



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: Paul B. Fenton (1996) Philosophie & exégèse dans Le Jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn Ezra, philosophe & poète andalou du XIIe siècle (Études sur le judaïsme médiéval t. 19)]

Schippers, A.

### Publication date

2001

### Document Version

Final published version

### Published in

Bibliotheca Orientalis

[Link to publication](#)

### Citation for published version (APA):

Schippers, A. (2001). [Review of: Paul B. Fenton (1996) Philosophie & exégèse dans Le Jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn Ezra, philosophe & poète andalou du XIIe siècle (Études sur le judaïsme médiéval t. 19)]. *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 58, 772-777.

### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

FENTON, Paul B. — Philosophie & exégèse dans Le Jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn Ezra, philosophe & poète andalou du XIIe siècle. (Études sur le judaïsme médiéval t. 19). Leiden, New York, Köln, Brill 1996.

Moses ibn Ezra is one of the most important poets and theoreticians of what was called the school of the New Hebrew poets, which arose in Muslim Spain in the 11th Century CE. The Jews were the oldest inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula; they were there as early as Phoenician times, but reached their cultural apogee only during Islam's dominance of Spain, which they welcomed in 711 CE because of their deteriorating relationship with the Visigoths. Although at the beginning, Jews also practised agriculture and were landowners, the impact of Arabisation led the Jews towards increasing urbanisation. The Jews were only one of the several ethnic and religious groups in al-Andalus (Muslim Spain). Contributors to the flowering of Jewish intellectual and cultural life were such famous Jewish courtiers as Hasday ibn Shaprut (d. ca. 970) — who lived at the court of the western Umayyad caliph, 'Abd al-Raḥmān III — and Samuel ha-Nagid (993-1056), who served at the Berber court of Granada. Rapid Arabisation meant for the Jews the use of Classical Arabic written in Hebrew characters. In the field of poetry, there existed at the beginning only the *piyyuṭim* influenced by Aramaic and liturgical Hebrew. But — under the impact of the study of Biblical Hebrew grammar with medieval Arabic methods, which gave them insight into the Biblical Hebrew language as never before — from the middle of the 10th century onwards they practised secular

Hebrew poetry written in purely Biblical Hebrew. This secular Hebrew poetry emerged as a Hebrew adaptation of Arabic verse. It took over metres, conventions and contents from the Arabs. *Piyyuṭim* and secular poems were consumed by a group of Andalusian Jews who could be characterized as 'courtier rabbis', in the sense that they were well versed in religious knowledge and had undergone Arabo-Muslim education, which was needed in order to be a good courtier.<sup>1)</sup> Their type of education was very 'medieval', and we see parallels with the education of Muslim and western European Christian scholars of the time: they try to reconcile Classical and other sciences outside the immediate scope of their religion with their religious viewpoints and ideologies.

In this manner, the Jews assimilated themselves without much difficulty<sup>2)</sup> to Arabic critical norms in their adaptation of foreign methodologies to the study of traditional Jewish texts. The Jews wrote in Hebrew and Arabic, their wisdom was Hebrew, Greek and Arabic, and their metres, themes and poetic style were Arabic. In his poetry, Moses ibn Ezra showed his predilection for *badī'* ([Arabic] decorative style), and his "Classicism" is based on his following from nearby Arabic poetic thematics. His Hebrew poetics, entitled *Kitāb al-Muḥāḍara wa-l-Mudḥākara* (Book of Conversation and Discussion), is a prescriptive treatment of the legitimacy of Arabic-style Hebrew poetry.<sup>3)</sup> His other book — the *Maqālat al-Ḥadiqa fi Ma'nā al-Majāz wa-'l-Ḥaḡiqā* (Treatise of the Garden of the Metaphorical and the Literal) — to which Fenton's present book is devoted, deals with the poetic diction of the Hebrew Bible within a scholastic, philosophical perspective.

We know that life was not very easy for Moses ibn Ezra because of his 'voluntary' exile in the barbarous Christian north of Spain after the arrival of the intolerant Almoravids in Granada — a period during which he nostalgically looks back to the 'flesh pots' of Andalusian cultural life. He was always complaining about his exile, where he suffered from a lack of intellectual refinement. In exile, Moses ibn Ezra endeavoured to give to future generations his vision of [Hebrew] literature and science. Let us now turn to the above-mentioned book by Fenton on Moses ibn Ezra's *Maqālat al-Ḥadiqa*.

