

Hispanic Hebrew Poetry: a Bridge between the Bible and Medieval Iberian Literatures

Aviva Doron
University of Haifa

I. Introduction

While literature tends to reflect historic, religious and social processes, inter-cultural contacts are reflected mainly in the works of poets from minority groups, as they speak the languages of their environment and are familiar with the literatures of the majority. In this context it is interesting to examine the Hebrew literature written in medieval Spain as a reflection of the inter-cultural dialogues that were taking place at the time, and as a riveting literary phenomenon. One of its outstanding and unique characteristics is that it serves as a literary bridge between the clearly defined literary genres of medieval Spanish literature in its various languages, and the language of the Bible.

One fundamental issue stands out among the questions of research and methodology that face the scholar: how can one distinguish between influence and original expression? Does the encounter between a minority culture and the majority literature cause the former to be influenced to the point of self-effacement or does it motivate the poets of that minority culture to seek original paths of expression, and is that search reflected in new departures in their works? Another question that arises relates to the use of biblical language: does it restrict the creative leeway of the Hebrew poets or enable them to break away to new forms of expression?

This article will discuss the development of Hispano-Hebrew poetry, composed, as mentioned, in biblical language, examine its characteristics in its relationship to the literatures of the environment –both during the Andalusian period and in Christian Spain– and review works of the major Hebrew poets both in the context of the contemporary literatures and with emphasis on their original attainments.

II. Historical and Cultural Background

At the time of the Roman Empire, the Iberian Peninsula already had a substantial Jewish population that lived as organized communities that, while cohesive and traditional, also received cultural cues from the surrounding milieu. Deterioration of Jewish life in Spain began in the fifth century, when the Roman Empire converted to Christianity under the Emperor Constantine; a confrontation between the new state religion and Judaism was inevitable: Christianity defined itself as the successor to its order (Gerber 3). And yet, the Jews were well integrated in the life of this predominantly Christian society. It is well known that Paul, the first of the Apostles of

Christianity, intended to visit Spain to make contact with its Judeo-Christian congregation.

When the Visigoths arrived, they found a Jewish population that was well integrated and in fact formed an influential part of society. However, when the Visigoth king abandoned his Aryan faith and converted to Catholicism in ca. 589, the status of the Jews began to deteriorate. The two centuries of Visigothic persecutions following Recared's conversion comprise one of the darkest periods in Jewish history in the Iberian Peninsula Spain. Under laws enacted by the Visigoth rulers, Jews were prohibited not only from practicing their religion but also from playing a part in economic life: a strict ban was imposed on Jews maintaining commercial links with Christians or managing the estates of wealthy landlords. They were banned from state service and from keeping slaves or having Christian tenants. Severe penalties were imposed on anyone who tried to evade being baptized by the Church or who continued with Jewish ritual practices. Furthermore, any Jews who did not abandon their religion were banned from entering coastal towns: this was in order to ensure they would not make any attempt to leave the country. At the Church Synod held in Toledo in 694, this virulently anti-Jewish policy was endorsed and that is most probably the last extant record of Christendom's uncompromising struggle against Judaism in Visigoth Spain, and testimony to the fact that the Jewish community was on the verge of annihilation (Gerber 10-16).

Relief came from an entirely unexpected direction, that of Islam. When the Muslims invaded Spain in 711, they believed that the Jews came under their protection and that the regime was obliged to grant them freedom of worship since, in the Muslim religious perception, adherents of all three monotheistic faiths worship the same God. Jews were then permitted to act as merchants in the fortified parts of certain towns and assumed the obligations as well as the rights involved in defense of the city and their own self-defense, and this situation continued later under Christian rule of Spain.

In the tenth century, Caliph Abd ar-Rahman III (912-61) suppressed the individual political forces and established a powerful and advanced united kingdom. Cordoba, the capital of the kingdom, was a center of culture and the ultimate destination of traders and scholars from Mediterranean countries. Its cultural life was of such a high standard and so rich that it came to be known throughout Europe, and indeed came to be seen by historians as a cultural model. Individuals of different religions worked together on economic and scientific texts and conducted a prolific literary dialogue. Alongside the cultural development taking place in the ruling Muslim society, Jewish culture was also developing. Cordoba was also the birthplace of the two philosophers whose influence on general intellectual history is still noticeable today: the Muslim Ibn Rushd –Averroes (1126-98)– and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204) who was to become the greatest spiritual mentor of the entire Jewish people.

Early in the eleventh century Muslim Spain, al-Andalus, which had been such a powerful entity, disintegrated and was broken up into several small states. An

aristocratic Republic was set up in Cordoba and another in Seville, until the Abbad family seized the reins of power there. In Zaragoza and Valencia, rulers emerged who identified as Arabs while Málaga, Granada, Badajoz and Toledo were ruled by Berbers.

The course of Jewish history is intertwined with these political upheavals. The Jewish communities prospered and declined parallel with the rise and fall of the surrounding societies. The Jews were involved in the courts of the ruling ministers and indeed wielded considerable influence on political developments. An interesting example of this may be found in the case of Shemuel ha-Nagid Ibn-Nagrila (993-1056) –who held political positions of the highest importance in the kingdom of Granada. He was deputy to the king, was involved in the external and internal politics of the kings of Granada and indeed held the office of Minister and Commander of the Army in Granada. For years he led the army in its wars and victories over the neighboring Muslim Principalities. Yet at the same time he was also a renowned poet who wrote in Hebrew and an outstanding Talmudic scholar who engaged in theological debates¹ with the poet Ibn Hazm (994-1064), one of the greatest Muslim scholars of his day (Baer 1959, 9-22; Ashtor 81-102, 152-72; Beinart 11-17; Stillman 1979, 210-32).

Centers of Jewish culture developed in the capitals of the al-Andalus and the Jews became adept at combining involvement in the life of society at large with preservation of their own cultural identity. They held key positions in the economy and in the administrative and bureaucratic authorities, while at the same time continuing to cultivate their spiritual heritage. Impressive spiritual and literary achievements were attained by Jewish scholars at the centers of Jewish culture in the major cities of Andalusia –Cordoba, Granada and Seville. These achievements were recognized and admired by the whole of the society in which they functioned as well as by the entire Jewish world, which began to regard Spanish Jewry as the spiritual center and source of inspiration to Jewish communities everywhere.

In the middle of the twelfth century, the Almohads invaded Spain, overturning the regimes in the Andalusian kingdoms and destroying the cultural centers.² They also dealt a mortal blow to the centers of Jewish culture in the southern parts of the Iberian Peninsula. From this time forward, the focus of Jewish cultural life moved to the areas of Christian Spain. While Hebrew culture in Muslim Spain attained the apex of its development, more modest foundations were laid in the areas under Christian rule in Northern Spain for new centers of Jewish life and culture. With the decline of the southern Muslim cities, more attention focused upon the towns of Christian Spain, and their Jewish spiritual centers began to attract attention. Hebrew literature and

¹ On the character of the theological debates of the Middle Ages –particularly the debates between Judaism and Christianity– see Ben-Sasson 243-54; Baer 1959, 58 and 100-10; 308-63.

