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Ilia Galán Díez

# The Birth of Thought in the Spanish Language

14th century Hebrew-Spanish  
Philosophy



Springer

# Philosophical Studies Series

Volume 127

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Madrid, Spain

Philosophical Studies Series

ISBN 978-3-319-50976-1

ISBN 978-3-319-50977-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-50977-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017934649

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# The Birth of Thought in the Spanish Language: 14th century Hebrew-Spanish Philosophy

*Ilia Galán Díez*



**SINFONÍA SINERGIA SILENCIO**

The book was translated by Fiona Westbury with funds of Institute of Historiography Caro Baroja, University Carlos III de Madrid, and Institute Science and Technology, University Carlos III de Madrid, and Eusophia Foundation.

# Interest and Relevance of This Research

**Abstract** This classical author was forgotten because he wrote his philosophy mixed with poetry (the first philosopher to write in Spanish), he was Jewish and a Spaniard. He was not able to be at the University and for that reason did not write in Latin. Scholars have studied him in literature, but very few in the philosophy faculties, where he was mostly unknown. As an outsider and with non-systematic thought, he was too revolutionary for his time and his books were only rediscovered in the second half of the twentieth century.

It may seem strange that a classic author of Spanish literature is barely known and that he should require a study on his work, when prominent medieval philosophers in general are little heard of in Spain, in comparison with France and other major European countries of the same period, however this has a clear explanation. On the one hand, the work of Santob<sup>1</sup> has been studied mainly by linguists, and not many at that. So states Baer, “His *Proverbios Morales* are only known today by

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<sup>1</sup>The first edition of this book, now corrected, revised and extended, was entitled: *Actualidad del pensamiento de Sem Tob (Filosofía hispano-hebrea del siglo XIV en Palencia)*, however now, after some pressure, this has been transmuted into **ORÍGENES DE LA FILOSOFÍA EN ESPAÑOL** (*Actualidad del pensamiento hebreo de Santob*), in Spanish, the common language of Spanish speakers from different regions and several countries, particularly in America, although I could also have said “Castilian”, which points to its differences from other Spanish peninsular languages. However, the use of the term “Spanish” is correct, as the Royal Spanish Academy notes, despite any nationalist or belligerent partisan confusion that affects our language today.

As this is the first philosophical text, if no other is discovered in this language, it therefore constitutes its source. Furthermore, the author is now named *Santob* and not *Shem Tov* or *Sem Tov* or *don Santo*. Why? After long deliberation, it has been decided to give him the name that he appears to have given himself on sheet 61 of the fifteenth century manuscript, HSS 9216, housed in the National Library in Madrid where, after some painstaking palaeographical research, we see that on the first page these same verses state, “Señor rey noble alto/ oy este sermon/ que vyene dezir don Santô/ judío de Carrión.” However, Don Santô appears as abbreviated to *Santob*, as in other abbreviations seen in the text, although the *don* is not seen here at all, despite the transcription by Garcia Calvo and others, and is moreover contracted in the following form: Stô. Moreover, it appears as Santob at the beginning of the codex, which includes in the same volume other texts by various different authors (1. *Libro de los cien capítulos*, 2. Pedro Gómez Baroso, *Libro del Consejo e de los consejeros*, 3. *El libro del rab Santob* (sheets 61–81) y 4. *Libro de la Consolación*

those who are familiar with the history of Spanish literature”.<sup>2</sup> Perry, however, points out<sup>3</sup> that this is “one of the great medieval works of wisdom in literary form, in the tradition of moral instruction. Surprising, as Francisco Márquez also explains, “the work of Sem Tob de Carrión is absolutely unique in the history of a classic author, written simultaneously in both languages (Hebrew and Spanish), and in this work Santob even attempts to reproduce the alliterative rhyme of Semitic verse.”<sup>4</sup>

Studied almost more by English-speaking Hispanists than by Spanish, as Perry<sup>5</sup> states in his extensive introductory study of one hundred and sixty pages, plus an appendix of another fourteen for the *Proverbios*, Perry’s work is the first monograph on Santob. In actual fact, this is an excellent work that could somehow almost be considered as a book on the author himself, rather than an extensive and excellent introduction and commentary, as it is, as is also Shepard’s<sup>6</sup> work. However, the book which the reader has before him is, properly speaking, the first monograph devoted to the author, and, without doubt, the only one, at this point in time, written originally in Spanish.

Santob is hardly known by name to philosophers.<sup>7</sup> For philologists, although Santob was half-poet, due to the brilliant images he uses he is primarily a thinker, eminent moralist and theorist who reflects upon politics.

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*de España*). He also calls himself Santob or Santo at the end of the famous text of the Proverbs, according to the manuscript.

Indeed, not far from Santob’s time, the author who transcribed his verses, put in the title, *El libro del rab Santob* and not *don Santo* or *Shem Tov*” or anything similar. Also, the writing, by the same pen, concludes: “Aqu acaba el/ rab don Santob/ Dios ssea loado.” (Here ends the/rabbi don Santob/God be praised.) For this reason, we decided to keep the name he was given then and which he, apparently, gave himself was in Spanish, rather than the one in versions closer to the Hebrew. The Marquis of Santillana, Don Inigo Lopez de Mendoza, around one hundred years after the death of the Jewish scholar, and born in the same place, refers to him as *Don Santo*.

