

History of Judaism

Arabic and Jewish Interaction: The Geonim

Dr Joshua Esler



SHERIDAN
INSTITUTE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



The Age of the Geonim

- Islam conquers Middle East, North Africa, Iberian Peninsula (7th-8th centuries CE)
 - Inherited and employed autonomous structure for Jews used under Arsacid and Sasanian rule
 - Jews – ‘people of the Book’; initially granted high level of autonomy
 - Muslim conquest created the environment for adoption of the Babylonian Talmud as representative of ‘normative’ medieval Judaism

Arsacid and Sasanian Persia



Babylonian Rabbinate under Muslim Caliphate

- Muslim Caliphs
 - Exilarch
 - Geonim (from plural of *gaon* – ‘excellency’)
 - Heads of two principal academies in Babylonia (Sura and Pumbedita) – arbiters of all questions concerning religious law, and religious heads of all Jewish communities
 - Received financial support from Jewish communities assigned them
 - Under Yehudai, gaon of Sura (760-763 CE) – Babylonian Talmud became the standard for normative Judaism – even in Palestine Babylonian corups replaced older Palestinian Talmudic literature

Exilarch and the Geonim



Babylonian Rabbinite under Muslim Caliphate

- Anti-Rabbinic reactions
 - Sectarian and messianic revolts – inspired by Palestinian sectarian doctrines and Muslim insights
 - Handbooks of Jewish law issued by geonim – Halakhot gedolot (Great Laws), Siddur Rav Amram Gaon (The Prayer Book of Rav Amram Gaon), and She'eltot (Disquisitions) by Aha of Shabha (c. 680-c.752); gained authoritative status and unified medieval Judaism
 - 9th century renaissance of Greek philosophy and sciences in Arabic translation
 - Cut across religious and ethnic boundaries; raised questions concerning basic doctrines of faith – influenced by latitudinarianism and gnostic beliefs denying divine providence and omniscience
 - Development of schools in North Africa and Spain; revival of Palestinian Rabbinite
 - Networks of dissenting voices led to revolts in outlying areas of Persia – put down by armed force

Sura and Pumbedita - networks with other Middle Eastern centres of Judaism



Babylonian Rabbinate under Muslim Caliphate

- Gaonate of Sa'adia Ben Joseph (942-988 CE), head of Sura
 - Appointed by exilarch David ben Zakkai (916/917-940 CE)
 - Responded to ideological challenges to Rabbinism through intellectual reasoning
 - Pioneer of Judeo-Arabic culture that developed fully in Andalusian Spain in the 11th century
 - Translated Bible into Arabic and wrote Arabic commentaries on Scripture – made the Bible accessible to masses of Jews
 - Rationalist commentary on Sefer yetzira
 - Treatise on philosophical theology, the Book of Beliefs and Opinions, synthesized the Torah and 'Greek Wisdom' with Muslim philosophical school of kalam
 - Led to further intellectual and religious self-sufficiency in the West: Egypt, Al-Qayrawan (Tunisia), and Muslim Spain

Translation of Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan Scriptures into Arabic



Babylonian Rabbinite under Muslim Caliphate

- The role of geonim of Sura and Pumbedita (6th-11th centuries CE)
 - Babylonian Talmud completed by 6th century *savorim* (expositors) – extent of contribution not known; short additions or creation of terminology linking phases of Talmudic discussions, or added comments and decided between conflicting opinions?
 - Contribution to Codes on the *Halakhot* (laws)
 - Geonim laid down rules in reference to literature for law-making; designated Babylonian Talmud the highest authority with Palestinian Talmud only considered when not contradicting this; did not recognize Haggadic literature having Halakhic authority; set guidelines for opinion expressed by *amoraim*
 - These boundaries imposed by Geonim served as basis for all future codifications

Post-Geonic Arabic-Islamic Influence (7th-13th century CE)

- Adoption of Arabic language and culture
 - Jews of Asia, Africa, and Spain
 - Introduced elements of Greek philosophy and Islamic mysticism
 - Raised questions concerning creation of the world; providential action of God; miracles and eschatology
 - Reaffirmation of theological concepts of Jewish origin common to the 3 Monotheistic religions
 - The divine unity; purging anthropomorphism from idea of God; and ascetic discipline leading to detachment from the world and freeing of soul
 - Influence on European Judaism from 12th century
 - Translation or adaptations into Hebrew of intellectual Arabic and Judeo-Arab works

Greek Philosophy and Islamic Mysticism



