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A Medieval Spanish Translation of Avot: Genizah Fragments

As is well known, the reading of the *Sayings of the Fathers*¹, unlike other Mišnaic treatises, is not restricted to the House of Study: "Aboth is now, and for many centuries has been, included in the Jewish prayer-book, and it is placed there in order to provide matter for edification in connection with worship. The prayer book contains, besides prayers and hymns (piyutim), passages from the Talmud for memorial purposes. But no other tractate or complete work of any kind, apart from those just mentioned, is included in the prayer book. To Aboth alone is that distinction given. The custom of reading it otherwise than in the study of the Mišnah began in Sura, where it was read (or recited) on Sabbaths, after the Minḥah service. This was done at first only in the Colleges; but the practice was adopted in the Synagogues, and was really established there by the eleventh century of the common era"².

This almost platitudinous statement bears repeating: it explains the large number of mss; 236 Genizah fragments, 31 Mišnah mss and 61 ms sidurim were available to one student of the Hebrew text of the treatise and the list does not, by any means, claim to be complete. It also explains the extreme variations in the textual tradition. It is also the custom of reading it on the Sabbath afternoon which explains its large later printed

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² R. Travers Herford, *Pirke Aboth*, New York 1930, 13 cf. also L. Zunz, *Die Ritus des Synagogalen Gottesdienstes geschichtlich entwickelt*, Berlin 1919, 85-86, who cites the Tur as evidence that in Spain it was read in the morning (Tur, I, 292) and Abudarham to show that it was read between Passover and Pentecost.
diffusion and the large number of printed copies of Judeo–Spanish translations both within Judeo–Spanish prayerbooks and as separate volumes. These translations were well–known to bibliographers from the XIXth c. and onward; dozens of editions of these printed books were recorded time and again by the cataloguers of the larger collections: Kayserling, for example, had mentioned editions of Amsterdam 1664, 1683, 1701, 1712, 1739, 1805, Vienna 1820, etc. ³.

In Amsterdam, for example, the congregations of Sephardim had the custom of reading the six chapters of the treatise between Passover and Pentecost. And students of the Sephardi school of Amsterdam in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries used to sing them at the Bimah as part of their training. Printers had therefore the double incentive of publishing a textbook and a sacred text.

The Advertencia at the beginning of various editions of these Perakim informs us of these customs. Of various possible editions the Amsterdam 1724 may be cited: “Advertencias al deboto Lector: Acostumbran nuestras congregaciones la Pascua de Pesah hasta la de Sebouoth leer... los Perakim que tradujo el docto Moseh Belmonte en lengua Española y yo lo belue a estampar con la enmienda y curiosidad posible, para la exercitacion en la Tebah cantar estos Sacros Himnos los discipulos de Abraham Chavez Rabi del Quarto Medras de las Escuelas en Amsterdam de Adar Año 5484”⁴.

The translator Moseh Belmonte has not been studied and yet scholars


⁴ This edition is the sixth issue of this particular translation: Paraprasis / Caldayca / En los Cantares de / Selomoh, con el texto / Hebrayco, y Ladino / traduzida en lengua / Espanola / Impreso en / Amsterdam. / En Casa, y a costo de / Yshak / de / Cordova / Anno. 5434. / sexta impre. The Advertencia is on p. 6 and the text of Avot on pp. 93–167. This edition is a purely random additional point of reference. Obviously, the custom is earlier (see Zunz above n. 2): The Amsterdam 1664 edition has a similar mention.
have been lately attracted to the study of these translations. Sephiha, for example, has studied portions of these Judeo–Spanish printed translations emphasizing their close connection to the Hebrew original. O. Schwarzwald Rodrigue’s laborious research on the printed versions deserves particular mention.

