

R. NISSIM'S *BOOK OF COMFORT* AND THE PROBLEM OF SCRIPT IN JUDAEO-ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS

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IN 1933, J. Obermann edited R. Nissim Gaon's *Book of Comfort* in its Arabic original.¹ The method of the edition was minutely examined by D. H. Baneth,² who also made many judicious remarks on many details of the text. Ob had to rely upon a single manuscript, using as an aid the medieval Hebrew translation³ and R. Nissim's rabbinical sources. So did also H. Z. Hirschberg, who in 1954 published a new Hebrew translation of the work with an extensive introduction.⁴ Our fund of knowledge completely changed with the discoveries of S. Abramson,⁵ who with his usual vast erudition furnished us with copious parallels from a number of other manuscripts. Accordingly W. M. Brinner, who is preparing an English translation of the *Book of Comfort* for the Yale Judaica Series, will be able to establish a much sounder base for the text which he is translating.

L. Nemoy, as the editor of the Yale Judaica Series, read the first draft of Brinner's translation and published some important emendations of Ob's edition.⁶ These emendations, however, were only the inner circle of his stimulating paper. Its outer circle constituted Nm's view, repeatedly expressed,⁷ that there exists scarcely one Judaeo-Arabic text that does

¹ *Studies in Islam and Judaism, the Arabic Original of Ibn Shāhīn's Book of Comfort* (New Haven Yale Oriental Series, Researches, XVII) (henceforth Ob).

² *Kiryath Sepher*, XI, 350-57 (1934) (henceforth Bn); the importance of Baneth's paper stands in inverse proportion to its small extent.

³ Entitled *Hibbār yāphē min ha-y-yāshū'ā*.

⁴ Jerusalem (Sifriyat Meqorot, 15).

⁵ *R. Nissim Gaon Libelli Quinque*, Jerusalem 1965 (henceforth Abr).

⁶ "The Factor of Script in the Textual Criticism of Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts", *JQR*, LXVI (1976), 148-59 (henceforth Nm).

⁷ See the literature adduced by Nm, p. 148, n. 1, and cf. *infra*.

not exhibit some internal evidence of having had, in the successive chain of its manuscript transmission, at least one codex written not, as usual, in Hebrew square characters, but in a cursive Arabic naskhî script. Many mistakes, in Nm's view, can only be explained as misreadings of partly or wholly undotted naskhî script.

In the following, I shall first make some remarks on Nm's emendations of Ob's text. Later on I shall attempt to examine Nm's view that Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts in Arabic characters were much more usual than generally assumed.⁸

Two general remarks on Nm's emendations will not be out of place. First, it is a pity that Nm did not utilize Bn's judicious remarks. Even less fortunate, in my opinion, is the fact that Nm took Ob as his starting point. Abr, in the introduction to the parallel texts discovered by him (see especially pp. 365 ff.), has convincingly shown that the manuscript upon which Ob had exclusively based his edition reflects a late version. Ms. *Ḳâfiḥ*, the only extensive other manuscript, exhibits, to be sure, late Yemenite features, yet typologically it reflects a more original version, as also exhibited by the Geniza fragments. Therefore, it is more expedient to base any treatment of the text of the *Book of Comfort* on Ms. *Ḳâfiḥ* (of course, taking into account its late features as well), and the same applies, in my opinion, to its translation.

We shall now proceed to Nm's emendations (pp. 150-56).

p. 150: title: Nm's attempt to reconstruct the original Arabic title as *Ta'lif ḥasan fî -l-faraj (ba'da -sh-shidda)*, assuming that the Hebrew translator misread *fî*, written in his *Vorlage* in cursive Muslim-Arabic, as *min* and accordingly translated *ḥibbûr yâphê mê-ha-y-yêshû'â*, is not convincing. Bn (p. 350; see also *ibid.*, n. 1) has clearly demonstrated that not only is *min* against the spirit of the Arabic language, but that it is altogether inconceivable that an Arab author

⁸ E.g., by J. Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic*, Oxford, 1965 (henceforth: Bl), pp. 34 ff.

should call his work *ta'lif hasan*, and he has made the European origin of both *min* and *hibbûr yâphê* quite likely. Moreover, Abr p. 364 has demonstrated that the Arabic title was *'al-faraj ba'da -sh-shidda*. And cf. now S. Abramson, *'Inyânôt b-sifrût hag-ga'ônîm*, Jerusalem 1974, pp. 312 ff.

