

YEMENI JEWISH AND MUSLIM *MUWASHSHAḤĀT*

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A. Research on Jewish-Yemeni poetry in relation to Muslim-Yemeni poetry

The Jewish-Yemeni *muwashshah* – in Hebrew as well as Arabic – has been discussed by two students of medieval Hebrew poetry. First, Tova Rosen covered the subject in her doctoral thesis on the medieval Hebrew *muwashshah* (Rosen-Moked 1985, pp. 127-31). Then Ezra Fleischer did so in an in-depth study on the development stages of the Hebrew *muwashshah* from Spain to Yemen (Fleischer 1991, pp. 144-52). These two studies were conducted in the frame of medieval Hebrew poetry, ignoring the “Yemeni connection”, namely the affinity of Jewish Yemeni poetry to Muslim Yemeni poetry. This “Yemeni connection” refers to two aspects of the *muwashshah*: form and performance. Tova Rosen, however, devoting a special chapter (5) in her study on the *muwashshah* as a musical genre, cites the renowned scholar of Jewish-Yemeni culture, Prof. Yehuda Ratzaby, regarding the performance of the *muwashshah* within the Jewish community in Yemen (pp. 60-1). But already S. M. Stern, in his posthumously published book about the Hispano-Arabic strophic poetry, published in 1974, alluded to a possible connection between Jewish and Muslim *muwashshahāt* in Yemen. He notes that what he calls the “double-chequered” *muwashshah* “seemed to have had an especial vogue among the poets of Yemen, Arabs as well as Jews” (pp. 18-19). He is more specific in another place in his book (p. 76), when dealing in a short paragraph with the *muwashshah* in Yemen: “It is to be expected, according to all the precedents, that the preponderance of this type in the Hebrew poetry of Yemen corresponds to a similar phenomenon in the Arabic literature of that country”. But he declares that “this problem would need more detailed investigation”, as he had the opportunity to come across only a few examples of Muslim Yemeni *muwashshahāt*. It should be observed that as against these few examples he determines that Jewish-Yemeni *muwashshah* are very rich. In fact, “the majority of the poems are of the type of the double *muwashshah*”.

Now Stern was not the first to raise the idea of the impact of the Muslim poetry in Yemen on Jewish poetry. A.Z. Idelsohn did so in his first scholarly *diwān* of Jewish-Yemeni poetry published in Cincinnati in 1931. Idelsohn, unlike other scholars of Jewish-Yemeni poetry, was not basically a researcher of literature but of music, and he learned much about this genre as performance poetry through his very close relations with the Yemeni immigrants in Jerusalem in the first decade of the twentieth century (Tobi

1994, pp. 258-9). Although he did not master Arabic or Muslim culture, he could discern with his keen intuition that some of the poetic qualities of the seventeenth-century poet Shalom (Sālim) Shabazī, the most important figure in Jewish-Yemeni poetry, were to be attributed to the impact of the local Muslim poetry. He notes that although Shabazī follows the Hebrew-Spanish poets, some modes of the scanning of Jewish poetry in Yemen, especially in Shabazī's, are not found in Hebrew-Spanish poetry. Idelsohn ascribes these changes to the impact of the Muslim-Yemeni poetry. He explicitly speaks about the influence of the Arab poets in Yemen on Shabazī's Arabic poetry, based on the fact that Muslim-Yemeni poetry flourished in the seventeenth century. He also mentions two seventeenth-century Muslim poets of Yemen: (a) Muṣhrif al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abd Allah, born around 1601, who wrote *muwashshahāt*; (b) 'Alī b. al-Ḥasan, who lived in Ṣan'ā in 1659 and had a *dīwān*. Idelsohn's conclusion is that many Hebrew poems or strophes of Yemen are simply translations of Arabic poems, for example, ראיתי בחלום עלמה נקיה [“I saw in my dream a pure girl”] (pp. 93-4).