And yet, the search for an archetypal, original translation, that is – one translation that is close chronologically to the beginnings of Spanish romance has not yielded results. This contrasts with the case of another Jewish language. In Yiddish there are known copies; Taylor had noted some mss of Yiddish translations of Avot and there are some Genizah fragments of an Yiddish translation. Had Avot been merely another Miṣnaic treatise, this phenomenon would hardly surprise us; though there are citations of the Talmud in the Castilian romance, no medieval ms of the Miṣnah in Spanish is known. But it is important to remember that, as has been noted above, Avot had a much wider currency. The later descriptions of Spanish Jews reading the treatise are preceded by medieval ones, one should not forget that it is the Tur and Abudarham who are usually cited to show the medieval currency of this custom: two eminently Spanish authorities.⁵

Nevertheless, one must admit that there are a number of writers who have put forward the hypothesis that there are no examples of Spanish translations of the Jewish liturgy from the Middle Ages. H. P. Solomon writes: “I do not believe that there was a demand for Spanish language prayerbooks among the Jews of pre-expulsion Spain”⁶. I Revah, though somewhat obliquely, implied the same.⁷ P. Naveh has maintained that: “Bisher wurden keine liturgischen Texte identifiziert, die für judische Gemeinden in Spanien vor 1492 in der Landessprache niedergeschrieben

⁵ On Mosseh Belmonte see Steinschneider loc. cit. (n. 3) and Kayserling, loc. cit. (n. 3). For Sephiha’s work see, for example, his study of the first two verses of Avot in Judeo–Spanish calque in his Le Ladino, Paris 1979, t. 2, 420–445; see also his bibliography ibid. O. Schwawzardg.) Rodrig, “Typologie des Traductions du Traite des Peres en Ladino” (Hebrew) Massorot 11 (1986), 103–118. The author was kind enough to mention my discovery on p. 104. The fragment, however, is not at the British Museum. For the Yiddish translations see Taylor, op. cit., vol. 2. The Yiddish Genizah fragments in S. Hopkins, “A Genizah fragment of Pirke Avot in Old Yiddish” (Hebrew), Tarbiz 111, 3 (1983), 459–468. The citations of the Talmud in Castilian romance I refer to are in the BN (Madrid) ms of the Memorial of 1416 written by maestre Juan el Viejo. See E. Gutwirth “The Memorial of Maestre Juan el Viejo”, Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Divison B., vol. 1, Jerusalem 1986, 129–134.

⁶ H. P. Salomon, “Was there a Spanish Translation of Sephardi Prayers before 1552”, American Sephardi, VI (1973), 79–90, 81.

wurden. Das reiche material in Handschriften und Drucken stammt aus der Zeit nach der Vertreibung...” 8.

According to Schwarzwald 9 the later, printed, Jewish translations in Latin characters were written not by Jews but by conversos who formed an aristocracy “proud of its pure Spanish language”. These later printed translations deserve, according to Schwarzwald, to be classified with the Jewish Ladino translations because of their literalism. I find it difficult to adapt this reasoning to Medieval Spanish texts. Whatever the evidence for a converso provenance for later printed translations in Latin characters, it is difficult to document such a differentiation for the Middle Ages; no evidence has been put forward to prove that Jews could not read Latin characters and that conversos were not able to read Hebrew characters. This fact should be sufficient to end speculations as to the provenance of such texts in Latin characters. But I have collected elsewhere 10 some examples, out of those available, to show that conversos could and did read Hebrew and that non–converted Jews used Spanish translations of the liturgy to a larger extent than had been allowed for in previous studies.

Another text which may cause to revise the hypothetical tendency to minimize the extent of liturgic translations before the Ferrara Orden of 1552, is the subject of the following lines. The ms fragment belongs to the Taylor–Schechter collection of Genizah fragments housed at the University Library, Cambridge. It forms part of the recently conserved Addition Series; it bears the call mark AS 209.256. It is a fragment on paper, somewhat stained and mutilated, which measures 100mm by 150mm, with writing on both sides, in Latin characters in a Spanish gothic hand of the XVth c., probably its second half 11. The pages contain 22 lines each. The misnayot are not numbered but they are divided by a sign. An examination of its content leads to its identification as part of the fourth chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers.

