

still in existence in Israel, even after receiving the Torah. But Ibn-Ezra explicitly abstains from relating such a reason to a commandment, and even found it necessary to hide this relation.

In my opinion, Ibn-Ezra's intent was totally opposed to Friedlander's contention. I believe that the long commentary was intended precisely for the learned and the philosophers, who had basic philosophical knowledge and were naturally more open and receptive of opinions of this kind. There was no danger that Ibn-Ezra would be accused of heresy or the like, because their thinking too was rational and philosophically based. In contrast to this, it was difficult to speak of such matters to the masses, who searched for a simple explanation of the written word, or to Rabbis and Talmudic scholars who were averse to philosophical ideas such as these. On the other hand, nothing could prevent Ibn-Ezra from expressing his true opinion when interpreting what was written. His method of matching up verses and partial explanations of hints as to where the solution could be found, was a way of fulfilling both functions – the overt and the hidden. One may add as a hypothesis, that the more dangerous and difficult the revelation was to accept, the more it was hidden. Ibn-Ezra does not explain the matter or verse to which he has directed the reader, but rather, he hints at it in the form of a riddle, in order to hide it more. Possibly he also depended on the unlearned scholar's impatience to be hindered with details, as a means of preventing him from finding the secret.

ABRAHAM IBN EZRA ON CANTICLES

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Fascinated as I have always been by the biblical exegesis of Abraham ibn Ezra, I began a serious scholarly study of his commentaries on Song of Songs some ten years ago and delivered a brief and tentative paper on that theme to the Society for Old Testament Study. Since then the Institute for the History of Jewish Bible Research at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, under the directorship of Professors Uriel Simon and Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, has made considerable progress with its projects on ibn Ezra's commentaries on the Hagiographa and Professor Simon, in particular, has made significant contributions to the field of research by the publication of newly discovered manuscript material and his excellent Hebrew volume *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms from Saadya Gaon to Abraham ibn Ezra* (Ramat Gan, 1982). Among the sad facts of contemporary *Old Testament* scholarship in Europe and America are the lack of acquaintance with the classical Jewish Bible commentators and an equally widespread ignorance of scholarship written in modern Hebrew. By way of example, I refer to a recent article in *Vetus Testamentum* which makes much of an allegedly novel interpretation of the first two verses of the book of Psalms which, as I pointed out in a rejoinder, had been anticipated by ibn Ezra by a matter of almost eight and a half centuries¹. In view of such a state of affairs, I feel justified in devoting my minor contribution to this important international symposium to a basic introduction to ibn Ezra's commentaries on Song of Songs which not only summarises what he offered and, indeed, still offers as an exegete, but also takes into account the first scientific studies as well as the latest Hebrew scholarship on the subject.

Abraham ben Me'ir ibn Ezra (1089-1164) bids well to be regarded as the most fascinating of all mediaeval Jewish Bible commentators. With interests ranging from the scientific to the philosophical, poetic and linguistic, and a *wanderlust* which carried him from his native Spain to North Africa, Italy, France and even the shores of

1. "Ibn Ezra on Psalm I 1-2", *Vetus Testamentum* XXXIV (1984), pp. 232-236, where other bibliographical references are also given.

England, his literary output was vast and varied and apparently included commentaries on all the books of the Hebrew Bible, sadly not all of them extant. The novel, independent and lively nature of these commentaries has captured the imagination of generations of scholars and attracted no small degree of suspicion from more staid ecclesiastical authorities, while many obscure glosses of his "riddles wrapped in mysteries inside enygmata" (to paraphrase Churchill), have challenged the intellect of those desirous of producing the definitive supercommentary on his work. The difficulties involved in understanding his commentaries are further compounded by the fact that they were written in the variety of circumstances dictated by his itinerant lifestyle and are consequently not lacking in internal inconsistencies. What is more, those familiar with the needs of distinguishing the views of Torczyner, Harry, from those of Tur-Sinai, Naphtali Hertz, or to cite the opinions of W. F. Allbright mark-1, mark-2 or mark-3, will appreciate the problems inherent in Ibn-Ezra's habit of producing revised versions of his commentaries in later life, while of course welcoming the richness of comment that thereby ensued. Considering that his commentary on the theologically controversial Song of Songs was not only written in two versions but consists of three interpretations, each reflecting a different approach to the text, it will be seen that it is not an exaggeration to regard its ambivalence and inner religious conflict as a microcosm of all biblical scholarship, whether ancient, mediaeval or modern. For this reason, as well as for the others already mentioned, it will be specially valuable to subject this particular commentary and its history to closer scrutiny.

