

THE JEWISH MIDDLE AGES

Edited by

Carol Bakhos and Gerhard Langer



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Biblical Women in the Hebrew Poetry of Al-Andalus

Aurora Salvatierra Ossorio

1. By Way of Introduction: The New Hebrew Poetry of Al-Andalus

During the tenth through fifteenth centuries, first in al-Andalus¹ and later in Christian Spain, medieval Iberia became the stage for one of the most fascinating expressions of Jewish culture throughout its history. Particularly from the time of the Caliphate of Córdoba, the Jews of al-Andalus were a people who prided themselves on living exclusively in accordance with the religious values that served as their sign of identity, zealously protecting themselves from outside influences and yet feeling attracted by the intellectual and artistic climate of the era. Arab culture was thus added to the Jewish tradition as part of the education transmitted from parents to children. Jewish courtiers took on the values of their environment and became experts in Arabic language and literature and patrons of poets and scholars. This process, however, does not in any way suppose a loss of their own identity: the Jewish communities of al-Andalus combined a program of traditional religious study with the study of scientific knowledge and literary creation, both in secular poetry and in the liturgy that was destined for the synagogue. These intellectuals brought together codes of religious law and at the same time investigated grammar and lexicography, composed verses in the style of al-Andalus, and dedicated themselves to philosophy and theology as well.²

1. This is the name given to the Iberian Peninsula while under Muslim power in the Middle Ages.

2. On this new model of the Jewish intellectual, see Raymond Scheindlin, "La situación social y el mundo de valores de los poetas hebreos," in *La sociedad medieval a través de la literatura hispanojudía: VI Curso de cultura hispano-judía y sefardí de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha*, ed. Ricardo Izquierdo Benito and Ángel Sáenz-

Within this process of acculturation led by the Jewish elite in the Arab-Islamic cultural context, poetry became the means of expression par excellence for the Hebrew aristocracy. Their verses combine the best of their own tradition (the Bible, the Hebrew language) with the best of Arabic literary tradition. On the one hand, Arabic poetry was adopted and imitated in all of its characteristics: its meter, genres, and images became part of this new poetry.¹ But together with this system, which was accepted without much debate, the Hebrew language and the Bible act as identifying elements among this select Jewish minority and its literary creations. In these poems, the biblical text becomes a linguistic paradigm and stylistic reference, and Hebrew is the means through which the new ideals of the court society are expressed. In an effort to create their own culture, the Jews of al-Andalus saw their biblical language as an element that would symbolize and unite the community to which they belonged, a community that was conscious of forming a distinct group within the sphere of al-Andalus.

2. The Bible: A Linguistic and Literary Universe

It is within the caliphate of Córdoba where the process of revitalizing Hebrew as a vehicle for poetic expression begins, a phenomenon that is inseparable from the flourishing of grammatical studies of the Bible. In al-Andalus, Hebrew was seen as a gift that God gave humans to express themselves, and this certainty caused authors to worry about the purity and correctness of its use.⁴ These poets made biblical language a model that they tried to faithfully follow, avoiding any change or innovation. Whether this was achieved in practice is another question. The Bible did not only provide these poets a language for poetry: it was also a creative and aesthetic resource. The myriad figures, images, and expressions that fill its

Badillos (Cuenca: Universidad Castilla-La Mancha, 1998), 53–70; Ross Brann, “La poesía en la cultura literaria hebrea de al-Andalus,” in *Poesía hebrea en al-Andalus*, ed. Judit Targarona-Borrás and Ángel Sáenz-Badillos (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2003), 9–25.

3. On Hebrew poetic themes and motifs shared with Arabic poetry, see Arie Schippers, *Spanish Hebrew Poetry and the Arabic Literary Tradition: Themes in Hebrew Andalusian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

4. Ángel Sáenz-Badillos, “Philologists and Poets in Search of the Hebrew Language,” in *Languages of Power in Islamic Spain*, ed. Ross Brann (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1997), 49–75.

pages formed part of the poets’ literary strategy. We must keep in mind that their audiences had a good knowledge of the sacred text through their education and through readings in the synagogue. They were thus capable of understanding changes in the nuance of verses as compared to what was written in the Torah. This allowed the poets to play with biblical references by inserting them into a totally different and nonreligious context: secular poetry. With their audience’s complicity, these poets constructed a literary universe in which quotes, characters, and situations from the Bible were moved into a different textual framework in which they acquired other meanings and values that had to be deciphered by the audience.⁵

Thus Hebrew, the *holy language*, becomes in al-Andalus the vehicle for writing secular poetry that included themes absent until then from the Jewish tradition.⁶ The Bible, its motifs, and topics were used without objection to discuss amorous relationships (with both female and male characters) and to compose poems about wine that have nothing to do with religion and were recited in courtly parties far removed from the synagogue’s sphere.

