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1 Early years: Samuel as emissary and mouthpiece of the yeshiva

Samuel ben Hoshā‘na must have been born some time in the middle of the tenth century, probably somewhere in the Land of Israel. Nothing is known about his birth or childhood, other than his father’s name, Hoshā‘na. He first appears on the stage of history in a document from the 970s, regarding the transfer of funds of a large contribution from an estate in Sicily, at the outskirts of the sphere of influence of the Yeshiva of the Land of Israel, to the poor of Jerusalem:³

We were already thinking that we would [give to] the men of the Holy City [Jerusalem], may it be rebuilt soon, as we have written to you; and when their letter reached us, and we examined it, and we knew of [...] their troubles, we were very concerned, and we all assembled together in the presence of the honorable, great, holy master Rabbi Samuel, son of the master Rabbi Hoshā‘na, and he took from Rabbi(!) and Rabbi Solomon the 193 *tari* entrusted to him [...] took from his money forty *tari* and entrusted it all to Rabbi Joshua‘ al-Ḥalabi, the custodian [of the funds] [...] gave to the honorable, great, holy master and Rabbi Joseph Gaon, the head of the Yeshiva [...]

From this document, we see that Samuel personally visited the Jewish community in Sicily, evidently as an emissary of the Yeshiva of the Land of Israel, which was then under the leadership of Joseph Gaon. Samuel was already known as a distinguished individual at this point, a “great, holy master”.

In another document, an anonymous author from an unknown location writes that he is sending a large monetary contribution to “the poor of Ramle and [the elders]⁴ of Ramle,” and insists that R. Samuel ben Hoshā‘na, who was

3 M. Ben-Sasson: *The Jews of Sicily, 825–1068: Documents and Sources* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1991, pp. 143–45.

4 The word is damaged in the manuscript; we are following Gil’s reconstruction in *The Land of Israel*, document 13.

a resident of Ramle, should receive some of the money himself.⁵ At the time, the community of Ramle was the largest and most affluent Jewish community in the Land of Israel, and even many of the rabbis of the yeshiva preferred to spend ordinary weekdays in Ramle, though they would come to Jerusalem on festivals in order to carry out official leadership functions, including official appointment of people to positions, on the Mount of Olives.⁶

At this time, the last quarter of the tenth century, Samuel was involved in the leadership of the Yeshiva, but did not yet hold the title of Fourth (*revi'i*). We have many liturgical poems that he wrote during this period; in the acrostic signatures, he typically signs as “Shemu’el He-ḥaver”, that is, Samuel, the member of the Yeshiva, without any specific title in the hierarchy. Many of these poems are for the the Sabbaths of Misfortune, that is, the three Sabbaths between the Seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av; evidently, he focussed his energy on writing for this season of the calendar during this earlier period of his career. On the other hand, we never find this early form of his signature in his compositions for festivals; it may be that the liturgy of these occasions was more fixed, and a poet would not dare to replace this traditional liturgy until reaching greater maturity.

By the beginning of the eleventh century, Samuel had already risen to a distinguished position in the leadership – the Fourth (*revi'i*). We see this in his signature in a letter that he wrote in the year 1001, signed “Samuel, the Fourth in the leadership, *beribbi*”.⁷ In this letter he speaks of a miracle: “The two enemies were subdued: one in Egypt, and one in our midst.”⁸ There is a poem accompanying the letter, and it is signed in acrostic: “Samuel son of Rabbi Hosha’na, the Fourth”. The poem is divided into two sections: the first section, which is mostly lost, deals with the events in Egypt, apparently instigated by some Turkish foes (called by the biblicalizing term “Agagites”);

5 Gil, *The Land of Israel*, document 13; M. Ben-Sasson, “The Gaonate of R. Samuel B. Joseph Ha-cohen” (Hebrew), in *Zion* 51 (1986), p. 389.

6 Ben-Sasson, “The Gaonate of Samuel,” pp. 384, 393.

7 The term *beribbi*, when not followed by another name, is an honorific; see M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig, 1903), p. 189, s.v. *beribbi*. When it is followed by another name, it means “son of Rabbi X”. See also Mordecai Akiva Friedman, *Jewish Marriage in Palestine: A Cairo Geniza Study*, Tel-Aviv and New York 1981, volume II, pp. 414–15.

8 We have not included this letter among the texts in this volume, despite its historical importance, because it has survived only in fragmentary form, which would not lend itself to an English translation. It can be found in Yahalom-Katsumata, *The Yotserot of Samuel the Third* (Hebrew), volume 2, pp. 1001 f.

the second section deals with events in the Land of Israel, instigated by a Christian foe (“uncircumcised Edomites”). In the section dealing with the events in the Land of Israel, it lists the Jewish communities on the coast that had been suffering from the oppressive hand of the local Christian ruler – Acre, Tyre, Ashkelon, Gaza, and Caesarea, as well as some other cities, whose names have not survived in the manuscript. According to the poem, the oppressors “flayed my skin; and darkened my light and my appearance.” In the tattered continuation of the page, we see the names of the coastal towns, which had been affected by the events: “He plundered the dwellings of Ashkelon, and hewed down the residents of Gaza, and sent the congregation of Hazerim (=Caesarea) into exile,” and, moreover, “he despoiled the residents of Acre, and exiled the men of Tyre.” The news of good fortune for the Jews finally arrived “on a Wednesday, at the end of the month of Marḥeshvan.” The relevant year in which the last day of Marḥeshvan fell on a Wednesday was 1001, when it fell on November 19. The letter, along with the poem, was sent to a place far away from either the Land of Israel or Egypt, to a man named Abraham.⁹

The prose section at the beginning of the letter is especially enlightening; in it, Samuel emphasizes that he is including a poem in order to make his words easily memorable, so that they can be spread widely. He instructs the recipient:

Send for our teacher, Rabbi Hillel, and teach him these words, and their meanings, very thoroughly, so that he may say them [...] before the prince [=Jewish aristocrat], may God protect him [...] And if he says them before the prince, Rabbi Moses, he should add that this letter is [...]

At this point, the text breaks off, but even what remains is a good reflection of how important the poem was for the expressive presentation of the events, and, perhaps most of all, of the poet’s position of authority.

9 B. Z. Kedar, “Notes on the History of the Jews of The Land of Israel in the Middle Ages” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 42 (1973), pp. 401–4, and J. Yahalom, “The Temple and the City, through the Lens of Poetry” (Hebrew), in *Sefer Yerushalayim: The Early Muslim Period (638–1099)*, ed. J. Prawer, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 223–4. Gil, in *The Land of Israel*, pp. 304–5, believes (for some reason) that the addressee was from Fustat.