The claim that Ibn-Ezra's tripartite commentary on Song of Songs first appeared in print in an Italian incunabulum would appear to be unjustified, for recognition as standard attachments to the Hebrew text. The earliest editions in which the printed commentary is included are the Pentateuch, with Five Scrolls and Haphtaroth published by the brothers Ibn Nahmias in Constantinople 1505-6, and the second rabbinic Bible of Daniel Bomberg issued in Venice in 1524-5, after which the appearance of his recension became commonplace in such texts of Song of Songs. Having thus established itself, it duly attracted, as did so much else, the attention of sixteenth century Christian Bible scholarship and found a place in the Latin edition of Song of Songs with three rabbinical commentaries produced by Gilbert G n brard,

Professor of Hebrew at the College of France, in Paris in 1570². With the exception of an eighteenth century Haskalah supercommentary by Aaron Solomon Emrich Gompertz of Berlin³, tutor of Moses Mendelssohn, further work on the commentary had to await the researches of those to whom modern scholarship is ever in debt, those giants of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Moritz Steinschneider and Adolf Neubauer. Their investigations into Hebrew MSS. containing Ibn-Ezra's work on Song of Songs established the existence of a second recension, again with a tripartite commentary, and were ultimately responsible for the edition of that recension by H. J. Matthews in Oxford in 1874⁴. This work contained a Hebrew text based on Paris and Oxford MSS. with variants from a Berlin codex, a sound if somewhat literal and bare translation of all three parts, and a brief introduction in which the newly discovered recension was identified as the earlier of the two and, following a lead given by Gr tz, the provenance suggested as Rome, circa 1140. Michael Friedlander, Principal of Jews' College, clarified the situation as it stood in 1877 in his *Essays on the Writings of Abraham ibn Ezra*. He entitled the version of the Rabbinic Bibles A, the French Recension, a product of Ibn-Ezra's later years in France, and the Matthews version B, the Italian recension originating in his earlier years while he resided in Italy. Friedlander also summarised the contents of the French recension A, made the briefest comparisons between the two recensions, and identified additional MSS. containing the Italian recension B⁵. In more recent years, the work of Yehudah Fleischer has enabled us to trace the composition of the French recension to the city of Dreux, 50 miles west of Paris, 20 miles north of Chartres, between 1156 and 1157, a year before Ibn Ezra's visit to London and at least fifteen years after the original Italian version⁶, while Naphtali Ben-Menahem's efforts have made it possible to estimate a total of at least 20 MSS. of Ibn Ezra's commentary of Song of Songs, more than half of them following recension A⁷.

Although Friedlander's efforts were pioneering in his days and set the tone for much of what was later claimed about Ibn Ezra's commentaries, the recent work of Uriel Simon has questioned a number of his assumptions about the environments in which the different recensions of Ibn Ezra's commentaries on the Song of Songs and other biblical books composed. Simon argues that there is neither historical nor

2. *Canticum Canticorum Salomonis Regis, cum Commentariis Trium Rabbidorum, Salomonis Iarhij, Abrahami Abben Esrae, & Innominati cuiusdam.*

3. *ספר מגלה סוד* (Hamburg, 1765).

4. *Abraham ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Canticles, after the first recension, edited from two MSS., with a translation.*

5. *Volume IV of the series Ibn Ezra Literature* published in London for the Society of Hebrew Literature, pp. 178-182.

6. *רבנו אברהם אבן עזרא בצרפת: התגוררותו ועבודתו הספרותית שם* in *Mizrah Uma'arav* 4 (1930), pp. 38-46, 217-224, 289-300.

7. See the bibliography cited in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 8 (Jerusalem, 1971), cols. 1169-1170.

