NEW DATA FROM SAADIA BEARING ON THE RELOCATION OF THE PALESTINIAN YESHIVA TO JERUSALEM*

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As remarkable as it may seem given more than a century of research on the vast wealth of documentary and literary sources afforded us by the Cairo Geniza, the date and circumstances surrounding the relocation of the Palestinian yeshiva from Tiberias to Jerusalem remain a matter of speculation. According to one view, as consolidated and boosted in recent scholarship by Moshe Gil, the relocation was an essentially linear one, from Tiberias to Jerusalem, and it occurred sometime “towards the middle of the tenth century”—that is, between July 922, when the Gaon of the yeshiva, Meir, sent his son Aaron to Jerusalem (hence, it is inferred, from Meir’s seat in Tiberias), and ca. 960, when the famous letter of King Joseph of Khazaria to Ḥasday ibn Shaprūṭ, in which express reference is made to “the yeshiva that is in Jerusalem” (הישיבה שבירושלím), was composed.¹ A less “tidy” picture of the yeshiva’s movement, however, was earlier advanced by Jacob Mann, who suggested that it relocated from Tiberias to Jerusalem “not long after the Arab conquest of Palestine,

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Also, for the sake of consistency and to facilitate reading, we have adjusted the use of diacritics in all the Judaeo-Arabic citations in this article according to the system adopted by (inter alios) Blau, Grammar, §28, i.e.: ג for ג, ד for ג, ה for ג, ק for ג, ר for ג, ס for ג, ח for ג, and ע for ג (unless the cited text has ת; cf. ibid. §278) for ג.

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¹ Gil, Palestine, pp. 499–500 (§738). The date of July 922 (i.e., 1233 Sel.) is given by Saadia Gaon in his Sefer ha-Mō’adím (per Bornstein, “Controversy,” p. 74 [frag. 2, line 1]): וישלח את בנו בדחי ירחא לשלום מא[תרון השלום] ישלחו ירושלם. For the reference in King Joseph’s letter, see Kokovtsov, Correspondence, p. 25, line 18.

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about 640,” and thence to Ramla sometime in the late-ninth/early-tenth century, owing to the Karaites’ ascendancy in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{2} Still otherwise, according to a recent proposal by Benjamin Kedar, the yeshiva relocated “in about 893” from Tiberias directly to Ramla—from the former city as a result of Rabbanite opposition to Ananite-Karaite assumption of the yeshiva’s leadership by the influential Tiberian family of the Gaon and nāsīʿ Ṣemah b. Josiah, and to the latter city since, in addition to the Karaites’ ascendancy in Jerusalem, Ramla was the then-flourishing capital of Jund Filastīn.\textsuperscript{3} Both of these latter proposals, moreover, would entail the yeshiva’s relocation, once more, from Ramla to Jerusalem by ca. 960, if the reference in King Joseph’s letter is indeed reliable.\textsuperscript{4}

In the course of our work in preparing an edition of Saadia Gaon’s Arabic translation and commentary on the book of Esther,\textsuperscript{5} we have come across a statement that may well serve to refine the date—or at least the terminus ad quem—of the yeshiva’s final relocation to Jerusalem. This statement is found on the recto (lines 7–13) of MS JTSL ENA 2678.7,\textsuperscript{6} in a uniquely attested (and hitherto unpublished) portion of Saadia’s comment on 5:1–14.\textsuperscript{7} After enumerating eight reasons for Esther’s invitation of Haman to her two banquets (see Esth 5:4, 8), Saadia avers that she may indeed have been motivated by all of them; he then rationalizes this assertion (and the underlying rabbinic tradition in b. Meg. 15b) by citing a psychological truism and giving an example clearly intended to reflect contemporary realia:\textsuperscript{8}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2}Mann, \textit{Palestine}, vol. 1, pp. 59, 65.
  \item \textsuperscript{3}Kedar, “Palestinian Yeshiva.”
  \item \textsuperscript{4}Neither Mann nor Kedar specifically address the bearing of this datum from King Joseph’s letter upon the yeshiva’s subsequent relocation to Jerusalem.
  \item \textsuperscript{5}Under contract with Brill to appear towards the end of 2014 in the series \textit{Biblia Arabica}.
  \item \textsuperscript{6}This fragment, which was identified by Ephraim Ben-Porat under the auspices of the Friedberg Genizah Project Judaeo-Arabic Biblical Exegesis Team (see the cataloging data at: \texttt{http://www.genizah.org/}), is from the same codex represented by MS JTSL ENA 2824.1–2, MS NLR Evr. II A 700, and MS NLR Evr.-Arab. I 3866—on our identification of which latter three see Wechsler, “Fragments,” pp. 238–39. For an index of all the (known) fragments of Saadia’s commentary on Esther see \textit{ibid.}, pp. 280–84.
  \item \textsuperscript{7}Saadia’s commentary on Esther, like his other biblical commentaries, proceeds pericope-by-pericope rather than verse-by-verse.
  \item \textsuperscript{8}In our transcription the brackets [ ] enclose text restored by us, and the hollow circle ◦ represents approximately one letter space of lost or illegible text.
\end{itemize}

