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CRIMEAN KARAITE TRANSLATION OF A HEBREW DRAMA
MELUKHAT SHA’UL AS AN EXAMPLE OF RABBINIC
LITERATURE’S INFLUENCE ON LITERARY ACTIVITY
OF THE CRIMEAN KARAITES

I

There is a limited amount of research conducted on Crimean Karaim handwritten
books also known as mejumas.¹ In the present day our knowledge concerning this topic
is more profound thanks to the first two critical editions of mejumas which were
published recently. They shed a new light on this still not sufficiently examined field of
study.² Both works present a wide range of Crimean Karaim folklore texts intertwined
with literary texts which were also common to other Turkic-speaking nations living in the
Critical Edition and Linguistic Analysis” is also devoted to the Crimean Karaim literature
preserved in manuscripts. Nonetheless, its scope differs to a certain extent. The subject
of my study is a Turkic translation of a play entitled Melukhat Sha’ul which was copied
into the mejuma of Samuel Kohen. This manuscript, No. VI-3/22, was written in the
Crimea in the second half of the nineteenth century, namely in 1876 or less probably in
1875.³ It consists of one hundred twenty folios, of which fifty-one are blank. The above
mentioned play occupies almost the entire book, which is quite peculiar in the light of the
previously published mejumas. They comprised literary works of wide range of themes
and contents and were by no means coherent. In the case of the manuscript of Samuel
Kohen I had an opportunity to analyze a text which was uniform in the terms of style,
theme and language. I do not aim to present the entire scope of the mejuma which was a
subject of my study. In this article I shall focus on the most important matter, that is on
the issue of the Crimean Karaim translation of a Hebrew drama Melukhat Sha’ul. For this

¹ See Borys Kokenaj, “Medżuma, Karaj Bitigi”, Karaj Aważy 6 (1933), p. 14-17; Henryk
Jankowski, “The contents of Katyk’s Mejuma” [in:] Temišev, É. (ed.) Tjurkskaja i smežnaja
leksikologija i leksiografija. Sbornik k 70-letiju Kenesbaja Musaeva. Moskva: Rossijskaja
Akademija Nauk. Institut Jazykoznanija, 2004, p. 103–119 and Ananiasz Zajączkowski,
„Literatura karaimska (Szkic bibliograficzny)”, Myśl karaimska 1, 3 (1926), p. 7-17.
² See Gülayhan Aqtay, Eliyahu ben Yosef Qılcı’s Anthology of Crimean Karaim and Turkish
Literature. İstanbul 2009 and Tülay Çulha, Kirim Karaycasının Katık Mecumasi. Metin-Sözlük-
Dizin. İstanbul: Mehmet Ölmez Yayınları 2010. Both works were published in Turkey. I should add
that the fist mejuma was published at the end of the nineteenth century in the seventh volume of
Radloff’s opus magnum (V. V. Radloff, Proben der Volkslitteratur der Nördlichen Türkischen
Stämme. Theil VII. Mundarten der Krym. St. Petersburg 1896), however it was not a critical
edition.
³ Both dates are provided in the manuscript, therefore it is impossible to determine beyond any
doubt the year in which the work was completed.
II

The original drama was written in biblical Hebrew by Joseph Ha-Efrati Tropplowitz at the end of the eighteenth century. Its Crimean Karaim translation emerged fifty years later, during a bloom of literary and publishing activity in the Crimea. The author of the translation is Abraham Lutski (1793–1855) who was brought up in the Crimea but originally had come from Volhynia. In the first half of the nineteenth century many Karaim intellectuals from the Eastern Europe decided to migrate to the Crimea in search for better financial prospects. Among these men there was Joseph Solomon Lutski (1768–1844), father of Abraham, who settled in Gözleve (Eupatoria) and became a ḥazzan of the Crimean Karaim community. He wrote both in Hebrew and in Karaim and he was an author of Iggeret Teshu'at Yisra'el, a detailed travel diary of a Crimean Karaim delegation to Saint Petersburg in 1827, which aimed to obtain exemption from obligatory military service.4 His son Abraham, though less renowned than the father, has also contributed to the flowering of intellectual life in the Crimea in the first half of the nineteenth century. He received a good education and was fluent in both the local variety of Crimean Karaim as well as in Turkish (most likely in its Crimean vernacular). He also was able to use Persian, Arabic and Hebrew. What is more, he studied the Torah and Rabbinic literature, which formed the canon of education of young Karaims at that time.5 After completing education in the Crimea he continued his study in Istanbul, where he focused on the Talmud and classics of the Rabbinic literature. On his return to Gözleve he was offered the position of ḥakham, the leader of the Karaim community, but Lutski decided not to take it. Instead, he assumed a position of ḥazzan, the chief prayer leader.6 In addition to religious duties, he was engaged in literary activities. In 1830s and 1840s as many as three of his works were published in the Karaim printing house in Gözleve, i.e. Shiv‘ei todah – a collection of prayers, Iggeret zug ve-nifrad – devoted to religious law halakhah and Mishlei musar – an anthology of didactic stories.7 Another book by this author was published in the present day, namely Sefer Shoshanim Edut le-Asaf