In Spanish culture today, the name *Santo* relates to the quality of religious excellence, so denigrated nowadays, while Sem Tob, as it is a Jewish and exotic form, is more acceptable and better liked. In the first edition of this book, page 26 reads: “We should however tolerate as extravagant licence the fact that we divorce ourselves from tradition in naming him *Santob*, a Spanish version, as *Sem Tob*, his Jewish name, is today, at last, easily acceptable. If we were really strict we should name him as he names himself in his own book”. This more rigorous edition aims to leave the author with his own name.

<sup>2</sup>Yitzhak Baer, *Historia de los judíos en la España cristiana*, Barcelona, Riopiedras, 1998, p. 399.

<sup>3</sup>T. A. Perry, *The Moral Proverbs of Santob de Carrión (Jewish Wisdom in Christian Spain)*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup>Francisco García Márquez “Pensar la Alhambra”, in *Dejar hablar a los textos: homenaje a Francisco Márquez Villanueva*, Ed. Pedro Manuel Piñero Ramírez, Seville, 2005, p. 268.

<sup>5</sup>T. A. Perry, *The Moral proverbs of Santob de Carrión (Jewish Wisdom in Christian Spain)*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987.

<sup>6</sup>Shepard, Sanford, *Shem Tov. His world and his words*, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1978.

<sup>7</sup>Likewise, García Calvo, years later, confirms the ignorance of the author’s existence on the part of literature enthusiasts and philosophers, and states that he had hardly been read as a poet until 1947, as formerly he had been “edited with barbarous negligence”- the date of the erudite edition by Llubera González (of the two then known manuscripts), printed at last “learned and decent” and, “restricted to a small circle of specialists” and which “do not seem to have achieved the



For philosophers, however, due to the difficulties of his expressions, written in such difficult Spanish<sup>8</sup> for today's reader – which has required a translation such as García Calvo's – Santob is, however, a poet or publicist with a number of ideas; a little of a theologian; psychologist; political scientist and anthropologist; but the worst of all this is the fact that virtually nobody has apparently heard of him or read him, despite the fame he achieved in his time.

In addition, in Spain in recent centuries, Santob passed as a Jew, despite the fact that some would consider him a convert to Christianity. The anti-Semitism typical in many parts of Europe from the fifteenth century had no truck whatsoever with this author, of whose work we only know a few short poems and a work of practical philosophy with simple ruminations, and at a great distance from his predecessor, the great Maimonides. Santob does not look for an elaborate system of thought for his ideas as Maimonides did – but rather an unsystematic, original, practical and simple “system”, surprisingly concealed beneath the dust of centuries of oblivion.

In a way, this study aims to encourage the discovery of a treasure, as was found a few years ago, in the Benedictine monastery of San Zoilo de Carrión de los Condes, the noble and ancient city of Santob: a Romanesque façade, previously hidden by plaster, with its sculptures and meanings emerging as if new. Although this was all already there, available to some, the gold of the land of philology there had not been mined, to then be deposited in the palaces of philosophy. One can almost see this as more important than finding a church of Santob's own time, concealed deep in the mud, since there are a number of architectural monuments of that time. However, fourteenth century Spanish philosophers, as rich as this one, we are hardly acquainted with at all.

Precisely because of his fragmentary, unsystematic thinking through aphorisms, as a result of his practical spirit and skilful expression, Santob is closer today to the philosophers who were born out of modernity. His variety in the treatment of subjects, albeit touched on in a short and simple way, make him more entertaining and interesting today than the study of a subject only for specialists – but also, perhaps, without interest today, like Descartes' subject of the pineal gland in its relationship with the soul, or the philosophical aspect of the divine power of kings, for example, so attractive in the past but today so lacking in interest, except for scholars.

On the other hand, from the moment we conceive that philosophy and literature do not have completely and easily defined borders, we might see his style as having added value, as in the case of the philosophical poetry<sup>9</sup> of Parmenides and

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rhymes of the rabbi (or recovered, after being lost from the sixteenth century up till now) any use by the public as reading material”. A. García Calvo, in his introduction to his book on Santob, *Glosas de Sabiduría o Proverbios morales y otras Rimas*, Madrid, Alianza, 1974, II. a. 13.

<sup>8</sup>Thus, García Calvo explains: “ediciones semibárbaras, plagadas de generaciones de ininteligencia superpuestas, con una escritura incierta o caprichosa, y tan ayunas de luces para los posibles lectores como faltas de piedad para con el texto.” *Ibidem* III. a. 35.