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It is among those commonly-understood things that a person may undertake an action and it be deemed right by him for many reasons, as (in the case of) one who says, “I consider it right that I go forth to Jerusalem (bayt al-maqdis) in order that I might acquire merit, and that I might meet the scholars (al-ʿulamāʾ), and that I might [...], and that I might amass its sweet fruits, and that I might exhibit my reliance on God to keep me safe during the journey, and that I might be absented for a time from those who annoy me; and so too, (that) if I should die, then I will be buried there.”

(and may also represent a blank space between words). We have also supplied the supralinear dots (per the convention remarked in the opening note above), which are employed by the scribe of this MS only for the letters ض (= צ) and ظ (= ט).

9 So, for אלמאתהיר (see Blau, Grammar, §130א; idem, Dictionary, p. 351b [s.v. אנשך]). In the MS the area where the א and the י adjoin each other is somewhat obscured due to damage, and it may be possible that there is an unusually small י between them; however, the normative length of the crossbar of the א weighs against this.

10 Or, perhaps: [ז giốngידלヘ] (“various reasons”).

11 The śāmekh is written (in the same hand) above the line.

12 The lāmed is almost entirely obscured by damage, and what we have taken to be a little bit of the top stroke may in fact be part of the vāv in the word above; hence it may also be possible to read [ב♂].

13 The reading of the dālet is uncertain. I am indebted, nonetheless, to Prof. M. A. Friedman for suggesting this restoration.

14 Other possible restorations (in place of והם, here at the end of the line) include אאֶא, or אֶל, or אֶל, or אֶל בָּלָה, or אֶל בָּלָה, or אֶל בָּלָה. "Whosoever wrongfully takes from a poor man to amass (more) for himself”.

15 “that I might amass”—Ar. li-astakthira min, on which see Dozy, Supplément, vol. 2, p. 445a, as well as Saadia’s translation of Prov 22:16a (עשֵּקָה דָּלָה לְהַרְבּוֹת וְאוֹלַדְו), construed as a protasis; per Qafish, Hikma, p. 173): מִן יִנְשֶׁהָ פִּסְרָה (לָיָּה לָיָּה מִן יִנְשֶׁהָ פִּסְרָה) (“Whosoever wrongfully takes from a poor man to amass (more) for himself”).

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The value of this statement as possible evidence bearing on the date of the yeshiva’s relocation hinges specifically on two expressions, which consequently require some further comment. The first of these is bayt al-maqdis (= Heb. bēt ha-miqdāsh). Though this phrase is also attested in medieval sources as a designation of the contemporary Temple Mount as well as of Palestine, its usual reference is either to the biblical Temple or to Jerusalem.16 This is certainly so in Saadia’s usage—in particular, as regards the present passage, of the 10 other occurrences of this phrase in the extant fragments of his commentary on Esther, all of them are clearly delineated by context as references either to the biblical Temple17 or to Jerusalem.18 Consistent with this observation, bayt al-maqdis in the present passage is best understood as a designation of contemporary Jerusalem (certainly not the Temple

