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Al-Munfatil and his Poetical Connection
with Samuel ha-Nagid ibn Naghrīlah

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The most important of the Hebrew Andalusian poets from a socio-political point of view undoubtedly was Samuel ha-Nagid Ibn Naghrīlah (993-1056). He became a vizier to the Berber king of Granada, was the commander of the Granadian army and organized war expeditions against Granada’s neighbour states, such as Almería and Sevilla. Within his own Jewish community, he was honoured as a leader in religious and worldly affairs, and was therefore conferred the title “nagid” 1.

It is interesting to take a look at his fascinating career, and how he came to the court of the Zirids after the destruction of Cordoba during the civil war of the Berbers (Fitnat al-Barābīrah; Herum ha-Pilishtim) and his exile in Malaga, where he opened a pharmacy. By virtue of his excellent letters in Arabic courtly chancellery style, he was made a secretary to the vizier or scribe of Granada’s Zirid king Ḥabūs around 1025; later, he became secretary or vizier to his successor King Bādīs of Granada (r. 1038-73) 2.

King Ḥabūs had two sons, Bādīs and his younger brother

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1 For a short biography of Samuel ha-Nagid, see A. Schippers, Spanish Hebrew Poetry, pp. 52-56; see also Wasserstein, “Samuel Ibn Naghrīla”. For the title “nagid” as mentioned in Arabic sources, see for instance Ibn Bassām, Dhakhīrah, I, II, p. 767.
2 See Ibn Daud, Ṣefer ha-Qabbalah, pp. 53-55 [pp. 71-73].
Būlughīn. We read in Ibn Daud’s *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* (Book of Tradition) that all the leaders of the Berbers were in favour of acclaiming Būlughīn as king, while the people sympathized with Bādis. Upon Ḥabūs’ death the leaders of the Berbers came together and stood in a row (Berakhot 2:2) to swear allegiance to his son Būlughīn as king. But Būlughīn went away and kissed the hand of his elder brother Bādis and recognized him as king in the year 1037 (wrongly put as 4787 according to the Hebrew calendar; in fact, it was 4797). We see here how the success and the rise of Samuel ha-Nagid had something to do with the succession, in which Samuel supported Bādis.

In the memoirs of ʿAbdallah de Ziride (the grandson of Bādis), we find a slightly different version of the rise of Samuel at the Granadian court, ha-Nagid. However, also in the memoirs it has something to do with the succession affair and with the timely discovery of conspiracies among members of the Zirid family against Bādis. Intellectual Muslim sources are very positive about Samuel ha-Nagid. The Cordobese historian Ibn Ḥayyān says about him:

This cursed man was a superior man, although God did not provide him with the true religion. He possessed extensive knowledge and could stand unpleasant behaviour with patience. He paired a solid and wise character with a clear mind and polite and friendly manners. Endowed with refined courtliness, under all circumstances he was able to flatter his enemies and to disarm their hatred by his amiable conduct. He was a man of extraordinary capacities. He wrote in both languages: Arabic as well as Hebrew. He knew the literature of both peoples. He went deeply into the roots and basic rules of the Arabic language and was familiar with the words of the most subtle grammarians. He spoke classical Arabic with the greatest ease and used this language in letters which he wrote in the name of the king. He used the usual Islamic formulas, the eulogies for God and Muhammad, our prophet, and

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3 *Ibidem.*
advised the addressee to live according to Islam. In brief, you would think that these letters were written by a pious Muslim. He was excellent in the sciences of the Ancients, in mathematics as well as astronomy. Also in the field of logic he possessed ample knowledge. In dialectics he was superior to his adversaries. In spite of his vivid spirit he talked little and reflected much. He collected an enormous, beautiful library.

