U

THE POETRY OF ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

VICTOR EMANUEL REICHERT

The Hebrew Union College

Cincinnati, Ohio.

1 9 2 6.

To The Memory of My Father

Isidor Reichert

Dec. 29, 1870 - Jan. 31, 1922

Rabbi in Israel

זכרונו לברכה

"עני וכסף ועשיר בדעת"

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It is not easy to express a debt of gratitude to one's teacher, especially when that person happens likewise to be one's friend. All I can say is that this thesis is no reflection upon Dr. Jacob Mann's vast erudition and amazing scholarship in the field of Jewish History and Literature. How much worse this essay would have been without his generous help I leave to the imagination of the reader. Happily, this effort will soon be buried in the archives of the Hebrew Union College along with the other masterpieces of my colleagues. That these contributions may soon achieve a lasting and well-merited oblivion is the earnest prayer of this scribe.

C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION - BACKGROUNDS

Nothing is more delightful than the excursion into the past. Whether it be as an anodyne for the woes of life or as a quest of the spirit to find a larger and a more sweeping horizon, surely these tranquil journeys backward are the most redeeming joys of our planet, so often grey with the presage of disillusionment and despair.

Here are lands, purple with promise, perhaps because they are just remote enough to deceive the critical eye of the literary adventurer. Here are people, moving behind the veils of memory, waiting for a resurrection that may never come. And here is Time, relentless in its historic irony, washing away these threads of memory, now with a flood or a fire, again with a war or an earthquake, until only the patient scholar, freighted with the essential apparatus of languages, literatures, histories, philosophies and what not, may venture with any assurance to stick his bookish nose into the tattered folios which History has washed up from the yesterdays and read aright the story written in fading letters upon the yellowing manuscripts.

Most of us, alas, are denied this rare joy of independent, adventuresome exploration. The staff of scholarship, the apparatus of learning, is much larger than the shepherd's stave. No one knows better than the writer of this feeble essay, the unhappy plight under which he has labored, handicapped by a most meagre Hebrew knowledge, completely ignorant of Arabic meters,-- a prerequisite for one who would approach the technical side of the medieval Hebrew poets,-- stumbling timorously through pages of German, -- did ever any one go

more brokenly and blindly into the twelfth century? Only this can he plead by way of extenuation, - that what he has lacked in knowledge he has atoned for in affection. Leaning as best he could upon the pioneer researches of others, he hopes that he has not missed altogether this quickening pleasure of stumbling upon a genius, buried deep beneath the eight long centuries that have piled upon Abraham Ibn Ezra.

This has been for the writer a grand, heroic adventure. It has meant the sweep of a soul, willing to fling itself over space and time and live again in a forgotten day. Not a stilted romance, this, feeding upon the tawdry melodrama of unreality, but a soul-summoning quest, seeking to commune once more with a great spirit, whose life makes possible an enrichment of our own.

For many days I have sailed softly away and dogged the foot-steps of our literary vagabond as he wanders from Toledo in Spain, -- wanders through North Africa and Palestine, -- yes, even to Bagdad. I have floated with him upon the blue Mediterranean, now placid, now tumultuous. I have accompanied him to Rome, to Mantua and Lucena. I have journeyed on with him to the Provence and then to Dreux in the North of France. Farther even we have gone to London, England where Abraham Ibn Ezra spends the winter of 1158, and so back through France where the trail ends about 1167. Now scholars must quarrel as to whether Abraham Ibn Ezra died in Rome in that year or in Calahorra in the Pyrenees, between Navarre and Old Castile....

It is a different world we are in from our own. It is a medieval world. A Dark Age, we sometimes call it, perhaps because we are dark about it and what little we know of its institutions seems hopelessly cruel and intolerable. It was a period of unrest. It was an age of war and conquest. Feudal lords were constantly arrayed against one another. "Some fought to aggrandize themselves at the expense of their neighbors; others fought to avenge injuries; in fact,

fighting was for many the best loved sport, and any pretext was good. But the zest for combat was keenest when there was likelihood of obtaining booty in some form."[1]

The spirit of unrest was in the air. Men turned to speculations on the life after death, believing that a life of suffering on earth would profit them in the hereafter.[2] It was an era of pilgrims and ascetics. Individuals were praised for their self-denial and self-torture. "Legends of the saints dwelt lovingly upon marvelous incidents of mortification of the flesh...New monastic orders, embodying stricter discipline and greater asceticism, were founded toward the close of the eleventh and in the beginning of the twelfth century, and soon enrolled a great number of converts. Religious leaders like Peter Damiani and popes like Gregory VII lent their influence to the increase in the practice of asceticism."[3] In the summer and autumn of 1096, when Abraham Ibn Ezra was a child of four, the Crusades started under Count Raymond of Toulouse, described by a contemporary " as fanatical as a monk and as land-greedy as a Norman."[4] It was a bloody march...And the Jews in Spiers, Mayance and Worms were hopelessly massacred...[5]

Such was the European Christian world in which Abraham Ibn Ezra moved. It was a Christendom of brave knights and fair ladies. It was a Christendom in which ignorance was all but universal. To travel from one country to another presented many dangers, especially for a Jew.[5a] There were Norman lords... "In the year 1119 a great Norman lord, Eustache de Bertrail, son-in-law of the King of England, ordered the eyes of one of his hostages put out. A nobleman, the father of the victim, caused the daughters of Eustache to be delivered to him by their grandfather, put out their eyes and cut off their noses. These acts of savage violence were still frequent in the 14th and 15th centuries."..[6]

Up to the Lateran Council in 1215, this was a typical method of justice..

It was called 'The Judgment of God." "Sometimes (the victim) was thrown bound into a pool of water, if he went to the bottom he won, if he floated he lost. At the moment when he was thrown into the water the priest adjured the water in these words: " I adjure thee, Oh water! in the name of the Almighty God, who created thee, and ordained thee to serve the needs of man, not to receive this man if he is culpable....but cause that he float upon thee"..[7]

These tests were called ordeals....

Such was something of the humanity of Christian Europe in the Twelfth Century. But Abraham Ibn Ezra grows up in Moslem Spain. This country had been convulsed with painful political changes in the eleventh century. Ever since 1009, Mohammedan Spain had been in wild civil war. In the course of the century, the caliphate lost practically all of its power. In almost twenty years, there were as many as eleven new chalifs in Cordova. This state was fraught with serious consequences. Between the rulers of the many small principalities that quarreled with one another, there were many petty jealousies. Each little capital tried to be a center of scholarship and learning. In the end, these political bickerings proved to be disastrous. The small Christian states in the North now began to unite with one another. Under Ferdinand I (1035 - 1065) there begins the great advance of Christianity in Spain which brought about great changes. Prophetic of Castille's later domination of Spain, Ferdinand Ist already calls himself "King of Spain". After his death, the realm was divided among his sons. For the next seven years there is civil war but finally one son, Alfonso VI (1072 - 1109) becomes the supreme ruler of Castille. Constantly at war with the Arabs, he achieved his greatest victory in 1085 with the conquest of Toledo. His successes at last showed the Arab rulers the danger lurking in their quarrels and so they turned to the Berber ruler of Morocco for assistance.

This was a terrible battle that was fought between Alfonso VI, King of Leon, Castile, Galicia and Navarre and Yusuf Ibn Tashifin, King of the
or Tashfin

Almoravides along with the Andalusians. It took place on Oct. 22, 1086. It is interesting to note, in connection with Ibn Ezra's beliefs, that Mu'tamid suspected the trickery of Alfonso and "ceaselessly consulted his astrologer."[8] The fate of Spain hung upon the issue of the forthcoming battle, and the Castilians were numerically superior. Alfonso was badly defeated by Yussuf and "escorted by only five hundred horse, with difficulty escaped."[9]

But Yussuf did not make use of his victory. Upon the death of his eldest son, he had returned to Africa. Shortly thereafter, however, Mu'tamid needed his help and came personally to beg the Almoravide (Yussuf) to come to the defense. "Aledo lies in the heart of our country, it is impossible for us to wrest it from the Christians, and if you can do so, you will render an immense service to religion. You have already been our deliverer; save us once more." And so Yussuf came. He crossed the Straits with his troops, landed at Algeciras in the Spring of 1090, and effecting a junction with Mu'tamid, invited the Andalusian princes to march with them to besiege Aledo.[10]

Yusuf was not regarded very favorably by the upper classes. They considered him a churl and a barbarian. When Mu'tamid asked him whether he understood the poems recited before him by the Sevillan poets, he replied: "All I understood was that their composers were in need of bread." In a land of scholars, like Andalusia, such shortcomings were unpardonable.[11] Moreover, the men of letters were quite content with their position, and desired no change. The courts of the petty tyrants were so many Academies, and literary men were spoiled children of the princes who lavished luxuries upon them.

Southern Spain was finally united under the dynasty of the Almoravides and endured from about 1086 until 1147 when the Almohades came. At the beginning of the 12th century, when Abraham Ibn Ezra was a boy of seven or eight, all Moslem Spain was united under the sceptre of the King of Morocco. Three pious princes

rule in succession over Andalusia. They are:

1. Yusuf
2. 'Ali (1106 - 1143)
3. Tashifin (1143 - 1145)[12]

It was under 'Ali especially that the Andalusian poets suffered from lack of proper patronage. The Fakihs had become exceedingly powerful and exercised an especially strong influence over the devout ruler. The poets of Spain hated this parsimonious clergy and naturally felt little inclined to sing the praises of those who had brought about so great a change in their personal fortunes. Poverty was now the singer's lot.

We listen to the complaint of a contemporary poet, Ibn Baki, who journeys hungry from town to town. "I live among you, my fellow-countrymen," he laments, "in poverty and distress, and had I preserved my self-respect, I should have long ago departed. Your gardens yield no fruit, your skies no rain. Yet I have merit, and if Andalusia rejects me, 'Irak will welcome me. To seek to live by poetic talent here is madness; for the land containeth none but dolfish and miserly upstarts."[13]

Thus far we have followed the evidence of Dozy who pictures these times as most intolerable, especially for those who were not Moslems.[14] We are presented with uncouth invaders who while posing as patrons of literature, were in reality semi-barbarians and tasteless imitators of Andalusian culture. When we turn to Graetz, however, we receive quite a different impression.[15] If one may trust this Jewish historian, the position of the Jews under the Almoravides was not merely secure but in some cases was highly honorable. Not only were Jews placed in charge of certain financial functions of the state; their poets and scientists were received with honor at the court. Thus we hear that Abu Ayub (Solomon Ibn Almuallim), a Jewish physician and poet of Seville was the court-physician of 'Ali and was called prince and vizier. Another Jewish physician of Saragossa,

Abulhasan Abraham ben Meir Ibn Kamnial, held a prominent court position under 'Ali. Of the important Rabbis of the time, we may mention Joseph ben Jacob Ibn Sahal (1070 - 1124, Cordova), Abu-Amr Joseph ben Zadik Ibn-Zadik (1080 - 1148-49, Cordova) and Joseph ben Meir Ibn-Migash Hallevi (1077 - 1141). Finally we may call to mind the names of several poets of the period: Solomon ben Sakbel, the four brothers Ibn -Ezra of Granada of whom, according to Graetz, the most celebrated was Abu-Harun Moses (1070 - 1139) and finally the most brilliant star of this period, Jehudah ben Samuel Hallevi, born in Toledo about 1086 and passing from the page of history sometime after 1141 as he journeys toward Palestine. We are left with the unhappy tradition that this sweetest singer of all was ridden down and slain by an Arab when at last he reached his goal and was singing his mournful Lay of Zion by the ruins he had longed to behold.[16]

It is into this golden age of Jewish creative literary activity that Abraham Ibn Ezra was born. When one recalls his distinguished contemporaries, poets of the quality of Moses Ibn Ezra and Judah Hallevi, and when one in addition calls to mind the amazing versatility of our genius, at home in philology, grammar, mathematics, philosophy, astronomy and the medieval occult science, astrology, the wonder is not that Abraham Ibn Ezra was able to write poetry that should commend itself to his contemporaries and to posterity but that he should have been able to caper about in verses at all. No matter how we moderns may respond to the metrical fashions of the twelfth century, we must surely confess that here we are confronted with a man of extraordinary knowledge and ability,-- a towering Jewish personality of the Middle Ages.

It was our purpose in these opening pages to set something of the background of the times in which Abraham Ibn Ezra moved. Before attempting to reach an intimacy with his spirit as reflected in his poetry, we shall now turn briefly and more directly to a survey of his life.

Notes to Chapter I

1. The Middle Ages, Dana Carleton Munro, p.242.
2. Ibid. p.242
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. p. 245
5. Eng. Graetz, Vol.3, pp.297 ff. Graetz is incorrect in many of the details but it is well known that the cruelties inflicted were heart-breaking.

5a. Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages, Louis Finkelstein, pp.3 and 42.

6. History of Medieval and Modern Civilization, C. Seignobos, p.77
7. Ibid.
8. Moslem Spain, Reinhart Dozy, London - Chatto & Windus, 1913, p.697.
   See Isaac Husik, Medieval Jewish Philosophy, pp.187 - 196.
   Ibn Ezra believed in astrological fatalism but he endeavored to reconcile it with the ethical purpose of Divine Providence. According to Ibn Ezra, the events of the sublunar world and the destinies of men are governed by the positions and motions of the heavenly bodies, in turn determined by the Intelligences or angels. The motions of the heavenly bodies are determined and invariable. But this does not mean that one cannot escape the evil destined by the stars. Ordinarily God does not know the particular individual. But exceptions are made when a person by developing his soul and intellect succeeds in his life-time in separating his soul from the corporeal and particular and brings it into contact with the universal and spiritual. Should he succeed in accomplishing this, he will attract to himself the special providence of the Divine, which will enable him to evade the evil threatened by his star, without however changing the star's natural course. Ibn Ezra illustrates how this may be done in an interesting way. Suppose it is fated according to the stars that a certain city shall be flooded by a river and its inhabitants drowned. A prophet comes and warns them, urging them to repent of their evil ways before the fate is sealed. They obey him, return to God with all their heart and leave the city to offer prayer to God. The river rises in their absence, as often occurs, and floods the city. The wolf is satisfied and the lamb is whole. The decree of the stars is not interfered with, and the good man is delivered from evil. Thus does Ibn Ezra reconcile the stars and the justice of God.

שמות לג כא ---- ואתן לך משל השור שהיתה מערכת הכוכבים
שיגדל נהר על עיר אחת וישטוף אנשיה או יכותו. ובא נביא
והזהירם שישובו אל השם בטרם בא יום רעתם וישבו אליו בכל לבם.
ובעבור שדבקו בו נתן בלבם שיצאו אנשי העיר לחוץ להתפלל אל השם
והנה עשו כן. וביום ההוא גדל הנהר פתאום כמנהגו כאשר ראינו
בעינינו פעמים רבות ושטף כל העיר והנה לא סרה גזירת השם והוא
הצילם.

9. Moslem Spain, p.698- The Battle of Zallaka, IV. Ch. XII.
10. Ibid. p.701.
11. Ibid. p. 702.
12. Ibid. p. 718
13. Ibid. p. 719
14. Ibid. pp. 720 - 724
15. Graetz, History of the Jews, Vol.3, Ch.XI
16. Shalshelet Ha-Kabbalah, ed. Venice, p.40b, Gedaliah Ibn Yahya.


MAP OF ABRAHAM BEN MEIR IBN EZRA'S
Born 1092-93. Toledo [Cordova?] Leaves Spain 1137.
Rome
London 1158
NAVARRE AND OLD CASTILE?

CHAPTER II

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

It is generally now admitted, Graetz and others notwithstanding,[1] that Abraham Ibn Ezra was born in Toledo about 1092 - 93. According to Rosin, Friedlander, Ochs, Bacher and others, the evidence is clear that our poet died on Monday, Jan. 23, 1167.[2] This conclusion is based upon the Biblical verse, which, with characteristic wit he is said to have applied to himself upon his death bed (Gen. 12:4) :

ואברם בן חמש שנים ושבעים שנה בצאתו מחרן -- אף העולם :
(וביום שני ר"ח אדר ראשון שנת ד" תתקכ"ז נפטר אבן עזרא ז"ל והוא
בן ע"ה וכתב סימן לעצמו בשנת פטירתו כתיבת ידו)

"And Abram (Ibn Ezra) was seventy-five years old when he departed from "Haran" - from the troubles of this world."

Just where our scholar-poet was buried we do not know. Ochs thinks that it is very questionable that Ibn Ezra died in Calahorra as Zacuto reported.[3] While Rome has been mentioned also,[4] this statement has been doubted. Until new evidence is brought to light, we must permit this problem to remain unsolved.

It is interesting to note the various ways in which our poet referred to himself. Sometimes he writes his name merely as Abram; again as Abraham, the Spaniard. Now he calls himself Ben Ezra, or the son of Meir. Elsewhere he writes out his name more fully, Abraham, the son of R. Meir, the son of Ezra, the Spaniard.[5]

How long Ibn Ezra remained in his birthplace is unknown. Graetz and Friedländer believe that the war-stricken condition of Toledo forced him to forsake that city. Is it likely, as Kahana points out in his misleading biography of Ibn Ezra, that he left first with his son and returned, being forced to leave a second time? We next hear of him in Cordova. Indeed, until Albrecht proved that Ibn Ezra was

born in Toledo, Cordova vied with Toledo as the birthplace of our poet.[6]

In both these cities Ibn Ezra must have devoted himself most diligently to the tasks of scholarship. We are uncertain about his teachers.[7] That he was familiar with the writings of Abraham ben Hiya, the astronomer and philosopher, and with the works of R. Yefeth, the Karaite, is clear from his mention of them. Whether he actually studied under them is another matter.[8] Nothing could be more natural than that this personality should speedily attract the attention of his contemporaries. For he was, as has been said by Zunz, " a genius who commanded all the knowledge of his time." He was "equally celebrated as poet, grammarian, commentator, and theologian. He was an excellent mathematician and astronomer; he possessed very little money, but very much wit; he had an innate aversion to all superficiality."[9]

Distinguished Jewish scholars of the day were happy to share the friendship of Ibn Ezra. R. Joseph of Narbonne wrote to ask him to solve several problems dealing with the calendar.[10] Joseph Ibn Zaddik,[11] the Rabbi of Cordova, had cordial relations with him as did also the immortal Judah Hallevi.[12] Moses Ibn Ezra, the gifted poet, was a personal friend of Ibn Ezra and according to some writers, it is possible that they were related by family ties.[13]

Great men, by the force of their personalities, become the subject of legend and fiction. That Abraham Ibn Ezra shares this distinction is particularly apparent in the conflicting remarks we encounter as to the relationship that existed between him and Judah Hallevi. It is amply acknowledged that both knew each other.[14] According to Zacuto, Judah Hallevi was a cousin of Ibn Ezra. Their mothers were sisters.[15] Other accounts whose historicity have been likewise questioned would have Ibn Ezra the son-in-law of Judah Hallevi.[16]

The story narrated by Gedaliah Ibn Yahya ben Joseph,[17] while without basis in fact, is sufficiently interesting for us to record here:

"Rabbenu Abraham, the son of Meir, Ibn Ezra. The author of the Sefer Yohasin

wrote that R. Judah, mentioned above[18] and this Ibn Ezra were sons of two sisters.[19] He was a great scholar in Bible exegesis,[20] in grammar, in poetry and in astrology...[21]

"Already most of his wisdom and works are known throughout the diaspora. Thus we find in the written compositions of Maimonides which he penned for his son, much laudation and praise for the scholarship of this sage, and he (Maimonides) commanded him (his son) to learn his compositions (Ibn Ezra's) with all his ability. This sage wandered in the diaspora of the world most of the days of his life as appears from the colophons of his compositions. I have heard many deeds concerning his affairs, his accomplishments and his clear literary style which I refrain from writing about to avoid long-windedness.[22]

" And I have heard said that Rabbi Judah Hallevi, the author of The Cuzari, was exceedingly wealthy and had but one beautiful daughter.[23] When she grew up, his wife used to urge him to marry her off while he was alive so that on one occasion the learned man became angry with her and made an oath to marry her off to the first Jew who would come before him. And it came to pass on the morning that R. Abraham Ibn Ezra entered by chance, clothed in tattered garments.[24] When the woman saw this poor fellow, she recalled the oath of her husband and her countenance fell.[25] Despite all this, she began to inquire of his name and if he knew Torah. And the man dissembled and the truth was not known from him.[26] So the woman went to her husband at his study and wept before him and carried on. But Rabbi Judah said unto her, " Do not fear, I will teach him Torah and I will make his name great."[27] And Rabbi Judah went out and spoke to him. But Ibn Ezra deceived him[28] and kept his name from him. After much supplication of Rabbi Judah, Ibn Ezra pretended to begin to learn Torah from him. And he was diligent in cunning and pretended to make progress.[29] Now it came to pass one night that R. Judah delayed to come home from the house of study on account of this --- that he had found it exceedingly difficult to compose a line for the letter "Resh" in the poem "O Lord, let Thy kindness."[30] And his wife called him to eat his meal[31] but he did not come. His wife went and urged him to come to eat. And Ibn Ezra asked Rabbi Judah what had happened in the school that he had tarried so long. But

the learned man mocked him. However Ibn Ezra persisted so much that this worthy woman went to the study of her husband, for she too was scholarly, and she took rather, the manuscript of her husband and showed it to Ibn Ezra. Then Ibn Ezra arose and he took a pen and began to revise two or three places in the hymn. And when he reached the letter "Resh" he wrote that whole first line which begins " God consented to give the Jews a double reward."[32] And when Rabbi Judah saw this affair, he rejoiced exceedingly and he embraced and kissed him, and he said to him: "Now I know that thou art Ibn Ezra, and thou wilt be my son-in-law."[33] Then Ibn Ezra removed the mask from his face and confessed and was not ashamed. And Rabbi Judah gave him his daughter as a wife together with all his wealth.[34] Rabbi Judah gradually composed the line beginning with the letter "Resh" in his poem beginning "Esther stirred up the King, etc.," but he desired that the "Resh" line of his son-in-law should also remain there in his writings to his honor.

"And I have seen in the Book "Foundation of the World" that Ibn Ezra died in the year 1065 and there are others who say 1194, the second day of the month of Adar, when he was seventy-five years old.[35] And he said at the hour of his death, "And Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran, - when he left the troubles of this world."

While legend thus comes to fill the places where we grope in darkness for facts, we must confess that of this first period in Spain we have little authentic knowledge. We may merely conjecture that these early days must have been spent in studious application of the available culture of the day and that not merely in Jewish lore. We have already noticed that the sciences and philosophies of the time were not unfamiliar to him. We have seen likewise that he was very much at home in Bible, grammar and exegesis. Whether he had carried on extensive Talmudical studies, as Lippmann[36] believed, is a matter of doubt.[37]

These were days of absorption rather than of creative scholarly activity. But they were relieved of their tedium by poetical compositions, some of which,

sparkling with his ready wit, afforded pleasure to his intimates while the liturgical pieces dealt with more earnest themes.[38] Our poet himself speaks of this devotion to his muse in a long poem beginning: "Wandering has sapped my strength"[39]:

"Before when I was young
I fashioned songs and hung
Them on the Jews
As a necklace."

We face conjecture once more when we inquire into the personal family life of Ibn Ezra. It has been stated that his marital life was unhappy and that he obtained a divorce from his wife.[40] We know from several bold poems that his marriage took place under that characteristic ill-fortune of which Ibn Ezra so frequently facetiously complains.[41] We also know that his son Isaac[42] probably went over to Islam (although Kahana denies this) - a circumstance that brought great sorrow to this distinguished father.[43]

Whether therefore it was the instinctive wanderlust of our poet, or that unhappiness drove him on, or the desire to bring back Isaac to Judaism, the fact remains that the rest of Ibn Ezra's life was spent in a vagabondage, beginning with his journey on to Lucena and carrying him away from Spain to other climes.

Some have held that Ibn Ezra left Spain somewhere about 1140 and mark the second period of his life with this date.[44] Albrecht believes that it was earlier and fixes the date at 1137.[45] Since it has been shown that most of his poetry dates from the first period in Spain and that the date assigned for this work is 1120,[46] it seems possible that Ibn Ezra may have left Spain some time shortly after this. 1140 we may regard as a fixed date when Ibn Ezra was in Rome[47] but it seems a mistake to think that our poet did not wander about for a long time before he finally came to Italy.

