

THE SONG OF CHESS

Abraham Ibn Ezra

a poem

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I will sing a song of battle
Planned in days long past and over.
Men of skill and science set it
On a plain of eight divisions,
And designed in squares all chequered.
Two camps face each one the other,
And the kings stand by for battle,
And twixt these two is the fighting.
Bent on war the face of each is,
Ever moving or encamping,
Yet no swords are drawn in warfare,
For a war of thoughts their war is.
They are known by signs and tokens
Sealed and written on their bodies;
And a man who sees them thinketh,
Edomites and Ethiopians
Are these two that fight together.
And the Ethiopian forces
Overspread the field of battle,
And the Edomites pursue them.

First in battle the foot-soldier
Comes to fight upon the highway,
Ever marching straight before him,
But to capture moving sideways,
Straying not from off his pathway,
Neither do his steps go backwards;
He may leap at the beginning
Anywhere within three chequers.
Should he take his steps in battle
Far away unto the eighth row,
Then a Queen to all appearance
He becomes and fights as she does.
And the Queen directs her moving
As she will to any quarter.
Backs the Elephant or advances,
Stands aside as 'twere an ambush;
As the Queen's way, so is his way,
But o'er him she hath advantage,
He stands only in the third rank.
Swift the Horse is in the battle,
Moving on a crooked pathway;
Ways of his are ever crooked;
Mid the Squares, three form his limit.

Straight the Wind moves o'er the war-path
In the field across or lengthwise;
Ways of crookedness he seeks not,
But straight paths without perverseness.
Turning every way the King goes,
Giving aid unto his subjects;
In his actions he is cautious,
Whether fighting or encamping.
If his foe come to dismay him,
From his place he flees in terror,
Or the Wind can give him refuge.
Sometimes he must flee before him;
Multitudes at times support him;
And all slaughter each the other,
Wasting with great wrath each other.
Mighty men of both the sovereigns
Slaughtered fall, with yet no bloodshed.
Ethiopia sometimes triumphs,
Edom flees away before her;
Now victorious is Edom;
Ethiopia and her sovereign
Are defeated in the battle.

Should a King in the destruction
Fall within the foeman's power,
He is never granted mercy,
Neither refuge nor deliv'rance,
Nor a flight to refuge-city.
Judged by foes, and lacking rescue,
Though not slain he is checkmated.
Hosts about him all are slaughtered,
Giving life for his deliverance.
Quenched and vanished is their glory,
For they see their lord is smitten;
Yet they fight again this battle,
For in death is resurrection.



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