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***THE MESSIANIC PRETENDER SOLOMON IBN AL-RUJI  
AND HIS SON MENAHEM (THE SO-CALLED “DAVID ALROY”)***

*(Kurdistan, First Half of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century)*

The earliest source describing the messianic pretension initiated by Solomon ibn al-Ruji in Kurdistan is the historical memoir of Obadiah the Proselyte, who apparently learned of it while sojourning in Baghdad approximately a decade after its inception during the Egyptian vezirate of al-Afdal (exercised power from 1094 to 1121). Obadiah’s Hebrew statement may be rendered into English as follows:

In those days there arose “children of the violent” among the nation of Israel, who lifted up their souls to establish a vision and stumbled in their words. In the mountains of Assyria, in the land of Hakkeriya, there arose a certain Jew named Solomon ben Ruji, the name of whose son was Menahem; and with them was a glib man named Ephraim b. R. Azariah the Jerusalemite, known as ben Fadhlun. They wrote letters to all the Jews near and far in all the lands which were round about them, so that their renown and the contents of their letters reached a far distance. Unto all the places which are upon the face of the earth where the Jews are scattered amongst all the nations beneath the heavens did their renown reach. All of them said that the time had come when the Lord would gather his nation Israel from all the lands unto Jerusalem the holy city, and that Solomon b. Ruji was the King Messiah. When all the Jews residing in the various lands heard the words of their letters, they rejoiced greatly. They waited days, months and years, but did not see anything. Many of the Jews spent many days in fasting, prayer and charitable acts, for they were awaiting the Lord’s salvation, as He had said through His servants the prophets. When they failed to see anything, their hearts were utterly broken within them, and the Jews became ashamed before all the gentiles (Muslims). For all the gentiles and the uncircumcised ones (=Christians) heard the rumors that came to the Jews, and they would all laugh and mock at the Jews and would say, “Behold the Jews want to fly, yet they have no wings with which to fly to their land!” They continued goading, calumniating and cursing the Jews, and the gentiles would say that everything that the Jews had was false and vain. (ed. Golb, pp. 100 – 101.)\*

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\* For this and other bibliographical references, see list at end of article.

We note in particular the following: (1) According to Obadiah's source, either written or oral, this messianic pretension took place in the mountainous Kurdish territory of upper Mesopotamia known as "Ḥakkeriya," viz. the Hakkari range whose ancient towns include (al-)Amadia; the (2) The party of three led by Solomon claimed that he himself was the Messiah, and they sent letters to that effect not only to nearby places but even to distant lands. (3) The essence of the claim was that under Solomon's leadership the Jews everywhere would soon be spirited to Jerusalem. (4) The ultimate result, after a period of penitent acts, was dismay on the part of Jews everywhere and their humiliation in the eyes of both Muslims and Christians.

Since Obadiah could hardly have finished writing his memoirs later than approximately 1130-1140, that denouement could not have occurred after that time. Obadiah limits it further, however, by stating that the event happened during the time of al-Afdal, whose (Egyptian) vezirate ended in 1121. Obadiah was living in Baghdad between approximately 1105 and 1115, and his knowledge of the event was apparently gained from eyewitnesses; so that on balance the emergence of Solomon al-Ruji as a messianic figure is best placed at the very beginning of the twelfth century, if not a few years before then.

As for the Ibn Ruji family's place of origin, it may first be noted that the Obadiah text does not have the words Ben Dugi, as Jacob Mann originally suggested, but clearly Ben Ruji. Moreover, in the 1939 Cairo edition of Samau'al al-Maghrebi's polemical work against Judaism, *Badl al-majhud fi ifham al yahud*, page 60 bottom, the reading is indeed "Ibn al-Ruji."\* This occurs in al-Maghrebi's description of the continuation of Solomon's movement by his son Menahem, where the name of the son is given as "Manahim ibn Sulaiman al-Ruji"— thus confirming the spelling recorded by Obadiah the Proselyte in his autograph memoirs.

The Ruj region, near Aleppo, is described by Yaqut in *Mu'jam* II, p. 828, as "one of the well-known districts of Aleppo, west of it, being between (Aleppo) and al-Ma'arah, and mentioned in historical accounts." The Ruji family originated in this district and was subsequently called by its name (in the same way, e.g., that Saadiah Gaon was usually called al-Fayyumi after the Fayyum district rather than al-Dilasi after the town where he spent his early years). Either Solomon alone or portions of his family before him had evidently migrated from the Ruj territory to the Ḥakkeri region, which is approximately 350 miles eastward of Aleppo.

