actual debate between the pen and scissors in Ma’aseh begins on page 55 (line 241), when the scissors entreat Sem Tob to test them. They say they have no need of any one but themselves and can write anything they wish, for nothing stands in their way: “Take us in your hand and test your servant, for you will be able to write anything--*we recoil before none* (Proverbs 30:30), and are in need of no one except ourselves” (lines 241-244). This assertion is revealing in that anyone who believed they could rely entirely on themselves was considered to be foolish and lacking in humility, according to biblical and medieval Jewish religious thought.<sup>348</sup> In “Ish ha Dat” this idea has a parallel in the *zaken*’s declaration that whoever depends entirely on his own understanding, like the youth, will be led astray.<sup>349</sup> A statement to this effect is also made by the judge (in “Ish ha

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<sup>348</sup> In Psalms the idea is made clear in several places. Sem Tob also comments on this theme in v. 184 in PM: “Fazese lo que plaze a Dios en todo pleito/ omre cosa non faze por su entendimiento.”

<sup>349</sup> Page 78: “Ki col ish toshei’ah mi-derech dato yiteh ve-yetzeh, ve-chochmato me-ayin t’matzeh?”

Dat”) regarding philosophers’ alleged abdication of religion: “Without Torah, a master of knowledge (*Ba’al Chokma*, i.e. philosopher) is like a man standing alone in the desert without a friend, for he cannot maintain his life without any help.” Philosophers, though, were not the only ones who were criticized for relying too much on their own strength and intelligence. Jewish courtiers were accused of haughtiness, moral laxity, and the shirking of their religious obligations as well.<sup>350</sup> However, there is a strong connection between the enterprise of philosophy and the Jewish oligarchy.<sup>351</sup> Indeed, the courtier class, whose ideology was philosophical rationalism, has been blamed for fomenting a type of anti-traditional rationalism that was corrosive to Jewish tradition (Twersky, *Provençal* 189).<sup>352</sup> From this socio-historical perspective, the haughty self-reliance of the scissors can be interpreted as a reflection of the social and political power of the rationalist aristocracy, who lorded it over those who considered themselves to be the true leaders of the Jewish community, the Torah scholars. The Torah scholars, in turn, are

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<sup>350</sup> While the freethinking circle of Toledan Jews who were accused of moral laxity was limited, they set the social tone for the Jewish aristocracy throughout Castile (Baer I: 239).

<sup>351</sup> It has been documented that the philosophic and orthodox parties belonged, with some exceptions, to different social strata, which corresponded to cultural differences. Sarachek maintains that the anti-Maimonists, as a class, “were often poor and led restrictive lives” and did not have the power to harm the Maimonists (272).

<sup>352</sup> Baer maintains: “Philosophy in Spain was fostered primarily by those whose allegiance to Judaism became increasingly attenuated as they rose to positions of influence in the Christian power structure” (qtd. in Saperstein 295, 306). Saperstein, however, takes issue with Baer. He challenges the widely held assumption that attempts to restrict philosophical study were indicative of the efforts made by representatives of the Jewish population and traditional rabbinic leadership to “throw off the oppressive rule of an oligarchy with values diverging from the tradition” (296). However, writings from the time period, such as the poetry of Todros ha Levi, the *Zohar*, and *Ra’ayah Mehemna*, attest to the acute social discord between the courtiers and the rest of the Jewish populace.

fittingly portrayed as weak, broken and impotent until the end of Ma'aseh, when they are vindicated through the symbolic victory of the pen.<sup>353</sup>

Other accusations leveled against the philosophers that correspond to the incriminations the pen makes against the scissors are the disclosure of secret teachings, exploitation of scripture, the destruction of the foundations of Judaism, intellectual arrogance, and the attempt to dominate those with true Torah wisdom.<sup>354</sup> In “Ish ha Dat,” the *zaken* censures the youth for these same transgressions:

It is not arithmetic that you study but worry and irritation; not fractions, but filth and impoverishment . . . Look, the philosophers deride our faith and scorn our wisdom. They do not observe the *mitzvot* (commandments), nor do they desire our ordinances . . . there are no chords in their garments, no *mezuzot* on their doors, and no *tosafot* between their eyes. They are destructive sons, children of evil.

And a few paragraphs later:

The masters of this wisdom [philosophy] think they can dominate us with their vain and empty knowledge. They put their mouths in heaven, speaking of the stars and their orbits, the forces and matter, and deny from their hearts what they have not seen with their eyes . . . *The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to man* (Psalms 115:16).

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<sup>353</sup> Nini and Fruchtmann comment on the declining stature of Torah scholarship in fourteenth-century Spain (36).

<sup>354</sup> Another accusation levelled against the philosophers was their excessive use of foreign wisdom. In Ma'aseh, a possible allusion to this phenomenon can be found in lines 469-470: “. . . your heart was seduced by a net of images [*maskiyyot*] that do not pertain to you.” The term *maskiyyot* literally means “silver filigree work.”

In Ma'aseh, the scissors are derided in a similar manner, although the accusations are less specific. In lines 296-97, we get a first glimpse of their superiority complex as they equate themselves with the prophet Moses:<sup>355</sup> “My name is the wondrous letter, I am applauded for my comeliness, and every letter in comparison to me is ashamed. The prophet of God was only a man, but the spirit of God was in him, and He commanded: ‘hew, engrave!’”<sup>356</sup> And then in lines 305 to 311, they describe themselves in lofty mystical imagery, evoking *ma'aseh merkavah*.<sup>357</sup>

Our writing is more wondrous than any letter with ink and pen, or any colorful embroidery . . . sometimes it is white and sometimes black-- it takes off one form and puts on another-- at times *its head is in the clouds* (Job 20:6)<sup>358</sup>-- and shines (*meziv*) like a wheel making itself a gallery *above the expanse* (Ezek. 1:15-16, 26).<sup>359</sup> *The Most High sent forth His voice* (Samuel II 22:14)-- and *it was beautiful*

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<sup>355</sup> Shepard's translation has been used for lines 296-297.

<sup>356</sup> It is noteworthy that in Sefer Yetzira (“The Book of Creation”), God's activities are described as hewing and engraving, or hewing and stamping. The association of the scissors with the act of writing, and therefore creation, would seem to confirm that the polemic between the pen and scissors is of a spiritual/religious nature.

<sup>357</sup> *Ma'aseh merkavah* (the study of the chariot vision in Ezekiel) was a source of contention between philosophers and traditionalists. In “Ish ha Dat,” the youth tells the *zaken* that Talmudic argumentation is less important than the study of the chariot vision: “The arguments of Davai and Rabah are a small thing, while *ma'aseh merkavah* is of great importance.” The conflict lay in the fact that traditionalists regarded the Talmud as the study of the essence of God, while philosophers assigned axiological primacy to the meta-halakhic disciplines (Twersky, *Kaspi* 244). During the time, though, most philosophers, excluding Ibn Kaspi, believed that one should first become a Talmudist before proceeding to cultivate philosophy or Kabbalah (244).

<sup>358</sup> The verse following Job 20:6 was perhaps meant to be inferred: “Though he grows as high as the sky, his head reaching the clouds, *he perishes forever like his dung* . . .” (20:7).

<sup>359</sup> Verse 26 reads: “Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne there was the

*in its grandeur* (Ezekiel 31:7) . . . I am the pinnacle of thought [*ruach*]/ I am form [*tzura*] without matter [*homer*], and without body, I am spirit [*ruach*]/ My vehicle is in the heavens and *I glide on the wings of the wind* [*ruach*] (Psalms 18:11).<sup>360</sup>

Finally, they compare their writing to grain without the chaff, and to a dream devoid of inanities, which possibly corresponds to some philosophers' belief that once they had discovered the philosophical kernel hidden in the Torah, they were free to discard the shell (the precepts).<sup>361</sup>

Immediately following the scissors' lofty description, the pen bursts out in anger exclaiming: "Who brought you to the work of the heavens, a work that is not yours! *But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways above your ways, and My plans above your plans* (Isaiah 55:9).<sup>362</sup> I turn to the scroll with kindness and compassion, while you pluck out its eyes" (lines 323-327).<sup>363</sup> The pen then accuses the scissors of spreading nets, spinning webs and composing iniquitous documents:

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semblance of a human form" (Ezek. 1:26). This part of Ezekiel forms the basis of *merkavah* mysticism, mentioned in chapter two, which was considered to be a secret teaching, not for public consumption. The Talmud forbids the public exposition of the chariot vision (*ma'aseh merkavah*) and the creation story (*ma'aseh bereshit*). *Meziv* is a zoharic term.

<sup>360</sup> Nini and Fruchtman comment that in line 309, *yakar* ("valuable" in modern Hebrew) is to be interpreted as "important." I have translated it as "pinnacle" given the context. Also, the term *ruach*, found in the same line, takes the meaning of "thought." They note that Sem Tob has used *ruach* in all three senses, i.e. thought, spirit, and flow of air [wind] (61, note 310). Additionally, they state that the concepts of form and matter expressed in the verses above derive from the language of the Judeo-Arabic philosophers (61, note 310).

<sup>361</sup> See Baer (I: 241).

<sup>362</sup> In the verse in Isaiah, God is speaking.

<sup>363</sup> "Plucking out its eyes" refers to the cutting of the scissors into the scroll. Most likely it is a metaphor for sin, or the marring of scriptural interpretation.



Were you called to spread a net that is full of traps and snares, like *recessed and latticed windows*? (Kings I 6:4). And if it is a *spider's web you are weaving* (Isaiah 59:5), the flies are going to get away because it does not fit the framework.<sup>364</sup> *Ha, those who write out evil writs and compose iniquitous documents* (Isaiah 10:1), and cause sorrow all the day long . . . (lines 331-335).<sup>365</sup>

At first glance, an apostate would seem to be the likely target of such a recrimination. Indeed, Abner de Burgos' anti-Jewish polemics were viewed as iniquitous documents full of traps and snares. However, in "Ish ha Dat," we see that the same accusations were made against philosophers:

God chose and redeemed us, He brought us out from darkness to light and gave us laws to guide us . . . now stammerers are trying to throw their net over us. They seek to nullify our faith to our great shame and disgrace. They make us odious to our enemies, extend our exile, and increase the weight of our burden. They have deviated from the right path and mock our wisdom . . . All the day long there are those upon us who increase our sorrows. They shame and disgrace us, gain strength over us and dominate. They pursue and run after us. They are called the philosophers.

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<sup>364</sup> This line, which is very ambiguous, was translated with the help of Professor Harold Leibowitz.

<sup>365</sup> It is noteworthy that in the first anti-Maimonidean controversy, an anonymous anti-Maimonist describes rationalism as overstepping the mark: "Let us, therefore, understand and know that our reason cannot dictate to us to turn to the right or to the left. And he who overreached the universal boundary to pervert all that is straight, to compose rationalist nonsense on the precepts, to devise a speculative structure for the Torah, has overstepped the mark, thus bringing retribution upon the world. This is the way of heresy" (qtd. in Sarachek 109-10).

Then after the youth chastises the *zaken* for denouncing philosophy, the *zaken* retorts:

God forbid should I study Greek wisdom and walk in her ways, lest I should learn from their deeds and go whoring after them and have my footsteps get caught in their net. I did not desire to take her in. Don't you know that our sages warned us to keep away from logic (*higgayon*)?

Upon comparing the net imagery in Ma'aseh to the way it is used in "Ish ha Dat," faulty and misleading scriptural interpretation does appear to be the issue Sem Tob is addressing. As already stated, it was not only Christians and apostates who were perceived as a threat in this regard. Jews who were preaching allegorical, or otherwise "flawed" interpretations of scripture in a public forum were viewed as heretics in the eyes of the traditionalists. Even Ibn Kaspi (1280-1340), a philosopher whose exegesis had a fair share of allegory, criticized non-literal interpretation of scripture on the grounds that it was not guided by context, grammar, or logic (Twerskey, *Kaspi* 238). He described it as an extreme measure, "like strong medicine which should be taken only on very rare occasions" (251). Similar to the pen's assessment that the scissors' web does not fit the framework, Kaspi believed that allegorical interpretation, because of its intellectual shortcomings, fell wide of the mark.

The accusation of revealing highly guarded secrets, one of the main sources of contention between the pen and the scissors, is another charge that was leveled against both Abner and the philosophers.<sup>366</sup> Abner, being a philosopher and an erudite scholar of

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<sup>366</sup> Halbertal, in addressing this issue, is referring to the 1305 controversy over the Jewish educational curriculum, in which the Provençal rationalists were criticized by Ibn

rabbinics and Torah, exposed aspects of Judaism to public scrutiny that Christians previously had not been familiar with.<sup>367</sup> Philosophers in general, though, were not well liked and were accused of violating all the traditional barriers of esotericism concerning divine matters (Halbertal 113).<sup>368</sup> Ibn Kaspi and Joseph Narboni, for example, were admonished for disclosing their views on such things as Maimonides' belief in the eternity of the world, "with its radical theological implications" (Ravitsky, *Secrets of Guide* 165-66).<sup>369</sup> Furthermore, Narboni, in his "Commentary on the Guide," wrote about the need to reveal more than what was previously allowed: "Times naturally change, and so do people, and so we can now widen the small hole of the filigree work with more truth than was possible, for accepted convention is no longer at loggerheads with intellectual truth as much as it was in the past" (qtd. in Ravitsky 167).<sup>370</sup> The *mitfalsafim* (pseudo philosophers) went even further in their disclosure of secrets and were

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Adret and French conservatives for emphasizing philosophy far in excess of the Maimonidean tradition, and for violating all the traditional barriers of esotericism (113).

<sup>367</sup> Abner's extensive knowledge of rabbinics and philosophy greatly added to the arsenal of polemical weaponry that Christians could use in their theological attacks against Judaism. Baer maintains that it was he who fathered the ideology of apostasy that brought ruin upon Spanish Jewry two centuries later (I: 330).

<sup>368</sup> The Jewish philosopher Moses Narboni, in Treatise on Free Will, stated that at that time (1320's), the Jews of Castile were in opposition to philosophy and hated any one who cultivated it (qtd. in Baer, I: 332).

<sup>369</sup> The intensification of the openness and confidence of radical exegetes during the course of the fourteenth century was due to the rising strength of Jewish Aristotelianism (Ravitsky, *Secrets of Guide* 175).

<sup>370</sup> The original source is Commentary on the Guide II:19, 34a. Samuel ibn Tibbon, Maimonides' foremost esoterical interpreter of the thirteenth century, also believed that more of the secret knowledge, which had been limited to a small and elite group, should be revealed. He did not see any virtue in withholding it from the masses of the Jewish population any longer (Sarachek 184).

admonished by both traditionalists and philosophers alike.<sup>371</sup> Ibn Kaspi warned, like Falaquera, Pollegar, and others, of the dangers of these pseudo-philosophers.<sup>372</sup> He described them as “little foxes in our generation who begin the study of the sciences and strive to ascend the mountain . . . and they open their mouths widely to vilify the sages of Israel” (qtd. in Mesch, *Studies in J. Caspi* 66).<sup>373</sup> Given the prevalence of this theme in medieval Jewish writing, it is not surprising that it also appears in Ma’aseh. Indeed, Sem Tob’s dedication of several pages to a debate about secrecy and disclosure tells us much about the actual discourse of the time period, and underscores his preoccupation with seemingly irreconcilable oppositions.

Beginning with line 350, the pen initiates the debate by describing the scissors’ writing as exposed and defective:

Your letter is full of great moral shortcomings, obvious to everyone. The secrets came out even though wine did not enter.<sup>374</sup> Don’t you know that *blessing can only be found in things that are hidden from the eye?* (*Ta’anit* 8, 2), for if you fold her

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<sup>371</sup> Philosophers were, for the most part, regarded as scholars who violated the code of secrecy from time to time and who strayed too far from orthodoxy. The *mitfalsafim*, in contrast, were viewed as dangerous and heretical because they had not learned the principles of philosophy or religion well, yet were preaching allegorical interpretations of scripture to the uneducated masses.

<sup>372</sup> Falaquera, in Epistle of the Debate, always distinguishes between true and false philosophers. Plato, in the Republic, a work that medieval Jews were familiar with, also makes this same distinction: “By far the greatest and most powerful slander comes to philosophy from those who claim to practice such things [i.e. from imposters who have taken on the guise of philosophers]” (qtd. in Harvey, *Epistle* 49, note 95).

<sup>373</sup> Menahem ha Meiri, Kolonymous ben Kalonymous, and Narboni also thought of themselves as centrists waging war against both the literalists and the pseudo philosophers (Twersky 205).

<sup>374</sup> The meaning here is that wine generally causes people to say more than they should. The scissors, even without wine, reveal too much.

or roll her up, she will be destroyed.<sup>375</sup> *All who admired her despise her* (Lam. 1:8).

Your writing has no merit. Her letters have no strength on which to stand, for they are suspended on nothingness. Your letter, therefore, will always remain exposed and naked, *like an open city without walls* (Proverbs 25:28). (lines 350-360)<sup>376</sup>

The pen, continuing its angry attack, accuses the scissors of acting like a foolish woman: “*Her mouth opened to the ignorant* (Proverbs 31:8), her secrets and defects exposed for all to see” (360). The original verse from Proverbs, which reads “*Speak up for the dumb, for the rights of the unfortunate,*”<sup>377</sup> is intentionally inverted by Sem Tob, and points to a moral judgment of a person or group of people who, like the *mitfalsafim*, were violating a code of secrecy and preaching to the ignorant and simple minded.<sup>378</sup> However, this inversion may also indicate criticism of a political nature. Those people, presumably the leaders of the Jewish community who were supposed to be speaking up for the weak, are instead uttering foolishness and shirking their social responsibilities. Indeed, the Jewish courtier aristocrats, most of whom lived by a rationalist ethic, were viewed by their

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<sup>375</sup> The word for letter (*iggeret*) is feminine in Hebrew, therefore it is referred to as “her.”

<sup>376</sup> It is significant that the same verse from Proverbs was used by the rabbi of Avignon--in the 1305 conflict--as part of his argument to introduce the ban. Many thought that allowing the study of philosophy before the age of 25 would pose too much of a danger to the “citadel” of Judaism. The ban, it was assumed, would serve as a protective wall so that philosophy would not erode the faith of youth.

<sup>377</sup> The italics designate the part of the verse that Sem Tob has inverted.

<sup>378</sup> Pollegar comments on this same moral infraction in “Ish ha Dat” in the guise of the judge who accuses the *mitfalsafim* of “instructing simpletons in the ways of knowledge” and of revealing secrets.

contemporaries as morally nihilistic.<sup>379</sup> Therefore it is quite possible that Sem Tob is commenting on both their misreading of scripture and abuse of power.

A more serious accusation involving destruction follows: “All that you plotted to keep secret will become revealed, you are destroying it down to its very foundations!” (lines 365-66).<sup>380</sup> This fear of destruction parallels both the discourse about philosophy in the fourth Maimonidean conflict and the traditionalist views held by the *zaken* in “Ish ha Dat.” The destruction of the foundations, which figuratively alludes to the destruction of Judaism, is exactly what the *zaken* and the traditionalists in the 1305 conflict feared the unbridled study of philosophy would do to Jewish tradition.<sup>381</sup> Indeed, the opponents of philosophy all repeated the charge that boundaries had been transgressed and that basic beliefs and mores were disintegrating (Twersky, *Provençal* 206). The *zaken*’s condemnation of the youth in “Ish ha Dat” illustrates the extreme position in this ongoing polemic:<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> The Jewish courtier aristocracy of the period was severely criticized by moralists who intended to expose their nihilism (Baer I: 241). Baer gives a prolific account of the reform movement in chapter VI, volume I.

