Saadya Gaon’s Translation of the Pentateuch

Introduction

Saˁīd b. Yūsuf al-Fayyūmī—Saadya ben Yosef from the Fayyūm district—commonly referred to as Saadya Gaon, was born in Dilāš, in the Fayyūm district in Upper Egypt, in 882, and died in Baghdad in 942. Saadya began his studies and scholarly activities in the country of his birth, were he lived until he was about thirty. After leaving Egypt he settled in Palestine, where he spent most of his time in the main Jewish center in Tiberias. From there he went to Syria, where he lived for some time in Aleppo, and thence to Babylonia. Eventually he settled in Baghdad, where he was appointed Gaon or head of the Sura academy in 928.

Saadya Gaon made major contributions in a variety of fields. His work encompassed halakhic, philosophical, and rabbinical studies, grammatical writings (including Haˀegron, a treatise on Hebrew language and poetry), liturgical poems, a prayer book, and an influential Arabic Bible translation plus commentary. He was also active in the dispute between the Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis regarding the Jewish calendar and led the opposition to the Karaites. His leading role in Rabbanite life and his literary contributions in so many fields stem from his personal gifts but also from his education and experiences. In Egypt, where he was born and grew up, and through his years in Palestine, Syria, and Babylonia, Saadya established firm contacts with the major Jewish centers in the Middle East. He was also well acquainted with the Palestinian Jewish tradition and its learning centers, as well as with the cultural and scholarly trends in the contemporary Arab world, with which he interacted. These advantages made it possible for him to go beyond the traditional Babylonian methods of studying the Talmud and related literature and to excel in new domains.¹

One such prominent breakthrough was Saadya’s project to translate the Bible into Arabic and write a commentary on it. Prior to his time, the Babylonian Geonim did not deal extensively with Bible study and exegesis and concentrated on the Talmud and related literature. Biblical exegesis was marginal

in Palestinian Jewish circles too, which concentrated on establishing the correct text. The environment in which Saadya worked was the Arab world, both Christian and Muslim, with regard to both the Bible and the Qurʾān. Saadya’s translation of the Bible into Arabic, the Tafsīr, was composed in the first half of the 10th century; its impact on the Rabbanite Jewish world and beyond was huge and immediate. Scholars now concede the existence of earlier Bible translations into Arabic, but these pre-Saadyan versions, discussed in chapter 1, were limited in scope and much less sophisticated than Saadya’s. In any case, it is far from certain that he had access to them.²

He may, however, have been familiar with earlier Christian translations of the Bible into Arabic thanks to his general acquaintance with Arab texts, including Islamic ones, as is variously attested. In a comprehensive discussion of Saadya’s polemics against Christianity, Schlossberg notes one direct mention of a Christian source by Saadya himself. This coincides with indirect evidence of his acquaintance with such sources, found in medieval texts. Schlossberg also shows that Saadya, in his commentary on Daniel, compares the Christian and the Jewish biblical computations of the lifespans of Adam and his descendants—clear testimony to Saadya’s knowledge of some Christian versions of the Bible. As we have no evidence that Saadya read Christian literature in Greek or Latin, he presumably acquired his knowledge of it, as of Islamic sources, from Arabic translations, as Schlossberg suggests.³

Schlossberg’s evidence augments that of Malter, who showed that Saadya knew at least one Christian tract, the Apophthegms by Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (809–873), to whom medieval sources ascribe the composition of an Arabic Bible translation in the 9th century, and possibly other works.⁴ More recently, Steiner posited that the two Arabic Bible versions preserved in MSS Sinai Arabic 2 and 4

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² For the older and now discarded view that Saadya was the first Jewish scholar to translate the Bible into Arabic, see Malter 1921:141–142; Zucker 1959:1–7; Blau 1992a:32–34. Blau 1992a connects Saadya’s translation to the pre-Saadyan translation of Prov 16:24–17:26 (CUL: T-S Ar. 53:8).
