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WORKSHOP REPORT

“The Interplay of Medieval Jewish Poetry and Bible Exegesis”,
held at Goethe University Frankfurt from 20-21 August 2014

ORGANIZERS:

Dr. Joachim Yeshaya (Goethe University Frankfurt)

Prof. Elisabeth Hollender (Goethe University Frankfurt)

From 20-21 August 2014, a select group of experts of medieval Jewish poetry and Bible exegesis gathered at the *Seminar für Judaistik* in Frankfurt for a workshop on “The Interplay of Medieval Jewish Poetry and Bible Exegesis.” This scholarly event featured the following line-up of junior and established scholars from different European and Israeli universities: Tova Beerli (Tel Aviv University), Wout van Bekkum (University of Groningen), Saskia Dönitz (Goethe University Frankfurt / Freie Universität Berlin), Elisabeth Hollender (Goethe University Frankfurt), Haviva Ishay (Ben-Gurion University), Daniel Lasker (Ben-Gurion University), Meira Polliack (Tel Aviv University), Riikka Tuori (Goethe University Frankfurt) and Joachim Yeshaya (Goethe University Frankfurt). Stefan Schreiner (University of Tübingen) had to cancel his participation in the workshop, which was organized by Joachim Yeshaya, with the support of Elisabeth Hollender, as part of a post-doctoral project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG): *The Introduction of Liturgical Poetry in the Karaite Prayer Book*.

The format was explicitly not a conference, but a workshop whose main goal was to serve as a platform where participants could present work in progress to an audience of their peers and investigate a pre-circulated corpus of poetical and exegetical texts by Aaron ben Joseph, Abraham ibn Ezra, and other Karaite and Rabbanite poets and exegetes. This setting allowed participants to make extensive use of sample exegetical and poetical texts for analysis and discussion, with the aim of finding answers to the following questions contained in the call for papers:

how did Rabbanite and Karaite poets and exegetes like Abraham ibn Ezra and Aaron ben Joseph approach the Hebrew Bible? Can we find signs of poetical creativity in their exegetical works, or—the other way around—signs of their exegetical mind in their poetical compositions? How do their poetical compositions relate to their exegetical works? Were not all medieval Jewish poets—including those who are not known to have written major exegetical works—Bible exegetes (e.g., by alluding to and quoting from the biblical text or by using words and phrases which are interpretive, reflecting how they understood the biblical text)? In sum, should the medieval Jewish poets be seen as active participants in the production and transmission of exegetical traditions?

The first day of the workshop opened with a special debate session on “The Interplay of Medieval Jewish Poetry and Bible Exegesis.” Wout van Bekkum introduced and presided over the discussion. The panel consisted of: Tova Beeri, Haviva Ishay, Daniel Lasker and Meira Polliack. After the introduction, in which Wout van Bekkum added to the discussion about the borders between exegesis and poetry many challenging issues of genre, language, and terminology, the four panellists were asked to give an outline of the workshop topic, and to use that as a starting point for a roundtable discussion. First, Tova Beeri discussed some of the topics brought up by the chair, among which was the functionality of Hebrew liturgical poetry and its primarily non-didactic nature, reflecting an aesthetic approach. Then she discussed a line from Yose ben Yose’s ‘*Avodah Azkir Gevurot*’ to illustrate how *midrashic* sources are essential for a correct interpretation of this poem with several biblical quotations. Next, on the basis of a handout with examples from Samuel ha-Nagid’s and Abraham ibn Ezra’s oeuvre, Haviva Ishay contrasted the long-standing tradition of Hebrew liturgical poetry with the secular poetry written in biblical language and Arabic style which flourished in Muslim Spain. She stressed the fact that the reader himself is an exegete who has to decode the interplay of poetry and exegesis. The next panellist, Daniel Lasker, focused on the Karaite tradition of using poetical introductions to exegetical and other compositions written in rhymed and regular prose. He richly illustrated this tradition with excerpts from works by Judah Hadassi, Aaron ben Elijah, Elijah Bashyatchi, Simcha Isaac Lutski, and others. As a final panellist, Meira Polliack discussed some of the topics brought up by the chair and the other panellists, like Abraham ibn Ezra’s critique of the classical *piyyuṭ*, the concepts of *ṣahot ha-lashon* and *i’jāz al-qur’ān*, and the contrast between the hermeneutical approach to the Bible typical of exegesis and the general absence of any efforts to explain the biblical text in liturgical poetry. In the subsequent roundtable discussion, Elisabeth Hollender mentioned an exception to this rule in certain Ashkenazic *piyyuṭim* that include innovative interpretations of biblical texts and might have influenced later exegetes. At the end of the opening debate, all participants agreed that the workshop topic should be studied period by period and even author by author and in relation to the Jewish traditions and the literatures of the surrounding cultures, and that the terminology used needs to be refined to describe the broad and complex array of possible and actual intertextual relations between poetical and exegetical texts.

