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Narrative in *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*

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Abstract

This article examines the narratives that appear in the encyclopedic *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity). Written in the tenth century, this multi-layered Neoplatonic work contains over 40 narratives—parables, allegories, fables, animal tales, and dialogues. These narratives serve multiple purposes, including the elucidation and illustration of ethical, philosophical, religious, mathematical, and scientific concepts. Together they encapsulate the philosophy of the secret society that produced them. With the exception of the famous animal fable, *The Case of the Animals vs. Man in the Court of the King of the Jinn*, these narratives have received little scholarly attention. Those narratives that have been studied have been considered in isolation rather than with the other narratives of the corpus. This article identifies the narratives in each epistle that utilizes them, shows their distribution, examines their types, and provides examples of the shorter narratives.

Keywords

Islamic philosophy – Arabic literature – Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' – narrative – animal fables – allegory – parables – Neoplatonism – Abbasid period

1 Introduction

Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity)¹ is an encyclopedic corpus of multi-layered epistles containing accessible introductory material

1 "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'" is a topos in Arabic literature, as shown by Ignaz Goldziher in *Muhammadianische Studien*. See Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. S. M. Stern and C. R. Barber (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1967), 18n1, as cited by Abbas Hamdani's introduction to *The*

for the uninitiated and esoteric messages for those who have developed their intellects and acquired the necessary knowledge to understand abstract concepts.² Written by anonymous authors,³ the ideas in the epistles were seen by some Muslim thinkers as heretical, and the authors of the epistles were vehemently attacked. Yet this work captured the imagination of Muslims from India to Spain, influencing important thinkers such as Ibn Masarra (d. 931 CE), Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185 CE), al-Shahrazūri (d. 1190 CE), al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), al-Qazwīnī (d. 1276 CE), Mullā Şadrā (d. 1636), and al-Idrīsī (d. 1640).⁴

The epistles of Ikhwān al-Şafā' contain over 40 narratives—parables, allegories, fables, animal tales, and dialogues. The different types of narrative that appear in the 52 treatises of Ikhwān al-Şafā' vary in length, the longest being the well-known animal fable, and the shortest only a few sentences long. Some of the narratives have human characters, while others have animal characters; some seem realistic, while others are clearly fantastic. The Ikhwān borrow many of their stories from Indian, Greek, Christian, and Jewish traditions, as well as Arabic *adab*, but many of their stories appear to be original. These narratives serve multiple purposes: they illustrate their authors' teachings and encapsulate the philosophy of the secret society. Most of them have been studied in isolation and not together with other narratives. To fill this gap, this article makes possible a more comprehensive study of these narratives by identifying and locating them, examining their different types, and providing examples of shorter narratives.

Call to God: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of EPISTLE 48, ed. Abbas Hamdani and Abdallah Soufan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13. "Brethren of Purity" is the English translation chosen by the editors of the OUP/Institute of Isma'ili Studies series. This translation appropriately emphasizes Ikhwān al-Şafā's central goal: the purification of the soul for the purpose of its release from the material world. A more idiomatic English translation is "sincere brothers." The term Ikhwān al-Şafā' had been translated thus when used in other contexts. For example, it appeared in the story of the ringed dove in *Kalilah wa-Dimmah*. See *Āthār ibn al-Muqaffā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1989), 140. It appears in numerous other works of Arabic literature.

- 2 Important studies about Ikhwān al-Şafā' to date include: Ian Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Şafā')* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), Godefroid de Callataÿ, *Ikhwan al-Safa': A Brotherhood of Idealists on the Fringe of Orthodox Islam* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2005), and Nader El-Bizri, ed., *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: The Ikhwān al-Şafā' and Their Rasā'il—An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 3 For authorship, see Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 63–64, 51–52, 339n. 5.
- 4 Godefroid de Callataÿ, "Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Şafā')," *EL*³.

The animal fable in which the animals sue the humans for maltreatment, *The Case of the Animals vs. Man in the Court of the King of the Jinn*, has been translated and has also been the subject of several studies. Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor translated the animal fable as *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn: a Tenth-Century Ecological Fable of the Pure Brethren of Basra*.⁵ The Ismaili Institute published Epistle 22, in which this fable appears, in 2009 with a critical edition of the original Arabic.⁶ Godefroid de Callatay recently published an article on the esoteric meaning of the narrative, in which he argues that it has a deeper layer of meaning intended for a particular set of discerning readers. He writes,

putting the discourse into the mouth of animals allowed them to stimulate the “intellectual contemplation” (*iʿtibār*) of their readers in a manner which would not otherwise have been possible. In the *Rasāʾil Ikhwan al-Ṣafāʾ*, as in many other Neoplatonic works from the Islamic Middle Ages, *iʿtibār* is a concept which has a very precise meaning. The “intellectual contemplation of the signs” (*iʿtibār al-āyāt*), in the fuller form of expression, designates the process by which the soul of a philosopher is able to rationally infer from the contemplation of this world the same divine realities as those the prophets have brought to mankind by way of revelation. The descent of God’s revelation unto the prophets is thus analogous to the philosophers’ intellectual ascent approaching the Divine through the different levels of creation—what medieval authors usually refer to as a “philosophical ladder.”⁷

De Callatay goes on to examine the animal fable’s important motifs, including the significance of the numbers that Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ use throughout the narrative, astrological predictions, and locations within the text. He argues that “the authors reserved the understanding of a deeper level of reading of this narrative for a special category of their readers.”⁸ The readers to whom the *Rasāʾil* are addressed are people who had been chosen by some of the “brothers” and identified as intelligent, trustworthy, and likely to be receptive to the

5 Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor, *The Case of Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: a Tenth-Century Ecological Fable of the Pure Brethren of Basra* (Boston: Twayne, 1978).

6 Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor, *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of EPISTLE 22* (Oxford: Oxford University Press with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2009).

7 Godefroid de Callatay, “For Those With Eyes to See’: On the Hidden Meaning of the Animal Fable in the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 29.3 (2018), 1–36 (6).

8 De Callatay, 34.

goals of Ikhwān al-Şafā'. They work in different professions and have expertise in different areas. Ideally, they are also young, as Ikhwān al-Şafā' expect older people to be set in their ways and less likely to be influenced by their epistles.

Studies of the shorter narratives are few. Omar Alí-de-Unzaga examines the dialogue between Moses and God and references to it throughout the *Rasā'il*, arguing that this is a common motif in medieval Islam and also in some Jewish texts.⁹ Ian Netton studies the story of the shipwrecked men who, unable to return to their homes, began to intermarry with apes.¹⁰ Below is the first identification and listing of all the narratives that appear in the *Rasā'il* along with their classification into types.

2 The Narratives in the *Rasā'il*

Below is a table that shows the distribution of the narratives across the epistles as they appear in the Beirut Dār Şādir edition:

Distribution of the narratives in the *Rasā'il*

Epistle	Number of narratives	Epistle	Number of narratives
Epistle Two	3	Epistle Thirty One	6
Epistle Four	1	Epistle Thirty Eight	4
Epistle Five	3	Epistle Forty Two	2
Epistle Eight	1	Epistle Forty Four	5
Epistle Nine	5	Epistle Forty Six	5
Epistle Twenty Two	1	Epistle Forty Eight	2
Epistle Twenty Eight	1	Epistle Fifty One	9
Epistle Thirty	1		

9 Omar Ali De Unzaga, "The Conversation between Moses and God (*munāġāt Mūsā*) in the Epistles of the Pure Brethren (*Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Şafā'*)," in *Al-Kitāb: la sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'islam: actes du Symposium international tenu à Leuven et Louvain-la-Neuve du 29 mai au 1 juin 2002*, ed. D. de Smet et al. (Brussel: Peeters—Société belge d'études orientales, 2004), 371–387.

