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# MEDIEVAL VIEWS ON THE SEXUALITY OF THE HARE IN IBN EZRA'S BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

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## Abstract

Abraham Ibn Ezra, a medieval Jewish commentator combined in his interpretations to the Bible, information taken from Middle Ages. Ibn Ezra's basic concept was that contemporary science may explain the biblical text. In his commentary on Leviticus 11.6 and Deuteronomy 14.7, Ibn Ezra suggests two options for explaining why the Bible's lawmaker uses the female form when he mentions the hare (in Hebrew: 'arnevet'). One, the hare has only a female species. Second, the hare is an animal that changes its sex from male to female and vice versa, and therefore it is not possible to clearly characterize it as a male. The view that the hare is a hermaphrodite was voiced in the classical times. In the middle ages additional views were evident with regard to the sexual uniqueness of the hare. According to the bestiary literature, the hare is an animal capable of changing its sex, i.e., sometimes it is male and sometimes female.

*Keywords:* hare, Ibn Ezra, medieval, Jewish, commentary

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## 1. Introduction

Abraham Ibn Ezra, rabbi and an intellectual, was born in Toledo circa 1090 (d. 1164) and operated in Muslim Spain. Ibn Ezra engaged in many disciplines of Science and Judaism such as commentary, Jewish philosophy, astrology and Astronomy and Mathematics [1-4]. During his lifetime in Spain, he travelled to many countries in North Africa and was exposed to various cultures and costumes. In 1145 Spain was occupied by the Al-Mohads, a Moroccan Berber Muslim Caliphate. In order to escape persecution by the Almohads, Ibn Ezra was forced to migrate to Christian countries. During this period he wandered to Western Europe where he utilized the knowledge he had obtained for his biblical commentary project.

Ibn Ezra wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible, however his chief work is the commentary on the Pentateuch (Torah). The complete commentary on the Pentateuch was finished shortly before his death (d. 1164), was called *Sefer ha-Yashar (Book of the Straight)*. In his commentary to the

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Bible, Ibn Ezra adheres to the literal sense of the texts, avoiding allegories and Kabbalistic exegesis. In his commentaries Ibn Ezra introduced philosophical and scientific ideas. He did not avoid from exercising an independent criticism, which, according to some researchers and scholars, borders on rationalism [5-8].

## **2. Purpose of the study**

In his biblical interpretations, Ibn Ezra combined knowledge taken from contemporary life, for instance descriptions of the home and its appliances, types of food, nutritional and medical views, and so on [9]. Ibn Ezra stresses in many places in his commentary that Muslims culture or scientific concepts may clarify and illuminate the narratives and the laws of the Bible. This study examines several zoological conceptions evident in Ibn Ezra's biblical commentary in light of medieval scientific literature. The focus will be put on his explanations concerning the sexual characteristics of the hare, which is mentioned in the Bible in two lists setting a prohibition against its consumption (Leviticus 11.6, Deuteronomy 14.7).

## **3. Discussion**

### ***3.1. The biblical hare – identification***

The word *arnevet* is mentioned in the Pentateuch two times (Leviticus 11.6, Deuteronomy 14.7). The *arnevet* is identified with the hare, i.e., the genus *Lepus*. This identification is accepted by all the translators and commentators, from the classical era and subsequently. The Septuagint on Deuteronomy 14.7 translates the word *arnevet* as *δασυποδα* (*dasypoda*), that is 'hairy legged', meaning the hare [10]. The Aramaic translations of Onkelos and that attributed to Yonatan ben Uziel translate *arnevet* as 'arnava' [11]. Maimonides (1138-1204), and R. Yehosef Schwartz (Germany and Eretz Israel 1804-1865) identify it as the Arabic *al-arnab* or *arnab* (أرناب), i.e., hare [12-14]. Modern scholars as well are of the opinion that the biblical hare should be identified with the genus *Lepus* [15]. In fact, Ibn Ezra does not refer to the identification of the hare and does not state its name in other languages. Nonetheless, from his words (see below) it appears that he is referring to the hare.

### ***3.2. Use of the female form of the word hare (arnevet) in the Bible – review of interpretations***

From medieval times and henceforth several biblical commentators, including Ibn Ezra, deliberated on why the words used to describe the camel and the hyrax, mentioned together with the hare as impure animals, appear in the male form while the hare appears in the female form (Leviticus 11.6, Deuteronomy 14.7). It seems that the commentators did not perceive this merely as a

grammatical issue, rather understood that it derives from a special quality of the hare.