The first, introductory chapter of this book is devoted to Moses ibn Ezra's time, and his poetic and prosaic works, including his lost works and Bible commentaries, of which the *Kitāb al-Muḥāḍara* and his *Maqālat al-Ḥadiqa* are discussed. The author discusses the manuscripts of the latter treatise and its [partial] Hebrew translation, [the *Arugat ha-Bosem*], and its translator, who according to Fenton seems to have been the famous *Maqāma* author, Yehudah al-Ḥarizi (1165-1235). In order to demonstrate his opinion about the identity of the translator, Fenton discusses the poetic intro-

duction to the translator's work, and makes remarks about the translator's vocabulary and the treatise's structure and contents. From Fenton's analysis of the manuscripts, we can see how much has become clear in the last fifteen years. The most important manuscript — A — was the most widely known and the best: it was sold in 1975 by the Sassoon family to the Israel National Library. For a long time, nothing was heard of the Petersburg manuscript (B), which — after A — is the most important and complete. It was reported that Kokozov at the beginning of this century had prepared a textual edition, but it was thought to have been lost. Recently, with the Russian borders being more open than in the past, even Kokozov's edition has been rediscovered. Fenton not only rediscovered the Petersburg material of the B manuscript, but also identified in the Geniza collections of Petersburg and Cambridge several other smaller fragments of the Arabic texts, as well as other fragments of the texts of the Hebrew translation, which cover only a small part of the Arabic original, especially those passages dealing with philosophy. The importance of the Hebrew translation lies in the fact that it probably influenced the works of later Jewish philosophers who did not know Arabic.

After the introduction, the book is divided into two parts: philosophy and exegesis. Chapter 2 starts with a general analysis of the philosophical parts of the *Maqāla*, and discusses the poetic prelude to the work, which is also known as a separate poem in Moses ibn Ezra's *Dīwān*. This poem has in its cosmological description much in common with a poem by Moses ibn Ezra's master, Ibn Ghiyath, and with another one, the famous *Kether Malkut* by Solomon ibn Gabirol. The preface, in prose, deals with the fact that God is ascribed many human attributes which have to be considered metaphorical and not literal. This refers, of course, also to the title of the book. Fenton concludes about this preface that Moses ibn Ezra does not only want to give an inventory of metaphors, but to make a work in the good tradition of *adab*. In his work, Moses ibn Ezra approaches a wide range of philosophical problems, which reflect the intellectual preoccupations of his time. The *Ḥadiqa* is a kind of abstract of what every honest man should know of philosophy. This treatise has the merit of reflecting the contents of the intellectual luggage of a lettered, Andalusian man of the 12th century. The merit of his 'philosophical anthology' is also that passages from lost works by predecessors have been preserved because Moses ibn Ezra quoted them in his treatise. Thus we re-find many quotations from the lost Arabic original of Solomon ibn [Gabirol's] neo-Platonic philosophic work, *Fons Vitae* [*Yanbū 'al-Ḥayāh*], which Fenton edited in an appendix to his present book. Fenton now follows the order of Moses ibn Ezra's treatise and explains Moses ibn Ezra's passages in the light of medieval philosophical literature. After dealing with Moses ibn Ezra's introduction about man as the proof of the existence of the Creator, he goes on to deal with what is said then about the dogma of the Unity of God, the negation of attributes or names given to Him, about motion and creation, rational and traditional laws, and the composition of man, nature, intellect and the three souls [vegetal, animal and rational]. Much of the material treated by Moses ibn Ezra is compared with passages from medieval philosophical works such as the *rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, Ibn Gabirol's *Fons Vitae*, Bahya ibn Paquda's *Hidāya* [Guide to the Duties of the Hearts], Farabi's *al-Madīna al-Fāḍila* [Perfect State] and Dunash ibn Tamim's Commentary on the

<sup>1)</sup> See for this term Ross BRANN, *The Compunctuous Poet, Cultural Ambiguity and Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain*, Baltimore 1991; FENTON speaks of 'honnêtes hommes' in connection with the education medieval Jewish intellectuals should have, see p. 71.

