

GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

The Newsletter of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library

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Ben Outhwaite (Head of the Genizah Research Unit) shows Dayan Yisroel Yaakov Lichtenstein (Rosh Beis Din of the Federation of Synagogues) and Dayan Yehoshua Posen (Director of Operations for Federation Beis Din) manuscripts of Maimonides during a Federation visit to the Genizah Collection in Cambridge. The photograph was taken by the photographer Zion Ozeri (www.zionozeri.com) as part of a major artistic project on Jewish education (www.jewishlens.org).

The Genizah as an untapped source of Geonic responsa

The responsa literature (Heb. she'elot u-teshuvot, questions and answers) has been an important Jewish literary genre since the eighth century.

As its name suggests, the responsa literature is a vast collection of queries sent by individuals or communities to important individuals or

groups with religious authority, and the responses that the latter sent back. Questions dealt with every facet of Jewish life: law, philosophy, language,

interpretation of the Bible, interpretation of the Talmud, and more. From their location in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate,

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ON OTHER PAGES: The Sisters of Sinai in Jerusalem | The Jewish Calendar Controversy

the Yeshivot maintained a wide-reaching network of communication with the Diaspora through the ninth and tenth centuries and responded to numerous queries.

Many responsa were translated into medieval Hebrew and transmitted in Europe, but such copies, which formed the bulk of the collections that were published to the middle of the nineteenth century, often omitted large portions of the responsa. In contrast, the responsa preserved in the Cairo Genizah have by and large maintained the original language and style.

In a new project, a joint venture between the T-S Genizah Research Unit of Cambridge University Library, the Research Authority of Orot Israel college, and Machon Yerushalim, made possible through the generous support of an anonymous donor from the US, four researchers, Dr. Amir Ashur, Dr Ezra Chwat, Dr Dan Greenberger and myself, will discover, transcribe and translate the Geonic responsa preserved among the Genizah hoard. The team is instructed by Prof. Robert Brody and Prof. Mordechai Akiva Friedman. To date, nearly 100 new Geonic responsa from the Cairo Genizah have come to light. Some of the most interesting findings include ancient quires by Rav Saadya Gaon, written on parchment, dating to the end of the tenth century or the

beginning of the eleventh. Several rotuli of a similar date have also been discovered. These fragments likely represent a version of the original responsa that are tantalisingly close to the original version of the responsa.

Zvi Stampfer
Orot College, Israel

A rotulus (vertical scroll) of Geonic responsa reconstructed from three fragments: **T-S AS 88.271**, **T-S 12.169** and **T-S 16.99**. The connection between the three was originally spotted by project member Ezra Chwat.

The rotulus contains responsa by the Geonim R. Sherira (d. 1006), R. Samuel ben Ḥofni (d. 1033) and R. Hayya (d. 1038). This manuscript was copied in the eleventh century perhaps during the lifetime of the authors. Some parts of this rotulus were previously published while others were discovered by our researchers.



The Genizah Research Unit is grateful for the support of the British Academy, other smaller or anonymous donations, and those made by Friends of the Genizah.

The Sisters of Sinai in Jerusalem

Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson, the Scottish twin sisters often known as 'The Westminster Sisters' or the 'Giblews' are best known for their expeditions to St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai between 1892 and 1906 to photograph and decipher biblical manuscripts.

In the archives of Westminster College in Cambridge, which they helped to found, are two unpublished travelogues written by Margaret in which she gives an account of the only expedition they made to the Middle East specifically to collect manuscripts. In the first account 'Cairo to Jerusalem by Land' Margaret gives a lively account of an overland trek by camel from the Suez Canal via Al Arish and Gaza to Jerusalem. In the second account 'Jerusalem in 1896' she describes their subsequent one-month stay in the Holy City where they visit many religious buildings and archaeological sites and meet dignitaries from all walks of life. Margaret records all this with great accuracy in her rather disciplined and detached style.

One particularly colourful account is given of their attending the ancient Greek Orthodox ceremony of the Holy Fire in the Holy Sepulchre Church. In this tradition, which takes place within the tomb of Christ, a sacred flame is said to erupt spontaneously during the Easter celebrations, a tradition dating back to an original miracle from the second century when water in lamps carried by the priests was said to have been miraculously transformed into oil. In 1009, Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, the Fatimid Caliph, ordered the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre Church as he regarded the ceremony as

fraudulent, and controversies surrounding this ceremony rumbled on through history.

The sisters had already witnessed the ceremony on an earlier visit to Jerusalem in 1869, and had vowed not to go again, but as Margaret explains, – *'we did not intend to see the Holy Fire, having done so on our previous visit, but the Greek Patriarch kindly sent us tickets, and we wended our way on Saturday at 11 o'clock to the upper gallery of the church, just under the dome'*. But on this particular occasion they did not stay until the end due to the crowds of people, who were only kept in check by Turkish soldiers. The raucous behaviour of the crowd and an altercation with other observers blocking their line of sight, caused the sisters to leave early. All of this is captured by Margaret in her lively narrative.