Kahana,[48] whose inaccuracies force us to be very sceptical of his statements, believes that Ibn Ezra made two journeys from Spain, the first and earlier one in

the company of his son Isaac. They journeyed together to Egypt where he labored over a manuscript that had been written by Dunash Ben Labrat and which contained many mistakes; from Egypt they went to Babylon, coming to Bagdad where they found a large Jewish community and where lived the "Heads of the Exile".[49] They were in Persia and even went as far as India, although this report has been questioned.[50] Their travels must have been exceedingly interesting for they were able to study the customs and manners of many peoples. Some of these folk entertained strange notions about the appearance of Jews, - notions which still persist in some rural districts.[51] Ibn Ezra in his comments tells us of the strange things he saw, people who bowed down to animals,[52] the wonders of nature that he beheld,[53] while all the time he was enriching himself with information that had not percolated through to Europe. Then he left his son Isaac in Babylon and he himself, poor in money as before but enriched by his experiences, returned to Spain by way of North Africa.

It was in North Africa that he may have met a Joseph ben Amrón, a man of wisdom and of great wealth. Kahana would make out this Joseph to be a distinguished poet also but I have been unable to identify him.[54] It seems that Ibn Ezra was greatly befriended by him in his troubles and that when he was in need of money, which we can well imagine was not infrequent, he would turn to Joseph for aid. Thus it was that as long as Joseph was alive, Ibn Ezra could forget the cares of life which so much annoyed him. But soon his joy ended for Joseph suddenly died.[55] After the death of this Joseph, Abraham Ibn Ezra was again friendless for a time but then found solace in another patron whose name was Isaac. Of him too we are without information save as we draw it from the internal evidence of Ibn Ezra's poems.

One source seems to indicate that Ibn Ezra came to Africa together with Judah Hallevi. Ochs rightly questions this statement made by Solomon Ibn Parhon and believes that both journeyed there at different times.[56] Another story is told that when Ibn Ezra was in Egypt, he tried to call on the distinguished

philosopher, Moses ben Maimon.[57] That this is purely legendary we can see at a glance. Maimonides was born in 1135 and did not leave Cordova until he was thirteen years old in 1148. The anecdote probably grew out of a well-known poem by Ibn Ezra which depicts his attempt to visit a certain dignitary. Ibn Ezra was unsuccessful and relates the experience with his usual gentle complaint:

אשכים לפיח השר
אומרים כבר רכב
אנא לעת ערב
אומרים כבר שכב
או יעלה מרכב
או יעלה משכב
אויה לאיש עני
גולד בלי כוכב.

"I seek his lordship at morning,
They tell me, "He's gone away,"
I come again at evening
"Abed he is," they say;
But whether he's off trotting
Or whether he's asleep -
Woe to the man afflicted
My ill-starred fate I keep."

It was between the years 1140 - 1148 that the Jews experienced great suffering.[58] The cities of Spain and North Africa were overrun by the savage Almohades and many were forced to change their religion. The city of Cordova was captured in 1148. It was then that Maimonides, a lad of thirteen years, together with his father, had to leave Spain. Ibn Ezra composed a lamentation on the fall of the Spanish and North African congregations describing the events.[59]

Kahana is incorrect, I believe, in ascribing this persecution of the Almohades and also the death of Joseph, his friend, as the two causes for Ibn Ezra's second departure from Spain.[60] But we need not quarrel further with these details. Suffice it to say that we now come to the second period of Ibn Ezra's precarious life.

Ibn Ezra is in Rome in 1140 and in three poems he speaks of the troubles that preceeded his coming to the "urbium excellentissima" as the medieval Christian pilgrims sung of it when they first caught sight of its gleaming towers.[61] The first of these songs is found at the beginning of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Lamentations; the second prefaces his Sefer Moznaim; the third preceeds his comments on Ecclesiastes. The poem before Lamentations begins: אנשי אמת ידינו "Men of truth know.."[62] I translate lines 13-15 which concern us here:

ואני אברהם בר מאיר מארץ מרחקים
חוציאתני מארץ ספרד חמת המציקים
וספרי אלו גלותי היו בידי מחזיקים

" And I, Abraham son of Meir, of a distant land,
By oppressor's wrath led from the Spanish strand,
In my exile these books of mine strengthened my hand."

. The poem before Moznaim begins: נשם אל יחלו "In the name of God they begin.."[63] I translate lines 5-17 which are important for us in this connection:

ואברהם עבדו
אשר מלא פחדו
יקות אל חסדו
לחזק נתנים

ובן עזרא נקרא
ובאה לו צרה
כצרת סכירת
אשר על אבנים

64- עדי בא אל רומה
ויהיותו שמה
65- הבינו אל חכמה
66- ופתח אזנים

"And Abraham His servant
Who is filled with God's dread
Yet hopes for His kindness
That his loins be strengthened.

Ben Ezra is his name,
Yet troubles to him came
As of a novice at child-birth
On the mid-wife's stool in pain.[67]

Until he came to Rome
And when he was there
God taught him wisdom
And made him to hear."

The poem before Ecclesiastes begins: שמע אמרי שפר "Hear words of beauty".[68] The translation of lines 5-16 appears below along with the text:

בנו מאיר נקרא
מכנה בן עזרא
ומצורו עזרה
כבודו שואלת

להגיה חשכו
להצליח דרכו
אשר נשאר עד כה
כאלה נובלת

וסארצו נפרד

אשר הוא בחרד

ואל רוטי ירד

בנפש נבהלת

"Meir's son is he called,

Ben Ezra his surname,

From His Rock he asks help

His Glory to claim

To brighten his darkness

To prosper his way

Which remains to him now

As a tree that is grey.

His land he departed

Which is in Spain

And to Rome wandered

His soul troubled with pain."

When Ibn Ezra came to Rome, he found the condition of the Jews was much better than elsewhere. Benjamin of Tudela has given us a picture of the Rome of that day and he helps to identify for us R. Menahem whom we shall mention in a moment. That we may gain a clearer insight of conditions in this city in which Ibn Ezra resided for some time, I append below Benjamin's description:[69]

....מהלך ששה ימים לעיר רומא רבתא והיא ראש מלכות אדום. ושם כמו מאתים יהודים נכבדים ואין פורעין מס לשום אדם ומהם משרתי הפפא אלכסנדירוש הוא ההנסון הגדול המסונה על כל דת אדום ושם חכמים גדולים ובראשם רבי דניאל ורבי יחיאל משרת של פפא והוא בחור יפה נכון וחכם והוא יוצא ובא בבית הפפא והוא פקיד ביתו ועל-כל-אשר-לו והוא נכדו של רבי נתן שעשה ספר הערוך ופירושיו ורבי יואב בן חרב רבי שלמה ורבי סנחם ראש הישיבה ורבי יחיאל חדר בפרשפירי ורבי בניסן בר רבי שפחי ז"ל ....."

"A journey of six days from thence (i.e. Lucca) brings you to the large city of Rome, the metropolis of all Christendom. The two hundred Jews who live there are very much respected and pay tribute to no one. Some of them are officers in the service of Pope Alexander, who is the principal ecclesiastic and head of the Christian Church. The principal of the many eminent Jews resident there are R. Daniel and R. Yehiel. The latter is one of the pope's officers, a handsome, prudent and wise man, who frequents the pope's palace being the steward of his household and minister of his private property. R. Yehiel is a descendant of R. Nathan, the author of the Book Aruk and its comments. There are further at Rome: R. Joab b. Rabbi Solomon, R. Menahem the head of the Yeshibah, R. Yehiel who resides in Trastevere and R. Benjamin b. R. Shabthai, of blessed memory."

While Ibn Ezra remained here in Rome he was able to find a little calm for his troubled spirits and to devote himself once more to scholarly tasks. It was not in Rome, however, as Kahana would have it but in Narbonne that R. David, son of Joseph of Narbonne asked Ibn Ezra several questions dealing with the calendar to which the latter replied.[70] Ibn Ezra seems to have made many worth-while friendships in Rome, especially with R. Menahem and his son Moses in honor of whom he composed a poem.[71] In the year 1140 he completed his commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes which is interesting for us here because in the course of his comments, he attacks the Paitan Eleazar Kalir for his linguistic peculiarities.[72] In the same year our versatile writer completed his commentary on Job which he inscribed to one of his disciples, Benjamin ben Joab. He also dedicated his commentary on The Song of Songs to this same student, who according to Berliner, was a member of the family to which the famous Nathan, the author of the Aruk belonged.[73] He also composed his Sefer Moznaim on the Hebrew Grammar at this time.

It seems to me artificial and far-fetched to picture just how Ibn Ezra occupied his time, as Kahana does, pretending to know the manner in which he spent his leisure moments and how he would jot down the thoughts that came to him. While we have preserved scattered through his writings many wise and brilliant epigrams,

it seems futile in endeavoring to record the life of a personality to weave these lonesome threads together and assign different times and places to them. We must content ourselves with a barer account.

That he was wedded to the quest for wisdom we know not only from his challenging utterances on the subject but also from the wide and varied writings that have come down to us.[74] He was a careful and conscientious scholar, revising and reworking his manuscripts until he felt that he had put them in the best form of which he was capable. Nor when in difficulty was he ashamed to ask others for help.[75] Like all truly great men, he did not feel that wisdom was born with him and so we find that he was not reluctant to confess that there were many matters the explanation of which was not wholly clear to him.[76] Although it is outside the interest of this essay, we may mention that Ibn Ezra was one of the first Spanish Jewish scholars who began to compose books of Grammar in Hebrew. At Rome he also translated three works of Jehudah Hayyug from Arabic into Hebrew:

1- ספר אותיות הנוח; 2- פעלי הכפל; 3- ספר הנקוד

thus performing a valuable service for the Jews in the west who knew no Arabic.[77]

But to remain in one place long, however peaceful and quiet, was impossible for this roving scholar. He must have enjoyed the life of literary vagabondage, he must have relished the uncertainty of the open road. For once more he is on his way, journeying from place to place. When we keep in mind that these were days when travelers were at the mercy not only of the bandits along the way but of the petty barons who ruled over their respective feudal districts, we can easily believe that to tramp the highways alone required courage. But Ibn Ezra had no personal possessions to guard and he was probably undismayed by the dogs that must have barked along his dusty path. When he came to a town where Jews lived, it was not difficult for him to win their respect for his learning and we may believe that proper honor was most usually accorded him. When it was not forthcoming, there was always his sharp tongue to reprove them.[78] He himself tells us in a short verse of his wide and extended wanderings:[79]

"I wandered everywhere...
Books did I prepare,
While secrets I made clear
As moulten mirrors."

Nor were his days spent only over books when he was not travelling about. He could enjoy laughter and sport. He was able to make merry with others and his poem on chess reveals that he was fond of that diversion:[80]

אשורר שיר במלחמה ערוכה
קדומה מן ימי קדם נסוכה
ערכוה סתי שכל ובינה
קבעוה עלי טורים שמנה
ועל כל טור וטור נתנו חקוקות
עלי לוח שמונה מחלקות
והטורים מרבעים רצופים
ושם חטחנות עמדים צפופים
מלכים נצבו עם מחניהם
להלחם ורוח בין שניהם
פני כלם להלחם נכונים
וחמה נמעים תמיד וחנים
ואין שלפים במלחמתם חרבות
ומלחמתם מלאכת מחשבות
ונכרים בסמנים ואותות
בפגריהם רשומות וחרותות
ואדם כי יחזה אתם רגושים
ירמה כי אדומים הם וכושים
וכושים נקרב פשטים ידיהם
אדומים יצאו אל אחריהם
והרגלים יבאן בתחלה
למלחמה לנכח המסלה

והרגלי יהי הולך לנגדו
ואת אירו יהי נוטה ללכדו
ולא יטה בעת לכת אשורין
ולא ישיב אעטיו לאחוריו
ואם ירצה ידלג פתחלה
לכל עבר שלשה פסלה
ואם ירחק וינור סגבולו
ועד סור השסיני יעלה לו
כסו פרז לכל פנים יהי שב
וסלחסתו כסלחסתו תחשב
והפרז יהי סטה פסעיו
וספעיו לארפעת רבעיו
והפיל נקרב הולך וקרב
והוא נצב על הצר כאורב
כסו פרז הליכתו אבל יש
לזה יתרון לסה שהוא ששלש
והסום נקרב רגלו סאד קל
ויתהלך עלי דרך סעקל
עקלקלות דרכיו לא סלולות
בתוך בתים שלשה לו גבולות
והרוק יהלך מישור בדרכו
ובשרה עלי רחבו וארכו
ודרכי עקשים הוא לא יבקש
נתיבתו סבלי נפתל ועקש
והסלך יהלך על צדדיו
לכל רוחות ויעזר את עבדיו
ויזהר בעת שבתו וצאתו
להלחם ובסקום תחנותו
ואם אינו באיבת יעלה לו
ויגער בו ויברח סזבולו

ואם הרוק באיבה יהדפהו
וסחרר לחיר ירדפהו
ויש עתים אשר יברח לפניו
ועתים יש לסתרו לו הסוניו
וכלם הורגים אלה לאלה
וזה את זה כרב חסה סכלה
ונבורי שניהם הסלכים
חללים סנלי רסים שפוכים
ועתים ינברו כושים עליהם
וינוסו אדומים סניהם
ועתים כי אדום ינבר וכושים
וסלכים בקרב הם נחלשים
והסלך יהי נתפש נשתתם
בלי חסלה וילכד נרשתם
ואין סנוס להנצל וספלם
ואין סברח לעיר סבצר וסקלם
ועל יד צר יהי נשפם ונשסם
ואין סציל ולהרג יהי סם
וחילו בעדו כלם יסותון
ואת נפשם פדות נפשו ישיתון
ותפארתם כבר נסע ואינם
נשורם שכבר ננף אדונם
ויוסיפו להלחם שניה
ויש עוד לחרוניהם תחיה.

The Song of Chess

I will sing a song of battle
Planned in days long passed and over,
Men of skill and science set it
On a plain of eight divisions,
All designed in chequered squares.
Two camps are facing one another,
And the kings stand by for battle,
And twixt these two is the fighting
Bent on war the face of each is,
Ever moving or encamping,
Drawing no swords in their warfare,
For a war of thoughts their war is.
They are known by signs and tokens
Sealed and written on their bodies;
And a man who sees them, thinketh,
Edomites and Ethiopians,
Are these two who fight together.
And the Ethiopian forces
Spread into the field of battle
And the Edomites pursue them.
First in battle the foot-soldier [81]
Comes to fight upon the highway,
Ever going straight before him,
But to capture moving sideways,
Inclining not upon his pathway.
Neither do his steps go backwards;
He may skip at the beginning
Anywhere within three squares;

Should he take his steps in battle
Far away unto the eighth row,
Then a Queen to all appearance
He becomes and fights as she does.
And the Queen directs her moving
As she will to any quarter,
The Elephant goes back or advances [82]
Stands beside as 'twere an ambush;
His way is even as the Queen's way,
But o'er him she has advantage,
He stands only in the third rank.
The Horse his way is swift in battle, [83]
He walks upon a crooked pathway,
His ways are never straight but crooked
Amongst the squares, three is his limit.
The Wind his way is straight in moving [84]
In the field across or lengthwise;
Ways of crookedness he seeks not,
But straight paths without perversion.
The King goes forth to any quarter,
And gives assistance to his subjects,
In his actions he is cautious,
Whether fighting or encamping:
If his foe come to dismay him,
From his place he flees in terror,
Or the Wind can give him refuge.
Sometimes he must flee before him,
At times his multitude supports him;
And all slaughter each the other,
Consuming with great wrath each other.

The mighty men of both the sovereigns
Are slaughtered, but there is no bloodshed.
At times the Ethiopians triumph,
And Edom flees away before them;
At times victorious is Edom,
The Ethiopians and their sovereign
Are defeated in the battle.
Should a king in the destruction
Fall into the enemy's power,
They grant him not the smallest mercy,
There is no refuge or deliverance,
No fleeing to a city of refuge.
Judged by the foe, with no redeemer,
Instead of death, he is checkmated,
His host about him all are slaughtered,
Giving their life for his deliverance
But gone and no more is their glory,
For they see their lord is smitten;
Yet they fight again this battle
In this death is resurrection." [85]

And to their claim one here is

Despite Kahana's blithe assurance that he can accurately follow the path of Ibn Ezra, it seems more honest to admit that we are hardly able to form a completely correct idea of his travels, or of the impressions which he carried away. While the places Ibn Ezra visited are sometimes mentioned by him in his works, this information is scattered and fragmentary and keeps us somewhat in the dark. We cannot be sure if it was the same as that of Benjamin of Tudela, the noted traveller who not long after in 1160 went "from Saragossa by way of Catalonia, the south of France, Italy, Greece, the Archipelago, Rhodus, Cyprus and Cilicia, to Syria, Palestine, the countries of the Khalif and Persia. From thence he returned by the Indo-Arabic Ocean, the towns of the coast of Yemen, Egypt and Sicily, to

not [illegible] either Benj. ever visited Yemen.

Castile, where he is said to have died in 1173".[86] It may be that he went in just the opposite direction.[87]

Ibn Ezra finally forsakes Rome where he had spent so rich a literary activity and goes to Lucca where he wrote more books. We are left to conjecture how long he remained in this city. All we can be sure of is that he was still there in the year 1145. It was in Lucca that Ibn Ezra completed his commentary on the Prophet Isaiah. Here too he composed astronomical tables which he later revised in Narbonne in 1160.

There is much debate over Ibn Ezra's commentaries on the Pentateuch which were written during the next ten years or so. In our essay, we need not enter into this lengthy discussion. Accepting the findings of Ochs, we may say that there were composed three recensions on the Pentateuch.[88] Ibn Ezra completed the first and most prevalent one in Lucca about 1145. He withheld it, however, until 1153. In the meantime he wrote his commentary on Ruth and Isaiah. The Sefath Yether was also written in Lucca. It was a work, partly exegetical and partly grammatical, defending Saadia Gaon against Dunash ben Labrat, whose criticism of Saadia, Ibn Ezra had brought with him to Lucca from Egypt.

In the autumn of the year 1145, Ibn Ezra was in Mantua in Northern Italy. Here he completed his best grammatical work which deals not only with linguistic correctness but also contains a brief outline of modern Hebrew meter. It is called Sahoth.[89] Not long thereafter he wrote his Sefer Ha-'Ibbur on the Calendar. We do not know where he composed his Keli Ha-Nehosheth on the astrolabe. It may be that the place of this composition may be assigned to the City of Verona where we find him in the year 1146-1147.[90]

Ibn Ezra now leaves Italy and goes to Southern France. We meet him in Beziers in 1148 - 1149 where he writes the Sefer Ha-Shem on the names of God.[91] This book he dedicated to his patrons Abraham b. Hayyim and Isaac b. Judah. He also writes the Sefer Ha-Ehad, a mathematical work on the peculiarities of the

numbers one to nine.[92] How marked was the impression made by Ibn Ezra by his stay in the Provence may be guessed by the comment of Jedaiah Bedersi, speaking more than a century and a half later.[93] Judah Ibn Tibbon of Lunel, a contemporary of Ibn Ezra, speaks of the great importance of his sojourn in Southern France.[94] The same year, 1148, Ibn Ezra wrote here an astrological work for his friend Johanan b. David. Indeed he composed six astrological works here in Beziers within the three months of July, August and September, 1148.[95] Surely a prolific writer !

From Beziers in the South, Ibn Ezra now continues his literary vagabondage to Northern France and comes to the City of Dreux in the Department of Eure.[96] Because of a corruption of the spelling of דרום to רדום , this place was confused with the island of Rhodes and following Graetz with the town of Rodez (Rhodez) in the Provence.[97] Here in Dreux, despite physical indisposition, Ibn Ezra continued his abundant literary productivity. Between the months of July and October, 1155 - 1156, he had completed a second recension of his commentary on Daniel. It appears that he then took sick and despaired of being able to carry on his work. But Moses b. Meir, a scholar of the city, watched and nursed over his bedside with such care that he soon recovered and was able to fulfill his vow to write the second recension of his commentary on the Pentateuch. We have his poem which precedes the Introduction.[98] In it he tells us that he took sick in his sixty-fourth year and that he made a vow that should he recover, he would write another commentary on the Torah of Moses and dedicate it to Moses ben Meir whom he praises not only for his kindness in caring for him while ill but also for his wisdom and knowledge:

על פרוש התורה שחבר לכבוד ר' משה בן מאיר

ירך שם אשר אין לו תמונה
ולמעונות שחקים הוא מעונה
ונשגב מחזותו כל נשמה
וחכמתו גלויה גם צפונה

לאברהם בנו מאיר יצו עז

יבינהו וספיו כל חבונה

עזרהו עדי חלום וספר -99

שני תיין שסונה על שסונה

בזקנתו סכרוהו עוניו

ביד סכה חדשה גם ישנה

ורב משה בנו מאיר מסכו

ושב גוו ככפה רעננה

ונדרתי לאל נדר בחליי

לבאר דת בהר סיני נחונה

ומה דעתי לקדם פה גבירי

וכל חכמה למשה היא למנה

כשלות מעם מים לגיחון

וערך נר לחמה או לבנה

בנזו אל היות אור לחשכים

וכפו בנדבות כעננה

זהן אחל יסוד דקדוק ופרוש

עלי דרך ישרה באסונה

ולא אזכיר אשר מעה בספרו

ואזכיר שם אנוש רבר נכונה

ודת משה ביד משה אפרש

והיא עדות יהוה נאסנה.

On the Commentary to the Pentateuch, dedicated to Moses ben Meir

Praised be the Lord who is without form,

Whose dwelling is the vault of heaven,

Too exalted to be beheld by any soul,

His wisdom both revealed and hidden, 100

May He bestow strength on Abraham, son of Meir,

May He grant him understanding, from whose lips is all wisdom.

He hath supported him until to-day
When the years of his life number eight times eight,[101]
In his old age his sins have brought upon him
Affliction new yet old,
But Rab Moses, son of Meir, supported him[102]
So that his body was restored like a succulent palm-branch.
I vowed to God a vow in my illness,
To interpret the Law given on Mt. Sinai!
But what am I able to offer to my friend,
To Moses, who is gifted with every kind of knowledge !
My work would be like a drop of water poured into the river,[103]
Like a lamp compared with the sun and the moon !
God reserved him to be a light to those who are in darkness,[104]
And that his hand should distribute rich gifts.
I now begin to write the elements of grammar,
And a literal exposition of the text,
I shall not name any one who went astray,
But I shall not omit to mention those whose words are correct.
I shall explain the Law of Moses and lay my work into the hand of Moses,
As a true token of gratitude."[105]

It was in September, the middle of the month of Ellul, of 1156 that Ibn Ezra completed his commentary on the Psalms.[106] A third work completed in Dreux was his commentary on the Minor Prophets.[107]

Not content with tramping the continent of Europe, Ibn Ezra crosses the Channel and in the summer of 1158 we find him in London where between the months of May and June[108] of that year, he composes his religio-philosopical work on "The Foundation of the Fear and the Essence of the Torah" for his pupil, Joseph b. Jacob.[109]

It is worthy of note that the commercial records of England, the "Sh'taroth", do not mention Ibn Ezra's name nor indeed is he mentioned in any other annals of business transactions.[110] As M. Friedländer observes, "He might have said in the words of the prophet, with a little variation, "I have not borrowed nor lent money, and yet will my people remember me for many generations." Certainly, as we have already seen, Ibn Ezra left behind him so ample a treasure trove of writings that we are often bewildered by its versatile range over so many fields of learning.

As a result of Ibn Ezra's stay in England, we have two interesting literary productions, the Yesod Moreh referred to above and the Iggereth Shabbath, a defense of the Sabbath, the introduction to which, however, Friedländer believes to be spurious:

"The account of the dream, and the resolve of Ibn Ezra to write the "letter" (אגרת) concerning the Sabbath, seems to have been written some time after the event, and somewhere far from England. If the letter were written in England he would not have said, "in one of the towns of the island called Angleterre", but "in one of the towns of this island", and would probably have named the place; nor would he have further described the island as situated in the seventh zone. I doubt whether the whole account of the dream, which is intended as a poetical introduction to the three essays on the beginning of the year, of the month, and of the day, was written by Ibn Ezra himself. Some of the ideas contained therein seem to be foreign to the spirit of Ibn Ezra." [111]

Ochs, however, does not question the Iggereth Shabbath but fixes its date as December 7, 1158 , suggests that it was probably written in London, and believes that the attack on the interpretation of Gen.1:5 in a heterodox fashion refers to the commentary of R. Samuel b. Meir. In this he follows Graetz and Rosin.[112]

Returning to the Yesod Moreh which we shall consider first and whose authorship has not been doubted, we notice as was Ibn Ezra's wont, he prefaces his ethical-religious treatise with a short poem:[113]

אחד בלי ראשית הכל סלא הודו
אך הוא סרומם על פי איש להגידו
ידע לבב משכיל נראו בסעדו
כי-כל-סכחם בו באסת עדו
ולעם נראהו לשמו ולכבודו
הראה בהר סיני אשו ולפידו
אכן תסונה לא ראו ולפקידו
ציר נאמן נתן דתו וחלטודו
ואני נכה רוח בנתי בפקודו
ואסצאה כחוב סודו וסוסדו
בית לתורתו אבנה, ועסודו
יראת אלהינו שתי להעסידו
אודה בהשלימי לאל ולידידו
יוסף בנו יעקב על סתנת ידו -114

One without beginning, all is full of His splendor,
Yea He is too exalted for man to declare Him,[115]
He knows the heart of the wise, He created him in His work,
Yea all who would deny Him in truth witness to Him.
He revealed on Mt. Sinai His fire and His torch[116]
To the people whom He created for His own sake and honor
But the Form they did not see. And under the charge
Of a faithful messenger, He gave His law and His teaching.[117]
I, contrite in spirit, have built at His command
And I have found written His secret and His foundation.
I will build a house for His Torah and its pillar --
The fear of our God I have placed to support it
At its completion I shall give thanks to God and to his friend
Joseph, the son of Jacob, for his support.

