

FROM 300 to 1000 Babylonia was the center of Jewish life. There the Jews had a political head in the exilarch and great religious leaders in the *geonim*, who were the presidents of the Talmudic academies of Sura and Pumbedita. These schools influenced Jewish religious life all over the world during the days of the Abbaside caliphate, whose capital was at Bagdad (750-1258).

One of the most famous of these academy heads was Saadia ben Joseph (882-942), who was born in the district of Faiyum in Upper Egypt. He was one of the greatest intellects in Jewry, and the first outstanding scholar to fuse together the Arabic and the Hebraic cultures. This creative scholar is noted for his many writings which touch almost all subjects: rabbinic law, poetry, liturgy, grammar, mysticism, polemics, chronology, Bible, and philosophy. His best known books were a translation of the Bible into Arabic and a philosophic work called *Emunot we-Deot* ("Beliefs and Opinions"), both of which are still popular. Most of his works were written in Arabic. After wandering and teaching in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, he came to Babylon (921), became *Gaon* of the academy at Sura (928), and soon was engaged in a bitter controversy with the exilarch who had appointed him.

The story of this struggle, which reflects the character of Saadia, is given below. This account, now extant only in Hebrew, was originally written in Arabic by Nathan the Babylonian about 960 and is part of a work of a rather popular nature dealing with the Jews of Bagdad.

¶When the president of the academy at Sura died, the Exilarch [David ben Zakkai] was considering whom he would induct into the office and had decided on either our master Saadia of Faiyum or Zemah ben Shahin. The latter was a learned man of a distinguished family. The Exilarch had sent first to Nissi Naharwani to be the head of the academy but he answered: "It cannot be. The head of the academy is called the 'Light of the World' while I am blind."

"Well, then, what is your opinion in this matter?" the Exilarch

said to him. "Do what you like," he answered him. The Exilarch then told him what he thought of doing, that his choice had fallen on either our master Saadia or on Zemah ben Shahin. Nissi told him to appoint Zemah ben Shahin and not Saadia, even though the latter was a great man and a distinguished scholar. "He fears no man, however," he said, "and kowtows to no one because of his great wisdom, his spirit, his eloquence, and his fear of sin." "Well," answered the Exilarch, "my decision is already made. I have decided on our master Saadia of Faiyum."

"Do what you like," answered Nissi. "The first one to listen to his words and study with him will be myself. And I shall be the first to accept him." So they inducted him into office at that time in the presence of Kohen Zedek and the scholars of the Pumbedita academy, and they appointed him chief of the college at Sura. [Kohen Zedek was the head of the rival academy of Pumbedita, then in Bagdad. He opposed Saadia, who was appointed to Sura, 928.]

But it was not long before a quarrel broke out [about 930] between the Exilarch and Saadia, and Bagdad was divided into two parties. All the wealthy of Bagdad, the scholars of the academies, and the prominent people of the city sided with Saadia, ready to help him by means of their money and their influence with the king, his princes, and advisers.

There was, however, a very influential man in Bagdad, Caleb [Chalaf] ibn Sargado by name, who was a supporter of the Exilarch. He gave 60,000 zuz of his fortune—for he was a rich man—to remove Saadia from office, but he did not succeed, for the sons of Netira and all the wealthy of Bagdad were with Saadia. [Sahl and Isaac Netira, influential bankers in Bagdad, were known for their generosity to the Jewish and Moslem poor. Saadia had taught Sahl.] The fact is that this Caleb was jealous of Saadia, for though Caleb was eloquent and very learned and knew an answer or two for every question, Saadia knew ten times more, and for this reason Caleb envied him. [Caleb wanted the Sura appointment. Later he became head of Pumbedita and thus achieved his ambition of presiding over one of the great Babylonian academies.]

The roots of the quarrel between Saadia and the Exilarch were some property that belonged to some men who were within the jurisdiction of the Exilarch, and a large sum of money which fell to them through inheritance and which they desired to divide. They quarreled about it until they voluntarily agreed to give to the Exilarch ten per cent of all that fell to them by inheritance, in order to remove all complaints against themselves and to settle the case.

