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Moses ibn Habib: Poet and Migrant

Arie Schippers

An examination of the work of Moses ibn Habib (1450-1520) on poetry and metre can help to illuminate the impact on the genre of Jewish migration to Italy from the Iberian peninsula – the cradle of the new Hebrew poetry that emerged in the fourteenth century. Both the life and work of Ibn Habib, who was born in Portugal, were dominated by the experience of this migration. He was one of several who brought their ideas about poetry and metre from the Iberian peninsula to Italy at a time when political circumstances forced them to become migrants.  

Jews are known to have been living in Portugal in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when they had their own administration under the kings of Portugal. In the fourteenth century they received protection yet, but in the fifteenth century their position deteriorated: there were riots and discriminatory measures in the period 1449-1481. Yet Jews continued to live in Portugal even when their co-religionists were expelled from Spain in 1492; in fact, a large number of Spanish Jews took refuge there. Following his marriage to the Spanish Princess Isabella, King Emmanuel issued an order on 4 December 1496, that no Jew or Muslim should remain in Portugal. Those who stayed were forcibly converted.  

The most illustrious scholars associated with Lisbon were the Ibn Yahya family. Lisbon was also the birthplace of Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel (1437-1508), who published some of his work there. It is interesting to compare the careers of Isaac Abrabanel and David ibn Yahya (1440-1524), both of whom also wrote about poetry and metre, with that of their colleague Ibn Habib (1450-1520). All three were born in Lisbon, but soon emigrated to other countries, including Italy. Isaac Abrabanel succeeded his father as treasurer to Alfonso V (1438-1481) of Portugal. Alfonso’s successor, João II (1481-1495), suspected Abrabanel of conspiracy, and the latter was forced to flee Portugal in 1483. He then entered the service of Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile (1484). With the expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492, Abrabanel fled from Valencia to Naples, Italy. The king of Naples, Ferrante I, appointed him to a position similar to that he had held in Castile. When the French sacked Naples in 1494, Abrabanel’s house was destroyed. He then followed the royal family to Messina, where he remained until 1495. After a brief stay on Corfu, Abrabanel returned to Naples following the French withdrawal and settled in Monopoli (Apulia) in 1496. He died in Venice in 1508 and was buried in Padua.  

David ben Solomon Ibn Yahya (c. 1440-1524) was appointed rabbi in his native Lisbon. He was denounced before the Portuguese king for helping Spanish Jews, but managed to escape with his family to Naples. Shortly after, when Naples was conquered by the French, Ibn Yahya’s possessions were confiscated and he and his family were placed on a boat to Corfu. After much hardship, he arrived in Constantinople, where he remained until his death.  

There are certain parallels between the lives of these migrants, both fleeing from Portugal to Spain, to Naples, to Corfu, again to Naples and then Venice, or to Constantinople, depending on the political circumstances. We know less about Moses ibn Habib, but it may be assumed that his trajectory was similar to that of his colleagues. They all appear to have followed the same migration pattern, depending to a great extent on the intolerance or tolerance of the Christian kings in a particular region.

What we know about Moses ben Shem Tov ibn Habib is the information that can be derived from his works. He was a philosopher, a grammarian and a Hebrew poet. Several of his works were completed in Southern Italy. One of his two grammars, Perah Shoslian (Rose Flower), which was influenced by Profiat Duran (1350-1414) and his rational theory, was completed in Naples in 1484. His other grammar, Lashon Marpe (Healer of the Tongue), in which he summarised the principles of Hebrew grammar, was published together with his work of poetry Behinat Olam (Examination of the World) in 1496.}

1. The situation in Spain and Portugal not only caused migration to Italy, but also to the Ottoman Empire; see A. Levy, The Jews of the Ottoman Empire, Princeton, NJ, 1994, p. 1-53.
2. The most traumatic date was of course the expulsion of the Jews from Grenada in 1492, or in the words of A. Levy: (p. 2) ‘In the collective Jewish memory this date represented, first and foremost, a tragedy of catastrophic proportions: the world’s leading Jewish community, efflorescent and long-established, was suddenly uprooted and destroyed.’ See also V. Baez, A History of the Jews in Christian Spain, Philadelphia 1966: ‘From the fourteenth century to the expulsion’, p. 443.
7. Not much is known about Moses ibn Habib’s life, except from his own work.
of Jedaiah ha-Penini Bedersi (Constantinople 1520). He is also known from his contacts with printers, and from his many liturgical songs.

