WRITTEN JUDEO-ARABIC: COLLOQUIAL VERSUS MIDDLE ARABIC

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Summary: Medieval Judeo-Arabic (MWJA) was written with Hebrew characters, and used for the Judeo-Arabic literature shared by all Jewish scholars in the domain of medieval Arab-Muslim culture. Its status was like that of literary Classical Arabic among the Muslim Arabic speakers. However, MWJA had never been a living spoken language and its life did not extend beyond four or five hundred years (tenth–fifteenth centuries). Yet, Arabic continued to function as a spoken language. Its numerous dialects also served as a written communicative vehicle, and for literature in various genres. This is true in regard to medieval Judeo-Arabic, opposed to the notion that MWJA of the school of Saʿadya was the only one used by Jews in the Middle Ages. Actually, colloquial Judeo-Arabic has existed as a written language for almost fifteen hundred years, since pre-Islamic time. Today, one of the important assignments is to carry out a meticulous and comprehensive comparative examination of the ancient and later non-classical Arabic languages in order to better understand the history of Judeo-Arabic.

1. Introduction

Middle Arabic is the current name used by the recent two generations for medieval non-classical written Arabic. Thus, by the recent two generations it was used for medieval Judeo-Arabic (MWJA), mostly thanks to the enormous life work of Prof. Joshua Blau.1 This Arabic, written with Hebrew characters, was used for the vast production of Judeo-Arabic literature of all genres and was shared by all Jewish scholars in the spacious domain of medieval Arab-Muslim culture. In this respect, its status among the Arabic-speaking Jewish communities was like that of literary Classical Arabic (CA) among the Muslim Arabic speakers, which has been used for written Arabic literature since the seventh century until today. Yet one can distinguish MWJA because of its grammatical, syntactical, and stylistic leniency, compared to the extremely strict rules of CA, and its distance from the highly flowery style so typical of CA.

As known, although insufficiently heeded by its researchers, MWJA had never been a living spoken language, and its life did not extend beyond four or five hundred years in the centres of literary creativity in the

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1 Blau’s studies about MWJA are too many to be detailed here. However, two of them should be mentioned in this context: Blau 1988 and 1999.
Eastern lands, North Africa and Spain from the tenth through the fifteenth centuries. In some of these countries, it stopped being used for writing after the fourteenth century (Vajda 1980; Tobi 2010: 273–4). One notable exception is Yemen, where Jews kept on with it—although not exclusively—for teaching and writing up to recent generations.\footnote{See Goitein in Habshush 1941: 72–81; Blau 1984; Tobi 1991; Tobi 1999: 400–403.} A very significant testimony is the story of a Jewish scholar in Yemen in the first half of the twentieth century, who came across a Judeo-Arabic translation of a printed version of Song of Songs:\footnote{Tobi 1991: 138.}

Now even though the meaning of his words was difficult for me in certain places, since it was [written in] the Babylonian (Iraqi) language and not [in] pure [Arabic], nevertheless, I corrected it according to the language of Rav Sa’adia Gaon, which is almost habitual in our mouths.

Evidently, the disappearance of MWJA did not impact in any respect the use of Arabic as a living spoken language among Jewish communities, whose surrounding majority spoke Arabic. Nor did its existence as a written language have any impact on the use of Arabic as vernacular. Even its invention in the tenth century was not the real reason causing those communities to speak Arabic. Spoken Arabic was always clearly separated from MWJA, since as a living colloquial language it was much richer than MWJA.\footnote{This may be easily shown if we compare the only comprehensive dictionary we have for the medieval Judeo-Arabic texts (Blau 2006) with the only comprehensive one we have for a single new written and spoken dialect of Judeo-Arabic—that of Iraq (Avishur 2009–2010). Unfortunately, no such work has been carried out for another dialect of Judeo-Arabic. We should, however, mention M. Piamenta’s Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic (Piamenta 1990–1991/i), of which ‘Judæo-Yemeni, the language of the Yemeni Jews is an essential part’ (ibid., i/v).} In fact, there was no common spoken Judeo-Arabic, but scores of different dialects, to such an extent that a speaker of one dialect could not understand a speaker of another, even, and not infrequently, in the same country. In principle, a specific Judeo-Arabic dialect is the same one spoken by the Arab or Muslim majority in a certain country, even if it differs in some respects, such as its Hebrew component and even phonetically, from the majority dialect.\footnote{Innumerable studies have been written about the Hebrew component in Judeo-Arabic dialects, of which might be mentioned five wide-ranging ones: Avishur 2001 (Iraq, Syria, Egypt); Ben-Yaacob 1985; Bar-Asher 1992 (North Africa); Bahat 2002 (Morocco); Henshke 2007 (Tunisia). The documentation and study of the Hebrew and Aramaic component in the Judeo-Arabic dialects is an important part of The Synoptic Dictionary of the Hebrew and Aramaic Component in the Jewish Languages in the Mediterranean Basin, an}