<sup>9</sup>If, for some poets, authors like this are banished to the realm of philosophy, and for some philosophers, to the realms of poetry, as if the two areas could have such clear demarcation, Agustín García Calvo makes an interesting defence in the prologue and study of the work of Santob, *Glosas de Sabiduría o Proverbios Morales y otras Rimas*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1974, p. 9; where he

Empedocles; the phrases and metaphors of Heraclitus; and the dramatic literature of Plato; or the work of authors such as Seneca, Galileo, Leibniz and Schelling – or the writer-philosophers with the body and soul of poets, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and Kierkegaard; like the poetic philosophy of Nietzsche or the brilliant disquisitions, bursting with literary beauty and poetic metaphors of Schopenhauer, Ortega y Gasset, Unamuno and Bergson.

Quite another thing is that with each mode of expression, with each poem, a unique and different view of reality is presented as if it were a Herder-style language. Perhaps this is the case, but not so much due to being an untranslatable language but rather an art, a peculiar way of perceiving and structuring knowledge which is not confined to its form but rather which sees, from the viewpoint of beauty, aspects otherwise hidden from the concept.

This is proposed by Andoni Alonso and Iñaki Arzoz in *La Nueva Ciudad de Dios*: that if we change the aesthetics, like that of computers within the panorama of cyberculture, the content also changes. Thus, we need a new way of doing philosophy, although these authors take the model of language as non-transferable to any language other than their own, Herder-style. The artistic interpretation can be taken as more suitable, as this is symbolized in a different way, not in terms of logical and translatable language, but as particularized sensitivity through art, which is not always translatable and not even able to be experienced equally by different subjects, just as a poem is understood in very different ways, depending on the culture and aptitude of the person reading it.

So states Luis M. Girón-Negrón<sup>10</sup>: “The moral proverb, due to its scriptural lineage and its impersonality, is an ideal vehicle for apodictic, linguistic knowledge. It is the stylistic incarnation of an autonomous truth. Whether moralising or of philosophical content, the aphorism stands with the independent authority of those who teach it; an irrefutable proposition of decisive brevity that breaks away unscathed from its immediate context”.

Santob, and along with him, the medieval thinkers of Castile, and more specifically Palencia, have been rediscovered, albeit still very timidly, in recent decades, as evidenced by the dates of the literature on them; scarcely anything at all 50 years ago. There are even editions of his work in English, Italian and German, with studies in these languages, in Hebrew – and on his thought, in French, almost as if,

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defends the moral or impure poetry that he says is liked, such as that of Hesiod, Parmenides or Lucretius. Today we would say poetry of a racial mix, open; artistic philosophy, plural; a synthesis between the world of concept and metaphor; Not far from there are great poets, taken as such, like Jorge Manrique, Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, Rilke, etc.; and if we mix poetry with social criticism, poetry and religion, poetry and politics, the list is endless ... The fact that metaphors are used does not mean, in spite of Plato, that they cannot point out the whys and the wherefores of things, delving deep into knowledge, and even more so into an impossible science, as are all sciences, at the end of the day, including mathematics, physics or biology (see the review by Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend).

<sup>10</sup>Luis M. Girón-Negrón, “*La rosa y el espino de Santob de Carrión: Breve nota sobre un motivo filosófico*”, in Pedro Manuel Piñero Ramírez (Editor), *Dejar hablar a los textos: Homenaje a Francisco Márquez Villanueva*, Seville, University of Seville, 2005, p. 257.

again, the Spanish had to wait for foreigners to discover for them the wonders which, like treasures, lie hidden in their own land, buried deep under the dust of oblivion. Not surprisingly, Hispanists of the stature of Marquez Villanueva comment<sup>11</sup> on the astonishing destruction of the Spanish cultural environment, as regards its scientific and philosophical development.

This foreign interest in our culture occurred with the discovery of Calderón de la Barca by August Wilhelm Schlegel and the promotion of this author by Goethe and others, such as Schopenhauer in Germany, so that here, sometime later, his work was recovered, almost abandoned; as was the Alhambra in Granada and so many medieval monuments that deteriorated into gloomy ruins after the confiscation by Mendizábal. This was rediscovered by British and foreign visitors in general, just as Napoleón's troops returned to modern Egypt the temples and wonders of the Pharaohs; so it was with Washington Irving and others.

The tragedy is that hardly anyone has paid any attention to Santob, due to the restricted understanding of the language of his time which readers of today neither read nor write, or which even the erudite do not understand well, thus requiring the continuous use of a dictionary, and not any, but one of that time, since many terms are no longer used today or their meaning has changed. Thus, Santob has remained concealed for his own countrymen of later centuries, as if we had kept someone locked up at home who we only half understood, until 1 day we had him translated for us from start to finish.

It is also striking that in Palencia – within this ancestral region, whose wealth in past times testifies to its fabulous and hardly known cathedral, to the point that it is referred to as the *Bella Desconocida* (beautiful unknown one), and its many fabulous Romanesque monuments in Carrión de los Condes – that we should come across the confluence of poets of the stature of Santob and, soon after, that of Iñigo López de Mendoza, first Marquis of Santillana.

