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Edited by Stefan C. Reif

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# THE CAMBRIDGE GENIZAH COLLECTIONS: THEIR CONTENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Edited by  
STEFAN C. REIF

*with the assistance of*  
SHULAMIT REIF



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*Dedicated to the memory of  
Professor Michael L. Klein  
(1940–2000)*

*fastidious researcher, inspired teacher  
and affable colleague*

דרש וחקר ושאל היטב  
יהי זכרו ברוך

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## PREFACE

In the Michaelmas Term of 1994, the Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library took advantage of the presence in Cambridge of four distinguished scholars on sabbatical leave from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A series of lectures on the general theme “The Impact of Genizah Discoveries on Recent Scholarship” was arranged at the Library, and each of the specialists spoke on a topic of his choice. The lectures were well attended, particularly by members of the Faculties of Oriental Studies and of Divinity, and lively discussions followed each of the presentations.

In the opening lecture, which was chaired by Dr Gordon Johnson, President of Wolfson College, Dr (now Professor) Menahem Kister, of the Hebrew University’s Talmud and Hebrew Literature Departments, dealt with the Hebrew fragments of the apocryphal book of Ben Sira, discovered in the Cairo Genizah one hundred years ago. He evaluated their historical importance and explained their significance for a better understanding of the history of the Hebrew language. He also suggested fresh interpretations of several verses, most of them having some bearing on theological concepts.

In the next lecture, chaired by Dr Robert Gordon, then recently pre-elected to the Regius Chair of Hebrew at Cambridge, Professor Menahem Kahana, of the Hebrew University’s Talmud Department, spoke about the discovery of tannaitic midrashim in the Cairo Genizah. He pointed out how these medieval fragments had not only provided early, reliable texts for known works but had also restored to Hebrew literature a number of lost works. He paid particular attention to *Sifre Zuta* on Deuteronomy.

The newly appointed University Librarian, Mr Peter Fox, introduced the third lecture, given by Professor Joseph Yahalom, of the Hebrew University’s Hebrew Literature Department, on the life and work of Judah Halevi, with the emphasis on the poet’s last years in Egypt and the Holy Land. Professor Yahalom evaluated the many poems and letters discovered in the Genizah and demonstrated how they illuminated the medieval culture of Andalusia and Halevi’s attempts to settle in the Jewish homeland.

Professor Haggai Ben-Shammai, of the Hebrew University’s Arabic Department, concluded the series with a paper on medieval history and religious thought, with Dr Fred Ratcliffe, University Librarian Emeritus, presiding. In that fourth lecture, Professor Ben-Shammai assessed the monumental contribution of Shelomo Dov Goitein to the exploitation of Genizah material for the purpose of reconstructing the everyday lives of ordinary people in the Mediterranean area of the Middle Ages. He also drew attention to the manner in which the Genizah documents had highlighted the names of lost thinkers and exegetes and had restored to scholarship versions of their seminal works.

Following these lectures, it was suggested by a number of participants that it would be appropriate to arrange another set of lectures and to publish them all, in a suitable

context, to mark the centenary of the formal presentation of the Genizah Collection, in October 1898, to Cambridge University Library by Charles Taylor and Solomon Schechter. Another five lectures, on 'The Contribution of the Genizah Collection to the Study of Medieval Jewish Culture', were consequently given, in the Michaelmas Term of 1998, in the Morison Room of the University Library's new Exhibition Centre.

The first meeting was chaired by Professor Robert Gordon and was treated to a study of Aramaic Bible translations and commentaries by Professor Michael Klein, of the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. He demonstrated how a detailed review of the oldest extant fragments helps to illuminate such subjects as the synagogal-liturgical setting of the targum. Several new targumic texts and text-types discovered in the Genizah were noted, such as 'shorthand' manuscripts; collections of expansive readings for festivals and special sabbaths; introductory Aramaic poems to the targum of the *haftarot*; a fragment-targum of Onqelos; and various compositions of masorah to Onqelos. The paper concluded with a reading of an unparalleled targumic *tosefta* to the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4).

Professor Joel Kraemer, of the University of Chicago, gave the second presentation, on Jewish female literacy, and the chair was taken by Rosamond McKitterick, Professor of Early Medieval European History. Professor Kraemer drew attention to the numerous letters between women and members of their families to be found among the vast treasures in the documentary portion of the Cairo Genizah. There are also appeals and petitions by women to the community and to communal officials, as well as declarations in last wills and testaments. These precious and unique documents let us hear the female voice directly, unmediated by men. The letters give us a fine *aperçu* into the socio-economic and cultural status of women and into the entire family structure.

