

Module Two

BETWEEN CROSS AND CRESCENT: The Jewish Medieval Experience

The Geonic Era:
Innovation Through Preservation

INTRODUCTION TO MODULE TWO

This module explores the rise of the Geonim, leaders of the Babylonian academies (circa 700 CE – 1100 CE) and how they came to determine the norms and behaviors of Jews throughout the world until modern times. The Geonim and their followers, both preserved the legacy of the classical rabbis and transformed it into something new. Learn about the Geonim in their historical context; their conflicts with, and ultimately victory over, the Karaites and the Sages of the Land of Israel; and their creation of new literary forms such as the siddur, responsa, grammars, commentaries, and philosophy. This module will also highlight themes (e.g, relations between Israel and the Diaspora) that continue to be relevant today.

PROFESSOR BIO

Michael Satlow is professor of religious studies and Judaic studies at Brown University. His most recent book is *How the Bible Became Holy*. He has produced a podcast, “From Israelite to Jew” (available for free at iTunesU) and directs the online project “Inscriptions of Israel/Palestine” (www.brown.edu/iip). He has taught in the Me’ah program for many years.

NAVIGATING THIS MODULE

This Study Guide provides Before-Viewing and After-Viewing materials for each of the **7 video lectures** in the module.

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| Video Two | 5 min | The Islamic Conquests and The Rise of the Geonim |
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VIDEO ONE

An Introduction to the Geonic Period

In this introductory video, Professor Satlow asks us to consider the concerns of Medieval Jews and how relevant they might be to our lives. He introduces several themes he will cover in the forthcoming videos.



Consider...

What comes to mind when you hear the term ‘Medieval?’

Can lessons from Medieval Jewish history and thought be relevant for us today?

WATCH VIDEO ONE

VIDEO TWO

The Islamic Conquests & The Rise of the Geonim

With the rise of Islamic caliphates, the Jewish community in Babylonia found itself at the center of a vast empire that stretched from Spain and North Africa to the Middle East and beyond. This video outlines the geo-political history of Babylonia and introduces us to the leaders of the Babylonian academies, the Geonim, and explains how they rose in importance between ca. 640 and 1040 CE.



Definitions

Babylonian Jewish Academies

Although the ancient kingdom of Babylonia no longer exist, Jews have continued to designate the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as “Babylonia.” Jewish life in Babylonia is documented from the time of the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian captivity of Jews from Israel in 586 BCE. It is during the Sasanian (Persian) reign (224-651 CE) that Babylonian Jewish academies emerged to rival and then eventually surpass the Jewish centers of religious studies in the land of Israel. Between the third and the fifth centuries, Babylonian rabbinic academies, later referred to as “yeshivot,” established a method of religious discussion which became the basis for the Babylonian Talmud (redacted in the late 6th or early 7th century).

The contents of this Talmud were then disseminated across the Jewish world by the Geonim, the leaders of the Babylonian

rabbinic academies from around 700 CE until the fall of the Abbasids in the 11th century. Eventually, the entire Jewish world came to accept the authoritative nature of the Babylonian Talmud.

**Geonim
(singular:
Gaon)**

The leaders of the Babylonian rabbinic academies in Sura, Pumbedita, and (later) Baghdad from ca. 700 CE – 1100 CE.

The Geonim acted as the heads of their individual academies, as well as leaders of the wider communities tied to them. (including communities that lived at great distances from them). The academies conducted all official business in the name of their Gaon.

Exilarch

The title of a line of hereditary rulers of the Jewish community in Babylonia from about the 2nd century CE to the beginning of the 11th century. Literally, “Head of the Exile.” In Hebrew, ראש גלות, Rosh Galut.

Umayyads

The Islamic dynasty, hailing from Cairo, that ruled from 660 CE – 750, with their capital in Damascus.

The Umayyad Caliphate, the second of the four major Arab caliphates established after the death of Muhammad, expanded the territory of the Islamic state to one of the largest empires in history. These early caliphates, coupled with Muslim trading and the later expansion of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in Islam’s spread outwards from Mecca towards both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and the creation of the Muslim world.