ב (fr. ז), I understood

The first line of the Hebrew poem reveals the first name of the author. The poem itself, while far from being unusual in its intrinsic poetic qualities, has yet a ring of sincerity and of earnestness. There is here, as we shall find so often even in Ibn Ezra's secular poems, a complete reliance and faith in God. To what extent such phrases were steryotyped and trite among the medieval singers is hard to say. That we encounter them again and again is an inescapable fact but in the face of a life of hardship and physical poverty, we would be uncharitable to suspect that our poet merely made use of them in a mechanical fashion. Ibn Ezra was too independent in his thinking and behavior to justify the assumption that he mouthed his reliance in God simply because he thought it was fashionable and expected. The contents of the Yesod Moreh further confirms this opinion.

In the preface we are reminded that man is distinguished from the rest of creation by his intellect, by the spirit that comes from God and returns again to Him when man has faithfully fulfilled his mission, --- a mission which our author conceives to be the study of the works of His Master and a Life in accordance with His precepts. To acquire knowledge of whatever kind is a step upwards on the ladder of knowledge towards the Most High.

Ibn Ezra recommends certain branches of learning as auxiliary knowledge, as means to an end, but which must not be treated as the aim of man's life. Such are the study of Massora and Grammar, the Bible, Talmud, Casuistry and Midrash. When studying these things we must never lose sight of our principal aim, " to obtain a knowledge of the works and the will of the Creator"; and in order to attain this end, we must add to the above studies Natural Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics, Astronomy, and Psychology."

" Among the students of Israel there be some whose whole knowledge consists in the knowledge of the Massora, its noble signs and useful hints, the various readings..... the number of verses, words, and letters in each book (of the Scripture) ...The Massoretic student who has learnt nothing else is like a camel clothed in silk; the silk is no use to him, and he does not suit the silk.".

There are others whose study is confined to the grammatical study of the (Hebrew) language...There are others who are always thinking of the Law, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings, and also on the Aramaic translation, and think, because they try to obtain the true sense with all their might, they have reached the highest excellence. The Law is in truth the source of all life, and the foundation of all the commands of God, but not a single sage can understand completely a single command from the written Law unless he learns the explanation of the oral Law....

" He alone who knows the ~~doctrine~~ of phenomena and its demonstrations, the art of dialectics by which are established the axioms that are the guardians of the wall of reason, who has learnt astronomy according to accurate deductions drawn from arithmetic, geometry, and the art of computing ratios, he alone, I say, can arrive at any high degree in knowing the mysteries of the soul, of the Supreme Being, the angels and the future world from the sacred Law and the sayings of Prophets and Rabbis of the Talmud. He shall increase in knowledge and understand profound mysteries which are hidden in the eyes of many...."

In connection with the course of study outlined by Ibn Ezra, it is interesting to see Friedländer's comment on our ignorance of certain important facts of our poet's life:

"History herein pays him measure for measure; for the study of geography and history were not treated by Ibn Ezra with due respect, and in the curriculum of studies recommended by him they occupy an inferior position." [118]

In the seventh chapter of the Yesod Moreh, Ibn Ezra sums up the aim of human endeavor:

"But I have found a verse which includes all the precepts, Fear the Lord your God and serve Him (Deut.6:13)....Man was created for this, and not for heaping up riches nor for building houses to be left for others while he himself shall be in the grave, nor for enjoying the delights of food, for pleasures remain but a few moments, are obtained by great efforts, and often bring many evils....

For the sage considereth that his life is but short and his soul is in the power of His Creator, nor knoweth he when it shall be snatched away. Therefore it behoveth him to inquire sedulously what can move him to love God, learn wisdom, and investigate belief till he recognizes and understands the works of God. It is not like a sage to waste his time in mundane trifles, but to pass a solitary life, learning and meditating on the hand of God and obeying His commands. Then will God open his eyes and mind and renew the spirit placed in his bosom."

ספר יסוד טורא .....פראנקפורט ח"ר לפ"ק .....

על ידי ה' יוסף בער 32-33

וסצאתי פסוק אחד כולל כל הסצות והוא את ה' אלהיך תירא ואותו תעבוד ..... כי בעבור זה נברא האדם כי לא נברא לקנות הון ולא לבנות בנינים יעזבם לזרים והוא ידור תחת הארץ ולא להתענג בסיני סאכלים כי רנעים טעטים חם והיגיעה רבה גם יזיקו ברוכם. גם משכב הנשים יכלה כחו ובשרו. גם דברי שחוק והשתכר סכלות והוללות כי הסשכיל יבין כי ימי חייו טעטים הם וביד בוראו נפשו ולא ידע סתי יקחנה. על כן יש לו לבקש כל דבר שיניאנו לאהוב אותו ללסוד חכסה ולחפש האסונה עד שיכיר ויתבונן סעשה ה' ולא יתעסק בהבלי העולם רק להתבודד ללסוד ולחנות בתורת ה' ולשסור סצותיו ושם יפקח עינו ולבו ויחרש בקרבו רוח אחרת..."

Iggereth Ha-Shabbath

We now come to the second composition, the Iggereth Ha-Shabbath, which as I have already indicated has been questioned by Friedländer. The Sabbath personified, a not unfamiliar fact in Jewish literature, addresses herself to Ibn Ezra, complaining at his laxity in permitting certain books to remain with him which are heterodox in their views concerning the sanctity of the day. Ibn Ezra, hitherto unaware of this fact, now comes to the defense of the Sabbath, "lest Israel be led into error." The text follows:[119]

אגרת השבת

ויהי בשנת ארבעת אלפים ותמע טאות ותמע עשרה שנה, בחצי הלילה כליל שבת, בארבעה עשר יום לחדש טבת, ואני אברהם הספרדי הנקרא אבן עזרא, הייתי בעיר אחת מערי האי הנקרא קצה הארץ, שהוא בגבול השביעי מגבולות הארץ הנושבת, ואני הייתי ישן ושנתי ערבה לי, וארא בחלום והנה אחד עומד לנגדי כמראה נכר, ובידו אגרת חתומה, ויען ויאמר אלי, קח זאת האגרת ששלחה אליך השבת; ואקד ואשתחוה ליהוה, ואברך את השם אשר נחנה לנו, ואשר כבדני זה הכבוד, ואתפשנה בשתי ידי, וידי נטפו מר, ואקראנה ותהי בראשיתה בפי בדבש למתוק.אך בקראי הטורים האחרונים, חם לבי בקרבי וכמעט יצאה נפשי, ואשאל את העומד לנגדי, מה פשעתי ומה חטאתי, כי ביום שידעתי השם הנכבד, אשר בראני ולמדתי מצותיו, לעולם אהבתי את השבת, והמרם בואה הייתי יוצא לקראתה בכל לבי, גם בצאתה הייתי משלחה בשמחה ובשירים, ומי בכל עובדיה כמוני בארץ, ומדוע שלחה אלי זאת האגרת, וזאת היא:

אני שבת עטרת דת יקרים
רביעית בעשרת הדברים
ובין השם ובין בניו אני אות
ברית עולם לכל דורות ודורים
ובי כל מעשיו כלה אלהים
וכן כתוב בראשית הספרים
ולא ירד ביום שבת אזי מן
למען אהיה מופת להוריים
אני ענן לחיים על ארמה
ומרגוע לעם מכני קברים
אני חדות זכרים גם נקבות
ושמים בי זקנים ונערים
ולא יתאבלו בי האבלים
ובי לא יספדו על מות ישרים
והשקם יצאו עבד ואמה
והגרים אשר הם בשערים

ינוחון כל נהטות, הם ניד איש
כסומים ימטורים כחורים
וכל משכיל ביינו הוא מקדש
ונם טרדיל חשכים כנזירים
נכל יום יפצאו שערי תבונה
ניומי נפתחו טאה שערים
סכבד סעיות דרך וכן סן
טצא חפץ, ודבר כל דברים
שטרתיך נכל יטים לטען
שטרתני כאר טיסי נערים
בזקנתך שנגה נסצאה נך
אשר הובאו אלי ביתך ספרים
ושם כתוב לחלל ליל שביעי
ואיך תחשה, ולא תדור נדרים
לחפר אנרות דרך אסונה
ותשלחם אלי כל העברים

ויען ויאמר אלי ציר החברת: הנד הוגד לה את אשר הביאו תלמידיך אתמול אל ביתך, ספרים פרושי התורה, ושם כתוב לחלל את השבת, ואתה תאזור מתניך בעבור כבוד השבת, להלחם במלאכת סלחמת התורה עם אויבי השבת, ולא תשא פני איש, ואיקץ: ותתפעם רוחי עלי, ונפשי נבהלת מאד, ואקום ו חטתי בערה בי, ואלבש כגדי וארחץ ידי, ואוציא הספר תוצה אל אור הלבנה, והנה שם כתוב פרוש ויהי ערב ויהי בקר, והוא אומר, כי כאשר היה בקר יום שני, אז עלה יום אחד שלם, כי הלילה הולך אחר היום; וכמעט קם קרעתי בגדי, בראותי זה הפרוש הרע, וגם קרעתי זה הפרוש, כי אמרתי טוב לחלל שבת אחת, ולא יחללו ישראל שבתות הרבה, אם יראו זה הפרוש הרע, גם נהיה כלנו ללעג ולקלס בעיני הגוים, ואתאפק בעבור כבוד השבת, ואדור נדר אם אתן שנת לעיני, אחר צאת יום הקדוש, עד שאכתוב אגרת ארוכה, לבאר מתי ראשית יום התורה, להרים מכשול ולהסיר פת ומוקש....."

" It was in the year 1158 at midnight, on Sabbath eve, on the 14th of Tebeth, that I, Abraham, The Spaniard who is called Ibn Ezra, was in one of the cities of the island that is called the "corner of the earth" for it is in the last of the seven divisions of the inhabited earth. I was sleeping and my sleep was pleasant unto me. And I looked in my dream and behold beside me stood one with the appearance of a man and in his hand was a sealed letter. He addressed me and said, " Take this letter which the Sabbath sends you." And I bowed down my head and worshipped the Lord and blessed God who had given it to us, who had honored me with this honor. And I laid hold of it with my two hands and my hands dropped myrrh. And I read it and in the beginning it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness. But when I read the concluding lines my heart waxed warm within me, and my soul almost departed, so that I asked him that stood by me, " What is my trespass? What is my sin? For from the day that I knew God who created me and learnt His commandments, I have always loved the Sabbath, and before she came I used to go out to mee her with all my heart, and when she departed I used to send her away with joy and with songs. 120 Who among all her servants has been as (faithful) as I on earth? Wherefore then has she sent to me this letter?" This is it:

I am the Sabbath, the crown of the Law of the precious ones, the fourth among the Ten Words.

And between God and His children I am the sign of the perpetual covenant for all generations and generations,

With me God completed all His works and so it is written in the beginning of the Bible (Gen.II:2)

And manna did not fall then on the Sabbath day in order that I might be a proof to the generations.

I am the delight of the living upon earth and give repose to the multitude of the dwellers of graves (There is truce in Sheol during the Sabbath)

I am the joy of men and women, old and young rejoice in me.

With me the mourners do not mourn, nor do they bewail the death of the just

(Mourning rites are suspended on the Sabbath)

Man-servant and maid-servant find rest and the strangers who are within the gates,

All the beasts repose that are in the service of man: horses, asses, and oxen,

And all who are wise both sanctify and conclude the feast with wine those who indulge in it as well as abstainers (Kiddush and Habdalah)

On all days they find the gate of wisdom. On my day the hundred gates are opened.

I am honored by not doing thine own way nor "clutching after business" nor speaking vain words (Is. 58:13)

I have preserved thee at all times because thou hast indeed observed me from the days of youth.

But in thine old age an unwitting transgression has been found in thee, for they have brought into thy house books,

There it is written to profane the Sabbath eve, and how canst thou be silent and not swear vows

To compose letters in the way of faithfulness and send them on to all sides?

And the messenger of the Sabbath answered and spoke to me: "It has been told to her what thy pupils brought yesterday to they house, books of commentaries on the Torah, and there is it written to profane the Sabbath; do thou gird up thy loins for the honor of the Sabbath to wage the battle of the Torah with the enemies of the Sabbath and do not treat any man with partiality" (Lev.19:15). And I awoke and my anger was kindled within me and my soul was very troubled and I arose and warmed the fire in me and put on my garments and I washed my hands and brought the books into the light of the moon and there was written an explanation of Gen. 1, "And it was evening and it was morning", namely, that when the morning of the second day came then one whole day had passed, for the night is reckoned as part of the preceeding day, and then I almost rent my garments, when

I saw this sinful explanation, and the explanation too, for I said it is better to profane a single Sabbath than allow Israel to profane many Sabbaths with fire if they saw the wrong interpretation. And we would all be exposed to ridicule and scorn in the eyes of the Gentiles. But I refrained myself for the honor of the Sabbath and I took an oath not to give sleep to mine eyes after the conclusion of the holy day till I had written a lengthy letter to explain when was the beginning of the day of the Torah to remove every stumbling block and to clear away snare and pitfall....."[121]

We have now come to the last decade of Ibn Ezra's active life. While we do not have very clear information on these years and the mist of legend seems to hover about the information that has come down to us, we do know with fair certainty that Ibn Ezra was again in the Provence in 1160. It was in that year in Narbonne that he translated an astronomical work from the Arabic. The next year he calculated the nativity of a child.[122] To this same period dates his work on Arithmetic, ספר המספר .[123]

In 1166 Ibn Ezra seems to have been in Rome where he completed his third recension of his commentary on the Torah. The end was now near at hand. On the 23rd of January, 1167, when Ibn Ezra had reached his 75th year, he died. Where his grave rests we do not know. Ochs, a recent and painstaking biographer, seems to think it questionable, as I said at the outset, that he died in Calahorra, in Northern Spain on the boundary between Navarre and Old Castile.[124] Jacobs would have us imagine that Ibn Ezra returned to England after leaving it in 1158 or 1159. It is true that there is a legend that Ibn Ezra died in England, surrounded by black dogs who were believed to be shedim . But we know how this tradition was spread. A traveller brought this news to Moses Taku, of Vienna, an opponent of Ibn Ezra and on the principle of הרוצה לשקר ירחיק עדותו England was connected with it.[125] It may be that Ibn Ezra died as he was once more seeking to look upon his fair native land of Spain. That he cherished its natural beauty we know from his comment on Lev. 23:40 where, speaking of the verse, " And ye shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees,

branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days," he comments feelingly:

"והגולה מארץ קדר לארץ אדום אם יש לו עינים ירע סוד המצוה הזאת"

"Whoever is exiled from Arabian lands to the lands of Edom, i.e. Christian countries, will understand, if he has eyes, the deep meaning of this commandment."

Friedländer believes that he died with these sublime words as his last utterance:

"My soul rejoices in the rock of my strength; in His might He bestowed benefits on me according to my righteousness; in His kindness He has taught me His ways, and kept me alive till I knew the object of my longing; and if my flesh and my heart is spent, the Lord remains my rock and my strength." [126]

Notes to Chapter II

1. Graetz, Vol. III, Ch.12, p.366 and German Geschichte der Juden, Vol.VI, pp. 167 and notes pp.370 - 383. See Graetz p.198 who maintains erroneously that Ibn Ezra was born in 1088. It is interesting to see the wild confusion of dates. Thus G.H. Lippmann, in his Einleitung to Ibn Ezra's Sefer Ha-Shem - Fürth, 1834, puts the date of birth at 1120 following Jost. See note ~~XXX~~ p.5. 3 F. Delitzsch, Leipzig, 1836, Zur Geschichte der Jüdischen Poesie, p.45, is also wrong.

2. D. Rosin: Reime und Gedichte, Breslau 1891, p. 82, note 6.
M. Friedländer, Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah, Vol.I, London, 1873 - Intr. pp.X, note 3 and XXVII, note 54.
S. Ochs - Abraham Ibn Ezras Leben und Werke, M.G.W.J., Jan.-Feb. 1916, Breslau, p.47, note 4.
W. Bacher, J.E., Vol.VI, p.520. See also H. Brody's recent article, pp.21-25 in אסכול אנציקלופדיה ישראלית - ה.ר.ס.י.

3. S. Ochs - M.G.W.J. - May-June, 1916, p.201, note 5.

4. L. Zunz - Die Monatstage des Kalenderjahres, Berlin, 1872, p. 4. See also Zunz, Essay on the Geographical Lit. of the Jews -- Benjamin of Tudela, Asher, Vol.2, London, p.250, 36. See Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie, L. Zunz, 1865 - p. 207, "Der Herold und Lehrer für die romanischen und germanischen Länder war Abraham b. Meir Ibn Ezra, im Jahre 1167 in Rom gestorben."

5. אברם, אברהם, אברהם השר, אברהם הספרדי, אברהם ספרדי, בן עזרא, אברהם בן רב מאיר בן עזרא הספרדי, אברם בן עזרא.....
For complete list see Z.D.M.G., 57, 1903, K. Albrecht, Studien zu den Dichtungen Abrahams ben Ezra, p.422.

6. Albrecht, Studien, idem.

7. Ochs, M.G.W.J.- Jan.-Feb. 1916, p.49.

8. Friedländer, Intr. to Isaiah, p.XI, notes 4 and 5.

9. Zunz, Essay on The Geographical Literature of the Jews, from the remotest times to the year 1841, In Benjamin of Tudela, Itinerary, Asher, Vol.2, London, 1840 - 41, p. 250, 36. L. Zunz, "Die Monatstage des Kalenderjahres, Berlin, 1872 - p.4: "Am. 23 Januar (1167) starb in Rom Abraham Abenesra, gleich berühmt als Dichter, Grammatiker, Exeget und Theolog, ein ausgezeichneter Mathematiker und Astronom, arm an Geld, reich an Witz, ein geborener Feind aller seichten Köpfe, dessen Poesien gesammelt zu werden verdienen, und über dessen Antworten und Leben die Alten ein eigenes Buch befassen."

10. Kahana, Toldoth, p.12. Question came when Ibn Ezra was in Rome in 1140. See Friedländer, Intr. to Isaiah, p.XI, note 7.

11. Kahana, Kovetz, p.6 of Toldoth and pp.76-77.

12. Aside from the poem in the Kovetz, p.79, we have the evidence at least of association in the Shalshelet Ha-Kabbalah, ed. Amsterdam, p.41a and the Sefer Yuhasin, ed. Filipowski p.217-218. Judah Hallevi's Diwan reveals no poems addressed to Ibn Ezra.

13. Ochs, M.G.W.J. - 1910, p.48, note 4 and Friedländer, p.XI, notes 8 and 9 who cites Davison in Omer Hashikcha and Dukes, Moses Ben Ezra, page 6, note.

14. Besides his references in his poetry, Rosin I, p.107, Nr. 65, there are allusions in his commentaries. Ex. XX,I; and Dan.IX, I. Ex. Com.2:1.

15. Sefer Yuhasin, ed. Filipowski, p.217 - 218.

ספר יוחסין השלם ....פיליפאווסקי 1857 218

הר' אברהם בן מאיר בן עזרא הידוע טנרנאטא שעשה פירוש
לתורה ועשה ספרי התכונה היו חייו ע"ה ונפטר בשנת התק"ה דקלהורה.
אבל אני שמעתי שהוא קבור בארץ ישראל בלי ספק ונפטר שנת התקנ"ד.
וכן שלחו לר' שלמה בן שמעון סא"י שראה בעיניו קבר ראב"ע שם.
וכן מצאתי כתוב כי ר' אברהם בן עזרא שעשה הרבה ספרים וספר השם
ודבו מספור ספריו דתורה התכונה בספר ובפיוטים ובקשות נפטר שנת
התקנ"ד יום ב' ר"ח אדר ראשון בן ע"ה שנה וכן כתוב ביסוד עולם.
ואם כן י"א שנה קודם הרמב"ם ז"ל נפטר. וזה נראה לי יותר ממה שכתבתי
למעל' כי נפטר בשנת התקצ"ב כי זה נותן החדש והיום וכן הוא, ואולי
הוא ר' אברהם בן עזרא אחר שהיה בשנת התקפ"ה.

.....217 .... ר' יהודה הלוי וראב"ע היו בני שתי אחיות והם
קבורים ביחד .....

2 Note that he omits the last three words "And they were buried together".

16. Shalsheleth Ha-Kabbalah, Lemberg, 1864; Seder Ha-Doroth, Karlsruhe, 1769, p. 55b. J. Bacharah; Kore Ha-Doroth of D. Conforte, ed. Cassel, p.10a, Note 2 of Ochs, M.G.W.J., p.48.

17. The article by S. Ochser, J.E. p. 582, Vol.XII is misleading with regard to the author of the Shalshelet Ha-Kabbalah. Gedaliah Ben Joseph Ibn Yaḥya was born in 1523 and died in 1588. He was a descendant of a noble family from Portugal and lived in several places in Italy. He was the author of 20 books. (See Kahana's Sifruth Ha-Historiah Ha-Yisraelith, Vol.II, pp.149-151). He wrote the Shalsheleth when his son was Bar Mitzvah in 1549. The boy was intelligent and used to ask questions. The book is divided into three parts and deals with (1) The Oral Tradition from Adam to the present time of the author; (2) The rules for the spheres and planets, biology, witchcraft, coins, weights; (3) The chain of generations of Christian scholars and the persecutions. All in all, the book is a medley of historical information and misinformation. The author used many sources, some of which are no longer extant. Solomon Delmedigo called the work "Shalsheleth Ha-Sh'korim" "A Chain of Lies" and Azariah di Rossi called the author a "Rosh Ha-G'novim". We can understand his interest in legends since he knew that his boy of thirteen would enjoy them.

18. Refers to Judah Hallevi. The legend of Hallevi's death at the hands of an Arab is quoted in the paragraph preceeding in the text. See Vol.II, pp.130-132.

א ברהם כהנא - ספרות ההסטוריא הישראלית - שלשלת הקבלה
ויניציקה שס"ז
X

19. See note 15 above.

20. גדול בתורה refers to his Bible exegesis.

21. This text in Kahana omits a portion of the Shalsheleth here.

22. This passage, found in Maimonides' Kovetz, Vol.II has been regarded as spurious by Rappaport and others.

23. Friedländer, Intr. to Isaiah, p.XII, n.12. R. Judah mentions his only daughter in a poem which he composed on his journey to Jerusalem. (Ginse Oxford, p. 45, and Divan of R. Judah Hallevi, ed. S.D. Luzzato, Lyck, 1864, note 9.)

עדי כי אפשה יוצאת חלצי אחות נפשי והוא לי רק יחידה
ואשכח את בנה פלח כבדי ואין לי בלעדי זכרו לחידה
פרי מעי וילד שעשועי ואיך ישכח יהודה את יהודה

"For the love of God would I forsake even her that sprang from my loins,
The beloved of my soul, though I have none but her;
And I could forget even her son, whom I love like myself,
Though nought I have on earth, except his memory dear.
Oh my child, my delight! How could Judah forget
Or from remembrance banish his Judah?"

From these lines we learn at the same time that the name of the grandson of R. Judah was not Isaac, the name of Ibn Ezra's son, and that the daughter of R. Judah was therefore not the wife of Ibn Ezra.

24. See Kahana, Kovetz, p.10. The poem on his tattered coat which reveals some background of truth for the legend.

25. Gen. 4:5

26. Read ולא הודיעָ כסנו האסת for ולא הודיע כסנו האסת

27. Gen. 12:2 for correct reading : ואגדלה שמו ולא הודיע לה האשה

28. Gen. 31:20, 26

29. וסראה עצמו כעושה פרי fig. "Made himself appear as if he yielded fruit."

