

# Apologetic and Polemical Aspects of *Yerīḇūnī ‘alei ‘Ozbī Berīt El*

*Aspectos apologéticos y polémicos de Yerīḇūnī ‘alei ‘Ozbī Berīt El*

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## Abstract

Research into Jewish polemics with Islam tends to focus mainly on purely polemical works and to overlook polemical references in other literary texts. This article attempts to correct this tendency by investigating apologetic as well as polemical allusions in *Yerīḇūnī ‘alei ‘Ozbī berīt El*, a twelfth-century CE poem by a Jew of unknown identity who converted to Islam and later recanted. The stanzas of this work alternate between apologetics toward Jews in the poet’s surroundings and polemics against Islam. The inquiry sheds some light on Jewish-Muslim relations in that era and demonstrates the potential benefits of similar investigation of additional literary texts.

**Keywords:** *Yerīḇūnī ‘alei ‘Ozbī berīt El*, Isaac b. Ezra, Abū ‘I-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, apology, polemic

## Resumen

Los trabajos de investigación en torno a las polémicas judías con el Islam se han centrado en los textos estrictamente polémicos obviando las referencias a esta cuestión en textos literarios. Este artículo trata de corregir esta tendencia analizando las alusiones apologéticas y polémicas en *Yerīḇūnī ‘alei ‘Ozbī berīt El*, un poema del s. XII compuesto por un judío no identificado que se convierte al Islam y se retracta más tarde. Las estrofas de este texto se mueven entre la apología dirigida a los judíos del entorno del poeta y la polémica contra el Islam. Este estudio aporta luz al conocimiento de las relaciones entre judíos y musulmanes en este periodo y muestra el potencial de esta línea de trabajo aplicada a textos literarios.

**Palabras clave:** *Yerīḇūnī ‘alei ‘Ozbī berīt El*, Isaac b. Ezra, Abū ‘I-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, apología, polémica

## 1. Introduction

In his “The Medieval Polemics between Islam and Judaism,” Moshe Perlmann, examining polemical works by sages of both religions, notes: “Polemical literature is only one aspect of polemics, as controversy may be conducted also orally, or in writings not directly devoted to it. But it stings by allusion and indirection may be felt in literature,

poetry, scholarship, etc.”<sup>1</sup> So far, scholars of the genre of Jewish polemic with Islam have tended to focus mainly on purely polemical works, leaving many anti-Islamic polemical references in literary texts in disciplines as varied as philosophy, theology, *responsa*, and poetry waiting for academic attention.

Some studies do touch upon the last-mentioned topic, mainly in reference to works of Jewish poets of Spanish origin. Norman Roth examines anti-Islamic polemical sentiments in medieval Hebrew poetry from Spain in works of poets such as Dunash b. Labraṭ (*ca.* 920–990 CE), Joseph b. Isaac b. Abītūr (*ca.* 939–*ca.* 1012 CE), Samuel b. al-Naghrīla (993–*ca.* 1056 CE), and Solomon b. Gabirol (*ca.* 1020–*ca.* 1058 CE).<sup>2</sup> Nehemya Allony investigates the polemical use of Sarah and Hagar by Jewish poets of the *shu'ūbiyya* movement, such as Ibn al-Naghrīla, Ibn Gabirol, Moses b. Ezra (*ca.* 1055–*ca.* 1138 CE), Abraham b. Ezra (*ca.* 1089–1167 CE), and Judah Ha-Levi (*ca.* 1175–1141 CE).<sup>3</sup> Ayelet Oettinger detects hidden criticism of Islam in Judah al-Ḥarīzī's (*ca.* 1166–1225 CE) *Taḥkemōnī*.<sup>4</sup> In a forthcoming article, I demonstrate and elaborate on the development and origins of polemical Jewish ideas such as the use of Ammon and Moab in connection with pre-Islamic Arabs as well as Muslims in the liturgical poetry of the Jews of Spain.<sup>5</sup> Yet much remains to be done.