The Islamic dynasty that ruled from 750 CE – 1258, with their capital in Baghdad. The Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad dynasty in 750 CE, which led to an unbroken line of caliphs for over three centuries, consolidating Islamic rule and cultivating great intellectual and cultural developments in the Middle East in the Golden Age of Islam.



Consider...

Napoleon Bonaparte is credited with saying “*Geography is Destiny.*” As you watch the video, consider how this applies to the Jewish academies in Babylonia.

WATCH VIDEO TWO



Questions to Consider

1. What geo-political changes happened with the rise of Islam?
2. How did these changes affect the Babylonian Jewish community?

VIDEO THREE

Israel and Diaspora: Center and Periphery

In this video, Professor Satlow speculates on what an old letter discovered in the attic of an ancient synagogue tells us about the relationship between the land of Israel (referred to as Palestine during this era) and the Jews living in 'diaspora' in Babylonia during the time of the Geonim. This video has fascinating modern implications in terms of how Jews may want to understand their connection to Israel today.



Definitions

Geniza

A place where decommissioned sacred texts are stored, awaiting burial in a Jewish graveyard. The word geniza (plural genizot) is Hebrew for "hiding place." Genizot are usually found in attics or basements of synagogues. Non-religious documents can be stored in a geniza as well.

Cairo Geniza

The uncovering in 1896 of the Cairo Geniza in the Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo, Egypt) was one of the greatest Jewish discoveries, often compared to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Israel. The sealed, dark room in the dry Egyptian climate allowed for the preservation of its documents. The contents of this geniza offer a detailed picture of life in the Mediterranean basin from the 10th to 13th centuries, when the Fatimid caliphs (10-12th centuries) and Ayyubid sultans (12th-13th centuries) ruled. Besides valuable biblical and talmudic documents, the geniza contained more than two hundred unknown poems by Yehudah Halevi as well as important papers by the great medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides.

Pirkoi ben Babboi

A scholar of the Talmud who, on behalf of the Geonim, circulated an open letter in the beginning of the ninth century CE arguing for the superiority of Babylonian rabbinic Torah over Palestinian teachings. Pirkoi is renowned for his efforts to make the Babylonian Talmud the authoritative code for world Jewry.

Palestine and the Palestinian Jewish

Academies

After the Roman Emperor Hadrian put down the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 ce) he renamed the territory of Judea the territory "Syria Palaestina." From that moment, until the creation of the State of Israel, the territory of Judea (Judah/Israel/Zion) was referred to as Palestine. During the Geonic era of Jewish history, there were central academies in Palestine as well as in Babylonia. The Palestinian Gaonate was the chief talmudical academy and central legalistic body of the Jewish community in Palestine during the middle of the ninth century, or even earlier, till its demise during the 11th-century.

In the middle of the ninth century, the Palestinian academy moved from Tiberias to Jerusalem. In 1071, it was forced to move to Tyre, Lebanon and later to Fostat, Egypt. Eventually, the Academy of Palestine ceased to exist although Benjamin of Tudela (c. 1170) in his travelogue recorded that the teachers of Damascus were considered as the "scholastic heads of the Land of Israel.



Consider...

"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." Psalms 137:5

This verse in the Bible, speaks of an eternal longing for Zion, which may resonate differently depending on the historical and personal circumstances of the reader. Consider these questions before watching video three:

What is your relationship to Zion today?

What do you expect would be the Babylonian Jewish attitude towards Zion/Israel during the time of the Geonim?

WATCH VIDEO THREE



Reflect...

How does the relationship between Israel and Babylonia compare to the relationship between Israel and the United States today?

VIDEO FOUR

The Karaites versus Rabbinic Judaism

In this video, Professor Satlow introduces us to the Karaites, a formidable group of Jews who rejected the authority of the Rabbinic (the rabbis), relying instead on a more literal reading of the Hebrew Bible. The Karaite challenge to rabbinic hegemony is fascinating both for what it reveals about the development of normative Judaism and for what it teaches about the Islamic influences on Judaism.