Meira Polliack (“Thoughts on Karaism and the Rise of Literacy in the Jewish-Islamic Milieu”) opened the next session with a focus on Karaite Judaism, which provided an overview of different Karaite-Jewish historical periods, as it moved from the Islamic world via Byzantium to Eastern Europe. Meira Polliack described how the Karaites in the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries were “revolutionary traditionalists” who—in an effort to preserve the attraction of Judaism—took up the challenge of the Islamic discourse about the origin and formation of the *Qurʾān*, and deconstructed the Rabbinic model of a “dual Torah”, by deligitimizing the oral Torah and reinstating the Hebrew Bible as the only legitimate, written Torah. Polliack explained how this process took place against the background of a rise of literacy and a social revolution of “bookishness” within the host culture. Next, Daniel Lasker (“The Interplay of Poetry and Exegesis in Judah Hadassi’s *Eshkol ha-kofer*”) discussed the workshop topic in the light of his ongoing research (with colleagues from the Freie Universität Berlin, including Saskia Dönitz) on Judah Hadassi’s *Eshkol ha-kofer*. He focused in particular on the various ways in which Hadassi’s poetry contributes to his exegesis, in addition to specific poetic techniques, such as modification of biblical verses for poetic reasons. The session’s last speaker, Riikka Tuori (“Medieval Exegetics in Polish-Lithuanian Karaite *zemirot*”), evaluated the use of exegetical technical terms in Karaite *zemirot* (para-liturgical metric hymns) from Poland and Lithuania printed in the nineteenth-century Vilna edition of the Karaite prayer book. Tuori addressed several relevant questions about the didactic nature of these poems, and their relation to the medieval (Karaite and Rabbanite) poetical and exegetical tradition. The ensuing discussion showed that even with lacunae in the documentation of the transmission of exegetical knowledge, Karaite exegetical traditions were transmitted from early Judeo-Arabic works through translations into Hebrew in the medieval Byzantine Empire to early modern Karaite authors in Eastern Europe.

The second day of the workshop started with a text reading led by Joachim Yeshaya (“The Ten Commandments in Karaite-Jewish poetry and Bible exegesis”), with input by Elisabeth Hollender on *piyyuṭ* commentary. After a brief introduction to the subject, Yeshaya invited the participants to a reading of the poetical and exegetical texts on which the second phase of the DFG-project on *The Introduction of Liturgical Poetry in the Karaite Prayer Book* is based. The main texts under discussion were a Hebrew poem composed by Aaron ben Joseph (c. 1250-1320) for

parashat Yitro, excerpts from Aaron's Torah commentary *Sefer ha-Mivḥar* "Book of the Precious", excerpts from Joseph Solomon ben Moses Lutski's (d. 1844) supercommentary *Ṭirat Kesef* "Palace of Silver" and excerpts from Berakha ben Joseph ha-Kohen's (18th century) *piyyuṭ*-commentary *Sefer Ṭuv Ṭa'am* "Book of Good Taste". In the discussion, the participants agreed that Aaron ben Joseph addresses in some of his poems on the *parashot* the same exegetical issues as in his Torah commentary, and that this point of view introduces a new approach to reassess these poems in the light of non-liturgical, exegetical materials, they contain and refer to. Again, the continuation of earlier Karaite exegetical tradition was mentioned and the importance of the question which exegetical traditions, Karaite as well as Rabbanite, were known to the medieval Byzantine Karaites was stressed. Meira Polliack reported on work in progress on new editions of early Judeo-Arabic Karaite commentaries that does take into account in some cases the translations into Hebrew from medieval Byzantium.

