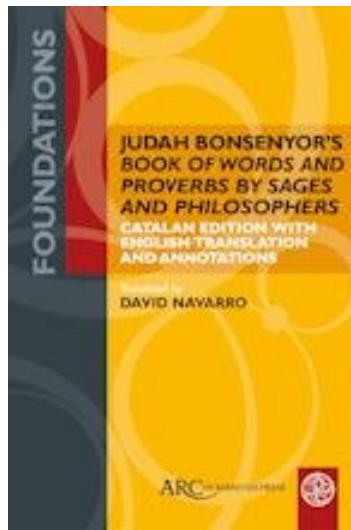


**David Navarro. *Judah Bonsenyor's Book of Words and Proverbs by Sages and Philosophers. Catalan Edition with English Translation and Annotations*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2025. ISBN 9781802702095. 240 pgs.**

Reviewed by: Antonio Cortijo Ocaña  
University of California, Santa Barbara



David Navarro's *Judah Bonsenyor's Book of Words and Proverbs by Sages and Philosophers: Catalan Edition with English Translation and Annotations* is a major scholarly contribution to the study of medieval Iberian intellectual culture, Jewish literary history, and the transmission of wisdom literature across linguistic and religious boundaries. The work presents a bilingual edition and annotated translation of a thirteenth-century Catalan compilation of 777 proverbs assembled by the Jewish courtier Judah Bonsenyor at the request of King James II of Aragon. The Catalan text is of Conca i Guia (2024). Navarro's translation prioritizes clarity and readability without sacrificing fidelity to the original, reflecting a balanced approach that serves both specialists and general readers. Navarro's book provides extensive historical, literary, and philological context that situates Bonsenyor's work within the broader traditions of medieval sapiential literature and cross-cultural exchange. The result is a volume that functions simultaneously as a critical edition, historical study, and interpretive guide to a significant but often overlooked text.

One of the central strengths of Navarro's work is the depth of historical contextualization provided in the introduction. He situates Bonsenyor's compilation within the dynamic cultural environment of medieval Iberia. It is well known that thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a period of intense literary production among Iberian Jewish communities, whose members frequently served as translators, scholars, and administrators in royal courts. These roles positioned them as key intermediaries in the transmission of knowledge across linguistic and religious boundaries. Navarro emphasizes that this cultural hybridity was not incidental but fundamental to the intellectual life of the period. The coexistence—often tense but productive—among religious communities fostered the circulation of philosophical, scientific, and moral ideas across cultural lines.

Within this context, Judah Bonsenyor's compilation emerges as a product of both political and intellectual forces. The text was assembled between 1291 and 1294 under royal patronage,

reflecting the Crown of Aragon's interest in vernacular translations of Arabic wisdom literature and classical philosophical traditions. The work therefore stands at the intersection of several historical developments: the scholastic movement's engagement with classical and Arabic knowledge, the growing importance of vernacular languages as literary media, and the role of Jewish scholars as cultural mediators. Navarro convincingly shows that Bonsenyor's book is not merely a collection of sayings but part of a broader program of intellectual transmission and moral instruction.

Navarro devotes substantial attention to the nature of wisdom literature itself. The introduction provides a detailed overview of the history of proverbs and sapiential traditions, tracing their development from ancient Near Eastern and Greek sources through biblical, Arabic, and medieval European traditions. This discussion frames Bonsenyor's compilation within a long lineage of gnomic literature characterized by brevity, moral instruction, and cultural adaptability. Proverbs function not only as expressions of general truths but also as instruments of social guidance and moral authority. By situating Bonsenyor's work within this tradition, Navarro demonstrates its participation in a transhistorical and transregional discourse of ethical reflection.

Equally important is Navarro's analysis of the transmission of wisdom literature across languages and cultures. Bonsenyor's compilation reflects the multilingual environment of medieval Iberia, drawing from Arabic, biblical, and classical sources while presenting them in Catalan. Navarro emphasizes that vernacular languages, unlike Latin, Hebrew, or Arabic, were not tied to a single religious tradition, which made them particularly effective vehicles for cultural exchange. This linguistic flexibility allowed works like Bonsenyor's to reach broader audiences and contribute to shared intellectual traditions.

Navarro also provides a detailed biographical reconstruction of Judah Bonsenyor and his family. Although documentary evidence is limited, royal records reveal that Bonsenyor belonged to a prominent Jewish courtier family that served successive Aragonese monarchs as translators, scribes, and physicians. His career illustrates the important administrative and diplomatic roles played by Jewish intellectuals in Christian courts. They possessed linguistic and cultural competencies that enabled them to navigate multiple worlds, facilitating communication and governance across religious divides. By reconstructing this social context, Navarro demonstrates that Bonsenyor's work cannot be understood apart from the institutional structures that supported and shaped it.

