

Stephan Conermann (ed.)

# Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Middle Islamic Period

Bonn University Press

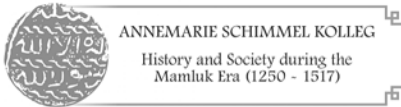


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# **Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Middle Islamic Period**

Jews in the Ayyubid and Mamluk Sultanates  
(1171–1517)

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Cover image: Ben Ezra Synagogue, Cairo, Egypt (photographer: Faris Knight, 10/12/2011).

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## Introduction

The Middle Islamic Period (twelfth-sixteenth centuries) marked a decline of the Jewish communities in Muslim lands. This deterioration was related to a gradual change in Islamic civilization that started in this period and the general decline in the security and economic at the time. This was especially noticeable in the prominent Islamic centers of this period, Egypt and Syria. Beginning with the Ayyubid Sultanate (1171–1250) and escalating under the Mamluks (1250–1517), Jews and Christians were subjected, more than in any earlier periods, to discriminatory laws, pressure to convert and frequent dismissals from government positions, alongside increasing persecution by the general populace. However, it seems that Jews, as a small minority, were less exposed to maltreatment than Christians. They received occasional protection by the authorities against acts of intolerance, and their integration into Muslim society, as well as their legal conditions, were better than those of their co-religionists in late medieval Europe. The picture we have of Muslim-Jewish relations during the Ayyubid period is fairly adequate, mainly thanks to the abundance of documentary material from the Cairo Genizah. The situation of the Jews during the long Mamluk period is somewhat more problematic to outline, due to the paucity of Genizah documents for most of this period and the general reluctance of Muslim historians to report on Jews or Christians. Still, a picture of the main developments of Jewish life under the Mamluks can be reconstructed from various sources. Interestingly enough, the only comprehensive research on Jews under the Mamluks is Eliyahu Ashtor's (Strauss) "The History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule", written in Hebrew, which was conducted in the 1930s and 1940s.

However, since Ashtor's research (and especially during the most recent decades), dozens of studies concerning the relations between the Muslims and the *dhimmi*s during the Ayyubid-Mamluk period have been published. This progress in research is due to the publication and digitization of literary historical sources from the Mamluk period, the discovery of documentary material and the identification of more material from the Cairo Genizah. Conducted by both orientalists and historians of the Jewish people, these studies shed more



light on various aspects of Jewish-Muslim relations in this period. Considering these developments in research, a more comprehensive examination of the situation of the Jews under the Ayyubids and Mamluks is necessary. Therefore, from October 30 to November 1, 2014, an international conference with a focus on Muslim-Jewish relations during the Ayyubid and Mamluk Periods (1171–1517) was organized at the Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg in Bonn ([www.mamluk.uni-bonn.de](http://www.mamluk.uni-bonn.de)). Special attention was given to the following issues: (1) the measure of tolerance of the Mamluk rulers and the Muslim populace toward the Jews; (2) Jews in government positions and as court physicians; (3) conversion and attitudes toward converted Jews; (4) the Sufi (mystical) nature of Jewish leadership and its relation to the Sufi Islamic discourse; (5) professional, intellectual and legal interactions between Jews and Muslims. In-depth discussion of the above-mentioned issues and other related topics brought about a more precise assessment of the state of the Jews during this long period, usually labeled as “deteriorating”. Was this decline in the status of Jews a gradual linear process, or rather a continuous static situation? Can a comprehensive process of deterioration be traced in all the above-mentioned points, or was there discernable improvement in certain aspects of life?

Eight colleagues agreed to flesh out their talks and to substantiate their argumentation. Their largely extended and modified papers are presented in this volume of edited articles. These articles will help us to sharpen our understanding of Jewish life during the Middle Islamic Period in the Near East.

Dotan ARAD’s contribution to this volume discusses how the Jewish community adopted strategies under Mamluk rule for dealing with the laws governing dhimmis and the various restrictions imposed on them. Under Mamluk rule, various dhimmihood laws were not only revalidated, but were also supplemented by new stipulations. This included prohibitive laws, one against the erection of buildings standing taller than Muslim edifices and one towards the laws of inheritance. In addition to the laws of dhimmihood, Jews frequently had to cope with interreligious hostility, acts of fanaticism and various forms of harassment. Focusing on the fields of synagogues, clothing and inheritance, Arad points out that a wide array of “coping strategies” existed for Jews. These strategies ranged from quiet compliance, lobbying and exploitation of the Shari‘a law in their favor to the violation of the laws through subterfuge, disguise and dissimulation. Officially, Muslim law forbade Christians and Jews to build new prayer houses that had not existed prior to the Muslim conquest and to enlarge existing structures. Furthermore, while cases of damage and destruction were not a daily phenomenon, Jewish synagogues were still under continual threat. To protect the houses of prayer and to prevent interreligious conflict, the Jewish community adopted several strategies designed to hide the happenings of the synagogue from the hostile gaze of Muslim neighbors. They created an im-

pression of antiquity that would gain them legal protection. On a visible level, synagogues were striking in their modesty, built to a very low height and refrained from using visible religious symbols. To safeguard them, Jews constructed historical narratives, linking them to local traditions and legends concerning the establishment of synagogues. They even affixed forged inscriptions on the buildings bearing earlier dates. In the case of clothing, the laws of dhimmihood included the obligation to outwardly distinguish oneself from Muslims. Despite this, sources prove that Jews regularly failed to comply with this rule, dressing quite similarly to their Muslim neighbors during the “Classical Genizah” period (tenth-thirteenth centuries), as well as through the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. However, there was greater sensitivity to religion during the Mamluk period, resulting in obligations to distinguish every community with different colored head coverings. Arad argues that, to a certain extent, each group adopted the color assigned to them as a mark of identity and sign of self-definition. However, in contrast to the issue of building or renovating synagogues, the legal restrictions concerning clothing had little adverse effect on Jewish life under the Mamluks. While some saw Muslim clothing as a distinct advantage, as it gave Jewish travelers and city dwellers a sense of security, it also carried great risks if the subterfuge was discovered. Furthermore, the clothing in Mamluk society carried strong religious implications, as it signified religious affiliation. Jewish religious law mirrored the Muslim dress code and prohibited a Jew from wearing a white turban. The turban turned into a religious artifact and was forbidden by Halacha, as it could be construed as indicating the acceptance of heresy. However, Jewish society under the Mamluk rule cannot be understood as a homogeneous and monolithic block. While traditional groups were establishing a clear divide between Jews and Muslims, Jewish migrants, particularly those from the Spanish kingdom, were less conservative. In terms of inheritance issues, the Jewish community was faced with the most severe changes through new laws during this time period. Inheritance belonging to deceased dhimmis was frozen until their heirs could prove that they were eligible to inherit in accordance with Muslim law. Any estate without an heir was to transfer to the sultan’s treasury. The most prevalent reaction of the Jewish community to this serious restriction was the establishment of an endowment in a form of the Muslim *waqf*. This Jewish trusts prevented the transfer to the authorities, guaranteeing that it remained in the family’s hands (*waqf ahli*, *waqf dhurri*) or community’s hands (*waqf khayri*). To avoid confiscation of inheritances, the Jewish community in Jerusalem even went so far as to introduce a ruling that obligated those dying without heirs to consecrate their estate to the community. However, even if a person failed to do this, the estate was still considered the community’s property after their death.

Paul B. FENTON's contribution focuses on the bilateral influence of Sufis and Jews in Mamluk Egypt. The resulting different religious mysticisms constitute one of the most fascinating facets of the Judaeo-Muslim relationship. The spiritual torpor caused by the Mamluks' suspicions towards philosophy and their rigorous legalism concerning religion was offset by their favorable attitude towards Sufism. During their reign, Egypt became a haven for Sufism, which resulted in the establishment of brotherhoods, the rise of the saint cult and several influential mystics who rose to eminent positions in the society. This rise was facilitated by the Mamluk sultans, who eagerly imposed themselves as Muslim sovereigns, following the example set by their Ayyubid predecessors in extending their patronage to the mystical brotherhoods. The model set by the sultans was emulated by the emirs and the governors of the Mamluk realm, who all contributed to the rapid proliferation of Sufi foundations by constructing an impressive number of lodges, hermitages, *zāwiyas*, *ribāṭs* and *ḥānqāhs* to shelter Sufis. Due to high financial allocations by the state, Sufism was transformed into an institutionalized movement in the Mamluk period. The *ḥānqāh* was transformed into a state institution, which was eventually influential enough to compete with the *madrassa* in offering instruction for students. This had an enormous impact on the local Jewish community, particularly in the urban centers which opened the doors of the synagogue to the revitalizing influence of Islamic mysticism. Fenton argues that this was due to a certain symmetry which existed at this time in the respective religious situations of Judaism and Islam. In addition to religious persecutions, the Jews shared the brunt of natural catastrophes with their fellow Muslim citizens. Social instability caused by such natural catastrophes led to a mystical longing to transcend painful reality. Fenton points out that the Sufi presence constituted a direct spiritual model for the Jewish population. In particular, Muslim and Jewish refugees that had been forced out of their Andalusī and Maġribī homeland by the increasing intolerance of the Mālikī 'ulamā' served as bridges for an exchange of ideas. This interaction facilitated contacts between mystic schools on both sides (which were suspiciously observed by the official clergy) and led to a profound effect of Islam on Jewish spirituality: a new form of Jewish pietism which integrated elements of Sufism and adopted models of Muslim piety. Followers of this movement referred to it as *derek ha-ḥasīdūt* 'The Path' or *derek la-šem* the 'Way to God', expressions which are reminiscent of the Arabic *ṭarīq*, a term by which the Sufis designated their spiritual discipline. The *derek la-šem* produced a rich and varied literary output that transposed Sufi concepts and terminology into the biblical and rabbinical texture. The movement gained momentum under the impetus of one of the most prominent political figures of the Ayyubid era, Abraham Maimonides. This leader of Egyptian Jewry even advocated for the establishment of a Jewish type of *ḥānqāh*. However, the attempt to integrate elements from Islamic

mysticism both in the cult and credo of the Jews provoked strong opposition by the conservative forces of the *ḥasīdīm*. Despite Abraham Maimonides' political and religious prestige, these forces denounced the pietists to the Muslim authorities. Accusations ranged from the use of improper language to diffusing "false ideas" to introducing "illicit changes" and "non-Jewish customs" into the synagogue. Fenton argues that this strong contestation was one of the factors that led to the pietists' failure to impose their way on the community at large. The other factor was that the pietist way was reserved for an elitist minority which gradually fell into total oblivion with the general decline of Eastern Jewry. However, while the outreach estimate of this Judeo-Sufi movement is difficult to determine, Fenton hypothesizes that a number of their practices survived in certain circles and were absorbed by later mystical movements, such as by the Qabbalists of the Holy Land.

Miriam FRENKEL focuses on the life and work of the Austrian-Israeli historian Eliyahu Ashtor (1914–1984). While Ashtor is well known for his important contributions to Islamic social and economic history in the Near East during the Middle Ages, Frenkel strives to emphasize his pioneering contributions to the history of Jewry under Mamluk rule. Born to a Zionist family in Vienna, Ashtor escaped to Palestine in 1938 following the "Anschluss" to Nazi Germany. It was not until 1949, after the establishment of the State of Israel, that he received a formal position as full professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This is where he taught until he passed away in 1984. In the young State of Israel, Ashtor was the first scholar in the institutional academy to study the Jewish history of the Orient, resulting in his three-volume magnum opus *The History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks*. Ashtor perceived himself as a positivist historian, carefully searching for "solid facts" with the aim to scientifically improve the scientific quality of the works of his predecessors, the Jewish scholars of the "Wissenschaft des Judenthums." Frenkel argues that his scholarly contributions follow two broad discourses, a Jewish national and an Orientalist discourse – which, although different methods, should be seen as deeply intertwined. This resulted in the fact that these discourses not only went along with each other, but also substantiated each other. In his early writings, Ashtor primarily dedicated himself to the Jewish national discourse in its Zionist-territorial version. This discourse aimed at constructing an essential modern Jewish identity, transcending place and time, and adhered strongly to the paradigm of a united autonomous Jewish history different and separate from the history of its surrounding nations and cultures. Ashtor followed the idea that only one unique and inseparable Jewish history exists. This was supplemented by the bonding idea that people strongly aspired to stay loyal to their religion and to conduct an independent national life. Accordingly, Ashtor's work on the Jews in the Mamluk period was motivated by a deep patriotism. He used his writing as an im-

plementation of an important national mission which was meant to promote empathy towards the figures of the past and to provide a moral lesson for future generations. He turned to the Mamluk era in order to search for an answer to what he viewed as an enigma in the present, namely the deteriorated condition of the Jewish eastern communities in the State of Israel in its first years. According to Ashtor, from the thirteenth century onwards, Jewish history began to enter a new phase of deterioration and stagnation, one that has actually continued until today. The study of this topic is based on the theoretical assumption of the uniformity of Jewish history. As a consequence, Ashtor shaped the narrative of the Jews under the Mamluks as an indispensable part of the great Jewish narrative common to the Jews in the East and the West, following the classical pattern of what was called “Jewish history” but was actually the history of the Jews in Christian Europe. The narrative depicted by Ashtor develops from one pogrom to another, and the social ambiance of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks is described as if it were an eastern European ghetto. His intensive use of Arab and Muslim sources solely served the methodological purpose of delineating external frameworks of Jewish history to compensate the scarcity of Jewish contemporary sources. It was certainly not a result of any historiographical comprehension in which the Jews were viewed as belonging to the great Islamicate civilization, or of seeing the history of the Jews in Muslim lands as part and parcel of the general history of their countries. On the contrary, Ashtor, with his belief in the unity of Jewish history, tried to detect the sources of the “problem” of the Eastern Jews within the realm of inner Jewish history, blaming the Eastern Jews themselves for abandoning the free and creative spiritual life of general studies such as science and philosophy and for preferring the narrow study of Halakha (Jewish law) and Qabbala (Jewish mysticism). In his later works, however, Ashtor abandoned the conceptual paradigm of the organic unity of Jewish history and departed from the then hegemonic Zionist-territorial discourse of the Jerusalem school. Contrary to his previous assumptions, he now unambiguously accepted the inseparable linkage between the history of the Jews of Islam and the general history of Islam. Frenkel argues that in place of the Jewish national discourse, the Orientalist discourse became dominant central, particularly in analysis of the leadership in the Orient. Ashtor portrayed these leaders as despotic, corrupted and capricious, traits he considered to be typically and essentially “Oriental” as opposed to the neat, organized, rationalistic and efficient traits of everything in the “Occident”. This shift in historical conceptions unavoidably changed Ashtor’s understanding of the reasons for the decline of Oriental Judaism. While he had originally blamed the Oriental Jews for their decline, he now transferred this responsibility to the surrounding Islamic social environment. With this, he exempted the Jews from blame and conceptualized the decline as an indispensable part of the overall decline of the Islamic East,

emphasizing rather structural, organizational and societal reasons. However, this did not result in the adoption of a new causal explanation for this historical process. Instead, Ashtor applied his previous essentialist posture on the entire Muslim culture. He now argued that the Islamic state could not develop organized democratic institutions as it not only lacked essential sense of law and order, but also because it was governed following “the despotic code the Muslims inherited from previous Oriental empires”. With these theories of decline, Ashtor was a dominant representative of this historiographical tendency in scholarship for many years. However, as Frenkel points out, while he advanced as a scholarly pioneer of Jewish medieval history, he also remained confined to the limits of the Orientalist discourse in his own research.

Yehoshua FRENKEL focuses on conversion stories narrated by Mamluk chroniclers. His analytical focus is less on a reconstruction of the past, but rather concentrates on the chronicles’ narratology, their aesthetics, literary styles and the assumed intentions of the authors. This methodology, Frenkel argues, provides a clearer interpretation of medieval perceptions of religion, social images and of communal and confessional borders in Mamluk society in general, and of the urban elite’s mind in particular. Based on the thoughts of the Indian scholar Gauri Viswanathan, Frenkel argues that the narrators of these conversion stories highly fictionalized the crossing of religious boundaries. Due to ideological motivations, Muslim authors envisioned the embracing of Islam by Jewish converts in solely positive terms. Frenkel argues that these rich accounts of personal conversions follow a clear narratological strategy. As a primary narratological strategy, the authors depicted Islam as the superior and ultimate religion, portraying the act of those who joined the Muslim community as merely voluntary based on a deep personal transformation. They paid no tribute to the obvious fact that not all Jews that adhered to Islam did so out of religious motivations, but instead may have been motivated by factors of adhesion, integration or pressure. This narratological strategy is in line with the *ṣulḥ-amān* traditions of the early Islamic conquest literature, which portrayed conquests of Islam (*futūḥāt*) not as a military onslaught, but as an accomplishment of a heavenly-guided program. Frenkel assumes that if this narratological framing was accepted as legitimate, it could explain the absence of accounts of forced conversion in the Mamluk chronicles. A second salient feature of the conversions’ narratology represents the depiction of the move across religious boundaries as a swift transformation. Although conversion is not a simple and absolute break with a previous social life, no traces of the converts’ past customs and beliefs can be found in the assessed accounts and biographies. Many narratives do not depict conversion in the sense of a longer lasting passage, but speak of the converts as immediately becoming devoted Muslims who follow the *Sharī‘ah* to the letter. This stands in strong contrast to other conversion narratives from Muslim and

non-Muslim sources, which state that old traditions die slowly and footsteps of past religions can be traced among Muslims. Based on this, Frenkl argues that these narrative strategies primarily served the purpose of masking a much more complex reality of the Mamluk society. While we should not underestimate the fact that the appeal of Islam was an element of conversion in some cases, we should also consider social, political and economic factors of the time. In a complex society, such as the Mamluk society, these factors played a central role and their weight was much heavier than psychological or devotional factors. For Frenkl, the act of conversion should consequently be seen mostly in light of assimilation.