4 Presently Iggeret Teshu‘at Yisra‘el was published for the second time, together with a comprehensive introduction, by Philip E. Miller, Karaite Separatism in Nineteenth-Century Russia. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press 1993.

5 In a section dedicated to education of the Crimean Karaims Golda Akhiezer (“The History of the Crimean Karaites during the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries” [in:] Meira Polliack (ed.), Karaite Judaism. A guide to its history and literary sources. Leiden, Boston: Brill 2003, p. 729-757) pointed out that students were acquainted with both Karaim and Rabbinic literature.

6 Abraham Lutski wanted to avoid conflict with his powerful friend, Sim‘ah Babovich, who was going to take over the leadership of the Crimean Karaims as the head of the Karaim Spiritual Consistory (in 1837).

(edited by Joseph ben Obadiah Algamil, 2004). To the best of my knowledge, the Crimean Karaim translation of the drama *Melukhat Sha’ul* performed by Abraham Lutski has never been printed. It was most probably preserved only in handwritten *mejumas* which were kept and read by Karaim families across the peninsula.

### III

The author of the translation is not mentioned in the manuscript. A colophon, which is placed after the main body of the text, informs us solely that the copyist is named Samuel Kohen. The question of authorship of the translation of *Melukhat Sha’ul* is discussed in two papers concerning Karaite Studies. The first one is an article of Shapshal from 1918 dedicated to Karaim literature, from which we learn that in the 1840s Abraham Lutski had written a play entitled *Sha’ul Khan* ‘King Saul’ and that it was still staged in the Crimean Karaim communities. Apparently, Shapshal was not aware that the play he had discussed was a translation of a Hebrew drama and not an original work of Lutski. An alternative explanation is that the question of the provenance of the drama was not a crucial matter to the scholar. Consideration should be given as to whether the contemporary Karaims were aware of the fact that the play they had watched was in fact of rabbinic origin. In the *mejuma* of Samuel Kohen there is no title, name of the author or any other information that would indicate the source text of the play. Therefore, we may assume that this knowledge was lost in time.

The other mention on the provenance of the play occurred in an article of Shapira who was far more precise and stated that „Lutski (…) translated from Hebrew the *maskilic* drama *Melukhat Sha’ul* by Yosef Tropplowicz”. On this basis, I decided to compare the Hebrew drama with the Crimean Karaim translation. During the process of research I determined that the text in the manuscript should be identified with the translation mentioned by Shapira. The Turkic text in the *mejuma* comprises a complete and accurate translation of the original text, even though the title of the drama is not provided. Only the final monologue of David was partially abridged. Moreover, the handwritten version does not include the title page nor the names of all characters, as in the original printed book. It begins directly with the first scene of the first act.

The copyist preserved the visual characteristics of a drama. On the other hand, if compared with the printed Hebrew version, the result he achieved should be perceived as quite modest. In the manuscript each statement begins with a new line and stage directions are usually written with interval spacing or are taken into ornate brackets in order to distinguish them from the main body of the text. However, there is no clear distinction between text in prose and verse. In the Hebrew version lines and stanzas of songs are visibly distinguished from each other, each line is written separately. Whereas in the translation I do not observe an analogical division. The text is written in a continuous manner and each fragment of a song recited by a new character is written

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8 Most probably it was the title under which *Melukhat Sha’ul* was known among Karaims.
separately, as in the prose text. This partition hardly refers to the division into stanzas and misleads the reader. The division into acts is another factor which distinguishes the translation from the original. In the Hebrew drama each opening of an act is written in larger script, whereas in the mejuma I observed a method typical of Turkic books. Here, almost every act ends with a colophon, that is with a text written inside a triangle whose acute angle is facing the bottom of the page. However, the copyist was irregular and some of the acts begin without any distinction in the text. Moreover, I must acknowledge that it is impossible to determine beyond any doubt, whether these editorial features are a result of actions of the translator, Abraham Lutski, or whether they were introduced later, by the copyist Samuel Kohen.