In his *Kitāb al-Muhādaraḥ* (Hebrew Andalusian Poetics), Moses ibn Ezra speaks very highly of Samuel ha-Nagid ⁶. He praises both his poetry and his learned work, and he deplores the death of Samuel, especially in the light of what happened to Yosef, his son and successor. Yosef did not have the diplomatic aptitude of his father: he was arrogant and insolent, and was considered as someone who ridiculed Islam. His behaviour finally led to a revolt against him and the other Jews. The son was killed ten years after the death of his father in 4827 (1066). He had tried to escape by blackening his face with coal, but had been discovered and crucified above the gates of Granada ⁷. Moses ibn Ezra describes how the Nagids' 35 years of success and dreams of power had disappeared like a dream evaporated in steam. At this point he quotes (35b) the famous line of poetry by 'Abdah ibn al-Tabīb on the fall of the pre-Islamic hero Qays ibn 'Āsim: "His death was not the death of one person, with him the building of a whole people was destroyed." ⁸

Under the Muslims, the Jewish viziers were never without enemies. This appears from poems written by such poets as al-Ilbīrī who tried to dissuade Bādīs, the Muslim king of Granada, from allowing Samuel to hold such a high position at court ⁹. It appears also from the aggression of the eunuch king of Malaga, Zuhayr, against Samuel ¹⁰. But

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¹⁰ Tībīyān, 31-32; Tībī, 56.
Bādīs refused to let down his vizier Samuel, who had won his trust by his diplomatic capacities and Arabic learning. Samuel wanted to transmit this knowledge to his son Yosef, as testified by his Hebrew poem written on the battlefield, which Samuel sent to his son together with a volume of Arabic poetry which he has to learn by heart in order to become a good courtier. The poem starts with the verse: “Yosef take this book into acceptance, that I have chosen for you from the best of the language of the Arabs.”

Samuel had more of this kind of correspondence with his son: the poet describes in a Hebrew poem that he was invited by his son to a drinking party, and how this also had an educative aim, that is, to teach him the ways of courtly life. And we see how, later on, his son has the opportunity to defend his father from accusations of being too attached to pederastic love, which at that time was normal in court life. In the wine-drinking scene, it is repeatedly described how young boys and girls were the servants of the wine, as can be seen from one of the beginning lines of [wine] poem 130: 4-7:

4. Pour me some old wine [yeshishah ] in a cup [ba-ashshishah] from the hand of a young girl who is a good musician on old instruments.

The young beloved were often called gazelles, and some poems describe the poet’s love for those young girls and boys, which is labelled pederastic or homosexual. For example, in a poem by Samuel ha-Nagid, the lad or gazelle is described with his effeminate accent. The young boy tries to avoid and fend off his lover, but does not succeed because his effeminate utterances make his words seem as though he is saying the opposite and encouraging him. The poem (no. 160) goes as follows:

4. He wanted to answer: “miscreant [ra’]”, but he said: “Come nearer [ga’]”. So I came nearer, as his tongue had uttered.

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11 Samuel ha-Nagid, Diwān, no. 2, lines 33-42.
5. He wanted to say: “Go away [surah]”, but he said: “Enclose me [sugah]”. Then I hastened to embrace him, a lily.

Yosef, who later edited his father’s Dīwān, did not much like the idea that his father occupied himself with such unimportant and shameful things as worldly love. Thus, in the introduction to his father’s Dīwān, he tries to explain the love poems of his father in a metonymic way 14:

Though some of them [these poems] included erotic themes, he believed these to be metaphors for the community of Israel [kān mu’taqadu-hu fi-hi -l-kināyah ‘an kneset Israel] and the like, just as is found in some of the writings of the prophets. God will reward him for his intention. Anyone who interprets them in a way contrary to his intention will bear his own guilt.

