NEW FRAGMENTS OF UNKNOWN BIBLICAL COMMENTARIES FROM THE “EUROPEAN GENIZAH”

Simcha Emanuel

Most of the fragments uncovered in the “European Genizah” come from works which were very popular in central Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. These fragments include Scripture and its commentaries, prayer books, the Talmud and its commentaries, and the popular legal codes. Most of these works were already available to us both in printed editions and in tens of complete manuscripts. Thus, the novelties of the European Genizah are not many. Nevertheless, the European Genizah has preserved remnants of a considerable number of books which had been entirely lost to us, and which are not available to us in any complete manuscript. Some of these books were already known to us by way of the references made to them by various medieval scholars, whereas others were altogether unknown before they were uncovered in the European Genizah. In this article I will discuss two new biblical commentaries, one of which was previously known, while the other is completely new.

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Manuscript Oxford, Ms. Heb. c. 66 contains dozens of unrelated passages, some of which apparently originated in the Cairo Genizah, while others come from the European Genizah. The Bodleian’s listings contain no information concerning the source of the passages, but the precise folds of the parchment pages, which at times were sliced with a sharp knife and along straight lines, clearly indicate that these pages had been used in bookbinding; after being detached from the books, they made their way to the Bodleian.

The first two pages of this manuscript (a single folio page) were obviously used in the binding of a book. The binder trimmed the edges of the page so they would suit his purpose, and the sharp creases in the page also eloquently attest to its new use. When I began to peruse this fragment, I found this sentence in its beginning:
On the Sabbath, things more pleasing than gold must be expounded [...] the people must be assembled on the Sabbath, to hear sermons.

I immediately recognized this sentence, which is taken from the commentary on the prayerbook by Rabbi Elazar of Worms. I realized that before me was an additional copy of the commentary on the prayerbook by this sage.

Rabbi Elazar of Worms (who was born around the year 1160) wrote an extensive commentary on the prayerbook, some of which is based on literal explanations, while the rest employs esoteric teachings, as was the practice of the Hassidei Ashkenaz. The several manuscripts of this commentary differ significantly from one another, attesting the author’s repeated revisions of his book over the course of at least thirty years. He wrote the first edition of his commentary circa 1189, and the last, not before 1218. I understood that the fragment at Oxford contained a bit of his commentary on Pesukei de-Zimrah, the chapters of Psalms recited at the beginning of the morning Shalḥarit service.

As, however, I continued to read the fragment in Oxford, I began having my doubts. What was written on the first page of the fragment appears word for word in the commentary on the prayerbook by R. Elazar of Worms, but I could not find the contents of the second page in his commentary, and a lengthy study revealed my error. This passage is part of a composition written by R. Elazar of Worms, but it does not belong to his commentary on the prayerbook. The first page of the folio at Oxford contains his commentary on Psalms 19–20, and his commentary on Psalms 23–24 appears on the second page. Several additional pages between these two are missing. My initial error in identifying the passage was due to the fact that R. Elazar wrote two commentaries, on the prayerbook and on the book of Psalms, while copying entire pages from one to the other. The Jewish prayers include whole chapters from the book of Psalms, thus enabling R. Elazar to use entire passages from one commentary in the other. I have written

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1 Pirushey Siddur ha-Tefilah La-Rokeach, ed. M. Hershler and Y. A. Hershler (Jerusalem: Makhon ha-Ray Hershler, 1992), 81.