CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CHASE AS AN ALLEGORY FOR THE WRONG AND SUFFERINGS IN THE WORLD AS FOUND IN TAHKEMONI BY YEHUDA ALḤARIZI AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF ARABIC POETRY

I. Preface

The first fruits of the direct contact between Hebrew poetry and Arabic poetry came into being only in the middle of the 10th Century, when Arabic poetry was already at its peak during the Abassid period, reaching its heyday, first, in Iraq, and even more prominently afterwards, in Andalusia. This fact, alongside others, would leave an indelible mark on the genre of Hebrew verse in Spain for generations to come, and which inclined itself more to the subtle style found in Arabic verse as developed during the Abassid and Andalusian period, and less to the war-like and desert nature of verse found during the jāhiliyya. Of all the poets of Jewish Andalusia, only Šemuel Ha-Nagid (993–1056) incorporated the use of warfare and glory (hamāsa) into his poetry, and even this can be attributed more to the poetic verses of Mutanabbi (d. 965), who came before him, than to the influences from heroic poetry dating back to the jāhiliyya.1 It goes without saying that Hebrew verse in Christian Spain was detached completely from all the hustle and bustle of life brought on by the jāhiliyya, and, subsequently, from the heroism portrayed in its verse.2

Then, in an astounding manner, we find in Tahkemoni, the maqāmāt of Yehuda Alḥarizi (ca. 1170–1225) who lived in the post-Andalusian period, the use of many themes and motifs that had become well-known through Arabic literature. For example: the seven rules applied to prose which he arranged and formulated in the eighteenth chapter of his work, following ‘amūd al-ši’r in Marzūqi’s introduction to Abū-Tammām’s hamāsa.3 What is yet even more astounding is the adoption of certain motifs and ideas known only from Arabic poetry

from the jāhiliyya period, or from the advent of Islam where the old tradition was still perpetuated with full vigor. These themes, such as warfare and hunting (henceforth: ‘the Chase’), were not regarded by the Jewish poets of Spain—whether they had come from the Andalusian period or from the period of Christianity. In the following pages, only the maqāma known as ‘The Hunter’ will be discussed, with the intent of arriving at its underlying meaning and moral lesson by studying what was written therein. In addition, and without confining ourselves strictly to that discussion on Jewish literature, our wider aim is to conduct a comparative study on Arabic literature written during the same period. The need for this study is given even further impetus by the fact that the subject of ‘the Chase’ does not find a place at all in the writings of this genre (maqāmāt) made by al-Hamādhanī and al-Ḥarīrī, works that were, no doubt, familiar to Alḥarizi who endeavored to emulate the style, and even procured a translation of the works of al-Ḥarīrī, giving it the name Maḥbéroth ʿItiʾel. Alḥarizi’s efforts, in this regard, have given to them a Hebrew-biblical dimension.5

This maḥbéroth (the Hebrew term for maqāma), has already become the subject of discussion amongst some scholars: Dishon, Segal, Oettinger and Khāṭīb.6 The latter is the only one whose research has not been limited to the Hebrew maḥbéroth, but to its comparative study as well, just as he has written (translated from Hebrew): “The recurring theme of the chase in the twenty-fifth maqāma of Alḥarizi and a comparison with Arabic poems of the chase.” The import of our study, therefore, is to treat on that maḥbéroth known as ‘the Hunter’ as it relates to poems of the chase found in ancient Arabic verse and to those from the Abassid period, but, especially, from an anthropological and philosophical perspective. This will enable us to determine more accurately to what extent and in which manner Alḥarizi was influenced by the Arabian poems of ‘the Chase,’ and where he deviated from the accepted norms of this genre in his own Hebrew verse, creating a novelty, as it were, in Hebrew verse. This comparative study, by revealing the literary sources available to Alḥarizi when he wrote the

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5 On the methods employed in the translation of Maḥbéroth ʿItiʾel, see Lavi 1979; 1983; 1984. Al-maqāma al-asadiyya (the sixth in the Maqāmāt of Hamadhānī) does not apply here since the killing of the lion described in the verse was not done through an act of the chase.