

*TE'UDA*

VIII  
STUDIES IN THE WORKS OF  
ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

TEL-AVIV UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
THE CHAIM ROSENBERG SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES

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VIII  
STUDIES IN THE WORKS OF  
ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

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# TE'UDA

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## IBN EZRA'S HARSH LANGUAGE AND BITING HUMOR — REAL DENUNCIATION OR HISPANIC MANNERISM?

by URIEL SIMON

Ibn Ezra severely denounced an 'unidentified' grammarian of eminent status who had professed the daring hypothesis of substitution, and invoked such epithets as: "the prater", "the madman" and "the dreamer", while ruling that "his book ought to be burnt". This diatribe evidently refers to R. Jonah Ibn Janaḥ, who devoted chapter 28 of *Sefer ha-Riqma* to "what is said in one way but means something else". Nevertheless, most scholars have denied the possibility that Ibn Ezra attacked Ibn Janaḥ; while assuming that his fierce language should be taken literally, they deemed it somewhat far-fetched that Ibn Ezra would condemn the most illustrious product of Hebrew linguistics on Spanish soil. However, the correct version of Ibn Ezra's extended commentary to Dan. 1:1, preserved in four MSS, makes it absolutely clear that the proponent of substitution was none other than Ibn Janaḥ. Ibn Ezra did not really mean that *Sefer ha-Riqma* should be burnt, since he used an identical expression against Dunash ben Labrat in relation to the latter's mistaken interpretation of Ps. CXXXIX:17. In a similar vein, Ibn Ezra lashed out against Saadiah Gaon: "and anyone who says thus should be flogged". It is thus evident that Ibn Ezra's usage of harsh language against medieval authors is nothing more than a vehement expression of genuine concern over the damage liable to be caused by a fallacious method of interpretation or an erroneous gloss. This anxiety is most likely the direct outcome of a fundamental principle of the Spanish exegetical school, viz. philology and

\* A shorter English version of this article appeared in: F. Diaz Esteban (Ed.), *Abraham Ibn Ezra and his Age*, Madrid 1990, pp. 325-334.

theology are interrelated disciplines. It is thus evident that the linguistic endeavor has far-reaching results in the realm of doctrine; just as it can illuminate Scripture it can also befog it.

## “HE’AḤEZI BE’SULLAM ḤOKHMA” [HOLD TO THE LADDER OF WISDOM]

by I. LEVIN

In his various writings, Abraham ibn Ezra was deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, especially from its theory of the intelligent human soul. Neoplatonic ideas play a major role not only in his prose works, such as some interesting parts of his commentary on the Bible or certain paragraphs of *Yesod Mor'a*, but also in a number of liturgical poems which are among his best poetical achievements. However, till present, very little scholarly research has been devoted to the study of the philosophical ideas inherent in his poetry.

This paper is a study of the influence of the Neoplatonic theory concerning the human soul on the liturgical poetry of Ibn Ezra. Basing himself on a thorough analysis of the poem *'Imru Bene 'Elim*, the author explores a wide range of his poetry, as well as relevant sections of his major prose compositions. It is argued that Ibn Ezra's philosophy, which was never systematically recorded in one single work, cannot be fully understood without a thorough study of his poetry; neither can his poetry, frequently employing obscure and enigmatic language, be fully understood and appreciated without the study and knowledge of his other works.

The present study reveals that almost all the major problems dealt with in the Neoplatonic theory are found in the liturgical poetry of Ibn Ezra: the source of the soul in the lofty metaphysical realms of emanation, its eternal existence, its “fall” or descent to the sublunar world; the dangers facing it when plunged into the darkness of matter by entering the human body, its yearning and obligation to return to its divine source, its destiny after leaving the body, etc. As a matter of fact, the crucial problem of the



“fall” or descent, the answer to the causal question “Why”, is dealt with in Ibn Ezra’s poetry more clearly than in any other of his literary or scientific works.

The paper argues that the sources directly influencing Ibn Ezra’s speculations on the human intelligent soul, were most probably the following: the philosophical works of the Jewish Neoplatonists Isaac Israeli, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Joseph ibn Zadik and the anonymous writer of the *Kitab ma’āny al-naḥs*, as well as the pseudo-aristotelic *Kitāb a-tulujiyya* and the *Rasā’il ihwān a-ṣafā*. Stressing the great importance of the last mentioned source, the author tends to conclude that the phraseology and sequence of argument of some of its speculations, are clearly reflected in the concise formulations found in a number of poems by R. Abraham ibn Ezra.

