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Schechter's eye for the extraordinary

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Alexander Marx, a German-American scholar at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), summed up the career of Solomon Schechter in a generous and personal obituary that appeared in the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* of 1917, two years after his colleague's death. For Marx, the former president of the JTS was an intellectual giant, and his necrology abounds with superlatives. He declared that with the death of Schechter "we have lost our greatest exponent of Judaism".¹ As a historian and Judaica librarian himself who had known Schechter since his Cambridge days, Marx could appreciate the range and depth of the great man's contributions to the scientific study of the Jewish religion and his interest in many different aspects of the long history of its people. Marx was adept at picking out the high points of Schechter's varied intellectual career: remarking on his publication in 1910 of the so-called "Zadokite Work" – which became the Damascus Document of Qumran fame – he stated: "It is characteristic of Schechter and deserves the greatest credit that he at once recognized the importance of this puzzling and enigmatically sectarian text which, in so rich a collection of unknown fragments, would have been neglected by almost every other scholar."²

The perspicacious Marx puts his finger on why Schechter seems even today to be such a remarkable scholar: he was blessed with an unerring eye that spotted, seemingly at first glance, the important, the significant, and the extraordinary from the great mass of texts that confronted him following his rehoming of the contents of the Ben Ezra storeroom to

1 Alexander Marx, "Solomon Schechter", *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 25 (1917): 177.

2 *Ibid.*, 185. The history of Schechter's discovery of the original Dead Sea Scroll is analysed in S. C. Reif, "The Damascus Document from the Cairo Genizah: Its Discovery, Early Study, and Historical Significance", paper presented at the Third Orion International Symposium "The Damascus Document: A Centennial of Discovery", 1998; see <http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/symposiums/3rd/papers/Reif98>, accessed 11 January 2017.



1 Solomon Schechter at work in Cambridge University Library, surrounded by his Cairo Genizah collection, 1898. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library

Cambridge. To anyone who knows the history of the discovery, the story of the two Smith sisters and the fate of their “Palestine bundle”, it might seem a truism to point out the remarkable serendipity of Schechter being presented with a Hebrew fragment of the book of Ben Sira, a lost work of which he had made a close study in previous years. Yet it was a serendipity distilled over some years. Schechter had seen many Genizah fragments before he was presented with the Hebrew of Ben Sira by Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson, through the efforts of Rabbi Solomon Wertheimer who had been making an income sending manuscripts from the Genizah through the post to Cambridge throughout the 1890s. These, it must be said, failed to excite him until after the discovery of the Ben Sira fragment had opened his eyes to the potential of the lost manuscript hoard. It was a failure that he was not to repeat.³ His sense for Ben Sira would have been

3 See Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2011), pp. 44–6.

finely attuned through the research he carried out for his 1891 article which recovered quotations from Ben Sira scattered throughout rabbinic literature, sparked by his research into midrashim.⁴ Thus armed, he was able to recognise the work more or less at first glance, even when he was confronted with it in the odd surroundings of the dining room of a mock Scottish baronial mansion in sedate Victorian Cambridge. But, and this is the most significant part of the story from an academic perspective, the scholarly intuition that weighed it and subsequently accepted it as a faithful copy of the second-century BCE work and not a medieval paraphrase, a retranslation from the Greek, or a pious (or even blatant) forgery – all posited by his contemporaries and even later scholars – is what distinguishes Solomon Schechter from a David Samuel Margoliouth or a Solomon Zeitlin, both of whom presented strongly worded opinions on the fragment, but were too blinkered and opinionated to weigh up the evidence with the same fair-minded, intellectual rigour. And I am not unfairly singling these two figures out. By their own grandiloquent claptrap have they flung their academic reputations into such deep chambers that it would take more than a Solomon Schechter fully to recover them. The position that Margoliouth adopted on what he referred to acidly as “the Cairene Ecclesiasticus” or “the Retranslation of Ecclesiasticus” necessitated his dismissal of the genuineness of Harkavy’s discovery of Sa’adya’s *Sefer ha-Galuy*, dissected and rejected by him at obscenely vituperative length as a “scandalous document” and “so much bad Hebrew and bad Arabic”.⁵ On Zeitlin, a scholar of a subsequent generation, you can take your pick of any one of numerous works also published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* in which he, as an increasingly lonely voice in the academic wilderness, calls out the Dead Sea Scrolls as forgeries and derides all who disagree with him. See, for example, the end of his article on the Ben Sira manuscript found in Masada: “The Ben Sira of Masada is not the original Hebrew of Ben Sira. It is a retranslation composed after the Bar Kokba period, probably between the fourth and the sixth Centuries. It is on a par with the Genizah fragments of Ben Sira.”⁶ His contention in the same article (p. 186) that “Schechter could not take any criticism in this matter, and considered the views of those who denied the authenticity of the fragments as a personal affront” probably explains Zeitlin better than it does Schechter.