That turbulent period of history, yet, judging from the works Santob left to posterity was a fruitful one, is passed down to us today though some thoughts that may be hugely interesting for our world, so in search of criteria to follow; the moral references of yesteryear having often been lost. Also, the community of scholars may be able to argue, through critical and updated analysis, with this Carrión philosopher,<sup>12</sup> from Palencia, Castilian – and in terms of today's political setting – a Spaniard. This work is not intended to be exhaustive in its analysis, or to comment one by one on each and every one of Santob's most significant verses for our mod-

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<sup>11</sup> Commenting on the book by Otis H. Green, *Spain and the Western Tradition, the Castilian Mind from El Cid to Calderon*, 4 volumes, Madison, 1963–1966, Márquez states how he “aseptically refuses to explain the cultural pattern of our scientific and philosophical annihilation and proposes instead his macro-theory of westernisation at any cost for the entire Spanish cultural phenomenon.” Francisco Márquez Villanueva, *Relecciones de Literatura Medieval*, Seville, Publications Unit, University of Seville, 1977, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> Philosopher in the pure sense and not only because he was writing for a Christian audience did Santob wish to avoid confrontation over religious issues or theological confrontation, as some suggest: SHEPARD, Sanford, *Shem Tov. His world and his words*, Miami, Universal Publishing, 1978, p. 51.

ern world. It is significant that in the histories of Spanish thought, Santob is not often found or, if he is, he is only cited from afar, as a name without any attributed works.

Santob, perhaps naturalised, was certainly an inhabitant of a small town, Carrión de los Condes (Palencia), which was then a major city, now relatively forgotten and given over to farming and somewhat to tourism. Santob lacks the cultural and advertising and support given to other Spanish regions, for example Catalan authors, such as the creators of *Tirant lo Blanch*, Jacinto Verdaguer, Joan Maragall, Pla, etc.; or Galicians such as Rosalía de Castro, or Ramón Cabanillas; or Basques, such as Ormaetxea and Gabriel Aresti. In these locations, peripheral nationalism has produced a reassessment, used rather as a flag for its poets and artists, while Palencia has experienced almost the opposite phenomenon of forming part of the Spanish whole, giving itself up with a universal desire, as it were, to its authors, albeit some neglected, lost in unfortunate oblivion.

This study is therefore also of more interest as it discovers a fertile thinker from a rich region, in good part unjustly forgotten, despite its many artistic treasures. Its literature was already partially known, but not its philosophy, which coincides with the disappearance, as such, of the Knights Templar and the struggles between the feudal lords, and the wars between Christians and Moors. Romanesque and Gothic have been brought again to the fore today, thanks to the resurgence of the St James's Way and cultural tourism, just as medieval and Renaissance music has been reedited and very positively appreciated by musicians, scholars, musicologists and many audiences.

This has resulted in albums and concerts which have enthralled many beyond Spanish borders, such as the music interpreted and recorded by Jordi Savall. All this has led us to rediscover other virtues of the area, such as Renaissance or Baroque architecture, whose magnificence also reached there, as well as other minor arts, gastronomy, folklore, etc. It should be borne in mind that, despite being held as the region linked to the empire created by Charles V, although the geographical empire remained intact for the most part until Ferdinand VII, that king allowed it to be lost. The decline there has been continuous, all the more striking when one ponders upon the fact that it was the largest empire in the world in its heyday, some generations after Santob.

It is no excuse to state that the work of Johann Sebastian Bach or Albinoni were also forgotten and later recovered, albeit by their own countrymen a few centuries later. There is always a hope that the mysteries of history will be revealed over time. We should remember at this point how Pseudo Longino, the author of *De lo sublime*, centuries later became one of the main reference points for Romanticism, and therefore for our time, through Boileau's translation of his work.

If it is often said that there have hardly been any great authors of philosophy in Spain, largely due to the Inquisition, despite such names as Seneca, Averroes, Ibn Khaldun, Maimonides and Lull, up to the Middle Ages; then Francisco de Vitoria in the Renaissance; Francisco Suarez and Baltasar Gracián in the Baroque period, or more recently, Amor Ruibal, Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset, José Luis L. Aranguren, Fernando Savater, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño or Eugenio Trías. This derives from the

fact that few have made the effort to study them, due to a dramatic inferiority complex when comparing themselves with the French, British and Germans, and which dates from the time of the Enlightenment. This sometimes leads us to admire more contemporary thinkers who have less substance than other nationals, who lie forgotten due to an unfair lack of equanimity with their own ancestors in the appreciation of works of thought and poetry. The fact is, then, that the century of the Enlightenment in Spain, and the nineteenth century also, appear poor in terms of philosophy, when compared to neighbouring nations of similar stature.

As in the case of the arts, in philosophy there are also fashions and sensitivities. Thus some scholars say<sup>13</sup> that, in the history of dialectical thinking, Hegel is often cited as its most salient representative, and Heraclitus, as his main forerunner – but Santob is never mentioned, despite his dialectical development at all levels. And the fact is that he is a remarkably unknown<sup>14</sup> author to all, including his own countrymen. Shepard's argument<sup>15</sup> on the lexicographical influence of *did* (Semitic words in both Arabic and Hebrew that mean two things which are contrary to each other), cannot be taken as crucial, as many other Jewish writers failed to achieve such clearly dialectical thinking.