² This fundamentalist Muslim tribe took over the cities of Andalusia, destroyed the elaborate cultural centers, and demanded that the Jews and Christians convert to Islam. See Gerber 1992, 80-83; Baer 1959, 44-45.

theoretical writing in fact moved to Christian Spain and continued to develop there until the end of the fifteenth century (Baer 1959, 69-90; Pagis 1970, 10; Pagis 1976, 173-75, Septimus 2, ff).

In Christian, as in Muslim Spain, the Jews were involved in the economic and cultural life of the general society. The Christian rulers found it to be most advantageous to seek the assistance of Jews who were well versed in Arabic language, commerce, administration and statesmanship –as a result of the experience they had garnered in the more advanced region of Andalusia. The most distinguished Jewish personalities, from among those invited to attend the King's court, were appointed to key positions in the kingdom. Jews served the Christian kings in politics and administration and held important political positions. In the reign of King Alfonso X the Wise (1221-84), several Jews were explicitly given the title of Secretaries to the King –there were more of them in the fourteenth century– and this title covered several positions that are not easy to define today. Political importance may also be attributed to the post of physician to the royal court.³

While the Jews were becoming involved in the apparatus of society as a whole, the religious rights that they had enjoyed under the earlier Castilian kings were restored to them. Alfonso X the Wise was not going to deprive them of those rights. He gave considerable support to the autonomous organizational development of the Jewish communities and appointed certain Jewish individuals to economic posts while others were admitted to the close circle of scholars and writers who attended his court. His personal relations with the Jews went far beyond the regular bounds of the requirements of *Realpolitik*.⁴ In the field of culture as well, the Jews' integration in broader Spanish society was remarkable. Access to source material of classical literature and knowledge in this era was dependent upon knowing the Arabic language or the skills to read and interpret Latin sources.⁵

Among the leading intellectuals in Christian Spain who knew Arabic were Jewish scholars who, while continuing with their own philosophical and literary writings,

³ The Cultural court of Alfonso X serves as a prominent example. The cultural conception of the Wise King is discussed by Márquez Villanueva 1994. In the prologue, he claims: "La obra de Alfonso X el Sabio es única no sólo por su volumen, sino por su carácter fundacional de una cultura de valor permanente y universal. . . .La labor creadora de don Alfonso representa la creación con que un hombre, excepcional en ser a la vez un gran realista y un gran visionario, acepta con todas sus consecuencias la crisis de un largo pasado y elabora un proyecto innovador enfocado hacia el futuro" (11-12). For general bibliographies of Alfonso X, see Snow 1977. On the cosmopolitan nature of Alfonso X's court, see Dronke 1969, 71; López Estrada 1974, 122; Díaz Esteban 1983. For reflection of this phenomenon in Hispanic-Hebrew literature see Doron 1995, 129-140. Many scholars have discussed the involvement of the Jews in the social, economic and cultural life of Toledo: León Tello 67-135; Fernández Suárez 101; Carpenter; Gutwirth; Roth 1986, 189-220; Gil. On the relations between Jews and Christians in Castile, see Carrete Parrondo 1978, 15-21 and Amador de los Ríos 1975, 337- 498.

⁴ See Baer 1959, 23-69; Carpenter.

⁵ On the involvement of the Jews of Toledo in the translation projects which played a central role in the cultural life of the period, see Singer 1927, 173-283; Gil 1985; Menendez Pidal 1985, 253-60; Roth 1985, 43-55; Márquez Villanueva 1994, 66-81; Castro 1984, 12-18.

maintained their links with the attainments of the culture that had evolved in al-Andalus.

The important contributions of these Jewish scholars are well known in Science (Romano) and Philosophy.⁶ One of their major contributions was the translations rendered by the Toledo School of Translators (*Escuela de traductores*) which included scientific and philosophical dissertations and outstanding literary works, as well as classics such as the writings of Aristotle and Plato (which had been translated from Greek into Arabic by Muslim and Jewish translators many years earlier in al-Andalus). Some of these translations were from both Greek and Hebrew (Deyermond 102ss). At this important institution, which created a bridge of knowledge through its translations into both Latin and Spanish (King Alfonso X had determined that Spanish should be the language of learning so as to make it more widely accessible) (Márquez Villanueva 1990, 1994) teams of Jews, Muslims and Christians worked together and in harmony. Americo Castro concluded that Europe, as the representative of Western civilization, is greatly indebted to this splendid establishment, particularly to the Jews whose role in the enterprise of translation was highly significant.⁷

III. The Birth of Secular Hispanic Hebrew Literature

The Jewish inhabitants of Spain at that time, though an integral part of the general society and exposed to the surrounding cultures, faced a significant and fateful dilemma: should they remain closed off to outside influences and confine themselves to the paths of the Jewish heritage or should they open doors to a cultural and literary discourse with their neighbors. The opening shot in this drama was fired by the poet Dunash Ben Labrat, who came to Cordova to the court of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut (875-905) who was the first Spanish Jew to be mentioned in the Arabic sources, and president of the Jewish community of al-Andalus. He was a diplomat, and a statesman, a court physician and trusted adviser to the caliph Abd ar-Rahman III. It is during his reign that we see the sudden development of a flourishing, creative, and highly independent Jewish community in Spain (Stillman 55-56).

Dunash ben Labrat wrote his poetry in the language of the Bible, which was the literary language of the Jewish poets. Although they were involved in Arab society, spoke in Arabic and were quite familiar with Arabic literature, the Jewish poets continued to create in the literary language of their own culture, which was Hebrew. Even when they begin to adopt motifs and forms from Arabic secular poetry,⁸ they chose to continue writing in biblical Hebrew along with literary Arabic, which was the

⁶ On Jewish Philosophy in Medieval Spain, see Singer; Guttman; Husik; Woflson; Twersky; Idel; Ravitzky.

⁷ See Castro 12-18; Romano 104-32.

⁸ On the life and poetry of Dunash Ben Labrat, see Allony's introduction to his edition of Ben Labrat's poetry (5-47); Schirmann and Fleisher 1995, 119-29.

language of the Koran (Pagis 1976; Schirmann and Fleisher 1995, 119-29; Schirman 1960, 27-30).

The historic decision regarding the nature of the development of Hebrew literature was not taken lightly. In Spain, too, as in so many instances throughout history, there was no lack of people who displayed overt hostility towards any attempt to extend the borders of traditional culture. They fiercely opposed any open approach to the new sciences and these included philosophy, to which they objected on the grounds of having its origins in Greek pagan and Arab Muslim sources. They rejected any possibility of accepting poetic norms originating in a foreign literature, particularly where secular poetry was concerned, which they deemed to be irreconcilable with the spirit of ancient poetry. They insisted that it was totally unacceptable to introduce “foreign meters” into texts written in the language of the Bible –the holy tongue.