In the following lines I discuss apologetic references to the Jews as well as anti-Islamic polemical aspects in *Yerībūnī 'aleī 'ozbī berī El* (They quarreled with me for leaving God's covenant), a poem written by a twelfth-century CE Jew of unknown identity who converted to Islam and later recanted.

## 2. The Debate surrounding the Poet's Identity

The identity of the poet of *Yerībūnī* is disputed. The poem is found in several different manuscripts.<sup>6</sup> Scholars focus on two major figures, both of whom converted to Islam in the twelfth century CE and were acquainted with each other.<sup>7</sup> A manuscript fragment found in the Genizah (T-S A.S. 111.1), containing the two first lines of the poem, is titled “So said Barūkh b. Melekh” (*qōl Barūkh b. Melekh*). Barūkh b. Melekh is Abū 'l-Barakāt Hibat Allāh b. 'Alī b. Malkā al-Baghdādī al-Baladī (d. *ca.* 1165 CE), a Jewish physician and philosopher who wrote Biblical and Talmudic commentaries in Judaeo-Arabic. Abū 'l-Barakāt, dubbed “The Singular One of the Age” (*awḥad al-zamān*) by his contemporaries due to his familiarity with philosophy, converted to Islam

1. Perlmann 1974: 103; Perlmann 1996: 119.

2. Roth 1989. See further, Roth 1994: 221–223.

3. Allony 1991: 21–28.

4. Oettinger 2014: 91–92, 95–96.

5. Mazuz 2018.

6. For a list of these manuscripts, see Ibn Ezra 1980: h–i.

7. For additional potential poets, see Ben-Menahem 1943: 450.

at an advanced age. Although Islamic sources propose several rumored explanations for his decision,<sup>8</sup> the actual reason is not clear.<sup>9</sup>

According to MS. Schocken 37, the poem is ascribed to Isaac b. Abraham b. Ezra (ca. 1109–1158 CE). Ms. Firkovich II A 353, in which a shorter version of the poem appears (only stanzas 1, 2, 6, and 7), supports this possibility. Isaac was born in Córdoba, lived for a time in Seville, traveled to Egypt and Syria, and settled in Baghdād in 1143 CE.<sup>10</sup> According to one of al-Ḥarīzī's poems, Isaac converted to Islam:

וְשִׁירֵי הַחֶכֶם ר' אֲבָרְהָם בֶּן עֶזְרָא עֲזָרוּהוּ בְּצָרוֹת / [...]  
וְיִצְחָק בְּנֹו גַם הוּא מִמְקוֹר הַשִּׁיר שָׁאֵב / וְעַל שִׁיר הַבֵּן מִזִּיּו הָאֵב.  
אֶבֶל בְּעֵבְרוֹ לְאַרְצוֹת מִזְרָח / כְּבוֹד ה' עָלָיו לֹא זָרַח.  
כִּי הִסִּיר מֵעָלָיו מְעִילֵי הַדָּת הַיְקָרִים /  
וּפָשַׁט אֶת בְּגָדָיו וְלָבַשׁ בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים  
וְנִשְׂאָר עִירָם וְעָרְיָה / מִבְּגְדֵי הָאֱמוּנָה וְהַתּוֹשִׁיָה

And the songs of the sage R. Abraham b. Ezra are of help in woe /  
[...] and his son Isaac also drew from the source of song / and the song of the  
son from the brilliance of the father.

But when he moved to Eastern lands / the Lord's glory did not shine upon him  
for he had removed the precious coats of the faith  
and shed his clothes and donned others  
and remained nude and naked / of the clothing of faith and resourcefulness.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars are undecided about whether Isaac indeed embraced Islam. Naphtali Ben-Menahem doubts Isaac's conversion, arguing that it may have been a rumor caused by his close relationship with Abū 'l-Barakāt, who converted.<sup>12</sup> Those who affirm the conversion debate its circumstances and explain them in various ways. One is that Isaac took this step under the influence of his teacher, Abū 'l-Barakāt.<sup>13</sup> Sarah Katz disputes this, arguing that it resulted from severe social problems and transient stress, after which Isaac returned to Judaism.<sup>14</sup> Yehuda Leib Fleischer claims that Isaac did convert but only for appearances.<sup>15</sup> Moshe Gil sees no reason to disbelieve al-Ḥarīzī regarding

8. See Pines 1960: 111; Stillman – Pines 2010.

9. See further, Gil 1997: 466–473; Gil 2004: 468–475.

10. See Fleischer 1947; Salvatierra Ossorio 2010. On Isaac and his oeuvre, see further, Katz 1991; Gil and Fleischer 2001: 148–173.