It is worth questioning whether this introduction of the biblical text into a profane sociocultural setting far removed from the Jewish tradition could be considered a desacralization of the Scriptures. It is not unreasonable to think that, among more orthodox communities, this practice would have indeed merited a negative judgment. In fact, we have some early testimonials that reflect a certain discomfort around this literary convention, and we know that, later Maimonides himself was in disagreement with such use of the Bible.⁷ Except for a few instances, though, we

5. This use of biblical references, called *shibbutz* (insertions) is one of the most used conventions in the Hebrew poetry of al-Andalus. A poem can eventually be composed of a mosaic of quotes taken from the Bible which link to one another in order to deal with profane ideas (love, wine, praise, etc.). For a presentation on this process, see Shari Lowin, *Arabic and Hebrew Love Poems in al-Andalus* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11–13.

6. On the other hand, Arabic, which was the language of communication for the Jews of al-Andalus, was employed in the rest of the texts these scholars composed on secular subjects (philosophy, medicine, science). In this vein, an interesting analysis of the role that the Hebrew language played in the process of constructing the identity of the medieval Jewish society from the tenth century onward can be found in Esperanza Alfonso, *Islamic Culture through Jewish Eyes: Al Andalus from the Tenth to Twelfth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9–11.

7. Yosef Tobl, “Maimonides’ Attitude towards Secular Poetry, Secular Arab and Hebrew Literature, Liturgical Poetry and towards their Cultural Environment,” in

do not have proof that Jewish Andalusian society understood this use of Scripture to be scandalously irreligious. Although the poets themselves express on occasion certain reservations, one thing is certain: medieval Hebrew poetry was defined by the way Jewish poets reclaimed their culture through their use of the Bible.

3. Biblical Women in Courtly Poetry

This phenomenon of fusing Arabic stylistic conventions with the world of the Bible allows for the appearance of numerous Biblical characters. However, in secular poetry, which was the great innovation of medieval Jewish literature, very few female figures from the books of the Bible appear, and those who do appear are highly stereotyped. This contrasts with the much more extensive gallery of male characters who appear in the verses. These include both negative features (Agag, Haman, Amalek, etc.) as well as positive characters (Noah, Joseph, David, etc.). Even though these male characters often reflect stereotypical patterns, their use in a large number of poetic modalities also allows for richer and more innovative literature.

When examining the role of biblical male and female figures in medieval Jewish poetry, however, it is necessary to keep in mind that the poems written in al-Andalus respond to a predetermined literary system to which the authors had to adhere. The true challenge for the poet was to make something new and original by combining forms, characters, voices, and spaces that were predetermined and required by convention. Poetry in this context was not a vehicle for expressing personal experiences or for narrating biographical anecdotes. The poet did not try to reflect real episodes but rather sought to embellish a known reality until it became almost unrecognizable while working within the established canon. In this sense, it was common for poets to regularly resort to the same models.

In the case of female characters, this challenge was accentuated, since there were so few genres that allowed for their presence (and those that did were counted among the most conventional). Songs of love and wine and wedding poems gave female figures the most textual representation,⁸

Between Hebrew and Arabic Poetry: Studies in Spanish Medieval Poetry (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 422–66.