10 Ian Netton, "Private Caves and Public Islands: Plato, Islam and the Ikhwān Al-Şafā'," *The Afterlife of the Platonic Soul: Reflections of Platonic Psychology in the Monotheistic Religions*, vol. 9, Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Texts and Contexts, ed. Robert M. Berchman and Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

The table below presents titles for each narrative. These titles are not in the text but are used here to give the reader a general idea of the themes of the narratives. The table also shows where the narratives appear in the 2006 reprint of the Beirut Edition:¹¹

The narratives and their placement in the Beirut Edition of the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Land Dispute	2	Geometry	1	99
Pool Dispute	2	Geometry	1	99
The Mathematical Question	2	Geometry	1	99
The King's Marvelous City	4	Geography	1	167
Two Angry Men and Musician	5	Music	1	184
Ragged Musician	5	Music	1	185
Philosophers on Music	5	Music	1	234
Sufi Who Died of Longing	5	Music	1	240–241
Ragged Musician version 2	8	Practical Arts	1	289
Jew and Zoroastrian	9	Ethics	1	308–310
Pious Man and Christian Monk	9	Ethics	1	338–342
Monologue on the Armies of Iblīs	9	Ethics	1	364–370
A Friend of God Speaks to God	9	Ethics	1	370–373
Moses' Dialogue with God	9	Ethics	1	383–385
Case of the Animals vs. Man	22	Animals	2	203–377
Confectioner	28	Epistemology	3	25–28
Father and His Drunk Son	30	Pleasures, Life, and Death	3	74
Two Men in the Garden	31	Languages	3	156–159
Crows	31	Languages	3	167
Doves	31	Languages	3	169
Foxes	31	Languages	3	170–171
Man and Fish	31	Languages	3	172–173
Indian King's Speech to His Son	31	Languages	3	173–175

11 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2004).

The narratives and their placement in the Beirut Edition of the *Rasā'il* (cont.)

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Cheerful Man Dialogue	38	Resurrection and Afterlife	3	310
Dialogue on Resurrection	38	Resurrection and Afterlife	3	310
Heaven and Hell Dialogue	38	Resurrection and Afterlife	3	312–313
Prophet and the Money Pouch	42	Religious Sciences	3	508
Prophet and Boys in the River	42	Religious Sciences	3	508
Doctor in the Sick Village	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	14–15
Khaishuwan's Vizier	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	20–22
Socrates' Death	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	34
Monkey Island	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	37–40
Socrates' Death version 2	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	73
Travelers and Their Bread	46	Faith and True Believers	4	78–79
Kidnapped King's Dream	46	Faith and True Believers	4	86
The Dream of the Iraqi Man	46	Faith and True Believers	4	87–88
Man Woken Up by God	46	Faith and True Believers	4	90–98
Braying Man	46	Faith and True Believers	4	114–115
Buddha	48	Missions	4	148–164
Wise Man and His Beloved	48	Missions	4	183
Gyges	52	Magic	4	287–288
Al-Ma'mūn and the Sorcerer	52	Magic	4	288–290
Esau	52	Magic	4	291–292
Witch of Endor	52	Magic	4	293–294
Jacob and Laban	52	Magic	4	292–293
Temple of Gerges	52	Magic	4	302–304
The Sick King	52	Magic	4	315–327
The Astrologer and the Thief	52	Magic	4	315–327
Magician and Prisoner	52	Magic	4	457–462

3 Narrative Types

Classifying the narratives is a complicated endeavor; this is arguably the first Arabic work that uses narrative so extensively to further its Neoplatonic message. Arabic litterateurs who wrote about Arabic prose did not classify Arabic philosophical narratives and neither have modern or contemporary scholars. The narratives, however, take familiar forms, with some borrowed from world literature. Dialogues and animal fables are easily recognizable. Allegories are frequently identified as such by the authors themselves (using the language of *mathal*). In some instances, the classifications below are based on how the authors use and describe the narratives. In other cases, the classifications are based on narrative features shared with types of narrative existing in world literature from which the authors draw. For example, the Qur'an and Arabic literature both contain dream narratives; it is, thus, not surprising that the authors of the epistles include this type of narrative in their work.

The narratives below are presented under the following categories: allegories, animal fables, cautionary tales, dialogues, biblical and pseudo-biblical tales, dream narratives, reports, and fantasies. One can easily use other categories to classify the narratives, and doing so would shed light on different aspects of this work. Furthermore, the types of categories used here are not necessarily distinct from each other; the famous animal fable *The Case of the Animals vs. Man before The King of the Jinn*, for example, has fantastical elements and dialogue, offers important lessons that are cautionary in nature, and might even be read as an allegory. Likewise, allegories and reports caution the reader away from wrongdoing, as do cautionary tales. The division of the narratives into artificial categories in this article only serves to give the reader a taste of the narratives that appear in the *Rasā'il*. Further work on these narratives will allow for better classifications in the future.

4 Allegories

A blind man and a man with paraplegia took shelter in a garden. They were hungry and had no homes. The garden's keeper brought them bounties of fruits from the trees in the garden and instructed them not to enter the orchards and attempt to pick fruits themselves. When he left the garden to run some errands, they went into the orchards, one riding on the shoulders of the other. They pulled at the branches and grabbed at the fruits, scattering litter all around the garden. When the garden's keeper returned, they denied any responsibility. This happened repeatedly. One day, the keeper announced he

would be leaving the garden to run some errands, then hid and watched the two men confirm his suspicions. He confronted them and banished them from the garden.¹²

This multi-layered story helps the authors make a radical critique of the political and religious structures of their time, but the subversive message is hidden in the deepest layer of the story's meaning. On the surface, it is about two characters who are destitute then receive help. Because of their destructive actions, they lose the support they received. The lesson: if people are generous to you when you are in need, do not abuse their generosity. However, Ikhwān al-Şafā' do not allude to this as the story's take-away. Before and after the narrative they provide two different deeper layers of meaning. First, Ikhwān al-Şafā' offer an interpretation of this narrative that approaches it as an allegory consistent with their Neoplatonic message throughout the *Rasā'il*. In this allegory, the owner of the garden represents God, the garden's keeper is the intellect which distinguishes right from wrong, and the two men running amok in the garden are body and soul—they can do good if they do as reason instructs but will do evil if they ignore it.

Second, Ikhwān al-Şafā' show the readers a third layer within the story. In this second interpretation of the narrative offered to their readers, they tie the meaning of the story to the subject of Epistle 31 in which it appears. This epistle is about the reasons for the existence of different languages and idioms. In the section of the epistle preceding the narrative, Ikhwān al-Şafā' explain the existence of different religions and the reasons behind the disagreement of people belonging to different traditions. They argue that there are different religions because of the differences in cultures, geographic landscapes, languages, and histories. However, most agree on the oneness of God, the need for messengers and prophets of God, and revealed scriptures.¹³ They argue that the circumstances of the people for whom a religion is created dictate the particularities of that religion: its language, imagery, practices, and laws. However, the differences and divisions *within* religions are not necessitated by differences in circumstance but rather result from greed. Ikhwān al-Şafā' argue that these divisions are created by those who seek power, extremism, to overstep their proper boundaries. Because of their greed, they introduce meanings into sacred texts that were never in them, follow certain practices in order to

12 This is a summary of the narrative that appears in Ikhwān al-Şafā', 3:156–159. This narrative appears in earlier Indian, Greek, and Hebrew literature. See Luitpold Wallach, "The Parable of the Blind and the Lame: A Study in Comparative Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 62:4 (1943), 333–339.

13 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 3:152–153.

strengthen their own power, oppose truth, and persecute scientists. Those, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' argue, are like the characters in the garden. The authors connect their larger points about sectarianism and greed to the narrative about the blind man and his paraplegic companion with a paragraph about the intellect's role in directing the soul toward the spiritual realm and urging it to choose good actions. If the soul rebels against the intellect, it leans toward the quest for power, extremism, etc.¹⁴

Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' name each of the narratives below a *mathal*, and they are indeed allegories because each element in the narrative represents something else.¹⁵ Each of these narratives has at least two layers of meaning. In one layer, we see the characters interacting with each other and the world around them. The deeper layer refers to different sets of actors and different settings. The characters in the narratives help provide distance and at the same time draw the reader closer; allegories often have difficult messages that are more easily digestible in the form of a story. For example, the allegory of the confectioner is a critique of those who do not understand their audience and attempt to teach people who are not ready to learn.¹⁶ The authors refer specifically to the attempts of scientists and philosophers to deal with the origin of the world by explaining their theories to the masses who lack the prerequisite knowledge to understand this material.

