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## OBADIAH THE PROSELYTE: SCRIBE OF A UNIQUE TWELFTH-CENTURY HEBREW MANUSCRIPT CONTAINING LOMBARDIC NEUMES

NORMAN GOLB\*

STUDENTS of the relationship between the synagogue and church have been puzzled for almost a half-century by the presence among the Cairo Genizah fragments of a unique musical manuscript. Written on a species of Egyptian paper that is quite common for Genizah manuscripts of the twelfth century, the manuscript exhibits paleographic features that set it entirely apart from those written in southern and western Europe; yet the musical notation that appears above every line but the last two of the poetic text is clearly of the type known to musicologists as "Lombardic." What were the circumstances which gave rise to this aesthetic marriage of Hebrew poetry and Italian church music, and who performed the ceremony which united them?

Owing to increasing knowledge in the field of Hebrew manuscript research, the answers to these questions can now be provided. Before doing this, however, I must briefly trace the history of this manuscript.

It is, to begin with, one of the numerous items in the E. N. Adler Genizah Collection. The manuscript bears the

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rubric "ENA 4096b" and contains text and musical notation on both recto and verso sides. Attention was first called to it by Adler himself, who in an appendix to his catalogue described the process whereby he had first sought to ascertain the significance of his unique fragment.<sup>1</sup> Adler correctly described the contents of the manuscript as being a eulogy on Moses (his further suggestion that it was composed by a poet named 'Amr ibn Sahl has remained problematic) and told of sending the fragment to the Benedictine fathers of Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight in the hope that they might offer some comments on the neumes. The answer that came back in April of 1918 was unequivocal: The neumes were of the thirteenth, possibly the end of the twelfth, century, said the correspondents, and were of the type commonly known as Lombardic.<sup>2</sup> Deepening the mystery of the origin and significance of the fragment was the fact that the Hebrew lettering of the scribe could not be associated paleographically in any way with southern or western Europe and that the paper employed was of the type commonly used in Genizah manuscripts of the twelfth century—thick, slightly tan, and quite evidently of Egyptian provenience. The manuscript, that is to say, exhibited a number of eastern Hebraic characteristics but was provided with western Christian musical

notation. It exhibited, in other words, a blend of Jewish and Christian features that was completely unexpected in a twelfth-century manuscript, and the cause of which it seemed impossible to fathom.

For years after the acquisition of the Adler Collection by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, this manuscript was exhibited with pride as one of the Seminary's rarest treasures.<sup>3</sup> It especially attracted the attention of the well-known musicologist Eric Werner, who dealt with it in at least four publications. As long ago as 1947, this authority had offered a better transcription of the neumes than had previously been accomplished<sup>4</sup> and had also discussed the significance of the manuscript itself. Writing in 1947, he stated concerning the music of this manuscript:

Its style is closely akin to that of the Gregorian Plainsong of the Church, if we disregard one or two embellishments, which seem to be alien to Gregorian style. . . . Of course, the fact that our Ms. is so similar to Gregorian tunes, is not surprising, since it is today proved beyond any peradventure of a doubt that the roots of Gregorianism lie in the music of Palestine and Syria. To quote but one famous catholic musicologist Father Dechevrens: "Gregorian chant is the music of the Hebrews, and there is for the totality of the Roman Catholic melodies but one modal system, not that of the Greeks, but of the sacred nation of the Hebrews."<sup>5</sup>

From this it appears that Werner at first believed that this manuscript, musically as well as paleographically speaking, was actually of Palestinian origin. Yet later on he wrote:

