

The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs

Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval

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The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet ben 'Eli on the Book of Proverbs

Volume 2: Translation

By

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

*To my dearest husband Ron Prywes
and to my beloved sons Noam and Eden*



וְרֵאִיתִי כִּי אֵין טוֹב מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׂיו
כִּי־הוּא חֶלְקוֹ כִּי מִי יִבְיֹאֲנוּ לְרֵאוֹת בְּמָה שִׁיְהִי אַחֲרָיו
קהלת ג כב



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Foreword

It is with bittersweet satisfaction that we set before the reader this monument to the prodigious scholarly acumen and industry of our dear friend and colleague Ilana Sasson, who passed away on October 15, 2017 at the age of 63. In the months preceding her passing Ilana undertook the herculean task of producing a complete draft translation of Yefet ben ‘Eli’s commentary on Proverbs, based on her edition published in the present series in 2016. We were in regular contact with Ilana regarding the necessary fine-tuning of her draft up through chapter seven, after which she was unable to engage any further in the process. Up to her last communication with us, in early September 2017, when her pain was severe and her medication quite heavy, she showed herself at every step to be a woman of quality and noble character, empathy, and grace. Without the slightest complaint or any trace of bitterness, her last words, expressed to us in an email of September 11, 2017, were to thank us for our kindness and to express to us her love. Her absence is keenly felt by all who knew her and loved her—an apropos example of the *ēshet hayil* that concludes the focus of the present work to which she dedicated so much of her time and energy.¹

Since the majority of Ilana’s translation remained in draft form, much “fine-tuning” work was still needed to ensure that it would both accurately reflect her proven skill and erudition as well as satisfy the high standards that we have set for this series. To this end it was necessary to go through the Judaeo-Arabic text of her edition, word by word, and ensure that the translation was as clear as possible, albeit while still reflecting the unique “voice” of Ilana. For Yefet’s translation and commentary on chapter 31, there is good deal of affinity to the present editor’s (Michael’s) translation, which was published, along with a critical edition of the Judaeo-Arabic text, in two separate publications (see the bibliography). Citations from the Hebrew Bible follow the JPS *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia, 1985), albeit adjusted per context and per taste.

Michael Wechsler

Meira Polliack

December 2022

1 For additional biographical information on Ilana see the recent volume dedicated to her memory by Meira Polliack and Athalya Brenner-Idan (eds.), *Jewish Biblical Exegesis from Islamic Lands: The Medieval Period* (Bible and Its Reception 1; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), xvii, 348.

Preface

In the first volume, released in 2016, I published the critical edition of Yefet ben ‘Eli’s translation and commentary on the book of Proverbs with an extensive introduction. This volume includes the translation of Yefet’s work into English. This translation makes Yefet’s Arabic translation and commentary on Proverbs accessible to scholars and lay people who are not versed in Arabic, and opens it to a general audience.

Yefet ben ‘Eli lived and worked in Jerusalem in the tenth century. He was one of the most prominent Karaite scholars during the golden age of Karaite scholarship (late-ninth through eleventh centuries). Yefet both translated into Arabic and commented on the entire Bible. His translation is literal and didactic, and is meant to accompany the biblical Hebrew text, not to replace it. His commentary is original and innovative, rationalistic, and egalitarian. He exhibits great knowledge of Kalām and Mu‘tazilite doctrine, as well as a deep knowledge of Jewish sources such as the Talmud and midrash. In addition, he is versed in the sciences of his time, and he has a special propensity for language and lexicography. In spite of some critical and polemical aspects, his commentary on Proverbs is written with a strong sense of identity as a member of the Jewish faith, not as a member of a sectarian movement.

Only in the past few decades has attention been given to the rich heritage that came down to us from medieval Jewish scholars who lived in the Islamic world, and in particular Karaite scholars. While not a liturgical text, the book of Proverbs was an important source that was extensively quoted in Jewish sources. Yet early commentaries on this book are rare. Yefet’s commentary made a significant impact on subsequent generations and captured the interest of later commentators, both Rabbanite as well as Karaite. His commentary on Proverbs represents an important contribution to the history of biblical interpretation. For example, his depiction of the *mudawwinūn*, the writers/redactors, of the book of Proverbs as including women contributors, and his egalitarian concept with regard to women’s roles are only beginning to be explored. So too, his concept of wisdom treated as a divine attribute, in light of Mu‘tazilite doctrine, while at the same time considered synonymous with the Torah, in accordance with midrash.

My personal involvement with the heritage of the Jews of the Islamic world begins with my parents who emigrated from Baghdad, Iraq, to what was at the time the British-mandated territory of Palestine in the early 1940s. As children of immigrants we yearned to blend into the mainstream culture of the young State of Israel. We were embarrassed by our parents’ mother tongue, the

Jewish-Iraqi dialect of Baghdadi Arabic. We were ashamed of their accent, and considered it ugly and uncultured. At the time, we were not able to appreciate the language, culture, heritage, and tradition that they brought with them. Society of the time did not make it any easier. I attended one of the best high schools in the country, and I remember that when one of my grade-mates, a Moroccan-born student, asked the history teacher why we did not study the history of the Jews of the Islamic world, the teacher said, "Because you, the Jews of the Islamic world, do not have a history." My life work on Yefet was partially motivated by the need to right this wrong, and open up a forgotten chapter in Jewish exegesis.