Another point in Santob's favour, although not the deepest metaphysical one, is that his work served in part as a handbook or "self-help manual", not in the sense of the rather discredited and superficial works which appear so frequently today, written in an consumerist, American style, but rather the style of the writings of Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, who Santob admired; or Montaigne or Pascal; some of Schopenhauer's *Parerga and Paralipomena*; some aphorisms of Nietzsche's, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and so many others.

From the castles in ruins which serve as the documents where we have followed the trail of his works, the thoughts we find in his *Proverbs* are still inhabitable buildings, even luxuriously comfortable after refurbishment. Despite the few studies conducted in recent decades (as if he had been discovered only in the twentieth century), it is to be expected that these will soon multiply so that everyone may enjoy his findings.

Although there are doubts about some of his works and even about who he actually was, or, indeed, if he even existed, as in the case of some ancient philosophers – the case of Leucippus, or Homer, or the authors of *el Cantar de Mio Cid* – the fact

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<sup>13</sup>"In the history of dialectic thought, Hegel is usually cited as the maximum representative and Heraclitus as his principal antecedent. Santob is never mentioned. His thinking, however, is part of the development of dialectical philosophy, and on all three of the levels that Hegel discusses: ontological, gnosiological and methodological." J.A. de la Pienda and Clark Colahan, "Relativistic Philosophical Traditions in Santob's *Proverbios Morales*", *La Corónica*, XXIII, 1994–1995, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup>Some of his first researchers were already saying this: "Einer der hervorragendsten spanischen Dichter jüdischen Glaubens ist Santob de Carrion, dessen bekanntes uns erhaltenes Werk "Proverbios morales" im folgenden näher untersucht werden soll." Leopold Stein, *Untersuchungen über di Proverbios Morales von Santob de Carrion mit besonderem Hinweis auf die Quellen un Parallelen*, Berlín, Mayer&Müller, 1900. p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Shepard, Sanford, *Shem Tov. His world and his words*, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1978, pp. 45–46.

is that his works, under that name and with the characteristics outlined here, do exist today and have come down to us from the fourteenth century. We know we can complain about how much has apparently been lost, however it is also possible to use to the full what remains, like the majestic ruins of an ancient temple that history has lost, along with its name.

## Aims of This Book

**Abstract** This book analyses some of Santob's thoughts and his world, but attempts to develop a new philosophical point of view. Starting his phrases and analyzing them historically, they are in stark contrast with the world today. In the first part the foundations of his life and works are studied and placed in a historical context. In the second part, chapter by chapter, his thoughts are developed in contrast with ours, as he seems to be a postmodern author who lived in medieval times.

This is not intended to be a detailed study of the theories of Santob, nor of his style, but rather an analysis of some of his fundamental thinking, in order to decipher it critically. This may prove useful within the context of the cultural world of the twenty-first century. Thus, the objective is to study and *criticize* his maxims, in the Greek sense of the word κρινεῖν, that is, to discern, to separate or distinguish nuances from others which are applicable to our times, and the why and wherefore behind them. In other words, the aim of this book is to think, while maintaining a dialogue with Santob, as poet and scholar, who spoke to us a few centuries ago. This is not so much just through his words but because of them, developing his own thoughts in contrast to what is revealed to us today as a universe in many ways quite transmuted, while in other aspects such as passion, love and death, human beings have remained identical for thousands of years.

It is therefore a question of developing a new way of thinking which Santob has handed down to us. The aim, however, is not only to develop a broad and far-thinking theory of my own, with the excuse of this wise man of Carrión, but rather that he should reveal himself to us, manifesting himself through his dialogue, which must thus be accessible and free of excessive pretension, no matter how much various different findings are sketched out along the way.

In a way, we shall attack the text the way one might loot a walled city, to unearth the treasures that might be useful to us today, discarding the rest, since we shall not restrict ourselves to a gloss or comment that would explain Santob's words, rather we shall confront it with our modern mentality of today and, in part, with the philosophy of the essay's author. At the end of the day, we are merely doing what has been attempted for centuries with these glosses, critiques or comparisons of texts, namely a dialogue; like a friendly chat with someone who is no longer close but from whom, as Santob states in his verses, we can hear the best of what he has to say to us<sup>16</sup>; the part that really interests us about him.

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<sup>16</sup>(314–327 of García Calvo's critical work).



All citations referring to the work of Santob in our study will be made with reference to the critical edition by Agustín García Calvo for centuries: *Shem Tov, Sermon de Glosas de Sabios y otras rimas*, Madrid, Lucina, 2000. The quotes from this book on Santob will be numbered in our text with a reference to the verse in that same issue; however, the quoted text is merely my own translation, taking as a reference the translation by García Calvo, and aiming as far as possible to follow the same terms and forms of the original, even syntax, while always giving priority to ease of understanding.