The volume's scholarly apparatus further enhances its value. Navarro provides extensive annotations, manuscript descriptions, and discussions of textual sources and concordances, with numerous footnotes aimed at "clarifying word choices and textual ambiguities". The extensive Appendix of Sources and Concordances (subtitled "Comparison of Proverbs and Maxims in Judah Bonsenyor's Book with Parallel Maxims in Other Works") provides a comparative reference system that identifies where individual proverbs in Bonsenyor's collection correspond to sayings found in other literary, philosophical, and religious traditions. Rather than treating the proverbs as isolated or original statements, Navarro demonstrates that many of them belong to long chains of transmission stretching across cultures, languages, and centuries.<sup>1</sup> Each of the 777 maxims in

<sup>1</sup> Among the works included in the apparatus of concordances figure *Al-‘Iqd al-Farīd (The Unique Necklace)* by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (860–940); *Abkār al-Afkār (The Unspoiled Ideas)* by Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Šaraf (d. Seville 1067); the *Kitāb al-Shihāb (Book of the Light in the Heavens)* by Baghdadborn Muhammād ibn Salāma al-Quḍā‘ī (d. 1062); the *Majma‘ al-Amthāl (A Collection of Proverbs)* by Aḥmad ibn-İbrāhīm an-Nīsābūrī al-Maydānī (d. 1124); the *Fī laḥnī l-‘Āmma (On the Incorrectness of Vulgar Speech)* by Seville-born Ibn Hishām al-Lāḥmī (d. 1181); and the *Amṭāl al-‘Awwām fī l-Andalus (Popular Proverbs of al-Andalus)* by Cordoba-born Abū Yaḥyā al-Zayyājī (1220–1294). There are as well biblical sources, the Talmudic tradition (*Babylonian Talmud* (ca. 375–500 CE), the *Talmud*

Bonsenyor's book is aligned with similar or related statements from earlier sources — including Arabic wisdom literature, biblical texts, classical philosophy, and medieval compilations, providing in many instances possible sources, similar concordances, and multiple sources and/or concordances

In sum, this volume makes available, for the first time to Anglophone scholarship, a major Catalan compilation of wisdom literature produced within the multilingual and multiconfessional environment of the Crown of Aragon at the close of the thirteenth century. This book stands as an important contribution to the study of medieval paremiology and wisdom literature and cross-cultural intellectual history. It highlights the role of translation and cultural mediation in shaping literary traditions and underscores the centrality of Jewish scholars in the intellectual life of medieval Europe. Navarro's work not only preserves a significant historical text but also deepens our understanding of the interconnectedness of medieval societies. For scholars of medieval studies, Jewish history, translation studies, and comparative literature, this book is an invaluable resource and a model of rigorous historical scholarship.

To the very noble and powerful Lord James—by the grace of God, King of Aragon and Sicily, and Majorca, and Valencia, and Count of Barcelona—who is thorough in the pursuit and exercise of knowledge above any other lord, and for the grand discernment and fulfilment of all good that dwells in him. For these reasons, he recognizes and comprehends that wisdom is one of the greatest possessions that God has granted to people—especially to those who love Him, which is a sign of clarity of the body and good manners through which one attains honour and benefits the body and the soul greatly. Just as the sage says: “There is nothing more rewarding than wisdom, for [with it,] if your lord wants to gain this life, he will, and if he wants to gain the next one, he will.” [And] he has entrusted me, Judah, a Barcelona Jew, son of Astruc Bonsenyor, time ago, to arrange and order words by sages and philosophers, and extract them from Arabic books and translate them into the vernacular, since these books deal with these topics more amply than others. And from these words, he has commanded me to make a book, although this entails a great responsibility due to the scarce wisdom I possess; however, entrusted by the grace of God and by the mercy of the aforementioned Lord King, humbly as it is proper, I translate the aforesaid words from Arabic into the vernacular in the manner contained in the chapters that follow.

---

*Shabbat* (ca. 375–425 CE), the *Talmud Berakhot* (Blessings) (ca. 450 CE), the *Talmud Arakhin* (Values) (ca. 450–550 CE), and the *Kiddushin* (Betrothal) (ca. 450–550 CE)), Midrashic and Hebraic didactic works (*Vayikra Rabbah* (ca. 500 CE), *Sefer Tahkemoni* (*The Book of Wisdom*)); and the *Mishle he-‘Arav* (*Sayings of the Arabs*) (ca. thirteenth century).