11. Yahalom – Katsumata 2010: 112–113. The texts were translated by me.

12. Ben-Menahem 1943.

13. See Fleischer 1947: 272–274; Stroumsa 1990: 66 n.20; Stroumsa 1995: 186 n.23; Gil, 1997: 466–473; Gil 2004: 468–475.

14. Katz 1991: 323, 331–336.

15. Fleischer 1947: 269–272.

Isaac's conversion.<sup>16</sup> Gil and Ezra Fleischer warn against thinking that Isaac wrote this poem and consider it unlikely that he recanted.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Apologetics and Polemics

*Yerībūnī* also implies that the poet returned to Judaism. As I will show, the poem contains two elements: apologetic and polemical. Apart from presenting these two aspects of the work, I will demonstrate the poet's contribution to our knowledge about the medieval Jewish-Muslim polemic.

The poem reads:

יריבוני עלי עזבי ברית אל / בצאתי מברית צדק לעולה  
 הלא שבר בנו עמכם באפו / שני לוחת כתב נורא עליה  
 וגור ארניה יהודה בא לתמר / ואמנון על אחותו הבתולה  
 וגם דוד בחנו אל ושג / בבת שבע ושמשון עם דלילה  
 טרפה לא אכלתיה בעודי / חשבתייה בשר פגול נבלה  
 ואם אמר משגע הוא נביא אל / ואודנו בראשית כל תפלה  
 כפי אמר ולבי יענני / מכוב את ועדותה פסולה  
 כפר שבתי לצל כנפי שכינה / אבקש ממך האל מחילה.

They quarreled with me for leaving God's covenant / when I left the covenant of righteousness [and embraced] injustice.

Is it not that Amram's son shattered in his anger / two tablets in the writing of He of awesome feat?

And that Judah, the lion's cub, came upon Tamar / and Amnon upon his virgin sister?

And that David was tested by God and stumbled / with Bat-Sheba and Samson with Delilah?

I never ate flesh torn of beasts / I deemed it adulterated, [likened it to] carrion.

If I say Madman is God's prophet / and so profess at the beginning of each prayer

I do so with my lips alone, my heart responding / You lie and your testimony is invalid.

I have already returned to the the shade of the wings of the divine presence / I ask You, God, for forgiveness.<sup>18</sup>

16. Gil 1997: 470 n.270; Gil 2004: 472 n.270.

17. Gil – Fleischer 2001: 148 n.3.

18. Ibn Ezra 1980: 147. See also Schirmann 1960: 2:628 (287); Ibn Ezra 1950: 16.

Lines 1, 5, and 8 are apologetic, probably toward the Jews in the poet's surroundings. Lines 2–4 are polemical toward Islam; 6 and 7 are both. Line 1 presents the background for the writing of this poem. It seems that some Jews taunted the poet for his conversion; he apparently uses the word “injustice” (*avlah*) as an euphemism for Islam in order to appease them. On Line 5, he affirms that he did not eat “torn” meat (*terefah*) even after he converted, in what may be an apology to the Jews in his milieu. Interestingly, the issue of *terefah* seems to be a point of debate among believers of both faiths. An interesting case is that of Samaw' al al-Maghribī (1125–1175 CE),<sup>19</sup> a contemporary of the poet and another student of Abū 'l-Barakāt who converted and is well-known for his anti-Jewish polemical tractate, *Ifhām al-Yahūd*. Samaw' al criticizes the Jews for eschewing Muslims' food, among other ostensible misdeeds. The Jews, he says, are enjoined only against consuming torn flesh, as in the literal meaning of Exod. 22:30 (“[...] Neither shall you eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dog”);<sup>20</sup> thus, he accuses them of having invented the laws of ritual slaughter. Once having done this, he discusses the issue of the Jewish dietary laws extensively.<sup>21</sup> Jewish law (*halakhah*), however, adopts a broader definition of “torn” meat, regarding as *terefah* the flesh of any beast that is permissible for consumption but is not slaughtered lawfully. On Line 8, the poet concludes the poem by saying that he has returned to “the shade of the wings of the divine presence”, i.e., to Judaism, and begs God's forgiveness.