R. David ben Yosef Kimchi (Radak, France 1165-1230) a biblical commentator, philosopher, and grammarian, associates the female form of the hare's name with the body of the male, which is similar to that of the female. He writes: "And when [the scriptures] say 'hare' (*arnevet*) they say [i.e., mean] that the male does not show its male organ and the males are similar to females" [16]. It was clear to Radak that there are both male and female hares, but the male hares resemble females due to their sex organs, which are not visible, and for this reason the hare is mentioned in the Bible in the female form.

In general, the male and female are similar and have no sexual dimorphism. In some species the females are indeed larger and have 3-5 pairs of nipples, but the size of the body and the nipples are not conspicuous [17]. The difficulty of distinguishing between males and females has another underlying reason as well. Most hare species are solitary by nature (aside from encounters for purposes of courtship and procreation) and only one species is sociable [17, p. 91-92]. Most of the species are active at night and hide during the day in niches and under shrubs, such that they are not easily observed [17, p. 91]. Interestingly, in medieval art as well the sexes are portrayed as fairly identical with no differences, and as stated, it is indeed hard to distinguish between them based on sexual features.

Mystical explanations have also been proposed for using the female form of the word for hare. The cabbalist R. Chaim Ben Atar (Morocco and Jerusalem 1696-1743), one of the famous Pentateuch's commentators in the recent centuries claimed that according to the Bible eating impure animals renders one impure, but there is a difference between eating female and male animals. He writes: "And the hare. The reason for using the female form is that in matters of impurity sometimes the female surpasses the male and the male is subordinate to the female." [18] Namely, the impurity caused by eating a female hare is graver than that caused by eating a male.

R. Chaim Ben Atar does not explain the source of his contention. It may originate from the human manifestation of this principle in biblical law. For example, in the biblical laws of purity and impurity, female impurity is considered more serious than male impurity. While male impurity associated with the body, for example ejaculation, results in one day of impurity, a woman's impurity during her menstrual cycle (*niddah*) lasts seven days and results in more severe restrictions, including a strict prohibition against sexual relations (Leviticus 15.19-33, 18.19, 20.18).

### ***3.3. Ibn Ezra's interpretation – the unique sexuality of the hare***

According to Ibn Ezra, use of the female form to designate the hare is based on a zoological view that stems from contemporary science. He writes: "And it is the way of the holy tongue to mention the male of each species because the female is included among the males. And [the scriptures] mentioned the *arnevet* (hare) – some say: as no male is to be found. And some say: that the male

becomes a female, and the opposite [is true] and the first one is close to me.” [5, p. 30] Namely, normally when the Bible mentions animals it uses the male form, considered the dominant of the sexes. The hare is outstanding in this respect, and Ibn Ezra suggests two options for explaining this. One, the hare has only a female species. Second, the hare is an animal that changes its sex from male to female and vice versa, so it is impossible to clearly characterize it as a male. Moreover, although it is an androgynous creature the Bible uses the female form in order to note the fact that the hare is a special case.

Ibn Ezra prefers the possibility that the hare has only a female sexual form, a presumption that we now know to be baseless, but he does not explain the source of this conjecture. This zoological view appears further on, in his interpretation of the term *bat ha-ya'ana*, another case in which the female form is used. He writes: “*Bat ha-ya'ana* (ostrich) – some say: that it is a species in which no males are to be found, similar to the hare” [5, p. 31]. Hence, according to Ibn Ezra, the phenomenon of animals that appear in nature exclusively as a female species exists among the mammals (the hare) as well as among the fowls (ostrich). Notably, some embraced Ibn Ezra's interpretation, for example the biblical commentator R. Hizkiya ben Manoach Hizkuni who lived in northern France in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, who quotes Ibn Ezra, although without mentioning his name [19].

The question is: from where did Ibn Ezra derive his zoological views concerning the hare?

### ***3.4. The scientific foundations of Ibn Ezra's interpretation in classical literature and medieval sources***

In classical literature, the hare is described as an animal that is very fertile and that runs fast [20, 21]. The view of the hare as differing from other animals sexually is first mentioned in the works of Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE). In his ‘Natural History’ he notes, citing the Greek philosopher Archelaus (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE), that each individual hare has features of both sexes, male and female, and therefore the hare becomes impregnated without mating with a male. He writes: “He [Archelaus] says also, that the same individual possesses the characteristics of the two sexes, and that it becomes pregnant just as well without the aid of the male” [22]. According to Pliny's approach, hares have male reproductive organs and thus are able to impregnate themselves. In contrast, in the first approach presented by Ibn Ezra whereby hares are always female, it is not clear how the female becomes impregnated without a male.