8. On these genres, one may consult, among others, Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women and Death: Medieval Hebrew Poetry on the Good Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986); Aurora Salvatierra Ossorio, *Cantos de boda hispano-*

but we cannot forget that we are dealing with a literature that was created by men and destined fundamentally for a male audience. The verses reflect their ideas and tastes, and the female representations fit their accepted cultural and literary framework. Their fundamental goal was to show their mastery of the language and their capacity for achieving complex metaphors or interweaving biblical verses in ways that their audience would admire. And these assumptions conditioned the selection and treatment of women of the Bible in this poetry, blurring the qualities that individualized them.⁹

In fact, poetic fiction is constructed on a dramatic monologue that functions around the absence of an ideal love; she makes her lover suffer from a distance, often to the point of death. These depictions of women thus represent more of an “idea” of the loved one rather than a detailed description of the “love” herself within the structure of this poetic game. This explains why we do not find real or individualized women who are invoked through their biblical ancestors. The female characters who populate these poems are the gazelle or the doe or the dove—terms frequently used to refer to beloved maidens without giving their actual names. Even though many of the images that describe these women originate in the Torah, these characters all respond to the same model built upon common ideas linked to the poetic genre.

The biblical women used by the poets are, with few exceptions, those whom the Jewish community identified with stereotypes of the beloved or the faithful spouse. In general, from the catalog of female characters in the Bible those who tend to be considered “bad women” are excluded (Eve, Lot’s wife, Potiphar’s wife, etc.), though there is little mention of the many who are considered good women either, especially if they are also strong, heroines, or prophetesses (Deborah,¹⁰ Miriam, Rahab). The female

hebreos: Antología (Córdoba: El Almendro, 1998). For this work, Shari Lowin’s book, *Arabic and Hebrew Love Poems in al-Andalus* (New York: Routledge, 2014), is of special interest.

9. The poets certainly make an effort to convince us that their loved one is unique and that no one is comparable to her. But all of the women look alike, and thus they represent a single stereotype. On the conventional traits used to describe a love, see Schippers, *Spanish Hebrew Poetry*, 168–212.

10. The war poems of Shmuel ibn Nagrella (Shmuel ha-Nagid) are an exception to this general rule, where on occasion he refers to Deborah, as in the following verse: “Do to them as to Sisera and for me as you did for Baraq and Deborah.” See Leon J. Weinberger, *Jewish Prince in Moslem Spain: Selected Poems of Samuel ibn Nagrella* (Alabama:

characters that are of most interest are those that the public could easily associate with love, with being a good wife, and, above all, with beauty. Despite the fact that the majority of women who appear in the Bible are, in one moment or another, described as beautiful (Sarah in Gen 12:11, Rebecca in Gen 24:16, Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11:2, Abishag in 1 Kgs 1:3-4, etc.), only a few of them are used, and only on a few occasions, to sing of amorous passion or marriage. The same use is made of male characters like Joseph or David to describe the beauty of the male lover.¹¹ In both cases, we are dealing with an attempt to take advantage of the resonance that a simple name can produce in a reader/listener who is familiar with the biblical text by assigning to the character the same role in the medieval poem that he or she played in the Bible.

Among the few women who appear in these love poems is Abigail, Nabal's wife and later David's (1 Sam 25:14-42). Shlomo ibn Gabirol, a poet from Málaga in the eleventh century, mentions her to highlight the attractiveness of the young woman who takes her lover prisoner and then abandons him:

What is the matter with Abigail that first she took
my soul with her eyes and then forsook it?
All her suitors told her that I hate her
With a most enduring hatred.
Yet despite this slander, and though she has forgotten my affection
I shall keep love's pact, I shall not forget.
The son of Jesse sent messengers to Abigail's house (1 Sam 25:39)
But I shall go to her in person, not by proxy.
In time of exile no sacrifices can be offered to God;
Then I shall slaughter whole offerings and sacrifice to this woman.¹²

The University of Alabama Press, 1973), 25. Hebrew text and Spanish translation in Ángel Sáenz-Badillos and Judit Targarona-Borrás, *Semuel ha-Nagid: Poemas I; Desde el campo de batalla; Granada 1038-1056; Edición del texto hebreo, introducción, traducción y notas* (Córdoba: El Almendro, 1988), 10.

11. See for example the well-known poem of Yishaq ibn Mar Shaul in which the male lover is described as follows: "Like Joseph in appearance, with Adonijah's hair / his eyes like Ben Yishai's, kill me like Uriah." English translation in Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain 950-1492* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 28-29. Hebrew text and Spanish translation in Federico Pérez Castro, *Poesía secular hispano-hebreo* (Madrid: CSIC, 1989), 23.

