

RABBI SHEMUEL BEN HOFNI'S TORAH COMMENTARY —
A REVIEW OF GREENBAUM'S EDITION

by NEHEMYA ALONI *

פירוש התורה לרב שמואל בן חפני גאון — המקור העברי עם תרגום ; יוצא לאור על-פי כתב-יד
לנינגרד עם השלמות והשוואות מכתב-יד נוספים מן הגניזה. בצירוף באורים, ציוני מקורות,
מקבילות, הערות, מבוא ומפתחות. ערוך בידי אהרן גרינבאום. ירושלים, הוצאת הרב קוק,
תשל"ט, תקכ"א עמ'.

(The Biblical Commentary of Rav Samuel Ben Hofni Gaon According to Geniza
Manuscripts; ed. by Aaron Greenbaum. Jerusalem: Harav Kook Institute, 1978,
521 p.)

Approximately one hundred years ago Harkabi discovered a Genizah document of sufficiently large scope which he identified as the *Torah Commentary* of the Gaon, Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni on pericopes Bereshit, Miketz, Wayigash and Wayehi. He published the fact of his discovery with several textual examples in two different journals¹ about one hundred years ago. One of his learned colleagues in Leningrad took it upon himself to publish this portion of Ben Hofni's *Torah Commentary* in its entirety. Several years after its discovery the first edition appeared, edited by Israel Israelson. This volume included the Arabic text of the Commentary, transcribed from Hebrew characters into Arabic (*naskhi*), as was customary among scholars of the nineteenth century. Israelson added a short introduction of eight pages in Russian. The book went out of circulation several decades ago.

Recently, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Greenbaum² published a second edition of Ben Hofni's *Torah Commentary* which contains the following :

* Prof. Nehemya Aloni is Professor-Emeritus of Hebrew literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba. The above review originally appeared in the Hebrew journal *Bet Mikra* 80:1 (September-November 1979), pp. 85-88, and was translated by Martel Gavarin.

1. A. A. Harkabi, *Magazin fuer die Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, I, (1878), p. 18, pp. 183-185; *Ozar Tov*, Berlin, 1897, pp. 55-64; A. A. Harkabi, *ZAW*, I, (1881), pp. 151-153.

Genesis — sections of the Commentary on pericopes; Wayetze, Wayishlach, Wayesheb, and the three pericopes, included within the first edition.
Numbers — sections of the Commentary on pericopes Bamidbar, Beha-
a'loteka, Korah, Hukat and Balak.
Deuteronomy — sections of the Commentary on pericopes Debarim, Wa-
ethanan, Reeh, Shofetim, and Haazinu.

THE CONTENT OF GREENBAUM'S EDITION

This edition contains new material as well as duplication of the material found in the Israelson edition. Furthermore, in the new edition, the Arabic material is translated into Hebrew. There are explanatory footnotes and citation of sources; an Introduction of one hundred and twenty pages; a foreword and title page in English. Here I will describe in tabular form the Editor's Introduction, which for some reason (perhaps under the influence of Israelson's format), was excluded from the book.

1. The Life of Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni (based on the few details which have been preserved in many sources)	11-21
2. The Date of the Composition of the Commentary ...	21-23
3. The Scope of the Commentary (the question is treated in the next item)	24-33
4. The Influence of the Commentary upon Subsequent Authors and Its Quotation in Medieval Jewish Sources	34-58
5. The Author's Sources	59-64
6. Halakhic Topics, Mentioned in the Commentary	65-75
7. Dream Interpretation	76-84
8. Religious Philosophy, Beliefs and Opinions	85-92
9. The Thirty-Two Homiletical Methods of Torah Interpretation	93-95
10. The Commentary in Manuscript (this includes only a listing of the manuscripts in which the Commentary appears without any further description and notation of their content)	96
11. List of the Editor's Abbreviations of Sources in Hebrew and Other Languages (without any further bibliographical description)	97
12. Indices: 1) Scriptural References; 2) Rabbinic Literature, 3) Gaonic Literature	98-115

2. Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni Gaon, *Torah Commentary*, (In Hebrew) ed. Rabbi Dr. Aaron Greenbaum, Jerusalem, 1979, Mossad HaRav Kook, 522 pages; Introduction, 116 pages; two pages of the manuscript are reproduced as photographs on page 117f; the Title Page and Foreword are written in English.

The last three items appear at the end of the book, not at the beginning.