A possible explanation for the existence of such Spanish fragments in the Genizah dating from before the expulsion may lie in the current of emmigration to Egypt and the Holy Land in the XVth century which has been increasingly well–documented in recent publications 12.

9 Loc. cit. (n. 5), 100.
11 Compare the late Gothic hand of plates 96, 99, 100, 101 and pp. LXII, LIX, of Zacarías García Villada, Paleografía Española, II (1923).
Although the main purpose of these lines is to make this ms available to scholars, some remarks may be made concerning its main characteristics. The later, better known, printed translations have not yet been made the subject of as extensive a study as has been devoted to the Pentateuch 13. Nevertheless they may serve to bring to light, by way of contrast, some of the features of the medieval ms translation. To this effect the earliest known printed translation, that printed in the Libro / de Oracyiones / de todo el año / traduzido del / Hebrayco de verbo a verbo de antiguos exemplares: por quanto los ympressos / fasta aqui / estan errados: con muchas / cosas acrescentades de / nuevo segun pro la / siguiente tabla se / muestra. 5312 De la Criacion / a 14 de Sivan / impresso pro yndustria y—despensa / de Yom Tob Atilas hijo / de Levi Atilas (Ferrara 1552, 8º) – as well as the Amsterdam 5434 version 14 will be used for comparison.

**Literal Character**

A confrontation of these texts suggests that the language of the ms is less of a “slavish” calque of the Hebrew than the printed version. This would seem to confirm what has been observed by Morreale 15 when contrasting the medieval ms translations of the Moses Canticle with their later printed counterpart. Similar remarks have been made by Amigo 16 as a result of a confrontation of the medieval romanceamientos of the Pentateuch with the Constantinople Bible of 1547.

**Use of the copula** 17

Later Judeo Spanish calque, Ladino, is characterized by the omission of the copula (which is absent, of course, in the Hebrew). This feature, for example, tends to differentiate the Constantinople Pentateuch from such medieval versions as E3 and E4.

The ms supplies the copula where the printed versions omit it; thus (recto, line 1–2) **aquel es el que es r rico el que el es alegre**; (recto, line

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4) bienaventurado eres; (recto, line 6) bueno es para ty; (recto, line 15) del mandamiento es mandamiento; (verso, line 13) su cuerpo es onrrado; (verso, line 15) su cuerpo es menospreciado; (verso line 22) el mismo disse no se. Ferrara, on the other hand, omits the copula: Qual este el rico? el alegante con su parte; bienaventurado tu; bien a ti; el precio de la encomendancia encomendanca; su cuerpo honrrado; su cuerpo abilitado. b. the present participle: the apocopated present participle is one of the salient morphologic characteristics of the later printed ladinamientos of the Bible 18. This holds true for the later printed translations of the Ethics of the Fathers as well. The medieval ms of Pirke Avot which I found does not show this feature, and neither do the mss of the Biblias Romanceadas studied by Amigo 19. Thus in the ms we find: el que gana ciudat (recto, line 1) and not prendien ciudad as in Ferrara; el es alegre (recto, line 2); el alegran-se; el que onrra (recto, line 7) F: el honrran; (fij) o de baroca disse (recto, line 19) but F: hijo de Berokah dizien, etc.

Lexic Peculiarities

1. Dio

The use of Dio instead of Dios is a common feature of late Judeo Spanish vernacular 20. It is explained as a medieval survival. The documentation for this is not as widespread as one might imagine. There is little medieval evidence to show that Jews avoided other forms of reference to the deity. True, Teyssier 21 has collected quite a few instances of references to a usage of Dio but these come from anti-Jewish or anti-converso sources bound by the traditions of the satiric genre; when a Spanish or Portuguese satirist mocked Jewish or converso linguistic usage he very often used the same words as targets of satire. This is not to deny that Dio was used: the testament of don Juda de Alba de Tormes (1410) contains the phrase "quel Dio guarde de mal" 22. But the constant use of Dio and total

