Review of Yitzhak Avishur, ed A medieval translation of the Later Prophets into Iraqi and Syrian Judaeo-Arabic, Book I: Isaiah and Jeremia
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Shlomoh Morag, the scholar says that his series will now be enriched by a manuscript with an Arabic translation which dates from 1354 CE made by Mordechay ha-Dayyan bar 'Uzziel in Mardin in Northern Iraq (now in southern Turkey or western Kurdistan). The manuscript contains a long foreword and some parallels with Saadya Gaon (d. 942).

Avishur first describes the manuscript and discusses the Judaeo-Arabic translations of the Former Prophets in general. For example, he compares the translation which he calls the Mardin Translation of the Former Prophets with Saadya's translations by asking himself whether Saadya translated the Former Prophets, and by discussing a) the translation of Judges 5 attributed to Saadya and the Mardin translation of the Former Prophets; b) a translation of two haftarot from the Book of Kings (I Kings 1: 1-31 and II Kings 4: 1-37) and the Mardin translation of the Former Prophets; c) Saadya's translation of Isaiah 36-39 and the Mardin translation of II Kings; and d) Saadya's translation of Psalms 18 and the Mardin translation of II Samuel 22. However, it seems that none of the known Arabic fragments or citations from the Former Prophets attributed to Saadya have anything in common with the present Mardin translation.

In introductory Chapter 4, Avishur discusses the characteristics of the translation of the Former Prophets by a) establishing the possible link with Jonathan's translation into Aramaic; b) establishing the link with alternative translations; c) investigating whether the translation contains interpretation; d) looking at the original features of the translation; and e) looking at inconsistencies.

In the fifth introductory chapter, Avishur discusses the language of the translation and deals with the nature of the mediæval Judæo-Arabic language; he also discusses the possible influence of Saadya's translations on the Mardin translation, based on a scrutiny of the translation of specific terms, of the translation of Hebrew words by words of similar roots, and of Persian, Hebrew and Aramaic words in the translation. But the influence of Saadya Gaon on the Mardin translation is difficult to trace, and the Mardin translation shows many original characteristics of its own such as the rendering of one Hebrew word with different Arabic words and his interpretative expansions introduced by the expression ya'ni (“that is to say”).

Then follows the translation of the text (Joshua: pp. 53-88; Judges: pp. 89-124; Samuel: pp. 125-210; Kings: 211-298; and notes to the foregoing books: pp. 299-334), and finally the list with the biographical abbreviations (pp. 335-342).

One wonders why in a time of increasing interest in the Qaraite linguistic literature and Qaraite translations of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic and Qaraite grammatical comments — which led to important publications by Haggai Ben-Shammai, Meirah Polliack and Geoffry Khan — no attempt is made by Avishur to compare the translations of the Mardin manuscript with similar translations made by the Qaraites, of which Yefet ibn 'Eli (d. 1005) is the most important representative. Finally, I should like to mention that the language of the translation — Arabic written in Hebrew letters, and therefore called Judæo-Arabic — is very close to or identical with literary or Classical Arabic.

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In the preface, Avishur states that this partial manuscript edition of the translation of the Latter Prophets into Arabic (Huntington 206; Bodleiana) is a part of the nearly complete translation made in Baghdad and copied there in 1196. It is a kind of follow-up to Avishur’s publication of the Mardin manuscript (Pocock 349; Bodleiana) containing the translation into Arabic of the Former Prophets.

The Huntington 206 manuscript has 298 leaflets, comprising Isaiah from 1a-83a, Jeremiah from 83a-172a, Ezekiel from 173a-238b, and the twelve Minor Prophets (in Aramaic, tere 'asar) from 238b-298b. Nineteen leaflets are written in a different hand, completed by a much later copyist. As we know, this edition covers only Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Here and there in the manuscript are dates, such as at the beginning: 'I start to write the sharh of the Latter Prophets etc. in the year 5340' (i.e. 1580). It seems, as Avishur implies, that the date at the beginning of the manuscript (1580) refers only to the date when the copying took place by the copyist of the last failing passages. After the translation of Jeremiah is written: 'the completion of this blessed text coincides with 16 Ab of the year 4957 (1197)'. A date very near to that is found at the end of the translation of Ezekiel, namely: 'The completion of it was the night [before] Wednesday, namely the night of Hoshana Rabba, 21 Tishri, 7th day Sukkoth'.

In his introduction, Avishur goes into the background of the Judaeo-Arabic translations of the Latter Prophets, describes the manuscript and concludes that it is not an original but a copy. This opinion is based on the fact that there are many mistakes in the manuscript, and that the translation of complete verses fails and apparently are omitted by oversight. Also the fact that the copyist uses the word nuskha ('copy') leads to this conviction. The other copyist involved in this codex has 19 leaflets: his handwriting is very unclear, while the other copyist was very readable. His language is more outspokenly dialectal and is reminiscent of the language of Syria and Baghdad. Avishur considers all the translations to be by the same hand, and lists grammatical and lexical particularities under one heading.