3, 12: The proposed reading *lam tujibnî* is, no doubt, correct. The Ms. of Ob in fact reads *tujibnî*, and the Geniza fragment Abr p. 505, 16 *falam tujibnî*. Yet for the omission of *lam* one need not assume a naskhî *Vorlage*. Often scribes omit negations; cf. my *Responsa of Maimonides*, I, p. 9, note 6, where the Hebrew translator omitted the translation of *wa-laysa*.

7, 13; 9, 13; 34, 6 and perhaps 83, 10 the emendations are, in fact, easier, if one assumes a naskhî *Vorlage*. Yet Ob's ms. is so replete with deviations from the correct version which cannot be explained by any sort of script in the *Vorlage*, that one should not trace these misreadings back to naskhî script either.

8, 5: *yatruk* is corroborated by 8, 9, further by a Geniza fragment (Abr 431, n. 31) *yatruk li-š-šâlih 'ajrahû*.

9, 1: Nm's proposal *ka-z-zamîn* is corroborated by the Geniza fragment adduced Abr p. 432, n. 36 *b'lzm'n*, to be read *ka-z-zamîn*.

þ. 151: 10, 5: for *šâba* cf. my *A Grammar of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic* (henceforth: Gr), Jerusalem 1961, p. 73, § 70.

11, 9: on the *ẓ* (*z*) in the ms. there is a mark, which perhaps denotes the transposition of this letter before the preceding one, thus corroborating Nm's emendation.

14, 6: One will hardly accept Nm's emendation, since the Geniza fragment cited Abr p. 437, n. 63 reads *faqâl 'byh* as well; for particulars v. Abr p. 68, n. 3.

16, 1: Bn p. 355 has already inserted *qâl* in a similar way, yet without crossing out *fî*.

26, 12: Ob proposed to interpret *k'n* as *ka-'anna*. He did not, however, realize (nor did Nm) that both in Classical Arabic and in the dialects *ka-'an(na)* may introduce an interrogative clause (see C. Landberg, *Études sur les dialectes*

de l'Arabie meridionale, II, Dathînah, Leiden, 1905-13, pp. 483, 484; this usage of *ka-'an(na)* is not recorded in the *Wörterbuch der klassischen arabischen Sprache*, ed. Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, s.v.). Translate accordingly, without any emendation *ka-'an(na) hâhunâ 'ilâh li-l-'âlam*, "has the world any god?"

27, 1: I would rather emend *llh* into *lh 'l'*, assuming some sort of haplogy and reading *wa-'ayya shay'in ra'ayta mina -d-dunyâ tasjudu lahû 'illâ lahû famun wa-lâ yatakallamu*, "and what worldly object of worship have you seen but that it has a mouth yet cannot speak?."

33, 6: cf. Abr 374.

þ. 152: 34, 3: So already Bn 355.

34, 6: Bn 355 suggested to read *thamar* instead of 'amr.

34, 9, 11: The Geniza fragment cited Abr 445, n. 43 in fact reads *qâlû*.

35, 10: I would tentatively suggest that the *Vorlage* of Ob ran as follows: *ja'alahâ fi mindîlihî wa-tarakahâ fi kummihî* (i.e., the jewel was in a handkerchief which he kept in his sleeve, as against the headkerchief of the other versions) *xashiyyatan mina -l-yahûdî lâ yatrûkûhû fi -l-bayti li'allâ yahtâla 'alayhî*; through homoioteleuton *lâ yatrûkûhû fi -l-bayti* was omitted and then the text adjusted.

39, 9: Similarly already Bn 355-56.

45, 4: The Geniza fragment cited Abr 453, n. 60 in fact reads *bimâ*.

54, 10: Nm's emendation is superfluous; see Abr 457, n. 2.

