

Fragment of the Month: June 2016

Moses ben Judah – a 15th century bibliophile and gourmand

by Dotan Arad and Esther-Miriam Wagner

More than 50 fragments from the Bodleian Library, Bodl MS Heb.c.72, have recently been digitised and made available through the Friedberg Genizah Project webpage. Not part of the Cairo Genizah, they appear to have come from another Genizah or archive. Many are mud-caked - suggesting that they may have been buried at some point - but the presence of worm holes and traces of glue seems to point to the fact that the fragments may have been used in bindings.

Some of the protagonists mentioned in the Bodleian sources also appear in Genizah documents and in materials from other collections, demonstrating the close links between the different manuscript depositories. Dotan Arad and Esther-Miriam Wagner are currently preparing a volume on life in 15th-century Alexandria based on this collection of manuscripts, entitled 'Wisdom and greatness in one place: the 15th-c. Alexandrian trader Moses Ben Judah and his circle'.

The Italian Mishna commentator R. Obadiah of Bertinoro visited Alexandria in February 1488 CE where he stayed in the house of a certain 'R Moses Grasso, dragoman to the Venetians'. He described his host as a 'generous man who was very much beloved even by the Arabs'. They bonded over reading Kabbalistic works together, and had a rather lavish feast: 'confectionary, fresh ginger, dates, raisins, almonds, and confectionery of coriander seeds; a glass of wine drunk with each kind. Then followed raisin wine, which was very good, then malmsey wine from Candia, and again native wine'.

The identity of this host, described in such rosy tones, can be established with great confidence as Rabbi Moses b. Judah, leader of the Alexandrian community, who acted as translator for the Venetian merchants. The reason why we can say this with certainty lies in a cache of manuscript fragments, held by the Bodleian library in Oxford under the classmark *Bodl MS Heb.c.72*. Most of them were written in Judaeo-Arabic while others were composed in Hebrew. These manuscripts do not come from the Cairo Geniza but seem to have originated in another Egyptian manuscript depository. The dirt and mud marks on many of the fragments suggests that they were buried in the ground at some point, but our effort to establish provenance of this part of the Oxford collection have not yet proved fruitful. All the documents will be published soon in our volume, with translation into English and basic commentary.

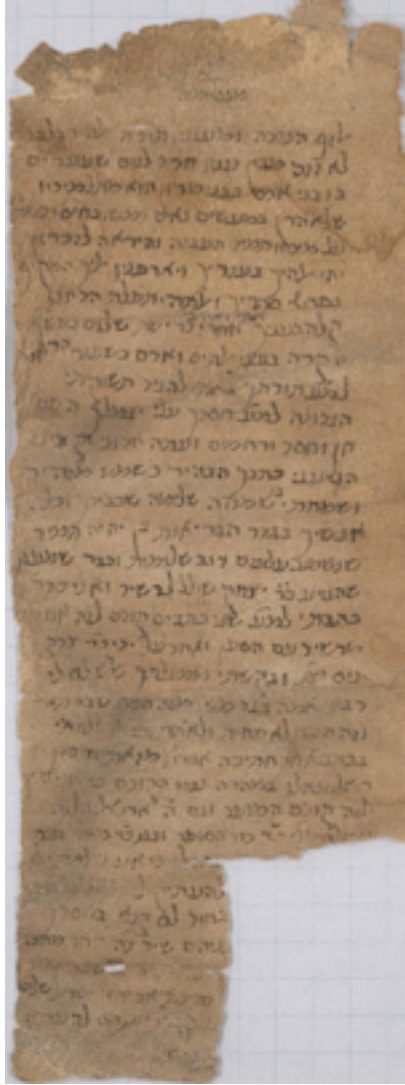
The Bodleian cache contains a large number of letters sent to Moses b. Judah, our above mentioned host, and paint a vivid picture of life in 15th century Alexandria and of Moses' role as scholar and community leader. In addition, we find leaves from literary works which inform us about books Moses would have used, and the intellectual atmosphere in the Alexandrian elite of the time. There are also connections to letters in other collections. Among the Genizah material, we have a letter (probably) by Moses himself, in JTS ENA 4101.6A. The Jewish Theological seminary has a letter (JTS 2331, letter 2) concerned with the copying of commentaries, which was sent to our Moses b. Judah. The letter also mentions a certain David aš-Šams referred to as 'our teacher', who is the author of a number of letters in the Bodleian cache.

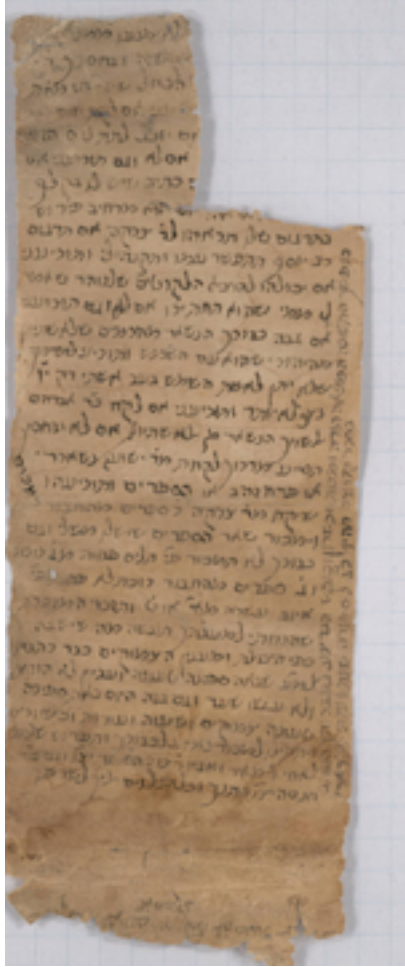
David aš-Šams' letters in particular confirm many of the characteristics reported by the Italian Obadiah. He calls him 'the choicest of friends, the descendant of the righteous, the delight of the inner wisdom' (*Bodl MS Heb.c.72.20, line 11*). He alludes to the same intercommunal connections with Muslims that Obadiah mentioned, implying contact with Muslim governors: 'Beloved by kings, friend of the princes' (*Bodl MS Heb.c.72.20, line 16*). He also describes the intimate business connections that he and Moses enjoyed with Muslim merchants, as evident in *Bodl MS Heb.c.72.39*, which mentions a large number of business associates with obvious Muslim names. And, importantly, he confirms the culinary information gleaned from Obadiah's account, and describes Moses' penchant for food and wine: 'his table is full with all the best which is similar to the falling of the Manna' (*Bodl MS Heb.c.72.20, line 15-16*).

Much of the correspondence in the Bodleian cache reveals Moses to have been a real bibliophile. He seems to have been selective and quite particular about potential holdings in his personal library. Only fine books, written on high quality paper or vellum, in clear and professional handwriting, made the cut. One writer apologises to Moses: 'you wrote also that the handwriting of the book of *Torat*

ha-Adam is not [nice] in your honour's eyes, and that there is difference between it and the [quality of the] paper I have sent to your honour from Candia' (*Bodl MS Heb.c.72.10, line 4-5*).

Moses b. Judah emerges from the manuscripts as a most interesting personality: a great scholar, bibliophile, community politician, and lover of fine food and wine.





JTS ENA 4101.6A: a letter by Moses ben Judah. Images reproduced by courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

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

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