It is impossible to describe Jewish culture today without the contribution made by Maimonides and the other philosophers, whose writings reflect cultural openness. Hebrew literature, to this day, is enriched by the influence of the Hebrew poetry which was created in Spain on the basis of an open cultural approach. The most important example may be found in the poetry of H. N. Bialik, the greatest poet in modern Hebrew literature, who was aware of the influence of Ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Ha-Levi on his work. The poetry of Spain also flows through the veins of late 20th- and 21st-century Israeli poems, such as those by Yehuda Amichai, Ozer Rabin, Aviva Doron, Roni Somek.⁹

The Hebrew poetry of al-Andalus therefore reflects a revolutionary and dramatic cultural turning-point that was to determine the character of Spanish Jewry for eight centuries, and was also to affect the subsequent Diaspora period of Spanish Jewry. Indeed, it influenced the development of Jewish culture through the generations. The decision to open out to the neighboring cultures was most significant and its implications are felt to this day.

It is only in the context of the decision taken to open out to the surrounding cultures that one can understand the impact of the literary encounter that evolved between the Hebrew poets and Arabic poetry. Hebrew poetry, whose origins lie in the Old Testament, never ceased to develop, even long after the Book of Books had been completed. However, prior to this period in Hispanic Jewish history, the Hebrew poets focused mainly on liturgical poetry that centered upon praise of the Almighty, and the power that He had to rescue the People from its troubles.¹⁰

The encounter with Arabic secular poetry proved to be an inspiration to Hebrew poets and a wellspring of innovative creativity. Liturgical Hebrew poetry was still being written in Spain but at the same time –after a thousand years of silence on these matters a new stream of poetry emerged that focused upon the individual and his life-cycle; a genre that came to be known as secular or non-liturgical poetry, reflecting the

⁹ See Schirmann and Fleisher 1995, 129-43; Sáenz Badillos 1980, 1986; Arie Schippers, 1997, 2003; Drory.

¹⁰ See Fleischer; Hazan.

ordinary lives of the people. It included songs of love and wine, of mourning for the dead, of praise for generous donors, or pleadings over the troubled state of man whose life is so short –and other motifs reflecting the human condition.

In his description of Andalusian poetry, Henry Pères wrote: “The Andalusians love poetry in itself for its rhythm which springs from the lips and because here, the ‘spoken word’ is music before it is ideas” (Pères 68). The concept of poetry as an artistic fabric composed of sounds, rhythms and agreed combinations of words was integral to Andalusian poetry. In both the Arabic and the Hebrew poems, emphasis was placed upon the design of the prosody and the poetic embellishments. Poets were expected to compose their verses in accordance with a set of conventions relating to thematic categories, and competed against each other over who could come up with the more brilliant development of rhetorical elements, word play and images drawn from familiar and accepted motifs.¹¹

According to T. S. Eliot, the principal purpose of poetry is to cause pleasure. Andalusian poetry lived up to this basic criterion honorably. The pleasure that it gave its audience arose from the combination of the familiar with variations upon it. The pleasure that we derive from the familiar has deep psychological roots and takes us back to the very origins of literature, when the artists would appear before the community and tell the same tale over and over again, narrating and acting out the well-known story.¹²

In Andalusian poetry, the familiar was expressed through conventional and agreed motifs, through a given and expected set of images pertaining to every genre, and through established rhythms (where even changes in meter were never allowed to interfere with the familiar flow of the poem or to upset the monotony characteristic of the genre). Variations were introduced through play on biblical allusions, the development of figurative ornaments and rhetorical and imagist virtuosity on the part of the individual poet. These poets, who were fully versed in the Hebrew language and its literature, displayed linguistic brilliance in their creative exploration of its treasures.

The conventional motifs to a large extent determined the framework for the specific theme. Thus, for example, the beloved in Andalusian poetry could not be described as anything other than a beautiful woman (‘the light in the firmament’ for example), as a source of pleasure and delight, but also as cruel, lethal, captivating etc. Of course, there was no place for description of emotions –either of the love object or of the first-person self in the poem: he was confined to expressing admiration for her beauty. At the most, he could describe a hedonistic moment, or alternatively describe

¹¹ The phenomenon of Hebrew poetry in Spain applying the poetic norms and standards of contemporary Arabic Andalusian poetry has been discussed by many scholars. See Yellin; Schirmann; Pagis 1976; Sáenz Badillos and Targarona Borrás 1988, 9-22.

¹² This psychological trait lies behind the tradition dating back to ancient societies of the whole tribe gathering to listen to its story-teller tell the same tale over and over again, a tradition out of which emerged over time the familiar tales of mythology. The same trait is to be found in children who look forward to hearing the same story told in the exact same words over and over again.

the form of suffering to which he was subjected: that he was love-stricken, dying for his beloved, a slave, a captive to his love.¹³

Even in eulogizing the dead, the poet was confined to conventional form, content and description, and if he sought to praise a man –be it an eminent personality or a valued friend– he could do so naming only a limited number of qualities which he might attribute to him: while he might speak of his wisdom, his courage, his loyalty and his leadership or praise his brilliance in writing, he was not permitted to step beyond this schematic circle and express admiration for any other quality that might more aptly apply to the personality of the individual.¹⁴

When the Hebrew poets came upon the highly developed Arab secular poetry, they looked upon it as a model to be emulated and based their own works on the poetic principles that had evolved in this Arabic poetry over so many years: the metric genres, the conventional motifs of each genre, the structures, the meters etc. They accepted the conventional restrictions that characterized Arabic poetry, which was divided into thematic genres and required that the poet abide by certain set motifs and anticipated images for each genre.

The following examples illustrate this point: A poem by the Arab poet, Abu Tammām depicts the lover whose suffering prevents him from sleeping: “You have kept the pleasure of sleep from my eyes” (466). The lover’s sleep is also stolen from him in a poem by the Hebrew poet Shmuel Hanagid: “[The beloved ones] have stolen my sleep” (1: 303, no. 178). The eyes of the gazelle are spears, and the lover must plead with him and ask him for mercy. Thus in Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi: “O you who torture me, have consideration for a tortured heart!” (81). And Shmuel Hanagid: “For whom have the eyes of gazelles sharpened a sword, for whom? Slowly, go slowly, sustain my heart and have mercy” (1: 308, no.191). The beloved woman is compared to the sun and her hair is compared to night. Thus, for example, in a poem by the Arab poet Ibn al-Kattānī: “If I seek the morning, your cheek will be my light / If I seek the night / -in your hair which is blacker than black” (Ibn al-Kattānī 125). And Yehuda Ha-Levi: “The sun is in your face, and you spread out the night / Over its glory in the thickness of your locks” (“What is the matter with you, O gazelle?” (54-59, vv. 39-40). These quotations show the obvious similarities between the works of Hebrew poets and Arabic poetry.¹⁵

However, while the Arab poets used literary Arabic –the language of the Qur’an– the Hebrew poets wrote in the language of the Bible. And so, while we find many similarities in the conventional motifs and form, as determined in Arabic poetry, a great measure of originality is to be found in the Hebrew poems, particularly in images taken from the Bible and allusions that draw the reader to threads of association

¹³ On Andalusian love poetry see Pagis 1976, 253-80; Levin 2: 287-434.