In the first paper of the concluding session with a focus on Rabbanite Judaism, Wout van Bekkum ("Between Convention and Innovation: An Unknown Seder for *Wayyosha*") presented an anonymous composition (*Seder*) for the seventh day of Passover (*Yom Wayyosha*), which he published together with Naoya Katsumata in *Ginzei Qedem* 10 (2014), pp. 45-97. Van Bekkum compared some of its structural and thematic elements and exegetical intentions to two other similar compositions, an anonymous one and another one belonging to the oeuvre of Samuel the Third, showing individual preferences and exegetical traditions existing next to each other in works belonging to this poetic genre. Next, Haviva Ishay ("The Exegesis of Abraham Ibn Ezra as a Tool for Solving his Secular Poetry") evaluated the pros and cons of structural and post-structural literary theory and strongly argued for the reader's ability to create meaning in her analysis of a famous riddle poem on the four quiescent letters by Abraham ibn Ezra. Knowledge of the author's exegetical oeuvre serves the reader to understand the poetical language of the riddle and to associate the intentionally obscure phrases with the solution of the riddle. In her presentation "Shemarya ha-Ikriti – Exegete and Poet?", Saskia Dönitz shed new light on the biography and oeuvre of Shemarya ha-Ikriti (1290-1340), known as a translator of Greek literature, an author of exegetical, philosophical and theological works, and a composer of liturgical and secular poems, including a panegyric poem in honour of

Maimonides' grandson David. Shemarya's claim to use biblical exegesis to heal the rift between Karaites and Rabbanites shows that Karaite and Rabbanite exegesis were inextricably intertwined in fourteenth-century Byzantium and as such need to be studied together. The workshop's last speaker, Tova Beerli ("The manifold uses of biblical verses in Israel Najara's Poems") surveyed the oeuvre of the great poet, musician and performer, Israel Najara (1555–1625). Beerli dwelled on chronological and many other issues related to the interplay between poetry, sermon and exegesis in his oeuvre, besides raising the question from whom (the Karaites?) Najara could have learnt the tradition of writing poems for every *parasha*.

The concluding remarks underscored the richness of the presentations and of the subsequent discussions, in which not only the generic borders between poetry and exegesis were crossed, but also the religious borders between Karaite and Rabbanite Judaism (and Christianity and Islam) as well as the geographic borders between the Islamic world, Byzantium and Christian Europe. It was decided to publish the proceedings of the workshop, adding papers from scholars who had not been able to attend, such as Mordechai Cohen, Daniel Frank, Stefan Schreiner and Adena Tanenbaum.

WORKSHOP PROGRAM:

Debate session: “The Interplay of Medieval Jewish Poetry and Bible Exegesis”; chair: Wout van Bekkum; panel: Tova Beeri, Haviva Ishay, Daniel Lasker, Meira Polliack

Session with focus on Karaite Judaism

Meira Polliack (Tel Aviv), “Thoughts on Karaism and the Rise of Literacy in the Jewish-Islamic Milieu”

Daniel Lasker (Beer Sheva), “The Interplay of Poetry and Exegesis in Judah Hadassi’s *Eshkol ha-kofer*”

Riikka Tuori (Frankfurt), “Medieval Exegetics in Polish-Lithuanian Karaite *zemirot*”

Text reading: “The Ten Commandments in Karaite-Jewish poetry & Bible exegesis”; chair: Joachim Yeshaya, with input by Elisabeth Hollender on *piyyuṭ* commentary

Session with focus on Rabbanite Judaism

Wout van Bekkum (Groningen), “Between Convention and Innovation: an Unknown Seder for *Wayyosha* (Exodus 14:30)”

Haviva Ishay (Beer Sheva), “The Exegesis of Abraham Ibn Ezra as a Tool for Solving his Secular Poetry”

Saskia Dönitz (Frankfurt/Berlin), “Shemarya ha-Ikriti – Exegete and Poet?”

Tova Beeri (Tel Aviv), “The manifold uses of biblical verses in Israel Najara’s Poems”