UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Study at Cambridge
About the University
Research at Cambridge
Quick links
Search

/ Collections / All collections & departments / Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit / Fragment of the month / FOTM 2024

Cambridge University Library

Home
Using the Library
Research
Teaching and Learning
What's On
Search and Find
Collections
About
Support
Contact

Cambridge University Library
Collections
All collections & departments
Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit
Fragment of the month
FOTM 2024
- Fragment of the Month: December 2024
- Fragment of the Month: November 2024
- Fragment of the Month: October 2024
- Fragment of the Month: September 2024
- Fragment of the Month: August 2024
- Fragment of the Month: July 2024
- Fragment of the Month: June 2024
- Fragment of the Month: May 2024
- Fragment of the Month: April 2024
- Fragment of the Month: March 2024
- Fragment of the Month: February 2024
- Fragment of the Month: January 2024

FOTM 2025
FOTM 2023
FOTM 2022
FOTM 2021
FOTM 2020
FOTM 2019
FOTM 2018
FOTM 2017
Fragment of the Month: December 2016
Fragment of the Month: November 2016
Fragment of the Month: October 2016
Fragment of the Month: September 2016
Fragment of the Month: August 2016
Fragment of the Month: June 2016
Fragment of the Month: May 2016
Fragment of the Month: April 2016
Fragment of the Month: January 2016
Fragment of the Month: September 2015
Fragment of the Month: August 2015
Fragment of the Month: June 2015
Fragment of the Month: April 2015
Fragment of the Month: March 2015
Fragment of the Month: February 2015
Fragment of the Month: January 2015
Fragment of the Month: December 2014
Fragment of the Month: November 2014
Fragment of the Month: October 2014
Fragment of the Month: September 2014
Fragment of the Month: May 2014
Addendum to November 2011's Fragment of the Month
FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE

Fragment of the Month: September 2024

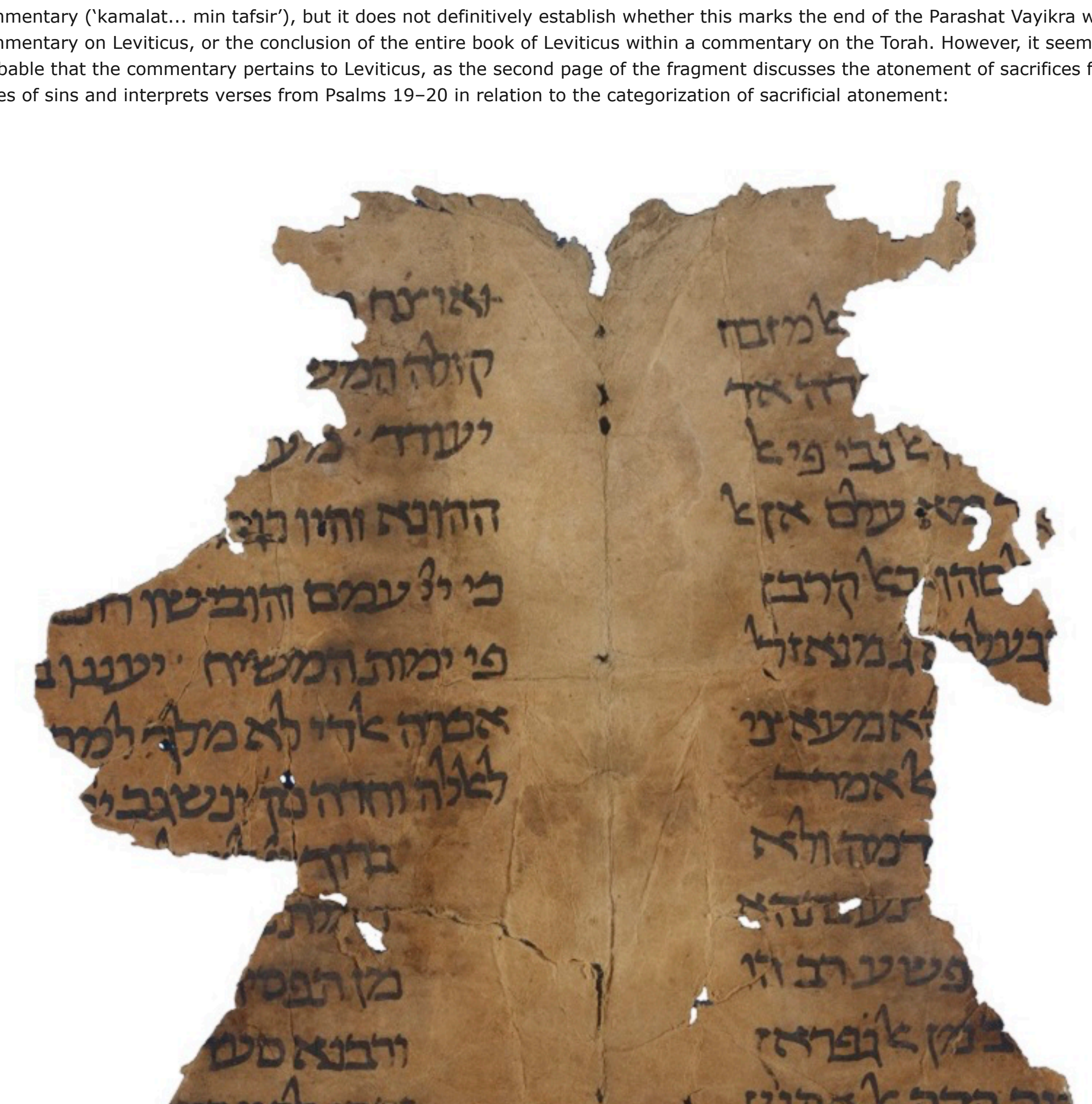
Unraveling a Genizah Mystery: New Insights into Saadia Gaon's Biblical Commentary and Anti-Karaite Polemic