<sup>380</sup> The literal meaning of the charge of disclosure in *Ma’aseh* has to do with the fact that the cutting out of the letters makes it impossible to conceal the scroll when folded.

<sup>381</sup> Halbertal maintains that one of the major concerns was that the philosophical allegorization of biblical narrative would lead to the allegorization of the commandments. It was also thought that “the elevation of the concrete particular to the universal and conceptual” would undermine not only the importance of the particulars of the biblical narrative, but also the very idea of the particularity of the People of Israel (112).

<sup>382</sup> Twersky uses “Ish ha Dat,” Falaquera’s *The Seeker*, and Kalonymous’ *Even Bohan* as examples of stereotyped debates in which absolute types are presented. He maintains that such works, however stereotyped they may be, accurately reflect the great spiritual tensions that characterized the religious conflicts of the period (*Provençal Jewry* 206, note 77).

I have not chastised you for your own benefit, but in order to prevent the people from listening to you and thereby sinning against the Lord. The study of evil things the likes of which you teach causes the destruction of the world, which stands and is preserved through the observance of the Torah.

Interestingly, Abba Mari, the protagonist of the conservative faction in 1305, did not take as fanatic a position as that portrayed by the *zaken* in “Ish ha Dat.” Rather than outright condemning philosophy as inherently worthless, he and his supporters aimed to restore it to the esoteric state.<sup>383</sup> The *zaken*’s hyperbolic arguments, perhaps, reflect the attitude of the most extreme opponents of philosophy in Spain, which had its real life manifestation in the Rabbi of Toledo, Asher ben Yehiel.<sup>384</sup>

In lines 429-436, the dynamic tension between secrecy and disclosure is very explicit. The scissors, flaunting their superiority, assert that if a prophet were now among us, he would surely write in the manner of the scissors (i.e. engraving, which is how the Ten Commandments were written).<sup>385</sup> Because their letter is perfect and flawless, with no evil residing in it, they see no need for concealment:

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<sup>383</sup> See Gregg Stern for a more detailed analysis of the subtleties and ambiguities of the early fourteenth-century debate concerning Jewish education and allegoresis. In his article “What Divided the Moderate Maimonidean Scholars of Southern France in 1305,” he clarifies the positions of Abba Mari and Menahem ha Meiri, both conservative rationalists but on opposite sides of the debate.

<sup>384</sup> R. Asher ben Yehiel (1250-1327), originally from Germany, stated in a letter to Abba Mari: “You know that I signed your ban against my will. How should I sign that students should not study philosophy till twenty-five, implying that I allow the study of philosophy after twenty five?! In my view, in this generation, the study of philosophy is prohibited throughout one’s whole life” (qtd. in Halbertal 117).

<sup>385</sup> Engraving is a term used to denote the act of creation in the kabbalistic text Sefer Yetzira (Book of Creation).

Should one conceal her as one conceals disgrace and shame? Should we hide the glory of our actions? Should we treat our letter like a prostitute? Because your letter is evil in the eyes of her master, he covers her face like a prostitute to conceal her shame and defects. Vile thing that you are, you spit in her face. (lines 429-436)<sup>386</sup>

While a literal reading suggests that Sem Tob is merely presenting the other side of the argument in the spirit of Arabic debate literature, the scissors and pen seem to represent, respectively, those rationalists who wanted to make philosophy more available to the masses, and those who feared this exoteric thrust.<sup>387</sup> The strengthening of aristotelianism and the increasing boldness with which philosophers defended their position in the fourteenth century may explain why this dialectic takes up so much space in Ma'aseh.<sup>388</sup>

To illustrate a case in point, the activity surrounding the fourteenth-century philosopher and exegete Ibn Kaspi (a contemporary of Sem Tob) may suffice. Kaspi, a rationalist who sought relentlessly to spread philosophical enlightenment “with the zeal and fervor of a proselytizer,” was known for taking certain views to atypical extremes (Twersky, *Kaspi* 236).<sup>389</sup> In his philosophic quest for truth, he made efforts to share his

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<sup>386</sup> The last sentence refers to the ink that the pen spits onto the face of the scroll.

<sup>387</sup> See chapter three in Habertal, “canon and curriculum,” for an interesting study on esotericism.

<sup>388</sup> To make clear why philosophers would have wanted to make secret teachings available to a wider public, Twersky explains: “any religious-intellectual movement which possesses special insight must eventually propagate it and become public or else it faces the serious charge of egotism; if one does not make it possible for others to benefit from this achievement, he is guilty of withholding the good from him to whom it is due and of destroying important, hard won knowledge” (*Kaspi* 236).

<sup>389</sup> Twersky maintains that the dialectic between restraint and popularization was also typical of Kabbalah, “which emerged from the shadows of a tight, almost impenetrable



insights with others beyond his small elite circle, while at the same time respecting certain cherished conventions of esotericism.<sup>390</sup> The general exoteric thrust in his works, however, drew sharp criticism from some of his contemporaries, who charged him with indiscriminate dissemination of secret teachings and misinterpretation of the Bible.<sup>391</sup> Kalonymous ben Kalonymous, one of Kaspi's main critics, thought that even if everything he wrote were true and unimpeachable, he should still be faulted for lack of discretion because of the danger inherent in spreading ideas that could potentially destroy the faith of the people.

Quite clearly, a parallel can be drawn between cases such as these and the dialectic between secrecy and disclosure in Ma'aseh. Even though the danger of philosophy may have been exaggerated in proportion to its real influence, most medieval Spanish Jews of the fourteenth century regarded it with suspicion. The end of the scissors' speech in this section perhaps reflects the position of those philosophers who wanted to go beyond received tradition and reach a wider public, which to the traditionalists seemed like a usurpation: "This is our letter, revealed for all to see, unlike the deeds of crooked people.

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esotericism to the center stage of an energetic movement attempting to popularize and proselytize" (*Kaspi* 236).

<sup>390</sup> In the works of Kaspi, one sees "an inevitable residuum of esotericism and tension consisting, on the one hand, of ritualistic assertions that not everything be told" . . . and on the other, a dedication to truth "that is not deterred by mass criticism or disagreement" (Twersky, *Kaspi* 236).

<sup>391</sup> Kaspi was also criticized by his contemporaries for radicalizing Maimonides' Guide and ridiculing and demeaning Talmud study (Twersky, *Kaspi* 247)

The one who sees it will be blessed; with intelligence *he exchanges pens*” (lines 439-440).<sup>392</sup>

In the next section of the *maqama*, the pen initiates the theme of strength and weakness, arguing that the scissors’ strength in no way confers upon them a superior status. This dialectic, in which the scissors are described as powerful yet shameless and obstinate, recalls both the *zaken*’s criticism of philosophers in “Ish ha Dat” and the moral indignation that Jews of a pietistic bent felt towards the aristocratic communal leaders who dominated the *aljamas*.<sup>393</sup> The negative similes the pen uses to insult the scissors, “I consider iron as straw . . . and brazen arrogance as rotten wood,” add to the impression that a social conflict is being addressed.<sup>394</sup> Indeed, verses 448-457 are couched in language that glaringly alludes to a power imbalance:

If I am not able to dip in the ink but once in a jubilee, it is because the ink was  
dried up by the aridity. Your heart rejoiced at this, yet when disaster strikes you, I

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<sup>392</sup> As previously stated, *me’shaneh ha etim* (“he exchanges pens”) is a play on words based on an Arabic prayer praising God for the changing of the seasons.

<sup>393</sup> Social criticism in the kabbalistic work *Ra’ayah Mehemna* (end of 13<sup>th</sup> century), the Zohar, and the poetry of Todros ben Judah ha Levi (1247-1306) serve as invaluable historical documents for the life, interests and mores of the courtier class. Todros, who moved in courtly circles, described the courtiers as sinners who, estranged from tradition, transgressed the precepts and cherished Christian lore (Baer I: 238-39). The description in the Zohar and *Ra’ayah Mehemna* is similar (272). While these accounts are from the end of the thirteenth century, conditions did not improve in the fourteenth. Baer has noted that in the generation following the death of Ibn Adret (c. 1315), Spanish Jewry did not produce any outstanding leaders who were able to cope with the complex spiritual and social conflicts. According to him, the energies of the community were dissipated in internal social conflicts, political intrigues, and polemics with detractors of Judaism (307).

<sup>394</sup> The word Sem Tob uses for arrogance, *ne’husha* (i.e. made of brass, or, as an adjective, brazen), is a clever play on words, as it describes both the material the scissors are made of and their moral character.

will mock your misfortune. Alas, it will come quickly . . . for if the screw is severed upon which you turn . . . and you are disgraced, you will be of no help or utility....

This critical assessment of the scissors, if indeed it does reflect social circumstances in fourteenth-century Castile, may be an allusion to the Castilian courtiers who, living by a rationalist ethic, often sought to impose their religious ideology and private interests on the rest of the community.<sup>395</sup> Their haughty and hedonistic behavior, which aroused much antipathy on the part of the Jewish population, is well documented in kabbalistic texts of the time period.<sup>396</sup> Indeed, scandals occasioned by the wielding of communal power by these high-handed men occurred frequently in Spanish Jewish history, and usually involved both political and religious interests (Septimus 205). Ibn Adret's regime in Barcelona, which replaced the prevailing Muslim aristocratic paradigm, is an example of a political-cultural revolt with a successful outcome (205). His effort to restore piety, *Halakha* (Jewish law), and *Aggadah* (Jewish lore or legend)<sup>397</sup> to the position they had formerly occupied in Jewish life would undoubtedly have made an impression upon

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<sup>395</sup> The courtiers, while adhering to a rationalist ideology, were generally not scholars, but practical men of the world. Baer describes them as Jews who, utilizing the opportunities opened up to them in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, attained high office and political power in the administration of the reconquered territories (I: 241). Furthermore, they resorted to a type of political ruthlessness that had become prevalent in the cities and states of southern Europe. He adds: "Having succumbed—in thought—to convictions so antithetical to the faith and traditions of their people, they did not hesitate to trample upon the vital interests of their correligionists" (I: 242).

<sup>396</sup> The authors of the *Zohar* and *Ra'ayah Mehemna*, both works of the late thirteenth century written in Castile, fulminate against the Jewish community leaders for despoiling the poor, shirking their social obligations, and neglecting the Torah.

<sup>397</sup> *Aggadah* is designed to either solve a problem in the text, or to be used as a springboard to introduce values.

Castilian Jews who were antagonized by the moral deterioration, political unscrupulousness, and Averroistic outlook that characterized much of the courtier class.<sup>398</sup> Since Sem Tob was once involved with the court himself, he would have been highly familiar with the ways of the courtiers, and was perhaps ill at ease with their spiritual and ethical mores.

To give a brief account of the revolt that resulted in the creation of a new religious-cultural paradigm in Catalonia, and that may have had some influence on Sem Tob's religious and political views, we need look to the early thirteenth century, when rivalries between groups representing different spiritual ideals came to a head in Barcelona.<sup>399</sup> The origins of the conflict can be traced back to antagonism between the leaders of the Barcelona *nesi'im* (aristocracy) and the leader of the nascent anti-aristocratic revolt, Samuel Benveniste. While not much is known about Samuel and his party, one of the charges leveled against him was the breaching of synagogue etiquette, which was a way of protesting the communal status and authority of the *nesi'im* (Septimus 199). The Provençal rationalists, who were closely allied with the Barcelona aristocracy, made a case against Samuel. However, he was able to convince the queen of Aragon, Maria of Montpellier (d. 1213), that the men of Provence had perverted the cause of justice. After much heated contention, the Barcelona aristocracy pronounced a *herem* (ban) against

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<sup>398</sup> Baer maintains that a minority of courtiers were so apathetic to faith and tradition that they only maintained social ties with their people (I: 240). Their ideological justification for such a position stemmed from the rationalism inspired by the philosophies of Maimonides and Averroes (240).

<sup>399</sup> For a complete account of the revolt see Septimus (1979): "Piety and Power in Thirteenth century Barcelona."

“any who would violate the inherited rights of the Barcelona *nesi'im*” or who sought to void those rights by litigation before the royal court (200).

Twenty five years later, the Barcelona aristocracy was attacked again, but even more forcibly, due to the conflation of spiritual and religious tensions,<sup>400</sup> and the involvement of some of the most outstanding figures of the day, such as Nachmanides (1194- c.1270)<sup>401</sup> and the great pietist preacher and Talmudic scholar R. Jonah b. Abraham Gerondi (d.1263). In this phase of the conflict, anti-aristocratic and anti-rationalist sentiment combined to form a powerful and victorious movement that succeeded in replacing the *nesi'im*. After the victory, the form of government in the Jewish community of Barcelona was no longer an aristocratic regime dominated by courtiers whose religious ideal was philosophic rationalism, but rather an elected government dominated by Torah scholars and merchants (205). However, this shift in power, which corresponded to a shift in spiritual authority, was only successful in Aragon (213). In Castile, where the traditions of Muslim aristocratic culture were more entrenched, the Spanish Jewish ruling class still adhered to what has been described as a

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<sup>400</sup> This second conflict had more to do with the Maimonidean controversy of the 1230's and the reorientation of Provençal religious culture in the direction of philosophy (201).

<sup>401</sup> Nachmanides, the rabbi of Gerona, was a great Talmudist, Biblical exegete and mystic whose range of knowledge was unrivaled in his day. He was opposed to the study of philosophy but not to Maimonides' works. In 1263, he took part in a public religious disputation that took place in Barcelona in the presence of King James I. Although he had been promised immunity, he was tried for blasphemy and had to leave Spain. From 1267 until his death, he lived in Palestine, where he continued writing his popular Bible commentary with its characteristic combination of rational interpretation and insistence on kabbalistic implications (*Standard Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1263).

corrosive, anti-traditional rationalism (Twersky, *Provençal Jewry* 189).<sup>402</sup> From Sem Tob's defense of the humble and weak pen, and derision of the "brazen arrogance" and strength of the scissors, one can speculate that the dialectic between strength and weakness, and the verses in PM regarding this subject, are an indication that he sympathized with some of the religious ideals of the reform movement.<sup>403</sup> While Sem Tob does not fit the category of a conservative traditionalist, he may have felt that the anti-traditionalism of aristocratic culture had gone too far and lost its spiritual moorings. Indeed, there is a certain ideological affinity between the role of the pen as Torah scholar and defender of tradition and the efforts of the religious reformers, whose work has been compared to that of the Sages of the *Mishna* who sought to save their people from secularization and disintegration (Baer I: 189).

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<sup>402</sup> Baer notes that even though the historical setting where the heart of the conflict between philosophy and religion took place was Barcelona and Provence, "there is no doubt that, in Spain, Averroism was much more common and its practical results more grave and more evident in daily life than was the case in Languedoc" (I: 290). He adds that the lack of information given in *Minhat Kenaot* about the conflict in Spain may be due to either Abba Mari's lack of interest in the situation there, or the Jewish Spanish leaders' deliberate silence about the situation in their own country. Pollegar's "Ish ha Dat," written in Burgos, indicates that the conflict was indeed prevalent in Spain. Rationalism, however, began to decline shortly thereafter (by the end of the fourteenth century).

<sup>403</sup> The weakness with which the pen is imbued underscores the decreasing social status of the Torah scholars: "It is well known that there is no substance to our polemic. It is not dependent on your audacity nor on my weakness, or on your valor or my feebleness. And your power, what is it to me? You have transgressed my boundary, but I did not transgress yours" (lines 459-463).

As for the scissors, their destructive activity (a constant theme throughout the text) can be read as a metaphor for the above-mentioned spiritual corrosion that was eating away at the Spanish Jewish aristocracy:<sup>404</sup>

Like fanged beasts your teeth are let loose on the scroll . . . You pluck the words from its heart and leave it full of holes. It is not my custom to behave that way, for my rule is that of a *hasid* (pious man): *what is mine is hers and what is hers is hers* (Pirkei Avot).<sup>405</sup> (lines 370-373)

The pen's description of itself as a *hasid* is significant in that it is a term associated with those new qualities of piety and spirituality mostly foreign to the culture of the *nesi'im* (Septimus 214).<sup>406</sup> The scissors, equated with *rashaim* (evil persons), take more than their share and seek to obtain what does not belong to them. The pen exclaims:

Your actions are despicable, and will cause the scroll to become like moth eaten clothes that will rot. You are not satisfied with what is yours but must take more [of the paper], until it is consumed and decayed. But you return empty and athirst. My letter, however, is sated with favor and full of the Lord's blessing. *I give generously and end up with more* (Proverbs 11:24). Nothing can be weighed against my writing. (lines 396-399)

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<sup>404</sup> Significantly, the *zaken* constantly refers to the destructive activity of the philosophers in "Ish ha Dat." As already mentioned, though, his position is stereotyped, and does not represent Pollegar's own views.

<sup>405</sup> The idea is this: if I say "what is yours is mine," I am a *rasha* (evil person). If I say "mine is yours and yours is mine," I am foolish. If I say "mine is yours and yours is yours," I am a *tzaddik* (righteous person).

<sup>406</sup> It should be mentioned that in Castile, the influence of the Rabbi of Toledo, Rav Asher ben Yehiel (1250-1327), a German Tosaphist who was hostile towards philosophy, was a significant force in galvanizing the energy of the religious leaders of Spanish Jewry to take an active role in the creation of an atmosphere of piety (Septimus 183).

Taking these religious and social conflicts within the Jewish community into consideration, it is not surprising that Sem Tob invokes the authority of a king, who represents the ideal of justice and order, to effect a restoration. His decree to return all effects to their rightful stations expresses the idea, on a literal level, that people should be content with their lot in life and not seek to obtain more than what they need. On a symbolic level, it is an appeal to cosmic order, which has been violated by the actions of those who have strayed from the principles of Jewish oral and written law:

No one shall seize the craft of his neighbor, for their works have been assigned from the beginning of creation. Nor *may anyone exchange or substitute* one work for another (Leviticus 27:10). Nor shall *a woman put on a man's apparel, or a man wear a woman's clothing . . .* (Deut. 22:5). (lines 537-539)

Interestingly, Ibn Adret uses similar terminology in a letter he wrote to Don Crescas Vidal in relation to the 1305 conflict about philosophy and the educational curriculum:<sup>407</sup>

Did a nation ever exchange its gods, which are not God (Jer. 2:11)? But these people exchanged their glory for foreign follies and pursue them. Before our very eyes they exchanged their honor for disgrace and substituted alternate lore for our perfect Torah . . . Now this plague which threatened to destroy our home and ravage our heritage, we have expelled it from our land, empty, scorned and despised . . . (qtd. in Baer I: 293-94)

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<sup>407</sup> The charge is that of substitution, i.e. the philosophers were recriminated for trying to substitute philosophic lore for Torah.



In both Ma'aseh and Adret's letter, the concern is that the Torah is being exchanged for something of inferior value. Even though this is not stated explicitly in Ma'aseh, a careful reading suggests that this is the message Sem Tob is trying to convey.

