THE STORY OF ZAYD AND KAḤLĀʾ—A FOLK STORY IN A JUDAEO-ARABIC MANUSCRIPT

Rachel Hasson Kenat

Summary: The story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ is a rare folk tale of Muslim origin. The story is found in seven different versions, all of them in manuscripts. Two versions exist in Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts, one of which is from the Firkovitch collection, the principal manuscript discussed in this paper. The story is written in Middle Arabic, a language that combines Classical Arabic characteristics with popular Neo-Arabic ones. From the copying mistakes throughout the manuscripts we learn that The story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ was removed from Muslim society into Jewish society; manuscripts of the story were copied from Arabic script into Hebrew characters, and possibly even in the opposite direction, from Judaeo-Arabic into Arabic script.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is a Judaeo-Arabic manuscript that contains The story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ; the manuscript was found in the second Firkovitch collection. I will start with a short description of the popular stories in the Firkovitch collection, followed by a general summary of the characteristics of the story. I will then describe the manuscripts of the story and concisely discuss the connection between the versions that each of them present. Finally, I will mention some facts concerning the textual transmission of the story and a few linguistic characteristics found in the principal manuscript of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ from the Firkovitch collection.

1 I came across The story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ while cataloguing the popular literature of the Firkovitch collection at The Center for the Study of Judaeo-Arabic Literature of the Ben Zvi Institute in Jerusalem. The text attracted my attention and I decided to edit it. A Judaeo-Arabic edition of about a fourth of the longest version of the story has been published, accompanied by a Hebrew translation and introduction, in Hasson 2010. I would like to thank my teacher Prof. Simon Hopkins who instructed me during the work on the text in every step until the publication of this article.

For the origins of the Firkovitch collection see Elkin-Ben Sasson 2002: 51–95.
1. The Popular Stories in the Firkovitch Collection

Among the 15,000 manuscripts written in Judaeo-Arabic in the second Firkovitch collection,² there are about 450 items of popular stories and more than fifty items of popular poetry. The majority of the items comprise between one to two folios and only four items number more than twenty folios; usually the manuscripts are fragmentary, and those that contain complete stories are rare. Most of the folk stories found in the manuscripts date from the fourteenth—eighteenth centuries; many of the manuscripts are in good condition.

Seventy different stories have been identified. Their topics are varied, from stories about Biblical and Midrashic characters, stories that describe relationships between human beings and animals, stories that describe relationships among animals themselves, to ‘Mağāzi’ literature (for example, The story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ which I shall discuss in this article), debate literature,³ fragments of ‘Adab’, and others.

The most common stories are those about biblical characters. The story of Esther, which is written in rhymed prose (‘sağ’), is represented by the largest number of manuscripts, about one hundred. The story of Joseph is retold in more than fifty manuscripts, some in prose, and others in poetry. Many of these stories had a ceremonial function at the time when they were copied.⁴

Stories with a clear Muslim identity are, for example, the stories of A Thousand and One Nights, The story of ʿantar b. Šaddād, and The story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ which is discussed in this article.

Studies on popular stories written in Judaeo-Arabic from the Firkovitch collection are rare; studies on popular texts from the collection have been published only by two scholars: Victor Lebedev and Heikki Palva.⁵

2. The Story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ—General Characteristics

The story of Zayd and Kaḥlāʾ, which is under discussion here, is a rare tale of Muslim origin. The narrative depicts a love story between Zayd and his

² For the importance of the Firkovitch collection for the study of Judaeo-Arabic literature see Sklare 1997: 7–9.
³ = ‘Rangstreitliteratur’.
⁴ See for example manuscript Tel Aviv, Bill Gross 352, a prayer collection that includes The story of Joseph.
⁵ Some of their publications can be found in the References.