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A Hebrew Lament from Venetian Crete on the Fall of Constantinople

*By Michael ben Shabbetai Cohen Balbo
(1420-?1484)
Translated By Avi Sharon*

Behold the noise of the bruit is come,
A great commotion out of the North Country,
Between Migdol and the sea,
A great captivity;
The daughter of my people of my ban.
They have destroyed my vineyard
And the multitude of my people.

The day star, son of morning,
Has fallen from heaven
Like a thing of no light,
The quiver rattles against it,
For He dissolves the bonds of kings.
They made long their furrows,
The glittering spear and shield
While those brought up in scarlet
Are now at their wits end,
Their souls slung out like the pouch of a sling.
And Bela died.

In the desolate valleys
They are embracing dunghills,
As the earth herself laments.
There shall be a consumption in the midst of the
land,
For the earth is utterly broken down.

There went a proclamation throughout the host:
“Woe unto us! For the day goeth away.”
And the voice said: “Cry!”
And he said: “What shall I cry? All flesh is grass
As the gleaning grapes when the vintage is done.”
The heavens above are black.
He has drunk at the hand of the Lord
A cup of trembling,
And the stars of heaven and night’s constellations
Shall not give their light,
Their visage is blacker than coal.
The sun shall be darkened
And the moon as black
As the tents of Kedar,
With neither from nor comeliness.

Behold their valiant ones cry without!
Behold you fast for strife and debate!
The ambassadors of peace shall weep bitterly,
They shall set up a great sign beside him.

Therefore I said - “Look away from me
For I shall weep bitterly,
Labor not to comfort me,
For with the hurt of the daughter of my people am
I hurt.
I am black.”

Astonishment has taken hold of me
And trembling there
Like the pangs of a woman that travails,
And my knees strike one against the other,
Therefore are my loins filled with pain.
He has trodden under foot my mighty men
In the midst of me,
For it is a day of trouble and of treading down and
of perplexity.
Who has given Israel up to the robbers,

Whose height was like the height of cedars,
A great eagle, with great wings, long-winged,
Full of feathers of many colours.
Riphath and Togarmah,
Those that dwell on high, the lofty city,
the host and the stars, now cast down to the ground,
Unto those that peep and mutter.

Woe is me now, for my soul is made weary by
murderers.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The taking of Constantinople in May 1453 was lamented by more hands than any other historical event and in more tongues, among them Greek, Armenian, Latin, Italian, and Hebrew. A single extant Hebrew lament is the only contemporary record in Byzantine Jewish literature of the great tragedy of Eastern Christendom. Written in Venetian-ruled Crete after the news of Constantinople's capture had reached the island, this poem is an important and enigmatic register of Jewish sympathy for the fall of Byzantium. The Jews of Venetian Crete occupied a typically uncomfortable position between the oppressed Greek Orthodox inhabitants of the island and the largely Catholic oppressors. For example, in 1450 an important Venetian official, Ludovico Foscarini, dedicated himself to a *perpetuum bellum* against the island's Jews. Only three years later, in March of 1453, six high-ranking members of the Jewish community of Candia (modern Herakleion) were found guilty of desecrating the host in a suit brought by the wife of a local Greek priest. But beyond this provincial turbulence, many Jews of the period and the larger region must have seen Constantinople, the successor of Rome, as the heir of Biblical Edom, and therefore a city whose fall, in spite of the suffering incumbent upon its large Jewish community, could usher in the redemption of their coreligionists. The web of feeling behind this Hebrew document from Venetian Crete lamenting that Greek city's capture and destruction is therefore both intriguing and complex.

Its complexity is compounded by a curiously "modernist" method of quotation and allusion. The lament ('Qinah' in Hebrew) was written

by the Candiot Rabbi and scholar Michael ben Shabbetai Cohen Balbo (1420-?1484) and is made up of a pastiche of scripture drawn largely from Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentation. The resulting patchwork of biblical quotes tells its story by means of ellipsis and allusion. For example, the phrase "Between Migdol and the sea" is a reference to the town or tower (migdol) where the Jews fleeing Egypt camped before their crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:2). Geographically the reference seems astray, but it opens up other interesting pathways of interpretation. Even more suggestive is the phrase, "And Bela died" which comes from Chronicles (2:16) and equates Constantinople, the central city of Byzantine Christendom with Bela, the fist king of the Gentiles and the first city of enemy Edom. Mention of "Riphath and Togarmah" (Genesis 10:3), grandsons of Noah, must have represent respectively the tribe of the Riphaeans (the ancient Paphlagonians) and the Armenians (toka-arma) people, the "modern" inhabitants of Constantinople. More emphatic, however, even if at times unspoken, is the poet's insistence on the unswayable hand of God behind Constantinople's demise. For the poem's final question, "Who has given Israel to the robbers?" is only answered by seeking out the biblical context from which it was taken, and that answer is unequivocal: "Did not the Lord?" (Isaiah 42:24). A careful reading might reveal more of the strange pity that does not stand in the words of this lament but is nevertheless conveyed.

NOTE:

For a wider discussion of this poem, its historical context and a more literal translation see Steven Bowman, *The Jews of Byzantium* (University of Alabama Press 1985). The lament has been carefully edited by Leon J. Weinberger in his *Jewish Poets in Crete* (University of Alabama Press 199?).''