## NEW FOLK TALES CONCERNING R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA (AND HIS SON) FROM EGYPT AND IRAQ

by YITZHAK AVISHUR

This article records and discusses ten new folktales from two eastern Jewish communities: three stories from Egypt and seven from Iraq. All of the tales are new, or represent novel versions of previously published tales. Six of them have been transmitted in Judaeo-Arabic, three in the Egyptian dialect and three in Iraqi JA. The remaining four are Hebrew tales from Iraq. The tales derive equally from manuscripts and from oral tradition; two of the latter have been recorded by the present writer, while the other three are taken from the Israel Folktale Archives. These new stories do not merely represent literary contributions, since some of them also contain new biographical information on R. Abraham ibn Ezra and his son.

Why did Jewish legend choose to deal with Ibn Ezra and elevate him to a position usually occupied by such great personages as Moses and Elijah the Prophet?

The answer seems to lie in that rare combination of factors that made Ibn Ezra so towering a figure: great in Torah and wisdom, he was both a poet and an astrologer. However, above all, one must stress his popular image, his poverty and sufferings much like those of the masses, his wandering from place to place, from community to community in the Diaspora, his affection for these communities and his grief over their destruction in North Africa and in the West. All these combined to make him one of the great figures in Jewry, who brought salvation to the oppressed Jewish communities and to individual Jews doomed to torture and death.

Popular legend described Ibn Ezra as the consummator of matches determined in heaven and attributed to him the ability to wrought miracles by use of the Divine Name, as well as the power to traverse vast distances in order to rescue Jews and save communities and individuals from gentile mobs and rulers, from drowning in the ocean and from torture. Ibn Ezra is depicted as the humbler of Jewish oppressors and his concern for the welfare of the Jews even after his acts of salvation was expressed by documents and firmans extracted from monarchs and rulers affirming that they would no longer afflict their Jewish subjects. Ibn Ezra himself is characterized as condescending and humble, actually disguising himself as a servant of lowly people (peasant or stonemason), but, in the end, his dignity — the dignity of his learning — was restored to him and all the people ascertained his identity as an authority of the Torah. He is also portrayed as wise and clever, capable of removing obstacles from the path of the Jews placed there by gentile Jew-haters and as one who caused Jews who had strayed from the faith to return to the God of Israel and His service.

The three tales deriving from the Jewish community of Egypt make explicit mention of the sojourn of Ibn Ezra in Egypt. Although merely legends, these tales, nevertheless, stimulate discussion as to whether Ibn Ezra actually visited Egypt. Although the folktale certainly cannot serve as evidence, it may, nevertheless, contain a kernel of historical truth.

In spite of the fact that Ibn Ezra never visited Iraq, his fame and his writings did reach Iraqi Jewry. His son, Yiḏḥaq, is known to have settled in Iraq; and it is here that he eventually converted to Islam and died. Tales about the father and the son circulated among the Jews of Iraq, some of

them were committed to writing, while others remained part of the oral tradition passed down from generation to generation.

## STUDIES IN THE EXTENDED VERSION OF R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA'S LITURGICAL REBUKE, *BEN 'ADAMA*

by MICHAL SARAF

The special ties between R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and North African Jewish communities produced folk takes woven around the poet's personality, the incorporation of his liturgical poems in collections of North African *piyyutim* and their usage in the liturgy, as well as the composition of paeans and elegies about these communities by this itinerate poet.

This paper focuses on the history of Ibn Ezra's *tokheḥa* (*piyyut* of rebuke), *Ben 'Adama* ("Mortal Man"), as found in Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic printed editions from North Africa, and on its dualistic conception of the life cycle.

The standard version of *Ben 'Adama* describes the course of man's life and his development from birth to death at the age of 80, in contradistinction with parallel versions extant in the Midrash and in other poems, whereby man's life span extends from birth to 100 years of age.

A variant version of Ibn Ezra's *tokheḥa*, *Ben 'Adama*, translated into Judaeo-Arabic, was found to contain an additional 6–7 strophes which extend man's life cycle until the age of 100, including a lengthy optimistic conclusion. This extended version of the *piyyut* was wide-spread in North Africa, and underwent several printings with minor variants.

The question is, do these strophes represent a later addition appended by the translator to Ibn Ezra's *tokheḥa* or did he have access to a lengthier Hebrew version current in North Africa, which served as the basis for his translation into Judaeo-Arabic?

