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The additional notes and comments, and the erudite introduction make his work a valuable contribution in the field of Hebrew Andalusian studies.

Amsterdam/Leiden, January 1994

A. SCHIPPERS

DIAZ ESTEBAN, F. — Abraham ibn Ezra y su tiempo. (Abraham ibn Ezra and his age), Actas del Simposio Internacional. Proceedings of the International Symposium, Madrid, Asociacion Española de Orientalistas, 1990 (24 cm, 400 + 8 ñms). ISBN 84-600-7500-1. 5189 PTS; $ 50.00; £ 27.00; 273 FF; DM 84.-.

This collection of papers consists of the proceedings of an international symposium which was held on the occasion of the ninth century of the birthday of Abraham ibn Ezra. Abraham ibn Ezra is one of the most remarkable persons of a period of transition of Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew scientific and grammatical literature. His birthday occurred just before the definitive arrival of the Almoravid dynasty in Muslim Spain when its leader, Yusuf ibn Tashshufin, deposed the petty kings (Malik al-Tawd’if) one after another in 1090-91. With the arrival of the Almoravids, Andalusian culture was cen­ sured by strictly orthodox Mâlkite fiqaha’ who constituted an intolerant regime and imposed a tight control of the free expression of ideas. Thus the blossoming of poetry at the various courts came to an end after the Almoravid took over, both for Arabic and Hebrew. The results of the Christian reconquista created a violent polarization between Jews and Muslims. The Almohad dynasty who invaded Muslim Spain subsequently in the second half of the twelfth century, belonged to an even more intolerant and fanatic sect of Islam. They tolerated neither Jews nor Christians within their empire. There were mass-conversions of Jews to Islam. Many Jewish intellectuals fled into Christian Spain where they formed a link between Islamic and Romance Christian culture, while others made their way to the more tolerant Muslim East. Yehudah hat-Lewi had left Spain for Palestine and Egypt, where he died in 1140. Maimonides and his family finally succeeded in leaving for Palestine and Egypt where they settled. Moses ibn Ezra already lived a life of exile in the Christian North (Saragossa), where he died c. 1138. Other exiles settled in Provence, where Hebrew rhymed prose literature in the style of the Arabs continued to flower along with Judeo-Arabic culture. Under Christian dominance Jewish scholars realized that the Arabic sphere of influence was waning and became aware of the fact that Judeo-Arabic was declining as a written means of communication. Hebrew could now take the place of Arabic as a written prose language. Scholars now hardly wrote their linguistic and other dissertations in Arabic, but in Hebrew since their hinterland now consisted not of Jews from an Arabic world but of those from Europe and Provence: in time Arabic would no longer be understood. The Christian rulers of Toledo used the Jews as translators: as bearers of Arabic culture they were indispensable for the translation of scientific Arabic texts into Latin.

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164), who was born in the Northern part of Spain in Tundela, when his town still belonged to the reign of the Banû Hûd, was well aware of the decline of Judeo-Arabic culture. He mourned the destruction of the Jewish communities of al-Andalus by the Almoravids in a long poem, chose for a wandering life and carried Andalusian Arabic and Jewish learning and literary taste to Christian Europe (Italy, France and England). As a poet he wrote more than 500 synagogal poems in which he introduced the popular schemes of muwashshahát strophic poetry. In his Hebrew version of the Arabic Ḥayy ibn Yaqzán, inspired by Avicenna, he describes a journey through the whole cosmos leading to the highest heavenly sphere. Among his works in Arabic and Hebrew are treatises dealing with grammatical questions, biblical commentaries, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and philosophy. His philosophy is essentially neo-Platonic, although it lacks a solid system.