In a poem in his *Darkhe No’am*, which was composed as an aid to the study of prosody and gives a detailed description of the nature of poetry and its forms, the poet introduces himself, mentioning his birthplace and his stay in Southern Italy. The brief passage from this poem quoted here does not in itself reveal much, since it does describe some of his misery:

The poet continues:

The brief passage from this poem quoted here does not in itself reveal much, since it does describe some of his misery:

I am he who speaks: Behold it is I [Isaiah 52:6] the poorest of my family [Judges 6:15]. Moses the son of rabbi Shem Tov from Safed; that is the signature and the sound of my name; 1 I am confused by the tribulations of Time 2 which imprisoned my roots and branches, the battle was before and behind [II Chron. 31:14], none went out and none came in [Joshua 6:1].

So I came here in Bitonto, by some whim of Fate, and lack of money is even worse than all these; these are the three things which imprisoned me in caves of the earth and in the rocks [Job 30:6] and I am far from my land of birth and the house of my beloved father and parents. I am like a pelican of the wilderness [Ps. 102:7] where live my ape and elephant and my little owl and my other owl 3 until the Lord of Heavens will look down and see to bring together the banished of the people of Israel, and they will come to Zion singing and barefooted, weary and tired.

The poet continues:

I will sing then a poem to God the Lord of Israel, thanking God abundantly with my mouth, and the words of my mouth will bring pleasure.


2. Moses ibn Habib, *Darkhe No'am* 'im Maseh Lashan, (Rodelheim 1865), f. 3a.

3. I would like to thank I. Zweig for suggesting the 'utterance' of the name as opposed to the name written down as the translation of *zif*.

4. This is of course the Arabic concept of the vicissitudes of Time or Fate.

5. I would like to thank I. Zweig for her suggestion of the reading *galp* = Greek *kalpe* referring to the urn from which the lots have to be taken. Literally: 'placed in my urn', see Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 27a.

6. The animals in this rather strange passage suggest the poet's alienation in his new surroundings, see Talmud Bavli, Baba Qama 102a, Berakhot 50b, 52b, 58b, Mo'ed Qatan 25b. See also Isaiah 34:11 and Zephaniah 2:14.

7. Moses ibn Habib, *ibid.*, f. 3a ff.
According to the synthetic approach, Aristotle put the works on Logic, called Organon, in the following order, which Ibn Habib reproduces faithfully in Hebrew: 1. menun'ah (Categories); 2. meliqat (De Interpretatione); 3. Qoppah (Synagoge); 4. mystef (Proof); 5. nizzah (Dialectics, Topics); 6. hata'id (Sophism); 7. hilezah (Rhetoric); 8. shu (Poetics). Above them is ascribed to King Solomon in arguing that the initial inscription, which still exists today, was used by James I to open with another inscription ascribed to the Prophet. Ibn Habib's poem was later adopted by Italians such as Azaria de' Rossi (1511-1578) to show the antiquity of the Hebrew metres. Azaria's text about this anecdote claimed contained exaggeration and imagery, the only kind which Aristotle accepted as true poetry, see also C.P. Hershon: Faith and Controversy: the Jews of Medieval Language, (Birmingham 1999), p. 233-234.