The allegories in the *Rasā'il* demonstrate multi-layered reading. This is especially true when the authors explain the meaning of a narrative. In several instances, the authors present a *tafsīr* following the allegory and name what each element in the narrative refers to.

"The King's Marvelous City" is an example of an allegory that appears to be original to the *Rasā'il*:¹⁷

14 Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', 3:156.

15 For a full discussion of allegories and their use in different cultures, see Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For the use of allegory in later Islamic philosophy, see Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina): With a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). A broader discussion of narrative in Islamic philosophy appears in Cyrus Ali Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (La Vergne: Oneworld Publications, 2017).

16 A full discussion of this narrative appears in Shatha Almutawa, "Imaginative Cultures and Historic Transformations: Narrative in *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*" (Ph.D. dis University of Chicago, 2013), 134–160.

17 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', 1:167. All translations in this article are of the Arabic in the Beirut edition and they are the author's unless otherwise stated. Other existing translations are cited; these are translations of the Arabic in the critical editions and not the Beirut edition. For

A group of people entered the city of a great king who was wise, just, and merciful. He was guided by his wisdom when he had that city built and he had created indescribable curiosities that had to be seen to be believed. He kept a table laden with food for anyone arriving in the city and gave provisions to anyone leaving it. He would summon travelers to him and give them lavish gifts, commanding them to stop and visit the city, so that they could see it, gaze on everything within it, contemplate his marvelous works, and consider his strange creations. All of this was for the purpose of exercising their souls. Simply by seeing that city and coming to know it, they would become wise, good, and noble. After this, when they were in the king's presence, they would truly be deserving of his generosity.

The group of people arrived in the city late and spent the entire night eating, drinking, cavorting, and having a good time. They left at the break of dawn, not knowing which gate they had entered through or which gate they left from. They did not see the monuments to the king's wisdom or any of his marvelous creations; and except for the pleasure they took that night from eating and drinking, they did not benefit from anything in the city.

Such is the case of the sons of this world below who come to it in ignorance. They dwell here confused and under compulsion, denying the truth of the Hereafter. And they leave this life as God, may His glory be exalted, describes: "He who is blind in this life will be blind and even more lost in the Hereafter."¹⁸

This narrative appears in the epistle on geography, in a section that encourages readers to learn about the earth and the world more generally. Although the authors do not explicitly explain the allegory, it is clear from the context: The marvelous city represents the earth. The king represents God. The food and drink on the table represent food and drink in this life and any material pleasures that distract people from pursuing knowledge and the refinement of the soul. Throughout their work, Ikhwān al-Şafā' encourage their readers to contemplate the world and study its wonders, which is what the travelers should have done in the city they were visiting. This contemplation and study is part of the preparation for the hereafter. Those who do not begin

previously untranslated passages, the Arabic will be provided. A critical edition of the narrative and a translation of it appear in Ignacio Sánchez and James Montgomery, *On Geography: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 59–60.

18 Qur'an 17:72. The author's translation.

these preparations early enough are like the travelers in this allegory—they are overtaken by death before they overcome their ignorance. They deny the afterlife, which becomes the reason for their eternal failure.

Allegories in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
The King's Marvelous City	4	Geography	1	167
Confectioner	28	Epistemology	3	25–28
Father and His Drunk Son	30	Pleasures, Life, and Death	3	74
Two Men in the Garden	31	Languages	3	156–159
Doctor in the Sick Village	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'	4	14–15
Monkey Island	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'	4	37–40
Kidnapped King's Dream	46	True Believers	4	86
Iraqi Dream	46	True Believers	4	87–88
Wise Man and His Beloved	48	Missions	4	183

5 Animal Fables

The animal fables in the *Rasā'il* are a subcategory of allegory; like the narratives above, they are labeled as *amthāl* by Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. Unlike the narratives above, these have animal characters that speak to each other and sometimes to humans and jinn. They have social structures and relationships that mirror those of the humans': friendships, enemies, kings, judges, etc. The book-length animal fable in the *Rasā'il*, which is the longest narrative overall in Ikhwān al-Ṣafā''s epistles, appears in Epistle 22 on zoology.¹⁹ In this famous animal fable, the animals sue the humans for maltreatment. The events in the narrative take place after Muḥammad is sent as messenger to the world, but the time is not specified further. The story begins when merchants, scholars, and wealthy people aboard a ship find themselves on an island ruled by the king of the jinn. There they try to use the animals as they did in their native homes, but the animals on the island object and take their complaint to the king, who

19 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', 2:203–377. Translated in Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor, *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Alvarez, 179–200.

listens to both sides. The narrative contains explicit interpretation and re-interpretation of the Qur'an, as well as critiques of kings and religious leaders. Complex theories about religion and politics are presented toward the end of this narrative.

The animal fable was already an established genre of writing in the time of Ikhwān al-Şafā'. *Kalila wa-Dimna*, translated from Sanskrit to Pahlavi and then to Arabic, was a popular work in the tenth century.²⁰ The *Physiologus*, a Christian bestiary written in Greek, was translated into Arabic in the ninth century.²¹ Al-Jāhīz wrote his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* about a century before the Ikhwān wrote their epistles.²² The Qur'an also includes narratives where animals, including ants and birds, speak.²³ The use of animals in mirrors for princes and other texts allows the author to convey ideas on sensitive issues (perhaps ones that may be controversial or offensive to rulers) through the words and actions of animals, softening their impact and giving the author the ability to deny such statements if he is accused of heresy or disrespect.²⁴ After their famous animal fable, Ikhwān al-Şafā' explicitly state that they choose to present their ideas in the form of allusion in order to protect themselves, and they express their hope that their readers will understand the meanings of their work.²⁵

Animal fables in the *Rasā'il* remind the reader to follow the prophet's teachings and to unite around them, arguing that division and discord are dangerous and destructive:²⁶

20 Naṣr Allāh Munshī and W. M. Thackston, *Kalila and Dimna* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2020). C. Brockelmann, "Kalila Wa-Dimna," *EI*².

21 Herbert Eisenstein, "Animals," *EI*³.

22 Pellat, "al-Djāhīz," *EI*². James E. Montgomery, "al-Jahiz," *Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925*, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa and Michael Cooperson, vol. 311, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 231–242. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Structures of Avarice: the Bukhalā' in medieval Arabic literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1985). Ḥannā al-Fākhūrī, *Al-Jāhīz* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1964). Jūrj Ghurayyib, *Al-Jāhīz: Dirāsa 'amma* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah), 1967. Al-Jāhīz, *Al-ḥayawān* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1965–1969).

23 Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

24 This did not save Ibn al-Muqaffa', who was executed, but his punishment was not directly related to his *Kalila wa-Dimna*.

25 Ikhwān al-Şafā', 2:377.

26 Ikhwān al-Şafā', 3:169. An Arabic critical edition and a translation appear in Eric Ormsby, *On Life, Death and Languages: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 29–37* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 203–204. Compare this with the story in the Pañcatantra about the king of the doves Citragīva and his retinue of birds who, enticed by grain, flew into a hunter's net. Citragīva saved himself and his retinue by suggesting that they work together to escape. They flew off together with the net. See the translation in

It is said that a flock of wild doves was flying in the air seeking out sustenance. A magpie saw the doves and thought, “Why don’t I join them? They might be heading to a place where there’s some food to eat.”

So the magpie joined them, and they arrived at a vast pasture. A hunter had gotten there first. He had set up his nets and buried his traps, placing many seeds in them. Then he kept out of sight.

Some of the doves said, “Let us go somewhere else.” But others said, “No, let us land here.” They quarreled and fought among themselves until they started beating each other and warring with one another, and they kept at it until they had knocked themselves senseless. That’s when they saw the seeds. The whole group swooped down, and the hunter closed his nets on the birds. They all came crashing to the ground. The hunter took them away and killed every last one, and the magpie died with them.

Beware of any place where there is strife and fighting. If fighting breaks out in your vicinity, leave that place and keep clear of it. And do not oppress others or be unjust to those who are below you.

