

# Iberian Babel

*Translation and Multilingualism in the Medieval  
and the Early Modern Mediterranean*

*Edited by*

Michelle M. Hamilton  
Nuria Silleras-Fernandez



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# Ask Now the Beasts and They Shall Teach You

## *Qalonymos ben Qalonymos and his Hebrew Translation of the Epistle of the Animals*

*Noam Sienna*

Who teacheth vs more then the beasts of the earth, and maketh vs wiser then the foules of heauen? ... But aske now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the foules of the aire, and they shall tell thee. Or speake to the earth, and it shall teach thee; and the fishes of the sea shall declare vnto thee.

— Job 35:11 and 12:7–8, from the frontispiece of *Iggeret Ba'alei Hayyim*  
(WARSAW: D. BLOSSER, 1879)<sup>1</sup>



### 1 Introduction

In 2005, the Kentucky-based interfaith publishing house Fons Vitae released an English translation of a medieval Hebrew text, which they titled *The Animals' Lawsuit Against Humanity*. The translation was prepared by two Reform rabbis, Anson Laytner and Daniel Bridge, although, as they acknowledge in the introduction, “the tale as we present it is but a highly adapted fraction of the original whole, the ingenious kernel that caught our fancy.”<sup>2</sup> Marketed as “a Muslim Sufi work translated by a Rabbi into Latin for a Christian king,” their work has also been adapted into a beautifully-illustrated children’s book by Alexis York Lumbard (retitled *When the Animals Saved Earth: An Eco-Fable*). In the preface to the Laytner-Bridge translation, the contemporary Sufi philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes that the original work “bears the mark of an Abrahamic cooperation, one in whose creation and propagation Muslims, Jews, and

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1 This English translation is from the 1611 King James Version. All other translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

2 Laytner and Bridge, *Animals' Lawsuit Against Humanity*, ix.

Christians participated... [It is] a fascinating story of enduring spiritual worth and great current significance.”<sup>3</sup>

I argue that in addition to its enduring spiritual worth, this text is a product of its individual historical moment – the transmission of Andalusi learning and culture through the Hebrew translation movement of fourteenth-century Provence. After summarizing what is known of the biography of the translator, Qalonymos ben Qalonymos, I consider the *Iggeret Ba’alei Hayyim* (his Hebrew rendition of Epistle 22 of the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*), the context of its composition, and its understanding of the Arabic text that it presents to its Jewish audience. In particular, I consider what we might learn of the medieval readership and reception of this text through analyzing Qalonymos’ introduction to the *Iggeret Ba’alei Hayyim*, which is presented in annotated translation in the Appendix.

## 2 Qalonymos ben Qalonymos

Qalonymos ben Qalonymos was born in Arles in 1286, to a noble and well-regarded Provençal family.<sup>4</sup> He studied in his youth with two local scholars of Provençal Jewry, Moshe ben Shlomo of Beauclair and Sen Astruc de Noves of Salon, and he soon became known as a talented and prolific writer and translator. His earliest Hebrew translation, *Sefer ha-‘ammud be-shorashei ha-refu’a* (from ‘Alī Ibn Riḍwān’s *Uṣūl fi’l-ṭibb*) was completed around 1307.<sup>5</sup> As shown from a letter that he wrote to his brother, to be examined below, Qalonymos then travelled to Barcelona (likely sometime between 1307–1310) where he studied with rabbinic scholars in the academy of Shlomo Ibn Adret (1235–1310) and perfected his knowledge of Arabic. During the first quarter of the fourteenth century, Qalonymos produced dozens of translations from Arabic to Hebrew of important medical, philosophical, and scientific works, including many of Ibn Rushd’s commentaries on Aristotle, as well as philosophical texts of al-Fārābī, geological and meteorological texts of al-Kindī, and several Arabic texts on mathematics and Euclidian geometry.<sup>6</sup> It was during this period that

3 Nasr, introduction to *Animals’ Lawsuit Against Humanity*, xiii-xiv.

4 The following biography is based on Schirmann, *Ha-shira ha-‘ivrit bi-Sfarad u-vi-Provens*, 499–502 and *Toldot ha-shira ha-‘ivrit bi-Sfarad*, 514–41; Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, 284; and Dunkelgrün, “Dating the *Even Bohan*,” 39–72.

