The Contexts of the Hebrew *Secret of Secrets*

Despite a growing interest in medieval Hebrew texts in various academic circles, the Hebrew version of the *Sirr-al-asrar*, the *Sod ha-sodot*¹, has failed to capture the interest of scholars, who probably view it as neither sufficiently literary or scientific nor sufficiently useful for recovering the impact of true Aristotelian thought on medieval Jewish philosophy. The only edition of the Hebrew version was made by the eminent scholar Moses Gaster, who published it, together with an English translation and comprehensive introduction, more than a century ago². Gaster approached the *Sod* primarily as a “mirror for princes”, that is, as a work intended for the education of rulers. This makes sense on one level, but may not reflect the way it was read in its Hebrew context, and many of Gaster’s theories about the *Sod* were contested, updated, and adjusted by Amitai Spitzer in 1982³. Spitzer pointed to some major flaws in both Gaster’s edition and translation, and wrote of his intention to produce a new edition, but no edition of the *Sod* has replaced Gaster’s⁴. Due to the relative lack of scholarly interest in the *Sod*, Spitzer’s article remains the most current study of the text. Yet allowing our modern sensibilities to guide our scholarship may result in our overlooking a text that, during the Middle Ages and the early modern period, was viewed quite differently. Following Spitzer, I would

1. For the sake of clarity I will hereafter refer to the Arabic version as the *Sirr*, the Hebrew as the *Sod*, the various Latin versions as *Secretum*, and other versions (or the tradition in general) as the *Secret* or *Secret of Secrets*.

2. M. Gaster, “The Hebrew Version of the *Secretum Secretorum*, a Mediaeval Treatise Ascribed to Aristotle”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Oct. 1907, Jan. 1908, Oct. 1908), p. 879-912 (Hebrew text), 111-162 (translation), and 1065-84 (introduction) respectively. This was republished in M. Gaster, *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Medieval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology*, 3 vols, London, 1925-1928, in two parts: the introduction and English translation in vol. 2, p. 742-813, and the Hebrew edition in vol. 3, p. 246-278 (reprint New York, 1971).

3. A. Spitzer, “The Hebrew Translations of the *Sod ha-sodot* and Its Place in the Transmission of the *Sirr al-asrār*”, in *Pseudo-Aristotle, The Secret of Secrets. Sources and Influences*, ed. W. F. Ryan and C. B. Schmitt, London, 1982, p. 34-54.

4. Spitzer’s comparison of Gaster’s transcription shows that, despite Gaster’s claims to have consulted four very similar manuscripts, his study is based on only one of them – the one that happens to be least representative of the manuscript tradition as a whole. Moreover, Spitzer shows that Gaster made many transcription errors. Regarding the translation, he praises Gaster but notes that he was translating without a good working knowledge of how medieval Hebrew translations of this sort may reflect technical Arabic idiom.

argue that the many extant Hebrew manuscripts containing the *Sod* are “a good indication of the book’s popularity in certain circles” during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, and that we need to consider the text more closely in order to understand the place the *Sod* had in medieval Hebrew letters⁶.

I will begin such a study by providing some basic contexts for understanding the place of the *Sod* within medieval Hebrew literary and scientific circles⁷, focusing primarily on other texts that are found with the *Sod* in manuscripts from the early sixteenth century; the corpus created by these manuscripts may allow us to understand how the Hebrew text was being read during this period. I will also look at the section of the *Sod* that deals with the properties of stones and gems and discuss it in light of other medieval Hebrew lapidaries and the Hebrew Alexander Romance, to establish the role the *Sod* might have played in medieval Jewish thought. Throughout, I will show how these different ways of approaching the *Sod* overlap, and how they revolve around the axis of the transmission, or supposed transmission, of knowledge from Aristotle to Alexander the Great. As will become clear, this discussion is but a first step in a process of which the goal is to highlight reasons for studying the *Sod ha-sodot* in greater depth and to propose several avenues for further inquiry.

Companion Texts, Aristotelianism, and the Medical Library

Amitai Spitzer notes that during the early sixteenth century the *Sod ha-sodot* was transmitted together with several other ethical works⁸: the *Musarei ha-philosophim* (a Hebrew version of the *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*, translated from Hunayn ibn Ishaq’s *Maxims of the Philosophers*), the *Sefer ha-tapuach* (“Book of the Apple”, a work misattributed to Aristotle⁹), the *Tikkun*

5. Spitzer, “The Hebrew Translations”, p. 36.

6. Spitzer, following Moritz Steinschneider, suggests that the *Sirr* was first translated into Hebrew in the late thirteenth century, though the earliest extant manuscripts are fourteenth-century. See “The Hebrew Translations”, p. 35 and 36. The earliest stages of the reception of the *Sirr* in Hebrew have not been thoroughly studied, though the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century examples provide a sense of its importance and reception throughout the late medieval period.

7. Spitzer’s essay addresses this issue only in passing; like Gaster, Spitzer is interested primarily in placing the Hebrew version within the context of the wider non-Hebrew transmission of the *Secret of Secrets*.

8. Spitzer, “The Hebrew Translations”, p. 37.

9. Known in Latin as the *Liber de pomo*, this is “an adaptation of the *Phaedo*, circulated in Arabic first under the name of Socrates and then Aristotle” (D. Gutas, “The Spurious and the Authentic in the Arabic Lives of Aristotle”, in *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages. The Theology*

middot ha-nefesh (“The Improvement of the Moral Qualities”, by Solomon ibn Gabirol)¹⁰, and an *iggeret* (essay or epistle) of “Ali ha-Yishmaeli”, translated by Judah al-Harizi¹¹. All four of these texts were written originally either in Arabic or Judeo-Arabic, and, like the *Sod*, were then translated into Hebrew. In the context of these works, the *Sod* does not simply play the role of a “mirror for princes” but rather, as Spitzer notes, that of a “moral” guide¹². Together the texts create a complementary program. On the one hand, they can be said to fall under the same general heading of ethical treatises; one the other, each of them approaches the subject from a different perspective and is in fact quite distinctive generically and stylistically. The *Musarei* provide short lessons attributed to diverse authorities, mainly from the classical Greek and Roman scholastic tradition. Ibn Gabirol’s *Tikkun* provides the author’s program for the cultivation of the soul. The *iggeret* has at its core a short ethical treatise attributed to Aristotle, prefaced and followed by the writings of Ali ibn Ridwan (“Ali ha-Yishmaeli”). The *Sefer ha-tapuach* and the *Secret of Secrets* take the form of Aristotle’s private teachings to his students, the former cast as deathbed instructions to several leading students, the latter as a letter addressed to his best student, Alexander the Great¹³. Thus, while all of the

and *Other Texts*, ed. J. Kraye, W. F. Ryan and C. B. Schmitt, London, 1986, p. 31). By the time it was translated into Hebrew it was firmly associated with Aristotle, and the Latin version was based on the Hebrew translation. An English translation from the Hebrew can be found in H. Gollancz, *The Targum to “The Song of Songs”; The Book of the Apple; The Ten Jewish Martyrs; A Dialogue on Games of Chance*, London, 1908. An English translation from the Latin *Liber de Pomo*, together with discussion of its history, can be found in M. F. Rousseau, *The Apple: Or, Aristotle’s Death*, Milwaukee, 1968.

