Moses ibn Habib: Poet and Migrant
Schippers, A.

Published in:
Studia Rosenthaliana

Citation for published version (APA):
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 eleventh 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.3

The most illustrious scholars associated with Lisbon were the Ibn Yahya family.4 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,5 with that of their colleague Ibn Habib (1450-1520).6 All three were born in Lisbon, but soon emigrated to other countries, including Italy. Isaac Abrabanel succeeded his father as treasurer to Afonso V (1438-1481) of Portugal. Afonso’s successor, João II (1481-1495), suspected Abrabanel of conspiracy, and the latter was forced to flee Portugal in 1495. He then entered the service of Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile (1484).7 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,7 was completed in Naples in 1484. His other grammar, Matpe Lashon (Healer of the Tongue), in which he summarised the principles of Hebrew grammar, was published together with his work of poetry Darkhe No’am (Ways of Delight) in Constantinople (1510-14), having been finished in Bologna in 1486. Finally, in Otranto he wrote a commentary on the Behinat Olam (Examination of the World).

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 Granada 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 Y. Bahr, A History of the Jews in Christian Spain, (Philadelphia 1966) II: ‘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.11

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 career in Southern Italy. The brief passage from this poem quoted here does not in itself reveal much, since it is a dry panegyric on his family and the community of his native city. The poem mentions the poet's origins and migration, without saying anything of the sufferings a migrant would have experienced. However, the prose text preceding the poem12 does describe some of his misery:

I am he who speaks: Behold it is I [Isaiah 52:6] the poorest of my family [Judges 6:13], Moses the son of rabbi Shem Tov from Sefarad, the place where he dwelt; that is the signature and the sound of my name,13 I am confused by the tribulations of Time14 which uprooted my roots and branches, the battle was before and behind [II Chron. 31:4], none went out and none came in [Joshua 6:1]. So I came here in Bitonto, by some whim of Fate,15 and lack of money is even worse than all these: these three are the 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 owl16 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.17

12 Moses ibn Habib, Darkhe No'am 'im Ma'peh Lashva, [Roddheim 1860], f. 3a.
13 I would like to thank I. Zwiep for suggesting the 'utterance' of the name as opposed to the name written down as the translation of zefey.
14 'This is of course the Arabic concept of the vicissitudes of Time or Fate.
15 I would like to thank I. Zwiep for her suggestion of the reading γαλή = Greek kalpe referring to the urn from which the lots have to be taken. Literally: 'placed in my urn', see Talmud Bavli Ta'amim 27b.
16 The animals in this rather strange passage suggest the poet's alienation in his new surroundings, see Talmud Bavli, Baba Qama 101a, Berakhot 59b, 52b, 58a, Mo'ed Qatan 25b. See also Isaiah 13:11 and Zephaniah 2:14.
17 Moses ibn Habih, op. cit., f. 3a ff.

1 Says Moses the son of Shem Tov from Sefarad, the place where he dwelt:
2 He belongs to the family of the Bene Habib and his place of birth is in Ishbina,
3 A glorified and much praised community, which is a corner stone in the Diaspora,
4 Distinguishing itself in learning and wisdom and observation of the commandments,
5 And equipped with lineage and riches, and glory.
6 Dwelling now in Bitonto in the country of the fertile and abundant Apulia,
7 A community of holiness and men of name; servants of God in good belief.
8 At the head of them all there is a perfect lord with all knowledge and insight,
9 The crown of all sons of Levi, given to him as a gift.
10 The glory of Yosef his name is well-known in the land of the South and the North.
11 And equipped with lineage and riches, and glory.
12 A present which is sent to him to rejoice himself in the garden of its delight;
13 Every piece of poetry and every melody in the midst of it is made perfect.
14 In summer and winter it is fertile and green,
15 Good understanding and gracious majesty. Beauty is with it in its dwelling.
16 Every piece of poetry and every melody in the midst of it is made perfect.
17 Oh man who is fond of the ways of poetry and its paths: come head
18 I shall teach you and I shall make you wise with sweet poetry and singing voices.
19 The songs of the others are thorns and thistles, my songs are like roses.
20 My poems are like the light of the sun, and their poems are like a cloud that flies away.
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 Ritiin (i.e., 424(1 = 14(0)
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 1486. He was still proud of his Lisbon past, but had been accepted in fertile Apulia, by his 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 B.C.E.) and the Aphorisms of the Statesman by al-Farabi (870-950) in their relation to truth and falsehood.18 Al-Farabi discusses six classes of poetry,9 i.e., three classes and their opposites: (1) poems intended to improve the 'smalls of the soul' which are related to strength, such as anger and pride, threaten to overtake us, and (2) poems intended to elevate the soul from 'lesser accidents' that are related to weakness, such as sorrow, pain and cowardice.20 He gives examples of biblical books in which they more or less occur:

These three classes are very praiseworthy, even though they [only] differ in degree more or less [gradually]. Upon them are based all of the Book of Proverbs, its revealed and hidden parts, most of the Book of Ecclesiastes, most of the Psalms of David, and some of the words of the prophets. Indeed, there are three other classes which are the opposite of the first three, and which undo all that the first three achieve. Heaven forbid that any bit of these be found in the prophetic books or in [the books written 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, Ha'azinu, 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.21 The third type clearly refers to the use of metre according to the rules of Arabic poetry, as adapted in Hebrew. But 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 Valencia, in the community of Murviedro, all the people at the gate and the elders told me that the tombstone of the army officer of Amaziah, 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'ul qina be-qol masra // le-sar gadol leyitho Yah //

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 Amaziah'. Then I believed that this manner of metrical poetry was from the time that our forefathers were in their land.'

