

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 Shaprūt, in which express reference is made to “the yeshiva that is in Jerusalem” (הישיבה שבירושלם), 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.: ת̣ for ט, ז̣ for ז, ח̣ for ח, ד̣ for ד, ז̣ for ז, ו̣ for ו, and ה̣ (unless the cited text has ת; cf. *ibid.* §27א) for ם.

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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 *Sēfer ha-Mō‘adīm* (per Bornstein, “Controversy,” p. 74 [frag. 2, line 1]): וישלח את בנו בחדש הרביעי לשנת מא[תים ושלושים] ושלש. ויבא ירושלם. For the reference in King Joseph’s letter, see Kokovtsov, *Correspondence*, p. 25, line 18.

about 640,” and thence to Ramla sometime in the late-ninth/early-tenth century, owing to the Karaites’ ascendancy in Jerusalem.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 *nāsī*’ Şemaḥ 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.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.⁴

In the course of our work in preparing an edition of Saadia Gaon’s Arabic translation and commentary on the book of Esther,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 2678.7,⁶ in a uniquely attested (and hitherto unpublished) portion of Saadia’s comment on 5:1–14.⁷ 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*:⁸

² Mann, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 59, 65.

³ Kedar, “Palestinian Yeshiva.”

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.

⁵ Under contract with Brill to appear towards the end of 2014 in the series *Biblia Arabica*.

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: <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 *ibid.*, pp. 280–84.

⁷ Saadia’s commentary on Esther, like his other biblical commentaries, proceeds pericope-by-pericope rather than verse-by-verse.

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

ומן אלמשאהר⁹ אן א[חד]א קד יפעל פעלא ויכון ענדה צואבא מן ו[גוה
 כתירה]¹⁰ כאנה יקול כרוגי אלי בית אלמקדס צואב ע[נדי] לאכתסאב
 תואבא ולאקא [אל]על[מ]א ולא [○○○○○○○○] ולאסתכתר¹¹ מן
 פואכההא ולאסלם עלי אקרא[ר אללה] ל[נ]פסי¹² פי אלספר. ולאתגיב
 מרה עמן יוד[יני]¹³. ותם¹⁴ [א]ן אקבץ פאדפן הנאך.

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-‘ulamā*), and that I might [...], and that I might amass¹⁵ 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 *zay*/*qay* (= *ض*) and *ta* (= *ط*).

⁹ So, for אלמשאהיר (see Blau, *Grammar*, §130א; *idem*, *Dictionary*, p. 351b [s.v. *مَشْهُور*]). In the MS the area where the ה and the ר 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 ה weighs against this.

¹⁰ Or, perhaps: [גוה מכתלפה] (“various reasons”).

¹¹ The *sāmekh* 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 [בנ]פסי.

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 ותם, here at the end of the line) include וחתי, or ובעד דלך, or וליכון (עלי), or ואיצא.

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 (עשק מן יגשם פקירא (דל להרבות לו לישתכתר לנפסה (“Whosoever wrongfully takes from a poor man to amass (more) for himself”).

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. Maṣliḥ “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 ...” (באתי מבית ... המקדש להזהיר; Pinsker, *Qadmōniyyōt*, part 2 [appendices], p. 30 [second par.], as earlier on p. 27 [last par.]: ... 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” (*mu'allimu 'l-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 כאן תגיד מלכהום לדשן בית אלמקדס עלי עהד 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 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): כאן אלתאריך לאכר פתחה לבית אלמקדס ועלי מא קאל דניאל למלאות לחרבות ירושלם ש' שנה וג' (“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. [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,¹⁹ would hardly constitute an expected venue at which to “meet the scholars”). The second key expression is *al-‘ulamā’* (“the scholars/sages”), by which Saadia typically designates the collective intellectual authorities of the time.²⁰ 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-‘ulamā’*?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 935–36,²² then the *terminus ad quem* of our evidence from his commentary on Esther—which was composed before his commentary on Daniel²³—

¹⁹ On this sad state of the site see the vivid description of Saadia's younger Karaite contemporary Salmon b. Yeruham, cited by Gil, *Palestine*, p. 67 (§81).

²⁰ I.e., of his or any previous time; cf., e.g., *Hikma*, p. 244 (on Prov 30:1): *Amānāt*, p. 99 (p. 99), 8th line *et seq.* from bottom: פאנא וגדנא עלמא אמתנא אלאמנא עלי דיננא ...; *Mabādi'*, p. 33, 8th line *et seq.* from bottom: פלמא כאן אלוקת אלדי אגתמע ... פיה עלמא אלאמה פאכדו מעאני אלמשנה ... 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 *awā'il/awwalūn* (“forerunners”; cf. *ibid.*, p. 213 [§6.7], lines 1–2: יקול אואילנא קשה רמה למת כמחט לבשר החי), *qudamā'* (“predecessors”; cf. *ibid.*, p. 157 [§4.4], 7th line *et seq.* from bottom: ... (וממא פי אלאחאר, מא נקל אלקדמא הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים ... and *salaf* (“predecessors”; cf. *ibid.*, p. 269 [§9.4], line 3 *et seq.*: נקל סלפנא ז"ל ען אלאנביא ... (ע"ה אן מהל אלדניא ענד אלאכרה כאלדהליז ענד קצר אלמלך ...)).

²¹ This expression, it should also be noted, is semantically equivalent (per Saadia's usage: see *Egrōn*, 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: ויהי כאשר שמע נשיאנו וראשי ... הישיבות והאלופים וכל הברורים ... וינעצו החכמים לכתוב אגרות ... וזה פתשגן הכתב אשר שלחו החכמים אליו ממקום הועדם ה[וא] בבל 21–22: Gil, *Ishmael*, p. 24, ד, lines 14–15: גמיע אלחכמים אלדין פי אלמתיבתין). 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): וקאל ענה והפכתי כסא ממלכות כמא סאשרח פ[י] כבר אליונאנין והו אלכתאב אלדי ילי הדא (“of

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-Shō’ēvā has never beheld joy in his life’ (*m. Suk. 5.1*) ...”²⁴

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him (i.e., Alexander the Great) He also says, “*And I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms* (Hag 2:22), as I shall explain in (my comment on) the pronouncement about the Greeks, which is (in) the book that follows this one [i.e., Dan 11:3–15; see Saadia, *Mamālik*, pp. 194–99]”); *Mamālik*, p. 57 (on Dan 2:46): וקד שרחנא ועלי מא שרחנא פי תפסיר מגלת אסתר; p. 140 (on Dan 7:17–18): בכמא הו משרוח פי תפסיר אלמגלה; p. 163 (on Dan 9:2–3): פי תפסיר מגלת אסתר; and *ibid.*: אלתי בינאהא פי תפסיר קינה ופי תפסיר מגלת אסתר.

²⁴ Bornstein, “Controversy,” p. 62, lines 1–3: ואין שבחן של ישראל אלא ירושלים עיר הקודש, וסנהדרין גדולה אשר בתוכה, שכך שנו חכ' ז"ל, מי שלא ראה שמחת בית ... השואבה לא ראה שמחה מימיו ... The reference by Sahl b. Maṣṣliḥ, writing in the second half of the 10th cent., to “the students of the Rabbanites on the Holy Mountain and in Ramla” ([צ"ל: וברמלה]) (Pinsker, *Qadmōniyyōt*, part 2, p. 33, second par., line 1)—if indeed a reference to yeshiva students (so Mann, *Palestine*, p. 65) and not Rabbanites in general (so, apparently, Gil, *Palestine*, pp. 802, n. 15 [§931]; 811 [§937])—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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