On Lines 2–4, the poet mentions five Biblical accounts of extreme behavior: Moses in breaking the tablets (Exod. 32:19) and the iniquities of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38:13–30), Amnon and Tamar (II Sam. 13:11–15), David and Bat-Sheba (II Sam. 11:2–27), and Samson and Delilah (Jud. 4–21). In these lines, Fleischer argues, the poet invokes the titans of the Jewish nation to show that since even those greater and better than him have sinned, *a fortiori* has he transgressed<sup>22</sup>—meaning that the poet's intention is apologetic. This argument is somewhat weak for several reasons: (1) The Biblical account does not fault Moses for breaking the tablets. In fact, according to the Talmud God even congratulates Moses for having taken this initiative, one of three initiatives with which He agreed (BT, *Shabbat* 87a; BT, *Babā Batrā* 14b). (2) Unlike other Biblical personalities referenced, Amnon is not a central character in the Bible; he is known only from the story involving Tamar in II Sam. 13, which speaks to his discredit. (3) When the prophet Nathan rebukes David for his relationship with Bat-Sheba, David immediately says: “I have sinned to God” (II Sam. 12:13). Although the Talmudic Sages generally acknowledge that David indeed sinned (e.g., BT, *Abōdah Zarah* 4b; BT, *Sanhedrīn* 107a), there is the isolated view of R. Samuel b. Naḥmanī, which was quite well known, according to which “Anyone who says that David sinned is mistaken” (BT, *Shabbat*

19. On Samaw' al al-Maghribī, see Firestone 2004; Schmidtke 2010.

20. Translation taken from *The King James Version of the English Bible* 1941. In certain cases, the translation is slightly modified to reflect (in my opinion) the Hebrew text more accurately.

21. Perlmann 1964: 19b (75–76).

22. Fleischer 1947: 272.

56a). (4) Samson is not presented in the Jewish sources as a paragon of fear of God; Mishnah, *Ro’sh ha-Shanah* 1:17 (as well as JT, *Ro’sh ha-Shanah* 14:1 [2:8] and BT, *Ro’sh ha-Shanah* 25a) terms him one of three “epitomically small men” (*qalei ‘ōlam*).

Thus, I argue that these lines appear to be polemical (and theoretically may serve apologetic purposes toward the Jews) in reference to the Islamic claim, anchored in the Qur’ān (2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41), that the Jews falsified their own scriptures (*taḥrīf*).<sup>23</sup> One of the manifestations of this “falsification”, Muslim polemicists allege, is the attribution of sins or misconduct to Biblical figures—an impossibility in the Islamic tradition because some of these personalities are considered prophets, who are vested with “infallibility” (*iṣma*).<sup>24</sup> The poet mentions the five Biblical accounts as points of evidence for his claim and appears, as one may judge from his wording, to accept them as valid, as indicated in his use of the word *ha-lo’*, “Is it not so?” Examples 2, 4, and 5 are criticized in Islamic sources. ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. Ḥazm (994–1064 CE), for instance, presents Samson as described in the Bible as a lecher who craves prostitution.<sup>25</sup> Samaw’al criticizes Examples 2 and 4, stating that Ezra the Scribe (whom he accuses of falsifying the Bible) added it because, as a priest, he sought to delegitimize the kingship of the Davidic line.<sup>26</sup> Theoretically, the poet may have learned about these arguments from Samaw’al, who shared his milieu, but we cannot know because his poem is of a nature that defies comparison with Samaw’al’s text.