Nathan HOFER's article challenges the conceptual usefulness of historians' narratives of decline in the study of Ayyubid and Mamluk Jewry. Many historians describe the Syro-Egyptian Jewry as irrevocably stunted by a decline that is usually tied to the broader decline paradigm of the Mamluk state in general. The idea of decline of the Mamluk Empire is still a paradigm of historical research on the period, following an implicit, yet very clear periodization that structures these accounts: rise, decline and fall of the sultanate. The common assumption of these narratives is that decline was systematic and inexorable, caused by social, political, military, cultural and economic factors. While a number of Mamlukists have begun to challenge the idea of decline, only a few have yet questioned the historiographical utility of the concept itself. Following this latter line of argument, Hofer strives to shed light on primary conceptual problems. On a general theoretical level, Hofer identifies two main conceptual problems of the "decline paradigm". First, this paradigm should not be seen as a helpful analytical category, but rather as an outdated artifact of the cyclical history of positivist historiography, postulated by scholars such as Spengler, Toynbee and Ibn Khaldūn. Modeled on the premises of natural sciences, it stipulated a narrative of "organic" processes of florescence and decay. From a conceptual perspective, decline served, in the words of Hofer, as a yard and yardstick, describing "what happened" while also explaining "why it ended", resulting in the fact that cause and effect were trapped in a teleological feedback loop. Second, Hofer sees the most severe conceptual problem to be the fact that the decline narratives organize historical data according to an implicit ideological judgment and are not subject to falsification. The positioning and description of a trajectory of decline for a certain time and place is based on a standard, an idea of a "normal" state of affairs from which this decline is measured. However, the conceptualizations of a "normal state" of a Golden Age are in no way innocent, but instead are historiographical inventions to the same extent as the supposed debased states of affairs. Hofer judges these narratives of decline as predictions which mask their own subjectivity by foreclosing other historiographical possibilities, thereby rendering the narratives immune to falsification. In the study of Ayyubid and

Mamluk Jewry, the ideology of decline prevents other ways of narrating and conceptualizing their histories. Hofer analyzes six factors for the enduring predominance of the ideology of decline as a main heuristic. As a first reason, there is a strand of historiography that attempts to make the case that Jewish life under Islam was and is a bad situation for political and nationalistic reasons. Second, a strong dependency on older Mamluk scholarship and on the work of Eliyahu Ashtor has existed up to present times. Third, the ostensible absence of a high rabbinic literary culture during this period has fueled this narrative of decline. Fourth, the Jewish population faced clear demographic losses during this period. Fifth, many historians take the apparently increasing number of anti-*dhimmī* measures enacted by Mamluk rulers as evidence of decline. Sixth, in a number of cases, authors have attributed the deteriorating status of the Jews directly to Islam, narrating Islam polemically as an inherently anti-Semitic religious ideology. While Hofer offers several counterarguments to this reasoning, his main argument is that Jewish decline is simply not a particularly useful heuristic, because, on a theoretical level, it prevented the occurrence of other historical narratives or usage of the data at hand. Constructing an alternative historiography to the vectored ideology of decline, future research should aim at narrating an agentive Jewish history. Instead of conceptualizing Jewish communities as passive *dhimmī* subjects of Ayyubid and Mamluk policies, they could be seen as deliberate and thoughtful actors in their own right. With the help of exemplary sources, Hofer points out that the Jewish communities of Damascus and Aleppo adapted to the changes in the political and social landscape in several ways and with a variety of deliberate strategies.

Paulina B. LEWICKA's contribution examines presentations of Jewish physicians in historiographical narratives written by Muslim authors between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Lewicka focuses on Muslim discourses during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods in Egypt and Syria, which she understands as the literary expressions of thoughts, disputes, beliefs, convictions, stereotypes and values that created the cultural climate and social mood of these times. Investigating discursive shifts in the portrayal of those physicians, the study extracts historical narratives from a variety of sources. These encompass bibliographical dictionaries, annalistic works, chronicles and religious treatises, including the genre known as *ṭibb an-nabī*, or medicine of the prophet. Lewicka conceptualizes these different sources – characterized by fragmentariness and ambiguity of information – not as a record of facts (i. e., true, or real events) but, rather as a record of the state of knowledge and mind of the author. Based on the theoretical ideas of Roland Barthes, a text's meaning and "truth" is primarily constituted by both the individuality of its author and by the community to which the author belongs. In the case of Jewish physicians during the Ayyubid and Mamluk times, the discourse's content differs from genre to genre and from



author to author. However, Lewicka argues that several regularities are evident, regularities which can be sorted into two main strategies reflecting a process of radicalization of Islam and its growing tendency to dominate the entire, multi-faceted cultural capital of the Islamic domains. First, authors promoted a “strategy of selection”, not recognizing eminent Jewish/non-Muslim physicians and their achievements. This feature is particularly evident in some biographical dictionaries written by religious scholars, but also in the parts of chronicles written by such scholars that included obituaries of eminent persons. At the current state of research, the reasons for this absence are rather vague. Lewicka proposes two main arguments: On the one hand, this absence could be influenced by a negative bias towards non-Muslim physician. On the other, their absence could reflect a shift towards a conceptualization of the superiority of Islamic religious education and skills. As a consequence, theoretical medical education became the domain of the *‘ulamā’*, while medical practice was left to professionals who were not the *‘ulamā’* – such as Christians and Jews. Hence, Jewish or Christian physicians were excluded as part of the “elite” who were famous for their books, knowledge or high positions. Instead, these physicians were merely perceived as “ordinary” medical practitioners who were not “worthy” to be mentioned. As a second strategy, several authors followed a narrative of negative propaganda, such as spreading false, overgeneralized and negative stereotypes relating to Jewish doctors (and *dhimmī* doctors in general), as well as encouraging negative attitudes towards them. These two strategies of religious bias were by no means used by the entire Muslim community, but primarily by radical religious scholars. The success of Jewish physicians and their generally good reputation and popularity (as well as that of their Christian colleagues) among Muslim patients was perceived as weakening Islam. Overwhelmed with the sense of mission of Islamizing the entire space of Dār al-Islām, these radical religious forces believed that Jewish doctors were occupying important fragments of this space. Consequently, the primary aim of the authors of such overgeneralized and negative stereotypes was to cleanse Dār al-Islām from “alien” elements. Lewicka differentiates between two main manifestations: On the individual level, physicians were linked to allegations of charlatan practices or insincerity. Exemplary narratives focused on Jewish doctors accumulating wealth. On the collective level, Jewish physicians were often characterized as having “evil intentions.” They were blamed as a group of taking medicine away from Muslims or of seriously threatening their Muslim patients’ lives. At times, they were portrayed as harming Muslims by their ignorance, while at other times they were portrayed as conspiring to harm or kill Muslims on purpose. Seeking medical advice from those doctors was characterized as improper for Muslims. Lewicka argues that while these negative stereotypes certainly had some influence on the majority of Muslims, this did not necessarily translate into applying

religious preferences to the choice of physician. Intuition, experience and habit seemed to have taken precedence over the power of religious authority.

Elisha RUSS-FISHBANE's article assesses the impact of natural disasters on the Jewish community in early thirteenth-century Egypt. During this period, a series of crippling natural disasters left a considerable impact on the Egyptian population, resulting in unemployment, resettlement, illnesses, impoverishment and hunger. Earthquakes, famines and plagues took not only a strong toll on the population in general, but also called for decisive action on the part of the local leadership. There are indications that the disasters particularly impacted religious minorities due to their vulnerable status. In the case of the protected minority of the Egyptian Jewry, relatively rich documentation exists in the papers of the Cairo Genizah. These Jewish documents, as well as reports by the Muslim polymath and physician 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġhdādī (d. 1231), paint a variegated picture of a community in crisis due to the spread of plague and the severity of the ensuing economic situation, each of which affected all strata of society to differing degrees. As such, these accounts of natural and social upheavals serve as a lens to daily life in Ayyubid Egypt, forming a critical backdrop to the transformations that unfolded within Egypt's Jewish population. These episodes of suffering in the Jewish community ultimately led to a large-scale population shift from the city of Fustat to Cairo, possibly in expectation of better living conditions and medical care. The most severe natural disaster period was between 1200 and 1202, when a combination of earthquakes, famine and plague overwhelmed Lower Egypt. The population of *dhimmīs* was particularly affected by additional political and social factors in the country. While the Ayyubid administration had already pursued a heavy-handed policy of taxation upon its *dhimmī* communities before the fall of 1200, it chose to put even more pressure on them during this difficult time in order to collect additional funds without a recourse. The government raided private storehouses of grain and other provisions at will. During the second and third decades of the thirteenth century, Egypt witnessed further episodes of plague and economic depression. With these events followed an intensification of Jewish welfare work and communal leadership to meet the needs of the indigent. This has been interpreted by the historian S. D. Goitein as a shift towards an administrative centralization of the negidate. Based on the primary sources at hand, Fishbane argues that Goitein's theory should be modified due to three reasons. First, the activities, responsibilities and prerogatives of the Nagid in the first half of the thirteenth century followed the same general model set by previous communal heads. Second, the Nagid's intimate involvement in social services did not extend beyond Fustat and therefore still very much adhered to the principle of local organization argued by Goitein. Third, the forty-five money orders that are the basis for the claim for increased centralization all stem from a single circumscribed period, the spring of 1218.

Fishbane argues that beyond his attentiveness to individual solicitations for aid or intervention, there is no evidence that the Nagid was increasingly involved, whether before or after 1218. While the Nagid's responses to the economic downturn went beyond the ad hoc emergency measures in some cases, these activities should generally not be seen as steps towards centralized authority. Rather, they should be understood as a reflection of an engaged, overextended leader with limited resources at his disposal during a time of exceptional crisis. Often the option to delegate the responsibility to other officials was simply not available. Despite the ongoing efforts of the Nagid and other communal officials to deal with the crises' dire consequences, it was a long time until conditions would improve for the community. Mamluk trade restrictions in particular were a considerable impediment towards a sustained economic recovery.

Last but not least, Walid A. SALEH's contribution focuses on the controversy around the multi-volume Qur'an commentary of al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-al-suwar*. The extensive quotations from the Arabic versions of the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and the four Gospels) in order to interpret biblical references in the Qur'an made the commentary revolutionary in the annals of Islamic religious practice. Never before had a Muslim medieval scholar so approvingly quoted from these scriptures and used the Bible to illuminate the content of the Qur'an. In parallel, this return to the Bible in the medium of *tafsīr* was also accompanied by a decline in the significance of the already extensive Islamicized biblical lore, *Isrā'īliyyāt*, which was available in the Qur'an commentary tradition. The consequences of this new approach were far reaching: Not only was the Qur'an interpreted with the aid of the Bible, but al-Biqā'ī appointed himself as a judge over the Islamic biblical lore, the *Isrā'īliyyāt*. He sometimes completely ignored this material, sometimes corrected it, and at other times gave the Islamic version as an alternative, weaker interpretive opinion. This strong dependency on the Bible resulted in an acrimonious public controversy over the practice of using the Bible to interpret the Qur'an. This "Bible controversy" forced al-Biqā'ī to write the apologia *Aqwāl al-qawīmah fī ḥukm al-naql min al-kutub al-qadīmah* (*The Just Verdict on the Permissibility of Quoting from Old Scriptures*). It remains one of the most extensive reviews of Islamic religious attitude towards the Bible in Islam. To defend himself, al-Biqā'ī relied on a strategy of book reviews as well as the solicitation fatwas on the practice of quoting the Bible from several leading scholars of the time. In his article, Saleh offers a preliminary analysis and a partial translation of these fatwas in order to spur future detailed analysis by scholars. Saleh states that the fatwas are unique documents as they represent major jurist opinions from all of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence and offer the opinions of the leading scholars of Cairo and Damascus on the issue of the Bible in Islam. He argues that it is exactly this line of prominent scholars (including the four chief judges) who were part of a

well-crafted propaganda campaign by al-Biqā'ī, which made it impossible for critics to ignore or criticize him. The various pieces of polemical and judicial opinions by these authoritative figures supplied al-Biqā'ī with major arguments and methods of defending himself. Saleh asserts that al-Biqā'ī followed a common stratagem perfected by the scholars of medieval Islam: the construction of networks in their struggle over ultimate authority in the field of religious teaching. These competing networks of scholars (which were constantly shifting) were based on a system of colleagues helping one another and were essential in creating blocks that acted in unison in times of crisis. Their cohesiveness was achieved through the medium of fatwas. They were paying each other in words, and were unwilling to allow any of their members to suffer the ultimate prize: death at the hands of the Mamluks due to a conceived infraction of the religious law. This network of authorities helped al-Biqā'ī to narrate himself as part of the establishment and to portray his approach as normative. This primarily served the objective of preventing his portrayal as an innovator and as falling into *muwālāt* (of loving) the Jews and the Christians, accusations which were indeed levied against him during his lifetime.

The reader of the proceedings of the conference will receive a broad and insightful perspective on the position and the life of the Jews during the Ayyubid-Mamluk period, a period which is still less studied than either the so-called "Classical Age" preceding it and the Ottoman period that followed it. In addition, these insights could contribute to the overall history of medieval Jewry as a basis for a comparative study of the position of the Jews in Christian Europe in the Late Middle Ages.



## Being a Jew under the Mamluks: Some Coping Strategies\*

The Mamluk rulers imposed a number of restrictions on all their non-Muslim subjects. Some of these are known from the earlier Muslim period, such as the well-known “Pact of ‘Umar.” Others were new restrictions imposed during the Mamluk period. In addition to the laws of Dhimmihood, Jews also frequently had to cope with interreligious hostility, acts of fanaticism, and various forms of harassment. What methods did Jews employ to improve their lot? In this article I want to discuss some of the strategies which the Jews adopted under these circumstances.

### 1. Synagogues

As is well known, Muslim law forbade Christians and Jews to build new prayer houses that had not existed prior to the Muslim conquest or to enlarge existing structures. From time to time, Jews also had to deal with others who objected to the presence of Jewish synagogues – ‘Ulamā’ and Muslims living next to the synagogue. In the absence of any ethnic or religious distinction in the urban space,<sup>1</sup> non-Muslim prayer houses frequently existed in the heart of mixed neighbourhoods, standing side by side with Muslim houses and mosques, minarets, Sufi centres, and Muslim cemeteries. This proximity often led to interreligious friction-harassment of the attendees and repeated complaints by Muslim neighbours about the activities conducted in the structures and the noise issuing from them. On occasion, synagogues and churches were even attacked and destroyed. In the fourteenth century, the question of the status of Dhimmis

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\* My thanks to Dr. Nathan Hofer for reading a draft of this article and for his helpful notes.

1 The Jewish neighbourhood in the Islamic city was not a “Ghetto” at the European type. Muslims and Christians lived there too, and mosques and other Muslim institutions were sometime located there. See for example Ira Lapidus’ description: “There was some separation of persons by communities but no ghetto-like isolation of communities in the whole” (I. M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Mass. 1967, p. 86).

became an urgent affair, damage to churches and synagogues being a common occurrence. Thus, for example, riots against the Dhimmis broke out in Egypt in 1301.<sup>2</sup> The Coptic Christians were the primary target of Muslim anger and several of Coptic churches were destroyed across the country. Although synagogues appear to have escaped unscathed during these attacks, Muslim sources attest that they were closed and Jews forbidden to pray in them. I have found a documented testimony of those events: a manuscript that contains an agreement by the elders of the Karaite community in Cairo, concerning a public property belonging to the community, which was located close to the Karaite synagogue. In alluding to the synagogue, the author asserts his hope that it will soon be reopened: “may it be opened speedily” (תפתח במהרה).<sup>3</sup>

In 1321, churches in Cairo were once again destroyed,<sup>4</sup> and a Karaite synagogue was demolished in Damascus.<sup>5</sup> A further wave of attacks occurred in 1354. The escalation of damage wreaked on churches and synagogues was accompanied by a greater stringency in the interpretation of Muslim law. Although Muslim jurists were generally agreed that while it was forbidden to erect new prayer houses, existing ones could be maintained, they debated the question of whether it was permissible to renovate existing structures. The Hanafites generally allowed renovations. Others took a far stricter line. Thus, for example, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī composed a legal volume entitled *كشفي الدسائس في ترميم الكنائس* (The Exposure of Plots Regarding the Renovation of Churches [and Synagogues]) in

2 See T. el-Leithy, ‘Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in Fourteenth Century Upper Egypt’, Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra (eds.), *The Development of Sufism in Mamluk Egypt (Chaier des Annales islamologiques, 27)*, Cairo 2006, pp. 79–82.

3 בשם יי אל עולם. הוא מא אתפקו עליה משאיך אליהוד אלקראיין ברוכים יהיו והו אן יאגרו ללשיך אלאגל אלצאפי אבו אלמחאסן ופקה א-ללה תעאלי אבן אלשיך אלאגל אלסעד אבו אלחסן כתאם אלערב נע' סלוכה בבאב אדואר אלדי מן ג'ה' דרב אלכניס תפתח במהרה אלי אל[...]. באק אלדי אחתכרה בסתה דראהם נקרה פי כל סנה ואקתצי ראייהם דלך למא ראוה מן אלמצלחה ובדלך וצ'ע כטה מן ראה מצלחה פי יום אלאתנין אלסאבע ואלעשרין מן שהר תמוז שנת אלף ושש מאות ושלש עשרה שנה לשטרות אלמואפק לשהר שואל סנה אהדי וסבע מאיה ללערב בעיר אלקא[הרה הס] מוכה לצען מצרים שעל נהר פישון מושבה והכל קים ושלום. (Translation: In the name of the God of the world. This is what the Jewish Karaite elders, may they be blessed, have agreed upon, and that is to rent to the honourable Sheikh al-Šafi' abū al-Mahāsīn, may the exalted God prosper him, son of the honourable Sheikh al-As'ad abū al-Hasan, the Arabs' scribe, may his soul rest peacefully, his way through the gate of the house that abuts the road of the synagogue, may it be opened speedily to ... who has leased it for six silver *nuqrah* dirhams for a year. Their opinion determined this agreement, viewing it as beneficial. And with this has signed the one who saw the usefulness, on Monday 27 of Tammuz, 1613 of documents [= Seleucid era], which is Shawwāl 701 in the Arab calendar [June 1302] in the city of Cairo that is close to *Šo'an Mišrayim* [al-Fustāt] on the *Pishon* [Nile] river, and everything is maintained and peaceful (MS St. Petersburg, RNL, Eyr. Arab. II 1367).

4 A.S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of 'Umar*, London 1930, pp. 61–77.

5 E. Bareket, 'Karaite Communities in the Middle East during the Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries', in: M. Polliack (ed.), *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its History and Literary Sources*, Leiden 2003, pp. 247–248; el-Leithy, Sufis (supra n. 2), p. 80, n. 22.