E.g. by Samuel ibn Tibbon in his preface to his Commentary on Ecclesiastes, quoted by J. Moscati (see Kugel, op. cit., p. 145, for other tripartitions see also A. Schippers, 'The work of Samuel Archivoli (1353-1611) in the Light of the Classical Tradition and Cinquecento Italian literature', in Hebrewistica, 54, 154 (2000), p. 121-138. Moses ibn Habib distinguished three types of verse in his commentary on Song of Songs and applied them to various biblical books: 1.metrical expressions not set to music (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Job, Psalms); 2. unmetrical or unrhymed expressions but set to music (Song of Songs, Song of Deborah, but perhaps also Job, Proverbs and Psalms); 3. metaphorical expressions which he opposed to neither, and which undo all that the first three achieve. Heaven forbid that any bit of these be found in the Holy Spirit.

Three types of metrical poetry are then dealt with, and we are given examples of the first type from the Bible: verses that have an equal number of syllables within the two half-verses of a line, e.g. verses from Psalms, Proverbs and Job. The second type of metre does not have an equal number of syllables, but the deficit is filled in by the melody. The Song of the Sea, Na'azim, the Song of David and the Song of Deborah belong to this second type. The third type agrees in every respect, vowels and semivowels, number of vowels, and agreement of the rhymes.

The distinctions among these three types (or similar ones) were made both before him and after. The third type clearly refers to the use of metres according to the rules of Arabic poetry, as adapted in Hebrew. Ibn Habib claims a Hebrew origin for metres of this sort—which for him was also necessarily the case, because no other language was superior to Hebrew. He tells a unique anecdote revealing that even in biblical times poetry was composed according to this third system (what we would call the Arabic system):

In my opinion, this manner of metrical poetry is very ancient. I swear by heaven and earth that when I was in the kingdom of Muravid, to the people of the gate and the elders told me that the tombstone of the army officer of Amazyah, king of Judah, was there. When I heard this, I made haste, I did not tarry to see his tombstone, a stone monument on the top of a mountain. After much toil and trouble I read the inscription; there was a verse engraved on it, and these are its words:

'se'ata yaqo bel-muna // le-sar gadol leypa Yaw ///

Raise a lament in a bitter voice // for the great officer whom the Lord has taken ///

'Ve could not read further for it was effaced, but the second verse ended with 'to Amazyah'.

Then I believed that this manner of metrical poetry was from the time that our forefathers were in their land. This Amazyah anecdote was later adopted by Italians such as Azaria de' Rossi (1511-1578) to show the antiquity of the Hebrew metres. Azaria's text about this anecdote

What is perhaps most interesting is the date of this poem. The text continues as follows:

32 And if you ask on which day, which month and which year I made this poem:
33 It is on the 14th of Nisan (April) of the year marked Rüm (i.e., 424 [1406])
34 In the fear of our God, may my soul be prepared.

Moses ibn Habib apparently could safely stay in Southern Italy and was in Bitonto in the year 1406. He was still proud of his Lisbon past, but he had been accepted in fertile Apulia, by its distinguished leader, Joseph ibn Levi, who also followed the profession of medicine, as is explained in the prose sections.

Ibn Habib was deeply involved in the study of prosody, and composed his Darkhe Na'am for this purpose. He made the list of metres preceded by a detailed introduction to the nature of poetry and its forms. He did not approve of secular themes. Only sacred and moralistic, at times satirical, poetry was permissible. Perhaps influenced by Moses ibn Tibbon, he held that rhyme and metre already existed in Hebrew poetry in ancient times.

After the introductory poem, Ibn Habib begins by mentioning the Eight Books on Logic by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and the Aphorisms of the Statesman by al-Farabi (870-950) in their relation to truth and falsehood. Al-Farabi discusses six classes of poetry, i.e., three classes and their opposites: (1) poems intended to improve the heart, (2) poems intended to elevate the soul from 'lesser accidents' that menace the soul which are related to strength, such as anger and pride, threaten to undo all that the first three achieve. Heaven forbid that any bit of these be found in the Holy Spirit.
was published together with Ibn Habib’s writings in the 1806 Rödelheim edition.31 However, most of the earlier Hebrew Andalusian authors on metre such as Moses ibn Ezra (1056-1198)32 and Judah ha-Levi (1075-1141)33 were conscious of the fact that Hebrew metrics were of foreign, i.e. Arabic origin.

