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Translated, Edited & Introduced by Peter Cole: The Dream of the Poem

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NOTES



THE PEN

Brody-Schirmann, #5. **Lines 1 and 4:** Jeremiah 9:7. The first word of the Hebrew, *'arom* (naked), puns on *'aroom*, which means clever (like the snake in the garden of Eden). For more on the use of martial imagery and writing in Arabic poetry see Schimmel, *Calligraphy*, pp. 118–19.

IF YOU'D LIVE AMONG MEN

SH, #176; *HaShira*, #92. G. Bargebuhr (*The Alhambra: A Cycle of Studies on the Eleventh Century in Moorish Spain* [Berlin, 1968]) calls this “an Islamic poem in the Hebrew language” and quotes “the pessimistic and somewhat gnostic” al-Ma'arri, the poet he feels had the greatest influence on Ibn Gabirol: “I see but a single part of sweet in the many parts sour / and wisdom that cries: Beget no children, if thou art wise.” (trans. Nicholson). **Line 1:** The first line is deceptive in the Hebrew, as it appears to say, “if you want to live among [with] men of this world (*heled*).” The ambiguity is maintained in the English. Schirmann glosses: “to be among men who live eternal life” (relying, it would seem, on the Arabic *khuld*, i.e., eternity). Yarden reads: “If you want, among men of this world, to live [on] in eternity in the world to come.” Psalms 17:14–15: “[Deliver my soul from the wicked . . .], from men, by Thy hand, O Lord, from men of the world, whose portion is in this life, and whose belly Thou fillest with Thy treasure; Who have children in plenty, and leave their abundance to their babes. As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.” Also Psalms 49:2; Psalms 96:48; Job 11:17. **2:** Isaiah 33:14; Nahum 2:4. **3–4:** Line 3 might also read: “Take lightly what the world . . .” Isaiah 23:9; Psalms 49:13; 2 Kings 19:10; Psalms 49:17; Proverbs 3:13–16. **5:** Genesis 16:4 (the story of Hagar and Sarah); Proverbs 13:18. **6:** This line is heretical in the Jewish tradition, where the commandment is to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). See also *Nedarim* 64b, and notes to Moshe Ibn Ezra’s “If You See Me,” lines 17–18. 1 Chronicles 2:30: “But Seled died without children.” Seled was in the line of Judah (see 1 Chronicles 2:3f.). **8:** That is, while you’re alive, soul infuses your flesh; but after you die, the body will wear away and only soul will remain. Psalms 78:27; 1 Samuel 16:11; Job 16:15.

I AM THE MAN

SH, #102; *HaShira*, #56. **Heading:** “And he was up late one Friday night and was looking about. And the light of the moon guided his way until the clouds thickened in the air and the horizon grew dark. As the rain began falling, the moon disappeared and he couldn’t see it. Then he described this situation and recited a poem that became famous.” Yehuda Ratzhaby reads the heading differently: “He went out to read by the light of the moon”—since it was the Sabbath and reading by lamplight was forbidden (*Leqet Shirim Metequfat HaZohar HaSefaradit*,

ed. Y. Ratzhaby [Tel Aviv, 1994], p. 59). **Line 1:** The elaborate rhetorical opening alludes to Lamentations 3:1 and, by implication, to what follows there: “I am the man that hath seen affliction.” The second half of the first line reads literally: “girded up his loins” [or “belt”] and alludes to 1 Kings 18:46: “And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins.” Also Job 38:3 and 40:7, where the Lord says to Job, out of the whirlwind: “Gird up now thy loins like a man.” **2:** Numbers 30:16. **3:** Literally, “whose heart [mind] was frightened by his heart [mind].” Schirmann glosses: “whose drive.” Ratzhaby comments: “when his old heart, the seat of wisdom, saw what his new heart had vowed, it trembled in fear.” Song of Songs 5:2. Septimus suggests that the line alludes to several rabbinic sources (*Yalqut Shim‘oni* 296, *Midrash Tehillim* 14:1), where man is described as having two hearts, i.e., two impulses, one to good, one to evil, and that what appears to be the presentation of a modern “divided self” is in fact a standard medieval figure (Dov Septimus, “He‘arot leDivrei HAZAL beShirat Sefarad,” *Tarbiz* 53 [1983/84]: 1). It might also simply mean that his body and spirit were at war. **4:** Job 7:15–16. **6:** Isaiah 48:10; Psalms 12:7: “The words of the Lord are pure words, as silver tried in a crucible on the earth, refined seven times.” **7–8:** Ecclesiastes 3:2–3; Jeremiah 1:10; Isaiah 5:5. **10:** Or, “as misfortune surrounds him.” **11:** Literally, “And the children of the daughter of days.” The tenses in English depart from the Hebrew, and some commentators understand these lines to read: “He’d have made it to the limits of wisdom and right conduct if it hadn’t been for misfortune, which surrounded him, and fate, which shut him in.” **12:** Proverbs 1:7. **13:** Jeremiah 31:37. **16:** Psalms 73:26. **21:** I.e., “Even if the day (fate, time) doesn’t help me.” Genesis 22:3: “Then Abraham rose up early and saddled his ass”—to climb the mountain as God had commanded. **23:** Numbers 30:15–16. **25:** Job 3:25: “For the thing which I did fear is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of hath overtaken me”; Proverbs 10:24. **26–27:** For Yarden’s and Bialik-Ravnitzky’s “it was night,” Schirmann has: “While I was resting [sleeping, staying over for the night]”—opening the possibility that this might have been a dream-vision. Psalms 24:4. **29:** Isaiah 59:13: “conceiving and uttering.” This line in the Hebrew, like its biblical precedent, has proven hard to decipher, and the English maintains the ambiguity. The implication is that Ibn Gabirol saw the moon as a powerful, even magical, guide. **32:** Malachi 3:17. **34:** 1 Kings 20:38. **36:** Jeremiah 6:7. **37:** Isaiah 50:3. **39–40:** 2 Samuel 22:12. **41–42:** Numbers 22:6, 31:8 and Deuteronomy 23:5 for the story of Bilaam (Balaam) and the circumstances of his death. **43:** 1 Samuel 17:38: “And [Saul] clad [David] in a coat of mail”—before he went out to face Goliath. **48:** Jeremiah 48:40. **49:** The image of darkness as a raven appears often in Arabic poetry, from pre-Islamic verse on. Here it is lightning that sends the ravens up into the air. There are various interpretations of the referents in this line; the English maintains the ambiguity of the Hebrew. **53:** As a warrior (the allusion is to Samson) breaks free from his chains, so the poet’s thoughts, will, and heart would free themselves from the prison of the body. Judges 15:13–14. Also Psalms 78:65. My reading here, in many other instances, draws on Devorah Breg-

