Recovering the Kuzari, Mosseri III.258.1

Daniel Davies, Lucy Cheng

The Unit’s ongoing work on the fragments of the Jacques Mosseri Genizah Collection, which are undergoing conservation, digitisation and description in the University Library, often turns up pleasant surprises, of which this month’s fragment is an example.

On the microfilm, the manuscript Mosseri III.258.1 was a congealed mass of medieval paper, tentatively identified by the original catalogue as a commentary on tractate Berakhot. The identification, however, was an heroic attempt based on an extremely poor microfilm image taken in the 1970s, in which hardly anything was legible.
Mosseri III.258 after it had been unfolded, but before further conservation
After Lucy, the Genizah conservator, went to work on the fused layers of paper, however, III.258.1 became five separate fragments as she carefully separated, cleaned, flattened and repaired them. Far from being an unknown commentary, all five fragments belong to a handsome manuscript of Judah Halevi’s *Refutation and Proof of the Despised Faith*, commonly referred to as the *Book of the Kuzari*, and probably date from within 100 years of the composition of the work. Even better, these five pieces belong with other leaves from the very same manuscript, which have turned up in the T-S (T-S Ar.26.45) and Bodleian (Bodl. MS Heb. d. 61 ff. 1–6) Collections.

As is well known, Halevi’s book takes the form of a dialogue between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, who is on a personal quest to choose a religion to follow. There are two sections in the Mosseri manuscript, both of which are from the fifth treatise and are set after the king’s conversion to Judaism while he tries to understand and learn about his new religious commitments.

There is a very noticeable difference in colour between the fragments in the T-S Collection and the new Mosseri fragments, perhaps indicating the less than ideal conditions under which some of the fragments were kept over the last 100 years. The Unit’s current conservation programme aims to halt and ameliorate past strains and damage on these documents so their content can be fully revealed and safely preserved for future generations.
All the pieces of Mosseri III.258.1 separated, flattened, cleaned and repaired.

If you enjoyed this Fragment of the Month, you can find others here.

Contact us: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk