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Conference of the birds synopsis

In order to use Sutori, you must enable Javascript in your browser. You can find instructions on how to do this here. The hoopoe is the first bird introduced in The Conference of the Birds. Heaven has sent him to lead the other birds in their quest for a king. The hoopoe is beloved of a prophet, trusted by God, has traveled the world, searched for dry land during the Deluge, and explored with Solomon, whom he has also served as dignified friend and messenger to the Queen of Sheba (summarizing the situation in th Qur'an 27:20-28). The hoopoe even has the *bismillah* (opening words of the Qur'an) etched on his beak. He sports a long erectile crest, called a "feathered spray," for a crown. In the cover painting by Habib Allah (ca. 1600 CE), the hoopoe appears to the right of the peacock and hawk and is being pointed to by the stork's red beak. The hoopoe wants his fellow birds to accompany him to find Simorgh, their rightful king. He tells them outright that the quest is long and dangerous. He has been lifted above the firmament and knows no fear in the trackless desert, but the frightened pilgrims know plenty, and the hoopoe has first to engage in a question-and-answer session to allay their fears and set right their misconceptions, errors, and sins. The hoopoe is blunt in his conclusions and judgments, but then takes the edge off by telling parables and stories to illustrate his point. After all of the birds have had their say and the hoopoe has made rebuttal, they set off, only to stop for an election of a leader, for Sufis always need a sheikh (spiritual leader) to teach the group. He is invested with all authority. He continues talking about the Way, emphasizing the need to get rid of Self. He develops seventeen major themes and then describes the topography of the seven metaphorical valleys they must traverse. The poem nearly ended, the hoopoe and his flock of 100,000 finally take wing. A lifetime later, 30 remain alive and show up at the Simorgh's doorstep. There, the birds learn that the trip has been all about seeing their true sides within and they are dissolved into the divine Unity.Simorgh The birds' rightful sovereign, Simorgh lives beyond the unidentified Kaf's mountain peak. He is always near them, yet is transcendent. He shares his throne with no one. He is omnipotent, magnificent, unintelligible, mysterious, unfathomable by Reason, and unnameable. Creatures seek him but are deluded by whim. The Conference of the Birds is an allegory about a great flock setting off in quest of the Simorgh and along the Way learning to look into themselves in the Sufi manner. The hoopoe, King Solomon's wise messenger, is elected the birds' leader and functions as a Sufi master. The preparation for the flight fills the lion's share of the poem. At the onset, the birds are told that Simorgh first appears in China and his fame spreads. People fancy how he looks based on the single feather that he lets float down. It is said to have a counterpart in every soul. Simorgh is the "Friend" of God. In a time of downcast spirits, the birds learn more specifically that the Simorgh long ago creates birds as his shadow, so they have a natural affinity. The truth comes out a lifetime later, as 30 of the 100,000 birds that set off arrive at the Simorgh's doorstep. His servant turns them away, saying the Simorgh is too exalted to receive such vagrants. He relents, however, and takes the birds through 100,000 veils of dark and light to behold the Throne of Thrones. They are amazed to see themselves mirrored, and the Simorgh explains that because they are thirty birds, he appears as thirty birds—si morph in Persian. If they were forty or fifty, his name and appearance would be otherwise. The journey has been about seeing who they truly are inside: the only authentic form of learning.Joseph Joseph is the paragon of male physical beauty in Persian poetry. As such, he is mentioned in The Conference of the Birds more than any other character. The pheasant is associated with Joseph in the opening verses of the poem, inhabiting a "filthy well." In the familiar story, common to the Bible and Qur'an, Joseph becomes the object of his brothers' jealousy. They put him down a dry well while figuring out what to do with him. They auction him—the hoopoe tells about an old woman who bids a few threads, just to be able to boast that she has bid on Joseph. Malek Dar is the successful buyer and takes Joseph down into Egypt. The brothers fake evidence of his death at the teeth of wild beasts and his father Jacob goes into deep mourning. Joseph becomes overseer of Egypt's granaries (Attar believes that he becomes King). His overcoming advances by the beautiful but cruel Zuleikha (in the Bible, "Potiphar's wife") and confrontation with his brothers are favorite themes in Persian poetry. The hoopoe shows Zuleikha ordering Joseph whipped, but the tenderhearted guard cannot bring himself to strike Joseph. Finally, heaven sighs as the whip descends and