As far as I can ascertain, examples 1 and 3 are not criticized in Islamic polemical sources on the grounds of unreliability. The Qur’ān specifically states that Moses shattered the tablets: “[...] And he cast down the tablets [...]” (Q. 7:150).<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it is unlikely that a Muslim author would discredit this account as a falsification; in fact, one can find medieval Muslim authors who retell it uncritically.<sup>28</sup> As for Amnon and Tamar, they are marginal figures in the Bible; therefore, one should not expect to find many references to them in Islamic sources that deal with Jewish history. The poet’s need to mention these cases may suggest that some Muslims used this argument perhaps not in texts but in casual debates. The poet may have learned about them by having witnessed informal oral debates; if so, his references to them contribute to our knowledge about the medieval Jewish-Muslim polemic.

On Lines 6–7, the poet states that although he recites the testimony before every prayer, affirming that “Madman” (*meshugga’*) is God’s prophet, his heart tells him that he is lying and that his testimony is invalid. He refers to the *shahāda*, in which the Muslims state that there is no God but Allāh and that Muḥammad is His messenger.

23. On *taḥrīf*, see Lazarus-Yafeh 2000.

24. On *iṣma*, see Madelung – Tyan 1978.

25. Ibn Ḥazm 1960: 284, 289.

26. Perlmann 1964: 16a (62–63).

27. Translation taken from Arberry 1964.

28. E.g., al-Maqrīzī 2003: 4/2, 933.

His use of the word “madman” as an epithet for Muḥammad reveals his anti-Islamic polemical attitude, since most other Jewish sources that apply this term to the founder of Islam do so in a polemical context.<sup>29</sup> At the end of Line 7, he uses the word “invalid” (*pesūlah*). Interestingly, the same word in the masculine, *pasūl*, is used by Jewish polemicists to describe Muḥammad.<sup>30</sup> They use it as a play on the Arabic word *rasūl* (messenger), one of Muḥammad’s appellations in Islamic sources. Given the polemical aspects of some of the stanzas, there may be a double entendre here: (1) the poet terms his testimony invalid because it is duplicitous, uttered only for appearances; and (2) he invalidates it because of its content. As a Jew, he definitely has no problem with the first part of the *shahāda* but with the second. If this is the case, his choice of the word *pesūlah* is deliberate.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Yerībūnī* abounds with cryptic apologetic messages toward the Jews—most likely those in the poet’s surroundings—as well as polemical messages against Islam. The poet begins and ends this work with apologetics. In between appear polemical messages spiced with apology—responses to arguments against the reliability of the Bible and against the truth of Muḥammad’s mission—as well as one explicit apology.

While the poet’s reason for criticizing the *shahāda* may trace to the credic importance of this recitation in Islam, the grounds for his response to the *tahrīf* allegation, of all things, are not clear. It is difficult to pinpoint the Islamic sources to which he was exposed, especially since his very identity is disputed. He may have been exposed to *Iḥām al-Yahūd*, which strongly influenced Muslim polemicists and drew the attention of prominent Jewish authorities.<sup>31</sup> Be this as it may, he contributes to our knowledge about arguments concerning the *tahrīf* that are not known from written Islamic texts.

Despite its brevity, *Yerībūnī* contains many subtle polemical and apologetic messages and promotes knowledge and understanding of the interreligious discourse of its poet’s time. It is, however, only one of many poems that await the kind of academic attention described above. Searching for and investigating additional polemical and apologetic messages in poetry (as well as in other literary texts) will help scholarship produce a broader picture of this topic.

29. E.g., Maimonides 1952: 14, 18, 36, 38, 80. See further, Steinschneider 1877: 302–303; Avishur 1997: 98–103.

30. See e.g., Maimonides 1952: 38; Marazka – Pourjavady – Schmidtke 2006: 39. See further, Steinschneider 1877: 302, 349; Ben-Shammai 1984: 14 n.47, 26; Avishur 1997: 103–105.

31. See Perlmann 1974: 114; Perlmann 1996: 134; Perlmann 1967: 28–29, 33, 43–46, 95, 97; Perlmann 1971: 48–49, 54, 68–71, 139, 143; Shtober 1994: 146–147. See further, Mazuz 2014; Chiesa – Schmidtke 2006.



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