

# Coming of (S)Age

## Religious Knowledge, Wisdom, and Gender in the Hebrew Tradition 'Mishle Sendebar'

**Abstract** Scriptural intertextuality is a unique hermeneutical strategy of the Hebrew version of the 'Seven Sages', the 'Mishle Sendebar'. This article aims to interpret such strategies of biblical and postbiblical intertextuality and offers an interpretation of selected examples – the encounter of Solomon with the Queen of Sheba in Midrash and retellings of Joseph and Potiphar's wife – in order to highlight the connectedness of Near Eastern literary and religious traditions of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. By tracing religious knowledge in the frame narrative of the 'Mishle Sendebar', the article argues that the Hebrew version of the 'Seven Wise Masters' is connected with biblical wisdom discourse, primarily with the book of proverbs and its interpretations.

**Keywords** Mishle Sendebar; Intertextuality; Palimpsest; Frame Narrative; Midrash

The Hebrew 'Mishle Sendebar' belongs to the group of textual traditions of the 'Seven Sages'/'Seven Viziers' named by Ben Edwin PERRY as Eastern, in which Sendebar, the king's wisest adviser, appears as the main character – similar to related texts in Syriac, Persian, Arabic, and Greek.<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew text has not yet received intense scholarly attention

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1 Perry 1960.

or interpretation.<sup>2</sup> In 1967, Morris EPSTEIN published a critical edition based on manuscripts already published in the Steinschneider Collection at the Jewish Theological Seminar of America and other previously unpublished manuscripts from the 14th century, of which the ‘Oxford Group’ is the most important because it includes three new tales, one of which (‘Ingenia’) is found in other Eastern ‘Seven Sages’ traditions.<sup>3</sup>

The dating of the ‘Mishle’ is highly controversial. It is mentioned by the 13th-century poet Avraham ben Yiszaq de Bézier<sup>4</sup> and by the Provençal philosopher and translator Kalonymos ben Kalonymos.<sup>5</sup> EPSTEIN, however, holds that the Hebrew tradition is far older. He even considers that a lost original Hebrew variant of the Arabic tradition of ‘The Seven Vizirs’ could have been the basis and that the Hebrew was the “intermediary” between the Eastern and Western traditions on the hypothesis “that the agents of transmission were the Radanites, those far wandering merchants of the ninth century”.<sup>6</sup> PERRY, on the other hand, probably because of Kalonymos, dates the ‘Mishle’ to the 13th century and places them after the Arabic and Latin tradition.<sup>7</sup>

The controversial dating is accompanied by questions about the context of transmission, i.e. the identity of the authors, transmitters, and audiences of the ‘Mishle’. The first mention of the text by Kalonymos already marks an uncertainty about the genre and knowledge context. Kalonymos mentions the ‘Mishle’ in his introduction to the ‘Iggeret Baale Hayyim’, a retelling of one Epistle of the Brethren of Purity in Basra (9th and 10th centuries) known as ‘Man and Beast before the King of the Djinn’. About this text he writes:

Lest anyone lacking in discernment and naked of judgment might think that this book is of the same kind as Kalilah and Dimnah or Mishle Sendebar or Hariri and similar books: Heaven forbid! For it is not like

2 Dan 1982.

3 Epstein 1976, p. 11. For an overview of the manuscript groups (two recensions A and B plus ‘Oxford Group’), see also Pratelli 2010, pp. 11–15, and for further modern editions *ibid.*, p. 16.

4 In his letter to his friend David Daslari on the occasion of the festival of Purim in 1295. For the letter that is extant in a 15th-century manuscript of the British Museum, see Doniach 1932. Although the mention of the ‘Tale of Sendovar’ is connotated negatively, the fact that it is mentioned around the occasion of Purim further strengthens the association of the ‘Mishle’ with the Book of Esther, a current biblical subtext in the ‘Mishle’.

