CONCERNING THE TERMINOLOGY OF AL-ḤARIZI’S VIRTUES DEBATE

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Like the classical Arabic *maqāmāt*, Judah al-Ḥarizi’s famous *Tahkemoni* draws upon established genres of medieval scholarly writing. Among the genres utilized throughout the *Tahkemoni*, sometimes for parodic effect, are the debate, the epistle, the sermon, the polemic, and the liturgy. In his nineteenth chapter, al-Ḥarizi turns to the subject of virtues (or “qualities,” Heb. *middot*) by staging a debate wherein seven (ultimately eight) proponents argue for the superiority of each of seven (ultimately eight) virtues. In constructing this episode, al-Ḥarizi draws upon various ethical traditions for the Hebrew terminology employed. The purpose of this essay is largely to review the terminology of al-Ḥarizi’s selection of virtues in light of Jewish ethical literature, most prominently Ibn Gabirol’s Hebrew *Mivhar ha-peninim* (*Choice of Pearls*) as well as his Judeo-Arabic *Iṣlah al-akhlāq* (*Improvement of the Moral Qualities*) and Maimonides’ Judeo-Arabic *Thamaniyat fuṣūl* (*Eight Chapters*), each in their Hebrew translations by Judah and Samuel Ibn Tibbon respectively. The original texts and these translations were likely known to al-Ḥarizi.

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2 I am basing this article on the version of the chapter published in Judah al-Ḥarizi, *Tahkemoni*, ed. Y. Toporovsky, Tel Aviv 1952, pp. 197–201 in consultation with al-Ḥarizi’s earlier version published in Yahalom and Katsumata, *Tahkemoni*, pp. 497–502. As Yahalom and Katsumata point out, the episode appears as chapter forty-five of the earlier manuscript. In the earlier version, there are eight youths debating eight positions from the outset. The change introduced in the later version heightens the dramatic dimension by adding a surprise twist. In the manuscript used by Toporovsky, the old man’s presence at the debate is not even mentioned until the end of the episode. For an English translation (of the later version) in rhymed prose, see Judah Alharizi, *The Book of Tahkemoni: Jewish Tales from Medieval Spain*, trans. D. S. Segal, London 2001, pp. 190–94.

The essay will also make reference to the expansive literature on virtues in the medieval Islamic and Christian traditions. Thus, although al-Ḥarizi’s parodic debate might be viewed as an inversion of ethical discussions internal to Judaism only, I think it more productive to imagine it as a reaction to a topic that had become pervasive in thirteenth-century life more broadly conceived. The selection of virtues al-Ḥarizi’s episode highlights intimate contact with ethical traditions in their Jewish and Islamic formulations. However, we should not ignore the environment of the Christian Mediterranean altogether, as though the author were impervious to the intellectual trends that surrounded him, especially since Christian treatments of the virtues had transcended the closed discourse of the Latin scholastics and had entered popular and vernacular realms.

As mentioned, the nineteenth chapter of the Taḥkemoni is structured as a debate, one of the staple forms of the classical maqāmāt with other examples in the Taḥkemoni including pen vs. sword, man vs. woman, day vs. night, the debate among the twelve months of the year, and so on. In the virtues chapter, the narrator Heman the Ezraḥite, traveling by the river Euphrates, happens upon seven youths debating which is best of seven virtues (or “qualities,” Heb. middot): humility (ʿanavah), alertness (zerizut), courage (omes lev u-gevurah), faithfulness (emunah), wisdom (ḥokhmah), refined culture (musar), and a good heart (lev tov). Each takes a turn stating his case in eloquent prose and verse, arguing on the basis of the benefits each virtue confers upon its possessor. After each of the seven speakers takes his turn, the old man presiding over the session, who turns out to be the Taḥkemoni’s swindling protagonist Ḥever the Qenite, pronounces an eighth virtue, liberality (nedavah), the superior. The narrator recognizes the protagonist as his friend (a standard scene of anagnorisis) and concludes the chapter, “I stayed with him for a moment to breathe in his fragrance and to be satiated with the sweetness of his speech. Afterwards, I bid him farewell and each man departed for his tent.”

As David Segal has pointed out, each virtue is understood not in terms of “covenant fulfillment, or imitatio Dei, or succoring the oppressed” but


Again, in the earlier manuscript published by Yahalom and Katsumata, the eighth speaker is simply another youth, not an old man. In both versions, the eighth speaker is revealed to be Ḥever the Qenite.