The king's decree, however, can also be read on the level of *sod* (kabbalistic interpretation), revealing it to be a reflection of mystical conceptions of sin and restoration. In the Kabbalah of Joseph Gikatilla, for example, evil is viewed as an entity that is not in the rightful place that was accorded to it at the time of creation: "every act of God, when it is in the place accorded to it at creation, is good; but if it turns and leaves its place, it is evil" (Scholem, *Kabbalah* 126).<sup>408</sup> This idea conforms perfectly with the sin the scissors commit, i.e. they have violated the social and spiritual order by performing an act [writing] that is not intrinsic to their nature, and by trespassing the pen's territory.<sup>409</sup> The scissors also commit the sin of "cutting" inappropriately, which implies, when the social and religious context is taken into consideration, altering the plain sense meaning of scripture in a way that impugns its validity.<sup>410</sup> Moreover, the act of cutting

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<sup>408</sup> It is not surprising that kabbalistic concepts can be found in Sem Tob's works, given the wide dissemination and popularity of Kabbalah in fourteenth-century Spain.

<sup>409</sup> "Who brought you to the work of the heavens? A work that is not yours," lines 323-24.

<sup>410</sup> Halkin clarifies this issue in his explanation of the permissible uses of allegory in scriptural exegesis: "The allegoristic method, which the *Aggadah* pursues very liberally, is not intended to replace the simple sense (*pshat*). It is rather the application . . . of the rabbinic principle that 'one verse is capable of several meanings,' or of the accepted truth that 'the Torah has seventy faces' (176-77)." Ibn Adret, addressing the inappropriate use of allegory, stated: "In the case of both the promises and the stories, whatever can be explained literally, reason dictates that we must not alter its plain meaning. Why should we? Indeed, whoever alters the plain sense meaning on his own accord is acting foolishly [*sh'ein lanu l'hotzi-am min mashma'ut ha-pshat, ve'lamah?*]" (qtd. in Halkin 177). [Original source: Perushe Aggadot la-Rashba, 27-28]. Significantly, Sem Tob refers to altering scripture from its plain sense meaning in lines 594-97 in Ma'aseh: "For not in

evokes the zoharic conception of sin (the introduction of division into the divine unity). Hence, the mystical significance of the scissors' sin may be that of creating separation between "brothers" [i.e. Jews] and between man and God by perverting the sanctity of the written word, upon which justice is erected.<sup>411</sup>

### **Messianic Allusions**

The next major section of the *maqama*, which comprises the pages following the pen's victory, stands apart from the rest of Ma'aseh in its solemn messianic tone. The pen is described as pious, humble, and as a gatherer of exiles (a function of the messiah), which reinforces the status it was accorded at the beginning of the text. Immediately following this description we are presented with a complex allegory involving biblical tree imagery that can be interpreted in relation to Ezekiel 31, which is alluded to in line 557: "No tree in the garden of God could compare with him in beauty and stature."<sup>412</sup> Since the lofty tree in the biblical story was cut down by the Almighty due to its

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vain did the author bring them together [the blades] in order to effect what is called 'iron sharpening iron'-and to alter scripture from its plain sense meaning [*u-l'hotzi mikra mi yadei peshutah*]." (Shepard, in his translation of Ma'aseh, inexplicably leaves this line out). While this ambiguous use of imagery makes interpretation difficult, what Sem Tob may have been saying is that he, as an intellectually and spiritually gifted rabbi, is qualified to take scripture out of its plain sense meaning, while the scissors, lacking the appropriate spiritual credentials, are not.

<sup>411</sup> "May the complaint of the one who fails in their use fall upon his soul. His mischief will recoil upon his own head . . . because he separates and disturbs the peace by coming between brothers" (lines 591-594).

<sup>412</sup> In Ezekiel 31, Assyria is the lofty tree with which no other tree in the garden of God could compare. Because he became haughty and wicked on account of his greatness and stature, God delivered him into the hands of the nations, who cut him down and cast him away. According to Greenberg's interpretation, the branches that were severed from the tree symbolize the Assyrian dead, and the birds and the wild beasts that live on his fallen trunk are the peoples who used to enjoy the protection he provided but who now exploit his parts (640-41).

arrogance, it is possible that Sem Tob is hinting at what will happen to the wicked of the nation of Israel who put their faith in wealth and power rather than God. However, the imagery in this line also relates to the tree allegory in Genesis, as the garden referred to is *Gan Elohim* (“God’s garden,” or Gan Eden).<sup>413</sup> The pen, in this case, would represent the Tree of Life.<sup>414</sup>

The strange (and difficult to translate) transition into the description of a second tree associated with death and destruction suggests the possibility that Sem Tob intended the reader to conflate the tree imagery of these different biblical texts and infer meaning on his/her own. In this transition, which occurs in lines 558-559, the imagery of thickets and bushes is used in order to emphasize the superiority of the pen (symbolized by the first tree) over all the other trees. Line 558, though, which is taken from Kings I, gives the passage a new twist.<sup>415</sup> When interpreted according to the biblical, rather than the

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<sup>413</sup> “The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:8-9).

<sup>414</sup> There may also be a hidden kabbalistic interpretation of the tree imagery. If the pen is the Tree of Life, which represents unity in kabbalistic doctrine, then the scissors may symbolize the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which symbolizes division and conflict. Blumenthal, in *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, explains that the Tree of Life, which is called *tiferet* in the Kabbalah, is constant, unified, and has no internal split or dichotomy. The Tree of Knowledge (*malkhut*), “is the confluence of all the conflicting elements, and hence contains within itself conflict and contradiction. It turns over and over, it changes its hues” (144). Interestingly, in lines 304-306 in *Ma’aseh*, the scissors’ writing is described in terms of changing hues: “[Our writing] is a double embroidery recalling the tablets with their seven transparent facets, reflecting green and blue, changing from light to dark, fashioned of turquoise and topaz and emerald. It changes appearance” (Shepard’s translation 89).

<sup>415</sup> Shepard translates the paragraph in *Ma’aseh* thus: “He [the pen] holds advantage over every planted tree. It is revealed and acknowledged that his paths do not pass through

literal, context a hidden polemic becomes apparent. The verse in Kings reads: “When noon came, Elijah mocked them, saying, “Shout louder! After all he is a god. *But he may be in conversation (si’ach), he may be detained (seeg),*<sup>416</sup> or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up (18:27),”<sup>417</sup> Given that Elijah is mocking the prophets of Baal who worship inanimate objects, the implication is that the other trees in the garden of Eden, aside from the pen, have put their trust in false gods (i.e. in wealth, power, or foreign belief systems), therefore their end, like the aforementioned prophets, will be destruction.<sup>418</sup>

If the biblical connotations are meant to be taken into consideration in lines 561-565, we can take the allegory further and postulate that Sem Tob is launching a two pronged attack.<sup>419</sup> After enumerating the diverse objects that are fabricated from the tree, he states that they are all dead corpses (*pgarim*), *devoid of sense and lacking in discernment* (Deut. 32:28). Since wooden objects cannot literally be corpses, his use of the word *pgarim* does not make sense unless the objects are to be interpreted as false idols, or useless people. If they are to be interpreted as false idols, it is possible that he is making a veiled attack on Christian truth claims. Indeed, the imagery in lines 560-61

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thickets. No tree in the Garden of God can vie with him in beauty and stature. He grows where no thickets are.” (Shepard does not note the allusion to Kings).

<sup>416</sup> The italics indicate the part of the verse that Sem Tob cites in Ma’aseh.

<sup>417</sup> The Hebrew word *si’ach* ‘conversation’ used in Kings I (18:27) can also mean “bush,” or according to Shepard, “thicket.” (Nini & Fruchtman, in note 558, point out the double entendre).

<sup>418</sup> The content of the following lines in Ma’aseh make this interpretation plausible.

<sup>419</sup> “Tables were made from him, a chair, rafters, doors, arks, and other objects- *but they are all corpses* (Kings II 19:35). *There is no utterance, there are no words* (Psa. 19:4)- *they are devoid of sense and lacking in discernment* (Deut. 32:28), *like a booth in a vineyard, like a hut* (Isa. 1:8),” (lines 559-565). See chapter two for full translation.

(“On the day that they cut the tree from its roots, they beat and wounded him . . .”) is suggestive of the crucifixion of Jesus, as he was beaten and wounded and later worshipped in the form of wooden statuettes, which Jewish tradition considers idolatrous.<sup>420</sup> Another possibility is that it is an indirect allusion to the powerful and spiritually bankrupt Jewish leaders who were dominating the cultural life of the community. Line 565 (“like a hut in an untended field”) is an allusion to Isaiah 1:8, in which the Israelites are harshly criticized for their depraved and unethical behavior. Because they have spurned the council of God, Isaiah proclaims that their cities will be laid waste by strangers, left “like a booth in a vineyard, or a hut in an untended field,” exactly what was to occur in the Jewish communities of medieval Spain. Hence, one can speculate, from the different types of biblical prophecies Sem Tob alludes to in this section, that his intention may have been to both defend Judaism against Christian ideology (and therefore from Christian missionizing efforts), and to remind the corrupt among his own people of the prophecies regarding their future if they did not change their ways.<sup>421</sup>

In verses 567-582, we are presented with a message of hope and the promise of redemption, as the narrator assures the reader that the destiny of the pen is not the same

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<sup>420</sup> There is more than enough reason to believe that some of the passages in Ma’aseh can be read as a rebuttal to anti-Jewish Christian polemic. Indeed, from the time of the official conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, which claimed to have replaced the Congregation of Israel, the Sages of the Jewish people regarded the entire Roman Empire as “the wicked kingdom, which seduces the world and leads it astray with its falsehoods” (Urbach 545).

<sup>421</sup> Baer, Ben Sasson, and Beinart, all authoritative historians of Jewish history, signal this time period as one of deterioration and hardship for the Jewish community (Nini & Fruchtman 36). The fact that many Jews converted during this time and blossomed in the fields of Christianity was also a source of bitterness and division (12).

as that of the aforementioned tree: “Its beginning is forced labor and its fate is to perish for eternity. A flame will dry up its tender branches, and it will be consumed by fire” (lines 565-567). Unlike this tree, when the pen (the nation of Israel) is cut from its roots, its shoots (descendents) will not dry up. Rather, it will attain eternal life. Lines 574-76 are of crucial importance in the interpretation of this part in that they parallel the messianic announcement of Isaiah 11:1-2:<sup>422</sup> “When it was cut from its trunk (*gizah*) its essence came into the world, and at the moment it was removed from its place, the spirit of God began to fill it. And when *the glory of its branches was removed* (Isaiah 10:33), the spirit of life entered its nostrils . . .”<sup>423</sup> Significantly, the verses from Isaiah to which Sem Tob alludes (10:33 -11:1-2) depict both the preservation of the Saving Remnant of the Jewish people from which the messiah will emerge and the destruction of the useless and corrupt majority (the branches that are removed).<sup>424</sup> Clearly, this message of future redemption would have inspired hope in times of spiritual crisis and physical danger, which are metaphorically depicted throughout the *maqama* as a harsh freeze and terrible day of cold and ice. This same imagery (“A sorrowful day of snow and cold, a day of terrible ice” lines 585-86), which concludes the messianic description of the pen, can be read, depressing as it is, as an affirmation of belief, given its allusion to the prophecy of

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<sup>422</sup> “But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, a twig shall sprout from his stock. The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him: a spirit of wisdom and insight . . .”(Isaiah 11:1-2).

<sup>423</sup> The idea in Isaiah 10:33 is that when God cuts down the lofty trees (Israel and other great nations), the trunk (roots) of Israel will not die out. Rather, a twig (redeemer) shall sprout from Jesse’s stock (Jesse is the father of King David, the line from which the messiah is to emerge).

<sup>424</sup> My interpretation of the tree imagery in this part of Isaiah is based on that of Robert Gordis in The Root and the Branch.

restoration in Ezekiel 34:12: “As a shepard seeks out his flock when some [animals] in the flock have gotten separated, so I will seek out my flock, I will rescue them from all the places to which they were scattered *on a day of cloud and gloom*.”<sup>425</sup> Indeed, upon juxtaposing the weather imagery and messianic allusions in the text, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Sem Tob and the Jews of his time may have considered these conditions to be the birth pangs of the messiah.

### **Metaphors of Unity and Reconciliation**

In the last section of Ma’aseh (lines 586-614), the theme of the scissors reappears in a somewhat paradoxical fashion. After incriminating them throughout the text, Sem Tob unexpectedly declares that they are essentially good and deserving of reward. In addition, he affirms that they will be remembered in the holy tongue and in the language of the people (Castilian), which is a reference to the verses about the scissors in PM where they are given as an example of friendship.<sup>426</sup> In Ma’aseh, since they lose the battle and are portrayed as morally unfit for the task of writing, it is odd that they would take on positive connotations at the end of the work. However, this valuation is not incongruent with the rest of the text if we view them as a double-edged sword. They are a benefit when used properly (denoting the secular wisdom of politics [power] and the sciences

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<sup>425</sup> The refrain “a sorrowful day of snow and cold, a day of terrible ice” is repeated several times in *Ma’aseh*, suggesting import that goes beyond the mere literal meaning. As already mentioned, Nini & Fruchtman have postulated that the harsh day may be a reflection of the dire spiritual and political situation of the Jews of Castile.

<sup>426</sup> “Whoever desires to learn about brotherhood and friendship should look to the example of the scissors. One can learn many good customs from them. Among the people, I don’t see any whose ways are as righteous as theirs. They cut whoever separates them not because they seek revenge, but because of their desire to become one” [my translation] (vv. 514-517).

[philosophy]), yet cause harm in the hands of those who fail in their use; who, consequently, deserve to be excommunicated (“for such persons shall be cut off from their people” lines 600-601). As already mentioned, this idea finds a parallel in the position of certain defenders of philosophy in the fourth Maimonidean controversy. Menahem ha Meiri, for example, believed that those who childishly stumble in their philosophical speculation should be “cut off and destroyed,” yet philosophy itself should not be executed (Stern, *Moderate Scholars* 371).<sup>427</sup> The fact that Sem Tob, in his Vidui Gadol (“Great Confession”), states that he has “rebelled and cut from every book” suggests that he himself may have been guilty of that “childish” transgression.<sup>428</sup>

Interestingly, the ending of Ma’aseh resonates with the conclusion of “Ish ha Dat,” as both authors effect a reconciliation between opponents, and employ the same biblical verse (Psalms 133:1) to express the concept of unity: “*how good and pleasant it is that brothers dwell together.*”<sup>429</sup> In “Ish ha Dat,” however, Pollegar uses the verse didactically

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<sup>427</sup> Meiri writes: “If at one time or another, some individual stumbles in his speculation, he shall be cut off and destroyed in his iniquity; why should philosophy (*hochma*) be executed? Were the gates of the *Pardes* [the garden of esoteric knowledge] sealed shut when Elisha ben Abuyah [the heretic] exited, cutting his way through, destroying?” (qtd. in Stern, *Moderate Scholars* 371. Original source *Hoshen Mishpat*, 162). Significantly, the word “cutting” is used by Meiri to denote the heresy of Abuyah.

<sup>428</sup> The word for “cutting” used in the *Vidui* is *yigrudu*, which means to “have cut.” Shepard states that it can also mean to “have erased.” However, he maintains that Sem Tob’s preoccupation with scissors writing justifies the first meaning (*World and Words* 119, note 15).

<sup>429</sup> Sem Tob proclaims: “For not in vain did the composer bring them together [the two blades of the scissors], and repair them in order to fulfill what is called iron sharpening iron by taking scripture out of its plain sense meaning. *There they will be seized with fright*, as it is said, *how good and pleasant it is that brothers dwell together* (Psalms 133:1),” (lines 594-596). In “Ish ha Dat,” Pollegar writes: “Without Torah, a master of knowledge [*ba’al chokhma*] is like a man standing alone in the desert without a friend, for he cannot maintain his life without any help. And without knowledge, a master of



to disseminate his conviction that the two “true” paths (religion and philosophy) must be joined together for human beings to become whole. Sem Tob, in contrast, wishes to unify “brothers” that have become divided, which indicates reconciliation between different factions of Jews.<sup>430</sup> The ambiguity and allegorical suggestiveness of the language, however, lends itself to several layers of interpretation. At face value, the reconciliation is a parody of the pen and sword literary tradition in which military might and scholarly learning are in the end both praised for their respective merits. Metaphorically, it expresses the need for tolerance so that ideological differences of opinion about issues such as philosophical interpretation of scripture would not lead to conflagrations that would end in sectarianism and strife.<sup>431</sup> Allegorically, the reconciliation has deep messianic undertones, which is evident in Sem Tob’s play on the language of Ezekiel.<sup>432</sup> By equating the blades of the scissors to the “stick” of Ephraim,

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religion [*ba'al ha-dat*] is like cattle without a shepherd, for without the shepherd [philosophical knowledge] he cannot know where the pasture is. Therefore, it is best that the two join together as one: *how good and pleasant it is that brothers dwell together* (Psalms 133:1).”

<sup>430</sup> The term “brothers” suggests reconciliation between Jews rather than between Jews and Christians.

<sup>431</sup> This is an issue that Spanish and Provençal Jews were acutely aware of, especially after the Maimonidean tragedy of 1232. In that phase of the conflict, the French anti-Maimonists invited the Christian authorities to mediate, which ended in the public burning of Maimonides’ Guide.

<sup>432</sup> God, referring to the kingdoms of Judah and Ephraim, speaks through Ezekiel saying: “And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thy hand” (Eze. 37:17). Following this unification, restoration to the land of Israel is assured, as well as centralized leadership: “You shall hold up before your eyes the sticks which you have inscribed, and you shall declare to them: ‘This said the lord God: I am going to take the Israelite people from among the nations they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land . . . and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms . . .’” (Ezekiel 37:20-22).

and the “stick” of Judah, which are to be unified (“For not in vain did the composer bring them closer to one another” line 595),<sup>433</sup> he is evoking the prophecy of the in-gathering of the exiles scattered among the nations and their restoration to the land of Israel. Most importantly, the emphasis on reconciliation at the end of Ma’aseh underscores Sem Tob’s preoccupation with the harmonizing of oppositions, and connects the work conceptually to PM.

## Conclusion

Ma’aseh ha Ray has been interpreted in divergent ways. While some scholars view it mainly as a parody of traditional debates between pen and sword, others find religious polemic and political allegory contained within it. In this study, because of the depth, complexity and ambiguity of the Hebrew Sem Tob employs, it has been interpreted as a work bearing multiple layers of meaning. Indeed, the commonality of *allegoresis* in southern European medieval Jewish writing and interpretation suggests that it was meant to be read on more than one level.<sup>434</sup> The chapter progresses, therefore, from an analysis of Ma’aseh in light of contemporary medieval Jewish discourses about religion, philosophy, and power, to an examination of its eschatological message.

In the analysis of Ma’aseh in relation to the discourse between religion and philosophy, recent and past scholarship on the fourth Maimonidean conflict was

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<sup>433</sup> The word used for “stick” in Ezekiel 37 is *etz* ‘tree,’ a complex symbol denoting nation and kingship (Greenberg 756).