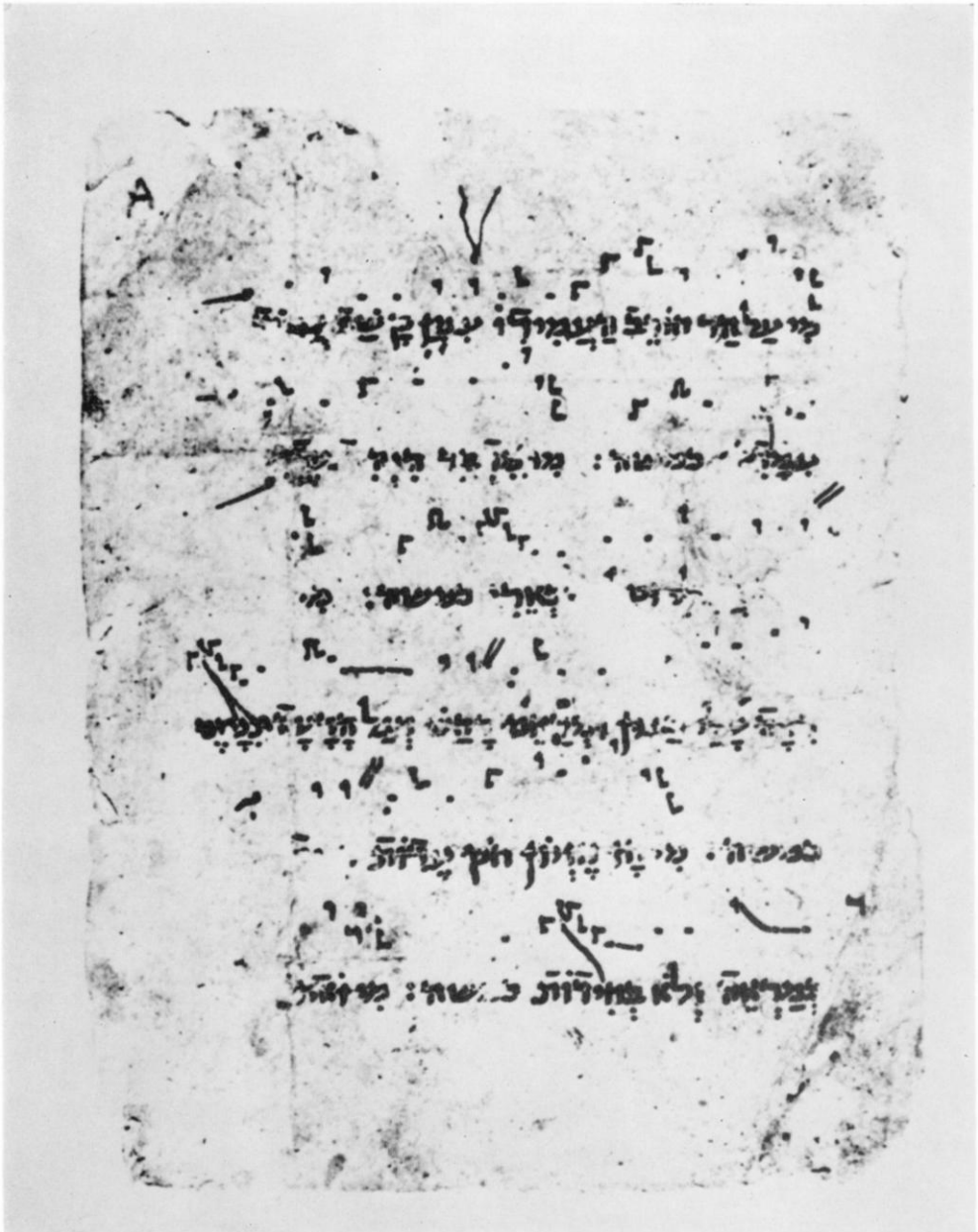
The oldest known manuscript of Hebrew music is a "Eulogy on the Death of Moses," written in Lombardic neums on a four-line staff. Its text, and probably also its music, was

composed by an otherwise unknown Amr ibn Sah'l [*sic!*] who lived in the eleventh century; it is very much akin to the more elaborate types of Gregorian chant. [The transcription of the music follows.] It seems to have originated at Ravenna, or thereabouts, although it was found in Cairo; the neums are Italian in type, while the Hebrew script shows Byzantine influence.