man's detailed study of the poem ("Tznefat Hur," *Mehqerei Yerushalayim beSifrut Ivrit* 14, part 2 [1988]:460). **54–55:** The transition and recapitulation of the poem's earlier images here is not altogether clear, but it seems to be saying that "this is the state of mankind," to be torn from within, and shackled and bound from without, and therefore the poet had best reconsider his ambition and accept the given state of things with humility. Job 30:26; Proverbs 20:20. See also Coleridge's "Dejection," lines 45–46: "I may not hope from outward forms to win/The passion and the life, whose fountains are within." **59:** Psalms 123:2. **60:** Literally, "has his spear beaten" (or "broken"), as in Isaiah 2:4, "into plowshares." **64:** The line might also read, literally, "though he put his holy of holies [dwelling] in the house of [among] the brightest stars [splendor]." The word in question is *noga*, which most likely refers to Venus. (See *Kingdom's Crown* 14, where Venus is associated with mirth and well-being.) At least one scriptural association, however, also suggests the moon: Isaiah 60:19. See also Proverbs 4:18–19.

HEART'S HOLLOW

SH, #173; *HaShira*, #91. The Arabic heading from Brody-Schirmann reads: "And this which speaks in dispraise of Time." **Lines 1–4:** Job 11:12, "A hollow man shall get understanding" (NJPS). Bialik-Ravnitzky comments: "Man's heart is hollow and empty, and wisdom [philosophy, thought] is obscured [or blocked] to him, and only his body and its affairs are visible and apprehensible, and people are drawn to them." In short, one is trapped in the world and in the body, and only death will offer release. **6:** Literally, "find evil [or trouble]." "Corruption" picks up on Schirmann's gloss to the previous lines. **7:** This line might also be understood as "Man in the ground rejoices in nothing." **8–9:** The implied metaphor of rebellion and struggle is that of body/servant versus master/soul (or master of the world, i.e., God). Proverbs 30:22–23; 1 Kings 16:9–10; 2 Kings 9:31. **10–11:** Micah 7:6–10: "For the son dishonoreth the father, a daughter riseth up against her mother. . . . A man's enemies are the men of his own house. But as for me, I will look unto the Lord . . . He will bring me forth to the light. . . . Who said unto me: Where is the Lord thy God? Mine eyes shall gaze upon her; Now shall she be trodden down as the mire of the streets." The English reverses the order of the Hebrew images in these lines. **14:** Ecclesiastes 8:15; Job 7:5: "My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust." **15–16:** Ecclesiastes 3:20–21: "All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all return to dust. Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upwards, and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth?" Also Ecclesiastes' closing words: "And the dust returneth to the earth, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The original has "dust returns to dust," or "clay returns to clay"; "slime" in the penultimate line picks up on Micah 7:10 (above, line 10).

day He wears a robe white as snow . . . and His face is radiant as fire from the greatness of his wisdom'” (trans. Scheindlin). **4:** Song of Songs 2:9: “My beloved is like a gazelle.” **5:** Psalms 44:24. **6:** Isaiah 13:2: “Set ye up an ensign upon the high mountain.” The Hebrew specifies Mount Hermon and (or) Senir, from which the Land of Israel can be seen. **7:** Numbers 16:26; Genesis 16:12: “And he [Ishmael] shall be a wild ass of a man.” **8:** Proverbs 5:19: “A lovely hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy thee at all times.” **9:** Song of Songs 6:3: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” **10–12:** “Chambers” is actually “palace” in the original, the same word that appears in line 1. Song of Songs 8:2: “I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother’s house, that thou might instruct me; I would cause thee to drink of the spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate.”