We have seen how learnedness in Arabic epistolary style and poetry was important for one’s career at court, but this of course applied only to Arabic learnedness and poetry. Why did Samuel write Hebrew poetry? This had to do with the prestige of the Jewish courts and the revival of the knowledge of the Hebrew classical language 15, which – like classical Arabic – was not spoken as a mother tongue, but – unlike Arabic – had no spoken languages close to it from which to draw expressions about day-to-day life 16. The desire to make it an appropriate literary language with its own poetry according to the themes and metres of Arabic poetry connects it with Arabic Andalusian society of the time. The Jewish viziers, notables and rabbis tried to create prestige for the classical Hebrew language, but this counted only in their own circles, not in Arabic circles. Perhaps the exercise of imitating Arabic themes and metres improved their ability to make Arabic poems as well, so that they

15 Moses ibn Ezra, Muhādarah 30ab; Schippers “Arabic and the Revival of the Hebrew Language and Literature”, and Schippers “The Hebrew Grammatical Tradition”.
16 See Drory, pp. 198 ff; pp. 203-204; Yahalom, pp. 543-77; Schippers “Hebrew maqamah”, p. 303.
A. Schippers

acquired also prestige at court in general 17.

We can only guess at how poets at a Hebrew court looked at the Arabic example when making poems. A clear case of how the Arabic examples were translated into Hebrew during a poetic session is given by Samuel ha-Nagid when he translated the Arabic inscription on a plate for apples. The original Arabic line went 18:

\[
\text{Li-makhāfātī min kulli jāfin 'aḍḍa-h/ sawwartu nafṣī hā-kadhā min fīḍḏāhī/}
\]

[For fear of the bite of any lout, I made myself, as you can see, of silver]

but was translated by one of the boon companions of Samuel ha-Nagid into the following Hebrew verse:

\[
\text{U- mig-guri neshikhat les u-feti/kemo kesef mezuqaq na[a]sētil/}
\]

[Because of my fear for the bite of a bore/ or simpleton, I am made of pure silver/.]

There then follow several other translations by Samuel ha-Nagid himself of the same inscription and motif, which is reminiscent of the ambience of the zurafā' (elegant) as described by the Arabic author al-Washshā'.

Learnedness in poetry and Arabic sciences in the case of Samuel ha-Nagid attracted Arabic laudatory poems. Samuel ha-Nagid was not only a good courtier and poet, but also the object of the praises of an Arabic courtly poet, namely Abū Ahmad 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Khayrah al-Qurtubī, who is better known as al-Munfatīl, an Arab who apparently had secretly converted to Judaism 20.

17 Brann speaks of “courtier rabbis”, see the Introduction of his “Compunctuous Poet”.
18 Samuel ha-Nagid, Dīwān, no. 114-128; Schippers, “Hebrew Andalusian Poetry and Arabic Poetry: descriptions of fruit in the tradition of the “elegants” or zurafā’”.
19 Schippers, Ibidem.
20 See Henri Pérès, pp. 269-70.
His poetry is amply dealt with in Ibn Bassâm’s *Dhakhīrah* and is perhaps useful in connection with the genres of poetry Samuel ha-Nagid also dealt with, such as descriptions of young boys in the wine scene, sometimes even a mildly humorous poem with Biblical allusions such as 21:

*By my father! A gazelle visited me and healed me from the lovesickness of my heart. I embraced him as though I were Jacob embracing Joseph*

Or a descriptive motif, such as 22:

*On the cheek of Ahmad is a mole with which every libertine falls in love. It looks as though the gardener of a garden of roses is a Negro.*

It is easy to understand how these short poems in the pederastic sphere are primarily humorous puns, and only secondarily love themes.

In a letter and panegyric on Samuel ha-Nagid, al-Munfatil tells how he left his homeland for ever in order to go to the famous vizier Samuel. Apparently, times were not very favourable for him in his home land, and he was compelled by circumstances to leave it and seek his luck at the court of Samuel, who is praised extensively and compared to all kinds of pre-Islamic Arabic heroes. It is interesting that Ibn Bassâm, who mentions this letter in his anthology, probably failed to make a distinction between Samuel and his son Yosef 23. After the piece on al-Munfatil, Ibn Bassâm tells us how Samuel was killed after having taken part in a conspiracy. The one who was killed, however, must have been his son Yosef. The one who figures in al-Munfatil’s poetry must be Samuel. Ibn Bassâm tells us that al-Munfatil had an epistle which he directed to Ibn