Such uncertainty about an otherwise unknown phenomenon might certainly be expected; nor could the author be called to task for wrongly suggesting that the manuscript itself originated in Italy—a possibility which the eastern character of both the handwriting and the paper quite excludes. However, the identification of the scribe of this manuscript also makes it evident that Werner's hypothesis, according to which this manuscript supports the contention that Gregorian chant was really Jewish in origin and that Hebrew liturgical poetry was sung to such melodic accompaniment by Jews in the Middle Ages independent of the influence of Christianity, must now be rejected in favor of its very opposite.

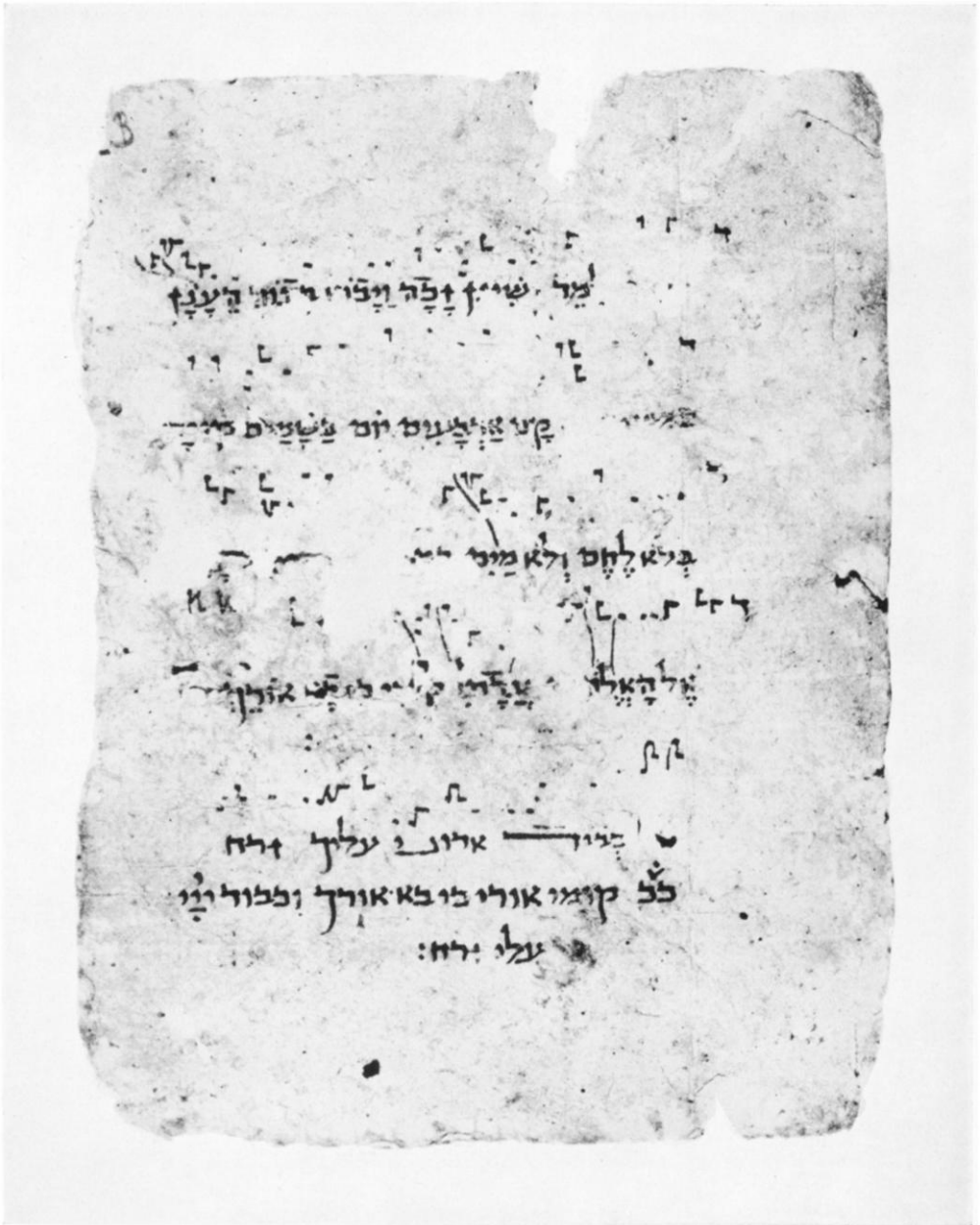
The opposite of this hypothesis is that the manuscript shows not that the Jews of Christian countries assimilated non-Jewish melodies into their liturgical service—something that is beyond any reasonable doubt—but that even the Jews of eastern countries absorbed something of the Gregorian chant from Christianity, namely, *through the medium of European converts to Judaism who had fled their homelands after their decision to enter the Jewish fold*. As I have shown elsewhere, this phenomenon of proselytism took place with some regularity throughout the eleventh century A.D. and into the twelfth.<sup>7</sup> The proselytes