Schechter’s immortal identification of Ecclesiasticus and his visionary

4 Solomon Schechter, “The Quotations from Ecclesiasticus in Rabbinic Literature”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* [hereafter, JQR] 3 (1891): 682–706.

5 David Samuel Margoliouth, “The *Sefer ha-Galuy*”, JQR 12 (1900): 506, 514.

6 Solomon Zeitlin, “The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada”, JQR 56 (1966): 190, 186.

exposition of the Zadokite fragment are well known and remain to this day a lasting testament to his abilities as a theologian and his profound knowledge of the written sources of Judaism. Less well known, however, particularly to those whose work does not take them into the historical Genizah, is the extent to which his seemingly unerring eye fell on some of the most significant and interesting items from the documentary corpus of historical texts, interlopers, and strange survivals in a “sacred storeroom” whose purpose was to preserve the name of God from profanation, but texts of paramount importance for the reconstruction of the lost history of the Jewish Middle Ages. As he rummaged through the boxes containing his new collection in the Cairo room of the old University Library, seeking out more fragments of the Hebrew of Ben Sira, the inquisitive Schechter could not help but be interested by the odd remnants of Jewish history he pulled out, texts that were in most cases penned with no real thought for posterity but which, in their usually careful squarish script, remained accessible eight hundred or a thousand years later to a skilled reader of Hebrew such as he. It is fair to say that Schechter’s lack of Judaeo-Arabic, in which a substantial proportion of the documentary corpus is written, was a handicap in his work on the Genizah, but it still did not prevent him from spotting important texts, which he could then pass on to his Arabist correspondents Saul Horwitz, Martin Schreiner and Hartwig Hirschfeld. His honesty (and the biblical allusion) is typical: “My identification [of a work by Sa’adya], both of this piece and of others composed in Arabic, rests entirely on the Hebrew quotations occurring in them and in the colophons where such are to be found. I am in this respect only ‘looking through the lattice’”.⁷ Schechter, through his training as a patient editor and bibliographer on the model of a Moritz Steinschneider or his own predecessor at Cambridge, Solomon Schiller-Szinessy, copied out the more interesting quotations and produced them for the readership of the JQR, the original English-language journal of Jewish Studies, through a remarkable series of articles – notable not just for the number of them (Moshe Idel counts thirty-two lengthy articles, along with shorter notices), but for the value that many of them retain even today, more than a century after their publication.⁸ In his colourful but precise prose, he drew attention to a number of historical documents that remain among the most important items to be drawn out of the documentary corpus and mark significant turning points in our knowledge of medieval Jewish history.

7 Solomon Schechter, “Saadyana” (2nd of 3 articles), JQR 14 (1902): 197.

8 For Schechter’s prodigious publication record in the JQR, see Moshe Idel, “On Solomon Schechter in the Pages of JQR”, JQR 100 (2010): 551–5. Idel wonders (p. 551) if “there is another author since who has published as much in this journal”; it is unlikely.