A comparison of the various available translations, gives the impression that the translator used a Hebrew original. Indeed, such an original, unknown from other literary sources, including the Cairo *Genizah*, has

been located in an Algerian festival prayer book. It may thus be concluded that the longer version of the *tokheḥa* which circulated in Algeria, was preserved as an oral tradition which eventually made its appearance in prayer books. This version may have been composed by R. Abraham Ibn Ezra or possibly by an anonymous poet who endeavored to correlate the contents of the *tokheḥa* with the well-known tradition of Midrash and *Piyyut* which extends man's lifespan to the age of 100.

The present paper also deals with an early source from a thirteenth century manuscript: the *piyyut* entitled *Ben 'Adama Yish'al be'Reshito* ("Mortal man inquires of his origin") by the Karaite poet, Moses Dar'i. This *piyyut* is identical in content and form with the above-mentioned *tokheḥa* of Ibn Ezra, including the extension of man's life cycle and path of development until the age of 100, as in the longer version. The fact that Moses Dar'i imitated much of Spanish poetry raises the question whether he also imitated Ibn Ezra's *Ben 'Adama*. If so, then it must be concluded that the longer version of the *tokheḥa*, including the additional strophes found in the Algerian festival prayer book and in the various Judaeo-Arabic translations, served as his *vorlage*.

A literary examination of Ibn Ezra's *tokheḥa* also strengthens the assumption that the extended version is indeed the original one. This version of the *tokheḥa* agrees with the structure of its classic model which stresses the dualistic perspective of man's life cycle: the pessimistic facet — birth, marriage, livelihood, children, old age and death — on the one hand, and the optimistic facet — life in the world-to-come based on the doctrinal principle of recompense, which preaches that the nature and quality of that future life are a function of man's conduct in this world — on the other.

The concluding section of this paper attempts to define the position of the motif of "the age of man" in Ibn Ezra's *tokheḥa*, within the broader context of international literary compositions of similar nature.

## R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA AND JEWISH-CHRISTIAN POLEMICS

by MOISÉS ORFALI

Until present, scholars have not examined the role of R. Abraham ibn Ezra in the rebuttal of Christological interpretations. This article attempts to prove that Ibn Ezra, an exegete well-versed in criticism and, a polemicist by nature, who almost never mentions Christianity in his bible commentaries, and in spite of the fact that no special treatise or polemic work by him against the Christians has remained extant as we have, for example, from members of the Kimhi family (also exiled from Spain), it is important to note that he was not divorced from the Jewish-Christian debate.

The author adduces various striking examples of Ibn Ezra's commentaries which serve as refutation of Christological interpretations of biblical passages. These genuine polemical arguments of Ibn Ezra shows that the Spanish exegete focused upon those verses and chapters whose Christological interpretation provided a real challenge to Judaism, much more than has been previously noted. A close study of ibn Ezra's explanations reveals that they were prompted by the issues raised during the religious disputations (e.g. the Trinity, the Messiah, the virgin birth, Shilo, the 'servant of the Lord', incarnation, etc.). Ibn Ezra was induced to provide apologetic explanations for those verses which Christians offered Christological or figurative interpretation. Needless to say, methods of hermeneutics which independently establish the literal meaning of the text (*peshat*) are based on etymological and grammatical explanations, which are major features of Ibn Ezra's commentaries. However, at times Ibn Ezra does not follow the traditional interpretations of the sages and in some texts which he apparently understood as messianic allusions, he made use of a long-standing but clearly radical Jewish interpretation by maintaining alternate views. These tactics were apparently adopted in order to eliminate any Christological references whatsoever.

Part two of the present study deals with the involvement of Ibn Ezra in both Jewish and non-Jewish polemical literature. It is important to note

that some of his explanations were included in *guide-books* written for the Jewish polemicist, or for the internal satisfaction of the Jewish communities in Germany and France during the 12th–13th centuries. The passages from Ibn Ezra's commentaries included in Raymundi Martini's *Pugio Fidei*, which became the most important and widely circulated medieval anti-Jewish polemic, and supplied polemical source material to disputant friars, Christian scholars, and Jewish apostates, are also illustrated.

ON THE ATTITUDE OF R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA TO THE  
EXEGETICAL USAGE OF THE HERMANEUTIC NORM  
*GEMATRI'A*

by AHARON MONDSCHIEIN

A study of the polemics of R. Abraham ibn Ezra against the homiletical interpretations of the talmudic sages, reveals that he focused on the interpretations *per se*, thus avoiding an open critical discussion of their fundamental methodological principles. This approach is most likely based on Ibn Ezra's tendency to eschew unnecessary criticism and opposition, which could have endangered his entire exegetical endeavor.