10. As yet there is no scholarly edition of this Hebrew translation of ibn Gabirol’s work. An edition of the original Judeo-Arabic, with an English translation, has been published as Solomon ibn Gabirol, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities, an Ethical Treatise of the Eleventh Century*, ed. S. S. Wise, New York, 1902 (reprint New York, 1966, and Piscataway, 2009). For the Hebrew text, I use an anthology of medieval Hebrew wisdom that includes ibn Gabirol’s *Tikkun middot ha-nefesh*, as well as the *Musarei ha-philosophim* and *Sefer ha-tapuach*, published under the collective title *Goren nachon* (“A Well-Prepared Threshing Floor”), Jerusalem, 1967 (a reprint of an 1807 Luneville book).

11. For a translation and discussion of this *iggeret*, and comparison with Arabic versions, see “One Ethic for Three Faiths”, in *Monotheism and Ethics: Historical and Contemporary Intersections among Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Y. T. Langermann, Turnhout, 2011, p. 192–218.

12. Spitzer, “The Hebrew Translations”, p. 37.

13. Interestingly, the private teachings communicated in these two texts also take different forms and arise from different contexts, so that even these cannot be unthinkingly grouped together. The prologue in the *Secret of Secrets* tradition explains why Aristotle is not with Alexander to advise him, as he has grown too old and weak to travel. See, for instance, M.

sixteenth-century companion texts fall under the general heading "ethical treatise", they deliver different teachings in different ways.

Further examination of these texts reveals other connections that become apparent once they are brought together. The *Musarei ha-philosophim* is divided into three *she'arim* (large sections, literally "gates") and then further divided into chapters containing material attributed to diverse thinkers, predominantly from the Greek tradition, but also from Roman figures, as well as King Solomon and others. A large part of this work, however, features Alexander the Great as the recipient or subject of wise sayings: two whole chapters are dedicated to teachings Alexander received from Aristotle, and an entire *sha'ar* is dedicated to the words of his mother and other wise figures after his death. As in the *Sod*, one of the chapters containing teachings sent to Alexander from Aristotle is said to have been sent "כשכבש ארצות רבות" ("when he conquered many lands"¹⁴) and contains advice about how to rule properly. But in the context of the *Musarei*, this advice, which otherwise might seem relevant only to kings or princes, becomes a larger lesson about human behavior.

Similar trends become clear when we consider other texts in sixteenth-century compilations. In his *Tikkun*, for instance, ibn Gabirol cites many aphorisms of previous sages (Jew and non-Jew alike), and many of these have parallels in Hunayn ibn Ishaq's *Maxims*¹⁵. Further, although there are no direct quotations from either the Arabic or Hebrew versions of the *Secret* in the *Tikkun*, there are sayings presented as wisdom that Aristotle taught to his pupil Alexander, and such content-based echoes might in fact serve to highlight overlapping but varying moral messages, a kind of repetition-with-variation. One of the *Tikkun*'s aphorisms, for instance, is described as a communication from Aristotle in "צויתו" ("his testament") to Alexander¹⁶, and, while it does not have an exact parallel in the *Sirr* or the *Sod*, it certainly sounds like something that might appear: אין מחשיבות הנפש שיהיה המלך מתגאה:

Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 2, p. 763, and the Arabic *Sirr-al-asrar*, ed. A. Badawī, in *al-Uṣūl al-yūnāniyyah li-l-naẓariyyāt al-siyāsiyyah fī l-Islām*, *Fontes Graecae doctrinarum politicarum islamicarum. Pars prima*, Cairo, 1954, p. 67. In the *Sefer ha-tapuach* (and *Liber de pomo*), by contrast, Aristotle's being very near death is the occasion for a lengthy meditation on the meaning of life and why one should not fear death.

14. A. Loewenthal, *Sefer musre haphilosophim* ("Sinnssprüche der Philosophen"). *Aus dem Arabischen des Honein ibn Ishak. Ins Hebräische übersetzt von Jehuda ben Salomo Alcharisi*, Frankfurt, 1896, p. 27.

15. A list of parallels is included by S. S. Wise in ibn Gabirol, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, as Appendix B, "A Comparison of Some Proverbs and Maxims in the 'Ethics' with Parallel Sayings in Other Arabic, Mainly Judæo-Arab, Works", p. 108-113.

16. *Goren nachon*, p. 41. Unless specified otherwise, all translations from Hebrew are my own.

"על בני האדם, וכל שכן קצתם על קצתם" ("It is not fitting for the soul that a king should lord it over men, even less so for some [regular men] over others"¹⁷). This does not contradict the *Secret*, but one might argue that the sentiment is very different in tone from that established by the *Secret*'s typical advice, such as: "הטוב שבמלכים מי שדומה לנשר שסביביו הנבילות, לא שדומה לנבילה שסביביו הנשרים" ("The best of kings is he who is like the eagle surrounded by corpses, not [he] who is like the corpse with the eagles around him"¹⁸). More important, however, is the fact that the *Tikkun* pointedly extends its lesson's applicability beyond kings to every man. The same can be said of the transmission of the *Sod* within its late medieval and early modern Hebrew contexts in general: while the Aristotle-Alexander attribution was important for its authority, it was clearly not read as a text merely about kings or ruling classes, but rather as a text comprising useful moral teachings applicable to every (well-educated) person and therefore suited to philosophical and ethical curricula.

During this time, the *Sod* was seen, at least by some, as an integral component of an Aristotelian (or, more generally, neo-classical Greek philosophical) corpus and was transmitted together with other texts associated with Aristotle and Alexander. Thus, while we may consider it to be, along with other texts in this corpus, a forgery of sorts, we must also consider that it, and texts like it, shaped the intellectual world of medieval Jewish neo-Aristotelianism as much as Aristotle's genuine works did. Furthermore, we must consider that an important portrayal of Aristotle that emerges from these texts is that of a monotheistic Aristotle¹⁹, particularly since these texts provide monotheistic defenses of astrology. For example, in the *Sod* Aristotle reminds Alexander that the stars were created by God, and that "לא ברא הקב"ה דבר שלא לצורך" ("God does not create anything in vain"); we should therefore use the stars as they were meant to be used²⁰. Astrology cannot be used to manipulate the future, but the stars can accurately predict events, and one can use these predictions to protect oneself, just as one can מעליו הקור לדחות האדם לדחות הקור מעליו

17. *Ibidem*. For the Arabic, see ibn Gabirol, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, p. 21 (note that the Arabic portion of this book is numbered separately from the English portion).

18. See Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 253 and vol. 2, p. 775. In the Arabic it is: "خير السلاطين: من أشبه النسر حوله الجيفة، لا من أشبه الجيفة حوله النسر" (Badawī, *al-Uṣūl*, p. 80).