The same tendency to relate the use of poetic devices in Jewish-Yemeni poetry to the influence of the local Muslim poetry is explicitly pointed out by Idelsohn regarding metre (p. 360). Although he does not ignore the fact that Jewish poets applied Arabic metre according to its use by Jewish poets in Spain, he states that they were directly impacted by the Muslim-Yemeni poets. He thereby explains the seemingly curious use of Arabic metre by Jewish poets in Yemen to the present day, while Jewish poets in other countries neglected it almost totally in the second half of the sixteenth century.

The first scholar to accomplish a thorough comparative study of Yemeni-Jewish and Yemeni-Muslim poetry was Moshe Piamenta, in an article published in Hebrew (1984) and later in Arabic translation (1997). His focus was the content of the poetry, as evinced by the title of the study: “Of Human, Divine, and Messianic Beauty in Yemeni Arabic Verse”; nevertheless, its importance far exceeds a comparison of the motifs of beauty in Jewish and Muslim Arabic poetry in Yemen. Piamenta unequivocally establishes the inevitable need to use the comparative method when researching the Jewish-Yemeni poetry, as it was closely connected to local Muslim poetry. Of course, the immediate conclusion was the one already expressed by Idelsohn more than fifty years previously, namely that the connection with Hebrew-Spanish poetry might only partially offer in-depth understanding of the realities of Jewish-Yemeni poetry. Also, Piamenta was the first to show the particular Muslim-Yemeni poetic genre, the post-classical *Humaynī*, written in colloquial Yemeni. His conclusion is very clear: the renowned and anonymous Jewish poets of Yemen must have undoubtedly followed up this poetry in its various stages attesting its tropes and figurative symbols switched to Jewish religious themes (Piamenta 1984,

p.37). Certainly, our concern here is not content or speculative motifs but form, namely the *muwashshah* design. In any event, when studying this form in Jewish-Yemeni verse we have to take in account its existence in Muslim-Yemeni verse.

This conclusion is not entirely self-evident. Ratzaby, the aforementioned scholar of Jewish-Yemeni verse, tended to minimise its being impacted by Muslim-Yemeni verse;¹ likewise Fleischer, as intimated above, preferred to focus on the connection with the Hebrew verse in Spain. But even if we bypass the specific issue of form and content, we cannot ignore a conspicuous and significant fact, unquestionably recognised by all scholars. It is that from the second half of the fifteenth century Arabic became the legitimate expression of Jewish verse in Yemen, to the point of its being the main carrier of that verse in the work of Shalom Shabazī, the most prominent Jewish poet of the seventeenth century (Tobi 1987). This phenomenon is not attested in any of the Jewish communities prior to modern times, reflecting the receptivity of the Jewish poets in Yemen to the local Muslim verse.

Another essential point in this regard, which we cannot analyse more deeply here, is the performance of the *muwashshah* in Yemen with music and dance. We know, and we have much evidence for this, that Jewish-Yemeni music and dance were borrowed from the Muslim environment, albeit in a sublimated and refined version. We even have the highly significant testimony of a Jewish Ṣan‘ānī scholar of the second half of the eighteenth century, stating that he used to listen in on Muslim banquets for the sake of his creative work. On the other hand, Yemeni rabbis and compilers of *ḏiwāns* warned their co-religionists not to sing the Muslim love-poems; they explained Shabazī’s Arabic poems as his intention to divert the Jewish community from the secular poems (Ratzaby 1988, pp. 44-5)

A more authorised and well-founded opinion concerning the influence on Jewish *muwashshah* in Yemen of the Muslim kind was expressed by the late Prof. David Semah of the University of Haifa. In an English-language study entitled “The Poetics of *Humaynī* Poetry in Yemen” (1988) he examined this genre, apparently for the first time in a Western language, including the “double-chequered” *muwashshah* and its relation to Hispano-Arabic strophic poetry. Soon after, he published a Hebrew-language article on the formal sources of the Jewish *muwashshah* in Yemen (1989). These two studies are to date the best on the subject under discussion, finally establishing the connection between the Jewish and Muslim *muwashshahāt* in Yemen and removing any reservations about this idea. In the following pages I try to draw some more insights, generally to strengthen Semah’s conclusion, but also to present it more precisely.²