12. See T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 312. Hebrew text in Hayyim Brody and Jaim Schirmann, eds., *Solomon ibn Gabirol*:

Of the woman characterized as "intelligent and beautiful" in 1 Sam 25:3, it is this last trait (her beauty) which is used to describe the beloved. What stands out about her in this context is her power to subdue her lover with just a glance. Thus, the function of the female character is to cause pain to whomever desires her and to even take away life through the force of her passion. And if, as we see in the following poem, other virtues are alluded to, it is to lament their loss since the "fair" Abigail has turned into a Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:31):

In form you're like a stately palm,
Your beauty's like the sun.
You fancied yourself a righteous girl
Fair like Abigail.
Now I know you want to kill me,
You're evil like Jezebel.
All splendor and beauty,
I've grown sick from your love.
So release my soul from Hades,
In front of you I will not die.¹³

Although infrequent, we find some poems that feature a female from the Bible whose role is completely transformed with respect to the original text. In this way the author shows his ability to create unexpected associations with well-known themes. A very interesting case is, again, that of Shlomo ibn Gabirol:

Like Amnon sick am I, so call Tamar
And tell her one who loves her is snared by death.
Quick, friends, companions, bring her here to me.
The only thing I ask of you is this:
Adorn her head with jewels, bedeck her well,
And send along with her a cup of wine.
If she would pour for me she might put out
The burning pain wasting my throbbing flesh.¹⁴

Secular Poems [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Schocken Institute, 1974), 27. For a discussion of Ibn Gabirol's poetry, see the essay by Meret Gutmann-Grün in this volume.

13. My own translation. Hebrew text in Brody and Schirmann, *Solomon ibn Gabirol*, 159.

14. See Scheindlin, *Wine, Women and Death*, 111.

The poet from Málaga makes use of the dramatic and violent biblical story narrated in 2 Sam 13. Its protagonists are Amnon, David's son, and his sister Tamar, a beautiful virgin according to the text. The Andalusian author projects this episode within the framework of a love poem and rereads it in light of the conventions of this genre in al-Andalus (beauty, the sickness of love, wine, etc.). The Jewish reader knows what happened to the Tamar of the Bible, and Ibn Gabirol knows what effect he will produce when transforming this tale of rape and incest into an idyllic scene between two people in love. An episode of tragic consequences in the sacred text appears here as courtly entertainment. In both cases, however, Tamar continues to be beautiful and to awaken a sick passion in Amnon.¹⁵

More common is the allusion to certain biblical women in wedding poems, secular compositions where Jewish marriage is celebrated. There is an attempt in these poems to create an association between the anonymous bride and biblical women who are examples of virtue. The wife is frequently compared to Rachel, Leah, or Anna, and there is an emphasis on her value as a future mother or her dedication to marriage. We can see this in the following verses taken from two nuptial poems by Yishaq ibn Gayyat (eleventh century). The first reads, "May your wife be like a fruitful vine within your secret house (Ps 128:3) / May God make the woman who enters / your home be like Rachel and Leah." The second poem declares, "Beautiful gazelle, loved by young men, / be blessed among the most beautiful of women / be visited as Anna by a male son / and may your son live for many years!"¹⁶ In these and other similar verses, it is the ability to be a mother that is the most important attribute for these women.

The mention of these biblical characters in the poem does not indicate that this is the wife's real name—her identity is not revealed. In fact, the female protagonists in these songs often have the same name: Esther, perhaps the biblical bride par excellence. Most often, the poet uses the Hebrew name that the queen receives in the Bible: *Hadassah* (Esth 2:7, 15). This term is quite similar to the Hebrew word *hadas* ("myrtle"), a bush associated with fertility in the Jewish tradition and, because of its good smell and the shade it provides, is used to adorn the nuptial *huppah*. The

15. For the interpretation of this poem, see Scheindlin, *Wine, Women and Death*, 111–13; Lowin, *Arabic and Hebrew Love Poems*, 179–203.