literary basis for the view that Ibn Ezra was able to give more expression to critical views and anti-midrashic tendencies in liberal Italy than in the more traditionally rabbinic communities of France, and questions the validity of any attempt to identify the respective characteristics of all Italian recensions on one hand and all their French equivalents on the other. Among other important point made by Simon are Ibn Ezra's favourable comparison of Song of Songs with contemporary, secular poetry; his acceptance of its Solomonic composition by prophetic inspiration; and his tendency, in what Simon regards as an anti-Karaite polemic, to underplay the importance of the prognostic element in prophecy even when using the text of the Song of Songs as guidance for the theological future⁸. It is good to know that Professor Simon's project includes a preparation for a critical edition of the various recensions and commentaries of Ibn Ezra on the Song of the Songs as well as annotations and an introduction. It is unfortunately the case that this has yet to be done for any of Ibn Ezra's commentaries, the latest edition of the Pentateuchal commentary produced by Asher Weiser leaving much to be desired⁹ and that of Leo Prijs covering only the first chapter of Genesis¹⁰. Indeed, in spite of Israel Levin's helpful book¹¹, a truly critical commentator is also lacking. Any study of Ibn Ezra's commentaries on Song of Songs will require to explain the motivation for its tripartite treatment, describe how the three parts inter-relate and compare the two recensions, especially in the light of Simon's latest work. It is my hope that this paper will make a modest contribution to the fulfilment of such aims, although its limited scope will prevent coverage of other such desiderata as an estimate of the reliability of the work of G n brard and Matthews.

The French recension A as printed in the Rabbinic Bibles is prefaced by one general introduction followed by a specific introduction to each of the three parts. In this general introduction Ibn Ezra praises Song of Songs as Solomon's poetical *pi ce de resistance* and stresses its arcane, allegorical character. It is to be understood, like other biblical Hebrew poetry, as a synopsis of the message of Jewish history, based on the common prophetic metaphor of God and Israel as lovers. It is under no circumstance to be regarded as erotic literature and its true, religious value is demonstrable from its incontrovertible inclusion in sacred writ. He then makes the somewhat paradoxical statement that in order to present the complete picture he has offered three interpretations, the first linguistic, the second literal and literary, and the third midrashic, i.e. allegorical. This tendency to have the best of all possible worlds

8. *Four Approaches*, especially pp. 127-8, 131-2, 148, 165-8, 181 and 191.

9. **אבן עזרא: פירושי התורה לרבינו אברהם אבן עזרא על כתיב ודפוסים**. 3 volumes, Jerusalem, 1977.

10. *Abraham ibn Ezra's Kommentar zu Genesis Kapitel 1; Einleitung, Edition und Superkommentar* (Wiesbaden, 1973).

11. *Abraham ibn Ezra: his Life and his Poetry* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv, 1976).

while defending himself as rabbinically traditional is continued in his separate introductions to each of the three parts. In the first he rejects the metaphysical and cosmological interpretation of the book then current in favour of the allegory about the people of Israel understood by rabbinic tradition which he claims to have followed in his third interpretation, and justifies the first part on lexical grounds and the second as an explanation of the erotic metaphor. All references to Solomon are to be understood literally with the exception of 8 : 12 which is messianic. The introduction to the second part describes the metaphor as that of the love between a physically immature girl and a passing shepherd, and commences with the confident declaration that "such erotic matters cannot possibly be publicly performed and viewed", thereby implying that they cannot be taken as the literal description of a factual situation. The third interpretation is introduced by a claim that the author is satisfied with the *Midrash Rabbah* on the book but has been forced to offer his own allegorical interpretation in response to the current fad for doing so. The same statement as before is made about the meaning of Solomon, and the "daughters of Jerusalem" are neither the heavenly equivalent of the earthly reality, nor angels nor gentiles, but the responses produced by the shepherd-girl herself in the course of her erotic fantasies. Solomon's prophetic gift is not to be wondered at or denied since Scripture itself records divine revelations to him and, like Assaph and Heyman, who composed divinely inspired psalms, he enjoys the status of a prophet.

If we now focus our attention on recension A, there is little in Ibn Ezra's first interpretation which is not typical of any of his Bible commentaries, although the unique nature of the subject-text has inevitably dictated the content of much of the comment. His favourite grammatical topics occur here and include common gender (with regard to the occurrence of שם in the feminine in 1 : 3), metathesis (חגוי in 2 : 14 from the root חוג), *hapax legomena* (אפריון in 3 : 9 and סנסניו in 7 : 9), privative verbs (*pi'el* לַבַּתְנִי "you have stolen my heart" in 4 : 9, and *hiph'il* הִרְהִיבְנִי "they have taken away my strength" in 6 : 5), reduplicated forms (in connection with their weakened sense when used to describe colours on שחרחרת in 1 : 6), and references to a Masoretic controversy about whether שלהבתיה in 8 : 6 is one word or two and to the use of the Divine Name there as a superlative. He explains a good deal of vocabulary simply on the basis of internal Biblical Hebrew evidence. The verb נשק followed by a direct object (as in 1 : 2) describes kissing on the mouth while that followed by the preposition ל־ refers to kissing whatever other part of the body prevalent custom demands in which case דדיך in the same verse may well mean "saliva", שחורה in 1 : 5 is a complimentary remark and since it is improbable that black is euphemistically used to describe white, and impossible that black-skinned is a complimentary epithet for Ibn Ezra, the sense must be "suntanned"; the spring-time mentioned in 2 : 12 is described as זמיר because of the singing of the birds and is not derived from the root זמר "to prune" which would be an