1353 that became very influential, his rulings being quoted by clerics who sided with the prohibition against the renovation of non-Muslim houses of prayer or even promoted their destruction.<sup>6</sup>

The intolerant view continued throughout the fifteenth century. The chronicles of Arab historians of the period and other sources indicate that arguments regarding Christian and Jewish places of worship were repeatedly raised by religious figures throughout the fifteenth century. Structures were meticulously inspected in order to ascertain whether they were new or had been illegally renovated. Thus, for example, in 1420, the Jews of the Jewish neighbourhood in Cairo built a wall around the synagogue and paved a path leading through plots on which Muslim houses had once stood. Although they obtained permission to do so from the Hanbalite qadi 'Alā al-Dīn ibn al-Majlī, a year later the latter acceded to pressure from 'Ulamā' and permitted the wall to be torn down. In 1427, the Jews were given permission to rebuild it, prompting another protest. Visiting the neighbourhood, the qadis came to the opinion that the wall was indeed illegal. To the rioting Muslim crowd seeking to destroy the synagogue, the Shafi'ite qadi, Shihāb al-Dīn abū Ḥajar suggested that one of the Christian houses of prayer also be checked first, after which they could all be razed. A mass assault on the synagogue was only averted because in the interim the qadi commanded the head of police to destroy the wall at night.<sup>7</sup> Another well-known incident was the destruction of the synagogue in Jerusalem which was demolished in 1474. Following an order given by Qāyṭbāy, the structure was renovated. 120 years later, however, it was closed once again at the command of the Ottoman authorities, not having being reopened till 1967.<sup>8</sup>

6 S. Ward, 'Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī on Construction, Continuance and Repair of Churches and Synagogues in Islamic Law', in: W. M. Brinner and S. D. Ricks (eds.), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions*, II, Atlanta 1989, pp. 169–188; S.D Goitein, 'Sifro shel Ibn 'Ubayyah 'al Harisat Bet ha-Keneset ha-Yehudi bi-Yerusahlayim bi-Shenat 1474', *Zion*, 13–14 (1948/9), p. 25.

7 E. Ashtor (Strauss), *History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Rule of the Mamlūks*, II, Jerusalem 1951, pp. 99–100 [Hebrew]. The "campaign" against churches and synagogues in Cairo was renewed in the forties and the fifties of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, see Ashtor, *ibid.*, pp. 100–105; D. S. Richards, 'Dhimmi Problems in Fifteenth Century Cairo: Reconsideration of a Court Document', in: Ronald L. Nettle (ed.), *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, Vol. I, Chur 1993, pp. 127–163; M. R. Cohen, 'Jews in the Mamlūk Environment: the Crisis of 1442 (a Geniza study, T-S. AS 150.3)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 47 (1984), pp. 425–448.

8 On the destruction of the synagogue in Jerusalem see Mujīr al-Dīn al-'Ulaimī, *al-Uns al-Jalīl bi-Tārīkh al-Quds wa-l-Khalīl* [*The Glorious History of Jerusalem and Hebron*] (Cairo, 1968), pp. 300–314. On this event and its effects there is extensive research. See, for example, Goitein, *sifro* (supra, note 6), pp. 18–32; Ashtor, *History* (supra, note 7), pp. 401–415; D.P Little, 'Communal Strife in Late Mamlūk Jerusalem', *Islamic Law and Society*, 6 (1999), pp. 69–96, esp. pp. 78–87; E. Reiner, 'Jewish Community Leadership in Late Mameluke Jerusalem', *Shalem*, 6 (1992), pp. 23–81 [Hebrew], here pp. 67–69; N. Luz, 'The Events of the Jewish Synagogue as a Mirror of the Public Sphere in Mamluk Jerusalem,' *The New East*, 44 (2004), pp. 127–143 [Hebrew].



Although cases of damage and destruction were not a daily phenomenon, Jewish synagogues were still under continual threat. What tactics and strategies were undertaken to protect them? The first method was the keeping of a low profile – both physically and architecturally.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages and early modernity (up until the *Tanzimāt* reforms of the nineteenth century), non-Muslim places of worship were very modest and restrained, refraining from the prominent use of visible religious symbols. This policy was designed to prevent Muslim slander and reduce interreligious conflict. Ancient synagogues in Muslim countries were striking for their unmarked exteriors and lack of ostentation. In recognition of Muslim sensitivities with regard to non-Muslim religious places, they were located in small, low edifices, frequently sharing a courtyard with other residential buildings and being indistinguishable from the urban landscape around them. This characterlessness stood in complete contrast to the design, colour, and richness of their interiors, hidden from the penetrating gaze of Muslim society. For example, the ancient synagogue of Jobar (now part of Damascus), known as the Synagogue of Elijah the Prophet was a famous site and a centre for pilgrimage within Syrian Jewry. Many visitors described its magnificent interior and mentioned its impressive textiles, *parokhot* (curtains) and oil lamps. However, its façade was very poor and simple. It was impossible to guess, according to its meager exterior, that a marvelous synagogue was hiding behind the door.<sup>10</sup>

As part of this strategy, synagogues were also built to a very low height. Many were below street level, some even being totally underground. One of the most prominent examples is the Karaite synagogue in Jerusalem. Below street level, entrance to it is gained by a flight of twenty steps that descend into the prayer hall. Obviously, it has no windows. During the Mamluk period, its only source of light appears to have been oil lamps. Later, however, several openings were made in the ceiling to let some sunlight in.<sup>11</sup> Synagogues that were above ground also frequently had no windows, a phenomenon that drew the attention of Western travellers. Thus, for example, R. Obadiah of Bertinoro, the well-known commentator on the Mishna, who migrated to Jerusalem from Italy in 1488, observed: “The synagogue here is built on columns; it is long, narrow, and dark, the light

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9 The same phenomenon occurred among the Christians. Tamer el-Leithy explains the reasons why Coptic churches in 14<sup>th</sup> century were smaller than former periods “due to the dwindling community, but possibly also to attempts to maintain a lower profile” (el-Leithy, *Sufis* [supra, n. 2], p. 80).

10 Unfortunately, the synagogue was completely destroyed recently during the Syrian civil war (May 2014).

11 On the Karaite Synagogue of Jerusalem see D. Cassuto, ‘Karaite Synagogues of Jerusalem and Cairo’, *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, Leiden 2010, II, pp. 114–121.

entering only by the door.”<sup>12</sup> The lack of windows was an architectural feature that accentuated more than any other the tendency to conceal what happened within the synagogue from the eyes of the Muslim public.

Not every synagogue was able to adopt this style, however. Some were large and prominent structures that stood out in their surroundings. One of the ways in which the Jewish community sought to protect such buildings was asserting that they had been erected prior to the Muslim conquest and could thus be legally maintained. This claim was valid in certain cases, some synagogues surviving from the pre-Muslim period. Many others, however, were in fact new edifices. One of the interesting phenomena in the Jewish folklore of Muslim countries is the number of legends concerning the establishment of synagogues. Many of these attribute various synagogues to biblical or rabbinic figures. Thus, for example, the aforementioned Jobar synagogue, is said to have been founded by Elijah the prophet. According to another local tradition, it was built by the *Tanna* R. Eleazar b. ‘Arakh. Inter alia, these legends reflect the need to tie the synagogue to a historical narrative that would safeguard it against Muslim attack.

The Jews not only attached stories to synagogues but also took practical steps to create the impression that they were ancient structures by affixing forged inscriptions bearing an early date to them. Thus, for example, the well-known historian al-Maqrīzī depicts one of the Karaite synagogues in Fustāt:

The al-Mašāṣah synagogue: The Jews adorned this synagogue ... They claimed (*wa-yaz’umūna*) that it was renovated in the caliphate of Emir of the believers, ‘Umar ibn Al-Khaṭṭāb, of blessed memory ... it was built in 315 of Alexander [4 c.e.] which is around 621 years before [the rise of] Islam. The Jews claim that this synagogue was the abode of Elijah the prophet.<sup>13</sup>

Al-Maqrīzī did not attribute much credibility to the tradition he had heard from the Jews of Cairo about the time at which the synagogue had been erected. He also refers to a foundation inscription on the Shāmiyīn synagogue in Fustāt – the well-known Ben-Ezra synagogue in which the Genizah was discovered:<sup>14</sup>

This synagogue is very close to the Qaṣr al-Shamī district in the city of Cairo. It is ancient. An inscription written in Hebrew script carved in wood over its gate states that

12 E.N Adler (ed.), *Jewish Travelers: A Treasury of Travelogues from 9 Centuries*, New York 1966, p. 235.

13 Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā’iz wa-l-Itibār bi-dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-l-Āthār*, Bulak 1270 h, II, p. 271.

14 On the Ben-Ezra Synagogue see R. J. H. Gottheil, ‘An Eleventh-Century Document Concerning a Cairo Synagogue’, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Old Series, 19 (1907), pp. 467–539; P. Lambert (ed.), *Fortifications and the Synagogue: The Fortress of Babylon and the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Cairo*, Montreal 1994; D. Cassuto, ‘Ben-Ezra Synagogue’, *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, Leiden 2010, I, pp. 379–386.

it was erected in 336 of Alexander, around 450 years before the destruction of the Second Temple that was razed by Titus, around 600 years before the Hegira.<sup>15</sup>

The inscription ascribes the date of the synagogue to 336 Sel. – i. e., 25 B.C.E. – the dating of the destruction of the Temple obviously being false.

Wood carvings were a conventional form of inscription in Egypt, continuing an earlier tradition from the Byzantine period. The Jews also employed this technique in adorning their synagogues. Several woodcarved inscriptions from the Ben-Ezra synagogue have been preserved.<sup>16</sup> Although that to which al-Maqrīzī alludes no longer exists, we have no reason to doubt his word. Apparently regarding it as false, he even summarizes his detailed survey of synagogue with the assertion that **all** those of which had he spoken were new, having been erected after the rise of Islam – and were thus in violation of the laws of Dhimmihood.

The strategies I have outlined so far were designed to hide the goings on of the synagogue from the hostile gaze of Muslim neighbours and create the impression of antiquity that would gain them legal protection. Synagogue are not museums, however, their everyday use meant that they required repair and renovation from time to time. As we have seen, this was a sensitive issue. Several legal authorities categorically forbade it and also some Jewish leaders used from time to time their position to prevent it.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, as time passed, Jews sometimes had no recourse other than to strengthen structures, rebuild walls, repair roofs, etc. Each of these activities required permission of the relevant authorities.

An important collection of this type of permit has been preserved in the archive of the Jewish community in Cairo. While we are all familiar with the Cairo Genizah and its significance for studying medieval Eastern Jewry, the Cairo community also possessed an organized archive of important documents, primarily from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.<sup>18</sup> Although we do not know where the originals are today, the central archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP) in Jerusalem possess facsimiles of some of these. *Inter alia*, they contain legal permits recognizing the right of Jewish ownership and renovation of synagogues in Cairo. Some have been published by Richard Gottheil, who saw

15 Al-Maqrīzī, *Ibid.*

16 E. N. Adler, *Jews in Many Lands*, Philadelphia 1905, p. 30; B. Richler, 'Ketovot Ḥadashot mi-Bet ha-Keneset shel ha-Yerusahlmim be-Fuṣṭaṭ', *'Aleī Sefer*, 5 (1977/78), pp. 182–185.

17 D. Arad, *The Musta'rib Jews in Syria, Palestine and Egypt: 1330–1700*, PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2013 [Hebrew], p. 278.

18 On this collection see Y. Ben Ze'eb, 'Archion ha-Qehila ha-Yehudit be-Qahir', *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1 (1952), pp. 438–452; Idem, 'The Hebrew Documents from the Cairo Community Archive', *Sefunot*, 9 (1964), pp. 263–293 [Hebrew]; Arad, *Musta'rib Jews* (supra, n. 17), pp. 6–7.

them at the beginning of the twentieth century in Cairo.<sup>19</sup> One of these indicates that in 878/1473, during the reign of Qāyṭbāy, a Cairo Jew asked the authorities for permission to repair the ancient synagogues in Fuṣṭāṭ. The supreme Ḥanafī qadī sent qadis and engineers to investigate the site and found that two of the synagogues were in danger of collapsing. He thus ruled that repairs were imperative, appointing an inspector to make sure that the Jews did not exceed what was permitted.<sup>20</sup> At least two documents from the Mamluk period (also survived in the Cairo collection) give permission for renovation work to be carried out on synagogues – One from 834h (1430/1) records the ruling of the Shar‘ī court permitting repairs to be carried out on two synagogues in Fuṣṭāṭ – the Shāmī and the ‘Irāqī – and the ancient synagogue in Zuwailah neighbourhood. The qadis based their decision on ancient documents submitted to them by the heads of the Jewish community, two from the Fatimid period,<sup>21</sup> and another document from the time of Sultan Qalāwūn’s reign (726/1325).<sup>22</sup> Another, written in 859 (1454/5), also asserts the Jews’ right to make repairs to the three synagogues we have mentioned, during the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Sayf al-Dīn Ināl, to which is appended another from 990 (1582/3).<sup>23</sup> During Ināl’s rule, the Karaite community also asked – and gained – permission to repair its two synagogues in Cairo and Fuṣṭāṭ. A copy of this permit, issued on 18 January 1456, is preserved in the Karaite community’s archive in Cairo.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Clothing

As is well known, the laws of Dhimmihood included the obligation to distinguish oneself outwardly from Muslims. A plethora of sources from the Fatimid and Ayyūbid periods – primarily lists of dowries and other sources – nonetheless prove that Jews regularly failed to comply with this rule, dressing much like their Muslim neighbours through the “Classical Genizah” period (10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries),

19 Gottheil, *An Eleventh-Century Document* (supra, n. 14); Idem, ‘A Document of the Fifteenth Century Concerning Two Synagogues of the Jews in Old Cairo’, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 18 (1927), pp. 131–152.

20 Gottheil, Document.

21 One of them is from 400 h (1009/10) and the second is from 429 h (1037/8).

22 Cairo Community Archive [hereinafter: CCA], No. 6.

23 CCA 3.

24 This permit was been published by Gottheil (R. J. H. Gottheil, ‘Dhimmi and Muslims in Egypt’, *Old Testament and Semitic Studies in Memory of William Rainey Harper*, II, Chicago 1908, pp. 351–414), and again, in revised version by Richards (Dhimmi Problems, supra no. 7, pp. 133–157). For a concise description of this document see idem, ‘Arabic Documents from the Karaite Community in Cairo’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 15 (1972), pp. 120–121.

as well as through the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.<sup>25</sup> While urban and village Muslims naturally differed in their dress, the various classes also being distinguished by their clothing, Jews and Muslims from the same socioeconomic class dressed in precisely the same fashion. A greater sensitivity to the problem of distinguishing between Dhimmis and Muslims in the public realm developed, however, during the Mamluk period. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, a new stipulation was introduced obligating each community to wear a different colour – Christians wearing blue headcoverings, Jews yellow, and Samaritans red. In the absence of personal diaries and other “ego-documents” of Jews in the Mamluk state it is very hard to know what did the Jews feel regarding this rule. It seems that the answer could not be independent from the researcher’s agenda. Nonetheless, I will venture to assume they did not object particularly to this imposition, regarding it as part of the regulation of the social order. Muslim society itself contained various groups of higher class than the masses who marked themselves off by their dress. As Leo Aryeh Mayer observes “In the Mamluk state each subject and each stranger had a clear place on the social ladder, each class having its own particular clothing, unique titles, and special rights.”<sup>26</sup> To a certain extent, each group adopted the colour assigned to them as a mark of identity and sign of self-definition. One of the expressions of this is found until today amongst the Samaritans, whose use of red head coverings for ritual apparel is very striking.

In contrast to the issue of building or renovating synagogues, the legal restrictions concerning clothing had little adverse effect on Jewish life under the Mamluks. We must nevertheless ask whether the Jewish community was always careful in relation to these. Did they ensure that they never wore clothing that would lead them to be mistaken for Muslims, or did they comply mainly in the large cities where they were visible to the authorities? In light of the lack of local sources on this question, we have to rely on sources written by foreigners.

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25 The most prominent researcher who looked after the (female) Jewish dress under Muslim rule in Middle Ages is Yedida Kalfon Stillman. Her researches show how much deep were Jewish women assimilated in the local fashion. See, for example: Y. Kalfon Stillman, ‘The Wardrobe of a Jewish Bride in Medieval Egypt’, *Folklore Research Center Studies*, 4 (1974), pp. 297–304; Idem, ‘The Importance of the Cairo Geniza Manuscripts for the History of Medieval Female Attire’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 7 (1976), pp. 579–589; Idem, “Cover her Face”: Jewish Women and Veiling in Islamic Civilisation’, in: T. Parfitt (ed.), *Israel and Ishmael; Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, New York 2000, pp. 13–31. See also Ora Molad-Vaza, *Clothing in the Mediterranean Jewish Society as Reflected in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza, Between the Middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century and the Middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century*, PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2010 (see esp. pp. 342–343).

26 L. A. Mayer, “Emdat ha-Yehudim bi-mey ha-Mamluqim”, in: J. N Epstein et al. (eds.), *Sefer Magnes*, Jerusalem 1938, p. 166.

One of the most important sources for the Jewish life in the late Mamluk period is a travelogue written by Meshullam from Volterra, an Italian Jewish banker. Blessed with a large measure of curiosity, he graphically recorded in detail the way of life in the cities and villages he visited in Egypt and Palestine in the 1480s. On one occasion, he describes his encounter with the Sultan Qāyṭbāy, to whom he relates very positively. After visiting Alexandria and Cairo, he turned northwards to Jerusalem. The routes were dangerous and he depicts how the Bedouin attacked and sought to plunder the caravan in which he was travelling. He was also disturbed, however, by the taxes he had to pay at various points in order to proceed. As they continued, the Jewish band thus undertook to disguise themselves:

“We left Bilibis [Bilbeis] on Sunday, the 13<sup>th</sup>... We entered the desert, and all the way wore white turbans on our heads<sup>28</sup> like Ishmaelites or Turks, with the permission of the chief of the caravan, although he knew<sup>29</sup> that we were Jews, because Jews and foreigners pay a heavy tax, and although the people of the place spoke with me and I could not understand their language, they thought that I was an inhabitant of Turkey because all my ways were like their ways. The Turks and the Ishmaelites have the same faith, and speak a different language, and do not understand each other”.<sup>30</sup>

Here, the Jews do not seem overly concerned about their safety. The Bedouin were attacking caravans without regard to religion, race, or gender. Their greater preoccupation was with the high rate of tax imposed on them.<sup>31</sup> In order to avoid paying it, they disguised themselves as Muslims by wearing white turbans. The fact that they did not speak Arabic aroused no suspicions for two reasons. The first was that they blended in culturally with Muslim travelers and “sat and ate on the ground and acted exactly like them.”<sup>32</sup> Many Jewish travelers during the Mamluk period wondered at the Eastern custom of sitting on the ground to eat. Meshullam gives us a detailed picture of Eastern eating habits, which he regarded with great disgust:

27 13.7.1481.