B. The sources of the Jewish-Yemeni *muwashshah*

In his Hebrew-language study Semah concludes that at this stage it is impossible

to decide if the formal similarity between the Spanish “double-chequered” *muwashshahāt*, in both Hebrew and Arabic, and the Yemeni ones attests to the impact of the former on the latter. According to his judgment this question might be answered only after specific research based on new material. Fleischer seems more sure about it, basing his view on many examples of Hebrew “double-chequered” *muwashshahāt* from Spain, Egypt, and Iraq from the twelfth century onwards (Fleischer 1991, pp. 117-52). This question was raised earlier by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maqāliḥ, in his work on colloquial verse in Yemen (1978). He posits two alternatives (p. 111): (a) the *Ḥumayni* verse, of which the “double-chequered” *muwashshah* is a manifestation, is just a late development of pre-Islamic verse in Yemen, independent of the pre-Islamic classical *qaṣīda*, the genre that the tenth-century Yemeni historian calls *badawī*; (b) it is an imitation of the *zajal* (namely *muwashshah*) genre, the predominant verse in Egypt of the twelfth century, whither it was imported from al-Andalus. Later he challenges some of the zealous Yemenis who opine that Yemen is the origin of the *muwashshah*, and that consequently it is the origin of colloquial verse, that is, the *muwashshah* written in colloquial Arabic. Maqāliḥ prefers the second option, although he does not ignore the significant role of the local poetry and the historical roots of popular songs and *badawī* verse. His clear view is that the *muwashshah* genre in Yemen is one element of the cultural impact of Egypt on Yemen in the Ayyūbī period (1171-1251), when Yemen was part of that kingdom.

Maqāliḥ’s analysis is very interesting and meaningful, and it might help us explain the obsessive use of the *muwashshah* form in Yemen compared with its relatively very limited use in other countries. Of course, one should bear in mind the same explanation regarding the wide use of the *muwashshah* form in Hebrew poetry in Spain, far more than in the parallel Muslim poetry in that country, and still more in the liturgical *piyyut*, which served for the synagogue ritual. The customary explanation for that seemingly strange phenomenon is that ancient oriental Hebrew poetry, before it opened up to the influence of Arabic poetry in the tenth century, was strophic and much richer in rhyme than the one-rhyme Arabic *qaṣīda*. One kind of this multi-rhyme Hebrew verse is the *musaddas*, a poem whose strophes are amazingly *muwashshah*-like, namely six verses in each strophe, of which the first four end with the same rhyme and the last two in another. The only detail by which the *muwashshah* may be distinguished from the *musaddas* is that the rhyme of the last two verses in the strophe of the *muwashshah* is common to all two last verses (*taqfil*, *qufl*). We find some excellent examples of this design in the liturgical *yoṣerot* of Sa’adia (882-942), unquestionably before the first Andalusī *muwashshahāt* (Tobi 1982, I, p. 178).

In passing I would like to draw the attention of scholars to the Arabic *muwashshahāt* written by the Spanish poet Ibrāhīm ibn Sahl (1211-51, a Jew

by origin), which to the best of my knowledge were not used to illustrate the “double-chequered” *muwashshahāt* already in Spain. Twenty-four poems of this kind are assembled in a separate section in the Iḥsān ‘Abbās’s edition (1967, pp. 283-345). Most of them are constructed on the classical form of the *muwashshah*: AA bbbAA cccAA etc., but there are some in which the *tawshīḥ* lines are more complicated, and at least two may be defined as “double-chequered” *muwashshahāt*: no. 9 – AABA ccccAABA ddddAABA; and no. 13 – AAB cccAAB dddAAB. Especially interesting is the second design, in which the third line of the *tawshīḥ* is shorter than the other lines and actually consists of only one word.