The continuation of the Ruji family's messianic claims is taken up subsequently by Benjamin of Tudela in his *Itinerary* and, as indicated above, by the Jewish convert to Islam Samau'al al-Maghrebi in his *Ifham al-yahud*. Let us first consider the initial portion of Benjamin's account, quoting from it piecemeal in order to explicate the sometimes confusing wording, and to attempt a rectification of certain terms as they occur in the manuscripts — not one of which, it should be noted, is an autograph original by Benjamin himself.

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\* I wish to thank my colleague Prof. Heshmat Moayyad who, in the wake of our discussion of the "Ruji" reading in the Obadiah autograph, looked into the 1939 Cairo edition of Samau'al's work and pointed out to me the same reading in that text. (It may be noted that in M. Perlmann's edition of the *Ifham*, the (Arabic) spelling is "al-Ruḥi"; i.e., the minuscule dot beneath the original *jim* went missing in the course of scribal transmission.)

The edited Hebrew text as produced by M.N. Adler, pp. 51-53, first states that in a metropolis or region characteristically spelled Amaria in the manuscript copies of Benjamin's work, "there arose ten years ago today a man named David Alroy." As has been perceived following publication of Obadiah's memoirs in the S.D. Goitein Festschrift, this "David Alroy" requires rectification. Whether in Hebrew or Arabic, the name Alroy is meaningless either as a place-name or as a personal epithet, whereas the parallels between the depictions of Solomon and of his son Menahem point directly to the need to correct Alroy to Al-Ruji, in consonance with the autograph spelling preserved in Obadiah the Proselyte's memoirs and with the spelling preserved in the 1939 Cairo edition of the *Ifḥam al-yahud*. In copies of Benjamin's text, the original *gimel* simply morphed into an *aleph*, whose structure is closely similar to *gimel*.

Moshe Gil has, on the other hand, convincingly explained the process by which Benjamin of Tudela or his copyists would have displaced "David" first with "Solomon" and subsequently with "Menahem;" it started with the confusion between Abu Da'ud — the nickname for Suleiman in Arabic — and the name Suleiman itself. The full name of Menahem would have been Menahem ibn-abi-Da'ud Suleiman ibn al-Ruji, which either Benjamin or his informant erroneously remembered only as Da'ud, i.e. David. Thus the "David Alroy" found in text-editions of Benjamin's *Itinerary* became widely spread out by later medieval Jewish chroniclers relying on Benjamin, and "Alroy" went on to become the title of a novel by Benjamin Disraeli and eventually the name of a street in Jerusalem.

As stated above, the name of Menahem's home-city, where his activities are described as being conducted, is characteristically spelled in the Benjamin manuscript copies as Amariya, almost always with infixed *aleph*. Adler in his translation of Benjamin emends the term to Amadiya, clearly giving weight to the fact that in the manuscripts the term as a rule is spelled with long *aleph* in the second syllable, as Amadiya is; the scribal *daleth-resh* interchange of course occurs often in Hebrew manuscripts. Gil, on the other hand, is of the view that Amariya of the Benjamin manuscript copies is basically correct: the term, he suggests, was simply a shortening of the well-known Jazirat ibn-Umar, known also as Jazirat al-Umariyya and Madinat al-Jazira, and shortened in Turkish to the key word Cizre (i.e., Jazira).

However, the term Amariah or Umariah, which as such is an adjective modifying al-Jazirah, never appears elsewhere by itself in either Arabic or Hebrew sources as the designation for what is now Cizre.. Moreover, Samau'al al-Maghrebi's text specifically places Menahem b. Suleiman in Amadiya, not in al-Jazirat al-Umariyah, and in Arabic there is virtually no chance of a scribal *ra - dal* confusion, as the shapes of these consonants are entirely different from each other.

In addition to these considerations, one may observe a striking concordance between (a) Obadiah the Proselyte's designation of "the *mountains* of Assyria, in the land of Ḥakkeriya" as the place of Solomon's activities, (b) Benjamin of Tudela's own statements — towards the end of his description of Menahem's activities — that the "king of Persia went up against the Jews *who dwell in the mountain*" — i.e., where Menahem was active — and that the distance between that mountain and Hamadan was a journey of twenty days, and (c) Samau'al al-Maghrebi's statement indicating that the center of Menahem's activities was, specifically, Amadiya, which is indeed in the heart of the Ḥakkeri mountain range. Cizre/al-Jazira, by

contrast, is not in the mountains; it is further to the west, on the Tigris and bordering Syria, in what is known as the Siirt region.