Two midrashic methods — explanation based on the plene and defective spellings of the biblical text and explanations based on the numerical value of letters, the subject of the present paper — are an exception to this rule.

An analysis of those instances wherein Ibn Ezra relates to the usage of *gematri'a*, exhibits a vehement negative attitude which derives from three distinct reasons: 1) Fear of exegetical anarchy and the breakdown of linguistic, contextual and logical barriers; 2) The apprehension that this norm would be negatively exploited in the Moslem (and perhaps also: the Christian) anti-Jewish polemic; 3) His reservation of the messianic speculators who utilized *gematri'a* for their purposes.

However, side by side with his awareness of the inherent dangers of

*gematri'a*, R. Abraham ibn Ezra, the poet, who was quite fond of numerical delights, was not prepared to completely relinquish its rhetorical advantages, as evinced by his commentary to Zach. 3:8, wherein he himself utilized this norm.

Nevertheless, the literary construction of the above-mentioned usage of *gematri'a* seems to exhibit the model proposed by Ibn Ezra for the limited usage of this norm: the commentator must first present the reader with the simple meaning of Scripture and bolster it by proofs from the Bible itself, and only then may he append an explanation based on numerical value, accompanied by an appropriate label of identification, *derekh derash* (=by way of homiletical exposition), which attests to its inferior status. This arrangement was necessary in order to stress the uniqueness of the simple meaning of Scripture and its legitimate apparatuses before the student; the homiletical method of interpretation and its various tendencies, merely serving as an ideological, ethical and educational adjunct, was never really meant to be a substitute for the simple meaning.

## DIDACTIC TENDENCIES IN THE SECULAR POETRY OF R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

by MASCHA YIZḤAQI

Considerable portions of the secular poetry of R. Abraham ibn Ezra fulfil a reflective–didactic function and deal with material relating to various scientific disciplines. In this context, the present article examines the polemic poems of Ibn Ezra as well as the 'medical' poem *Shim'u na Devar ha'Rofe*, which is ascribed to him.

The article also includes the complete version of the polemic poems dealing with winter and summer as well as the complete version of the above-mentioned 'medical' poem. These are accompanied by a comparison of the various versions and a verbal commentary.

## IBN EZRA'S POEM "THE TORN COAT" AND "THE GOODLY RAIMENT" OF JACOB

by YOSEFA RACHMAN

This article presents a dovetailed study of Ibn Ezra's poem 'The Torn Coat' and his comment on Gen. 25:34, concerning poverty and clothing.

A systematic classification of the poem's biblical vocabulary, including its connotations, reveals a wide array of situations of poverty experienced by Ibn Ezra. On the other hand, the comment on Genesis positing poverty in the house of Isaac, and Jacob's lack of goodly raiment exposes an unfortunate case of exegetical insensibility, which apparently testifies to a deep-rooted complex regarding clothes within the conscience of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra.

## PROBLEMS OF COMPOSITION AND REDACTION IN THE BIBLE ACCORDING TO R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

by GERSHON BRIN

Ibn Ezra expressed a profound interest in questions concerning the literary composition of the Bible. The subject of editing the biblical text is one of the main issues in his exegetical writings.

In the present paper, these subjects have been discussed in conjunction with Ibn Ezra's method of interpretation concerning some ancient compositions whose names — with or without citations — are mentioned in the Bible, but are, nevertheless, non-extant.

The expression *דברי משה* (= "Moses' words") in Ibn Ezra's writings is also discussed. Ibn Ezra utilizes this term in order to define the editor's [=Moses'] remarks concerning various details that appear in the text. Those segments of the texts that seem to be of later vintage than the others,



are ordinarily defined by Ibn Ezra as דברי משה, which indicates 'the editor's [=Moses] remarks concerning a certain text.'

This line of thought enabled Ibn Ezra to arrive at some of his well-known critical solutions regarding specific texts and issues, such as Genesis 12:6 ("Abram passed through the land... at that time the Canaanites were in the land").

The paper concludes with a discussion of Ibn Ezra's exegesis relating to the titles of the Prophetic Books. In these contexts, Ibn Ezra deals with such cardinal issues as the era of the prophet and the formation of prophetic literature.

## תקצירים באנגלית