28 In the origin: עם העמימילו לבן בראשנו. A. Yaari explains that this is an Italian form of the Arabic word عمامة, turban (A. Yaari [ed.], *Masa' Meshulam mi-Voltera be-Ereṣ Israel bi-Shnat [5]241 (1481)*, Jerusalem 1948, p. 61, n. 5).

29 Yaari: היו יודעים (they knew).

30 Adler, *Jewish Travelers* (supra, n.12), p. 176. Adler's edition is based on the Hebrew original in: J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Massaoth: A Collection of Itineraries by Jewish Travelers to Palestine, Syria and Egypt and Other Countries*, New York 1926.

31 On Meshullam's feelings towards the taxes policy of the Mamluks, see also: E. Weber, *Traveling through Text: Message and Method in Late Medieval Pilgrimage Accounts*, New York 2005, p. 121.

32 According to Yaari's version: בהיות כי הייתי יושב ואוכל בארץ וכל המעשים הייתי עושה כמעשיהם (Yaari, *ibid*, p. 61). In Eisenstein's version there is only: כי כל המעשים הייתי עושה כמעשיהם: and the beginning of the sentence is lacked.

And the Mameluke also wears clean clothes, but in their feeding they are pigs. They sit on the ground or the carpet or a linen box without a cover. They put neither a cloth nor knife nor salt on the table, they all eat out of one vessel, both servants and master, they eat with their fingers...<sup>33</sup>

Despite his aversion, Meshullam took part in the Muslim meal and thus failed to arouse any suspicions that he might be a Jew. The second reason why not knowing Arabic did not constitute a problem lay in the fact that Turkish Muslims did not speak the language themselves. A week later, on July 18, we find Meshullam once again presenting himself before a Mamluk official as a non-Arabic-speaking Turk:

At midnight, the head of the customs came to me and asked me in Arabic, but I did not know what to reply, but the head of the caravan quickly said: 'Do not speak to him for he does not understand your language, as he is a Turk,' and so the Moslems did not get to know that I was a Jew.<sup>34</sup>

Under such circumstances, Jews could dress like Muslims in order not to be identified. The atmosphere Meshullam depicts is one of great tolerance. The caravan master and his men display no reservations regarding Jews disguising themselves as Muslims, participating in the subterfuge themselves. Sometimes, the Muslims would suggest such a plan to the Jews travelling with them. When Meshullam and his company arrived at Katia, an important post on the caravan route in the northern Sinai, on the way leading to Gaza from Egypt, the Jewish group had to stop the caravan in order not to violate the sabbath. An armed group of Turks arrived later on the scene and the Jews sought to join them in order to reach Gaza safely. The emir of Katia made sure that the Turks took them under their wing because he had made friends with one of the Jewish group. The master of the Armed Turks' caravan agreed but added a condition:

The noble lord, the head of the caravan, replied that we should wear a white sash [=turban] like the Turks and Moslems, and fear nobody, for he would be responsible, and please God he would bring us safe to our destination.<sup>35</sup>

Just how common was the practice of wearing Muslim dress in order to obtain protection and avoid paying extortionate tolls? Did the Jewish leadership approve of such conduct and permit the risks it entailed? Did some object to it and seek to prevent it? Although we have no sources that give us a clear answer to this question, a document from the Shar'ī court in Jerusalem maybe sheds light on different views regarding the matter. It deals with a Karaite Jew named Suleiman who wore a turban in the manner of the Muslims. His friend, Barakāt, seeking to

33 Adler, *Jewish Travelers* (supra, n. 12), p. 169.

34 *Ibid.*, p, 178.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 177–178.

save him from punishment, remarked on his habit to him, to which Suleiman replied with a blow:

Barakāt b. Ibrāhīm, the Karaite Jew sued Suleiman b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz the Karaite Jew for striking him because he, Barakāt, had said to Suleiman when he saw him wearing a turban that Jews were forbidden to do so. Suleiman, the defendant, denied this, and the plaintiff, Barakāt, could bring no proof. The qadi offered Suleiman the chance to swear that he had not worn a turban or struck Suleiman but he only swore that he had not struck him. The qadi asked him three times to swear but he refused. When it became clear that he had indeed worn a turban, it was determined that he must be punished and he was sentenced by the court.<sup>36</sup>

Up until now, we have addressed the dangers involved in disguising oneself as a Muslim. While wearing Muslim clothing could be a distinct advantage, giving Jewish travellers and city dwellers a sense of security, it also carried great risks if the subterfuge was discovered. In addition to this aspect, however, we must also address the religious implications. In a society in which the dress code also symbolized one’s religious affiliation, could the adoption of Muslim apparel signify to the person wearing it and others that he recognized Islam? In other words, was there a halakhic issue involved in a Jew dressing as a Muslim? This question was discussed by the great sixteenth-century Egyptian scholar, R. David Ibn Zimra [Radbaz]. Born in Spain in 1479, Radbaz fled to Palestine in the wake of the expulsion, thence moving to Cairo. There he served as the head of the local court during the last years of the Mamluk rule in Egypt, continuing to serve as a judge into his fifties and then moved back to Jerusalem. His misfortunes followed him there, as well as the Ottoman authorities jailed him on the charge that he had no legal permit to serve as a judge.<sup>37</sup> Eventually, he migrated to Safed, where he died at the age of 95.<sup>38</sup> A question that Radbaz was asked regarding this issue follows. The question is not dated, so we cannot know whether it belongs to the end of the Mamluk period or the beginning of the Ottoman period:

**Question:** You asked of me, those who go up to the land of Israel, that the Jews pay such and such a “protection toll” for every person. Is it permitted to change one’s dress so that we will not be thought to be a Jew and therefore avoid paying the toll?

36 A. Cohen and E. Ben-Shimon (Simon)-Pikali, *Jews in the Moslem Religious Court*, Vol. I [The 16<sup>th</sup> Century], Jerusalem 1993, p. 151 [Hebrew]. The document was written in the Jerusalem court in 4. 4. 1585.

37 On the lack of official approval for Jewish scholars to serve as judges in the Ottoman period, see J. R. Hacker, ‘Jewish Autonomy in the Ottoman Empire: Its Scope and Limits, Jewish Courts from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries’, A. Levy (ed.), *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, Princeton 1994, pp. 153–202.

38 On Radbaz see I. M. Goldman, *The Life and Times of Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra*, New York 1970.



**Answer:** Because what is involved is merely financial loss, it is forbidden to a Jew to dress like an idolater.<sup>39</sup> If it is apparel that is not distinctive to the idolaters but is common to all travelers, it is permitted. But the wearing of a white turban or such like, which is distinctive to the idolaters, is forbidden.<sup>40</sup>

What to Meshullam of Volterra and others was a simple matter was thus an act that Ibn Zimra categorically forbade. What were the reasons for such a ruling? His answer provides us with three grounds:

**One reason** is that it is *hillul hashem* (desecration of the Name), because it is possible that he may be recognized and say that he has converted for monetary gain. **Moreover**, sometimes it entails a threat to religion, such as we have seen with our own eyes on several occasions. **Likewise**, he makes himself as though a heretic in order to avoid the toll ...<sup>41</sup>

The Jewish regulations regarding dress thus turn into a mirror of the Muslim dress code. The fact that religious law prohibited a Jew from wearing a white turban turned the latter into a religious artifact, being forbidden by Halacha in any case because it could be construed as indicating the acceptance of heresy. Such an act was likely to arouse Muslim disdain for a Jew who converted not out of belief but for despicable reasons – “converted for monetary gain” (“ההלירי דתו מפני” (הממון)). As is well known, numerous descriptions of conversion to Islam portray the convert wearing typical Muslim clothing to signify the beginning of his road in the new religion. The phrase “taking the turban” in fact designates conversion to Islam. One of the most interesting of examples is that of Shabbtai Zvi in the Sultan’s palace wearing a white turban on his head. The day on which he converted, which his followers celebrated each year on its anniversary, is referred to in Sabbatean literature as *יום המצנפת* (the day of the turban). In their eyes, the white turban represents the headdress of the high priest in the temple, Shabbtai Zvi thus being made privy to profound mystical secrets when he donned it. The wearing of a turban could thus never be perceived as an innocent act merely designed to escape from paying a high toll but rather it carried explicitly religious associations.

Did the prohibition still carry force when risk to life was involved? We know that according to the Halacha Jew must sacrifice his life only if given no choice but to shed blood, worship idols, or engage in forbidden sexual relations. As we know, Islam is not considered to be idolatry. Ibn Zimra ruled that: “But where

39 עכ"ל"ם. The word here is not reflecting halachic decision of Radbaz which considers Muslim as Idol worshippers, but rather reflects changes made by the printers of Radbaz' responsa, which been published under the supervision of the Christian censorship.

40 R. David Ibn Abi Zimra, *Shut ha-Radbaz*, Warsaw 1882, Vol. IV, § 65.

41 Ibid.

there is risk to life, a person may change his clothing.”<sup>42</sup> Thus while a Jew could not disguise himself as Muslim to avoid paying a high toll, where his life might be in danger – if he was forced to convert, for example – he could do so. Anyone familiar with Talmudic Halacha will raise a serious objection at this point. Although only the three “cardinal sins” mentioned above involve sacrificing one’s life, R. Yoḥanan expresses an alternative opinion in the Talmud: – אבל בפרהסיא – אבל בפרהסיא ואל יעבור אפילו מצוה קלה יהרג ואל יעבור (“in public one must be martyred even for a minor precept rather than violate it”). What constitutes a “minor precept”? The Talmud gives an example: אפילו לשנויי ערקתא דמסאנא (“Even to change one’s shoe strap”).<sup>43</sup> In other words, when Judaism is being persecuted, even the most insignificant religious custom or habit must be defended at all costs in order to ensure its survival as whole – even to the point of fashion. Radbaz gives an innovative answer to this objection: no prohibition at all exists against pretending to be a Muslim at a time of danger. The Talmudic prohibition only deals with a Jew who is being persecuted by Gentiles who know he is a Jew and force him to change part of his clothing. If a Jew is compelled to wear a white turban to demonstrate his acceptance of the ruling religion, he is obligated to give his life and refuse to do so. If, however, he personally chooses to disguise himself as a Muslim in order to save himself, no prohibition exists against doing so.

Although the use of *taqiyyah* (dissimulation) was not so common in the *sunnī* regions,<sup>44</sup> we can find examples of adopting this praxis among religious minorities in the Mamluk state, such as the Druzes.<sup>45</sup> We should not be surprised that the Jewish community adopted the same strategy in specific cases. But although Maimonides (1138–1204) had already permitted the Jews in Morocco to act in this way,<sup>46</sup> Radbaz permits a Jew to disguise himself as a Muslim but not to actively represent himself as one:

42 Ibid.

43 BT Sanhedrin, 74a.

44 On *taqiyyah* in the *sunnī* world see D. Stewart, ‘Morisco Taqiyah and the Islamic Discipline of Dissimulation’, *Al-Qantara*, 34 (2013), pp. 437–488, esp. pp. 448–454. For references to latest researches on *taqiyyah*, see Ibid., p. 448, n. 25.

45 See: A. Layish, ‘Taqiyya among the Druzes’, *Asian and African Studies*, 19 (1985), pp. 245–281. See esp. the discussion on the opinion of ‘Abd Allāh al-Tanūkhī, a Druze sage (d. 1480), regarding this issue (ibid., pp. 251–257).

46 In his *Iggeret ha-Shmad* (a letter on apostasy). The “true” opinion of Maimonides in this matter was a subject for an important debate among scholars. See H. Soloveitchik, ‘Maimonides’ “Iggeret HaShemad”: Law & Rhetoric’, L. Lamdan (ed.), *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume*, New York 1980, pp. 281–319; *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership* (A. S. Halkin edition), with discussions by D. Hartman, Philadelphia 1985, pp. 46–90. On this debate see also Y. Lorberbaum and H. Shapira, ‘Maimonides’ *Epistle on Martyrdom* in the Light of Legal Philosophy’, *dine Israel*, 25 (2008), pp. 123–169.

Even in a place of danger it is not permissible to say that you are an idolater. And even if they ask you, you must say: "I am a Jew," and trust in God. Because if a person says that he is an idolater, he acknowledges their religion in order not to be killed ... In this respect many have erred in the persecution in Portugal,<sup>47</sup> thinking that if they said that they were idolaters but had not been baptized they were not obligated to give their lives. May God atone for us and not bring us into temptation. Amen.<sup>48</sup>

In the absence of sources describing the stance taken by the native Jewish populace in the Mamluk state, we must rely on documents written by Jews from outside it – i.e., Jews from Christian Europe. Who is more likely to better reflect the views of the local Jewish community in Egypt and Syria – the Italian Meshullam, who had no problem disguising himself as a Muslim, or the Sephardi Ibn Zimra who regarded such an act as categorically forbidden? I conjecture that it was Meshullam, who may have gotten the idea from local Jews. Meshullam was free from complexes and guilt feelings which characterized the Sephardi Jews, and did not see a problem in blurring the visual borders between Jews and non-Jews. We do not have any clear proof from which origin was the inquirer who asked Radbaz this question, but we should assume that he was a Jewish migrant. The local Arabic-speakers Jews probably had no ideological problem with using such a disguise. On the contrary – as people who were aware the practice of *taqiyyah*, they could see it as a clever subterfuge to avoid paying a high toll. I assume that the inquirer was a migrant who had encountered the local norm of wearing Muslim dress and wondered whether it was a halakhically-valid code of behaviour. As I have demonstrated in my doctoral dissertation, Ibn Zimra's responsa contain *dozens* of questions of this type, in which he is asked by migrants whether a local practice "in this kingdom" ("במלכות הזו") is permissible.<sup>49</sup>

The issue we have just discussed constitutes a good example of the fact that when we study religious minorities in the Mamluk period we must avoid assuming groups to be homogenous and monolithic. The Jewish society under the Mamluk rule contained many subgroups. It was divided not only to the Rabbanite and Karaite sects but also to veterans and migrants, and the migrants themselves were a heterogenic group. Throughout this period, and particularly in late fifteenth century, mass waves of Jewish migrants arrived in the kingdom, mainly from the Spanish kingdom (including Sicily). Their views, both regarding internal Jewish affairs and matters relating to Jewish relations with the authorities, frequently differed from the veteran local Jewish populace. The latter were less concerned with establishing a clear divide between Jews and Muslims.

47 Radbaz means here to the events in Portugal in 1497, when all the Jews in the country forced to convert to Christianity.

48 R. David Ibn Abi Zimra, *Shut ha-Radbaz*, Ibid.

49 Arad, *Must'a'rib Jews* (supra, n. 17), pp. 120–123.

Popular Jewish folklore has no qualms about recounting that Maimonides succeeded in fooling Muslims into thinking that he was their compatriot.<sup>50</sup> Like the remainder of the Sephardi refugees, however, Ibn Zimra came from a very different cultural climate. The Jews who were expelled from Spain and Portugal carried a heavy burden of guilt concerning the high rate of conversion to Christianity amongst their brethren.<sup>51</sup> This makes sense of Ibn Zimra's stringency.

### 3. Inheritance

During the Fatimid period, the authorities appear not to have intervened in the laws of inheritance practiced by minorities. With the introduction of the Ayyūbid dynasty, however, Saladin raised the question of whether the Muslim law in this regard should be imposed on Dhimmis. The Mālikī and Shāfi'ī scholars ruled that these laws were not applicable to Dhimmis and permitted the heads of the various religious communities to administer their own laws of inheritance,<sup>52</sup> in exchange for a commission to be paid to the government inheritance authority (*dīwān al-mawārith*). The minorities continued to pay a certain percentage of the inheritance to the *dīwān* during all the Mamluk period,<sup>53</sup> but in the early Mamluk period they still usually had the right to take care of the deceased's inheritances by themselves. In the fourteenth century, however, the contrary opinion was adopted, and a ruling was issued in 1354 placing all minority inheritance issues under the jurisdiction of the government authority.<sup>54</sup>

We referred earlier to the attacks against non-Muslims that took place that year. According to various chronicles, the Dhimmihood laws were revalidated, and the heads of the non-Muslim groups were summoned to the Sultan's palace and ordered to swear that their communities would comply with the accepted

50 See D. S. Margoliouth, 'The Legend of the Apostasy of Maimonides', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, O.S., 13 (1901), pp. 539–541; B. Lewis, 'Ever be-Sifrut 'Arav, I: Te'udot 'Arviyot 'Al ha-Rambam', *Mešudah*, 3–4 (1945), pp. 171–180; A. Mazor, 'Maimonides' conversion to Islam: New Evidence', *Pe'amim*, 110 (2007), pp. 5–8 [Hebrew].

51 See J. Hacker, "If We have Forgotten the Name of Our God" (Psalm 44:21): Interpretation in Light of the Realities in Medieval Spain, *Zion*, 52 (1992), pp. 247–274 [Hebrew].

52 Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah al-Kubrā*, Cairo 1906, Vol. IV, p. 47; Ashtor, *History* (supra, n. 7), p. 223.

53 On the financial revenue form the *mawārith* in Egypt at the Ayyūbid and Mamluk periods see H. Rabbie, *The Financial System of Egypt A.H 564–741/A.D 1169–1341*, London 1972, pp. 127–132.