19. It is interesting in this light to remember that the attribution of the *Liber de pomo* shifted in the Arabic tradition from Socrates to Aristotle, perhaps either as a deliberate attempt to further portray Aristotle as a monotheist, or as the result of his already being known as a monotheistic Greek philosopher who would have expressed the positions found in that book.

20. Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 255 and vol. 2, p. 778.

"escape the cold by gathering wood²¹"). Moreover, the stars can reveal God's decree, and then the decree can be averted if the revelation causes "שובו בחשובה ושיבו אחרים ויתפללו אליו" ("turning back in repentance and causing others to do so and pray to Him²²"). Thus, according to the *Sod*, not only is reliance on astrology not contrary to belief in God but it can lead one to return to God. Furthermore, the *Sod* explains the power of the stars as power that stems from and reveals God's will on earth, not as an expression of independent power. A similar idea is found in the *Sefer ha-tapuach*, where it is Aristotle who explains that the "פועל ראשון" ("first actor"), which is God,

תקן בחכמתו שבעה רקיעים ובכל רקיע מהם כוכבים מאירים ונתן בהם כח למשול בזה העולם התחתון משטרם בארץ לעשות טוב ורע מות וחיים ועושר ורש.

[fixed in his wisdom seven firmaments, and in each firmament [he fixed] shining stars, and gave them power to rule this lowest world. Their rule is on the earth, causing good and bad, life or death, and wealth and poverty²³.]

In other words, God gave the stars their power; therefore, it is permissible to study and make use of astrology. Aristotle also explains here that the use of astrology became problematic when early stargazers observed "ממשלותם בעולם" ("their [the stars'] governance of the world") and, thinking that the power of the stars was of their own volition, "עשה מהם אלוה" ("made gods of them²⁴"). A problem occurs, according to the *Sefer ha-tapuach*, only when one does not recognize that the stars' power derives from God and is based on God's plan for the world.

Spitzer remarks that this constellation of texts that travelled with the *Sod* in the early sixteenth century was of specific interest to physicians and a component of their libraries²⁵. In this light, we can see the influence of the Arabic origins of these texts and consider their overlapping ethical and philosophical uses more widely. The compiler of the Arabic precursor of the *Musarei ha-philosophim* (usually called *Maxims of the Philosophers* in English-language scholarship) was Hunayn ibn Ishaq, the noted translator of Galen into Arabic. And Ali ibn Ridwan ("Ali ha-Yishmaeli"), whom Judah al-Harizi considered to be the author of the *iggeret* he translated, was a renowned Egyptian

21. *Ibidem*, vol. 3, p. 255 and vol. 2, p. 779.

22. *Ibid.*

23. My translation. There is no scholarly edition of the Hebrew text of the *Sefer ha-tapuach*. I am using the anthology described above (n. 10): *Goren nachon*, here p. 3.

24. *Goren nachon*, p. 3.

25. Spitzer, "The Hebrew Translations," p. 36-37.

physician and the author of several medical treatises. In the *iggeret* we can see the impetus for physicians to collect books on ethics, as it comprises not only translation of a pseudo-Aristotelian text but also explains the role of such texts in self-education, suggesting that physicians wishing to follow in ibn Ridwan's footsteps might require a similar library²⁶. Both the *Sod* and the *Musarei*, moreover, contain ethical and explicitly medical material. In the case of the *Sod*, this includes sections on physiognomy, the preservation of the body, and gemology (which will be discussed more fully below²⁷), each of which reflects the perspective of the physician. And in the *Sefer ha-tapuach* as well, Aristotle compares philosophy to the medicinal uses of poison:

החכמה הזאת היא לעזור גם לעולם כאשר יועיל בשר האפעה ברפואת הצרי עד ירחק ויגדל הכאב יש בה תועלת ומרפה.

[This wisdom [philosophy] is of help to the world, just as the flesh of the adder is of use in healing extreme cases. Although it prolongs and increases pain, it is useful and helps to heal²⁸.]

The philosopher is like the doctor, in that while the one uses potentially harmful and certainly painful substances to heal the sick body, the other uses potentially harmful and painful substances to cure the sick mind. Ibn Gabirol's *Tikkun* similarly compares the wise man to a physician, but, in his analogy, it is the philosopher's five senses that are analogous to the doctor's medicines:

יהיה כרופא הבקי אשר הוא חושב על הנוסחא ומשים כל סם שיעור ידוע והיו הסמנים חלוקים במשקליהם כמו שישים מזה הסם גרה ומזה כאיסר

[He [the one who wishes to cure his soul] should be like a skillful physician who calculates the prescription, taking of every medicine a definite quantity; thus the ingredients vary in quantity: he puts a *gerah* of this medicine, and of that an *isar*²⁹.]

Just as the physician balances different medicines to produce a prescription, the wise man needs to balance his senses to achieve a healthy soul. In

26. Langermann, "One Ethic for Three Faiths," p. 205.

27. In Gaster's edition of the *Sod*, these are *she'arim* 11-13. See M. Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 264-278 and vol. 2, p. 799-813.

28. *Goren nachon*, p. 4. Gollancz translates more freely (*The Targum*, p. 115), "This science [philosophy] is of help and value in the same way as the flesh of the adder is of use as an antidote in extreme cases; for although it increases pain, it helps to heal, despite its deadly poisonous character."

29. *Goren nachon*, p. 19.

fact, this is more than simile in the *Tikkun*, as ethics and the physical body are intimately connected for ibn Gabirol, who suggests that healing the soul cannot be accomplished without intimate knowledge of the senses, in turn connected to the four humors³⁰. Stephen Wise's 1902 summary of ibn Gabirol's thesis effectively makes this clear:

The qualities of the soul are made manifest through the five senses, and these senses in turn are constituted of the four humors. Even as the humors may be modified one by the other, so can the senses be controlled and the qualities of the soul be trained unto good or evil³¹.

A good physician, in ibn Gabirol's estimation, not only would have studied the physical effects of the humors but also would have developed an understanding of ethics, because all were connected. In the context of its companion texts, then, the *Sod* may have served, among other things, as a perfect reference book for the physician³².

30. The Arabic manuscript of the *Tikkun middot ha-nefesh*, as well as several of the Hebrew manuscripts, contained a chart that connected various qualities (e.g., bravery, jealousy, humility) to the humors and physical attributes associated with them. See S. S. Wise's printing of the Arabic chart in ibn Gabirol, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, p. 11 (in the Arabic portion) and p. 43 (in English translation).

