

**A Hebrew Lament
from Venetian Crete
on the Fall of Constantinople**

**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 is made captive
Along with the 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 bond 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.
 And 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 goes 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.
 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 form nor comeliness.

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

Therefore I said – 'Look away from me
 For I shall weep bitterly,
 Labour 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 my loins are filled with pain.

He has trodden under foot all the men
In my midst,
For it is a day of trouble and of treading down and of perplexity.
Who has given Israel up to the robbers?—
Whose height is like the height of cedars,
A great eagle, with great wings, long-winded,
Full of feathers of many colours.

Riphat 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 murder.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The fall of Constantinople in May 1453 was lamented in many tongues, among them Greek, Armenian, Latin, Italian, and Hebrew. The one extant Hebrew lament is the only contemporary record in Byzantine Jewish literature of that great tragedy of Eastern Christendom. Written in Venetian-ruled Crete after the news of Constantinople's capture had reached the island, the 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 Greek Orthodox ruled and the largely Catholic rulers. In 1450 an important Venetian official, Ludovico Foscarini, dedicated himself to a *perpetuum bellum* against the island's Jews, while in March 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 Greek priest. But beyond this local turbulence, many Jews of the period and

the region must have seen Constantinople, the successor of Rome, as the heir of Edom, a city whose fall, in spite of the suffering incumbent upon its large Jewish community, might usher in the redemption of their coreligionists. The web of feeling behind this Hebrew document lamenting the Greek city's capture and destruction is therefore intriguing and complex.

The lament ('Qinah' in Hebrew) was written by the Candiot Michael ben Shabbetai Cohen Balbo (1420–?1484) and is made up of a pastiche of scripture drawn largely from Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations using a compositional technique known as 'Shebusi'. The resulting patchwork of biblical quotation (curiously evocative of a 'modernist' poetics) tells its story by means of ellipsis and allusion. For example, 'Between Migdol and the sea' is a reference to the town or tower (*migdol*) where the Jews fleeing Egypt camped before their notorious crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:2). 'And Bela died' comes from Chronicles (2:16) and equates Constantinople, the central city of Byzantine Christendom, with Bela, the first king of the Gentiles and the first city of Edom. So too 'Riphat and Togarmah' (Genesis 10:3), grandsons of Noah, must here represent respectively the tribe of the Riphaeans (the ancient Paphlagonians) and the Armenian (*toka-arma*) people. Unremitting meanwhile, though at times unspoken, is the poet's insistence on the unswayable hand of God behind Constantinople's demise. 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: 'Did not the Lord?' (Isaiah 42:24). A careful reading might reveal more of the strange pity that is not spelled out in the words of this lament but is nevertheless conveyed.

For a wider discussion of this poem and 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 *Hebrew Poetry of Crete* (Cincinnati 1985).