65, 13: Ob erred in the reading of the ms., which has *libaytinâ*, as realized by Bn 356 and Abr 465.

þ. 153: 66, 10: The text need not be emended, cf. Gr, pp. 217-18, § 337 *wâw*.

72, 2: Nm's emendation is confirmed by Abr 470.

81, 5: The emendation is superfluous, since *wa* may open a circumstantial clause.

82, 10: I tentatively suggest that Ob's *Vorlage* had *fi 'amr 'an jarâ lî* (for this 'an see Gr, p. 234, § 359); the text

was corrupted by a copyist who did not understand this 'an.

84, 10: The text is correct, since *taghayyar* means 'to be grieved'; see Bn 356.

93, 2: The ms. reads *tasagqaf*; see Bn 356.

φ. 154: 95, 2: The emendation, in my opinion, is not necessary.

96, 6: Cf. also Ob 6, 5 *rād* = Abr 428, n. 14 *kād*.

Whereas Nm's reading 99, 3 is quite ingenious, in 108, 10 one will prefer Bn's emendation (356) *zawāl* instead of *hāl*.

109, 7: The ms. reads 'mn', i.e. 'āminnā, "protect us!", the subject being God.

113, 10: The ms. reads *thw'n*. In the two Geniza fragments cited Abr 486, n. 9 the second parallel member is an infinitive, rather than a participle.

128, 6 (sic!, rather than 5): For the usage of *wa-kamā* see Gr, p. 195, § 309; for the construction of *fī, ibid.*, pp. 217-18, § 337 *wāw*.

129, 6: Lane adduces 'irtadda 'alā in a similar sense.

135, 7: 'illā is not used in such a construction. For the correct interpretation of the parallel version cf. Abr 496, n. 7. In Ob's version 'ōnh has to be interpreted as 'a'ānahū rather than 'i'ānat, and the passage translated "may God the Exalted not help it (the inclination to evil) against those who seek salvation from Him (or: against it) and may He remove it from the Sages."

140, 9: Ob exhibits the *lectio difficilior*; for this construction cf. H. Reckendorf, *Arabische Syntax*, Heidelberg, 1921, § 137.2d, cited by Bn 357 (somewhat hesitatingly, presumably because of the *min*-phrase preceding its head), further *ibid.*, § 61.3. For a similar passage (yet without exceptional word order) in Judaeo-Arabic cf. Abraham Maimuni, *Kifāyat al-'ābidîn*, Ms. Bodl. Neubauer 1274, fol. 63a,5, *mā 'ajallahū min tartīb*, "what a venerable ordinance it is!"

141, 1: *tilka* is used here for actualization, in the sense of "certain"; for this phenomenon in Judaeo-Arabic cf. H. Yalon *Memorial Volume*, Ramat-Gan—Jerusalem, 1974, p. 45.

141, 2: For the correct interpretation of *thawâb* as "pious work" see Bn 357.

145, 1-3: Nm's emendations are, it seems, superfluous. The omission of the apodosis is regular in alternative conditional clauses only; otherwise, it is exceptional (see Reckendorf, *ibid.*, pp. 515-16). Therefore, and because even if the penitent refrains from sinning under different circumstances, people would have to follow him everywhere in order to know it, I cannot accept Nm's interpretation. Tentatively I suggest (partly following Nm, and Torrey in Ob, "Addenda et Corrigenda") "this is not compulsory; this is (also) the case, even (*wa-'in*; admittedly, this is the only case I have so far noted in which *wa-'in* serves in this sense, rather than introducing concessive clauses; see Gr, p. 255, § 405) if something different happens and he refrains from (cf. 144, 7, *taraka wa-tâba mimmâ*) the (sins) to which he was addicted (for '*amila bi*, "to be addicted to," see Dozy, *s.v.*; for *fî* replacing *bi* see Gr, p. 118, § 161, *dalet*). But this ("this" referring even to when he eschews sins under different circumstances) implies that people must follow the penitent (everywhere) until this (literally: and this) becomes evident. Yet I do not make this a (compulsory) condition (i.e., if he repents, even without other people realizing it, he nevertheless has proven himself a penitent)."

p. 157: 150, 1: Ob's emendation (n. 4) *rutbatuhû* is much easier (and since the word is somewhat erased, this may even be the reading of the ms.).

