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* The Story of Johannes-Obadiah, the Norman,

A Seeker of God from Southern Italy

(The Library of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati possesses a fragment of a beautifully written manuscript of a Hebrew prayer book, which has the following inscription at its end: "Copied with his own hand by Obadiah, the Norman proselyte, who entered the covenant of the God of Israel in the month of Elul (August/September) 1413 of the era of the documents, which corresponds to the year 4862 of the creation (1102 A.D.)."¹ Obadiah, according to his own report, had followed the example of the archbishop of Bari, and of others, who had adopted Judaism before him. These phenomena were certainly due to some crisis in the church in Southern Italy at that time. However, Johannes-Obadiah's case is of special interest, because he has left a detailed account of the step taken by him and, in particular, of his extended travels in Muslim countries after his conversion. His account is written in a dignified, simple, and straightforward Hebrew, the like of which was not in vogue in the East at that time, where a more artistic and flowery language was preferred. As can be proved in detail, he took as his model the Hebrew accounts of the persecutions of the Jews in Germany during the Crusades, which he must have studied eagerly as one of the "signs of the Hour," the end of the world, expected by his apocalyptic mind.

Fragments of two different copies of Obadiah's autobiography have been found in the Cairo Geniza. Altogether there are five pieces, one preserved today in New York, one in Budapest, Hungary, and three in various sections of the huge Taylor-Schechter collection, Cambridge, England.² Three of these fragments are double-leaves, forming parts of codices or quires, the second leaves not being the direct continuation of the first

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ones. Thus, a total of eight disconnected leaves has been preserved, one half of which are very badly damaged and effaced. On the other hand, a letter by Obadiah has been found,³ which to some extent fills the gaps in the first part of his autobiography. There, he describes how, after his conversion, he wrote a book of 14 quires, containing his proofs and arguments, and submitted it to his superior, "the head of the monks." He remarks naively that all his colleagues and superiors would have followed his example had they only read his book. Of course, they did not, and Johannes was put in prison and threatened with the death penalty, if he did not recant. However, one of the guards had a dream favorable to Johannes and helped him escape. After having been freed, he chose to lead a life of privation for God's sake.

The continuation of his story can be reconstructed from still another document found in the Geniza: a most eloquent letter of recommendation, written for him by Isaac b. Baruch, a famous scholar and, at that time, chief rabbi of Aleppo.⁴ From this we learn that Johannes, who had meanwhile adopted the name of Obadiah, had been smuggled out of Italy by local Jews, who assured the chief rabbi that the convert was of a noble and very much respected family and was himself a sincere man, and that, in accordance with the law, he had been warned before his conversion of all the dangers and hardships connected with such a step.

Of Obadiah's book itself, only eight disconnected leaves have been preserved, as explained above. Therefore, the exact sequence of his travels is not known. But it can be reconstructed with a high degree of probability. From Aleppo he went to Bagdad, where he acquired his first knowledge of the Hebrew language and its script. From there he travelled back to Aleppo,

and then on to Damascus and Palestine. The last town mentioned in his account as visited by him is Tyre on the Lebanese coast. But as he expresses his intention to travel to Egypt and refers to al-Afdal, the Egyptian viceroy, who died in 1121, and above all, since all the material concerning him has been found in the Geniza of Old Cairo, it is most likely that his wanderings came to an end in the latter city.

The preserved part of Obadiah's autobiography begins with an account of his birth:)

Ms. Budapest, David Kaufmann Coll. No. 1a-b

...And its name is Oppido. He married a woman called Maria. She became pregnant and bore to her husband D(e)rō^{a)} two sons on the same day. The first was born in the normal way and was called Rogerius, that is, Roger. But the second..., and his mother bore him with great pain, and called him Johannes, that is, Guan.^{b)} When the boys reached maturity, Rogerius took up the profession of arms and warfare, while Johannes devoted himself to the pursuit of knowledge and the study of books.

At that time, God put into the heart of Andreas, the Archbishop, the great priest, of the city of Bari,^{c)} the love of the Torah of Moses. He left his country, his priestly office, and all his honors and went to the city of Constantinople, where he was circumcised. He experienced many troubles and calamities and finally fled to save his life from the Christians, who tried to kill him. But the Lord, God of Israel, saved him from their hands, with his faith unimpaired. Blessed be His Name for ever, who protects the proselytes! The evil doers followed after him, but they were impressed by his deeds and did themselves what he had done and entered the covenant of the Living God. The man (Andreas)

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went to the city of Old Cairo and remained there until his death. The name of the King of Egypt at that time was al-Mustangir and that of his viceroy...^{d)}

The story of the Archbishop Andreas spread through the whole land of Italy,^{e)} (and reached) all the sages of Greece (Byzantium) and Rome, which is the capital of Edom (Catholic Christianity). The Greek and Roman sages were covered with shame when they heard the tale. Johannes heard the story of Andreas, when he was still a boy in his father D(e)rōkhus' house.

