

y joue. Les auteurs rappellent la réflexion de H. Klengel, qui, en 1975, avait mis en avant l'unité du temple et du palais à travers le contrôle du roi hittite.

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THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

SACHA STERN:

The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/2 CE.

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Sacha Stern, an expert in the history of the Jewish calendar, has devoted a voluminous study to one of the most significant episodes in this history: a dispute which pitted Babylonian and Palestinian rabbinic institutions against each other and marks a milestone in the competition between these ancient centres for influence over the Jewish diaspora. Most of the book consists of a series of text editions with introductions and translations; for each text which is preserved in more than one manuscript Stern has provided both a critical edition of the text and an individual diplomatic edition. Stern has made major contributions to the textual corpus relevant to the dispute of 921–2: he has re-examined manuscript fragments and corrected numerous errors in their original editions; identified and published additional fragments; and made great advances in reconstructing the manuscripts from which these fragments derive. His expertise in calendrical matters finds expression in clear explanations of the calendrical issues which were disputed by the Babylonian and Palestinian authorities.

Stern has also provided the first English translation of almost all of these texts, and the first translation into any language of many of them. This is a welcome step but as usual translations must be used with caution. For example, we should translate “built and succeeded” rather than “understood and succeeded” (p. 125, see 2 Chronicles 14: 6) and “he revealed himself to everyone to be a fool (literally: said to everyone that he is a fool)” rather than “of everyone he said ‘he is stupid’” (p. 131, see Ecclesiastes 10: 3).

The difficulties multiply when it comes to broader questions of historical interpretation. Stern believes that his study justifies a “radically new vision and understanding of the controversy, its aftermath, its history” (p. vii); given the centrality of this episode in the protracted competition between Babylonian and Palestinian rabbinic centres this would have profound implications for the course of Jewish history.

Stern’s attack on the standard scholarly view of the controversy centres on three contentions. There is some overlap between the first two: that Saadia b. Joseph played only a marginal role in the controversy and that he was not the author of the text which Stern calls “the Book of the Calendar Controversy”. There are reasons to consider Saadia’s participation quite significant even if his authorship of this work is denied (see pp. 14, 19, 308–13), including the fact that the Palestinian leader singles him out as perhaps the most significant figure on the Babylonian side (see pp. 244–5, 376–7, 382–3 and Stern’s attempted explanation at pp. 18–20). Furthermore, it seems likely that his role in this controversy helps explain his

elevation a few years later to the position of Gaon (head of the academy) of Sura. But in my opinion the accepted attribution of the work in question to Saadia should be maintained. Stern's strongest argument against it is that in a letter written at the beginning of 923 Saadia (apparently) attributed this work to the exilarch David ben Zakkai; taking this attribution at face value, Stern believes that Saadia's assertion about a decade later that he had written a work concerning this dispute, divided into verses and provided with cantillation signs, on behalf of the Babylonian leadership must refer to another work which has been lost (see pp. 90, 97). I believe the explanation is simpler: in 923, when Saadia was on good terms with the exilarch (and perhaps dependent on his patronage) he credited him as the nominal author of this work; a decade later, when they were at daggers drawn, he named himself as the true author. The suggestion that David ben Zakkai was the true author of the work in question, whereas Saadia was describing another work, now lost, is implausible for a number of reasons: (1) *pace* Stern it was very unusual for an author to provide his own writing with quasi-biblical cantillation (see pp. 96–7; the sporadic cantillation of earlier canonical works is not to the point); (2) had David in fact written such a work, when Saadia was criticized several years later by the exilarch's allies for doing so in another composition, he would presumably have defended himself by pointing out that the exilarch himself had done so; (3) the stylistic and thematic similarities to Saadia's *Egron* and *Sefer ha-Galuy* are very strong, including use of the conversive *waw*, a fondness for rare grammatical forms and the characteristically Saadianic emphasis on the need for rabbinic tradition to supply that which is lacking in the Bible (see pp. 144–5).

Stern makes a stronger case for his third major contention, namely that the dispute of 921/2 did not end in a Babylonian triumph. His best evidence for this assertion is provided by several newly identified fragments of calendrical manuals, apparently written as late as the eleventh or early twelfth century, which preserve the distinctly Palestinian version of the calendar which was at the heart of the controversy (pp. 478–522). Assuming the dating of these fragments is accurate and that they were written with a view to their practical implementation and not merely for historical interest, this implies that some adherents of the Palestinian position remained as long as 200 years after the dispute. In Stern's opinion (pp. 22–3, 526) we hear nothing of a continued Babylonian–Palestinian dispute after 922 not because of a Babylonian triumph but because both sides were weary of debating these issues. In my opinion this is hardly plausible, and although the persistence of the Palestinian position in some circles provides a corrective to an overly simplistic narrative, we should bear in mind that by the fall of 922 the arena of conflict had shifted to the Jews of the Islamic world outside Palestine and Babylonia. The Babylonian authorities were no longer attempting to convince the Palestinian leaders but rather to convince other Jewish communities to adopt the Babylonian version of the calendar, and if they succeeded in this undertaking this would have been a major triumph even if pockets of Palestinian “resistance” remained.

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