While it is true that Cizre had to its north a castle of the Kurdish emirs, ‘Amadiya to this day is itself dominated by a remarkable citadel built on the top of a steep rock mesa. The citadel, *qal’ah*, of *Amadiya* by that name specifically figures in Samau’al’s account of Menahem al-Ruji’s activities.

For all these reasons, it is hardly possible to avoid recognizing the cogency of Adler’s suggested reading of the Benjamin of Tudela passages — that is, Amadiya, in the heart of the Ḥakkari range. It was without doubt a place of lesser intellectual and cultural attainments than Cizre/Al-Jazirah — a place, that is, inhabited by Jews (as well as others) of perhaps limited cultural attainments, as appears to have been the case with the mountain Jews of medieval Kurdistan more generally speaking. While Benjamin of Tudela does state that the Aramaic speaking Jews of that region did include rabbinic scholars among them, Samau’al’s description of the Jews inhabiting Amadiya leads one to infer that it was apparently a town where many Jews lived in ignorance of current philosophical speculations on topics such as the Messiah and the Messianic Age, indulging themselves instead in the grosser conception of a this-worldly Messiah who could work miracles, even such as the ability to cause the Jews, wherever they were, to fly as if on wings of angels to Jerusalem, there to live corporeally in eternal bliss. That, from all the evidence, was surely the popular message preached by Solomon al-Ruji early in the twelfth century.

Benjamin of Tudela in that same first passage of his account gives the time of Menahem’s activities as “ten years ago today.” On the reasonable assumption that Benjamin jotted down his account piecemeal while making his journey, the time of Menahem’s activity would have been approximately 1160, as Adler perceived in his edition of the *Itinerary* (This date is but a few years before 1163, the year given by Yosef Hakohen in his *‘Emeq habakha* for the so-called “David Alroy” events.) It is indeed a question, however, whether Menahem b. Solomon al-Ruji could have been active at so late a date. Obadiah the Proselyte, as indicated above, places the activity of Solomon al-Ruji approximately during the first decade of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and already then mentions the son Menahem as his cohort. Even assuming that he was only in his teens when he began propagandizing on behalf of his father, can one reasonably believe that he was still active fifty years later? He would have been sixty-five or seventy by then, and yet Benjamin describes a man engaged in highly energetic pursuits to benefit his cause, and to top that states that Menahem’s (unnamed) father-in-law —presumably a few decades older than he — was the one who murdered him. By contrast Samau’al al-Maghrebi calls Menahem at the beginning of his career “one of the young Jews.” It is difficult to see any of this happening, logically speaking, much after 1150. Either the manuscript reading *‘eser shanim* goes back to a scribe’s misunderstanding of *‘es. shan. as* an abbreviation by Benjamin of *‘esrim shanah* (twenty years), or else we shall have to infer that Benjamin’s informant was off by at least a decade regarding the actual time of Menahem’s activity.

As for Samau’al al-Maghrebi, he mentions no hard date for the activity of Menahem, but does indeed say that the *wali* of the fortress of Amadiya at first admired Menahem. However, Samau’al fails to name this *wali*. The fortress itself was according to Ibn al-Athir (*al-Kamil* IX, p. 60) built in the year 1142, whereas the *Nuzhat al-Qulub* (p. 105)

attributes it to the Buyid Imad al-Dawla, who died in 949 — yielding in effect no reliable *terminus a quo* for Menahem's activities in Amadiya.

Moshe Perlmann's judgment, in the wake of his sifting through all pertinent evidence, is that Samau'al lived approximately from 1126 to 1175; and it is known that he converted to Islam in Maragha (Iran) in 1163, commencing to write his *Ifham al-Yahud* right then and there. He had grown up in Baghdad, where his father Yehudah had settled and married early in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and Samau'al studied medicine and other subjects there under the tutelage of Abu 'l-Barakat, later practicing medicine in Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan itself and Adharbajjan. So it was probably during these sojourns, if not in Baghdad earlier on, that he learned about Menahem's claims and activities — i.e., during the period between approximately 1145 and 1163, when he first set about composing the *Ifham*.

The period of activity of Menahem according to Samau'al's description may, however, be narrowed down somewhat by the fact that Samau'al states not only that Menahem was already dead at the hands of the *wali* by the time he composed his book (1163), but also that misguided Jews in Amadiya

“until now prefer him ... to many of their prophets...among them being those who believe him to be the expected Messiah himself. I have seen groups of Persian (*'ajam*) Jews in Khoy, Silmas, Tabriz, and Maragha who made use of his name for their strongest oaths. And as for the Jews in Amadiya, they became more segregated from and opposed to the (other) Jews than to the Christians. In this *wilayat* is a group of them that professes a religion (*din*) which they relate to the aforementioned imposter Menahem.” (Cf. translation Perlmann, p.73).