This volume was prepared within the framework of the DFG-DIP international research project "Biblia Arabica: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians and Muslims." My deepest gratitude to Prof. Meira Polliack of Tel-Aviv University and to Prof. Michael Wechsler of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago for treating my work not only with the highest professional standards but also with utmost compassion and love. My gratitude to the staff of Brill for the publication of this volume in their prestigious series *Karaite Texts and Studies*. My gratitude also to The Jewish Theological Seminary, where all this research began, and especially to Prof. Alan Cooper, the Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies and provost of The Jewish Theological Seminary, to Prof. Raymond Scheindlin, and to Prof. David Kraemer, the Joseph J. and Dora Abbell librarian and professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, for their invaluable advice and support.

This volume is dedicated to my dear and devoted husband, who draws great pleasure in my academic achievements, and to my most amazing two sons, Noam and Eden, who fill my heart with joy every day, and about whom it was said, עטרת זקנים בני בנים ותפארת בנים אבותם.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all my other friends, colleagues, and family members whom I did not mention by name.

Any possible errors and inaccuracies are solely my own responsibility.

Ilana Sasson

Teaneck, NJ, July 2017

Transliteration Tables

1 Hebrew and Aramaic

Consonants

<i>l</i>	ל	׳	א
<i>m</i>	מ	<i>b</i>	ב
<i>n</i>	נ	<i>b̄</i>	ב
<i>s</i>	ס	<i>g</i>	ג/ג
׳	ע	<i>d</i>	ד/ד
<i>p</i>	פ	<i>h</i>	ה
<i>f</i>	פ	<i>v</i>	ו
<i>ṣ</i>	צ	<i>z</i>	ז
<i>q</i>	ק	<i>ḥ</i>	ח
<i>r</i>	ר	<i>ṭ</i>	ט
<i>ś</i>	ש	<i>y</i>	י
<i>sh</i>	ש	<i>k</i>	כ
<i>t</i>	ת/ת	<i>kh</i>	כ

- The sign ׳ is omitted when initial (e.g., *īsh* for שׂאִי).
- The doubling of letters prefixed by the definite article and in biblical “*vayyiqtol*” forms is generally not indicated (e.g., *ha-kātūb*, not *hak-kātūb*; *va-yōmer*, not *vay-yōmer*).

Vowels

<i>ā</i>	הַ/וַ/וָ (gādōl)	<i>a</i>	◌ (furtive: ä)	<i>ǎ</i>	◌
<i>ē</i>	הֶ/וֶ/וֵ	<i>e</i>	הֶ/וֶ/וֵ	<i>ě</i>	◌/◌ (vocal)
<i>ī</i>	יִ	<i>i</i>	◌	<i>ǐ</i>	◌
<i>ō</i>	הוֹ/יוֹ	<i>o</i>	◌ (qātān/hātūf)		
<i>ū</i>	וּ	<i>u</i>	◌		

- The signs *ī* and *ū* are also generally used in cases of *scriptio defectiva* (e.g., *nābīl* for אַבִּי [= אַבִּי] and *qūm* for קָם [= קָם]).
- Quiescent ◌ and ◌ in the suffixes יוֹ and יוֹ are not transliterated (hence, respectively: *av* and *āv*).

2 Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic

Consonants

q	ق/ק	z	ז/ז	ʿ	ע/א
k	כ/כ	s	ס/ס	b	ב/ב
l	ל/ל	sh	ש/ש	t	ת/ת
m	מ/מ	ṣ	ص/ص	th	ث/ث
n	נ/נ	d	ذ/ذ	j	ج/ج
h	ה/ה	ṭ	ط/ط	ḥ	ح/ح
w	ו/ו	ẓ	ظ/ظ	kh	خ/خ
y	י/י	ʿ	ع/ع	d	ד/ד
		gh	غ/غ	dh	ذ/ذ
a/at	آ/ة/ة	f	ف/ف	r	ر/ر

- The sign ʿ is omitted when initial and followed by a vowel (i.e., without *waṣla*; thus: *iqtidār* for اقتدار, yet *ḥasaba ʿqtidār* for حسب اقتدار).
- ة/ة is represented by *at* when in construct or when the following word begins with *alif* (e.g., *al-qīṣṣat al-ūlā* for القصة الأولى).

Vowels

ā	آ (and ماqṣūra)	a	ا
ī	ي (and final ي; yet non-final: iy)	i	ي
ū	و (and final و; yet non-final: uw)	u	و

- Before *alif al-waṣl* the vowels آ, ي, and و are respectively represented by *a*, *i*, and *u* (thus: *alayhuma ʿl-salām* for عليهما أسلام, *fi ʿl-kalām* for في الكلام, and *abu ʿl-kadhib* for أبو الكذب).
- *Tanwīn*, though generally not indicated, is represented by *un* (for ً), *an* (for ًا, ِ, ِ, ِ, or, when denoting any of the previous, final ع), and *in* (for ِ or ِ, when denoting the previous, final ي).
- The resolved diphthongs َي (< َي) and َو (< َو) are respectively represented by *ai* and *aii*.

Manuscript Abbreviations

- A¹ Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, Adler 3356
A² Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, Adler 3357
B Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Or. Qu. 828
BL₁ British Library, London, Or. 2553
BL₂¹ British Library, London, Or. 2506
BL₂² British Library, London, Or. 2507
BL₃ British Library, London, Or. 2402
P Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, héb. 292
SP₂ National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Evr.-Arab. I 217
SP₃ National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Evr.-Arab. I 231
SP₄ National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Evr.-Arab. I 232
SP₅ National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Evr.-Arab. I 240
SP₆ National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Evr.-Arab. I 241
SP₇ National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Evr. I 577
SP₈ National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, Evr. I 578