The Captions ‘fi wazn’ and ‘fi lahn’ in Strophic Poetry

Samuel Miklos Stern, who made ground-breaking discoveries in the field of Hebrew and Arabic strophic poetry,1 discusses in an article on ‘The Muwashshahs of Abraham ibn Ezra’ eight secular strophic poems from a formal and comparative point of view.2 Attached to the article is a list of headings to another twenty, partly unidentified, muwashshahs from the famous Diwan by Yeshua ben Eliah, who also redacted the Diwan of Judah ha-Levi.

Abraham ibn Ezra’s secular muwashshahs are – in contrast to his numerous spiritual ones – limited in number. But in Stern’s words, ‘they offer in spite of this a great variety of problems’. Among the problems to which Stern refers is the contentious prosodic issue so ardently discussed among scholars for the past fifty years.3 Some of the poems in this group4 are introduced by a heading indicating a particular stanza of another strophic poem, which Ibn Ezra used as a prosodic model for his own composition, and which in the majority of cases carries the prefix wazn or fi wazn, e.g. wazn[:] ma li shumul illa shujun.5 The word wazn corresponds to another frequently used Arabic term: lahn or fi lahn, which most muwashshah scholars, including Stern, translate as ‘according to the melody or the tune of stanza such and such’. But few have so far attempted to explain how the melody or tune in question is to be envisaged, let alone the technique of its composition.

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1 Hebrew ‘shir ezor’, Arabic ‘muwashshah’.
4 Stern’s article of 1959 was preceded by another study entitled ‘An Unpublished Poem by Abraham ibn Ezra’, in Between East and West. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of Bela Horovitz, London 1958, 107-111. The poem occurs in Ibn Ezra’s Diwan but has been left out of early editions, presumably due to the impudent tone of the kharja.
5 According to the measure (wazn), ma li shumul illa shujun, a trochaic-like rhythm from an Arabic poem.

The present article suggests that the terms *fi wazn* or *fi lahn* in the captions of strophic poems indicate a rhythmic quality or mode\(^6\) rather than a succession of notes, a scale or a melody. This claim is supported by Saadia Gaon's important treatise on music, and is also corroborated in Abraham ibn Ezra's own writings.

**The testimony of Saadia Gaon**

Saadia Gaon's religio-philosophical treatise *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (*Kitab al-amanat wa-'l-i'tiqadat* in the Arabic original) concludes with a chapter 'concerning how it is most proper for man to conduct himself in this world', to which the tract on music is appended. This tract deals more specifically with the eight musico-rhythmic modes, their proper blending and their influences on the human soul (the *Ethos Doctrine*). This is a musico-ethical concept which dates back to the Platonic idea of the 'Harmony of the Spheres', and was eventually adopted and commented upon by Arabic philosophers.\(^7\)

Saadia evidently modelled his musical treatise on a work by his older contemporary, the Arab philosopher Al-Kindi. Like Al-Kindi, Saadia approached music and prosody from the viewpoint of both theory and practice in his presentation of the modal system. The treatise has caused, however, much confusion among scholars, due to the subsequent translations, paraphrases and commentaries in Hebrew, making ambiguous use of musical and prosodic technical terms. Amnon Shiloah observed that 'already at the time of the beginnings of the scientific study of music in the ninth century, scholars and theorists faced the serious problem of terminology. They succeeded in finding adequate technical terms, but in their writings as well as in those of the following generations this terminology is fluid and often ambiguous'.\(^8\)

Shiloah's predecessors in the field of medieval Jewish musicology, Eric Werner and Isaiah Sonne, commented on this terminological confusion,

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\(^6\) As opposed to quantitative metre.

\(^7\) For Pythagoras, music was based entirely on mathematical ratios. Plato and Aristotle recognized that tonal music influenced the human soul positively as well as negatively, and Aristoxenus claimed that rhythmic music exerted greater influence over human conduct than tonal music.

\(^8\) A. Shiloah, 'The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings (c. 900-1900)', in *RISM*, Munich 1979, 9.