Yehuda Seewald

The Cairo Genizah continues to yield fascinating discoveries that shed light on medieval Jewish scholarship and the development of rabbinic thought. This article presents new findings regarding fragments of Saadia Gaon's commentary on Leviticus and his polemical work against the Karaites, offering a solution to a puzzling juxtaposition of texts and revealing the interconnected nature of Saadia's biblical exegesis and anti-Karaite writings. These discoveries emerge from an ongoing research project on Saadia Gaon's commentary on Leviticus, conducted in collaboration with David Sklare under the auspices of the Aleh Zayis Institute in Lakewood, led by Rabbi Shimon Szimonowitz.[1] This collaborative effort has enabled a comprehensive analysis of Genizah fragments, leading to significant insights into Saadia's exegetical and polemical works.

1. The Initial Puzzle: T-S AS 154.313

The Genizah fragment T-S AS 154.313 has raised some questions for scholars. On one side, it contains a colophon indicating the conclusion of Saadia Gaon's commentary on the book of Leviticus. The colophon indicates the conclusion of a section within a larger commentary ('kamalat... min tafsir'), but it does not definitively establish whether this marks the end of the Parashat Vayikra within the commentary on Leviticus, or the conclusion of the entire book of Leviticus within a commentary on the Torah. However, it seems highly probable that the commentary pertains to Leviticus, as the second page of the fragment discusses the atonement of sacrifices for various types of sins and interprets verses from Psalms 19–20 in relation to the categorization of sacrificial atonement:



T-S AS 154.313 recto

ברוך ייי ל[עולם אמן ואמן]

כמלת [פרשת ויקרא]

מן תפסיר [ויקרא למרנא]

ורבנא סעד[יה גאון]

זכרו לחיי העו[לם הבא]

Translation

Blessed be the Lord forever [and ever, Amen and Amen]

The completion [of the parashah of Vayikra]

From the commentary [on Leviticus[2] by our master]

And our rabbi, Saad[ia Gaon]

May his memory be for the life of the wo[rld to come]

However, the reverse side of the same page of the fragment (verso, right-hand leaf) contains a commentary on Leviticus 3, discussing the Karaite-Rabbanite controversy regarding the consumption of the fat tail (אליה). This discussion revolves around the interpretation of biblical verses (such as Leviticus 3:9) that list the fat tail among the 'fats' (חלבים) to be offered on the altar. The Karaites, adhering to a literal interpretation of the Bible, concluded that the fat tail was forbidden for consumption like other fats. Saadia Gaon, on the other hand, argued for the existence of two distinct categories: חלבים (fats) and אימורים (parts to be burned), with the fat tail included only in the latter category. According to Saadia, the prohibition of consumption applies only to the חלבים.[3]

The presence of this discussion after the colophon announcing the end of the commentary posed a significant problem for researchers, as it seemed illogical for such content to appear after the declared conclusion of the work.

