

**"The Chronicle of Ahimaaz"**

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## *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz*

The *Chronicle of Ahimaaz*, written by Ahimaaz ben Paltiel (1017–1060), depicts the history of a family in Southern Italy and provides information about the social status of that Jewry. The author, born in Capua, traces his pedigree back two hundred years—very likely from notes and traditions that had been passed down through the generations. The chronicle-memoir, (1054) reveals how the Jews communicate with their coreligionists, travel freely, rise to high positions, honor visiting sages, and are influenced by the literary traditions of the surrounding cultures. The *Chronicle* sheds light on the early Jewish settlement of various towns in Southern Italy, now (with the exception of Naples) almost completely devoid of Jews. It also shows the tolerance to Jews in Italy, a country that throughout its long history was exceptional in its attitude toward Jews. Despite the tragedy of occasional upheavals and invasions, there is little in the *Chronicle* that indicates that the Jews were victims of continual oppression.

In addition to its value as a historic and social document, the *Chronicle of Ahimaaz*—also called the *Book of Genealogies* by its author—contains many popular stories, beliefs and superstitions. Among the Jewish folkloristic elements mentioned are demons, the magic use of God's name, a dead man who prays, revivification of the dead, a cessation of the celestial cycle, and various bits of astrological lore. One folk motif recognizable from world literature is the metamorphosis of a man into a mule,

which appears in the *Golden Ass* of Aupelius and, in modern times, in *Pinocchio*. The *Chronicle* also has the first recorded instance of the legend of the Wandering Jew. However, in line with the rather unreliable historiography of the day, the author draws no distinction between legend and history.

The unifying element in Ahimaaz ben Paltiel's account is his excellence as a storyteller. He has psychological insight, a sense of humor, and the skill to build a narrative and bring it to a successful conclusion; indeed, the various anecdotes in his *Chronicles* are constructed along novelistic lines. Ahimaaz's work is written in rhymed prose, a style favored by Jewish writers under the Muslim orbit—but since it is composed of brief rhymed phrases and lines, a modern translation must choose to render the work in prose.

In his modesty, he complied with their request. With the fear of God in his heart, he began with the penitential prayers, then melodiously chanted a poem of R. Silanus to show that he was a man of sound faith; that, although he was at first false and sinful and godless, when he remembered the former teachers, he followed them as his masters, who shattered the power of heretical teachings over him, so that he turned away from the heretics. When the sage had finished the prayers, they asked him who that lover of the great teachers was, so consecrated with power to utter prayer, who loved and honored the masters, and turned away and shunned the heretics. He answered, "That beloved one is R. Silanus, who has been denounced as unworthy among you." They immediately arose and annulled the ban which they had declared against him, and, invoking upon him abundant, enduring and substantial good, all of them said, "May R. Silanus ever be blessed."

In those days a king reigned over the Romans, a wicked man, elevated to the throne through treachery and murder, who determined to make an end of the acknowledgement of God whose work is perfect, among the descendants of the upright and holy.

In the 800th year after the destruction of the Holy City and of the Temple, the seat of glory, and of the exile of the people of Judah and of Israel, there arose a king whose name was Basil, a worshipper of images, seeking to destroy the people of Israel ever under God's protection, to lead them astray, to exterminate the remnant of Israel root and branch, to compel them to abandon the Law and to accept the worthless doctrine [of Jesus]. He sent couriers and horsemen to the provinces and all parts of his kingdom, to force the Jews out of their religion, and make them adopt his senseless faith.

The agents of the king went through the land as far as the harbor of Otranto; there they embarked and passed over into the province of Apulia. When the report of their coming reached the inhabitants, the people were thrown into consternation. They traversed the province from end to end. Finally, they came to the city of Oria, bringing a letter, officially stamped with the royal seal—the seal was the bulla of gold—that the king had sent to R. Shephatiah.

And these are the words that were written in the letter, "I, King Basil, send word to thee R. Shephatiah, to have thee come to visit me. Come to me, do not refuse, for I have heard of thy wisdom and thy vast learning. I long to see thee; I swear by my life and by the crown on my head, that thy coming shall be in peace, and that I will send thee back safe to thy home. I will receive thee with honor, as I would one of my own kin, and any boon thou mayest ask of me, I will grant in grateful affection."

R. Shephatiah then embarked to go to Constantinople, which Constantine had built—may God shatter its splendor and the power of all its

people. And God let him find favor in the presence of the king and of his court.

The king led him into a discussion of the Law, and then questioned him regarding the building of the Temple, and that of the church called Sophia, asking him to tell in which structure the greater wealth had been used. The king firmly contended that it was Sophia, for in its construction uncounted treasure had been used.

But R. Shephatiah answered, in well-chosen words, "Let the King command that the Scriptures be brought to him. There thou wilt find the truth as to which structure is the more costly." He immediately did so and he found that the quantity used by David and Solomon was in excess of the amount counted out for Sophia, by 120 talents of gold and 500 talents of silver.