This statement of Samau'al describes a Messianic cult-following that developed with variations of belief and even practice in different places and regions after Menahem's death — something that could hardly have happened, if we are to judge by the history of other medieval cultic groups of messianists, millennialists, and the like, in less than a decade or two.

This portion of Samau'al's description, in other words, points to a time not later than approximately 1150 for Menahem's death, with various developments ensuing among his followers not only in the Ḥakkeri region of Kurdistan itself but also in other places as far to the east as the aforementioned provinces if not also as far south as Baghdad. It is much to the point that Samau'al does not mention places in Syria and Egypt in his description.

Samau'al's treatment, although clearly motivated by polemical considerations, appears to be in most respects quite accurate — considerably more so, at all events, than that of Benjamin of Tudela, who unlike Samau'al travelled only quickly from place to place in the Islamic east and while there, as suggested above, picked up bits of information about Menahem that included some obviously fictitious ones (such as the items describing his ability to walk on water and to make himself invisible). Samau'al on the other hand not only *lived* in the region of Menahem's activity while the latter was himself alive and active, but he also encountered some writings of Menahem's from which he paraphrases two passages (*faba' ad fusul kutubihi 'llati ra'aytuha yahwi ma hadha ma' nahu*). The paraphrases are these:

(a) Perhaps you might say, “for what has he (i.e., Menahem himself) rallied us — for war or battle?” No, we want you not for war or battle, but rather so that you might stand before this *qa'im* being seen at his gates by the royal envoys surrounding him! (b) Each of you must have a sword or other weapon of war and conceal it beneath your clothing. (Cf. trans. Perlmann, p. 72.)

It is striking that Menahem, if correctly quoted or paraphrased, does not here call himself a messiah but rather a *qa'im* — that is, as Perlmann points out (p. 100 of his edition), a “precursor or representative of an imam,” or “the head of a movement in favor of a saintly pretender or redeemer.”

We recall that Obadiah the Proselyte had, earlier on, stated that it was the father, Solomon, who claimed to be the Messiah, while Menahem as well as Ephraim b. Azariah were his aides. Likewise, in no other element of Samau'al's account is it stated or implied that Menahem himself claimed to be the Messiah. The account may more reasonably be read, in the light of Obadiah's statement written between three and four decades before Samau'al's, as a description of a son who believed his father was the true Messiah, who remained loyal to his memory and carried his message far and wide, and who under the believed aegis of that Messiahship aspired (according to Samau'al) “to free the Jews from the hands of the Muslims.” (It was only after his death, as Samau'al also states, that some of the Jews of Amadiya — not others — came to assert that Menahem himself was the Messiah.)

The main actions of Menahem, as described by Samau'al, bring out quite forcefully Menahem's intentions in his role as his father's *qa'im*. Samau'al writes that Menahem, a man of handsome appearance, was relatively well-versed in the knowledge of Judaism. (Benjamin of Tudela makes essentially the same statement.) He adds, as mentioned above, that the anonymous *wali* was kindly disposed towards him and moreover would even visit him from time to time. Menahem, however, only coveted the *wali*'s place; he thought the latter was a simpleton and even imagined that he could attack the fortress and take it over as his own fortified stronghold. Samau'al describes Menahem's correspondence with Jewish communities in Adharbaijan and adjacent territories as being due to his perception that the Persian Jews were less enlightened than others and thus more gullible. In response the Persian Jews and those in Amadiya and the Mosul region flocked to him in vast numbers with concealed weapons. At first the *wali* thought that these people were only pilgrims visiting their alleged sage, but later the truth came out and, according to Samau'al, it was the *wali* himself (and not the father-in-law) who had Menahem executed, his followers dispersing in shame and disarray.

Samau'al in effect describes (as does Benjamin in other language) a type of insurrection led by a self-styled Jewish *qa'im* whose goal was to gain freedom from Islamic domination for the Jewish masses, at least those of the eastern regions of Islam. He may have considered this the first step in carrying out his father's claim that the Jews would be miraculously transported to Jerusalem, or, as Benjamin of Tudela states, in marching on to capture Jerusalem. Samau'al never says as much regarding Menahem. However, he does append to his account a description of events that occurred in Baghdad ostensibly after Menahem's death, in which the theme of the miraculous flight to Jerusalem — first recorded by Obadiah the Proselyte with respect to *Solomon's* pretension — recurs.

