CHAPTER THREE

YEDET’S TRANSLATION OF ESTHER

1. Literalistic Technique

Among the medieval Karaites, whose extant Arabic translations of Scripture are generally characterized by “imitative”—that is, literalistic—technique, Yefet has been ranked as the “most imitative” of all.1 Such, at least, is the assessment of M. Polliack in her thorough study of Karaite Arabic translations of the Pentateuch—which assessment is consistent with our own regarding the book of Esther, of which the only other (positively identified)2 extant Karaite Arabic translation, discounting the few snippets supplied by David ben Abraham al-Fāsi in his dictionary,3 is that of Salmon ben Yerūḥim. More so than this latter,—and much more so than Saadia, the primary representative of Arabic Bible translation among the Rabbanites,—Yefet exhibits a degree of imitation, both of syntactic as well as of lexical features, that may be generally described as slavish and, at times, even awkward (for examples see sec. III.3 below).4 Although taken by some as indicative of Yefet’s less-than-notable ability as a translator, if not also as a grammarian and lexicographer,—an assessment by no means shared among scholars,5—this slavishness is in fact congruent with Yefet’s purpose—

1 Polliack, Tradition, p. 248.
2 I.e., discounting the translation contained in the undetermined fragments described in sec. IV.3.2–3.
3 For a list of these see Skoss, Dictionary, p. lxxv.
4 Birnbaum (Hosea, p. xxxiii) goes so far as to claim—rather excessively, in our view—that Yefet’s slavishness is on occasion “carried to the point of absurdity.” For a thorough and much more reasoned study of Yefet’s translation technique, albeit as reflected in his tarjama to Genesis, see now Polliack, Tradition, passim (Yefet’s concept of translation is specifically treated, vis-à-vis his introduction to Genesis, on pp. 37–45). See also Nemoy (“Karaïtes,” p. 605a), who more reasonably describes Yefet’s tarajim as “very literal and often grammatically awkward.”
5 As well noted by Birnbaum, Hosea, pp. xxxvi–vii, Yefet’s ability in this regard must be relatively assessed with respect to the still-blossoming field of Hebrew grammatical science in the 10th c. For one of the better assessments in this regard cf. Munk, “Notice,” pp. 310–337, and esp. his concluding summary on p. 334. Among the more
to wit, that his tarjama be read in conjunction with his commentary, both of them functioning as interdependent, component parts of his overall exegetical enterprise. That this is so may be gathered from Yefet’s own declaration of intent in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis:

Our intention has been (to provide) a translation (tarjama) of the words of this book and an explanation (takhliṣ) of its meanings (maʿānīhī) according to what its words require.

And again, underscoring the joint composition (generally pericope-by-pericope) of his tarjama and commentary (takhliṣ):

Here (i.e., in our following work on Genesis) we begin with a translation (tarjama) of the words of this book and an explanation of its meanings (takhliṣ maʿānīhī).

positive of Yefet’s critics see also Neubauer, Bibliothek, p. 15; Pinsker, Geschichte, I, p. 169; and Sokolow, Deuteronomy, pp. xxvii–iii, as well as Sanders’ recent description (Review, paragraph 18) of Yefet, on a par with Ibn Janāḥ, as one of “the expert medieval grammarians.” Among the less positive (and, in our opinion, less relatively focused) cf. Broydé, “Japheth,” p. 72b; Grätz, Geschichte, pp. 313–14; and Margoliouth, Daniel, p. viii. Moreover, as regards Margoliouth—in connection with whom cf. Lehrman’s suggestion (“Jephet,” p. 234) of negative bias—, the few examples cited in support of “inaccurate” renderings are hardly determinative— (“Jephet,” p. 235) of negative bias—, the few examples cited in support of “inaccurate” renderings are hardly determinative— (Dan. 9:25; مشاركته “dough”) for בקע (“his communion”) for (Isa. 53:5), and אגיה (“the response (of)” for (Ps. 22:25; reading ישוע [cf. the Targ., Pesh., and Vulg.]). As to the first of these, it may well be the case that Yefet’s Heb. exemplar had בקע, which he thus read as בקע: moreover, he clearly understood the meaning of the obvious cognate אכלה, which ad Prov. 1:27 [per Ms. JTSA ENA 21q, I. fol. 9] he renders אכלה (“waning from grief or illness” [cf. Hava, Dictionary, p. 218b]). As to the last two renderings, Margoliouth unreasonably sets his assessment parameters a majori, seeing that Yefet’s renderings are quite sustainable in context.


7 On the application of this term to the commentary component of Yefet’s exegetical work cf. Polliack, Tradition, p. 42.


9 This observation applies, as far as we can tell, primarily to narrative. Poetic and aphoristic passages, on the other hand, are generally organized verse-by-verse (cf., parashim, the editions of Bargès, Canticum; Birnbaum, Hosea; Bland, Ecclesiastes; Hirschfeld, Nāḥum; Hofmann, Psalm; Hussain, Job; Marwick, Retribution; Sokolow, Deuteronomy; and Wendkos, Jeremiah). On Yefet’s construal of pericopes (fusilh) see further Bland, Ecclesiastes, p. vi.