The first Hebrew-Yemeni poem in which we find the “double-chequered” *muwashshah* is by Abraham ben Halfon, who lived in the first decades of the thirteenth century: its structure is ababCCCD efefGGGD. In fact, the *tawshīḥ* is composed of four shorter lines, of which the first three have the same rhyme, but it alternates from one strophe to another (CCC DDD), while the fourth line has a consistent rhyme, common to the equivalent lines in all the other strophes. This design is already well known from Shelomo ibn Gabirol of Spain (1120-50) (Fleischer 1991, pp. 125-7). This, like many other effects in Abraham ben Halfon’s verse, demonstrates that he still represents the Andalusī Hebrew style adopted by the Jews of Yemen. It is not the classical design of the Yemeni *muwashshah* as known from the sixteenth century onwards, Jewish as well as Muslim.

Now, the background against which the Jewish Yemeni poets began to adopt the characteristic “double-chequered” *muwashshah* in their writing is connected with the general tendency of their receptivity to local Arabic poetry. The first step, according to the data at our disposal, involved the plain use of Arabic for poetry. The earliest poem (some lines are in Hebrew) is by the philosopher and commentator Zekhariah al-Ṭabīb (in Hebrew: Ha-Rofe, the doctor), who flourished in the first half of the fifteenth century. The use of Arabic in this case, as in some poems by three other Yemeni writers in the second half of the same century, has to be related to the philosophic content of the poems, since philosophy was read and written in Yemen at that time in Judeo-Arabic or Arabic (Tobi 1987). All these poems are *muwashshahāt*, albeit in the simple classical design. Also from fifteenth-century Yemen we have a few simple *muwashshahāt* of secular content (drinking), written in Judeo-Arabic and containing lines in Hebrew (Tobi 1976, p. 371-2). Thereafter, Arabic assumed increasing importance in Yemeni-Jewish verse, to the extent, as noted, that more than half of Shabazī’s poetic oeuvre was written in that language. However, the Yemeni-Jewish school of poetry proper started only with Yosef ben Israel, who flourished in the second half of the sixteenth century in the area of Shar‘ab, around Ta‘izz in the south. This now became the centre of Jewish poetry in Yemen. This “Yemeni-Jewish school” is characterised by two features: the central role of Arabic and the particular Yemeni “double-chequered”

muwashshah. Unfortunately for most scholars, his verse is by and large *terra incognita* (Amir 2001). Little wonder then that they attribute the development of these two features to his younger relative Shalom Shabazi (1619-1680?), who acknowledged Yosef ben Israel as his mentor in poetry and in Torah study in general.

Modern research into Muslim-Yemeni verse began with the publication of the *dīwān* entitled *Tarjī' al-aṭyār bi-marqaṣ al-ash'ār* by 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Yaḥyā al-Ānisī al-Ṣan'ānī al-Jamanī (1754/5-1834/5). It was edited by 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Yaḥyā al-Iryānī al-Yaḥṣūbī and expounded by 'Abd al-Ilāh al-Aghbari al-Fā'ishī (Cairo 1319 H/1901 CE). Since the 1960s, after the republican revolution in Yemen in 1962, some works about Yemeni verse by Yemeni scholars appeared, first in Beirut and Cairo and later in Ṣan'ā. Generally, the *malhūn* verse, which in the Yemeni nomenclature includes the *muwashshah*, is actually almost completely ignored. The reason for this is familiar, being the dismissive attitude to anything not written according to the rigid rules of the classical *qaṣīda*. So it comes as no surprise that a revered spiritual as well as political figure such as al-Shawkānī (1754-1836) eschewed writing *muwashshahāt*, as attested from his *dīwān*, published by Ḥusain al-'Amrī (Shawkānī 1986). Only later, when Yemeni scholars started to deal with the local popular culture, in which the particular Yemeni legacy is expressed, were some works on Yemeni verse published in the colloquial language. As far as I know, the most important book in this regard is al-Maqālīh's *Shi'r al-'āmmiyyah fī al-yaman* (Beirut 1978). According to these studies, one of the first Yemenis to write in the colloquial language and non-classical forms, including *muwashshahāt*, was the poet Aḥmad b. Falīṭah al-Ḥakamī (d. 1330). But the first poet to write *muwashshahāt* in the exclusively Yemeni form was 'Abd Allāh b. Abī Bakr al-Mazzāḥ (d. 1426/7). One of the poems, cited by Maqālīh, is constructed in tripartite strophes: *bayt*, *tawshīh*, *taqfīl* (or *taqmī*). The rhyme pattern is as follows:

