

AN ARABIC VERSION OF THE BOOK OF JOB

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RABBI Saadia ben Josef is one of the brightest names in Hebrew literature. Born at Fayoum in Egypt in A.D. 892, he quickly displayed great aptitude for learning. Unlike most Jewish scholars, he did not confine his attention to Judaism, but studied the rival systems of Islamism and Christianity under the best masters of the day. The Jews of that period enjoyed great prosperity and consideration. A large community of them existed at Irak (the ancient Babylonia) and their chief, David ben Zakkai, under the title of "Prince of the Captivity," lived at Baghdad in a style of regal magnificence. The fame of the young Egyptian scholar spread throughout the Jewish world, and the Prince invited him to Baghdad, and made him Gaon of the Academy of Sora, almost the only instance of such an honor being conferred upon any one who had been educated in the Babylonian schools. This was in 928. Saadia occupied his new position with great credit until the beginning of the year 933, when he was deposed by the Prince of the Captivity because he refused to sanction one of the decrees of that despot. Freed from the cares of office, Saadia resumed his studies at Baghdad, which was then the center of Moslem culture; and his reputation became so great that David ben Zakkai was constrained to elevate him once more to the dignity of Gaon of Sora, which he exercised until his death in A.D. 942.

When we remember that Saadia died at the comparatively early age of forty-nine, his industry and learning seem almost incredible. He translated the whole of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic, and wrote a commentary upon each book. He also translated the Mishna, and composed many treatises upon the Jewish law and Talmudical matters. In addition to this he founded the science of Hebrew grammar, and wrote treatises upon peculiarities of the Massoretic text; beside being the author of several polemic works directed against the Karaite Jews who rejected the authority of the Talmud. In all these labors he had to rely upon himself alone, for he moved in a world of thought unknown to his predecessors; and he thus became a creator and initiator in Hebrew theology, exegesis, philosophy, and

grammar, whose influence endured for centuries, and in some places still continues. When the Arabs had conquered Egypt and Persia, they speedily absorbed the new culture with which they came into contact, and under the Abbaside Khalifs, Moslem learning made its greatest advances in all its departments. This was the atmosphere which surrounded and stimulated Rabbi Saadia ben Joseph. New ideas were suggested to him by the Arab schools of philosophy; and the researches of the Moslems into Arabic philosophy induced him to apply the same principles for the first time to the Hebrew language. In the days of Rabbi Saadia, Arabic had become the common vernacular of the Oriental Jews, and his translations were undertaken chiefly for the benefit of his co-religionists; but not exclusively so, for he always had the world of Islam in view. His own name shows that his family had close Arabian connections, and all his life he was in intimate association with the Moslem scholars of Egypt and Babylonia. Consequently he took great pains to reconcile the leading tenets of Judaism with the current ideas of Arab philosophy; and it is said that he habitually wrote his works in the Arabic character in order to recommend them to Moslem readers, though, as might have been expected, all the manuscripts which have been preserved to us are written in the Hebrew alphabet which was principally affected by the Jewish copyists.

In 1892 the French Orientalists decided to signalize the millenium of the birth of Saadia by publishing a complete edition of all his extant writings. The work of preparing this edition was entrusted to the well-known Semitic scholar, Monsieur Joseph Derenbourg, who labored at the task with great enthusiasm until his death on the 29th of July, 1895. At the time of his decease he was engaged upon Saadia's version of the Book of Job; and to his son, Monsieur Hartwig Derenbourg, fell the filial duty of completing the work which is now before us.¹ The Arabic text and Hebrew commentary have been prepared under the able editorship of Wilhelm Bacher of Budapest, who has employed for the purpose two manuscripts preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, England, a manuscript in the Royal Library at Berlin, Germany, and a fourth manuscript which Monsieur Joseph Derenbourg procured from Jeru-

¹*Œuvres Complètes de R. Saadia ben Josef Al-Fayyôûmi*. Publication commencée sous la direction de Joseph Derenbourg, Membre de l'Institut. Continué sous la direction de M. M. Hartwig Derenbourg et Meyer Lambert. Volume cinquième. "Version Arabe du Livre de Job."

salem, together with some minor fragments. This accurate and excellent text will be of the greatest value to Orientalists; but the ordinary occidental reader will derive more benefit from the admirable French translation commenced by Monsieur Joseph Derenbourg, and completed by his son, Monsieur Hartwig Derenbourg. The latter explains that his endeavor throughout has been to carry out the work in the same spirit as his father; that is to say, to render the very words of Saadia into French, with the greatest possible accuracy and fidelity, quite irrespective of our present knowledge of the Hebrew original, or our notions of the Book of Job. It is needless to say that this endeavor has been crowned with complete success, and the student who reads French can now acquaint himself with the exact views held by this celebrated rabbinical scholar of the tenth century.