From *KINGDOM’S CROWN*

Keter Malkhut, ed. Y. A. Zeidman (Jerusalem, 1950); SQ, #22; *HaShira*, #108. *Kingdom’s Crown* is essentially a *baqasha*, or poem of petition, though its hybrid composition renders it in many ways unique in Hebrew literature. While it is doubtful that the poem was originally intended for synagogue use, its powerful religious emphases have led to its incorporation into the rite for the Day of Atonement, on which it is uttered quietly by individual worshipers. Current practice varies from community to community.

There are three parts to the poem: part 1 opens with an address to the Creator that gives poetic expression to the philosophical thought of *The Fountain of Life* (cantos 1–9); part 2 is a detailed (Ptolemaic) cosmology (cantos 10–32); and part 3 is a percussive confession (*vidu’i*) of human failings that returns the speaker/reader to God (cantos 33–40). My rendering of the poem takes its cue from the graphic arrangement of Y. A. Zeidman’s definitive, and out-of-print, 1950 edition *Keter Malkhut* (Jerusalem, 1950). Zeidman’s great innovation was to set the poem out in lines that highlight the rhyme and rhythmic movement of the cantos (whose prosody differs considerably from that of the monorhymed and metrical lyrics in this volume). Zeidman’s method emphasizes the symphonic nature of the work—something that the standard and prayer book editions obscure. For more on the formal aspects of the poem, as well as translation of the poem in its entirety, see *saj’*, in glossary at the back of this volume, and Cole, *Selected Ibn Gabirol*, pp. 137–95, 289–90.

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Epigraph

Lines 1–2: Job 2:21, 24:9; *Pirquei Avot* 2:2: “For the merit of their fathers is their support.” **5–6:** Literally, “I’ve set it over [at the head of] all my hymns, and called it *Kingdom’s Crown*, [or ‘the crown of the kingdom’].” With this translation of the title I have tried to emphasize the overall and abiding sense of majesty-in-creation—God’s, but also the poet’s—while maintaining the abstract aspects of

the register and its esoteric implications. Possible sources for the title include *Pirquei R. Eliezer* 23 and Esther 2:17.

from Part I: Prologue

Canto I. Line 1: Psalms 139:14. **2–5:** *Netzah* has been variously translated as “triumph,” “victory,” “glory,” and “eternity.” I Chronicles 29:11; I Samuel 19:29. I have followed the medieval commentator David Qimhi in his *Book of Roots*, where he says it implies “authority and might [or glory].” **6–7:** Psalms 102:27. **8–9:** Literally, “within whose counsel our ideas cannot stand”—Jeremiah 23:18. **11–12:** Habakkuk 3:4; Proverbs 25:2. Zeidman points out that *sod* and *yesod*—literally, “mystery/secret” and “foundation”—here stand for “form” and “matter,” key terms in Ibn Gabirol’s philosophical scheme. **13:** I.e., the four letters of the Name of God. *Qiddushin* 71a for the rabbis on Exodus 3:15, where a change of vocalization in “This is my name forever (*l’olam*)” turns “forever” into “to be kept silent [secret] (*l’alem*)”; also *Exodus Rabbah* 3:9. The knowledge of how to pronounce the four letters no longer resides with the wise. **14:** Job 26:7. **15:** Job 28:11. **16–17:** I.e., “your creatures.” Psalms 31:20. **18–21:** Psalms 102:27–28; Isaiah 6:1. See part 2, canto 24 for the location of the throne in the tenth sphere. **22–25:** The translation follows Zeidman’s gloss, especially “light’s reflection.” Lamentations 4:20; *Fountain of Life* 5:41: “And the impression of form in matter, when it reaches it from the Will, is like the return of the form of the one who gazes into a mirror at his reflection there.” Literally, “the hidden dwelling in the secret heavenly place.” **26–30:** This world and the world-to-come. *Pirquei Avot* 2:21: “He used to say: The work is not upon thee to finish, nor art thou free to desist from it. . . . Faithful is the master of thy work who will pay thee the wages of thy toil. And know that the giving of the reward to the righteous is in the time to come.” Also the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* 1, which Yarden cites (p. 43): “And they have said in the books of wisdom: This world is a bridge. Cross over it into the world-to-come [the Hereafter]. . . . For this world is a house of action, the one to come a house of reward.” **31:** Exodus 2:2: “And when she saw that he [Moses] was a goodly child, she hid him”; here the words refer to God and the reward to come. See also *Hagigah* 12a, which glosses the verse from Genesis, “And God saw the light, that it was good”—this being the primary light that could be seen from “one end of the world to the other,” but which, after witnessing the corrupt generation of the flood and the dispersion, God hid and reserved for the righteous.