This narrative emphasizes the authors’ advice to avoid enmity and discord. The doves’ tale serves as a cautionary tale.

There are four animal fables in the *Rasā’il*:

Animal fables in the *Rasā’il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Case of the Animals vs. Man	22	Animals	2	203–377
Ravens	31	Languages	3	167
Doves	31	Languages	3	169
Foxes	31	Languages	3	170–171

6 Dialogues

The dialogues in the *Rasā’il* focus on conversations rather than actions and exclude elements found in other types of narrative, such as character development. They often encapsulate the mindsets of the characters, their ideas, and

Patrick Olivelle, *Pañcatantra: The Book of India’s Folk Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA—OSO, 2002), 71–72.

beliefs, offering the reader a snapshot of a particular outlook or attitude. They are sometimes somber, as we see in Moses' dialogue with God, and sometimes light and humorous, such as the dialogue between the wealthy merchant and his drunk son:²⁷

There was once a pious and wealthy man who had a son who was openly a drunkard. The man hated that about his son, and said to him once, "Son, stop getting drunk, so I may give you a portion of my money and property, set aside a house for you, and marry you to a beautiful woman from a wealthy family."

"Father, what for?" his son replied.

"So that you can be happy and content, enjoying yourself as long as you live."

"If that's the goal, then I have already achieved it."

"How so?" his father asked.

"When I get drunk, I find happiness, pleasure, and joy within myself, so much so that I believe that all of Khosrow's kingdom is mine. I imagine such greatness and glory that small birds become the size of camels."

"But when you sober up, you see that none of it is true."

The son replied, "Then I start drinking again, and I keep on drinking until my sight returns to me."

This narrative demonstrates the position of those who believe in the eternity of the soul; the authors, however, do not clarify whose position corresponds to those with sound opinions and beliefs—the author is left to decide whether it is the father or the son. On the one hand, the son's happiness is transitory, ending when the effects of the alcohol wear off. On the other hand, the son is happy, and perhaps the point of the story is that the joys of material life are so misleading that one would easily be content with them and distracted from greater everlasting joys.

Like the genre of the animal fable, dialogue is an established form that was used widely in the medieval period. The authors of the epistles are generally understood to have been Neoplatonic Ismā'īlīs and with regards to some ideas, their philosophy was closer to *kalām* than to Aristotelian or Neoplatonic philosophy. This makes the writings of the Ismā'īlīs, theologians, and philosophers writing in Arabic important reference points, as they all employed dialogue in their work. Ismā'īlīs used it in accounts of their *da'wa*, such as Ja'far b.

27 Ikhwān al-Şafā', 3:74. An Arabic critical edition and English translation appear in Ormsby, 94–95.

Mansūr al-Yaman's *Kitāb al-ʿālim wa'l-ghulām* (*The Master and The Disciple*).²⁸ Although most of Plato's dialogues were not translated into Arabic in the medieval period, they were known through summaries and commentaries translated from Greek into Arabic.²⁹ Dialogue was a popular form in Arabic literature written by Jews in the medieval period as well, with Judah Halevi's *Ha-Kuzari* serving as a notable well-known example.³⁰

Ten dialogues appear in the *Rasā'il*:

Dialogues in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Monologue on the Armies of Iblis	9	Ethics	1	364–370
A Friend of God Speaks to God	9	Ethics	1	370–373
Moses' Dialogue with God	9	Ethics	1	383–385
Pious Man and Christian Monk	9	Ethics	1	338–342
Father and His Drunk Son	30	Pleasures, Life, and Death	3	74
Indian King's Speech to His Son	31	Languages	3	173–175
Dialogue on Resurrection	38	Resurrection and Afterlife	3	310
Heaven and Hell Dialogue	38	Resurrection and Afterlife	3	312–313
Magician and Prisoner	52	Magic	4	457–462

7 Cautionary Tales

A cautionary tale offers the reader an example of someone who chose poorly, showing the reader the consequences of those choices so that the reader may avoid them. Cautionary tales thus revolve around actions that are harmful to oneself or others. An example of such a narrative is the delightful story of the braying man, which appears to be original:³¹

²⁸ Translated by James Morris in *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue* (London: I. B. Tauris and The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001).

²⁹ David C. Reisman, "Plato's *Republic* in Arabic: A Newly Discovered Passage," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004), 264.

³⁰ Translated into English by H. Slonimsky in *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

³¹ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', 4:114–115.

وذكروا أن رجلاً من المنهمكين في الشهوات وطلب اللذات كان أكلواً شريباً شبقاً ، فمن كثرة ما كان يأكل ويشرب ويجماع حرقت معدته ، وضعفت قوته الهاضمة ، واسترخت آتته من كثرة الجماع ، وكان ممكناً من شهواته ، ولكن آلات الجسد وأدوات الفعل لم تكن تواتيه ، ولا قوة النفس الشهوانية تطاوعه في ترك الطلب ، لأن الشهوات صارت عادة لها لكثرة الدربة فيه ، وجبلة مركوزة فيها ، فجعل ذلك الرجل يطلب الحيلة والدواء مما يقوي القوة الهاضمة في معدته ، وينعظ آتته للباه لشدة شهوته ، وكان مما يداوي ويحتال في إنعاط آتته أن أمر حتى صور له في بيت الخلوة على الحيطان والسقوف صور الجماع للباه ، وكتب بين تلك الصور أخبار المرأة الأليفة وأوصافها في حالات الجماع ، ثم كان يدخل ذلك البيت مع غلمانه وجواريه يخلو ويشرب ويلعب ويلهو وينظر إلى تلك الصور ليستنهض بها آتته ، فلها أعيته ولم تجبه ، دعا عند ذلك غلمانه إلى نفسه ليأتوه من خلفه ، وصار ذلك دأبه وعادته ، حتى إنه ربما كان يهيج ويصيح كالسنانير ، وينهق كالحمير . ثم امتنع عنه غلمانه لبشاعته ونحرقة وقبح منظره ، وهجروه وهلك هو على تلك العادة ، وفشا حديثه في الناس وسوء الثناء عليه . وربما كان يرى بعض غلمانه في منامه على تلك الحال التي كان يدعوهم إلى نفسه فيصيح وينهق .

There was a man who was a slave to his desires, always seeking after pleasure. He ate a lot, drank a lot, and was lustful. He had heartburn because of how much he ate, drank, and fornicated, and his digestive system was weak. Furthermore, his member was becoming increasingly flaccid due to excessive intercourse.

He might have been able to overcome his desires, but his organs and bodily functions did not cooperate, nor did the desiring faculty of his soul obey him when he tried to turn away from this excess. His appetites had become habitual on account of how often he had satisfied them, and desire had become second nature to his soul. So the man tried various stratagems and sought out different remedies to improve his digestion and harden his penis, hoping to satisfy his intense cravings.

One of the things he tried in order to harden his member was to have the walls and ceilings of a private room of his painted with pornographic scenes, and among these images he wrote stories about promiscuous women and descriptions of them having sex. He used to go to that room and spend time there alone with his young slaves, both male and female. He would drink and play with them, and look at those images to wake up his penis. When he grew tired of the images and they stopped having the desired effect, he summoned his slave boys to take him from behind, and that became his new habit. Sometimes when he became excited he would even yowl like a cat and bray like a donkey.

Then his slave boys began to keep away from him because of how ugly and immoral he was, and they all left him. He died still holding on to his habit. His story and bad reputation became known among people. He would occasionally still see some of them in his dreams and would start yowling and braying again. He died this way, and his story became a cautionary tale among the people.

This narrative drives home its message against excessive indulgence in material pleasures by creating feelings of disgust toward the main character, who is so abhorrent that he is abandoned by all people, including his slaves. His story is the ultimate cautionary tale.

The *Rasā'il* contain other forms of cautionary tales, such as the three mathematical word problems that appear in the epistle on geometry.³² These narratives ostensibly deal with mathematical concepts appropriate for the epistle in which they appear, but they are also cautionary tales. Their purpose is to convince the reader that each science has its specialists who ought to be consulted on matters related to their specialty. When those without proper training attempt to do the work of the specialists, they inevitably make costly mistakes. Each of the mathematical word problems presented in the epistle on geometry demonstrates this point. The lesson is that serious and systematic study is necessary for the eternal happiness of the soul, and that study must be at the hands of the masters of the different sciences.