5 Epstein 1967, p. 12.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

7 See also Krönung 2016, p. 367: “The Hebrew Mishlè Sandabar (H), most probably from the first half of the 13th century too, also has an Arabic text as its source.” Krönung refers to Epstein’s edition and translation in the footnotes, although he does not support this hypothesis. He thinks that a Hebrew original was the basis for the Latin ‘vulgate’ text. On the hypothesis of a ‘Buddhist’ original of the Hebrew Sindabar, see also Habermann 2006, p. 632.

them and not even like those which are like unto them. Its purpose is to render us consolation and moral lessons; and deep secrets are concealed in it and scattered throughout – which even the wise will not fully comprehend at the first reading.<sup>8</sup>

Kalonymos thus lists the ‘Mishle Sendebār’ – unlike the other literary traditions – as a text from which moral meaning and wisdom can be expected.<sup>9</sup> The fact that the ‘Mishle’ is associated at all with the ‘Maqamāt’ of al-Harīri and with ‘Kalīla wa-Dimna’ is presumably due to the popularity of the tradition and the structure of frame and individual narratives known from those texts.<sup>10</sup> EPSTEIN, like many other scholars looking at other ‘Seven Sages’ traditions, also classifies the ‘Mishle’ as ‘popular’ and even ‘secular’ literature.<sup>11</sup> The fact that there is almost no Talmudic knowledge in the ‘Mishle’ but, instead, a multitude of intertextual references to the Bible, many of which EPSTEIN has already worked out in the footnote apparatus of his edition, speaks for a localisation of the text in Middle Eastern Judaism. EPSTEIN himself assumes that the author could not have been a (mediaeval) Jew, because the text speaks of “the Torah of the Jews”.<sup>12</sup> Such a phrasing would perhaps most likely suggest an Islamic author. However, the implicitness and intensity of biblical language in the ‘Mishle’ makes the opposite likely. The various biblical intertextualities are reminiscent of the hermeneutics of Midrash. This is not to say that the ‘Mishle’ are primarily influenced by rabbinic literature, but they share the hermeneutical strategy of using scriptural language and narrative elements as a departure for storytelling.<sup>13</sup>

In this paper, I want to trace these remnants of biblical and post-biblical knowledge in the ‘Mishle’. Biblical intertextuality seems to be one of the “meaningful differences” of the Hebrew in the great variety of ‘Seven Sages’ traditions.<sup>14</sup> In focusing here on these traces of religious knowledge, my primary goal is not to arrive at a more precise dating hypothesis but, rather, to explore in more detail the *function* of biblical intertextuality in the ‘Mishle’, primarily in its frame

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8 Epstein 1967, pp. 12f.

9 Very similarly, Bézier writes in his letter: “Our anxious longing is for our own works, and not for the tales of Sendovar. We do not desire the Thousand Nights nor the story HLBT WLBR.” (Doniach 1932, p. 66.)

10 Another text that is grouped together with the ‘Mishle Sendebār’ as one of the Jewish fables of the Middle Ages, the ‘Mishle Shu’alim’ (‘Fox Fables’), also has similarities with the Arabic genre of the Maqāma. See Hasan-Rokem 1971, p. 667.

11 Epstein 1967, p. 33.

12 Ibid., p. 31.

13 A very similar observation is made by Lerner 2018, who analyses such ‘rabbinic’ strategies in the Arabic tradition of the ‘Seven Viziers’ in the ‘Arabian Nights’.

14 Lundt 2020, p. 124.

narrative. As recently pointed out by Bea LUNDT, ‘Seven Sages’ research today is less concerned with influence hypotheses and urtexts. Influence models established by earlier philologists like PERRY have been gradually replaced by concepts of transcultural entanglement or ‘global literary studies’, to which I want to link in this paper.<sup>15</sup> The term that seems appropriate to me for shedding new light on the Hebrew tradition is that of palimpsest:

It has been said that the Near East resembles a palimpsest, layer upon layer, tradition upon tradition, intertwined to the extent that one cannot really grasp one without the other, certainly not the later without the earlier, but often also not the earlier without considering the shapes it took later.<sup>16</sup>

The observation of the cross-connectedness of different traditions in the Near Eastern cultures of late antiquity and the Middle Ages is not only true for the different *religious* traditions (scriptural interpretation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam):<sup>17</sup> the ‘popular’ literary genres are also part of this geographically and historically widely interconnected palimpsest of a Near Eastern knowledge economy.<sup>18</sup> One scholar who, early on, pointed out the interconnectedness of literary and religious traditions in this network is Shlomo Dov GOITEIN.<sup>19</sup> The religious corpora of knowledge in Islam, Qur’ān and Sunna, have in many cases integrated and varied aggadic material from contemporary Judaism. In early Islam, professional storytellers (*quṣṣās*) transmitted the stories of the prophets known from Jewish culture outside of narrower religious circles and centres of learning.

