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Around the white milk are circling seven loathsome flies' (Bar-Adon 1975:87). Hints of Galilean Dialect pronunciation can still be heard in the speech of elderly people, especially in their use of hyper-corrected forms, e.g., דבוקה ['precisely; for spite'] (rather than דבוק), where the standard ע sound of ו (waw) has been replaced by ב, or מדבר ['speaking'] (rather than מדבר), where the original ב sound of ב (bet) has been replaced by ע.

References

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Gaonic Correspondence

The ge’onim throughout much of their history were remote from the majority of the Jewish population over whom they wielded spiritual and moral leadership, and they were thus accustomed to communicating through letters. While much of their earlier correspondence has come down to us in the form of collections of gaonic responsa, a form of communication characterized by its legalistic character and technical language, thanks to the discovery of the Cairo Genizah, we possess hundreds of other letters, written by the famed ge’onim of Iraq and by the lesser-known incumbents of the Jerusalem Yeshiva.

Much of the extant correspondence is in Hebrew, a language that appears to have been adopted for gaonic letter-writing from at least the 10th century (Saadya Gaon) and that continued in common use until the second half of the 11th century, when, like the academies that championed it, it went into decline. It is likely that Hebrew served as a medium of communication for religious authorities from a much earlier period (at least in Egypt or Palestine), as a few tantalizing discoveries at Oxyrhynchus suggest (Mishor 1989:256), but the Genizah preserves only very few items of correspondence prior to the 10th century. Pastoral letters were intended to be read aloud to the scattered congregations in the diaspora, and therefore Hebrew was preferred to Arabic, since the former was a language suitable for recitation in the synagogue, and, in addition, its use bore a spiritual and nationalistic resonance befitting the official language of gaonic authority and testified to the confidence felt by these traditional Jewish institutions under Islamic rule.

The Cairo Genizah has preserved the Hebrew correspondence of Babylonian ge’onim from Saadya onwards (as either later recensions, contemporary copies for the purposes of promulgation, or as autograph manuscripts) and that of the Palestinian ge’onim from Josia ben Aaron (d. 1025) until the eventual disappearance of the Jerusalem Yeshiva. The most prodigious letter-writer of the period, who left approximately one hundred letters in the Genizah, was Solomon ben Judah, ga’on of the Palestinian Yeshiva from 1025 to 1051. His correspondence shows a remarkable fluency, a surprising candor, and illuminates a highly colorful character.

While some correspondence was intended for only one recipient, usually a local leader or representative of the Yeshiva, many of the letters were intended to be read aloud to a congregation or select group. The writers took pains to produce letters that reflected favorably on their knowledge of Hebrew sources (first and foremost the Bible), their linguistic flair, and their appreciation for the literature of the day, principally poetry. They are not, however, merely literary artifices, but represent a homogenous, fluid idiom that had to convey a wide variety of information relating to the governance of scattered communities, the disputes and controversies of the day, and the economic realities facing the ge’onim as they sought to maintain their academies.

Most of the gaonic letters have been published by Mann (1920–1922; 1931) and Gil (1991; 1997); the language has been described by Outhwaite (2000).
1. Vocalization

The majority of texts are entirely unvocalized, and when vowel signs do occur they usually serve to elucidate a rare or unfamiliar word, such as a proper noun. An exception is made, however, by the pretender to the gaonate of Jerusalem, Nathan ben Abraham (active in the first half of the 11th c.). Following his adoption of the title of ga’on, he adorns his correspondence with a variety of vowel signs. They are especially frequent in the opening poetic embellishments, marking the rhyming syllables, and are probably used to lend an air of gaonic authority to his letters, rather than to aid comprehension.

Where used, the principal system of vocalization is Tiberian, although Babylonian vowels can be found in correspondence from Iraq and in the copies of Babylonian letters made in Egypt (by, for instance, the local Babylonian dignitary Shemariah ben Elnahan). Again, the Palestinian pretender Nathan ben Abraham is exceptional, in that he not only attests Tiberian vowel signs, but also frequently uses Babylonian vowels, mixing both systems in the same letter and even on the same word (e.g., CUL T-S 13J31.1). His Babylonian vocalization superficially resembles the compound system, marking lines above many vowels; however, a close examination shows that the lines are used without reference to the nature of the syllable, and it appears to be a graphic device only, employed for effect (→ Vocalization, Babylonian).

Other reading signs are sparingly used: the Palestinian ga’on Josiah ben Aaron frequently distinguishes sin and shin with the diacritic dot (e.g., סָשִׁים šasim ‘rejoicing’, CUL T-S 13J14.10) and occasionally uses dagesh and rafe, but he is exceptional. Very common, however, is the use of supralinear dots (either single or multiple), lines or other symbols to mark abbreviations in frequent expressions, e.g., in the epistolary formula זַעָלִית נָא יִהְיֶה יִקְרָא וְיִשְׁכָּב וְיַחֲדֵשֵׁנִי יִשָּׁלוּם ‘I myself greatly wanted’ (CUL Mosseri Ia.4, a letter in the hand of Solomon ben Judah, the Palestinian ga’on), and in titles, blessings, and common phrases.

