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Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164), who was born in the Northern part of Spain in Tudela, when his town still belonged to the reign of the Banū Hūd, 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 300 metaphorical poems in which he introduced the popular schemes of muwashshahāt strophic poetry. In his Hebrew version of the Arabic Ḥaway ibn Yagzan, 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 Piyut 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 pīyyūtim of Erez 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 Sahot [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 pīyyūtim by Eleazar bi-Rabbi Qallir [now usually called bi-rabbi Qilir, A.S.] of the kind of the poem that begins as qoṣes ben qoṣes qeṣṣay le-qaṣṣāy which sounded awful in his ears. In his comments on Ecclesiastes/Qohelet 5:1 he condemns the pīyyūtim forged by Eleazar bi-Rabbi Qallir 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”. Therefore the author goes into further comments by Abraham ibn Ezra on defects of pre-Spanish pīyyūtim.

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
judges Abraham ibn Ezra's harsh manner of expressing his name 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 Exégetas de la Biblia" that Abraham ibn Ezra's harsh and severe criticisms are not to be interpreted as Spanish manerism, 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 different 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 factors 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'adya", Ángel Sáenz Badillos (pp. 287-294) deals with the attitude of Abraham ibn Ezra to Sa'adya's work. F. Díaz-Esteban’s article (pp. 79-90) entitled "Abraham ibn Ezra y el Sefer Okhla 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 collection 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 oeuvre of one of the most interesting persons of medieval Jewish culture. The character of most of the articles 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


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 Respected Sir (London: Quartet Books, 1986).

The two major works in English on Mahfouz published before the book under review have been Sasson 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, Qustutmur (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-Ashiri (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 for 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 special 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 classification of Mahfouz's works into four chronological phases: historical, realistic, modernist, and traditional. He rather preferred 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 development. 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 environment, Dr. El-Enany relates the novelist's life to his writing 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 Asahaddath Haykam (Beirut, 1977) and he makes good use of Mahfouz's memoirs edited by Jamal el-Chitar under the title of Najib Mahfouz: Yatadikkar (Beirut, 1980 and Cairo, 1987). Into the narrative of 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 ‛Abbâsiyya, 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 follows 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 creatively in his writings.