¹⁴ While there have been some isolated exceptions to this rule, through the centuries of the flourishing of Andalusian poetry, the tradition of remaining within the bounds of conventional themes was broken only very occasionally.

¹⁵ See additional examples in Levin 1995, 287-434; Ratzaby 27-76.

stemming from the biblical world. In many cases the combination of conventional motifs with biblical images takes the form of word-play. But in others, the biblical allusion enriches, deepens and adds shades of color to the poem; the poets sometimes went so far as to alter the very nature of the convention as we will go on to demonstrate in discussing the poems of Shlomo Ibn Gabirol (Schirman 1960, 31-34; Schirman and Fleischer 1995, 47-54).

The Hebrew literary and scholarly work of the Christian era also reflects the attitude of openness to the surrounding cultures that characterized Spanish Jewry, an attitude that is evident in the books on Jewish philosophy and interpretation of the Kabbalah, in the fact that mixed teams of Jewish, Christian and Muslim translators worked together, cooperating on scientific projects, and in the Hebrew literature of the time.

And just as we find wonderful linguistic combinations of biblical language with elements that have their roots in Arabic poetry in the Hebrew poetic works of the Muslim era –the Andalusian period– in the Hebrew poetry written in Christian Spain in biblical language, we find combinations of Jewish elements, motifs and forms originating in Andalusian poetry, poetic traits originating in Spanish Christian poetry, and even motifs originating in Provençal poetry that reached Spain through the troubadours.

Thus for centuries, the poetry of Spanish Jewry, while written in biblical language, reflected contacts with the broad spectrum of literary genres that had evolved in Medieval Spain.¹⁶ At the same time it pursued a unique style of its own due to the special qualities of Biblical Hebrew. The following are some examples.

IV Lyrical Poetry in the Framework of Conventional Poetry

Yehuda Halevi,¹⁷ who won fame and acceptance in his day, and who is widely known also in the annals of general literature, and indeed became something of a myth in the collective memory of the Jews through the generations, illustrates the special status of Hebrew poetry in Spain, as a bridge between the Hebrew Bible and the many forms of Medieval Spanish literature. His prolific works include hundreds of poems based on the poetic norms of Arabic poetry, yet written in Biblical Hebrew and drawing their associations from the biblical world.

It is interesting to note that he won the accolade of “National Poet” for all the generations of Jewish culture and is regarded as the ultimate representative of the collective Jewish psyche.¹⁸ However, as a great and original poet, while keeping

¹⁶ See for example Menéndez Pidal; López Estrada 1974, 1978; Alvar and Gómez Moreno.

¹⁷ Yehuda Halevi was born in Tudela, North Spain, around 1075. He left Spain towards Jerusalem in 1140 and died in 1141. On Yehuda Halevi, see Schirman and Fleischer 1995, 421-80; Doron 1985; Sáenz Badillos, Targarona Borrás and Doron.

¹⁸ See, for example, the introductions to Luzzatto 1840 and Luzzatto 1864; Wolfsberg; Yellin 1941; Schirman 1955, 457-66; Yahalom; Doron 1980, 457-66.

within the framework of conventional literature, he produced lyrical poems of a remarkable personal nature. These are poems that express the individual spiritual experience of the poet: his decision to set out for Jerusalem, for the national and historic home of the Jews, leaving behind for good his physical homeland, Spain and the landscapes of his childhood, and abandoning his family, his many friends and his students.¹⁹

In a special group of poems Yehuda Halevi expresses his personal feelings and his yearning for Jerusalem not only as the national, religious and historic homeland or as an abstract concept, but rather as a real place for which he longs, as though it was embedded in his personal memory. He compares this distant homeland which he has never seen to the beloved, from whom he cannot bear to be separated by distance. He expresses the longings that fill his soul for the beloved land, seeking images to hang on to and tries to imagine the landscapes of the holy land, its hills and its forests.

Just like a lover who conjures up in imagination the moment of his meeting with his beloved, the poet conjures up the moment of his encounter with Zion. To this end he refers by name to places from the Bible that are lodged in the collective memory, linking them to descriptions of what he envisages will happen to him, once he reaches the longed-for destination: “I would walk in your forests and meadows stop In Gilead, marvel at Mount Avail” (Schirmann 1: 485-89, vv. 27-28).²⁰

Through the technique of linking up verbs in the first-person mode with reference to locations which have assumed a special significance in the Jewish consciousness –such as Beth-El, Mt. Avarim, Gilead– the poet has created a tangible image. The expressions of emotions of the individual associated with places of significance in the communal memory, take historic concepts out of their abstract contexts, breathing into them a spirit of life.²¹ Attempts to illustrate the abstract are even more remarkable against the background of Andalusian Muslim poetry: the motif of yearning from the West for the distant East appeared in Muslim Arabic-Andalusian poetry long before Yehuda Halevi, though of course in a different context: the Caliph Abd ar-Rahman, who was expelled from Syria and made his way to Andalusia, expressed his yearnings for his homeland in the poems that he wrote: looking at the palm-tree in the Mosque in Cordoba, he attributes to it the same feeling of alienation that is sensed by the exile from his country, a sense that it is isolated and a stranger in the West, remote from the Land of the Palms in the East. The exiled king shows in his poetry that the memory of his homeland is deeply rooted in his entire being as he conveys to us the anguish suffered by one who is cut off from the familiar scenes of his home. However, unlike the king, Yehuda Halevi, who was born and bred in Spain, never felt like a stranger in al-Andalus: Spain was his mother country and he was tied to it with his entire being

¹⁹ Some scholars consider the personal, philosophical and emotional migration of Yehuda ha-Levi as an act of pilgrimage. See Scheindlin 2008.

²⁰ The English version of “Ode to Zion” quoted here is by Carmi 347-49. Translation of the poem to Spanish is included in Sáenz Badillos, Targarona Borrás, and Doron 425-29.

