review of Yitzhak Avishur, The Oldest Translation of the Early Prophets into Judaeo-Arabic, The text of Bodleian Manuscript
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impediments to marriage are established. In this context, jurists have argued about the number of sucks, the ways of transmittance, or the age of the suckling as relevant criteria. This unique extension of kinship in Islam, at least compared to Judaism and Christianity, has had a remarkable social impact and significance. It has been practiced to broaden the network of relatives on whom one could rely for assistance and cooperation and with whom women could have free and open social contact, while it also encouraged exogamous ties beyond the boundaries of the own patrilineal and patrilocal extended families. The author could also have referred here to the scattered notes in the anthropological literature on the political and economic use of breastmilk, for instance some Berber tribes in Morocco have used it to establish pacts, while elsewhere it was used to establish trade relations.

Of particular interest is Giladi’s analysis of the discussion on milk banks, which illustrates how Medieval Islamic views on breastfeeding continue to play a role in present times. In milk banks as set up in some Western countries since the 1940’s, human milk is pooled to make its nutritional and immunogenic properties of full use to babies who are premature, have low birth-weight or suffer from malabsorption or feeding intolerance. Although milk banks play only a very marginal role in Western countries and do not exist in Islamic countries, the idea behind them is passionately discussed by Muslims because such sharing of human milk from unknown origins is particularly problematic from an Islamic point of view. Giladi includes the full texts in Arabic of an article by ‘Abdallah Mabruk al-Najjar, a teacher of Islamic law at al-Azhar University in Cairo, and a book-chapter by two Sa’udis doctors, Zuhayr Ahmad al-Siba’i and Muhammad ‘Ali al-Bâr on this issue. Both the physicians and the scholar of law reject the milk bank because it threatens the legitimacy of future marital relationships between nurslings fed through milk banks. I would like to add here that knowledge about the Islamic notion of milk kinship and the resulting objection against milk banks is of relevance for medical personnel working with milk banks in multi-cultural and multi-religious hospital settings.

Medieval medical views on breastfeeding were largely in agreement with religious views in their recommendation of maternal breastfeeding up to two years and their recognition that maternal milk had nutritive and immunogenic value (stated by Ibn Sinâ in terms of “repelling harms” p. 51) and was important for the well-being and health of both the infant and its mother. Wet nursing was seen as an acceptable alternative, animal milk was not. Less unanimously shared notions were that pregnancy could harm a woman’s milk and that the nurse’s milk influenced the nursing’s character traits. There was but one medical advice which was detrimental to the infant in terms of present day medical knowledge: that a newborn baby should not be breastfed the first two or three days. Such a practice deprived the nursing of the highly nutritional and protective colostrum.

Galén’s idea that women who are nursing babies should abstain from sexual intercourse because this could spoil or diminish the milk was taken over by Muslim physicians. Religious scholars were more ambivalent towards this issue, and neither group seems to have been successful in convincing couples to practice abstention for as long as the mother was lactating. It conflicted with what males considered as their basic marital right, especially for men from the lower strata who could not afford polygamy or female slaves. A similar post-partum taboo on sexual intercourse had supported the widespread European practice of mercenary wet nursing. That mercenary wet nursing never became so widespread in the Islamic world as in Europe, is attributed by Giladi to the ambivalent religious stance on abstinence and to the sexual outlets provided to young fathers by polygamy and slavery (p. 119). But because second wives and slaves were only available to a very limited elite group of men, I would rather argue that the “cult of the mother” (p. 96) and especially the kinship effects of wet nursing were the more important explanations for this difference. Current anthropological research not only shows a general awareness and occasional strategic use of milk kinship relations, but also a recurrent hesitation or even aversion to use strange wet nurses, as also the discussion on milk banks confirms. The fear of loosing track of one’s kin ties and the possibility of unwittingly committing incest looms large. By taking account of this deeply felt fear for incest we can also better understand why jurists have such hair-splitting discussions on whether suckling from a dead woman, a virgin, or an animal, leads to prohibitions of marriage, or why local people can spend hours in discussing who is allowed to marry whom. Another reason for the aversion to wet nursing lies in the distrust of women, because men fear that women may use it for their own purposes against the interests of the husband or his patrilineage, for instance to prevent a patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage, to enlarge their network beyond the circle of in-laws, or to socialize with strange men.

This is a truly fascinating book, especially for specialists in Islamic family law or scholars researching Islamic childhood or family relations. It is also important for historians, anthropologists and other readers who want to know more about the various meanings and social consequences of breastfeeding or about the intricacies of kinship in non-European cultures. It is a fine piece of research, well written, and an excellent sequel to the author’s Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society (1992). The specialists will appreciate the inclusion of transcribed Arabic terms and citations in the text, and the glossary of Arabic terms designating child feeding based on Ibn Sîda’s al-kitâb al-mukhassas in Arabic and English. Unfortunately, the non-Arabic speaking reader is at times left puzzling because some Arabic terms and citations have remained untranslated, and it is not systematically indicated when they have been paraphrased or summarized elsewhere in the text. The high price set by Brill Publishers may be an impediment to buying this book, which is very much worth reading.

University of Nijmegen, January 2001

Willy Jansen


This book is devoted to a manuscript containing the Arabic translation of the Former Prophets, that is, the biblical books Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. In the preface by
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 Judeo-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 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 medi­eval 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 Haghai 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 repre­sentant. 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

Arie SCHIPPERS


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’.1)

In his introduction Avishur goes into the background of the Judeo-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 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 comments 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.)