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19 Ibid., 57, 3.3.3., B.
20 Cf. e.g.R. Lapesa, Historia de la Lengua Española, Madrid 1965, 338.
exclusion of Dios would seem to be a later feature. Thus el saday (Gen. 7, 1) is translated as dio abastado in the Constantinople Pentateuch of 1547 but as dios abastado in E3, the XVth c. Bible which is divided into Jewish sections, is faithful to the Hebrew, has a Jewish vocabulary and betrays influence of the Jewish tradition. And the Respuesta de los Rrabyes, probably of Pero Ferruz, in the Cancionero de Baena, which is supposed to parody Jewish usage, has Dio but also Dios and Adonay. Ms C of the Proverbios Morales, does not adopt Dio either, but uniformly uses Dios. Where F has criador, the medieval Genizah ms translation has Dios with a clearly discernible s at the end: (recto, line 20) nombre de dios (verso, line 1) nombre de dios.

2. Agora

The ms has descubierto agora sea su (1–21) where F has ...se vengan del en descubierto, quien erran quien soberian. The word agora, common in Judeo–Spanish dialects, has attracted some comment from linguists who attribute it to archaism or Portuguese influence. Here it is used as ya sea.

3. Ambezar/aprender/mostrar/deprender

Ferrara translates Avot 4/Ribi Yismael dizien, el deprendien con yntencion de abezar abastecen en su mano para depender y para abezar. The Genizah ms (verso, 2–4) has rrebi ysmael su fijo dise cualquiera que aprende con intencion de... mostrar daranle pode par aprender mostrar y faser. In Deut. 6/7, the Constantinople Bible translates weśinantam as meldarlasas; while E4 and E7 use the verb mostrar. E119 has abezarlas. It may be said that our text agrees with those medieval versions which tend to attempt to be intelligible. Again it shows that a medieval text does not necessarily need to use the “archaic” ambezar.

4. Dise/dizien

As Mišnaic style demands, the word omer is very frequently used.

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23 Amigo, op. cit., 37, 77 and n. 37. Corominas gives no examples of the usage.
27 Cf. Amigo, op. cit., and n. 68.
Later, printed, Judeo-Spanish translations use the apocopated present participle *dizien* in translating it. This apocopated present participle existed in Old Spanish especially in Aragon.  

According to Sephiha, the Levantine translations of Avot are characterized by the use of *ke ansi dize el pacuk* to translate *šene’emar*. Ferrara has *como es dicho*. The Genizah ms has (recto 3) *asi como dise* to translate *šene’emar* and *dise* to translate (verso, line 5) ’*omer* while Ferrara has *dizien* (4/7).

**Orthographic/phonologic traits**

Some of the traits of the ms correspond to medieval characteristics preserved in later Judeo-Spanish dialects, e.g. *agora*, *fijo*. It would seem useful, however, to compare it with its contemporary romance. Initial *f* is preserved in *faser* (recto, line 14); *fijo* (verso, line 2); *fagas* (verso, line 5). This may be a ‘dialectal’ feature in modern Judeo-Spanish, but when dealing with this type of text rather than pointing to later Salonikan usage, it may be more useful to point to the fact that in Old Spanish initial *f* was preserved from the end of the visigothic age. By the XVth c. there was hesitancy between the literary initial *f* and the popular *h*.

Multiple *rr* before vowel at the beginning of a word: (recto, line 2) *rrico*; (verso, line 2) *rribi*; (verso, line 5) *rebi*; (verso, line 12) *rebi*; and also after *n*: (recto, line 7) *onrrado*; (recto, line 7) *onrra*; (verso, line 13) *onrrado*, seems to be closer to the norm in medieval Spanish where it is regional dialects (such as Galician) that have singular *r*. Mss M, N and E (XVth c.) of the *Proverbios Morales* share this feature with our ms. Final *t* in *cibdat* (recto, line 1) contrasts with more modern *ciudad* in the later translations (e.g. Ferrara, 159 verso); *prendien ciudad*. The use of initial *h* in the printed versions: *honrado*, *honra*, *huyen*, *hombre*, contrasts with the lack of ‘inorganic’ *h* in the ms: (recto, line 7) *onrrado*; (recto, line 7) *onrra*; (recto, line 17) *omilde*; (verso, line 13) *onrrado*.