54 On the inheritance laws of 1354 as a way for preventing the Christian legal subterfuge of "single-generation conversion" which gave the converts the option to transfer properties to their non-Muslims relatives, see T. el-Leithy, *Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D.*, PhD Dissertation, Princeton University 2005. pp. 96–97.

restrictions. The latter were now supplemented by new stipulations which included a prohibition against any Dhimmi serving in an official capacity even if he had converted to Islam and one against the erection of buildings standing taller than Muslim edifices. The most damaging addition, however, was that related to the laws of inheritance. From then on, the inheritance belonging to deceased Christians, Jews, and Samaritans was frozen until their heirs could prove that they were eligible to inherit in accordance with Muslim law. Any estate without an heir would be transferred to the Sultan's treasury. This constituted a serious impingement on the status of Dhimmis. The extent to which the law was enforced throughout the Mamluk period is a complicated historical problem we cannot discuss here. What is of interest to us at present is the fact that it compelled Jews and Christians alike to find strategies to deal with it.

The most prevalent method adopted was use of the Islamic *waqf*. Consecrating property prevented its transfer to the authorities, guaranteeing that it remained in the family's hands (*waqf ahli*, *waqf dhurri*) or community's hands (*waqf khayri*). During the Mamluk period, the establishment of a *waqf*, both familial and communal, was a common practice amongst the Jewish community. Nearly twenty *waqf* deeds from the Mamluk period had been preserved in the Archive of the Rabbanite Community in Cairo.<sup>55</sup> Most of them are not accessible today, but we can learn about their content from an Arabic-language hand-written catalogue made in the 1930's. For example, one of the documents teaches us that on 12<sup>th</sup> of Sha'bān 838 (13/3/1435) a Jew donated a house in the midwife alley, an alley in the Jewish Neighborhood in Cairo, in front of the synagogue. The *waqf* deed was made in a Muslim court and not in a rabbinic court.<sup>56</sup> Consecration of property in general and at the time of writing a will before death in particular was a well-known custom in the Jewish community. What innovation thus occurred during the Mamluk period? Comparison of the "classic Genizah" documents (1000–1250) and those from the "later Genizah" – i. e., from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods – clearly demonstrates that an essential change took place in the latter. In contrast to the Fatimid and Ayyūbid periods, in which consecrations were made in accordance with Halakhah, during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods they were made in accordance with the Muslim *waqf* laws. These were performed not – or at least not only – before a Jewish court but before a Shar'ī court.

Haim Gerber discussed at length the difference between the characters of the Jewish *waqfs* in the classic Genizah, as reflected in Gil's corpus,<sup>57</sup> and the Jewish

55 CCA 5, 9, 11, 31, 33, 39, 42, 47, 51, 52, 61, 62, 64, 73, 78, 97, 226.

56 CCA 64. The description in the catalogue is very concise: حجة وقف – منزل كائن بحارة زويلة بزقاق القابلة: تجاة كنيس اليهود.

57 M. Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza*, Leiden 1976.

*waqfs* in the Ottoman Empire, based on the Ottoman archives and the Jewish responsa literature.<sup>58</sup> He proved that the Jewish endowments in the Fatimid and Ayyūbid periods were not actually a legal Muslim *waqf*, and had no validity, most of the time, according to the Muslim law, while the Jewish endowments in the Ottoman Empire were a proper Islamic *waqf*. In his explanation for this difference, he focuses on the cultural and social aspects:

“Analysis of the Genizah documents can also serve as an important basis for comparison between two Jewish societies in terms of their assimilation into the culture of the wider society... Outwardly it is a formalistic and legalistic discussion, but it is really a cultural discussion... The unavoidable general conclusion from this brief discussion is that the Genizah documents that call themselves “*waqf*” are in fact not Muslim vakif at all, but only Jewish hekdesch, with a certain cultural resemblance to the Muslim Vakif. Thus, the Genizah society of Medieval Egypt, famous for being intimately connected with the surrounding society, fall much short of this when we read their documentation meticulously enough. By comparison, we shall see that, in this respect at least, the level of assimilation of Ottoman Jewry in their wider society was considerably higher.”<sup>59</sup>

The cultural aspect can help us to sharpen the exact context of the Jewish activity of establishing endowments in the Muslim lands, but it cannot give us a full explanation for the difference between the periods. Moreover, the phenomenon of establishing a Jewish *waqf* according to the Muslim law did not appear in the Ottoman period but rather in the Mamluk period, when the cultural relations between Jews and Muslims had different dimensions. There is no other choice than to offer a political and legal explanation. We have to assume that this development was a consequence of the change in the laws of inheritance introduced in the fourteenth century.

Eliyahu Ashtor explained the growth of the Dhimmi’s *waqfs* in the late Mamluk period as a result of the authority’s legislation.<sup>60</sup> His discussion on the Jewish *waqfs* in the Mamluk periods incurred a slight criticism by Gerber, who noted that Ashtor’s sources (mainly responsa texts) on the Jewish endowments

58 H. Gerber, *Crossing Borders: Jews and Muslims in Ottoman Law, Economy and Society*, Istanbul 2008, pp. 159–180. See Also his Hebrew Article: H. Gerber, ‘The Jews and the Wakf in the Ottoman Empire’, *Sefunot*, N.S. 17 (1983), pp. 105–131.

59 Gerber, *Ibid.*, pp. 160–162.

60 In his words: "1438-ו 1354 הירדשה משנת 1354-ו 1438" (Ashtor, history [supra, n. 7], p. 233). Ashtor proves well the linkage between the Jewish *awqāf* in the Mamluk and early Ottoman periods and the Muslim legislation (*Ibid.*, pp. 221–234). The weak link in his discussion is the absence of reference to the legal difference between the Jewish endowments of the Fatimid and Ayyūbid periods and that of the Mamluk period. On Ashtor claim concerning the growth of the endowments in the Mamluk period, compare the same argument by Hassanein Rabie, which refers to the whole population in the Mamluk state: “It is noteworthy that the unfair seizure of deceased persons’ property, in the presence of heirs, was one of the reasons for the growth of the *awqāf*” (Rabbie, Financial Revenue [supra, n. 53], pp. 131–132).

which were established in the form of the Muslim *waqfs*, were indeed from the beginning of the Ottoman period.<sup>61</sup> However, Ashtor is still right in his conclusion that this process began in the Mamluk period. The Cairo community archive documents, which Ashtor did not use here, prove with no doubts that those endowments were made according the Muslim law. For example, one of the stipulations of the Muslim laws is that a *waqf* deed (*waqfiyyah*) must determine all the beneficiaries of the endowment, and the last beneficiary in the list must be a Muslim institution. The Cairo Archive documents are following this rule. For example, a *waqfiyyah* from 878 (1473/4) tells that Ṣarfah bint Mūsā ibn Ibrāhīm, a Rabbanite Jewess, consecrated a property in Cairo, for the purpose that its profit (from the house' rent) will be "for the Jewish poor people who live in Cairo. And if it is impossible, the profit will be spent for the Jewish poor people in Jerusalem. And if it is impossible, the profit will be allocated for the benefit of the *ḥaram* of our Master Ibrāhīm [tomb of the patriarchs, Hebron]."<sup>62</sup> A similar list of beneficiaries appear in a *waqfiyyah* from Jerusalem, written before 860 (1456), but the last beneficiary here was the Dome of the Rock's *waqf* in Jerusalem.<sup>63</sup>

Establishing an endowment in a form of the Muslim *waqf* was therefore the main strategy that adopted by Jews (and Christians) as a reaction to the intolerant inheritance laws of the Mamluks. The Jewish policy against this law was not limited to the change that has been described before. One of the common occasions for a Jew for establishing an endowment was on his deathbed. The Jewish leadership did not want to leave the choice to establish an endowment or not in the hands of a sick man, when he had no heirs. It was too risky and exposed the estate to a danger of expropriation by the government, and as a result, loss of a possible financial resource for the community. In order to avoid confiscation of inheritances, a ruling was introduced, at least in Jerusalem, determining that those dying without heirs were obligated to consecrate their estate to the community, and if they did not do it, the estate was considered, after their death, the community's property.<sup>64</sup> The Italian sage R. Obadiah of Bertinoro<sup>65</sup> criticized strongly this custom. According to his description, the "elders" (the community's leaders) claimed to be the endowment's treasurers. R. Obadiah described a terrible phenomenon he had seen personally as an eye-witness: when a Jewish

61 Gerber, *The Jews and the Wakf* (supra, n. 58), p. 105, n.1.

62 [وقد وقفت التسعة الاسهم المذكورة] على صعاليك اليهود المقيمين بمصر. وإذا تعذر ذلك يصرف الربح على صعاليك اليهود (CCA 52) بالقدس. وإذا تعذر ذلك يخصص الربح لمصلحة حرم سيدنا الخليل

63 Cohen and Simon-Pikaly, *Jews in the Moslem Religious Court* (supra, n. 36), pp. 324–325.

64 On this ruling see E. Rivlin, 'Taqanot ha-'Izvonot bi-Yerushalayim u-ve-Ereṣ Israel', Y. L. Maimon (ed.), *Azkarah, le-Nishmat... R. Abraham Isaac ha-Cohen Kook*, V, Jerusalem 1937, pp. 559–619; Reiner, *Community Leadership* (supra, n. 8).

65 For a list of editions in European languages of his letters from Jerusalem see E. M Hartom and A. David (eds.), *From Italy to Jerusalem: The Letters of Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro from the Land of Israel*, Ramat Gan 1997, pp. 93–94 [Hebrew].

foreigner was sick, all his friends and neighbors were afraid of approaching him and entering his home, because they feared the “elders”, who could accuse them of stealing his assets.<sup>66</sup> The elders’ policy was criticized both by R. Obadiah and by scholars based on his letters (as Heinrich Graetz and more), but interpreted favorably in the light of the Mamluk law and Jewish custom in the Muslim east, mainly by Elchanan Reiner.<sup>67</sup> A place thus exists for systematic study of the strategies the religious minorities adopted to deal with the laws governing Dhimmis and the various restrictions imposed on them. Thus, for instance, we could examine the various ways in which they dealt with the *jizyah* tax and the inability of the poor to pay it. Or we could investigate how they succeeded in raising money for this purpose. An example of such a study is that by Mark Cohen.<sup>68</sup> Although this study focuses on the Fatimid and Ayyūbid periods, it also looks at documents from the fourteenth century. Additional issues may also be addressed, such as the ruling preventing Dhimmis from serving in high offices or the prohibition against performing religious ceremonies in public, etc.

In conclusion, we have discussed the various strategies the Jews in the Mamluk state adopted to deal with the laws of Dhimmihood. These ranged from quiet compliance, lobbying, and exploitation of the Shar‘ī law in their favour all the way through to violation of the laws through subterfuge, disguise, and dissimulation.

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66 This passage appeared in the Neubauer’s German-Hebrew edition (*Jahrbuch für die Geschichte der Juden und des Judenthums*, 3 (1863), p. 214 [Hebrew], p. 251 [German]), but was omitted in his English edition, probably because of the negative image of the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem (A. Neubauer, ‘Selections from Two Letters by Obadja da Bertinoro in the Years 1488 and 1489’, *Miscellany of Hebrew Literature*, I, London 1872, p. 138.) Adler’s edition followed this omission (Adler, *Jewish Travelers* [supra, n. 12], p. 235). The “problematic” passage appears again in recent editions in European languages, as the Italian: A. David and J. Ramón Magdalena, *De Italia a Jerusalén: el viaje de rabí Obadyah de Bertinoro, 1486–1488*, p. 101.

67 Reiner, *Community Leadership* (supra, n. 8). For discussion see also Arad, *Musta’rib Jews* (supra, n. 17), pp. 169–171.

68 M. R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*, Princeton 2005; Idem, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages, An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza*, Princeton 2005.





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Paul B. Fenton

## Sufis and Jews in Mamluk Egypt

At the time of the rise of the Mamluk dynasty, Egypt was in the throes of great social and religious upheaval. External dangers such as the Crusader invasion of 1249–1250 and the Mongol advance in the East threatened its borders. These menaces were in turn compounded by natural catastrophes, such as plague and famine, all of which had a deep impact on the religious psychology of the Muslim population and provoked a spirit of defence, characteristic of societies in crisis. The *'ulamā'* attributed the political and social turmoil to the decline in morality as well as the adulteration of the purity of Islam by the encroachment of foreign elements whose deviations they vehemently denounced. The somewhat tyrannical Mamluk rule was not always to be favourable towards the Jews, who were periodically targets of oppression and exploitation. For example, in 1300 al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (1293–1341) assigned them a yellow headgear, which became their distinctive attire for several centuries.<sup>1</sup> Further restrictions were decreed in 1354 when the size of this head covering was reduced and a special sign was imposed upon them consisting of a piece of wood to be hung around their necks.<sup>2</sup> In 1301, the historical synagogue of Dammūh, a major place of pilgrimage for Jews, and five other prominent places of worship in Fuṣṭāṭ and Cairo were closed and sealed by the chief tax collector by order of the sultan al-Nāṣir in a campaign against Jews and Christians. They were excluded from bath-houses and barred from employment in the *dīwān*. These measures were renewed in 1400.<sup>3</sup> Financial extortion, destruction of *dimmī* houses<sup>4</sup> and other forms of persecu-

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1 Muḥammad Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i al-zuhūr fī waqā'i al-duhūr*, I, part 1, Cairo, 1963, p. 408; Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *al-Nuġūm al-zāhira*, ed. H. Popper, vol. 6, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1915, p. 400, for the year 822H. See also E. Ashtor, *Jews in Syria and Egypt*, vol. I, Jerusalem, 1944, pp. 84–103.

2 Ibn Iyās, *Op. cit.*, p. 551–552; Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 186, for the year 854H. See al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma'rīfat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭṭā', vol. 2, Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1997, pp. 337–340; vol. IV, pp. 198–205, and Ashtor, *Op. cit.*, pp. 303–327.

3 Ibn Iyās, *Op. cit.*, vol. I, part 2, p. 605.

4 *Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 53 in 1502 robbing them of their marble to be reemployed in a *madrasa*, and (p. 235) the proprietor Samuel and his wife were later tortured and killed in 1511.

tions became frequent. Mamluk chronicles from the fifteenth century again relate that during an investigation by the authorities of a Rabbanite synagogue carried out in Fustāṭ in 1442, a supposedly anti-Islamic blasphemy was discovered. This led to partial destruction of the synagogue followed by a general inspection of *ḍimmī* houses of worship ordered by the *ṣayḥ* Amīn al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Aqṣarā'ī. This resulted in their closure or their conversion into mosques and ended with the vigorous enforcement of the disabilities laid down in the pact of 'Umar.<sup>5</sup> In 1456, the issue of non-Muslim houses of worship flared up once more bringing a renewed wave of investigations.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of 1498, the Dam-mūh sanctuary was destroyed by al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qā'itbāy, who, in a show of piety, had the demolition carried out in his presence.<sup>7</sup> The Mamluks were suspicious of philosophy and, on the religious plane, their rigorous legalism resulted in a certain spiritual torpor. This was offset by their favourable attitude towards Sufism which greatly expanded during their reign with the establishment of brotherhoods and the rise of saint cult.<sup>8</sup> Its spread responded to the dissatisfaction felt by numerous Muslims with institutionalized religion and was facilitated by the Mamluk Sultans. The latter, anxious to impose themselves as Muslim sovereigns, followed the example set by their Ayyubid predecessors, in extending their patronage to the mystical brotherhoods.

At the beginning of the Mamluk era, Egypt became a haven for Sufi mystics such as the poet 'Umar Ibn al-Fārid (d. 1235), and the great charismatic figures Abū l-Ḥasan al-Šādīlī (1196–1258), Aḥmad al-Badawī (1199–1276), Abū l-'Abbās al-Mursī (1219–1287)<sup>9</sup> and Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh al-Iskandarī (1259–1309). Many of the Sufis who rose to positions of eminence originated from the Eastern Islamic world and, like the Mamluk rulers to whom they remained loyal, were adherents of the *ḥanafī madḥab*. While the Mamluks showed outward signs of respect towards the Sufis, as a military caste, they had but a superficial interest in their

5 *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 233. See also M. Cohen, 'Jews in the Mamlūk Environment: The Crisis of 1442 (A Geniza Study)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984), pp. 425–448.

6 See R. Gottheil, 'Dhimmis and Moslems in Egypt', in *Old Testament Studies in Memory of William Rainey Harper*, Chicago, 1908, pp. 353–414.

7 Ibn Ilyās, *Op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 385; Ashtor, *Op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 503. On the significance of this synagogue, see J. Kraemer, 'A Jewish Cult of the Saints in Fatimid Egypt', in: M. Barrucand (ed.), *L'Égypte fatimide – son art et son histoire; actes du colloque organisé à Paris, mai 1998*, Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999, pp. 579–601.

8 On Sufism during this period, see E. Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers mamelouks et les premiers ottomans*, Damascus, Institut français de Damas, 1995; Ch. S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous, Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt*, Leyde: E.J. Brill, 1999; and J.-Cl. Garcin, 'Histoire et hagiographie de l'Égypte musulmane à la fin de l'époque mamelouke et au début de l'époque ottomane', in *Hommages à la mémoire de Serge Sauneron (1927–1976)*, vol. II, Cairo, 1979, pp. 287–316.

