CHAPTER THREE

AL-ANDALUS AND SEFARAD IN THE HEBREW QAŞĪDA

Introduction

The previous chapters have focused on articulations of loss and nostalgia as expressed in Arabic poetry and prose. As shown, the rithāʾ al-mudun and the maqāma as executed by Ibn Shuhayd and al-Saraqusṭī respectively illustrate intersections of literary convention and personal or communal experiences. These artistic expressions, composed on the heels of real military/political losses and cultural threats, illustrate the multiple discourses available to the Arab litterateur, and the requisite understanding of those discourses on the part of the community to which he speaks and whose emotions he articulates. Whether in poetry or prose, the Arabic writer draws upon nostalgic sentiments present in the earliest pre-Islamic odes. These sentiments are an essential component of the qaṣīda and related forms of literature, and centuries after Imruʾ al-Qays wept over the ruins of his beloved’s abandoned campsite, the nostalgic tone remained pertinent and useful to the writer expressing a wide range of emotions in a variety of contexts. As the Arabs in al-Andalus faced challenges to their political and cultural hegemony, feelings of loss, nostalgia, and alienation from both a real and imagined past found expression in the qaṣīda as a whole, and in particular in the introductory verses of the nasīb.

Like his Arab counterpart, the Jewish Andalusī poet composing poems in Hebrew drew on the rich literary tradition of the pre-Islamic poets. As it has been shown elsewhere, the Jewish writer was very much a part of the Arabic literary tradition in terms of intellectual foundations, training, and influence.¹ However, this literature cannot be read simply as Arabic literature written in Hebrew. Because the language is

biblical Hebrew, the referential field is quite different from that of Arabic poetry, and therefore has the potential to cover vastly different territory from that of its Arabic counterpart. By writing in biblical Hebrew, the Jewish poet removes his audience from the ‘real’ and ‘stable’ ground of contemporary al-Andalus and connects it to the broader Jewish religious, historical, and cultural experience, even when he composes in an undeniably Arabic style. This occurs not only through the poet’s choice of language, but also by the collective memory and knowledge of the intended audience. So while these poets utilized a language that expressed their view of “themselves as links in an unending chain of Jewish experience that began with the divine call to Abraham…and would culminate in the splendor of redemption,” they lived very much in the Arabo-Muslim dominated and defined culture of the time; they wrote philosophical, literary, grammatical, and religious treatises in Arabic, and adopted and adapted Arabic literary forms in Hebrew. Thus, the Andalusī Jew stood in both al-Andalus and Sefarad, and related to this place from multiple viewpoints.

An analogy can be made between the inherent biblical allusions contained in the Hebrew language and the pre-Islamic imagery and symbolism embedded in the Arabic poetic language. In both of these traditions, archetypal symbols and linguistic references situate the audience simultaneously in the past and the present. The biblical and the pre-Islamic tradition each speak to subsequent generations who are familiar with the language and imagery contained in them, and who are thus able to understand and appreciate these literatures operating on multiple levels. Andalusī Jews writing in Hebrew drew upon both of these traditions in order to articulate a complex view of al-Andalus, and by examining two of Moses Ibn Ezra’s (d. after 1135) poems that utilize the classic abandoned campsite motif as well as other ‘modern’ (muhdath) techniques, I demonstrate that Ibn Ezra’s nostalgic look back to the golden age of Andalusī literature relied on an Arabic-educated Jew’s unique ability to understand the complex interplay between Arabic and Hebrew literatures. Thus, his poetry provides a good example

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3 Sefarad takes its name from Obadiah 20: “And the exiles of this fortress of the children of Israel will have that which is to the Canaanites as far as Sarfat, and the exiles of Jerusalem, which is in Sefarad, shall possess the cities of the Negev.”