Some remarks on Hebrew Andalusian and Arabic Elegies
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Some Remarks on Hebrew Andalusian and Arabic Elegies

INTRODUCTION

In Muslim Spain (al-Andalus) Jewish poets began to compose secular Hebrew poetry and inaugurated the “Golden Age of Hebrew Andalusian poetry” which reached its apogee in the eleventh century.¹

The Hebrew poets tried to demonstrate that Classical Hebrew had the same possibilities as Classical Arabic for composing poetry and used it for correspondence in courtly and rabbinic circles and among friends, and for panegyrics.

In the following we will try to show the dependence of the Hebrew Andalusian poets on their Arabic examples in the elegiac genre, mostly Eastern Arabic poets. In doing so we will use examples from the main poets of the Golden Age, namely Samuel ha-Nagid (993-1055),² Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021-1058)³ and Moses ibn Ezra (1055-1138).⁴ We will show how these poets in the expres-

1. A larger and more elaborate version of this lecture for a more general reading public (without original texts in Hebrew and Arabic) is: Arie Schippers, ‘Hebrew Andalusian Elegies and the Arabic Literary Tradition’ in J. M. Bremer, Th. P. van den Hout and R. Peters, Hidden Futures; Death and Immortality in Ancient Egypt, Anatolia, the Classical, Biblical and Arabic-Islamic World, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 1994, pp. 179-194. More information on the subject is also to be found in Arie Schippers, Arabic Tradition & Hebrew Innovation, Arabic Themes in Hebrew Andalusian Poetry (Amsterdam, dissertation Institute for Modern Near Eastern Studies 1988), 290-338 and Arie Schippers, Spanish Hebrew Poetry and the Arabic Literary Tradition, (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1994), 244-287.

2. Quotations from the poetry of Samuel han-Nagid according to the numbers of the poems: see Samuel han-Nagid [Shemuel Ibn Naghrila], Diwan (Ben Tehillim), Ed. Dov Yarden, (Jerusalem 1966).


4. Quotations from Moses [Moshe] Ibn Ezra according to the numbers of the poems: see
sion of their feelings about death and immortality made use of motifs and images borrowed from ancient Arabic poetic tradition and we will try to explain for what reason they did so. This does not imply that their feelings were not intense or serious enough. They just considered these Arabic themes and motifs, put into Classical Hebrew language, the best way to convey their feelings.

The themes and motifs of these elegies can be traced back to the sixth century poetry of the Arabian peninsula. Unlike the other poems, the elegiac poems did not begin with an amatory introduction. Instead it began with the following motifs: descriptions of weeping and crying; 'consolation' motifs i.e. sayings concerning the irreversibility of Fate, vide the transitoriness of earthly life and the perfidy and faithlessness of the World; the weeping over the grave and the poet's addressing the deceased person from whom he gets no answer. In the middle of the elegies we find the laudatory passages on the deceased and condolences directed to members of the family of the deceased among whom the poet's patron takes a prominent place. At the end we often find a formula of benediction for the grave: 'May a rain fall upon it!' Through the whole poem we find parallel structures, like internal rhyme, and repetition of the name of the deceased.

In order to show how the Hebrew Andalusian elegiac poetry is indebted to Arabic elegiac poetry I shall deal in the following with three motifs: the participation of the whole universe in the grief, the consolation motifs and the benediction formulas.

A. PARTICIPATION OF THE UNIVERSE IN THE GRIEF

In the elaboration of this Arabic elegiac motif one finds a cosmic "animism", which personifies as weeping entities sun and moon, stars, clouds, mountains, animals and the collectiveness of the world.

For instance, the pre-Islamic Arab poetess al-Khansa' weeps her brother saying:

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5. See Werner Caskel, Das Schicksal in der altarabischen Poesie, (Leipzig 1926).


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SOME REMARKS ON HEBREW ANDALUSIAN AND ARABIC ELEGIES
“The Face of the Sun is obscured because of his Death and the Moon is not in Harmony”.

And in an elegiac poem about his exile, the Arabic Andalusian poet Ibn 'Ammar takes a similar motif from his fellow poet Ibn Zaydun and extends it over several lines:

‘Do the clouds weep for anyone other than me? Are the clouds mourning for anyone other than me? Because of me the thunder has produced the scream of someone who wants revenge, and the lightning has shalen the blade of the word. The bright stars have clothed themselves with mourning garments for nobody other than me; only for me they are appearing at fun­eral meetings. Have the violent winds torn open their collars for anyone else but me? Or sighed like females fondling their young for anyone else but me?’