Avishur asks himself whether or not Saadya Gaon (d. 942) translated the Latter Prophets and individuates terms used by Saadya in the present translation, referring to Saadya's commentaries and their relation to the Latter Prophets, and the identification of place names.

According to the editor, the influence of Saadya can be seen in the translation of Hebrew roots by Arabic words of similar roots; by the Persian words in the translation, by the Hebrew and Aramaic words in the translation, and by the use of rare words in Saadya's translation and the present

1) Schlossberg (Pe'amim 83, pp. 154 ff.) asks why Avishur did not spot the discrepancy between the dates indicating 1196. Jeremiah was completed in Ab, and Ezekiel was completed in Tishri 1196, while Tishri is normally the first month of the year. The reason may be that the beginning of the year at the time was Nisan, so that until Nisan everything is still 1196, not yet 1197. (To me, the meaning of 'minyan ha-shetaroth' is unclear. Does it mean different counting of the seasons? A.S.)
translation, the interchange of letters and the vocabulary. He discusses some of the characteristic features in the translation of the Latter Prophets such as interpretation and grammar, alternative translations, and people and periods in the translation. Moreover, he tries to determine the translation's relationship to Targum Yonathan. In the introduction, Avishur talks at length about the identity of the author of the translation and his whereabouts. Having failed to see a possibility to identify the person, he goes on to individuate the place. The way the author translated the names of the towns of Iraq shows that he was an Iraqi from Baghdad or Basra, the use of Persian words is also frequent in Iraqi dialects. These features added to the Syrian dialecticisms lead him to believe that the translator was from an Iraqi family residing in Syria.

After the text of the translations of Isaiah (pp. 45-114) and Jeremiah (pp. 115-190) into Arabic, with notes added to Isaiah (pp. 191-222) and Jeremiah (pp. 223-236), the editor ends with a list of bibliographical abbreviations (pp. 237-241). According to Schlossberg (see Pe'amim 83), Avishur did not take into consideration that the translations are a reworking of the Qaraite translator Yefet ibn 'Ali (‘Eli), the greatest interpreter of the Bible of the Qaraite in the Middle Ages. The Huntington manuscript on which the work is based has been known in academic circles for more than 300 years, but scholars have been more interested in the twelve Minor Prophets than in the other parts. However, those scholars did not identify the author: some thought it was Saadya Gaon, while others thought it was not written by him, but influenced by or based on him.

Paltiel Birnbaum was the first to attribute the twelve Minor Prophets to Yefet ibn ‘Ali. He edited the long commentary by Yefet on Hosea. In his foreword he analyses the likeness between the commentary in question and our present Huntington 206 manuscript and concludes that it must be by Yefet. 1) Schlossberg agrees with Birnbaum because comparisons of our manuscript with the recently edited Nahum and Habbaq (by Livneh-Kari) prove that they are clearly those of Yefet, with all the changes due to time.

2) This supposition can be based upon the edition of Isaiah 47 which Haggai ben-Shammai made for a study on differences of translation in the work of Yefet ibn ‘Ali. Ben-Shammai compares the text of the manuscript Huntington 60b with the text of three other manuscripts namely British Library Or. 2548 (112a-118a), and London Or. 2502 (37b-43b) and Petersbourg Yevr. I: 569 (165a-172a).

3) Compare e.g. Jeremiah 2 Huntington with BM Or. 2549 (11th Century) written in Arabic letters which is the oldest remaining comment by Yefet on Jeremiah. Sometimes in Huntington Ms there is a concession made for the vernacular, where it says ‘esh al-hajah bik’ instead of the classical ‘ma lak’. In other verses of the Huntington manuscript parts of the commentary are added, comprising identifications of places and rivers, etc. concludes that Huntington must be one of the early reworkings of the translations of the Prophets by Yefet. Avishur indviduated the author of the translations as someone from Iraq residing in Syria, but did not want to conclude that the author could be identified with the important Qaraite translator Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan ibn ‘Ali al-Basri alias Yefet ibn ‘Eli (Hasan=Yefet, “beautiful”) who came from Iraq and lived in Jerusalem, where he died ca. 1000. However, comparisons between the twelve Prophets as represented in Huntington 206, reveal that there are in the British Library manuscripts of Qaraite translations ascribed to Yefet, which are textually almost identical to the ones in Huntington 206. 5)

A final remark about the so-called Judaeo-Arabic language of the published text: it is very close to literary Arabic and hardly dialectal. This is a feature the text shares with Saadya Gaon’s translations. It is certainly not Middle Arabic, which should be a mixture of the vernaculars and the Classical language. The situation in this manuscript is quite the opposite of the later shurtih genres in Morocco, which are totally in vernacular and exhibit no knowledge at all of written Arabic. Concluding, I should like to thank Avishur for making all this material accessible and hope that he will publish the remaining texts, in order to provide us with more insight into the nature of the Arabic of the Jews which was a tool for them to make the Hebrew Bible comprehensible.

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5) Kees de Vreugd (Faculty of Mathematics, University of Amsterdam) is working on one of these texts of the twelve Minor Prophets.