PLATE I



THE UNIQUE MUSICAL MANUSCRIPT ENA 4096b, IN THE HANDWRITING OF OBADIAH THE PROSELYTE  
(*Recto*)

PLATE II



THE UNIQUE MUSICAL MANUSCRIPT ENA 4096b, IN THE HANDWRITING OF OBADIAH THE PROSELYTE  
(Verso)

with whom we are acquainted were men of thought and of substance, and most of them were deeply troubled by the religious condition of their time. It is only natural, however, that, after their flight from Christian countries and their resettlement in Muslim-dominated lands, they should have sought to impart some of the charm of their former religion to the one newly adopted by them. This surely was the case with the scribe of the present manuscript of the Adler Collection, who is none other than the most famous of these Christian converts to Judaism, namely, Obadiah, the Norman Proselyte.<sup>8</sup> In November of 1964 I arrived at this identification on the basis of a comparison between the handwriting of our manuscript and that of another Genizah manuscript written by Obadiah (see below, n. 9). Obadiah was born in Italy *circa* A.D. 1070, converted to Judaism in 1102,<sup>9</sup> thereafter wandered to Syria, Palestine, and Iraq, in which latter place he learned to write Hebrew sitting in a classroom with schoolchildren. Evidently he settled,

after many vicissitudes, in Egypt, which then had a thriving Jewish population. Here he wrote his memoirs,<sup>10</sup> and it was here that he sought to cause some of the "beauties of Japheth" to dwell within the tents of Shem.

The solution to the problem raised at the beginning of this discussion may now be stated in the following terms: Manuscript E. N. Adler 4096*b* is written in an Eastern Hebrew handwriting and on Egyptian paper and is, at the same time, provided with Lombardic neumes because it was written by a proselyte who was born and raised as a Christian in Italy, who learned how to write Hebrew in Baghdad, and who finally settled in the land of the Nile, probably in its chief city of Fustāṭ-Miṣr, toward the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>11</sup> It can hardly be doubted that he had an audience to listen to his Gregorian renderings of Hebrew liturgical poetry: to resist the exotic beauty of their combination would have been a difficult task indeed.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

1. Cf. E. N. Adler, *Catalogue of Hebrew Manuscripts in the Collection of Elkan Nathan Adler* (Cambridge, 1921), pp. 156*c*-156*d*. Illustration No. 40 at the end of the catalogue is a full-size reproduction of the recto of MS 4096*b*. The manuscript itself is 5½ inches long and 4¼ inches wide, with a right-hand margin of 1 inch and a top margin of ¾ inch. There are six lines of text on the recto and seven on the verso.

2. Cf. the statement of Dom André Mocquereau (*ibid.*, p. 156*c*), "J'ai confié l'étude de la feuille avec neumes à trois de mes confrères . . .," and the following discussion of Dom G. Beyssac (*ibid.*).