31. Ibn Gabirol, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, p. 16.

32. It has been argued, in fact, that some form of the *Sirr-al-asrar* was in the possession of the famous physician and apostate from Judaism, Petrus Alphonsi. See A. Büchler, "A Twelfth-Century Physician's Desk Book: The *Secreta Secretorum* of Petrus Alphonsi Quondam Moses Sephardi", *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 37 (1986), p. 206-212. Büchler notes that a book by the title *Secreta secretorum* is cited twice in Alphonsi's works, and he traces the sources of one of these to the *Sefer ha-razim* ("Book of Secrets") and *Sefer yetsirah* ("Book of Creation"), both mystical texts originally composed in Hebrew. He further suggests that the alchemical material quoted by Alphonsi came from the *Sirr* and was probably combined with these other two sources. Because there is no evidence that the *Sirr* had been translated into Hebrew at this time (Alphonsi died c. 1110), however, it seems impossible that Alphonsi had these texts before him as a single book, nor does it seem likely that his citations refer to a single book. Rather, I would suggest that the title *Secreta secretorum* (lit. *Secrets of secrets*, in the plural) is used for two different texts: the *Sefer ha-razim* (which may include material from the earlier *Sefer yetsirah*) and the Arabic *Sirr-al-asrar*.

Manuscript Context, Astrological Knowledge, and the Maimonides Question

Turning from Spitzer's commentary on the *Sod*'s late-medieval and early modern companion texts, we can focus on a particular manuscript situation from the fifteenth century. Individual manuscripts can of course provide more specific contexts for understanding how the *Sod* was received by medieval Hebrew readers, and the manuscript I will use as a case in point here is Jerusalem, Hebrew University Library, MS Heb. 8° 2303, which A. M. Habermann described in 1958 and dated to the mid-fifteenth century³³. Although several of this *codex*'s texts correspond to some of those listed above, some do not. Of the texts added to those we have already discussed, some fit the established ethical-philosophical-medical framework, but some do not. But the fact of the *Sod*'s position in this *codex* is itself an interesting clue to how the *Sod* could have been received. Its placement in MS Heb. 8° 2303 connects it more strongly to the *Musarei ha-philosophim* and shows that the two texts could work together as one: according to Habermann's description, the *Sod* is, in this case, interpolated between the second and third *she'arim* of the *Musarei*, right before the *sha'ar* that focuses entirely on the death of Alexander and the eulogistic sayings of his mother and other philosophers. By placing the *Sod* at this point within the *Musarei*, a new textual unit devoted to Alexander is created, or, rather, the pre-existing one is expanded and modified. The interpolation ensures that the two works fit into a general chronology of Alexander's life and serves to highlight biographical details in each: the *Sod* begins with Alexander's conquest of Persia and is followed, from within the *Musarei*, by the *Musarei*'s story of his death.

In the arrangement of texts in MS Heb. 8° 2303, this *Musarei*-with-*Sod* unit is directly followed by the *Sefer ha-tapuach*, a text that, in the main, describes an astrological vision attributed to Aristotle. A work attributed to Galen, on the nature of the soul, then follows the *Sefer ha-tapuach*. Up to this point, the compilation might fall under the rubric of physician's reading, but, after this, it does so less obviously if at all. The book attributed to Galen is followed by two polemical epistolary texts against apostate Jews³⁴, a departure in topic and genre from the previous texts. The next three texts are three different

33. See A. M. Habermann, "Alphabet of Ben Sira: Third Version" (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz*, 27 (1958), p. 191-192.

34. According to Habermann, "Alphabet of Ben Sira", p. 192, one of these letters was erased, because of a fear of Christian censors.

versions of the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, which describes the deeds of Ben Sira and contains many aphorisms. The aphorisms of the *Alphabet* could be seen as Jewish equivalents to the predominantly Greek wisdom of the *Musarei*, and some of the material could be seen as relevant to physicians, but an argument for a wider range of reception could also be made. The versions of the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* are followed by the *Alphabet of Rabbi Akiva*, which, on the one hand, has certain resonances with the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (they both contain Hebrew acrostics, the feature for which they are named), but, on the other hand, is hard to view as another Hebrew parallel to the *Musarei*, because it does not present aphorisms or wisdom. The final two texts in the *codex* deal with subjects apparently distant from the interests of the physician and, indeed, seem to bear no connection to any of the other texts in the *codex*. The penultimate text is an elaboration of elements pertaining to the Passover story, and the final text seems to deal with numbers in the Hebrew Bible³⁵. In sum, MS Heb. 8° 2303 presents evidence to support the notion that the *Sod* was part of an ethical-philosophical-medical reading list of the fifteenth-century Jewish physician, but it likewise suggests that the *Sod* could fit into a broader literary context.

Sketching contexts of reception for the *Sod* based on the evidence of manuscript content does not mean, of course, that we can surmise how all medieval Jews, or even all medieval Jewish doctors, read the text. This is also true of how medieval Jewish scholars viewed the complex of pseudo-Aristotelian writings of which the *Secret of Secrets* was a part. Put more plainly, not all medieval Jewish readers, even those deeply influenced by medieval Aristotelianism, could have considered the *Sod* proper for study. This point can be illustrated by considering how later developments connecting Maimonides (d. 1204) with the pseudo-Aristotelian tradition represented by the *Secret* may have been antithetical to Maimonides' own opinions about texts like the *Sod*³⁶. Charles Burnett has argued that the *Sirr* contains traces of a textual tradition that melds Hermetic astrological approaches with Aristotelian scientific speculation³⁷, and he points out that, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides

35. Since I have not been able to examine these two texts myself, I rely on Habermann's description of them.

36. While Maimonides predates the *Sod*, he may very well have known the Arabic *Sirr*. As will become clear shortly, however, he makes no explicit reference to it.

37. C. Burnett, "Arabic, Greek, and Latin Works on Astrological Magic Attributed to Aristotle", in *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds*, Brookfield, 1996, p. 84-97 (here p. 88).

identifies such approaches as Sabian and only falsely attributable to Aristotle³⁸. In his lengthy discourse on Sabian texts, Maimonides explains that he lists them in order to substantiate his claim that "the foundation of the whole of our Law, and the pivot around which it turns, consists in the effacement of³⁹" Sabian belief. According to Maimonides, Sabian beliefs are that "the stars are the deity and that the sun is the greatest deity" and that their books describe the means by which to affect these deities⁴⁰. Indeed, the texts discussed by Burnett in his work on the textual tradition of the *Sirr* deal with various forms of astral magic⁴¹, and Maimonides' claim that certain astrological texts have been misattributed to Aristotle should be understood in this context.

One of Maimonides' main goals in the *Guide* was to align Aristotelian philosophy with Jewish wisdom as found in the canonical Jewish texts, primarily the Bible but also the various writings of the sages (including the Talmud, and so on). For Maimonides, weeding out falsely attributed texts was not merely a matter of cleaning up the Aristotelian canon for the sake of accuracy. Maimonides discounts precisely those texts that he views as antithetical to the purpose of the Torah. This begs the question: how would Maimonides have viewed the *Sod*? On the one hand, it stands to reason that he would have rejected it, just as he rejected other pseudo-Aristotelian and Sabian texts. On the other hand, the *Sod*, like other texts with which it circulated, clearly draws a distinction between viewing the stars as independent powers and viewing the stars' power as stemming from the way God created the world. Indeed, pseudo-Aristotle's position in the *Sefer ha-tapuach* (discussed above), that the source of idol worship is the belief that the stars' power is indicative of their divinity, seems very similar to Maimonides' position that the source of all idol worship is the idea that the stars are gods. However, a distinction between the two positions is important: the former does not make an argument against accepting the stars' power, only claims that one must recognize God as the ultimate source of this power; whereas the latter, Maimonides' view, denies the stars any power at all. Since the *Sod* and the *Sefer ha-tapuach* ultimately present a monotheistic understanding of astrology, it is just possible that Maimonides would not have seen them as containing knowledge that was essentially antithetical to Torah.

