SOLOMON BEN MOSES MELGUIRI AND THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE FROM LATIN INTO HEBREW

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Solomon ben Moses Melguiri (de Melgueil), a physician and scholar who was active in southern France in the second half of the thirteenth century, has emerged from near obscurity in the last two decades. Recent studies of his extant works reveal a versatile author: apart from poems, he left behind a sizeable book on traditional Jewish themes, Beit ha-Elohim (The House of God, henceforth BE),¹ and three scientific treatises translated from Latin: [pseudo-]Ibn Sinā’s On the Heaven and the World (henceforth OHW), an adaptation of Aristotle On Sleep and Wakefulness (henceforth HSW), and a translation of the Latin pharmacology Circa instans.² It has long been recognized that Melguiri’s scientific translations were abridged by Gershon ben Solomon of Arles and incorporated into his encyclopedia Ša‘ar ha-šamayim, thought to have been composed in the 1280s.³ These translations circulated as separate treatises, too, and were quite influential, to judge by the number of extant manuscripts (eighteen of OHW and sixteen of HSW), as well as their use by Jewish scholars from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.⁴

¹ The author announces in the introduction of Beit ha-Elohim (MS Vatican 248, fol. 9", ll. 10–11) that it will consist of two parts: Ša‘arei šeḏeq and Beit middot. There are two extant manuscripts: (1) MS Vatican 248 (IMHM 300), 155 folios in a fourteenth-century Spanish hand, includes the (lengthy) introduction and about a third of Ša‘arei šeḏeq. (2) MS Escorial G-II-1 (IMHM 7361), 316 folios in a fifteenth-century Spanish hand, contains only the last three folios of the introduction and almost all fourteen sections of Ša‘arei šeḏeq. The second part, Beit middot, seems to be lost.

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This paper summarizes Melguiri’s biography and personal links with Jewish and Christian scholars, illustrating one of Gad Freudenthal’s major concerns, the transmission of Latin science into Hebrew. On the basis of a considerable body of medieval Hebrew scientific translations, Freudenthal has recently analyzed the cultural habits behind the preference for Arabic over Latin scientific sources. Learned Jewish circles in Provence, he writes, “preferred to rely on Arabic sources ‘imported’ from the Iberian Peninsula, rather than turn to the Latin writings of their neighbors. Only in medicine was there a significant absorption of Latin learning.”5 Even in medicine, he shows, the number of works translated from Arabic during the period that interests us here (1251–1300) is more than twice the number of translations from Latin (35 from Arabic, 15 from Latin).6 Melguiri’s command of Latin was rare among Jews in southern France at the time.7 We shall examine particular cultural and social settings to explain the motives behind his scholarly work.

1. Capsule Biography

The surname מלגורי, מלגורי, מלגוריו, מלגורי, found in Solomon’s Hebrew works and poems,8 is derived from Melgorio, Melgoire, or Melgueir, medieval versions of today’s Mauguio, a small town east of Montpellier.9 As noticed by Bar-Tiqva, a poem by Melguiri offers a clue to his date of birth: he was “a young man” when Muslims and Christians resided in Jerusalem.10 This plausibly alludes to the Christian and Muslim coexistence that followed the Treaty of Jaffa (1229) between Emperor Frederick II and the Ayyûbid

6 Ibid., Table 2.
9 The name may have been pronounced Melgueiri, Melgoiri, or Melgori. See H. Gross, Gallia Judaica (Paris, 1877): 355–359.