

EXCHANGE AND TRANSMISSION ACROSS CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

PHILOSOPHY, MYSTICISM AND SCIENCE
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

Proceedings of an International Workshop Held in Memory of
PROFESSOR SHLOMO PINES
at The Institute for Advanced Studies
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
28 February – 2 March 2005

Edited by

HAGGAI BEN-SHAMMAI SHAUL SHAKED

SARAH STROUMSA

JERUSALEM 2013

THE ISRAEL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

Copy Editors: Miriam Himmelfarb and Deborah Greniman

Production: Yehuda Greenbaum

ISBN 978-965-208-188-9

©

The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013

Typesetting: yy.gamliel@gmail.com

Printed in Israel by . . . Jerusalem

CONTENTS

Preface	vii
<i>Haggai Ben-Shammai</i> <i>Ṣuḥuf</i> in the Qurʾān – A Loan Translation for ‘Apocalypses’	1
<i>Patricia Crone</i> The <i>Book of Watchers</i> in the Qurʾān	16
<i>Gad Freudenthal</i> Abraham Ibn Ezra and Judah Ibn Tibbon as Cultural Intermediaries: Early Stages in the Introduction of Non-Rabbinic Learning into Provence in the Mid-Twelfth Century	52
<i>Steven Harvey</i> Avicenna and Maimonides on Prayer and Intellectual Worship	82
<i>Warren Zev Harvey</i> Arabic and Latin Elements in Ḥasdai Crescas’s Philosophy	106
<i>Y. Tzvi Langermann</i> An Early Jewish Defence of Creationism	116
<i>Yehuda Liebes</i> The Platonic Source for the Philosophical Riddle and How It Is Used in Ibn Gabirol’s Poem ‘I Love You’	148
<i>Josep Puig Montada</i> Eliahu del Medigo, the Last Averroist	155
<i>James T. Robinson</i> Secondary Forms of Transmission: Teaching and Preaching Philosophy in Thirteenth-Century Provence	187
<i>Shaul Shaked</i> The Sayings of Wuzurgmihr the Sage – A Piece of Sasanian Wisdom Transmitted into Arabic	216
<i>Sarah Stroumsa</i> Philosophy as Wisdom: On the Christians’ Role in the Translation of Philosophical Material into Arabic	276
Contributors to This Volume	295

The Platonic Source for the Philosophical Riddle and How It Is Used in Ibn Gabirol's Poem 'I Love You'

Yehuda Liebes

אהבתיך כאהבת איש יחידו / בכל לבו ונפשו ומאודו
וששתי על לבבך אשר תר / להבין סוד פעולת צור ילדו
והדבר מאוד עמוק ורחוק / ומי ידע ומי יבין יסודו
אבל אגיד לך דבר שמעתיו / ועליך להתבונן בסודו
חכמים אמרו כי סוד היות כול / למען כל אשר הכול בידו
והוא נכסף לשומו יש כמו יש / כמו חושק אשר נכסף לדודו
ואולי זה ידמו הנביאים / באמרם כי בראו על כבודו
השיבותי לך דבר ואתה / תנה מופת למען העמידו

Translation:

I've loved¹ you as a man who loves his sole one,
With all his heart and his soul too and his vim,
And took great joy about your heart which did seek
To see the secret act of God who bore him.
Now this idea's very deep and remote,
And who can know and understand its bedrock;
Yet I'll relate to you a thing which I heard,
And you reflect upon its secret that's locked.
The wise had said the secret of the being of All
Is for All's sake for whom all is in His hand,
And He aspires to make it be like that Be
Just like a lover whose desire's for his friend.
Perhaps that is what prophets did allude to
When the said He had made it for His name's sake;

1 I prefer to render *ahavtikha* as 'I love,' in the present tense, as I have done in the title of this article.

I've given you reply, and now it's you
Who must find proof in order that it will stand.

This poem by Solomon ibn Gabirol,² with the philosophical riddle at its heart, has fascinated scholars, making it perhaps the most widely interpreted medieval Hebrew text. I, too, devoted a lengthy article to it, to which I refer the reader for my own interpretation of both the poem as a whole (including some critical remarks on the text) and the riddle within it.³ I now intend to provide the riddle with its literary source, and to demonstrate that my interpretation generally holds for this source as well.

The poet himself tells us that he heard the riddle from some 'sages.' Up to now, no scholar, to my knowledge, has succeeded in identifying its exact source, but it is generally assumed to have something to do with Platonic (or Neoplatonic) philosophy, with which it is indeed suffused. In my above-cited article, I adduced a number of literary parallels, some by Gabirol himself – in his poetry and in his philosophical work *Fons Vitae* (which I believe was written after this poem) – and others from what I saw as possible sources. These included passages in the *Sefer yetsira* and in the commentary on it by Saadya Gaon, and others drawn from Gnostic and Neoplatonic literature in both Greek and Arabic, and from Plato himself (in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere). But all these possible sources shed light only on the philosophical-theological aspect of the riddle and do not relate to its personal aspect, which, to my mind, is the very essence of both the riddle and the poem. Now I believe I have identified the riddle's principal source, in the second letter of Plato. Here lies the key to all its elements.

