CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAIMONIDES’ ATTITUDE TOWARDS SECULAR POETRY, SECULAR ARAB AND HEBREW LITERATURE, LITURGICAL POETRY, AND TOWARDS THEIR CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

I. Introduction: State of the Research

Various researchers have discussed Maimonides’ attitude toward poetry, principally H. Schirmann, who studied medieval Hebrew poetry, and M.S. Geshuri, the Jewish music researcher, both of the previous generation of researchers of Judaic studies.1 In recent years, three researchers have dealt with Maimonides’ attitude toward poetry: (a) J. Blidstein, who in his book on prayer in Maimonides’ halakhic philosophy, and, as a matter of course, directed his analysis to Maimonides’ attitude toward liturgical poetry that was integrated into prayer; (b) A. Sáens-Badillos, a scholar of Hebrew linguistics and Hebrew poetry in Spain, whose Spanish study relates mainly to secular poetry and provides the most comprehensive summary of the subject yet to be presented; and (c) J. Kraemer, whose approach is from the point of view of the division accepted in Islam of people’s behavior into five categories.2 Here we discuss the subject in a more general framework, focusing on the status of secular poetry in Jewish culture in the Arab-Muslim space basing on Maimonides’ pronouncements in his treatises in regard to this poetry and to both Hebrew and Arabic literature in general.

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1 Schirmann 1935; Schirmann-Fleischer 1997, pp. 279–283; Geshuri 1935; on Maimonides and Arabic literature, see Steinschneider 1901, Chapter 31, pp. 609–610.
Maimonides was not the first to express reservations over Arabic secular literature and the material hedonism connected with it. It should be recalled that Arabic secular poetry cannot be evaluated only according to measures of prosody and linguistics, but also according to social-ideological measures. The study of medieval Hebrew poetry has stressed how secular Hebrew poetry initially—that is, in the first generation of the poets of Spain in the courtyard of Ḥisdai ibn Ẓaprūṭ in Córdoba in the early part of the second half of the 10th century—had to cope. This was due to Menahem b. Saruq and his disciples’ documenting their objection to the new school of Hebrew poetry that Dunash b. Labrat had brought with him from the Muslim East. The controversy that broke out between the two poet-linguists, including between their respective circles, revolved only around matters of prosody and linguistics. The polemic was not heard in relation to the social-ideological aspects of the new school, which was borrowed from Arabic poetry. However, this school did have to contend with critiques of its religious-nationalist-social stance. In actuality, though, and this has not received sufficient analysis, a clear manifestation of this criticism is found in two of Dunash’s poems, which are considered the first secular Hebrew poems of the new school that were written in Spain: Ve-omer al tišan and De’e libbi. In each of these poems, the objection is expressed, not to the form or to the language in which they are written, but to the hedonism connected with poetry. For our purposes, there is no difference whether Dunash identified with the ideological criticism of the hedonism or only paid lip service to the expected objection, for our discussion is concerned not with Dunash’s attitude toward poetry, but with the standing of secular poetry in Jewish society and the attitude of the scholars toward it.³

The source of the ideological objection to secular poetry was not in Spain, where it had gained the support of Ḥisdai, the confidence of the Muslim Caliph ʿAbd al-Rahmān III, but in the East, principally on the part of the Babylonian Geonim, Saʿadia at their head.⁴ Moše Gaon (825–836) had already responded to the question of “a witness about

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³ See, above, Chapters One, Two (n. 28), and Five 5 (Section B).
⁴ On Saʿadia’s reservations about secular poetry, see Tobi 2004, pp. 107–114, 132–137, 140.