In his (Hebrew Andalusian) elegy Samuel han-Nagid, (poem no. 84) upon the son of rabbi Nissim, describes the participation of the universe in weeping in lines 5-6: it is as if common human beings do not know that heaven and its clouds are in distress because of his death, as are the crops in the field:

5. It is as if you [ungrateful human beings] did not know that heaven and its clouds are in great grief because of his calamity;
6. The harvest and vintage are in great pain and the rain and the lightning experiences disaster.

In poem no. 85 Samuel han-Nagid describes how the world is in confusion because of the death of Hay Ga’on (939-1038), the most important spiritual and juridical Jewish authority in Baghdad:
73. Alas! The sons of Earth are burning and the World is in great confusion!
74. The inner moods are in the hands of the people; they are not doing their business.

When the stars hear about the execution, April 1039, of Abu Ishaq al-Mutawakkil ibn Hasan ibn Capron, known as Yequietl and famous as Shelomo ibn Gabirol's Maecenas in Saragossa and as a vizier of the Tujibid dynasty, they become extinguished, according to Solomon in his elegy (poem no. 156/194: line 27):

27. In darkness and night the stars have become dark while the days of Earth are cursed.

In an elegy on his brother Abu-1-Hajjaj Yosef (poem no. 117), Moses ibn Ezra describes the participation of the world in his weeping: the foundations of the world tremble because of the sad Fate of the poet; the stars of Heaven weep for him; moon and sun are grieving. Similar descriptions can be found in the poems of Ibn 'Ammar and Ibn Zaydun. He describes also how his heart trembles and his ears are deafened:

4. For me are mourning the stars of Heaven; and for me are weeping the moon and the sun;
5. Because of a calamity my heart trembles and my ear is uncovered and deafened by the noise of its voice.

7. Mercedes Etereros and Angeles Navarro, 'Moséh ben "Ezra; elegías a la muerte de su hermano José, Misceláneas de Estudios Arabes y Hebraicos 32, 2 (1983), 51-68.
8. See Arie Schippers, "Two Andalusian poets on exile: Reflexions on the poetry of Ibn 'Ammar (1031-1086) and Moses ibn Ezra (1055-1138)", in The Challenge of the Middle East, I.A. El-Sheikh, C.A. van de Koppel, Rudolph Peters, eds. (Amsterdam 1982), 113-121, especially 114.
B. ‘Consolation’ motifs: the irreversibility of Fate, the perfidy of the World

Before Islam the Arab pagan poets saw blind, irreversible Fate as the dominating power in their lives. This notion figured prominently in Arabic elegiac poetry. Life in this World was called treacherous, since no one knew what it had in store for him. Since the coming of Islam, these pre-Islamic notions continued to have their place in elegies, sometimes juxtaposed with Islamic concepts. This could result in a certain scepticism, as expressed in an elegy composed by the Arabic poet al-Mutanabbi:9

43. People are in disagreement about death and there is only consensus about the fact of death.
44. Some say man’s soul survives safe and sound and others say it shares the destruction of the body.10

Hebrew Andalusian poets also made use of this motif of blind Fate, to which they usually referred with expressions such as “Time’, or “the Days’ and “the Nights’. The “Life is a Dream” motif that we find occasionally in Arabic Andalusian poetry, occurs frequently in Hebrew Andalusian elegies. Samuel ha-Nagid says e.g. in his poem no. 30: line 13:11

13. Your World is like a dream, and in your old age you find many of its explanations; in your Death you will find all its solutions.

11. See also Samuel ha-Nagid, Ben Qohelet, ed. S. Abramson, (Tel Aviv 5713/1953), no. 272, which is identical.
In Solomon ibn Gabirol's elegy (poem no.156/194) on his above-mentioned Maecenas Yequti'el we find the following consolation motif combined with a criticism of all people who believe in slogans like “Life is a Dream”: the fact that Yequti'el’s days now have come to an end indicates that the cosmos has been created in order to perish. The poet adjures mankind to pay attention to the fact that Time had already, before their birth, arranged their grave. The Days of Time give here and take there, so that you are led to believe that men are merchandise (lines 1-3):

2. Pay attention in order that you may know that Time arranges graves for people, when they are not even born!
3. Its Days take people and they give other people, so that I think that they make bargains with mankind.
4. I do not know it, just as all the wise people whose names are known did not know ...
5. Whether the souls despised the bodies or the living spirits are urged to go up.
6. How foolish are those who say: ‘The World is a dream!’ How could they have forgotten a thing and not remember it any more.