Strophe 1	Strophe 2
<i>Bayt</i> ab ab ab ab	<i>Bayt</i> ef ef ef ab
<i>tawshīh</i> cd	<i>tawshīh</i> gh
<i>taqfīl</i> ab ab	<i>taqfīl</i> ab ab

The key point in this pattern is that the repetitive frame of the *muwashshah* includes the last line of the *bayt* and the two lines of the *taqfīl*, while the rhyme of the line (or two short lines) of the *tawshīh* alternates. This pattern is known from later poets too, such as Muhammad b. 'Abd Allāh Sharaf al-Dīn who lived in the second half of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century (Semah 1989, p. 255-6), a contemporary of Yosef ben Israel. The pattern under discussion is also represented in the verse of the nineteenth-century al-Ānisī, mentioned above. There is a strong likelihood that al-Iryānī,

the editor of al-Ānisī's *dīwān*, was the first to depict the exclusively Yemeni nature of the "double-chequered" *muwashshah*. This publication was the starting point for European research into popular Yemeni verse, in a series of studies by two Czech scholars in the 1960s. They are M. Fiedler (1965) and Karel Petráček (1968).

Returning to the Yemeni-Jewish verse, it seems that only after an interval of at least two centuries following the innovation of the exclusive Yemeni pattern of the *muwashshah* in Muslim verse did Jewish poets use it for theirs. Yosef ben Israel was apparently the first, considering his openness to Arabic poetry and his role as the founder of the Jewish-Yemeni school of poetry. Sadly, as said above, his poetry is almost unknown to modern scholars. Only a very small part of it has been published in a scholarly edition. Moreover, our information about him is sparse and vague, including his place of birth and exact dates.

Far better known is Shalom Shabazī, who was a younger member of Yosef ben Israel's family – the Mashtā – and who lived in the same area. Shabazī, who became the most prominent poet of Yemeni Jews, was a prolific writer who penned over seven hundred and fifty poems and who, more than any other poet, shaped the Jewish-Yemeni poetic school. He attracted many scholars who published a considerable part of his work. In relation to our concerns here, he took the distinctively Yemeni *muwashshah* pattern to the peak of its development, incomparably farther than any other Jewish or Muslim poet.

We may add that this pattern was much more widespread in Jewish verse, Arabic or Hebrew, than in Muslim verse. This is explained by the fact that it was composed not only or mainly in the colloquial language (*malhūn*) as was the Muslim verse, but also in classical Judeo-Arabic and in Hebrew, which was always classical and not spoken.

We have not dealt here with the performance and the social aspect of the Yemeni *muwashshah* among the Jews and the Muslims. On this subject some works have recently been published, such as those of Steven C. Caton (1990) and Jean Lambert (1997). We shall also have a lot to say about its use in the Jewish communities in Yemen, especially those in the villages and small towns, in contrast to the Ṣan'ānī Jewish community. But this will be the subject for a future paper.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Ratzaby 1988, Introduction, pp. 7-45.
2. Mark S. Wagner 2004.

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