

MS Uppsala O Nova 791 – a rediscovered manuscript of the Arabic translation of and commentary on the Song of Songs by Japheth ben Eli

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the translation and commentary on the Song of Songs by the Karaite Japheth ben Eli (died *ca* 1005). The point of departure is the manuscript Uppsala O Nova 791, which was used by Paul Achilles Jung, the father of Carl Gustav Jung, as the basis for his dissertation in 1867 and later acquired by Uppsala University Library in 1982.²

Keywords: Japheth ben Eli, Karaites, medieval Arabic Bible translations

In 1867 Paul Achilles Jung (1842-1896) published his dissertation *Ueber des Karäers Jepheth arabische Erklärung des Hohenliedes* in Göttingen.³ Jung based his edition on a manuscript that was at the time in the possession of Heinrich Ewald (1803-1875), professor of Oriental languages in Göttingen, but since 1982 the manuscript has been at the Library of the University of Uppsala Carolina Rediviva. It is a dissertation typical of the period: a short introduction on the Karaites and on Japheth ben Eli and his commentary followed by the edition, in Arabic script, of chapter 1:2-15 and a translation into German of chapter 1:2-6. It is one of the first editions ever of any of Japheth ben Eli's works, only preceded by the publication by Jean Joseph Bargès of excerpts of his commentary on the Psalms in 1846, the edition by Bargès of his translation of the Psalms in 1861, and the edition of the commentary on chapter 30 of Proverbs by Zachariah Auerbach in 1866.⁴

The editor Paul Jung was a pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church in Basel and is today mostly remembered as the father of Carl Gustav Jung.⁵ For Jung, the commentaries by Japheth ben Eli were important from two points of view: first of

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³ Paul Achilles Jung 1867.

⁴ Jean Joseph Bargès 1846, Jean Joseph Bargès 1861, Zacharias Auerbach 1866.

⁵ For discussions of possible implications of the dissertation of Paul Achilles Jung for the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung, see Battye 1994: 169-170, and Ryce-Menuhin 1994. Whatever such implications, it is well known that the Song of Songs was of great importance for Carl Gustav Jung and his psychology.

all to understand Karaite exegesis, but also to enhance knowledge of the views of Saadia Gaon, whom Japheth ben Eli is said to have quoted in his commentaries. And, according to Jung, his commentaries are all the more important as a Rabbinic commentator like Ibn Ezra (died 1167 in England) quoted him by name in his commentary on Exodus.⁶

The Karaites

The Karaites, *qarā'im* or *bānē miqrā'*, represent Judaism's oldest surviving sect. They derive their name from the Hebrew word for Scripture and their identity from their scripturalist interpretation. Denying the authority of Rabbinic tradition and the Talmud, they emerged in Iraq of the 8th century, and they were perceived as a deadly enemy to normative Judaism in the Islamic East until at least the 12th century. In the 12th century, Byzantium became their new centre, and from there groups settled in the Crimea. Although originally Arabic-speaking, they adopted the languages of their host-countries, and so there emerged a Turkic-language speaking group, *Karaim*. A tiny remnant community of Karaim still lives in Lithuania while the Arabic-speaking Karaites who once lived in Egypt now have settled in Israel.⁷

In the second half of the 10th century, Jerusalem emerged as their spiritual and intellectual centre when several Karaites moved from Iraq to Jerusalem. Calling themselves *āvēlē Šiyyōn*, "Mourners for Zion,"⁸ *maškilīm*, "teachers,"⁹ *shā'erīt Yiśrā'ēl*, "the remnant of Israel," *tāmīmē derekh*, "the Perfect of Way," and *shōshānīm*, "lilies,"¹⁰ they moved to Jerusalem as they were convinced that they were living in the End of Days and were eager to await the imminent advent of the Messiah there. But the Messiah did not come and, instead, the Karaites in Jerusalem were massacred when the city was conquered by the Crusaders in 1099.¹¹

In Jerusalem, the Mourners for Zion produced a large body of Judeo-Arabic literature, including translations of Scripture, commentaries, codes, and grammatical works, in order to encourage their co-sectarians and persuade their Jewish opponents. The Bible commentaries are complex and multi-layered, embodying prefaces, complete Arabic translations of the Biblical text, verse-by-

⁶ Paul Achilles Jung 1867: 6.

⁷ Polliack (ed.) 2003 provides an excellent summary of the history of the Karaites and for the state of current research.

⁸ From Is. 61:3.

⁹ Ps 74:1.

¹⁰ Song of Songs, and the headings of Psalms 44, 69, 80.