150, 7: *minhum*, rather than '*alayhim*, makes the emendation of '*irtadâ* into '*iftaradâ* somewhat precarious.

175, 3: '*axadha*, no doubt, is a *lectio faciliior*. For the meaning of *lazima*, see Bn 357.

175, 4: Read *fa-wajjaba*, "he declared it binding upon himself"; see Lane, *s.v.* '*awjaba*.

177, 8: There is no need to emend *mawdi'an*, since he might have been afraid to take them to one 'place' where they could overpower him.

181, 2: Assuming homoioteleuton, I tentatively suggest *lam 'arâ 'ajhal min [hâdhâ -l-hâkimi -lladhî lam yafham su'âla] hâdhihi -li-mra'ati*.

To sum up, one can scarcely infer from the mistakes in Ob that it had a naskhî *Vorlage*.⁹ Ob is replete with errors only a very small part of which can be more easily explained by the assumption of a *Vorlage* in Arabic characters. It is, in my opinion, methodologically not justified to choose from this plethora of deviations a few and claim that they are due to such a *Vorlage*. For all of them the same reason is responsible, viz. the carelessness of the scribes, who through the presumably long history of this work transmitted and copied it.

To some extent, I have the feeling that Nm was misled by the fact that the works of the early Karaite authors were very often written in Arabic script. Nm himself (p. 158) admits that most Judaeo-Arabic mss. written in Arabic script are of Karaite origin, and H. Ben-Shammai, in a forthcoming article, is about to demonstrate that the use of Arabic script among Karaites was even more widespread than I assumed in my *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic*, pp. 43-44. One will hardly agree with Nm's suggestion (p. 159) that the preservation of Arabic script in Karaite mss. is a matter of pure accident. On the contrary, in my opinion at least, the only explanation for the Karaite origin of the overwhelming majority of mss. written in Arabic characters is that Karaites used Arabic script comparatively often (for historical reasons yet unknown), whereas Rabbanites, as a rule, refrained from using it.¹⁰ Therefore, as a rule at least, when dealing with

⁹ Ob himself, 140, n. 4, surmised that *marash*, rather than *maras*, occurring in the ms. points to a *Vorlage* in Arabic script. Yet *marash* is well attested in Maghrebine dialects; see *Grammar of Judaeo-Arabic*, p. 37, § 19 *alef*, quoting Dozy (cf. also Ibn al-Jawzi's *Taqwīm al-lisān*, p. 184).

¹⁰ Therefore, *pace* Nm, p. 158, n. 11, I still adhere to the view that Arabic script is *prima facie* evidence of Karaite origin.

Rabbanite Judaeo-Arabic documents and texts, one should not attempt to remedy difficult passages by the assumption that they had been copied from a *Vorlage* written in a cursive Arabic naskhî script.

In my opinion, Nm has not succeeded in disproving this view through the analysis of Rabbanite Judaeo-Arabic texts. We have already dealt with Ob. As to the four texts mentioned by Nm, p. 148, n. 1, two are of Karaite origin (Yefet, dealt with in *JQR*, XXXIII, 505, and Salmon, *JQR* XLVIII, 60 ff.) and therefore not relevant to the assumption of Arabic script in Rabbanite mss.¹¹ Nor must Ibn Kammûna's *tanqîh al-'abhâth li-l-mîlal ath-thalâth* (the third text, PAAJR XXXVI, 155) be adduced, because this work interested Muslims and Christians alike and was therefore copied by them, as proven by both quotations and extant mss. The only text relevant to the problem of Arabic script in Rabbanite mss. is Mubashshir's *Kitâb istidrâk*, which was treated by Nm in *JQR* XLVI, 199-201. Among the cases adduced by Nm, allegedly demonstrating the existence of a naskhî *Vorlage*, one stands out, which, if proven true, would in fact make the existence of a naskhî *Vorlage* necessary: p. 202, *ad* p. 65, 1ff. Nm four times(!) reads *furûx*, "chickens," for *frj* in the ms. Such a consistent false reading of *x* as *j*, in Arabic script differentiated solely by the place of the diacritical point, would of course originate in Arabic characters. Yet the correct interpretation of *frj* is simply *farrûj*, likewise denoting "chickens." As to the other cases cited by Nm, which are even *prima facie* less convincing, Nm. p. 200, *ad* p. 18, 9-10, *muttajîha* need not be corrected, since it has the sense of "possible" (see Dozy *s.v.*), whereas *taxmînhâ* instead of *taqsîmhâ* is not convincing, since *hâ* refers to "question",

