**Late Judeo-Arabic Manuscripts of Popular Literature from the
Firkovitch Collection**

Rachel Hasson
*Department of Arabic Language and Literature,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

More than 1,200 Judeo-Arabic manuscripts of popular literature have been identified in the central Genizah collections. The Firkovitch Collection, an assortment of manuscripts taken from the Karaite synagogue of Dar Simha in Cairo, is the most important collection for studying the popular literature written in Judeo-Arabic found in the Genizah, as the collection itself includes 660 manuscripts. Among these manuscripts are more than 140 different titles of popular stories and poems.

I divide this corpus into two categories, according to the texts’ affinity to Jewish tradition. The first category contains texts that have an affinity to the Jewish communal tradition. This category includes texts that appear to have had a ceremonial role in the period in which they were copied, as well as didactic or social roles within the Jewish community. This category includes stories about biblical figures such as “The Tale of Joseph,” which was read at Passover, and the popular “Tale of Esther,” which retold the contents of the Scroll of Esther, and stories from the *Midrash*, *piyyutim* in praise of God, lamentations such as “The Tale of Hannah and Her Seven Sons,” which was recited on Tisha B’Av, exhortatory rebuke poems, wine poems, and moral poems.

These texts are characterized by the integration of Hebrew words as well as by biblical verses and sentences from the *Midrash*. The texts often contain explanations about the festivals with which they are associated or interpretations of biblical verses. In addition, some of the stories reflect close intercultural relations between Jews and the surrounding Muslim society, and some of them even contain some Quranic material.

The second category contains texts that have no affinity to Jewish communal tradition. To this category belong texts of definite Muslim origin, such as stories from the *One Thousand and One Nights* and “The Tale of Zayd and Kaḥlā.” This category also includes texts that were composed or adapted by Jews but that have no affinity to Judaism, such as the poems of the Karaite poet Ibn Mi‘mār, debate poems like “The Tale of the Cairene and the Countryman.” In addition, there are texts about animals and humorous verse.

These texts are characterized by their affinity to the local Arab Muslim culture, especially Egyptian culture. Many texts refer to specific places in Cairo; others developed from close contact with Egyptian social discourse.

The texts in both categories have many characteristics in common: most of the stories and verses in the corpus are anonymous, that is, the name of the author is not mentioned and they are told from the mouth of an unnamed storyteller, *al-rāwī* (= “the narrator”) or *al-ʿulamāʾ* (= “the teachers”). In terms of style, some of the texts are written in rhymed prose, and in many of them the repetition of specific formulas is prominent. The texts also reflect well-known folkloric motifs. Many texts exist in more than one version; the poems in particular are multiversional in that the order of the verses changes from one transmission to another. Altogether, the common characteristics show that the texts have many features that are typical of orally transmitted literature. It may be assumed that most of the texts were part of the storytellers’ repertoire and told in coffeehouses or on street corners, especially in Egypt, in the period in which they were copied.

While parallels to texts included in the first category can be found also in print editions, the vast majority of the texts included in the second category are rarities that have neither other textual *testimonia* in Judeo-Arabic, in manuscript or in print, nor parallels in Arabic script. Most texts are from a page to two leaves in length, and complete texts are very few.

The texts are written in late Judeo-Arabic; a paleographical examination of each manuscript proves that the majority of the texts were copied from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. As is usual in texts written in Middle Arabic, they combine characteristics of Classical Arabic together with vulgar traits of the spoken vernaculars. The late Judeo-Arabic reflected in these texts is unique in the relatively large number of vulgar linguistic elements that are present.