2 A lengthy letter
in Hebrew by the
Qayrawan/Kairouan
sage Chushiel b.
Elchanan to Shemarya
b. Elchanan in Fustat
(Genizah T-S 28.1)
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Perhaps one of the biggest revelations, for both Schechter and for the historians who read his work in the JQR, was one of the first items that he published from the Cairo Collection. Describing it as “a single strip of parchment 65 by 23 cm. in dimensions”, it forms the subject of an eight-page article, “Geniza Specimens: A Letter of Chushiel”, which appeared in the JQR of 1899.⁹ It describes a single manuscript, T-S 28.1, that Schechter identified as “an autograph letter by R. Chushiel b. Elchanan of Kairoan”, giving plates and a full transcription of its Hebrew text. He begins in characteristic, bibliographer style, with a description of the material and its language—“‘poetic’ to a degree” (that is, paytanic, by which he means that the language is flowery, allusive, and, occasionally, elusive) – before addressing what he regards as significant about it. From the mutilated address on the verso, he identifies the recipient as “R. Shemaryah ben Elchanan”, and recognizes him as “one of the famous four captive Rabbis” from the story of the Four Captives told by Ibn Da’ud. He identifies the sender of the letter, Chushiel b. Elchanan, as one of the other captives, Chushiel the father of Rabbenu Chananel, pointing out that Chananel and Elchanan are essentially interchangeable and, as was common, the child was named after his grandfather. The story of the Four Captives features in chapter 7 of Abraham ibn Da’ud’s *Sefer ha-Qabbala* (Book of Tradition, c. 1161), where it is told that the commander of a Spanish Muslim fleet, Ibn Rumachis, captured a ship from the southern Italian port city of Bari, which was carrying four great scholars – Chushiel father of Chananel, Moses father of Enoch, Shemarya b. Elchanan, and a fourth whose name Ibn Da’ud did not know (a clear bit-part, he plays no further role in the story). The Muslim sailors sold the captives in different ports around the Mediterranean, thus leading to the establishment of rabbinical schools at Fustat (by Shemarya), Qayrawan ([Kairouan] by Chushiel) and Córdoba (by Moses and his son). As a story it has a sufficiently legendary character and clear political purpose to arouse suspicion. Yet Schechter was able to confirm that Chushiel’s origins in Italy were probably correct, since the letter alludes to leaving what was probably a Christian country for a Muslim one (“our departure from the land of our birth to dwell in the land of Ishmael”, line 58). As with his identification of Ben Sira, Schechter showed his ability rapidly to link manuscript discoveries in a fundamental way with his wide reading of Jewish sources.

Had Schechter ended his article there, it would have been entirely

9 Solomon Schechter, “Geniza Specimens: A Letter of Chushiel”, JQR 11 (1899): 643–50.

sufficient for the first publication of an autograph letter from the hand of one of the “four captives” of romantic Jewish tradition, a chance discovery that linked the documentary history of the Cairo Genizah with one of the few literary sources that purports to relate the history of the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean. But in typical Schechter fashion his interest had been piqued by what he viewed as clear contradictions with the account of Ibn Da’ud and he remarked that “the present letter would throw great suspicion on the whole story of the capture, and all the romantic features of a collection of money for providing brides with dowries, and would even make it questionable whether Chushiel and the other three ever were thrown together in such dangers as the legend mentions”! These contradictions are only clear once the sparse, allusive, and elliptical text of the letter has been given due consideration, and it is greatly to Schechter’s credit that the exciting discovery of a letter from the hand of the captive Chushiel did not cloud his powers of reasoning. In a pointedly sober retelling, Schechter purposely strips away the romance from the tale and presents the story that the evidence, as it now stands, can support: “about the end of the tenth century certain Rabbis, for reasons unknown to us, emigrated from Italy at various times, and established schools in certain centres of Jewish population in Africa as well as Spain”. In 1960–61 Gerson Cohen, in his thorough dissection of what he describes as “this simple and yet baffling tale”, refers to the original publication of the letter from Chushiel as “the epoch-making publication in 1899 by Solomon Schechter”, and it is easy to agree with this description.¹⁰ In his minimalistic laying bare of the bones of Ibn Da’ud’s blithe tale, Schechter heralds an age of rational historiography based on a close reading of the primary sources combined with a healthy scepticism.

In publishing an eleventh-century *ketubah*, T-S 24.1, as “A Marriage Settlement” in the JQR of 1901, Schechter’s interest was aroused by the seemingly incompatible religious standings of bride and groom, for the man to be married was David ha-Nasi, the son of Daniel ha-Nasi, whom he correctly identified as a “Rabbanite bridegroom”, and his bride was a Qaraite, Nashiyya bat Moses ha-Kohen b. Aaron ha-Kohen.¹¹ Schechter was aware that matrimonial matches between Qaraites – who rejected rabbinic tradition and sought all their Halakhah in the Bible – and

¹⁰ Gerson D. Cohen, “The Story of the Four Captives”, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1960–61): 72.

¹¹ Solomon Schechter, “Geniza Specimens: A Marriage Settlement”, JQR 13 (1901): 218–21.

