Netanel b. Yeshaya

The midrashic *yalqutim—*compilations of Biblical exegesis and homiletics—that were written in Yemen in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have typical recurrent characteristics: intertwined and integrated use of Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic; eclecticism, anonymous quoting of sources; reworking of sources of the Sages by way of revisions, additions, and omissions; and references to the surrounding Arab culture. *Me’or Ha-Afelah* (Nur al-salam) is one of the first works produced in Yemen in that period. Its author, R. Netanel b. Yeshaya, lived in Yemen in the early fourteenth century, a time when the Jews’ social and political situation in that country was relatively secure. Very little is known about his personal history. He is known to have written a work on the laws of ritual slaughter (mentioned on p. 508 of *Me’or Ha-Afelah*); it has not survived. He also authored a commentary on Maimonides’ *Mishne Torah.* Although it, too, is lost, R. Yihye Kappah remarked that it was studied almost until the Yemenite community’s last generation under the auspices of his mentor, R. Hayyim Korah. In this book, R. Kappah explains, R. Netanel traces Maimonides’ sources in both Talmuds and the midrashim (exegetic literature) and interprets points of Jewish law that are opaque in Maimonides’ wording.

We possess two commentaries by R. Netanel b. Yeshaya: *Me’or Ha-Afelah* on the Pentateuch and a commentary on the Scroll of Esther.

*Me’or Ha-Afelah* was evidently written shortly after R. David Adani’s *Midrash Ha-Gadol* was completed. Its dating (1329) is noted in the author’s preface. Some claim that Netanel was influenced by *Midrash Ha-Gadol* (Schlossberg, 1991, p. 18). According to others, *Midrash Ha-Gadol* was marginal in the Yemenite midrashic corpus and *Me’or Ha-Afelah* came first (Havatselet, p. 3; Langermann, p. 265). Netanel explains the purpose of the commentary in the preface: “My goal in this collection is to commit to writing the matters that I have adduced from words of Torah or some of them, lest they be lost or let I forget them, just as much has already been lost and forgotten” (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 4). Later in the preface, R. Netanel notes that he intends the work to be consulted by scholars and ordinary Jews alike: “… This collection has words that are fit for the masses and that they will find favorable, and words fit for scholars that they will like, and words unsuited to some people, who will then will regard it as though it had not been written, these being what the exegetes cited among matters avoided” (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 4).

*Me’or Ha-Afelah* was written partly in Hebrew and partly in Arabic. The sections in Hebrew are mainly gleaned from the Sages. Many midrashic passages quoted in this work are worded differently from the phrasing known to us (Schlossberg, 1991). For example, according to the midrash, the three angels who visit Abraham after his circumcision are Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael (B.T. Bava Metsiya 86b among others); in *Me’or Ha-Afelah,* however, the third angel is called Saraphiel (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 93). Sometimes R. Netanel reworks and abridges the wording of the midrashim; in other cases he proves to have been in possession of midrashim unknown to us from any other source. For example, after Noah realizes what his son has done to him, he curses him: “They said, and with what curse did he curse him? He disowned him and gave his inheritance to another whose name is the same as his own in numerology: this is Ya’akov in its full orthography, who was given the inheritance of [the land of] Canaan” (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 72).

The sections in Arabic are philosophical/allegorical passages in which scattered teachings of medieval commentators are brought together. The part of the work is influenced mainly by the philosophical approach that Maimonides introduced. R. Netanel bases himself on Maimonides’ entire oeuvre: *Guide for the Perplexed,* the *Epistle to Yemen,* *Ma’amar Tehiyat Ha-Metim,* and others. Aside from Maimonides’ teachings, R. Netanel was influenced by R. Sa’adia Gaon and uses the latter’s writings extensively although without mentioning him by name. Also mentioned are the Aramaic targumim—Onkelos and Targum Yerushalmi on the Pentateuch and Targum Yonatan on the Prophets. Kabbalistic ideas infiltrate the text here and there, even though the works of the kabbalistic sages had not yet made inroads in fourteenth-century Yemen.