Like al-Mutanabbi in his elegy, quoted before, Ibn Gabirol expresses the uncertainties of the mysteries of Death, which human beings cannot solve. Dreams are vain and cannot be explained (line 7). 12

The motif of the treacherous World by Moses ibn Ezra is expressed in the following line of his (no. 141):

1. The one who puts to the test treacherous Time will meet in it a beloved one who hides the mantle of the hater he is in reality.

In Arabic poetry e.g. by al-Mutanabbi we can observe that the poet imagines that his Maecenas had in vain tried to make a deal with Fate. In Hebrew Andalusian literature we see this motif expressed by both Samuel han-Nagid and Moses ibn Ezra. In his Muhadarah (129b) Moses ibn Ezra quotes as an example of tásdir the following line:

He thinks that Time will perform his will unto a good end, but [Time] itself does not think so.

In panegyrics Fate, Time, the Days and their vicissitudes stay in opposition with the Maecenas, the just and mighty ruler, to whom Fate is subdued. In elegies, Fate and its calamities have won. Fate here has to be considered in opposition with God, whose benediction is asked on the grave by means of a raincloud which drenches the grave grounds.

C. BENEDICTION FORMULAS

In Arabic Andalusian poetry the poets ask God to send rain clouds to the grave of the deceased:

12. 
أَنْيَ رَحْمَةٌ وَجَدَلُ الزَّمَانِ، وَسَقَى الَّذِي قَبْرَ كَصْبَ الْوَلِيّ

13. 
سَقَى اللَّهُ قَبْرًا ثَانِيًا بِسَفَاقِسٍ، وَسَوَاجَمْ يَرِضِي النَّبِيرُ فِيهَا عَنِ السَّحْب

14. 
سَقَى اللَّهُ قَبْرَ أَبِي رَحْمَةٌ، فَسْقَى يَرِضِي رَجُلٌ غَادِيَة

13. Schippers, Arabic Tradition, 311; Schippers, Spanish-Hebrew Poetry, 262: "Fate has made a deal with Sayf al-Dawlah by taking away the younger sister and sparing the elder one [poem no. 231 of al-Mutanabbi's Diwan (ed. Dieterici), lines 12-13] [...]. But Time deceives Sayf al-Dawlah, as we see in the elegy on the elder sister Khawlah (no. 238) because now Death has also taken Khawlah." See also Winter, "Content", 342.

1. O my brother Husayn, unique being of Time, may God water your grave with the shower of a spring rain.  
23. May God water a rebellious grave at Sfax with rich rainclouds which satisfy the earth.
7. May God drench the grave of my father with mercy, so that a fragrant morning cloud will be his shower.

In Hebrew Andalusian poetry this motif is used too as the following examples show:

15. ושם על קברות חביבים • חשקה את עפר בטלילים
16. והר קברות בכל עיני ורות • חמשת אל תחי לעדו ירא
17. עב תעריסChelsea קברות בימי • רצון שבככת ותקחי משכמת
18. תפור קברות כל רוח وكل • רכינ בטל איור תחי פנקדים
19. May He drench his grave with clouds, may He shed morning showers on his dust.
3. May He (the Rock = God) drench the rock of her grave with the waters of a cloud so that she may never fear a desert.
50. May a cloud drip to drench her grave with the waters of good will, and may a layer of dew rise early in the morning.
39. May her grave flower like an irrigated garden and be watered at every moment with the dew of the morning.

From the examples quoted above, it will be clear that both in the Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian elegiac poetry several pre-Islamic concepts have inspired the motifs most commonly used: cosmic animism, fatalism, and the belief in a high God, which in pre-Is-

15. Beginning and ending the line with the same word.
20. Moses ibn Ezra, Diwan, poem no. 3 on Abu Yahya Ibn al-Rabb’s wife.
22. Moses ibn Ezra, Diwan, poem no. 53 on Yoshiah ibn Bazzaz’s sister.