2. Orthography

The orthography displayed by gaonic correspondence is fuller than that of earlier traditions of Hebrew, but the influence of the MT remains evident (→ Orthography: Biblical Hebrew). There is a lack of total conformity, and writers vary in their approach. For instance, yet Solomon ben Judah, who is otherwise orthographically conservative, regularly writes the waw, as does Daniel ben Azariah. The two extremes are best represented by the Palestinian ge’onim Nathan ben Abraham and Josiah ben Aaron: while both will customarily spell o, u, and long i vowels with vowel letters, they differ considerably over ē, short i, and the writing of consonantal w. For example, Nathan does not mark ē in a closed syllable with yod, yet spellings such as יִשָּׁלֶם yasilem ‘may He save them’ (CUL T-S 13J4.10) occur in Josiah’s correspondence.

The semantic distinction perpetuated in Biblical Hebrew orthography between the spelling with and without yod of the ending of the singular and plural noun with suffixes (הַמְּכַבֶּה תֵּבֶל, תְּבֵל, תְּבֵל) both miktabenu is maintained only by some of the writers, principally Solomon ben Judah, Nathan ben Abraham, and Sherira Ga’on; yet even then, is sometimes forgotten on feminine singular nouns, e.g., מַזְלַתָּנוּ tefillatenu ‘our prayer’ (Solomon ben Judah, CUL T-S AS 151.20).

3. Morphology

Pronouns and particles. For the 1cs יָאָה anoki and יָאָה anahnu are attested alongside the pronouns יָאָנִי ami and יָאָנִי amnu. While the archaic 1cs pronoun יָאָה anoki is sufficiently rare to indicate a marked usage, e.g., יָאָה רַחַל גְּרוּיָה anoké me’od rasiti ‘I myself greatly wanted’ (CUL T-S 13J16.24, Solomon ben Judah), the biblical יָאָה anahnu is used in free variation with יָאָנִי amnu by many writers, e.g., in a letter by the 10th-century Babylonian ga’on Nehe-miah ha-Kohen: שֵׁאָר יָאָה anahnu mešallehim ‘that we sent’ and יָאָנִי amnu mešaqqesim (CUL T-S 12.831). For some, however, יָאָה anahnu apparently represents a higher register of language, as it is found only in formal epistolary phrases, giving way to יָאָנִי in the body text, e.g., Nathan ben Abraham.

The archaic 3pl pronoun הַמֶּה hemma is found alongside הם hem, particularly as a demonstrative, e.g., התּוּבֵה הַמֶּה ha-zehubim ha-hemma ‘those dinars’ (CUL T-S 16.275, Solomon ben Judah). Indeed, a wide range of
The masculine plural noun usually takes the ending ש -im, though י -in is also found, mainly on post-biblical vocabulary, e.g., Solomon ha-Kohen Ga’on ‘and many died from the tortures’ (JTS ENA 28.4, 1925 C.E.). The 3ms pronominal suffix וה -ehu, written with or without yod, is often favored over י -ו, particularly with biradical nouns (notably ב -ab ‘father’ and א -ab ‘brother’) or to create a pleasing assonance in elegant prose, e.g., ‘and may He cause him to find grace and kindness, and in all that he does may he allow him to succeed, son of the scholar Shemariah, whose rest is Eden’ (CUL T-S 20.102, Solomon ben Judah to Ephraim ben Shemariah). The vocalized letters of Nathan ben Abraham and occasional plene examples show that the 2ms suffix י - was pronounced -ka rather than -ak.

Nouns of the patterns getila, qittul, and haqṭala are very common in the letters, and coinages are made using these and the afformatives ד -nt (for abstract nouns) and -on (popular in the rhymed openings of letters). Given that many of the ge’onim composed poetry (to varying degrees of competence), the influence of payṭanic word creation techniques is discernible, but not widespread, and is limited mainly to a number of lexicalized nouns, e.g., moreh ‘deed’ and mišal ‘request’ (→ Payṭanic Hebrew). These are more frequent in the writings of the Jerusalem ge’onim than those of Babylon.

Morphology of the verb. Gaonic verbal morphology retains a number of older features, in particular the 3pl forms of the verb, the cohortative, paragogic nun forms of the prefix conjugation, and the jussive. The cohortative occurs frequently in waw-consecutive constructions in Solomon ben Judah’s letters, e.g., ‘and may he allow him to succeed, son of the scholar Shemariah, whose rest is Eden’. These are more frequent in the writings of the Jerusalem ge’onim than those of Babylon.
is particularly common in Babylonian sources, perhaps due to the influence of the Iraqi dialect of Arabic, e.g., יושב יושב ברכיה ve-im יישלום ha'am ma yadasin hakmehem ‘and if the people are lazy, what shall their sages do?’ (CUL T-S 13j25.5, Sherrira Ga'on). The jussive is frequently used in bestowing wishes for good fortune on correspondents. The waw-consecutive construction with the prefix conjugation is common, and employs the morphological jussive of middleweak and, usually, the apocopated forms of וְלָל (final yod) verbs.