I myself introduced the third speaker, Professor Mordechai Friedman, of Tel Aviv University's Talmud Department, who spoke on three major aspects of medieval Jewish marriage and the family. He began with a re-examination of the question of child brides, on the basis of published and unedited fragments. The evidence confirmed that such marriages were irregular as far as legal minors were concerned and almost exclusively restricted to orphan girls. One case of homicide within the family, the murder of a wife and mother-in-law, is documented. Jewish marriage contracts of both the Palestinian and Karaite traditions include 'mutual obligations', whereby the groom's undertaking to honour and serve his wife are balanced by her undertaking to honour and serve him.

At the fourth session, chaired by the Sir Thomas Adams's Professor of Arabic, Tarif Khalidi, Professor Paul Fenton, of the Sorbonne, devoted his paper to Jewish-Muslim relations. He used Genizah texts to demonstrate that 'the principles of seclusion and discrimination inculcated by religious bigotry were often countered by the kind of economic and social realities that nurtured more tolerant attitudes'. Professor Fenton gave details of Genizah letters that reveal Jewish-Muslim partnerships unrestricted by social or religious dictates and personal contacts that were often quite intimate, despite official segregation.



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The fifth and final session, as well attended as all its predecessors, was devoted to the talmudic and rabbinic fields and was chaired by the Reverend William Horbury, Professor of Early Christian and Jewish Studies. Professor Neil Danzig, of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, presented a detailed analysis of a well-known Genizah fragment containing a prayer on behalf of the Babylonian Geonim and the Exilarch, one part of which is in New York and the other in Cambridge. The combined text comprises a ninth-century liturgical handbook from a Babylonian synagogue, the contents of which include guidelines for the formulaic conclusion of a homily delivered on the sabbath and festivals.

The Reverend Dr Andrew Macintosh, who was at that time President of St John's College, and who attended all the Genizah centenary lectures, brought the proceedings to a close and referred to the Genizah's close connection with the College, especially with its Master in Schechter's day, Charles Taylor. He noted that Taylor had been enthusiastic about the study of talmudic Hebrew, and had published in 1877 an edition of *Pirquey Avot* which is still much used and appreciated. It had also been his financial support of Schechter that had facilitated the whole Genizah enterprise. Dr Macintosh reported that Professor Klein had been a popular Visiting Scholar at St John's College and expressed his pleasure that the College had appointed me to a fellowship.

Given that these nine lectures covered many of the major fields of Genizah research, it seemed to me that, with the addition of an appropriate essay of my own, a volume could be produced that would serve as the introductory volume in the 'Genizah Series' that has long been planned. I therefore brought such a proposal to the Steering Committee of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, under the chairmanship of Professor Malcolm Schofield, and it was heartily endorsed. The lecturers were asked to update and adjust the texts of their lectures as they saw fit and the articles that now appear in this volume represent these later versions of their papers. Assisted by my wife, Shulie, who undertook the technical preparation and the sub-editing, and did most of the indexing, I edited the scholarly content of the papers and added my own essay.

In that essay, which serves as an introduction to the others, I have tried to demonstrate that Genizah research is not simply the technical treatment of certain narrow topics in medieval Jewish literature and history, with limited relevance to the broader academic discipline, but has, in a little over a century, had a profound effect on almost every area of Jewish studies. I have done this by summarizing the contributions made by Genizah texts to various fields of study and by citing a few examples of the kind of manuscripts that have been deciphered and analysed. To this end, I have touched on the biblical Hebrew text, talmudic and halakhic matters and the evolution of Jewish liturgy. The history of the Holy Land and some leading personalities have received attention but the mundane activities of more ordinary folk have not been forgotten.

It is a source of considerable sadness to all those involved in these series of lectures and their publication that Professor Michael Klein is no longer with us. His death, a few months ago, at the early age of sixty, robbed Genizah research of one of its most important and industrious scholars. In the course of twenty years, Michael published

some fourteen important articles on Genizah themes, and the second of his two seminal volumes on targumic material from the Genizah was published in the same series as the current volume and was indeed the first volume to be made available in electronic form on the Unit's web site. He was a visiting scholar in the University of Cambridge on a number of occasions and was most popular with all who came into contact with him. It is singularly appropriate that the University Library has agreed to dedicate this volume to his memory.

I am most grateful to the contributors for their kindness in agreeing to give the lectures and their co-operation in the editorial process; to all my colleagues in the Genizah Research Unit for their generous assistance in many matters relating to the lectures and their publication; to the University Librarian and the Library Syndicate for supporting the series and the creation of the volume; to the Faculty of Oriental Studies and to the Sidney and Elizabeth Corob Charitable Trust for contributing to the costs of the series; and to Cambridge University Press for seeing it efficiently through the publication process. I hope that it may be seen as a fitting tribute to the outstanding scholarship and prescience of Charles Taylor and Solomon Schechter, whose efforts of over one hundred years ago are still bearing sumptuous, scholarly fruit.

Stefan C. Reif