²¹ For a discussion of this descriptive style, see Pagis 1970, 64-86.

and all his senses. When he wrote of his yearning for the East, it was a striving for an abstract concept –a land as yet unknown to him. But Abd ar-Rahman actually remembers the landscapes of the East where he was born, unlike Yehuda Halevi, who conjures up in his imagination the East, which he has never seen. Abd ar-Rahman speaks of his yearning in the mood of mourning for what has been and is no more, whereas Yehuda Halevi speaks of the East in concepts of the future and of hope.²²

This group of poems by Yehuda Halevi has come to be universally accepted by generation after generation, due to the original and powerful expression of a personal experience (Fleischer 471 ff; Doron 1986). The question that arises is how did Yehuda Halevi come to compose lyric poetry expressing the thoughts of one individual, while yet remaining within the framework of the conventional poetry of the day. The answer is to be found in his extraordinary talent for breaking down boundaries of genres and using motifs from different genres in the same poem. One may discern groups of conventional motifs which generally belong to separate thematic genres but which, in the poem “Ode to Zion,” are combined in a single poetic fabric. We find images that generally pertain to the genre of the dirge, such as standing by the graveside: “As I stood by my ancestors’ graves” (v. 25), and mental agony portrayed in physical descriptions: “Walk naked and barefoot” (v. 33) “I shall cut off my glorious hair and throw it away” (v. 37).

Elsewhere we find a complaint against time –which in this era was typical of contemplative lamentation “I shall curse Time” (vv. 37-38). From the accepted motifs of hedonist Andalusian love poetry, we find images such as descriptions of “the attitude of the poet” who appears in this poem as a captive, one given to weeping, as ‘the slain’ and other images reminiscent of the attitude of the “suffering suitor” in Andalusian love poetry. He sees himself as captive and he weeps profusely: “Sheds his tears” (v. 5) and of course: “I would carry the pieces of my broken heart” (v. 22).

Additionally, one may discern poetic elements that fall into the category of ‘Extolling the Place’ (*al-fada’i*), which evolved in Arabic literature and assumed a particularly important role in the literature of Andalusia in its struggle against the centers of the East (Baghdad and Damascus). What we have here is praise of Andalusia: of its good air, its rich soil, the sweet water (Pères 49-62, 121-62). And in “Ode to Zion:” “The air of your land is / the very life of the soul, the grains of your dust are flowing myrrh, your / rivers are honey from the comb” (vv. 31-32). We also find in the poetry of Yehuda Halevi descriptions of the qualities of a place stemming from sacred associations, as was the convention in this literary genre: “I would pour out my life in the very / Place where once the spirit of God was poured out upon your chosen ones / You are the seat of royalty, you are the throne of the Lord” (vv. 15-17).

In analyzing this poem for the ways in which it incorporates elements from different genres, we find in it elements that conventionally pertain to different genres that were generally remote from each other, such as motifs from the genre of courtship

²² For a comparative study between the motif of yearning in Andalusian Moslem poetry and in Yehuda Halevi’s Poetry, see Barkai and Doron, 1981.

poetry together with conventional elements from the dirge category. These elements do not appear in ‘closed’ and separate verses but seem to mingle with each other. For example: Verse 5 refers to ‘the captive of desire’ (courtship) and verses 5 and 6 speak of the self in the poem weeping in his grief. Verse 7 speaks of love: “My heart longs” (v. 5) and “I would love your stones” (v. 24), while the following verse (v. 25) describes standing at the graveside. Through the new context in which the conventional expressions are set, far removed from their original context, they simultaneously trigger different, sometimes even contrary, associations. Thus, for any reader familiar with the conventions of poetry (whether through conscious knowledge or through a less formal acquaintance with the poetry of the age), encounter with the text engenders a complex reaction.²³

V. The Dynamics of the Poet’s Attitude in Hebrew Poetry. Between Convention and Biblical Allusion

The attitude of the self in a poem generally plays a central role in the poetic fabric. In the Andalusian love poems, the attitude of the poet is formed through the anticipated stylistic motifs of the Arabic genre –a thematic genre. However, in the Hebrew poetry that was written in medieval Spain on the pattern of Arabic poetry, the attitude of the narrator is largely determined by the biblical language in which it is written. It is enriched and diversified by it, due to the biblical allusions and the connotational strata that they draw to the text. Thus, while the poet’s attitude in the Hebrew poetry of medieval Spain is based upon the Andalusian conventions, the character of the poetry is determined largely by its biblical language, which influences the deeper meaning of the poems.

Let us consider in some detail two examples of the riveting literary manifestation evident in medieval Spanish Hebrew poetry that we will call the *dynamics in the attitude of the poet*, which both links the conventions to the biblical allusions and moves between them. The examples to be presented here come from the two entirely different categories of poetry: on the one hand, there is the poem “What has become of Abigail” which belongs to the category of the schematic love poem; at the other extreme, the poem “I am the man” which belongs to the genre of poems of lament on the one hand and poems of self-aggrandizement on the other, in which some space is allotted –however narrow it may be– to biographical elements relating to the poet himself.

²³ See Sáenz Badillos, Targarona Borrás and Doron 411-22.

“What has become of Abigail” as a Reflection of the Tension between Convention and Allusion in Love Poems

In Andalusian love poems the attitude of the poet, which is formulated by the anticipated and stylized Arab motifs of the thematic genre, we find a set order of hierarchy, at the head of which there is the object of devotion, and at its lower end the poet –the would-be suitor. He is submissive, enslaved, a captive etc. and the convention would have it that the lover meekly accepts his inferior status and even rejoices in it. The poet Ibn Hazm, in his theoretical poetic book *The Ring of the Dove*, devotes an entire section to the subservient and humiliated stance of the lover (Levin 335). In the words of the famous poet al-Mutanabbi: “There is no desirer who will not humiliate himself and surrender” (2). This poet’s stance is, of course, a conventional component of the schematic poems, in which we will find not the slightest hint of any autobiographical element: they represent the typical attitude of a given type of character.

A study of the love poems of Shlomo Ibn Gabirol leads to the conclusion that the position adopted by the poet incorporates both compliance with the requirements of the convention of the genre and a marked tension arising from the interweaving of biblical allusion in the descriptive fabric of the poem.

Thus, for example, in the poem “What has become of Abigail,”²⁴ the poet, following the convention, says of the beloved that she first “took my soul and then forsook it.” His stance, that of the forsaken, is described as follows: his beloved has rejected him, because of the slanders of ‘all her suitors’ who seem to have sparked a dispute among them, and she has forgotten him –“forgotten my affection”. The poet –true to the convention– meekly accepts the humiliation and promises that he, for his part, will never forget his beloved and will seek her out in person.

On first reading, it might appear that the attitude of the poet is expressed in accordance with the accepted convention: he has been forsaken and rejected, humiliated and defeated. But an analysis of the expressions that relate to the poet-self in the poem, and of the biblical allusions interwoven in the text, throws a rather different light upon the stance of the speaker.

When he uses the expression “took my soul” (v. 2), he breaks away from the conventional poetic attitude, by implying a parallel between himself and great and outstanding individuals in the Hebrew canon, through the use of biblical language and allusion.