9 See on him, D.M. Dunlop, 'A Spanish Muslim Saint: Abu'l 'Abbās al-Mursī', *Muslim World* 35 (1945), pp. 181–196.

spiritual values. There were, however, exceptions and chroniclers persistently indicate that many rulers came under the sway of Sufi *šayḥs* whom they venerated and protected. Al-Ẓāhir Baybars (r. 1260–1277) was particularly attached to Aḥmad al-Badawī, the future patron saint of Egypt, and it is said that he even kissed his feet.<sup>10</sup> Sultan al-Muʿayyad Šayḥ (r. 1410–1421) was fond of listening to *samāʿ* and attended the ceremony in the *ḥānqāh* at Siraqus, lavishly rewarding the Sufis for their singing. It is said of the Sultan Ḥuṣqadam (1461–1467) that he and his spouse were enthusiasts of the Sufi way of life and were great admirers of Aḥmad al-Badawī. The Sultan even ordered his own bier to be covered with the patched frock (*muraqqʿa al-fuqarāʿ*) of the Sufis.<sup>11</sup> Of his wife it is related that she adopted the *nisba* al-Aḥmadiyya as a token of her attachment to the saint and ordered that her bier too should be covered with the red flags of his order.<sup>12</sup> The young son of Ġaḥmaq, Sultan Nāšir Muḥammad is even reported to have danced himself during the ceremony.<sup>13</sup> During Qāʿitbāy's reign, 'the Sufi of his age' Ibrāhīm b. 'Alī al-Matbūli (d. 1472) used to come to his court and the Sultan would never decline any petition he submitted.<sup>14</sup> The last Mamluk Sultan Ašraf Qāʿitbāy (1468–1496) followed the Sufi way and believed in the *faqīrs*. He is said to have established a hospice for Qaysuguz Abdāl (d. 1444), a leading figure of the Bektaši order.<sup>15</sup> All, however, were not unanimous in their admiration for Sufism. In 1483 a man who had inherited a copy of Ibn 'Arabī's *Fusus al-ḥikam* demanded that it be burnt 'since Ibn 'Arabī was an infidel worse than the Jews, Christians and idolaters.'<sup>16</sup>

Out of loyalty to the Mamluk sovereigns, Jews would attend official ceremonies which invariably also involved Sufis and therefore they came into direct contact with Muslim mystics. For example, in 1393, Jews took part in a procession with the Sufi brotherhoods who 'were bearing their banners and chanting *dīkr* with the *šayḥs* of the *ḥawānīq*'.<sup>17</sup> During the terrible Bubonic plague of 1419, Sultan al-Muʿayyad Šayḥ, attired in the white woollen *ġubba* of the Sufis, a modest turban, and a woollen wrapper over his shoulders, made a pilgrimage to

10 Quoted by A-M Schimmel, *art. cit.*, p. 371.

11 Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 759. Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, 'Some Glimpses of the Religious Life in Egypt during the Mamluk Period', *Islamic Studies* 4 (1965), 353–392, in part. p. 359.

12 *Idem.*

13 *Idem.*, p. 379.

14 *Idem.*, p. 381.

15 *Idem.*, p. 371–372. Sultan Qāʿitbāy was also a great admirer of al-Badawī and visited his tomb at Tanta.

16 Ibn Iyas, *Badāʿi*, (ed. M. Mustafa, vol. III, Cairo, Matbaʿat Dār al-kutub, 2008, p. 203), quoted by Schimmel, p. 380. See also See M. Fierro, *Op. cit.* and Th. Homerin, 'Sufis and their Detractors in Mamluk Egypt', in F. de Jong and B. Radtke, *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999, pp. 225–247.

17 See Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 518, for the year 796H.

Barqūq's mausoleum as a sign of contrition, surrounded by Sufi dignitaries and mendicants. Jews too were said to have participated in the procession, bearing Torah scrolls.<sup>18</sup> Jews and Sufis took part in a similar procession on the occasion of an *istiḡṣā'* ceremony in 1450.<sup>19</sup> Court favour together with such pompous celebrations would certainly have made an impression on the Jews and may even have induced some to convert, although we have no record of such conversions.<sup>20</sup>

The model set by the Sultans was emulated by the Emirs and the Governors of the Mamluk State, who contributed to the rapid proliferation of Sufi foundations by constructing an impressive number of lodges, hermitages, *zāwiyas*,<sup>21</sup> *ribāts* and *ḥānqāhs* to shelter Sufis. At the same time, they lavished generous allocations upon these buildings in which the mystical adepts would gather around charismatic masters. Their maintenance cost the State enormous sums but this tendency completely transformed Sufism into an institutionalized movement that was also to have an enduring impact on the Jewish populations, especially in the urban centres. It will be seen below that Abraham Maimonides, the leader of Egyptian Jewry, even advocated the establishment of a Jewish type of *ḥānqāh*. In view of their important contribution to the growth of Sufism in Mamluk times it will not be superfluous to dwell on the emergence and development of the *ḥānqāh*.<sup>22</sup>

From a relatively minor institution under the Ayyubids, the *ḥānqāh* was transformed in the Mamluk period into a State institution eventually influential enough to compete with the *madrassa* by later offering instruction for students. Of a grander architectural style than the *zāwiya*, the *ḥānqāh* became a complex with cells, sleeping quarters, a refectory and a library providing all the needs of select Sufis. The latter were expected to take up permanent residence within the *ḥānqāh*, where they fostered an 'orthodox' type of Sufism. Residents had to fulfil requirements of religion and virtue (*adab*). Their practices and rituals conformed in principle with the *sunna* and set them apart from the popular Sufism practiced in *zāwiyas* and *ribāts*. Attendance at rituals was recompensed with regular pay or a maintenance allowance, a fact that popularized the institution. Celibacy was the preferable state of its residents and numerous men and women became full-time adepts by joining *ḥānqāhs*. Not having to earn their living, they

18 Ibn Iyās, *Op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 46.

19 Ibn Iyās, *Op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 282. Cf. also Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 206 for the year 854H.

20 However, Ibn Iyās, *Op. cit.*, vol. III, pp. 273 and 431 mentions the author and poet Šihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Sayrafi b. Šadaqa al-Isrā'īlī (1432–1499), a Šāfi'ī *qāḍī* who taught in the Šayḫūniyya *ḥānqāh*, whose name seems to indicate a Jewish origin.

21 On the *zāwiya* see L. Fernandes, 'Some Aspects of the Zāwiya in Egypt at the Eve of the Ottoman Conquest', *Annales islamologiques* 23 (1983), 9–17.

22 See L. Fernandes, *The Evolution of a Sufi Institution in Mamluk Egypt: The Khanqah*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1988.

devoted their time to worship and recitation of the Qur'ān. It is known from *waqfiyyāt* that at the end of the 14th century resident Sufis were divided into two groups 1) seekers of knowledge and 2) a limited number of *mutağarridūn* or ascetics.<sup>23</sup> Their influence progressively gave rise to the development of the mystical orders in urban centres. Among the more important endemnic brotherhoods in Mamluk Egypt, were the Šādiliyya, the Rifā'iyya, the Burhāniyya and the Qādiriyya.

According to the chroniclers the first significant *hānqāh* in Egypt was introduced from Syria by Šalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī in 1173. Known as the Sa'īd al-Su'adā' or the Šālihiyya, it was situated in Raḥbat Bāb al-'Īd in Cairo and accommodated 300 adepts.<sup>24</sup> This trend was vigorously emulated by the Mamluks. For example, al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars (r. 1260–77) built a *zāwiya* and later a mosque for *šayḥ* Ḥadir (d. 1278), whom he used to visit twice a week. He likewise built a hospice bearing his name that housed 400 Sufis. Baybars al-Ğašankīr (r. 1309–10), who revered *šayḥ* Naṣr b. Sulaymān al-Manbiġī (d. 1319), completed a *hānqāh* opposite the Šālihiyyah in 1310. Erection of numerous *hānqāhs* got underway during the reign of Nāšir al-Dīn Muḥammad (1309–1341), who built a *hānqāh* at Siraqus in 1324 where 100 Sufis resided. The building of *hānqāhs* was pursued during the reign of Sultan Barqūq (1382–1389). Sufis began to enjoy a higher status, especially when a *madrassa* type teaching and administrative positions were introduced into the *hānqāh*.

Many of these buildings were majestic edifices of imposing dimensions that could not have failed to impact even the local Jewish community. According to al-Maqrīzī, the *baraka* of the Sufi inmates of the Sa'īd al-Su'adā' was so sought after that every Friday crowds from Fuṣṭāṭ would flock to join them in their procession to the mosque of al-Ḥākim.<sup>25</sup> Of particular significance in this respect would have been the *zāwiyat al-šayḥ* Abū l-Ḥayr, mentioned by Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad Ibn Duqmāq (ca 1349–1406) in the chapter devoted to Sufi *zāwiyas*, *ribāṭs* and *ḥawāniq* in his description of the city of Cairo. It was established by al-Malik al-Šāliḥ (r. 1342–1345) at Fuṣṭāṭ, relatively close to his new citadel in al-Rawḍa, more or less opposite the Jewish quarter in Qaṣr al-šam'.<sup>26</sup> Ibn Duqmāq mentions too an important *zāwiya* situated in the very heart of the Jewish quarter:

23 Fernandes, *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

24 See art. "Sa'īd al-Su'adā'", *EF* VIII col. 861. [S. Denoix]

25 Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā'iz wal-'itibār fi ḍikr al-ḥiṭaṭ wal-'ātār*, Cairo: Maktabat al-ṭaqāfa, vol. II, 1853, p. 415; ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid, vol. IV:2, London, al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2003, p. 729. See also N. D. MacKenzie, *Ayyubid Cairo, a Topographical Study*, Cairo, American University Press, 1992, pp. 140–141.

26 Ibn Duqmāq, *Kitāb al-intiṣār li-wāsiṭat 'iqd al-amṣār*, ed. K. Vollers, vol. IV, Cairo, 1893, p. 103, l. 21. Cf. also MacKenzie, *Op. cit.*, p. 142.

The *zāwiya* of *šayḥ* Šams al-dīn Ibn Nu'mān was built by Šams al-dīn Ibn Nu'mān al-Fāsī, and remains in the custody of his descendants to this day.<sup>27</sup> It is a blessed place known as the al-Naṣr Mosque or the al-Faṭḥ Mosque situated in Qasr al-šam' nearby the Mu'allaqa Church and is well known in the vicinity.<sup>28</sup>

Little wonder then that this Sufi religious fervour reverberated far beyond the confines of the Muslim community and contagiously took hold of the local Jewish populations who opened wide the doors of the Synagogue to the revitalizing influence of Islamic mysticism. The latter was by no means a new phenomenon, for already in al-Andalus fascination for Sufism is patent in Hebrew poetry of the 11th century and Jewish ethical works.<sup>29</sup> The *Duties of the Heart*, composed in Arabic around 1080 by Baḥyā Ibn Paqūda, Rabbi of Saragossa, shows a deep appreciation of Sufi doctrine.<sup>30</sup> Despite its widespread diffusion, it did not bring about a full-scale spiritual movement as later in Egypt. The spiritual climate of the time was unsuitable, for Andalusī Sufism itself was the object of implacable persecution on Iberian soil.<sup>31</sup>

Circumstances proved more favourable in Mamluk Egypt.<sup>32</sup> Together with the institutional development described above, the Mamluk reign ushered in a period of profound transformations both for Muslim and Jewish religiosity. At this time, a certain symmetry existed in the respective religious situations of Judaism and Islam. In addition to religious persecutions, the Jews shared the brunt of natural catastrophes with their fellow Muslim citizens. The messianic effervescence provoked by forced conversions in the Yemen, Crusader wars in the East and the Almoḥad massacres in the Muslim West, cast up waves of Jewish refugees upon the shores of the country of their ancient bondage. Social instability certainly contributed to a mystical longing to transcend painful reality. Though

27 Ibn Nu'mān is no doubt identical with the North African Sufi Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Mūsā Ibn Nu'mān al-Marrākuṣī al-Fāsī (d. 1284), who is said to have written a work on the virtues of the *ribāṭ* and *ḡihād* called *I'lām al-aḡnād wal-'ibād ahl al-iḡtihād bi-faḍl al-ribāṭ wal-ḡihād*. See Ismā'īl Bāšā al-Baḡdādī, *Hadīyat al-'arīfin wa-asmā' al-mu'allifīn*, ed. R. Bilge *et alia*, vol. II, Istanbul, 1951, col. 134.

28 K. Vollers, *Description de l'Égypte par Ibn Doukmaq* (Bibliothèque Khédiviale), vol. IV, Cairo, 1893, p. 101.

29 For an overview of the relationship between Judaism and Sufism, see P. Fenton, 'Judaism and Sufism', in S. H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, I, London, 1996, pp. 755–768.

30 On Baḥyā, whose *Farā'id* is in fact the first Sufi manual composed in al-Andalus, see G. Vajda, *La Théologie ascétique de Bahya Ibn Paqouda*, Paris, 1937, and D. Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue, Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

31 M. Fierro, 'Opposition to Sufism in Al-Andalus', in F. de Jong and B. Radtke (Eds.), *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, pp. 174–206.

32 For an overview of the situation of Egyptian Jewry prior to the Mamluks, see P. Fenton, 'La communauté juive dans l'Égypte fatimide', *DossArch* 233 (1998), pp. 28–33.

rational philosophy had failed to provide an answer to existential questions,<sup>33</sup> it supplied the speculative infrastructure capable of promoting metaphysical speculation. A new form of pietism emerged among the Jews which embraced the ideals of Sufism and adopted the models of Muslim piety.

On both sides, the official clergy looked askance at what they suspiciously considered as unlawful innovations, while the Muslim and Jewish mystics deployed enormous efforts to prove their legitimacy. In defence of their principles, the Sufis, such as al-Ġazālī (d. 1111), combining both mastery of legislative and philosophical speculation, often evoke the authority of the Qurʾān and Sunna, sparing no effort in clearing Sufism of the suspicions of heresy by strictly adhering to religious norms. Al-Ġazālī's writings reveal striking parallels with the enterprise of Rabbi Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237), who was a key-figure in the Judeo-Sufi leadership and the worthy heir to his illustrious father, the philosopher and legislator Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). He presented this new pietistic tendency as a restoration of ancient custom, rooted in the biblical and rabbinical traditions, while systematizing its principles and integrating them into a respectable legal and intellectual framework.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the intolerant attitude of the authorities towards Jews, there are testimonies to intellectual contacts between Muslims and Jews in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. An interesting instance is provided by the following anecdote about *ṣayḥ* Abū Ḥafs ʿUmar al-Dahabī al-Maqdisī, an Ašʿarī theologian.<sup>35</sup> He was once visited by the Head of the Jews (*raʾīs al-yahūd*) who engaged him in a religious dispute and put to him fifty difficulties concerning the Qurʾān. Seeing that Abū Ḥafs had successfully answered each question, his Jewish interlocutor having exhausted his arguments realized that there was no way to demonstrate the falsehood of the Muslim Scripture. In desperation he quoted the verse: 'The Jews say: "Surely the hand of Allah is fettered!"; may their hands be fettered, and may they be cursed for saying so'(Sūra V, 64).

When Abū Ḥafs acknowledged that this was indeed Allah's revelation to the Muslims, the Jew brandished his hand and gibed: "Look I can move my hand and it is not

33 Extremely instructive in this respect is the composition studied in our article 'Le *Taqwīm al-adyān* de Daniel Ibn al-Māšīṭa: nouvelle pièce de la controverse maïmonidienne en Orient', *REJ* 145 (1986), pp. 279–294.

34 See our study 'Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237), Founding a Mystical Dynasty', in: M. Idel and A. Ostrow (eds.), *Jewish Mystical Leaders und Leadership in the XIIIth Century*, New York, Jason Aaronson, 1998, pp. 127–154; S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* Vol V, chap. 10: The Individual. Seven Portraits, Berkeley, 1988, pp. 476–496; 'S. D. Goitein, Abraham Maimonides and his Pietist Circle', in: A. Altmann (Ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1967, pp. 145–164, and G. Cohen, 'The Soteriology of Abraham Maimuni', in G. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures*, Philadelphia, 1991.

35 He was said to be a disciple of al-Ġazālī's opponent Muḥammad al-Ṭurṭūšī (d. 1125).



fettered!” Thereupon Abū Ḥafs brandished his hand and struck him on the head for his impudence saying that the blow would serve as a retort. When the Jew remained steadfast in his unbelief, Abū Ḥafs declared that from this day forth the Jew’s hand would be fettered. The Jew left smirking, but he awoke the next day surprised to find that his hand was indeed fettered.<sup>36</sup>

Despite its hagiographical character and its being an example of the recurrent topos of *ḍimmīs* being subjected to miraculous punishment, the anecdote may possibly serve as an example of interreligious discussions between Jews and Sufis.

## The Maḡribi Connection

Now Egypt had also become a halt for Sufi masters in search of a more amenable climate who had been forced out of their Andalusī and Maḡribī homeland by the increasing intolerance of the Mālikī ‘*ulamā*’. Others, on their way to the Mekkan pilgrimage, had been persuaded to settle in Egypt by the favourable conditions that prevailed in the country. The numerous disciples who accompanied them considerably reinforced the local Sufi component. Interestingly, more or less at the same period, Egypt also became a haven for Jewish refugees fleeing the Almoḥad persecutions in the West. Now, a proportion of these Jewish refugees settled in the same district as their former Maḡribī compatriots, i. e. in Fuṣṭāṭ, where, as has been indicated, in the neighbourhood of the ancient Jewish community a Maḡribī *zāwiya* was to be found. Beyond confessional barriers, these uprooted Andalusīs had much in common: the same dialect, culture, costume, and, above all, a similar destiny.

