Prayer finds from the genizah of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat (old Cairo) constitute a key resource for our knowledge of the early siddur, in particular, prayer rite praxis in the late first, and early second, millennium CE. If it were not for the hundreds of pages from worn-out siddurim in the Cairo Genizah, the Palestinian branch of prayer would remain virtually unknown. But Genizah texts also impact significantly on the study of early versions of the better-known Babylonian rite.

History favoured the Babylonian rite. Its adoption and constant use over the generations by the majority of Jews throughout the far corners of the Diaspora, guaranteed its preservation to our day. This preservation was, however, accompanied by the introduction of manifold changes. The acceptance of the Babylonian rite also assured the survival of several manuscripts of this ancient rite in various locations worldwide. Cherished by generations of worshipers, and later by collectors, these manuscripts ultimately came into the possession of libraries, primarily in Europe.

Among these manuscripts are witnesses to the two main prayer books attesting to the old Babylonian rite: Seder Rav Amram Gaon (SRA), and Siddur Rav Sa'adya Gaon (SRSG). For SRA, several copies dating to circa the fifteenth century from a number of locations are extant. They formed the basis for the printed editions, and later for the

A complete manuscript of SRSG, copied sometime during the twelfth or thirteenth century—housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford—comprised the basis for the collaborative critical edition by Simha Assaf and others.

But the preservation of these manuscripts is by no means an unmixed blessing, as anyone involved in the study of the early siddur according to the Babylonian rite is aware. Its wide acceptance fostered the introduction of changes by each generation and in each locale in line with the local praxis of the day and hampers our ability to reconstruct the early Babylonian rite from the late, complete findings. This is well known for the manuscripts of SRA. It can be shown that each manuscript of SRA reflects the prayer rite for a specific place and time. And, even the base text for SRSG’s critical edition displays traces of late oriental influence. Here the Genizah prayer finds make a vital contribution. Untouched by later scribal hands, thousands of discarded pages from Genizah prayer books, largely belonging to the eastern branches of the Babylonian rite as practiced during the late first, and early second, millennium, reflect early versions of this rite.

An identical situation applies to a third extant witness to the Babylonian rite: the siddur of Rabbi Solomon ben Nathan (SBN), which belongs to a later, secondary, eastern branch. Where its compiler, the twelfth-century scholar Solomon ben Nathan, was active remains undetermined. Although briefly noted by the bibliographer Moritz Steinschneider as early as the mid-nineteenth century, nevertheless,


4 See Goldschmidt, Seder Rav Amram Gaon, pp. 11–19. Louis Ginzberg hit the nail on the head when he commented, “It was used until it was used up”—L. Ginzberg, Geonica, vol. I: the Geonim and their Halakic Writings (New York, 1909), p. 124.