

Meshal Haqadmoni, Isaac ibn Sahula, Fables from the Distant Past,
edited and translated by Raphael Loewe.
Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation 2004. 2 volumes.

Meshal Haqadmoni is a labour of love for its editor, Professor Raphael Loewe, former Goldsmid Professor of Hebrew at University College London. As an undergraduate student of Raphael Loewe's in the 1970s, I had the pleasure and privilege to study medieval Hebrew poetry with him, an experience that to this day evokes the happiest and warmest of memories. The writings of the medieval Hebrew poets are jewels in the crown of an already rich Jewish literary heritage, and presented by Loewe, himself a poet of subtlety and panache, they came to life in their original and in translation, usually Loewe's own.

Meshal haqadmoni is a collection of moral fables in which animals are the leading protagonists and which engage with most of the major topics of the author's time. The texts are suffused with quotations from and allusions to biblical and rabbinic literature, meticulously annotated by the editor. Loewe's translations show him at his quintessential best and stand on their own as testimony to his linguistic and poetic skills.

The first volume contains a lengthy introduction explaining the work of Ibn Sahula and including all the background information that might be needed to get the most out of the fables. As might be expected, Loewe's work is intellectually demanding and makes no compromise for those with lesser minds, but the joy to be encountered by those who rise to his intellectual challenge is great.

The Littman Library is owed an immense debt by all lovers of Hebrew Literature for having committed to this ambitious project, and although the two volumes are expensive, the quality of Meshal Haqadmoni is such that the price is worth paying, and all those interested in Jewish literature, and especially that of the medieval period, should have this work on their shelves.

Raphael Loewe's translation and commentary on Ibn Sahula's work is a lasting testimony to a great scholar and a great teacher with a poet's soul.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh