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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Citation for published version (APA):

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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 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 Arabic; 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 Judaeo-Arabic language; he also discusses the possible influence of Saadya’s translations on the Mardin translation, based on a scrutiny of the translations 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 Hagai Ben-Shammai, Meirah Pollack and Geoffry Khan—no attempt is made by Avishur to compare the translations of the Mardin manuscript with similar translations made by the Qaraite, of which Ye’efet 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 Judaeo-Arabic—is very close to or identical with literary or Classical Arabic.

Amsterdam, December 2000

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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, Ezechiel 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 Ezechiel, 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 nuskhah (‘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 dialects 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 Ezechiel 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 individualize 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 dialectics leads 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 Qaraites 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 Birnebaum 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 Yefet.5)

It can now also be explained that the first three translations of the Huntington manuscript (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezechiel) are the fruit of the pen of Yefet. Perhaps the translator also used non-Qaraite translations.

The bibliographer of the writings of Yefet, Giuliano Tamani, unhesitatingly classifies the translation of the Latter Prophets between the translations of Yefet. Comparisons with the Huntington Isaiah and other Yefet Isaiah manuscripts reveal that what we have here is a reworking of the Isaiah by Yefet. There seems to be no doubt that the Huntington manuscript belongs to Yefet. However, the text is far from the original, because the copyist made a reworking on his own and changed the text in a number of places.6) Schlossberg concludes that Huntington must be one of the early reworkings of the translations of the Prophets by Yefet. Avishur individuated 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 206.3)

A final remark about the so-called Judaean-Arabic language of the published text: it is very close to literary Arabic and hardly dialectical. 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.

Amsterdam, December 2000

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Álvaro Galmés de Fuentes, professor emeritus of the Universidad Complutense of Madrid, has been for years the most important founder of this field of study, namely the Spanish-Arabic literature in Arabic script written by the Moriscos, the Muslims who remained in Spain after the Reconquest. This Spanish literature in Arabic is, as we know, called “Aljamiado” literature. A few of these Aljamiado manuscripts are to be found in the collection of 58 manuscripts, some of them fragmentary, made by Pascual de Gayangos (1809-1897) and endowed to the Spanish Royal Academy of History.

The manuscripts described in this collection concern topics ranging from poems to history, legends, novellas and religious literature. The author decided to catalogue the manuscripts because the index by Edmundo Saezeda is merely a list which did not merit the title of catalogue. The thematic classification of the manuscripts, however, is difficult, since there are many codices which are miscellaneous or comprise various materials. But the author has made a uniform system for describing the codices, following a sequence in which he gives the name of the author or declares the work anonymous.

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