The present collection of papers consists of an introductory article plus some 45 articles devoted to the phenomenon of Abraham ibn Ezra. It is impossible to go into the whole variety of subjects in the context of this short review. I would like to apologize for my subjective selection here which does not do justice to the bulk of the learned contributions, most of which are of outstanding quality. Therefore I would like to single out some of the articles. The last article in the Abraham ibn Ezra volume, written by Josef Yahalom (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), is entitled “The Poetics of Spanish Piyyut in Light of Abraham ibn Ezra’s Critique of its Pre-Spanish Precedents”. Yahalom describes how Abraham ibn Ezra during his stay in Rome, came into contact with the piyyuṭim of Eres Yisra’el, which constituted for him “a cultural clash which shook the poet to the depths of his soul” (p. 387). Because of his Spanish education he represented in Rome the aesthetic values of Arabic poetry as inherent to Hebrew poetry. His grammatical work Sefer Ṣahot [recently published by Del Valle Rodriguez, A.S.] composed in Mantua included a chapter on quantitative Hebrew Metrics in the Arabic style. He severely criticized piyyuṭim by Eleazar bi-Rabbi Qalîr [now usually called bi-rabbi Qilîr, A.S.] of the kind of the poem that begins ʾaḥ qoṣēs ben qoṣēs qeṣuṣay le-qoṣēs which sounded awful in his ears. In his comments on Ecclesiastes/Qohelet 5:1 he condemns the piyyuṭim forged by Eleazar bi-Rabbi Qalîr and his colleagues. They should have been better poets or become silent, as the wisdom in Ecclesiastes makes clear: “Do not be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter anything before God”. Then the author goes into further comments by Abraham ibn Ezra on defects of pre-Spanish piyyuṭim.

The article by Luis Vegas Montaner (Universidad Complutense, Madrid), entitled “El poema de Ajedrez de Abraham ibn Ezra” consists of a critical textual edition of the Chess poem by Abraham ibn Ezra. The popular game of chess was introduced into Europe by the Jews. It was often a forbidden game, only allowed by the religious authority on the condition that people did not play for money. There was
some doubt about the authorship of Abraham ibn Ezra of this
chess poem beginning with the verse ashore shir be-
mithamah arukkah (“I will make a poem with an arranged
battle”), but most sources attribute it to him. The rules of the
game then apparently were different from those of our time.
Apart from the textual edition he gives an introduction and
literal translation of the poem into Spanish.
Other articles are the following: Israel Levin (pp. 193-
198) gives a synoptical evaluation of the work of Abraham
ibn Ezra, stressing the necessity of an interdisciplinary
approach to medieval works like those of Abraham ibn
Ezra; in this respect he treats some philosophical poems in
the context of his philosophical writings. Moisés Orfali
deals (pp. 225-232) in his “Abraham ibn Ezra, crítico de los
Éxégetas de la Biblia” that Abraham ibn Ezra’s harsh and
severe criticisms are not to be interpreted as Spanish man-
erism, but as the Jewish counterpart of Arabic hija’ (in-
vective poetry). He presents some examples of Abraham ibn
Ezra’s criticisms on exegetes and grammarians, mentioning
also his comment on the Pentateuch in which figure the dif-
ferent categories of reprehensible exegetes. Uriel Simon, in
his article “Ibn Ezra’s harsh language and biting humor:
Real Denunciation or Hispanic Mannerism?” (pp. 325-334),
judges Abraham ibn Ezra’s harsh manner of expressing his
criticisms as typical for his time, one of the underlying fac-
tors being anxieties about negative doctrinal implication
deriving from mistakes in grammar (p. 229). In his article
entitled “La obra de Abraham ibn Ezra sobre las Críticas
contra Sa’adyah”, Angel Sáenz Badillos (pp. 287-294) deals
with the attitude of Abraham ibn Ezra to Sa’adya’s work. F.
Diaz-Esteban’s article (pp. 79-90) entitled “Abraham ibn
Ezra y el Sefer Ohkla we-Oklah” is a descriptive article
with many translated samples of the book. Of interest is also
Gérard Nahon’s article (pp. 217-224) about Abraham ibn
Ezra’s well-known elegy on the persecution of the Jews by
the Almohades.
Here to discuss and evaluate all the articles of this collec-
tion would take too much space. One is amazed of how
many specialists there are in this field, when one realizes
that not even all the specialists participated in the congress.
The collection is very useful as an introduction for the study
of the œuvre of one of the most interesting persons of
medieval Jewish culture. The character of most of the arti-
cles is descriptive and occasional, but that is what one would
expect of memorial conferences such as this one, which are
especially useful to stimulate these studies in the field.

