CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HEBREW TRANSCRIPTION OF RISĀLAT AL-HĀTIMĪ: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN SAYINGS ATTRIBUTED TO ARISTOTLE AND POETIC VERSES ATTRIBUTED TO MUTANABBĪ (CAMBRIDGE, T.S., ARABIC, 45.2)

I. Arabic Poetry among the Jews in the Middle Ages

Openness to surrounding culture was one of the keystones of Jewish society in Islamic countries from the 10th century, owing largely to the immense literary work of Saʿādia (882–942). He was not only accommodating regarding ideas and methods of thinking borrowed from Muslim-Arab culture and from Greek culture clothed in Arabic, allowing them to be integrated into Jewish culture, but he also adopted the Arabic language (albeit written in the Hebrew script) as the principal language of creativity of Jewish scholars in Islamic countries. He also translated the Bible, or at least most of them, into Arabic, and made commentaries on many of its parts in that language. Of course, this is not the place to summarize his great literary work or to duly treat of its full implications, while it being even doubtful if the hour has actually come to divulge these things from the point of view of the actual state of research. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that this came about only after many hundreds of years wherein Jewish culture had been secluded within itself, as proven by Talmudic and halakhic literature, as well as by ancient liturgical poems derived from the Land of Israel. During this period, the Bible lost its importance as a literary and linguistic work and served principally as a source for Halakha and for midrāšic works of consolation for the people of Israel who were then governed by the Christian Byzantines within their own country. Indeed, one of the keystones of the new cultural school of thought

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1 The only thorough, all-encompassing work to have been published on Saʿādia and his contributions—whether biblical, literary, cultural or spiritual—was written nearly ninety years ago (Malter 1921). Obviously, since that time, many new things have come to light on Saʿādia. In spite of this, they have yet to be fully appreciated or given their due respect.
taken from the school of Saʿadia was the decisive change in his relationship to the Bible. No matter which way you look at it, throughout the commentaries of Saʿadia on the Bible, he has become avant-garde in his new approach, creating a literary work in a class of its own and worthy of being judged by its own literary and esthetic merits. As for its essential make-up, the sages of the Middle Ages in Islamic countries never ceased from its use, and by its sheer strength were able to renew biblical commentaries, renew the study of the Hebrew language, and renew secular Hebrew poetry as well as liturgical poetry in Spain. These have all become the prized jewels of Jewish creativity during the Middle Ages.

Again, it must be stressed that in all of the above areas of creativity, they were accomplished out of the strongest sense of affinity to Arab culture and to the other cultures that had been assimilated into it, the more notable of which being Greek culture. In the succeeding pages, we shall treat upon only one subject, viz., the connection between Hebrew poetry and Arabic poetry in the Middle Ages, based upon an important literary document that was found in the Cairo Geniza.

This affinity happens to be well-known, seeing that many scholars have already demonstrated that Jewish poets were thoroughly acquainted with Arabic poetry, as well as with the critique that had been written about it in the Middle Ages. Moreover, it is impossible to fully understand Hebrew verse without reading it within the context of Arabic verse. It is generally agreed that most of the Jewish poets in Spain, at least those of the Andalusian period (ca. 950–1150), and, to some extent, those Jews also living in North Africa and in the East, could read Arabic literature in its Arabic original, that is, literary texts that had been written with Arabic characters. The Geniza affords much proof to this effect, where numerous leafs of Arabic script treating on fine literature, particularly poetry, were amassed. In addition to this, the Geniza also yielded fragments of diwān belonging to the pre-Islamic Arab poet, Ṭarafa (died 569?), (TS Ar. 42.14), as well as that written by the well-known poet, Mutanabbī (TS AS. 184.196), of whom we shall speak later. So, too, there has survived Arabic poetry

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2 The research literature available in this particular field is rich and diverse, though far from being exhaustive. For a comprehensive discussion on the study of the connections between Hebrew and Arabic verse during the Middle Ages, see Tobi 2004, Chapter One.