30. חסדך בל יחדל אדון A well-known Piut by Judah Hallevi for Shabbath Zohor before Purim. It is in the Yotzer of that Shabbath in the Sephardic rite. The poem is both alphabetical and an acrostic with the name of the author.

31. Gen. 31:54

32. רצה האחד לחסור כפלים מסטרתו ומסטרת חברו שתי ידים
והשני סם בספל הסים שם שם לו:

The prayer-book of the Karaites has the following line:

רץ סרוכי לדבר לאסתר המלכה. לאסר למלך הנה עהדי' מכינים לו
חכה. ויי הקדים רפואה קרם יבוא מכה. ותחשב לו :

(Landshuth, Amude Haavodah, I. p.76). Friedländer, Intr. XIII.

33. Ex. 4:25

34. In telling this story, Friedländer, Intr. to Isaiah, XIII, says that Rabbi

Judah exclaimed, 'Ibn Ezra, thou art truly a son of help' - a pun on the name Ibn Ezra. The disguise was broken off and the marriage took place. Rabbi Judah is said to have then described this happy event in the words of Scripture, "I have made Abraham rich", Gen. 14:23:

אני העשרתי את אברם

If besides the wife he gave him, other treasures are here alluded to, they could not have been in his possession for a long time, as he was in needy circumstances throughout his life."

35. Both dates are incorrect. See Note 2. In the דחתכ"ה the ק has probably fallen out of the Mss. 1165 would be nearer the truth. Isaac Israeli, of Toledo, the first half of the 14th century is the author of the יסוד עולם . At the request of his master, Asher b. Yehiel, in 1310, he wrote this important work on Astronomy and the Calendar, called "The Foundation of the World." תחקנ"ד - The נ is possibly corrupted for a ל -- 1174.

36. Sefer Hashem - Einleitung - G. H. Lippmann - Fürth, 1834 - page 6, Note - "Dass er es in dieser Wissenschaft sehr weit gebracht, und im Thalmud wohl bewandert war, was schon sein Commentar über den Pentateuch beurkundet, beweist noch der besondere Umstand, dass die Verfasser der forgenannten Zusätze zum Thalmud (בעלי תוספות) eine Frage von ihm der Aufzeichnung würdig fanden und dieselbe zu beantworden sich bemühten." See Tractate Rosh Hashonah 13 and Kiddushin 37b - Tosafoth.

37. Ochs - M.G.W.J. Jan-Feb. 1916 - p.49.

38. "In this first period of his life Ibn Ezra's creative activity was chiefly occupied with poetry; and the greater number of his religious and other poems were probably produced during that time." W. Bacher, J.E. Vol.VI.p.521.

39. D. Kahana, Kovetz, p.22, No.14.

40. Rosin, Mosnaim 3 a.u. Safa Berurah 31 a -

41. Kahana, Kovetz, pp.76-77. This poem, N.49, Ibn Ezra sent in reply to R. Joseph Ibn Tzaddik, No.I, p.70, who had taunted him when his bride menstruated on the night of his marriage. Such erotic allusions were not infrequent among the medieval writers.

42. From an extended comment on Ex. 2:2, it has been concluded that Ibn Ezra had five children but all probably died early except Isaac. If this be true, we see additional reason for the unhappiness that seemed to pursue Ibn Ezra through life.

43. Kahana, pp.32 and 33. No.17 and 18. See Eger's Diwan, No. 203, 205., Rosin, No. 55, 56 - Monatschrift 42, - p. 19.

44. Bacher, J.E. Vol.VI., p. 521.

45. Albrecht, Z.D.M.G. - 57, 1903, p. 426.

46. Ochs, M.G.W.J., Jan.-Feb. 1916, p.50 and Albrecht, Z.D.M.G., 57, 1903, p.433 who both cite Eger's Diwan, N. 165 ...

47. Bacher, J.E. Vol.VI., p. 521 - In the Intro. to Koheleth, Com., Ibn Ezra says of himself, "He departed from his native place, which is Spain, and came to Rome."

48. Kahana, Toldoth, pp.8-9.

49. Comment on Zechariah, 12:6

50. Addenda 3 to Toldoth, Kahana.

51. Comment on Isaiah, 52:14 - Publications of the Society of Hebrew Literature, Second Series, The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah, edited from Mss. M. Friedlaender, Vol.III, 1877, p.91.

וזה דבר ידוע, כי כמה גוים יש בעולם שיחשבו כי צורת היהודי משונה מכל הצורות, וישאלו היש ליהודי פה או עין, כן (רר"ק בפירושו גורס כן הוא) (משעתי) בארץ ישמעאל ובאדום:

"It is a well-known fact that many people in the world imagine the Jew a being altogether different from his fellow-creatures; they ask, "Has the Jew a mouth, an eye, etc?" This is the case among Mohammedans as well as among Christians." It is interesting to remember Shylock's speech in The Merchant of Venice in this connection. Shakespeare must have known the outlandish superstitions that lingered among ignorant people then and which still persist in our modern twentieth century.

52. See Com. on Deut. 4:16

53. Kahana, Toldoth, p.9, Note 3.

54. Kahana, Toldoth, p.9.

55. Kahana believes that in the bitterness of his soul, Ibn Ezra poured out his sorrow in a poem beginning: איך ישליו קרבי בלבי אשר כים יהסיו:

"How can my inner heart, tumultuous as the sea, be at peace?"
See Kahana, Kovetz, p.51, No.30. Brody and Albrecht, p.136, who believe this a poem to his lady-love. See also Kahana, p.40, No.25. The internal evidence of the poem does not support definitely Kahana's view and I believe that he is mistaken in assigning this to Joseph ben Amrfn. Certainly the name of that worthy is not mentioned in the poem.

56. Solomon Ibn Parhon, Mahberet Ha-Aruk, 4b -

וכשבאו ר' יהודה הלוי ור' אברהם בן עזרא ז"ל לאפריקי וראו כל העולם קורין אשתי (בסקום שתים) תמהו מזה

"darf mit Egers (Diwan A.z.Nr. 185) und Rosin (Monatsschrift 42, p.20) nicht dahin verstanden werden, dass I.E. zusammen mit Jehudah Ha-Levi im Jahre 1140 in Africa war; davon muss nicht die Rede sein; gemeint ist nur, dass jeder einzelne bei seinem Aufenthalte in Afrika sich über die befremdliche Lesart oder Aussprache gewundert hat. Auf der Orient-Reise mag IE. sein Sohn Isak begleitet haben, der nach 1143 zum Islam übertrat. (Juchasin, ed. Filipowski, S. 94 aus Tachkemoni.)

ויצחק בנו גם הוא מסקור השיר שאב ועל השיר הבן סזיו האב כיוד ה' עליו לא זרה והסיר מעליו מעילי הדת היקרים ופשט את בגדיו ולבש בגדים אחרים.

See Ochs - Monatsschrift, Jan.-Feb. 1916, pp. 57 - 58. It is strange that Brody in his recent article on Ibn Ezra swallows this fiction -- אשכול אנציקלופדיה ישראלית p.21.

57. M. Friedländer, Intr. to Isaiah, p.XVIII.

58. Kahana's Toldoth, p.10, is incorrect with its date of 1138. He is also too general in his description of the invaders.

59. This elegy beginning אהה ירד על - ספרד , was based on this invasion of the Almohades (Unitarians) under Muhamet Ibn Tumert, d.1130. He would not tolerate other religions. Under Abd al-Numen, 1140 - 1147, Morocco and then S. Spain were overrun. Both Christians and Jews had to choose between Islam and emigration or a martyr's death. M. Friedländer, in the Biography of Moses Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed, G. Routledge, 1919, p. XVII and XVIII, quotes from the Sefer Ha-Kabbalah and the Shevet Jehudah to show the horrors of the time for the Jews.

Numen

60. Monatsschrift, March- April, 1910, p. 118, Note 1 - "Die Ursache seiner Auswanderung aus Spanien ist unbekannt. Mit der Verfolgung der Juden seitens der Almohaden kann sie nicht zusammenhängen, da diese erst in 1146 in Marokko und 1148 in Spanien begann. " (S. Steinschneider in der Ztsch. f. M. u. Ph. 1180, Suppl., S.68.)

61. The Medieval Mind, Henry Osborn Taylor, Vol.II, p.229.

62. D. Rosin, Reime und Gedichte, No. 4, pages 18 - 19.

63. D. Rosin, Reime und Gedichte, No.3, pp. 17-18.

64. רומא -following Heidenheim, see Rosin, p.18, note 1.

65. הכינו Rosin, p.18, note 2.

66. ופתח אזנים Is. 50, 4, 5; Ps. 40, 7 - Note 3, Rosin, p.18.

67. "Midwife's stool" -- Ex. 1:16, B.D.B. p. 7; Je. 4:31

68. Rosin, p.16-17.

69. Benjamin of Tudela, Itinerary, Asher's edition, 1840, p.38.

70. Kahana is incorrect. Ibn Ezra answered David b. Joseph's questions in Narbonne, the Provence, shortly before 1139. Schne Ha-Meoroth, ed. Steinschneider, Berlin, 1847, p.1.

71. Monatsschrift, March - April, 1916, S. Ochs, p.124.
Kahana, Kovetz, p. 60, No.35.

72. קהלת - ה'א .....ארבעה דברים קטים -- הדבר האחד כי רובי פיוטיו חידות וטשלים. והדבר השני שפיוטיו מעורבים בלשון תלמוד וידוע כי כמה לשונות בתלמוד ואינם לשון הקדש וכן אמרו לשון מקרא לחוד ולשון תלמוד לחוד. והדבר השלישי אפילו הטלות שהם בלשון הקדש יש בהם מעיות נדולות. והדבר הרביעי שכל פיוטיו סלאים מדרשות ואגדות וחכמינו אמרו אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו ולא אוכל לבאר אחד מני אלף מטעות הפייטנים והטוב בעיני שלא יתפלל אדם בהם כי אם התפלה הקבועה ויהיו דברינו מעטים ולא נענש בדין.

Ibn Ezra's comments on Eccles. V:1. S. Ochs, March-April, 1916, Monatsschrift, p. 119.

73. Nathan ben Yehiel, b. in Rome not later than 1035 - d. 1106. J.E. p.180, Vol. IX. A. Berliner, Geschichte der Juden in Rom, Frankfurt a.m. 1893, II. pt.I, pp.29-30.

74. Kahana, Toldoth, p.15

75. Ibid. Toldoth, note 1, p.16.

76. Toldoth, note 2, p.16.

77. Ed. by L. Dukes, Frankfurt a.M., 1844. Hayyuj's first three works were twice translated into Hebrew, first by Moses Ibn Gikatilla and later by Abraham Ibn Ezra. "Hayyuj exerted an immense influence on succeeding generations. All later Hebrew grammarians up to the present day base their works on his; and the technical terms still employed in current Hebrew grammars are most of them simply translations of the Arabic terms employed by Hayyuj." See Caspar Levias's article in J.E. Vol.VI, p.277 and John W. Nutt, "Two treatises on Verbs...etc...", London, 1870.
Charles Homer Haskins, Studies in the History of Medieval Science, Cambridge Harvard Univ. Press, 1924... p. 3 .."The recovery of ancient science and philosophy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries marks an epoch in the history of European intelligence." Abraham Ibn Ezra played a prominent role in the transmission of culture into Europe. "In general, the lure of Spain began to act only in the twelfth century, and the active impulse toward the spread of Arabic learning came from beyond the Pyrenees and from men of diverse origins. The chief names are Adelard of Bath...while in Spain itself we have Dominicus Gondisalvi, Hugh of Santalla, and a group of Jewish scholars,....and Abraham Ibn Ezra."p.9. This translation from the Arabic is but one example of the important role played by Ibn Ezra in the twelfth century.

78. Kahana, Kovetz, p.12, No.7.

79. Kahana, Kovetz, p.22, No.3.

80. Kahana's Kovetz, No.118. שירי שחוק-156

81. The pawn (fr. OF., fr. LL. pedo, pedonis, foot soldier. L. pes, pedis, foot) Any of the 16 men of least value in Chess.

82. The Elephant is the Bishop, a certain piece in Chess that can move diagonally only.

83. The Horse is the Knight, a certain piece in Chess usually bearing a horse's head.

84. The Wind is the Rook (F. roc, fr. Per. and Ar. rokh, or rukh, castle at chess). It moves parallel to the sides of the board across any number of unoccupied squares.

85. The Jewish Chronicle, June 22, 1894. Translation by Nina R. David. The poem bears the evidence that the moves in Chess have not changed. The Indian chessman have the Elephant to represent the Castle or Rook but it is clear that Abraham Ibn Ezra followed the Arabic designation and makes the Bishop the Elephant or פיל , which the Arabs call "Al Fil", Ency. Brit. Vol.5, p.599. The Rook from the Indian "Rock" "war-chariot" is generally written by Hebrew writers רוק but in this poem the reading רוח has been followed. Ibn Ezra may have used the word "wind" metaphorically as a war chariot. Rosin, Reime...p.159, No. 88 and page 160, note 6.

86. Benjamin of Tudela, Ed. A. Asher, Vol.II, p. 250 - 51, Zunz: On the Geographical Literature of the Jews.

87. M. Friedländer, Intr. to Isaiah, p. XVII,

88. Monatsschrift, March-April, 1916, S. Ochs, pp. 125 ff.

89. Ed. Halberstam, 1874.

90. Ed. Edelmann, 1845. Monatsschrift, Mar.-April, 1916, p.133.

91. Note 1, p.193, Monatsschrift, 1916 - May-June.

92. Pinsker and Goldbardt, Odessa, 1867.

93. Responsa, Solomon Ibn Adret, No.418. I could not verify this reference as the Library did not have the book.

94. Preface to "Rikmah".

95. Monatsschrift, 1916, May-June, pp. 194 - 195 and notes.

96. R.E.J. XVII, p.301.

97. See Friedländer, Vol.IV, p.174 who confuses Dreux with Rhodez -
נשלם ספר דניאל במרחשון שנת ארבעת אלפים ותתק״יז בעיר
רודוס.

98. Kahana, p.69:46; Rosin, p.55: No 33; Friedländer, Vol.IV. p.147, Note 2.

99. חלום emend to היום ff. Luzzatto. No need to emend except to read הלום for חלום meaning "here".

100. These lines recall הקדוש ברוך הוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו
מקומו--

his note [illegible] leave here!

Bereshith Rabbah 68:10 - "In circumscribing the name of the Lord, why do we call Him Makom ? Because He is the existence of the World, but His world is not His existence.

101. Ibn Ezra was 64 years old in 1156.

102. Rosin suggests that this may be the Moses referred to in Eger's Diwan, p. 11, No.50.

103. "Like the Shiloah compared with the Gihon"- See note 1, p.56, Rosin.

104. See T.B. Hagigah 12 a - אור שברא הקב״ה ביום ראשון ....כיון
שנסתכל הקב״ה בדור המבול ובדור הפלגה וראה שמעשיהם מקולקלים עמד
וגנזו מהן......ולמי גנזו? לצדיקים לעתיד לבא

105. Following Friedländer, p.148, Vol.IV. But see Rosin, p.56, note 5 who takes it differently. [illegible] is correct

106. Monatschrift, Ochs, May-June, 1916, p.197, Note 2.

107. Ibid, pp. 197 - Note 3 and page 198.

108. Orient Ltbl. 1850, N. 16; Ochs, p.198.- אני אברהם הספרדי בן מאיר
הנקרא אבן עזרא התילותי לחבר זה הספר ולכותבו בעיר לונדרש באי
אנגלטירא בירח תמוז ונשלם בירח אב סוף ד׳ שבועות שנת ארבעת
אלפים ותשע מאות ושמונה עשרה
ליצירה.

109. See note 2, Ochs, p. 178 - Steinschneider, Ztsch. f. M. u. Ph. 1880, s.61 u. R.I. N. 48. See J.H.S. of E. Trans. 1894-5 - p.49 where Friedländer identifies this disciple as Joseph, son of R. Jacob of Vaudbille. See JHS of E. p.48, note 3 where Sefer Ha-Mitzvoth is suggested as the correct title of the book. Friedländer also points out that the name London is not given nor is the date mentioned in the book itself.

110. JHS of E. Trans. 1894-95, p.47 - M. Friedländer, Ibn Ezra in England.

111. Ibid. p. 55.

112. Monatsschrift, Ochs - May -June, 1916, p.199, Notes 2,3, 4.

113. Kahana, Kovetz, p.70- No.47; See Jews of Angevin England, London 1893, pp.29 38. Joseph Jacobs. Jacobs includes a translation of the poem but his English follows the German translation of J. Rosin: Reime..pp.77 -78.

114. JHS of E. Trans. 1894 - 95, p.49, note 1 where this line is added in several Mss. Rosin, p.78, note 4.

115. Ps. 9:12; 51:17; 92:3, 10; 145:4.

116. Ex. 20:18; Dn. 10:6 (sim. of eyes of angel in vision)

117. Prov. 25:13. Moses is here referred to.

118. JHS of E. 1894 - 95, p.47 - Yesod Moreh, Ch.1: "The knowledge of the names of the towns in Palestine, the history of the Judges and the Kings, the building of the first Temple, that of the future Temple, or the prophecies that have already been fulfilled can only be acquired by hard work and is of little benefit." Page 6, Yesod Moreh, Ed. Joseph Baer, Leipzig, 1840.

119. ד. כהנא ....קובץ ...כרך שני -- 90

120. See Ibn Ezra's popular Table Hymn, כי אשמרה שבת אל ישטרני
Singer's Daily Prayer Book- Historical and Explanatory Notes. Revised Ed. pp. CCLXI. The poem is joyous, genial and reverent and testifies to Ibn Ezra's love of the Sabbath.

121. Jacobs, Joseph, Jews of Angevin England, London, 1893.pp. 29-38. See also Appendix p.403 where he mistakenly tries to venture that Ibn Ezra was again in England in 1166.

122. Monatsschrift, May-June, 1916, p.199, Note 5 -
נולד הילד הסכורך בחלק ראשון מהשעה הראשונה מיום השבת י"ג
לחדש שנת ד' אלפים וחתקכ"א ....על ארך מדינת נרבונה
JHS of E. Trans. 1894-5, p.59, Note 3.

123. Monatsschrift, May-June, 1916, p.199, Note 6.

124. Ibid. p. 201, note 5.

125. Note,129; JHS of E. Trans. 1894-5, p.59, N.4, Ozar Nechmad, Vol.III, 97.

126. He cites the familiar play on Gen. Anecdota Oxoniensia, Semitic Series, Vol.I pt.4; Med. Jew. Chron. ed. A. Neubauer, p.131 --JHS of E. Trans. pp.59 note 5 and p.60.

CHAPTER III

APPRECIATION

No one who approaches Abraham Ibn Ezra's poetry today should forget that in Medieval times the poet's verse was held in the highest esteem by friend and foe. Judah Al-Harizi in his Takhemoni of the Andalusian poets sings in laudation of him:[1]

" And the songs of the scholar, R. Abraham b. Ezra, are a help in trouble,
And as bountiful rain in the time of drought,
And all his piutim are wonderful,
Their subject-matter amazing,
Seers have not beheld any like them.
He also composed an order for the Day of Atonement,
Its themes are molten in the furnace of intelligence,
Engraved upon the heart."

While Al-Harizi's words are couched in the superlative degree, it is possible to discern not only sincerity but critical acumen as well in them. For two important virtues, it seems, are emphasized. In the first place, the play of words "a help in trouble" suggests a characteristic of Ibn Ezra to which we have repeatedly referred. It is his skill in making words twist into several meanings. In the second place, the comparison of his poems to "bountiful rain" is an admirable description of the refreshing spirit that courses through the verse, -- a spirit of gentle wit and bouyant humor.

In the eighth Makame, Al-Harizi links Abraham Ibn Ezra with the other three distinguished Spanish poets in a singular way:[2]

"And after Solomon died, who sat upon His throne,
And Abraham, His Vizier, expired and died,

And Judah, the captain of His host,

And Moses, His prophet; the vision of poetry and its spring were stopped up,

And that glory and awe departed,

And the angel of the Lord no longer appeared,

For none arose after them who could compose such songs as theirs...

The first ate up the fine flour

And left us the bran."

Moses Ibn Ezra, another distinguished poet of the day, links Abraham with Judah Hallevi in this manner:[3]

" Also Judah Hallevi who drew pearls and composed brilliant parables and metaphors, and Abraham Ibn Ezra who belonged to the exalted rhetoricians and poets, -- both were from Toledo and afterwards sojourned in Cordova. They attained the most distinguished rank in poetry according to the Arabic manner."

Another early writer who praised Ibn Ezra was Abraham Ibn Daud. At the end of his work, "The Sefer Ha-Kabbalah", he calls our poet one of the last of the great and pious men, the pride of Spanish Jewry, "who strengthened the hands of Israel with songs and with words of comfort." [4]

As the years flowed on, the poetry of Ibn Ezra received more critical estimation. While Samuel David Luzzatto (b. Triest, Aug.22, 1800 - d. Padua, Sept. 30, 1865) attacked the scientific works of Ibn Ezra, he speaks in a praise-worthy manner of his poetic ability.[5]

Leopold Zunz (b. Detmold, Aug.10, 1794 - d. Berlin, March 18, 1886) is just and accurate in his appraisal of Ibn Ezra. Zunz emphasizes the fact that to write poetry was not his peculiar activity. Number and measure lurk in his poetry, and out of the words there springs the lightning of the thought, not the picture of the imagination.[6]

Graetz is very harsh. He is sure that Ibn Ezra is no poet. Dipping his brilliant pen into caustic ink, Graetz confesses that while " Ibn Ezra was

acquainted with the artistic forms of Arabic and neo-Hebraic poetry, he was, nevertheless, no poet. His verses are artificial, pedantic, uninteresting, and devoid of feeling." [7]

Sachs, too, speaking more particularly of Ibn Ezra's liturgical poems, says that they "consist of wise maxims or censorious admonitions; there is no outpouring of religious feelings which absorb the soul, and which characterize fervent prayer. In the religious poetry of Ibn Ezra there is lacking what is so manifest in the compositions of Ibn-Gabirol and Judah Hallevi, the spirit of sublime joyousness which expresses itself in inspired hymns, the exalted majesty which aspires to the highest and attains it." [8]

As recently as 1916, S. Ochs repeats the general unfavorable remarks about Ibn Ezra's poems, calling the style of the dedicatory poems "exuberant and stilted", - sometimes "insipid and out of place." His lyrical poems, according to Ochs, are not better, "the inner warmth, the fervor of emtions are lacking." "One receives the impression," says this critic, "when reading his poems that the content is a side issue and only the grammatical and metrical aspects were the principal things." Ochs then analyzes H.I. N.63, -- the description of a storm at sea and finds it philosophic on the one hand and tasteless on the other. R.I. N. 64 presents the change of the struggling seasons. Again Ochs finds it merely a dialectical dissertation without poetic quality. R.I. N. 68, the longings of a separated pair of lovers, according to Ochs is "dry and banal."

So too the religious poetry is more speculative than it is religious. "The lofty exaltation of a deeply inspired soul never confronts us in the religious poesy of Ibn Ezra. I believe that the only difference between him and R. Elazar Ha-Kalir, whom Ibn Ezra assails so forcefully in his Koheleth Commentary, Chapter V:1 (See Page 47, Ch.2, Note 72) is the following: - that whereas R. Elazar Ha-Kalir fills his liturgical poems with Midrashic and Talmudic erudition, Ibn Ezra seeks to give in his expressions his astrological-metaphysical views. The peculiar poetic element is missed in both." [9]

The most recent criticism of Ibn Ezra's poetry appears in the new Hebrew Encyclopedia in an article by Brody.[10] Brody fails to draw a distinction between the religious and non-religious poetry of Ibn Ezra and likewise emphasizes the lack of emotional qualities in the poetry, stressing the idea that it contains no flights of the spirit as is the case with Judah Hallevi, and so strain of grief as is true of Moses Ibn Ezra, but rather reflects a tranquility of soul, looking with contemplative eye upon the world and its events. It is interesting, however, to notice that he singles out the poem on "The Mosquitoes" as one of especial beauty.

Against the distinguished array of adverse critics, it were presumptuous for me to plead a more generous estimate of Ibn Ezra as a poet. And yet, reading at the poetry of Abraham Ibn Ezra, I have found here and there such redeeming lines that I cannot but protest against the decision of Graetz and his followers. No poet can claim to have written verse of an equal excellence in poem after poem. Were we to recall the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson or Browning, we would speedily find that the fame of these English poets rests upon a strikingly small portion of the actual lines they penned. The bulk of their production has been forgotten by an indulgent posterity. Only the few choice songs live on for the greater glory of their authors.