Samau'al writes that, after news of Menahem's death had reached Baghdad, two confidence men forged letters that they then attributed to Menahem, in which they announced to the Baghdadi Jews that Menahem "would appoint for them a certain night in which they would all fly to Jerusalem." The Jews were duped by these letters into parting with much of their wealth — trusting that the two tricksters would distribute it to charity — and, donning green garments, on a particular night crowded onto the rooftops "expecting ... to fly to Jerusalem on the wings of angels." The Muslims "were so amazed at what had happened that they refrained from opposing (the Jews) until the result of their vain expectations had revealed itself. The Jews kept crowding together for the flight until morning disclosed their frustration and ignominy ...." (*apud* ed. Perlmann.)

Minus the rooftops, green garments and specific Baghdad setting, this latter account of Samau'al's is strikingly akin to Obadiah the Proselyte's description of the effect of Solomon al-Ruji's pretension some forty years earlier, during which the Jews spent many days in fasting and prayer. When the hoped-for miracle failed to materialize, they were broken-hearted and ashamed before the Muslims and Christians, who laughed and mocked at them, saying, "Lo and behold, the Jews want to fly, yet they have no wings with which to fly to their land;" and eventually "the Muslims said that everything that the Jews had" —i.e., in the way of their beliefs and practices — "was false and vain" (ed. Golb, p. 101.)

Regardless of the differences in the two accounts, they are almost suspiciously similar. It seems particularly strange that Samau'al should write that two tricksters in Baghdad forged letters about an impending miraculous flight of the Jews when (a) such a concept is never described by him as being Menahem's and while (b) the same belief, on the contrary, had apparently been held by Solomon al-Ruji and his two cohorts some forty years earlier. Perhaps the lapse of four decades was enough for the Baghdadi Jews to have forgotten what happened to those who had been Solomon's devoted followers; in this interpretation, the scam of the two tricksters worked because Jews in Baghdad mostly had no recollection of the disaster that had happened during Solomon al-Ruji's time. On the other hand, Samau'al's strong polemical interest in attacking Jewish practices and beliefs must be taken into consideration in our assessment of the Baghdad episode's authenticity. As Perlmann points out, Samau'al compiled a second edition of the *Ifham* in 1167, adding to it new information and ideas — and the passage concerning the Baghdad denouement is apparently one of them. (Logically it should have come before rather than after the passage in which Samau'al describes the spread and variety of Menahemism in various regions after that charismatic's death.) Reading through the pages of the *Ifham* with its various polemical misstatements and exaggerations interspersed amidst Samau'al's often authentic and trenchant observations, one cannot totally put aside the suspicion that he adapted the story of the flight as first recorded by Obadiah to the account concerning Menahem. Samau'al states that since that night, the Baghdadi Jews named the year in which it occurred the '*am al-tiran* or "year of the flight;" that they began to reckon the years of their old and young as from that year; and that this "is the era of the Jews of Baghdad at the present time" (*fi hadha 'l-zaman*). However, he does not tell us in what specific year of the Muslim or Jewish calendar the aborted flight took place, nor, apparently, is this expression '*am al-tiran* known from any-other source concerning the Jews of Baghdad.

In conclusion, reviewing the evidence concerning Solomon al-Ruji and his son, we may with considerable certainty acknowledge a Jewish messianic movement during the first

five decades of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, originating in the Ḥakkari region of Kurdistan, centered in the city of Amadiya, and spreading out thence at least throughout large areas of the eastern Caliphate. Solomon ibn al-Ruji was the one who, supported by his cohorts, claimed to be the Messiah; while his son Menahem took up the banner after Solomon's death, claiming that he was the authentic *qa'im* of his father and proceeding to raise an army of mountain Jews in order to capture Jerusalem — that is, to wrest it from the Crusaders.

It may also be noted that, when Solomon's claim and his movement were getting under way — some time, that is, during the first decade of the twelfth century — Crusader armies were occupying large parts of Syria and upper Mesopotamia, and engaging their foes in numerous battles. Indeed, in 1103 a force under Raymond of Poitiers made an attempt to reach the gates of Baghdad. The Franks took Qal'at Jabr, near Raqqa, in the following year. Between 1104 and 1109 Mosul itself — only 150 kilometers to the southwest of Amadiya and the Kurdish territories— was almost constantly being fought over by mutually antagonistic forces native to the wider region, including such as those those loyal to the Turkoman Musa as well as to Jekermish, Jawali, the Kurdish chieftain Abu'l-Haijan, and Qillij Arslan. It may well be that Solomon's messianic claim and its evidently wide acceptance among the Jewish masses of the neighboring territories were instigated by these awesome events bordering on the apocalyptic.

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