38. *Ibidem*, p. 87.

39. M. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines, vol. 2, Chicago, 1963, p. 520.

40. *Ibidem*, p. 514.

41. C. Burnett, "Arabic, Greek, and Latin Works", p. 88.

Naturally, it is hard to make a conclusive statement about Maimonides' possible views on this aspect of the *Sod's* portrayal of astrology, but there are some aspects of its astrological views that are clearer cut in relation to Maimonides. The *Sod*, for instance, expresses a clear belief in predestination, that is, the belief that the stars control one's destiny from birth. This comes across especially in the section of the *Sod* that deals with how a king should choose proper advisors, scribes, officers, and knights, wherein it explicitly says that *יש נולד שיוליד בשום מזל ואין במלאכתו ואומנותו אלא כפי טבעי הכוכבים* ("people are born under certain nativities, and these men follow then the nature of the stars which control their birth"⁴²). The point is then further illustrated by a story about a boy who was born a weaver's son, but whom the astrologers secretly calculated was destined to become a counselor. Indeed, despite his father's best efforts, the boy cannot be made into a weaver, and, when left to his own devices, he finds his way to becoming a counselor⁴³. Maimonides speaks strongly against this kind of understanding of astrology in a letter sent in response to a question from the rabbis of southern France:

דעו רבותי שכל אותן הדברים כילן של גזרת הכוכבים שהם אומרים יארע כך ולא יארע כך ומולדו של זה ימשוך אותו שיהיה כך ויערא לו כך כל אותן הדברים אינן דברי חכמה כלל וטפשות הם.

[Know, sirs, that every one of those things concerning judicial astrology – that they say it will happen thus, and it will not happen thus, and that this person's nativity will guide him so that he will be such, and so that things will happen to him thus. All those statements are not wise statements. They are stupidity⁴⁴.]

While the reason given here for rejecting astrology is its "stupidity" rather than its role as the precursor to idol worship, the two positions are not far apart in Maimonides' mind: bad science and wrong thinking in general are the equivalent of heresy. To Maimonides, correct science is the same as orthodox religion: if it seems that the two are at odds with each other, then one or the other has been misunderstood⁴⁵.

42. Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 258 and vol. 2, p. 783.

43. Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 258 and vol. 2, p. 784.

44. A. Marx, "The Correspondence Between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides About Astrology", *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 3 (1926), p. 311-358 (here p. 351).

45. It is worth mentioning here that the fact that *Sod* was clearly sometimes viewed as a component of the physician's library and could be associated with Maimonides via pseudo-Aristotelianism may have played a part in its transmission to Russian contexts. See W. F. Ryan, "Maimonides in Muscovy: Medical Texts and Terminology", *Journal of the Warburg and*

Medieval Lapidaries, the Priestly Vestments, and the Alexander Romance

That the *Sod* became a part of a medieval medical tradition is perhaps above all due to its concluding lapidary section⁴⁶. Medieval lapidaries were replete with medical information, and this was part of what made the *Sod* a medical text of sorts, but its lapidary content also suggests additional ways to investigate the place of the *Sod* in medieval Hebrew literature. We can compare it with other Hebrew lapidaries and consider it part of the lapidary genre, just as we can by extension question the contexts and uses of lapidaries and their relevance to the *Sod*. What other lapidaries exist in the Hebrew tradition, and what characteristics do they have? In what contexts were they found? Do they match the information found in the *Sod*, or contradict it? To begin to answer these questions, we can note that, in the case of medieval Latin and vernacular texts, the lapidary genre was very fluid, and there was in fact no conformity of thinking about what stones have what properties. As John Riddle notes, "Hardly any two lapidaries among the many hundreds are alike. [...] [I]t is obvious that the compiler of a lapidary exercised personal judgment of some kind in determining what to put into his particular text"⁴⁷. This also seems to be the case in Hebrew texts, where, although one can point to far fewer lapidaries, there is still much variation. A comparison of entries on the emerald in several different Hebrew lapidaries, for example, reveals this efficiently. In the *Sod*, *מכבדים מי שישים ממנו טבעת בידו* ("one who places a ring [made] of it is respected"), *משקט כאב האסטומכה* ("it silences stomach pain"), and it cures *צרעת*⁴⁸ ("leprosy"). By contrast, a lapidary translated from Anglo-Norman by Berachya Ha-Nakdan (fl. in France c. 1150-1200) lists none of these properties but instead includes: *בה יעדיף הונו ולא יפחת* ("with it fortune will grow and not dwindle"), *ונושא בצוארו יכול לכלכל דבריו במשפט לענות כל איש* ("he who wears it at his neck will know how to control his words")

Courtauld Institutes, 51 (1988), p. 43-65, wherein Ryan notes that three medical texts, written by Maimonides and translated into Russian from the Hebrew, "were interpolated into the seventh book of the eight-book Short Form of the *Secretum*" (p. 48). Ryan follows Spitzer, "The Hebrew Translations", in surmising that this transmission is due to the Hebrew *Sod's* status as part of the canon of medical writings.

46. This is the final section of *sha'ar* 13 in Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 277-278 and vol. 2, p. 811-813.

47. J. M. Riddle, "Lithotherapy in the Middle Ages: Lapidaries Considered as Medical Texts", *Pharmacy in History*, 12 (1970), p. 39-50 (here p. 50).

48. Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 278 and vol. 2, p. 812.

in speech, answering each person as he wishes"), "טובה בעת הרעם להסיר הפחד" ("it is good at times of thunder to remove fear"), and "ומי שיש לו חולי חם" ("also anyone who has a hot disease or [suffers] from epilepsy should wear it at their neck⁴⁹"). In another lapidary written by Rabbi Gershon son of Rabbi Solomon (fl. in Spain c. 1275-1300), we find some of the above properties attributed to the emerald (e.g., that it helps the stomach and epilepsy), but we also find that it "מחזק השניים" ("strengthens the teeth"), and that "ועיל מסם המוות" ("it aids [anyone who drinks] from deathly poison⁵⁰"). We can see from this small sample that, by and large, there is no canonical body of knowledge to which a lapidary conforms⁵¹, and therefore that the information pertaining to stones in the *Sod* would not necessarily be expected to conform to other lapidaries. Thus, the importance of its lapidary material was probably not limited to its ability to confirm or deny other works.