These are the names of the cities around Oppido,^{f)} the birthplace of Johannes, son of D(e)rōkhus: To the West, the city of Rome, the city of Salerno, the city of Potenza, the town of Pietragalla, and the town of Anzi. To the East, the city of Bari, the city of Montepeloso, the town of Genzano, and the town of Banzi. To the North, the city of Acerenza and the river called Bradano, between Oppido and Acerenza. To the South, the city of Tolve and the city of...and Oppido lies between the two.

In the year in which Johannes received his first orders...in the house of his father D(e)rōkhus, in the same year he had a dream: He was officiating in the great church...his own people, when he saw a man standing at his right hand facing the altar, who called out to him: Johannes!

(Here the Budapest manuscript breaks off and is continued in T.-S. 8.271, which is, however, extremely fragmentary. The first words visible tell how Johannes awoke from his dream and was very much upset. In the middle of his Hebrew account, he quotes in Latin^{g)} the following verse from the book of Joel: "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord will come"

(2:31 in the Authorized Version; 3:4 in the Hebrew text). As Obadiah's autobiography was written at least twenty years after his conversion, the very sound of ^{these} Latin words must have made an indelible impression on him. The reverse side of the same leaf speaks about the persecutions of the Jews (in Germany) during the Crusades (see above). Much must have been lost here. For on the following leaf, we find Obadiah already in Mesopotamia on his way to Bagdad. In Mosul - as is evident from the continuation of his route, which lead through Raḥba, at that time a prosperous town between Mosul and Bagdad - he had discussions about apocalyptic explanations of the prophecies of Moses. On his arrival in Bagdad, he was in danger of being killed by Muslims.^{h)}

At this point, the story is taken up again by the Budapest manuscript. Obadiah tells how he was well received by the head of the Jewish academy in Bagdad, who provided for his sustenance and enabled him to study Hebrew script and language, as well as the Bible, "together with the orphan boys."ⁱ⁾ Obadiah inserts here an extensive and very colorful description of the various discriminations to which non-Muslims were exposed at that time in the city of the caliphs.

In the next fragment, T.-S. Loan 31, we are back in Aleppo. With his predilection for exact details, Obadiah describes the plight of the town after the death of Ridwān, the well-known Seljuk ruler (December 10, 1113), the installation there of another Seljuk, Ghāzī b. Urtuq, and the harrassing of its inhabitants by Roger of Antioch (died in battle on June 27, 1119).

In the following fragment, Ms. New York, E. N. Adler No. 4028, we find Obadiah in Damascus and in Palestine in the year 1121. As the passage is characteristic, both for the man and for the period in which he lived, it

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is translated here in full, as far as it is preserved:)

The Hebrews in Damascus appointed a collector for Obadiah, the proselyte, who gathered the tithe for him every week...^{k)} He was happy to be with them...and every one contributed as much as he could. From Damascus, Obadiah went to Dan^{l)} in the Land of Israel, where only few poor Jews lived, who supported him according to their means. At that time, in the month of Elul (August/September), a Kohen of the Karaite sect, called Solomon, made his appearance in Dan and announced to Obadiah and the Jews in that place that in two and a half months, God would gather in the people of Israel from all countries to Jerusalem, the Holy City. Said Obadiah to Solomon: How do you know this, my lord? Said Solomon: I am the man for whom Israel is awaiting.^{m)} To this, Obadiah replied: I understand that you are a descendant of Aaron, the Kohen. Now, it is exactly nineteen years since I entered the covenant of the God of Israel,ⁿ⁾ and I have never heard that Israel expects salvation to come through a Kohen, but only through the Prophet Elijah and the Messiah from the seed of David, king of Israel. Now, what (proof) do you have for your words. Said Solomon: ...I do not eat bread nor drink water.^{o)} Said Obadiah: What then do you eat and drink? Said Solomon: Pomegranates, figs, almonds, walnuts, sycamores, apples, and fruits of other trees, and I drink milk. Then Obadiah told him that he was a proselyte, and Solomon grew fond of him and said: Do not go to Egypt, for in two and a half months, we two and all Israel will anyhow be gathered in to Jerusalem. Said Obadiah: I shall go to Egypt and come back together with our brethren of the house of Israel who dwell in Egypt. Upon this, Solomon remained silent. He later went to Tyre and Obadiah himself afterwards travelled to Tyre and arrived...