These story-tellers freely borrowed from Jews and Christians, and in particular from the vast literature of the Midrash, the popular exposition of the Bible. Naturally, they added material from other sources and from their own imagination. In their turn, these ‘Stories of the Prophets’ are echoed in some of the later Jewish Midrashim, which may contain even some Koranic material.<sup>20</sup>

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15 Ibid., p. 125. Lundt remarks that the “transmission of SWM can be seen as an indicator that for centuries a kind of global communication has taken place over at least three continents”.

16 Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, p. 4.

17 This is the subject of Lazarus-Yafeh 1992.

18 On the notion ‘knowledge economy’, see Schmidt, Pissis and Uhlmann 2021.

19 After Goitein, several other scholars have contributed to a better understanding of the interconnectedness of Near Eastern literatures. See very prominently Schwarzbaum 1979 and 1982 and, more recently, Lerner 2018, p. 217 with further references.

20 Goitein 1955, p. 194.

The reciprocal borrowing between Jewish Aggadah, Qurʾān, Islamic *quṣṣās*, and Midrash often describes, as GOITEIN already implies here, a “full circle”.<sup>21</sup> One example of such a process of reciprocal borrowing is represented in the ‘Mishle’ in Sendebar’s utterance of the ‘dictum of Hillel’ (bTalmud, Shabbat 31a) in the end of the frame narrative:

And Sendebar replied: “I request of you only what is hateful unto you do not to your neighbor, and love your people as yourself.”<sup>22</sup>

The Golden Rule is manifestly an ethical maxim shared interreligiously. The commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself is in Leviticus (19:18) and the book of Tobit (4:15) and became part of Christian ethics through the Sermon on the Mount (Matth. 7:12), here presented in a positive light and surpassed with the demand to love one’s enemies. The fact that the Golden Rule finds its application at the end of the ‘Mishle Sendebar’, after the resolution of the initial conflict, gives the narrative a final note in distinction to the Western ‘Seven Sages’ traditions, some of which tell of drastic punishments for the condemned woman.<sup>23</sup> Also in the Persian ‘Sindbadnama’ and in the ‘Seven Viziers’ in the ‘101 Nights’ we find the application of the Golden Rule to the king’s wife, though not at the end of the story.<sup>24</sup> Unlike what EPSTEIN and CASSEL argued, the occurrence of the Golden Rule does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the ‘Mishle’ must be the source for the other texts;<sup>25</sup> rather, it is an example for their common use of the same set of traditions that connects the literatures of the Middle Ages with the (religious) heritages of antiquity. A neat distinction between a ‘positive’ Christian and a ‘negative’ Jewish rule is impossible for the occurrence of the Golden Rule in mediaeval literatures.

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21 Bernstein 2006, p. xiii about the 16th-century popular Jewish tradition called ‘The Stories of our Master Joseph’: “Here we have a fascinating example of this phenomenon of cultural borrowing coming full circle: a Jewish text has seemingly taken its form from an Islamic prototype, which in turn was derived from the Jewish literary mode of scriptural interpretation known as midrash.”

22 Epstein 1967, p. 297.

23 Ibid., p. 5. Epstein also emphasises this characteristic ending: “Only in the *Mishle Sendebar* is she allowed to go free.”

24 See Lerner 2020.

25 Epstein 1967, p. 34; Cassel 1891, p. 306.

## 1 The Frame Narrative: The Existential Task of Learning Wisdom

The frame narrative of 'Mishle Sendebar' is localised in an Indian court where a king named Bibar reigns. The most beloved and outstanding of Bibar's wives, Beria, holds a feast in his honour. She notices his sadness during the celebration and stands by him as an advisor when he expresses his grief to her: since he is already eighty years old and does not yet have a successor, his family's rule over the throne of India will die out with him.<sup>26</sup> It is again Queen Beria who gives hope and good advice to the ruler: Bibar should pray to God and practise repentance together with her.