Now in the case of Ibn Ezra, we find that his critics have been unkind enough to go to those poems of his that were particularly graceless, and on the basis of these barren songs, to stamp Ibn Ezra as banal and devoid of poetic gifts. Naturally their arguments sound cogent when they point to the stilted dedicatory poems or to such verse as the dialogue between the poet and the sea. R.I. N.63, Kahana, p. 16, N. 10. But no poet should in fairness be judged in so haphazard and partial a fashion. A poet is not as inferior as his poorest work. He is as good as his best composition. The solemn joy of "Crossing the Bar" would be enough to make Tennyson a gifted and great poet although it is one of the smallest and simplest poems he ever penned. William Blake might easily claim the gratitude of posterity for a few small pieces in his "Songs of Innocence and

Experience." So too might Keats and Shelley rest their reputations on a few, immortal songs.

At his best, Abraham Ibn Ezra is a secular poet of whimsical charm welled to humorous conceit and a religious poet of lofty spiritual faith. His short, epigrammatical lines are clear-cut and memorable and are to be found not only in his poems but in his other writings.[11] When he writes about his "tough luck" (Kahana, p.9), or of his inability to meet the dignitary (p.10 - See Ch.2, p.15); of his "tattered coat" (p.10); of the City of Moreh (p.13); of "The Mosquitoes" (p.21) and in parts of his long poem on his wanderings (p.22) -- in all this verse we meet Ibn Ezra full of lively wit and humor, loving life even though it turns its troublesome face to him.

Nor is there ever wanting a trust in God that comes from the heart rather than from the pen of the professional religionist. His poems, both religious and secular, both liturgical and non-liturgical, echo this clear, sincere reliance in God. Abraham Ibn Ezra possessed an unshakable and steadfast trust. This deep religious faith reaches a height of sheer, unquestioned poetic beauty in his hymn of resignation with which I bring this appreciation to its conclusion. After all, as our poet himself wrote in a little epigram,[12] we must look in the religious poetry for the flowering of Israel's poetic genius, for the poet's source of inspiration is God, the age-long quest of Israel's seers and singers:[13]

Resignation

"I hope for the salvation of the Lord,
In Him I trust, when fears my being thrill,
Come life, come death, according to His word,
He is my portion still.

Hence doubting heart ! I will the Lord extol
With gladness, for in Him is my desire,

Which, as with fatness, satisfies my soul,

That doth to heaven aspire.

All that is hidden, shall mine eyes behold,

And the great Lord of all be known to me,

Him will I serve, His am I as of old;

I ask not to be free.

Sweet is ev'n sorrow coming in His name,

Nor will I seek its purpose to explore,

His praise will I continually proclaim,

And praise Him evermore."

אל אלהים כלהה נפשי אזכרנו ותחי נפשי

אל יקועת אלי אוחל
יאמן נו לבב בוחל
אח יחיה או יהיה חל-

כי ה' אסרה נפשי אזכרנו ותחי נפשי

ההסירי את לב ולב
אצעקה אל אל סטוב לב
נו הניבי וכסו חלב

או כדשן תשבע נפשי אזכרנו ותחי נפשי

ראתה עיני כל נעלם
עם אדון כל אסכון אשלם
ארצעה אזני ולעולם

אעבוד לא אצאה חפשי אזכרנו ותחי נפשי

סחקה בשסו כום רעל
לי ולא אשאל סה פעל
אעלה את סהללו על

פי ועתה ירום ראשי אזכרנו ותחי נפשי

Notes on Chapter III

1. From the 3rd Makame, Sha'ar Ha-Shir שער השיר -Brody and Albrecht, 1906, p.176, lines 150 - 160:

ושירי החכם ר' אברהם בן-עזרא עזרה בצרות -- ונשמי נדבות בזמן
בצרות -- וכל פיוטיו נוראים -- ועניניו נפלאים -- כהם לא ראו
הראים -- גם הוא חבר סדר ליום הכפרים עניניו בכור שכל יצוקים
ועל-הלבבות חקוקים.

2. Pauli de Lagarde, 1924, 2nd Ed. p. 89, Al-Harizi:

ומאחר אשר נאסף שלמה היושב על כסאו   ויגוע ויסת אברהם נשיאו
ויהודה שר צבאו   ומשה נביאו נטהם חזון השיר ומוצאו ונסתלק
הכבוד ההוא ומוראו ולא יסף מלאך יהוה להראה כי לא קם אחריהם מי
יחבר כשיריהם ......והראשונים אכלו הסלת ועזבו לנו הפסולת"

3.

ספר שירת ישראל ---- משה בן יעקב אבן עזרא ----

גם אבו אלחסן בן הלוי שדלה פנינים וחבר משלים ומכתמים בהירים,
ואבו אסחק בן עזרא, שהיה מכת המדברים והמליצים הנשגבים, שניהם
היו מטולידה, וגרו אחר-כך בקורטובה. הם הגיעו למעלת השירה
היותר רמה על-פי דרך הערבים."

4. Neubauer, ed. p.81 -

ספר הקבלה להראב"ד ----
......ור' אברהם בר מאיר בן עזרא כולם
חכמים גדולים ומחזיקים ידי ישראל בשירות ונחמות על אלו נאמר
זכר צדיק לברכה

5. Kerem Hemed, IV. 131, et. seq., J.E. Vol.VIII, art. by M. Seligsohn, p.225

6. L. Zunz - Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie, 1865, Berlin, p.207 - "Durch ihn kam die Kluft zwischen Piut und klassischen Stil zur deutlichen Erkenntniss. Doch war das Dichten nicht seine eigentliche Thätigkeit: Zahl und Maas lauern in seinem Versen und aus den Worten springt der Gedankens Blitz, nicht das Bild der Phantasie hervor."

7. English Graetz, Vol.3, pp. 366 - 375. German Graetz - Geschichte der Juden - 1894, Vol.6, pp. 167 - 178 and Note 8, pp. 370 - 383. See esp. 367 Eng. and p. 168, Vol.6 Ger:

"Ibn Ezra, der die mannigfachen Kunstformen der arabischen und neuhebräischen Poesieregel zu handhaben verstand, war darum doch kein Dichter. Seine poetischen Erzeugnisse sind künstlich, gelehrt, trocken, gemüthlos."

"Although Ibn Ezra was acquainted with the artistic forms of Arabic and neo-Hebraic poetry, he was, nevertheless, no poet. His verses are artificial, pedantic, uninteresting, and devoid of feeling."

8. M. Sachs, Religiose Poesie der Juden Spaniens, 312 ff. whom Graetz follows: "His liturgical poetry, produced at all periods of his life, bears the same impress of sober contemplation. It consists of wise maxims or censorious admonitions; there is no outpouring of religious feelings which absorb the soul, and which characterize fervent prayer. In the religious poetry of Ibn Ezra there is lacking what is so manifest in the compositions of Ibn Gabirol and Judah Hallevi, the spirit of sublime joyousness which expresses itself in inspired hymns, the exalted majesty which aspires to the highest, and attains it."

9. Monatsschrift, Jan.-Feb. 1916 - S. Ochs, pp.54-56.

10. אשכול אנציקלופדיה ישראלית --- תרפו --- 23 --21

„הוא אינו מתרחק מן המציאות האנושית כשלמה בן גבירול, המשכיח ביצירות הפיוטיות את האדמה, שעומד עליה האדם; אין בפיוטיו מעוף עלית נשמה והתפשטות הגוף כבפיוטי ר' יהודה הלוי; גם אין בהם בכיה תדירית ובטוי הצער הנצחי כבפיוטי משה בן עזרא. שירי הראב"ע מצטינים בשקט הנפש הבא מתוך הסתכלות אמתית בטבע העולם ובמאורעותיו ההכרחיים, שאין להצטער עליהם, אלא להבין בהם הבנה אמתית ושלמה; הבנה זו מביאה לידי מרגוע הנפש .....יפה מאד הוא גם שירו על הזבובים".

11. Kahana, Kovetz, part II, pp. 96 - 104. Some examples are:

יד -- החכמה תוליד ענוה
כו -- החכמה לנשמה כמאכל לגוף
טז -- המלאך בין אדם ובין אלהיו הוא שכלו
יח -- הלב הוא נסתר, ויתגלה ויתודע בסכלות או בחכמה
יט -- האדם לא נברא אלא שילמד חכמה
לח -- השכל שלית השם
לו -- החכמה תחיה האדם שהוא עולם קטן
ס -- החכם שאין לו נחלה וכסף , ישמח בחכמתו ולא יכעס בעבור עניו.

"Wisdom begetteth humility"
"Wisdom is for the soul as food for the body"
"The angel between man and His God is his intellect"
"The heart is hidden and yet it reveals and discloses folly or wisdom"
"Man was only created to acquire wisdom"
"The Intellect is the messenger of God"
"Wisdom quickeneth man who is a microcosm"
"Let the sage who has no inheritance nor wealth rejoice in his wisdom and not fret because of his poverty."

12. Kahana's Kovetz -- Page 86:

הישמעאלים שיריהם באהבים ועגבים
והאדומים במלחמות ונקמות
והיונים בחכמות ומזמות
וההודיים במשלים וחידות
והישראלים בשירות ובתשבחות
ליהוה צבאות.

The Arabs' song is of love and lust,

The Christians' of war and revenge,

The Greeks' of wisdom and cunning,

The Hindoos of proverbs and of riddles,

But Israel, in its songs and praises is

To the Lord of Hosts.

13. Eger's Divan, No. 55, p.15. This beautiful translation was by Alice Lucas, found in The Jewish Year, p.60, London, Macmillan and Co., 1898.
The poem is an acrostic spelling Ibn Ezra's first name. I place below a literal translation of the Hebrew:

Unto God my soul yearns, I will remember Him that my soul may live.

I hope for the salvation of my God,
Doubtful hearts believe in Him,
Whether He keeps me alive or kill me

My portion is the Lord, saith my soul, I will remember Him that my soul may live.

When I remove duplicity
I cry unto God out of satisfaction
My meditation is about Him and

My soul is sated like fat and fatness I will remember Him that my soul may live.

My eye beheld all hidden things
If I become familiar with God then I become perfect
I shall bore a hole in my ear and forever

I will serve Him nor will I go free, I will remember Him that my soul may live.

The cup of bitterness is sweet to me in His name (Zidduk Ha-Din idea)
And I will not ask what He doeth
I will offer up His praise upon my mouth

And now my head will be lifted up, I will remember Him that my soul may live.

CHAPTER IV

RABBI BEN EZRA

Every student of English Literature is familiar with Robert Browning's noble poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra", first published in 1864. Since Dr. Furnivall, it has been commonly accepted by critics that Abraham Ibn Ezra formed the model for this poem.[1] Thus in a reliable anthology of English Literature, Abraham Ibn Ezra's life is shortly outlined and an attempt is made to prove that his writings contain some of the views expressed by Browning's sage.[2] To bring together some of these conclusions and to set forth the message of the great English poem is the purpose of this short chapter.

Robert Browning was born in the parish of St. Giles, Camberwell, London, May 7, 1812. He died at the ripe age of eighty-seven at his son's home in Venice, December 12, 1889. His appearance was somewhat Jewish, if that means anything; he seems to have had some knowledge of Hebrew,[3] and he was certainly sympathetic with Jews as is amply demonstrated not only by his poetry but also by two noteworthy acts: in 1881 he signed the memorial to the lord mayor to summon a meeting to protest against Russia's persecution of the Jews and in 1887 he joined the Council of the Anglo-Jewish Exhibition.

Until Dr. Furnivall proved the contrary, for a long time it was believed that Browning was of Jewish descent.[4] As one of his biographers points out, "the chief reason assigned by his contemporaries for the belief was the fact that he was, without doubt, specially and profoundly interested in Jewish matters."[5] It is well known that the boy Browning, despite an indifferent schooling, managed to acquire a vast and miscellaneous knowledge of languages and literatures. He could put his finger on almost anything and a retentive memory helped him to retain much of the information which

he picked up at the British Museum through which he roamed. [6]

Two immediate questions concern us here: What did Browning know of Abraham Ibn Ezra, if anything? Is "Rabbi Ben Ezra" to be identified with Abraham Ibn Ezra?

With reference to the first question, it may be conjectured that the name of the distinguished Rabbi was at least familiar to him. Joseph Jacobs maintains that "it cannot have been by accident that he (Browning) chose to give two of the most important summaries of his Weltweisheit by means of Jewish speakers, Rabbi Ben Ezra and Jochanan Hakkadosh. [7] "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is by many considered Browning's most striking poem, and certainly it yields to none of his in dignity and lucidity. It is of peculiar interest to English Jews as the eponymous hero is Abraham Ibn Ezra, who was himself in England, "the island of the corner of the earth" (a pun on Angleterre) as he calls it, in the spring and summer of 1158. It is scarcely likely that Browning knew more of him than that he was a distinguished Rabbi of the Middle Ages. Certainly the poem has none of those satiric touches with which Abraham Ibn Ezra's name is associated in the mind of the student of Jewish literature. Nothing can be more dignified and stoical than the soliloquy of the old Rabbi reviewing life, and seeing that it is very good both in youth, with its pleasure, and in age, with its experience. The image of the Potter and the wheel, hackneyed as it has been by the homilists, has never been more finely utilized than in the concluding lines of the poem.....The fact seems to be that Browning could read his Hebrew Bible, and that was about the extent of his Hebrew learning, though it was a foible of his to give an impression of recondite learning... But it is not in the minutiae of Hebrew scholarship that we are to look for Browning's sympathy with the Jewish spirit. This comes out in the lines I have been quoting and in his poems of toleration. That this sympathy was not due to any agreement with the characteristic features of Jewish

faith is, I think, undoubted. All the more honor to the poet who could rise above differences of creed and pierce to the human nature which is common to Christian and Jew because it is the gift of a Common Father."

Aside from the conjectural nature of these remarks, it is of course untrue that Abraham Ibn Ezra was merely a satirist. If anything, the internal evidence of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" would seem to indicate that Browning knew much more of Ibn Ezra's philosophy than has come to the surface through the speculations of his critics. Whereas in other characters, "we seem to hear the ring of Browning's own voice"[8] in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" we hear also the voice of the Medieval Jewish sage.[9] Some critics who have apparently been only familiar with the satiric comments of Ibn Ezra have presented the thesis that Browning expresses his own philosophy of faith through the lips of "Rabbi Ben Ezra".[10] That may well be. We know that Browning did not lack reliance in God. "The robustness of Browning's nature, its courage, its abounding joy and faith in life, make his works a permanent storehouse of spiritual energy for the race, a storehouse to which for a long time to come it will in certain moods always return. In an age distracted by doubt and divided in will, his strong, unfaltering voice has been lifted above the perplexities and hesitations of men like a bugle-call to joyous battle in which the victory is to the brave."[11]

We have also direct testimony of this faith based on the famous third verse of his "Epilogue to Asolando":

"One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake."

The Pall Mall Gazette of February 1, 1890 related this incident: " One evening, just before his death-illness, the poet was reading this from a proof to his daughter-in-law and sister. He said: 'It almost looks like

bragging to say this, and as if I ought to cancel it; but it's the simple truth; and as it's true, it shall stand." [12]

But if Browning had a strong robust faith, so had Abraham Ibn Ezra. Again and again in his poetry and in his prose we meet with the thought so beautifully expressed in one poem in particular: [13]

"I hope for the salvation of the Lord,
In Him I trust, when fears my being thrill,
Come life, come death, according to His word,
He is my portion still....

Sweet is ev'n sorrow coming in His name,
Nor will I seek its purpose to explore;
His praise will I continually proclaim,
And bless Him evermore."

In another well-known hymn he sings:

"I thirst for God, to Him my soul aspires
The living God it is my heart desires ...

ending magnificently with

"Yea, though my dwelling be
In darkest night, God is a light to me."

This thought we find once more in another hymn which ends

.."In darkness, God is a light to me." [14]

All that we wish to maintain here is that "Rabbi Ben Ezra" not only reflects the sturdy optimism of Browning; in a remarkable way it sets forth the Jewish attitude of faith and reliance in God and life, - a philosophy in which Abraham Ibn Ezra heartily shared. Summing up the evidence on our first question, we may say that the fact that Browning knew something of Abraham Ibn Ezra, while indirect, seems fairly certain. Israel Abrahams is right in saying that "it is probable that the poet had him vaguely in mind." [15] More than this is questionable. Certainly Browning had

never read any of Abraham Ibn Ezra's writings in the original and probably picked up his information either from learned Jews or from casual secondary sources. Joseph Jacobs tells the following revealing incident which would confirm the theory that Browning's knowledge of Hebrew was not sufficient to enable him to read Medieval Hebrew sources:[16]

"As some indication of the slightness of his acquaintance with Hebrew idiom, I may mention that he was going to call his Jochanan "Hakkadosh Jochanan" (-John Saint). Through a common friend I pointed out the error to the poet, and the adjective was put in its proper position." Israel Abrahams also tells us that while he "had dipped into curious, out of the way books on Jewish lore," he was not as much a Hebrew scholar as some would claim.[17] The Rev. Michael Adler cleverly detected that he owed some of the astonishing Hebrew words in his Jocoseria to a little read edition of the Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela. Very bad Hebrew it is, but its author was not Browning byt Baratier.[18]

Admitting then that Browning had some general knowledge of the medieval sage and poet, Abraham Ibn Ezra, are we to identify"Rabbi Ben Ezra" with Abraham Ibn Ezra? This question has usually been answered in the affirmative. On the basis of the English poem, critics have endeavored to establish a definite relationship between the writings of Ibn Ezra and the thoughts expressed by Browning in the poem. That there should be agreements is not surprising, because as we have seen, Browning had a vast collection of stray knowledge in his capacious head and probably remembered some ideas of the medieval Rabbi. But two facts should be remembered. In the first place, Browning calls his Rabbi merely "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and Abraham Ibn Ezra is almost never spoken of that way. In the second place, and of greater importance, we meet with another "Rabbi Ben Ezra" in Browning's "Holy-Cross Day." This second "Rabbi Ben Ezra" sings a "Song of Death" which is of a very different tone from the resiliant optimism of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" of our poem. Is it possible, as Abrahams believes, that Browning did not

wish his readers to have any particular Medieval Rabbi in mind?[19] This too is the thought of one of his biographers:

"When he (Browning) wishes to express the largest and sublimest scheme of morals and religion which his imagination can conceive, he does not put it into the mouth of any of the great spiritual leaders of mankind, but into the mouth of an obscure Jewish Rabbi of the name of Ben Ezra." [20]

Is it perhaps safest then to believe that Browning merely took a "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and having vaguely in mind the medieval vagabond, he tried to place in his lips a philosophy of high faith which he knew to be true not only of the Rabbi but as well of the Jewish spirit? Happily too, this exalted idealism he himself shared. This is the thought of another writer who maintains that Robert Browning's treatment of the Jew was not only true and broad-minded; it was "based on a sympathetic and intellectual study of the Jewish race.[21] I do not know of anything which expresses so intensely and with such concentrated language the semi-tragic-comedy enacted at Rome every year on Holy Cross Day, as does the poem bearing this name. The scorn, the contempt, the bitterness, and the mockery of the Jews, driven like sheep and compelled to listen to the annual sermon preached with the view of converting them, is portrayed with a rare and wonderful power. The conclusion, too, with its reconciliation over the bond of suffering could never have been conceived by any one with merely a passive interest in Judaism. To RABBI BEN EZRA as a subjective poem, one would naturally turn for the purpose of discovering in what measure Browning appreciated the inner workings of the Jewish spirit. The coloring here does not depend on past persecutions or on the contrast between Jew and Gentile. The persistance and frequency with which these latter have been exemplified in real life has somehow led to their undue adoption as the material of poetry and fiction. But, after all, the portrayal or suggestion of oppression only shows one phase of existence, and that not the most important, being in essence transitory. Our lasting desire is not simply or chiefly to

know the feelings of down-trodden human beings, although our sympathies are widened by such knowledge; it is rather to penetrate to the inner motives of man when he is completely man. And so it is not the outer or chance characteristic appertaining to Jews which gives an insight to their moral and religious nature; this insight can only be obtained through what is permanent and therefore spiritual.

Rabbi Ben Ezra may in a manner be called a poetical portrait of that dominant Jewish habit of viewing things which is neither ascetic nor epicurean, but which accepts both pleasure and pain as having distinct but rightful uses. That effort after, and consequent sense of progress towards perfection, of which Browning is ever fond of discoursing, has much in common with the unconquerable optimism that lies at the root of the Messianic idea in its widest range:

"Grow old along with me.... see all nor be afraid..."

There are other pieces like Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial, Jochanan Hakkadosh, Ben Karshook's Wisdom, etc., which give abundant evidence of Browning's wide knowledge of, and sympathetic insight into Jewish character."

Taking finally to "Rabbi Ben Ezra", we see that it pictures an old medieval sage looking back upon a long vista of life:

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, ' A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'

The poet then turns to youth and finds that its hopes and fears have speedily annulled its brief years. And yet, " he has found the fixed points over which age and death have no power, in God and the human soul, which, emanating from Him, must become one with Him again." [22]

The spiritual conflict is appropriate to youth. Life does not mean mere feasting and joy, which when ended, brings an end to man. The body

must project the soul on its lone way. Powerfully Browning rejects the Omar Khayyam philosophy, asserting that we should welcome the struggle inherent in life, believing that it proceeds from lower to higher forms, and making man, ultimately, despite his corporeal nature, one with God:

"What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale.

Man ought to thank God for the gift of manhood, for the ability to learn. Nor is that inheritance merely of earthly wisdom. It is also a moral one of right and good. God's plan is perfect sings the poet:

"Perfect I call thy plan:

Thanks that I was a man!

Maker, remake, complete,-- I trust what thou shalt do!'

Both body and soul are good, says Browning, rejecting the ascetic notion of the evil inherent in the flesh:

"As the bird wings and sings,

Let us cry, 'All good things

Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!'

Man's affinity with God, even though it be but in the germ, is still the redeeming truth of life's struggles and vicissitudes:

"Therefore I summon age
To grant youth's heritage,
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:
Then shall I pass, approved
A man, for aye removed
From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

And I shall thereupon
Take rest, ere I be gone
Once more on my adventure brave and new:
Fearless and unperplexed,
When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armor to indue."

The poet now reviews age and finds that far from filling him with terror, it enables him to hope further:

..."Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid!"

Browning goes further. Man's success or failure must be sought in the

unseen order. With undaunted conviction, Browning asserts the essential worth of every man in the sight of God, no matter how little the world of affairs might understand or value him:

"All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped."

Once more, Browning or Rabbi Ben Ezra, denies the pagan thought of "carpe diem", denies that "all is change." Nothing dies or changes which has truly been. God and man's soul are invincible before Time, spinning like the potter's wheel, rotting on the highway:

"Fool! All that is, at all,
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

He fixed thee mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance,
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed."

It is with this soaring faith in the reality of these ideals, in the knowledge that Truth is definitely spiritual that the Rabbi sums up his reflections, finding perfection at the core of life and meaning and purpose in both youth and age:

"So, take and use thy work,
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!"

Certainly "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is one of the great spiritual legacies in our language. However much or little of Abraham Ibn Ezra's life and thought may have served as a model, the poem remains an eloquent tribute to the nobility of Jewish religious idealism. We may as Jews take pride in the thought that if a fictitious Jew gave Shakespeare his "Shylock", it was an historical Rabbi of the Twelfth Century who inspired the gifted

Victorian seer to write one of the enduring ~~psalms~~ songs of poetic faith in~~the~~ English Literature for it is from the lips of a Jew that the words, memorable and ~~is~~ unforgettable, are spoken:

"All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God..."

Notes on Chapter IV

1. Frederick James Furnivall 1825-1910, English philologist and editor, J.E. Vol.III, p.399, art. By Joseph Jacobs, see Jewish Ideals, pp.84-95.

2. Century Readings in English Literature, Ed. by Prof. J.W. Cunliffe of Columbia University, The Century Co., 1925- Notes p.CLI.

3. Robert Browning, Life and Letters, Vol.II, p.556- By Mrs. Sutherland Orr - "In the course of his last decade he devoted himself for a short time to the study of Spanish and Hebrew, The Spanish dramatists yielded him a fund of new enjoyment; and he delighted in his power of reading Hebrew in its most difficult printed forms." It is interesting to note that among the pieces in his study in the De Vere Gardens, he had a silver Jewish "Sabbath Lamp" brought from Venice. Vol.II, p.580.