After performing a comparative analysis of the Hebrew drama and its Crimean Karaim version I established that the translation has not been made in a literal manner. Nevertheless, it is accurate and captures every nuance of the original text. The majority of discrepancies stems from the differences between Hebrew and Turkic word order. In simple sentences Turkic syntax is respected. Curiously enough, in complex sentences the translator attempted to preserve the Hebrew order of subordinate clauses. It is well known that participial clauses typical of Turkic languages, which usually introduce subordinate clauses, precede the superordinate clause. Abraham Lutski repeatedly decided to use the Persian conjunction ki ‘that, which’ in complex sentences instead of Turkic participial clause. Thereby, he was able to maintain the postpositional position of subordinate clause when it was required. Naturally, the conjunction ki is also observed in other Turkic languages, yet it is never as common as we observe here.\(^\text{12}\) I would like to show an example of this method of translation. I shall present a sentence from the original play in Hebrew and its Turkic counterpart in the mejuma.

In Hebrew:

\[
\text{more-pleasant-words-of-the-prophet-my-soul-knows-which-more-than-honeycomb-to-palate-juice-dripped}
\]

In Turkic:

\[
\text{prophet’s-pleasant-words-my-soul-still-knows-which-honeycomb-more-than-to-palate-honey-dripped} \text{13}
\]

The vocabulary is usually translated properly, therefore we may assume that Abraham Lutski was fluent in Hebrew. He decided to use paraphrase only in a few cases. I shall discuss the two most prevalent causes of non-equivalence in translation. Firstly, it occurred when there was no Turkic, Arabic or Persian equivalent of the Hebrew word. For example, the word ‘\text{shofar – a traditional Jewish horn}’ was translated with a word borrowed from Russian, i.e. \text{truba ‘trumpet’ (Rus. трубы).\text{14}} This choice of word is quite surprising in the light of the fact that Karaim dictionaries provide more accurate equivalents, such as \text{boru ‘pipe, horn, trumpet’}.\text{14} In other case, a specific term ‘\text{sapphire’ was translated with a more general word cevaer ‘gem} as there was no equivalent in Crimean Karaim. The word \text{safr}, which is present in Arabic, must have

\(^{12}\text{For reading on postpositional clauses introduced by ki in Karaim, Krimchak an Armeno-Kipchak, see H. Jankowski, “Position of Karaim among the Turkic Languages”, Studia Orientalia 95 (2003), p. 143.}\)

\(^{13}\text{The Hebrew conjunction ki present in the Hebrew sentence should not be confused with a homonymous Persian conjunction ki in the Turkic sentence.}\)

\(^{14}\text{N. A. Baskakov, A. Zajączkowski, S. M. Shapshal (eds), Karaimsko-russko-pol’skij slovar’. Moskva: Russkij Jazyk, 1974, p. 131.}\)
been unknown to the translator. Secondly, paraphrase occurs when the original phrase is not explicit. The first scene of the first act begins with a monologue of Saul who says in a vague manner: 'after smiting him'. The translator wanted to be precise, as he probably considered that the reader may not understand the meaning of this phrase from the context, hence he paraphrased it as Bu 'Ameleq qavmunı qırğımdan sonra ‘After overcoming this tribe of Amalek’. Another good example is the translation of the following phrase, which occurred in the last lines of the play, i.e. bu ra’mım qırdığımdan sonra ‘above in your nest’. It was paraphrased as öksekde duran ‘standing above’.

This being said, I should emphasize that non-equivalence is relatively rare. In The Witches’ Song, which is provided below, there are only three discrepancies between the original text and the translation. They are as follows:

1. The word הܢܐ dance’ was paraphrased with an unrelated word kemang ‘to the violin’. However, as we may observe, both of them are music terms.

2. The word יִתְנָה ‘you sing’ was paraphrased with related words sevinir oynarsız ‘you are happy, you dance’, which are more elaborate and were probably used to maintain a similar amount of syllables in the line.

3. The words אֶֽמֶּֽנֶּה ‘indeed then’ were paraphrased with an unrelated word anca ‘only’. I do not find a logical reason to this choice of the translator.