Canto VII. Line 1: Psalms 36:10. **2–5:** Isaiah 59:2; Lamentations 3:44. **6–8:** The reading follows Zeidman; other Hebrew editions read: “will be revealed in the upper world of beauty.” Genesis 22:14. Also *Ta’anit* 31a. **9–12:** Isaiah 60:19: “The Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light”; Numbers 23:3: “Thou shalt see but the uttermost part of them and shalt not see them all.”

Canto IX. This entire section reverberates against the “autobiography of wisdom” as it is set forth in Proverbs 8, especially 22–31: “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, the first of His works of old.” **Lines 1–4:** Proverbs 16:22;

Jeremiah 10:14; Psalms 36:10, which also explicitly mentions the “fountain of life” that gives the poet’s major philosophical work its title. **7:** Proverbs 8:30; **8–10:** Isaiah 40:14. **11–13:** Shelomo Pines calls these and the following lines “among the most remarkable” of the poem (“‘He Called to Nothing, Which Split’: On *Keter Malkhut*” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 50 (1980): 339–47). *Genesis Rabbah* 1:2: “I was an instrument of the artistry of the Holy One, blessed be He”; Zeidman adds: “like a workman and artist [or artisan] with whose help the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world.” See note to lines 20–22. **14–15:** *Sefer Yetzira* 2:6: “He formed substance out of chaos, and made nonexistence into existence.” “According to Empedocles, vision was occasioned by particles continually flying off the surface of bodies which met with others proceeding from the eye” (*Selected Religious Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, trans. I. Zangwill, ed. I. Davidson [Philadelphia, 1923], p. 178). **16–19:** In the Hebrew the active agency and grammatical subject of these lines is God’s desire (line 12) or will. Emanating from God, this desire works like an artist, or artisan, to give shape to the world. Zeidman cites (p. 23) the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*: “And know, my brother! Every flesh-and-blood artist has need of six things in order to complete his work. . . . Primary matter, place, time, tool, vessel, and movement. . . . ; whereas the exalted Lord has no need of any of these, all of which are his creations and works.” Proverbs 9:1; *Sefer Yetzira* 1:12: “Fire from water, with it He engraved and carved the throne of glory”; Malachi 3:3. **20–22:** The interruption of part 1’s anaphora—“you are the . . .”—by “He called” signals the transition to part 2 of the poem, the cosmology. **23–26:** The imagery here is taken from the description of the wilderness sanctuary in Exodus. Exodus 26:4; Isaiah 44:24; Exodus 36:17: “And he made fifty loops upon the edge of the curtain that was outmost in the first coupling [set],” where “coupling” is understood, by Zeidman, as referring to the system of the spheres. In the scheme laid out here, God’s desire or will—literally, “the power [of his/its hand]” (Ibn Gabirol identifies God’s will as “the power of unification”)—reaches from the highest “innermost chamber” of the tenth sphere (canto 24) to the “outermost edge” of the lower creation, with earth at its center. See also Isaiah 40:12: “Who has . . . meted out the heavens with his span.”

from Part II: The Cosmology

Readers of *Kingdom’s Crown* have long had a certain prejudice against this section of the poem. The rabbis of the Middle Ages were concerned about its confusion of science and religion; twentieth-century teachers have suggested that students would be more interested in the emotionalism of parts 1 and 3, and that the detail of part 2 was something of an acquired taste. To my mind, it is precisely the musical and physical detail of part 2 that establishes the palpable sense of grandeur and kingdom that are central to the poem.

Canto X. Line 1: Part 2 begins at the center of the Ptolemaic universe, with the sublunary sphere—the globe of earth and water surrounded by air and fire. The poem then begins its ascent up through the ten spheres of the moon,

Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the fixed stars (the zodiac), the all-encompassing (diurnal) sphere, and the sphere of intelligence (the source of angels). Above this tenth sphere is the “place of the souls of the righteous after death,” universal matter, the Throne of Glory, and the “Effulgence of Divine Glory: the Source of Soul” (see R. Loewe, *Ibn Gabirol* [New York, 1989], p. 114). Psalms 106:2. **2:** Zeidman notes that the notion of the earth as a sphere appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 3:1): “It is said: The earth is made like a ball . . . R. Yonah said: Alexander of Macedon, when he asked to ascend on high and ascended on high, rose until he saw the earth as a ball and the seas as a bowl”; the full term “ball of earth,” he notes, was renewed in Hebrew by Ibn Gabirol. Prior to that it appears, of course, in Pythagoras, and the Muslim cosmographers drew on earlier Greek sources. *The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (cited in Loewe, *Ibn Gabirol*, p. 181): “The parts of the water were lighter than the parts of the land and the water stood over the land. And since the parts of the wind were lighter than the water the wind was set over the water.” **3:** For more on Ibn Gabirol’s treatment of the elements, see his early ethical treatise *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*. **4:** In an effort to establish a sense of motion and dimension, and to maintain the musical flow of the poem, I have varied the English for *galgal* throughout—here “wheel,” but a few lines later “circle,” or “circuit,” and elsewhere “sphere.” **5:** Ecclesiastes 1:6. **10:** Ibn Gabirol, *Fountain of Life* 1:5: “The universal essence . . . is not unified, however, . . . it is reduced to two principles . . . the universal matter and universal form.” **11:** Hosea 2:2: “And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint themselves one head, and shall go up out of the land.” The *shibbutz* again employs the biblical phrase in a different context entirely. **13:** Genesis 2:10: “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became four heads.” Avraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary (M. Friedlander, *Essays on the Writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra* [London, n. d.], p. 40) reads as follows: “And now I will reveal to you by allusion the secret of the garden and the rivers. . . . And I have not found this matter discussed by any of the sages except R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol, who was a great sage and saw into the matters of the soul’s mystery. . . . And the ‘river’—is like a mother (which is to say, the universal natural common matter) to all bodies; and the ‘four heads’ [fonts]—are the roots [the elements of fire, wind, water, dust].” In the standard editions of his commentary Ibn Ezra writes: “And he who understands this mystery will understand how the river diverges.”