4. 'Brownings' Ancestors' - Dr. Furnivall- privately printed -- See Life of Browning - William Sharp - 1897, pp.9 and 16.
What Stopford A. Brooke - The Poetry of Robert Browning- pp.33-34- Thomas Y. Crowell- 1902 --- says is striking:...."I do not know whether Browning had any Jewish blood in his body by descent, but he certainly had Jewish elements in his intellect, spirit, and character. His sense of an ever-victorious Righteousness at the center of the universe, whom one might always trust and be untroubled, was Jewish." Brooke speaks of his intellectual subtlety, his pleasure in intense color, his love of music and then says.." It was this Jewish element in Browning, in all its many forms, which caused him to feel with and to write so much about the Jews in his poetry. The two poems in which he most fully enshrines his view of human life, as it may be in the thought of God and as it ought to be conceived by us, are both in the mouth of Jews, of Rabbi Ben Ezra and Jochanan Hakkadosh."..."The Jew lay deep in Browning."

5. G. K. Chesterton- The Macmillan Co., 1903 - Robert Browning - p.4. "Life and Letters of Robert Browning" - Mrs. Sutherland Orr - Vol.I, 1891, pp.1-2 - " A belief was current in Mr. Browning's lifetime that he had Jewish blood in his veins. It received outward support from certain accidents of his life, from his known interest in the Hebrew language and literature, from his friendship for various members of the Jewish community in London. It might well have yielded to the fact of his never claiming the kinship, which could not have existed without his knowledge, and which, if he had known it, he would, by reason of these very sympathies, have been the last person to disavow. The results of more recent and more systematic inquiry have shown the belief to be unfounded." Mrs. Orr then sets forth the poet's genealogy and in a footnote confesses her indebtedness "to some notes made for the Browning Society by Dr. Furnivall." These notes I have not been able to locate.

6. Essay by Horace E. Scudder in Student's Cambridge Edition "The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning - Houghton Mifflin Company, p. XIV.

7. J.Q.R. O.S. Vol.II, 1890, p.254 - "Browning's Theology" -- See same in Jewish Ideals - Joseph Jacobs - 1896, p.92.

8. Moody and Lovett Q- A History of English Literature, Scribners, 1918, p.363.

9. The thoughts in the first stanza are parallel by a poem of Ibn Ezra's -

quoted by Dr. Michael Sachs : "In deiner Hand liegt mein Geschick". Stanzas 2 and 3 have their parallel in Ibn Ezra's comment on Job 3:11 : "Man has the sole privilege of becoming superior to the beast and the fool." Stanza 8 has a line about the soul which is similar to Ibn Ezra's comment on Psalm 22:22 - "The soul of man is called lonely because it is separated during its union with the body from the universal soul."

10. Rabbi Ben Ezra - By Robert Browning - with supplementary illustrative quotations and an introduction by William Adams Slade - Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., N.Y. MDCCCCII. See also - Handbook to Robert Browning's Works - Mrs. Sutherland Orr - 6th Ed. revised - London - 1892 -p.205 - "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is the expression of a religious philosophy which, being, from another point of view, Mr. Browning's own, has much in common with that which he has imputed to St. John; and, as "A Death in the Desert" only gave the words which the Evangelist might have spoken, so is "Rabbi Ben Ezra" only the possible utterance of that pious and learned Jew."..."the religious imagination in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is strongly touched with the gorgeous and solemn realism which distinguishes the Old Testament from the New. The most striking feature of Rabbi Ben Ezra's philosophy is his estimate of age. According to him the soul is eternal, but it completes the first stage of its experience in the early life; and the climax of the earthly life is attained, not in the middle of it,but at its close. Age is therefore a period, not only of rest, but of fruition."

11. Moddy and Lovett - A History of English Literature, p.366.

12. Browning's Complete Poems, Students' Cambridge Edition, p.1007.

13. Eger's Diwan, N. 55, p.15.

14. Eger's Diwan, p.20, N.64.

15. By-Paths in Hebraic Bookland - p.269-271 - "Browning's "Ben Karshook".

16. J.Q.R. O.S. Vol.II, 1890, p.256.

17. By-Paths in Hebraic Bookland, p.270.

18. The Jewish Chronicle, April 25, 1890 and in The Jewish Chronicle, Jan. 3, 1890, p.6, an editorial appears which first raises this question:..... "we invite Rabbinically learned students of Browning to the explanation of the title of a Treatise משך של רבים גרים quoted in a note on Jochanan Hakkadosh. Did Browning meet with a volume of Talmudic selections bearing this fanciful title? Or did he coin this title? ("A Bundle of many Branches") himself? Or is it (as a savant has suggested) a mistake for מעשיות של ריבה רב רב חנה , the extravagant fairy tales of which the poet proceeds to give illustrations?"

Jewish Chronicle - April 25, 1890 - p.14 - Sir -- A few weeks ago, a friendly discussion in your columns, between Dr. Berlin, of Newport, and Dr. Chotzner, of Harrow, concerning a certain Hebrew phrase employed by Browning, terminates in a draw, as we say in cricket, neither side being able to claim the victory. The cause of this learned contest was the phrase משך של רבים גרים . Mr. Jacobs, in the April number of the Jewish Quarterly Review, I see, also gives up the task of satisfactorily explaining this ungrammatical passage as hopeless. If I may be permitted to say a word to these eminent scholars,however, --"for when doctors disagree and a word to these eminent scholars,however, --"for when doctors disagree who shall decide?" -- I would suggest that Mr. Browning took the words as they stood from the Dissertation of that precocious commentator, Baratier

(II. 32), upon the Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela. The passage runs as follows: Speaking of the (to him) incredibility and absurdity of Benjamin's accounts of his travels, this learned youthful prodigy, of the mature age of twelve, remarks, "On peut selon les lettres initiales de son ouvrage ס"ש"ר"ב (qui doivent signifier ספרו של רבים בדים Voyages de Rabbi Benjamin) l'appeler
Tissu de plusieurs mensonges."

This, I believe, is the solution of the whole mystery, as Mr. Browning would hardly have composed this wonderful phrase himself,

Yours obediently,
Michael Adler

Jews' College, Tavistock Square, W.C.
April 18th, 1890.

19. By-Paths in Hebraic Bookland, p.209.

20. Robert Browning, G.K. Chesterton, 1903, Macmillan, p.23

21. J.Q.R. O.S. Vol.II - 1898 -99, pp.425-26 - The Jew in English Poetry and Drama- Charles B. Mabon.

22. J.Q.R. O.S. Vol.II, 1890 - p.230 - 249 - Marion Von Glehn - Browning as a Religious Teacher -

Supplement to Note 13, speaking of Ibn Ezra's faith:

From "Medieval Wayfaring" in "The Book of Delight" by Israel Abrahams, p.150, J.P.S. - 1912 -

"Looking back on such a life, Ibn Ezra might well detect a Divine Providence in his own pains and sorrows. So, Jew-like, he retained his hope to the last, and after his buffetings on the troubled seas of life, remembering the beneficent results of his travels to others, if not to himself, he could write in this faithful strain:

"My hope God knoweth well,
My life He made full sweet;
Whene'er His servant fell,
God raised him to his feet.
Within the garment of His grace,
My faults He did enfold,
Hiding my sin, His kindly face
My God did ne'er withhold
Requiting with fresh good
My black ingratitude."

CHAPTER V

SOME POEMS AND COMMENTS

א

נאם אברם אביר תקוה
אשר פתח עני יתרו
עדי הלך חצי לכו
וענה הנדוד יתרו
וזה פרש בפרשה
תחלתה דבר יתרו:

1.

Saith Abraham, a Prisoner of Hope,
Against whom poverty loosened its dart,
Until it pierced through half his heart
While wandering harassed the other part
This one expounded in the Parasha
Which begins with the account of Jethro.

Notes.

These six lines appear in the Introduction to Exodus Commentary, Chapter 18, the Parasha called " יתרו ". While Kahana, Kovetz p. 9, l. line 2 reads ענ' , other texts read ע"נ' . On this basis, Friedländer, Intr. to Commentary on Isaiah, Vol.1, page xvl, believes that the reference is to Abraham Ibn Ezra's wife, who says this scholar, "probably died before he left his home, and to this bereavement he perhaps alludes.. when he says:

"Thus says Abraham, trusting in Him
Who opened the eyes of his mind,
When his heart's blood half had been taken away,
And his spirit by wand'ring was bent."

However this may be, the epigram is instructive for several reasons. In the first place, it gives us something of an insight into the life of poverty and vagabondage which was the lot of our poet. Although the thought is expressed in few words, it is none the less convincing and vivid. In the second place, we see a characteristic literary trick of Ibn Ezra's -- a witticism that is effected by the play on words. The word " יתרו " is used in three different meanings: 1. bowstring, Ps. 11:2; Jb.30:11; 2. remainder, other part, Is. 44:19; 3. Jethro, the father of Moses'wife, Ex. 18:1. Kahana, Notel,p.9, Kovetz, suggests that he likens himself to Jethro for just as Jethro forsook his people to go with Israel through the wilderness, so Ibn Ezra forsook the place of his birth to go as a wanderer in search of knowledge.

Many examples of Ibn Ezra's punning may be cited, of which a few are given
~~cited~~ here. (See Friedlaender, Essays on the Writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra, Vol.IV, pp.126-127)

רב יצחק חבר שני ספרים מבראשית ועד ויכלו ועוד לא כלה

"R. Isaak composed two books on Gen.1 - 2:1 and has not yet finished." [Intr. Par. 1]

רב שמואל בן חפני אסף רוח כתפניו (Ibid)

ובן אפרים אשר שהוא רכות חסר אל"ף ונעשו ארוכות והוא היה

חסר אל"ף -- Gen.29, 17

ויצחקי אשר וגו' הכי קרא שמו יצחק כל השומע יצחק לו

Gen.36:3

י"א תכתוב על ערפו קודש והאומר כזה אומר אני שהוא קשה

עורף עץ -- Exodus 13:13

אשר בן זימא כי רעהו תואר לשור, ואין לשור רע רק בן זימא

לבדו--- Exod. 21:35

אנלה קצת הסוד בזכרי נעשר שני אם יעזרני אחד ואין לו שני

Lev. 27:34

ולסה רכב על פיל ואותו לארץ יפיל --- Eccles.5:1

אם כסיל אחד נשמים רבים הם בארץ, והוא (רבי סוריגוס)

א' שהם --- Amos 3:15

והאומר גם תחת נאם הוא גם --- Is. 1:24

In all of these examples there is the same clever playing on words, a literary device which shows the ingenuity of Ibn Ezra. It is this invention that makes it so pointless often to translate him into another language. It is perhaps this too that has served to weaken the prestige of our poet in a generation that looks with disfavor on such ~~playing upon~~ trifling with words.

ב

על רוע מזלו

גלגל ומזלות במעמדם
נטו במהלכם למולדתי.
לו יהיו נרות סחורתי
לא יאסף שמש עדי מותי:
איגע להצליח ולא אוכל
כי עותוני כוכבי שמי
לו אהיה סוחר בתכריכין
לא יגועון אישים בכל ימי.

The planets and stars from their courses
Swerved when first I saw the light;
Were I a dealer in candles
The sun would then shine by night;
I strive to succeed but I cannot,
For the spheres of the heavens oppose,
Were shrouds my trade,
Men would never die, -- I suppose!

Notes.

In this short and memorable poem we are permitted an intimacy with the spirit of the poet. While it reflects the medieval notion of astrology, which Ibn Ezra strangely enough for so alert a mind shared, it does more than that. Here we have him as a vagabond, -- a glorious type of the eternal vagabond that is the Jew. No furtive brand is upon his brow. He had not known the Ghetto inhibitions that were later to mark his unfortunate brethren in Europe. He did not slink from country to country, broken in spirit and blighted in soul. There is a fire in his eye that betokens the courageous, untamed dreamer. Life does not deal with him gently. Life rarely dealt gently with the Jew. And yet Abraham Ibn Ezra is brave and gentle, - an ironic compassion hovers about him, - a sweetness and a light that comes from wisdom and faith.

Here in these lines we catch this truest insight into our poet, smiling into the clouds of disaster, patient before the inevitable tragedies of Life, willing to believe that growing old meant that the best was yet to be. Here we have just a breath of his pathetically colorful spirit, a fleeting picture of our noble and exalted wanderer leading the forlorn life of an exile. Jack M. Myers in his text-book for children, "The Story of the Jewish People", Vol.II, p.102, offers a more skilful but less literal translation of Ibn Ezra's sparkling lines:

My labour's vain,
No wealth I gain.
My fate since birth
Is gloom on earth.

If I sold shrouds,
No one would die.
If I sold lamps,
Then in the sky,
The sun for spite,
Would shine by night.

ג

נדוד הסיר אזני
והבהיל רעיוני
ושם פי ולשוני
אסורים בזקים.

ב

לפנים בנערים
הכינותי שירים
בצואר העברים
נתתים כענקים.

ג

בכל מקום גרתי
ספרים חברתי
וסודות בארתי
וכראי מוצקים.

ד

שפתי אם אשים
בהרים ורכסים
יעופון כם סוסים
ירוצון כברקים.

ח

ויהי נפלתי
לעפר תפלתי
ותחנון הפלתי
לאל מסעפים.

ו

אכלוני עופות
עדי הקיפופות
ועל ראשי אשפות
בני עולה זורקים.

ז

וחרפות טובתם
יכתשו באבותם
ועל זך חרפותם
סניפים וסריקים.

ח

ואנשי לב סמו
והיום נסעמו
אבל חסנו כעמו
אשר ציה עורקים.

ט

יקר ראתה עינם
ואם נרים הנם
מזויהם חנם
סלאים וספיקים.

י

ו אנכי מזסר
לעיני כל נסר
כגוד הודי סר
ושן עלי תורקים.

יא

ונכר סחסרי
לשרכי ולרחבי
ופה לא אפתח פי
שדי דעתי צופקים.

יב

וחיתי ספה
בעם עסקי שפה
ונפשי נכספה
לרבי אליקים.

יג

יג

גביר במשפחות
גביר דבר צחות
גביר משיב רוחות
לחיות נאנקים.

יד

ועל פיו נשמעות
צפונות כל דעות
בדת אל, ויריעות
תעודתו מקים.

טו

שפתיו ספירים
אמריו יקירים
ומפחדו שרים
יבאון בנקיקים.

טז

אמת רע אין לו
ברעתו ובמכלו
ומחסדים כלו
וחכו ממתקים.

יז

שמעני, אחי
שמע נא אל מיתי
אהבתך רוחי
ועדי שחקים.

יה

ולמה נתעכר
נזד כי התגבר
ומה נזכל דבר
בארץ מרחקים.

יט

אנחנו עם דלות
וקלות עם סכלות
בגלות תוך גלות
בכל עת מעתיקים.

כ

ביד אל לו מתנו
בעת שיעבנו
בטרחב כי שבנו
לחוצים ודחוקים.

כא

ובאדום אין הדר
לכל חכם הוא דר
באדמת בן קדר
ועלינו שרקים.

כב

ואלו בא חנב
יוני בם שגב
ורכב על כל גב
ונחשב כענקים.

כג

וחרפה ובשת
לנפש נקדשת
אשר לבב תשת
לאחר הרקים.

כד

הלא הסתהולל
בריח קדש חלל
עזב לו ויקלל
אנשים צדיקים.

3.

1.

Wandering has sapped my strength
And confounded my thoughts;
It has set my mouth and tongue
Captive in chains.

2.

Formerly in youth
I composed songs;
I set them as a necklace
About the necks of the Jews.

3.

In all places I sojourned,
Books I composed
And secrets expounded
Clear as molten mirrors.

4.

If I should set my eloquence
Against hills and crags
Horses could run over them,
They could dash as thunder-bolts.

5.

But now I have fallen,
To the dust I am lowered,
And I pour forth my supplication
To God from the depths.

6.

Birds devour me --
Even the owls --
And worthless fellows cast
Dung upon my head.

7.

When their prosperity increased
They denied their sires;
They unsheath and swing their swords
Against an innocent person.

8.

Men of culture have dwindled,
Today they are few,
But they who fed on dryness
Have become fat and kicked.

9.

Their eyes saw preciousness,
And if strangers are here
Their garners for nothing
Are full and overflowing.

10.

But I have become a reproach
In the sight of all mortals,
The glory of my honor is gone
And they gnash their teeth at me.

11.

But although my thought prevails
Far and wide,
Here I dare not open my mouth,
The breasts of my knowledge shrivel up.

12.

And my life is cut off
Among a people of low culture,
And my soul yearns
For Rabbi Eliakim.

13.

The head of families,
Master of pure speech,
Master who restores souls
To those who despair of life.

14.

From his mouth are heard
All knowledge hidden
In the Law of God. He lifts up
The curtains of His testimonies.

15.

His lips are sapphires,
His words very precious,
And from his wrath
Princes go into clefts.

16.

A true companion he has not
In knowledge and in intelligence;
"Yea! He is altogether lovely,
His mouth is most sweet."

17.

Listen to me, my brother,
Pray listen to my speech,
My spirit loves thee,
And my witness is in heaven.

18.

But why infuriate oneself,
Against an insolent fellow who behaves proudly,
For what are we able to say
In a distant land?

19.

We are but poor,
For frivolity joins with folly,
And exiles in the midst of exile
We constantly push against one another.

20.

Would that we had perished at God's hand
When we dwelt in freedom,
For we have become
Oppressed and maltreated.

21.

In Christian countries there is no glory
For any scholar who dwelt
In the Arabian land, --
They hiss at us.

22.

But if a Greek locust comes
He is exalted by them;
He rides upon every back
And is thought to be a giant.

23.

Disgrace and shame
Are considered holy by the soul
Whose heart is set
To one such worthless fellow.

24.

Does he not act like a madman,
Profane the Holy Covenant?
Leave him alone
For he curses righteous men.

25.

Like Shimei is his name numerically,
He has genealogy,
And the reckoning with his judgment
Make up an ancient record.

26.

Place the Greek among them
His deeds will be "detestable"
I will count his genealogy (as changeable)
As the "He" in grammar.

27.

His eyes witness against him
For the evil of his mind;
He plans his treachery within
And does his cleansing (on the outside).

28.

And with his bowings
To all who behold him,
Lowering, curving down
His whole height.

30.

And how dare he call heretics
The faithful sons, -
Pious men and distinguished, -
All who hear him are silent.

Notes:

This poem is interesting and important because it throws light not only upon the life of our poet but also because it reveals some of the internal conditions that Ibn Ezra encountered. No. 22 is probably a reference to a Byzantium scholar whom Ibn Ezra met in Southern Italy. Ibn Ezra was probably attacked as a heretic for his liberal philosophical and theological views. (See Isaac Husik, Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy, 187 - 196, esp. p.188.) In the verses that remain untranslated, Ibn Ezra complains that a certain Solomon, who knew better, hearing of this attack did not stop this Shimei in his false charges. Ibn Ezra points out what an ignoramus this Shimei is with regard to Jewish learning, showing that he did not even know Pirke Aboth (No.33 and 34). Ibn Ezra also mentions a young scholar by the name of Benjamin (No.39). The remainder of the poem is devoted to harsh, satirical thrusts at this "Greek locust" and at the people who make such a fuss over him and place such confidence in him. It is interesting to see that the Jews in Christian countries often suspected the Spanish Jews of holding heretical views.

No.1 -- See Ps. 149 - 8 - "to bind their kings with chains."

No. 3 -- See Jb. 37:18 - "which is strong as a molten mirror"

No. 6 -- See 2 S. 3:34 - "children of iniquity "

No. 8 -- See Jb.30:3 -- "they who gnaw the dry (ground) ".

No. 9 -- See Ps. 144:13 - "our garners are full"

No. 10 -- See Rosin p.89 - חולד for סר . See Ps. 37:12.

No. 11. - See Ho. 9:14 "shrivelling breasts "

No. 12. - Is. 33:19; Ez.3:5,6. - "unintelligible of speech".

No. 16. - Ct. 5:16 - "His mouth is most sweet; Yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend..."

No. 19. - See Rosin, p.90 OY for ON

No. 21. -Kedar - name of tribe of Arabs - used for Arabian in M.A.

No. 25. -- See 2 Sam. 16:5 and 1 Ch. 4:22

No. 26. -- See Rosin, p.91

No. 27 -- Scores his hypocrisy.

Abraham Geiger, "Judaism and Its History", pp.334 - 339, commenting on this poem, has the following to say:

"His life must be called a disrupted one. A man with the complete Spanish culture, living in the Arabian atmosphere, breathing its free mental air in full drafts -- he is driven about in countries the tendencies of which he did not share, whose language was strange to him, communicating with men who occupied other points of view, everywhere at home, yet nowhere enjoying a home. He himself expresses his pain in many places about that restlessness:

"Aged, in foreign land I wander without rest
Like the birds that anxiously coo for the nest."

He longed for his native country and yet dared not enter it. The disturbances which had broken out there, the fury of the oppressors as he says, had driven him forth, and so he was wandering about and found nowhere a lasting home. He was honored everywhere, the scholars know how to estimate his importance; and yet he had to experience insults and carry on fights with the illiberality and narrowmindedness among the Jews in the Christian countries. He himself occasionally gives us an account of such happenings. Somewhere in Italy, he met with a Jewish scholar from the Byzantine Empire, who with the narrowmindedness of his home and imbued with the Talmudical spirit, looked down with contempt upon every scientific endeavor. That man corresponded more to the mental attitude of

Italy than Aben Ezra, and this one had to hear how the other abused all the important Spanish scholars, and yet was treated with all respect. He pours out his pain at that to a friend in a poem:

"My youthful hopes are under ground,
My mouth and tongue in chains are bound
My mind is sore with serious wound,
And restless roving strain.

O friend, here am I rated vile,
Around me are madness, folly and guile,
My mind is now in double exile
By corn, with grief and pain.

How lucky if I had but died,
While fortune yet with me did abide
Before this rabble began to deride
And treat me with grievous disdain.

In Edom (Christian countries) is neither honor nor praise
For sages from Spain or one of their ways,
Where ignorance rules all of the days,
Contempt is their only gain.

Yet if there comes in a cricket from Greece,
Of all dignity he is given a lease,
And in his mind he does increase
To a giant on uppermost plane.

See the winks and the nods of the hypocrite,
What bows he makes, how he tries to fit,
How he presses their hands and does never omit
To press hands for money to gain.

And then he swells up, abuses the blessed
The great spirits now gone to their rest,
While the empty heads who feather his nest
With laughter are bursting in twain.

O masters and men ! ye that spread the light,
Our teachers and poets, heroes in the fight
'Gainst folly and wrong! Does this requite
The work and stress of your brain?

And now he makes his voice resound
So loud, it must be heard all around;
He pretends the Talmud to expound,
And yet he is weak in that domain.

Ask him who does so glibly converse,
Ask out ofthe Bible but for one verse,
Known to a child from the mouth of his nurse,
'I do not know' is his refrain.

To make of such a fool a god,
To tremble at his wink and nod!
Yet fill they him with meats and wash
Them down with best champagne.

So feed him up lest he grow less,
Get him purple and linen for his dress,
Maids for his service also press,
Perhaps absolution may be your gain.

Well, keep on with serving his weight,
Procession and pray at his gate!
We shall stay true to the word of God
And true in the spirit's domain.

"Deep pain goes through Ibn Ezra during his restless wandering, and the pain is reflected in all his works. Pessimism and melancholy shine through everywhere. Just as he is at home in every land but without a home in it, so he is at home in every mental field and yet finds no rest for his soul in any."

ד

על מעילו הקרוע

מעיל יש לי והוא כדמות כברה
לחטה להנפה או שעורה;
כאהל אפרשנו ליל באישון
וכוכבי רום ישיטון בו מאורה;
בתוכו אחזה סהר וכימה
ויופיע כסיל עליו נהרה
ואלה מספור את כל נקביו
אשר דומים לשני המגרה
ותקות חוט תפירת כל קרועיו
עלי שתי וערב היא יתרה
ואם יפול זבוב עליו בחזקה
כמו פחי, יהי נסלך מהרה;
אלהי החליפהו במעטה
תהלה לי, ותיטיב התפירה.

4.

ON HIS TATTERED COAT

I have a coat but it is like a sieve
For sifting wheat or barley;
Like a tent I wrap it about me at night when I sleep
But the lofty stars shine into it.
Through it I behold the moon and the Pleiades
And Orion beams its light upon it.
I weary of counting all its holes
Which are like the teeth of a saw;
And the skein of the thread which sews together all its tatters
By warp and woof, is great.
And if a fly should fall into them with sureness,
Like a fool, he will certainly regret his folly.
My God, change this into a mantle of praise for me
And improve the patch.

Kahana, Kovetz, p.10 - 11, No.4.