Let us declare a fast and clothe ourselves in sackcloth and ashes and afflict ourselves before God, for He is merciful and ever present to those who seek Him and He responds to all who call upon Him, nor does He reject those who seek Him.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the aged king's favourite wife is not only a wise counsellor and devoted partner but also exemplarily pious. The king "heard the wisdom of her words and was very pleased".<sup>28</sup> Beria herself now becomes pregnant and gives birth to the longed-for son, in whose honour the king sends letters to all 127 provinces of his kingdom<sup>29</sup> and invites all the wise men to a feast, a total of 1,000 people, who are now selected by the king himself until the seven wisest among them are identified: Sendebar, Ipokras, Apulin, Lukman, Aristalin, Hind, and Amami.<sup>30</sup>

The frame narrative of 'Mishle Sendebar' repeatedly raises the question posed by King Bibar in his first demand to the seven sages: they are to search the stars for the fate of his son in order to learn whether he will live or die. The alternative of life and death arises at several crucial moments in the frame story with reference to different protagonists: the greatest of the sages, Sendebar, accepts the prince's education as a task on which the success of his own life will also be decided: "If I fail, let my treasure and my life both be forfeit."<sup>31</sup> The other sages express fear of death after Sendebar prevails over them in a contest: "Now Sendebar will ask our heads of the King!"<sup>32</sup> Sendebar and the prince see in the stars that the young man

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<sup>26</sup> Epstein 1967, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> This is one of the similarities to the Book of Esther. See further down.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55. The naming of the seven wise men by name is a specific feature of the 'Mishle'.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

would have to die if he opened his mouth to speak during the seven days after his return to his father.<sup>33</sup> This silence of the returned prince, on whose wisdom the survival of the entire kingdom depends, sets the stage for the appearance of another woman: a nameless wife of the king promises to break the silence. She does so by an attempt of seduction, again with a deadly alternative: she proposes to the prince to kill the old ruler and make him king himself.<sup>34</sup> When the prince does not take her up on the offer, she considers killing him so that he will not betray her once he begins to speak again.<sup>35</sup> Finally, the king's death sentence on the prince, also contained in the other 'Seven Sages' traditions, follows after the woman accuses him of rape and he still remains silent: "Will this one then be king? He is not fit to rule!" And he ordered his servants to remove his head."<sup>36</sup>

The continuously expressed alternative between life and death over the events of the education of the future ruler not only builds tension and creates high expectations for the listener of the story but also underlines the importance of the personal development of the prince, as further stressed by several links of the frame narrative to his age: the sages predict that the prince will be able to live and rule but that, in his twentieth year, he will be in mortal danger.<sup>37</sup> The prince's instruction by the wisest of the sages beginning on his seventh birthday serves to save his life from this danger. When the prince is tested by his father after twelve and a half years of education with Sendebär, the drama reaches its climax: the prince proves to be completely uneducated. Here, as well, the father is so horrified that he wishes his son had never been born.

Evidently, the upbringing of the youth is a prominent aspect of several 'Seven Sages' traditions. Bea LUNDT observes:

Insofar as the king and his son were included as central figures of SWM, it was predominantly understood as a treatise on upbringing, comparable to books on the raising of the sons of nobles, called 'mirrors for princes'.<sup>38</sup>

According to this genre classification, the development of the prince is connected to that of the state, or differently put, the success of his education is not at all a

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33 Ibid., p. 75.

34 Ibid., p. 83.

35 Ibid., p. 85.

36 Ibid., p. 87.

37 Ibid., p. 57.

38 Lundt 2020, p. 127.

private but a very political matter.<sup>39</sup> But in the ‘Mishle’, the young protagonist is neither representative of a specific court nor of a particular aristocracy. The title used for the ‘Prince’ in the Hebrew is simply “Son of the King” (*ben ha-melekh*) and very often only “the son” (*ben*) or “the youth” (*na’ar*).<sup>40</sup> Also, the localisation of the court in India might, on the contrary, be a strategy of exoticisation that suggests a reading of the frame story as allegory or archetype.