16. Spanish translation in Salvatierra Ossorio, *Cantos de boda hispanohebreos*, 31 and 33; English translation by Anna Deckert; Hebrew text in Yonah David, *The Poems of Rabbi Isaac ibn Gayyat* (Jerusalem: Ahshav, 1987), 374 and 389.

similar sounding *Hadassah hadas* (Esther myrtle) is part of the wordplay seen in this fragment of a poem from Yehudah ha Levi (eleventh-twelfth centuries):

From the myrtle blows over Hadassah a wind of love,
which cures he who is sick from love.
It passes through the garden beds of balsam trees (Song 5:13)
Looking anxiously at the fawns with a present
and persuades them with tenderness.
The hand of love has written on them:
the moment of the union comes closer.¹⁷

The use of this homophonic convention is retained when the wife is presented in some of these songs as "the daughter of Abihail" (Esth 9:29), in his own turn a model for a fair man:

Why risest thou, O sun, why shinest thou?
The turn of Abihail's daughter hath come
She shameth the face of the sun
with the splendor of her form,
She hindereth the host of heaven from their work.
She chooseth not to dwell in the heavens above,
But maketh her heaven of the myrtle tree.¹⁸

In these verses the bride's beauty makes the sun and stars useless since she shines brighter than they do, and yet she has renounced living in the heavens to inhabit the nuptial room adorned with myrtle.

The presence of Rachel, Esther, and other women from the Bible responds, above all, to the desire to create beauty with language. As a result, the poets selectively read from the entire corpus of female characters within the Torah, limiting both their number and their characterizing traits.

17. Spanish translation in Salvatierra Ossorio, *Cantos de boda hispanohebreos*, 74; English translation by Anna Deckert; Hebrew text in Hayyim Brody, ed., *Dīwān des Abū -l-Hasān Jehuda ha-Levi* [Hebrew], 3 vols. (Berlin: Schriften des Vereins Mekize Nirdamin, 1894–1930), 2:55–56.

18. English translation in Nina Salaman, *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1924), 54; Hebrew text and Spanish translation in Ángel Sáenz-Badillos and Judit Targarona-Borrás, *Yehudah ha-Levi: Poemas* (Madrid: Editorial Alfaguara, 1994), 115; see also 149.

4. The Beloved in the Song of Songs: The Court and the Synagogue

Outside of these and other similar examples, the presence of women from the Bible is not very meaningful in secular Hebrew poetry because of the characteristics of the genre itself. But this literature does give space to a woman who is, without a doubt, the most celebrated female biblical protagonist in this genre: the beloved of the Song of Songs. As was previously mentioned, when Jewish authors started to compose poetry in Hebrew using the Andalusian style, the authors judaize the Arabic literature by using the Torah as a reference. The Song became a key text when adapting and bringing the Jewish public toward the Arab style of love poetry because of the numerous literary traditions that the two share. In both traditions the gardens, aromas, and sounds that make up the amorous setting, and the comparisons and metaphors that describe the lovers or their emotions, have a great deal in common. Conscious of these similarities, the Hebrew poets brought together Arab motifs and biblical allusions, and in this way they created a singular lyrical landscape where there is a blurring of lines between the profane and the religious.

The fixed elements that describe the idealized woman in Arabic love poetry (pale face, dark hair, thin body, red lips) and the topical situations of which she is the protagonist (a plea to the beloved, the pain of separation) are re-elaborated and reread in light of the Hebrew sources. In this way, the lover in secular songs fuses with the Shulamite, the beloved of the Songs. Images such as the hill of frankincense (Song 4:7), the dripping myrrh (5:5), the wine on the lips (1:1), the cheeks like pomegranates (4:3), and the beloved as sister or the spying watchmen are introduced in the poems and allow the Jewish aristocracy to enjoy the erotic poetry of al-Andalus through their own cultural references. The beloved of the Song is thus adapted to the literary model that is recreated in these medieval texts; she becomes, above all, a beautiful woman whose great virtue is her ability to make others fall in love with her.

The Hebrew poets will only very rarely allow us to hear the woman's voice or know her feelings. In appearance, the women are powerful in the poetry of al-Andalus: they are often described with physical characteristics that underline their aggressive nature (curls like serpents, breasts sharp as swords, hearts like rocks). In fact, it is a cliché that their strength is in direct opposition to the apparent weakness of their lovers, the victims of their beauty. When digging into these poems, however, one can see that it is the lover, the male character, who controls his glance, who controls

language. It is he who looks at her and thus turns her into an object of desire.¹⁹ The female beloveds, although the lives of their lovers come to depend upon them, generally remain silent. And the Shulamite is not in this way an exception. Unlike what happens in the biblical text, she is also silent in these love poems.