Its importance, rather, may lie in its very existence as a lapidary attributed to Aristotle. That is, by standing as witness that Aristotle found such knowledge worthy to think and write about, the *Sod* may support the entire genre and its authority. Moreover, there is at least one other lapidary in Hebrew attributed to Aristotle⁵², a strong indication that knowledge of the properties of stones was part of an Aristotelian curriculum. As such knowledge became part of certain biblical commentaries too, specifically those dealing with the stones used in the High Priest's clothing⁵³, Aristotle was occasionally cited as a source, and writers of these commentaries assert that knowledge documented in the writings of Aristotle was once known by the ancient Israelites but had since been lost. The anonymous *Ma'ayan ganim* ("A Garden's Wellspring"), a fourteenth-century allegorical-philosophical commentary on portions of Genesis and Exodus, includes in its explanations of the properties of the stones in the shoulders of the High Priest's *ephod* a textual tradition by the name of

ספר השולטנות לאלכסנדר, שציוה ארסטו שיעשה חותמות ושמות כוכבים ידועים מפותחים באבנים יקרים ידועות שהם מחלקי אותם הכוכבים ובעתים ידועים להתמיד ממשלתו ושולטנותו, ולכן אמר הפסוק עליהם: "אבני זכרון לישראל" (שמות כח: יז).

[the *Sefer ha-shltnt* of Alexander, in which Aristotle commanded [Alexander] to make talismans with the names of known stars engraved with known gemstones that come from fragments of those stars at known times, in order to lengthen his government and his rule. This is why the verse said of them [stones on the High Priest's shoulders]: "Stones of memorial for the Children of Israel" (Exodus 28: 12 and 39: 7⁵⁴).]

The name of the book cited by the *Ma'ayan ganim* is an enigma, because the word *shltnt* is unknown and might have several possible meanings. One of these could be "governance" or "control", in the political sense, and it is thus possible that the work cited in this passage is in fact the *Sod*, wherein the primary topic is Alexander's maintenance of his rule. It is also possible that this title is inspired by the Arabic version of *Secret*, as some Arabic manuscripts of the *Sirr* begin under the rubric "كتاب السياسة في تدبير الرياسة المعروف بسر الأسرار"⁵⁵ ("The book of proper management in conducting government known as the *Secret of Secrets*"). This inscription would highlight the nature of the *Sirr* as a book about governing, and perhaps the *Ma'ayan ganim*'s "*Sefer ha-shltnt* of Alexander" means "Alexander's *Book of Governance*". Alternatively, it is possible to understand "לאלכסנדר" as "by Alexander", that is, "written by Alexander". Indeed, this is how Dov Schwartz understands it; in his footnote on the passage above, he refers readers to other books that have been attributed to Alexander, like the *Kitab al-Istamatis*⁵⁶ ("Book of the Istamatis"). But even if the *Sefer ha-shltnt* is not a reference to the *Sirr* or its Hebrew translation the *Sod*, the *Ma'ayan ganim*'s description of it as a book that contains Aristotle's instructions to Alexander about stars and gemstones helps to point to one context for the reception of the *Secret of Secrets* by medieval Jewish readers. The information found in the *Sod*'s lapidary section is comparable with the description provided by the *Ma'ayan ganim*. That is, the *Sod* also describes Aristotle teaching Alexander gemology so that his reign will be secure, specifically in the moment when Aristotle tells Alexander how to make a ring that aids a ruler: "מי שמשים טבעת זו יכבדו אותו ושומעים לקולו ועושים כל חפצו בעולם" ("whosoever wears such a ring will be revered by the

49. Berakhiah Ben Natronai ha-Nakdan, *Sefer Ko'ah ha-Avanim (On the Virtue of the Stones): Hebrew Text and English Translation*, ed. and trans. G. Bos and J. Zwink, Leiden, 2010, p. 21.

50. *Sefer segulat ha-avanim ha-tovot* ("The Book of the Qualities of Precious Gems"), Jerusalem, 2006, p. 36. This book is an anthology of several medieval and early modern Hebrew lapidaries, but it is not an academic publication.

51. Compare the short survey of the emerald here to the longer, more systematic survey of its properties in Christian medical lapidaries in Riddle, "Lithotherapy in the Middle Ages", p. 46-50.

52. Included in *Sefer segulat ha-avanim ha-tovot*, p. 84-93.

53. This was also a frequent topic of Christian lapidaries. See Riddle, "Lithotherapy in the Middle Ages", p. 40.

54. This passage from *Ma'ayan ganim* is quoted in D. Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought*, Ramat Gan, 2004, p. 249. The translation is mine.

55. Badawī, *al Uṣūl*, p. 65.

56. Schwartz, *Astral Magic*, p. 249, n. 73.

people. They will listen to his voice and fulfill all his wishes in this world; and no man will be able to withstand him⁵⁷). The *Ma'ayan ganim* provides, even if indirectly, an orthodox reason to read the *Sod's* section on the properties of stones: it is part of the knowledge necessary to understand the meaning of the High Priest's special clothing. Moreover, as Schwartz notes, it indirectly argues that the knowledge Aristotle teaches Alexander in the *Sefer ha-shlnt* was once known to the Israelites and is now lost. By extension, then, translating the *Sirr* into Hebrew, at least the lapidary section, could have been understood as an act of reclaiming lost "Jewish" knowledge.

This sort of argument – that various elements of Greek, Persian, and Babylonian knowledge are based on or represent knowledge lost to the Israelites in the Diaspora—is not uncommon and can be found in many places and forms. Of particular interest here are examples that specifically tie the loss of knowledge by the Israelites, and its gain by the Greeks, to Alexander and Aristotle, since such arguments provide parallels to the *Ma'ayan ganim* passage and might serve as a further Jewish context with which to understand the *Sod*. The tradition appears in several medieval Jewish sources and, as the *Ma'ayan ganim* suggests, defines Greek knowledge as ancient Jewish knowledge previously lost. This, for instance, is how the *Shvilei emunah* ("Paths of Faith"), an encyclopedic text written by Rabbi Meir ben Isaac Aldabi in the mid-fourteenth century, puts it:

עוד מצאתי כתוב כי ארסטו היוני אשר כל חכמי המחקר נגררים אחריו ושואבים מספריו שהיה רבו של אלכסנדרוס מקדון שמלך כל כל העולם וכאשר כבש אלכסנדרוס ירושלם השליט לארסטו רבו על אוצר שלמה ה"ע ואז חקר ודרש על ספרי שלמה ולקחם והעתיקם על שמו והוסיף הוא טעויות משלו ואז גנו הספרים ההם של שלמה כדי להטעות העולם שיסברו שארסטו עצמו חיברם משיקול דעתו

[Furthermore, this is what I found written about Aristotle the Greek, whom all the wise men of learning follow, and whose books they draw from, who was the teacher of Alexander the Macedonian who ruled all over the world – when Alexander conquered Jerusalem, he put his teacher Aristotle in charge of the treasure of Solomon, peace be upon him. Then he [Aristotle] studied and inquired into the books of Solomon and took them and translated⁵⁸ them in his own name, and he added his own errors. Then he hid those books of Solomon in order to mislead the

world, so that they would think Aristotle himself wrote them out of his own thoughts⁵⁹.]