Interestingly, it was precisely among the Andalusī elements that disciples of the *wuḡūdī* school were to be found, whose openness on the question of religious pluralism may have facilitated contacts between Jews and Muslims. To be sure, they believed that every religious form could be a manifestation of Reality. Following the steps of the *ṣayḥ* al-Akbar himself, Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, who

36 It is unclear whether in fact ‘Umar was a Sufi, but his tomb is mentioned as a place of pilgrimage in the classical cemetery guides such as that of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī l-Ḥaram Ibn ‘Uṭmān (d. 615), *Muršid al-zuwwār ilā qubūr al-abrār*, ed. M. Fathī Abū Bakr, Cairo: al-Dār al-misriyya al-lubnāniyya, vol. I, 1995, pp. 352–54. See also the guides by Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Ibn Zayyāt (d. 814H), *al-Kawākib al-sayyāra fi tartīb al-ziyāra fi al-qarāfatayn al-kubrā wal-suḡrā*, ed. A. Taymūr, Cairo, 1325H, p. 256 and his pupil ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Saḥāwī, *Tuḥfat al-aḥbāb wa-buḡyat al-ṭullāb fi l-ḥitat wal-mazārāt wal-tarāḡim wal-biqā’ al-mubārakāt*, Cairo, Maktabat al-kulliyyāt al-azhariyya, 1986, p. 386. The anecdote is also quoted by Ch. S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous, Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Muslim Egypt*, Brill, Leiden, 1999, p. 118. On this literary genre, see Y. Raghib, ‘Essai d’inventaire chronologique des guides à l’usage des pélerins du Caire’, *REI* 41 (1973), pp. 259–280.

passed through Egypt in 1202 and 1207, and again in 1223, his disciples, Ḥasan Ibn Hūd al-Mursī (d. 1300)<sup>37</sup> as well as ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (1219–1291)<sup>38</sup> in the company of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī (d. 1274), son-in-law and the most influential disciple of Ibn ‘Arabī, make a halt in Cairo. The Sufi philosopher of Andalusī origin, ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Ibn Sab‘īn (d. 1268), expelled from Mekka, was welcomed by Baybars in Cairo in 1268. Now, in his *Risāla al-naṣīḥa wal-nūriyya*, he quotes Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*.<sup>39</sup> In Egypt, Ibn Sab‘īn met up with his future son-in-law, al-Tilimsānī (1219–1291), who quotes him in his commentary on the *Mawāqif* written by the mystic al-Niffarī (d. ca 961).<sup>40</sup> It is noteworthy that a passage of this commentary expresses a most positive attitude towards *ḍimmīs* so typical of the monist school of Ibn ‘Arabī. While explaining chapter 5 of this text, al-Tilimsānī elucidates Niffarī’s words:

‘I should gather all men in happiness’: This verse means that in your glance you must perceive them all in kindness and in the mode of compassion. I perceived this in the words of the *ṣayḥ* ‘Abd al-Rahīm Ibn Ṣayyāg in Upper Egypt.<sup>41</sup> He use to say: “I used to chide myself for living in a country (sc. Upper Egypt) in which there resided a single Jew or Christian: but now I cannot hold myself back from embracing them!” No doubt this is the meaning of the spirit of al-Niffarī’s words though not the letter. Now, this individual [‘Abd al-Rahīm] had achieved their essence, i. e. he perceived people united in kindness. The expression ‘no more to scatter or to be despised’, signifies you will not discriminate between them in your regard, as ‘Abd al-Rahīm states, ‘or to be despised’, you will regard them all without scorn in the presence of Reality, that is no longer related to imperfection. The meaning of the sentence ‘do then bring forth My Treasure’, – My being in everything is concealed from you and is, as it were, a [hidden] treasure. Therefore bring it forth through your contemplation of Me, and ‘if you achieve this, you will have achieved the statement which I have achieved through you, i. e. the part of Reality which I manifested through you.’<sup>42</sup>

37 On him, see *infra* fn. 88.

38 On al-Tilimsānī, see P. Nwiya, ‘Une Cible d’Ibn Taimiya: le moniste al-Tilimsānī’, *BEO* 30 (1978), pp. 127–145.

39 *Al-Risāla al-naṣīḥa wal-nūriyya*, in: *Rasā’il Ibn Sab‘īn*, ed. A. Badawi, Cairo, 1965, p. 157. The quote is possibly a reformulation of what Maimonides says in *Guide* III: 51 about the individual who “through his apprehension of the true realities ... achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned towards Him”.

40 Al-Niffarī, *Ṣarḥ al-Mawāqif*, ed. Al-Marzūqi, Cairo, 1997, p. 353. A. Arberry, *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffari*, London: Luzac, 1935, pp. 30–31.

41 Perhaps identical with the *ṣayḥ* of Maghribī origin ‘Abd al-Rahīm al-Qinawī (d. 1196), a disciple of Abū Madyan. Cf. D. Gril, ‘*La Risāla de Safī al-Dīn Ibn Abī l-Mansūr Ibn Zāfir*’, Cairo, IFAO, 1986, pp. 157–158.

42 Al-Niffari, *Op. cit.*, pp. 97–98. See also Arberry, *Mawāqif*, p. 197. This interpretation is probably bound up with the Akbarian exegesis of the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* ‘I was a hidden treasure and I loved (*aḥbabtu*) to be known; so I created the creatures and made Myself known to them; so they knew Me.’

Furthermore, it is known that there were contacts between certain Sufi masters and their Jewish neighbours. Abū l-Ḥasan al-Šāḍilī (1196–1258), who originated from the Maḡrib, took refuge in Egypt where he gained great renown. One of his biographers relates that to treat his disciples he employed a Jewish optician, to whom he showed a touching dedication:

It was related to me that the šayḥ al-Šāḍilī had invited a Jewish optician to treat one of his disciples. The Jew replied that he could treat him only after having obtained permission to do so. Indeed, a decree had just been passed in Cairo, prohibiting all *ḍimmī* doctors to treat Muslims without authorization from the director of medicine (*ra'īs al-ṭibb*) in the capital.<sup>43</sup> When the Jew had left the šayḥ's presence, the latter requested his servants to prepare his bags, and he immediately left for Cairo. Having obtained there the necessary paper, he returned to Alexandria without having rested a single night in Cairo. He again requested the Jew to come. The latter apologized once more for not being able to act, but the šayḥ showed him the document authorizing him to practice. The Jew was enchanted to see a man with such a noble and generous character.<sup>44</sup>

Now if contact took place on the level of outstanding personalities, it is reasonable to suppose that there were also exchanges among the common folk; moreover, we have a tangible example in a document presented below. To be sure, the Sufi presence necessarily constituted an immediate spiritual model for the Jewish population. It imbued a new spirit into the Jewish soul, numbed by the ritual formalism resulting from the processes of legal codification, which, having begun in the Geonic period, culminated in the work of Maimonides.

## The Jewish Pietist Movement

The Jewish pietism of Sufi inspiration constitutes the profoundest impingement of Islam on Jewish spirituality.<sup>45</sup> Its followers, who attempted to integrate elements from Islamic mysticism both in the cult and credo of the Jews, were called *ḥasīdīm* or 'pietists'. They named their discipline *dereḳ ha-ḥasīdūt* 'the Path' or *dereḳ la-šem* the 'Way to God', expressions which are reminiscent of the Arabic *ṭarīq*, a term by which the Sufis designated their spiritual discipline. Not at all a

43 Perhaps a reference to the prohibition imposed upon *ḍimmī* physicians discussed by Ġāzī al-Wāsītī. The latter mentions in his treatise, written in Egypt at the close of the 13th century, that at Maimonides' time, the Qāḍī Faḍīl, Saladin's infamous chancellor, forbade Jews to practice medicine. Cf. R. Gottheil, 'An Answer to the Dhimmis', *JAOS* 41 (1921), p. 430. A similar prohibition is recorded as having taken place in 1448 by Ibn Iyās, *Op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 265.

44 Tāğ al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī, *Laṭā'if al-minan* (composed in 1284), printed on the margin of al-Ša'rānī, *Laṭā'if al-minan* vol. II, Cairo, 1357H, pp. 14–15.

45 A detailed exposition concerning this movement is to be found in the introduction to our *Deux traités de mystique juive*, *op.cit.* See also E. Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt*, Oxford: OUP, 2015.

marginal sect, the pietist movement, which enjoyed wide popularity throughout the Mamluk period, gained momentum under the impetus of one of the most prominent political figures of the Ayyubid era, Abraham Maimonides. Now, is it a coincidence that this family, whose name was long associated with the pietist movement, was of Andalusī origin? Was it by chance that certain key personalities involved in the propagation of this tendency, such as Ḥanan'el b. Samuel al-Amšāṭī, Abraham's father-in-law, were likewise of Andalusī extraction?<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it is no coincidence that certain Sufi texts discovered in the Cairo *genīzāh*, brought there from al-Andalus or acquired from Muslim neighbours, were written in Maġribī Arabic script?<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the interest shown by Jews in Sufi literature during this period is clearly attested by the multiple writings brought to light in the Cairo *genīzāh*. The latter, discovered at the end of the 19th century, had been a repository attached to an ancient synagogue. Among the thousands of fragments of medieval manuscripts it has preserved, are included numerous texts of a Sufi character. Their presence not only reflects the intellectual curiosity of the members of the synagogue, but also the very fact that they had been deposited in a *genīzāh*, a place normally reserved for the sacred texts of the Jewish tradition, shows the reverential status they enjoyed in the eyes of their owners. Two types of writings can be distinguished: on the one hand, texts of Muslim *taṣawwuf* written sometimes in Arabic characters and sometimes transcribed into Hebrew letters to facilitate their use by Jewish readers; and, on the other hand, Jewish writings of Sufi inspiration composed by the pietists themselves.

The investigation of these documents has not only enriched our knowledge of Jewish pietism but also that of Sufism in Mamluk times for no equivalent Muslim archive has survived. These unique literary vestiges reflect the contents of a Sufi library and furnish data on the titles and authors read in Egypt at this time. All the tendencies of Sufi literature are represented in the documents belonging to the first category, from the first masters of Bagdad until the writings of monist school of Ibn 'Arabī, not forgetting the *iṣrāqī* current, founded by Suhrawardī in the 12th century. There are aphorisms by al-Ġunayd,<sup>48</sup> pages from al-Quṣayrī's *Risāla*, poems by al-Hallāġ,<sup>49</sup> the *Maḥāsin al-maġālis* of the Andalusī mystic Ibn

46 On this personality, see P. Fenton, 'A Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on the *Haftarôt* by Rabbi Ḥanan'el ben Šemū'el ha-Dayyan, Abraham Maimonides' Father-in-Law', *Maimonidean Studies* 1, 1990, p. 27–56. In his article in Hebrew 'The Ibn al-Amšāṭī Family', *Zion* 49 (2004), p. 271–297, M. Friedman demonstrated that the ancestors of Ḥanan'el had been established in Egypt for several generations. Nonetheless, he wrote in an Andalusī hand, which is an indication of his origin or, at least, his proximity to Andalusī circles.

47 Such as Cambridge University Library, T-S Arabic 41.1, which also contains a mystical correspondence between al-Ġunaydī and al-Nūrī.

48 Preserved in Ms. T-S Arabic 43.78.

49 See our study 'Les traces d'al-Hallāġ, martyr mystique de l'islam, dans la tradition juive', *Annales Islamologiques* 35 (2001), pp. 101–127.

al-‘Arīf, the *Munqid min al-ḍalāl*, the spiritual autobiography of al-Ġazālī, the *Treatise on Divine Love* by al-Šayḍalah,<sup>50</sup> the *Kalimat al-taṣawwuf*, *Raqīm al-quds* and the *Hayākil al-nūr* of Suhrawardī, just to mention a few.<sup>51</sup> In addition, numerous texts containing quotations, legends, anecdotes and even hymns attributed to the Sufi masters are to be found.

The pietists themselves produced a rich and varied literary output, which clearly bears the imprint of Sufi concepts and terminology. Though based on traditional rabbinical themes, their compositions resonate with Sufi overtones. However, the latter were not merely Judaized adaptations of Muslim texts, but original works, ingeniously transposed into the biblical and rabbinical texture. The revisionist spirit of the *ḥasīdīm* led them to develop their own doctrines and practices, partly borrowed from Islamic models. Using an original exegetical method, they uncovered their teachings in the scriptural narrative where they often construed biblical figures as masters of the Sufi path.<sup>52</sup>

Not only did the pietists adopt the ideas of *taṣawwuf* but also integrated certain of its rituals into daily worship. The most detailed exposition of these ‘ritual reforms’ is to be found in the section devoted to prayer in the *magnum opus* of Abraham Maimonides, the *Kifāyat al-‘ābidīn*, ‘Compendium of the Servants of God’,<sup>53</sup> veritable summa of pietistic doctrines and practices, this work is partially presented as a manual for the wayfarers along the path. Written by the spiritual and temporal head of Eastern Jewry, it played a considerable rôle in the diffusion of the pietist movement. It is unknown precisely when Abraham embraced this tendency, but it seems that he was already a sympathiser when, in 1205, he succeeded his illustrious father as head of the Egyptian community. Henceforth, he utilised this position of political eminence in order to advance the cause. Unlike his father, who had composed a purely legal code, Abraham Maimonides gave preference in his *Kifāya* to the explanation of the spiritual significance of the precepts. His expository method recalls that of Muslim mystics, such as al-Ġazālī in his *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. If, as a consequence of the tribulations suffered during their exile, the Jews had forgotten the ‘mysteries’ of the ritual commandments, the author of the *Kifāya* believed he had rediscovered some of them in the usages of the Sufis. This conviction provides the key to the zeal deployed by the *ḥasīdīm* in assimilating what were obviously Muslim cus-

50 See P. Fenton, ‘Deux traités musulmans d’amour divin en transmission judéo-arabe’, *Arabica* 37, (1990), pp. 47–55.

51 See *Deux traités*, pp. 28–36.

52 See P. Fenton, ‘The Post-Maimonidean Schools of Exegesis in the East: Abraham Maimonides, the Pietists, Tanḥūm ha-Yerušalmi and the Yemenite School’, in M. Saebø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible: Old Testament, The History of its Interpretation*, Göttingen, 2000, pp. 433–455.

53 Edited by S. Rosenblatt, *High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides*, 2 vols., New York-Baltimore, 1927 and 1938 (henceforth *Kifāya*).

toms. In addition, the pietists, who also called themselves ‘disciples of prophets’, not only subscribed to the Israelite origin of Sufi rules, but also to their having belonged to a ancient ‘prophetic discipline’, whose imminent renewal in Israel’s midst they were awaiting. Hence, their restoration to the synagogue was to hasten this process.

With the aim of intensifying the decorum of synagogue worship, the *Kifāya* advocates a certain number of ritual innovations, whose Muslim origin is obvious. The preliminaries to worship entail the ritual ablution of the hands and feet. This prescription, which, unlike Islamic law, is not strictly required by Jewish custom, enjoyed particular attention in Sufi practice. Worshippers were arranged in rows, in Muslim manner, continuously facing Jerusalem during prayer. Different postures, such as that of standing, bowing, prostrations, the spreading of hands, are prescribed for certain passages of the liturgy. In addition to canonical prayer, nocturnal vigils and daytime fasts were recommended, as well as the typically Sufi practice of contemplation (*murāqaba*) in a solitary retreat (*ḥalwa*), during which *ḍikr* the repetitive invocation of divine names, would be carried out. It is also known that because of their protracted devotions, the Egyptian *ḥasīdīm* established their own private oratories, such as Abraham Maimonides’ personal synagogue where pietist rituals were enacted. In an effort to obtain legitimization, these innovations were often presented as restorations of practices that had formerly been widespread among the ancient prophets and the sages of Israel, as explained in a page of the *Kifāya*:

Do not regard as unseemly our (comparison) of [the practices of ancient prophets] to the behaviour of the Sufis, because the Sufis imitate the prophets [of Israel] and walk in their footsteps, and not the prophets in theirs.<sup>54</sup>

Solitary meditation in the course of which the devotee withdraws from society for prolonged periods in isolated and dark places in order to devote himself to prayer and meditation, is one of most significant rituals adopted by the pietists.<sup>55</sup> Scarcely compatible with the traditional Jewish principle of communal and collective worship, this practice, known as *ḥalwa* in Sufism, where it is combined with the invocation of divine names (*ḍikr*) and reliance on God (*tawakkul*), was nonetheless considered by Rabbi Abraham to be of Jewish origin.

<sup>54</sup> *Kifāya*, vol. II, p. 320.

<sup>55</sup> On this practice, see P. Fenton, ‘La *hitbōdedūt* chez the premiers Qabbalistes in Orient and chez the Sufis’ in R. Goetschel (ed.), *Prière, mystique et Judaïsme* (Colloque de Strasbourg, 1984), Paris, 1987, pp. 133–158 and *idem*, « La Pratique de la retraite spirituelle (*khalwa*) chez les judéo-soufis d’Égypte », in: G. Cecere, M. Loubet et S. Pagani (eds.), *Les mystiques juives, chrétiennes et musulmanes dans l’Égypte médiévale*, Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2013, pp. 211–252.

Also do the Sufis of Islam practice solitude in dark places and isolate themselves in them until the sensitive part of the soul becomes atrophied so that it is not even able to see the light. This, however, requires strong inner illumination wherewith the soul would be preoccupied so as not to be pained over the external darkness. Now Rabbi Abraham he-Ḥasīd,<sup>56</sup> the memory of the righteous be blessed, used to be of the opinion that that – I mean solitude in darkness – was the thing alluded to in the statement of Isaiah: ‘Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, who walketh in darkness and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God (Is. 50, 10).’<sup>57</sup>

Doubtlessly inspired by the model of the *ḥānqāh*, whose spread had attained impressive proportions under the Ayyubids and Mamluks, Abraham Maimonides even advocated the establishment of a sort of Jewish convent:

‘It behooves the leaders of the communities of Israel to choose an elite of chaste individuals, practising asceticism in relation to the present world and are in search of the life of the Hereafter. These are to practice reclusion (*munqāṭi’in*) in the synagogue. There they are to recite the Torah and devote themselves to worship, pursuing these religious occupations, detached (*zuhhād*) from mundane cares [...] It is necessary that there be [at least] ten individuals without any other occupation than that of the needs of the community, the study of the Torah, and the frequentation of the synagogue which is a substitute for the former Temple [...]. Care must be taken to install these individuals in order that they might serve as a [model] of attraction and imitation.’<sup>58</sup>

Likewise, according to the author of the *Kifāya*, the initiatory investiture of Sufis, whereby the master would confer his tunic (*ḥirqa*) upon the disciple, was originally practiced by the Israelite prophets:

Elijah cast his cloak over him [Elishah] [I Kings 19, 20], as a hint in which there was a joyful annunciation – a hint to him that his dress and his uniform and the rest of his course would be like this, and a joyful annunciation of the fact that his [Elijah’s] perfection would be transferred to him and that he [Elishah] would attain the degree which he had attained. Thou knowest also (of the practice) that is (prevalent) among these Sufis of Islam, among whom there is prevalent, “because of the iniquities of Israel”, of the ways of the early saints (*awliyā’*) of Israel, what is no longer prevalent or (but) little prevalent among our contemporaries, namely that the master attires the novice (*murīd*) in the ragged coat (*ḥirqa*) as the latter is about to embark upon the mystical path (*ṭarīq*) and pursue it. “He receives of Thy words” (Deut. 33 : 3). We, moreover, take over from them and emulate them in the wearing of sleeveless undergarments (*baqā’ir*) and the like.’<sup>59</sup>

56 On this pietist figure, who passed away in 1223, see our study ‘Some Judaeo-Arabic Fragments by Rabbi Abraham he-Hasid, the Jewish Sufi’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 26 (1981), pp. 47–72.

57 *Kifāya*, vol. II, p. 418.

58 *Kifāya*, ch. 24.