5 Zonta, “A Chronological Table,” 49.

6 See, *inter alia*, Freudenthal and Lévy, “De Gérase à Baghdad,” 479–511; Zonta, “The Revisions,” 457–74; and the bibliography in Zonta, “A Chronological Table.”

he also translated the “Epistle of the Animals” into Hebrew (*Iggeret Ba’alei Hayyim*).<sup>7</sup>

In the 1320s, Qalonymos was engaged as a translator for Robert of Anjou, for whom he translated Ibn Rushd’s Aristotelian tour de force, the *Incoherence of Incoherence* (*Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*), into Latin, under the title *Destructio destructionis*.<sup>8</sup> In Robert’s service, Qalonymos spent several years in Naples and Rome, where he met (and impressed) his contemporary poet, Immanuel of Rome, and composed one of his major original works, *Massekhet Purim*, a parody of Talmudic scholarship intended for the holiday of Purim. From Rome he travelled to Catalonia, where he composed his most well-known work in early 1323: *Even Boḥan*, a collection of witty observations on the Jewish society of his time, including satirical descriptions of holidays and caricatures of different professions, and a fascinating and puzzling declaration of dissatisfaction with gender roles.<sup>9</sup> In Naples, he also began writing an ethical will, *Iggeret Musar*, addressed to his son and probably finished around 1324.<sup>10</sup> By 1329 he had returned to Provence, where he presumably remained until his death sometime later.

### 3 Qalonymos’ Work as a Translator

In his work, Qalonymos represents part of a larger Jewish intellectual tradition that was responsible for the transmission of Arabic science and learning (and its Greek roots) into Hebrew and thence, into Latin; a tradition which had Provence as one of its most active and dynamic centers.<sup>11</sup> Initially, some of these translators were native or heritage speakers of Arabic from Iberia, such as Yehuda Ibn Tibbon, the patriarch of the Ibn Tibbon family, who migrated

7 Throughout this essay, I use “Epistle of the Animals” to refer to the original Arabic text, the 22nd epistle of *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*; while *Iggeret Ba’alei Hayyim* will refer to Qalonymos’ Hebrew translation.

8 Zonta, “The Jewish Mediation,” 99. In earlier scholarship, it was assumed that Qalonymos was the sole translator (e.g. Joseph Chotzner, “Kalonymos ben Kalonymos,” 145); but more recent work has questioned his knowledge of Latin, and suggested that he was perhaps the ‘vulgarizer’ in a paired *traduction à quatre mains*: Shatzmiller, “Au Service de la Cour de Naples,” 168. This work is, presumably, the translation for the “Christian king” alluded to above, mistakenly conflated with the *Iggeret* by Laytner and Bridge.

9 On the *Even Boḥan*, see Rosen, “Circumcised Cinderella,” 87–110; and Dunkelgrün, “Dating the *Even Bohan*.”

10 Sonne, “Iggeret Musar leQalonymos ben Qalonymos,” 91–110.

11 Freudenthal, “Les sciences,” 29–136, and “Arabic into Hebrew,” 124–43; Harvey, “Arabic into Hebrew: The Hebrew Translation Movement,” 258–80; Zonta, “The Jewish Mediation,” 89–105.

from Granada to Lunel around 1148. Even Yehuda seemed concerned about maintaining his family's Arabic proficiency in the Provençal milieu; in his ethical will, he exhorts his son Shmuel (ca. 1160–1232) to remember that “the greatest men of our nation did not achieve their greatness or their lofty heights but through their Arabic writing,” and encourages him to spend an hour every Shabbat studying the Bible in Judeo-Arabic, “because it will be useful to you in developing your Arabic vocabulary and in translation, should you wish to become a translator... If you find my counsel to be worthwhile, then choose one of your Arabic books that is written in a hand that appeals to you aesthetically and try to learn from it by imitating it.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in his career as a renowned translator, Shmuel relied not only on his childhood instruction in Arabic but also on the books his father left him, along with other grammatical and lexicographical aids.<sup>13</sup>

Other Arabic-Hebrew translators in Provence had to rely on the combination of oral instruction and textual study, without a native knowledge of the language. We might assume, for example, that Shmuel Ibn Tibbon's son-in-law Ya'aqov Anatoli (ca. 1194–1256), a native Provençal Jew who also translated Ibn Rushd from Arabic, must have initially learnt Arabic from Shmuel himself; indeed Ya'aqov testifies that he had “stud[ied] occasionally in the Arabic language a little of the mathematical science before the great sage, my father-in-law, R. Shmuel.”<sup>14</sup> It seems that Qalonymos' Provençal contemporary Yosef Ibn Kaspi (1280–1345) had not only a reading knowledge of Arabic grammar, and access to Arabic books, but also some grasp of vernacular Maghrebi Arabic, perhaps acquired through his travels in the Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup>

Todros Todrosi (Todros ben Meshullam of Arles, 1313 - after 1340), relied in his translations on the Arabic dictionary of al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-'ayn*, which Shmuel Ibn Tibbon had brought to Provence. As Todrosi writes in the introduction to his translation of Ibn Rushd: “there was no strength in our knowledge of the Arabic language to produce this translation, until God graced me with a noble book including explanations of each Arabic word and its grammar, called *Sefer ha-'Ayin*... [which] R. Shmuel Ibn Tibbon of blessed memory expended great effort to bring from Arab lands.”<sup>16</sup> What books

12 As translated in Pearce, *Andalusi Literary and Intellectual Tradition*, 208, 211, 221. For the Hebrew original, see Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, 59, 66–67, 84.

