Yefet ben ‘Eli on the Book of Joshua: Preliminary Observations

Yefet b. ‘Eli and His Commentary on Joshua

As is now well known, Yefet b. ‘Eli (fl. 960–1005) was the most prolific and most influential exegete in the Karaite tradition; he was to the Karaites what Rashi was for later Ashkenazi Rabbinic tradition: parshandata.1 Apparently from Iraq, he worked in Jerusalem during the latter part of the tenth century and beginning of the eleventh. His extraordinarily large corpus of writings includes legal, liturgical, and polemical works, and most importantly commentaries on the Bible, including Arabic translation with full explication of the entire text. He is one of the few pre-modern Jews to write a commentary on the entire Hebrew Bible: truly a remarkable achievement. Even more remarkable is that most of the commentary remains in manuscript. I would estimate that in modern typescript the commentary would include around 15,000 pages. Perhaps twenty percent has been published so far.2

As far as we know, Yefet wrote his commentaries following the order of the biblical text. This certainly applies to Joshua, which was likely produced in the 970s or 980s. It includes cross-references to his commentaries on the Torah but


2 See the review article of M. Zawanowska, “Review of Scholarly Research on Yefet and His Works,” Jewish History Quarterly (forthcoming), for complete updated bibliography. The sections that have not been edited include most of the Torah plus Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, Isaiah, Ezekiel, four of the Minor Prophets, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Lamentations, the second half of Qohelet, Ezra-Nehemiah, I and II Chronicles.
not a single reference to his commentaries on later books. The commentary itself is relatively straightforward. It includes an Arabic translation of most of Joshua; only the list of kings at Josh 12 and some of the lists of cities throughout Josh 13–21 are not translated. And it includes substantial commentary, in which one finds many of the characteristics and idiosyncrasies found in his other commentaries. For example:

1. The commentary on Joshua has strong anthological tendencies. Yefet collects other people’s explications and records them before giving his own preference. What the ‘ulamā’ say or dispute, what the people disagree about, what one qawm or another said or claimed or interpreted or asked, or just “it has been said” are constant refrains throughout the commentary.

2. The use of the *mudawwin* (narrator, compiler, redactor), and *tadwīn* (the process of narration or compilation) to account for apparent lack of chronology. Yefet identifies a narrator’s voice throughout the book, although he never identifies who that narrator is.

3. There are occasional grammatical explications in the commentary, and frequent appeals to rhetorical topos using, for example, the Arabic terms

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3 Yefet refers to his commentary on Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; see his commentary on Josh 5:12, 6:25, 7:11, and 20:3.


8 For example, Yefet’s discussion of plural language, verbal forms, and nominal forms. See pp. 38*, 89*, 107*, 124*.