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28 Cf. n. 18.
30 Lapesa, *op. cit.*, 37, 7.
31 Llubera, *op. cit.*, 37, 7.
THE HEBREW COMPONENT

Transcription — The ms (recto, line 19) transliterates Baroca and the printed version Berokah. The ms reading corresponds to the vocalization with qamaṣ under the beth in the 1610 Siddur of Shabetai Sofer used by Taylor. The ms omits final h.

The Ferrara version transliterates Rebi, the Amsterdam version Ribi while the ms transliterates rrebi. Taylor cites evidence, including Greek inscriptions, for ribi as the more archaic form. Elijah Levitah mentions the shewa vocalization as not unknown in his time. The ms has Yosef for Hebrew Yosi while Ferrara has Yose and so does Amsterdam. Taylor does not record a reading Yosef.

The ms fragment has Yismael su fijo (verso, line 2) (verso line 17) while Amsterdam has Ribi Yismael and Ferrara Rebi Yismael in Avot 4/6 reflecting variants in the Hebrew ms tradition where the Miṣna text published by Lowe includes ‘his son’. It may be noted that the Ferrara and Amsterdam text have the longer version in Avoth 4/7: Rebi Sadok dizien, no te apartes de la vniuersidad: y non fagas a ti mismo como ordenantes los juezes, which is omitted by the ms. The Genizah fragment obviously had a Hebrew vorlge of the same family as the Roman Mahzor, Miṣna ms and Siddur of 1527 (cited by Baer) which omit the phrase translated as no fagas a ti mismo como ordenantes los juezes. Miṣna 4/3: ‘El Era dizien no seas menosprecian...’ is missing. This same passage is not included in Avot de Rabbi Nathan; also missing is ‘Rabi Sadoq...’, which is also missing from the Munich ms (see Taylor, II, 156).

CONCLUSION

In the latest studies on the ladinamientos from the XVIth century and onwards, the tendency seems to be to emphasize the continuity uniting medieval and later translations. This accords with a general, not always documented, belief in an isolated Sephardi Jewry which preserved medieval traditions (ballads, proverbs, language) almost intact: this to such an extent that XVIth century and later translations of Bible, Siddur, etc., are believed to provide sufficient evidence for a reconstruction of an ‘archetypal’ medieval text.

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32 Cf. Taylor, op. cit., 2, 155, 7.
33 ibid., 2, 81.
34 ibid., 2, 156, 8, 63.
35 ibid., 2, 156, 9.
I have argued elsewhere that it may be debated whether this isolation was indeed absolute and that, given the relative high level of acquaintance with these texts amongst Jews of various social and cultural strata in medieval Spain, it is doubtful whether one may postulate one archetypal medieval Bible translation 36.

Here my main purpose has been to make the text of the Genizah fragment of a hitherto unknown medieval Spanish translation of Avot available to scholars. But its analysis seems to confirm the doubts as to the 'fossil-like' quality of Sephardi Jewry expressed elsewhere.

APPENDIX NO. 1

T–S AS 209.256 recto

1 en su espiritu que el que gana cibdat aquel es el que
2 es r rico el que el es alegre con lo que ha en su
3 p(arte) asi como dis del trabajo de tus pal
4 (mas) quando comieres bienaventurado eres
5 (b)ueno es para ty bienaventurado eres en
6 (este) mundo & bueno es para ty en el otro mun
7 (do)–(aqu)el es onrrado el que onrra las criaturas a
8 ........(c)omo dis los que me (onrr)an a elleos he
9 ................menospresian ................my. .......
10 dos. ............................... ....................
11 Ben A)say dis sey aceroso (?) en el mandamiento
12 ..................vc? del pecado por quanto por el
13 ..........................(man)damiento requiere faser manda
14 (miento). ........(p)ecar requiere faser pecado & por
15 ..........................do del mandamiento es mandamiento &
16 ..........................mucho sey omilde que el fin
18 ..........................(gusa)no
19 .....................(fi)jo de baroca dis todo aquel
20 ..........................nombre de dios en escondido
21 ..........................(de)scubierto quien sea su
22 ..........................por su voluntad su vi. . .