13 Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon*; Robinson, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon,” 2014.

14 As translated in Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy*, 224–25. On Anatoli's translations, see Zonta, “A Chronological Table,” 28–30.

15 Aslanov, “How Much Arabic Did Joseph Kaspi Know?” 259–70.

16 Goldenthal, *Be'ur ibn Rushd le-'sefer ha-halaṣah le'Aristo*, 3; on Todrosi and his translation technique, see Elgrably-Berzin, *Avicenna in Medieval Hebrew Translation*.

Qalonymos had at his disposal, if any, are unknown; nor do we know to what extent Qalonymos was able to receive an Arabic education in his youth. In his *Iggeret Musar*, while he does not mention Arabic specifically, Qalonymos does follow Ibn Tibbon in urging his son to “be diligent in reading [the books of] the science of grammar and its studies... and it would bring me joy if you devoted yourself to studying script and calligraphy, according to your ability.”<sup>17</sup>

It appears that Qalonymos had already achieved a basic grasp of the Arabic language when he left to study in the Crown of Aragon, although it is not clear whether he learned Arabic from colleagues, books, or some combination. In a lengthy letter, Qalonymos defends having travelled to Barcelona to study with the great sage, Shlomo Ibn Adret (Rashba), despite Ibn Adret’s recent embroilment in the Maimonidean Controversy with the Jews of Provence, and his attempted ban on the study of philosophy for anyone under the age of thirty.<sup>18</sup> In his letter, Qalonymos explains the intellectual deficiencies of his native Provence, and explains that he has travelled to Barcelona in order to study with the great rabbinic scholars there, and also specifically to correct his basic, yet deficient, grasp of Arabic:

For surely the people here are masters in all the details of the Arabic language (*leshon hagari*), and have penetrated it to its depths, and they have innumerable books with which I take pleasure for long hours, which is no small thing. And in those hours with them I perfect my knowledge of the language of this land. O brothers (may the Blessed One fulfill all your desires), surely you have seen, with your own eyes, how the Holy Blessed One has brought me to success in [Arabic], and in the understanding of its rules of grammar, general and specific, so that I am able to quickly read its texts in their different types, until my translations of many various sciences have spread in the land, all the way to Perpignan (may the Blessed One protect it), as you know.<sup>19</sup>

The precise dating of this letter is not clear, but Qalonymos’ description of his “translations of many various sciences” which are already widespread may refer to his 1307 translation of Ibn Riḍwān (and perhaps other medical translations which are lost to us), implying that he may have learnt enough Arabic in Provence to begin translating books of medicine. But Qalonymos, like other Provençal translators, saw proficiency in Arabic as the key to intellectual

<sup>17</sup> Sonne, “*Iggeret Musar*,” 106–7.

<sup>18</sup> See Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture*, 176–221.

<sup>19</sup> Shatzmiller, “*Megillat ha-hitnaṣlut ha-qaṭan*,” 50.

success, and his desire to study and translate advanced philosophical texts required a more thorough grasp of the language.<sup>20</sup> Following his immersion program in Andalusi Arabic in the Crown of Aragon, Qalonymos went on to produce translation after translation of treatises on mathematics, logic, and the natural sciences, in what some historiographers see as the last gasp of Arabophone learning in southern Europe; indeed, Gad Freudenthal calls him “the last great scientific translator.”<sup>21</sup> It was likely also in the Crown of Aragon that Qalonymos acquired or studied some of the original Arabic manuscripts for these translations, including a manuscript containing part of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, an Arabic philosophical encyclopedia of fifty-two epistles, originally composed in Basra sometime in the tenth century.<sup>22</sup>

In the *Iggeret Baʿalei Ḥayyim*, his rendering of the *Rasāʾil*’s Epistle 22, “The Epistle of the Animals,” Qalonymos shows himself to be not only a great scientific translator but a literary translator as well. “The Epistle of the Animals” presents an allegorical fable of a trial between humanity and the animals, judged by the King of the Jinn, to decide which of them is the superior creation, and which should have power over the other. This is the only known literary work that Qalonymos translated, and indeed the only medieval Hebrew translation of any part of the *Rasāʾil*, although they were known in Arabic to a number of medieval Andalusi Jewish philosophers, including Maimonides, Moshe Ibn ʿEzra, and Shem-Tov Ibn Falaquera.<sup>23</sup>

Qalonymos’ translation was completed in 1316, and circulated in manuscript copies throughout Europe.<sup>24</sup> It was first printed in Mantua in 1557, and reprinted in over a dozen editions over the seventeenth to twentieth centuries,

20 Freudenthal, “Les sciences,” 71–2.

21 Freudenthal, “Les sciences,” 70.

22 In his Introduction, Qalonymos acknowledges that “if only I had the entire work, I would have already translated it [completely]; but I only have approximately a third of it.” The Arabic text of the “Epistle of the Animals” has been edited, translated, and commented upon in Lenn Goodman and Richard McGregor, *Case of the Animals*.