Very often, the metrics or certain phonetic and formal parallels will thus be sacrificed; the poetic externality, while preserving its meaning and metaphors i.e. the poetic inner being. This is what is often lost when translating verse, although here, in many cases it can remain as in the original, as these features are fully understandable. However, the translation from one language into a later version of itself is less rigorous, as not all the terms are carried across, rather only the meaning, when the old expressions are not understood. This is something which *can* be done between different languages.

The remoteness in time of the *Castilian* used by our wise man from Carrión means some degree of assistance is necessary, to the extent that translation may be required even for the most cultivated public, despite the discomfort this may cause to linguists and philologists.

It is not merely a matter of transforming his writing into modern spelling and handwriting but also semantics and even syntax. With this step it is inevitable that the rhyme is lost, to give pre-eminence to the content or spirit of the verses, and the author's ideas, since reading along with notes on difficult words, or with a now altered meaning which is frequently obsolete, is exhausting. This in part explains the lack of general knowledge about this author.

If here we use the decisive term of *translation* rather than *version*, this is due to the fact that the vibrant evolution of Spanish from the writings of Santob up to today makes it almost a different language, making these to a great extent inaccessible to most of today's cultivated readership, and almost incomprehensible to the remainder of the public.

Precisely this can be used as evidence against defending the idiosyncrasies of each language, understood as the spirit of a people or *Volkgeist*, as if it were something sacred and linguistic rules were dogma, despite Herder. Rather practice – basically nominalism – determines the abstract universe of syntax and its meanings and result is essentially almost the same thing.

Language is slowly lost as it evolves, transmuting itself. Hence, attempting to keep language as something fixed or sacred, as immutable, preventing any language from disappearing completely, is an impossible task. It has always been the case that some languages evolve and prevail at the expense of others, or themselves, lost in the memory of their former uses.

Hence the importance of national language academies to maintain, wherever possible, the linguistic unity with the past and with other geographically distant regions, while belonging to the same linguistic community, and delaying mutations in order that the changes occurring should not be so great as to make the language

incomprehensible between different generations of speakers who use it, it being in terms of genealogy the same language. This is what happened to Latin, transmuted into the different forms of Romance languages such as Spanish, Galician, Catalan, French, Romanian or Italian. Despite the continuation of the Spanish language since that time, it is clear that few can understand this old form, and certain texts are in fact more easily understood in Galician, Italian, Catalan or French than those that were written, according to history, in Spanish.

It would also be too tedious to analyse the textual differences between some manuscripts and others, hence we shall stick to this version of review, where the references will only prove interesting to scholars or experts in the field. Here we are primarily interested in Santob's thinking, not his original lexicon, which has already been published in many different forms and with different interpretations and errors, depending on the particular corruptions of the manuscript in each case. In this regard, some scholars have appealed to obtain a critical and accessible edition.<sup>17</sup>

In any case, this is an open encounter, more than a struggle with the author; a conversation that will help to understand and convert contradictions into wise choices. Probably, as astutely practiced by Plato, Galileo, Leibniz, Schelling and others, dialogue is one of the most appropriate ways of practising philosophy. If, as some scholars believe, including Garcia Calvo, the *Proverbios* are a series of glosses on another book now lost, this would somehow be a gloss of glosses. Just as some verses of Santob can be read as individual and independent aphorisms, this book can however also be read as something independent from the glossed author, while at the same time linked to him and his reflections.

As regards the issues that will be addressed here, these could be summed up by another possible title for this volume:

CONVERSATIONS WITH SANTOB: REFLECTIONS UPON POLITICS, SOCIOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGY, ETHICS, PYSCHOLOGY, METAPHYSICS, THEODICY AND AESTHETICS.

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<sup>17</sup>“Possibly Machado read this in the only attainable edition at that time: the venerable and incorrect volume of medieval poetry published by the “Library of Spanish Authors” (in this same volume he would have read Berceo). Today, the critical work by Llubera Gonzalez has made Santob more accessible to scholars, while remaining outside the grasp of the popular reader, and making a modernised edition justifiable”. Segundo Serrano Poncela, Machado y don Sen Tob, *Cultura Universitaria*, LXVI-L, 1959, p. 10.



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**Part I**  
**Introduction to the Historical  
and Cultural Context**

# Chapter 1

## The Life of Rabbi Santob

**Abstract** We know very little about his life, but he lived in Carrion de los Condes, in the province of Palencia (Castile) in the fourteenth century, at the court of the Kings Alfonso XI and Pedro I of Castile. It is not certain if he wrote the *Proverbs* when he was old, or if he converted to Christianity, as his works were confused in earlier times with others. Some scholars have studied his works trying to develop some ideas about his life, as authorship was also often confused, that is, his own name with that of other Jewish thinkers or poets. Was he a proper rabbi? We attempt to distinguish the facts from the legends.

What is known about the life and works of Santob? Or rather, why would we like to know about this? If we talk about an artist, it seems important to know something about the man who created the work in order to better decipher it. What would seem interesting in the field of art or poetry is less so in philosophy and even less so in science, as this presupposes increasingly less subjectivity and more objectivity, so that his work would thus be less imbued with the personality of its writer. However, in philosophy this is not the case, as philosophers are like poets, in a way, and as Fichte quite rightly said, we all philosophise depending on our personality or the way our character is formed.