<sup>434</sup> Frank Talmage is indispensable in explaining to students of literature how allegory was used in medieval Jewish culture (*Apples of Gold*, pp. 108-113). He states: “for so many in this Islamic-Jewish world of southern Europe, allegory was not merely a hermeneutic mode; it was a state of mind. It was not simply a way of looking at the world; it was a way of constructing the world. It was used in a variety of ways as abundant as its metaphors” (110).

examined, as well as Isaac Pollegar's Hebrew *maqama* "Ish ha Dat ve ha Filosof." While exact parallels cannot be drawn, there are striking similarities between the arguments made by the *zaken* and youth in "Ish ha Dat," the participants of the 1305 controversy, and the debate between the pen and scissors in Ma'aseh. Hence, it is argued that the scissors play the part of philosophical poseurs whose lack of adequate training in the principles of Judaism and philosophy causes them to misinterpret scripture, which is metaphorically described as marring and destroying the scroll (*megillah*). Because of their association with power and might, it is also assumed that they are affiliated with the Jewish courtier class that was reviled by many in the Jewish community. In contrast, the pen personifies the traditional wisdom of the Torah scholar whose status has been undermined by these new cultural and political authorities. Its weak and broken state reflects this situation, as well as the general dire circumstances of fourteenth-century Castilian Jewry. Its victory, a product of wishful thinking, conveys Sem Tob's desire to provide a message of hope to his coreligionists, who were demoralized by both the spiritual and moral decay of their leadership, and the increasingly hostile Christian polemical attacks on Jewish belief.

In the last part of the chapter, messianic allusions are explored and analyzed in relation to the role of the pen as redeemer. The scissors' metaphorical reversal is also addressed, which is shown to accord with the valuation of the scissors as a two-edged sword in the sense that they can be used for good or for evil. The implied message is that philosophy, or power, when used in conjunction with the principles of the Torah, is a

boon to the community, but when separated from the truth of revealed religion, they become instruments of destruction.

In chapter five, I explore the different ways in which similar concepts are expressed in Ma'aseh and PM, and elucidate, for those unfamiliar with medieval Jewish thought, some of the rabbinic principles and philosophical ideas that inform Sem Tob's worldview. My intention is to better situate PM within its proper cultural context, and to give the reader a deeper understanding of Jewish intellectual and spiritual life in medieval Christian Spain.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PHILOSOPHICAL AND RABBINIC CONCEPTS IN PROVERBIOS MORALES AND MA'ASEH HA RAV

Ma'aseh and PM, while belonging to distinct literary genres, give expression to many of the same concepts and ideas. Given the significant differences between the Hebrew and Castilian languages, and the stylistic devices that are employed in the respective genres, the ideas take on a different form in each work.<sup>435</sup> As was explained in chapter two, Ma'aseh is a *maqama* written in the *musiv* style that was directed towards a more learned readership than PM.<sup>436</sup> The use of Talmudic and Biblical verses characteristic of the Hebrew version of this genre enriches and deepens the text by allowing the author to evoke contexts that go beyond the literal meaning.<sup>437</sup> This technique, and the polyvalence of the language employed, lends itself to multiple levels of interpretation, including allegory.<sup>438</sup> Proverbios morales, in comparison to Ma'aseh, is

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<sup>435</sup> Clark Colahan (1979) has extensively addressed the subject of stylistic similarities between the two works.

<sup>436</sup> Castilian was the spoken language of the majority of Jews living in Christian Spain. Literature written in Hebrew, as opposed to *aljamiado* (Castilian written with Hebrew characters), would have been less accessible to the majority of the Jewish population.

<sup>437</sup> While in PM there are metaphorical passages that require the reader to make connections to the Biblical context, they are fewer in number than in Ma'aseh.

<sup>438</sup> PM, like Ma'aseh, can be read on different levels, but does not contain allegory (except for several passages in the beginning of the work). Theodore Perry posits that three distinct kinds of readers were envisioned for the more sophisticated passages of PM: the common reader, the poetic reader, and the Biblical reader (*Jewish Wisdom* 76). The common reader is one who is uninterested or uninformed of the literary sources of the text and therefore uses common sense and logic to create meaning. The poetic reader, in contrast, is aware of the literary precedents of ideas and concepts found in the text. The Biblical reader, because of his rabbinic education, is alerted to subtle Biblical and Talmudic allusions and is able to expand on the meanings those references evoke. To

much more pragmatic, realistic, and experiential, which can be attributed, in part, to the genre, language, and intended audience.<sup>439</sup>

Despite these differences, both Ma'aseh and PM are a reflection of and a response to some of the same social, philosophical, and religious issues.<sup>440</sup> In contrast to Ma'aseh, though, the more universal character of the language in PM does not easily lend itself to historiographic interpretation. Moreover, the expression of ideas in each text is so different that those unfamiliar with the Hebrew language may have difficulty discerning the conceptual and thematic unity between them.<sup>441</sup> For this reason, a comparison and analysis of certain themes and concepts that appear in both Ma'aseh and PM, in light of the rabbinic and philosophical thought of the era, will be the subject of this chapter, the purpose of which is to reveal consistencies in Sem Tob's thought across his two most

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those, I will add the philosophical reader. That is, the reader who is versed in philosophy to the extent that he can grasp abstract ideas that go beyond knowledge of the Bible and the Talmud.

<sup>439</sup> PM, written in Castilian and dedicated (in two manuscripts) to two different kings (Alfonso XI and his son Pedro), was clearly directed towards a more varied audience, including the uneducated. The various manuscripts of PM (one which is in *aljamiado*), and its documented oral transmission attest to its wide popularity among the Jewish and Christian populations (See introduction by Díaz Mas & Mota for an account of the oral transmission of PM, pp. 20-26).

<sup>440</sup> These issues include the abuses of the Jewish courtier oligarchy, Christian theological attacks, political and economic instability, and Jewish conversions to Christianity.

<sup>441</sup> To give an example of how similar ideas are conceptualized in the two works, the concepts of speech and silence are useful. In PM, the debate between speech and silence appears in its traditional guise and does not go beyond its literal meaning. In Ma'aseh, in contrast, it is transformed into a religious debate about secrecy and disclosure that serves as a metaphor for the different levels of scriptural interpretation. Also, the motif of the pen in PM is presented in a secular mode, whereas in Ma'aseh, it is portrayed as the suffering servant of Isaiah and likened to the messiah. The fact that PM was directed towards both Christians and Jews undoubtedly would have constrained Sem Tob's use of Jewish references.

important works and to illuminate some of the more esoteric and philosophical ideas that inform his world view.

Regarding the latter aim, it is clear that Jews and Christians would not have read PM in the same way, given religious and cultural differences between the two groups.<sup>442</sup> My contention is, therefore, that for Jews,<sup>443</sup> one of Sem Tob's purposes for writing the work may have been to teach and disseminate, in a manner that did not violate the code of secrecy, certain philosophical ideas that were pertinent to the social and spiritual circumstances of the period.<sup>444</sup> Interestingly, the text contains striking parallels to ideas found in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed (Heretofore Guide) which tells us that PM itself may have functioned as a popular "guide" for the perplexed, meant to illuminate and concretize, for the general public, abstract and esoteric concepts related to the problems of evil and suffering. Indeed, the popularization of philosophy had already started in the thirteenth century in Spain and Provence through the vehicle of the sermon. These ideas were "simplified, integrated with traditional texts, and communicated to an audience composed of Jews at various social levels" (Saperstein 302). A close reading of PM places it squarely in this trend, as many of the concepts Sem Tob articulates resonate

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<sup>442</sup> For more on this subject, see Régine Gartenlaub, "*Los Proverbios de Sem Tob de Carrión*," *Mémoire pour le Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures*, Univ. Of Paris, Sorbonne, Juin 1955.

<sup>443</sup> MS C, copied in *aljamía* (Castilian in Hebrew script), proves that at least one of the manuscripts was destined exclusively for Jews (Carlos Más y Mota 24).

<sup>444</sup> John Zemke has noted that twentieth century criticism of PM and Ma'aseh tends towards the view that "Sem Tob's vital interest in these works is the defense of Castilian Jewry against the campaigns of religious apostates and persecutors" despite the absence of any explicit statement in the poem to that effect or empirical corroboration [notably Baer, Klausner, Orringer, Shepard, and Colahan] (232). My interpretation differs from previous scholarship in that I view the work primarily, but not exclusively, as a discourse between Jews rather than as a defense of Judaism.

with the philosophical thought of the era.<sup>445</sup> However, PM should not be confused with the teachings of the *mitfalsafim*, as Sem Tob, in contrast to those who were considered to be pseudo philosophers, does not allegorize scripture or discuss concealed teachings such as the Accounts of the Chariot and Creation.<sup>446</sup> Moreover, Sem Tob was a poet and his Castilian work falls into the broad category of wisdom rather than philosophy in the sense of scientific and metaphysical investigation.

#### Overview of Rabbinic and Philosophical Views on the Suffering of the Just and Reward and Punishment<sup>447</sup>

During the Middle Ages, the concept of philosophy as a discreet academic discipline did not exist (Leaman 5). Rather, the subject, in Jewish culture, was more identified as “wisdom” in its broadest sense (6). Recent scholarly examinations of the influence of philosophy within Jewish society has led to a broader definition of the philosophical canon, which, aside from classical philosophical texts, includes encyclopedias, biblical and *aggadic* commentaries, sermons, and moralistic tracts (Saperstein, *Social* 296). Hence, while Jewish intellectuals like Gersonides, Narboni, Samuel ibn Tibbon, Maimonides and others are considered to be the great Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, works like PM also fit into the parameters of

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<sup>445</sup> Many of the ideas contained in Maimonides’ excursus on evil in the Guide are reflected in PM.

<sup>446</sup> As discussed in chapter four, the *mitfalsafim* were unqualified philosophers who presented allegorical interpretations of scripture to the uneducated masses.

<sup>447</sup> It should be noted that it is impossible, in the span of such a brief amount of space, to do justice to these concepts. The summary is merely intended to familiarize the reader with some of the basic differences between philosophical and rabbinic thought concerning the suffering of the just and reward and punishment. For an in depth account of rabbinical concepts and beliefs, see Urbach (1975). For medieval Jewish philosophy, see Sirat (1985).



philosophical discourse of the fourteenth century. Indeed, Sem Tob addresses some of the most important philosophical questions of the day in PM. His reflections, however, are more experiential than theoretical, which sharply differentiates him from the philosophers mentioned above.

Of the philosophical issues Sem Tob addresses, the suffering of the just and the problem of evil seem to concern him the most. Regarding the latter question, Maimonides' Guide appears to be a significant influence, as certain verses in PM can be directly traced back to III: 12 of this seminal text.<sup>448</sup> The suffering of the just, or the question of why the righteous suffer in a world supposedly governed by a just and equitable god, is a component of the discourse about divine providence. This issue took on great importance in the Middle Ages due to the conflict between faith and reason that was instigated by the questions Aristotelian philosophy raised in regards to religious belief and tradition. The contradiction between Aristotle's claim that God does not know particulars and the biblical affirmation that divine providence extends to every individual spurred prolonged philosophical debate.<sup>449</sup> Additionally, hostile anti-Jewish Christian polemic, such as the kind found in the writings of Abner de Burgos, lent immediacy to the issue that is apparent in many of the philosophical writings of the time period.<sup>450</sup> It is even thought by some scholars that Sem Tob may have been an adversary of Abner

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<sup>448</sup> III: 12 of the Guide addresses the problem of evil.

<sup>449</sup> Aristotle's position is based on the idea that an omniscient, immutable deity cannot know changing particulars.

<sup>450</sup> See chapter three.

because of his inclusion of the theme of the suffering of the just in PM.<sup>451</sup> However, this topic has a long history that dates back to the Book of Job, which is the *locus classicus* for discussion of divine providence and theodicy in Judaism (Níclós 206, note 76).<sup>452</sup>

In rabbinic Judaism, there were an array of opinions regarding the question of the suffering of the just, none of which can be summarized in a single dictum.<sup>453</sup> The positions on the subject, though, generally fall between the extreme conception, formulated by Rabbi Akiba,<sup>454</sup> that suffering is inherently precious and that God inflicts it for the person's benefit, and the naive folk view that the evil that befalls the righteous is destined to have a happy ending (Urbach 455). Akiba's conception was theologically necessary because his tragic and violent death cast doubt on the simplistic notion of reward and punishment in this lifetime. Hence, it was postulated that God is strict towards both the righteous and the wicked, but punishes the righteous more severely for the few wrongful acts that they have perpetrated so that He may send them an unreduced recompense in the world to come (Urbach 260 [Original source *Genesis Rabba*

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<sup>451</sup> Abner was preoccupied with the subject of why, if the Jews were the chosen people, the righteous and wicked suffer equally amongst them. See Sanford Shepard (1978) for a discussion of Sem Tob's works in relation to Abner de Burgos.

<sup>452</sup> See Eisen (2004) for an extensive discussion on medieval Jewish philosophical interpretations of the Book of Job.

<sup>453</sup> One cannot find "the elevation of a single principle to the level of a systematic doctrine . . . that endeavored to reconcile the conflicting facts speculatively" (Urbach 284).

<sup>454</sup> Rabbi Akiva (c. 40- c. 135), a sage from the Tannaitic period, died a martyr's death for defying the Roman prohibition against studying Jewish Law. While his flesh was being shredded with iron combs, he declared that all his days he had prayed for the moment when he could affirm his belief in God in the midst of suffering (Urbach 270).

xxxiii]).<sup>455</sup> This teaching, however, was not viewed favorably by all sectors of the Jewish community, and for obvious reasons, could only be assimilated by a minority. The majority, as a general rule, was taught the traditional biblical doctrine of reward and punishment, which stipulates that the righteous and the wicked are punished or rewarded in this lifetime according to their just deserts (270).

In Jewish philosophical circles, the themes of the suffering of the just and divine providence were generally interpreted according to rationalist principles informed by Aristotelian philosophy (as filtered through Averroes).<sup>456</sup> The point of departure was the Book of Job because that is where the subject is treated most extensively in the *Tanakh* (the Bible). Of the Jewish philosophers who wrote commentaries on Job, some leaned towards the conservative end of the spectrum while others took a more radical approach.<sup>457</sup> The radical philosophers viewed Job as an allegory, which allowed them to divide the biblical text into esoteric and exoteric layers (Eisen 213). The exoteric layer, as they saw it, was for the masses and taught that they must bear their suffering with patience and composure like Job, and recognize that an understanding of providence is

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<sup>455</sup> The wicked, in contrast, are rewarded in this lifetime rather than in the next, which accounts for why they often prosper. It should be noted, however, that the argument that the righteous are to receive their compensation in the world to come was treated with derision in some quarters (Urbach 442).

<sup>456</sup> The interpretations of the conservative philosophers Saadiah Gaon (882-942) and Simon ben Duran (1361-1444) are exceptions to this general rule.

<sup>457</sup> I am going by Robert Eisen's division of medieval Jewish philosophers into radical and conservative camps. Maimonides (1138-1204), Samuel ibn Tibbon, and Zerahiah Hen are considered to be the radicals, while Saadia Gaon and Simon ben Duran are viewed as conservative. Gersonides lies some where in the middle (213). It should be noted, though, that by the fourteenth century, Maimonides was not considered to be a radical, as his works were accepted by all Jews. His *Guide*, however, raised considerable problems, as it was often interpreted in a radical way by Jewish philosophers who came after him.

beyond their ken, as Elihu makes clear to Job in his speech (207). The esoteric layer, as touched upon in chapter three, ties the concept of providence to intellectual perfection. The idea is that as the individual shifts his focus from the material world to philosophical and intellectual matters, he will become indifferent to affliction and loss (Schwartz 186). In other words, providence, as understood esoterically by the radicals, does not entail protection from misfortune, but psychological immunity to suffering.<sup>458</sup>

The conservative Jewish philosophers, in contrast to the radicals, took a more literal approach to the Book of Job. Simon ben Duran (1361-1444)<sup>459</sup> and Saadiah Gaon (882-942) explained Job's ordeal in terms well grounded in rabbinic sources and a traditional rabbinic world view (Eisen 214).<sup>460</sup> Saadiah, in his philosophical work The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, provides several reasons for the suffering of the righteous. One is

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<sup>458</sup> Most modern interpreters of Maimonides agree with Maimonides' view that Job's ultimate lesson is that that one can guard oneself from suffering in a psychological, but not a physical, sense (Eisen 57). This psychological immunity "is achieved when Job perfects his intellect, contemplates God, and detaches himself from the material concerns of the world so that he is entirely caught up with the pleasure of focusing all his thoughts on the Deity" (57).

<sup>459</sup> Even though Duran wrote his works after Sem Tob's death, I am including a discussion of his ideas here because they are representative of the conservative philosophical reaction against radical trends in Jewish philosophy. As explained in chapters three and four, there was a considerable polemic raging between traditionalists and philosophers during the entire fourteenth century. Duran's views show the direction Jewish philosophy eventually took in response to that polemic.

<sup>460</sup> Saadiah Gaon, the first major Jewish philosopher in the medieval period, spent the first half of his life in Egypt; then wandered through Syria and Palestine before settling in Babylonia. Simon ben Zemah Duran, a noted rabbinic authority and philosopher, spent the first thirty years of his life in Majorca. In 1391, when the violent riots broke out against the Jews in Spain, he fled to Algiers where he spent the rest of his life (Eisen 176). Eisen (2004) considers both to be representative of the conservative philosophical interpretive tradition of Job.

that God may simply be punishing them for sins they have committed,<sup>461</sup> and another, that God is testing them (18). Both explanations are connected to the rabbinic concept of “sufferings of love” (*yisurin shel ahavah*).<sup>462</sup> Two additional explanations that Saadia offers are that the righteous may suffer on account of natural processes of generation and corruption that are not caused by an essential act of God, and that certain kinds of suffering are not truly evil in that what is deemed evil may turn out to be for the person’s benefit. These two latter conceptions can be detected in PM.

The conservatism of Simon ben Duran’s interpretation of Job differs from that of Saadiah in that it is considered to be a backlash against the radical philosophers’ use of allegory in Biblical interpretation, a reaction fairly common among conservative Jewish philosophers after Maimonides (Eisen 213).<sup>463</sup> In his philosophical work Ohev Mishpat (“Lover of Justice”),<sup>464</sup> he argues for the centrality of providence as a principle of Jewish belief, the importance of which lies in its connection to the observance of the *mitzvot*

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<sup>461</sup> This explanation is based on rabbinic sources associated with Rabbi Akiba’s conception of the suffering of the just, i.e. the notion that the righteous are punished for their few misdeeds in this life so that they can be rewarded fully for their good deeds in the world to come (Eisen 18).

<sup>462</sup> This kind of suffering, in Saadiah’s thought, involves a type of divine trial that allows the righteous to demonstrate their devotion to God and thereby earn extra reward in both this lifetime and the next (Eisen 19). Maimonides, however, rejected this type of suffering on the grounds that there is no text in the Torah expressing the notion. He adds that some of the later day *Gaonim* heard it from the *Mu’tazila* and believed it [which is how it became a part of rabbinic thought] (*Guide* III: 17, 471).

<sup>463</sup> “Duran is one of the first representatives of a traditional backlash in medieval Jewish philosophy against Maimonides, Gersonides, and Jewish Aristotelianism in general which began at the end of the fourteenth century and gained momentum through the fifteenth” (Eisen 176). See also chapter three, where a brief history of the Maimonidean conflicts is given.

<sup>464</sup> Ohev Mishpat, a commentary on the Book of Job, is one of Duran’s major philosophical works. It was composed in 1405 and published in Venice in 1590 (Eisen 176).