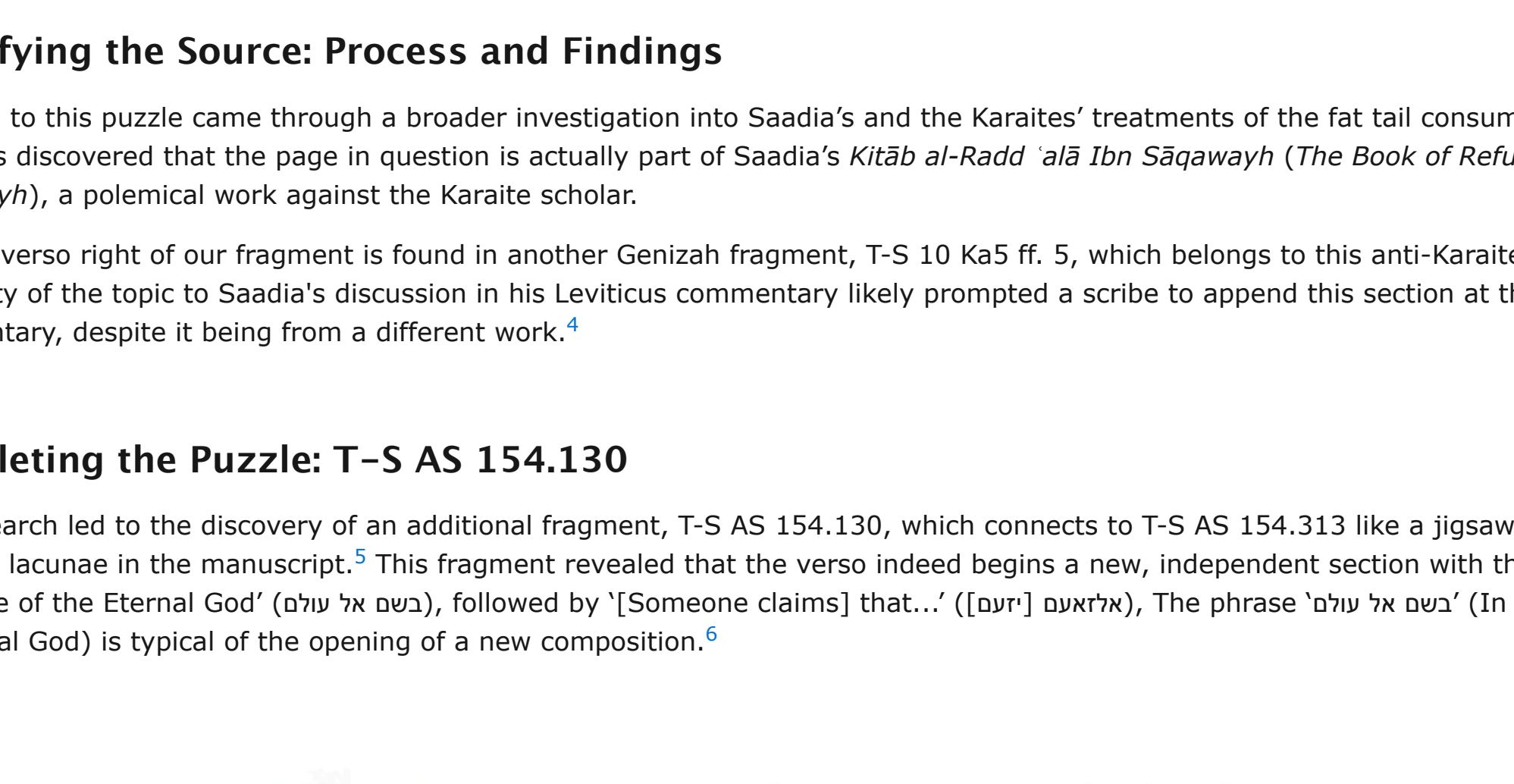
2. Identifying the Source: Process and Findings

The solution to this puzzle came through a broader investigation into Saadia's and the Karaites' treatments of the fat tail consumption issue. It was discovered that the page in question is actually part of Saadia's *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā Ibn Sāqawayh* (*The Book of Refutation of Ibn Sāqawayh*), a polemical work against the Karaite scholar.