Clearly, then, various triplications of poetry and embellished speech appear again and again in treatises about poetry and metre in Provence and Italy.34 Like Saadia ibn Dannan (c. 1420-1490)35 and many others, Ibn Habib had his own system of kinds of metres, although he was apparently inspired by predecessors and contemporaries. All systems were indirectly based on the Arabic metrical foot, consisting of yatid and sabab (tentpin and cord), or yatid and temu’ot (tentpin and vowels) in Hebrew. In Arabic metre the sabab can consist of long as well as short syllables; in Hebrew metre the short syllables (syllables with sheiva mobile) are found exclusively in the yatid (which usually consists of a short syllable and a long one), whereas the rest of the foot consists of long syllables (vowels).

The distinguishable types or metres are based on the possible combinations of yetedim and temu’ot. Ibn Habib identifies ten classes, which differ from the 18 of Ibn Dannan and the 17 of Ibn Yahya that are described by Del Valle Rodriguez.36 In the Arabic system these combinations were indicated by different traditional names of metres, which were used in their Hebrew equivalent by Hebrew writers such as ha-Levi and Ibn Dannan.37 Later Hebrew writers such as Ibn Habib do not use these names, but content themselves with numbering them. The following are the metres in question.

\[y = \text{yatid} = \text{short plus long;} \quad t = \text{temu’ot} = \text{long}\]

1. yut/yut
2. yut/yut
3. yut/yut
4. yut/yut
5. yut/yut
6. yut/yut
7. yut/yut
8. yut/yut
9. yut/yut
10. yut/yut

When discussing the fifth metre Ibn Habib refers to the Qa’arah (i.e., Qa’arah Kesef; Plate of Silver) of the Provençal author Yosef Ezobi (c. 1250-1290). This shows that Provence sometimes exerted an influence on Spain as well as the other way round, which was more common.

Ibn Habib’s treatise not only provides the metrical scans, but also gives examples of paronomastic rhyme, and most of the poems are combinations of two rhymes, sometimes a meriba’ poem (with rhyme scheme aab, cceh etc), whereas occasionally the rhyme consists of complete paronomasia.

As far as the forms are concerned, Ibn Habib’s method of classifying metre in subcategories together with rhymes influenced later Italian authors such as Samuel Archivolti (1515-1611).38 Although Archivolti was also interested in the themes of his poems, which were often satirical and moral, like Ibn Habib his main interest was in metre and rhyme.

Since Ibn Habib thought that poetry should be moral and religious, the themes of his poetry were not the usual subjects of the Spanish Hebrew school. At his best, his poems are satirical. Sometimes the poet announces the subject he proposes to address. The following are some examples from his poetry:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Above all acquisition, acquire wisdom} \\
\text{Go far away from every bad habit} \\
\text{and above all from stinginess}\end{align*}
\]

Inhabitants of the worlds, chasers of vanity
all their life laboured in vain
in their stupidity, until the day of death
They did not make provision for themselves

I am sleeping but my heart is awake from sorrow [Song of Songs 5:2], because of the vicissitudes of impetuous Time.

31 Ibn Habib, op. cit., f. 11b-24a. See also Azariah de’ Rossi, The Light of the Eyes [Me’or ‘Enayim], ed. and trans. by Joanna Weinberg, (Yale 2001), p. 69b-68b; y.33
32 Dealt with by Berlin, op. cit., p. 67-82.
33 Dealt with by Del Vale Rodriguez, op. cit., p. 286-288; Berlin, op. cit., p. 64-66.
34 See also Schippers, op. cit.
and within my heart is like a burning fire, very much a prisoner of my bones
on that day when I remember my thoughts, my character and abilities;
and my experiences and my wisdom, I will look for the arrival of my passing away.33

