

A Sad Chapter in the History of the Exegesis of the Psalms

Ps 53 Explained by the Karaite Yapheth ben Eli (10th c. AD)

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The Karaite Exegete Yapheth ben Eli

The Karaite Yapheth ben Eli (in Arabic, Abū 'Alī al-Hasan ibn 'Alī al-Basrī) is one of the great commentators of the whole Bible. He flourished in the second half of the 10th c. A.D. in Jerusalem, having come from Iraq to settle there. His massive work is largely preserved in manuscript form. He wrote in Arabic.¹ The biblical commentary of Yapheth interprets by applying the text to current events in the manner of a *peshet*, for he sees in the prophets and psalms forecasts of historical events up to the advent of the Messiah, son of David, and the establishment of his reign. According to Yapheth, this is imminent, as he shows in his commentary on Daniel.²

This is why the psalms are seen to contain veiled allusions to the period immediately preceding the Messiah's coming whose times fall within Yapheth's own lifetime. Among other psalms, Ps 53 is, in Yapheth's view, a prophecy of David concerning Edom, i.e., the

1 On Yapheth ben Eli (also written Yephet, Yefet ben 'Ali), cf. L. Nemoy, **Karaite Anthology. Excerpts from the Early Literature** (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1952) 83-108; A. Schenker, "Der Karäer Jafet ben Eli, die Buyiden und das Datum seines Daniel Kommentars," **Bulletin d' études Karaites** 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 1983) 19-26.

2 D.S. Margoliouth, **A Commentary on the Book of Daniel by Jephth Ibn Ali the Karaite, I-II** (Anecdota Oxoniensia; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887-1889).

Roman, Byzantine and Christian kingdoms. The Karaite exegete does not distinguish between the Byzantine empire of his day, the ancient pagan Roman empire and Christianity. In his view, these communities are all one.

Pss 14 and 53

The two psalms 14 and 53 represent the same psalm in two distinct editions. Yapheth takes Ps 14 as a prophecy concerning the caliphate, the Moslem empire that he calls Ishmael, according to Gen 25:12-18; 1 Chr 1:29-31. The twin psalm, on the other hand, announces the kingdom of Edom, i.e., Rome and the Christians, according to Gen 36; 1 Chr 1:34-53. In his commentary of Ps 53, Yapheth does not repeat what he had already said on Ps 14, but only explains the textual differences of Ps 53 with respect to Ps 14, understanding them as specific traits that distinguish the Byzantine Christians from Moslem Arabs in their relation to the Jewish people and the coming of the Messiah.

How is Yapheth's View of the Christian Religion Reflected in Ps 53?

Ps 53 is read in Yapheth's Arabic text, preserved in the manuscript of the National Library of Paris, Arabic MS 288.³

Yapheth first explains the term *'al-mahalat* in the title, which does not appear in Ps 14:1. He says that it refers to the name of Ishmael's daughter, the wife of Esau, mother of Reuel, mentioned in Gen 28:9 (*Mahalat*). Yapheth concludes: "It is said, then, that Reuel will rise at the end of time to be the lord of Edom. It is he who will associate himself with Ishmael" (fol. 70v). The psalm is eschatological ('at the end of time'), announcing an alliance between two powers, Christian-Byzantine and Moslem, against the Messiah, likewise predicted under different names by Dan 11 and Ezek 38-39.

According to Yapheth, the term *a'wel* (v. 2), 'perversity', designates Christian doctrine: "Their Lord is the creator of heaven and earth; (however) he came into existence in the womb of a woman. He was crucified and exalted, the creator of the universe - may his name be exalted!" (fol. 70v). This perversity leads the Christians, moreover,

3 Fol. 70r - 72v.

"to kill (the Jews) in vengeance for the blood of their Lord. That is the greatest 'perversity' that there is.⁴ For if their Lord had the power to liberate himself from them, but did not, it is because he wanted it that way. But then he who killed him is without fault. In fact, if that was not in his power, one can no longer (say) that he had power over all creatures. . ." (fol. 71r). In addition, "they do not know the use of water for 'impurities' and they go into the flowing of blood (of a woman) at the time of her period... That is why it says: 'they are rendered abominable' " (*ibid.*).

The peculiar expression in Ps 53:6, "because God disperses their bones," alludes to their sacking of the 'Second Temple' and dispersion of the people. . . That is why he says in regard to their chastisement...: "He (i.e., God) opens their tombs, takes their bones and disperses them at the surface of the desert, as it is written regarding those who adore idols (Jer 8:1-2)" (*ibid.*).

Another expression, "You make them blush with shame" (v. 6), means: "You will confound them with shame, O Israel, when the Messiah appears, the 'Seed' (may peace be upon him!), of the line of David who is one of you! It is he who will sack the country of Edom and kill everyone there, according to Num 24:19" (*ibid.*).

The phrase, missing in Ps 14, "for God has rejected them (v. 6) means: God will make their dwelling on earth cease, because they are uncircumcized, servants of idols, speaking against the creator of the universe (his name is blessed!). . . eaters of abominations, assassins of Israel who shed innocent blood according to Joel 4:19" (fol. 72r). Yapheth adds: "As the action of this 'evil one' (i.e., Edom) against Israel was harsher than the action of the former (i.e., Ishmael), God (may He be exalted!) threatens to leave him no survivor, according to Obadiah 18. As for the survival of Ishmael at that time, Israel will dominate him, but will not kill him. And they (i.e., the Moslems) will enter the (Jewish) religion with obedience, according to Isa 60:6-7" (*ibid.*).

In v. 7, Yapheth comments on the plural 'salvations of Israel', differing from the singular 'salvation' in the corresponding verse in Ps 14: "for there are numerous salvations of different sorts. Or it is (also) possible that he spoke of the first 'salvation' (in Ps 14:7) because

4 Words in single quotation marks appear in Hebrew in the MS.

it was the 'salvation of Israel' from (servitude under) Ishmael, and when He will have liberated them (again) from Edom, a 'salvation' will have joined itself to another 'salvation'. For this reason, he says: 'salvations' " (fol. 72r-v).

Conclusion

The interpretation of Ps 53 in light of contemporary historical conditions leads Yapheth to paint a portrait of the Christian religion. He sees in its doctrine a contradiction between the incarnation and crucifixion of God, on the one hand, and his omnipotence as creator over all creatures on the other.

Christians are impure because they refuse the ablutions necessary for cleansing impurities. More than that, however, they appear cruel to him because they want to kill the Jews in vengeance for the death of God. (Yapheth does not employ the name of Jesus.) The Christians of Yapheth's day are the successors of the Romans who destroyed the Second Temple in A.D. 70 and dispersed the Jews from Jerusalem (A.D. 135).

The Moslems appear less cruel. This is because Yapheth writes his commentary on the psalms around 975, when the Byzantine empire was renewing its military power in the Middle East to make itself master there.

Ps 53 thus becomes a biblical message enabling Yapheth to express all the aggressiveness of a religious minority oppressed and anguished by a powerful and cruel religious majority. In this aggressive Karaite exegesis is revealed the suffering of the Oriental Jewish community, whether Karaite or rabbanite. The suffering of the people of God of the Old Testament was revived in what the Jewish communities bore in the 10th c. A.D. because of the harshness of the Moslems and especially of the Christians.

This exegete, and thanks to him Ps 53, thus reminds us that we destroy our own Christian religion in the eyes of men when they cannot see there the religion of the love of God!

Father R.J. Raja, whom this small essay on the history of oriental exegesis intends to honour, exemplifies this truth, for in his biblical teaching and especially in his person, the love of the Lord for men shines forth.