Amsterdam/Leiden, February 1994

Arie Schippers


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EL-ENANY, Rasheed – Naguib Mahfouz. The Pursuit of
Meaning. London/New York, Routledge, 1993 (22 cm,
xvii, 271) = Arabic Thought and Culture. ISBN 0-414-

This is to date the most comprehensive literary study in
English of Najib Mahfouz by a single writer. Its author,
Rasheed El-Enany, is Lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies
at the University of Exeter where, in 1984, he wrote a Ph.D.
thesis entitled “Hadrat al-Muhtaram by Najib Mahfouz: a
Translation and Critical Assessment”. He later published the
novel translated and studied in his doctoral thesis as

The two major works in English on Mahfouz published
before the book under review have been Sassoon Somekh,
The Changing Rhythm: a Study of Najib Mahfouz Novels
(Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) and Mattityahu Peled, Religion,
My Own: the Literary Works of Najib Mahfouz (New
Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1983). They both deal with
Mahfouz’s works up to the late 1960s only, the former being
a perceptive analysis of the man’s novels with equal interest
in their form and content, the latter a good study of his
works concentrating more on the man’s meaning than on his
art.

Dr. El-Enany’s book does not only update the information
on Mahfouz to his latest novel, Qustumur (1988), and his
latest collection of short stories, Al-Fajr al-Kadhib (1989),
adding relevant data from his collected journalistic writings
recently edited in three books by Fathi al-Sabr (1990), but
he also makes good use of all the Arabic books and the
wealth of articles in English and Arabic on him published
before and after Mahfouz was awarded the 1988 Nobel Prize
in literature. Furthermore, Dr. El-Enany adopts an approach
in his study that preserves a reasonable balance between an
analytical pursuit of meaning and a keen interest in fictional
technique, expanding more elaborately on Mahfouz’s later
works of the 1970s and 1980s that have not had sufficient
critical study when compared with earlier ones which have
received abundant scholarly attention, but also paying spe-
cial care to some of his early books of the 1940s needing
reappraisal in his judgment. With a prolific writer like Mahfouz who has written thirty-
three novels, some two hundred short stories, and eight
plays, it is not an easy job to show the unity of the man’s
lifetime work. Dr. El-Enany has eschewed the familiar clas-
sification of Mahfouz’s works into four chronological phases:
historical, realistic, modernist, and traditional. He rather pre-
fers to examine Mahfouz’s works in groupings of units to
show his own understanding of the elements of coherence
and continuity in the man’s thought and aesthetic develop-
ment. And I believe he has succeeded in demonstrating that
there is a deep unity in Mahfouz’s œuvre.

In a very interesting chapter on Mahfouz’s life and envi-
ronment, Dr. El-Enany relates the novelist’s life to his writ-
ing by studying the local and the foreign influences on him.
He takes advantage of interviews with Mahfouz collected
and edited by Sabri Hafiz under the title of Athahaddath Haykum
(Beirut, 1977) and he makes good use of Mahfouz’s memoirs
edited by Jamal al-Ghaffar under the title of Najib Mahfouz:
Yatadhakkar (Beirut, 1980 and Cairo, 1987). Into the narra-
tive on Mahfouz’s life derived from these sources and others,
he weaves texts from Mahfouz’s fiction inspired by al-
Jamaliyya quarter in the old city of Cairo, where Mahfouz
was born and grew up, and by ´Abbásiyah, the suburban
Cairene quarter to which his family moved when he was
twelve, these two localities having had the deepest effect on
the novelist’s consciousness and art. Dr. El-Enany also fol-
lows Mahfouz’s education and intellectual development as an
adolescent and a young man, his career as a civil servant,
aspects of his private life at home and at the café with
friends, and the many cultural and political events of his
times. He traces the influence of all these elements on him
and shows in admirable detail how Mahfouz used them cre-
natively in his writings.