verso

1 el menospresciamento del nombre de dios
2 rrebi ysmael su fijo dise qualquiera que apren
3 de con intencion de a(?) el(?) mostrar daranle po
4 de(rio(?)) para aprender & mostrar & faser
5 rrebi cadoc disse non la fagas coron(a) (para?)
6 magnificarte con ella ni acuela pa(ra)....
7 tar con ella & asi desia hilel aquel.....
8 sa por el po(?) corona sera cortad(o)
9 disse que (aquel)l que se apro(vecha) (de pa?)
10 labras de la ley priva su vid(a) del (mundo?)
11 perdurable
12 rrebi yocèf disse que todo (a)quel (que onra la?)
13 ley su cuerpo ed onrrado (sobre las cria?)
14 turas & todo aquel que menos(prescia) (le ley?)
15 su cuerpo es menospresci(ado) (por las?)
16 criaturas
17 rrebi ysmael su fì(x)o dis(e)....
18 juysio de sy roydo &.....
19 & juramento falso & el. . . . . . . .
20 ro al consejo es loco &.. . . . . . .
21 coracon
22 el mismo dise no se(as)

APPENDIX NO. 2

Avot IV/19

Ferrara Orden 1552

Hijo de zoma dizien qual este el sabio? el deprendien de todo hom-bre, como es dicho de todos mis abezantes entendi que tus testamentos fabla a mi. Qual este el barragan? el sojuzgan a su apetite como es dicho mejor luengo de furores; mas que barragan. Y podestan en su voluntad mas que prendien ciudad. Qual este el rico? el alegranse con su parte como es dicho lazerio de tus palmas quando comerias; bienauenturado tu y bien a ti: bien auenturado tu enel mundo el ese y bien a ti en el mundo el venidero. Qual este el honrrado? el honrran a las criaturas, come es dicho, que mis honrrantes honrrare, y mis menos preciantes seran desonrrados.

Hijo de Azay dizien see corrien a la encomendaca ligera y huyen del pecado: que encomendanca acarrean encomendanca y pecado acarrean pecado.
Que el precio de la encomendanca encomendanca y el precio del pecado pecado.

El era dizien no seas menosprecián a ningun hombre y no seas contrarian a ninguna cosa que no ay hombre que no a el hora y no a ti cosa que no a ella lugar.

Rebi Levitas varon de yabne dizien, mucho mucho see baxo de esprito delate todo hobre q esperanca de varon gusano.

Rebi Yohana hijo de Boerokah dizie: todo el abiltan nombre del criador en encubierto se vengan del en descubierto quier erran quier soberuian en abiltamiento del criador.

Rebi Ysmael dizien el deprendien con yntincio de abezar abastecen en su mano para deprender y para abezar y el deprendien con yntincion de fazer abastecen en su mano para deprender y para abezar y para guardar y para fazer.

Rabi Zadok dizie no te apares de la vniuersidad y no fagas a ti mismo como ordenantes los juezes y no fagas corona para te engrandecer con ella y no destral para comer del y assi era Hillel dizien y quien se sirve co corona de la ley tajado vees aqui todo aprovechanse de palabras de ley toma sus vidas del mundo.

Reby Yose dizien todo el honrran a la ley su cuerpo honrrado sobre las criaturas y todo abiltan a la ley su cuerpo abiltado sobre las criaturas. Erebi Ysmael hijo de Yoseph dizien el vedan a si mismo del juizio descargan de el malquerencia y robo y juramiento vano y el alteran su coracon en demostracion loco malo y alterado de espriito.