These narratives represent the simplest form of narrative that Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' share with their readers. If the Ikhwān's project is understood as a structured, progressive curriculum which begins from the simplest and most basic (mathematics) to the most complicated (magic), the increasing complexity of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's narratives mirrors this progression. While these short narratives demonstrate mathematical principles with the help of characters and plot, they also present critiques on social phenomena and show how injustice is served by ignorance. Characters and plot make the math problem easier to imagine, and therefore easier to understand; they also point to areas in life that are served by knowledge of this particular field of study.

Mathematical word problems do not tell us much about the setting—other stories are set in Persia, Sri Lanka, India, or Iraq. They are pithy and fast-paced, employing dialogue and action but leaving out characters' emotions, and overall their language lacks ornamentation. While these narratives do not directly deal with religion, they engage with the authors' philosophy and fit into their

32 See Susan Gerofsky, "A Linguistic and Narrative View of Word Problems in Mathematics Education," *For the Learning of Mathematics* 16.2 (1996): 36–45.

larger agenda of purifying the mind through its education with the ultimate goal of embracing an ascetic life focused on the soul's disentanglement from the material world.

Cautionary tales in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Land Dispute	2	Geometry	1	99
Pool Dispute	2	Geometry	1	99
The Mathematical Question	2	Geometry	1	99
Travelers and Their Bread	46	True Believers	4	78–79
Braying Man	46	Faith and True Believers	4	114–115

8 Illustrative Anecdotes

Some illustrative anecdotes are short and simple; the anecdote about the musician in the ruler's court shows the power of music, which is the topic of the surrounding text. In the discussion preceding the narrative, the authors write, "Well-balanced and well-measured sounds that stand in proportionate relationships [*mutanāsib*] help restore equilibrium to the blend of the humors. They please the natural disposition [*tibā'*]: spirits enjoy them and souls are delighted by them."³³ The narrative's appearance in one of the first epistles likely accounts for its simplicity; the narratives grow more and more complex the deeper their placement in the Epistles. The anecdote in the last epistle, for example, on the temple of Jirjās, is far more complicated, requiring greater effort on the part of the reader to interpret and understand.³⁴ One of these short anecdotes, about an ascetic musician, appears more than once in the epistles:³⁵

33 Owen Wright, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Music : An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97.

34 For a detailed discussion about the temple of Jirjās and its place in this epistle, see Godefroid de Callatay and Bruto Halfants, *On Magic: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation 52a* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–65.

35 The authors tell two versions of this narrative, first in Epistle 5 on music, then again in Epistle 8 on the practical arts. This second version appears in Ikhwān al-Şafā', 1:289. A critical edition of the Arabic and an English translation appear in Nader El-Bizri and Godefroid de Callatay, *On Composition and the Arts: An Arabic Critical Edition and English*

A group of musicians were assembled by invitation of an important ruler when a ragged man came in wearing the clothes of ascetics. The host chose him over all the others to sit at the head of the assembly, and disapproval appeared on their faces. The ruler wanted to demonstrate the man's virtue, so he asked him to play something. The man took out some pieces of wood, put them together, stretched on them some strings which he had with him, and moved them. He made everyone in the assembly laugh from pleasure and joy, then he changed the strings about and moved them in a different way,³⁶ and made everyone in the assembly cry from sadness and sympathy. Then he turned around and moved the strings in a different way, and made everyone fall asleep. He then got up and left. No one heard of him again.

Illustrative anecdotes in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Two Angry Men and Musician	5	Music	1	184
Ragged Musician	5	Music	1	185
Philosophers on Music	5	Music	1	234
Sufi Who Died of Longing	5	Music	1	240–241
Ragged Musician version 2	8	Practical Arts	1	289
Jew and Zoroastrian	9	Ethics	1	308–310
Prophet and the Money Pouch	42	Religious Sciences	3	508
Prophet and Boys in the River	42	Religious Sciences	3	508
Man Woken Up by God	46	True Believers	4	90–98
Temple of Jirjās	52	Magic	4	302–304
The Astrologer and the Thief	52	Magic	4	397

Translation of Epistles 6–8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 156–157. A version of this story appears in *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān* of Ibn Khallikān (1211–82). In this version, the musician is identified as the philosopher al-Fārābī. See Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*, 155.

36 Owen Wright translates this line as “Then he changed them about, and set them in motion in a different way.” He explains, “The implication is of something more drastic than the discreet retuning of a string.” Wright, 80n18.

9 Biblical and Pseudo-Biblical Tales

The Hebrew Bible and the Gospels were known to the Arabs in early Islam;³⁷ converts from Judaism and Christianity to Islam and some Hadith transmitters quoted the Bible.³⁸ Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Mas'ūdī, and Ibn Ḥazm refer to Arabic translations of the Bible by the tenth century and Saadya Gaon's translation of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic is well known.³⁹ Ikhwān al-Şafā', as scholars, scientists, and courtiers, must have interacted with both Christians and Jews in Baghdad and indeed they demonstrate knowledge of both religions in the *Rasā'il*.⁴⁰ Yet, they also misattribute a narrative to the Bible. This narrative is about the biblical figure Esau and is clustered with several other narratives that the authors claim demonstrate the reality of magic. They present an Arabic narrative, a Greek narrative, and two biblical narratives alongside this pseudo-biblical narrative as evidence that magic exists, although in their original contexts these narratives were not used for this purpose. The story of Esau is as follows:⁴¹

37 Jewish and Christian communities lived in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and other regions governed by Muslims before the rise of Islam and through the Abbasid period. Arabs had knowledge of biblical narratives and quoted the Bible in their works beginning in the eighth century. See Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the People of the Book in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

38 Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Tawrāt," *EI*².

39 Lazarus-Yafeh, *EI*².

40 The epistle on the call to God shows that among the Ikhwan were members of the court: "Know, O good and merciful brother, may God aid you and us with a spirit of His, that we have brothers and friends among the noble and gracious people spread out in different places; among them is a group of the sons of kings, *amīrs*, viziers, secretaries [*kuttāb*], and governors [*ummāl*], among them are the sons of notables." See Hamdani and Soufan, 74.

41 An Arabic critical edition and English translation of this narrative appear in Godefroid de Callataÿ and Bruno Halflants, *On Magic 1: An Arabic Critical Edition and Translation of Epistle 52a* (Oxford: Oxford University Press with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011), 107–109. This story appears in the work of midrash (rabbinic interpretation of the Bible) known as *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*: "Esau, the brother of Jacob, saw the coats of Nimrod, and in his heart he coveted them, and he slew him, and took them from him. Whence (do we know) that they were desirable in his sight? Because it is said, 'And Rebecca took the precious raiment of Esau, her elder son'. When he put them on he also became, by means of them, a mighty hero, as it is said, 'And Esau was a cunning hunter'. And when Jacob went forth from the presence of Isaac, his father, he said: Esau, the wicked one, is not worthy to wear these coats. What did he do? He dug the earth and hid them there, as it is said, 'A noose is hid for him in the earth.'" *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. Gerald Friedlander (New York: Hermon Press, 1970), 177–178.

Esau the son of Isaac was a hunter. Every time he went out to hunt, the son of Nimrod son of Canaan approached him and said, "Wrestle me, and if I win, I will take what you have hunted."

The son of Nimrod always wore the tunic that Adam wore when he left Paradise. On that garment there were images of all the things God had created, from beasts and birds to creatures of the sea. When Adam had wanted to hunt a beast or any other creature, he would put his hand on its image on the tunic, and that thing would stand still, confused and blind, until he came and took it.

Whenever he wrestled him, the son of Nimrod took Esau the son of Isaac and beat the ground with him, then took what he had hunted. After this had happened several times, Esau complained to his father Isaac about what he was suffering at the hands of Nimrod's son, and Isaac said, "Describe the tunic to me." Esau described it. "That's Adam's tunic," Isaac said, "and you won't beat him as long as he's wearing it. When he comes and asks you to wrestle, tell him, 'Only if you take off your tunic.' If he does that, wrestle with him, and you will win. After you win, take the tunic and come back here."