Hegel, for example, could not be understood without the context of his era – precisely the man who preached that there is no thought without the history that creates it. But, in any case, it is clear that knowing the author’s life often helps us to better understand the sense that he, initially at least, wanted to bring to his work.

“In the early fourteenth century Rabbi Sem Tob ibn Arduziel<sup>1</sup> or *donSanto* as his name was simplified to by his contemporaries, author of *Consejos y Documentos al rey Don Pedro*, was born into a rural environment; in the opening stanza of this work he declares with pride that he is from Carrión and Jewish, and already had white hair, he tells us, when he dedicated his poem to the king. For some time he lived in Soria, where he completed one of his works, the *Ma’ase*, which deals with a dispute

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<sup>1</sup>Baer has identified him with this name in his article in Hebrew on fourteenth-century Hebrew-Castilian poets, published in the volume which pays tribute to David Yellin, *Minha le David*, Jerusalem, 1935, 200–204.

between men of the pen and those of the scissors, on their respective values in rhyming prose.”<sup>2</sup>

Also, in later life we are told<sup>3</sup> that Semtob wrote the penitential prayer or *Viddui*, perhaps his last work,<sup>4</sup> and, basing himself on this, we take literally, as if there were no literary device to simulate this situation, what he says of himself, such as the fact that he reflects upon a youth now long gone, having experienced at first hand the pillage and carnage suffered by the Jewish community of Toledo, linked to the support they had given to Peter I, who used Jewish troops in the conflict. Enrique de Trastámara, his opponent in court proceedings, saw the Jews as enemies and thus, on taking Burgos, asked the Jewish community for large sums of money. Those who could not pay up were sold as slaves.

If we look at Santob’s words in the *Viddui* and we take it literally, as autobiographical, this gives us an extremely unforgiving self-portrait of the author, since he declares that he has perverted all the commandments, ending his life in despair<sup>5</sup>; an impoverished sinner who has committed treason, dishonesty, insolence, violence and rebellion, although not against God, the companion of sinners. He has afflicted the ruler, been jealous of sinners, bad, creating ruin, committing abominations, without finding any satisfaction until achieving evil, leading honourable man astray to end in madness; an impostor, his mind as sly as a fox, recidivist, and weak. Now repentant, he appeals to the Creator to be released, as he is nothing, in his wickedness, compared with the immense grandeur of God and his infinite power of mercy. In other words, he has been a monster, but if he exaggerates his ills or is urged by poetic force to look at himself, he may not be such, that is, this is not Santob expressing himself in the first person but rather a song of atonement, worded as if seeking deep repentance, in order that it be valid even for the worst of human beings.

What is certain is that this great Spanish poet and thinker was Jewish and lived in Carrión de los Condes (Palencia), despite recent research on another possible Santob (Semtob in the Hebrew version), perhaps a native of Soria,<sup>6</sup> however these are rather improbable hypotheses which scholars frequently entertain.

This confusion is exacerbated by the many names that this same character has been given (*Sen Tob*, *Santo*, *Santob*, *don Santo*, *Shem Tov*, *Arduziel*, Spanish-made

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<sup>2</sup>Pilar León Tello, *Los Judíos de Palencia*, Palencia, Institución “Tello Téllez de Meneses”, 1967 p. 14. This is reaffirmed also by Sanford Shepard in his introduction to *Sem Tob: Proverbios Morales*, Madrid, Castalia, 1985, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Shepard, Sanford, *Shem Tov. His world and his words*, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1978, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup>Sanford Shepard in his introduction to *Sem Tob: Proverbios Morales*, Madrid, Castalia, 1985, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup>On the causes of this misidentification and other works being attributed, see the Introduction to *Sem Tob de Carrión, Proverbios Morales*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1998, edited by Paloma Díaz-Mas and Carlos Mota, p. 33–34.

versions of *Shem Tov ibn Artutiel ben Isaac*<sup>7</sup> or *Sen Tob ben Is haq ibn Arduziel*,<sup>8</sup> *Sem To Yitzhak Arduziel*, *Sem Tob Arduziel*, *Sem Tob de Carrión*, all assuming that the individual from Carrión and Arduziel are the same person,<sup>9</sup> a point which is not entirely clear to everyone and would increase the range of his works.

Thus, the most sensible way of referring to him would perhaps be Santob of Carrión, regardless of whether he is identified with others) and this we do without considering any other known Spanish Shem Tavs<sup>10</sup> from the same period: Shem Tov ibn Falaquera (physician and poet), Shem Tov ibn Gaon (Kabbalist and philosopher), Sem Tob ibn Saprut (physician and polemicist) or, in other periods of history: Shem Tov Falcón, Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Shem Tob, philosopher, Joseph ibn Shem Tov ben Shem Tov, his son and grandson, Yosef ibn Sem Tob, etc.