Saadia calls the work "The Book of Justification, which is attributed to Job." Why he gives it this title will best be explained in his own words. .

The Wise One —glorified be He— has written for us the history of Job and his friends, and has given it to us as a pattern for our instruction, to dispose us to piety; so that when sorrow and misfortune come to us we may know that they fall into one of the two following categories: Either they are because of former sins; and then they are called punishment. (In this case it behooves us to search out these sins, that we should correct our deeds, and that we should cease to be negligent; as it is said, "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Lam. iii:40). Or else the misfortune is a trial, that the Wise One has sent us, to the end that we should support it with resignation, and He will recompense us for it. We must not in either case attribute any injustice to the Creator; but we must recognize the truth of the attribute which He has applied to Himself in His book, "The Lord in the midst of her is righteous; He will not do iniquity," Zeph. iii:5. For this reason the work has been called "The Book of Justification.

Saadia's constant object was to convey the sense of the Hebrew text, as he understood it. His translations, therefore, were not mere literal renderings; but were more in the nature of paraphrases. And he never hesitated to depart slightly from the letter of the original,

if by so doing he could more clearly exhibit the spirit, or show the logical connection of the various parts. Naturally, in such cases, he showed his weakness as well as his strength, for he thus constituted himself the interpreter as well as the translator of the Scriptures. Like all other oriental poetry, the Book of Job abounds in peculiar and enigmatic passages, and it may be questioned whether Saadia with all his immense erudition has invariably caught the correct sense. As an instance of his method, one may cite his rendering of the well-known passage, Job, xix:

If but my words were now written; if only they were traced in the book; if, with a stylus of iron or of lead they were graven in the rock forever, so that I might know that my friends will continue, and that a later generation shall appear after them upon the earth. After my skin shall have perished, my history shall be transmitted; and by the maladies of my body I shall show the power of God; as I see myself, and as my eyes contemplate me, not those of another, though my piercing gaze shall penetrate my breast.

Even the LXX translators were puzzled over this passage. The rendering of the English Authorised Version is derived from the Vulgate of St. Jerome; and the Revised Version only suggests "Vindicator" in the margin, instead of Redeemer. Saadia's rendering seems to be aimed chiefly at the LXX, which was, of course, the only Christian version with which he was acquainted. The LXX translates verses 25 and 26 as follows:

For I know that he is eternal who is about to deliver me,
and to raise up upon the earth my skin that endures these; for
these things have been accomplished to me of the Lord.

In the Hebrew commentary, which accompanies the Arabic translation, Saadia is careful to inform us that he understands the original word *Goel* (i.e. Redeemer or Vindicator) to refer to the children of men and not to God; his idea being that Job desired his words to be preserved as a lasting memorial, in order that Job might be justified in the eyes of the children of men who came after, and that they might know how God will establish the righteous.

The above instance of Saadia's method, however, is perhaps an extreme one, for even the best expositor may occasionally be led astray by preconceptions; and we must not forget that Saadia wrote

as an orthodox Jew, who had no desire to place weapons in the hands of adversaries. But, apart from doctrinal considerations, this Arabic version of the Book of Job is a work of exceptional ability, which may be read with profit by any one, and which gives a clear conception of the nature of the Hebrew poem. When we reflect that this translation was made in the tenth century—a period of the grossest intellectual darkness in Europe—we are lost in wonder that such a work could have been executed in so masterly a fashion with the means at the disposal of an oriental scholar. Not merely will the Semitist be indebted for this excellent edition of Rabbi Saadia, but the ordinary student will be ever grateful to Monsieur Hartwig Derenbourg for placing in our hands such a lucid, complete, and able exposition of the work of this bright particular star of Hebrew learning.