THE PROBLEMATICS OF RABBINIC COMMENTARIES ON THE TORAH WRITTEN IN JUDAEO-ARABIC

One of the great riddles of biblical exegesis, still awaiting a basic investigation, clarification and explanation, is summarized in a remark of the two sons of Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon,³ "and what Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon interpreted, concerning these matters, was the first half of Genesis, the entire book of Exodus, and the entire book of Leviticus. This is puzzling: Did Rabbi Sea'dya write a commentary only on the first half of the book of Genesis? Why did he not see fit to also comment upon the second half of the book of Genesis? Another important piece of evidence comes to us from Rav Joseph Rosh Ha-Seder (who lived in Baghdad during the latter half of the twelfth century and in Cairo in the first quarter of the thirteenth century).⁴ He said, "the first half of the book of Genesis, the book of Exodus, the book of Leviticus is the commentary of Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon; the second half of the book of Genesis, the book of Numbers, and the first half of the book of Deuteronomy is the commentary of Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni; the second half of the book of Deuteronomy is the commentary of Rabbi Abraham Ben Sarajado." Again, we must ask: Did Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni comment only upon the latter halves of two books of the Pentateuch? Why didn't he compose a complete commentary on the Torah? This is not all. Was Aharon Ben Sarajado's ability limited to the composition of a Torah commentary only on the latter half of the book of Deuteronomy?

All that has been said by scholars on the question has not settled matters and has not satisfied right opinion and common sense. Greenbaum did not ignore this question.⁵ He even cited bibliographical sources that mention the commentaries of the three Gaonim, from which one may conclude that Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni interpreted more pericopes than suggested by the two testimonies above. Other bibliographical lists, concerning Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon's Torah commentaries, attest to the existence of a complete Torah Commentary by that author. The problem remains how to reconcile these conflicting reports, particularly these

3. Jacob Mann, *JQR*, New Series, XI, (1921), pp. 421-427. Reprinted in Jacob Mann, *Collected Articles*, II, Gederah, 1971, pp. 307-313.

4. Jacob Mann, *The Jews in Egypt* (In Hebrew), II, Oxford, 1922, p. 310f; also in the above.

5. Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni, *Torah Commentary*, Jerusalem, 1979, editor's Introduction, Ch. II, pp. 24-30.

two testimonies, that of the sons of Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon, Sheerit and Dosa, and that of Rav Joseph Rosh Ha-Seder.

At the same time one must remember that no unknown parts of Torah commentaries by Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon or by Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni have been found in the Genizah material which we have to date. As Greenbaum states, "It is interesting that in this listing no other material is mentioned other than that also recorded by Rav Joseph Rosh Ha-Seder..." Even the quotation from the Torah Commentary of Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni found in a Genizah fragment and quoted by Greenbaum in his Introduction contains no information that contradicts the testimony of the sons of Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon or that of Rav Joseph Rosh Ha-Seder. The problem remains unsolved and still awaits a solution.

HEBREW GRAMMAR IN RABBI SHEMUEL BEN HOFNI'S *TORAH COMMENTARY*

We know a few details about the life of Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni. However, it is well established that Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni lived in Sura and was head of the Sura Academy from the year 997 until his death in 1013. Therefore, it is clear that the Spanish school of Hebrew grammar had not yet reached the gates of the Babylonian *yeshivot*. The innovations of Hayyuj (Fez circa 940—Cordoba 1010) were made only at the end of the tenth century. The Hebrew grammar of the *yeshivot* was Tiberian, then dominant in both East and West: in Spain as well as in Babylon. The paradigm of the verb was based upon the principle of multi-radical roots,⁶ varying from one to seven letters. The origins of this system may be traced as far back as "Sefer Yezira", ("The Book of Creation"), and can be found in the liturgical poetry of the Payytanim and in all the books of Tiberian grammar, written during the years 750–1100. Jews, living in the lands of Christendom, continued to follow this grammatical system until the thirteenth century. As stated above, in Babylon, the Tiberian system of verb classification was dominant at the time of Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni. Also Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni's son-in-law, Rabbi Hai Gaon (Sura 938–1038) remained faithful to this system of verb classification, as demonstrated in his comprehensive work

6. Re. the multi-radical system for the classification of Hebrew verbal roots see my studies as follows: (1) "The Anagrammatical System of Hebrew Lexicography in 'Sefer Yezirah'", (In Hebrew) *Temirin*, I, Jerusalem, (1972), 63-99; (2) "Zunz. Kraus and Scholem on 'Sefer Yezirah'", (In Hebrew) *Sinai*, 74, (1973), pp. 42-66; (3) "Concerning the Multi-radical System for the Classification of Hebrew Verbs", (In Hebrew), *Bet Mikra*, 57, (1974), pp. 202-224.

on mishnaic Hebrew, according to the anagrammatical system of verb roots. That is the work, *Kitab Al-Hawi*, known in Hebrew by the name "Ha-Measef". Greenbaum states,⁷ "The Gaon Ben Hofni was at yet unfamiliar with the principle of the three letter root of the Hebrew verb as presented in the system of Rabbi Judah Hayyuj." Greenbaum includes several references from Ben Hofni's *Commentary* which concern grammatical problems. Following this conception, Ben Hofni derived common roots for words which in modern opinion are derived from different roots. Some examples follow :

The root, Het Dalet — (p. 356) "B'sodam al *tehad kevodi*" — *Oh, my soul, come you not into their secret* (Gen. 49 : 10).