Canto XIV. Lines 1–5: Isaiah 61:10. **6–8:** As Raphael Loewe has demonstrated, the measurements Ibn Gabirol refers to are remarkably close to modern computations throughout the poem. For precise figures see Loewe’s *Ibn Gabirol* and the notes to the poem in Cole, *Selected Gabirol*. **9:** *Baraita de Shmu’el HaQatan* 9: “Venus is appointed over charm and grace and love, and over passion and desire and fruitfulness and over increase of humankind and beasts, and over the fruit of the land and the fruit of the tree”; *Ketubah* 8a: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, . . . who

hast created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, rejoicing and song, mirth and delight.” 15–16: Deuteronomy 33:14: “precious things of the fruits of the sun . . . and the precious things of the yield of the moon.”

Canto XVI. Lines 1–4: This canto is still about the sun. Genesis 1:14. 4–8: Genesis 1:12; Job 38:31; *Genesis Rabbah* 10:6: “R. Simon said: There is not a single herb that does not have a constellation in heaven which strikes it and says, ‘Grow,’ . . . R. Hannina b. Papa and R. Simon said: Pleiades binds the fruit and Orion draws it out between knot and knot, as it is written, ‘*Canst thou lead forth the constellations in season?*’ (Job 38:32). R. Tanhum b. R. Hiyya and R. Simon said: The constellation which ripens the fruits.” 24: Psalms 78:4. 26: Daniel 1:4. 28: Genesis 24:10: “All the goods of his master [Abraham] were in his hand.” Ratzhaby notes the Arabic proverb from which the line might also derive: “The power of the servant [derives] from the power of his lord.”

Canto XXIV. Line 4: 1 Kings 6:17: “The house, that is, the Temple, before [the Sanctuary]”—where the Hebrew for Temple is *heikhal*, and might also be translated “palace” or “chamber.” 5: Leviticus 27:32: “Every tenth . . . shall be holy to the Lord.” 9: Habakkuk 3:4. 10–13: Song of Songs 3:9–10. “Throne” (*matzava*) or “base” has a variant reading, *misba*, “couch” or “table”—Song of Songs 1:12: “while the king sat at his table.” 15–16: Genesis 4:7: “unto thee is its desire.”

Canto XXVII. Lines 1–3: *Shabbat* 152b: “R. Eliezer said: The souls of the righteous are hidden under the Throne of Glory.” 4–6: 1 Samuel 25:29. 7–9: Isaiah 40:31; Job 3:17; *Genesis Rabbah* 9:7, Esther 9:16. The verse involves a play on Genesis 9:19: “The sons of Noah”; *no’ah* also means “rest” in Esther 9:16. 11: *Berakhot* 17a on the pleasures of the world to come; cf. below (line 16). 14: Exodus 38:8. 16–20: Descriptions of the world to come and its pleasures abound in rabbinic literature. See, for an elaborate example, *Yalqut Shim’oni* to Genesis (in Zeidman). A more concise description is found in *Berakhot* 17a: “In the future world there is no eating nor drinking nor propagation nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the divine presence, as it says, *And they beheld God, and did eat and drink* (Exodus 24:11).” Also Avraham Ibn Hasdai’s *Ben HaMelekh veHaNazir*, chapter 35, on the pleasures of the “world of intelligence and mind, which have absolutely nothing in common with any other kind of pleasure.” 21–24: Numbers 13:27: “A land [that]. . . floweth with milk and honey, and this is the fruit of it.”

Canto XXVIII. Lines 1–4: The translation follows Zeidman’s commentary. 5–6: *Hagigah* 12b: “*Araboth* is that in which there are Right and Judgment and Righteousness; the treasures of life and the heavens of peace and the heavens of blessing, the souls of the righteous and the spirits and the souls which are yet to be born.” 7–8: Isaiah 59:20. 9–10: Isaiah 30:33; Ezekiel 38:22; Hosea 6:7; *Yalqut Shim’oni*, Ecclesiastes, 976: “He created the Garden of Eden [beside] Gehinnom so that one could be saved from the other, and what is the space between them? R. Haninah said: A wall the width of a hand-breadth.” 11–13: Proverbs 22:14. 14–19: Zechariah 14:6; Job 24:15; Deuteronomy 4:11; Genesis 15:17; *Hagigah* 12b.