F. Bargebuhr did adduce this text in his magisterial article on the poem's philosophical meaning. In connection with Gabirol's concept of the relationship between God and the universe, he remarks: 'The Hebrew wording has its support in Proverbs 16:4 (similarly Plato, in his second letter, speaks

2 *Secular Poetry of Solomon ibn Gabirol*, ed. Haim Brody and Jefim (Haim) Schirmann, Jerusalem 1974, no. 24, p. 17. The translation is by the late A. Leo Motzkin and was given to me by him. Though it occasionally differs from my own interpretation of the poem, I find it superior to the many other translations, and it preserves some of the rhythm of the original.

3 Yehuda Liebes, 'Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Use of the *Sefer Yesira* and a Commentary on the Poem "I Love Thee,"' in J. Dan (ed.), *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, Jerusalem 1987 (= Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 6/3–4), pp. 73–123 (in Hebrew); also at <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar/gabirol.doc>.

of a king in whose hands everything remains).⁴ But this short, parenthetical comment does not expressly assert the passage from Plato as Gabirol's source; it refers only to a general resemblance between the two with regard to the philosophical element, for which other examples can be adduced as well.⁵ Bargebuhr's remark elicited no further scholarly discussion, and I myself noticed it only after preparing the first draft of the present paper.

The comparison I suggest is much wider and takes into account the parallels in the wording and style of both texts, which are both phrased as riddles and expressly so defined by their authors. At their center lies the word All, reiterated several times. Both texts are written in response to the respective disciple's wish to solve the mystery of creation, which is deemed by the writer to be beyond the disciple's ability at the present point in the course of his education. In both cases, this seems to be the rationale for phrasing the mystery's solution as a riddle.

But the main ground for comparison lies in the human or social contexts of the two texts. I interpret Gabirol's poem as a love poem rather than a philosophical one, with the philosophical riddle serving as an instructive and pedagogical means towards an erotic end. The cosmogonical relationship between creator and universe is used to elucidate the desired relationship between the poet and his beloved disciple, which will be actualized once the disciple has become educated enough (by means of instructional exercises like this riddle) to make him fit to receive the teacher's love.

Plato's letter, too, was designated for a particular student, who had to be educated towards a specific personal end. Its addressee was Dionysius II, tyrant of Syracuse, son of Dionysius I and nephew of Plato's friend Dion, who deposed Dionysius II but was murdered before he could complete Plato's politico-philosophical plan. When Plato wrote his letter, however, he was still hoping to educate Dionysius II and through him to implement his political ideas;⁶ the whole letter is dedicated to a rather desperate attempt to heal the initial breach in their relationship. Plato's goal thus was admittedly

4 Frederick P. Bargebuhr, 'Gabirol's Poem Beginning "Ahavtikha..."', *Review of Religion*, 15 (1950), p. 11.

5 In my article 'Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Use of the *Sefer Yesira*' (above, note 3), I adduced several ancient passages in which the word 'All' recurs in more than one significance, along with some other medieval 'All' riddles; see *ibid.*, pp. 117–123. Other ancient examples may be found in Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God*, Tel-Aviv 2004, pp. 299, 314–316, and note 126 (in Hebrew).

6 My late father Joseph Gerhard Liebes wrote about Plato's relationship with Dionysius and his dynasty and the part it plays in Platonic philosophy in his book *Plato: His Life and Work*, Jerusalem 1969 (in Hebrew).

different from Gabirol's, in that it was political rather than erotic. This difference, which diminishes when we take into account the philosophical dimension of both goals, may account for the major variance between Gabirol's version of the riddle and its Platonic source: Plato speaks of the first being as of a 'king,' whereas Gabirol only alludes to kingship⁷ and invokes erotic terms. That is because Plato wished to make a good king out of Dionysius, while Gabirol desired but a loving friend; both, apparently, were eventually disappointed. However, while the love relation between God and the world is not expressed in this second Platonic letter, it is nevertheless a central idea in the Platonic world and appears in many places in Plato's writings and those of the Neoplatonists.⁸

I reproduce here not only Plato's version of the riddle, but also some of its context, in which Plato indicates the internal difficulty of the philosophical subject, the manner of approaching it, and how Dionysius's understanding of it ought to affect their relationship. This passage should thus be seen as the source not only of the philosophical riddle in Gabirol's poem, but also of its context and pedagogical meaning. When the passage as a whole is juxtaposed to the poem, I believe the similarity speaks for itself.

