

Ben Meir's First Letter

9.1 Introduction

Ben Meir's 'First Letter' is part of the official correspondence exchanged between the Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic leadership during the calendar controversy of 921/2.

This letter is critical for understanding the controversy from the Palestinian perspective. As the *Book of the Calendar Controversy* suggests, as well as our corpus of texts as a whole, the Palestinians and Babylonians never held meetings in person, or confronted each other face to face, to argue out their cases for the calendar dates of 922. It was only through the exchange of letters such as this that the controversy was effectively played out. The preservation of this letter in later manuscripts suggests that it was considered a particularly important element of the correspondence on the Palestinian side. It is attested in two manuscripts.

The text consists of a letter, presumably from the Babylonians, followed by a reply to it, which is attributed to ben Meir. The letter to ben Meir is dated to the month of Tevet, 1233 SE (5 December 921–2 January 922 CE); only the end of it has been preserved, in one of our two manuscripts (L1BM1). Ben Meir's reply, between the two manuscripts, is almost completely preserved. It appears to have been written before Passover of the same year, when the Palestinian and Babylonian dates were due to differ for the first time. His response to Babylonian jibes (L1BM 14:9, 25:8) suggests that the polemic between Palestinians and Babylonians had already soured. Moreover, ben Meir is already employing a Palestinian version of the Four Gates (L1BM 14:8–21:7), which according to the *Book of the Calendar Controversy* was only developed when the controversy was well under way, and represented a momentous escalation of ben Meir's argument (BCC 7:7–8:4). Nevertheless, even at this stage, ben Meir is still trying to achieve conciliation with his opponents, by appealing to alliances which he had made in previous years with certain elements within the Babylonian Rabbanite camp (L1MB 10:1–12:5), and by referring to his opponents in complimentary terms (L1BM 12:6).

Bornstein (1904) called this text 'Ben Meir's First Letter'. It is certainly the earliest letter attributed to ben Meir that is extant, but there were probably other letters earlier. According to the *Book of the Calendar Controversy*, Babylonians and Palestinians exchanged several letters before ben Meir devised his

Four Gates (BCC 4:5–6:1); whereas after he did so, the Babylonians ceased corresponding with him (BCC 11:2). We know of at least one letter that was sent by ben Meir after this one; it is preserved in the Letters Miscellany (Letter 4), and was written after Passover 922 CE. I have retained Bornstein's nomenclature.

Contents

The first folio extant of the first manuscript, L1BM1, contains the end of a letter, including the concluding blessings and greetings, and a date (corresponding, in my edition, to section L1BM 1). This letter presumably challenged ben Meir's calendrical decision, and called on him to either justify it or desist from it. It was probably written by the Babylonian leaders, among the letters that were sent by them to ben Meir, as narrated in the Book of the Calendar Controversy (BCC 4:5–6:1). If, as I argue in the diplomatic edition, the earlier manuscript (L1BM1) is missing only one external bi-folio, the letter to ben Meir would have been relatively short.

Ben Meir's reply begins with a lengthy proem in liturgical-poetic style, in two parts. The first part, written in a simple rhyme, consists almost entirely of a list of biblical figures, referred to allusively, as is typical of liturgical poetry (or *piyyut*: L1BM 2–3:4); the second part is an elaborate greeting to the addressees (L1BM 3:4–8:7). This highly literary proem, and in particular its first part, may be following standard epistolary practices, although I can only find one close parallel to it: this is a private letter written much later by a woman in the Byzantine Empire to her brothers in Egypt, with proem incorporating a similar list of biblical, patriarchal figures.¹ But the proem and list of biblical figures is considerably longer here, and appears somewhat excessive and gratuitous, as well as irrelevant to the main body of ben Meir's letter. Ben Meir's intention may just be to show off his literary skills, or to assert his Palestinian identity, inasmuch as the writing of *piyyut* may have been regarded as a distinctly Palestinian tradition. The result is not particularly impressive: as a literary creation, this proem may be regarded as rather mediocre. But in fairness, it must be remembered that at the time of writing, ben Meir did not intend this letter to be more than ephemeral.

Through the second part of the proem (the greeting), the poetic style gradually erodes and gives way to an introduction to the main theme of the letter: the Palestinians' supremacy over the calendar (L1BM 5:9–8:7).

¹ T-S 13J11.4, lines 1–4; Mann (1920–1922) i.241–242, ii.306–307 (no. 26). The letter may be dated, by its script, to the thirteenth century, although this is uncertain (advice of Judith Schlanger).