The influence of Rabbinic Hebrew (RH) is felt in the frequent use of the כ- in ending on plural participles, in the Aramaizing forms of the verb היה haya ‘to be’ (אוה be and אוי yebe), in the form of infinitives like יָלִין littin ‘to give’, חָיָה liqqa, and עַד ledā (alongside the BH equivalents), and the extensive use of the nitpa'al stem. Indeed, the hitpa'al is mainly limited to phrases drawn in whole or part from the Bible; in nearly all other cases the nitpa'al occurs. This is a hybrid stem (and was probably pronounced nitpa'al, but no vocalized forms occur in the letters) since the participle form takes the -תָּל mit- prefix of the BH hitpa'al (→ Morphology: Rabbinic Hebrew).

in particular of vocabulary related to finance, legal procedures, and religious practice. Where Arabic terms for particular concepts or items exist, and would occur in a contemporary Judeo-Arabic text, writers prefer a Hebrew word. Thus, for ‘money order’, Arabic suftaja, we find diyya and for the ‘poll tax’, Arabic jizya or jalyya, we find biblical של mas.

A number of particular nouns, though not unique to correspondence, are characteristic of it: הבט ha bá hamod ‘son’; הבוק ret ketab ‘letter’ (frequently instead of המכתיב miktab); המאמת ha ‘amitta ‘truth’; הבש hašas ‘need, worry’.

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Mann, Jacob. 1920–1922. The Jesus in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid caliphs: A contribution to their political and communal history based chiefly on genizah material hitherto unpublished. London: Oxford University Press.
Mishor, Mordechai. 1989. “The Hebrew letter ‘Ya keveda’ (first half of the 13th century)” (ed. Gumpertz 1958) and is still widely used today. The ga’ya is part of the accent system and is generally only marked in manuscripts that have accent signs, but omitted in those that have only vocalization signs. The ga’ya sign is written beneath the consonant, generally to the left of the vowel sign, though in some manuscripts it is often written to the right of the sign. While in printed editions and in most manuscripts the sign is vertical, in a few manuscripts it is written slanting to the right slightly.

The patterns of marking of ga’ya differ among the manuscripts. The distribution of the sign in the late manuscripts was described by Baer (1869). These differ in some respects from what is found in the early manuscripts and even among the early manuscripts there are differences in the marking of certain categories of ga’ya, including between the Aleppo Codex (A) and the Codex Leningradensis (L). The most detailed studies of the ga’ya in the early manuscripts are those by Yeivin (1968:89–194, 1980:240–264).

In the early Masoretic sources the ga’ya was not regarded as one of the accents, but rather as a sign to denote the slowing down of the reading. It appears, however, that it acquired a musical motif of its own in some cases.

Yeivin classifies the ga’ya into two main groups:

(i) Musical ga’ya. This type of ga’ya is related to the musical cantillation and generally marks some kind of secondary stress preceding the main accent. It is dependent on the syllable structure of the word and the type of accent that is adjacent to it.

(ii) Phonetic ga’ya. This slows down the reading of vowels in various places to ensure the correct pronunciation of the word, usually to indicate that a following vowel should be made vocalic or to ensure that certain consonants were not slurred over.

Ga’ya

A ga’ya is a short vertical sign that is written under words in Tiberian Masoretic Bibles. The term is used in the early Masoretic sources (vocalized הגה ga’ya and הגיה gi’ya). It later came to be known as מֵכֶבֶת meteg, a term that was introduced by Yequtiel ha-Naqdan (first half of the 13th century) (ed. Gumpertz 1958) and is still widely used today. The ga’ya is part of the accent system and is generally only marked in manuscripts that have accent signs, but omitted in those that have only vocalization signs. The ga’ya sign is written beneath the consonant, generally to the left of the vowel sign, though in some manuscripts it is often written to the right of the sign. While in printed editions and in most manuscripts the sign is vertical, in a few manuscripts it is written slanting to the right slightly.

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I. Musical Ga’ya

The musical ga’ya may be divided into a variety of categories.

Minor ga’ya. This was marked on a short vowel in a closed syllable. In the early Masoretic sources it was referred to as ‘minor ga’ya’ (גייה בוכה ga’ya qetanna). This seems to relate to the fact that the ga’ya lengthened the vowel to a lesser extent than when the ga’ya was marked on a long vowel, which was referred to as ‘major ga’ya’ (גיה מענה ga’ya gedola). Yequtiel ha-Naqdan used the term ‘heavy ga’ya’ (גיה עני ga’ya keveda) to refer to the minor ga’ya and the term ‘light ga’ya’ (גיה קל ga’ya