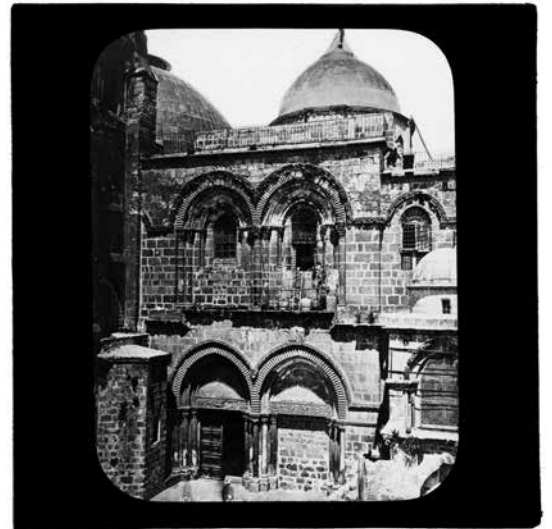
Controversy surrounds the ceremony as it is thought by many to be based purely on magical beliefs, the church dignitaries themselves sometimes having differences of opinion. This had led to disturbances, sometimes violent, between the different religious factions. Among the Greek Orthodox congregation opinions varied as to whether the Holy Fire is really of Divine origin – Margaret reports – *'the Patriarch himself preached a sermon about two years ago in which he told the people that there is no miracle in it, but a superstition upheld for centuries is hard to uproot'*.

In 1896, the dates of Easter in the Greek and Roman churches coincided and Margaret emphasises that the Turkish

Image 1: Margaret Dunlop Gibson and her husband James Young Gibson.



Image 2: The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.



The manuscripts and photographs of Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson are deposited in Westminster College, Cambridge. In 2019 their lantern slides were digitised by Cambridge University Library, and can be viewed on Cambridge Digital Library (cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/westminster). Reproduced with the permission of Westminster College, Cambridge.

authorities were afraid that as – *'the members of the various Oriental churches, Greek, Roman, Syrian, Armenian and Copt had a strong mutual antipathy to each other, besides thinking that they do God service by hating all the Jews and Mohammedans, a feeling which is heartily reciprocated, so a little spark is sufficient to light so much tinder and produce a fatal conflagration'*.

Both Margaret and Agnes are great observers and during their

travels appear to be content to observe and comment on life around them, their reactions are rarely critical. There is a sense that they enjoyed the riot of colour, noise, smells and complexities of the ritual of the eastern Christian churches so much in contrast to their own, much plainer, Presbyterian background.

But at one point, towards the end of her account, Margaret does react rather forcefully, 'I do

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not suppose that any of them can be said to savour of importance, like the Holy Fire, but to our colder Northern natures, pomp and display when carried so far, make devotional feelings well-nigh impossible. The more gorgeous a Bishop's robes and the more homage he receives, the less he becomes like a follower of the meek and lowly Saviour whose minister he is'.



Above and right:

In June 2019 Westminster College unveiled a blue plaque to commemorate their benefactors, Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson.



Perhaps Margaret, though appearing to be so non-judgemental, could not in the end, resist commenting on how their religious sensitivities had been very deeply shocked by what they had witnessed.

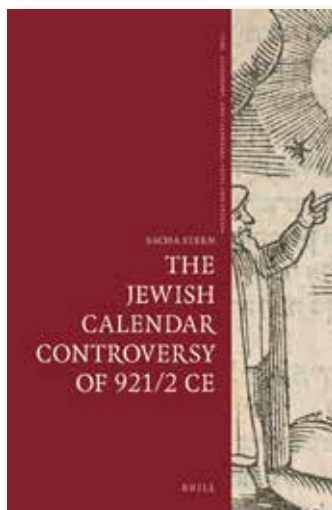
Catherine Anson
Cambridge University Library

The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/2 CE

Sacha Stern
Leiden: Brill, 2019

Simmering tensions between the Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic leaderships boiled over into a calendrical schism in the year 921–922 CE. In the summer of 921, the Palestinians, led by Gaon Aharon ben Meir, announced calendrical calculations for the forthcoming year that differed by two days from the calendar already announced by the Babylonians. The resulting mess forced Rabbanite communities to choose sides, saw Palestinians and Babylonians celebrating the festivals on different days, and produced a wealth of vitriolic and condemnatory texts. The controversy has fascinated modern scholars, but in this new publication Stern (Professor of Rabbinic Judaism and Head of the Department of Hebrew

and Jewish Studies at University College London, and leading expert on the Jewish calendar) and his colleagues have given the issue a new treatment that recontextualises the medieval literary evidence – making use of advances in philology, history and manuscript studies – and



critically reevaluates the roles of individuals like Saadya Gaon who had previously been seen as 'key players' in the events. This volume, both readable and handsomely produced, includes a detailed historical treatment of the controversy, as well as a critical edition based on five manuscripts and diplomatic editions of each reconstructed manuscript, letters and other polemical writings that circulated during 921–922, and later sources from the following centuries. The schism over the calendar caused such a fundamental break between the Palestinian and Babylonian Gaonates that relations never fully recovered. This new treatment of the controversy is long overdue and very welcome.

Melanie Schmierer-Lee
Genizah Research Unit

HOW YOU CAN HELP To receive *Genizah Fragments*, to inquire about the Collection, or to learn how to assist with its preservation and study, please write to Dr Ben Outhwaite, Head of the Genizah Research Unit, at Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DR, England.

The Library can be reached by fax (01223) 333160 or by telephone (01223) 333000. Inquiries by email should be addressed to the Unit at: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

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