The belief concerning the existence of androgynous creatures originates from Greek mythology, such as the figure of Hermaphroditos (Ἑρμαφρόδιτος) the son of Aphrodite and Hermes, who was portrayed as a female figure with male genitals [23-25]. Animals equipped with both female and male reproductive organs are called hermaphrodites. This is a well-known natural phenomenon and it exists, for instance, among snails and earthworms, but not among hares [17, vol. II: *Terrestrial Invertebrates*, 125].

The view that hares are capable of changing their sex is mentioned in the bestiary literature beginning from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, quite a few years after Ibn Ezra's time, but it is clear that this reflects his era as well [26]. A passage that appears in several versions of the bestiaries describes some qualities of hares, including the irregular nature of their sex: "The Hare is called 'lepus' as it is 'levipes' or light-footed, that is, it runs quickly, and so in Greek it is called 'lagos' on account of its speed. It is a swift animal and also timorous. Some affirm that the hare's nature is such that sometimes it is male, and sometimes female. To this animal inconstant people are likened, who being dissolute, as they are neither man nor woman, that is, neither faithful nor treacherous nor cold nor hot, are without doubt those of whom Solomon said: a doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways." [Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 254 fol. 22v; Cambridge, University Library, MS KK 4 25 fol. 74v; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 88 (II) fol. 94v; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS e Musaeo 136 fol. 26r; London, Westminster Abbey, MS 22 fol. 27v.]

The hare's transformation of its sex is not only portrayed as an unusual natural phenomenon rather it is also utilized in medieval European culture as a symbol for unstable people. The hare symbolizes people who do not behave according to clear codes regarding gender (man versus woman), human ethics (loyalty versus disloyalty), or distinct qualities from the domain of health and human temperament ('hot' and 'cold') as customary in the doctrine of the four temperaments (Humoralism) utilized in medieval medicine. According to this doctrine, there are four elements, four personality types, and four humors, which reflect one's temperament and influence one's health [27]. It is important to note that the passage links the "people of the hare" to a saying by King Solomon, who complains of the contemptible course and quality of devious people (Proverbs 21.8). The quote in this passage, however, is taken from the Book of James 1.8 (KJV version).

Ilya Dines [26, p. 75] stresses that the first two sentences are taken from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* [7<sup>th</sup> century CE] [28], while the latter ones are from the *Physiologus* and bestiaries devoted to the hyena [29]. The view whereby the hyena switches its sex from male to female is mentioned as early as the ancient period, and even in Jewish sources [30]. It seems, however, that there is no certain evidence a tradition that was copied from the hyena to the hare. Ilya Dines does not explain how this feature was transferred from the hyena to the hare, but rather as stated it was a phenomenon ascribed to various animals, each for a different reason. In the case of the hyena, this is because the female has a long clitoris that looks like a male sex organ, while concerning the hares it is because the sex organs of the two sexes are not visible, including the male's prominent sex organ [30].

The claim that the hare is at times male and at times female, mentioned in the passage, is compatible with that presented by Ibn Ezra, whereby the hare can change its sex from male to female. As stated, however, Ibn Ezra preferred the approach whereby hares are exclusively female.

## 4. Conclusions

The view that the hare is a hermaphrodite, i.e., has both male and female features, was voiced in the classical period. In the medieval period additional views were evident with regard to the sexual uniqueness of the hare. According to the bestiary literature, the hare is an animal capable of changing its sex, i.e., sometimes it is male and sometimes female. Ibn Ezra, a well-known biblical commentator, mentions this phenomenon, side by side with another whereby there are only female hares. Ibn Ezra supported the outlook claiming there are no male hares, but did not deal with the question of how the hare procreates. He may have thought that hare reproduction does not require males or shared the opinion that although the female hare has in its body certain male qualities it should be considered female. As we suggested above, this pseudo-scientific view may originate from the fact that the male's sex organs are not prominent. The suggestion that the concept of the hare's transformed sex originates from the hyena and was transferred to the hare does not seem reasonable to us, although in the ancient world both were considered unusual animals, for different reasons.

Ibn Ezra utilizes the zoological conceptions common in his time to explain why the bible uses the female rather than the male form when speaking of the hare. He also enlists the scientific world of his era to show that the Bible's orders and its contents are compatible with common scientific knowledge. In other interpretations proposed by Ibn Ezra he describes animal qualities based on the zoological worldview of his era (see Ibn Ezra's commentary to Psalms 42:2 [31]) and this topic deserves more extensive research attention.

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