Definitions

Karaites

A group of Jews who believed that Judaism should be based on Scripture (the Hebrew Bible). The main hallmark of the Karaites is their rejection of the authority of the Oral Law (i.e, Mishnah and Talmud). Although a small group of Karaites exist today (mostly in Israel), they only constituted a serious alternative to rabbinical Judaism in the Middle Ages. Followers of Anan Ben David, Karaite leader from the 8th century, formulated the sect's beliefs and preached them in Jewish centers throughout the Islamic caliphate, including in the land of Israel. The Karaite customs and practices are based on the literal interpretation of the biblical rules concerning Shabbat and holidays (i.e., they do not celebrate Hanukkah not mentioned in the Bible). The Karaite attack was not powerful enough to topple the Rabbinate but it did recruit many converts.

Anan Ben David

Anan Ben David is widely considered to be a major founder of the Karaite movement of Judaism. His followers were called Ananites and, like the modern-day Karaites, did not believe the Rabbinic Jewish oral law to be authoritative.

Quran

This is the central Islamic sacred book believed by Muslims to be the word of God as dictated by Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel and written down in Arabic. It shares the same root for “read” or “recite” as Mikra (the Hebrew word for Scriptures) and Karaites.

Mikra

Mikra, or Tanakh, the canonical collection of Jewish texts. Among the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah exiled to Babylonia in 586 BCE were scribes and scholars who edited and collated both the Five Books of Moses and a large number of other Hebrew and Aramaic texts to ensure survival of their national identity. When they returned to Zion in the 5th century BCE, they brought these texts with them, and Ezra the Scribe instituted the practice of public readings of the Torah. These texts began to be called the Mikra, meaning “that which is read”—a term still used in modern spoken Hebrew. (www.momentmag.com/jewish-word-bible/)

“Rabbinate”

The term refers to rabbis and the rabbinical tradition and is typically used to contrast them from the Karaites who rejected the authoritative quality of the rabbinically-produced Talmud (“Oral Law”)

Rabbinic Judaism

Rabbinic Judaism is Jewish life and law as envisioned by the rabbis of the Talmud. Most of what is considered normative Jewish practice and law up through contemporary times, is based on Rabbinic Judaism.



Consider...

A.J. Jacob’s *A Year of Living Biblically* describes what it would look like to follow the Bible literally in the 21st century.

Do you consider Judaism to be a product of the Hebrew Bible or the Talmud?

What challenges do you think a person “living biblically” would have with the Geonim’s teachings.

WATCH VIDEO FOUR

Video Length: 7 min



Questions to Consider

1. Islam characterizes Jews as “people of the book.” Would you describe Jews as people who abide by the teachings of the Bible?
2. How might rabbinic Jewish tradition and the Karaite tradition vary in their understanding of what it means to characterize the Jews as “people

of the Book”

3. Do you think this characterization of the Jewish people continues to make sense in the 21st century?

VIDEO FIVE

The Formation of the Talmud

In this video, Professor Satlow makes the case that innovation during the Geonic period happened through acts of preservation. View the video for an introduction to this topic through the history of the Talmud and then read about three additional Geonic preservation projects--the Jewish prayer book (the siddur), the Haggadah, and Responsa Literature--that have impact today.



Definitions

The Talmud

The Talmud (Hebrew for “study/instruction”) is an authoritative compilation of rabbinic teaching from the first century C.E. through the sixth and seventh centuries C.E. It remains the definitive source of understanding how Judaism is practiced today. While the Hebrew Bible is referred to as the “written law,” the Talmud is usually referred to as the “oral law.”

**The Mishnah
& The Gemara**

The Talmud is made up of two separate works: the Mishnah, primarily a compilation of Jewish laws, written in Hebrew and edited around 200 C.E. in Israel; and the Gemara, the rabbinic commentaries and discussions on the Mishnah, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, emanating from Israel and Babylonia over the next three hundred years.