Although the fact of being of one race or another, one religion or another, Spanish or French, should matter very little for a view with some claim to universal validity regarding the quality of his work, this has not been the case historically, since for religious reasons and to see his work in a more favourable light, great importance was attributed to the fact that he converted to Christianity, although it is difficult to clarify this and this has questioned and even denied. Perhaps his origins partly explains why we have scarcely preserved any of his works, discovering here yet again the prejudices (conservative or progressive, fascist, Marxist or democrat, sexist or feminist, religious or atheist, etc.) which have unfortunately plagued and continue to plague the greatest discoveries and the finest creations of humanity, so that instead of taking advantage of what has been done well anywhere and from almost any religion and way of thinking, this is forgotten, or its disappearance from the world that it emerged from is deliberately sought – perhaps like ephemeral beauty or wonder (at the end of the day perhaps all works are like this) – such as, for example, what is left after several millennia of eminent Egyptian literature; Babylonian writing; the much venerated, unmatched, mythical Library of Alexandria).

The interpretation which Baer makes of Santob goes against that of a famous convert from Judaism to Christianity, Abner of Burgos, and thus he says, from his

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<sup>7</sup>Jacques Joset considers this to be the Jewish name of the Spanish form, Santob, in “Pour une archeologie de l’autobiographie: de quelques modalités du yo dans les *Proverbios Morales* de Santob de Carrión” *L’autobiographie dans le monde hispanique: Actes du Colloque international de la Baume les Aix*, 11, 12, 13 May, 1979, Aix-en-Provence, France, 1980, p. 67. Similarly, Perry considers Santob de Carrión to be the pen name of Rabbi Shem Tov Ibn Arduziel, born in Soria at the close of the thirteenth century and dying in 1345. T. A. Perry, *The Moral proverbs of Santob de Carrión (Jewish Wisdom in Christian Spain)*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>Segundo Serrano Poncela, in his article “Machado y don Sen Tob”, *Cultura Universitaria*, LXVI-L, 1959, p. 10 gives him this name, also indicating that Sen Tob means “good name”.

<sup>9</sup>A brief summary of that identification and its families, as well as its implications can be read in the Introduction to *Sem Tob de Carrión, Proverbios Morales*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1998, edited by Paloma Díaz-Mas and Carlos Mota, p. 30–31, referring to other more extensive studies such as Zemke 1997:11, 25–32.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 26.

Jewish perspective as an apostate to this Abner: “Amongst the opponents of the apostate, was also, apparently, the poet R. Sem Tob Arduviel, i.e. Rabbi Don Santob of Carrión, author of poems in Hebrew and Castilian. His *Proverbios Morales*, now known only by those who are familiar with the history of Spanish literature, were read in Hebrew in his time, and were known among the Jews of Spain up to the time of the expulsion of the Jews.

In these verses the poet concerns himself with the problem of the suffering just; that issue that so concerned Abner of Burgos and, apparently, the men of that generation in general. Essentially Rabbi Santob exhorts men not to think about greatness and to be content with their lot and the position that heaven has assigned to them.”<sup>11</sup>

Doubts do exist as regards some of his works and even as to who he was. As we have said, this was also the case of pre-Socratic philosophers: Leucippus and Democritus, or Homer and the author of the *Cantar de Mío Cid*. So, it matters little.

Shepard<sup>12</sup> states that the *Proverbios* were written by Santob between 1355 and 1360. Many have attempted to draw conclusions about his biography from his work. In fact, Perry<sup>13</sup> believes his *Proverbios* to be a hybrid genre between autobiography and biblical reflection, in the manner of Ecclesiastes, and even the modern novel, “almost everything we know or assume about the author comes from the wording of the moral proverbs and a certain degree of hearsay”<sup>14</sup> and the fact that he calls himself *Santo* or *Santob*, deriving from Sem Tob, meaning “good name”, a common name, incidentally, among Spanish Jews at that time. In any case, he identifies himself as being from Carrión de los Condes, an important town on the *Camino de Santiago*, in Palencia.

Moreover, Perry<sup>15</sup> points out much of the great merit of the *Proverbios* where, compared to other proverbial wisdom or writings of his time in Castile, the author does not claim the status of sage, nor does he speak from a theoretical position based on dogmas or precepts, such as Lopez de Ayala, nor does he moralise from that position, but rather appears to reveal his experience, his own individual life, as a possible example. However, without doubt, many of his poems are also emphatic and typical of those who dictate.

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<sup>11</sup>Yitzhak Baer, *Historia de los judíos en la España Cristiana*, Barcelona, Riopiedras, 1998, p. 399.

<sup>12</sup>Sanford Shepard in his introduction to Sem Tob: *Proverbios Morales*, Madrid, Castalia, 1985, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>T. A. Perry, *The Moral Proverbs of Santob de Carrión (Jewish Wisdom in Christian Spain)*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>Sem Tob de Carrión, *Proverbios Morales*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1998, Introduction by Paloma Díaz-Mas and Carlos Mota, p. 26–27.

<sup>15</sup>T. A. Perry, *The Moral proverbs of Santob de Carrión (Jewish Wisdom in Christian Spain)*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 149.