(This little story about Obadiah's encounter with the Karaite impostor is not without a certain element of mockery. The same is true of the next, and thus far last, fragment found: T.-S. 10 K 21, f. 1, where Obadiah tells about two other contemporary pseudo-messiahs, and in particular one Ben Dūgī, who began his career in Hakkēriyya,^{p)} a district of Kurdistan, but was hailed in many places of Iraq and elsewhere as a genuine messenger of God. He promised that in a certain night, the Jews would be flown to the Holy Land. Many believed and prepared themselves for the flight. They became the laughing stock of everyone, for as Obadiah remarks, how can one fly when one has no wings! A little over 800 years later, the Jews of Iraq and Kurdistan were really flown to Israel - but not by their own wings.)

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Notes

- a) The name is given below three times in full, spelled D(e)rōkhus, with a sign of stress on ̄ (De Rochus?). The sign rendered here with (e) stands either for a short e or indicates that the preceding consonant is not followed by a vowel (Drōkhus).
- b) As Hebrew g was used also for expressing the sound j, Juan is probably intended here.
- c) Andreas became archbishop in 1062 and died in 1078 (see A. Scheiber in Acta Orientalia Hung. IV (1954), p. 273, No. 9).
- d) In 1078 (see the preceding Note), Egypt was ruled by the Armenian Badr al-Jamālī for the Caliph al-Mustangir. Our writer, who is eager to provide exact details, is careful to mention the name of the actual ruler of the country along with its nominal sovereign.
- e) Called in the text Lombardy, spelled Langubardia (u, not o).
- f) These place-names are given here in their modern Italian forms, which differ very much from the spelling of the manuscript.
- g) The Latin words are transcribed into Hebrew characters. The puzzle presented by the words drew the present writer's attention first to this much effaced fragment.
- h) Under Muslim law, no Christian or Jew is allowed to change his religion, except to Islam. However, the danger to which Obadiah was exposed in Bagdad might have ^{had} some other cause.
- i) Tuition for orphans was paid by the community (cf. p.).
- k) It was general usage to appoint such ^a gabbai or collector to look after a distinguished and indigent foreigner (cf. p.). We learn here that in Damascus, the collection was made once a week and was called "the tithe." A Jew is expected to give one tenth of his income to the poor.

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- l) The medaeval Hebrew name for Banias, a place in Northern Palestine, which gained some importance during the crusades.
- m) Namely - as the allusion to Malachi 3:1 implies - as a forerunner of the Messiah, a role generally assigned to the prophet Elijah (see Malachi 4:5).
- n) The writer had this statement in mind when he previously mentioned the month in which this meeting took place (cf. above). As Obadiah changed his faith in 1102, we are here in 1121.
- o) The Karaites in Jerusalem abstained from meat and wine, as these two used to be offered in the Temple. In addition, this Karaite - most logically, albeit with some inconvenience - also refrained from bread and water, since these formed part of the offerings made in the Temple as well.
- p) Instead of this, Jacob Mann read here: Khazariya(?), which further complicated the already intricate Khazar problem (cf. D. M. Dunlop, The History of the Jewish Khazars, Princeton, 1954, p. 255).

Comments

1. Final publication with facsimiles in A. Scheiber's articles quoted in Note 2.
2. Ms. New York, E. N. Adler 4208, published first by Adler himself in REJ 69 (1919), p. 129-34; republished, together with T.-S. Loan 31 and T.-S. 10 K 21, f. 1, by Jacob Mann, REJ 89 (1930), 245-59. T.-S. 8.271 published in English translation by the present writer in JJS 4 (1953), 74-84. Ms. Budapest, David Kaufman Coll. No. 1-2, published with facsimiles of all the fragments by A. Scheiber in Kirjath Sepher 30 (1954/5), pp. 93-98, and simultaneously, in Acta Orientalia Hung. 4 (1954), pp. 271-296. English translation of the Budapest fragment by J. L. Teicher in JJS 5, pp. 35-37.
3. Published in ATaS, p. 143.
4. Ms. Oxford, Bodl. a3 (Catal. 2873, f. 1. First part published by S. Wertheimer in Ginze Yerushalayim II, 16-7, second part by J. Mann, REJ 89, pp. 247-9.