This ten per cent which they gave to the Exilarch as his share amounted to seven hundred goldpieces, so he issued the documents for them, sealed them, and ordered them to go to the heads of the academies who would confirm them. [The legal papers of the Exilarchs had to be confirmed by the heads of the great academies of Sura and Pumbedita.]

When the documents reached Saadia he examined them and saw things in them that did not seem right to him. Nevertheless he spoke to the men courteously: "Go to Kohen Zedek, the head of the Pumbedita academy, and let him sign this document first; then I will do so." Now he only said this in order to cover up the unseemly thing which was obvious to him but which he did not wish to make public. They did as he commanded them and went to Kohen Zedek, the head of the Pumbedita academy, and he put his seal on them.

After Kohen Zedek had done this, they came back to Saadia to have him also sign and confirm them. "Why do you want my signature?" asked Saadia of them. "You already have the signatures of the Exilarch and of Kohen Zedek, the head of the Pumbedita academy. You don't need my signature." "Why don't you sign?" they countered. "I don't know," he answered, and refused to reveal the reason to them, until they adjured him many times to tell them what he found wrong in their documents. He could not violate his oath to hide anything from them; hence he told them what he found wrong in the papers and why they were invalid.

They then returned to the Exilarch and told him about it, so he sent Judah, his son, and said to him: "Go tell Saadia, in my name, that he should sign the documents." Judah, the son of the Exilarch, went and told Saadia, in the name of his father, to sign the papers. "Return and tell your father," Saadia answered, "that it is written in the Bible [Deuteronomy 1:17]: 'You must never show partiality in a case.'" So the son went back and his father said to him: "Tell Saadia to sign the papers and not to be a fool." The youth returned to Saadia and spoke to him respectfully. He did not repeat the words of his father but begged and entreated Saadia to seal the documents for fear lest a quarrel arise between Saadia and his father. But Saadia refused.

The Exilarch sent to him many times, but the son did not want to reveal to Saadia all that his father had really told him to say. He made every effort to persuade him to sign the documents so as to avoid a break between Saadia and his father on account of this. However, when his father tired him out with all this coming

and going, he became angry and raised his hand against Saadia saying: "If you don't sign the papers, as my father wants you to, I'll hit you."

No sooner had the words left the mouth of the youth than the servants of Saadia dragged him outside the door and closed the gates in his face. With tears streaming down his cheeks he came back to his father who asked him what had happened. He told him the whole story. As soon as his father heard this he deposed Saadia and appointed Joseph, son of Jacob, to be head of the academy of Sura in his stead. But Saadia, too, when he heard of the action taken, in turn excommunicated the Exilarch and sent for Hasan, that is Josiah, the brother of David ben Zakkai, to be Exilarch in place of his brother.

This brother held the office for three years and died, but the quarrel between Saadia and the Exilarch, however, was dragged out for seven years, until a certain case turned up between two men who were wrangling at law. The one chose Saadia as judge, the other selected the Exilarch. The Exilarch sent for the man who had chosen Saadia to come before him and they beat him badly. [The Exilarch's ban against Saadia forbade anyone to employ him as a judge.]

With his clothes torn, the wounded man went about crying to the whole community telling them what had happened to him. They took the matter very much to heart, for it was established custom that academy heads had no power over any man who was under the authority of the Exilarch, nor did the Exilarchs have any control over any one who was under the authority of the academy heads. No one had the right to contest the legality of the action of the other in any matter that lay within the jurisdiction of the other. And if a man was a stranger in the country, hailing from a foreign land, and not coming under the jurisdiction of the one or the other, he had the right to turn to whichever one he wished.

Since this man who was cudged was not under the jurisdiction of the Exilarch, the community was incensed at what had happened to him. All of them went to Bishr ben Aaron—the father-in-law of Caleb ibn Sargado—who was a great man in Babylon and one of the important men of his city [probably a member of the "Bene Aaron," court-bankers], and they told him how far this quarrel had gone among the Jews and how serious were the things that had happened. "Do something. It all depends on you," they said to him. "We're with you. Perhaps we'll be able to stop this quarrel which is only being kept up by your son-in-law Caleb ibn Sargado." [Sargado had written a diatribe against Saadia in which he made

nasty insinuations. Saadia called him *celeb*, dog, instead of Caleb or Chalaf. Street-brawls between the two factions were frequent. Saadia himself was assaulted.]