Here, the framework of the story about the difficulties of a youth learning wisdom connects royalty and rulership with learnedness. This combination of personal maturity and learnedness is already a prominent discourse in the Bible, and particularly in the book of Proverbs, the classical wisdom text and most ‘secular’ and ‘humanistic’ of biblical books that also focusses on the development of young men to maturity with help of the experience transmitted by older sages.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the (frame narrative of the) ‘Mishle’ resonates in several respects with biblical wisdom: both Proverbs and the ‘Mishle’ present one major obstacle for the wisdom student in a seductive woman.<sup>42</sup> The old king Bibar has strong similarities to the biblical Solomon, the wise ruler *par excellence* and lover of many women.<sup>43</sup> Like Bibar, Solomon also has a conflict with his son Absalom over the future of government, and the story of this father–son conflict is even told in the ‘Mishle’.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the son in the frame narrative is accused of laziness, the worst of all vices according to Proverbs, and Proverbs and Psalms repeatedly affirm that “fear of God” is the beginning of all wisdom.<sup>45</sup> We read in the ‘Mishle’: “A youth will not learn if he does not fear, and chastisement teaches knowledge and knowledge brings forth wisdom.”<sup>46</sup> Last but not least, we have the title of the text: *mishle* (sg. *mashal*) is the very title of the book of Proverbs itself and a crucially important term in rabbinic Midrash, where it takes on several meanings, ranging from exemplary to allegory and wisdom sentence.<sup>47</sup> In the Middle Ages, the term appears in the titles of Jewish fables, like in the ‘Mishle Shu’alim’ (‘Fox Fables’), a collection of fables mentioned in the Talmud (Suk. 28a; Sanh. 38b) that shares with the ‘Mishle Sendebār’ the “religious tendency of the Midrash” to

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39 On the ‘mirror for princes’ genre, see also Zakeri in this volume.

40 See Epstein 1967, p. 64.

41 See Longman III 2021.

42 In the book of Proverbs are several warnings of the ‘strange’ woman, who threatens the student of wisdom. For a particularly characteristic text, Prov. 7, see further down.

43 Epstein 1967, p. 44, and 1 Kings 11.

44 Epstein 1967, pp. 229–239.

45 See Prov. 1:29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 10:27; 14:2.26 f.; 15:16.33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30.

46 Epstein 1967, p. 61.

47 See Langer 2016, pp. 154–160.



include “numerous references to scripture”.<sup>48</sup> It is likely that the word in the title of these ‘Mishle’-works still associated biblical wisdom and its alterations and modernisations in rabbinic culture in a mediaeval Jewish reader.

Let us take a brief look at the collective of sages in the ‘Mishle’. Although the number of the sages (*hokham*) is seven, the group can hardly be described as a symbol of ‘perfect unity’ as in other ‘Seven Sages’ texts.<sup>49</sup> Not only is it unique that they each have a name in the ‘Mishle’ but their relationships are also loaded with competition and distrust. Interestingly, the speakers express this competition again in biblical language: the six sages say Sendebār’s words are “as vapours and wind without rain”, an allusion to Prov. 25:14: “As vapours and wind without rain, so is he that boasteth himself of a false gift.” And Sendebār defends himself by using words of another biblical wisdom text, the Song of Songs. He says: “Wisdom in me is *like musk and amber* – when water is poured on it its aroma is released. So too is wisdom kindled by jealousy.”<sup>50</sup>

To sum up, the conflict that the frame narrative of the ‘Mishle’ raises and resolves via the detour of the uttered narratives does not initially consist of a trial of strength between men and women.<sup>51</sup> Instead, with the motifs of the couple’s childlessness, the death of the mother, the competition between the sages, and the unlearnedness of the youth, the Hebrew text focuses on the issue of upbringing, including a significant disturbance of understanding between an overabundantly wise father and his late-born son.

## 2 Other Forms of Intertextuality

We have seen that the frame narrative and the stories are interwoven with biblical language. EPSTEIN already pointed out many *linguistic borrowings* from verses of the Bible. Most of EPSTEIN’S references are to the Book of Esther.<sup>52</sup> But literal ‘quotations’ are also found from other books of the Bible. To name one example: in the first story, about a parrot accusing a man’s wife of adultery, there is an allegory of the lover with a lion ravaging a vineyard:

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<sup>48</sup> Hasan-Rokem 2007, p. 670.

<sup>49</sup> Lundt 2020, p. 127.

<sup>50</sup> Epstein 1967, p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> Although readers have long emphasised the ‘misogynistic character’ of the Hebrew tradition. See Pratelli 2010, p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> The examples Epstein notes are almost abundant. In the frame story alone, we have eleven direct links to Esther. See Epstein 1967, pp. 45–92.

It is true that the lion did come there and found the clusters of grapes lovely and good; he did not however eat of the fruit nor did he break down the fence.<sup>53</sup>

The phrase is linguistically identical to the wording in an allegory of Israel with a vineyard in Isaiah 5:5.<sup>54</sup> Such literal takes on the Hebrew biblical text are not surprising. They are common in Jewish literature of the Middle Ages, particularly in Midrash and other ‘homiletic’ texts. They occur not only in the narrower confines of religious erudition but also in popular literary or aggadic traditions of the Talmud and their echoes in Islamic *Isrā’īliyāt*. Next to such direct *linguistic* allusions and intertextualities, biblical *topoi* stand out, especially in relation to the ruler types in the ‘Mishle’. The aforementioned similarity between Bibar and Solomon is particularly evident in one instance: when the son returns home, his wisdom is tested. The story has a parallel in Solomon’s encounter with the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10). I will concentrate on this theme for a comparison in the following.

