CHANGING LANDSCAPES OF THE HEBREWW RHYMED PROSE NARRATIVE

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Abstract

The development of the Hebrew rhymed prose narrative in Christian Iberia entailed an expansion of ecological settings referred to in Hebrew writing. Although the manmade hortus conclusus of the Andalusian tradition continued to be evoked, we also find landscapes unshaped by human hands, such as grassy pastoral settings where animals graze, and springs and broad rivers beside which lovers stroll and amuse themselves. The landscapes encountered signify a world in cultural transition as Hebrew authors come to identify less exclusively with Islamic culture and begin to synthesize elements of Arabic and Christian European traditions. This is witnessed not only in the ecological settings that authors mention in passing but also in the landscapes that they actively idealize. The hortus conclusus—so idealized in the Andalusian corpus—becomes a topic of cultural debate; while some authors of Christian Iberia continue to idealize the Andalusian-style garden, others exploit the garden as a symbol of decadence and moral decay and turn instead to new idyllic landscapes.

In a previous publication, I showed that Andalusian Hebrew poets exploit the cultural significances of garden, desert, and forest landscapes to create a discourse about cultural belonging and estrangement. In particular, the contrast between the garden and its counterparts in the desert and forest was linked with a poetics of estrangement that surfaced following the destruction of Cordoba (1013) and became prominent following the establishment of Almoravid hegemony over al-Andalus (1090). The present article continues this discussion by considering aspects of landscape in the Hebrew rhymed prose narrative tradition. Although the garden continues to be evoked in the narratives, we also find new landscapes, such as pastoral settings where one finds grass upon which animals graze, and springs and broad rivers beside

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which lovers stroll and amuse themselves. The landscapes encountered signify a world in cultural transition as Hebrew authors come to identify decreasingly with Islamic culture and increasingly with the culture of Christian Europe. This is witnessed not only in the ecological settings that authors mention in passing but also in the landscapes that they actively idealize. The garden—so idealized in the Andalusian corpus—becomes a cultural object surrounded by an active discourse; while some authors of Christian Iberia continue to idealize the Andalusian-style garden, others exploit the garden as a symbol of decadence and moral decay and turn instead to new landscapes.

In the expansive world of the Hebrew rhymed prose narrative, characters find themselves in gardens, orchards, meadows, deserts, forests, and pastoral settings. On one level, the inclusion of new landscapes might be considered a mere reflection of the world in which their authors resided. However, as Ross Brann has pointed out (apropos al-Harizi’s Tahkemoni), to reduce narrative to panorama is to “completely separate the realistic from the imaginative,” resulting in a failure to recognize “the way in which these elements are intertwined.” Authors sought to construct a discourse around the subject of landscape by associating ecological settings with specific cultural values.

The first Hebrew rhymed prose narrative, Ne’um Asher ben Yehudah, composed in al-Andalus by Ibn Saqbel in the mid-twelfth century, begins with the protagonist boasting over the love exploits of his youth: “I was in the days of my youth like one of the fawns, skipping on mountains and dwelling in forests (ye’arim). . . . I dressed in a chequered robe, my trap and snare for a lovely gazelle.” These forests, of course, may only be figurative, like the epithets of “fawn” or “gazelle” applied to a woman. Still, the image is only logical if we understand the forest as

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