On the other hand, in the wedding songs the female voice is heard again. In this genre, the woman converses frequently with the groom since the ideal of love that is celebrated here is very different: their relationship is now harmonious, mutual, and long-lasting; the community approves of it and God blesses it. The bride, however, still retains some character traits from the love poems. She continues to be the erotic figure from the period before the marriage and continues to be described with images that underline the beauty of her face, her hair, her eyes, or her breasts. And again the Jewish authors find material from the Song of Songs, although any association to Eros that might be deemed inconvenient is accommodated to the new context. It is worth examining an example from a fragment of a *muwashshah*, a strophic poem of Arabic origin, by Yehudah ha-Levi:

My beloved, turn in to me, (Song 4:16)
To my porch and my temples,
To feed in the gardens. (Song 6:2)

Show thyself in my tents,
Among the beds of mine aloe tress,
To gather lilies

Behold, for thee, breast of pomegranates
Given for a gift!
My beloved is mine and I am his
When I knock at the habitation of his Temple;
To feed in the gardens. (Song 6:3)

His banner over me is love,
And his left hand is under my head;
To gather lilies. (Song 2:4)²⁰

19. See Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), esp. 30–63.

20. English translation by Salaman, *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*, 64–65; Hebrew text and Spanish translation in Saénz-Badillos and Targarona-Borrás, *Yehudah ha-Levi. Poemas*, 121, vv. 5–13.

The influence of Arabic poetry is not limited to this type of secular composition. Surprisingly, in the synagogue congregants began to recite verses whose style comes from Andalusian culture. Although Jews had used poems (*piyyutim*) in Palestine since the Byzantine era to accompany different parts of the liturgy, in al-Andalus they prayed in Hebrew with texts that imitate love poems. Their audience was no longer a small group of courtesans holding a courtly celebration in a garden. It was the assembly, the entire Jewish community, who listened to the poetry, distant from their own tradition, in a religious setting. Upon hearing it in the synagogue, they would have perceived the fusion of elements of Arabic love poems with other elements from the Song of Songs. Centuries earlier ancient synagogal poetry had taken from the Song of Songs its model to present God and Israel as lovers who, although separated, would finally be united. But here, in medieval Jewish poetry, the verses take on a different light since they take advantage of the similarities between the situations and images from the biblical book and erotic Arab poetry, blurring the lines between the secular and the religious.²¹

These Jewish authors, as we have seen, were conscious of the number of parallels that existed between the love poetry of al-Andalus and the Song. These similarities also allowed them to transmit a religious message in the main Jewish space: the synagogue. For example, “the friends of the lover”—a motif whose function in secular poetry is to observe and censure one’s surrender to passion—came to identify themselves with the “daughters of Jerusalem” (Song 1:5, 7, etc.) in the poetry of the synagogue. And within this new framework this collective character (“daughters of Jerusalem”), who in the Song looks jealously at the Shulamite, is transformed in the religious poems into a symbol of Israel’s detractors during the exile. In a similar way, the sad and frustrated love typical of Andalusian poems becomes a vehicle to develop key themes of liturgical poetry. Concretely, the problem of exile finds in this convention an effective vehicle to express the pain caused by God’s abandonment and the trust in recovering His love.

Thematically, the Jewish poets applied an allegorical procedure to love poetry that is similar to what was used in the traditional interpretation of the Song of Songs. Taking advantage of similarities with Arabic models,

21. Raymond P. Scheindlin, *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel and the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 18–25 and 36–41.

the Jewish poets carried out a transfer to liturgical poetry. This happens with the gazelle, an image of the beloved in the verses of al Andalus. This motif is made to equal that of the gazelle of the Bible (for example, in Prov 5:19), which in turn comes to symbolize God and his people. In the following poem, written by Ibn Gabirol, we hear one of these dialogues where Israel, like an abandoned bride, longs for the return of its beloved, the messiah:

The gate long shut
Get up and throw it wide;
The stag long fled
Send him to my side.
When one day you come
To lie between my breasts,
That day your scent
Will cling to me like wine.
How shall I know his face, O lovely bride,
The lover you are asking me to send?
A ruddy face, and lovely eyes
A handsome man to see?
Aye, that’s my love! Aye, that’s my friend!
Anoint that one for me!²²

The beloved of the Song has found a new setting in these poems in which to show off her beauty and the strength of her feelings. With images that secular poetry has made its own, she expresses the sadness of separation or the desire for reuniting. But in the synagogue, the lover is no longer the young woman who awakens her lover’s passion and submits him to her will. She now personifies Israel and her partner is none other than the Redeemer for whom the Jewish community waits.

5. Final Reflections

If Hebrew poetry in medieval Spain does indeed offer us a very limited and prescribed use of the women in the Bible, their presence in these verses is an interesting change in respect to how they were represented in prior Jewish literature. The rereading that is offered of the beloved of the Song of

22. See Scheindlin, *Gazelle*, 91; Hebrew text in Hayyim Schirmann, ed., *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Provence*, vol. 1 [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954), 240.

Songs is of particular interest as it shows us how her figure is rebuilt and singularized to respond to the tastes and circumstances of Jewish communities in medieval Iberia. Within this new framework the Shulamite also recovers characteristics that had been lost during an earlier period.

There is no better way to see the change that occurred than to think about classic Jewish literature (roughly from the third through the eighth centuries). There, the interest in the Song of Songs and its protagonist was oriented toward religious questions on the interpretation of the sacred texts, both in the Written Law (Bible) as well as in the Oral Law (*Mishnah*). In works composed during this period, the Song, like the rest of the biblical books, was not of interest for its literary value but only for its theological-religious intention. It is sufficient for this purpose to think about the Midrash Song of Songs. In this work almost all of the verses of the biblical book are meticulously discussed, and each of them is seen as an image of the main acts of liberation from the history of Israel. This is the interpretation, for example, of the verses that start that text:

"The words of the Torah are **compared** to water, to wine, to oil, to honey and to milk (...) Another explanation: *For thy loved ones are better than wine* refers to the patriarchs. *Than wine* indicates the **princes** (...) Another explanation: *For thy loved ones* indicates the offerings; *Than wine* indicates the drink-offerings (...) Another explanation: *For better are thy loved ones*: This refers to Israel. *Than wine*: This refers to the **Gentiles'** nations.²³

The beloved in these writings is no longer the passionate woman who looks all night for her lover. The free and happy woman has become an allegory; her emotions and body are diminished. Something similar happens in a passage taken from the Babylonian Talmud in relation to Song 7:3:

R. Aha Haninah said: Scripture states, '*Thy navel is like a round goblet [aggan ha-sahar] wherein no mingled wine is wanting*' (Song 7:3). '*Thy navel*'—that is the Sanhedrin. Why was it called '*navel*'?—Because it sat at the navel-point of the world. [Why] *goblet [aggan]*?—Because it protects [*meggin*] the whole world. [Why] *round [ha-sahar]*?—Because it is moon-shaped. [Why] *in which no mingled wine is wanting?*—i.e., if

23. English translation in Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Song of Songs* (London: Soncino, 1977), 33–36.

one of them had to leave, it had to be ascertained if twenty three, corresponding to the number of the minor Sanhedrin, were left in which case he might go out; if not, he might not depart. Thy belly is like a heap of wheat. Just as all benefit from a heap of wheat, so do all benefit from the deliberations of the Sanhedrin." (b. Sanh. 37a)²⁴

In a similar vein, the Targum (the Aramaic translation of the Bible), in another classic interpretation, reads the relationship between the lovers of the Song as an allegory of the relationship of God with Israel from the time of the exodus from Egypt until the end of the exile when the messiah arrives.²⁵

However, when the center of Jewish life is moved from the East to the lands of al-Andalus, certain lost traits of the woman in the Song, such as her beauty, will again become important in Hebrew literature. The rich Andalusian culture made it possible for liturgical and secular poetry to recover the passion of the Bible's text and to return the female lover to her place as protagonist. From the tenth century onward, verses that speak of kisses, caresses, and embraces will again be heard. When evoking the Shulamite and some other female figures, the poets embellish their verses but, at the same time, they offer a renewed vision and distinctive reading of the Torah. In their verses, traditional images and themes are updated in order to allow the female lover of the Song to express her longing for messianic times while in the synagogue, but also to celebrate secular love in courtly gatherings while enjoying wine and music in the garden. In both of these spaces, the woman of the Song of Songs takes life and allows us to hear her voice again.

24. English translation in Isidore Epstein, ed., *Soncino Babylonian Talmud. Sanhedrin* (London: Soncino, 1935).

25. English translation in Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles: Translated with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus and Notes* (London: T&T Clark, 2003).