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21 Ibn Bassâm, *Dhakhīrah*, I, II, p. 759
al-Naghīlī al-İsrā’îlî (i.e. Samuel), saying:

Whosoever understands Time and His habits and drags in His new and His worn out clothes, and knows that He uproots everything as long as He continues on his way, and breaks all that He can divide, does not bother any more when His weapons strike, and does not expect that there will come a time of compensation from damage. When Time made me choke on my saliva and urged me into a narrow place – leaving sorrow behind and loosening its knot immediately after, and scattering the pearls right after having strung the necklace – I saw the impossibility of the situation. I saw the poverty among the families and my grandfather who had been respectable and had come with those who participated in high society, and then was among the stumbled and the poor.

So I prepared a beast for riding and furniture, and left my dear homeland for ever, and I said by myself: either I am in existence so that I appear, or I am dead so that I am free from blame. How many a free woman uncovered from veil, bewailed me at the hour of farewell, weeping on the day of departure, like a dove bewails her young. I rendered myself to the darkness of the nightly travel on four legs as arrows of cypress wood, attaching myself to the hills as an opponent in a lawsuit to the sentences, and they [the hills] attached themselves to the riding beasts, as orphans attach themselves to the executor of the testament, until I moistened the orbits of my eye with tears and the hearts reached the throats and I asked the four legs to seek refuge by means of the windings of a valley and I made myself widen for them [the four legs] the desires, and I said: You [the four legs of the mount] will forget this place, when you put yourselves into contact with Ismā’īl ibn Yūsuf, a generous knight, noble from mother’s and father’s side, who explains what was riddlesome and concealed of the glory, Quss [ibn Sa’īdah] in eloquence and Ka’b [ibn Zuhayr] in magnanimity, and a Luqmān of knowledge and an al-Aḥnaf [ibn Qays] in patience, and more noble in ambitions than Ḥummām and greater in compliance than...

Bistām [ibn Qays]; when he speaks to someone, he likes brevity; when he wins, he refrains from imposing himself; when he is excellent, he makes other things excellent; when he promises something good, he repeats it; he commands and purveys, he rewards and punishes, he is the refuge of mildness and generosity, the travel in winter and summer, the defender of family honour, his racecourse is wide, he does not punish unjustly a miserable man, and does not disappoint a poor man, and perseveres attentively in giving presents, and controls himself to his own benediction, and longs for spending generously, like a stranger longs nostalgically for his family:

1- He united excellent habits with benefits and preceded the latest as well as the first.

2- They went down when his excellence rose like a sun in the nobility of his daily journeys.

3- This is Ibn Yusuf who inherited his merits from benefits

4- By people like him, Fate has become noble such as the nobility of the lance points are supported by the parts next to the iron heads;

5- Who does not seek shelter in his courtyard, is not safe from treacherous Time.

6- He is girding on the sword of the highest achievements when his noble actions are the sword belts.

7- I would fall short of my description of him, even were I the Subhān of Wā’il [ibn Hajjār]:

8- Not is small the perfection which is hoped for someone whose father was not perfect,

9- Generosity lives in his hand like the joints of the fingers belong to the fingers;

10- Shamefulness streams on his face like a fine sword shines on its blades.

When they heard his description which was the forerunner of his good taste, they believed in his glory and took leave from me with congratulations, and I left them waiting.
A. Schippers

One of al-Munfatil's madīhs on Samuel ha-Nagid is particularly famous for the poet's exaggerated praise for Samuel, and for Ibn Bassām's fierce reaction to it. In the following I will give a translation and explanation of the poem. Al-Munfatil's qaṣīdah - whose first amatory introduction line commences with "I ask you to solve the riddle whether they were heading for lotus tree and acacia: while my heart which was their purpose refused to stay in my breast" - was severely criticized by Ibn Bassām, not for its nice nasīb, but for the laudatory part at the end, in which the poet is far too hyperbolic in his praise for the famous Jewish vizier at the Granadian Zirid court. However, I suppose that Ibn Bassām must have had a certain predilection for the beginning of the poem, from which he had not quoted so extensively in his famous anthology.