### 3 Testing With Riddles

The text of ‘Mishle Sendebār’ relates:

And the boy was with Sendebār twelve years and six months. And the king commanded and they brought him before the king, and *he tested the boy with riddles* (ינס בהידור).<sup>55</sup> And he found in him no wisdom at all.<sup>56</sup>

The wording of the story is reminiscent of a biblical story related in 1 Kings 10:1 f.:

When the Queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to *test Solomon with riddles* (לנסתו בהידור). [...] Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.” All English Bible texts are from the English Standard Version 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Pratelli 2010, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> Epstein 1967, p. 59.

The ‘Mishle’ picks up the wording “test with riddles”. Since the word “riddle” (*hida*) appears in the Bible only here and in one other verse,<sup>57</sup> the term *hida* alone would probably associate the story of Solomon and the Queen to a reader well acquainted with the Bible. Apart from the lexical identity, the story related in 1 Kings about the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon’s court is probably the most famous story about the encounter of a distinctly wise ruler with a woman. It goes like this: after exchanging gifts and the testing with riddles, the noble female ruler of a foreign (possibly Far Eastern) country exclaims: “In wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard.” (1 Kings 10:7) The biblical account, which concentrates on the breathtaking impression of Solomon and the generous exchange of luxury gifts, inspired the imagination of Bible readers and interpreters in the Middle Ages; one of the details they added to the story was the riddles of the Queen themselves. See for example ‘Midrash Mishle’ (a Midrash on the Book of Proverbs):

The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon’s fame through the name of the Lord and she came to test him with riddles. And what is meant by “with riddles”? Jeremiah Bar Shalom relates: She said to him, “You’re the Solomon about whom I have heard? The Solomon whose kingdom and wisdom have come to my attention?” “Yes,” he replied. Then she said, “You are a wise man. Would you be able to answer a question of mine were I to put it to you?” He responded: “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding.” And so, she asked: “What are they? Seven depart and nine enter, two give drink but only one partakes.” He responded, “No doubt, seven are the days of the menstrual cycle, nine are the months of the pregnancy, two (refers) to the breasts that succor and one to the child born (who drinks from them).” She then said to him, “You are a wise man!”<sup>58</sup>

The riddles of the Queen of Sheba in Midrash are structurally similar to the response of one of the other sages in the ‘Mishle’. The sage Aristalin here responds to Sendebat’s promise to teach the Prince wisdom in only six months:

Aristalin replied, saying: “There are five things like unto each other and no man can be certain about them until he has seen their outcome, and he cannot sing their praises until he has observed their conclusion: The vessel in the heart of the seas before it reaches its destination; one

<sup>57</sup> The other occurrence is in Judg. 14, where Simson poses a riddle to the guests of his wedding.

<sup>58</sup> Lassner 1993, p. 162. Further examples of other Midrashim and Targumim relating to the riddles posed by the Queen of Sheba on the following pages.

cannot tell if a man is a hero in battle until he returns home in safety; the sick man until he is cured; the pregnant woman before she gives birth; the youth before he matures. And so it is not fitting for us to submit to Sendebār until we shall behold his deeds.”<sup>59</sup>

The formulation “five things like unto each other” again resembles a biblical saying.<sup>60</sup> Aristalin’s enigma, on closer inspection, is not exactly logical: it is clear that he wants to say that only after the prince has returned fully educated can he and his colleagues agree that Sendebār was the best choice for the job. But the examples he chooses are odd: it is not true that one can only tell a sick person after he is cured or a pregnant woman after she gives birth. In fact, both the sick and the pregnant are no longer sick and pregnant after the event. It could be that the narrator of the story, taking party with Sendebār, aims to disqualify his competitor by adding this level of illogic to Aristalin’s riddle. What Aristalin’s comparison does accomplish is to further stress the existential task of the sapiential educator: the youth reaching maturity under Sendebār’s supervision is compared to a battle won, a man cured, and a baby born. But the analogy to the Queen of Sheba goes beyond the structural similarity: Aristalin’s riddle concerns identity and gender and is, thereby, again associated with the riddles of the Queen of Sheba in Midrash. As far as I can see, all of the riddles attributed to the Queen of Sheba have this strong connection to gender and identity. In one of her riddles, she presents Solomon with young people dressed alike, and the king is supposed to distinguish the boys from the girls.<sup>61</sup> She asks about the twisted family relationships of Lot and his daughters,<sup>62</sup> and in other Midrashim, the gender of the queen herself is the issue: although she is a beautiful woman, she presents an unladylike detail to Solomon: her hairy legs.<sup>63</sup>