According to this tradition, not only do Aristotle's writings, and all Greek knowledge derived from them, contain knowledge that was lost to the ancient Israelites, but Aristotle introduced "errors" into the original texts and was, indeed, responsible for having "lost" the originals by purposely concealing them⁶⁰. Thus, the act of translating books like the *Sod* into Hebrew, and into medieval Jewish culture, could be seen as vital not just as a way of increasing understanding of the gemological elements of the Bible, but also because translators reclaimed lost Jewish knowledge by doing so.

Alexander plays a part in this story of lost knowledge in a particularly interesting way, because the idea that Alexander the Great had attacked Jerusalem, although not historically accurate, was commonplace in medieval Jewish texts. Ultimately the source for this is Josephus, who in his *Jewish Antiquities* records how, after the High Priest refused to pay tribute to Alexander instead of to the Persian emperor, Alexander decided to conquer Jerusalem⁶¹. But in all versions of this legend, starting with that of Josephus, Alexander is prevented from attacking the city at the last moment. From one specific version of this episode to another, details of his change of heart may differ. In Josephus, an angel of God appears to Alexander in a dream and instructs him not to conquer the city, but rather to enter the city in peace and give gifts to the Temple instead of demanding tribute⁶². In the Talmud and some other medieval versions, the High Priest (who some texts say was Simon the Just) persuades Alexander to change his mind⁶³. And in the Hebrew Alexander Romance tradition, the High Priest dressed in his vestments functions as an

59. M. ben Isaac Aldabi, *Shvilei emunah*, Riva di Trento, 1559, p. 214. There is no modern or scholarly edition of this text.

60. D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early "Abbasid Society" (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)*, New York, 1998, p. 37-40, cites a similar legend found in Zoroastrian and Islamic sources from the Abbasid age of translation, which states that Alexander translated all Persian works of lore he found into Greek, sent them to Aristotle, and had the originals destroyed.

61. See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books 9-11, trans. R. Marcus, Cambridge and London, 1937, p. 472-477. For a study of the episode, see S. J. D. Cohen, "Alexander the Great and Jaddus the High Priest According to Josephus", *AJS Review*, 7 (1982), p. 41-68.

62. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, p. 476-477. The *Yosipon*, a tenth-century Hebrew adaptation of a Latin translation of Josephus' *Antiquities* and *Wars of the Jews*, also contains this explanation, though more elaborately. See D. Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1, Jerusalem, 1981, p. 54-55.

63. See Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Yoma* 69a; and, for instance, A. ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabalah*, ed. and trans. G. D. Cohen, Philadelphia, 1967, p. 16-17 (English) and p. 11 (Hebrew).

57. Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, vol. 3, p. 277 and vol. 2, p. 811.

58. The word used here in the Hebrew can mean both "copied" and "translated".

avatar of God, and Alexander therefore recognizes him from an earlier dream (of which more below). In all versions, regardless of the specifics of the intervention, Alexander never conquers Jerusalem nor has the opportunity to steal the wisdom of Solomon. Thus the idea presented in the *Shvilei emunah* represents an interesting twist of the general trope that Alexander attacked Jerusalem: it modifies the legend, so that instead of entering Jerusalem to honor the city, its Temple, and its God, Alexander does in fact conquer it, and most especially by plundering its wisdom.

The contradictory versions of the legend of Alexander at Jerusalem can be seen as versions of Jewish responses to Greek culture, as symbolized by Alexander, and it is worth exploring both options (i.e., that he did or did not conquer Jerusalem) in more detail, since they may pertain to the place of the *Sod* in medieval Hebrew letters. In the version of the legend represented by the *Shvilei emunah*, Greek knowledge is really Jewish knowledge, copied or recast as original Greek thought. Thus, translating and studying materials derived from Greek knowledge is an act of reclamation. In other versions, Greek culture in all aspects, and epitomized by Alexander the Great, is inferior to Jerusalem and the Jewish culture embodied by that city. Furthermore, in versions that prevent Alexander from conquering the city, Alexander's career and conquests are all part of God's design and not a result of his own capabilities or of the skills of his advisors and tutors.

Here it is worthwhile focusing on a version of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem that appears in one of the Hebrew Alexander Romances, that found in New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Heb. MS Supplement 103⁶⁴. In this text, as Alexander approaches the city, the High Priest receives instructions from God in a dream:

ואתה לבוש בגדיך אשר חקר לבא בהם אל הקודש פנימה וכן ציץ נזר הקדש הכתוב עליו קדש
לי על מצחך וצא אתה וכל הקהל עם האותות האלה לקראתו

64. This Romance has been edited in W. J. van Bakkum, *A Hebrew Alexander Romance According to MS London, Jews' College, no. 145*, Leuven, 1992. The London manuscript that van Bakkum was working from has moved; it is now in the Beinecke at Yale, with the shelfmark I cite. Van Bakkum is the only scholar to have worked extensively with the manuscript, but he does not provide details on the date or provenance: he argues that the text "existed before 1160" (p. 23), but his discussion relates only to the date of composition and not to the date of the manuscript itself (p. 27-30). I can add from my own examination (from microfilm) that the Alexander Romance is seventy pages by modern foliation (35 fol.) and is the sole text in the *codex*, although this may not have always been the case. Certainly, future codicological and paleographical work will repay the effort.

[Now, you, put on your vestments, in which it is your law to come inside the Holy, and place the diadem on which is written "Holy to God" on your forehead, and you and all of the congregation go out with these signs to greet him⁶⁵.]

The High Priest's vestments were heavily charged with symbolic meaning, as evinced by many Jewish and Christian texts devoted to their description and interpretation, and "these signs" must be a reference to the vestments, at least clearly to the diadem. God's instructions are successful, because we are told that, when Alexander saw the High Priest "וציץ הזהב במצחו והשם חקוק בו" ("with the golden diadem, which had the Name carved in it, on his forehead⁶⁶"), his plans changed: instead of attacking the city, he descended from his carriage and bowed down before the High Priest.

In his essay on "The Semiotics of the Priestly Vestments in Ancient Judaism", Michael Swartz has noted several motifs of interpretation associated with the vestments in late antiquity and medieval Jewish traditions⁶⁷. Two of these are relevant to understanding the role that donning them before Alexander plays in the Romance episode. First, according to Swartz, some traditions suggest that the garments possessed "an active capacity [...] to procure atonement or perform some metaphysical or material task⁶⁸". According to this thinking, the "signs" – the garments themselves, or their component parts – are the cause of Alexander's change of heart⁶⁹. Seeing them, Alexander is transformed from a would-be conqueror to a peaceful supplicant. But this is not the only possibility raised by the Romance story. The Romance narrative, and Alexander within it, are at pains to stress that Alexander was not bowing to the priest himself but specifically to the diadem on his forehead. When describing Alexander's bow, the Romance says: "וישתחו לפני השם הקדוש" "וישתחו לפני השם הקדוש" ("And he bowed before the Holy Name carved

65. The Hebrew quotation is from Van Bakkum, *A Hebrew Alexander Romance*, p. 62. The translation is mine.

66. *Ibidem*.