[divine commandments] (177). The observance of the *mitzvot*, according to his theology, perfects the soul and entails divine protection, a view representative of a trend in medieval Jewish thought that combined philosophical speculation with Kabbalah.<sup>465</sup> The suffering of the righteous, which is the primary obstacle to the belief in divine providence, becomes a philosophical difficulty for Duran “only when a righteous individual seems to have been targeted for misfortune *as* an individual” (Eisen 180). Natural disasters do not fall into this category because they emanate from processes that are essentially benevolent and that kill the innocent and guilty unintentionally (180). In general, the reasons Duran adduces for the suffering of the righteous are similar to those of Saadiah, and are derived from various rabbinic concepts.

#### Reward and Punishment, Suffering of the Just, and Divine Providence

In PM, Sem Tob does not present us with specific doctrines about divine providence and its corollaries, as do the above mentioned philosophers; however, a close examination of concepts in PM and Ma’aseh reveal, in some cases, Sem Tob’s philosophical inclinations on these matters. Indeed, both rabbinic and sophisticated philosophical concepts regarding providence, evil, and related themes can be detected in many of the verses in PM, the most basic of which is the notion of retributive justice. This principle, which is referred to in rabbinic sources as “measure for measure,” is the prevailing rule in both personal and collective retribution in the existing world in traditional Jewish thought, and is encapsulated in the *Mishnaic* teaching: “With what measure a man metes it shall be meted out to him again” (Urbach 438). Some sages, as

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<sup>465</sup> See chapter three for a discussion of the differences between philosophers and kabbalists’ understanding of the purpose of the *mitzvot*.

already stated, were personally inclined to transfer the subject of reward and punishment to the hereafter (440). However, belief in reward and punishment in this world was deeply rooted, and is evidenced in the numerous dicta, aphorisms, stories, and parables that were written by the sages in the post biblical period in order to prove that the principle “measure for measure” had not been abolished” (439).<sup>466</sup>

In Ma’aseh, the *Mishnaic* principle is alluded to directly in line 605: *be-midato midaduhu* (“In the way that he measures, so shall they measure him”),<sup>467</sup> and is used in reference to the punishment of those who create division and discord in the Jewish community, and possibly to heresy.<sup>468</sup> A version of it can also be found in lines 599-601: “Do to them according to their wickedness, for such persons shall be cut off from their people,” which is an allusion to Deut. 19:19: “You shall do to him as he schemed to do to his fellow. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst.”<sup>469</sup> Here, the use of the injunction is polemical and suggests a social/religious conflict in the community, as

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<sup>466</sup> It should be noted that in the biblical period, reward and punishment was all in the present. In the rabbinic period, the primary reward was deferred to the future. However, the sages of the post biblical period did not negate the theology of Genesis (reward in the present). They posited that if a just man suffers, and God is just, then there is a place where he will receive his reward—the world to come (*olam ha-ba*).

<sup>467</sup> This line is significant in that it concludes the main body of the text. Shepard leaves it out of his translation, which may be due to fact that he did not have Nini and Fruchtman’s edition at his disposal.

<sup>468</sup> The expression “measure for measure” at the end of Ma’aseh gives weight to the argument that the work is polemical. If Ma’aseh were simply a parody of the pen and sword motif, it is doubtful that Sem Tob would have invoked such a severe rabbinic injunction.

<sup>469</sup> While this version of reward and punishment can be interpreted in terms of human justice, being cut off from the community entails the exclusion of the individual from the benefits of divine providence that the community of Israel as a whole receives from the Creator. This idea, derived from *Mishna Avot* 11, 4, appears in chapter VI of Ibn Shaprut’s (late fourteenth century) philosophical work Eben Boheh, in which he addresses the subject of free will and divine providence (ed. José Vicente Nicolás, 1997).

discussed in chapter four. In PM, however, it is expressed in a didactic manner, and is closely related to Hillel's rule "what is hateful to you do not do to your fellow" (Urbach 589):

Quien quier fazer pesar, convién se perçebir:  
no-s puede escusar de pesar reçebir  
Si quieres fazer mal, pues, fazlo atal pleito  
de receber atal cual tu fizieres. Ciertó,  
non puedes escusar, si una mala obra  
fizieres, de topar en reçebir tú otra. (vv. 317-319)

In both works, the general idea is that people can expect punishment in this world for the evil deeds they commit. In Ma'aseh, though, the principle as it relates to the act of being "cut out" (excommunicated) from the community also implies losing one's place in the world to come (*olam ha-ba*).

The next verse (v. 320), "Que sab que non naçieste por bevir apartado; al mundo non venieste por ser abantajado," also conveys the ethical and religious values of Hillel, who stated that man is obliged to be for himself, but not to seclude or separate himself from the community:<sup>470</sup> "Sever not yourself from the community . . . and where there are no men strive to be a man" (Urbach 589). While in its rabbinic context, the dictum prohibits the saintly and humble sage from withdrawing from the community into a contemplative asceticism, in PM it signifies the irresponsibility and narcissism inherent in

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<sup>470</sup> Attributed to Hillel is the saying: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" But because man cannot achieve much through seclusion and separation, he added: "and being for my own self, what am I?" (Urbach 589 [original source *M. Avot* i, 14]).



isolating oneself from the community to pursue one's desires, a problem also addressed in Ma'aseh.<sup>471</sup> The underlying message of both the rabbinic dictum and Sem Tob's rendering of it in PM is that man is equally responsible for himself and the welfare of the community. Sem Tob makes this clear in verse 320, cited above, and verse 196: "E el mecer del ombre es para mejorar. A sí e non a otre lo mandaron lazrar."

In Ma'aseh, Hillel's dictum is cited in the beginning of the work, alongside Isaiah's rebuke:

*I saw that there was no man, I gazed long, but no one intervened* (Isa. 59:16). I said: may my right hand sustain me and give me triumph – Let not dead flies pollute the balm of my joy (Eccl. 10:1).<sup>472</sup> *In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man* (Avot 2, 5). (lines 29-33)

The meaning of this passage bespeaks a situation in which the author is secluded because of the harsh conditions of the day, which prevent social contact. However, the biblical citations allude to a state of desolation caused by the spiritual and moral decay of the community. As argued in chapter four, the cold and icy day is a metaphor for the precarious state of fourteenth-century Castilian Jewry, which, according to scholars of Jewish history such as Baer, Ben Sasson, and Beinart, was undergoing a spiritual and intellectual decline.<sup>473</sup> Hence, Sem Tob's evocation of both Isaiah's warning to the people

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<sup>471</sup> Note the relation between verse 320 in PM and Proverbs 18:1: "He who isolates himself pursues his desires; he disdains all *competence*" (Hebrew meaning of italicized word is uncertain according to the JPS Tanakh).

<sup>472</sup> Shepard's translation was used in the allusion to Ecclesiastes.

<sup>473</sup> Nini and Fruchtman summarize the opinions of these scholars on p. 36. Also, Díaz Más and Mota note that to be a Jew in the fourteenth century was not the same as being a

and Hillel's humanitarianism can be interpreted as a response to social and spiritual conditions. Indeed, the theme of Isaiah 59 is that of God turning His face (his providence) away from the Israelites because of their iniquity. God, seeing that no man is willing to intervene and redress the situation, vows to exact vengeance on those who violate the ethical and moral code on which the covenant is based: "... He clothed Himself with garments of retribution, wrapped Himself in zeal as in a robe. According to their deserts, so shall He repay fury to His foes . . . "(59:17-18).<sup>474</sup> By reading the passage in Ma'aseh in light of the biblical context, one can speculate that Sem Tob, as a voice of conscience, is paying heed to Hillel's dictum to be courageous and stand up to corruption rather than take refuge in isolation. This, consequently, appears to be one of his motives for writing PM, given the numerous verses dedicated to moral and ethical principles relating to the social and psychological welfare of the individual and the community.<sup>475</sup>

In verses 96-112 of PM, Sem Tob addresses the central paradox of the concept of divine providence, that of the suffering of the just and the prosperity of the wicked:<sup>476</sup>

Yo nunca he querella del mundo, de que muchos

lo an, e que por ella se tienen por maltrechos:

que faz bien a menudo al torpe, e al sabio,

mal, e al entendido --de aquesto non me agravio--; (vv. 96-97)

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Jew in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The fourteenth century, they maintain, marks the beginning of the deterioration of the situation of Castilian Jews (38-39)

<sup>474</sup> The rabbinic concept of "measure for measure" is based on biblical verses such as these in which the concept of reward and punishment is affirmed.

<sup>475</sup> There were other motives as well, such as prompting the king to pay back a loan; however, it is doubtful that he wrote the work for this reason alone. See Introduction.

<sup>476</sup> In Hebrew writings, the problem is generally referred to as *tzadik ve'rah-lo, rasha ve'tov-lo*.

This theme, as stated in chapter three, was one of the predominant concerns of Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages, as it posed a considerable challenge to faith. Accordingly, many tried to resolve the issue philosophically, one of whom was Yitzchak Pollegar, who describes it thus in “Ish ha Dat ve- ha Filosof”: “Concerning the great doubt that caused most of our ancestors to stumble, that pit of confusion in which they fell, which is the issue of the suffering of the righteous and the success of the evil, I knew how to define it. I loosened the mighty knot that binds it.”<sup>477</sup> Sem Tob, being a participant in this discourse, devised his own response to the conundrum, which seems somewhat conservative at first glance: “Aquesto Dios usa porque uno de çiento no cuide que faz cosa por su entendimiento” (v. 99).<sup>478</sup> He then presents a series of *exempla* that illustrate the theme, concluding with the traditional idea: “Non cumple gran saber a los que Dios non temen, nin tien pro el aver del que pobres non comen” (v. 104).<sup>479</sup> Considering the work as a whole, and the ideas contained in Ma’aseh, we know that Sem Tob was not a literalist. However, this response is in line with a traditionally religious way of thinking characteristic of the conservative position, which is illustrated in Pollegar’s “Ish ha Dat.” In fact, the *zaken* resorts to a similar argument to contest the philosophical youth’s presumptuous stance that he can come to know the mysteries of existence through pure logic and reason: “Don’t you know that our Sages warned us to keep away from logic?”

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<sup>477</sup> My translation.

<sup>478</sup> There are no antecedents noted for this verse in PM, which suggests that it is original.

<sup>479</sup> The idea expressed in the first half of the verse is found in Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, Psalms 111:10, and Job 28:28.

What benefit is all of their wisdom, argumentation and logic? It is vanity and crookedness . . . for *the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God*” (Psalms 111:1).<sup>480</sup>

On the other hand, Sem Tob may have been presenting the exoteric interpretation of Job (in accordance with the philosophical tradition mentioned above) since he was writing for a popular audience.<sup>481</sup> Like Maimonides in his commentary on the Book of Job, he seems to be affirming that the divine intentions for the created order are beyond our capacity to conceive, [or are at least considerably different from what we assume] (Frank 152):

But the notion of His providence is not the same as the notion of our providence; nor is the notion of His governance of the things created by Him the same as the notion of our governance of things that we govern. The two notions are not comprised in one definition, contrary to what is thought by all those who are confused, and there is nothing in common between the two except the name alone. (*Guide* 3:23, 496)<sup>482</sup>

Resonating with this idea are verses 183-186, which contest the notion that man can attract good fortune through intelligence alone:

En el seso çertero, al que Dios da ventura

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<sup>480</sup> Another passage in “Ish ha Dat” that expresses this view is on p. 84: “Aristotle, the Greek atheist whose [books] annul God’s covenant . . . He wasn’t able to reach the level of prophecy because of the inferiority of his knowledge. From the prophets he received knowledge of the secret things which cannot be understood through the intellect” (my translation).

<sup>481</sup> As stated on page 7, the philosophers divided the Book of Job into exoteric and esoteric layers. The esoteric layer was not meant for the masses.

<sup>482</sup> Maimonides later explains that the lesson on the equivocality of divine attributes is the central message of the Book of Job (Eisen 56).

açierta de ligero, e non por su cordura.  
Fázese lo que plaze a Dios en todo pleito;  
omre cosa non faze por su entendimiento.  
Si se faz por ventura lo que a él plazía,  
tien que por su cordura e su sabiduría;  
e faze d'él escarnio Dios, por que quier creer  
que pued alongar daño e provecho traer.

In line with Maimonidean thought and Elihu's speech in the Book of Job, Sem Tob is saying that ultimately, we have no real comprehension of how God governs the world (Eisen 56). However, as Maimonides idealistically concludes, when one realizes the fact that our idea of providence is not the same as that of God, "one is then able to cope with suffering and bear misfortune with equanimity" (57). From Sem Tob's declaration in verse 96 that he has no complaints about the world ("Yo nunca he querella del mundo, de que muchos lo an . . . "), we can infer that he has come to terms with uncertainty and misfortune precisely through an awareness that human beings can never have a definitive understanding of divine providence.<sup>483</sup> This notion may have resonated with the Jewish population not only as a response to the problem of suffering, but as a contestation to Christian polemicists, like the apostate Abner de Burgos, who claimed that the Jews no longer benefited from God's providence because of their rejection of the Christian messiah. Indeed, the refutation of certainty regarding the workings of the divine may

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<sup>483</sup> Sem Tob's equanimity is also due to the fact that he understands the workings of both the natural order and the social world, and is able to see beyond the oppositions that characterize life on the temporal plane.

have ironically served to bolster Jewish identity during a time when Jewish belief was under attack by an increasingly dogmatic and intolerant Christianity. The Christian truth claim that the misery and exile of the Jews is an indication of God's annulment of the covenant would surely have caused deep reflection on the meaning of this concept, which is clearly evident in PM.<sup>484</sup>

In contrast to PM, the concept of providence is expressed in no uncertain terms in Ma'aseh, and is informed by primarily rabbinic concepts:<sup>485</sup>

. . . But the pen shall not come to such an end. His end shall be better than his beginning. He renews his youth at the season of old age. After his dessication he will be supple. He is made lithe as in youth. He shall be as king in his assembly . . . If he is cut down and even if he is altered in form, his source of nourishment does not dry up. If he removes the linen clothes he wears, he shall go forth like lightning, cleansed and polished. After death he is the possessor of eternal life.

Thus he is called the possessor of life (*qoneh*)<sup>486</sup> . . . (lines 567-574)<sup>487</sup>

The pen, as servant of God and embodiment of the principles of the Torah, figuratively represents in this passage the divine election of Israel as a whole. Since these lines follow the polemical and condemnatory passage about things devoid of sense and reason

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<sup>484</sup> See chapter one for an explanation of Christian anti-Jewish hostility in medieval Spain and Europe.

<sup>485</sup> Of course, one must keep in mind the audience for whom the work was intended. Given that PM was written in Castilian and directed towards Christians as well as Jews, Sem Tob would not have been able to openly write about the divine election of the Jewish people.

<sup>486</sup> *Qoneh* is one of the four terms which, according to Maimonides (*Guide* II: 30), biblically denote the relationship between heaven and God (Diamond 369).

<sup>487</sup> Shepard's translation.

whose end is destruction,<sup>488</sup> one can speculate that Sem Tob is both reminding his own people to mend their ways (presumably the courtier class, who were considered by many to be morally bankrupt), and turning Christian replacement theology on its head by equating Christians with idol worshippers.<sup>489</sup> Indeed, the affirmation of the election of the people of Israel can be read as a refutation of Christian truth claims, such as the annulment of God's covenant with the Jews and the commandments. This more traditional concept of providence, which entails divine election and immortality, would have served as consolation for the Jewish community, as it conveys the message that despite the hardships, uncertainties, and miseries of exile, God had not forsaken them. Moreover, Sem Tob's religiously devout side, which is not as evident in PM as in Ma'aseh, reveals the rabbinic component of his thought, and elucidates the interplay of certainty and uncertainty in his conceptualization of providence. This comparison also serves to illustrate how the intended audience of each work influenced his expression of Jewish ideas and doctrines.

Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*) 7:15-18, analyzed in relation to PM and Ma'aseh, gives another interesting twist to the themes of providence and the suffering of the just:

In my own brief span of life, I have seen both these things: sometimes a good man perishes in spite of his goodness, and sometimes a wicked one endures in spite of his wickedness. So don't overdo goodness and don't act the wise man to excess, or

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<sup>488</sup> "On the day they cut [the tree] from its roots, it was beaten and bruised and of no use until sliced and pierced from all sides, and fashioned with steel into tables, chairs, doors, arks and other objects. These are dead things, devoid of sense, lacking in discernment . . . their beginning is forced labor and their fate is to perish for eternity" (lines 559- 566).

<sup>489</sup> Replacement theology is the assumption that God's covenant with the Jews was annulled after the coming of Jesus and replaced by Christians.

you may be dumbfounded. Don't overdo wickedness and don't be a fool, or you may die before your time. It is best that you grasp the one without letting go of the other, for one who fears God will do his duty by both (Eccl. 7:15-18).

Significantly, verses 96-97 express the same concept, while the following verses concretize it:

Yo nunca he querella del mundo de que muchos  
lo an, e que por ella se tienen por maltrechos:  
que faz bien a menudo al torpe; e al sabio,  
mal, e al entendido --de aquesto, no me agravio-;  
Unos vi por locura alcançar gran provecho  
e otros por cordura perder todo su fecho:  
Yo vi muchos tornar sanos de la contienda,  
otros ocasionar dentro de su tienda;  
e muere el dotor que la física reza,  
e guareçe el pastor con la su gran torpeza. (vv. 96, 97, 100, 102-103)

Sem Tob's conclusion, that it is ignorant and foolish to respond to all situations equally, parallels Kohelet's sage advice to not be overly wicked or overly righteous, for inflexibility in thought and action can lead to recklessness and self-destruction: "Suma de la razón: es muy gran torpedat lebar toda sazón por una egualdat, mas tornarse a menudo com el mundo se torna: bezes seer escudo e a vezes açcona" (vv. 110-111).<sup>490</sup> In the constantly shifting social and political tides of fourteenth-century Castile, this pragmatic

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<sup>490</sup> "Let him change often just as the world changes: sometimes one needs to be a shield while at other times a sword" (v. 111).



response to the question of the suffering of the righteous, very secular in orientation, would have served Sem Tob's Jewish public well, as their lives and livelihoods often depended on their cultural adaptability and flexibility in response to changing circumstances.

While the allusion to the same passage of Ecclesiastes in Ma'aseh also implies flexibility (ability to use both pen and scissors), it reveals another aspect of Sem Tob's thought. The verse that he employs ("It is best that you grasp the one without letting go of the other, for one who fears God will do his duty by both" [7:18])<sup>491</sup> is situated in the context of the preceding lines (that of the scissors thinking they are qualified to take the place of the pen as an instrument of writing),<sup>492</sup> signifying hubris and excessive pride, qualities that are not only considered to be cardinal sins in rabbinic Judaism, but violate the golden mean, which Sem Tob extols throughout PM: "Toda buena costumbre ha çertera medida que si la pasa omre su bondad es perdida" (v. 112). As argued in chapter four, Sem Tob appears to be criticizing the values of the courtier class, while at the same time addressing the issue of scriptural misinterpretation.<sup>493</sup> In both cases, the central problem was a type of excess. In regards to the morality of the courtier class, excess

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<sup>491</sup> "It is best that he grasp the one without letting go of the other, for he alone (Sem Tob)- fears God and will do his duty by both" (lines 474-477). The only differences between Ecclesiastes 7:18 and the verse as it appears in Ma'aseh is the person (3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in Ma'aseh rather than 2<sup>nd</sup> person), and the insertion of the words "for he alone" (*ve-hu le'vado*). Sem Tob is saying that he alone is qualified to write with both the scissors and the pen.