The first lines of this manneristic nasīb allude to the Arabian desert, by means of its flora, as the unknown destination of the members of the tribe of the beloved woman, and the general thematics of love are introduced by the well-known theme of the heart that leaves the body to accompany its beloved. Then the beloved woman is mentioned. Because of her beauty she is referred to as a wild calf from a sandy ground, and as a woman of high class she is travelling in a camel litter, with long earrings and therefore a long neck - which is a sign of beauty. Then her girdle and bracelet are described with reference to heavenly bodies such as the Pleiades and the Crescent. Apparently she shows her bracelet through her veil like a moon between the clouds across the nightly sky which is as a veil. Her eyes are described as magic, that is, from Babylon. Then her brilliant face is compared to a full moon, and she is brighter than Sirius. Her neck is more an ornament for her necklace than vice versa.

"1. I ask you to solve the riddle whether they were heading for lotus tree and acacia: when my heart which was their goal refused to stay in my breast;
2. In the camel litter which was buttoned up was a wild calf from a

sandy ground, round is the shape of her face with her earrings on the stony tract of her ear bone.

3- As though the Pleiades came forth from her belt, and her buttocks were anxious to guarantee the safety of the waist;

4- Her bracelet reminds me of the form of the crescent from behind the veil she had released before the camel litter

5- They say: magic is in the land of Babylon, but if they were able to see her eyelids with their own eyes, then they would see magic.

6- The ways of her rays of light show you the rise of the full moon and they surprise the star of Sirius from the light of her brightness.

7- O what a neck she has! Which is an ornament for her necklace! When the necklace of someone who is sadly in love with her is the ornament of her neck."

Then the poet speaks of his own burning love and the tears of passion he has shed for the lady: there follows a description of the poet’s nightly travel and of the nightly heaven, which was alluded to in the earlier sky metaphors in connection with the beloved woman. The dark night is compared to a pavilion, heaven to a sea of topazes and the stars to pearls which are brought up from the bottom of the sea by divers. His night is Fateful and has never been so dangerous, his life has never been so full of fear, and to escape from the danger of Fate the poet addresses himself to his saviour, Samuel ha-Nagid or Ibn Yusuf.

8- May the forerunning horses of my tears not forsake my eye, as though my night after them has forsaken my daybreak

9- So speak about a sad person who passed the night wiping his tears with one hand while under the other hand was a burning liver.

10- The dark night had already pitched its pavilion, and made appear its bright stars on the horizons.

11- As though the heaven of the earth were a sea of topazes, when the pearl-diver scattered pearls from above him.
A. Schippers

12- This night lasted long and Fate was part of it, never had I seen a night which bore resemblance to Fate.

13- And [never before] was my eye anointed with people like Ibn Yūsuf, even if we do not exclude the sun and the moon from those.

This last line is the transitional line (takhallus); the poet uses the blackness of the night and the blackness of the collyrium of his eye as opposed to the brightness of Ibn Yūsuf and of the sun and the moon as comparisons and contrasts which have a function in this transition from the erotic introduction (nasīb) to the panegyric (madīḥ).

In the next part of the poem as reported by Ibn Bassām, the Ibn Naghrīlahs – the family of Samuel ha-Nagid – are compared to full moons because of their brightness and to rains because of their generosity. They are contrasted with the other kings on earth (or the other kings of al-Andalus) who lack these qualifications.

14- They were full moons, but we were safe against the dark of the last night of the month; they were seas, but before them we did not see any land.

15- They were rains, when drought kindled a town; they were caves and shelters when a great calamity put us on his earth.

16- The other kings imagined themselves despicable because of an excess of shame while their bowels quivered for them [the Ibn Naghrīlahs] out of panic.

17- And whoever was not excellent in poetry and prose, their generosity taught them poetry and prose.

Then Ibn Bassām says he will not include the next part of the poem because he finds it awfully exaggerated, but some years later he changed his mind and reinserted the hyperbolic passage (ghuluww). In this later part of the poem, Samuel ha-Nagid is referred to in the
18- Those who count Moses among them and enjoy his light, say what you want about them, but you will not arrive at one tenth of their qualities.