Zuleikha is satisfied. At the end of the birds' quest, they are given the story of Joseph to read and see there all of their own hidden sins. They are too ashamed to speak, but this helps elevate their minds so they can see the truth. Abraham and Nimrod According to the Qur'an, the prophet Abraham and Nimrod are contemporaries and archenemies. Nimrod is defeated when God sends an army of gnats. One enters his brain and the buzzing drives Nimrod insane. In the opening verses of the poem, the parrot is likened to Abraham, risking the flames to cut off Nimrod's head.Adham A 9th-century prince from Balkh, a once-Buddhist region of Afghanistan, Abou Eshaq Ibrahim ibn Adham renounces the world and lives as a wandering dervish, much like the Buddha. In the poem, Ibrahim Adham tells someone whining about poverty how he gives up a realm and has gain hundreds of worlds. One must renounce heart and soul and suffer for years.Bayazid Also referred to as al-Bistami (d. 874), Bayazid is an "ecstatic" Sufi, who also makes scandalous proclamations and claims to have seen himself seated on the throne of God. He writes of rapture and intoxication. al-Junaid's school, by contrast, emphasizes sobriety. Bayazid's story shows the birds that not all are worthy to come into God's light. When Bayazid dies, he comes to a disciple in a dream to say he says nothing to the examining angels but merely waits for God's summons. God works, not humans.David The Hebrew king renowned for his psalms and "songs that make men long to die," David is linked in the opening verses of The Conference of the Birds with the sweet-throated nightingale. David is also a fighter motivated by holy zeal, by which the pilgrim's Self must be melted. God tells David that He alone lacks an equivalent, so he must be one's single goal. Every breath should remember Him. Otherwise, one is an idolater.Hallaj An extreme "antinomian" (relativist), Hallaj openly teaches mystical doctrines, the most famous of which, "I am the Truth," gets him brutally executed and cremated, as is seen in the text. It means that the Self is re-absorbed into the sole reality of God. Sufis see him as being killed for revealing a mystery, not for heresy. As Hallaj is being dismembered for crying, "I am the Truth," he smears blood on his face to show he has not turned white with fear. Facing death, heroes know that the world is worth little and the gallows are a "transitory dream." Hanbal An important Islamic theologian, Ahmad ibn Mohammad ibn Hanbal (780-845 CE) founds one of the four schools of orthodox Islam. Attar describes him in the poem as renowned, wise, and knowledgeable, but consulting a barefoot beggar at his gate when in doubt. Hanbal admits to being wise in hadith and law, but not intimacy with God.Jacob The biblical patriarch, Jacob is shown longing for his favorite son, Joseph, whom his jealous brothers sell into slavery. Persian poetry often uses Jacob as a metaphor for the human soul's longing for God. The hoopoe condemns the finch's hypocrisy of likening himself to Joseph in the well and tells a story about Jacob's dream about his lost son. The angel Gabriel warns Joseph to renounce his tears or be dropped from God's list of prophets. Jacob no longer speaks his beloved son's name, but Gabriel accuses him of sighing it in his heart—which also breaks the vow Junaid A celebrated "sober Sufi, Abou'l Qasim ibn Mohammad ibn al-Junaid writes about the soul's annihilation in God. In one of Attar's stories, Junaid is addressed as "God's prey," yet "free in every way." He then expounds on finding one's heart, the only way for courage not to be wasted.Kherghan / Kherghani A 10th/11th century CE Persian Sufi who lives near Bistan, Abou'l HasanKherghan appears in the poem near death, advising people to forsake idolatry to become God's slave, for devotion requires meekness and resolve, and later giving in to cravings for an aubergine (eggplant), which he apparently (but not explicitly in the poem) has forsworn. While he eats, ruffians kill his son. This teaches that every encounter is a test.Leili and Majnoun Archetypal lovers, Leili and Majnoun belong to rival tribes, so their love is forbidden. Majnoun is driven mad by love (his name in Arabic means "crazy"), and lives on the margins of civilization among wild beasts. His madness often typifies the sou's longing for God. Leili and Majnoun both die of grief. When Leili's tribe rejects Majnoun, he dresses in a sheep's skin to crawl near amidst the flock. Mahmoud and Ayaz The Sultan of Ghazna, who reigns Afghanistan in 998-1030, Mahmoud expands his territory by invading northwest India. Mahmoud is a poet and surrounds himself with poets and philosophers. Attar treats the fanatical, cruel, fickle tyrant as a benign ruler. Mahmoud's relationship with his slave, Ayaz ibn Aymaḳ Abou-Najm, is a common theme in Persian poetry. He is raised to highest honor by his king and a metaphor for the mystic's relationship with God. Attar refers to Ayaz's story frequently in this poem. When Shah Mahmoud makes Ayaz king, everyone complains. Ayaz