The combination of the words ‘took’ with ‘my soul,’ appears in the Bible and is attributed to King David and the Prophets: “Thou layest in wait *for my soul to take it*” –these are the words of David (I Samuel 24:12) and in Psalm 31, which begins: “For

²⁴ The English version of “What has become of Abigail” quoted here is by Carmi (312). The title given by Carmi to his translation of the poem is “The offering of love.” Translation of the poem into Spanish is included in Cano (310, no. 238).

the Leader: a Psalm of David” –“They devised *to take away my life*” (v. 14) and in the words of the Prophet Jonah: “*To take away my soul*” (Jonah 4:4)

Now let us turn to the words of the Prophet Elijah: “...and said: It is enough; now, O Lord, *take away my life*” (I Kings 19:4) (emphasis mine) and further on, in v. 10 of the same chapter: “And he said: I have been very jealous of the Lord, The God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left and they seek my life, to take it away.”

In the poem we find another departure from the traditional poet’s attitude when he says: “I shall keep love’s pact” (v. 7). The combination of ‘keep’ and ‘pact’ appears in the Bible, but there, of course, it relates to the Almighty: He is “the faithful God who keepeth covenant and mercy with them” (Deuteronomy 7:9).²⁵

Further to these expressions, we can see other parallels arising out of the biblical allusions. The poet declares: “The son of Jesse sent messengers to Abigail’s house; but I shall go to her in person, not by proxy” (vv. 8-10). Here the son of Jesse is, of course, is none other than David, King of Israel, who was the son of Jesse, and who sent messengers to Abigail. Through this affirmation by the speaker in the poem, he implies a parallel between himself and King David.

We find another expression that elevates the status of the poet in the last verse of the poem: “Then I shall slaughter whole offerings and sacrifices to this woman” –for it was common knowledge that, in Biblical times, only priests of the caste of Cohen were entitled to make sacrifices.

Thus, we have seen that the combination of biblical associative connotations with the stylized motifs of the genre enables the reader to understand the poet’s stance in the poem as both a specific attitude and its reverse. In the conventional presentation, the poet –the narrator in the poem– feels abandoned, rejected, humiliated and defeated. However, in the context of the biblical allusions, he implies a status comparable to that of a Prophet and of a Cohen, of a king and even God. In similar fashion, the poet toys with formulating the stance of the poet in other love poems. It would seem to be no coincidence that Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, whose singular self-perception is so influential in the entire body of his poetic work, felt uncomfortable in the position of inferiority, required from him by the agreed conventions of the genre, and sought his own way to modify it and to interweave it with a stance of superiority –and this he does through the introduction of biblical allusion.

²⁵ Only when this word combination appears in a negative connotation, as in “did *not* keep the covenant,t” does it apply to mortals. “They kept not the covenant of God” (Psalms 78.10).

“I am the Man” as a Reflection of the Tension between Convention and Allusion in the Poetry of Self-Praise

The poem “I am the Man”²⁶ opens with words of self-aggrandizement: “I am the man who...” –this expression is equivalent to the Arabic *ana rajulu anna* and this phrase was a conventional characteristic stance of self-aggrandizement. The poet’s words of self-praise are intertwined with a declaration of his deep aspiration for wisdom, another motif that complies with the convention (‘the son of wisdom,’ ‘the father of wisdom,’ etc). But a complaint is implicit in the self-praise; the poet who takes pride in having chosen wisdom and knows that he will certainly attain it, describes himself thus: “I am the man who harnessed his spirit / And will not rest with his promise unkept” (vv. 1-2); “From earliest youth he held to wisdom– / though tried seven times in the furnace of fate” (vv. 5-6) –but his path is strewn with obstacles which fate (time) has placed in his way.

In a first reading, basing ourselves solely on the convention that a poem is composed of different parts, some of which do not necessarily contribute to its overall meaning, conventional motifs from the genres of poems of self-aggrandizement and lament. The poet’s attitude remains static and the poem ends with the stanza: “As a soldier in battle has his sword destroyed / and falters as he runs, then stumbles –so is man who is hounded by struggle / though Venus be home to his shrine.”

Reading the poem on the basis of conventional characteristics alone, its final verses appear to fulfill the conventional role only –in terms of their general schematic sentences alone– and the ending would appear to have no connection to the thematic development of the poem, or to add any particular meaning. However, in second or alternative and more profound reading, we suggest that, through biblical allusion, the concluding verses of the poem should be seen as an important and integral part of the lyrical course of the poem, and *not* as some disconnected afterthought. By an alternative reading, I refer to the definition suggested by Joseph Margolis, which discusses the validity of different interpretations of the same work of art. He maintains that widely different hypotheses concerning the same work of art, hypotheses that are not identical and do not even relate to each other, may be perfectly legitimate interpretations. However, he makes a distinction between what he calls “more or less acceptable” interpretations rather than “correct or incorrect” ones. In this context, he points out that, when one determines that proposition A is correct, then the reverse must not necessarily be incorrect. Namely, that the reverse of proposition A may also be acceptable. However, if one determines that A is “reasonable,” then the reverse of A may also be reasonable.²⁷ If we accept the theory advanced by Margolis we can

²⁶ The English version of “I am the Man” quoted here is by Cole (97). See also the Spanish translation of Cano (196, no. 99).

²⁷ Reuven Tzur suggests a distinction between “two different qualities which the reader can grasp –in alternative readings– of the very same description” because “even a single description may leave room for two ways of cooperation by the reader, both of which are legitimate” (7).

apply the two alternative readings to the personal poems of Ibn Gabirol in general, and to his poem "I am the Man" in particular. The first is the conventional interpretation: this reading illuminates the text on the basis of the expected convention in the conventional genres; the self-aggrandizement, the lament, or a combination of the two.

In an alternative reading, then, we suggest the poem should be read as a unity, all of the elements of which are thus given an alternative role. In this way they integrate in the progression of the flow of the poem, and this brings us to a description of the dynamics of the poet's attitude. In this reading, all the metaphorical elements which touch upon the concept of time and its hardships, that is to say, the descriptions of the forces that encumber man, signify a metaphor for spiritual forces: Time (the customary image in Medieval Arab and Hebrew poetry is of time as an allegory for cruel fate) and its kin, the Misfortunes, are customary images for mythological external forces that impede the path of man. They, and certainly the awe that they inspire, are –according to our understanding of this profound text– inner spiritual and psychological forces that are connected with the weaknesses of the flesh, with fear and doubt and so on. The elements of nature in the image of the night storm also metaphorically represent the different parts of the soul: from the forces of light that are close to the intellectual "self" to the forces of darkness that are remote from it.

According to this reading, then, in "I am the Man" we have a description of a lyrical progression that evolves from the attitude of the narrator (self), who takes pride in and declares his total commitment to his purpose, and describes the clashes between the conflicting elements in his own personality, culminating in the narrator's dejection or defeat as the poem ends.