23 Zonta, “Influence of Arabic.” In Goodman and McGregor, *Case of the Animals*, 249, it is stated that there are two other lost Hebrew translations of the *Rasāʾil*, a claim which apparently derives from a misreading of Steinschneider’s original entries on the subject (*Die Hebraeischen Uebersetzungen*, 860–862, 872–873); this was pointed out by Freudenthal, “Recently Published Books,” 171–172. Arabic fragments of the *Rasāʾil* have been found in the Cairo Genizah, in both Arabic and Hebrew script: Krinis, “*Al-Risāla al-jāmīʿa* and its Judeo-Arabic Manuscript,” 312 (no. 5).

24 Steinschneider, *Die Hebraeischen Uebersetzungen*, 860–862. Surviving medieval manuscripts, to my knowledge, comprise: Vat. ebr. 296 (Byzantium?, fifteenth century); BnF hébr. 899 and 900 (Italy, fourteenth century), and hébr. 1396 (Provence, sixteenth century); Biblioteca Ambrosiana L 45 (Italy?, fifteenth century); and Torino LXII.A.III.13 (Germany, 1469 – only the first page preserved). There is also a sixteenth-century Yiddish

including a Yiddish translation, printed in Hanau in 1718, and a Judeo-Spanish translation, printed in Salonica in 1867.<sup>25</sup> A scholarly translation into German was done in Darmstadt in 1882 by Julius Landsberger, and a Hebrew edition based on the *editio princeps* of 1557 was published in Jerusalem in 1949, with notes by Israel Toporovsky and an afterword by A.M. Habermann.<sup>26</sup> Since then, Qalonymos' translation of this epistle has received scarcely any academic attention, and has no English translation besides the adaptation of Laytner and Bridge mentioned above.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4 Qalonymos' Introduction to the *Iggeret*

Importantly, Qalonymos' translation is preceded by an introduction (presented in the Appendix), which offers precious insight not only into Qalonymos' techniques and methodologies as a translator, but also to his understanding of the philosophical context of this chapter of the *Rasā'il*. In his introduction, Qalonymos first describes his working process, in which he claims to have translated the whole book in a mere "seven days of work," and explains that at times he had to adapt the text into a Hebrew idiom, since he found in it "some strange phrases, and rare fables, and fine and beautiful poems with foreign words of such depth which I had not seen." The printed editions of the *Iggeret* add a telling, if cliché, phrase here: that these "beautiful poems" and "foreign words" were "built according to the structure of the Arabic language." This addition does not appear in any manuscript available to me; nonetheless, it testifies to the particular tensions (perhaps in the sixteenth-century world of the first printing of the *Iggeret* as much as in the fourteenth-century world of its composition) around the question of translating, and transforming, Arabic into Hebrew.

Furthermore, Qalonymos explains that he was "under great pressure, for in many places there were difficult and intense phrases embroidered in rhymes. If I had translated them word-for-word, their fatness would have been thinned, and their delight plundered." Many medieval translators weighed the merits of two strategies for translation: word-for-word and sense-for-sense. The

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translation in manuscript, different than the Yiddish text printed in 1718, in St. Petersburg, Institute of Oriental Studies Ms. A 295.

25 See the corresponding entries in the Bibliography of the Hebrew Book (БНБ), available through the website of the National Library of Israel.

26 Landsberger, *Iggereth baale chajjim*; Toporovsky, *Iggeret ba'alei hayyim*.

27 Laytner and Bridge, *The Animals' Lawsuit*.

word-for-word school of medieval Hebrew translation is most prominently associated with the Ibn Tibbon family, especially Yehuda (and to a lesser extent his son Shmuel), whose conservationist approach, S.J. Pearce has recently argued, “may be seen as part and parcel of the fastidious cultural dedication of Arabophone Jews to the Arabic language itself.”<sup>28</sup> The opposing strategy, sense-for-sense translation, was championed by Maimonides, among others; Maimonides cautioned Shmuel Ibn Tibbon that “the translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject thoroughly, and state the theme with perfect clearness in the other language.”<sup>29</sup>

It is this approach that Qalonymos claims to have adopted, declaring that “therefore, I pushed (*daḥaqtī*) them [i.e. the phrases], to preserve their meanings but not the words, although I have not intentionally altered or changed them [substantially].”<sup>30</sup> This ‘push’ represents Qalonymos’ efforts as a translator to break open the culturally-prestigious but linguistically-inaccessible work of Arabophone Andalusī writers for his Provençal audience. Staking his position in the historical debate over the proper methods of translation, Qalonymos authoritatively portrays his own work as the perfect balance between faithfulness to the Arabic original and responsiveness to the linguistic and stylistic constraints of Hebrew.