suggests having him lead the army but dreads being parted for a day; pilgrims must long for God like this. Other stories that the hoopoe tells about Mahmoud include his encounter with a poor fisher boy, when helps him haul in a great catch for his family, and then ignores his courtiers' scorn to seat him on his throne; when Mahmoud comforts a conquered king whose weeping he takes for self-pity, but it is really his fears of Judgment Day, for not having converted to Islam until the conquest, attacking Somnat and refusing bribes not to destroy the idol Lat, for Mahmoud fears God—but also claims th jewels that survive the fire; one must destroy the idols in the heart. When Mahmoud attacks India, he promises that if he wins, the dervishes may have the spoils, and leaves it to crazy Boul-Hossein to decide, when the soldiers object. The madman says to keep his promise. Shah Mahmoud throws to a street sweeper a bracelet, which the man rejects because he seeks truth wealth beyond.Moses The Hebrews' deliverer from Egyptian slavery and lawgiver at Mount Sinai, Moses is associated with fire. In the opening verses of the poem, the finch is likened to Moses. Having ignored Gharoun's 70 cries for forgiveness, Moses is reminded that God's grace is infinite and those who accuse sinners are tyrants. The devil tells Moses never to speak of "me" or become like him. An anchorite gets no pleasure from his prayer, and God tells Moses that he cares too much about his beard; pulling it out only confirms this. In the wintry, barren "Valley of Detachment," reference is made to Moses' being cleansed.Muhammad The final prophet of Islam is mentioned in The Conference of the Birds, most notably when he intercedes with God to redeem Sheikh Sam'an from his conversion to Christianity in Rome. Muhammad also praises the tranquility of a "saintly fool" living in squalor, only to hear that the man is tormented by insects like Nimrod. Reference is made to Borag, the fabulous beast that carries the Prophet to the seventh heaven, with an admonition about what it takes to be his rider. Rabe'eh One of Islam's most important female mystics, Rabe'eh bint Esmail al-Adawiya lives in the 8th century. She is sold into slavery as a child and spends most of her years in poverty in Basra. Gaining fame for piety, she is visited by mystics and is credited with introducing the theme of Divine Love into Islamic mysticism. Rabe'eh is mentioned in the poem, several times with the honorific "Saint," several times. After walking seven years to Mecca, she menstruates, rendering her ritually impure to enter the sacred confines. The hoopoe asks, if she is hindered on the Way, who may not be? Later, she tells a sheikh of Basra's that her strength comes from fearing money. Rabe'eh asks God to favor her enemies and her friends and make her God's slave in poverty. Sam'an A renowned sheikh who travels to Rome and becomes a Christian in the longest story in The Conference of the Birds. Sheikh Sam'an is for 50 years the keeper of Mecca's holy place, a teacher to 400 pupils, a strict ascetic, a theoretician, and an attraction to astonished saints and clerics. He "split[s] religious hairs in argument," heals the sick, reads people's hearts, and symbolizes Belief, until he dreams about living in Rome and worshipping idols. Determined to resist and learn the meaning of his dream, Sam'an travels to Rome with 400 followers. There he falls in love with a Christian woman, commits every Muslim blasphemy to prove his love, converts to Christianity, and still is not acceptable to her. The Prophet Muhammad intercedes with God for Sam'an, and his good sense and standing in Islam are restored. His followers, who have given up on him and returned to Mecca, find him on his way out of Rome. The unnamed girl sees the light and follows Sam'an into the desert, is instructed in Islam, and dies, desiring to achieve Unity with God.Sanjar The Seljuk ruler of Khorasan (1096-1157), Sanjar is crowned king in Baghdad in 1119. In his later years, rebellions are frequent. The Conference of the Birds alludes to a rivalry with Sheikh Ghouri, who challenges Sanjar to choose the Way.Solomon The great and wise king of the Jews, Solomon inspires the hoopoe, who has serves as his secret messenger to the Queen of Sheba. Solomon by a glance has given the hoopoe certainty beyond prayer, which is needed, ceaselessly, but ignorance leaves only when Solomon accepts one. Tarmazi Called by scholar A. J. Arberry "one of the outstanding creative thinkers of Islamic mysticism," Abou Abdallah Mohammad ibn Ali ibn al-Hosain al-Hakim al-Tarmazi is a 9th/10th century CE teacher at Neishapour, the author's home town. Tarmazi appears in the poem with Bayzaid submitting to a master Sufi's guidance.Zuloon Abou'l-Faiz Thauban ibn Ibrahim al-Mesri is a 9th-century CE Egyptian who is considered the first and most important of the Islamic mystics. He is for a time imprisoned for heresy at Baghdad. In the poem, Zuloon talks about how God rewards asceticism after death.

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