¹¹ Nevertheless, I do not agree that even in these Karaite texts all the emendations proposed have to be explained as due to a naskhî *Vorlage*. Thus, *pace* *JQR* XXXIII, 505, *ad* 37, 1, *wa-qad*, instead of *wa-mâ*, may simply be due to *wa-qad* in line 2, suggested as a source of additional influence by Nm himself.

and it is the answer rather than the question that is conjectured. Tentatively I compare *qassam shay'an fi 'aqlihî*, "to contemplate something," Barthélemy, s.v.¹² The text of Mubashshir 38, 1 (Nm 201) is not sufficiently clear,¹³ and 47, 4 I am inclined to read *yubdhar*, i.e. *r* for *l*, which is similarly possible in Hebrew and Arabic script. In short, there is no evidence from these texts for the use of Arabic script in Rabbanite Judaeo-Arabic mss.

On this background of the scarcity of Rabbanite mss. in Arabic characters, I still adhere to the view (*pace* Nm 157-58) that the bulk of Rabbanite Jewry could scarcely read Arabic characters, and that even the intelligentsia preferred to use Hebrew script in both reading and writing. Jews, to be sure, learned writing in Arabic script,¹⁴ yet it seems to have remained, as a rule, a foreign medium. Only this explains the fact that Jews transliterated works by Muslim authors into Hebrew characters,¹⁵ and that autographs of Maimonides dealing with medicine and thus directed to the general public are written in Hebrew script.¹⁶ Just as Jews in Poland and Russia *who still belonged to the traditional society*,¹⁷ even when they knew non-Hebrew script, could, as a rule, *easily* read only Hebrew script, though they could, to some extent, read other scripts as well, but not without difficulty, so also did medieval Arabic speaking Rabbanite Jews. *Mutatis mutandis*, I would like to compare the situation of my Hebrew speaking students who, after having finished their first degree in Arabic, start reading Judaeo-Arabic texts in Hebrew characters. Although the natural script

¹² In the sequel nothing is "divided," since the correct reading is *la'allahû shabara li-mâni'in*, "perhaps he waited because of some obstacle."

¹³ In the sequel read perhaps *muraddan*, "repeated," for *madadan*?

¹⁴ See S. D. Goitein, *Jewish Education in Muslim Countries*, Jerusalem, 1962, pp. 28; 35; 64, n. 42; 135.

¹⁵ See *Emergence*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 41, n. 6.

¹⁷ But not German Jews in the 19th century (*pace* Nm 157), because they had already left the traditional Jewish society.

for them is Hebrew, they inevitably experience great difficulty in reading Arabic in Hebrew characters, since they are used to reading Arabic in Arabic characters. The more so did mediaeval Jews experience difficulty in reading Arabic in Arabic script, since they were accustomed to the use of Hebrew characters in both Hebrew and Arabic.

It is always a pleasure to discuss problems with men of the caliber of Nemoy, and this is true also as to the problem of the use of Arabic characters in Judaeo-Arabic mss. Nevertheless I would like to suggest that only in Karaite mss. should one be entitled to explain misreadings as due to a *Vorlage* written in Arabic characters, whereas in Rabbanite mss., as a rule, such an assumption seems to be erroneous, because according to the evidence of extant mss., Rabbanites used Arabic script in exceptional cases only, and this is not disproved by errors which occur in these mss., allegedly due to a naskhî *Vorlage*.