20–23: Habakkuk 1:2: “O Lord, Thou hast ordained them for judgment, and Thou, O Rock, hast established them for correction”; Job 37:13: “They are turned about by His guidance. . . . Whether it be for correction, or for His earth, or for mercy, that He cause it to come.”

Canto XXIX. Lines 1–5: Ezekiel 28:7, 28:17; Isaiah 51:1. **6–10:** Numbers 11:17. **11–14:** Psalms 29:7; Isaiah 30:33; Genesis 2:15; Exodus 3:2: “The bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.” **15–16:** See note to canto 9, line 14; Exodus 19:18: “Now Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire.”

Canto XXXI. Lines 4–5: Proverbs 15:22; Jonah 4:6. **6–7:** Job 33:6; Genesis 2:7. **8:** Numbers 11:17. **11–12:** Literally, “you’ve shut him [man].” Likewise in the following two lines, where the translation continues the first person plural. **13–14:** Exodus 25:11: “Within and without shalt thou overlay it,” where Ibn Gabirol plays both on *titzapenu* (“thou shalt overlay it”)—taking it to mean “thou shalt see it” (also *titzapenu*)—and on “within” (the body/the home) and “without.”

from Part III: Confession

Canto XXXIII. Having ascended as high as one might ascend, and mapped the cosmos, the poem now picks up where the final cantos of part 2 left off, with the link between God, man, and man’s conduct in the world. **Lines 1–4:** Ezra 9:6; Jeremiah 22:22. Also *Berakhot* 17a: “Raba on concluding his prayer added the following: My God, before I was formed I was not worthy [to be formed] and now that I have been formed I am as if I had not been formed. I am dust in my lifetime, all the more in my death. Behold, I am before Thee like a vessel full of shame and confusion.” **12–13:** Job 7:5; Genesis 2:7. **14:** Habakkuk 2:19: “Woe to him that says to the wood ‘Awake!’; to the dumb stone, ‘Arise!’” **15:** Psalms 144:4. **16:** Psalms 78:39. **17:** Psalms 140:4. **18:** I.e., a heart uncircumcised, as in Jeremiah 9:25. See also Jeremiah 17:9. **19:** Proverbs 19:19. **20–22:** Proverbs 6:18, 14:12, 19:2, 28:18; Isaiah 6:5; Psalms 101:5. **23–26:** *Yoma* 87b: “What are we, and what is our life?”; Isaiah 40:17; Deuteronomy 31:27. **27:** *Pirquei Avot* 3:1: “Know whence thou camest, and whither thou art going, and before whom thou art destined to give account and reckoning.” **28–29:** Esther 4:16. *Ta’anit* 7b: “Any man who is insolent stumbles in the end.” **30–33:** Ezekiel 6:9, 22:24. **34–35:** *Pirquei Avot* 1:13: “A name that is widespread loses its fame; one who does not add [to his knowledge] causes [it] to cease.”

Canto XL. Line 4: Cf. The liturgy for the Day of Atonement, *Avinu Malkeinu*: “Our father, our King, be gracious unto us and answer us, though we have no worthy deeds.” **5–10:** Nehemiah 5:13; Isaiah 24; Hosea 10:1; Esther 8:5; 1 Kings 8:38. **14ff.:** The liturgy for the Day of Atonement—“May it be Thy will . . . again in Thine abundant compassion to have mercy upon us and upon Thy Sanctuary.” The syntax in the Hebrew is somewhat unusual as well. **17:** Genesis 45:10. **18:** Zeidman has: “Remember me in the order of peace.” **19–20:** Psalms 4:7; Numbers 6:25–26, and the Priestly Blessing: “The Lord make His face [to] shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee, the Lord lift up His countenance to thee and

give thee peace.” **21–22:** Psalms 103:10, 39:9. **23–24:** Psalms 102:25, 27:9. **25–26:** Psalms 51:4, 51:13. **27–28:** Psalms 71:20, 73:24. **29–33:** Genesis 15:1; Hosea 11:7. **34–36:** Psalms 17:14. **37–39:** Job 33:30; Psalms 89:16, 71:20. **41–42:** Isaiah 12:1. **43–45:** Psalms 62:13. **46–47:** The morning liturgy for Shabbat and festivals, *U’bemaqhalot*: “For this is the duty of all creatures towards Thee, O Lord . . . to give thanks unto Thee, to laud, adore, and praise Thee.” **48–55:** The morning liturgy for Shabbat and Festivals, *Shokhen ‘ad*: “It is befitting for the upright to praise Him . . .,” etc. The lines of the poem follow the outline of the prayer: “Hallowed in the mouth of the holy” is, literally, “the mouth of those who hallow (sanctify) you,” i.e., the holy ones, as in the prayer. **56–57:** Psalms 86:8: “For there is none like unto Thee among the gods, O Lord, and there are no works like Thine.” **58–61:** These lines incorporate elements of the end of the *‘amida* prayer and Psalms 19:15: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before Thee, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