<sup>492</sup> "This one incident cannot serve as evidence. Your heart has been seduced to a net of images (*reshet maskiyot*) that are not yours. Who do you think you are, the king's scribe? Don't you know that as a general rule, the majority viewpoint prevails?" (lines 469-473)

<sup>493</sup> The former issue relates to the latter in that rationalism served as the official ideology of the courtier class, and was thought by many to be undermining Jewish tradition.

meant the eschewing of moderation in the pursuit of physical and material gratification without regard for the welfare of the community,<sup>494</sup> whereas in the spiritual/religious realm, it meant the violation of commonly upheld norms circumscribing scriptural interpretation and the study of philosophy. Hence, the allusion to the passage (Eccl 7:15-18) in Ma'aseh implies both flexibility in response to changing circumstances (the temporary uselessness of the pen), and knowing how to use power and wisdom correctly, i.e. in accordance with the golden mean (with moderation).<sup>495</sup> As previously stated, the person (or persons) to whom Sem Tob directs his criticism is not qualified to use the scissors because he does not know what his boundaries are, either socially (he takes too much paper from the scroll),<sup>496</sup> or spiritually (he falsely imagines himself to be qualified to address difficult spiritual and theological questions),<sup>497</sup> therefore he ends up destroying the scroll (scripture).<sup>498</sup> Sem Tob, in contrast, is qualified to utilize both the scissors (temporal power and foreign wisdom) and the pen (divine wisdom) as instruments of

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<sup>494</sup> It is interesting that Ferran Verde, the aforementioned prisoner of the Inquisition who cited two hundred and nineteen verses of PM by memory, included the following verse: “El hombre malo y de maldad, que tiene poder y saber, usa siempre mal del; ¿quien se guardara d’él?” While the verse is not conserved in any of the other manuscripts, it illustrates how medieval Jews interpreted PM. (See Díaz-Más y Mota, pages 15-16, for more on the history of Ferrán Verde and MS Cu).

<sup>495</sup> Literally, the passage is referring to Sem Tob’s ability to physically manipulate the scissors and the pen as instruments of writing, i.e. he holds the scissors in one hand, and the pen in the other.

<sup>496</sup> The pen declares: “Your actions are despicable, and will cause the scroll to become rotten like moth eaten clothes. You are not satisfied with what is yours but must take more [of the paper] until it is consumed and decayed” (lines 396-397).

<sup>497</sup> The pen, in response to the scissors’ arrogance exclaims: “Who called you to the work of the heavens, a work for which you are unsuited, for you are unlawfully entering the domain of your peers. But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways above your ways, and my plans above your plans . . .” (lines 323-327).

<sup>498</sup> The pen continues: “I turn to the scroll with kindness and compassion while you pluck out its eyes” (lines 327-329).

writing because he is in right relationship to both, i.e. he knows his measure and does not exceed the limits of divinely and socially prescribed codes of conduct.

### The Golden Mean

Interestingly, Maimonides' conception of excess, which is tied to the question of providence and the problem of heresy, strongly resonates with PM and Ma'aseh. Indeed, the golden mean (the Aristotelian notion of moderation in the realms of contemplation, behavior, and action) was an axiomatic principle in Hispano-Judaic thought, and is, consequently, a pivotal concept in Sem Tob's world view. In Maimonides' Guide, excess, which is an aspect of the golden mean, has an interrelated material and spiritual component, conveyed through the term *akhol* (eating), which connotes both consumption and sustenance. In accordance with the first notion, aside from its obvious literal meaning, "the term eating is figuratively applied to all destruction and undoing" and, in general, to corruption of form (*Guide* 63; I: 30). According to the latter notion, it is applied figuratively to knowledge, learning, and Torah.<sup>499</sup> In relation to the golden mean, "eating" in its destructive aspect connotes physical and intellectual gluttony which, in Maimonides' system of thought, not only is the cause of all corporeal and psychical ailments, but is "the source of the most ubiquitous evil in the world," belonging to the category of evil that is inflicted upon man by his own actions (Diamond 360; *Guide* III:

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<sup>499</sup> It should be noted that knowledge is also designated as water, and that the words meaning "hunger" and "thirst" are likewise employed to designate lack of knowledge (*Guide* 64; I: 30). According to Maimonides, the use of these terms are frequent in the writings of the sages.

12).<sup>500</sup> This type of inappropriate consumption is what led to the fall of the legendary biblical apostate Elisha the “Other,” whose taking in of knowledge to excess became perverted into a defect, which eventually led him to abandon his faith, and hence be cut off from the Creator.<sup>501</sup>

As explained in chapter four, Sem Tob, in Ma’aseh, seems to be addressing a similar issue. His use of the terms “eating” (*akhol*) and “water” (*mayim*)<sup>502</sup> are congruent with Maimonides’ figurative definitions of those concepts.<sup>503</sup> Indeed, the differing ethical statuses of the pen and scissors are, for the most part, conveyed through the imagery of consumption and nourishment.<sup>504</sup> The pen, for example, in its embodiment of Torah, is associated with water and its function throughout Ma’aseh is that of imparting wisdom (nourishing): “[The pen] is a river of wisdom. He endows the simple with subtlety, and his knowledge droppeth like dew. He pours out his complaint before God” (lines 47-48). Then in lines 71-73: “With love he nourishes the lines- he eats but not to satiety, and drinks but not to drunkenness. His only purpose is to water the book. What he consumes

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<sup>500</sup> The reasons for this are explained in Maimonides’ taxonomy of evil in III: 12 of the Guide.

<sup>501</sup> Guide I: 32

<sup>502</sup> The Hebrew word *mayim* ‘water’ is commonly used in rabbinic literature as a metaphor for Torah or wisdom. In the Guide, Maimonides states that parables likening knowledge to water were generally known in the community (73; I: 34).

<sup>503</sup> Maimonides did not himself create these definitions. He is merely pointing out how these terms have often been used by the sages of the biblical and post biblical periods. Indeed, he mentions that the employment of the term “water” as a designation for knowledge was so frequent and widespread in the Hebrew language that it became, “as it were, the first meaning” (Guide 64; I: 30).

<sup>504</sup> Significantly, those terms are used by Maimonides to initiate his excursus on knowledge and its limits in the Guide I: 32 (Diamond 354).

he spills back onto the page, retaining nothing for himself.”<sup>505</sup> The scissors, in contrast, have no association with water, violate the golden mean, and are described in terms of consumption in its negative sense:

Is not your sin inscribed? What is yours is yours (*she'lakhem la'khem*),<sup>506</sup> and from the scroll you take [more than your share]. You split her heart, and like the teeth of beasts grazing in the grass you let loose in her (Deut. 32:24). From her heart you take out words, and cut wicks,<sup>507</sup> until all of her is filled with holes. I [the pen] do not treat the scroll in this way. My rule is that of a pious man (*hasid*). I irrigate the scroll's garden beds and sprinkle my dew upon her . . . (lines 367-375).

In the section that immediately follows the above passage, the subject changes to secrecy. This is significant in that secrecy, or concealment, is a component of the principle of moderation as it relates to spiritual and intellectual apprehension. To illustrate, Maimonides states in Guide I: 33 that the “divine science” (metaphysics) is very harmful to people who have not progressed through the appropriate stages of intellectual development.<sup>508</sup> This is why the sages repeated: “The account of the Chariot ought not to be taught even to one man, except if he be wise and able to understand by

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<sup>505</sup> The pen is also associated with water and knowledge in lines 169-175. The context is that of the pen's rebuttal when the author accuses it of betrayal: “Why do you heap insult and scorn upon me, would it not be better to wait until the sun melts the ice? . . . when the ice has been melted . . . brooks shall come forth from the mountains and the depths (Isa. 28:17) . . . then with joy shall you draw the waters from the fountains of triumph (Isa. 12:3), and the scroll and its writing shall be like an irrigated field.”

<sup>506</sup> This is the rule of the wicked (*rashaim*), described in *Avot*. See chapter four.

<sup>507</sup> Cutting wicks is a reference to the cutting of the scissors.

<sup>508</sup> The proper sequence of training is the art of logic, mathematical sciences (according to their proper order), natural sciences, and finally the divine sciences (metaphysics) (*Guide* 75; I: 34). According to Maimonides, when knowledge is acquired too rapidly, doubts may occur which can lead to spiritual confusion and disbelief (*Guide* 69; I: 32).

himself . . .” (*Guide* 72; I: 33).<sup>509</sup> To underscore this admonition, he utilizes verses from Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in their figurative senses:<sup>510</sup> “Honey and milk are under your tongue” (Song of Songs 4:11),<sup>511</sup> “It is not good to eat too much honey” (Prov. 25:16), and “Neither make thyself over-wise; why shouldst thou destroy thyself” (Eccl. 4:17), (Diamond 370). Clearly, the progression is from eating honey appropriately (good honey), to the over consumption of it (it is not good . . . ) to the final effect it has on one who is not moderate in its consumption, i.e. destruction.<sup>512</sup> James Diamond points out that a more fitting context for the images of honey would be difficult to find since the next verse in Song of Songs (4:12) repeats the words for locked (*na’ul*) and sealed (*hatum*) three times: “A garden locked is my own, my bride, a fountain locked, a sealed up spring.” The first segment of this same verse is found in line 384 of *Ma’aseh*, in the debate between the pen and scissors about secrecy and disclosure.<sup>513</sup> Of course, it is possible that Sem Tob is not using the verse in the same way as Maimonides; however, the fact that the scissors are accused of destroying the scroll (scripture) and of entering a domain (the heavens) that is not theirs strengthens the argument that Sem Tob did have

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<sup>509</sup> See chapter three in the section on Kabbalah for a description of the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation.

<sup>510</sup> Honey in its figurative sense in these verses connotes intellectual apprehension.

<sup>511</sup> This is the beginning of the honey metaphor, which describes it as intrinsically good. However, “once it has been imbibed, it cannot be dispensed liberally” (Diamond 370).

<sup>512</sup> It should be noted that the honey metaphor from Song of Songs is used in the closing comment of Maimonides’ *Mishneh* commentary “in support of maintaining a kind of gag order” on the disclosure of secrets such as the accounts of the Chariot and Creation (Diamond 370).

<sup>513</sup> The theme of secrecy and divine science is found in *Guide* I: 32-34, a subject that Sem Tob was undoubtedly familiar with.

philosophy or metaphysical speculation in mind.<sup>514</sup> Indeed, the previously mentioned verse from Ecclesiastes (7:18), which is contained in the last section of the dialogue between the pen and scissors,<sup>515</sup> immediately follows the one that Maimonides uses in the Guide to illustrate metaphorically why the esoteric sciences should be restricted (“Neither make thyself overwise; why shouldst thou destroy thyself” Eccl. 7:17 [*Guide* I: 32, 69]). Clearly, the depiction of the scissors correlates to that of a person who considers himself to be wiser than he is. Hence, he ends up destroying the scroll in his “cutting,”<sup>516</sup> which is why, in the end of the *maqama*, he is “cut out.”<sup>517</sup> This accords with Maimonides’

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<sup>514</sup> Several passages hint at metaphysical speculation: “Who brought you to the work of the heavens, a work that is not yours! You have entered the domain of the craft of your peers. But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my thoughts above your thoughts, and my plans above your plans. I look towards the scroll with an eye of mercy and compassion, but you pluck out its eyes! I embroider a rich tapestry, while you tear it into twelve pieces” (lines 323-330). Also lines 303-311 strongly suggest metaphysics both because of the allusion to Ezekiel, which is the biblical text upon which *ma’aseh merkavah* (the Work of the Chariot) is based, and the mention of the “rider of the wings of the winds,” an expression suggestive of mystical experience and metaphysical speculation: “Our writing is more wondrous than any letter with pen and ink . . . it takes off one form and puts on another- at times its head is in the clouds- and shines like a wheel making itself a gallery above the expanse (Ezekiel 1:15-16, 26) . . . I am the pinnacle of thought, I am form without matter, and without body, I am spirit. My vehicle is in the heavens and I fly on the wings of the wind.” Furthermore, the description of the scissors in lines 231-232 also derives from Ezekiel (1:14 [in italics]): “They are twins- in your hand, *dashing to and fro like lightning*.” This imagery is explained in *Guide* III: 2 in relation to the Work of the Chariot (*ma’aseh merkavah*).

<sup>515</sup> “It is best that he grasp the one without letting go of the other, for he alone (Sem Tob)- fears God and will do his duty by both.”

<sup>516</sup> “Cutting,” as argued in chapter four, is equated with the problem of scriptural misinterpretation. Taking scripture out of its plain sense meaning in inappropriate ways constituted a violation according to medieval Jewish religious norms. Pollegar’s use in “Ish ha Dat” of the term *gazar* (to cut) to denote the taking of wisdom from one context and placing it in another strengthens this argument.

<sup>517</sup> “. . . Do to them according to their wickedness. For such persons shall be cut off from their people” (lines 599-601).

interpretation of Elisha, whose hubris and excess (intellectual consumption) in approaching the divine resulted in separation from God and the community.

In PM, Maimonides' principle of the golden mean is conveyed realistically rather than figuratively, and is geared towards behavior in the social world rather than the realm of the intellect. Whereas Ma'aseh addresses the dangers of excess in relation to intellectual speculation, Sem Tob's focus in PM is the consequences of egotism and excessive material consumption.<sup>518</sup> Verses 240-242 express well Sem Tob's poetic interpretation of this core Maimonidean principle:

Por buscar lo de más es cuanto mal avemos;  
por el mester (the necessary), jamás mucho non lazaremos.  
Si que no-t mengüe (lack) quieres, dexa la tu codiçia:  
lo que haber podieres, sólo eso codiçia,  
de las codiçias siempre toda sobra dexando  
e de toda costumbre lo de medio tomando.

The concept of moderation, however, is not Maimonidean in origin. It reflects the Judeo-Arabic Aristotelian ethos, which in the fourteenth century, was still deeply ingrained in the Jewish culture of northern Spain. Moreover, the fact that Sem Tob knew Arabic

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<sup>518</sup> In the *Guide*, these two types of excess are shown to be inter-related. Both are consequent upon ignorance (of self and "inferior matter"), and lead to vice and confusion about the sources of evil: "Thus every ignoramus who thinks worthless thoughts is always sad and despondent because he is not able to achieve the luxury attained by someone else. In most cases a man exposes himself to great dangers, such as arise in sea voyages and the service of kings; his aim therein being to obtain these unnecessary luxuries. When, however, he is stricken by misfortunes in these courses he has pursued, he complains about God's decree and predestination and begins to put the blame on the temporal and to be astonished at the latter's injustice in not helping him to obtain great wealth . . ." (*Guide* 446; III: 12).



suggests that he may have been more influenced by the intellectual legacy of Judeo-Arabic Andalusian culture than his non-Arabic speaking contemporaries. The expression of the golden mean in PM, though, has such striking parallels with the way in which it is articulated by Maimonides that one can speculate that the Guide, or philosophical works inspired by it, were the principle source of influence on Sem Tob's thought regarding this concept. For example, in verses 240-242 above, and in the following passage, Sem Tob makes the same connection between greed and privation as does Maimonides:

Non puede omre tomar en la codicia tiento:

es porfundada mar sin orilla nin puerto.

De alcançar una cosa nace codicia de otra

mayor e más lazrosa, que mengua vien de sobra:

Cuando lo poco vien, codicia de mas creçe;

quando más omre tien, tanto más le fallece. (vv. 215, 216, 222)<sup>519</sup>

In verses 218, 221 and 223, another parallel can be detected:

Quien buena piel tenía que-l cumplié para el frío,

tabardo non pidría jamás sinon por el brío;

porque el su vezino buen tavardo vestía,

con çelo, el meçquino, en cuidado vivía.

Fue buscar tavardo; fallól', e entró en cueita (cuita)

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<sup>519</sup> Maimonides writes: "If one restricts oneself to what is necessary, this is the easiest of things and may be obtained with a very small effort. Whatever in it is seen as difficult and hard for us is due to the following reason: when one endeavors to seek what is unnecessary, it becomes difficult to find even what is necessary. For the more frequently hopes cling to the superfluous, the more onerous does the matter become" (*Guide* 446; III: 12).

por otro más onrado para de fiesta en fiesta;  
e si este primero tavarado non fallara,  
del otro disantero jamás non se membrara.  
... e cuanto más alcança, más codiça diez tanto.<sup>520</sup>

Interestingly, these verses parallel ideas contained in Maimonides' excursus on the "third species of evil" (i.e. the kind that are inflicted upon individuals by their own actions). This is significant in that it helps us to understand the relationship between the golden mean, Maimonidean ethics, and Sem Tob's conceptualization of evil. While it is not certain that Sem Tob agreed with Maimonides' assertion that the third species of evil is consequent upon "concupiscence for eating, drinking, and copulation, and doing these things with excess,"<sup>521</sup> we can deduce from the above verses and Sem Tob's general insistence on moderation throughout PM, that he believed, like Maimonides, that the most abundant type of evil is that which individuals inflict upon themselves and others in the pursuit of superfluous goods. Indeed, in Sem Tob's world view, man is the most dangerous, destructive, and malevolent creature on earth because of his inability to experience satiety ("Com el omre tal cosa en mundo peligrosa non ha, nin tan dañosa nin

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<sup>520</sup> "... For whereas all necessary things are restricted and limited, that which is superfluous is unlimited. If, for example, your desire is directed to having a silver plate, it would be better if it were of gold; some have crystal plate; and perhaps plate is procured that is made out of emerald and rubies, whenever these stones are to be found. Thus, every ignoramus who thinks worthless thoughts is always sad and despondent because he is not able to achieve the luxury attained by someone else" (*Guide* 445; III: 12).

<sup>521</sup> Maimonides explains that these vices are physically, as well as spiritually, destructive because the moral qualities of the soul are consequent upon the temperament of the body. When "the soul becomes familiarized with, and accustomed to, unnecessary things," it "acquires the habit of desiring things that are unnecessary either for the preservation of the individual or for the preservation of the species ..." (*Guide* 445; III: 12).

tan maleficioſa,” v. 672). In his relentless desire to acquire unnecessary things, he robs, kills and plunders, and feels content only upon witnessing the misfortune of others (“Cuanto el omre famriento está, roba e mata, e males más de çiento faze de que se farta, ca non se tien por farto sinon con famre d’otro . . .” vv. 674-75). Hence, the invocation of the golden mean as a remedy for greed and the destructive behaviors associated with it is not surprising in this context. For evil, as conceptualized in PM, is not a metaphysical reality, but a human creation that can be reduced through the dissemination of wisdom. Human responsibility, therefore, plays an integral part in Sem Tob’s world view, and is, really, the pith of his ethical system in PM. By living according to one’s means, having a realistic and balanced sense of self, and taking the proverbial middle road in life, one can achieve a modicum of happiness while contributing to the common good.