¹¹ Frank 2004: 1-32 (for a sketch of the medieval history of the Karaites), Gil, 1992: 777-837 (for the history of the Karaites in Jerusalem).

verse explications, and excursuses on a variety of topics. The surrounding Islamic environment and Arabic culture naturally provided the models for them, but these models were fused with Jewish literary tradition. The Karaites were not the first ones to introduce these genres into Jewish literature: the translations and commentaries by Saadiah Gaon (died 942) – an ardent defender of Rabbinic tradition and a staunch opponent of the Karaites – predate the works of the Jerusalem Karaites by half a century. But while Saadiah Gaon's *oeuvre* in these genres seems to be partly lost, substantial parts of the Karaite corpus have survived in manuscripts, awaiting publication and analysis.

A palaeographic peculiarity among the Jerusalem Karaites is the occasional use of Arabic script, not only writing Arabic but also Hebrew. As is well-known, Jews generally prefer using Hebrew script, not only for writing Hebrew and Aramaic, but also other languages including Arabic. Further, there are several Hebrew and Aramaic loan-words in these languages creating a cluster of Jewish varieties of different languages. There is a substantial corpus of Arabic script manuscripts of Karaite provenance, above all in the Firkovitch collections in the Russian State Library in St Petersburg, which remains to be explored. However, the preference of Arabic script among the Jerusalem Karaites has not yet been satisfactorily explained, nor is it clear why they seem to have abandoned the script around 1100. After that date, texts were transliterated into Hebrew script, which, by now, is how they are most commonly transmitted.¹²

Japheth ben Eli and his translation and commentary of the Song of Songs

Japheth ben Eli (Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī al-Lāwī al-Baṣrī) belonged to the Mourners for Zion. He was active ca. 960-1005, and he seems to have been the first Jew to translate and write commentaries on all books of the Jewish Bible. Most of his *oeuvre* has survived – a search in the database of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts (IMHM) in Jerusalem gives more than 800 hits.

The Song of Songs has always posed problems for Jews and Christians alike.¹³ Its assumed Solomonic authorship assured it a place in the canon, but its overt eroticism has posed several problems in interpreting it. Jews early discovered a parable for the historical relationship between God and Israel, but

¹² The best discussions of the use of Arabic script among the Karaites remain Khan 1992, and Khan 1993. The transformation of Karaite texts when transliterated into Hebrew script is discussed in Wechsler 2002 and Wechsler 2003.

¹³ The medieval Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs is discussed in Matter 1990. The only comprehensive discussion of the medieval Jewish interpretation is, to the best of my knowledge, Salfeld 1879 (non vidi), but time is no doubt ripe for new discussions.

interpretation was still required. The traditional Rabbinic interpretation understood the Song as an allegory of the history of Israel from the exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai, via the conquest of Canaan, the building of the Solomonic temple and its destruction, to the rebellion of the Macabees and the rule of the Sanhedrin. The final two chapters they understood as a prophecy of the advent of the Messiah in a distant and unknown future. This interpretation can already be seen in the Targum, and it remained the dominant Rabbinic interpretation throughout the centuries.

For the Mourners for Zion and thus for Japheth ben Eli, the Song of Songs was central. Japheth ben Eli's introduction to the Song centres on its first verse. He begins with a survey of the Solomonic corpus, its generic classification, and the modes in which it was revealed. After that, he takes up the Song itself starting with a tripartite classification of *shīr*, "song". The first category consists of the exoteric songs, exemplified by Ex 15:1-19, Deut 32:1-52, Jud 5:1-31, and the psalms which have the heading *shīr*. Then follow songs that are parables with their own interpretative keys, exemplified by Is 5:1-7. The third and final category is the esoteric songs. It is in this third category that Japheth ben Eli places the Song. Not a word of it should be taken exoterically; rather, it should be interpreted as condensed speech, rich in meaning, and be understood only through the prophetic books. According to Japheth ben Eli, it was composed as a parable in response to the prophecies of Ezekiel, in which the relationship between a man and a woman is depicted negatively, and the people's abandonment of God is deplored. In the Song, by contrast, the people's return to God is celebrated through the female-male relationship. As for the Song's Solomonic authorship, Japheth ben Eli stresses emphatically that the text is not autobiographical but prophetic. Solomon recited it, we are told, with reference to the community of Israel and their leaders, the Perfect of Way, i.e. the Karaites, and the Messiah. Of all the Prophets, God revealed the Song to Solomon, because his reign was the most glorious in Jewish history, only to be surpassed by the Messianic period, of which the Song prophesizes.¹⁴

In his commentary on 1:2, Japheth ben Eli writes:

This song contains four types [of discourse]: (1) the address of the congregation of Maškilim to the Lord, describing His deeds and beneficence to their ancestors and them, and beseeching Him to fulfil His promises; (2) the complaint of the daughters of Jerusalem concerning their condition, their rehearsal of God's deeds as a stimulus to serve Him, and their request that He fulfil His promises; (3) the words of the people to each other concerning their affairs, e.g. the passage "We

¹⁴ Japheth ben Eli on Song of Songs 1:1. See also Frank 2004:155.

have a little sister” (8:8); and (4) the Creator’s response to the Maškilīm concerning their petition and desire as well as an account of their excellence and beauty when they serve Him, and their ranks, as we will explain in every section.