YITZHAQ IBN GHIYYAT

MY WANDERING

Shirei R. Yitzhaq Ibn Ghiyyat, ed. Y. David (Jerusalem, 1987), #98; *HaShira* #127. A *ge’ula* in the form of a *muwashshah*. Schirmann, who calls this “a remarkable poem,” notes that it takes to an extreme the notion that the hardships forced on the people of Israel are in fact its greatest source of pleasure and hope. As such, it echoes the *Udhri* tradition of Arabic love poetry, where suffering in love is central. (See Yehuda HaLevi, “Love’s Dwelling” and the commentary there.) **Line 3:** Exodus 6:5. **6:** Proverbs 23:13. **8:** Proverbs 3:11. **9–10:** Isaiah 52:2. **13:** Lamentations 3:19. **18:** Literally, “they incense me with no-god,” as in Deuteronomy 32:21. **33–34:** Numbers 33:55; Isaiah 17:11. **35:** God is the speaker in the final stanza. **40:** The pronoun in the Hebrew is “it” (or “him”)—literally, “I’ll place him.” Schirmann comments that it refers to “my love,” or “he who loves me,” i.e., the people of Israel, which the Lord will set over all other peoples. I have inserted the third-person plural for clarity, as both “it” “him” would be confusing. **44:** Deuteronomy 28:65.

YOSEF IBN SAHL

THE FLEAS

Schirmann, *Shirim Hadashim min HaGeniza*, p. 212. This is the first of several highly entertaining flea (or fly) poems in the medieval Hebrew tradition. See also Abraham Ibn Ezra’s “The Flies” and Alahdab’s “Another Flea,” as well as Alharizi’s hilarious prose passage about fleas in the *Tahkemoni* (Gate 4—not translated here). **Line 6:** Isaiah 8:12. **10:** 2 Samuel 5:24. **14:** Song of Songs 6:11.

YITZHAQ IBN SAHULA

The reader of *Meshal HaQadmoni* may wonder why its otherwise qabbalistically inclined author chose to leave all traces of mysticism out of his work (though this is the first work in which *The Zohar* is mentioned). Raphael Loewe suggests that he did so for several reasons: (1) the work was intended for ordinary, not esoteric, readers; (2) Maimonides (who appears in the book in thinly disguised form) is the model of the ideal man for the author and his readers, and he came down—famously—on the nonmystical (i.e., rationalist) side of the medieval debate over faith; and (3) the denunciation of astrology in the work might have seemed to Ibn Sahula somehow at odds with a presentation of mystical doctrine. (See Ibn Sahula, *Meshal HaQadmoni: Fables from the Distant Past*, ed. and trans. Raphael Loewe (Oxford, 2004), pp. xxiii–xxiv.) The other curious detail of the qabbalistic matrix behind the book is that *The Zohar*'s principal author, Moshe de Leon, at one point identifies himself as the author of a work that is also called *Meshal HaQadmoni*. While it seems odd that two books, by two friends, would emerge from the same part of Spain with precisely the same title at roughly the same time, scholars have been unable to identify the book de Leon referred to, and the mystery of the “other” *Meshal HaQadmoni* remains unsolved.

THE CYNIC SPEAKS

Meshal HaQadmoni, ed. Y. Zemora (Tel Aviv, 1952), vol. 1, chapter 4, pp. 22–23. **Line 7–8:** Ecclesiastes 2:10; Psalms 46:1. **11–12:** Isaiah 22:18.

ON HUMILITY

Meshal HaQadmoni, vol. 4, chapter 60, p. 232. **Line 1:** Isaiah 18:3. **2:** Lamentations 4:6. **10:** 1 Samuel 18:8.

AVRAHAM ABULAFIA

Just why there isn't more first-rate qabbalistic Hebrew poetry from Spain (or elsewhere, for that matter) has been a matter of some speculation. Gershom's Scholem's works are peppered with indications that he considers the subject of qabbalistic poetry a promising one for study, and he finds far more Qabbala in verse than do other scholars, such as Schirmann and Fleischer. Fleischer speculates that the paucity of qabbalistic poems may have something to do with the cerebral nature of Jewish mysticism on the one hand and the secular foundations of Spanish-Hebrew poetry on the other. Schirmann laments the fact that the qabbalists simply weren't good poets, or had a hard time expressing their complex thought and theories in poetry. More recently Moshe Idel has suggested that

the qabbalistic emphasis on *mitzvot*, the observance of the commandments within a mystical framework, in many ways occupied the place in Jewish mysticism that poetry occupied in the mystical traditions of other faiths; that is, the mystical performance of the commandments cathected the psychic energy that might otherwise have gone into the making of poems.

FROM *THE BOOK OF THE LETTER*

In making these selections from the some fourteen hundred lines of verse in *The Book of the Letter*, I have tried to give a sense of the poem's various modes (lyrical, narrative, apocalyptic) as well as its shifting rhythms and moods; I have not, however, included any of the most obscure language-centered passages, which are composed entirely of neologisms. Apart from the first section, the excerpts here are taken from the final 350 lines of the poem. My annotation is based on Moshe Idel's *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1988), pp. 95–105 and 157–58) and Scholem's lecture on Abulafia, published in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1946), pp. 119–55. For more detailed summaries of Abulafia's thought, see Idel (above), and *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1989), and Colette Sirat's *History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1985). The speaker in this poem is one Zekharyahu, whose name is numerologically equivalent to "Avraham," and the book has also been called *Sefer Zekharyahu*.