In this delightful verse one finds Abraham Ibn Ezra optimistically laughing at fate, gaily wandering along the dusty road with no baggage but his thoughts and his tattered coat. It is a brave, genial, and charming selection. I have purposely given what I hope is a literal translation of the Hebrew poem so that its original piquancy might not be wholly lost.

ה

על הזבובים

לסי אנוס לעזרה טחטסי
אשוע טפני שוד הזבובים
אשר לא יתנו השב רוחי
פכל כחם יעיקוני כאויבים
ועל עיני ועפעפי ירוצון
פאזני יאסרו שירי עגבים
אדטה לאכול פתי לבדי
והם גו יאכלו כדסות זאבים
ועוד ישתו בכוס ייני כאלו
קראתים כאהובים או קרובים
ולא ירצו לבד חלקם פקדתים
ניין עתיק ומשמן שה כבשים
ויטעט רק אכול סאשר לפני
ליין סטתי ופת אכלי תאבים
וכי אקרא לטודעי לאכלה
והנם יושבים ראש הטספים
אקוה לסתו כי הוא יכלם
פקר רות שלנים או רביבים
ולולי זאת אני קץ טפניהם
פכן אורה ליוטר הכרחים.

5.

ON THE MOSQUITOES

To whom shall I flee for help from my terror,
I cry out for help because of the violence of the mosquitoes,
Who do not permit me to breathe,
With all their might they press upon me like enemies,
They run down my eyes and eyelids,
In my ears they recite their love-songs;
I suppose that I will eat my morsel alone,
But they help themselves as if they were wolves,
They even drink of my cup of wine as if
I had invited them as friends or relatives.
They are not satisfied alone with the portion I mete out to them,
Of old wine and the fatness of choice lamb,
They even diminish the food that is before me,
The wine that I drink and the morsel that I eat,
And if I invite a friend to dine,
Behold they sit at the head of the company;
I hope for the winter which will destroy them
With its cold winds, its snows and rains:
Were it not for this, I would be in despair because of them,
As it is, I praise Him who dwells among the Cherubim.

Kahana, Kovetz, p.21 - No. 13.

Here is Ibn Ezra in a witty mood, finding an engaging theme in the mosquitoes who invite themselves to his company. His alert and restless mind neglected nothing in his experience. All was grist for the mill. The poem is still fresh after all these centuries and might have been penned by a modern realist.

1

בהגיע לעיר סורה כתב הראב"ע

הקנקן ריקן בלי יין
והגבינה נגורה בלי זין
והגברת עורת בלי עין
חגרת ונשברת צעדה עלי עין
ואנשי המקום אחי קין
ומותר האדם אשר בו אין
אם אין אני דר שם
אשים בראשה העין.

When Abraham Ibn Ezra reached the city of Moreh, he wrote:

The bottle is empty without wine,
The cheese is dry without nutrition,
The landlady is blind without eyes,
Limping and broken she walks to the well,
And the men of the place are brothers of Cain[1]
Their superiority amounts to nothing,[2]
Indeed, if I did not live there
I'd call the place Gomorrah.[3]

1. Acc. to Kahana, Kovetz, p.13, note 1, the reference is to Abel and the thought is that the men of the place are fools and knaves.

2. Ec. 3:19 "the superiority of man over beast is nothing".

3. Lit. "I would place at its head an 'Ayin'", Since the town is Moreh, the addition of the Hebrew letter would make it Gomorrah, the notorious city of antiquity, referred to especially in Gen. 18 and 19. The wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah have made these names proverbial. The jingle illustrates Abraham Ibn Ezra's cleverness in poking fun. To attempt to render it into any English is to rob it of the subtlety which it possesses in the original. Nevertheless I attempt it in the following free rendition:

o.

No wine is in the vat,
The cheese is dry and flat,
The landlady's blind as a bat,
Her step is halt and lame,
And the men of the place are like Cain,
They vaunt their merit in vain.
Did I not there remain
I'd call the place
Gomorrah!

cf. Kedem p. 79

ז

ר' יהודה הלוי להראב"ע

עֶרְבָה שָׁנָתִי לִי וְאַהֲבָתָהּ
דודי העירתני ראות צלמך
כתות זכול בוזרו בשירך
הן הם שלחוני קרא בשמך
בא נא ונשירה ועל עפר
נשכב וסה לך לחיות גלמך?

תשובת הראב"ע אליו

אחי יחודה טוב שכב כי אל
סאן לתתי להלך עמך
עוד אעשה בנים וסטעטים
אכל ולא אטעם בסן טעמך
נעצב אני על סותך אך זאת
עצב אשר לא אקתה סמך.

7.

RABBI JUDAH HALLEVI WRITES TO IBN EZRA

My slumber is sweet to me and thy love,
My friend, arouses me to see thy face.
The Heavenly Choir have chosen thy song,
Behold they have sent me to call thee along (lit. thy name).
Come, prithee, we will sing and in the dust
We will rest. What matters it thee that thy body's alive?

THE REPLY.

My brother, Judah, return, sleep;
God refuses to let me go to thee.
Yet shall I beget children and taste food
And not taste of the manna thou enjoyest;
Though I am grieved over thy death
Yet this is a grief I cannot take from thee.

Kahana, Kovetz, p.79 - 80.

Judah Hallevi was born in Toledo about 1085 and disappears from history some time after his start to Palestine in 1140 when Ibn Ezra was in Rome. The poetical conceit represents Hallevi seeking to have Ibn Ezra join him in the world beyond death. But our poet loves life and in true realistic fashion prefers the morsels along the open road to the choicest manna of Heaven.

ח

אל נהר סוד כל יקר נהרי
טחנה יורים זטה תזכרי
בחתנת בר סעיף האטת
כי כטו שרש יהי הפרי
רב כבוד ילדו בלי ראש וסוף
כי לסכת הזטן הוא צרי
טהלל הבן היש לו ערוך
רם וסתנשא ארי בן ארי.

ט

הנה פני תהל טחדשה
שטלת שטחות היא טלבשה
יום שש יליד טשרה בבת רודו
כי סארני לאנוש אשה
חיא אשר שאל והיא גם היא
טצאה אשר דרשה ובקשה
אך לו לבדו יאתה כואת
לו טנעריו היא טקדשה
לו בקשה בלתי (בלתו) היותה לו
ההנעשה ארץ ורעשה.

8.

A NUPTIAL SONG

Flow to the river of counsel, all preciousness,
To the camp of the princes, and what shall you mention
At the nuptials of the son of the true branch?
For as is the root so will be the fruit,
Much honor will be born without beginning and end,
For he is balsam for the wounds of Time.
Can one estimate the praise of this son,
High and exalted, Lion son of a Lion:

9.

TO A BRIDEGROOM FOR HIS WEDDING DAY

Lo Earth itself renews her face
With joyous garments her attire
This nuptial day to mark and grace
On which the scion, destined to rule
Rejoices in the daughter of his desire.
Since God decrees for man his wife
he brought what he asked and she --[1]
She found what she wanted for blissful life
For only to him was she fated to be[2]
Consecrated from infancy,
And were she to seek for another than he
Earth in a trembling rage would be.

8. Kahana, Kovetz, p.129
9. Kahana, Kovetz, p.126. Brody and Albrect - Sha'ar ha-Shir, p.137,124.
1. See Prov. 19:14; Gen. 20:3
2. Lit. "To him alone becomes such as she".

אני הבן קרב לספד כי אל מסך רחק
את בנך את יחידך אשר אהבת את יצחק:

אני הנבר ראה שבר ומשוש גלה
הה פקדתי פרי נמני ועל לבי לא עלה
כי השכחי לעת זקנה היותו לרוח והצלה
אך לריק יגעתי וילדתי לבהלה
כי איך ישמח לבי וינוע ויסת יצחק:

בכה אבכה בכל רגע ואשא נהי נהיה
בזכרי זה שלש שנים סותו בארץ נכריה
וצאתו ממקום למקום ונפשי עליו המיה
עד שהבאתיו אל ביתי לילה ויומם בוכיה
כמה תלאות מצאוני ואלה תולדת יצחק:

רעי הרפה ממני אם תנחמני תניעני
מחלת נפשי אל תזכר ושמו אל תשמיעני
נחלתי אשר נשארה לי כמה זמן ואם ירועני
משמות עולם השמני ויקח מחמד עיני
כלה שארי ולבבי כאשר כלה יצחק:

מעון אשר הכל בידו וחפצו עשה בכל יצוריו
דבר עלי לב אב נכאב ירא שמך מנעריו
רוח תנחומים עורר עליו ויעבר בין פתריו
הזרח חמודו יראתך ללכת בדרך הוריו
עודנו נער אותה הכחת לעבדך ליצחק:

Father of the Son, come to lament for God has removed from thee
Thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, -- Isaac:

I am the man that hath seen misfortune and joy exiled,
Alas! I am deprived of my son (of the fruit of my body)
He comes not up in my mind.
For I fancied that in my old age he would be my comfort (lit. "for relief
and deliverance")
Lea! in vain I labored, I begat in vanity, --
How can my heart rejoice.... "And Isaac perished and died."

I weep bitterly at all times, I lift up doleful lamentations
When I remember three years ago his death in a strange land
His departure from place to place, -- my soul disquieted over him
Until I would bring him back to my home, weeping day and night,
How many misfortunes befell me, ... " And these are the generations of Isaac."
(i.e. Yet this is what has happened).

My friend, leave me alone. If you try to comfort me, you but stir me up,
The sickness of my soul do not recall and mention not his name,
My only spark which remained (his son) Time has extinguished and if
it goes on to do evil to me ....
It has desolated me with an everlasting desolation, It has taken the joy
of my eyes,
My flesh and my heart were consumed when an end was made of Isaac.

God, in whose hand is all and who performs His pleasure with all His
creatures,
Speak to the heart of the grieving father who feared Thy Name from his
youth,

it (the heart) and ; as between its two parts.

May the spirit of consolation stir him, May God's spirit pass between them,

Show Thy Fear to his son (Isaac left an only son) that he may walk in the path of his sires (remain true to Judaism),

while still a boy, thou hast appointed him for thy servant Isaac. (While still a boy, he brought him up piously).

Notes to "Lamentation for the'death'" of his son Isaac.

Kahana, p. 33, No.18. Also found with some notes in the "Sha'ar Ha-Shir", ed. by H. Brody and K. Albrecht, p. 137, No. 125. Also E. 205; HI 55.
We cannot go into the evidence on both sides of the question of whether a real death is referred to in this poem or whether it refers to the apostacy of Isaac. I am in no position to judge the merits of this question but following Dr. Jacob Mann, who follows Kaufmann, I believe that Isaac actually went over to Islam. Page 159, No. 140 of the Sha'ar Ha-Shir contains a note on Isaac Ibn Ezra's poem to R. Samuel. One Ms. contains a poem in which Isaac denies the charge that has been levelled at him. Harizi however seems to believe the accusation. See page 170 of Sha'ar Ha-Shir. "And Isaac, his son, he too drew from the fountain of song and the song of the son partakes of the splendor of the father. But when he came to Bagdad, the glory of the Lord did not shine upon him (cf. Is. 60:1) and he removed from himself the precious garments of the faith and he took off his garments and clothed himself in other vestments. (Became a Meshummad about 1145). "
The poem by Abraham was written three years after the supposed death or apostacy . Not death but apostacy says Kaufman but the poet had to find a rhyme for "Yitzhak". The poem forms the name "Abram" and also is in the nature of a poetic mosaic, the strophes ending with Biblical quotations. In this connection, I would like to quote what Israel Zangwill brilliantly remarks in his Introduction, p. III "On Translating Gabirol" - Selected Religious Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, J.P.S. p. 1923 -

"This trick of quotation, which is almost, though not quite, unknown in other poetic literature -- even Wordsworth uses it -- may puzzle a hearer unfamiliar with neo-Hebrew poetry. It is not like our own decaying practice of classical or of Shakespearean quotation, a mere illumination of the argument, nor is it that rich literary allusiveness of a Hazlitt or a Lamb: it rests upon the Bible almost as on a foundation, to the cramping and even the distorting of the poet's own vision. To the mediaeval Jew the quotation ... seemed only an additional beauty. The Bible, regarded as a uniform whole, everywhere inspired and inspiring, about which you could move <u>per saltum</u>, skipping from Genesis to Micah, or from Job to Chronicles, was "familiar in our mouths as household words." And this familiarity bred not contempt but enhanced delight."

Zangwill here refers to Gabirol but the modern reader of Abraham Ibn Ezra is apt to feel that somehow the intrusion of these quotations is nothing but a cheap literary trick and cannot have been the product of true, genuine feeling. The modern mind recoils from these artifices (as they seem) of acrostics and quotations. And yet, upon more careful study, and remembering the poetic traditions which Ibn Ezra had inherited, it seems fair to say that this poem reflects a true sorrow and rises to touching poetic heights. Here the twinkle in the eye is gone for a moment and we feel his sense of disappointment and grief but likewise an unswerving trust in God.

יא

טילדי יום אל תבהל,
כי ילדי יום לא ירגעו;
אל תשטח פם אם ייטיבו,
גם אל תחת אם ירעו;
כי הטובות גם הרעות,
כאחר יחנו כן יכעו.

יב

היום בחברת הידיד נשטח,
טחר בהפרדו יכל טובו;
מי יאטר היום ולא יברח,
או יארב אחר ולא יבא.

יג

קום, עצל, עד טתי תשכב,
שור הנטלה אנרה לה בר;
לא ראיתי חתול יקן
שבא אל תוך פיהו עכבר.

יד

אנוש ריקם וקורא דספרים,
כאני תוך ים בלא הרן וסלח,
וכאלם טפלי פה אין דברים,
היטעם חך בלי תבלין וסלח.

טז

קול קורא כיס הזהובים,
טלקרב אליו הקרובים:
טוב נולד אל שעה טובה,
טאשר ילד סן הטובים.

טז

טוסיף על המאו פחע
כל יום, לא יטלט גבר,
אך הקדרה הולכת
לסים עד כי תשבר.

יז

ל איש הרש היתכן
לדבר לפני הסוכן,
הלא נודע אשר הוא כן
בזויה תכטח תטסכן.

יח

איש אל תהי טכיר כזיו סדיו,
אל סעלליו שור וטעפדיו,
כי אם זאב שני וגם תולע,
יחזיק סנת סדיו ורת יולדיו.

יט

שור כי בנות ציון נהשקיפן
אש המנה תבער באור אפן,
אש לא תלבה את סביביה,
כי אם תלבה את לבב צופן.
נחנו הרוגי אש שביב יופי,
קראו למישאל ואלצפן.

כ

על צוארך ושער ראשך,
יש לברך
יוצר אור ובורא חשך.

כא

ביום כלות וחטות ריב ינרון
נאהל איש אזי תשכון בעוזה,
ואשת חן, באישה עין יטינה
הלא תשית, וערפה לחטוזה.

כב

זקן כפוף קומה טקלו בידהו
עבר בשוק, נער סת זה שאלהו,
אם קשתך תטכר אלי ואקנהו,
ענה, ואם החיה חנם נתתיהו.

כג

אחר אחר אחר טות התיינו,
למה בחיינו תחפץ תטיהנו;
לולי אשר נירא טחטא לשוננו,
נאטר שחי אלה עסל בעינינו.

כד

אלו לפי אידי דטעי יזלון,
לא דרכה רגל אנוש יבשת,
אך לא לטי נת לבד כרת ברית,
כי גם לדטעי נראתה הקשת.

(לו ענני חחק כעיני יזלו
לא דרכה רגל אנוש יבשת
אטנם דעו כי לא לטי נת לבד
כי גם לדטעי נראתה הקשת.)

EPIGRAMS

11.

Of the vicissitudes of time that the day brings forth
be not dismayed,
For the changes of time are unceasing,
Do not rejoice about them if they are favorable,
Do not be confounded if they are unfavorable,
For with both good things and evil
As they come so do they go.

12.

Let us rejoice today in the company of a friend,
Tomorrow at his departure his goodness shall come to an end,
(Since he will no longer be here)
Who can bind the day that it should not flee,
Or who lie in wait for another? It may not come.

13.

Arise, Oh sluggard, how long will you sleep?
Behold the ant gathering grain for herself..
I have not seen a cat asleep
When it wanted to catch a mouse. (Lit. That it should get a
mouse into its mouth.)

14.

An empty (headed) man who reads in books

Is like a ship in a sea without mast or mariner,

Or like a mute without a mouth and without words...

Can the palate taste without spices and salt?

15.

Hark! The money-bag calls out aloud so that

His relatives should not approach him;

It is better to be born in a propitious hour

Than to be born from a good family. (The miser does them no good.)

16.

He who adds to his sin iniquity

Daily, that man will not escape:

Indeed the vessel goes to the well (for water)

Until it is broken.

נהחטיד הכד אל הסעין לא ימלם

משבירה:

17.

Does it avail the poor man

To speak before the employer?

It is well known that he (the poor man) is right (the poor man may be correct)

But the wisdom of the poor man is despised.

18.

Let not a man be recognized by the brightness of his garments,

Look to his deeds and to his achievements, --

For a wolf though adorned in crimson and scarlet,

Will continue the portion of his habits and the custom of his sires.

(Once a wolf, though disguised, he still remains a wolf).

19.

Beware! For when the daughters of Zion look at you,

flares up

The fire of the burning bush consumes with the light (flame) of their faces.

It is a fire that does not consume those about it

But it consumes the heart of their beholders,

We are slain by the fire of the sparks of beauty ...

Page Mishael and Elzaphan!

(See Lev. 10:4 - "And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said unto them: 'Draw near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp.' Ref. to the fire that devoured Nadab and Abihu.)

20.

Upon thy neck and the hair of thy head,

One should praise God:

"Who formed light and created darkness."

A brilliant epigram. Ibn Ezra knew how to compliment a lady. This one was evidently beautiful, with white neck and black hair. This epigram is exceedingly ingenious. I have put it freely thus:

When I behold thy neck and hair,

(A contrast white and black so fair)

Then would I turn to God and bless

"Who formeth light, createth darkness".

21.

On the day that daughtem-in-law and mothers-in-law quarrel

together,

Then terror dwells in the tent of a man,

But a woman of grace, does she not turn her right eye to her

husband,

While she shows her neck to her mother-in-law!

22.

An old man, bent down, with cane in hand
Goes along the street. A boy asks him, "What is this?" (the cane)
"If you will sell me your bow, I will buy it."
He answered , (the old man) " If you will live (long enough)
I will give you it for nothing.

23.

Since after death You will revive us again
Why during our lives do you wish to kill us?
Were it not that we feared the sin of our tongues,
We would say these two actions are a trouble in our eyes.
Epigrams 11-23 -- See Kahana, Kovetz, pp.82-86.

24.

Were my tears to flow in proportion to my calamities,
The foot of man could not tread on dry land,
Yea not in the days of Noah alone was a covenant made,
For even through my tears appears the rainbow.

Kahana, Kovetz, p.34, No.19. This epigram bears a striking similarity to one quoted by F. de Sola Mendes as being written by Al-Ḥarizi. See J.E. Vol. 1, p.390. He gives this free translation that follows. I have placed the text on p.110-No.24.

"If heaven's clouds should weep as my poor eyes have done,
Then were for man no path that still were dry;
But know, that e'en for me, as erst for Lameck's son,
With all this deluge stood a rainbow in the sky!"

25.

BLESS GOD LORD OF THE WORLD

Bless God, Lord of the World, by the mouth of all creation,
although And if thou art exceedingly exalted above by song and praises,
I have called Thee to reveal a secret which is not hidden from Thee,
Thou hast revealed deep things to me and hast not returned thy servant confounded;
I have beheld Thee in Thy law as the who beheld it was a ladder (i.e Jacob)[1] a man sees, for it is a ladder of wisdom,
For this do I praise Thy wonders
And I will not be silent for I have comprehended them,
Nor will I forget Thy word unto me
When my heart dreamed a dream;
Perform miracles for one imprisoned,
Show him the porch of the Holy of Holies,
And I will come into the house of Thy prayer
Upon which I have been beating, concerning which I have been smitten
And I will sanctify Thee and regard Thee with awe,
In the council of my people and their assembly,
There will I bow down and open my hands
For I will come with a mind at peace.

For text, omitted here, see Kahana, Kovetz, p.19, No.12.

1. See Deut. 31:22, Kahana, p.20, note.

26.

DIRGE UPON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JEWISH CONGREGATIONS IN SPAIN

Alas! Evil from Heaven has descended upon Spain (Mi.1:12)

(And much mourning upon the West. Through this (calamity) they became enfeebled) (This line not in B & A.)

My eyes, my eyes shed tears.

I weep as a hyena over the city of Lucena (2nd half of 9th cent. I. Alfasei)

Where guiltless, alone, there a (community of) the Diaspora used to dwell

Without change for a thousand and seventy years (1070)

Her day has come; her people has fled; Yea she is become as a widow

Without Torah, without Mikrah and the Mishnah is hidden

And the Talmud is now sterile for all its splendor is gone;

And there are slaughterers and fugitives here and there;

The place of prayer and praise is converted into a house of unseemliness,

(The synagogues are turned into mosques)

For this do I weep, striking my hands and on my tongue a constant dirge.

I shall not cease saying: " Oh that my head were waters... (Jer. rest of the verse 8:23 ..."and mine eyes a fountain of tears.")

That I might weep day and night

For the slain of the daughter of my people!

I tear my hair and cry bitterly over the exile of Seville,

Upon the noblemen, they are slain, and their sons are in captivity,

Upon the daughters, delicate maidens, given over to a strange religion (Islam)

[illegible]

There were sages and mighty men. They died from hunger and thirst,

And there is no Jew, not a single one, in Jaen or Almeria (These places are in the south of Spain)

And Majorca (an Island in the Mediterranean) and the City of Malaga,

There no living Jews are left,
And the Jews, the refugees, have been smitten with festering wounds,
For this will I mourn, I do learn to speak in bitter elegy,
I shall yet moan a great lamentation,
And my groaning cries in my grief flow forth like water.

Woe! I cry as a woman in travail over the community of Sejelmessa
(סגלמאסה - An Arabic City in North Africa)
A city of Geonim and persons of understanding whose light covered/darkness,
The pillar of the Talmud has been bent and the structure thrown down,
And the Mishnah has become a hissing by-word, trampled under foot,
And the precious ones, riddled, the eye of the enemy did not spare,
Alas'. Nothing is left of all the congregation of Fez on the day that it was given over to spoilation,
Where is the strength of the congregation of Tlemsen, its adornment is vanished away,
I cry with violent weeping over Sabtah and Michnosah (Tlemsen) ? Meknes.
And I tear my garment over Darad (In North Africa) which was formerly captured,
On the Sabbath day, (males and females) sons and daughters spilt their blood like water.
What shall I answer for because of my sin (Israel's) this has come to be
(He ascribes these sins to himself and people)
And from God, the Rock of My strength, evil is consumed upon me,
Unto whom shall I hope, and what shall I say for all this my hand hath done,
My heart burns within me for my soul (The Jewish Nation) which hath done perversely,
12 And from her land, the haven of her desire, she is exiled to an unclean land,
She is abashed and she is dumbfounded; she is too weary to relate her troubles,
But despite the pain in her heart, she hopes for the loving-kindness of her

Rock (God)

So that (God) should command deliverance from servitude that she may
take refuge in the shadow of His wings,
In the prison-house (Exile) at all times, when she remembers His name,
she revives
But her weeping is on her cheek as long as she is in the power of the
hand-maid who shoots straight with her bow
Until God looks down from Heaven.

(The meaning here is clear but the language difficult. Israel, the Jewish nation, is in prison. Her weeping is on her cheek as long as the Nation is in the hand of the handmaid (Mohammedans, Ishmael - The maid is Hagar, Mother of Ishmael - both mean Arabians -- Gen.21:20 and Lam.3:50)

The above elegy is a lamentation for the fall of Spanish and North African Congregations. It is based on an event connected with the Almohads (Unitarians) after 1148. Muhamef Ibn Tumert declared the Unity of God. The idea was not to permit other religions to function. Ibn Tumert died in 1130. His successor from 1140 - 1147 conquered all of Morocco. He then went over to Spain in 1147 and overran Southern Spain. Cordova was captured in 1148. It was then that Maimonides had to leave with his father.

The poem technically is an acrostic of Abraham. It has one strophe and four hemistichs. The first two and the last two have rhyme. They end in Biblical verses. Otherwise, each strophe has its own rhyme.

For text omitted here, see Kahana, Kovetz, p.140 and Brody and Albrecht, Sha'ar Ha-Shir, p.138, No,126.

27.