Choose an intelligent man who can teach you, and do not spare your wealth
acquire wisdom, acquire insight, and teach them to your sons.34

Many are the people drunk from the wine of the insolence of their heart; they shall punish.
They intoxicated themselves with venom and not with wine which gladdens the heart of a man.35

Choose truth in your speech, and no lie on any topic;
Truth is the basis of peace and lie [= Cozbi, cf. Num. 25:13] is the daughter of the leader of Midian.36

My soul deeply abhors all high-ranking people
because they sell themselves with the purses of their money.
They make many acquisitions and [buy] delightful plants
and build buildings on land that is not theirs.
On the day of their death their sons and daughters rejoice themselves
and they empty their sacks in order to inspect their treasures.
All the tribes of the orbit will undergo death by the sickle,
so that they put on the waves of the sea the purses of their money.37

The poet Ibn Habib sometimes introduces his poem with an explanation, noting:

The third category consists of combining substantives. To put this into practice I invented the following poem in order to blame those who forgot their creator and made their own gods of gold:

33 Ibid., f. 12b.
34 Ibid., f. 12a.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., f. 13b.
37 Ibid., f. 13a.

of embellished speech and poetry at the beginning of his work reveal Ibn Habib to have been a poetical theoreticians who was aware that a poem had to convey a message. It was therefore important to know a poem’s degree of truthfulness or falsehood. This subject is much discussed with regard to poetic language. Moses ibn Ezra appears to have influenced all his successors down to the later Renaissance theoreticians with his Arabic adage that ‘the best poet is the poet who lies most’. This idea of falsehood mixed with truth in poetry ultimately goes back to classical sources. Ibn Habib quotes Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and al-Farabi (870-950), and his later Renaissance successors follow him in connecting their knowledge even more to classical sources. A prominent feature of all poetic theory is that Hebrew theoreticians (including Ibn Habib) felt the need to divide poetic speech, or speech in general, into three parts. Similar classifications were used by the Provençals Moses ibn Tibbon (1190-1240) and Profiat Duran (1350-1414), through to the Italians Azaria de Rossi (1511-1578) and Samuel Archivolti (1515-1611).

Ibn Habib created his own categories of metre, which were perhaps inspired by his contemporaries Ibn Dannan and Ibn Yahyah, and by Provençal ideas found in Ezobi. The use of metrics per se goes back to Dunash ibn Labrat (925-990), the first to introduce Arabic metres into Hebrew poetry, and Judah ha-Levi, who wrote the first metrical treatise introducing the Arabic metrical system for Hebrew poetry. Later, metrics were further developed in Italy by Archivolti and others. Even in Holland, in his *Sheashot Gashot* (‘Chains of Limitedness’) which appeared in 1665, the Sephardic poet Salomon de Oliveyra discussed the same system of yatedot and lenot used by his Spanish forefathers.41

Of course, Ibn Habib’s idea about the primacy of Hebrew over Arabic metres did not conform with the views of Moses ibn Ezra and Judah ha-Levi, who realised the Arabic origins of the metres. Perhaps the examples in which Arabic metre occurred by chance in the Hebrew Bible, as shown by Moses ibn Ezra, may have inspired Ibn Habib to choose his 8+8 syllable examples from Psalms and Job as samples of metrical poetry at the beginning of his treatise.

All Ibn Habib’s verses take guidance as their theme, creating a kind of moral poetry. The only motif which is really of Arabic origin is perhaps the theme of Time and its vicissitudes. The satirical vein of his poems is rather simple, and sometimes misogynistic. But his moral poems also have their origin in Muslim Spain. This genre started with Samuel ha-Nagid (993-1056) and continued in Provence with authors such as David Qimbi (c. 1280-1350) and his *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*.


The migrant Ibn Habib felt himself uprooted. To combat his nostalgia he turned to the poetry of his lost homeland, and was thereby instrumental in spreading the theory and practice of Iberian poetry as far as Italy, and even to Holland.

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