The text on verso right of our fragment is found in another Genizah fragment, T-S 10 Ka5 ff. 5, which belongs to this anti-Karaite treatise. The similarity of the topic to Saadia's discussion in his Leviticus commentary likely prompted a scribe to append this section at the end of the commentary, despite it being from a different work.[4]

3. Completing the Puzzle: T-S AS 154.130

Further research led to the discovery of an additional fragment, T-S AS 154.130, which connects to T-S AS 154.313 like a jigsaw puzzle, bridging the lacunae in the manuscript.[5] This fragment revealed that the verso indeed begins a new, independent section with the phrase 'In the name of the Eternal God' (בשם אל עולם), followed by '[Someone claims] that...' ([יזעם] אלזאעם), The phrase 'בשם אל עולם' (In the name of the Eternal God) is typical of the opening of a new composition.[6]



T-S AS 154.30 recto

Interestingly, while in the *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā Ibn Sāqawayh* this passage is part of a broader discussion, in our Genizah fragment the wording differs slightly. These modifications, whether made by Saadia Gaon himself or a later editor, transform the discussion about the permissibility of eating the fat tail into a self-contained unit, independent of the preceding sections of the original composition.

4. Ibn Sāqawayh: A Formidable Karaite Opponent

To fully appreciate the significance of these fragments, it is crucial to understand the context of the Rabbanite-Karaite debate and the role of Ibn Sāqawayh, Saadia Gaon's primary opponent in this polemic.[7]

Ibn Sāqawayh was an influential Karaite scholar and polemicist who flourished in the 10th century in Babylonia or a neighboring region, making him a contemporary of Saadia Gaon. While details of his life remain obscure, his impact on Jewish intellectual discourse of the period is evident from Saadia's engagement with his work in two specific treatises, which will be discussed below.

Ibn Sāqawayh holds a unique place in Karaite scholarship as a pioneer in critical Talmudic studies. He was the first to systematically employ Mishnaic and Talmudic sources in his polemics against the Oral Torah, using analytical tools to highlight contradictions and issues within these texts. His approach focused on demonstrating what he perceived as the Rabbanites' departure from the plain meaning of scripture. Ibn Sāqawayh presented fundamental critiques of Rabbinic Judaism, arguing against the existence of an unbroken tradition for the Oral Torah and criticizing the multiplicity of Rabbinic opinions on halakhic matters.[8]

The 15th-century Karaite chronographer David ben Saadel ibn al-Hiti described Ibn Sāqawayh as primarily focused on calendrical issues, including the determination of the new moon, the date of Shavuot, and the prohibition of eating the fat tail.[9]

Ibn Sāqawayh is traditionally associated with two works against the Rabbanites, allegedly written in response to Saadia's polemical writings: *Kitāb al-Abṣār* (or *al-Ibṣār*, *Book of Observations*), though his authorship of this work is highly conjectural, and *Kitāb al-Faḍāʾiḥ* (*Book of Disgraces*). While these works have not survived in their entirety, S. Assaf published a manuscript that he believed contained part of Ibn Sāqawayh's response to Saadia.[10]