"DISPUTE BETWEEN SUMMER AND WINTER"

One God, how numerous are Thy witnesses
They testify that there is none beside Thee
Thou hast created man for Thy glory
But thou hast not made known to him Thy secret;
Yet he has learned from the works of Thy hands
For the generations of the earth are Thy work, offsprings
Yea! Thou hast placed in the sky Thy majesty

Of Thy majesty all is replete Day by day thou doest miracles
We behold miracles in everything "Even the one as well as the other"

The ways of God are set up in Justice
But the ways of man are considered as vanity
The ways of God go round in a circle
(There is uniformity in God's ways)
As at first so at last they turn round
How good are all days in their season
We have heard that they contend among themselves
Cold and Heat, they draw near to a law suit

The judge
They draw near for argument They tell all their affairs
The matter of justice he decides And they are both right.

Summer opens his mouth and says
Winter gets its name from shame (A pun on the Hebrew - see text)
The head is bald by the fearful ice
It tears down the walls of houses furnished with timber -
(A fine, playful alliteration in the Hebrew - see text)

The hand that toils for food is hidden

(One is afraid to go out in Winter)

Also the foot cannot go with the caravan,

Also the bird in the sky is not seen

But then you see men — Encamped about fires

By fires they warm themselves — Were it not for this they would perish.

Winter now reproaches Summer:

When Winter heard this he opened his mouth:

The soul of all living is cut off in Summer,

There is fear of thy heat when one ventures outside

But in the inside coldness is found (in the sense of feverish coldness - One gets a fever from the heat)

The heart of those who understand do not care for thy days

They cannot eat sweet things, even half of them,-

They are terrified if the sun comes forth

If the Sun comes forth they are terrified — They run to shady places

Strong people run — To my cold waters.

Summer rejoins:

Hypocrite, why will you multiply words with me

It is I who prepare foods

Go and ask the ants and ewe-lambs

Mine the flowers, the fruit, the leaves,

Mine the rose, the henna, the aloes, (Ct.1:14; BDB.499 and 14)

as at The time when the bride adorns herself with jewels (Is.61:10)

But your days are as mourning

The lands are likened To complete desolation
As complete as an old Poor widow.

Winter answers:

That sayest thou Summer before men
Thou dost make them eat the roots of fruits
Thou engenderest in them all severe sicknesses,
Young men and old groan from them
Pleasant eatables are deceptive
Deadly flies and even fleas,
And fathers are separated from their children

They are separated to places Some of them to wars
There are wars in thy time (with thee) But in my days they are at peace.

The poet himself now speaks and gives his judgment:

I will declare the strength at the end of the matter, of Him
Who is the Healer of broken hearts, He who gives
Much endurance to those weary of strength,
Lest the soul of man shall perish and in a moment cease,
The good and evil that are to come He foresees
And in its season He does everything well,
He has given me a mouth to say all these things

Let the mouth praise His Name For lovingkindness is with Him
With Him will I be perfect I will rejoice at all times.

For text see Brody and Albrecht, p.140, No.127; Kahana, p.109.
The poem forms the acrostic Abraham. Each strophe has rhyme of its own.
One strophe of four hemistichs of separate rhyme. It is a kind of chain.
The last four lines of each strophe read almost like a child's ditty.

Notes on Chapter IV

1. Frederick James Furnivall 1825-1910, English philogolist and editor. J.E. Vol. III, p. 399, art. By Joseph Jacobs, see Jewish Ideals, pp. 84-95.

2. Century Readings in English Literature, Ed. by Prof. J.W. Cunliffe of Columbia University, The Century Co., 1923- Notes p. CLI.

3. Robert Browning, Life and Letters, Vol. II, p. 556- By Mrs. Sutherland Orr - "In the course of his last decade he devoted himself for a short time to the study of Spanish and Hebrew, The Spanish dramatists yielded him a fund of new enjoyment; and he delighted in his power of reading Hebrew in its most difficult printed forms." It is interesting to note that among the pieces in his study in the De Vere Gardens, he had a silver Jewish "Sabbath Lamp" brought from Venice. Vol. II, p. 580.

4. "Brownings' Ancestors" - Dr. Furnivall - privately printed --See Life of Browning - William Sharp - 1897, pp. 9 and 16.
What Stopford A. Brooke - The Poetry of Robert Browning - pp. 33-34- Thomas Y. Crowell - 1902 --- says is striking: ....."I do not know whether Browning had any Jewish blood in his body by descent, but he certainly had Jewish elements in his intellect, spirit, and character. His sense of an ever-victorious Righteousness at the center of the universe, whom one might always trust and be untroubled, was Jewish." Brooke speaks of his intellectual subtlety, his pleasure in intense color, his love of music and then says.." It was this Jewish element in Browning, in all its many forms, which caused him to feel with and to write so much about the Jews in his poetry. The two poems in which he most fully enshrines his view of human life, as it may be in the thought of God and as it ought to be conceived by us, are both in the mouth of Jews, or Rabbi Ben Ezra and Jochanan Hakkadosh."..."The Jew lay deep in Browning."

5. G.K. Chesterton- The Macmillan Co., 1903 - Robert Browning - p. 4 "Life and Letters of Robert Browning" - Mrs. Sutherland Orr - Vol I, 1891, pp. 1-2 - "A belief was current in Mr. Browning's lifetime that he had Jewish blood in his veins. It received outward support from certain accidents of his life, from his known interest in the Hebrew language and literature, from his friendship for various members of the Jewish community in London. It might well have yielded to the fact of his never claiming the kinship, which could not have existed without his knowledge, and which, if he had known it, he would, by reason of these very sympathies, have been the last person to disavow. The results of more recent and more systematic inquiry have shown the belief to be unfounded." Mrs.Orr then sets forth the poet's genealogy and in a footnote confesses her indebtedness "to some notes made for the Browning Society by Dr. Furnivall." These notes I have not been able to locate.

6. Essay by Horace E. Scudder in Student's Cambridge Edition "The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning - Houghton Mifflin Company, p. XIV.

7. J.Q.R. O.S. Vol. II, 1890, p. 254 - "Browning's Theology" -- See same in Jewish Ideals - Joseph Jacobs - 1896, p. 92.

8. Moody and Lovett -- A History of English Literature, Scribners, 1918, p. 363.

9. The thoughts in the first stanza are paralled by a poem of Ibn Ezra's- quoted by Dr. Michael Sachs: "In deiner Hand liegt mein Geschick". Stanzas 2 and 3 have their parallel in Ibn Ezra's comment on Job 35:11: "Man has the sole privilege of becoming superior to the beast and the fowl." Stanza 8 has a line about the soul which is similar to Ibn Ezra's comment on Psalm 22:22 - "The soul of man is called lonely because it is separated during its union with the body from the universal soul."

10. Rabbi Ben Ezra - By Robert Browning - with supplementary illustrative quotations and an introduction by William Adams Slade - Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., N.Y. MDCCCCII. See also - Handbook to Robert Browning's Works - Mrs. Sutherland Orr - 6th Ed. revised - London - 1892 - p. 203 - "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is the expression of a religious philosophy which, being, from another point of view, Mr. Browning's own, has much in common with that which he has imputed to St. John; and, as "A Death in the Desert" only gave the words which the Evangelist might have spoken, so is "Rabbi Ben Ezra" only the possible utterance of that pious and learned Jew."..."the religious imagination in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is strongly touched with the gorgeous and solemn realism which distinguishes the Old Testament from the New. The most striking feature of Rabbi Ben Ezra's philosophy is his estimate of age. According to him the soul is eternal, but it completes the first stage of its experience in the early life; and the climax of the earthly life is attained, not in the middle of it, but at its close. Age is therefore a period, not only of rest, but of fruition."

11. Moody and Lovett - A History of English Literature, p. 366.

12. Browning's Complete Poems, Students' Cambridge Edition, p. 1007

13. Eger's Diwan, N. 55, p. 15

14. Eger's Diwan, p. 20, N. 64.

15. By-Paths in Hebraic Bookland - p. 269-271 - "Browning's "Ben Karshook".

16. J.Q.R. O.S. Vol. II, 1890, p. 256.

17. By-Paths in Hebraic Bookland, p.270.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Abrahams, Israel ... By-Paths in Hebraic Bookland, J.P.S. 1920
The Book of Delight, Essay on "Medieval Wayfaring", J.P.S. 1912.

Al-Harizi ..... Pauli de Lagarde, 1924, 2nd Ed. p.89

Albrecht, K. .... Studien zu den Dichtungen Abrahams ben Ezra .. Z.D.M.G. 57, 1903

Bacher, W. .... Abraham Ibn Ezra in Jewish Encyclopedia, J.E. Vol.VI.

Benjamin of Tudela Ed. Asher, Vol.I. and II. London, 1840.

Berliner, A. Geschichte der Juden in Rom, Frankfurt a.m., 1893.

Brody, H. and Albrecht, K. שער השיר Leipzig, 1905

Brody, H. אשכול אנציקלופדיה ישראלית ..ת.ר.ע.י

Browning's Complete Poems Student's Cambridge Edition

Dozy, Reinhart .. Moslem Spain, London - Chatto & Windus, 1913

Egers, Jacob ... Diwan des Abraham Ibn Ezra, Berlin, 1886

Friedlaender, M.. Ibn Ezra Literature, Publications of the Society of Hebrew Literature, Vol.I-Isaiah,1873, Vol.II, 1873; Vol. III, 1877; Vol. IV -- Second Series

Graetz, H.... History of the Jews, Vol.III and Geschichte der Juden, Vol.VI.

Geiger, Abraham .. Judaism and Its History, trs. by Charles Newburgh, 1911, Bloch.

Halevi, Jehudah Selected Poems. H. Brody and Nina Salaman, J.P.S. 1924

Husik, Isaac A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy, Macmillan, 1916

Ibn Ezra, Abraham יסוד מורא Leipzig, 1840

Ibn Gabirol, Solomon Selected Religious Poems, Israel Davidson and Israel Zangwill, J.P.S. 1923

Ibn Yahya, Gedaliah שלשלת הקבלה..ספרות ההסטוריא
הישראלית ..אברהם כהנא
ספר שני -- תרפ"ג

Jacobs, Joseph ...	The Jews of Angevin England, London, 1893. Jewish Quarterly Review, O.S.- Vol.II - 1890 -- Abbr. J.Q.R.
Kahana, David ...	Kovetz of Abraham Ibn Ezra's poetry, 1922 דוד כהנא -- קובץ חכמת הראב"ע
Kerem Hemed ...	Vol.IV., p.131
Lippmann, G.H.	ספר השם Einleitung, Fürth, 1834.
Lucas, Alice...	The Jewish Year, Macmillan & Co., 1898
Munro, D.C.	The Middle Ages
Ochs, S. ...	Articles on Ibn Ezra in The Monatsschrift für Geschichte Und Wissenschaft des Judentums -- Jan.-July, 1916, Vol.60. Abb. Monatsschrift.
Orr, Mrs. Sutherland	Robert Browning, Life and Letters, Vol.II.
Rosin, David ..	Reime und Gedichte des Abraham Ibn Ezra, Breslau, 1891
Seignobos, C.	History of Medieval and Modern Civilization
Sharp, William ..	Life of Browning, 1897.
Transactions ..	Jewish Historical Society of England, Transactions, Session, 1894 -5. M. Friedländer, Ibn Ezra in England. Abbr. J.H.S. of E. Trans.
Zacuti, Abraham ..	Liber Juchasein - Ed. Filipowski - ספר יוחסין השלם
Zunz, L. ..	Literaturgeschichte der Synagogalen Poesie, Essay on the Geographical Literature of the Jews, in Benjamin of Tudela, Asher, Vol.2, London, 1840.

RABBI BEN EZRA

Every student of English literature is familiar with Robert Browning's noble poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra", first published in 1864. Since Dr. Furnivall, it has been commonly accepted by critics that Abraham Ibn Ezra formed the model for this poem.[1] Thus in a reliable anthology of English Literature, Abraham Ibn Ezra's life is shortly outlined and an attempt is made to prove that his writings contain some of the views expressed by Browning's sage.[2] To bring together some of these conclusions and to set forth the message of the great English poem is the purpose of this short paper.

Robert Browning was born in the parish of St. Giles, Camberwell, London, May 7, 1812. He died at the ripe age of seventy-seven at his son's home in Venice, December 12, 1889. His appearance was somewhat Jewish, if that means anything; he seems to have had some knowledge of Hebrew,[3] and he was certainly sympathetic with Jews as is amply demonstrated not only by his poetry but also by two noteworthy acts: in 1881 he signed the memorial to the Lord Mayor to summon a meeting to protest against Russia's persecution of the Jews and in 1887 he joined the Council of the Anglo-Jewish Exhibition.

Until Dr. Furnivall proved the contrary, for a long time it was believed that Browning was of Jewish descent.[4] As one of his biographers points out, "the chief reason assigned by his contemporaries for the belief was the fact that he was, without a doubt, especially and profoundly interested in Jewish matters."[5] It is well known that the boy Browning, despite an indifferent schooling, managed to acquire a vast and miscellaneous knowledge of languages and literatures. He

could put his finger on almost anything and a retentive memory helped him to recall much of the information which he picked up at the British Museum through which he roamed.[6]

Two immediate questions concern us here: What did Browning know of Abraham Ibn Ezra, if anything? Is "Rabbi Ben Ezra" to be identified with Abraham Ibn Ezra?

With reference to the first question, it may be conjectured that the name of the distinguished Rabbi was at least familiar to him. Joseph Jacobs maintains that "it cannot have been by accident that he (Browning) chose to give two of the most important summaries of his Weltweisheit by means of Jewish speakers, Rabbi Ben Ezra and Jochanan Hakkadosh."[7] "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is by many considered Browning's most striking poem, and certainly it yields to none of his in dignity and lucidity. It is of peculiar interest to English Jews as the eponymous hero is Abraham Ibn Ezra, who was himself in England, "the island of the corner of the earth" (a pun on Angleterre) as he calls it, in the spring and summer of 1158. It is scarcely likely that Browning knew more of him than that he was a distinguished Rabbi of the Middle Ages. Certainly the poem has none of those satiric touches with which Abraham Ibn Ezra's name is associated in the mind of the student of Jewish literature. Nothing can be more dignified and stoical than the soliloquy of the old Rabbi reviewing life, and seeing that it is very good both in youth, with its pleasure, and in age, with its experience. The image of the Potter

and the wheel, hackneyed as it has been by the homilists, has never been more finely utilized than in the concluding lines of the poem..... The fact seems to be that Browning could read his Hebrew Bible, and that was about the extent of his Hebrew learning, though it was a foible of his to give an impression of recondite learning..... But it is not in the minutiae of Hebrew scholarship that we are to look for Browning's sympathy with the Jewish spirit. This comes out in the lines I have been quoting and in his poems of toleration. That this sympathy was not due to any agreement with the characteristic features of Jewish faith is, I think, undoubted. All the more honor to the poet who could rise above differences of creed and pierce to the human nature which is common to Christian and Jew because it is the gift of a Common Father."

Aside from the conjectural nature of these remarks, it is of course untrue that Abraham Ibn Ezra was merely a satirist. If anything, the internal evidence of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" would seem to indicate that Browning knew much more of Ibn Ezra's philosophy than has come to the surface through the speculations of his critics. Whereas in other characters, "we seem to hear the ring of Browning's own voice"[8] in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" we hear also the voice of the Medieval Jewish sage.[9] Some critics who have apparently been only familiar with the satiric comments of Ibn Ezra have presented the thesis that Browning expresses his own philosophy of faith through the lips of "Rabbi Ben Ezra".[10] That may well be. We know that Browning did not lack reliance in God. "The robustness of Browning's nature, its

courage, its abounding joy and faith in life, make his works a permanent storehouse of spiritual energy for the race, a storehouse to which for a long time to come it will in certain moods always return. In an age distracted by doubt and divided in will, his strong, unfaltering voice has been lifted above the perplexities and hesitations of men like a bugle-call to joyous battle in which the victory is to the brave."[11]

We have also direct testimony of this faith based on the famous third verse of his "Epilogue to Asolando":

"One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake."

The Pall Mall Gazette of February 1, 1890 related this incident: One evening, just before his death-illness, the poet was reading this from a proof to his daughter-in-law and sister. He said: 'It almost looks like bragging to say this, and as if I ought to cancel it; but it's the simple truth; and as it's true, it shall stand."[12]

But if Browning had a strong robust faith, so had Abraham Ibn Ezra. Again and again in his poetry and in his prose we meet with the thought so beautifully expressed in one poem in particular:[13]

"I hope for the salvation of the Lord,
In Him I trust, when fears my being thrill,
Come life, come death, according to His word,
He is my portion still.....

Sweet is even sorrow coming in His name,
Nor will I seek its purpose to explore;

His praise will I continually proclaim,

And bless Him evermore."

In another well-known hymn he sings:

"I thirst for God, to Him my soul aspires

The living God it is my heart desires.....

ending magnificently with

"Yea, though my dwelling be

In darkest night, God is a light to me."

This thought we find once more in another hymn which ends

.. "In darkness,God is a light to me."[14]

All that we wish to maintain here is that "Rabbi Ben Ezra" not only reflects the sturdy optimism of Browning; in a remarkable way it sets forth the Jewish attitude of faith and reliance in God and life, - a philosophy in which Abraham Ibn Ezra heartily shared. Summing up the evidence on our first question, we may say that the fact that Browning knew something of Abraham Ibn Ezra, while indirect, seems fairly certain. Israel Abrahams is right in saying that "it is probable that the poet had him vaguely in mind."[15] More than this is questionable. Certainly Browning had never read any of Abraham Ibn Ezra's writings in the original and probably picked up his information either from learned Jews or from casual secondary sources. Joseph Jacobs tells the following revealing incident which would confirm the theory that Browning's knowledge of Hebrew was not sufficient to enable him to read Medieval Hebrew sources:[16]

"As some indication of the slightness of his acquaintance with Hebrew idiom, I may mention that he was going to call his Jochanan

"Hakkadosh Jochanan" (=John Saint). Through a common friend I pointed out the error to the poet, and the adjective was put in its proper position." Israel Abrahams also tells us that while he "had dipped into curious, out of the way books on Jewish lore," he was not as much a Hebrew scholar as some would claim.[17] The Rev. Michael Adler cleverly detected that he owed some of the astonishing Hebrew words in his Jocoseria to a little read edition of the Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela. Very bad Hebrew it is, but its author was not Browning but Baratier.[18]

Admitting then that Browning had some general knowledge of the medieval sage and poet, Abraham Ibn Ezra, are we to identify "Rabbi Ben Ezra" with Abraham Ibn Ezra? This question has usually been answered in the affirmative. On the basis of the English poem, critics have endeavored to establish a definite relationship between the writings of Ibn Ezra and the thoughts expressed by Browning in the poem. That there should be agreements is not surprising, because as we have seen, Browning had a vast collection of stray knowledge in his capacious head and probably remembered some ideas of the medieval Rabbi. But two facts should be remembered. In the first place, Browning calls his Rabbi merely "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and Abraham Ibn Ezra is almost never spoken of that way. In the second place, and of greater importance, we meet with another "Rabbi Ben Ezra" in Browning's "Holy-Cross Day." This second "Rabbi Ben Ezra" sings a "Song of Death" which is of a very different tone from the resiliant optimism of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" of our poem. Is it possible,

as Abrahams believes, that Browning did not wish his readers to have any particular Medieval Rabbi in mind?[19] This too is the thought of one of his biographers:

"When he (Browning) wishes to express the largest and sublimest scheme of morals and religion which his imagination can conceive, he does not put it into the mouth of any of the great spiritual leaders of mankind, but into the mouth of an obscure Jewish Rabbi of the name of Ben Ezra."[20]

Is it perhaps safest then to believe that Browning merely took a "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and having vaguely in mind the medieval vagabond, he tried to place in his lips a philosophy of high faith which he knew to be true not only of the Rabbi but as well of the Jewish spirit? Happily too, this exalted idealism he himself shared. This is the thought of another writer who maintains that Robert Browning's treatment of the Jew was not only true and broad-minded; it was "based on a sympathetic and intellectual study of the Jewish race."[21] I do not know of anything which expresses so intensely and with such concentrated language the semi-tragic-comedy enacted at Rome every year on Holy Cross Day, as does the poem bearing this name. The scorn, the contempt, the bitterness, and the mockery of the Jews, driven like sheep and compelled to listen to the annual sermon preached with the view of converting them, is portrayed with a rare and wonderful power. The conclusion, too, with its reconciliation over the bond of suffering could never have been conceived by any one with merely a passive interest

in Judaism. To RABBI BEN EZRA as a subjective poem, one would naturally turn for the purpose of discovering in what measure Browning appreciated the inner workings of the Jewish spirit. The coloring here does not depend on past persecutions or on the contrast between Jew and Gentile. The persistance and frequency with which these latter have been exemplified in real life has somehow led to their undue adoption as the material of poetry and fiction. But, after all, the portrayal or suggestion of oppression only shows one phase of existence, and that not the most important, being in essence transitory. Our lasting desire is not simply or chiefly to know the feelings of down-trodden human beings, although our sympathies are widened by such knowledge; it is rather to penetrate to the inner motives of man when he is completely man. And so it is not the outer or chance characteristic appertaining to Jews which gives an insight to their moral and religious nature; this insight can only be obtained through what is permanent and therefore spiritual.

Rabbi Ben Ezra may in a manner be called a poetical portrait of that dominant Jewish habit of viewing things which is neither ascetic nor epicurean, but which accepts both pleasure and pain as having distinct but rightful uses. That effort, after, and consequent sense of progress towards perfection, of w ich Browning is ever fond of discoursing, has much in common with the unconquerable optimism that lies at the root of the Messianic idea in its widest range:

"Grow old along with me.....see all nor be afraid...."

There are other pieces like Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial,

Jochanan Hakkadosh, Ben Karshook's Wisdom, etc., which give abundant evidence of Browning's wide knowledge of, and sympathetic insight into Jewish character."

Turning finally to "Rabbi Ben Ezra" we see that it pictures an old medieval sage looking back upon a long vista of life:

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'

The poet then turns to youth and finds that its hopes and fears have speedily annulled its brief years. And yet, "he has found the fixed points over which age and death have no power, in God and the human soul, which, emanating from Him, must become one with Him again."[22]

The spiritual conflict is appropriate to youth. Life does not mean mere feasting and joy, which when ended, brings an end to man. The body must project the soul on its lone way. Powerfully Browning rejects the Omar Khayyam philosophy, asserting that we should welcome the struggle inherent in life, believing that it proceeds from lower to higher forms, and making man, ultimately, despite his corporeal nature, one with God:

"What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i'the scale.

Man ought to thank God for the gift of manhood, for the ability to learn. Nor is that inheritance merely of earthly wisdom. It is also a moral one of right and good. God's plan is perfect sings the poet:

"Perfect I call thy plan:
Thanks that I was a man!
Maker, remake, complete, -- I trust what thou shalt do! '

Both body and soul are good, says Browning, rejecting the ascetic notion of the evil inherent in the flesh:

"As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry, 'All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul! '

Man's affinity with God, even though it be but in the germ, is still the redeeming truth of life's struggles and vicissitudes:

"Therefore I summon age
To grant youth's heritage,
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:
Then shall I pass, approved
A man, for aye removed
From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

And I shall thereupon
Take rest, ere I be gone
Once more on my adventure brave and new:
Fearless and unperplexed,
When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armor to indue."

The poet now reviews age and finds that far from filling him with terror, it enables him to hope further:

...."Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid! "

Browning goes further. Man's success or failure must be sought in the unseen order. With undaunted conviction, Browning asserts the essential worth of every man in the sight of God, no matter how little the world of affairs might understand or value him:

"All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped."

Once more, Browning or Rabbi Ben Ezra, denies the pagan thought of "Carpe diem", denies that "all is change." Nothing dies or changes which has truly been. God and man's soul are invincible before Time, spinning like the potter's wheel, rotting on the highway:

"Fool! All that is, at all
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure!

What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.
He fixed thee mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance,
This Present, thou,forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed."

It is with this soaring faith in the reality of these ideals, in the knowledge that Truth is definitely spiritual that the Rabbi sums up his reflections, finding perfection at the core of life and meaning and purpose in both youth and age:

"So, take and use thy work,
Amend what flaws may lurk
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same! "

Certainly "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is one of the great spiritual legacies of our language. However much or little of Abraham Ibn Ezra's life and thought may have served as a model, the poem remains an eloquent tribute to the nobility of Jewish religious idealism. Jews may well take pride in the thought that if a fictitious Jew gave Shakespeare his "shylock", it was an historical Rabbi of the Twelfth Century who inspired the gifted

Victorian seer to write one of the enduring songs of poetic faith in English Literature, for it is from the lips of a Jew that the words, memorable and unforgettable, are spoken:

"All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God..."

A paper for the Literary Club

Victor E. Reichert

April 3, 1967