

# Early Genizah Fragments of Sa'adyah Gaon's Arabic Translation of the Pentateuch in the Russian National Library in St Petersburg\*

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The following is an outline of my findings while working on the identification and classification of early Genizah fragments of Sa'adyah Gaon's Judaeo-Arabic translation of the Pentateuch in the Russian National Library in St Petersburg and after recently conducting a research visit there.

Sa'adyah ben Yosef Gaon (Ar. Sa'īd b. Yūsuf al-Fayyūmī; b. 882, d. 942) was the first major rabbinic figure to write in Arabic. During his tenure as the gaon of Sura (928–942), he produced a major corpus of texts in Judaeo-Arabic, including the famous translation (*tafsīr*) of the Hebrew Pentateuch.

The earliest and most important manuscript containing Sa'adyah's translation of the Pentateuch is kept in the Russian National Library. This is MS St Petersburg RNL Yevr. II C 1, copied by Samuel ben Jacob in c.1009–1010 CE in Fustāt, which contains almost all the Pentateuch (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> It is intended to be the main version used in a new critical edition of this translation.<sup>2</sup> While Blau discussed in detail the characteristics of Sa'adyah's translation in this manuscript,<sup>3</sup> my research of Genizah fragments in the Russian National

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1 This paper manuscript has many small lacunas and half of the book of Leviticus is missing from it. Samuel ben Jacob is also known as the copyist of the Leningrad Codex (MS St Petersburg RNL Yevr. I B 19a, parchment, 1008–1009), the oldest complete manuscript of the (Masoretic text of the) Hebrew Bible, which serves as the basic version of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) and other important critical editions of the Hebrew Bible. On other codices written by Samuel ben Jacob see also Beit-Arié et al. 1997, 118–119.

2 Schlossberg 2011.

3 Blau 1998, 2001.



Fig. 1. MS St Petersburg RNL Yevr. II C I, 1r: the two-volume Pentateuch, Hebrew text followed by Sa'adyah Gaon's Arabic translation, written by the scribe Samuel ben Jacob, reproduction courtesy of the Oriental collections of the National Library of Russia.

Library in St Petersburg focused on identifying and examining other early Genizah fragments of Sa'adyah's translation of the Pentateuch in this collection.

So far I have identified about one hundred such fragments, many containing only a few folios, made of parchment or paper. Most of these are very fragmentary and their state of preservation is extremely poor. Many are partly torn and none provide details concerning the copyist or the date when they were copied. Some of these fragments were previously identified as holding Sa'adyah's translation, but the exact type of Arabic translation of many others was not specified: these required further examination and classification. Low-resolution black and white images of most of the fragments in the Russian National Library can be observed on the Internet site of the National Library of Israel. Some of them are also displayed in the Friedberg Genizah Project <<https://fjms.genizah.org/>>.

The fragments of Sa'adyah's translation of the Pentateuch in Hebrew characters kept in the Russian National Library in St Petersburg are no different from other fragments of this translation kept in other Genizah collections

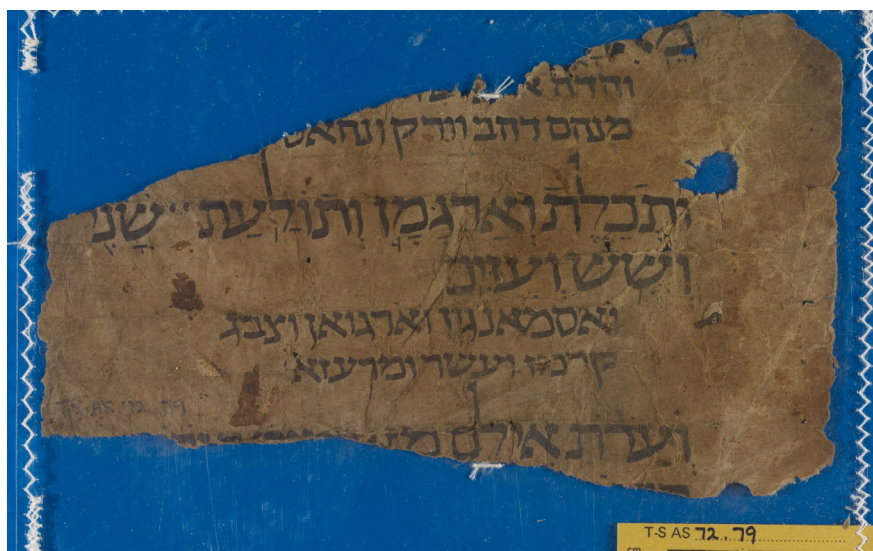


Fig. 2. MS Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, T-S AS 72.79, recto: Hebrew text of Exodus 25:3–5 or 35:5–7 with Sa'adyah Gaon's Arabic translation, written by the scribe Samuel ben Jacob.

worldwide. The largest is the collection in the Cambridge University Library.<sup>4</sup> They include fragmentary remnants of manuscripts in which Sa'adyah's translation follows Hebrew incipits or full Hebrew verses, and occasionally triglots displaying the Hebrew verse, its Aramaic translation (Onkelos), and Sa'adyah's translation (fig. 2). Passages of Sa'adyah's translation are also found embedded in his exegesis, but these are fewer. Some of the fragments are written in square oriental script, others in semi-cursive script. The fragments are made of parchment or paper. Common words and proper nouns may be shortened, numbers are frequently conveyed in Hebrew characters and the transcription conventions to Hebrew characters mostly include diacritic points for *ض* (ض) and *ظ* (ظ), occasionally also *ج* mostly representing *ج* and rarely *غ*. The versions of Sa'adyah's translation attested in these fragments are generally close to that of MS St Petersburg RNL Yevr. II C 1, but also reveal minor differences.

One small fragment, MS St Petersburg RNL Yevr. II A 640, containing two leaves made of parchment, discloses remnants of several Hebrew verses (Deuteronomy 4.31–35, 46–49, 5.1) accompanied by Masoretic vocalization, cantillations, and one Masoretic note; Sa'adyah's translation follows (fig. 3).

4 E.g. Polliack 1998 on Arabic Bible translations in the Cambridge Genizah collection; Ashur and Zewi forthcoming on Sa'adyah's Bible translation in the *JTS* Genizah collection.

Fig. 3. MS St Petersburg RNL Yevr. II A 640, 6r:  
Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 5.1, followed  
by Sa'adyah Gaon's Arabic translation, writ-  
ten by the scribe Samuel ben Jacob, repro-  
duction courtesy of the Oriental collections  
of the National Library of Russia.



This fragment, according to the shape of its characters, most probably belonged to a manuscript, unknown so far, copied by Samuel ben Jacob in the first quarter of the eleventh century.<sup>5</sup>

Worth mentioning is also one short fragment made of parchment in the form of a rotulus,<sup>6</sup> which does not contain any part of Sa'adyah's translation of the Pentateuch but rather of Daniel. This is Yevr. III B 642, which holds Dan. 6.15–29, 7.1–8. This fragment is similar to fifteen other rotuli that Amir Ashur and I identified in other Genizah collections and prepared for publication.<sup>7</sup>

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5 This fragment is described in detail in Zewi forthcoming. I thank Amir Ashur for confirming to me the identity of the copyist of this fragment.

6 On rotuli in the Cairo Genizah see Olszowy-Schlanger 2016.

7 Zewi and Ashur forthcoming. We have also identified the copyist of these fragments.

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