16 See the richly documented discussion of Gil, Palestine, p. 114 (§125) and n. 38. One point of his, however, we would call into question (which he reiterates on p. 788 (§924)— viz., that the Karaite Sahl b. Māṣliḥ “evidently means Palestine” when, in his letter to Saadia’s disciple Jacob b. Samuel, he says “I have come from bēt ha-miqdāsh to issue a warning ...” (באת מ мяש ... המקדש הילידים ... Pinski, Qadmōnīyōt, part 2 [appendices], p. 30 [second par.], as earlier on p. 27 [last par.]: ... אני מבית המקדש באתי להזהיר את בני עמי). In fact it would make eminent sense that he means Jerusalem (so Mann, Texts, p. 22), which was his primary residence and where he was active within the prominent Karaite circle of “the teachers of the émigrés to Jerusalem” (muʾallimu ʾl-maqādisa). Cf. also Friedman, Polygyny, pp. 252–53, n. 28.

17 E.g., in his commentary on 3:6–15 (per MS CUL T-S Ar.23.44, fol. 3r, lines 13–15): ופי תשרי וכא תבירה מלקוהוים לשב בתי מקדס עלDenver שלמה כק׳ אז יקהל שלמה את זקני ישראל \("In Tishri their kingdom was revitalized by the consecration of the Temple in the time of Solomon, as it says, Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel, (etc.) \([1\text{ Kgs 8:1}])"). The other uses of this phrase as a designation of the Temple are found in his commentary on 1:3–4 (once); 3:1–5 (once); and 3:6–15 (once). The phrase also occurs once each in his commentary on 8:1–14 and on 9:1–19, where it may refer either to the Temple or to Jerusalem—though certainly not to Palestine.

18 E.g., in his commentary on 1:3–4 (per MS CUL T-S Ar.27.47, fol. 2r, lines 5–6 + MS CUL Ar.1b.94, fols. 23v, line 8–24r, line 1): רמא אלמדה אלמדא לאבר ("The starting date (of the 70-year exile) was at the end of (Nebuchadnezzar’s) conquest of Jerusalem—consistent with what Daniel says, to accomplish the desolations of Jerusalem, seventy years, etc. \([\text{Dan 9:2}])"). The other uses of this phrase as a designation of Jerusalem are likewise found in his commentary on 1:3–4 (five times), in addition to the two ambiguous uses remarked in the previous note.
Mount, which, being a garbage dump in Saadia’s day, would hardly constitute an expected venue at which to “meet the scholars”). The second key expression is al-ʿulamāʾ (“the scholars/sages”), by which Saadia typically designates the collective intellectual authorities of the time. Since he uses the term here without further qualification—other than that they are to be met with in bayt al-maqdis (= Jerusalem)—it seems to us most reasonable to construe this as a reference to the collective scholars of the yeshiva. Indeed, to what other collective of Rabbanite scholars in contemporary Jerusalem would Saadia apply the unqualified, definite honorific al-ʿulamāʾ?21

If our above reasoning is correct, we have before us evidence of the yeshiva’s existence in Jerusalem by at least September 942, when Saadia died. If, moreover, Saadia’s Sēfer ha-Gālūy was indeed his last work, the final version of which was composed between 935–36, then the terminus ad quem of our evidence from his commentary on Esther—which was composed before his commentary on Daniel—

