MEDIEVAL KARAITE METHODS OF TRANSLATING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE INTO ARABIC

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I. Introduction

In his classic analysis of *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York and London, 1981), Robert Alter defined the methods of fiction innovated by the biblical narrators as emanating from their notion of "indeterminacy" in the creation of meaning. In his words, "meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature was conceived as a process, requiring continual revision—both in the ordinary sense and in the etymological sense of seeing-again—continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in the information provided".2

The notion that the meaning of a biblical story lies in the open-ended process of its reading, rather than in a fixed form of message it may contain, becomes particularly focused in the art of those who translate it into another tongue. This may be due to the nature of the translation medium, which in itself consists of a process whereby meaning is decoded in one language system and then recoded in another language system.3 Translation is therefore a form of linguistic activity

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1 This article is based on a revised paper with the same title originally presented at the 26th annual conference of the American Association for Jewish Studies in Boston, in December 1994. I later had the opportunity of discussing its topics at the Colloquium on Medieval Jewish Bible Exegesis, held under the auspices of the European Association for Jewish Studies in Oxford, in July 1996. I am grateful to the colleagues who have participated in these forums for lending me their fine insights and helpful observations, which have contributed to the paper's crystallization in written form.


which has a basic affinity with the "process requiring continual revision" that distinguishes biblical narrative. Moreover, the mere task of translating a sacred text such as the Hebrew Bible turns all those who undertake it, almost inadvertently, into its closest readers. Through practising their craft, Bible translators of all periods developed a heightened sensibility towards the literary devices by which its indeterminacy of meaning is formed. 4 Those who translated it into a cognate Semitic language such as Arabic were in a different and often advantageous position to that of those translating it into a non-cognate language.

The Jewish exegetes who shared in the spoken tongue and intellectual milieu of medieval Arabic culture were able to draw from a rich repository of syntactic and lexical structures common to both Arabic and Hebrew in their Arabic Bible versions. 5 As translators they endeavoured to use the hidden or apparent connections between these cognate systems of language when rendering specific features of the Hebrew source text in the Arabic translated text. 6 They also had the additional advantage of working within an accepted framework of a bilingual, and often trilingual, Semitic culture. Their audience, which was made up of laymen and scholars, was generally able to understand Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic in various degrees of fluency.

Semantics of Biblical Language (Oxford, 1961, repr. London, 1987). Barr suggests the concept of "transculturation" (p. 4) in order to express the necessary bridging of the cultural as well as the linguistic gap between the source and target languages, particularly with regard to the translation of Scripture.


5 Their language is known as Judaeo-Arabic, which is essentially Classical Arabic transcribed into Hebrew letters, yet influenced by vernacular and other features typical of the Middle Arabic employed by the Jews; see J. Blau, The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 1-50. For a survey of Jewish Arabic translations, see S.W. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews 6 (New York, 1958), pp. 263-72; On the translation traditions which developed amongst Christians and Jews in the Near East throughout the 9th and 10th centuries, see M. Polliack, The Karate Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation (Leiden, 1997), pp. 3-22, and the bibliography cited there.

6 For a systematic study of their translation methods, see Polliack, pp. 93-277.