S.J. Pearce


One could take a number of approaches to the multi-faceted figure of Judah ben Saul ibn Tibbon (b. Granada, 1120). He was the product of an Arabic Jewish culture, religiously Jewish, but steeped in Andalusian-Islamic cultural values. Judah ibn Tibbon became a leading translator of Arabic works into Hebrew in Provence, where he settled in 1150. Several members of his family became Hebrew translators, beginning with his son Samuel ibn Tibbon. Among Judah ibn Tibbon’s original works we find a letter written to Samuel in the genre of an ethical will (Hebrew: ṣevaʾah). The ethical will was a carefully composed document, rather than a death-bed testament, and transmitted personal, religious, and moral values. By Judah’s time the notion of bequeathing such values in written form was not unknown in Hebrew literature. The earliest extant Hebrew ethical will as an independent document has been traced to Eleazar [the Great] ben Isaac Kalonymus, penned in Germany c.1050. However, Judah’s ethical will is unmatched by any earlier models in terms of length, breadth, and style.

Pearce’s study looks to a literary model for Judah’s ethical will. Pearce examines Judah’s letter in light of the Arabic genre of ethical will, the waṣīya. This is the main contribution of this rich, illuminating study. Pearce is not the first to notice parallels between Judah’s ṣevaʾah and the genre of waṣīya. As early as 1891 Israel Abrahams suggested that the high importance accorded to the genre of waṣīya among Andalusian Muslims may have played some part in its dissemination among the Jews (Pearce does not cite Abraham’s article). More recently, James T. Robinson has pointed to the waṣīya as a literary model for Judah’s will. Nonetheless, the bulk of scholarship on Judah ibn Tibbon has emphasized his place in Hebrew letters and the history of Hebrew translation.
Pearce’s study shows that while Judah physically left Islamic Andalusia, it never left him. Pearce examines how the ethical will, along with Judah’s translations, “advocate for the cultural prestige of the Arabic language and the Andalusi culture from which it emerged” (9). Ultimately, Pearce shows how Judah’s œuvre is not merely a product of his Andalusian background but a conscious effort to disseminate [Judaeo-] Arabic linguistic and literary attitudes among the Hebrew-reading Jews of Provence—beginning with his own son. The subsequent history of this program shows that Judah was in some measure successful. Not only did Samuel himself become an accomplished translator of Arabic to Hebrew, best known for his translation of Maimonides’s Guide of the Perplexed, but Samuel’s own son Moses and other members of the Ibn Tibbon family became translators as well. Knowledge of Arabic would be prized by the learned classes of Provence Jewry for centuries to follow. Beyond translation of texts, Judah’s promotion of Arabic meant that later Jewish thinkers in Provence adapted into Hebrew the literary forms characteristic of Arabo-Islamic literature “to serve the needs of the Jewish population through a kind of cultural translation, an adaptation of a mode of thinking and a transformation of the target language” (29; emphasis in the original).

Chapters in the book focus on different aspects of this cultural translation. Chapter One explores Judah’s professional translations, arguing that Judah’s preference for literal translation, rather than sense-for-sense translation, illustrates the value placed on cultural and linguistic Arabization of Hebrew; literal translation “conveys the sociocultural prestige of the source language” (37). While this is significant, it is unclear how this aspect of Judah’s program relates to the ethical will.

Chapter Two examines Judah’s description of his Arabic library within the will, which Pearce juxtaposes against the close relationship between biographical and bibliographical writing that exists in Arabic and Islamicate literature. Here the connection with the ethical will is stronger, as Pearce quotes Judah’s specific instructions for cataloguing, storing, and lending books. Pearce productively and successfully argues that the will can also be read as the catalogue of Judah’s own library as reassembled in Provence.

Chapter Three builds upon Judah’s instruction that Samuel should read the Bible in Arabic “on every Sabbath ... because it will be useful to you in developing your Arabic vocabulary and in translation, should you wish to become a translator” (87). The author reads this passage as advice for Samuel to “instrumentalize at least a portion, if not all, of his devotional weekly reading, thereby closely connecting the notion of Bible reading to that of pursuing translation” (87), emphasizing the depiction of biblical Arabic as both a devotional language and a professional language within the will.