19- How many visible marvels on earth they have accomplished and how many generous gifts they have continuously given to people.

20- O you who unites all the glorious qualities of which the other are only small parts; O you who has liberated Generosity in persona when she was a captive.

21- You are superior to the noble men of the Orient and the Occident, just as gold is superior to copper in importance.

22- If people could distinguish between doom and the right way, they only would have to kiss your ten fingers!

23- They would have to kiss both your hands out of dignity [to satisfy God] as though they were the cornerstone of the Ka‘abah, because your right hand is made for prosperity and your left hand is made for rich gifts.

24- Thanks to you I have won this world and I have satisfied my wishes, and thanks to you I long to meet the same gain in the other world.

25- I profess openly the religion of Saturday when I stand before you, and when I am among my compatriots I believe in that religion secretly.

26- Moses was afraid, prudent and poor, and I am safe from fear and poverty.

In this last part, al-Munfatil professes his Jewishness. Ibn Bassām’s comment on this poem was not very favourable, as might be expected from a refugee whose native town – Santarem – had been taken by the Christians and was committed to strong Islamic domination. Through his Dhakhirah we hear of his hatred for the Christians in the descriptions of the many battles involving Christians and Muslims. Now

26 The following lines are also translated by Henri Pérès, Op. cit., pp. 269-70.
A. Schippers

he is very surprised that a non-Muslim like the Jew Samuel ha-Nagid could rise to such a position at the Zirid court of Granada. Full of anger, he writes 27:

May God make this [kind of poems] abominable as a profit, and may He discard [Samuel’s] religion as a religion, to which he [al-Munfatil] attached himself with a close relationship. I do not know any of the circumstances of this ostentatious sinner, and hazardous offender of his Lord, I wonder whether it is because of the fact the he really prefers this weak-minded Jew above all prophets and messengers [of God], or because [Samuel] gave him power over religious and worldly affairs. May God assemble him under His banner, and not let him enter Paradise except by His special care.

In the next passage Ibn Bassām confuses Samuel with his son Yosef, with whom Ibn Hazm polemicized in the treatise called al-Radd 28 and Ibn Bassām even supposes that Samuel’s father – who was also called Yosef – was someone belonging to the poor classes of Granada charged with collecting taxes in Granada. In reality, Samuel came from an aristocratic family in Cordoba or Mérida. The Samuel (Ismā’il ibn Yusuf) in this part of Ibn Bassām’s text was in reality Yosef, who was hated even by his own people, although Ibn Bassām also mentions some more neutral judgement of him, such as that by Ibn al-Saqqa’ the ruler of Cordoba who said: “He is not bad, if only he would forget Judaism”, which probably refers not to Yosef but to Samuel, who had more prestige 29.

At the end of the passage Ibn Bassām describes how Samuel alias Yosef conspired with Ibn Šumādiḥ of Almería against the Zirids: he “imprisoned his master between earthen wine jug and cup”, that is, he

28 This treatise has also been edited by Iḥsan ‘Abbas who thinks Yosef [Yūsuf] is the author.
used to make him so drunk that he was not aware of any conspiracy.  

In the preceding texts we have seen how important Arabic poetry was for the ruling class. Not only was Samuel eager to teach his son Arabic poetry — and was so well versed in Arabic poetry that he created a similar poetry in Hebrew with the same metres and themes as the Arabic — but also Arabic courtiers made their own Arabic panegyrics on a Jewish vizier, who could appreciate it on a high level. Samuel ha-Nagid is a unique example of a vizier to a Muslim king who could openly profess Judaism in that high position. Other Jews in the Arabic world climbed high up the social ladder and were sometimes vizier to a king, such as Ibn Killis in Egypt, but officially they had to be Muslims, even if they perhaps remained Jewish in their hearts.

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A. Schippers

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Al-Munfatil and his Poetical ...  