67. M. D. Swartz, "The Semiotics of the Priestly Vestments in Ancient Judaism", in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, ed. A. Baumgarten, Leiden, 2002, p. 57-80.

68. Swartz, "The Semiotics of the Priestly Vestments", p. 64.

69. The version of this story in the Alexander Romance was not the only one in circulation in medieval Hebrew texts, and others could place less emphasis on the High Priest's clothing. Abraham ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 17 (Hebrew) and p. 11 (English), emphasizes that the transformation occurred solely through the moral character of the High Priest involved, and does not mention the vestments.

on the diadem, and honored the priest greatly⁷⁰). And, after his astonished general asks him to explain why he is bowing down to an old man, Alexander replies, "לא השתחויתי לזקן הזה בלתי לשם הקדוש החקוק על הציץ אשר על מצחו" ("I did not bow to this old man, rather to the Holy Name carved on the diadem that is on his forehead⁷¹"). Alexander, who in many legendary and historical traditions was respectful of the deities of various peoples and places, sees the name of God on the diadem and, respecting the God of the Jews, changes his plans. This is not the end of Alexander's explanation, however: he goes on to reveal that before leaving Macedonia he had had a dream, in which he saw himself standing in a desert similar to the one outside of Jerusalem, and in front of him was

קהל גדול מלובשים בגדי לבן והולך לפניו זקן כדמות דיוקנו של זה ומלבושיו ויוני ככה והיה מתחבר אלי ואומר "אני המלך המנצח לפניך בבית מלחמתך". בראותי אותו [...] כי האלוהים שלחו להיות לו למבשר לעזרה וממון

[a great crowd wearing clothes of white, and, walking before them, an old man looking exactly like this one, and his vestments and accessories were just so, and he joined me, saying: "I am the king who is victorious for you in your warfare." When I saw him [I knew⁷²] that God sent him to be a messenger of help and succor⁷³.]

The "king" speaking to Alexander in his dream is the God of the Jews, telling Alexander that it is through His plans that Alexander will succeed in his conquests. This becomes even clearer later on when, after entering Jerusalem peacefully, the High Priest shows Alexander the prophecy in Daniel about "the youngest of kings who will rule over the face of the whole earth⁷⁴"), a reference to Daniel 8: 3-8 and its interpretation in Daniel 8: 20-21. With this in mind, a second motif from Swartz's study becomes key to interpreting the scene: as Swartz puts it, there is "a type of interpretation that sees the vestments as conferring upon the High Priest aspects of divinity or at least significations of divine authority⁷⁵". By donning the vestments before meeting Alexander, in this light, the High Priest becomes the earthly representative, even an avatar, of the "king" who spoke to Alexander in his dream in Macedonia. When Alexander sees the man, he

recognizes that the God of the Jews has appeared to him in a dream and has been behind his success, and he repays Him homage.

Conclusion: Recovering the Contexts of the Hebrew *Secret of Secrets*

I have focused on the Alexander-at-Jerusalem episode from the Hebrew Alexander Romance as prelude to conclusion for a few reasons. For one, as we have seen, the legend that Alexander the Great had visited or conquered Jerusalem played a role in the way some medieval Jewish texts contended with Greek knowledge in general and, more specifically, with knowledge attributed to Aristotle via Alexander the Great. The Romance legend serves as one of the matrices for understanding the relationship between "Jewish" and "Greek" forms of learning: Alexander and Aristotle become the point at which two cultures meet, both physically and textually, when texts about them or attributed to them are translated into Hebrew. Furthermore, although the Alexander Romance may seem far removed from even pseudo-scientific and falsely-attributed Aristotelian material, such as the *Secret of Secrets*, there is evidence to suggest that some medieval Jewish readers did not think so. The colophon in the manuscript that records the Alexander Romance discussed above attributes its translation from Arabic to Hebrew to Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon⁷⁶, the famous early-thirteenth century translator of Maimonides and Aristotle. Although this attribution must be viewed as false, it creates the impression that a scholar interested in Aristotelian materials would and should be reading the Alexander Romance⁷⁷. Most importantly, Alexander's life and career as it is portrayed in the Alexander Romance is an important context for reading the Hebrew version of the *Secret of Secrets*. The High Priest stands as a physical embodiment of Jewish occult knowledge, and this knowledge is either set in opposition to non-Jewish forms of occult knowledge, or it is positioned as equal to, even the source of, other occult traditions. The gemological lore in the lapidary section of *Secret of Secrets* can be understood as the same lore involved in various interpretations of the High Priest's vestments, just as it can stand in distinction to them. The point is that it is unlikely that

70. Van Bakkum, *A Hebrew Alexander Romance*, p. 62.

71. *Ibidem*, p. 64.

72. There is a lacuna in the manuscript here.

73. Van Bakkum, *A Hebrew Alexander Romance*, p. 64 (for the Hebrew).

74. *Ibidem*.

75. Swartz, "The Semiotics of the Priestly Vestments", p. 64.

76. Van Bakkum, *A Hebrew Alexander Romance*, p. 205.

77. For a longer discussion of this colophon and arguments against its veracity, see my "Hebrew Alexander Romances and Astrological Questions", in *Alexander the Great in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. M. Stock, Toronto, forthcoming.

medieval Jewish readers could have read the lapidary section without thinking of the gems in the High Priest's attire, or without forming some opinion about the relationship between this text and other accounts of the vestments.

By its nature, this essay represents merely an opening into the subject of its title, a sampling of interrelated texts, contexts, and interpretive modes rather than an exhaustive study. I have suggested ways in which we may begin to understand the place of the Hebrew *Sod ha-sodot* on the medieval Jewish bookshelf. For future study, I propose a continuation of the methods indicated here, including study of the immediate codicological contexts of the *Sod ha-sodot* – particularly of the texts that are its physical neighbors – with a view to further clarifying how this work was perceived. While previous studies, and the discussion here, reveal that in the sixteenth century the *Sod ha-sodot* was viewed as part of a curriculum for doctors, linking treatises on ethical and physiological issues, I have also argued that to understand the Hebrew context of the *Sod* one needs to consider its content. My look at the gemology of its lapidary section is just one example of the yields of this fairly simple approach. We know that there was indeed interest in gemological knowledge transmitted by Aristotle to Alexander, and that discourse around this knowledge focused on its relation to historical knowledge believed to have been possessed by ancient Israel. The symbolic relationship between Alexander and Aristotle, who represent Greek knowledge, and the High Priest, who represents lost Hebrew knowledge, is clearly of importance to consideration of the *Sod ha-sodot*. Much more work must be done, of course, beginning with proper scholarly editions of the *Sod* and many of the related texts quoted in this essay, as well as annotation of when and where the *Sod* was quoted and excerpted in the medieval and early modern periods. My sincere wish is that many scholars will take up this work and discover the doubtless very large network of textual and contextual associations of the Hebrew *Secret of Secrets*.

Shamma A. BOYARIN
University of Victoria