

YOSEF SAMBARI

(b. ca. 1630s; d. ca. 1700s)

LIFE

Y.S. was born in Cairo probably in the 1040s/1630s where he lived for the rest of his life as a member of the Musta'ribī congregation of the Jewish community (autochthonous Eastern Jews, assimilated in the Arabic culture). Besides his name, that of his father, Isaac, and his toponymic nickname, Qatāya, there is almost nothing more we know about Y.S.¹ Although the distinguished Qatāwī family of Cairo claimed Y.S. as their ancestor, his name does not appear in the community's archival documents.² Y.S. studied in Cairo at the *yeshiva* (rabbinic academy) headed by Rabbi Abraham Scandari, whose extensive library not only aroused in Y.S. an intense curiosity in history, but also provided him with sources he used in his works.³ Y.S. seems to have been one of the few Cairene scholars of his time whose research went beyond history proper and included the history of Biblical texts as well.

The only available information about the later years of Y.S. pertains to his professional life. In the 1670s he functioned as a clerk in the service of Raphael Yosef, the chief financier (*ṣarrāfbashi*) of Qaraqash °Alī (deposed 1080/1669), the Ottoman governor of Egypt at the time. The generous support of his patron enabled Y.S. to indulge in historical research and writing. Although he complained bitterly about the hard times that befell him after the assassination of his benefactor in 1080/1669, Y.S. managed to complete his main historical work five years later.

WORK

① *Sefer Divrei Yosef*

In the introduction to the second part of his main work Y.S. delineated the structure and the scope of his historical project, which consisted of two consecutive Hebrew chronicles, spanning a chronology of 1100 years: (1) *Sefer Divrei Ḥakhamim* (*The Book Containing the Sayings of the Sages*), a historical account from Adam to Rabbanan Savorai (Babylonian Sages of the 7th Century), which is not extant today, and (2) *Sefer Divrei Yosef* (*The Book of Yosef's Sayings*),⁴ which was completed on 23 January 1673.⁵

The historical material was cast in *Sefer Divrei Yosef* into a structure resembling concentric circles. The outermost circle gives a concise description of the politico-religious history of Islam written in a florid, Biblical language. After portraying succinctly the biographies of Islamic rulers beginning with Prophet Muḥammad and the first four caliphs (10-40/632-661), followed by the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Fatimids, Y.S. describes in detail the Ottoman rulers, beginning with °Osmān Beg (r. 699-726/1300-26) up to the reign of Mehmed IV (r. 1058-99/1648-87).

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The second circle is a history of the Jews written against this Islamic backdrop, describing the life-stories and activities of Jewish leaders and sages, who lived around the Mediterranean from the 4th/10th to the close of the 11th/17th centuries. The story of the Jewish community in Egypt, and particularly that of Cairo, makes up the third circle, which is a more detailed continuation of the preceding circle, discussing topographical and demographic data, relations between Jews and Muslims, communal institutions, the intellectual achievements of outstanding personages who lived in Egypt (e.g., Maimonides). It is within this third circle where Y.S. documented various calamities, especially episodes of persecution, that befell the Jews of Egypt, and interspersed the scanty autobiographical particulars mentioned above.⁶

Ottoman sultans make up the main topic of about 52 chapters out of the total of 228 of *Sefer Divrei Yosef*. These chapters dealing with the lives of nineteen sultans supplies the background to the second half of this historical work. Each chapter, dedicated to a certain Ottoman sultan, depicts a significant event or activity that took place during his reign, mostly acts of conquest or critical political vicissitudes.⁷ Y.S. elaborates on the careers of prominent sultans, such as Mehmed II (r. 848-50/1444-46 and 855-86/1451-81), Selim I (r. 918-26/1512-20), and Süleymān I (r. 926-74/1520-66), fleshing out the accounts of their military expeditions in a sequence of chapters. The author offers, for instance, much detail on the campaigns against the Safavids (920/1514) and Mamlūks (922-23/1516-17).⁸ The detailed presentation of the latter encounter is understandable, since it resulted in the conquest of the Holy Land, which aroused Messianic expectations among the Jews of the Ottoman Empire. Y.S.'s ethnocentric attitude is one of the reasons for his positive evaluation of the Ottomans, whom he describes as "gracious Kings (*Malkhey hesed*)" or even as "Kings who loved the Jews (*ohev ha-Yehudim*)."⁹ Another expression of the centrality of Egypt in *Sefer Divrei Yosef* is the enumeration of the names of governors appointed to the province by Ottoman sultans beginning with Selim I up until the reign of İbrāhīm (r. 1049-58/1640-48). Y.S. occasionally adds short remarks about the relations of Ottoman governors with the local population, and more specifically with the Jewish *şar-rāfbashus* (chief financiers).

Y.S.'s access to the writings of previous historians facilitated his work of reviewing the history of the Ottoman Empire from its early days onward. Y.S. drew mainly on the works of two historians of the 16th century, namely Elia Capsali's comprehensive history of the Ottoman Empire entitled *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* and on Samuel Sul-lam's Addenda to the *Book of Genealogies* (*Sefer Yuhasin*). Among the historical sources Y.S. utilized are also Arabic chronicles, such as Aḥmad ibn Zunbul's *Infiṣāl al-āwān wa ittiṣāl dawlat Banī ʿUt̄mān*. Almost certainly unversed in Turkish, Y.S. had no access to the works of Ottoman historians who wrote in that language. His sketches of the sultans who reigned from the very beginnings of the Ottoman Empire until the middle of the 16th century are an epitome of the works of his predecessors, and lack, therefore, originality. As to the description of the next century, roughly up

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to 1050/1650, Y.S. did rely on some unidentified informants and on his own experiences, albeit the scarcity of elements of objective source criticism in his *Sefer Divrei Yosef* marks Y.S. as a faithful follower of the traditions prevailing in medieval Jewish historiography.

A treatise entitled *Porath Yosef*, which contains Y.S.'s explorations in the text of the Old Testament is extant, but has not been published.

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¹See the introduction of Shimon Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef: Eleven Hundred Years of Jewish History Under Islamic Rule*, (Jerusalem, 1994).

²Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, 14-15, 81. For the Qatāwī family see Isra'el Ben-Ze'ev, "The Hebrew Documents in the Archives of the Jewish Community in Cairo," *Sefunot*, 9 (1965), 272.

³Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, 15, 79-81.

⁴The proper name *Yosef* alludes to the author's name.

⁵Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, 78-79 (in Y.S.'s Introduction), 420 (in the colophon). *Sefer Divrei Yosef* consists of 228 chapters.

⁶Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, 462 and cf. index.

⁷On the Ottoman Sultans, see: Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, 240-53; 268-92; 307-10.

⁸The campaigns of Selim I were extended over 13 chapters. See Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, 268-82.

⁹Shtober, *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, 241 and 249 (Meḥmed II), 252 (Bāyezīd II).

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