The unifying thread that runs through the entire poem, according to this reading, is the pain of realization of man's frailties stemming from the weaknesses of man as a creature of the flesh. In his well-known philosophical poem "Kingdom's Crown," the poet expresses how profoundly he is torn: "And temptation stands, an obstruction, beside me / and keeps me from measured breath and repose" (Canto 36, vv. 10-11).

In the poem "I am the Man", we have a description of a complex interaction of forces in the poet's inner world: the intellectual-self: the 'self' who "held to wisdom –though tried seven times in the furnace of fate" (v. 3), who "seeking the limits of wisdom and discipline" (v. 5), interacts with an element that is portrayed in the poem as the source of light and a guide–; the moon: "the moon [...] as it led me along discernment's sphere, teaching me by its light and direction" (v. 12-13), i.e. the moon is both the light and the master. The elements of the 'self' of human weakness, the elements of lust and of the flesh and of "even as destiny hemmed him in" (v. 11), which place obstacles before the intellectual, the philosophical 'self' (portrayed by the images of "time" and "misfortune"), and the elements of nature which are portrayed in "the night put on its mail of gloom" (v. 43) (heavy black clouds that overshadow the light), and "the ravens of darkness" (v. 49).

The 'poetic self' is aware of the inner forces that hinder the possibilities of realizing the striving of the 'intellectual self.' In the poem, the 'poetic self' describes

the poet's fear of the intellectual aspect of his personality being overwhelmed by the other aspects of his 'self,' for then he would be confined –with them– to darkness. Therein lies the terror of the situation: "Then the Lord closed in on my thoughts / Blocking my heart's desire inside it / Holding my heart in cords of darkness" (vv. 50-52). And, indeed, at the end of the poem the narrator complains of his detachment from his interior intellectual element. "I no longer hope for the moon, my friend / Which thickest dark has replaced" (vv. 54-55). The narrator –who at the opening of the poem was identified with his 'intellectual self' ("I am the man [...] who held to wisdom")– by the end of it identifies with the parts of his soul that were torn away from their ties to the 'intellectual self' and is steeped with them in darkness.

The poet's attitude at the end of the poem, which appears to go against the convention, and is surprising in terms of it (for in a stylized poem of self-praise, there is no room for dynamics in the poet's attitude and certainly not for any spiritual process building up to a declaration of defeat), may be understood in terms of the biblical allusion that is structured into its very fabric:

A) By way of a series of allusions, the reader's mind is drawn to the following passage from Lamentations: "I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath / He hath led me and brought me into darkness. / But not into light [...] He hath builded against me and compassed me with gall and travail [...] He hath enclosed my ways" (Lamentations 3:7-9)

The opening phrase of the poem: "I am the man who" is clearly, as aforesaid, based upon the Arabic phrase: "*Ana rajulu anna.*" In the commentaries on the verse from Lamentations, the phrase "I am the man who has seen affliction" is interpreted to mean "I am the man who has known and has suffered agony." This phrase brings us back to the alternative reading of the poem –to conceiving it in terms of the biblical allusions, to the verses from Lamentations that are echoed at the end of the poem: "Then the Lord closed in on my thoughts" (v. 50), "He hath hedged me [...] He hath enclosed my ways" (Lamentations 3.7-9) "holding my heart in cords of darkness [...] and taken its light away from me" ("I am the Man," vv. 53-57); "He hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light," "He hath set me in dark places" (Lamentations 3:2, v. 6), "He shall be afflicted by hardships" ("I am the Man," v. 28), "He hath builded against me and compassed me with gall and travail" (Lamentations 3:5).

B) The poem opens with the affirmation "I am the man who harnessed his spirit" echoing God's reply to Job "Gird thy loins like a man" and this is the key motif in the poem. The awareness of the 'self' of the hardships facing him is expressed in the sentence: "And know, my friends, I've feared what was coming, / And nothing comes that fear doesn't bring" (vv. 24-25), which is reminiscent of the phrase in Job "and that which I was afraid of is come into me" (Job 3:25) and in the same chapter: "Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in?" (Job 3:23).

The deeper format is thus suggested already at the beginning of the poem through the biblical allusions. This format is also reflected in the rhetorical pattern, where the

conclusion of the poem comes as a response to the opening in a circular format. In the opening we find: "I am the man who harnessed his spirit / And will not rest with his promise unkept" (vv. 1-2). And at its ending we have: "As a soldier in battle has his sword destroyed / And falters as he runs, then stumbles" (vv. 60-61).

Again, in the opening we have: "As misfortune burned [...] even as destiny hemmed him in –seeking the limits of wisdom and discipline" (vv. 10-11). And at the ending: "As a soldier in battle has his sword destroyed / And falters as he runs, then stumbles, so is man who is hounded by struggle, / Though Venus be home to his shrine" (vv. 60-63).

From the above we learn that all the verses of the poem –right down to the last line– are a lyrical expression of the narrator's inner experience; the poem begins almost in an attitude of pride; then we are led along the paths of the poet's intense inner struggles until at last he concludes with a sense of spiritual defeat. Beardsley maintains that there are three general criteria which may be applied in any positive evaluation of a work of art; unity, complexity and intense human quality (Beardsley and Monrow). In the alternative reading, we find that the poem does indeed meet these criteria; it is conceived as an artistic unity; it flows as a lyrical progression; the cycle format, in which the ending echoes and responds to the opening, is a further aspect of that unity. Furthermore, the poem does not end with the conventional empty phrases, but rather as the culmination of its lyrical progression.

In conclusion, in discussing examples from two diametrically opposite extremes in Medieval Spanish poetry, Hispanic-Hebrew poetry written in biblical language displays a palpable tension between the literary conventions and the biblical allusions. Although the attitude of the poet is shaped by Andalusian conventions, Hebrew poetry is enriched and diversified by the biblical language which enhances its dynamism and profundity. The poetic fabric acquires additional meanings through the biblical allusion.

VI. The Image of the Beloved between Hedonism and 'Fin Amor'

Thirteenth-century Toledo, the capital of Castile, stands out on the map of intellectual history for its cultural achievements. The royal court of King Alfonso X the Wise served as a cosmopolitan cultural center, where scholars and poets of different religions and nations gathered. Muslims, Christians and Jews collaborated in the sciences and in cultural enterprises and literary trends emerged that cross boundaries of tradition and language.