3. Several typed notes accompany the manuscript in its brown cardboard folder, one of which reads: "Oldest piece of Jewish Music found in the Genizah (photograph). The original is on exhibition in the Museum of the Jewish Theological Seminary."

4. The piece was transcribed by Werner and recorded in the collection "Israel Sings" issued by the Hebrew Union College some time before 1947 (n.d.). The view expressed in the spoken introduction to the recording (Record No. 7) is in consonance with the first statement of Werner quoted in the text. I wish to thank my friend Mr. Hyman Reznick of Chicago for making this information available to me.

5. In *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XVI (1947), 227.

6. *New Oxford History of Music* (Oxford, 1957), I, 326. Still another view seems to be implicit in a later statement by Werner to the effect that, regarding the music of this manuscript, "Eine gewisse Ähnlichkeit mit zeitgenössischen Tropen ist unleugbar" ("Hebräische Musik" in *Das Musikwerk*, Heft 20 [Köln, 1961], p. 9).

7. "A Study of a Proselyte to Judaism Who

Fled to Egypt at the Beginning of the Eleventh Century" (Hebrew) in *I. Ben-Zwi Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 87-104; "Notes on the Conversion of Prominent European Christians to Judaism in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in the forthcoming volume of the *Journal of Jewish Studies* (in press).

8. A bibliography of the studies devoted to Obadiah the Proselyte is given by me in the *I. Ben-Zwi Memorial Volume*, p. 102. For some new interpretations of certain passages in the extant fragments of Obadiah's memoirs, see *ibid.*, pp. 102-4. Since publishing the essay referred to, I have been collecting and translating into English for a comprehensive monograph on this subject all the pertinent material relating to the Christian converts to Judaism of the eleventh century. It was while engaged in this work during the past autumn that I came to the conclusion that the scribe of ENA 4096*b* was Obadiah the Proselyte.

9. The information that Obadiah converted to Judaism in A.D. 1102 is contained in a prayerbook fragment of the Hebrew Union College (MS H.U.C. Genizah Collection, No. 8). The colophon of this prayerbook reads in English as follows: "Obadiah the Norman Proselyte who entered the covenant of the God of Israel in the month of Ellul, year 1413 of [the era of] Documents [A.D. 1102] which is 4862 of [the era of] Creation—he, Obadiah the Proselyte, has written [this prayerbook] with his own hand." This statement establishes the fact that Obadiah himself was the scribe of the H.U.C. Genizah fragment in question, as has been pointed out by J. Mann in *REJ*,

LXXXIX (1930), 246, and by A. Scheiber in *Kirjath Sefer*, XXX (1954-55), 93. The reader need only compare the photograph of this manuscript (*ibid.*, facing p. 96; cf. *Acta Orientalia*, IV [1954], pp. 290-91) with the reproduction of the musical manuscript that has been available ever since the publication of the Adler catalogue in 1921 (see n. 1 above) to recognize that the scribe of the two fragments is one and the same person, namely, Obadiah the Proselyte. The musical fragment is not a leaf from this prayerbook, however, since the H.U.C. fragment is 7¼ inches long and 5¾ inches wide (cf. n. 1 above).

10. For the various fragments of Obadiah's memoirs (usually called the "Scroll" of Obadiah) that have been published, see the bibliography in *I. Ben-Zwi Memorial Volume*.

11. Since making the above discovery and ordering photographs of the manuscript from the Seminary librarian, I have learned from my colleague in Budapest, A. Scheiber, that he has also arrived at the same conclusion. A puzzling and noteworthy coincidence.

12. I wish to thank my friend and colleague Edward Lowinsky for his valuable suggestions regarding the present article. Upon his urging, I am now undertaking the complete transcription of the Hebrew poem together with the music, in collaboration with an expert in early Christian chant. I am also publishing here, for the first time, photographs of both the recto and verso of the manuscript, with the kind permission of the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Professor Louis Finkelstein.