

ABSTRACT

HOW LATE WAS THE PALESTINIAN RITE PRACTICED IN EGYPT?
NEW EVIDENCE FROM THE CAIRO GENIZAH

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The Palestinian rite of Jewish liturgy, which was practiced all over the Middle East during the first millennium CE, gradually receded because of the decline of the Geonic center in Palestine. The final abandonment of the Palestinian prayer rite in Egypt is usually dated to the beginning of the 13th century, when the local leaders, Rabbi Abraham Maimonides and Rav Yosef Rosh HaSedder, acted decisively, and, according to Abraham Maimonides, also successfully, in order to abolish the Palestinian rite.

This paper presents new evidence from dated prayer-book fragments from the Cairo Genizah, showing that some Palestinian prayer traditions survived many decades later, until the end of the 13th century. These prayer books, written by a local scribe whose colophons are dated to the last decade of the 13th century, generally follow the eastern Babylonian rite, but preserve the Palestinian practices of the reading of 'the Song' (Psalms 120-134) and the Ten Commandments for Shabbat Morning Service.

These findings show that Abraham Maimonides's prayer reforms were not immediately successful. Rather, the Palestinian rite went through a process of decay probably lasting more than a century. This pattern of slow degeneration might also be found in other Middle-Eastern Jewish communities, where the local Babylonian population gradually became dominant. The prayer books from Aleppo, for instance, demonstrate a similar process, where a variant of 'the Song' is one of the several extant Palestinian traditions within a framework of Babylonian rite. The paper concludes with the assumption that the special significance of 'the Song' for the Palestinian community on the one hand, along with its peripheral status in the prayer hierarchy on the other hand, made its preservation possible despite the rabbinical opposition.