unsuitable occupation for that time of the year; and שולמית of 7 : 1 is so called because she is from שלם, i.e. a Jerusalemite woman. On the other hand, the evidence of other languages is appealed to in a number of instances. Aramaic provides the meaning of the nouns כתל and חרץ in 2 : 9. Rabbinic Hebrew usage removes any difficulty with the verbs מנף in 5 : 3 and מוג in 7 : 3, and the word אנון in 6 : 11, and the Spanish *canfora* (Modern: *canforero*) is equivalent to the Hebrew כפר in 1 : 14. The final comment in the first interpretation is devoted to a justification of the cautious use of Arabic as an aid to the understanding of Biblical Hebrew, of which we have so little, on the grounds that the vocabulary and grammar of the two languages have so much in common. Ibn Ezra apparently thought this comment necessary because of the extensive use he had made of Arabic in his earlier remarks and the doubts entertained by some Jewish scholars about the validity of such a comparative approach. Among words identified from that language are פרדם "orchard" in 4 : 13, סהר "moon-like" in 7 : 2 and the stem רפק "to be joined" in 8 : 5. A significant part of this first interpretation is also devoted to definitions of items from the world of nature. He identified the two flowers of 2 : 1 as the rose and the lily (although in each case there seems to be a confused reference to the narcissus), he refers to the loyalty exhibited by doves to their mates in his note on 1 : 15 and adopts the usual folkloristic notion of the mandrake as a plant in the form of a human being in 7 : 14. Mediaeval chauvinist as he was, he understands the pronominal suffix of תשוקתו in 7 : 11 as objective and a reference to female desire for the male. In addition he defines מור in 1 : 13 as an aromatic of vegetable origin and not as musk as נרד in 1 : 12 as similar to saffron, and makes various identifications of animals, jewellery and clothing. As for geographical matters, he indicates that Ein Gedi (1 : 4) and Tirzah (6 : 4) are place-names in the Holy Land and that Carmel (7 : 6) is not a proper noun but a colour. There is certainly no evidence here of a personal acquaintance with the land of Israel although one may be forgiven for being sceptical about the scholarly value of Weiser's argument that he must never have visited it since, had he done so, he would surely never have left it! He often presents a number of alternative views, usually presenting his own opinion anonymously as a statement of fact and rejecting the others as far-fetched. In the case of תלפיות in 4 : 4 he cites two views and then reports that grammarians regard it as a unique form. Here, as elsewhere, he enjoys a joke at the expense of his colleagues as when he makes a rendering of the oils in 1 : 3 at odds with his own by suggesting that the author had obviously never used anointing oils in his life and thought that the reference was to olive oil. Finally one should point to the reference to his own commentaries on Isaiah 6 : 6 on the subject of רצוף in 3 : 10 and on Proverbs 9 : 2 on the subject of the word מוג in 7 : 3.

In view of the limited time at my disposal in the present context, I must forego the luxury of specific examples in the cases of the second and third

interpretations and be satisfied with providing general summaries of their contents. The literal, or literary, interpretation describes a rustic love-story in which a girl enjoys romantic assignations and affectionate dialogues with a shepherd-boy, sometimes in reality, sometimes in fantasy, and their situation is favourably compared to that of King Solomon and his beloved. Ibn Ezra places the unusual vocabulary of love and physical attraction in its context; makes much of the part played by the senses and a suitable atmosphere in sexual matters; cites a number of romantic ideas such as the uniqueness of love and the importance of having it declared; and is fairly explicit about aspects of the sexual act in his comments on 5 : 4 (שתי דלתות) and 7 : 7-11. But there are clear indications of a tension between the commentator's desire to be explicit and his fear to that such boldness, however justified in his literary analysis of the book, may attract censure. He is clearly well aware of the parallels that can be drawn between this book of the Hebrew Bible and Muslim love-poetry and makes a specific reference (7 : 6) to the theme of entanglement in the waves of one's lover's hair that occurs in such poetry (שרי קדר החושקים). Yet on 5 : 14 he hastens to deny that a naked body is presupposed and on a substantial part of the particularly erotic chapter 5 (between verses 2 and 13) the only significant comment offered is וכל הפרשה כולה מבוארת "the meaning of the remainder is obvious".

If the third interpretation is, as Ibn Ezra claims, a midrash, then it is a very personal one. It is generally presented as a historical allegory with references to Abraham, the Egyptian bondage and Exodus, the two Temples and their officials, the special roles of the tribes of Judah and Ephraim; prophets, kings, the Babylonian exile, the Hasmoneans and Greeks, the physical and the spiritual Restoration and the Messiah, and the briefest allusion to Christianity (6 : 8). It is, however, also a theological allegory with ideas on such subjects as assimilation, faith, repentance, the precepts, the Torah, and the sexual morality of the Jewish woman, and has, in spite of his earlier criticism of metaphysical and cosmological interpretations, numerous comments borrowed from his Neoplatonist philosophy of the world.

A close examination of the earlier Italian recension B reveals a number of important differences with the later French recension A. In the cases of the first two interpretations, the later recension is more structured, literary and confident in style; provides approximately 40% more comment in coverage and in detail; arranges the internal order of comments differently; makes references to other commentaries of Ibn Ezra; and, in a small number of cases, offers slightly different opinions. The text is at times less corrupt in B but this is not a factor to be stressed since this recension, as distinct from A, has been directly edited from important MSS. Different vocabulary is employed for the same comment but it remains to be seen whether any firm conclusions may be drawn from this. What is significant is that in the Italian recension, Ibn Ezra's view is not anonymously given first but follows all the others and is clearly identified as his preferred opinion. In the first interpretation, recension B has less

Aramaic and Arabic and no passage justifying the use of the latter, includes an Italian word (2 : 1), an has less humour, while in the second interpretation, recension B includes an additional medical comment (2 : 5), is sexually even less explicit and probably did not contain a reference to Muslim poets in its earliest version. The difference between the allegorical interpretation offered in each recension are of a different variety. Here the changes made are of emphasis, identification and even direct exegesis, rather than relative scale and style. B contains an alternative and what appears to be a simpler cosmology, allusions to Jewish religious practice rather than concepts, and some clearer references to events and personalities. The passing mention to another faith is here made with regard to Islam rather than Christianity. The introductions in B are also constructed in simpler and briefer fashion than in A. The general preface, poetically composed, serves to introduce the first interpretation too, and includes a reference to the three interpretations being offered. Although the MSS. are not unanimous about this, there would also appear to be a poetic dedication to בנימין הצעיר with the usual pious affirmations. The introduction of the second interpretation makes the points about the uniqueness of the book, the inadmissibility of regarding it as erotic literature, the theme of God and his beloved, Israel, the inclusion of the book in the Canon and the nature of the metaphor, all included in the general introduction in recension A. The third interpretation is introduced by an explanation of the phrase בנות ירושלים and a brief reference to the historical allegory. The introduction of the later French recension are therefore seen to consist of various layers added at different times; to be more apologetic, defensive and repetitive than their earlier counterparts about the poetic value, the nature of the metaphor, and the true religious message of the book; and to amount to a somewhat more discursive, composite and disputatious prologue to the actual contents of the commentaries.

It only remains to offer the following brief and tentative conclusions:

1. Ibn Ezra's provision of three interpretations which are not always consistent with the intentions declared in the introductions, not clearly distinct from each other, even after copyists' and printers' errors have been taken into account, represents one global approach to the book, each part of which compliments the others, and the intention of which is to convey not only a wealth grammatical and exegetical comment but also to defend the overall religious acceptability of such composite comment.

2. The critical study and comparison of the two recension of his commentary provide further evidence, if any be needed, that as he grew in maturity, knowledge and confidence, Ibn Ezra felt the need to expand and revise his earlier work to take account of this growth and of responses and challenges encountered in the intervening years.

3. While the differences between the earlier and later recensions reflect the

changing requirements of biblical commentary as Ibn Ezra saw them, there is no internal evidence to indicate that these were exclusively dictated by a move from an Italian to a French environment. Simon's scepticism in this regard appears well founded and a more convincing explanation of the changes would make more of the varied experiences of the travelling scholar through the years than of the geographical contexts in which he happened to compose the results of these cultural encounters.