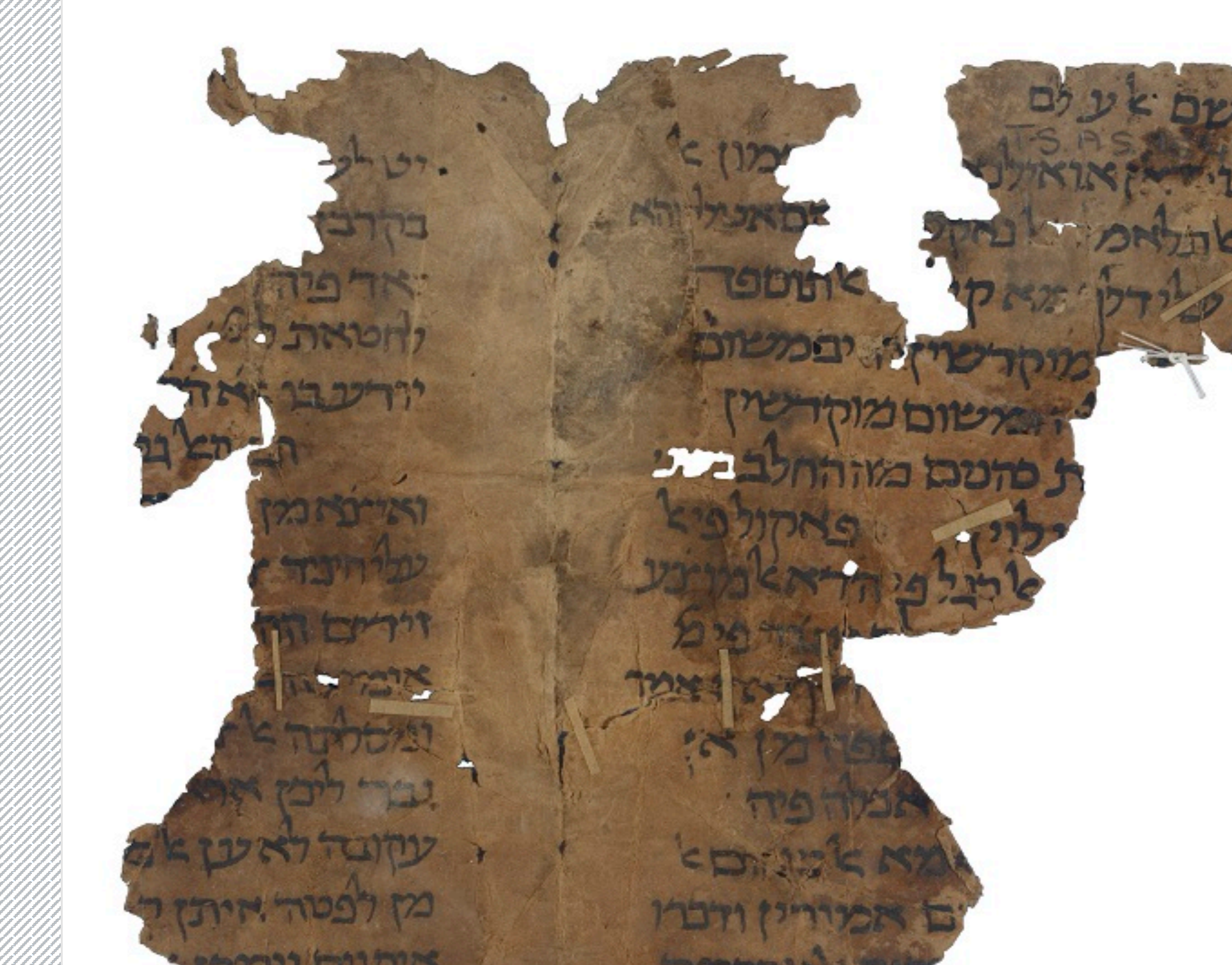
The scholarly debate surrounding Saadia Gaon's responses to Ibn Sāqawayh is complex and ongoing. While the exact number and nature of Saadia's polemical works against Ibn Sāqawayh remain a subject of discussion in academic literature, it is generally believed that Saadia composed at least one, possibly two, targeted refutations. Some scholars identify these as *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā Ibn Sāqawayh* (*Book of Refutation of Ibn Sāqawayh*), believed to have been written after 926 CE, and *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā al-Mutaḥāmil ʿalā al-Mishnah wa-al-Talmud* (*Book of Refutation of the Attacker of the Mishnah and Talmud*). Fragments preserved in the Cairo Genizah, which some researchers attribute to these works, deal with issues such as the anthropomorphism of God, the intercalation of the year, the prohibition of the fat tail, and the laws of menstrual impurity. However, the precise attribution and extent of these fragments remain topics of scholarly inquiry.[11]

In his works against Ibn Sāqawayh, Saadia also addresses matters of the new moon and yearly cycles, using these to calculate the time of the Messiah's arrival, which he believed would be close to his own time: about 2,200 years after the Exodus from Egypt, or 32 generations. This calculation is based on the relationship between solar year cycles and lunar months, which results in an accumulation of 1 hour and 485 parts in each 19-year intercalation cycle.