**The
Jerusalem
Talmud & The
Babylonian
Talmud**

There are two versions of the Talmud: the Jerusalem/Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. Despite its name, the Jerusalem Talmud was a product of the Galilee (with Tiberias at its center) . The Babylonian Talmud, compiled under Persian rule, was a product of the Jewish academies situated primarily between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Babylonian Talmud, edited approximately 200 years after the Jerusalem Talmud, is better known and considered more authoritative than the Jerusalem Talmud.

**Rav Amram
Gaon**

Ninth century Gaon who may have organized the first, no longer extant, Jewish prayer-book (siddur).

**Teshuvah/
responsa**

A rabbinic written answer to a legal question, justified with sources, to respond to questions of practice that arise in living Jewish communities. Teshuvah (plural teshuvot) means "response."

**Rav Sa'adiah
Gaon**

Gaon in the late ninth and early tenth centuries CE. Sa'adiah is the best known and most influential of the Geonim.



Consider...

How can preservation be a form of innovation?

WATCH VIDEO FIVE

VIDEO SIX

Saadia Gaon and the Project of Jewish Philosophy

In this video, Professor Satlow introduces us to Rav Saadia Gaon, the philosopher. View this video to learn how Rav Saadia made sense of his place as a Jew in a rapidly changing world. Although Saadia lived over a thousand years ago, he asks remarkably modern questions that are relevant today.



Definitions

Rav Saadia Gaon

Saadia Gaon is the most prominent of the Babylonian geonim. Born and educated in Egypt, he was appointed Gaon in Sura, Babylonia and his influence spread throughout the Jewish world. As we have already seen, he subdued a Palestinian attempt to alter the Jewish calendar, engaged in a lifelong battle against the Karaites and compiled an early siddur and haggadah. These were, however, only a small part of his monumental achievements which also included a book on Hebrew grammar, commentaries on the Torah and Talmud, and the first systematic work of Jewish philosophy.

Jewish Philosophy

Much of Jewish philosophy is an attempt to reconcile new ideas with traditional Jewish practices. With the rediscovery of ancient Greek philosophy among the Geonim of 10th century, Babylonian academies brought rationalist philosophy into Judaism. The first important book of Jewish philosophy is Rav Saadia Gaon's *Emunot v'Daot*, Book of the Articles of Faith and Doctrines of Dogma, written in the 11th century.

Maimonides

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides or Rambam) was perhaps the greatest medieval Jewish figure. He wrote indispensable works of philosophy, Jewish law, biblical commentary, and Responsa. His great work of philosophy, *The Guide to the Perplexed*, spawned an entire discipline and had incalculable influence upon enthusiastic promoters and vehement opponents alike. Like Rav Saadia Gaon before him, he was interested in reconciling Judaism with modern philosophy. A later module in this course is devoted to the philosophy of Maimonides.

Halakha

The Hebrew term for Jewish law—civil, criminal, and religious law. The root of the word *halakha* means “go” or “walk.” *Halakha*, then, is the “way” a Jew is directed to behave in every aspect of life.



Consider...

How does one reconcile new ways of thinking with traditional practices?

WATCH VIDEO SIX

Video Length: 9 min



Reflect...

1. Saadia Gaon made a case that modern thinking could be harmonized with Judaism. Today, Jews continue to confront the question, “How can you be a Jew in the Modern world?” What are your thoughts on this?
2. What challenges does the modern world present to Jews?
3. What solutions, if any, do you find compelling?

VIDEO SEVEN

Concluding Thoughts: Judaism & History

In this video, Professor Satlow reflects on the direction of Jewish history over time and shares how his understanding of history impact his personal relationship with Judaism.

WATCH VIDEO SEVEN

Video Length: 2 min



End of Module Reflection Question:

How does the historical study of the development of religious thought impact your personal relationship to tradition and religious belief?



Optional Readings

VIDEO ONE:

Consider these two highly-accessible readings by Professor Michael Satlow for helpful background information.

Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, Introduction

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879878/docviewer>

In this introductory chapter of *Creating Judaism*, Professor Satlow compares his understanding of Judaism as a child to his more complex understanding today. You may opt to skip the synopses of later sections of the book at the end of this chapter.

Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, Ch 7, The Rise of Reason

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879880/docviewer>

In this chapter of *Creating Judaism*, Professor Satlow presents the changes that came to Babylonian Jews with the collapse of Byzantium and the rise of Greek philosophy under the early Muslim caliphates.

VIDEO TWO

Jewish Commerce in Muslim Lands

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879887/docviewer>

This essay, adapted from *My Jewish Learning* for Me'ah Online, is about Jewish trade routes in Muslim lands. How could Jewish trade routes have helped spread the teachings of the Babylonian Jewish academies?

Gafni, “Babylonian Rabbinic Culture”

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879884/docviewer>

Here, in this in-depth and rewarding chapter from David Biale's *Cultures of the Jews*, Professor Isaiah Gafni presents the origin of Babylonian Jewry, the development of their culture, and how their feelings of intellectual and religious authority contributed to securing a near universal acceptance of their Talmud.

Firestone, “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam”

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879881/docviewer>

In another in-depth chapter from David Biale's *Cultures of the Jews*, Professor Reuven Firestone introduces the Jews of Arabia, the first to come into contact (and confrontation) with emerging Islam in the seventh century. We learn that Arabian Jewish culture was both influenced by and an influence on the new Muslim religion.

VIDEO THREE

Hoffman and Cole, Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879882/docviewer>

A beautifully written introduction to the Cairo Geniza from Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole.

The Debate over the Religious Calendar

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879886/docviewer>

This essay, adapted for Me'ah Online from the Jewish Virtual Library, explains how the Jewish leadership in Babylonia and Palestine were in conflict over the religious calendar.

The Hebrew Calendar: A Marvel of Ancient Astronomy and Math

<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-the-secrets-of-the-hebrew-calendar-1.5304911>

A short article on the history of the Hebrew lunar-solar calendar from the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz.

Who Controls the Hebrew Calendar?

<https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Who-controls-the-Hebrew-calendar-321668>

An intriguing article from The Jerusalem Post on who controls the Hebrew calendar and the contemporary challenges this question presents.

VIDEO FOUR

The conflict between the Karaites and the Rabbinites was long and multi-faceted. Read this short essay, adapted for Me'ah Online from Jewish Virtual Library, to learn more about Sa'adiah Gaon and the Karaites:

Fighting the Karaites & Development of Oral Law

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879888/docviewer>

Karaism is still practiced in a number of communities around the world. Read this article from Tablet about the Karaites of San Francisco:

The Karaites of San Francisco, Tablet Magazine

<https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/213816/the-jews-youve-never-heard-of>

Read Robert Brody's account of the rabbinic struggle against Karaism from his book, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*:

Brody, "The Struggle Against Heresy", pp 83 - 99

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879879/docviewer>

VIDEO FIVE

The struggle of the later geonim to retain their position of authority contributed to their willingness to “innovate” through consolidation and conservation. Learn about three important geonic innovations- which continue to enrich communities around the world today. — the Siddur, the Passover Haggadah, and Responsa literature—in this short article adapted for Me’ah Online.

Geonic Innovations - Siddur, Haggadah and Responsa

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879889/docviewer>

Professor Alan Mintz’s fascinating, academic article focuses on the creation of the prayer book.

Alan Mintz, “Prayer and the Prayerbook,” in Barry Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources*

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879883/docviewer>

Hoffman offers a rich a history of the Jewish prayer-book in this selection.

Lawrence Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service*

<https://app.schoolology.com/attachment/829879885/docviewer>

VIDEO SIX

For a brief introduction to Saadia Gaon, see **Saadia Gaon - The New World**

Encyclopedia http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Saadia_Gaon

The following readings are not available in the online materials but you may be interested in purchasing the books:

Lewy, Altmann, and Heinemann, *Three Jewish Philosophers*, Introduction

H. Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works*

For further reading on the geonic period, see:

Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*