Rabbanites, despite the invective exchanged between the two parties, were not unknown in the Middle Ages, but he presented this marriage deed as the first documentary proof of such a union: “but it is now for the first time that we have an official document testifying to it” (p. 218). In the article he elaborates the arrangements that the bride and groom’s family have agreed in order for the marriage to go ahead – that David would not make Nashiyya eat the fat from the tail of the sheep and, in return, she would not profane his festivals – as well as musing on who the dignitaries David ha-Nasi and Daniel ha-Nasi might have been. He also rightly infers that the appearance of the titles *mar ve-rav* before a Qaraite name reflects only their use as simple courteous appellation rather than an “official dignity”. Schechter’s article is short, and his analysis, though correct in most of its details, cannot draw much in the way of far-reaching conclusions: at this stage of Genizah research too little was known about the individuals mentioned in documents such as this and the political background that occasioned them. But it is interesting that Schechter chose to publish this manuscript, all on its own. He was evidently drawn not just to the counter-orthodox nature of the matrimonial arrangement – which, as he states, was already evidenced in the Jewish tradition – but to the obvious importance of the dignitaries who were mentioned as parties or who signed as signatories to the deed. Indeed, the wealth and substance of the parties to the marriage can be seen in the prodigious size of the deed itself (45 × 50 centimetres) though, at this stage of his familiarity with the Genizah Collection, Schechter was perhaps unaware of how untypically impressive it was.

While the *ketubah* has subsequently been cited on many occasions for its intriguing Rabbanite–Qaraite match, the deeper significance of this document, beyond its ability to effect a marriage of two people with seemingly incompatible religious customs, is only brought to light when placed in the larger context of the political history of the Genizah world. As Schechter supposed, the parties to the marriage were not average citizens but were among the leading families of the Jewish community. David b. Daniel was a scion of an aristocratic Babylonian clan, whose father had left Iraq and attained the headship of the Palestinian Academy amid much controversy. His bride’s father, the Qaraite Moses ha-Kohen b. Aaron, held a high appointment in the Fatimid government, as evidenced by his Hebrew title *sar*, “prince”, that is, a courtier. Moses ha-Kohen was also rich enough to bestow an enormous dowry of up to 900 dinars on his daughter. This marriage therefore enabled a political alliance between

the new masters of the Palestinian Yeshivah – the Babylonian exilarchic family of David b. Daniel b. Azarya – and a powerful representative of the Qaraite party at the Islamic court, perennial kingmakers to the leading Jewish offices in the Fatimid Empire.¹² The document symbolizes the merging of several different streams of power into supporting David b. Daniel's right – political, moral, and inherited – to a single role, that of “Head of the Jews”, Ra'is al-Yahud, in the Fatimid realm.

David and Nashiyya's marriage deed reflects the political manoeuvrings that took place in the second half of the eleventh century over the rulership of the Jews in the Fatimid Empire. This is a tale given in the *Megillat Evyatar* (also known as the “Scroll of Abiathar”), a polemical history of the episode presented as a scroll of thanksgiving for deliverance by the Palestinian Ga'on Evyatar ha-Kohen b. Elijah, a rival of David b. Daniel. As might be expected, the tale is told from a partisan point of view. In fact, the historian Marina Rustow refers to Evyatar's scroll as “a lengthy poetic character assassination” of David and his claims to power.¹³ The Scroll, only known from the Cairo Genizah, attracted the attention of earlier historians for the unique (if skewed in its skewering of David) insight it gives into a period of Jewish political strife: Julius H. Greenstone, the theologian, historian and principal of Gratz College in Philadelphia wrote that “By far the most noted contribution to Jewish history was made by the discovery and publication by Dr. S. Schechter of the *Megillat Ebyathar*, by which we are informed for the first time of the existence of a line of Geonim in Palestine and Egypt, even after the Babylonian academies had been closed and the office of the Gaonate there ceased for ever. The student of Jewish history, who was hitherto accustomed to pass rapidly from the Orient to Moorish Spain . . . will now have to stop for a while in Palestine and in Egypt”.¹⁴ Thus, once again, we find that it was Schechter who first uncovered and published the Scroll of Evyatar, a pivotal text for the reconstruction of Jewish political history, in his third “Saadyana” article in the JQR in 1902 (presenting two different copies that he had found).¹⁵ Schechter himself did not draw the two texts – the Scroll of Evyatar and the *ketubah* – together, but his grasp of the facts was faultless: “the Dramatis Personae in our story are a Jewish

12 On the wider implications of the *ketubah*, see M. Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 335–7; on the important role that the Qaraites played between the Rabbanites and the Islamic government, see 111–33.

13 *Ibid.*, 326.

14 Julius H. Greenstone, “Two Memorial Lists from the Genizah”, JQR 1 (1910): 43–4.

15 Solomon Schechter, “Saadyana” (3rd article), JQR 14 (1902): 449–516.



3 Cambridge University Library, T-S 12.729: beginning of the Scroll of Evyatar, a polemical account of political strife and communal turmoil in the eleventh century. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library

priest, and a Jewish noble. The object of contention was, as it seems, the religious jurisdiction over the Jews in Egypt and Palestine which Abiathar, the author of this document, and his ancestors, a representative priestly family of Palestine, claimed for themselves, whilst David b. Daniel the descendant of the House of David tried to bring them under his own authority.” Moreover, his sceptical nature recognized in Evyatar a man trying to fit the facts to his worldview: “The style of Abiathar is plain prose with occasional lapses into Piyut. Less satisfactory than his diction is his reasoning which is never convincing, whilst quotations are inaccurate and his interpretation of them faulty” (p. 454).