Before concluding this section, one other difference, and similarity, between PM and Ma’aseh concerning evil could be noted. As already stated, evil in PM is associated with the pursuit of superfluous goods, whereas in Ma’aseh, it is viewed in relation to faulty reasoning (or scriptural misinterpretation) conjoined with power. In both works, however, it is conceptualized in terms of consumption in its negative sense; or, in other words, as something that could be nourishing if pursued in moderation. Taking both works into consideration, Sem Tob’s conception of evil can be construed as nothing more than a perversion of the good. When pursued with humility, wealth, knowledge, and power aid the progress of society and are beneficial to the social order, yet when

approached with excess and arrogance, they become liabilities.<sup>522</sup> One should keep in mind, though, that “goodness” in Sem Tob’s worldview does have an absolute, metaphysical reality. Evil, in contrast, is simply the misuse of one’s humanity. It resides in the individual and has no other natural or supernatural source onto which we can project blame: “Del mundo mal dezimos, e en él otro mal- non ha si non nós mesmos, nin vestiglos nin ál” (“We see evil in the world, and also in God- but it is really just ourselves [that cause evil], not fantastical monsters or anything else”; v. 650).<sup>523</sup>

### The “Good”

In verses 643-670, Sem Tob changes his tone somewhat from the preceding sections and launches into a more abstract philosophical excursus on the common misconceptions people have of self and the temporal world that lead to flawed theodicies,<sup>524</sup> the purpose of which may be to make accessible to his contemporaries philosophical ideas that will lead to more enlightened conceptions of reality. Beginning with a declaration of the goodness (*tob*) of God, he disassociates the Creator from any connection to evil:

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<sup>522</sup> In Jewish theology, the acts of individuals can impede the salvation of the community, which may help to explain the emphasis on personal responsibility in PM.

<sup>523</sup> Note how profoundly Sem Tob’s conception of evil resonates with that of Maimonides: “The greater part of the evils that befall its individuals are due to the latter, I mean the deficient individuals of the human species. It is because of our own deficiencies that we lament and call for aid. We suffer because of evils that we have produced ourselves of our own free will; but we attribute them to God . . .” (*Guide* 443; III: 12).

<sup>524</sup> For example: “El mundo non tien ojo, nin entiende fazer- a un omre enojo e a otro plazer/ . . . El viçioso razonal bien, tienlo por amigo; el cuitado baldonal, tienlo por enemigo/ . . . E torpe non es él (el tiempo)- nin ha entendimiento: mal e bien dizen d’él- sin su mereçimiento,” vv. 651, 655, 665). Díaz-Más y Mota note that *él* in verse 665 signifies “time.”

La merced de Dios sola es la fuzia çierta.

Otra ninguna, ¿dóla en mundo que non mienta?

De lo que a Dios plaze, nós pesar non tomemos:

bien es cuanto Él faze e nós no lo entendemos. (vv. 643-44)<sup>525</sup>

Then in verses 643-646, he continues with an explanation of how this goodness manifests:

Al omne más le dio e de mejor mercado

de lo que entendió que-l era forçado;

de lo que más provecha, de aquello más avemos:

Pan e del agua mucha e del aire tenemos; (vv. 645-646).

Given the allusion to *Guide* III: 12,<sup>526</sup> one can postulate that these verses were directed towards three distinct readers. For the general public, or the uneducated reader, the affirmation that the things that are most necessary to life are the most abundant in nature would have been taken at face value. For the wealthy Jewish oligarchy, or courtier class,

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<sup>525</sup> Significantly, the “good” is the predominant concept that informs Maimonides’ excursus on evil in part III of the *Guide* (Diamond 355). He states that “it may in no way be said of God . . . that He produces evil in an essential act . . . rather, all His acts . . . are an absolute good; for He only produces being, and all being is a good” (*Guide* 439-440; III: 10).

<sup>526</sup> Theodore Perry (*Moral Prov.* 189) has noted the striking similarity of these verses to parts of *Guide* III: 12: “For the more a thing is necessary for a living being, the more often it may be found and the cheaper it is. On the other hand, the less necessary it is, the less often it is found and it is very expensive. Thus, for instance, the necessary for man is air, water and food. But air is the most necessary . . . As for water, one can remain without it for a day or two. Accordingly air is indubitably easier to find and cheaper than water . . .” (446-447). In a discussion on divine providence, the philosopher David Kimhi (fl. 1232), who was influenced by Maimonides, uses the same examples: “. . . Liquids are more necessary for the maintenance of life than are foods; therefore water is more abundant than food and [involves] no work or preparation . . .” (Talmage 21).

perhaps they were a reminder that the pursuit of wealth for its own sake is foolish and misguided. The philosophical reader, who would also have belonged to the Jewish elite, would have undoubtedly picked up on the Maimonidean allusion, which in the Guide has a more profound meaning related to the rationalist ideal of intellectual apprehension.<sup>527</sup> According to this ideal, living in harmony with the natural order (i.e. not going to extremes) is a condition upon which correct apprehension depends, and, consequently, the ability to perceive the goodness of the creation as a whole. Sem Tob, like Maimonides, teaches that the pursuit of luxuries is a futile endeavor (“Non puede omre tomar en la codicia tiento: es porfundada mar sin orilla nin puerto,” v. 215) that ultimately leads to doubt in the Creator and rebellion against Him: “Fi d’omre, ¿qué te querellas cuando lo que te plaze non se cumple, e rebellas en Dios porque non faze” (v. 298).<sup>528</sup> Hence, in order to apprehend the “goodness” of the Creator and of creation, which is the true reality underlying the oppositional nature of the world, he recommends striking an equilibrium between extremes (“Toda buena costumbre ha çertera medida que

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<sup>527</sup> The paragraph in the Guide immediately preceding Maimonides’ affirmation of God’s abundance illustrates this ideal: “. . . Men of excellence and knowledge have grasped and understood the wisdom manifest in that which exists, as David set forth saying: *All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep His commandments and his testimonies* (Ps. 25:10). By this he says that those who keep to the nature of that which exists, keep the commandments of the Law, and know the ends of both, apprehend clearly the excellency and the true reality of the whole. For this reason they take as their end that for which they were intended as men, namely, apprehension” (*Guide* 446; III: 12).

<sup>528</sup> Note the parallel to *Guide* III: 12: “Thus every ignoramus who thinks worthless thoughts is always sad and despondent because he is not able to achieve the luxury attained by someone else. In most cases such a man exposes himself to great dangers . . . his aim therein being to obtain these unnecessary luxuries. When, however, he is stricken by misfortunes . . . he complains about God’s decree and predestination and begins to put the blame on the temporal and to be astonished at the latter’s injustice in not helping him to obtain great wealth . . .” (446).

si la pasa omre su bondad es perdida,” v. 112) and putting ones trust in the divine, which in PM, and the Jewish philosophical tradition, is associated with the intellect.<sup>529</sup>

In Ma’aseh, like PM, the concept of goodness is axiomatic. However, it is expressed in a way that accords with the differing needs and intellectual propensities of his audience.<sup>530</sup> For example, in order to convey ethical principles or actions associated with the concept of goodness in PM, Sem Tob never explicitly mentions Jewish law or Talmudic dicta. In Ma’aseh, in contrast, these are cited or alluded to throughout the text. Furthermore, the concept of goodness in Ma’aseh seems also to have an esoteric meaning not found in PM, which is hinted at through biblical verses in the passages following the pen’s victory. Sem Tob, in lines 534-538, introduces the personage of the king who utters a decree, rich in metaphor, which is better understood when contextualized in the religious and philosophical thought of the era.<sup>531</sup> The passage begins:

The family of the pen rose up<sup>532</sup>--*and it was proclaimed throughout the camp*  
(Exodus 36:6)-- *by the council of the king and his nobles* (Jonah 3:7): Each man  
shall attend to his tools, for *the Lord made every utensil for a purpose*

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<sup>529</sup> “El omre de metales dos es cofaçionado; metales desiguales, uno vil e otro onrado:/ el uno terrenal, en él bestia semeja; otro, çeestrial, con ángel le apareja;/ en que come e beve semeja alimaña: así muere e bive como bestia sin falla;/ en el entendimiento como el ángel es: non ha despartimiento si en cuerpo non es,” vv. 492-495).

<sup>530</sup> While it can’t be proven that Sem Tob had the Guide in mind when writing certain passages of Ma’aseh, it can still be used as a resource for unlocking meaning in several obscure parts. Indeed, any concept in Maimonides’ excursus on evil would surely have been common knowledge among the intellectual elite.

<sup>531</sup> The figure of the king in medieval literature is a common motif and is often used as a symbol of restoration.

<sup>532</sup> Nini and Fruchtmann translate *adat* as family (75, note 534), while Shepard uses “congregation” in his translation. The term can also mean “assembly,” “meeting,” or “community.”

[*lama'anehu*] (Prov. 16:4).<sup>533</sup> No one shall stretch forth his hand to seize the craft of his friends, for their works have been assigned from the beginning of creation.

This passage contains a pivotal line (536) that alludes to a verse in Proverbs (“The Lord made everything for a purpose [*lama'anehu*], even the wicked for an evil day,” 16:4) that Maimonides cites in his excursus on evil in the Guide. Rambam interprets the verse to mean that God brought everything into existence not for the sake of some other thing, but for His own sake, and that its existence conforms to its purpose (Guide III: 13, 453):<sup>534</sup>

This is the meaning of his saying: *And God saw that it was good (tov)* [Gen. 1].

For you know that we have explained with regard to their saying: *The Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man* (Yebamoth 71a). And *good (tov)* is an expression applied by us to what conforms to our purpose. About the whole, it says: *And God saw everything that He had made, it was very good (tov me'od)* [Gen. 1:31]. For the production in time of everything that was produced conformed to its purpose, and nothing went wrong. And that is the meaning of the expression *very (me'od)*; for sometimes a thing is *good* and conforms for a time to our purpose, whereas afterwards, the goal is missed. (453; III: 12)

According to this abstract conceptualization of goodness, a thing is excluded from the category of the “good” when it veers from the ontological purpose that was assigned to it

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<sup>533</sup> The JPS Tanakh translates *lama'anehu* as “for a purpose,” whereas Maimonides interprets it as meaning “for His sake.”

<sup>534</sup> Maimonides (Rambam) uses the verse in the sense that everything was created not for the benefit of something else, but for its own sake, or for the sake of God (i.e. because God willed it). In this, he follows rabbinic tradition which stipulates that “there does not exist a final end but only will alone,” therefore the search for telos is futile (Diamond 356).



by God at the time of creation, exactly the message Sem Tob conveys in the above passage in Ma'aseh and in the lines that follow (538-542):

. . . Nor may anyone exchange or substitute one work for another (Lev. 27:10). Nor shall a woman put on a man's apparel, or a man wear the garb of a female (Deut. 22:5). The pen is for writing, and the scissors for shearing-- and fire for the altar-- and the scyth for the harvest, and the bridle to restrain. And the people returned to their proper places in peace. The voice was heard in every corner and the joyful song spread. Every tool returned to its place, and the order of its laws and customs did not change-- and the earth was quiet for forty years. (Judges 3:11)

This way of conceptualizing “goodness” reveals the philosophical context for the aberration of the scissors (or, more correctly, for those who misuse them). The scissors, as representative of both power and a foreign, philosophical way of viewing reality remain in the purview of the good as long as they stay within the bounds of religiously prescribed norms (conforming to their purpose). However, once those norms are violated, they no longer conform to their preordained function and are therefore “cut out” (*nikratu*) from the community.<sup>535</sup> The underlying message is not that power and philosophy are evil, but that they must be utilized with caution and moderation, and in harmony with the principles of revealed religion. In PM, a similar notion is conveyed in regards to wealth and material goods (and in general, to any custom that is over or under-used). In contrast to Ma'aseh, though, the message is straightforward and applies to the pragmatic realities of everyday life.

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<sup>535</sup> As explained in chapter four, this same idea is associated with kabbalist conceptions of evil.

## Unity

Interestingly, the concept of unity is a focal point in both Ma'aseh and PM, as the narrative of each text slowly moves from opposition and conflict to the unification of contradictory elements. In Ma'aseh, this dynamic is reflected in the movement from heated debate between the pen and scissors, in which arguments are made by each utensil to support their respective claims, to the emphasis on unity in the last few paragraphs, which is evoked by Sem Tob's use of Proverbs 133:1 ("How good and pleasant it is that brothers dwell together") and the imagery of the blades coming together: "The scissors greatly desired to stand together without anything separating them. From two they become one, yet whoever comes between them will be cut in two" (lines 589-591; 606-607).

Also pertinent to the concept of unity in Ma'aseh is Sem Tob's allusion in the beginning of the work to a *midrashic* interpretation found in the *Mekhilta* to Exodus 20:8:<sup>536</sup> "In one saying (*niv*),<sup>537</sup> the pen makes the two as one: observe (*shmor*) and

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<sup>536</sup> *Mekhilta* is the name applied in ancient times to a *halakhic* (legal midrash, with some *aggadah*) *midrash* on the book of Exodus, from chapter 12 onward. (While the primary text of the *Mekhilta* is that of Rabbi Ishmael--and that is the one cited here--another fragmentary text of the *Mekhilta* is that of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai). The *midrash* seeks to explain the conflict between the opening verse in both Decalogues dealing with the Sabbath. The explanation offered by the *Mekhilta* is as follows: "'Remember' (Exod 20:8) and 'Observe' (Deut 5:12): Both were said in a single saying (*dibbur*) . . . which is impossible for human beings to do, so as it is written, 'One thing God has spoken, two things have we heard' (Ps 62:12), and it states, 'Behold, My word is like fire' (Jer 23:29)" (Qtd. in Yadin 10 [Original source *Mekhilta bahodesh* 7]).

<sup>537</sup> In Ma'aseh, Sem Tob uses the Hebrew word *niv* in place of *dibbur*, both of which mean "saying," or "expression."

remember (*zakhor*)!” (line 96).<sup>538</sup> The meaning the *Mekhilta* gives it is that God, unlike man, is able to utter two statements simultaneously in one speech act; or, as Yadin puts it, “the singular speech of God . . . yields a twofold understanding,” the proof text of which is Psalms 62:12: “One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard” (Yadin 12-13). The uniqueness of the two different reports of the same speech act is also explained in the *mekhilta* “as a reflection of the unbridgeable gap between human and divine speech” (12); a notion that can be detected in Ma’aseh in the great distinction Sem Tob makes between the divinely inspired writing of the pen and the flawed, inferior, writing of the scissors (“But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways above your ways, and my plans above your plans [Isaiah 55:8]),” lines 325-327.<sup>539</sup> This verse from Isaiah, which is cited by Maimonides in *Hilkot Tshuvah* V, is used to explain the unknowability of God’s essence in relation to free will (Agnon 118-19).<sup>540</sup> This same idea--the inability of man to apprehend or discover the true essence of the Creator--is one of the main tenets in Ma’aseh and PM concerning the God/man relationship.

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<sup>538</sup> “Observe” and “remember” are two versions of the fourth commandment spoken by God at Sinai. God offered it as one word but man was not able to understand it (the unified speech of God), therefore it was written in two different ways.

<sup>539</sup> This verse, which is cited by Maimonides in *Hilkot Tshuvah* V, is used in relation to free will and the inability of man to comprehend or discover the true essence of the Creator. In both PM and Ma’aseh, Sem tob makes clear that the divine essence is unknowable. the idea is that humans can never apprehend or dicover the real essence of the Creatorcome to a perfect understanding of

<sup>540</sup> “We have already explained . . . that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not know with a knowledge external to himself, like the human beings, whose knowledge and self are two distinct things. But He, exalted be his name, and His knowledge, are one, and the mind of man cannot comprehend this clearly. And, just as the mind of man cannot apprehend or discover the real essence of the Creator . . . so it is not in the power of man to apprehend or discover the knowledge of the Creator. So the prophet said (Isa. 55:8): ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways’” (Maimonides qtd. in Agnon 118).

In PM, the concept of unity is developed in relation to the physical/temporal/material aspects of existence, as Sem Tob makes clear in his excursus on the fundamental unity of time, the body, and the world:

Él (the world) es uno todavía: cuando es denostado

atal como el día que es mucho loado.

El viçioso razonal bien, tienlo por amigo;

el cuitado baldonal, tienlo por enemigo.

Non le fallan ningunt cambio los sabidores:

los cambios son segunt los sus reçevidores.

El día uno es mesmo, non se camió,

cuán d'él este, rebés d'est'otro, reçibió.

E el mundo es en un egual todo tiempo,

e el omre también, uno es en su cuerpo;

su talente se camia de alegre a triste,

e este se agrabia de lo que plaz a este.

Los querellosos d'él o pagados también

mal nin bien non faz él: de sí mesmos les vien. (vv. 654-656; 667-670)

Similar to Ma'aseh, the movement is from opposition to unity, which seems somewhat paradoxical since before this part of the text, the world is presented as inherently unpredictable and changeable (“torna sin detenencia la mar mansa muy brava e el mundo

espreçia oy al que ayer loava” v. 419).<sup>541</sup> However, from these verses, we learn that it is not the world itself that is in constant flux, but human perceptions of it. People, who are swayed by temperament and emotion, interpret phenomenon as good or bad according to how it affects them. If we keep in mind line 96 in *Ma’aseh* (“In one saying [*niv*], the pen makes the two as one: observe [*shmor*] and remember [*zakhor*]!”) and Psalms 62:12 (“One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard”), the reversal from opposition to unity becomes more transparent. The world, with its myriad manifestations of life is, metaphorically speaking, an utterance of God, and can be viewed as a whole in that all parts of it operate in unison according to divinely orchestrated physical and natural laws.<sup>542</sup> Human beings, however, have difficulty experiencing this unity either because they are negatively affected by natural events, such as cold, draughts, fires and earthquakes, or because of vice, which in the medieval Jewish mind, obscures human perception of divine goodness.<sup>543</sup> Hence, man, whose mind perceives the world dualistically, “hears” more than one thing from this “utterance”; that is to say, he gives it

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<sup>541</sup> Perry has commented on this paradox in PM: “Following along Santob’s long excursus on ‘the world and its changes,’ it comes as a paradox to learn that, after all, the world does not change.” He adds: “Santob’s general thought is that all the characteristics we ascribe to *mundo* are only projections of our own human reality, whereas in reality the world is in its essence unknowable” (*Moral Prov.* 190-191, notes 2465, 2485-2486).

<sup>542</sup> A distinction must be made between the social and temporal/physical worlds in PM. The former, being a construction of human opinion and imagination, is inherently unstable. In contrast, the physical world, which is characterized by the generation and corruption of matter, is a divine creation, and therefore constant and unified.

<sup>543</sup> Examples of this can be found in many verses in PM: “Sacan por pedir luvia las reliquias e cruces, cuando en tiempo non ubia, e dan por ella voces/ E si vien a menudo, enójanse con ella, e maldizen al mundo e la pro que vien d’ella;” (vv. 207-08); and regarding vice: “Bien çertero, serviçio de Dios es çiertamente; mas por catar al viçio olvídanlo la gente” (v. 108).

many interpretations.<sup>544</sup> Through harmonizing seemingly incompatible elements of reality Sem Tob effects a tenuous bridge between these two domains.<sup>545</sup> The truth he conveys is that even though the world is unpredictable, paradoxical, and beyond human comprehension, the contradictions that we perceive in it are simply different sides of a constant and unified whole that is essentially good. The only evil that exists in this cosmic order is that which arises from human ignorance and greed. In order to combat these social and psychological ills, he prescribes the contemplation of scripture and philosophy,<sup>546</sup> the observation of the precepts (Jewish Law), and reflection on the nature of *mundo*. This approach to truth, however, is not unique to Sem Tob, as it defines the intellectual milieu in which he lived. What Sem Tob contributes that is so refreshing and seemingly modern is his ability to sustain paradox by admitting unity and plurality at one and the same time. Indeed, it is precisely in the interplay of these concepts that Sem Tob stands out as a truly innovative writer.