One of the most prominent personages at the court of Alfonso the Wise was the Hebrew poet Todros Halevi Abulafia, born in 1247 in Toledo, where he lived throughout his life. He worked as a tax collector in the service of the king and was among the close circle of the Catholic monarch.²⁸ A famous poet, he was part of the

²⁸ On the life of Todros Abulafia see Baer 1937; Schirmann 2: 413-18; Targarona Borrás; Doron 1989a; Schirmann and Fleischer 1997, 366-424.

cultural court at the palace and was familiar with all the literary genres of contemporary Spain. In his work one may discern poetic elements that are remarkable innovations in Hebrew poetry, aspects reminiscent of characteristics that were evolving in the literatures of the contemporary general society.²⁹ I refer here to the crossover between sacred and profane poetry and the use of a combination of “low” and “high” register language³⁰. The poet devoted particular attention to the concept of love and incorporated into his poems hedonistic motifs originating in Andalusian poetry³¹ and motifs typical of Troubadour poetry,³² above all the concept of *fin amor*.³³

Breaches of the traditional division between poetic domains, between liturgical and secular poetry are characteristic of Abulafia’s works. In his love poems –by way of contrast to poems that are dominated by concrete trends written in the “low” linguistic register– we find that the “high” register dominates over the “low” motifs. Phrases that are associated with hedonistic love poetry are harnessed in Todros’ poetry to a trend of Troubadouresque *fin amor*.

Let us consider one poem as an example. In “When I was Still Unwise,”³⁴ the speaker describes a hedonistic moment, as in the following example: “My heart ran [...] and it loved damsels / To seek fleshly desire was its only will” (vv. 1-3). However, the descriptions of desire are given from a perspective of critical observation, whereas in Andalusian love poetry they appear as the *supreme purpose* of the speaker.

The hedonistic moment, which in Andalusian love poetry is connected to nectar, achievement, and pleasantness, is presented in Todros’ poem as negative: “Desire alone was his only will” (v. 3). And as: “The evil of my acts” (v. 6). The element of self-criticism is conveyed through de-familiarization. The speaker in the poem is described from the distance of time: “When I was still [...] / in the age of youth” (vv. 1-2), and from the distance of moral judgment: “And did not distinguish between base and precious” (v. 4). And also from the distance of non-identification by employing the third person rather than the first: “Thought my heart” (v. 6), “My heart ran to every beauty” (v. 1), “For desire was its only will” (v. 3), “[It] did not distinguish between base and precious” (v. 4). Sensual pleasure per se, that appears in Andalusian love poetry in a positive context and with no spiritual meaning, is here given a different connotation; the poet affirms that he does not seek sensual contact: “And I would never think of touching her” (v. 15), “I seek not her desire for fleshly pleasure...” (v. 21), “A gazelle is she, and like the sun” (v. 9).

²⁹ See Doron 1986, 1988, 1989a, and 1999.

³⁰ See Doron 1989b and 1998.

³¹ About the characteristics of Andalusian love poetry, see *supra*.

³² On Troubadouresque Poetry see Menéndez Pidal; Lazar 1975; Riquer; Alvar, 1982, 1978; Alvar and Beltrán; Beltrán.

³³ See Lazar 1964.

³⁴ The Poem “When I was Still Unwise” is included in Todros Abulafia, ed. Yellin 2: 124-26.

In Todros' love poems, while they retain much of the Andalusia materials, we also find an expression of a love of a different nature –descriptions of the kind of spiritual relationship that are the hallmark of trobadouresque poetry: “And my soul is bound to the soul of a gazelle / More precious than Ursa and the Pleiades” (v. 8), “And she is always in my heart” (v. 13). The speaker combines these declarations with affirmation of the restraint in his attitude towards the beloved: “Her image in my heart is enough for me at time of thought” (v.18).

The poet speaks here of a spiritual relationship in which he strives for spiritual harmony: “I seek not her desire for fleshly pleasure, only for the pleasure of the soul” (v. 21); “And I would never think of touching her for what would my life be if I did [...] and it is enough for me to hear her pleasant speech” (v. 15). He implies, through the dialogue form, the knowledge that he cannot attain his beloved, and this is also expressed both directly and through dialogue with his environment: “For I knew the sea of honey and nectar in her mouth / And I will die of thirst” (st. 16).

As we have seen, this poem contains elements whose origin is in Andalusian hedonistic love poetry aimed at very simple women, and which are dominated by characteristics of troubadour poetry. The higher narrative that describes a position of sublime love dominates the lower narrative. The position of superior style employs ‘low’ expressions to serve its purpose.

In his love poems, Todros combines expressions and motifs drawn from the hedonistic love characteristic of Andalusian poetry with sublime motifs drawn from trobadouresque love poetry. The higher narrative that describes a position of sublime love dominates the lower narrative. The superior style employs ‘low’ expressions to serve its purpose. The Toledian poet cleverly juxtaposes two contradictory perceptions of the image of the beloved, two different attitudes to love, while also incorporating biblical images that contribute to the color and complexity of his unique poetic tapestry.

VI. Conclusion

In Hispano-Hebrew literature, we find reflected the literary processes that were evolving in medieval Spain. The Hebrew poets encountered the entire spectrum of literary genres that were being written in the languages of Iberia during eight centuries of inter-cultural dialogue and collaboration between individuals from the three cultures and, in their poems, interwove poetic principles of the literatures of the environment with the tones and connotations of biblical language.

During the Andalusian period, the encounter with Arabic secular poetry stimulated the Hebrew poets to a surge of innovative creativity in secular poems centered upon the individual. Basing their writings upon the conventional motifs of Arabic poetry, they enriched them with biblical allusion. Some of the poets found ways to break free of the restrictive rules of the schematic convention and wrote poems of an individual character. We find an outstanding example of this trend in the group of personal

poems by Shlomo Ibn Gabirol. Here he shows how a Hebrew poet, a neo-platonic philosopher could, in this unique category of poems, express his personal feelings, his aspirations and his perplexity as he seeks to attain wisdom. While confining himself to the conventional genres, he produced daring and original combinations of conventional motifs with biblical allusions, thereby attaining a high standard of expression of a highly personal and complex nature. Yehuda Halevi, who came to be known as the “national poet” in Jewish culture, is perceived as the outstanding representative of the collective psyche. In the framework of conventional literature, he produced a special group of lyrical poems in which he expresses his yearning for Jerusalem as a temporal, a real and concrete city, that he aspires to reach in person, not as one dreaming of the symbolic national, religious or historic homeland in the abstract sense. He compares this remote mother country which he has never seen to the beloved to whom he longs to return. These poems are composed of conventional elements with roots in the accepted genres, intertwined with new and original contexts that allow the poet to express his emotions in lyrical mode.

In Christian Spain, and in particular in Toledo, its capital, the Hebrew poets came face to face with Spanish Christian poetry in its various languages and nuances. In their works we find biblical motifs intertwined with poetic elements rooted in the various streams of world literature –even elements from the Provençal poetry that was brought to Spain by the troubadours– as can be discerned in the works of Todros Abulafia, an attendant at the cultural court of Alfonso X the Wise.

In Hispano-Hebrew poetry we thus find a reflection of its contacts with all the streams of literature that evolved in medieval Spain over centuries, with remarkable and original expressions of personal emotion, a poetic genre that may be regarded as a bridge between the Bible and medieval Iberian Literatures.

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