And the letter is longing:

Sefer ha'Ot: Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia, ed. A. D. Jellinek, in *Jubelschrift zum Sibzigsten Geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz, Breslau, 1897*, section 4, p. 70; M. Idel's manuscript (given to this translator), p. 5a, lines 277–88. The Hebrew involves anagrammatic play on "the letter" (*ha'ot*—*heh*, *aleph*, *vuv*, *tav*) and "desire" (*ta'ava*—*tav*, *aleph*, *vav*, *heh*), both of which are formed from four letters: *heh*, *aleph*, *vuv*, *tav*; in the same way the poem plays with "sky" (*hashahaq*) and "desire" (*hahosheq*—literally, "the one who desires"), both of which employ *heh*, *het*, *vuv*, *shin*, *quf*; in both cases only the vocalization differs. To get a sense of that dimension one might translate the opening as: "And the sign sings, / and sky is key / to knowing the will."

And YHVH spoke:

Jellinek, section 6, p. 81; Idel MS, p. 17a. "The letter" (or "sign") in Abulafia's thought indicates Active Intellect. Kingdom and Law are one of several conflicting forces that appear in the poem, and in Abulafia's thought generally. "Your father and mother" here are most likely Adam and Eve. Throughout his work Abulafia makes extensive use of Hebrew numerology (*gematria*); here, for instance, "my father and mother" = 70 = blood and ink = Adam and Eve. "And ink" = 26 = YHVH, while the pronounced form of the divine name (*Yod Heh Vav Heh*) = 44 = blood. The Sabbath's triumph over the days of the week is the triumph of the sacred over the profane, but also of intellect over imagination, and life

over death. In *Sefer HaMelitz*, Abulafia writes: “A line of life, a line of ink; and a line of death, a line of blood.” Elsewhere he states plainly: “‘Adam and Eve’ in numerology equals ‘my father and mother,’ and their secret is blood and ink, and this latter is proven by this name, יחַוּחַ, and one who merits it will have engraved upon his forehead a *tav* [the Hebrew letter]—for one a *tav* of blood, for the other a *tav* of ink.” He goes on to derive the significance of that *tav* from its combination, when it is written out, with ink (*dyo*) in the word *yoledet* (she gives birth), as opposed to that of blood (*dam*) in *muledet* (she is born). In the former (*yoledet*), the letters *yod*, *lamed*, and *dalet* are combined with the *tav*; in the latter, the same three letters are combined with *mem* (as in blood). A follower of Abulafia’s thought, Isaac of Acre (in the thirteenth–mid-fourteenth century) writes: “The blood alludes to the secret of the sacrifices and the prayers, while ink is like the writing of the Torah in ink upon a book.” All of the above is drawn from Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abulafia*, pp. 96, 99, 155, and 158.

The Lord showed me:

Jellinek, section 7, p. 8r; Idel MS, pp. 18a–b. The vision of the man and his army is met with fear on the part of the poet-seer, which, as Idel notes (*Mystical Experience*, p. 119), might be taken as either a Jungian fear of encounter with the inner Self or a Rudolph Otto–like dread and awe before the “wholly Other.” Referring to another of Abulafia’s works (*Sitrei Torah*) in which the poet-seer cites *Sefer Yetzira* 5:2—“the heart in soul [i.e., within man] is like the king in a battle”—Idel is convinced of the internal nature of the events described. The man himself is an external product of the “intellectual flow.” The sign or letter on the man’s forehead, which stands for the letters of the divine name, becomes the fount of seventy tongues, that is, the Active Intellect. “The Active Intellect is the potion of life for those who are able to receive its flux, while for those who are unable to do so it is the potion of death” (Idel, p. 97). Likewise, the transformation of the colors here—black to red and vice versa—is indicative of the dual potential of the letter. *Shabbat* 55a: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Gabriel: Go and record upon the forehead of the righteous a line of ink, that the angels of destruction may not rule over them; and upon the foreheads of the wicked a line of blood, so that the angels of destruction may rule over them.” At the end of this section, the phrase “and turned into another man” alludes to 1 Samuel 10:7, where prophecy itself transforms Saul.

And from the bow of knowing:

Jellinek, section 7, pp. 82–83; Idel MS, pp. 20a–20b.

And I lifted up my eyes:

Jellinek, section 7, p. 83; Idel MS, pp. 22a–23b. “The stone that drew it” is in Hebrew *even zohelet* (the stone of Zohelet—literally, a creeping stone), from 1 Kings 1:9, where Adonijah slays sheep and oxen, but here Abulafia seems to be describing a “magnet.” Later in the poem Abulafia says that the stone of Zohelet is the mind disturbed with terror and fear. “Vi.s.i.o.n” is marked (in the Hebrew) to indicate an acronym, most likely for *meshalim*, *remazim*, *aggadot*, *halakhot* (parables,