As in the Rabbinic interpretation, Japheth ben Eli has thus discovered a parable for the historical relationship between God and Israel – but from the standpoint of the Mourners for Zion. Hence, its distinctive focus on the End of Days, which is identified with the present. Emblematic appellations are furthermore isolated and explained in detail. To this is added a vigorous polemic against Islam, which is identified with the fourth kingdom in the book of Daniel, and an ardent stance against their Rabbinic opponents.¹⁵

MS Uppsala O Nova 791 and its history

The MS which forms the basis of Jung’s edition and which is now kept in Uppsala, consists of 169 folios, 19 x 13, 9 cm and is written in Hebrew script, i.e. it represents the text as a transliteration from Arabic into Hebrew script. The manuscript is not complete: the first folio is missing, and it is not dated. This means that a possible title page is missing. Today, the binding is loose. As for date and provenance, the ligature *alef* and *lamed* indicates Syria and Palestine as the area of origin, whereas it may date from the 16th century or later.¹⁶

As to the manuscript’s early modern history, it passed into the possession of Carl Mützelfeldt, a pastor in Hannoversche evangelisch-lutherische Freikirche in Rabber in Niedersachsen at some time in late 19th century. After his death it was inherited by his son, Karl Mützelfeldt, who was also a Lutheran pastor. Karl Mützelfeldt was married to a lady from a Jewish family, and in 1934 the family left Germany for Adelaide in Australia. The son of Karl Mützelfeldt, Bruno Muetzelfeldt (1918-2002) who was active in the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva in Switzerland, brought the manuscript to Europe and the home-land of Paul Jung after World War II. In 1980, Bruno Muetzelfeldt was to return to Australia and through the good offices of a Swedish colleague, the rev. Ebbe Arvidsson, also active in the Lutheran World Federation, the manuscript was offered to Uppsala University Library. In an annotation from July 1981 it is mentioned that the late Professor Helmer Ringgren, Professor of Old Testament Studies in Uppsala, investigated the manuscript, expressing his interest in it. In 1982 it was included in the collections of Uppsala University Library.¹⁷

¹⁵ The Karaite interpretation of the Song is discussed in detail in Frank: 2004: 144-164.

¹⁶ Beit-Arié, Malachi, 1987.

¹⁷ I am indebted to the staff at the manuscript department of Carolina Rediviva for supplying me with the correspondence related to the acquisition of the manuscript.

It is of interest to observe that all the early modern owners were Protestants as was Paul Jung. It is well known that Protestants took a keen interest in the Karaites from the 17th century onwards, no doubt hoping to find a more “authentic” interpretation of the Scriptures and for missionary purposes.¹⁸ It is, however, also interesting to note that Jung does not voice any such ideas, only mentioning that the Karaites reject the Talmud. In a memorandum from 1907, written on New Year’s Eve that year, Carl Mützelfeldt mentions that Professor Heinrich Ewald thought that the manuscript could be of interest for the establishment of a revision of the Biblical text. This no doubt reflects changing perspectives of scholarship.

A search in the database of IMHM in Jerusalem gives 18 hits for the translation and commentary of the Song. One of them is MS British Library Or. 2554. The MS is written in Arabic script, and was copied while Japheth ben Eli was still alive. Unfortunately, the MS – as well as most of the other MSS – is not complete: the oldest MS with the complete text seems to be a Hebrew script MS from 1331, also in British library, just as another complete Hebrew script MS from the 15th century is there as well. In 1884, Jean Joseph Bargès published *Rabbi Yapheth Abou Aly in Canticum canticorum commentarium arabicum* from MS Bibliotheque National Paris 293 that is a third complete Hebrew script MS, copied in 1626. Like Jung’s edition, it is an edition typical of the period, i.e. a transliteration of the Arabic text into Arabic script with a translation, this time into Latin.¹⁹ A comparison between the Uppsala MS and Bargès’ edition indicates that the first ten lines of the introduction are missing in the Uppsala MS. In 2010 Joseph Alobaidi published a re-edition of the text in the Paris manuscript in *Old Jewish commentaries on the Song of Songs. I, The commentary of Yefet ben Eli*, providing the text in Hebrew script, an English translation and some comments on the text.²⁰ Still, however, an edition taking its departure from the oldest MS but also taking into account the whole spectre of manuscripts is a *desideratum*. In such an edition the Uppsala MS has a natural place.

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1866: Zacharias Auerbach. *Iepheti ben Eli Karitae in Proverbiorum Salomonis caput XXX commentarius*. Bonn.

¹⁸ For a Swedish example of this from the 17th century, see Csató 2007.

¹⁹ = Jean Joseph Bargès 1884.

²⁰ = Joseph Alobaidi. For a review of this edition, see Almbladh 2010.

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