

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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ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

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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-nafs*, 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, Yizḥaq, 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