"*Wayihad Yitro*" — And Jethro rejoiced... (Ex. 18 : 9) The root of the word *tehad* is *aleph, het, dalet*, and the root of the second word *wayihad* is *het, dalet, heh*.

The root, Shin, Lamed — (p. 356) "'Ad ki yavo *Shiloh* — Until *Shiloh* come (Gen. 49 : 10); "W'nashal Habarzel min haetz" — ...and the head slips from the helve (Deut. 19 : 5); "Ki *yishal* Elohim nafsho" — When God takes away his soul (Job 27:8). The word, *Shiloh*, is derived from the root *shin, yud, lamed*. The word, *nashal*, is derived from the root *nun, shin, lamed*, and the word, *yishal*, is derived from the root, *shin, lamed, lamed*.

The root Shin, Kuf (p. 138) — "W'al Pichem *Yishak* kol 'Ami" — ...and according to your word shall all my people be ruled (Gen. 41 : 40). "W'el ishek *teshukatek*" — ...and your desire shall be to your husband (Gen. 3 : 16). The word, *yishak*, is derived from the root, *nun, shin, kuf*, and the word, *teshukatek*, is derived from the root, *shin, waw, kuf*.

These three examples suffice to prove that Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni was familiar with the Tiberian system of verbal roots, as were Rabbi Sea'dya Gaon, David ben Abraham Alfasi, Judah Ibn Quraish, Menahem Ibn Saruq and Dunash Ben Labrat. However, I cannot prove that Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni was familiar with the composition of the Spaniards, Menahem Ibn Saruq and Dunash Ben Labrat, or the composition of the Karaite grammarians. I tend to the opinion that he learned the Tiberian system of grammar from the works of Sea'dya Gaon (the

7. Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni, *Torah Commentary*, ed. Gruenbaum, Jerusalem, 1979, p. 34, n. 2.

Egron, the first Hebrew-Arabic dictionary). Ben Hofni took much from Sea'dya on the question of translation of Scripture from Hebrew into Arabic, and he accepted many of Sea'dya views, expressed in the work, *the Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. Greenbaum spared no effort and took great pains to elucidate Ben Hofni's linguistic comments by comparison with the writings of Spanish grammarians Yonah Ibn Janach, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra and Rabbi David Kimhi.

Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni's *Torah Commentary* is comprehensive and multidimensional in terms of its semantic and linguistic analysis of Scripture. This is also true as regards the halakhic and homiletical material that Ben Hofni employed to elucidate the Bible.⁸ For Ben Hofni the correct exegesis of the Pentateuch conforms to the *halakha's* understanding of the verses. The *Commentary* also refers to Kalaam doctrines and Mutazilite teachings.⁹ It seems to me that the great length of Ben Hofni's comments also contributed to the loss of the greater part of the *Commentary*. Greenbaum invested great effort (more than twenty years of research) in order to elucidate the halakhic references and uncovered their sources in the writings of the Sages utilizing relevant findings published in the *Wissenschaft* literature of Europe.

One must also single out for praise the book's fine printing format, the careful proofreading, the fine binding and jacket cover with its pleasing design. This edition of Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni's *Torah Commentary* is an invaluable contribution to our collection of medieval rabbinic exegesis. The commentary, written by one of the most intellectually productive of the Gaonim, is certainly to be welcomed.¹⁰

Immanuel 12 (Spring 1981)

8. Greenbaum treated this topic at length, and my comment here is not intended to ignore this fact. However, this review is intended for a Bible-reading public.

9. This matter is also worthy of a lengthy scholarly treatment on the basis of a comparison with relevant Arabic literature.

10. Compositions, written by Karaites, enjoyed a better fate. Not only were the Karaite works published in our time, but many more of them have been preserved. In contrast, most of the compositions, written by Rabbinites of that period, have been lost or have disappeared. The vast majority of over forty known and titled compositions of Rabbi Shemuel Ben Hofni have been lost See *Alei Sefer*, 5, (1979), pp. 28-49.