The *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā Ibn Sāqawayh* was referenced in subsequent generations by both Rabbanite scholars like R. Moses ibn Ezra and R. Judah ben Barzillai, and by the Karaite Yefet ben Ali in his commentaries on Exodus and Deuteronomy. The *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā al-Mutaḥāmil* is mentioned by R. Nissim ben Jacob of Kairouan, by an early Yemenite scholar in his commentary on the Rif's work on Tractate Ḥullin, and in several book lists from the Genizah.

5. The Combined Text

Below is a transcription of the combined text from the two fragments, with additions from T-S 10 Ka.5 ff. 5 in square brackets. Minor textual variations between the sources are noted in the apparatus (A - T-S 10 Ka.5 ff. 5):



The joined fragments

1. בשם אל עולם
2. [יזעם] אלזאעם אן אואילנא [כאנו יחר]מון אל
3. [אליה. ו]אן אלתלאמיד אלנאקלהם אטלקוהא.
4. [ו]שבה עלי ד̇לך מא קי[ל פי] אלתוספה
5. [האוכל אליה מן ה]מוקדשין חייב משום
6. [שני לאווין משום אליה] ומשום מוקדשין.
7. [ומא קיל פי תור]ת כהנים מה החלב בשני
8. [לווין אף אליה בשנ]י לוין. פאקול פי אל
9. [רד עליה נט̇ר הד̇א] אלרג̇ל פי הד̇א אלמוצ̇ע
10. [פערצ̇ת לה הד̇ה אלשבהה] לם ינט̇ר פי מ
11. [מוצ̇ע אכ̇ר פכאנת תזול ענה] ד̇לך אלאמר
12. [וד̇לך אן אלחלב אפצח ואביין פי אלתו]ספה מן אן
13. [ישובה תוהם אן אלאליה ד̇]אכ̇לה פיה
14. [לאן אלחכמים ביינו לנא אי]מא אלשחם אל
15. [מקרבה ואסמהא ענדה]ם אמורין. וד̇כרו
16. [פיהא אלאליה. ואימא אלש]חום אלמחרמה
17. [וסמוהא חלבים. ולם יד̇כרו פיהא אלאלי]ה.

---

2. [יזעם] אלזעם] ואד̇[א] שרחנא אלג' אלבואב מן אלו' אלאכ̇ירה אלד̇י אדעא עלינא פיהא אנא כ̇אלפנא קדמאנא וכשפנא מא קד תביין פינבגי אן נשרח אלג' אלבאקיה והי תמאם אלכתאב. ונקול אדעא הד̇א אלרגל עלינא A | 3. ואן אלתלאמיד אלנאקלהם] ואנא ומן כאן קבלנא מן אלתלאמיד A | 5. משום] - A | 11. ד̇לך אלאמר] - A | 12. מן] מא A.

Translation

In the name of the Eternal God[12]

[He claims,] the claimant, that our forebears [used to for]bid the

[fat tail, and] that the disciples who transmitted from them permitted it.

[And] he draws an analogy from what is sai[d in] the Tosefta:

["One who eats the fat tail from] consecrated [animals] is liable for

[two prohibitions: for the fat tail] and for consecrated [items]."

[And what is said in Tora]t Kohanim: "Just as the fat [incurs] two

[prohibitions, so too the fat tail incurs tw]o prohibitions." So I say in

[refutation of him: This] man looked at this passage

[and this analogy occurred to him,] but he did not look at

[another passage which would have removed from him] this matter.

[For the fat is more explicit and clearer in the To]sefta than

[one might suspect that the fat tail is in]cluded in it.

[For the Sages explained to us: Ei]ther the fat

[that is offered, which they call] 'emurin', and they mentioned

[the fat tail among them; or the] forbidden [fa]ts,

[which they called 'ḥalavim', and they did not mention the fat ta]il among them.

Conclusion

The analysis of the newly discovered Genizah fragments, T-S AS 154.313 and T-S AS 154.130, has provided significant insights into the relationship between Saadia Gaon's biblical exegesis and his polemical works. This study not only resolves the initial puzzle presented by the fragmentary nature of T-S AS 154.313 but also illuminates the complex interplay between different genres of medieval Jewish scholarship.

The juxtaposition of Saadia's biblical commentary with excerpts from his *Refutation of Ibn Sāqawayh* demonstrates how closely exegetical and polemical writings were intertwined in medieval Jewish thought. This discovery highlights a fascinating aspect of textual transmission: whether compiled by Saadia himself or, more likely, by a later scholar, these fragments show how relevant portions of polemical works were appended to biblical commentaries. This practice reflects the medieval scholars' understanding that a comprehensive study of a topic often required integrating information from various genres.