This Amaziah 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

18 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. monunaru (Categories); 2. meliaq (De Interpretatione); 3. arbo (Syllogism); 4. metaf (Proof); 5. muzu (Dialectics, Topics; Arab. mukhtata hikayya); 6. ha'tul (Sophism; Arab. mukhtatah al-fayy'); 7. hadiaq (Rhetoric; Arab. mukhtatah kihatay'); 8. sha (Poetics; Arab. mukhtatah abh'). See D. Gutu, 'Paul the Persian on the classification of the parts of Aristotle's philosophy: a milestone between Alexandria and Baghdad, in Der Islam 60 (1983), p. 231-257; D.M. Dunlop, 'Al-Farabi's Introduction to Risalah on Logic', in Islamic Quarterly 3 (1956-57), p. 195-205.
21 Cf. the Arabic of al-l-arabi, op. cit., p. 53/511; Berlin, ed. P. Kriperman, (ed.), The Islamic Influence on the Arts of Arisioile's Philosophy; a milcsltine Introduction, the Muftah of Moses ibn Habib's treatises on logic, and refuted his case. 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.
22 Translation Berlin op. cit., p. 119, n. 4. Note that this inscription, which still exists today, was used by James Finn together with another inscription ascribed to King Solomon to argue that the initial Jewish settlement in the Iberian peninsula as early as 1600 BCE, but Millas Vallcorasa and Canteru y Burgos dated the inscriptions, which were ascribed to other persons, to around the year 1000 CE and refuted his case.
was published together with Ibn Habib’s writings in the 1806 Rödelheim edition. However, most of the earlier Hebrew Andalusian authors on metre such as Moses ibn Ezra (1056-1158) and Judah ha-Levi (1075-1141)39 were conscious of the fact that Hebrew metrics were of foreign, i.e. Arabic origin.

Clearly, then, various tripartitions of poetry and embellished speech appear again and again in treatises about poetry and metre in Provence and Italy.40 Like Saadia ibn Dannan (c. 1420-1490) 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 (tindentin and cord), or yated and temat’ol (tendentin 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 yated (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 yeditim and temat’ol. 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.41 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.42 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.

\[(y = \text{yated} = \text{short plus long}; \ t = \text{tema’ol} = \text{long})\]

- 1: yeditim/yeditim
- 2: yeditim/yeditim
- 3: yeditim/yeditim
- 4: yeditim/yeditim/yeditim/yeditim
- 5: yeditim/yeditim/yeditim/yeditim
- 6: yeditim/yeditim/yeditim/yeditim
- 7: yeditim/yeditim/yeditim/yeditim
- 8: yeditim/yeditim/yeditim/yeditim
- 9: yeditim/yeditim/yeditim/yeditim
- 10: yeditim/yeditim/yeditim/yeditim

When discussing the fifth metre Ibn Habib refers to the Qa’arah (i.e., Qa’arat Kesef, Plate of Silver) of the Provencal 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 merubba’ poem (with rhyme scheme aaab, czech 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).43 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:

\[
\text{Above all acquisition, acquire wisdom above all ranks, choose lowliness Go far away from every bad habit and above all from stinginess}^{44}
\]

\[
\text{Inhabitants of the worlds, chasers of vanity all their life they laboured in vain in their stupidity, until the day of death They did not make provision for themselves}^{45}
\]

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

39 See Schippers, op. cit.
41 Del Val Rodríguez, op. cit., p. 458-460.
42 Del Val Rodríguez does not mention Ibn Habib, instead he mentions his contemporaries Ibn Yahya and Ibn Dannan; see above.
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.

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

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.

Choose truth in your speech, and no lie on any topic; Truth is the basis of peace and lie [ = Cozbi, cf. Num. 25:15] is the daughter of the leader of Midyan.

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

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:

To gold and outer garments and balsam and embroidery and a pleasant woman the face of a man is directed a fearing [woman], longing [for him], and with honourable appearance. And he is hungry and thirsty for what perishes and becomes extinguished. When they ask him to utter a blessing for his God, he sings with his voice towards gold and balsam

In another poem he describes the girls of his town who uncloak their hair, without knowing that hair is a noxious weed and nakedness:

Beautiful are the daughters of my town with the splendour of beauty; crowned with morality without omission. But the hair on their head reveals that it is reddish yellow when uncloaking the head. Perhaps they are gracious nuns [mazal] and therefore never shave their head, but neglect it. The Explorer of the reins of a man may give them their hair as the fruit of their piety and so they are redeemed.

The expression used in the latter verse alludes to a passage in Jeremiah 17:10: 'I try the reins even to give every one according to his ways'. Another poem also has a slightly misogynistic touch:

If your wife is bad and does not listen to the sound of your speech in order to serve you and is planning evil

Know that with a rod of strength the cow is corrected which treads from its furrows, while it remains silent.

Ibn Habib's ideas about poetry, both on the formal metrical level as well as the thematic level, can be placed within the context of the migration of concepts about poetry from Spain to Italy, and from Italy to the rest of Europe. Ibn Habib's views were influenced by the poetic theoreticians of Spain and Provence. His classifications
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 Profut 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 metres 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 Sharshat Gavelot (‘Chains of Limitedness’) which appeared in 1665, the Sephardic poet Salomon de Oliveyra discussed the same system of zatedot and lenus’ot 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 Shegel ha-Qodesh.

41 Cf. Del Valle Rodríguez, op. cit., p. 420-427; on this poet see also J.A. Brombacher, Chofa Zede, Handen vol zilpoven, de poezie van Shelomoh D'Oliveyra, rabbin en lensaar van de Portugese Nisie in de 17e eeuw te Amsterdam, diss. University of Leiden, 2 vols (Leiden 1991).