19 On this sad state of the site see the vivid description of Saadia’s younger Karaite contemporary Salmon b. Yeruḥam, cited by Gil, Palestine, p. 67 (§81).
20 I.e., of his or any previous time; cf., e.g., Ḥikma, p. 244 (on Prov 30:1): בקשו אלנוכ (צ"א: אלנוכ) אלא להם החכמה של משה של מקרא (§2.9), 8th line et seq. from bottom: מנהוגות עלה לעת פאמה לעין יהודא ...; Mabādiʾ, p. 33, 8th line et seq. from bottom: פלח הצאן הרליאง שאר בימינו ומאותה ... For the collective authorities of bygone ages—expect for those of his own (i.e., the geonic) age—Saadia also uses, apparently interchangeably, the terms awāʾil/awwalūn (“forerunners”; cf. ibid., p. 213 [§6.7], lines 1–2: יהו בא תואר מחמד עלעманה ברי ויימא עלعطנו לך ...), qudamāʾ (“predecessors”; cf. ibid., p. 157 [§4.4], 7th line et seq. from bottom: ... ועמדת עלמעה ז"ל ען אלאנביא ע"ה אן מת אלדניא ענד אלאכ ... ויהיו החכמים לכתוב אגרות ...; ibid., p. 76, lines 21–22: והפכתי כסא ממלכות ...); and salaf (“predecessors”; cf. ibid., p. 269 [§9.4], line 3 et seq.: נכל פלאמה יד ען אלאנביא ... ויהיו החכמים לכתוב אגרות ...; ibid., p. 232 [§6.7], lines 1–2: יהו בא תואר מחמד עלעמן עד היי). The possibility cannot be absolutely dismissed, however, that Saadia is referring to a non-specific collective of scholars in Jerusalem.
21 This expression, it should also be noted, is semantically equivalent (per Saadia’s usage: see Egrön, p. 223) to Heb. החכמים, by which he typically designates the collective of authorized scholars of the Yeshivot (cf., e.g., Bornstein, “Controversy,” p. 75, lines 10–15: ויוה הוא אשר שנית עליע是什么呢 ירשה החכמים מלת חורור ... ויתעמע תnable הכהננים ...; ibid., p. 76, lines 21–22: והפכתי כסא ממלכות ...). The possibility cannot be absolutely dismissed, however, that Saadia is referring to a non-specific collective of scholars in Jerusalem.
22 See Harkavy, Remnant, p. 147; Malter, Saadia, p. 269; Schlossberg, Concepts, pp. 45 and 65, n. 1.
23 See MS CUL T-S Ar.1b.94, fol. 19r, lines 7–10 (on Esth 1:2): ומכם זמא ממלכות כמ סאמרה פ[ו] בבר עלנומז וה אלנברק אלזיו לי הדה ...
may be reasonably pushed back to 934/35. Though this revised date point certainly does not preclude the possibility of a prior relocation to Ramla (per the theories of Mann and Kedar noted above), it does lead us to wonder whether, if the yeshiva did in fact relocate to Ramla towards the turn of the century, it was intended only as a transitional relocation before the final move to Jerusalem—the desirability of which destination is clearly expressed by the Palestinian Gaon Aaron b. Meir himself, in a letter written around the time of his calendar dispute with Saadia, ca. 921/22: “The glory of Israel is naught but Jerusalem, the Holy City, and the Great Sanhedrin therein, for so our sages of blessed memory have taught: ‘He who has never beheld the joy of the Bēt ha-Shōʾēvā has never beheld joy in his life’ (m. Suk. 5.1) ...”

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL AND MANUSCRIPT ABBREVIATIONS


The reference by Sahl b. Maṣliaḥ, writing in the second half of the 10th cent., to “the students of the Rabbanites on the Holy Mountain and in Ramla” (תלמידי הרלנים בהר הקדש וברמלה [בכרמלה]; תלמידי הרבניא בכר הקדש וברמלה) may attest to a small holdover of the yeshiva’s presence in Ramla following its relocation magnam partem to Jerusalem (not dissimilar, perhaps, from the scenario of a present-day college’s main campus, where the administration and most of its facilities are situated, and its much smaller extension site in another location).

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CUL = Cambridge University Library.


Kokovtsov, Correspondence = Kokovtsov, P. K. Еврейско-хазарская переписка в X веке. Leningrad, 1932.

Kraemer and Wechsler, Pesher Naḥum = Kraemer, J. L., and M. G. Wechsler, eds., with the participation of F. Donner, J. Holo, and D.


Friedman, Polygyny = Friedman, M. A. ריבוי נשים בישראל:acockot ודריש מנהית חור [Jewish Polygyny in the Middle Ages]. Jerusalem/Tel Aviv, 1986.

ENAI = The Elkan Nathan Adler Collection, JTSL.

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NLR = The National Library of Russia (Российская национальная библиотека), St. Petersburg, Firkovitch Hebrew (Evr. [= Еврейский]) and Judaeo-Arabic (Evr.-Arab. [= Еврейско-арабский]) Collections.


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T-S = The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, CUL.