This case study underscores the ongoing importance of the Cairo Genizah in unraveling the complexities of Jewish intellectual history. By meticulously analyzing these fragments from the Taylor-Schechter collection, we have gained new insights into the development and transmission of important works of rabbinic literature. The reconstruction of this text serves as a reminder of the complex layers of meaning and context that can be uncovered through careful analysis of Genizah materials. Furthermore, this research sheds new light on the significant role of Ibn Sāqawayh in the development of Karaite thought and his impact on Saadia Gaon's work, touching upon critical issues such as biblical interpretation and the authority of the Oral Torah - key points of contention in the Rabbanite-Karaite discourse.

Footnotes

[1] Two volumes have been published from this series: Seibald Y. & Sklare D., *Commentary on the Book of Leviticus: Parashat Isha Ki Tazria*, Alei Zayit, Lakewood 2023; idem, *Commentary on the Book of Leviticus: Parashat Zot Tihyeh and Parashat Acharei*, Alei Zayit, Lakewood 2024. This series continues the volumes previously published: Zucker, M., 1984, *Saadya's Commentary on Genesis*, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America [Hebrew]. Ratzaby, Y., 1998, *Rav Saadya's Commentary on Exodus*, Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook [Hebrew]. See also Kafiḥ, Y., 1963, *Perushe Rabenu Saʿadyah Gaon ʿal Ha-Torah*, Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook.

[2] The reconstructed words in square brackets [*parashah of Vayikra*] and [*Leviticus*] are conjectural completions based on the analysis presented earlier in this article. The reasoning for these specific additions, despite their absence in the damaged manuscript, is elaborated in the preceding discussion of the colophon's context and content.

[3] For a discussion of the Karaite-Rabbanite polemic about the permissibility of eating the "Aliyah", see: Hirschfeld, H., "The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge: Third Article", *JQR* OS 16 (1904), pp. 98-112; Poznanski, S., "The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadiah Gaon in the Tenth Century", *JQR* OS 18 (1906), pp. 209-250; Poznanski, S., *The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadia Gaon*, London 1908, pp. 6-7, 58; Mann, J., "Various Matters for the Study of the Geonic Period", *Tarbiz* 6 (1935), p. 67 [Hebrew]; Aharoni, A., "What is the Aliyah?', *Sinai* 11 (1948), p. 78 [Hebrew]; ; Sassoon, D., Ohel David, vol. 2, Oxford 1932, p. 1083; Kafaḥ, S., *The Rif on Tractate Hullin*, Jerusalem 1960, pp. 3-4 [Hebrew]. See also *Sefer Ha'Eshkol*, ed. H. Albeck, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1938, p. 182v: את המינין הכי, ועל האליה שאוסרין, תשובתן מן התורה שאע"פ שאליה ויותרת הכבד ושתי הכליות היו קרבין לגבוה, לא אסר הב"ה כי אם חלב בלבד, ואליה ויותרת הכבד וכליות לא נקראו חלב, שכן כתיב ולקחת מן האיל החלב והאליה וגו', שחלב לחוד לעצמו ואליה לחודה לעצמה, והיא אבר בפני עצמה, וכן הוא אומר ואת החלב אשר על הקרב ואת יותרת הכבד ואת שתי הכליות ואת החלב אשר עליהן ללמדך שהחלב אשר על הקרב לבד ויותרת הכבד לבד, וכן את שתי הכליות ואת החלב דכליות עצמן לא נקראו חלב לפיכך אין בהן צד איסור. "*As for the heretics who forbid the fat tail, their refutation from the Torah is as follows: Although the fat tail, the lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys were offered on the altar, the Holy One, Blessed be He, prohibited only the fat (ḥelev). The fat tail, the lobe of the liver, and the kidneys are not called 'fat' (ḥelev). As it is written, 'Take from the ram the fat and the fat tail, etc.' This shows that the fat is separate unto itself, and the fat tail is separate unto itself, and it is an organ in its own right. Similarly, it says, 'The fat that covers the entrails, and the lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys, and the fat that is on them.' This teaches you that the fat covering the entrails is separate, the lobe of the liver is separate, and likewise the two kidneys and their fat. The kidneys themselves are not called 'fat' (ḥelev), therefore there is no aspect of prohibition in them*."