Qalonymos then turns to the correct interpretation of this puzzling text, urging his readers to see the work not just as an amusing fable, like the stories of Kalila and Dimna or the *maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, but rather as a source of deep moral lessons:

One bereft of wisdom might think that this is like the book of Kalila and Dimna, or the tales of Sendebār, or [the *maqāmāt* of] al-Ḥarīrī, and similar things. Heaven forbid! It is not like them or anything of their type. Rather its intention is to share some lessons and morals (*neḥamot umu-sarim*), and some deep secrets which are widely scattered, so that even the wise will not notice them in a single reading.

28 Pearce, *Andalusī Literary and Intellectual Tradition*, 33

29 This is from Maimonides’ correspondence with Shmuel Ibn Tibbon, published by Shailat, *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 525–54, as translated in Pearce, *Andalusī Literary and Intellectual Tradition*, 35. On the general debate surrounding translation methods, see Harvey, “Arabic into Hebrew,” 263–66; Pearce, “Matter, Meaning and Maimonides,” 376–412, and *Andalusī Literary and Intellectual Tradition*, 20–45 and 171–97.

30 The printed editions add: “and therefore I went according to how the fine (*ṣaḥ*) Arabic language would guide me, even though I have not mastered that language as much as I wished,” another phrase that is not found in any of the manuscripts available to me.

The deceptive simplicity of its narrative exterior hides a deep philosophical core which must be unlocked through repetitive and diligent study. Qalonymos explains that this epistle is one part of a much longer collection of philosophical writings, but that its authorship is anonymous, since it is filled with “matters of dissent (*devarim ḥaluqim*), some which follow the opinions of faith, and some which follow philosophy,” and that it caused a great scandal among the “sages of Ishmael.” Qalonymos is not only hinting at the potentially subversive nature of this text and its deep secrets; this may also be a rhetorical (and polemical) move to include his Jewish readers in the ‘inner circle’ of those who are intellectually and philosophically mature enough to handle the power of this text. One of the recurring arguments in the text is the question of unity: are people truly united by their common humanity, or divided irreparably into tribes and nations? Is disagreement and difference a weakness, or a potential source of inspiring truth? Referencing “dissenting people that were there, in that time, in that religion,” Qalonymos challenges his (Jewish) readers to move beyond that time and place and demonstrate that they, like the humans in the book, are worthy of achieving a universal human communion.

Qalonymos concludes with what he believes to be the central intention of the work, which he has arrived at “after reading this book many times”: that neither human political structures, nor any product of the practical intellect (*sekhel ma’asi*), separate humans from animals. Rather, it is only the active human intellect (*sekhel enoshi befo’al*) which provides any justification for human existence. Qalonymos suggests that the set-up of the story as a contest between humans, spirits, and animals is merely a stage to allow its readers to wrestle with the central question of what lies at humanity’s core. By offering this interpretation, Qalonymos transforms the *Iggeret* into a classically-Andalusi imaginative narrative of allegorical fiction meant to stimulate the development of the reader’s intellect, in the model of Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, Shem-Tov Ibn Falaquera’s *Sefer ha-mevaqqesh*, Ya’aqov Ben-El’azar’s *Sefer ha-meshalim*, and Alfonso de la Torre’s *Visión deleitable*.<sup>31</sup>

Qalonymos was also addressing a question which had occupied philosophers and poets for centuries, especially in the Sephardi world: namely, what (if anything) grants humanity superiority over animals, and what is the exact

31 Ben-Zaken, *Reading Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzan*; Hamilton, “Medieval Iberian Cultures in Contact,” 50–62; Levy and Torollo, “Romance Literature in Hebrew Language,” 279–304. Other comparable works might include Yiṣḥaq Ibn Sahula’s didactic animal tales, *Meshal ha-qadmoni*, or Ibn Sina’s *Epistle of the Birds* (*Risālāt al-Ṭayr*), translated and adapted at least three times into Hebrew; see Malachi, “Rabbi Elijah ha-Kohen’s *Scroll of the Fawn*,” 127–57; Yahalom, “*Iggeret ha-ṣipporim shel Ibn Sina*,” 282–314; and Loewe, *Meshal ha-qadmoni*.

nature of the human-animal boundary?<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in the fifteenth century, Yosef Albo (1380–1444) cited the *Iggeret Ba'alei Hayyim* as teaching exactly this point: that humanity's purpose, as distinct from animals, is to perfect the Active Intellect. Albo writes:

We cannot say that the purpose of the human intellect is exclusively practical (*ba'avur hama'ase*), i.e. to enable the invention of labor and craft. For it has been made clear in the *Iggeret Ba'alei Hayyim*, composed by the Brethren of Purity, that animals are generally closer to perfection in these practical skills than people... This is proof that the central human purpose depends on the speculative aspect of intellectual power (*ha-ḥeleq ha-'iyyuni min ha-koah ha-sikhli*).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in his Hebrew translation of the *Iggeret*, Qalonymos is participating in an Andalusí philosophical tradition that emphasizes the pursuit and exchange of knowledge, in the service of the development of the individual intellect. While this was likely not the original intention of the tenth-century Shi'í esoteric authors, who conclude “The Epistle of the Animals” with the importance of human piety rather than intellectual development, this philosophical reading clearly informed the text's reception in Iberia in the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries.<sup>34</sup>

