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Fragment of the Month: October 2020

Sa'adya's Hermeneutical Principles? T-S Ar. 50.159

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Most readers of the FOTM (Fragment Of The Month) are familiar with Dr Solomon Schechter as the founder of the Cambridge T-S Genizah Collection that bears his name (together with Dr Charles Taylor). Schechter is also known as a researcher who published a great many articles and books in the field of Jewish studies. In this FOTM, I would like to connect these two areas of interest and try to solve a riddle related to his first academic publication. This will be conducted through a new suggested reading of Genizah fragment T-S Ar. 50.159.

In 1885, three years after his arrival in London, Schechter published his first academic paper. It was an article on an unpublished manuscript from the Bodleian Library.¹ The work in this article deals with the thirteen Talmudical hermeneutical principles (= *Middot she-ha-Tora Nidreshet bahen*). The manuscript bears the title: 'Commentary by our master and rabbi, Sa'adya Gaon'. Another piece of information was mentioned in the manuscript: that this work is a translation from Arabic to Hebrew, and the name of the medieval translator was Nahum.

Professor Moritz Steinschneider, the great bibliographer and orientalist, had already mentioned this manuscript in 1882.² Hence, Schechter prepared an edition, published it and dedicated the publication to the memory of his benefactor Nathaniel Montefiore.

Steinschneider, as a cautious researcher, hesitated to accept the attribution to Sa'adya Gaon, even though it appears in the manuscript. Steinschneider wrote: 'angeblich von Sa'adya Gaon, übersetzt von nachom [wohl ha-Maarabi]'; i.e. 'Allegedly by Sa'adya Gaon, translated by Nahum [al-Maghrebi]'. Despite Steinschneider's hesitation, Schechter was sure that Sa'adya Gaon was the author of this work. Steinschneider was at that time nearly 75 years old and well known as a prestigious scholar. Schechter was, at that time, in his early academic career, taking his first steps into the world of Hebrew manuscripts. Was it beginner's self-confidence? Time will tell. Schechter argued that one should trust the information supplied by the author or the scribe of the manuscript. He also discovered that a 14th century Jewish scholar mentioned one of Sa'adya's opinions, and the same opinion appears in this work.

More than a decade later in 1896, Schechter brought the Cairo Genizah to Cambridge University Library and gained his glory. But in 1921, *Jacob Mann* found a list of Sa'adya's writings in the Genizah, prepared by his sons in 953.³ There was no mention of this particular work in the list. The claim of Schechter that Sa'adya was the author of this 'commentary to the 13 hermeneutical principles' was again put in doubt.

Time has passed and Schechter's article was re-published again and again, with no real advance on our knowledge about the work.

Recently I came across the Genizah fragment T-S Ar. 50.159, which may shed light on this riddle.⁴ The fragment is part of Sa'adya Gaon's commentary on Leviticus 1:2, the very beginning of the book. Sa'adya explains the verse by using a pair of the hermeneutical principles. Then he wrote: 'These two principles are part of the thirteen (principles), which the sages said that they practice in (Jewish) tradition. I shall now explain to you (may God help you) their meaning. But first I will open with an introduction'.

This means that Sa'adya integrated his work on 13 principles into his biblical commentary. This explains why the work was not mentioned in Sa'adya's list of publications: it was not originally a work that stands on its own. The extrication of this work from its original place happened a few generations after the time of Sa'adya, apparently by the medieval translator.

Careful reading of the fragment uncovers another piece of information. In this fragment Sa'adya recommends his reader to study another work of his: 'Kitāb al-radd 'ala [Anan]' i.e. 'The book on the refutation of Anan'. This is an early work by Sa'adya, written at the age of 23, in which he fought against the ideas of the proto-Qaraite scholar *Anan Ben David*. In this book Sa'adya claims that tradition is the only source for judicial interpretation.

In the next stage of my research I managed to identify, transcribe, and translate the entire work of the 13 principles by Sa'adya from the original Judaeo-Arabic, which has survived in three copies in the Genizah.

So it has happened that 135 years after Schechter published his first article and determined that Sa'adya was likely the author of the 'commentary to the 13 Talmudical hermeneutical principles', we now have in the Genizah the evidence that he was right from the beginning.



Sa'adya Gaon's commentary on Leviticus 1, T-S Ar.50.159 verso

Transcription of the relevant lines of T-S Ar. 50.159v

1. ...
2. והארתן כיתאן מן י"ג אלתי קאל אלאולן אנהא גרנאה
3. גאריה פי אלסנ ואבין לך אסעדך אללה [מע]ניחא ואקדם
4. קבל דלך מקדמה וחי אן אלחכמ' זל' לם [יטעתמ]ל[נ]
5. אלקיאס פקט פי שי מן אלפרץ' לאנהם ל'א[נ] [מ^סת]...
6. פירגעון אלי קיאס עקולהם ואראיה[ם] וא[נ]מא הם קום
7. נאקלין ען אלרסול וחמאל אתארה פאד כאן אלאמר כדאך
8. פק[ד]א[ס]תגנ ען גיהדון אראהם או יי[ט]ת[עמליון]
9. מק[א]יסת[ה]ם ואיצ'א לאנהם אן אסטע[מ]לו כ[ד]לך אפסך
10. עליה[ם] מ[א]ת נקלה ען אלנבי כמא שר[ח]ת[א] פי כתאב א'לי רד
11. עלי [...]ב'א אלקיאס וקלנא אן אלקיאס יחכם בנקי'
12. אח[כאם] מנוצרה] פי אלתאב וקד קאל אלחכמ' אצ'א מתל דלך
13. [...] ערפונא בהדא
14. [...] אלי פסך מ'א' שי ממא
15. [...]מר עלי מא וצפת פמא
16. [...] שלוש עשר[ח]ה מצות התורה נדרשת פאן
17. [...] ואל כוארג הדא אלמסילה
18. [...] נקלה אהל אלגמאעה מן אלדין
19. [...]פקה אל[נ]... ש'ר'חה אלעלמא אנמא
20. [...]אן אן ינסאג לה כדלך
21. [...]יג'תהדון ואנא כושף הדא ומוצח
22. [...]מנהא מא וז גארי עלי קיאס
23. [...]ואלמג'אלטה ואליכאנה ומא
24. [...]כמא אן אלעקל יסוי בינהם
25. [...]ק'איאס אלעקל וחי עקובה אלסארק
26. [...]ט בינהמ ועלי אנהם פי אלעקל

Footnotes

- [1] *Beth Talmud: Zeitschrift für rabbinische Literatur und Geschichte*, 4 (תרמ"ה), p. 236ff.
- [2] *Hebräische Bibliographie, Blätter für neuere und ältere Literatur des Judenthums*, Berlin 1882, s.134 .
- [3] Jacob Mann, 'A Fihrist of Sa'adya's Works', *JQR* 11.4 (1921), pp. 423–428.
- [4] The fragment was published some years ago by Moses Zucker ('Fragments of the "Kitāb Ṭahṣīl Al-Sharā'i' Al-Samā'iyah"', *Tarbiz*, 41 [1972], pp. 375–376). Zucker did not enjoy the optimal conditions that we now have, and this caused him some misreading and misinterpretation. Zucker already suspected that Sa'adya located this work in his commentary on Leviticus (as he suggested in the *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 23 [1954], p. 47, note 9), but did not succeed in establishing this notion.

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