[4] For previous publications of this Genizah fragment, see Hirschfeld, ibid. note 2; Poznanski, ibid. note 2.

[5] The identification of fragment T-S AS 154.130 as part of fragment T-S AS 154.313 was not suggested by the join proposal tools of the Friedberg Genizah Project (FGP). It was discovered through the catalog of biblical verses mentioned in the fragments, due to the verse from the Book of Zechariah 10:5 cited on the verso of both fragments: "והיו כג[בורים בוסים בטיט חוצות במלחמה ונלחמו] כי ה' עמם והובישו ר[וכבי [סוסים".

[6] The opening phrase "In the name of the Eternal God" (בשם אל עולם), used as a translation of the common Arabic phrase "bismillah" (بسم الله), is an abbreviation of the more prevalent opening "In the name of the Lord, the Eternal God" (בשם י"י אל עולם). Such an abbreviated opening is found in one of the manuscript witnesses of Jonah ibn Janāḥ's Risālat al-Tanbīh. See Elnatan Chen, "Risālat al-Tanbīh (The Epistle of Admonition) by Rabbi Jonah ibn Janāḥ: A New Translation", *Leshonenu* 86-2 (March 2024), p. 178.

[7] On Ibn Sāqawayh See: Harkavy, A., *Fragments of Anti-Karaite Writings of Saadiah in the Imperial Public Library at St. Petersburg*, *JQR* OS 13 (1901), pp. 655-668; Hirschfeld, ibid. note 2, pp. 98-112; Harkavy, A., *From an Eastern Genizah in the Imperial Library in Petersburg*, *Ha-Kedem* 1 (1907-1908), pp. 68-69 [Hebrew]; Eppenstein, S., *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Literatur im geonäischen Zeitalter*, Berlin: Verlag L. Louis Lamm, 1913, pp. 107-114; Assaf, S., *Polemical Words of an Early Karaite Against the Rabbanites*, *Tarbiz* 4 (1933), pp. 35-53 [Hebrew]; Zucker, M., *A Fragment from 'Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā Ibn Sāqawayh'*, *PAAJR* 18 (1948-9), pp. 1-24 [Hebrew]; Zobel, M., "Ibn Sakaweihi", EJB 8:368-370; "Ibn Sāqawayh", EJ 8:1194-1195; "Ibn Sāqawayh", EJ2 9:689; Vidro, N. (2023, July 13). One letter at a time: reconstructing Saadya's Refutation of Ibn Sāqawayh, Blog of the Genizah Research Unit, supported by the Littman Genizah Educational Programme.

[8] It is important to note that Ibn Sāqawayh's original writings have not survived. Most of our knowledge about his work and ideas comes from Saadia Gaon's refutations, as published by Harkavy, ibid. n. 7.

[9] Al-Hiti's words are cited in Poznanski, 1908, ibid. n. 3.

[10] See Assaf, ibid. n. 7

[11] On *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā al-Mutaḥāmil* and *Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā Ibn Sāqawayh*, and the fact that these are two separate works, see H. Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works*, Philadelphia 1921, pp. 265-267; Mann, ibid. note 3.

[12] The heading "In the name of the Eternal God" was added to the Genizah fragment by a different hand and is not original.

If you enjoyed this Fragment of the Month, you can find others here.

Contact us: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

The manuscripts in this article are part of the Cairo Genizah Collection in Cambridge University Library. To see more items from this collection visit: https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/

Contact us
Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DR, UK
Email: library@lib.cam.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 1223 333000

Privacy Policy
Privacy Policy

Social Media
Library blogs
Instagram
Twitter
Facebook
YouTube

Join us
Job opportunities

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
© 2025 University of Cambridge
Contact the University
Accessibility
Freedom of information
Privacy policy and cookies
Statement on Modern Slavery
Terms and conditions
University A-Z

Study at Cambridge
Undergraduate
Postgraduate
Continuing education
Executive and professional education
Courses in education

About the University
How the University and Colleges work
Give to Cambridge
Jobs
Map
Visiting the University

Research at Cambridge
Research news
About research at Cambridge
Public engagement
Spotlight on...