IV

The foundation of Karaism lies in a belief that each follower should read the Torah in an independent manner and should be able to find answers to his questions through independent interpretation of the Scripture. Over the centuries, the Old Testament was the apple of the eye of Karaim scholars and biblical exegesis was a subject of their ongoing research. In this context, it is understandable that one of the nineteenth-century’s Crimean Karaim scholars got interested in a maskilic drama Melukhat Sha’ul, which was the first historical drama written in biblical Hebrew. The plot revolves around biblical events presented in The First Book of Samuel, from the holy war against the Amalekites to the death of Saul and Jonathan on Mount Gilboa. The central topic of the play is a conflict between king Saul who was scorned by God and young David anointed by the prophet Samuel to be the future king of Israel. The antagonism between these two figures was triggered by Saul who could not come to terms with the loss of the favor of God and could not understand that he was the one who had brought misfortune upon him. He preferred to put the blame on David who was unaware of the feelings of the king and did everything he could to be a loyal subject. Unfortunately, David’s victory over Goliath was the straw that broke the camel’s back and the king decided to kill his young rival.

The drama does not only aim to present historical facts concerning biblical figures. It should be described as an independent attempt to explain the motives of actions and emotions that tormented Saul and David in dramatic moments of their lives. The character of Saul is described in a multidimensional way. We get to know his point of view on the above depicted events through long monologues, which he delivers in solitude or in the presence of his closest advisors. Furthermore, we learn how he was perceived by other characters of the drama in dialogues between his wife and children, in discussions which took place between his enemies about plans to overthrow Saul as well as in a quick exchange of words between royal guards frightened by the king’s strange behavior in the middle of the night as Saul was falling deeper and deeper into madness. Below I present a fragment of a dialogue between guards:
Tahrea: “Now, brother, listen to what I have to say to you. Maybe three nights ago I was a guard over here with Ahiezer. I heard a racket in the middle of the night. We heard a turmoil coming from the king’s chamber. If I was not afraid to leave my post for the sake of my health, I would dare to go into his (Saul’s) chamber.” Bakbakkar: “In the middle of the night? God forbid! I would not do it in the middle of the night. At this time demons are gathering. Look, the moment I said it the hair on the back of my neck stood on its end. Woe, I would hide myself in the walls like the birds do. Oh God, watch over me!”

15 Biblical narrative is written in a succinct and cohesive manner. The Scripture does not intend to give a profound explanation of causes of behavior of specific individuals. It seems that they are either directed by the will of God or that their actions stem from their nature hence they are not able to behave in any other way. The author of Melukhat Sha’ul wanted to expose the human aspect of Saul and David who, from the perspective of centuries, are incomprehensible to contemporary generations. He was able to make the reader understand seemingly frantic and insane behavior of king Saul. What is more, one tends to sympathize with him when he expresses utter disappointment, loneliness and sadness in long monologues:

Saul: “Oh, what is this? My God, are these horrible visions not enough? You stupefied me while I was sleeping and you still torment me in my dreams during the night and in this deceitful night I see this rascal (David), he is approaching me, he is humiliating the one who is wearing the king’s crown. May every thought be damned! May every thought of my soul be damned! May thoughts of a man be damned! They make misfortune even worse. He looks at the ones who came. You are a refractory generation, insensitive rascals, wicked men! Not even one of you hurts because of me (my state). You all disobeyed me. Insensitive rascals, wicked men! My servant (David) deceived me and all of you loathed me. To Jonathan: I can see wicked devils in your eyes. I wish your mother’s womb had split in two when she was sitting on a chair. But also me, I wish I had been scattered over seas and that I had been thrown with a sling to the end of the world before (…) I gave birth to you. It was you who made this Jesse’s son so important. You stole reign from your father’s house! You! You!” (pp. 43a-43b).

The monarch was also shown in moments in which he came back to his senses and apologized to David for his acts of hostility. In the final monologue he asked David for forgiveness and said that David was like a son to him. It appears that Saul was essentially good at heart and his acts of madness were caused by the rejection of God. The reader is also informed about the condition of David. The young boy, who had been eager to serve his king, was distraught when he heard false and malicious accusations that he wanted to overthrow Saul. Consequently, he escaped from the king’s palace to save his life. As he wandered alone in the desert he tried to find an explanation why he had met such a fate. He gave the following monologue when he finally encountered Saul.