So Esau went out to hunt, and the son of Nimrod approached him as usual and asked to wrestle. "Take off your tunic," Esau said, "then we will wrestle." The son of Nimrod did so, and Esau took off the tunic he was wearing as well. They had at it. Esau beat the ground with him and sat on his chest. Then Esau jumped up, took the tunic and the animals he had caught, and ran away with them, making it impossible for Nimrod's son to walk in the desert.

Then Isaac said to him, "Son, as long as you wear the tunic, he'll never win. When you want to catch something while you're hunting, place your hand on its image on the garment and it will stand still until you take it."

Whenever Esau wanted a beast, he would place his hand on its image on the tunic, and the animal would stop in its tracks until Esau came and took it. From then on, he always hunted by putting his hand on the tunic. And this, brother, is a famous story known by all who affirm the truth of the Torah among the Jews and Christians, and none deny it.

In the discussion of the narrative about Gyges' ring below, I argue that this cluster of narratives offer multiple layers of meaning. Within Epistle 42, they deal with magic—the topic of the epistle in which they appear—and potentially also with justice. Unlike the narrative about Esau, the other two narratives in

the same cluster that are attributed to the Bible are in fact biblical: the story of Jacob and Laban is from Genesis 30:25–43 and the First Book of Samuel.⁴²

Biblical and pseudo-biblical tales in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Esau	52	Magic	4	291–292
Witch of Endor	52	Magic	4	293–294
Jacob and Laban	52	Magic	4	292–293

10 Reports

For the purposes of this article, reports are stories in which characters are named and treated as historical figures who lived in specific times and places.⁴³ The authors present details about these characters that they do not offer in other types of narratives. For example, one of the reports in Epistle 44 is about a specific king and his vizier.⁴⁴ The authors state explicitly that this narrative is historical.⁴⁵ They might also present context for this type of narrative. For example, before the report about Socrates' death, the authors introduce Socrates and discuss his importance among the philosophers.⁴⁶

42 A brief discussion of these narratives appears in de Callataÿ and Halflants, *On Magic*, 31–35.

43 For different treatments of Arabic historical accounts see Julia Bray's *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

44 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 4:20–22.

45 In his translation of Epistle 44, Ian Richard Netton identifies the main character as the Mongolian King Khushnavār of the Hephthalites, who ruled in fourth/fifth centuries CE. See Samer F. Traboulsi, Toby Mayer, and Ian Richard Netton, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Companionship and Belief. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 43–45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2016), 83n66.

46 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', IV, 34. This translation is taken from Traboulsi, Mayer, and Netton, 103–104. There are two versions of Socrates' story in Epistle 44. The first, quoted here, is a brief summary about his life, imprisonment, and sentencing. This narrative slows down for Socrates' dialogue with his disciples who offer to help him escape. His response and acceptance of his impending death is the point of the narrative in this epistle. The second version of the narrative, which appears only a few pages later, begins with Socrates' choice not to escape. The imagined dialogue between Socrates and the law at the heart of the first story appears again in the second story with minor differences in wording.

Yet another indication of the fact that the wise and divinized philosophers firmly hold to this view⁴⁷ is the way that Socrates gave himself up to death, freely drinking the draught of poison. For he was one of the wise Greek philosophers who lived ascetically with regard to the delights and pleasures of this world. He desired the joys of the spiritual world and its *rest and satisfaction*.⁴⁸ He preached this to the people and filled them with a desire for it, inducing them to abstinence in their sojourn through the world of being and corruption.

A group of princes and notables responded favourably; young men and the offspring of persons of wealth flocked to him, listening to his wisdom and his curious anecdotes. But a group of his opponents and those who sought the world and its vanities were envious of him. They suspected him of love of youths and disparaging the worship of the gods and ordering others to do the same.

So they brought him before the king, and eleven men bore false witness against him with accusations so serious that they merited death. Socrates was imprisoned for a month while they mulled over his execution. About seventy philosophers gathered with him in the prison, [intellectual] opponents and followers alike, debating his belief in the immortality of the soul after death and its well-being thereafter. Socrates debated with all of them and remained unshaken in his belief in the immortality of the soul and the well-being of its condition after death. It is a long story, which is elaborated in Plato's *Phaedo* dialogue.

In some manuscripts, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' name the source of the story, and present enough details about this figure: He was a Greek sage who was well respected and loved, and he lived in a place with a specific set of laws that he chose to follow even when it cost him his life. Likewise, in the case of another report about the Caliph al-Ma'mūn, the authors provide the name of the person who transmitted it: Ibn Ma'shar Ja'far ibn Muḥammad.⁴⁹

47 The opinion referred to here is that the soul continues to exist after its separation from the body.

48 Inspired by Qur'an 56:89, which uses the phrase "rawḥaha wa-rayḥānahā" to describe the realm of the souls.

49 Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', 4:288. The authors are referring to Abū (not Ibn) Ma'shar Ja'far ibn Muḥammad (d. 886 CE), the astrologer known in mediaeval Europe as Albumasar.

REPORTS IN THE RASĀ'IL

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Khayshuwān's Vizier	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	20–22
Socrates' Death	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	34
Socrates' Death version 2	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	73
Al-Ma'mūn and the Sorcerer	52	Magic	4	288–290

11 Fabulous Tales

Several of the stories from the *Rasā'il* designated in this section as fabulous tales contain elements of fantasy that are central to the plot. These tales feature large birds that carry humans for long distances, fish that speak and judge human actions, and magical rings that make their wearers invisible. Similar elements appear in the biblical and pseudo-biblical tales (a magical hunting garment in Esau's story, for example) and in the animal tales. The majority of narratives in the *Rasā'il*, however, do not have fantastic elements.

Below is the narrative of Gyges and his magical ring:⁵⁰

Plato, the philosopher—as eminent as he was—wrote in the second section of his book on politics: Gyges, an inhabitant of the city of Ūrūbā,⁵¹ was a shepherd. He was employed by an unjust man who at the time ruled Ūrūbā. Once, after rain and an earthquake, a chasm split the earth in two where the man used to herd his sheep. When he saw that chasm he was surprised and went down to it. He saw there incredible things. Among what he saw there was a horse made of copper, with openings on its side. He looked inside the horse's cavity and found a man that he assumed was dead. His size, from what the shepherd could see, was larger than the size of humans. He was wearing nothing but a gold ring on his hand. The shepherd took the ring and climbed out of the chasm.

50 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 4:287–288. A critical edition of the Arabic and an English translation appear in de Callataj and Halflants, 97–99. The Arabic name used by the authors is Jirjis (usually translated into English as George).

51 In *Republic* 11, the city from which Gyges hails is Lydia.

It so happened that the shepherds met monthly to report to the king about his sheep, and the shepherd came wearing that ring. While he was sitting with the rest of the shepherds he happened to turn his ring so that its setting was on the inside of his hand, which was more comfortable. When he did that he became invisible to the other people sitting there and they could not see him. They started talking about him as if he were not there, and he was surprised by that conversation. So he turned the ring around and the people could see him again. He turned the ring again to make sure that it does in fact have this power, and he confirmed this.

When he had experimented sufficiently with the ring, he used tricks to covertly sneak himself among the king's messengers. When the shepherd reached the king, he killed the king, and he is with him now.⁵²

This narrative, which appears in the last epistle on magic, ostensibly demonstrates the reality of magic on the authority of Plato, but it is multi-layered with more than one meaning.⁵³ Although the authors explain why they use this narrative, its interpretation does not align with its meaning in the original source, *Republic* book II. While it clearly contains the element of magic, the story makes a point about justice in Plato's dialogue. When read in the context of the other narratives in this epistle, it is in fact possible to read it as dealing with justice as it does in the *Republic*.⁵⁴ The theme of justice would have been apparent to medieval readers who had read the *Republic* or knew it through summaries or commentaries. Knowing the context of the story would make accessible to the reader a deeper reading of the text. The way that Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' use this narrative illustrates their approach to the material of the *Rasā'il* as a whole: they carefully show the reader how to read, how to reason, and how to understand layers of meaning, and in the final epistle, they leave the reader to apply this knowledge. Those who did not undergo full training would not be able to see beyond the surface meaning of the text.