Φῆς γὰρ δὴ κατὰ τὸν ἐκείνου λόγον, οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἀποδεδειχθαί σοι περὶ τῆς τοῦ πρώτου φύσεως. Φραστέον δὴ σοι δι' αἰνιγμῶν, ἵν' ἂν τι ἡ δέλτος ἢ πόντου ἢ γῆς ἐν πτυχαῖς πάθῃ, ὁ ἀναγνούς μὴ γνῶ.

Ὡδὲ γὰρ ἔχει. Περὶ τὸν πάντων βασιλέα πάντ' ἐστὶ καὶ ἐκείνου ἕνεκα πάντα, καὶ ἐκεῖνο αἴτιον ἀπάντων τῶν καλῶν· δεύτερον δὲ πέρι τὰ δεύτερα, καὶ τρίτον πέρι τὰ τρίτα. ἡ οὖν ἀνθρωπίνη ψυχὴ περὶ αὐτὰ ὁρέγεται μαθεῖν ποῦ ἅττα ἐστίν, βλέπουσα εἰς τὰ αὐτῆς συγγενῇ, ὣν οὐδὲν ἱκανῶς ἔχει.

Τοῦ δὴ βασιλέως πέρι καὶ ὧν εἶπον, οὐδὲν ἐστὶν τοιοῦτον – τὸ δὲ μετὰ τοῦτο ἡ ψυχὴ φησιν – ἀλλὰ ποῖόν τι μὴν; τοῦτ' ἐστίν, ὃ παῖ Διονυσίου καὶ Δωρίδος, τὸ ἐρώτημα ὃ πάντων αἰτίον ἐστὶν κακῶν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἡ περὶ τούτου ὥδις ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἐγγιγνομένη, ἣν εἰ μὴ τις ἐξαιρεθῆσεται, τῆς ἀληθείας ὄντως οὐ μὴ ποτε τύχη.

7 'Has all in his hand.' According to my colleague Ze'ev Harvey, the poem contains further kingly allusions to the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, both of which are ascribed to King Solomon, with whom Gabirol, whose first name was Solomon, somehow identifies. Harvey also sees an allusion to Is. 43:15, where the Creator is called King (personal communication).

8 See Bargebuhr, 'Gabirol's Poem' (above, note 4), pp. 12–15, and my article, 'Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Use of the *Sefer Yesira*' (above, note 3), pp. 117–120.

Σὺ δὲ τοῦτο πρὸς ἐμὲ ἐν τῷ κήπῳ ὑπὸ ταῖς δάφναις αὐτὸς ἔφησθα ἐννεοηκέναι καὶ εἶναι σὸν εὖρημα· καὶ ἐγὼ εἶπον ὅτι τοῦτο εἰ φαίνοιτό σοι οὕτως ἔχειν, πολλῶν ἂν εἴης λόγων ἐμὲ ἀπολελυκώς. Οὐ μὴν ἄλλω γέ ποτ' ἔφην ἐντετυχηκέναι τοῦθ' ἡύρηκότι, ἀλλὰ ἢ πολλή μοι πραγματεία περὶ τοῦτ' εἴη· σὺ δὲ ἴσως μὲν ἀκούσας του, τάχα δ' ἂν θεία μοίρα κατὰ τοῦθ' ὀρμήσας, ἔπειτα αὐτοῦ τὰς ἀποδείξεις ὥς ἔχων βεβαίως οὐ κατέδησας, ἀλλ' ἄττει σοι τοτὲ μὲν οὕτως, τοτὲ δὲ ἄλλως περὶ τὸ φανταζόμενον, τὸ δὲ οὐδέν ἐστιν τοιοῦτον. Καὶ τοῦτο οὐ σοὶ μόνῳ γέγονεν, ἀλλ' εὖ ἴσθι μηδένα πώποτε μου τὸ πρῶτον ἀκούσαντα ἔχειν ἄλλως πῶς ἢ οὕτως κατ' ἀρχάς, καὶ ὁ μὲν πλείω ἔχων πράγματα, ὁ δὲ ἐλάττω, μόγις ἀπαλλάττονται, σχεδὸν δὲ οὐδεὶς ὀλίγα.

Τούτων δὴ γεγονόντων καὶ ἐχόντων οὕτω, σχεδὸν κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν ἡύρηκαμεν ὃ σὺ ἐπέστειλας, ὅπως δεῖ πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἡμᾶς ἔχειν. Ἐπεὶ γὰρ βασανίζεις αὐτὰ συγγιγνόμενός τε ἄλλοις καὶ παραθεώμενος παρὰ τὰ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ αὐτὰ καθ' αὐτά, νῦν σοι ταῦτά τε, εἰ ἀληθὴς ἢ βάσανος, προσφύσεται, καὶ οἰκεῖος τούτοις τε καὶ ἡμῖν ἔση.⁹

Translation:

You say that you have not had a sufficient demonstration of the doctrine concerning the nature of 'the First.' Now I must expound it to you in a riddling way in order that, should the tablet come to any harm 'in folds of ocean or of earth,' he that readeth may not understand.