We know that the *Rasā'il* were read and discussed in medieval Iberia by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, likely already by the late tenth century, from its citations in (and influence on) other philosophical and literary works in Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and Romance, although it does not appear that any of the surviving manuscript witnesses of the *Rasā'il* can be traced to an Iberian provenance.<sup>35</sup> Qalonymos himself alludes to a like-minded community of readers in his Introduction, when he explains that he was urged to translate the *Iggeret* by “attentive companions... who desire the light of revealing hidden mysteries and who long to attain the secrets of nature.” He adds that he had already shared some pieces of his translation (or interpretation?) with them, and they had urged him to put it in writing. Thus Qalonymos is translating not only from Arabic to Hebrew, but also from oral to written, and from private to

32 Bland, “Construction of Animals,” 175–204.

33 *Sefer ha-'iqqarim* 3:2. See Husik, *Sefer ha-'ikkarim*, 15–17.

34 Maria Alvarez, “Beastly Colloquies,” 179–200; Goodman and McGregor, *Case of the Animals*.

35 Alvarez, “Beastly Colloquies”; Godefroid de Callatay, “Who Were the Readers of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*?” 269–302; Krinis, “Cyclical Time,” 20–108.

(semi-) public. His translation both expands the reach of the *Rasā'il* beyond the Arabophone world, and codifies a particular reading of the *Rasā'il* as part of Andalusī literary and philosophical heritage.

In presenting this understanding of the *Rasā'il*, or at least that portion of it presented in the *Iggeret*, Qalonymos is also claiming a central place for philosophical inquiry in Jewish life – an idea challenged by his teacher, Ibn Adret; he further asserts that it is the scholars and philosophers of Provence who are most suited to carry on the cultural legacy of Sefarad, albeit in translation. As scholars like S.J. Pearce, David Wacks, and Ram Ben-Shalom have shown, the Jewish community in Provence claimed their place as the true heirs of Sefarad, in the sense of al-Andalus and its cultural legacy of intellectual openness, through their cultural and intellectual production, and especially the Arabic-Hebrew translations produced there.<sup>36</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

In the final dénouement of the *Iggeret*, it is an “ultimate, universal, and complete”<sup>37</sup> human who makes the closing argument in favor of humanity, uniting in one person the best of what humanity has to offer:

Then arose the sage, the one of pure intellect, the praiseworthy and renowned pious one: Persian in breeding, Arab in faith, Babylonian in refinement, Hebrew in monotheist belief, Christian in custom, Levantine in asceticism, Greek in science, Indian in discernment, Median in qualities, masterful in belief, and divine in piety and knowledge.<sup>38</sup>

Qalonymos' Hebrew translation of *Iggeret Ba'alei Ḥayyim* might itself be described in the same universal terms as that syncretic sage: a Hebrew translation, based on an Arabic mystical text that itself draws on Greek fables and a collection of Sanskrit stories transmitted to the Islamic world through Persian, produced by a Provençal Jew who learnt Arabic from Andalusī Jews in the

36 Iancu-Agou and Nicolas, *Des Tibbonides à Maïmonide*; Wacks, *Double Diaspora*, 64–96; Ben-Shalom, “*Translatio Andalusiae*”, 273–96; Pearce, *Andalusī Literary and Intellectual Tradition*.

37 Goodman and McGregor, *Case of the Animals*, 53.

38 Toporovsky, *Iggeret ba'alei ḥayyim*, 159; the phrase “Christian in custom” is present only in manuscript. In the Arabic text, this list is almost identical, with the addition of the phrases “*hanif* by confession” and “Sufi in thought”; Goodman and McGregor, *The Case of the Animals*, 313–14.

Crown of Aragon, and who also produced Latin translations for a royal Christian patron in Italy.

Like Nasr's summary of "The Epistle of the Animals," Theodor Dunkelgrün has observed that the work of Qalonymos ben Qalonymos embodies all the complex and shared flourishing of the medieval Mediterranean, and its open-ended transmission of knowledge between and across civilizations and cultures.<sup>39</sup> We will likely never know exactly why Qalonymos chose to add this story to the corpus of philosophical and scientific texts that he made available to his Jewish audience. But in his appeal to see past the divisions of arbitrary political and religious structures, and to find spiritual unity in the shared power of intellect, we might read this text alongside his translations of Ibn Rushd and al-Fārābī as an expression of a transcendent human philosophy, and as a story of enduring spiritual worth and great current significance indeed.

