FOUR UNPUBLISHED POEMS BY
YOSEF BEN-YISRA’EL
A SIXTEENTH CENTURY JEWISH
YEMENITE POET*

by

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The following four poems bear the name of Yosef-ben Yisra’el spelled out in acrostics at the beginning of each of the poem’s stanzas. These as yet unpublished poems are in the possession of my good friend, Yosef Tobi of Jerusalem, Israel, who graciously granted me permission to research and publish them—a fact for which I am very thankful.

Little is known about the life of Ben-Yisra’el. His exact time, and even place of birth cannot be definitely determined. His son was the famous scribe, Yisra’el Safra ben-Yosef, whose death was lamented by Shalom Shabazi (born in 1619, died after 1680) in a poem of his, Ya ‘Ein ma balek šajiyya (Hapēṣ Hayyīm, pp. 362–363). From this poem and from the dates provided in two manuscripts copied by this son, we may reasonably infer that the poet Yosef ben-Yisra’el lived in the second half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, in Šar‘ab, in the southern part of Yemen. Thus ben-Yisra’el was evidently the older contemporary of Shabazi.

Traditions current among Yemenite Jews persistently hold that our poet was the father of Shabazi; they point to the fact that both poets carry the nickname Mašta. It has, however, been determined that

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1. Three of the poems spell out only the name Yosef. But since they were found in a collection of poems, some of which (like our first poem) spell the author’s name in full, we may safely attribute all these poems to him.
4. a) a book consisting of Haptārōt, copied in 1608, and b) a tiklal, copied in 1622.
5. See, among others, Se’adiah Mansura, Hapēṣ Hayyīm, p. 9; Amram Qorah (Ibid, p. 336).
although both poets may have been related in some manner, they were not father and son.\(^6\)

Thus far, some eighty poems and \textit{piyyûtîm} (liturgical hymns) from the pen of ben-Yisrâ’el are extant. Most of these are still unpublished, scattered in diverse collections of Yemenite manuscripts. Some of ben-Yisrâ’el’s poems, our four poems included, are written in Hebrew; others are written in Arabic, with Hebrew characters; still others are in alternating verses of Hebrew and Arabic, or in Hebrew interspersed with Arabic phrases and words. Ben-Yisrâ’el is known to have written secular poetry also, consisting mainly of riddles,\(^7\) and poems which deal with philosophical themes.\(^8\)

The tenor of Ben-Yisrâ’el’s lyrics is predominantly nationalistic, permeated by a profound religious consciousness, a fact which is characteristic of almost all Yemenite Jewish poetry. Ben-Yisrâ’el’s \textit{piyyûtîm}, like those of others, revolve mainly around the themes of \textit{galût} (exile) and \textit{gâûllâ} (salvation). While the echo of generations of suffering reverberates through them, they are highly charged with exuberant eschatological messages. Great resonances of the biblical past, particularly that of the Exodus, resound vividly in them. With the strong conviction that the Bible presages the panorama of the future, they paint a graphic, indeed hyperbolic picturization of the glorious future that awaited the now down trodden Jewish brethren. Miracles will be enacted as in times of old; the poet exuberantly anticipates the coming of the Messiah, whose advent will culminate in the restoration of the Jews and the enthronement of King David. Thus a very pointed contrast is drawn between the gloomy present and the glorious future, and a cheerful, hopeful note rings throughout the poems.

Ben-Yisrâ’el’s Hebrew poems, as characteristic of medieval poetry, are lavishly studded with verses drawn from diverse strata of Jewish literary creativity, particularly the Bible, the verses of which serve as vehicles of both the poet’s and the reader’s thoughts and feelings.\(^9\)

Ben-Yisrâ’el is one of the most prominent poets ever produced by Yemenite Jewry. It is widely held that he and his predecessor Zecharia al-Dhahri (ca. 1516–ca. 1581) laid the ground, both in form and content,

\(^6\) Tobi (1973, pp. 63–72) convincingly argues that Shabazi’s father was Yosef ben-Abigad ben-Hallon.

\(^7\) See, for example, Ratzaby (1967, pp. 56–60).

\(^8\) See Kali~ (1963, pp. 4 and 10).

for the most celebrated Yemenite poet, Shalom Shabazi, with whom Yemenite poetry attained its highest pinnacle. Indeed, glimmerings of creative power are readily discernible in ben-Yisrāʾel.10

Here are the four poems, edited, vocalized and annotated:


1. The whole biblical verse reads: “Let the mountains bear peace for the people.”
2. Based on Job 25:2, “Who brings about harmony in his heavens.”
3. See Ps 29:11.
5. The poet substitutes the biblical plural עם עם with the singular synonym עם. See Isa 35:10 and 51:11.
7. See Isa 32:18.
8. See Ps 55:19.
9. Ellipsis. See Exod 21:5; the reference is to ‘bondage’ or ‘exile,’ namely “set me free from bondage.”
10. An unintelligible verse. Perhaps one should read:רמלךל, for רמלךל, “Let your King go over before me.” Indeed, in the next verse, the poet refers to the Messiah: “Abi ad, the Prince of Peace.”
12. See Isa 41:3, “He pursues them and passes on safely.”
13. See Mal 2:5; see also Num 25:12.
14. In Jewish tradition, Yinnon is a symbolic name of the Messiah; see Ps 72:17.
15. See 1 Sam 17:8.
16. Reference to the People of Israel. See, for example, Exod 19:5; Ps 135:4 and Isa 19:25.
17. See Lam 1:1.
20. Reference to Ishmael and his descendants; see Gen 16:1, 15 and 21:10.
22. See Num 11:17.
27. See Num 25:12.
28. See Deut 26:15.
30. See Prov 9:11.
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II

2. This whole verse is taken from Ps 118:15.
3. Based on Mic 7:19.
4. See Ps 68:27.
5. See Amos 9:11.
7. See 1 Kgs 8:52.
8. See Mic 5:4.
10. Reference to the Messiah. (see Sanhedrin 98b).
11. See Ezek 34:10, 11.
13. See Lev 26:6; Ezek 34:25.
III


2. See Lev 20:26; Est 3:8.

3. See Deut 33:12.

4. See Amos 5:15.

5. Note the rhyming of yeṣep with tef (Yemenite pronunciation), namely of the vowels šerē and hōlām. These two vowels are treated as identical in Aden and southern parts of Yemen, particularly Sar‘ab, our poet’s place of birth.

6. The whole verse is taken from Ps 81:3.


8. See 1 Sam 25:29.

9. Reference to God; see Exod 3:14.


11. See 1 Chr 9:10.


14. See Jer 7:19; Ps 35:26 et alit.
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IV

1. See Mic 7:19.
2. The expression דַּעְשֶׁנָה רָחָמִי, ‘Dove on Far-off Terebinths’ (see Ps 56:1) refers in Jewish tradition to Israel.
3. Based on Ps 55:2. The poet substitutes uses the objective מֵאֲנָא, ‘from me’ instead of the biblical מֵאָנַן, ‘from my supplication.’
4. See Ps 20:10.
5. See Isa 45:17, et alt.
6. This whole verse is taken from Ps 118:10.
9. Like מַעַדְרֶם, See the expression מַעַדְרֶם יִרְאֶה, ‘He who plans to do evil’ (Ps 24:8).
10. See Ps 118:12.
11. A highly unusual grammatical and syntactic use of הָרָם ‘harm’ or ‘injury’. Perhaps one should read הנִשְׁטָכָם, ‘they will be slain with their own weapons,’ namely, they will be hoist with their own petard.
14. Reference to the Land of Israel. See, Ps 79:1, et alt.
15. See Ezek 34:10, 11.