David: “Is this my voice? It is a voice you know, a voice of a man whom you chased away. How long could you not recognize my loyalty and my truthfulness? Look, father! In these last days you fell into my hands. I didn’t touch you and I left you on a good (safe) road. If it is a God’s order, then may God forgive, I will bring Him sacrifice. His laws are sweeter than honey. Even if I didn’t know that a good thing may come out of a bad thing, He knows it. He understands our actions. But if wicked rascals deceived your heart, they are damned. Because of the evilness of their hearts I am walking in confusion during the day and like a stray during the night, as if I didn’t have a soul. During the day from the

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15 All quotes from the drama come from the mejuma of Samuel Kohen and are given in my translation into English.
heat, during the night from the cold. O my king, who do you walk with? Who do you chase? What is, what is my fault that you chase after me? What good does it do that you chase after a man like me? When a mountain bird chases after an ant it fills his stomach. But you give yourself a feast!” (p. 54a).

V

The drama written by Tropplowitz is multilayered and not limited to the two main figures. Minor characters are vital to the plot and are vividly depicted, so they attract the reader’s attention. The most intriguing example are the characters of witches of Endor who prophesied for Saul. The king encountered them in a gloomy ambience. When he came in the middle of the night to the place of their assembly only two candles were burning and something mysterious was brewing in a cauldron. This is a direct reference to the *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, in which three witches foretell the king’s future. One of the characteristic motifs of this famous drama, which repeatedly occurs in literary works, is a song performed by the witches in Act 4, Scene 1. As in *Macbeth*, witches of Endor evoked a person from the underworld, yet firstly they had sung together a sinister song. That being said, one must acknowledge that the song written by the English playwright is far more gruesome.

Below I present the version of *The Witches’ Song* taken from the Hebrew original drama together with its Crimean Karaim translation and my translation into English.
The Witches’ Song

The text in the drama *Melukhat Sha’ul*

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I

The text in the *mejuma* of Samuel Kohen

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Cadular Cümleleri

I

Vaqıt geldi, yarı gece vaqıtı oldu.

Canımızı sevindiren vaqıt geldi.

Haydi qosemciler, haydi mitupan qarılár.

Čığırıñ gece ile, odr qalbımızñ ferraḥlığı.

Gece, anca gece. Oldır qalbımızñ ferraḥlığı.

Gece, anca gece. Oldır qalbımızñ ferraḥlığı.

II

Qızlar kemanğa yigkeitler kezalik.

Sizler gündüz sevinir oynarız.

Gece geldikte qorquya düşersiz.

Oda içinde odaya girip yatarsız.

Gece, anca gece. Oldır qalbımızñ ferraḥlığı.

III

Askerniñ bağatırları daẖı.

Bizim sevindigimiz vaqıt onlar behzun olurlar.

Onlar gece qaranlığından qaçarlar.

Anca bizim qalbımız sevinir.

Gece, anca gece. Oldır qalbımızñ ferraḥlığı.

IV

Arqi, Barsi ḥadır olun.

Emir eyle üşte biz buradayız.

Siz qızqardaşlar devşirilin.

Seniñ qalbiniñ muradlarlardir bizim de muradimiz.

Gece, anca gece. Oldır qalbımızñ ferraḥlığı.
Translation of the text in the *mejuma*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Witches</strong></td>
<td><strong>Everyone</strong></td>
<td><strong>Witches</strong></td>
<td><strong>Witches</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The time has come, the midnight has come</td>
<td></td>
<td>Even brave warriors</td>
<td>Archi, Barsi, get ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The joyful time has come</td>
<td></td>
<td>Are sad when we are happy</td>
<td>Here we are, give us commands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come on witches, come on brave women</td>
<td></td>
<td>They run away from the night’s darkness</td>
<td>Gather, my sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing in the night, it is the joy of our hearts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Only your hearts are joyful</td>
<td>The wishes of your heart are our wishes, too</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Everyone</strong></td>
<td><strong>Witch</strong></td>
<td><strong>Everyone</strong></td>
<td><strong>Witch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night, only night, it is the joy of our hearts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Night, only night, it is the joy of our hearts</td>
<td>Witches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Witches</strong></td>
<td><strong>Witches</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Everyone</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls (play) the violin, boys likewise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Night, only night, it is the joy of our hearts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Facsimile of *The Witches’ Song*, the *mejuma* of Samuel Kohen, page 57a