Bishr went to the most prominent Jews, gathered them together in his home, and in the presence of them all spoke to the Exilarch who was also there: "What is this that you are doing? How long will you persist in this dispute and not fear divine punishment? Fear your God and stay out of trouble, for you know how far a quarrel can go. Now consider how you can improve your relations with Saadia. Make your peace with him and don't cherish any grudge against him."

The Exilarch responded with a peaceful answer that he would do as advised. Then Bishr got up, went to the home of Saadia, brought him and his followers who accompanied him to his house, and repeated to him the very words he had spoken to the Exilarch, and he also responded favorably. The Exilarch with all his adherents and his men were in one house, and our master, Saadia, with his party and all his men were in another house opposite it, but both houses were in the courtyard of this Bishr who went from one to the other with words of peace.

Then men, the leaders of the community, got up and divided themselves off into two groups. The one group escorted the Exilarch, and the other, Saadia; and these two marched from their respective sides until they met. Then they kissed and embraced each other. All this happened during the Fast of Esther [the day before Purim, February 27, 937]. When this matter between the two was settled, Bishr, rejoicing that they had made peace through his mediation, begged them and those standing there with them to spend the night with him and read the scroll of Esther in his home. But neither the Exilarch nor Saadia was willing to do this. "Then let Saadia dine with me or let me dine with him," suggested the Exilarch. They cast lots between them and the lot fell to the Exilarch, that Saadia should go with him, and so he did. He went to his home, took Purim dinner with him, and spent two days in his company, and departed on the third day in joy and in good spirit.

After the reconciliation had taken place between them and the quarrel had ceased, Joseph son of Jacob, whom the Exilarch had kept as college head in place of Saadia all the years of the dispute, now remained at home. Nevertheless the salary that he used to get as college president was not withheld from him, but sent to his house. The Exilarch, David ben Zakkai, died [about 940] and they sought to appoint his son [Judah] in his place, but he only lived

seven months after his father and also passed away. He [Judah] had a young son, about twelve years of age, and Saadia took him into his home and kept him in school until Saadia himself died. [Saadia died of melancholia, 942.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

REFERENCES TO TEXTBOOKS

Elbogen, pp. 52ff.; Roth, pp. 154ff.; Sachar, pp. 164ff.
Golub, J. S., *Medieval Jewish History*, Sec. IV, "A Great Gaon—Saadia," etc.

READINGS FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS

Graetz, III, pp. 187ff.; Graetz-Rhine, III, pp. 71-95; Margolis and Marx, pp. 264-272.
Malter, H., *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works*. The standard work on Saadia.
Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, "Se'adiah."
JE, "Saadia b. Joseph."

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ADDITIONS

SURVEYS

Baron, 5:21-24, 30, 74; Ben-Sasson, 443-48; *EJ*: "Saadia (ben Joseph) Gaon," "David ben Zakkai," "Exilarch: During the Arab Period, Relations with the Rashei Yeshivot."

STUDIES

Baron, S. W., "Saadia's Communal Activities," *Ancient and Medieval Jewish History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972), pp. 95-127 [1943].
Rivkin, Ellis, "The Saadia—David Ben Zakkai Controversy: A Structural Analysis," in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Newman* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), pp. 388-423.
Fischel, Walter, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Mediaeval Islam* (New York: Ktav, 1969), esp. pp. 34-44, on Jewish banking families.
Goitein, S. D., *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 379-90.
Hecht, N. S. et al., eds., *An Introduction to the History and Sources of Jewish Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 197-250 (on the Geonic Period).
Brody, Robert, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 75-82, 235-60.

ADDITIONAL SOURCE MATERIALS

Kobler, Franz, *Letters of Jews Through the Ages* (New York: East and West Library, 1978), pp. 78-91 [1952]: letters from Saadia in a different controversy.