Three narratives in the *Rasā'il* center around fantastic events:

52 The pronouns are ambiguous. It is unclear whether the implication is that the shepherd is with the king now (meaning that they are both dead now). The manuscript on which the Beirut edition is based likely incorrectly replaced "*malikan*" (king) with "*ma'ahu*," which is what the Arabic critical edition of de Callatay and Halfants prefers. They translate the passage as: "he killed him and became king at once." De Callatay and Halfants, 99.

53 Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', 4:288.

54 Almutawa, 182–201.

Fabulous tales in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Monkey Island	44	Creed of Ikhwān al-Şafā'	4	37-40
Man and Fish	31	Languages	3	172-173
Gyges	52	Magic	4	287-288

12 Mirrors for Princes

The stories designated here as mirrors for princes are meant to be read specifically by kings and princes and tend to be longer narratives.⁵⁵ This excerpt is from a story about the Buddha's life, adapted by the Persians and the Arabs but not identified in the epistle in which it appears as the story of the Buddha.⁵⁶ The narrative below is one of two tales embedded in the larger narrative:⁵⁷

Once upon a time there was a king who had a son and he was generous toward his son. The king married his son to a princess. He threw his son a lavish wedding suitable for a princess, and decreed for his entourage seven days to eat, drink, sing, rejoice, and be merry. The prince sat on a recliner in the place of honor and looked at the people gathered. That night the people who gathered there drank until they fell asleep. He stood up, intending to enter the room and be alone with his wife, but he walked out of the house and onto the street. He kept walking until he was outside the city and in a desert without knowing where he was! He saw a far-away

55 An overview of secondary literature on European and Middle Eastern mirrors for princes appears in Linda T. Darling, "Mirrors for Princes in Europe and the Middle East: A Case of Historiographical Incommensurability," *East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Transcultural Experiences in the Premodern World* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 223-42.

56 For the history of the Arabic versions of the story of the Buddha's life, see D. M. Lang, "Bilawhar Wa-Yūdāsaf," *ET2*.

57 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 4:162-164. The larger narrative in which it appears begins on page 148. An Arabic critical edition and English translation appear in Abbas Hamdani and Abdallah Soufan, *The Call to God: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 48* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 134-136.

light, so he walked towards it until he was near it. It was coming through the cracks of a closed door,⁵⁸ so he pushed it and saw sleeping people strewn to the right and left, each one of them wrapped in a shawl. He thought it was the room of the bride, and that the sleeping people were her slaves and servants. He called to them but nobody responded to him, so he assumed that this was because of their drunkenness. He tried to find the bride among them. When his hand touched one whose clothes were the softest and whose smell was the sweetest, he thought that it was his bride. He lay down with her and embraced her. He kissed her all night, and sucked her saliva, taking pleasure in it. He could not imagine a better pleasure than what he was experiencing!

When morning came and he was no longer drunk he called for a servant but nobody responded. He nudged the bride but she also did not respond. Eventually he opened his eyes and realized that he was in a dilapidated sarcophagus, and that the sleeping people were all the cadavers of the dead. He was next to an old woman who had died recently. She was dressed in a new shroud, and her body was embalmed with a subtle perfume. Blood and pus were oozing out from her. The prince's clothes, body, and face had been polluted by that blood, pus, and filth.

When he realized this he was horrified, so he got up and looked for the door. He fled in disguise out of fear that someone would see him in that state. He sought water to wash himself. When he arrived at a river he took off his clothes to wash off the blood, pus, and filth, all the while thinking about how he had walked out of the house without knowing where he was in relation to his country or what state his family was in after he left them. He was still in that state when a man passed by. The man did not recognize him. The passerby asked the prince, "What's your story? And why are you sitting in the water?" The prince was too ashamed to tell him his story. He said, "I slipped into a dung hill and my clothes got dirty, and I'm sitting here waiting for my family to bring me clothes to wear."

The passerby told him, "People are preoccupied!"

"What happened?"

"They say that the son of the king has been kidnapped by jinn yesterday. They are grieving. They miss him."

"I know what happened to the son of the king. Would you lend me your clothes and your mount so I may tell them the good news? We will share the reward equally." So the man pushed towards him some of his clothes

58 The door is described as *mardūd*, which either means closed but not locked or slightly open depending on region and dialect.

and let him ride his animal, and took him to the house of the king. The boy entered in disguise. When they saw him they were glad and asked him what happened. He said, "It's a long story. I'll tell it to you at a different time. Return to what you were doing." The people were overjoyed, and their happiness was now greater than it had been before.

This embedded story, in the adapted narrative about the Buddha's life, is followed by a series of questions that the storyteller asks the young prince: "Do you think the prince in this story would want to return to the sarcophagus the next day to spend another night with the young woman?" The listener, of course, responds with a resounding "No!" The wise man then goes on to illustrate that the soul also does not miss this material world after it leaves it. He emphasizes the feeling of disgust that the new groom feels when he remembers sleeping with the dead woman and argues that the soul also feels disgust when it remembers its life in the material world.

In Epistle 48, which contains this narrative, the authors discuss how one approaches kings and princes, guiding them toward true belief and practice that would allow them to be more righteous rulers. The larger narrative in which this smaller narrative is nested offers the reader an example of how one wise man approached a prince, and how he answered his questions—with narrative. The narrative quoted above is one of the narratives that the wise man shared with the prince in answer to the prince's questions about the soul.

Mirrors for princes in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Indian King's Speech to His Son	31	Languages	3	173–175
Buddha	48	Missions	4	148–164
The Sick King	52	Magic	4	315–327

13 Dream Narratives

One of the most important dream narratives in Islamic history is that of Joseph/ Yūsuf in Qur'an 12, Sūrat Yūsuf.⁵⁹ The events of his life are bookended

59 "Ru'yā." *E12*.

by a dream and its interpretation. Autobiographical dream narratives, in which authors describe their dreams, are also common in the medieval period, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī's being a well-known example.⁶⁰ In the *Rasā'il*, the dream serves as proof that the soul exists and can continue to exist after the death of the body. The first dream narrative in the text is about a prince caught by enemies who enslave him, leading him to live a miserable life. One day he falls asleep and dreams that he is in his father's kingdom again, as healthy and strong as he used to be.⁶¹ The Ikhwān ask their readers, "Which is better for this man and more pleasing, that he remains for the rest of his life asleep and enjoying it, happy with what his soul sees in his dreams, or that he wake up and experience his physical pain? And what would you say to those who claim that the human being is only a body and that there is no truth to the existence of the soul?"⁶²

Dream narratives like the one summarized above and the one quoted below offer a springboard for discussions about the soul, its relationship to the body, and human experiences:⁶³

وذكروا أيضاً أن رجلاً بالعراق أصلح مجلساً للشرب، ودعا إخواناً له ، فلما فرغوا من الأكل وقعدوا للشرب ، وارتفعت أصوات العידان والمزامير ، ودار الشراب فيهم ، وطرب القوم ، نام رجل منهم عند ذلك مما هم فيه من اللذة والسرور ، فرأى داراً حسنة وستوراً وفرشاً ، وأواني ، ورياحين ، وفواكه ، وشموعاً تزهر ، ومجامر تجر ، وقد امتلأ ما حول الإيوان من الضياء والروائح والنعيم . ورأى فتیاناً عليهم زين الجمال ومحاسن الكمال ، فبقي متفكراً متعجباً بما يرى ويسمع ويشم من محاسن المحسوسات ، وما تلتذ منه الحواس ، وتفرح الأرواح ، وتسرع النفوس ، ونعس وغاص في نومه ، حتى لم يحس بشيء مما كان في المجلس من تلك المحسوسات .