Aside from citing rabbinical midrashim, the author wishes to present the gist of the halakhot (provisions of rabbinical law) that is adduced from the verses. For this purpose, he quotes from Maimonides’ *Mishne Torah* and *Commentary on the Mishna.* Apart from its eclectic compilation of midrashim and commentaries, the work contains numerous interpretations and novellae that belong to the author himself. For example, when R. Netanel explains Jacob’s plan to post white branches in front of the sheep in heat (Gen. 30:38), he explains it by likening it to a hen that hatches her eggs. When she looks at something, a bit of what she sees adheres to the chicks (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 145).

As noted, R. Netanel admired Maimonides and quoted him extensively. In his commentary on Num. 23:23, he mentions a tradition that Maimonides received from his father and grandfather: that prophecy would resume in the year [4]972 (1216) [הלא מתתקע"ב יוצא 1212?]. “If this is so,” he wrote, “it is the time of the late R. Moshe b. Maimon [Maimonides], and the commentators have already said that it is he of whom it is stated, Behold, I am sending you the Prophet Elijah ahead of the great and awesome day of the coming of the Lord” (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 444). By inference, R. Netanel believes that Maimonides was privileged with the spirit of prophecy. Even so, occasionally he does not refrain from disagreeing with Maimonides. He writes, for example, that the censer for the incense would be placed on the incense altar but that incense would not actually be offered on it (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 273)—in contrast to what Maimonides wrote (*Hilkhot Temidim u-Musafin* 3:8).

R. Netanel’s attitude toward the Muslim surroundings was complex. Some claim that he criticizes Islam more radically than do other midrashim [authors of midrashic works?] in Yemen (Schlossberg, 1993). In his commentary on Deut. 4:27, for example, he writes: “ ‘Only a few of you will survive among the nations where the Lord will lead you’—as has happened to us today in exile, in that Lahlah and Habor and the River Gozen were destroyed, a “madman” and his associates killed them and lay waste to their cities, and the survivors set out for the land of Yemen and built cities and dwelled in them” (*Me’or Ha-Afelah*, p. 475). Jews in medieval Islamdom used the term “madman” to denote Muhammad; the commentary alludes to Muhammad’s conquest of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE and the surviving Jews’ escape to Yemen. Others contend that one can find much more positive references to Islam in Netanel’s commentaries than the norm in his surroundings (Ilan, 2002). An example is the presentation of Ishmail in a favorable light: “There are six who were named before they were born: Ishmail and Isaac and Moses and Solomon and Josiah and King Messiah” (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 88). Another case in point comes from Gen: 21:20 “‘And God was with the boy and he grew’: divine providence escorted him… —he was quick to grasp and therefore learned even the most difficult things, those that have been likened to the *merkava* as the appearance of the rainbow” (*Me’or Ha-Afelah,* p. 104).

*Me’or Ha-Afelah* enjoyed relatively wide circulation among the Jews of Yemen. It has survived in dozens of copies and was quoted by ensuing compilers such as R. Mansour al Damari in his book *Ner Haskelim*, R. David b. Yesha Halevi in his *Ha-Qatsar ha-Maspiq,* and others.

R. Netanel’s commentary on the Scroll of Esther has also come into our possession. Unlike *Me’or Ha-Afelah,* this work is entirely in Hebrew (apart from the first four verses, in which Judeo-Arabic is mixed in) and contains no philosophical ideas. It comprises a collection of midrashim harvested from the Babylonian Talmud, the Aramaic targumim, *Midrash Esther Rabba,* and *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer,* along with interpretations originating in R. Sa’adia Gaon’s commentary on Esther and halakhic points from Maimonides’ *Mishne Torah.* Some of the interpretations are unique to this source and may have produced by its author. An example is Netanel’s original commentary on the word *tor* in the sense of a carrier pigeon: “‘And when the *tor* of Esther arrived’— … Why is it called a *tor*? Because they had *torim* [carrier pigeons] and it is written *ad loc* that every girl had her *tor* and they release them. The one whose *tor* reaches the king’s home first goes to him that night, as it is said: ‘andwhen the *tor* arrived” (Esther 2:15).