## 6 Appendix: The Introduction of Qalonymos ben Qalonymos to the *Iggeret ba'alei ḥayyim*

### 6.1 *Author's Introduction to the Translation*

This English translation is based on the edition of Toporovsky 1949 (itself based on the *editio princeps* of Mantua 1557), with modifications made according to the following manuscripts: BnF hébr. 899 and 900 (Italy, fourteenth century), BnF hébr. 1396 (Provence, sixteenth century), and Vat.ebr. 296 (Byzantium?, mid-fifteenth century). I was unable to consult Ambrosian Library Ms. L 45 (Italy, fifteenth century), or Torino Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria A III 13 (Ashkenaz, 1469). The rhyme scheme of the Hebrew original, written in rhymed prose like the style of Hebrew *maqāmāt* and other narratives, is not preserved.<sup>40</sup>

### 6.2 *Translation*

Thus said Qalonymos, the translator of this book:

I apologize for the translation of this book. It was not from my desire to imitate some of those earlier mindless translators, nor from my favoring of the delight of playthings over the tents of study, nor from my turning towards the emptiness of illusions, that my heart was moved to translate these things. And it was not from my sympathy for those who lie on ivory beds<sup>41</sup> and fill their homes with quantities of gold and luxurious adornments, who sup on delicacies of the finest cuts of meat, and who recline in fine clothing in the city squares, saying

39 Dunkelgrün, "Dating the *Even Bohan*," 39–41, 70–72.

40 On Hebrew rhymed prose narratives, see Decter, "Changing Landscapes," 55–68.

41 See also Amos 6:4.

they are satisfied from the lushness of their poetic conversation,<sup>42</sup> that my spirit prompted me to translate for them these texts. It was also not from a state of abundant happiness in my heart, peace with myself, tranquility in my tent and repose in my days; nor from an excess of spare time. Nor indeed because my eyes had turned aside to that which is of no avail, for this is blemished and shameful, and the one who does this destroys many souls<sup>43</sup> – even for an [unfulfilled] condition [they will be punished].<sup>44</sup> For it is better to sit on the corner of the rooftop<sup>45</sup> than to occupy oneself with the emptiness of the time; that [former] one remains without doing [wrong]. But that [latter] one hopes for the delights of emptiness, and pulls themselves towards delicacies, and exchanges the benefits of study and contemplation (*meḥqar ve-histaklut*) for debauchery and foolishness. Therefore, without doubt I was filled [with inspiration] to translate this [text], to entreat attentive companions<sup>46</sup> to seek the mysteries of wisdom, and to recommend those who guard sound wisdom and discretion, those who desire the light of revealing hidden mysteries and who long to attain the secrets of nature.<sup>47</sup> They occasionally heard [these things] from my mouth, when I spoke with them privately, [sharing with them] three or four verses.

And [I translated it] since this book gives forth fine words<sup>48</sup> – although the confused fool, the one missing understanding and bereft of wisdom might think that this is like the book of Kalila and Dimna, or the tales of Sendebār or al-Ḥarīrī, and similar things. Heaven forbid! It is not like them or anything of their type. Rather my intention<sup>49</sup> is to share some morals (*musarim*) and wisdom (*ḥakhamot*), and some deep secrets which are widely scattered in it, so that even the wise would not notice them in a single reading.

I was convinced to share it by the desire of my acquaintances and friends; and since this book is small and its contents are few, I was able – with the help of the One who teaches my hands to write, and makes my pen the pen of a speedy scribe<sup>50</sup> – to complete this translation with the labor of seven days.<sup>51</sup> Let me recount that I found in it some strange phrases, and rare fables, and

42 See also Psalms 36:9.

43 See also Proverbs 6:32.

44 See also BT Makkot 11a.

45 See also Proverbs 21:9 / 25:24.

46 See also Song of Songs 8:13.

47 See also Proverbs 3:21.

48 This phrase is found in the printed editions but not in the manuscripts available to me.

49 The manuscripts have *kavvanati*, “my intention,” while Toporovsky has *hakavvana*, “its intention,” which are both logical readings.

50 See also Psalms 18:35 and 45:2.

51 Habermann suggested reading this not as *shiv’at yamim*, “seven days,” but *sov’at yamim*, “the fullness of days,” indicating a lengthy time: “Aḥarīt davar; *Iggeret ba’alei ḥayyim*, 168.

fine and beautiful poems with foreign words of such depth which I had not seen,<sup>52</sup> and some phrases repeated in smooth rhetoric. Even more than this, I was under great pressure,<sup>53</sup> for in many places there were difficult and intense phrases (*leshonot qashim ve'azim*) embroidered in rhymes. If I had translated them word by word, their fatness would have been thinned, and their delight plundered. Therefore I pushed (*dahaqti*) them, to preserve their meanings, but not the words, although I have not intentionally altered or changed them [substantially].<sup>54</sup> Now I shall explain some of the intention of this translation:

Know that this translated text is part of a larger and longer work, called in Arabic *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, and it is composed of small books called epistles, and this text is one of them; there are fifty-one [other] epistles in all.<sup>55</sup> They speak of all the sciences in the world, and everything spoken of in each book is told through allegory (*haggada*) and story (*sippur*) and examples (*re'ayot*) and signs (*moftim*). However, its signs are not numerous, but deal only with what has been made clear to philosophers, ancient and contemporary, until today, regarding investigation (*meḥqar*) to determine what is good or bad, according to what one or another sage has said, throughout history.