In the imagination of mediaeval Jewry, the Queen of Sheba increasingly develops into a figure that combines the female with the demonic and uncivilised. The formerly dazzling female ruler, who met the wise king Solomon on his own level and even functioned as his examiner in the Bible, becomes a threat to the

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<sup>59</sup> Epstein 1967, p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Prov 30:18 f.: “Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin.”

<sup>61</sup> In Midrash Mishle and Midrash ha-Hafez. See Lassner 1993, p. 162.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> That the hairy legs are unladylike is clear in the Targum Sheni Esther (see Lassner 1993, p. 167). Here Solomon says to the Queen: “You are a beautiful woman, but hairiness is for men.” Even more drastically, in the text Pseudo Ben-Sira, on the Queen’s visit to Solomon he has her hair removed. See Lassner 1993, pp. 167 f.

newborn and the pregnant, a demonic force opposite orderly society, maintained by wisdom teachings.

Reading the Midrashim about Solomon and the Queen as a subtext of the frame narrative in the ‘Mishle’ adds to the perception of the narrated situation as a moment of crisis: unlike the father, ‘Solomon’, whose perfection of wisdom, wealth, and justice the wild animals and foreign rulers affirmed, the son of the ‘Mishle’ fails to live up to the expectations of the sages. The father’s glorious past can not be met, and the future is uncertain and scary – to the same degree as the female herself has become uncanny. Concomitant to the threat that wisdom might be lost on an uneducated son, the woman has changed from being a pious support (Beria) or exalted admirer and examiner (Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings) to a dangerous, uncanny ‘other’ (the Queen of Sheba in Midrash and the nameless seductress of the ‘Mishle’) and obstacle for the young man.

#### 4 The Evil Seductress of Mishle and Potiphar’s Wife

I want to quickly point at one other intertextual subject – not new in ‘Seven Sages’ research – with the story of Joseph. Although the obvious connection of the frame narrative to Gen. 39 is repeatedly pointed out, what has not been stressed enough is the fact that the Joseph story itself, by the time of its reception in mediaeval literatures, has undergone repeated interpretation and rewritings as intense and interreligiously diverse as the episode about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.<sup>64</sup> As soon as in Genesis, Joseph’s encounter with Lady Potiphar may be seen as one of the character tests a young man has to pass to achieve maturity. The archetypical scene of a young man falling victim to the strange woman is in Prov. 7, a classical wisdom text that most probably influenced the Joseph story of Genesis.<sup>65</sup> In Prov. 7, the intentions of the “strange woman” are flat-out evil. She leads the young man astray through sexual advances and “smooth talk” (Prov. 7:5); she lures him to her house “like an ox going to the slaughter” (Prov. 7:22). In contrast, the seduction of young Joseph in Gen. 39:6–12 is narrated in a comparatively undramatic way and has a different outcome:

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master’s wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything

<sup>64</sup> For an excellent overview, see Kugel 1990.

<sup>65</sup> Maier 1998, p. 96.

that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

The Egyptian woman then falsely accuses Joseph of raping her and causes his imprisonment. While the text of Genesis repeatedly stresses that "the Lord was with Joseph" (Gen. 39:2f., 5, 21, 23) in Potiphar's house and later in prison, inner-biblical, late-antique, and mediaeval interpreters of the Bible dramatised the conflict to the level of an existential threat.<sup>66</sup> Similar to the Queen of Sheba, Lady Potiphar in postbiblical rewritings and interpretations becomes more and more a demonic female, whose uncontrolled impulses attack not only Joseph's integrity but the norms of society. Joseph, on the other hand, becomes more and more the model of the pious, the successful student of wisdom, who resists the "strange woman" by way of learnedness (Jub 39, 6f.,<sup>67</sup> TestJos 3–9,<sup>68</sup> bTalmud: Yoma 3, 4<sup>69</sup>), the appearance of his father's face in a window pane (BerRabba 98, 24<sup>70</sup>) or a sign from his Lord (Quran 12, 24).<sup>71</sup> Authors differ about whether or not Joseph was sexually tempted or provoked by the woman. Some wonder about the sexual potency of Potiphar,<sup>72</sup> while others add the detail of Lady Potiphar seeking compliance and solidarity with other Egyptian women, who attest that Joseph was irresistibly handsome and thereby indirectly pardon the woman (Quran 12, 30–32; Midrash Tanhuma).