The matter stands thus: Related to¹⁰ the King of All are all things, and for his sake they are, and of all things fair He is the cause. And related to the Second are the second things and related to the Third the third. About these, then, the human soul strives to learn, looking to the things that are akin to itself, whereof none is fully perfect.

But as to the King and the objects I have mentioned, they are of quite different quality. In the next place the soul inquires – 'Well then, what quality have they?' But the cause of all the mischief, O son of Dionysius and Doris, lies in this very question, or rather in the travail which this question creates in the soul; and unless a man delivers himself from this he will never really attain the truth.

You, however, declared to me in the garden, under the laurels, that you

9 Plato, *Epistulae* (II), 3.312d–313d. The text here is the same as that on the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG) site, based on J. Burnet, *Platonis opera*, V, Oxford 1907 (reprinted 1967).

10 Another possible translation is 'Turning about' (Y. L.).

had formed this notion yourself and that it was a discovery of your own; and I made answer that if it was plain to you that this was so, you would have saved me from a long discourse. I said, however, that I had never met with any other person who had made this discovery; on the contrary most of the trouble I had was about this very problem. So then, after you had either, as is probable, got the true solution from someone else, or had possibly (by Heaven's favor) hit on it yourself, you fancied you had a firm grip on the proofs of it, and so you omitted to make them fast;¹¹ thus your view of the truth sways now this way, now that, round about the apparent object; whereas the true object is wholly different. Nor are you alone in this experience; on the contrary, there has never yet been anyone, I assure you, who has not suffered the same confusion at the beginning, when he first learnt this doctrine from me; and they all overcome it with difficulty, one man having more trouble and another less, but scarcely a single one of them escapes with but little.

So now that this has occurred, and things are in this state, we have pretty well found an answer, as I think, to the question how we ought to behave towards each other. For seeing that you are testing my doctrines both by attending the lectures of other teachers and by examining my teaching side by side with theirs, as well as by itself, then, if the test you make is a true one, not only will these doctrines implant themselves now in your mind, but you also will be devoted both to them and to us.¹²

The precise solution to Plato's riddle is unclear. Some say that it should not be taken very seriously, for Plato would not have given Dionysius, a novice disciple, real clues to such a major philosophical problem, which, as Plato says later on in the same letter, should not be discussed in writing at all. According to this view, Plato's main purpose in posing the riddle was pedagogical: He meant to put Dionysius in place and to hint vaguely towards

11 Cf. the last verse of Gabirol's poem, which, rendered more literarily, says: 'Give [or, according to another version, "Buy" or "Take"] a proof to substantiate it [or "to make it stand"].'

12 This translation is the same as that on the Perseus site (<http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus-cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekTexts&getid=1&query=Pl.%20Ep.%20313b>), based on *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, VII (English transl. by R.G. Bury), Cambridge, MA–London 1966.

his prospective philosophical way.¹³ Nevertheless, the riddle was discussed intensively in late antiquity, in Pythagorean, Middle-Platonic and Neoplatonic circles, and during the Renaissance.¹⁴ It is thus plausible, even without the evidence of Gabirol's poem, that Plato's riddle was known in the Middle Ages, though I could not find an Arabic translation (nor could the experts I consulted supply any information in this regard). But the obvious use Gabirol makes of it testifies to the existence of an Arabic version, which may be found eventually. This hope is encouraged by evidence from medieval Arabic literature attesting that at least the existence of Plato's letters was known to the Arabs.¹⁵

13 See the lengthy note by my late father, Joseph G. Liebes, in *Plato's Writings* (Hebrew transl. by Joseph G. Liebes), V, Jerusalem-Tel-Aviv 1967, p. 33.

14 See John Dillon. *The Middle Platonists*, Ithaca, NY, 1977, p. 367; and Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, London 1967, pp. 242–244.

15 Alfarabi mentions the letters (رسائل) of Plato in the last paragraph of his book *Platonic Philosophy* (فلسفة افلاطون), in *Plato Arabus*, ed. Richard Waltzer, II, London 1973, p. 22–23 in the Arabic section (the volume includes a Latin translation and detailed notes). Ibn an-Nadim also mentions Plato's 'existing letters' (وله رسائل موجودة) in his famous *Fihrist* (المطبوعة الرحمانية), Cairo 1929, 7.1, p. 344, s.v. Plato (افلاطون). I am grateful to my colleague Donna Shalev for these references.