This book originates from a sect comprising many philosophers, who are great sages among the people of Ishmael; it is not known who authored it, nor is the name of an author mentioned. And I think that the reason for this is that in many places of this text, there are matters of dissent (*devarim ḥaluqim*), some of which follow the opinions of faith, and some of which follow philosophy in these matters, such that there is no epistle which does not have contradicting opinions, except those which deal with learned matters. And therefore the names of those who wrote and authored this book are absent.

Indeed, there had been a great argument (*maḥloqet*) among the sages of Ishmael regarding this book, attributing its parts to the dissenting people that were there, in that time, in that religion, just as the sages of that generation explained at length in the introduction made for this text. What we have translated is the end of the epistle called "The Epistle of the Animals." It is not entirely [translated] here, for before this story there is what the philosopher

52 The printed editions add, "but built according to the structure of the Arabic language [*akh 'al meteg leshon 'aravi benuyyot*]."

53 This clause ("Even more than this I was under great pressure") is in the manuscripts but not the printed editions.

54 The printed editions add: "and therefore I went according to how the fine [*ṣāḥ*] Arabic language would guide me, even though I have not mastered that language as much as I wished." BnF hébr. 1396 has "I have not intentionally altered or changed a single thing about the meaning of the Arabic [text]."

55 In all the manuscripts except BnF hébr. 1396, and in all the printed editions, the original Arabic of *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, "the Brethren of Purity," has been corrupted as *Abū al-Ṣafā'*.

[Aristotle] and those after him spoke of, and I did not translate this.<sup>56</sup> But at the end of that book, this text is written:

“Our intention now is to speak of the utility of these animals, and their advantage over humanity or vice versa, and the argument about who has the advantage over whom. And they appoint an outsider to judge, so that the matters will be sweet to hear, and each person will desire to read it and realize the intended truth from what they find here.”

The meaning of this, according to what we have understood from reading this book many times, is to establish that practical and political matters (*devarim medinīyyim ve-ma’asīyyim*) do not grant humans any advantage or elevate them over animals; nor does any product of the practical intellect (*sekhel ma’asi*), for whatever humanity gains from this in will (*beḥira*), is also found among the other animals by their nature; and indeed their faculties are more adept, as is explained in *The Book of the Soul*.<sup>57</sup> Rather, as will be explained at the end of this story, the only advantage [humanity] has over animals is in the active human intellect (*ha-sekhel ha-’enoshi keshehu befo’al*). There is nothing to his final perfection, except this alone. Indeed, no-one besides a stubborn fool could disagree.

And since two who disagree and come to an argument must appoint some impartial judge, who knows the matter, [this story] places the spirits [*shedim*] between humanity and animals, to judge between them. It appears to be like the opinions of those who mistakenly believe [that there are spirits who] take the forms of humans when they wish, and the forms of animals when they wish. But it is not the case that the author of this book believed in them! Rather, they serve as examples for the purposes of the story, and should not be believed in.

And in the book, along with this, the discovery of the nature of animals<sup>58</sup> is developed, and wondrous and respected mysteries and secrets will be

56 This refers to the Prologue of the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’* to “The Epistle of the Animals,” which explains their intentions in presenting the work and outlines their Aristotelian understanding of the natural world: Goodman and McGregor, *Case of the Animals*, 63–98. However, I cannot find the following passage which Qalonymos presents as a quote; it may have been a scribal addition in the manuscript he was working from (with thanks to Lenn Goodman for this suggestion).

57 Namely, the *Sefer ha-nefesh* of Shem-Tov ben Yosef Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290). In particular, this idea seems to refer to chapters 4–18, discussing “the faculties of the soul,” which compares how animals have faculties (smell, touch, memory, etc.) which are provided to them by nature, while humans perform functions “generated by rational choice.” See Jospe, *Torah and Sophia*, 325–47.

58 The printed editions have a longer list: “beasts and wild animals, birds of all kinds, flying insects, creeping and crawling insects, and fish, and descriptions of people of every language and faith and science, and their strengths and weaknesses.”

explained to whoever reads them with oversight (*hashgaha*). Indeed, there are some images mixed into the story which do not contribute to the general intention, but which are necessary to complete its negotiation, and which are done in order to complete the beauty of this book's representation (*hiqqui*). And if only I had the entire work, I would have already translated it [completely]; but I only have approximately a third of it. The time has come to end my speech; I have spoken thus at length only to apologize, and we rely on the help of the Blessed and Exalted God, amen.

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