<sup>2)</sup> For the difficulties and ambiguities of the intellectuals, see Ross BRANN, *Compunctuous Poet*.

<sup>3)</sup> According to Scheindlin, the arguments of the *Muḥāḍarah* could defend Jewish morale against claims of cultural backwardness, but are ultimately focussed on legitimizing Arabic-style Hebrew poetry. Cf. Raymond SCHEINDLIN, "Rabbi Mosheh ibn Ezra on the Legitimacy of Poetry", *Medievalia et Humanistica* VII (1976), pp. 101-105; Ross BRANN, *Compunctuous Poet*, pp. 59-83.

*Sefer Yesirah* [Book of Creation]. The chapter closes with a resumé of Moses ibn Ezra's philosophical ideas concerning such popular medieval questions as the nature of God, emanation or creation, intellect, cosmology and revelation, and ethical doctrine. Such a resumé is necessary because Moses ibn Ezra is not a closed system. Fenton concludes that Moses ibn Ezra's speculations about God fit in with the ideas of the Arabic Neo-Platonians. He is not as negative as Ibn Gabirol about the unknowability of God, and calls him the Creator (*al-bāri*) and the First Author (*al-Mubdi' al-awwal*), whose unity is incomparable. Attributes such as Mighty, Omniscient, Living are devoid of meaning and only serve to bring the transcendence of God nearer to human understanding. For the believer, God can be found by meditating on the divine traces in the universe. Moses ibn Ezra combines the notions of creation *ex nihilo* and emanation by admitting three stages: creation of the intellect by God's will, emanation, by means of God's generosity, of simple spiritual substances, and, thirdly and finally, the formation of the corporal substances of the sublunar world, to begin with the causality of the elements. According to Fenton, Moses ibn Ezra succeeds in reconciling the rabbinic tradition with Arabic neo-Platonism. In cosmology, Moses ibn Ezra apparently follows the system of the Arabic Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā) with some modifications. Unlike the Ptolemaean system, Moses ibn Ezra recognizes the existence of a last sphere, that of the intellect, followed by the sphere of the fixed stars, the spheres of the six planets, and that of the moon. With respect to revelation, Moses ibn Ezra declares the authenticity of Mosaic law and recognizes that human reason could elevate itself to equal knowledge. Like the mu'tazilites, Moses ibn Ezra makes a division between duties of the heart, and rational and traditional prescriptions. As human beings we cannot comprehend the motives of the traditional prescriptions, although they are in the end rational. Man has the choice between good and bad, otherwise there would be no sense to recompense and punish. Man is a reflection of the universe, whose crown he is. He is capable of elevating himself morally to the level of the angels, but sinks to the bestial level if he corrupts himself and does not use his reason, by which he can discern between good and bad. The work manifests an ascetic and even mystical tendency, which one can also find in Muslim manuals of piety of neo-Platonic or Sufic inspiration. Moses ibn Ezra believes in physical mortification. Every one of the above-mentioned three souls has its virtue to which justice is added as a fourth, conforming to Plato's system of four cardinal virtues.

Chapter 3 deals with the philosophical sources of the *ḥadiqa*, such as the work of the Brethren of Purity and that of Ibn Gabirol, pseudo or real Platonic or Aristotelian works, and Judeo-Arabic works by Sa'adya and Samuel ben Hofni. His mu'tazilite ideas perhaps derive from such Qara'ite Judeo-Arabic authors as al-Qirqisāni. Moses ibn Ezra appears not to like Mishna and Talmud so much, because he quotes these writings almost exclusively for philological rather than theological reasons. Dealing with the influences the *Ḥadiqa* has had upon later Jewish thinkers and philosophers, mainly by its translation (the *Arugat ha-Bosem*), Fenton presents a list of authors who were probably influenced by its neo-Platonism: among them are many Kabbalist authors from Spain and Provence, and authors from Germany, Italy and Persia. The author shows how Kabbalistic terms are sometimes linked with Neo-Platonic ones (such as the identification of

the *sefirah Hokhmah* of the Kabbalists with the Active Intellect, the Giver of Forms).

