

Iberian Jewish Tales of the Sea and Seafaring: Letters and Poems *in* the Medieval Mediterranean

Nicholas M. Parmley (University of Minnesota)

Abstract: *This paper suggests that the Mediterranean Sea and the journeys taken over its depths are presented or invoked with striking similitude between the poetic stylings of medieval Andalusí poets and the commercial letters of Jewish Geniza merchants. Ibn Ezra invokes his exile through the sea as a violent wind that swept away his peers and left him forsaken and alone, while Judah ha-Levi seized opportunity, traversing the raging and perilous seas to find salvation, stopping momentarily in Alexandria just long enough for us to catch him before the scented breeze carried him east. And al-Harizi, who himself left his native Andalus for the wonders and wisdom of the east, presents the reader with the poet-merchant reduced to panic-stricken jettisoning and the invocation of talismanic amulets in an attempt to salvage both self and sales in the midst of the ocean's wrath. Though these descriptions are the poetic renderings of prolific litterateurs, the vision they depict has much in common with the historical reality of their co-religionists who traveled those same seas in search of profit and gain. In their letters, merchants describe terrible storms, suffering and disfigurement, shipwrecks and damaged cargo. All reveal the great risk of venturing out onto the seething sea. More importantly, the selected source evidence presents a remarkable ensemble of travelers who weighed these risks and benefits and yet decided to make the voyage. The evidence presented suggests a maritime society that was not only familiar with the sea, but a culture of impassioned and persevering travelers who truly perceived blessing in movement, whatever the risks.*