Thereupon the king exclaimed, "R. Shephatiah, by his wisdom, has prevailed against me."

But R. Shephatiah answered, "My Lord, not I, but the Scriptures have prevailed against thee."

Then the king asked him to be seated with him at the royal table, to partake of refreshing delicacies and fruits. Golden dishes were placed before him that he might eat in the cleanliness required by the Law. The dishes were drawn up and down by costly chains of silver, but no one could see the place from which they were let down before him.

And Basil had a daughter whom he loved as the apple of his eye. An evil spirit tormented her. He could not find a cure for her. He spoke to Shephatiah in secret and with earnest entreaty said, "Help me, Shephatiah, and cure my daughter of her affliction."

And Shephatiah answered, "With the help of the Almighty, I will surely do so." He then asked the king, "Hast thou any secluded place in which there is no uncleanness?"

The king answered: "I have the beautiful garden of the Bukoleon." After looking about in it, he agreed to make use of the Bukoleon, which literally means the mouth of the lion. He took the maiden into it and exorcised the evil spirit in the name of Him that dwelleth on high, the Creator of height and depth, that founded the earth in His wisdom, the Maker of the mountains and seas, that hangeth the world over nothing.

The evil spirit cried out, "Why dost thou help the daughter of the man who rules in wickedness and heaps affliction upon the people of the redeemed. She has been delivered to me by God, that I should humble and crush her. Therefore, let me be, for I will not come forth from my place."

But Shephatiah answered the evil spirit, "I will not heed thy words; come forth in the name of God, that he may know there is a God in Israel."

It came forth at once and tried to escape; but he seized it and put it into a leaden chest; he then covered the chest on all sides and sealed it in the name of his Maker, dropped it into the sea, and let it sink into the depth

of the mighty waters. The maiden, quieted and cured, then returned to the king and queen.

Shephatiah now went to the king for his dismissal. The king came forth to meet him, placed his arm about his neck, brought him into his chamber, and began to tempt him to abandon his religion, and, with the promise of large reward, to induce him to accept the senseless error of his heathen belief. He walked about with him, and insistently urged him; he approached him with a bribe and appointed companions for him.

When Shephatiah, the master, noticed the fanatic zeal and presumption, he exclaimed in a loud voice, "Mighty Master, Thou overwhelmest me with violence." Thereupon the king arose from his throne, took him from among the people, and gave him permission to go. He sent him to the queen that she might give him her gift and blessing. And the queen questioned him about his affairs saying, "Hast thou any daughters or sons?" He accordingly answered, "Thy servant has one son and two daughters." She then gave him the rings in her ears and the girdle on her loins, and urged them upon him, saying, "As my tribute to thy learning, give them to thy two daughters; in costliness there are none to be compared to them." The weight of the rings was a litra of gold and the girdle was of equal value.

When he was about to go, the king again called him and said to him, "Shephatiah, ask a boon of me and I will give it to thee from my treasures; and if thou dost not desire money I will give thee an inheritance of towns and cities, for I said in my letter to thee, that I would grant thy wish."

He answered in sorrow and bitter weeping, "If thou, my lord, wouldst favor Shephatiah, let there be peace for those engaged in the study of Law. Do not force them to abandon the Law of God, and do not crush them in sorrow and affliction. But if thou be unwilling thus to fulfil my wish, grant for my sake that there be no persecution in my city."

The king exclaimed in anger, "Had I not sent a letter with my seal, and taken an oath, I would this very instant punish thee. But how can I harm thee, since I have bound myself in writing to thee, and cannot retract what I have said in my letter." So he issued for him an edict, sealed with a costly seal of gold, commanding that no persecution take place in the city of Oria, and therewith sent him in peace and honor to his home and people.

Then the wicked king continued to send emissaries into all the provinces and ordered his agents to fall upon them; to force them out of their religion and convert them to the errors and folly of his faith. The sun and moon were darkened for twenty-five years, until the day of his death. Cursed be his end. May his guilt and wickedness be remembered, and his sin not be forgotten. May the recompense for his vileness and cruelty be visited upon the kingdom of Rome, that his royal power may be cast down from its high places and his dominion be removed from the earth, to bring cheer to

the afflicted and comfort to the mourners, that, in mercy, we may soon see the time of fulfilment.

After his reign, his own son, Leo, came to the throne; the Lord God had chosen him. May his memory be blessed. He annulled the cruel edict that had been enacted in the days of his father, and permitted the Jews to return to the laws and statutes of their religion, to observe their Sabbaths, and all the requirements of their commandments, and the ordinances of their covenant, as of old. Praised be the name of their Rock that did not abandon them in the hands of their enemies, that saved them from their despoilers, and delivered them from their oppressors. Praised be the name of God from the heights forever and ever.