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<sup>544</sup> “El (the world) siempre uno es; mas todos los nascidos, commo faz e envés, asi son departidos./ Lo que a éste tien pro, tien a éste daño; e d’ éste el su bien, toma el otro agrabio” (vv. 663-664).

<sup>545</sup> As already stated, the wide gap between human ways and the ways of God, an idea prominent in both *Ma’aseh* and PM, precludes a comprehensive understanding of *mundo* and the divine. This idea is conveyed directly in verses 658-659, where Sem Tob proclaims how little human beings know about the world: “So un çielo toda vía ençerrados yazemos; fázenos noche e día e nós ál non sabemos./ A este lueñe tierra ‘mundo’ posimos nombre; si verdat es o mentira, d’él más non sabe omne.” Lines 325-327 in *Ma’aseh* (“But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways above your ways, and My plans above your plans”) and verse 22 in PM are also relevant: “Bien como es más alto el çielo que la tierra, el su perdón es tanto mayor que la tu yerra.”

<sup>546</sup> In regards to philosophy, verse 331 demonstrates the esteem that Sem Tob conferred upon it: “Los sabios muy granados que omre deseava. Filósofos onrados que veer codiçiaaba.” However, one cannot extrapolate from this that he was sympathetic to all philosophers, as I argue in chapter four.

## Summary

In PM, the concept of providence is addressed primarily, but not solely, through its corollaries: the suffering of the just and reward and punishment. As a response to the first corollary (the suffering of the just), Sem Tob offers a traditional argument, based on Elihu's speech in the Book of Job, that God's ways are beyond the ken of human understanding. However, upon closer inspection, he also seems to be presenting a simplified explanation of a complex philosophical idea that entails the refutation of a direct correlation between moral virtue and divine providence.<sup>547</sup> This view can be inferred from verses 96-111, which emphasize the fact that the wise and the ignorant equally suffer the vagaries of fortune. Sem Tob's own position on the matter is hinted at in verse 105: "Cuando yo meto mientes, muy alegre sería con lo que otros tristes veo cada día," i.e. he is not bothered by what others generally regard as evil in the temporal world, for the filter of emotions distorts human perception.<sup>548</sup> The true reality, which he seems to have arrived at through some combination of intellectual and spiritual insight, is that all of creation is essentially good, and that it is only man who projects evil onto the world.<sup>549</sup> In essence, he affirms, the world is one.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> According to the philosophical interpretation, Job's moral virtue was not enough to merit divine providence. Intellectual perfection was also required. See beginning of chapter.

<sup>548</sup> "E el mundo es en un igual todo tiempo, e el omre también uno es en su cuerpo;/ Su talante se camia de alegre a triste, e este se agrabia de lo que plaz a este" (vv. 668-69).

<sup>549</sup> "Los querellosos d'él o pagados también, mal nin bien non faze él: de sí mesmos les ven" (vs. 670).

<sup>550</sup> "Él es uno toda vía: cuando es denostado atal como el día que es mucho loado" (v. 654).

The concept of retributive justice (or reward and punishment), which exemplifies a more traditional rabbinic world view, is evidenced in PM as well as Ma'aseh. While in PM Sem Tob expresses the concept in the form of an *exemplum* closely associated with Hillel's golden rule ("what is hateful to you do not do to your fellow"), in Ma'aseh the full force of the *mishnaic* injunction is invoked ("in the way that he measures, so shall they measure him"). This use of the principle strongly suggests polemic, which supports the argument that Ma'aseh may be an allegorical representation of a heated religious and/or political dispute. In PM, it is difficult to get a sense of Sem Tob's own views about reward and punishment, as the concept is expressed in a less polemical manner.

The golden mean, an Aristotelian principle adopted by Maimonides and Judeo-Hispanic culture in general, features prominently in both works. In fact, if one concept epitomizes Sem Tob's world view, it is moderation. However, as with the other concepts, it is articulated differently from one work to the other. In Ma'aseh, the golden mean is expressed in relation to immoderate intellectual contemplation (and power), whereas in PM, the focus is on excess in the material/social realm. I argue that the scissors (in their destructive aspect), conveyed through the terminology of consumption, represent those who misuse philosophy and interpret scripture out of context in a way that perverts its meaning. Their arrogance and immoderate conduct in relationship to the scroll and the community eventually lead to their metaphorical excommunication (being cut out).

In PM, Sem Tob's use of the principle relates to the chapters of Maimonides' Guide that contain his excursus on evil. Both authors argue (in stylistically different ways) that



excessive desire for unnecessary things leads to greed, envy, and doubt in the goodness of creation. Sem Tob's own views on the correlation between greed, arrogance, and evil are so closely related to those of Maimonides' that one can speculate that one of his purposes for writing PM may have been to simplify Maimonidean concepts so that the general populace could benefit from Maimonides' teachings, or those of his followers who espoused similar views.

In the last part of the chapter, I argue that Sem Tob's concept of "goodness" in PM and Ma'aseh is informed by "goodness" as conceived by Maimonides in the Guide. In PM, the idea put forth is that creation is essentially good. Evil is attributed solely to man's ignorance and inclinations towards vice rather than to some kind of inherent duality in creation. In Ma'aseh, an esoteric conception of goodness is alluded to near the end of the work through the king, who declares that the Creator made everything "for a purpose (*lama' anehu*).” This same line, a verse from Proverbs, is also found in Maimonides' excursus on evil in III: 13 of the Guide where he uses it to explain the futility of the quest for telos and to define "goodness":

This view too has been expressed in the prophetic books. Thus it says: *The Lord hath made everything lama' anehu [for His sake or for its sake]* (Prov. 16:4) . . . For with reference to none of them [i.e. of the things created] is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other thing. He only says that He brought every part of the world into existence saying: *And God saw that it was*

*good* [tov] . . . and *good* [tov] is an expression applied by us to what conforms to our purpose. (452-453)<sup>551</sup>

This conception strongly resonates with the problematic of the scissors, which have deviated from “the work they were assigned from the beginning of creation.” In summary, “goodness” is expressed in general philosophical terms in PM, while in Ma’aseh it is imbued with an esoteric meaning that may also be informed by kabbalist doctrine.

Finally, my last chapter concludes with a comparison of how the concept of unity is expressed in each work. Interestingly, both Ma’aseh and PM begin with a focus on opposition and gradually move towards harmony. In Ma’aseh, this is evidenced in the reconciliation between the pen and the scissors, and the joining of the blades. In PM, the unification is of a more existential nature. People, who judge the phenomenal world according to how they are affected by it, often come to erroneous conclusions about the nature of evil, which then leads to doubt about the Creator and the goodness of creation. In PM, Sem Tob counters these misapprehensions by affirming that time, the body, and the world are really essential unities that are neither good nor bad. It is only the

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<sup>551</sup> Following the explanation of the nature of *tov*(goodness), Maimonides relates the verse to telos: “Thus we are obliged to believe that all that exists was intended by Him, may He be exalted, according to His volition. And we shall seek for it no cause or other final end whatever” (*Guide* III: 13, 454, 455). The chapter concludes thus: “This is what one ought to believe. For when man knows his own soul, makes no mistakes with regard to it, and understands every being according to what it is, he becomes calm and his thoughts are not troubled by seeking a final end for what has not that final end; or by seeking a final end for what has no final end except its own existence, which depends on the divine will- if you prefer, you can also say: on the divine wisdom” (456).

changeable, impressionistic nature of the mind that causes humans to project negative or positive valences onto them.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, certain themes and concepts that appear in both PM and Ma'aseh have been explored and analyzed in relation to Jewish rabbinic and philosophical thought of the era. Ma'aseh, being a Hebrew work intended for a learned Jewish public, contains abundant biblical and Talmudic allusions, word plays, and double entendres, requiring the reader to infer meaning and make connections that are not readily apparent. PM, in contrast, is a Castilian work intended for a much broader public; therefore it is more accessible to a less educated readership. Certain themes in PM, however, are highly abstract and can be read on different levels. The complex and simplistic rabbinic concepts that are found in the text firmly ground it in rabbinic tradition, while the more abstract philosophical themes show it to be an integral part of fourteenth-century Jewish philosophical discourse. The inclusion of these themes has led me to conclude that PM served as a popular “guide” for the perplexed for Jews living in uncertain times. I argue that Sem Tob, in certain passages, simplifies key Maimonidean concepts relating to the problem of evil in order to make accessible to the general, non-Hebrew reading, Jewish public important philosophical ideas that could help to alleviate some of the existential pressures that were weighing on the community and individual Jews.

Sem Tob's philosophy for the common man, though, should not be confused with the agenda of the *mitfalsafim* (pseudo philosophers).<sup>552</sup> His argument for secrecy in Ma'aseh makes clear that he advised caution in the dissemination of esoteric ideas that were potentially hazardous to the faith of the people. As explained in chapter four, Sem Tob was an eclectic Jew who was probably positioned somewhere in the middle in the debate between philosophy and religion. The emphasis on unification in both works attests to his centrist tendencies, and shows him to be a harmonizer of faith and reason. However, the victory of the pen in Ma'aseh and the characterization of the scissors indicate that he opposed philosophical extremists whose interpretive methods threatened Jewish beliefs and traditions. This aspect of his thought does not appear in PM, as its themes are broader and its polemical issues more generalized. The ideas and beliefs expressed in both works, however, reveal a sophisticated and erudite poet/rabbi who was both a seeker of wisdom (philosophical and biblical) and a non-dogmatic moralist who sought to return Torah scholarship to its proper status. This posture accords with the general intellectual climate of the period, which is characterized by the blending and intertwining of the main doctrines of medieval Judaism--philosophy, mysticism, and Talmudic-traditionalism--in interesting and highly literary ways. Sem Tob, an author who eludes categorization, is a product of this compelling mix.

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<sup>552</sup> Those who did not understand well the principles of philosophy or religion, but who considered them selves to be learned men, were called *mitfalsafim*.

## CONCLUSION

I sincerely hope that this study of Ma'aseh ha Rav, Proverbios morales, and other Jewish works of the time period, has contributed to a deeper understanding of Judeo-Hispanic culture and literature. Broadly, my intention has been to give the modern reader insight into the thought structure of medieval Semitic peoples by describing the intellectual context of fourteenth-century Castilian and Provençal Jewry, and by demonstrating how one particular medieval Jewish author understood the world, society, and God. While the period in which Sem Tob lived seems to have little relevance from a modern technological standpoint, the study of cultures from the past motivates us to reflect on the ways in which our perceptions and understanding of the world undergo transformation over time. Moreover, Sem Tob participates in a centuries old wisdom tradition that continues to give meaning to the lives of many people. Even though our society may have changed in dramatic ways, we still ponder the same questions that concerned him: the relationship between the spiritual and the mundane, the suffering of the just, the causes of evil, how to create a just society, and the difficulties of living in a world filled with contradiction and uncertainty. These questions may have no definitive answers, yet knowing how authors such as Sem Tob responded to them enriches our lives not only by providing a sense of continuity with the past, but by illuminating the ways in which medieval peoples strove to make sense of themselves and the world around them.

In line with the above stated intention, I offer a new way of reading PM and Ma'aseh by analyzing them in relation to one another, to the social and intellectual context within which they are embedded, and to other seminal Jewish texts of the period.

In order to reconstruct the time period, I examined historical scholarship on Jewish-Christian relations, ideological and social conflicts among Jews, and primary texts by Jewish authors that convey the great spiritual and intellectual tensions of the era. The purpose of this endeavor has been two-fold. First, as stated in the introduction, scholars of Sem Tob have primarily examined PM in isolation from his Hebrew writings; therefore they have drawn conclusions about his worldview that are incomplete. Secondly, the few scholars who have taken both works into consideration have tended to interpret them solely on the basis of Christian-Jewish conflict and “convivencia” rather than as a reflection of discourses among Jews themselves. Hence, in order to better understand Sem Tob and the cultural milieu in which he lived, and to avoid reductionist readings of PM and Ma’aseh, I analyzed these works in relation to their intellectual context, and in light of the social and spiritual tensions that define Spanish Jewish life of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Furthermore, an accurate analysis of the style and content of the writing itself, especially that of Ma’aseh, is impossible, or at least very difficult, without taking into consideration Jewish biblical exegesis or allegoresis. By interpreting passages according to their biblical, rabbinic, and mystical associations, new levels of meaning were uncovered in Ma’aseh, which resulted in a new reading of the work.

Since the Jewish-Christian discourse invariably forms part of Sem Tob’s outlook on life, I discuss in chapter one the origins and manifestations of European anti-Semitism, as well as Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Spain. In chapter two, I give an overview of how Ma’aseh and PM have been read by scholars of Sem Tob, translate parts of

Ma'aseh, and give an extensive description of the two works. In chapter three I provide a review of Jewish streams of thought in medieval Spain and Provence in order to lay the foundation for understanding Sem Tob's thought structure and intellectual milieu. Chapter four involves an in-depth analysis of Ma'aseh in which different layers of meaning are unveiled. This is accomplished through a process of decoding ambiguous biblical and rabbinic allusions, and studying the work in relation to polemics and discourses that were relevant during the time period. This textual analysis of Ma'aseh allows for a more informed reading of PM, which is the subject of chapter five. Bound concepts and themes that appear in each work are explored and examined in relation to one another, and to concepts found in other Jewish philosophical works of the time period; specifically, the influential Guide for the Perplexed. Without a prior analysis of Ma'aseh, or reading of Maimonides' Guide, the exploration of Sem Tob's conceptual understanding of terms such as "goodness," "evil," and "suffering" would have remained incomplete. Indeed, because PM is directed towards a Castilian, rather than a Hebrew, speaking public it does not reveal the full spectrum of his worldview.

In the process of analyzing the two works in this way, certain concepts and themes become apparent and acquire new meaning. For example, the question of divine providence, an issue that greatly concerned Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, is addressed in PM in terms more associated with Jewish philosophy than with rabbinic theology. Allusions to Ecclesiastes and Job are formulated in such a way as to evoke Maimonides' sophisticated response to the suffering of the just, which refutes a direct correlation between moral virtue and divine protection from suffering. The rabbinic

concept of retributive justice, a corollary of divine providence, is less evident in PM than in Ma'aseh. The only kind of punishment exacted in the work is that which takes place between humans on the temporal plane, which comes as a consequence not of divine influence, but of a kind of karmic necessity encapsulated in verse 317: "Whoever considers doing harm should be aware that harm will come back on him as a result" (my translation). Ma'aseh, in contrast, is replete with acts of divine providence and retribution, and, consequently, evidences a revelationist concept of providence. The difference between the two works in this regard can be attributed to the intended audiences, the genre, and to the fact that PM addresses the existential dilemmas of worldly life rather than religious polemics or the hope for redemption.

Another interesting finding in the analysis of Ma'aseh and PM is the correlation between excess and the problem of evil. Indeed, the principle of moderation is axiomatic in both works and ties them together conceptually. In Ma'aseh, however, excess is associated with lack of moderation in the realm of intellectual contemplation and power, while in PM, Sem Tob relates it to the pursuit of wealth and material things. Significantly, Sem Tob's expression of the concept corresponds to Maimonides' philosophical commentary on evil, and to his excursus on knowledge and its limits in Guide 3:12 and I: 32, respectively. In the Guide, excessive intellectual and material consumption lead to erroneous conceptions of evil, and to doubt in the Creator and the goodness of creation. This subject is treated at length in PM in relatively straightforward language. In Ma'aseh, given the ambiguous nature of the Hebrew Sem Tob employs, the reader must infer the connection to I: 32 of the Guide, where Maimonides, through the



example of the biblical apostate Elisha the “Other,” expounds on the destructive nature of excess and hubris in approaching the divine. After a thorough analysis of Ma’aseh, I have come to the conclusion that such a connection exists, and that the work contains allegory relating to the polemic concerning philosophical interpretation of scripture that so dominated intellectual discourse among Jews in fourteenth-century Spain and Provence.

The concept of goodness, also axiomatic in PM and Ma’aseh, further helps to expand our understanding of Sem Tob’s worldview. As explained in chapter two, PM and Ma’aseh are both highly influenced by Arabic debate literature. Because this style of writing is characterized by the presentation of different points of view about a subject, which ultimately leads to the unification of oppositions rather than to extreme positions of right or wrong, scholars of Sem Tob have tended to interpret PM as exemplifying a relativistic outlook on life. While it is true that, in PM, Sem Tob views judgments and opinions people have about the world as relative, he makes clear that God and the goodness of creation are ontological certainties. Those who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of wisdom and live according to the golden mean are, according to the author, able to comprehend this goodness, which is the true reality underlying the apparent contradictions of the temporal world.

In Ma’aseh, where Sem Tob’s orthodox side is on display, ontological certainty is even more evident. Through the medium of the pen, which embodies goodness in the absolute sense, he reassures his coreligionists that the covenant between God and Israel is

still binding, and that messianic redemption awaits those who live in accordance with the principles of the written and oral Law.

Finally, I found the theme of unity to be the most fundamental link between the two works. As explained in chapter three, the spirit of harmonization was a defining characteristic of fourteenth-century Jewish intellectual culture. Jewish philosophers, influenced by Maimonides and Arabic/Aristotelian thought, attempted to prove that faith and reason in no way contradict one another, and that the two ways of approaching truth are both necessary for human beings to attain perfection. In general, Jewish authorities either rejected the effort to bring Judaism up to date on the dictates of logic, as exemplified by the *zaken* in “The Religionist and the Philosopher,” or sought to blend the two. While Sem Tob was clearly not a pure rationalist, as was Pollegar, his preoccupation with the harmonization of oppositions and the inherent unity of *mundo* (the world), place him squarely within this trend. In Ma’aseh, for example, the scissors and the pen are polarized throughout the debate, arguing their respective positions with intelligence, wit, and verbal ferocity. Since the pen wins the debate and is the superior of the two in its role as Torah scholar and servant of God, one would expect the scissors to be denigrated in the end rather than declared upright and deserving of reward. Indeed, this conclusion confounds the reader in its incongruity with the rest of the text. However, when read in relation to the general medieval preoccupation with faith and reason, and the more specific polemic between rationalists and traditionalists regarding philosophical interpretation of scripture, it becomes apparent that Sem Tob was attempting to reconcile, or harmonize, intellectual tendencies that were creating divisions in the community. The

victory of the pen, though, reveals him to be a moderate in this discourse, who lamented the declining status of Torah scholars.

In PM, as made clear in chapter five, the concept of unity is cast in an existential light, and relates more to the problem of theodicy than to the polemic between religionists and philosophers. The general idea conveyed is that the changeable, impressionistic nature of the mind causes human beings to perceive reality in a dualistic manner, which leads them to project evil onto God and the temporal world. If people could only fathom the unitary nature of time, the world, and the body, they would understand that creation is an essential good and that evil has no existence outside of the human mind. This concept of unity is quite different from that found in Ma'aseh. However, the conclusion of each work, especially that of PM, points to a non-dualistic conception of reality rather than to philosophical relativism, and underscores Sem Tob's fundamental preoccupation with the reconciliation and harmony of contradictions on both the spiritual and social levels of existence. This is a subject, however, that merits further investigation, as Sem Tob's conceptualization of unity may also have roots in medieval Christian philosophy and thought. Hence, in a future research project, I plan to analyze the subject from Christian, and perhaps mystical, angles to expand on the research conducted in this dissertation.

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## VITA

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