Samaritan Bible Exegesis and its Significance for Judeo-Arabic Studies*

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1 Introduction

In 1785, Christian Friedrich Schnurrer edited the commentary on the forty-ninth chapter of the Book of Genesis by the Samaritan Ṣadaqa b. Munajjā (died after 1223) and translated it into Latin. His aim was to present a sample of Samaritan scriptural exegesis and to determine whether the Samaritan commentaries on the Torah could add anything to the biblical studies of his day. The manuscript was no. 301 in the Huntington collection at the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford. The text Schnurrer edited runs over fourteen pages and contains a commentary on Jacob’s blessing of his sons, a pericope that is relevant both for the Samaritan and the Rabbanite traditions. The reason behind Schnurrer’s choice of this specific portion is probably coincidental. He did not have at his disposition the manuscript itself, but a handwritten copy of only a small part of it.

The commentary has a number of interesting features. The author – Ṣadaqa b. Munajjā, also known as Ṣadaqa al-Ḥakīm (“the physician”) – goes through the biblical text verse by verse. He often paraphrases the Hebrew text in Arabic, explains its meaning, and sometimes adds “scientific” details that exceed the mere interpretation of the biblical account, such as the biological background of the conception of twins. He employs exegetical methods that correspond to those used in Judeo-Arabic commentaries; see, for example, his rejection of an unjustified non-literal interpretation (taʾwil) of Genesis 49:12 (“His eyes are darker than wine, and the teeth whiter than milk”). Samaritan reading variants are defended against Rabbanite ones. In one case the author bases his argumentation on the Masoretic text, not on the specific Samaritan

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1 Ṣadaqa b. Munajjā, Genesis, fol. 199r.
2 Ṣadaqa b. Munajjā, Genesis, fol. 195v.
3 Ṣadaqa b. Munajjā, Genesis, fol. 194 r–v.
variant (Masoretic text: reḵəlō [רֶחֶלֹ] “his feet,” Samaritan text: ḏēḵəlō⁴ [דהֹלֹ] “his flag”). This is probably because he had consulted a non-Samaritan source without noticing the textual differences. To discover these features, however, a good deal of familiarity with Jewish and Samaritan Arabic literature is required, which Schnurrer apparently did not have. Consequently, he was not able to appreciate the full value of the text and concluded: “The experts may now decide if one should be satisfied with this sample – as is the editor’s opinion – or if there is any reason to ask for further contributions.”⁵

Whereas Judeo-Arabic studies have made considerable progress since then, the study of Samaritan Arabic texts is still in its infancy. Scholars of Samaritan studies proper are mostly interested in their Hebrew and Aramaic writings. Although the Arabic texts outnumber the Hebrew and Aramaic ones and could provide us with precious information about the religious, intellectual, and social life of the Samaritans from around the eleventh to the twentieth centuries, only a small number of the manuscripts have yet been edited and studied. Outside the narrow field of Samaritan studies, Samaritan Arabic literature is almost unknown. Scholars of Judeo-Arabic hardly ever refer to texts written by Samaritans, partly because they are still rather difficult to access, and partly, we may assume, because their interrelatedness with the Judeo-Arabic tradition is not generally known.

Admittedly, Samaritan Arabic texts are very few in number compared with the large corpus of Judeo-Arabic literature, and their impact on scholars from other communities was small. Experiences with Samaritan texts left only few traces in the writings of the Rabbanites and Karaites. Yet, in the opposite direction, references are very frequent: some Samaritan authors, including Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ṣūrī, Šadaqa b. Munajjä, Yūsuf al-ʿAskārī, and Abū Saʿīd, refer directly to Rabbanite and Karaite sources. Their writings indirectly supplement our knowledge of Judeo-Arabic literature and indicate how Judeo-Arabic literature was received outside the Jewish community.

In this paper, I will concentrate on exegetical literature in a broad sense, including all texts that are concerned with the explanation of the Torah, be it for dogmatic, halakhic, or “pure” exegetical reasons. I will begin with a brief overview of the exegetical literature of the Samaritans; I will then present the

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⁴ Šadaqa b. Munajjä, Genesis, fol. 195r; on Genesis 49:10. Hebrew and Aramaic words in this paper are transcribed according to the Samaritan tradition. For a brief introduction to the transcription system, see Florentin, “Samaritan Hebrew.”

⁵ Schnurrer, Probe, 154: “Die Kenner mögen nun entscheiden, ob man sich, wie der Herausgeber denken sollte, an der Probe genügen lassen sollte, oder, ob man Ursache habe, weitere Beyträäge zu verlangen?”.