The second part of the book is devoted to exegesis. Chapter 4 gives an introduction to the exegetic part of the *Ḥadiqa* — its structure, literary context and lexicographical aspect. Chapter 5 discusses the problematics of metaphor, starting with the ancient rabbinical literature and the Islamic writings in this field, and continuing with oriental Judeo-Arabic literature, and the anti-Kara'ite polemics in the light of the problem of anthropomorphism, and concluding with a discussion of the metaphorical theories of the Andalusian school.

Chapter 6 deals with metaphor in Moses ibn Ezra's theory about figurative and real meaning and his method and its application: the relation between metaphor and reason, metaphor and tradition, and the effects of metaphors. Then the different types of *majāz* [figurative expression] are dealt with, as is the relationship between exegesis and rhetoric, and exegesis and philology. Among the types of metaphor are: *al-majāz al-darūri* [the categoric metaphor]; *al-isti'āra* [metaphor]; *al-tashbīh* [comparison]; *ghuluww* [hyperbole]; *mubālagha* [exaggeration]; *badal al-mujāwara* [metonymia by association]. Terminology and lexicography are then discussed, such as that mentioned by Moses ibn Ezra in his treatise: a comparison of Hebrew with Arabic from the point of view of lexical roots and lexical similarities, and a comparison of Biblical Hebrew with post-Biblical or neo-Hebrew [e.g. the Hebrew of Mishna and Talmud], as well as a comparison with Aramaic. Finally the relationship between exegesis and grammar and the influence of literary criticism is dealt with. Also in this chapter, many authors who inspired Moses ibn Ezra are mentioned: Arabic, Oriental Judeo-Arabic as well as Andalusian works on metaphor and grammar.

Chapter 7 deals with rhetorical sources of the *Ḥadiqa* as well as its influences on later literature. According to Fenton, many unmentioned sources for the rhetorical part of the book are perhaps the rhetorical works mentioned by name in the *Muḥāḍara*, and other Arab authors such as al-Muqaffa', al-Asma'i and al-Jāhiz. From the Jewish side, Sa'adya is quoted from time to time, sometimes in connection with his critics, such as Mubashshir al-Baghdadi and Samuel ben Hofni. Grammatical literature by the Qara'ite Abu'l-Faraj, and by such Andalusians as ibn Barūn, Ibn Chitella and Ibn Janāh (especially the last one) is amply mentioned. Among the later grammarians he must have influenced are Joseph Qimḥi, David Qimḥi and Tanḥūm ha-Yerushalmi (ca. 1220-1291).

The book ends with a general conclusion. Fenton starts by underlining the uniqueness of the treatise in Jewish literary history, as it combines the domains of exegesis, philology, lexicography and aesthetics. Moses ibn Ezra can be considered as the compiler and consolidator of the science of previous generations. New is the fact that he wrote an *adab* work, trying to combine the didactic with the amusing. Moses ibn Ezra abounds in humanism from Greco-Islamic civilization, and does not limit himself to Jewish material and Judaism. In his work there is a synthesis between the sacred and the profane. His treatise must not be considered a philosophical work, but more as an anthology, because he does not pretend to be a philosopher. In the book, Moses Ibn Ezra meticulously described a number of stylistic phenomena. Written in exile, during his old age and at the end of the Golden Age of Hebrew literature in Spain, he transmitted to later generations the sum of a whole culture.

The book ends with a number of appendices: (I) a critical edition of the Arabic passages of the *Fons Vitae* by Ibn Gabirol; (II) an index of authors and works quoted in the *Hadiqa*; (III) a list of Hebrew poems quoted in the *Hadiqa*; (IV) idem: Arabic poetry lines (pp. 393-410), followed by Bibliography and Indexes (pp. 411- 459).

Fenton's book will be a useful companion for readers who want to deal with the text of the *Maqalat al-Ḥadīqa*, which — along with its translation — will be published very soon by Fenton himself, and will perhaps already be available when this review is published. We are lucky then to finally have the tools with which to comprehend the intellectual heritage of not just one person, but of a whole period. In spite of the many uncertainties that often remain when trying to establish in detail the influences that one work has on another, or what is a tribute to what, Fenton has written a major opus by putting this treatise into the framework of its time. His book is also amusing and easily readable. This is something it has in common with the treatise by Moses ibn Ezra — but only if we read it with the annotations in Fenton's book.

Amsterdam, May 1999

Arie SCHIPPERS