When set alongside his identification of the Hebrew of Ben Sira or his giving the modern world its first glimpse of a Dead Sea Scroll (in not just one but two different copies!), not to mention the remarkable undertaking

of his recovery of the Genizah itself, these glimpses of his discoveries in the more abstruse documentary world of Genizah research might seem to lack momentousness. But that would understate the importance of these texts, of which I have given only a selection. There are others that Schechter uncovered, published, and edited that remain today pivotal texts for the insight they give us into the Jewish Middle Ages: Sa'adya's *Sefer ha-Galuy* in its Hebrew version,¹⁶ the *Qazarian Chronicle*,¹⁷ the Kaddish for Evyatar Ga'on,¹⁸ and even a Genizah text with first-hand evidence of being plundered by enterprising Crusaders.¹⁹

Was Schechter simply fortunate? He certainly made his own luck. His on-the-spot identification of Ecclesiasticus was only possible thanks to the months (or years?) of patient research he had put into recovering the lost words of Ben Sira. He snatched the Genizah out from under the noses of rivals by showing enterprise while they stuttered and prevaricated. And his remarkable series of discoveries, made in the relatively short time between his acquisition of the Genizah and his move to the United States, derives principally from his armoury of talents: a prodigious knowledge of the Jewish sources, religious and historical; his inquisitive nature – it was following the trail of Ben Sira that led him first to Sa'adya, then to Hai and the Babylonian *geonim* and then to the tempestuous world of the Palestinian *gaonate*; his profound common sense, which enabled him to cut through to the facts behind the texts; and, perhaps most importantly, his historical imagination that enabled him to piece these disparate fragments into the bigger picture of a lost world of medieval Judaism that we are now, thanks more to Schechter's efforts than any other scholar of Jewish history, reconstructing. To finish, it is fitting to turn once again to Alexander Marx in his necrology for Schechter: "It may be said without exaggeration that hardly any other single scholar has

16 Published in Solomon Schechter, "Saadyana" (1st article), *JQR* 14 (1901): 37–47.

17 Solomon Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document", *JQR* 3 (1912): 181–219; now known as the "Schechter Text".

18 Solomon Schechter, "A Version of the Kaddish" [Hebrew], in *Gedenkbuch zur Erinnerung an David Kaufmann*, ed. M. Brand and F. Rosenthal (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1900), 52–4.

19 T-S 12.722, published in Schechter, "Saadyana" (2nd article), 222–4. It contains a Latin inscription, '[inter]p[re]tacio esay[a]e prophet[a]e' ('an interpretation of the prophet Isaiah'), identifying it as a commentary on the book of Isaiah. This was probably added after the book was plundered in Palestine so that its return to the Jewish community could be negotiated, for a suitable price. For the Crusader tactic of ransoming books back to the Jews, see M. Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634–1099* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 832–5.

enlarged our knowledge of our past to the same degree as Dr. Schechter. He has changed our whole view of conditions in Babylonia, Palestine, and Egypt in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Various Genizah publications in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, his *Saadyana*, etc., will always remain first-class sources of Jewish history”.²⁰ Marx may have lacked Schechter’s flair for vibrant prose, but his sentiments are genuine and, even from our perspective today, remain incontestable.

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Ben Outhwaite has been Head of the Genizah Research Unit in Cambridge University Library since 2006. His PhD thesis, on the grammatical description of Hebrew letters in the Cairo Genizah, was completed in 1999 under the supervision of Professor Geoffrey Khan. Ben’s current research interests revolve around Hebrew and its use and transmission in the Middle Ages: the vocalization traditions of biblical (and post-biblical) Hebrew, medieval Hebrew language and the documentary history of the communities who deposited manuscripts into the Cairo Genizah. Among numerous publications, he is the author, with M. C. Davis, of *Hebrew Bible Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections*, vols. 3 and 4 (Cambridge University Press, 2003), and the editor, with Esther-Miriam Wagner and Bettina Beinhoff, of *Scribes as Agents of Language Change* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013). bmo10@cam.ac.uk

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²⁰ Marx, “Solomon Schechter”, 184.