ثم رأى ، فيما يرى النائم ، كأنه في بلاد الروم في كنيسة من كنائس النصراني ، وهي مشتعلة بالقناديل ، منقوشة بالتصاوير ، مملوءة من الصلبان . وإذا هو بين قوم من القسيسين والرهبان عليهم ثياب المسوح ، وعلى أوساطهم مناطق من السيور ، وبأيديهم مجامر معلقة ، وهم يطرحونها ويخرون فيها القسط والكندر ، وهم يقرأون كلمات لهم شبيهة بالتسبيح ، ويلحنونها ويكررونها ، حتى حفظها الرجل من تكرارهم لها وهي هذه : كسنى وسخرة قليلاً وأبان * محمد حين بنسا إلى بما . ومعناها بالعربية : إن الأختيار يسبحون الله تعالى بالليل فهم أحياء عنده ، وإن كانوا قد ماتوا . وأما الأشرار الظلمة فهم موتى عند

60 Hagar Kahana-Smilansky, "Self-Reflection and Conversion in Medieval Muslim Autobiographical Dreams," *Dreaming Across Boundaries: The Interpretation of Dreams in Islamic Lands* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008).

61 This narrative appears in Epistle 46 on faith and the characteristics of true believers.

62 Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', 4:86-87.

63 Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', 4:87-88.

الله ، وإن كانوا في الدنيا أحياء . ورأى قوماً من الأساقفة بأيديهم أقداح مملوءة نخباً ، وفي مناديل لهم أقراص برسان يفرقونها على القوم ويحسونهم من ذلك الخمر . فتناول ذلك الرجل ، من تلك الأقراص ، واحداً بحرص ورغبة ، وتحسى من ذلك الشراب من شدة الجوع والعطش ، وهو لم يستمرئ بعد ما قد تعشى بالعراق . ثم ما زالت تلك حاله وهو متعجب ومتفكر كيف وقع بالروم وحصل في تلك الكنيسة ، وكيف الرجوع إلى العراق ، مع طول المسافة . ثم تذكر إخوانه في مجلسهم وما تركهم فيه من اللذة والسرور ، فاشتد شوقه إليهم وضحجه بمكانه ، وما يرى من الأشياء المخالفة للسنة والشريعة التي هو فيها ، المضادة لطبيعته وعادته ، فضاق صدره ، واضطرب في منامه من ضجيره ، فانتبه فإذا هو بالعراق في مجلسه ومكانه بين إخوانه ، وتلك الشموع وتلك الأصوات وتلك الروائح التي تأملها قبل نومه بحالها لم يتغير شيء منها .

A man in Iraq set up a bar and invited his friends to join him. When they were done eating and sat down to drink, they listened to the music of ouds and flutes. The alcohol went around, and they were moved by the music. One of the men fell asleep, pleased and happy as they all were. In his dream he saw a beautiful house with curtains, beds, pots, fragrant, aromatic herbs, fruits, glowing candles, and burning incense. The courtyard was bathed in light and had many fragrances. He saw handsome boys. He was surprised, and thought about the sounds and smells, good sensations that please the senses and overjoy the soul. He became drowsy and fell more deeply in his sleep, until he was not aware of anything around him.

Then he dreamt that he was in a church in the land of the Byzantines, lit with braziers, ornamented with images, and filled with crosses. He found himself amidst priests and monks wearing garments made of hair-cloth, on their waists bands and in their hands hanging lanterns, which they waved and were using to burn costus⁶⁴ and frankincense. They were reciting words of praise for God, chanting them and repeating them, until the man memorized them. The chant was "*Kisna wa Sakhra qalilan wa aban / Muḥammad hina bansa ila bama,*" which translates to, "The chosen ones praise God at night, for they are alive with Him, even though they have died. As for the evil ones who are unjust, they are dead to God, even if they were alive in this life."

He saw a group of bishops with wine glasses, and in their napkins pieces of wafers used as host that they distributed to the group. They passed around the wine. The man took some of the bread eagerly and drank from the wine; he was extremely hungry and thirsty, having

64 The Arabic, *qust*, refers to a plant usually grown in India and used in perfume or incense.

forgotten that he had dined in Iraq. That continued to be his state. He was surprised and wondered how he landed in the land of the Byzantines and ended up in that church, and how he can return to Iraq, with the great distance between them. Then he remembered his friends and the joy he left them in, so he missed them and was bored with the place where he was. He woke up and found himself in Iraq, in his seat between his friends, and the candles and sounds and smells that he contemplated before falling asleep were the same, nothing having changed.

A set of questions following the narrative guide the reader in thinking about the existence and nature of the soul: Who traveled to Rome and saw the scene there—the body or the soul? The answer, of course, is the soul—the body never left Iraq. This leads to the next question: Who was present in Iraq, the body or the soul? Since the body was in Iraq, why didn't the body hear and smell what was around it? Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' use Qur'anic verses about dreams to argue that dreams are useful for understanding metaphysical issues and also matters relating to religion. The prophets' dreams provided instruction for them at key moments in their lives and led to significant and defining actions not only for them but for all followers of their religion. Yusuf's dream is given as an example, and Abraham's determination to sacrifice his son is also attributed to a dream. The argument in this section of the epistle is that these dreams reflect truth and have meaning, which leads into an in-depth discussion of the sources of dreams and their interpretation.⁶⁵

Dream Narratives in the *Rasā'il*

Narrative title	Epistle	Epistle topic	Volume	Pages
Kidnapped King's Dream	46	True Believers	4	86
Iraqi Dream	46	True Believers	4	87–88
Man Woken Up by God	46	True Believers	4	90–98

14 The Function of the Narratives

Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's use of narrative in the *Rasā'il* is intricately connected to their interpretation of the Qur'an. The narratives, as shown above, take a variety of

⁶⁵ Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', 4:88–89.

forms and deal with different topics. Some of the narratives include quotations of the Qur'an and interpretations and re-interpretations of the quoted verses. Many of them follow or precede quotations and discussions of Qur'anic verses. The Qur'anic text is also sometimes key in moving the narrative plot in one direction or another. In Epistle 9, Ikhwān al-Şafā's characters discuss the Qur'an within a narrative. In the section on the treacherous tricks of the *shayāṭīn* where narrative is interwoven with Qur'anic verses, a learned man said to another: "How did you know the *shayāṭīn* and their temptations?" The other responded that he had grown up, studied the law including commandments and prohibitions, learned about what is beneficial and harmful, and reflected on the meaning of Qur'anic verses that deal with the *shayāṭīn*.⁶⁶ Such narratives present specific interpretations of the Qur'anic verses, but give the authors distance from these interpretations so that the authors are not themselves endorsing these particular readings of the verses.

Ikhwān al-Şafā' also comment on many of their narratives and present these commentaries as *tafsīr*.⁶⁷ Some narratives do not explicitly come with a commentary that is labeled as *tafsīr*, but nonetheless carry a quick explanation. The dialogue between the wealthy merchant and his alcoholic son is followed by such a brief explanation, as is the story about the wise man whose actions are driven by his love for a woman.⁶⁸ The length of commentary on the narratives varies; the narrative about the doctor in the sick village has a long explanation that spans several pages, for instance,⁶⁹ while some have shorter explanations, such as the story of Gyges.⁷⁰

15 Conclusion

Narrative has different functions in the *Rasā'il*. In some places, it adds color and illustrates certain points with lively characters and surprising events. In other places, the narratives seem to distract the reader from ideas that the authors seem to bury, creating chaos and multiple universes of meanings. Some of the stories illustrate several different points of various degrees of complexity. There is still much work to be done to understand these narratives beyond the survey offered here. We await interpretations of each narrative and its significance in

66 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 1:364–370.

67 An example of a narrative followed by an explicit *tafsīr* is the allegory of the confectioner and the story of the shipwrecked men, Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 3:28 and 4:40.

68 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 3:74 and 4:184.

69 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 4:16–17.

70 Ikhwān Al-Şafā', 4:288.

the epistle in which it appears, research becoming ever more possible as we get closer to a full body of critical editions and translations of the complete works of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. Identifying the narratives and recognizing how prevalent they are in the epistles is a first step toward a better understanding of this encyclopedic corpus and its place in Arabic literature. The continued study of these narratives will create new possibilities for identifying, classifying, and interpreting other Arabic philosophical narratives, a neglected but rich genre.