This antagonism of the "strange woman" and the pious youth is also part of the personal development the frame narrative of the 'Mishle' tells:

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66 See already Ps. 105:16–22, which dramatises Joseph's physical pain in prison and portrays him as teacher of wisdom to the elders in Egypt.

67 Berger 1981, p. 516.

68 Becker 1980, pp. 120–128. For more examples on the dramatisation of the conflict between Joseph and Potiphar's wife in late antiquity, see Schmidt 2021, pp. 56–69.

69 Goldschmidt 1930, p. 93.

70 Freedman 1980, p. 812.

71 For the relevance of the Quranic Joseph story to the Arabic tradition of the 'Seven Viziers', see also Ridwan in this volume.

72 Many Hellenistic texts, following the Septuaginta translation of Genesis, claim that Potiphar was an eunuch. See Becker 1980, p. 119 and Berger 1981, p. 515.

And she said to the King: “Lo, you said that your son is dumb; false however, is all that he does. With the cleverness of a villain does he act. He came with me into the chamber and I began to talk with him and he seized me and desired to lie with me and he struggled with me and I overpowered him and freed myself from his hand.” And it came to pass when the King heard her words, he grew angry and his wrath burned with him. And he said: “Will this one then be a king? He is not fit to rule!” And he ordered his servants to remove his head. Then spoke the six sages, the counselors of the King, concerning his son: “This youth is wise and from an abundance of wisdom does he act. And she, ocurred one that she is, tells falsehoods about him! Let us take counsel among ourselves. Perhaps we will be able to rescue the Prince through wisdom, each of us on another day. [...]” And the one came before the King and prostrated himself and said to him: “My lord King! May your servant find favor in your sight and he will speak before you, for wise men listen to counsel and to words of wisdom. And it befits you not to be like men who jest, who decree and then regret their decrees. And you, my lord King, may indeed not act thus, for the word of the King is law and who shall tell him what is to be done? And now, attend to my voice and hasten not to kill your son in accord with the words of the woman. For the wiles of women are many.”<sup>73</sup>

There are several parallels to the Joseph story both in its biblical and post-biblical variants. In both cases, the young male has early in his life lost his mother and has no power to defend himself against the accusations by the female, in the ‘Mishle Sendebār’ because the prince is condemned to silence and in the story of Joseph because of his social status: he is a “Hebrew slave” (Gen. 39:14) in the house of an Egyptian nobleman. Both texts imply an obscurity of who is victim and accuser: the ‘Mishle’ in the accusation that the prince, while playing dumb, really is “clever as a villain”; the Joseph story of Genesis by way of defamation (Gen. 14 f.); in later rewritings, in the attempts of Lady Potiphar to paint Joseph as so irresistibly beautiful (Quran 12, 31; Midrash Tanhuma to Gen. 39) that he, not she, is to be blamed. In both traditions, the youth has to use an indirect method to bring the truth to light: in Genesis, this is Joseph’s interpretation of dreams in prison. In the ‘Mishle’, it is the sages speaking on behalf of the mute prince. Both Joseph and the prince of ‘Mishle Sendebār’ finally forgive their assailants and become rulers for the benefit of the collective. Here and there, the entire family is saved thanks to the vulnerable youth becoming a mature ruler. Thus, the ending

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73 Epstein 1967, pp. 90 f.

of the ‘Mishle’ might also be understood in the light of scriptural intertextuality, not only due to the Golden Rule but also with regard to the interreligiously shared and forthwritten story of Joseph.

Pinpointing the different methods of scriptural intertextuality in the ‘Mishle Sendebar’ shows that it is misleading to classify such fables as ‘secular’ literature. In language, motives and themes, the ‘Mishle’ are clearly in conversation with the Bible and its rewritings.<sup>74</sup>

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