59 *Kifāya*, vol. II, p. 266. On the *baqīra*, see R. Dozy, *Dictionnaire détaillé des Noms des vêtements chez les Arabes*, Amsterdam, Jean Müller, 1845, p. 84: ‘a sleeveless tunic’. See also *Kifāya* II,

In the chapter devoted to the different dress styles in his secretarial manual, the Mamluk scholar Šihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Qalqašandī (1355–1418) describes the attire of the Egyptian Sufis and mentions that they specifically wore a *dilq* ‘only it is not flowing and is without long sleeves’.<sup>60</sup> Obviously, neither he nor Rabbi Abraham are referring to the extremist dervishes of the Aḥmadiyya-Rifā‘iyya orders whose conspicuous accoutrement had aroused the disapprobation of the ‘*ulamā*’. They would don iron collars around their necks with chains around their shoulders and wrists, and would wear their hair tangled and matted. They also specialized in eating snakes and walking through fire. The idea that Sufi usages are of Judaic origin is taken up again by Abraham when he describes the austere exercises of the ancient ascetics (*perūšim*) of Israel:

We also see the Sufis of Islam proceed in [this] war [against the self] to the combatting of sleep, and perhaps that [practice] is derived from the statement of David: ‘I will not give sleep to mine eyes’ (Ps 132, 4) [...]. Observe then these wonderful traditions and sigh with regret over how they have been transferred from us and made their appearance among a nation other than ours, whereas they have disappeared among us. About situations like which they have said, blessed be their memory, in explanation of: ‘But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret for your pride’ (Jer. 13, 17): What is meant by ‘for your pride’? Because of the pride of Israel that was taken away from them and given to the nations of the world (*TB Hag. 5b*).<sup>61</sup>

As is known one of the fundamental principles of the Sufi Path was the necessity of spiritual development under the guidance of a *šayḥ*. Abraham Maimonides perceives the origins of this practice in the discipline of the ancient prophets:

What thou must know and grasp is that the useful course that leads to true union (*wuṣūl*),<sup>62</sup> generally has it as its condition that it be (pursued) under the direction (*taslik*) of a person having already attained the aim, as it is said in the tradition: “Provide thyself with a teacher” (*Abōt* 1 : 6). Thou knowest, also, the express statement of the Torah in regard to the follower and him who has to be followed (*al-tābi‘ wal-matbū*), (namely) that Joshua, ‘the servant of Moses, was one of his disciples’, who, after having reached the spiritual goal, succeeded him.<sup>63</sup> Such a course did also the prophets after him assume. The mentor (*musallik*) of Samuel ‘the Ramathite’ was Eli,<sup>64</sup> and of Elisha

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p. 320, where Abraham compares the attire of the prophets ‘in garments of rags and suchlike garments of the poor resembling the dress of the Sufis in our days’.

60 Al-Qalqašandī, *Šubḥ al-a šā fi šinā‘at al-inšā*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Rasūl Ibrāhīm, Dār al-kutub al-ḥadīwiyya, IV, Cairo, 1914, p. 43. On the *dilq*, see Dozy, *Op. cit.*, p. 183–185, where the *ḥirqa* is also described.

61 *Kifāya*, vol. II, p. 322.

62 We devoted a study to the examination of this concept in Abraham’s writings: ‘The Doctrine of Mystical Union in the Thought of Abraham Maimonides’, *Da’at* 50 (2003), pp. 107–119 (in Heb.).

63 See Num. 27, 18.

64 I Sam. 1, 25.



Elijah,<sup>65</sup> and of Baruch the son of Neriah Jeremiah.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the ‘disciples of the prophets’ were called by this appellation only because the prophets were their mentors. Now this practice has been adopted by nations (i. e. the Sufis) other than us, and there became (prevalent) among them the (institution of the) master (*šayḥ*) and the servant (*ḥādim*), of master and disciple (*al-tābi’ wal-matbū’*). – ‘He receives of Thy words’ (Deut. 33, 3). For him, however, who pursues (the course) without a mentor, it is difficult to attain his goal, for he will generally encounter obstacles in his course and he may turn aside and deviate (from the right path) or think that he has attained his objective whereas (in reality) he has not yet achieved it, as happened to many false prophets. Under a mentor who himself has achieved the goal, on the other hand, if the wayfarer possesses fitness and follows well, he could reach his goal.<sup>67</sup>

This stand in this matter is most reminiscent of that of al-Ġazālī in his *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*:

The disciple [*murīd*] must of necessity have recourse to a director to guide him aright. For the way of the Faith is obscure, but the Devil’s ways are many and patent, and he who has no *šayḥ* to guide him will be led by the Devil into his ways. Wherefore the disciple must cling to his *šayḥ* as a blind man on the edge of a river clings to his leader confiding himself to him entirely, opposing him in no matter whatsoever, and binding himself to follow him absolutely. Let him know that the advantage he gains from the errors of his *šayḥ*, if he should err, is greater than the advantage he gains from his own rightness, if he should be right.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to these ritual observances, the pietists adopted social attitudes of which some were, in certain cases, discordant with traditional Jewish ethics. For example, ‘Obadyah Maimonides (d. 1265), son of Abraham following certain Sufis, advocated celibacy, considering that marriage and family responsibilities were an obstacle to spiritual achievement:

Know that the accomplished mystics who pursued this path, strived towards perfection prior to marriage, for they knew that after having acquired wife and children, one knows no real respite, and that if opportunities for spiritual realisation present themselves, it is only rarely and at the price of multiple tribulations.<sup>69</sup>

The figure of ‘Obadyah Maimonides (1228–1265) inaugurates a long association of the celebrated Maimonidian dynasty with a Sufi-like pietism, spanning two centuries of Mamluk reign, albeit not without interruptions. ‘Obadyah Maimonides himself betrays a strong penchant for Sufism in his composition *al-Maqāla*

65 I Kings 19, 16.

66 Jer. 32, 12.

67 *Kifāya*, vol. I, p. 422.

68 Al-Ġazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, ed. B. Tabāna, vol. III, Cairo, 1957, p. 73, translated by H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism*, Oxford: OUP, 1953, p. 150–1.

69 *Treatise of the Pool*, London: Octagon Press, 1981, p. 116. The image is possibly borrowed from al-Ġazālī, *Iḥyā’*, *Op. Cit.*, III, p. 74.

*al-ḥawḍiyya* ‘The Treatise of the Pool’. The latter is a mystical manual, replete with Sufi technical terms, which explains to the spiritual wayfarer how to obtain union with the intelligible world. In compliance with a typically Sufi allegory, the heart is compared therein to a cistern which needs to be purified before it can receive the revitalizing waters of gnosis. In keeping with the pietist tendency to project Sufi stereotypes into the patriarchal past, ‘Obadyah describes there Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as wandering hermits who practice solitary meditation in the desert. Enthusiasm for Sufism attained such alarming proportions under the negidate of ‘Obadyah’s brother, David Maimonides (1222–1300), that the latter saw fit in one of his sermons, to castigate its sympathisers and their ascetic practices with the words of the prophets:

Religious discipline practiced by Gentiles imposes upon them [excessive] frustration, exertion and effort, such as the torments they inflict upon the body, the wearing of woollen garments, fasting and celibacy, despite the fact [that marriage] is the purpose of this world, as it is written: “He said to them: Increase and multiply” (Gen. 1 : 28). Similarly, by obliging them to undertake journeys to distant and dangerous places in order to reach their goal, [their practices] have an adverse effect on their possessions and their persons [ ... ]. The religion of Israel, however, does not require exertion, or fatigue and expenditure in our manner of serving God, and studying the Torah, as the prophet declared: “Oh! all you who are thirsty, come ye, here is water! You who have no money, come supply your needs and eat freely without payment, come, procure wine and milk. You will eat that which is good, and your soul will delight in savoury meats” (Is. 55: 1). No act was imposed that was damaging to our welfare and our bodies. Perhaps you will retort: “Since that came to us without effort, without toil and without mortifying our bodies, it is of an inferior spiritual level”. God forbid! On the contrary, our religion is superior and more majestic than the precepts of nations. It is incomparable to what exists amongst them, as it is stated: “What is the chaff doing with the grain?” (Jer. 23: 28). Hence, why would one want to resemble the nations and imitate their ways thereby serving false and futile gods? Why waste one’s time with that which is not worthwhile, and expend one’s energy for a useless thing? To deploy one’s efforts and toil in a quest devoid of truth and a goal that presents no advantage? But which, on the contrary, imposes upon you suffering and the destruction of your souls, as it is written: “Why spend ye money without receiving bread?” Obey His precepts and observe His commandments and you will obtain happiness and felicity, and you will delight in beatitude, as it is said: “Then will you eat that which is good, and your soul will delight in savoury meats”.<sup>70</sup>

David ben Joshua (c. 1335–1415), the last of the Maimonidean dynasty recorded by history, also came under the sway of Sufism.<sup>71</sup> His *al-Muršid ilā l-tafarrud* [‘Guide to Detachment’], composed in the twilight of neo-classical Judeo-Arabic

70 *Midraš Rabbi David ha-nāgīd*, Paris, MS BN Heb. 297, fol. 44a.

71 On him see our article P. Fenton, ‘The Literary Legacy of David II Maimuni’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 74 (1985), pp. 1–56. Translated in our ‘Deux traites ...’, pp. 195–300.

literature, represents the most consummate synthesis of traditional rabbinic ethics and the stations of the Sufi Way.<sup>72</sup> Imitating the classical manuals of Muslim mysticism which begin with a definition of *taṣawwuf*, the author firstly proposes a definition of *ḥasīdūt*. The framework of the manual reposes on an ethical rabbinical formula that David interprets through the prism of the mystical stages of the illuminative path of Suhrawardī. Hence, he derives the initial virtue, *zehīrūt*, normally signifying ‘precaution’, from the root *zhr* ‘shine’, associated with the illuminative notion of *īṣrāq*, since the first step on the path of perfection is motivated by the quest for light.

## Opposition

The introduction of Sufi practices into the fabric of Judaism did not go unchallenged, and the *ḥasīdīm*, like other revisionists in religious history, encountered virulent opposition. Despite the political and religious prestige of Abraham Maimonides, the movement had to confront determined opponents, who even went as far as to denounce the pietists to the Muslim authorities,<sup>73</sup> accusing them of employing improper language, diffusing ‘false ideas’, introducing ‘illicit changes’, and ‘non-Jewish (viz. Sufi) customs’ into the synagogue.<sup>74</sup> An echo of these intestinal disputes is provided by a curious legal consultation addressed by the Jewish community to the Muslim authorities after the death of the *nāgīd* Abraham in 1237. It inquires into the unlawful character of such practices, which, according to their opponents, were contrary to Jewish custom. As conservative Sunnis, the Mamluk sultans saw themselves not only as the defenders of the Islamic faith, but also of the ritual orthodoxy of the religions under their protection. The letter, which is one of the most curious documents preserved in the *genīzāh*, asks in fact the authorities Muslim to intervene in a specifically Jewish dispute. The plaintiff insists on the fact that prostration, one of the disputed practices, constitutes the revival of ancient custom. He presumed that the Mamluk jurisconsult would consider these liturgical innovations lawful:

In the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate. What is the opinion of our Sires, the jurisconsults, the imams of the faith and models of Muslims, may Allah grant them success by reason of their obedience and assist them in obtaining His satisfaction,

72 See our David b. Josuha Maimuni, *al-Muršid ilā l-tafarrud*, Jerusalem, Mekisey nirdamim, 1987.

73 See S. D. Goitein, ‘New Documents from the Cairo Geniza’, in *Homenaja a Millas-Valllicrosa I*, Barcelona, 1954, p. 718.

74 See S. D. Goitein, ‘A Treatise in Defence of the Pietists’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16 (1965), pp. 105–114. It is noteworthy that the Sufis were often the victims of the same sort of accusations.

concerning the following case: a group of Jews whose word is authoritative, i. e. the *raʿīs al-yahūd* and those of their sages who are his disciples, had established the practice of kneeling and prostrating in the course of their prayers. They claim that this was a former [Jewish] practice and that they had restored an aspect of their religion that had fallen into disuse. Having reintroduced it, they practiced it for a long period of approximately twenty years. When the *raʿīs al-yahūd* passed away, an individual who is not a scholar came forth and ruled against the former opinion of their sages and disapproved of genuflexion and prostration. What measures should be taken against him by reason of his opposition, if he recidivates? Grant us your opinion, that Allah may show you mercy.<sup>75</sup>

Opposition continued during the period of office of *nagīd* David Maimonides I (1222–1300) son of Abraham, whose personal synagogue was shut down, and who, at a certain moment, was forced to flee Egypt, seeking refuge in Akko. This contestation which even resulted in the banishment of a religious leader descended from the illustrious Maimonides dynasty may partly explain the pietists' failure to impose their way on the community at large. In addition, the pietist way was necessarily reserved for an elitist minority which, with the general decline of Eastern Jewry, little by little fell into total oblivion. Nonetheless, Sufism continued sporadically to exercise fascination upon individual Jews during the following centuries. Mention has already been made of Rabbi David II Maimonides (c. 1335–1415) and his inclination towards Sufism. The *genīzāh* has preserved a petition addressed to him by a Jewish housewife imploring him to intervene on her behalf with the *šayḥ* al-Kurānī in order to retrieve her husband. The latter was so infatuated with Sufism, that having abandoned his home, he was now threatening to abduct his children and settle permanently in a Sufi convent on 'the mountain'. Hitherto, participation of Jews in the mystical sessions of Sufi masters had only been attested by Muslim sources. The master referred to in this letter is without doubt Yusūf b. 'Alī al-Kurānī (ob. 1367),<sup>76</sup> the spiritual head of a *zāwiya* situated in the Qarāfa al-ṣuġrā cemetery, between the outskirts of Cairo and the slopes of al-Muqaṭṭam, a favourite place for hermitages, where he was eventually buried. He himself was a disciple of Yaḥyā al-Sanāfirī. Is it to be supposed that the Jewish *nāgīd*, who himself had mystical tendencies, maintained relations with the Sufi *šayḥ*?

75 T-S Arabic 41.105; the text, which was written in Arabic characters, was published by G. Khan, *Arabic Legal Documents from the Cairo Genizah*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 291–292.

76 On al-Kurānī, a specialist of *taslik*, who renewed the method of al-Gunayd and practiced *taġrīd* 'withdrawal', see al-Ša' rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, vol. II, Cairo, 1954, p. 64–66; Ibn al-Zayyāt, *al-Kawākib al-sayyāra*, pp. 225–226; al-Saḥāwī, *Tuhfat al-aḥbāb*, p. 357; al-Nabhānī, *Ġāmi' al-karamāt*, vol. II, p. 535–536 and M. F. Abu Bakr, *Ḍayl kitāb muršid al-zuwwār*, vol. II, Cairo: al-Dār al-misriyya al-lubnāniyya, 1995, pp. 100–103.

'In your name, O Merciful one. To the Court of our Lord the *nāgīd* David, may his splendour be exalted and his honour great. The maidservant, the wife of Baṣīr, the bell-maker, kisses the ground and submits that she has on her neck three children because her husband has become completely infatuated with (life on) the mountain with al-Kurānī, in vain and to no purpose, a place where is neither Torah, nor prayers nor true evocation of God's name.<sup>77</sup> He goes up the mountain and mingles with the mendicants (*fuqarā*'), although these have only the semblance, but not the essence, of religion. The maidservant is afraid there may be some bad man who may induce her husband to forsake the Jewish faith, taking with him the three children. The maidservant almost perishes because of her solitude and her search after food for the little ones. It is her wish that our Master go after her husband and take the matter up with him according to his unfailing wisdom, and what the maidservant entreats him to do is not beyond his power nor the high degree of his influence. [Recto] The only thing the maidservant wants is that her husband cease to go up the mountain and that he may show mercy towards the little ones. If he wishes to devote himself to God, he may do so in the synagogue, attending regularly morning, afternoon and evening prayers, and listening to the words of the Torah, but he should not occupy himself with useless things. Furthermore, he presses the maidservant to sell their house, to leave the Jewish community and to stay on the mountain, (which would mean that) the little ones would cease to study the Torah. (It would be helpful) if our Lord gave orders to the maidservant in that matter and instructed her concerning it, for his wisdom is unfailing. Peace! Our Lord – may God prolong his life – is in charge of a vast region; thus his high aspiration could not fail to hinder the above mentioned from going up the mountain and to induce him to attend the synagogue and to occupy himself with the upkeep of the family.<sup>78</sup>

A testimony to relations between Jews and Sufis from the end of the Mamluk dynasty and the beginning of Ottoman reign over Egypt is supplied by the great Muslim mystic 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Ša'rānī (1492–1565).<sup>79</sup> He relates in his autobiography his privileged relations with Jews and prided himself with having induced a certain number of them to convert. They would consult him and attend his public lectures, which were possibly delivered in the *zāwiya* that the *qādī* Muḥyī Dīn 'Abd al-Qādir al-Uzbīkī built for him in the heart of Cairo:

I know no one amongst my contemporaries to whom the Jews and the Christians have shown more love than towards me. I was deeply surprised when they asked me to write amulets for the protection of their children and I wondered how my faith was acceptable to them despite the divergence of it with their religion. However, this belongs to the totality of the inheritance of our father Abraham, the friend of God.<sup>80</sup>

77 Perhaps a scornful allusion to the *ḍikr* ritual.

78 Ms Cambridge T-S 8 J26.19, published by S.D. Goitein, 'A Jewish Addict to Sufism', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 44 (1953), pp. 37–49. See also our *Deux traités de mystique juive*, pp. 196–197.

79 On him, see M. Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī*, New Brunswick, 1982.

80 al-Ša'rānī, *Lata'if al-minan*, Cairo, 1976, p. 681. Similarly, Mr Mechali, a Paris Jew originating

Likewise, al-Ša‘rānī advocates tolerance towards Jews and condemns their ill-treatment:

We have taken the promise that none of our companions without exception will ever harm a *ḍimmī* [a Jew or a Christian] – much less a Muslim – especially if he recites his morning prayers with the community, for he is thus in the protection [*ḍimma*] of Allah and in His proximity, as we have already explained. In short, whosoever harms one who has performed his morning prayers with the community is tantamount to despising the protection of Allah, and whosoever despises the protection of Allah deserves to be fought against and incurs anger, Heaven forgive! Beware then brother not to confront him with any harm. If, however, he is first harmful to you that day, there is room to say “that he who attacks you is to be met in the same manner” (Qur. II, 194). Even so, it is better to be patient with him for the sake of Him in whose protection and proximity he is. Consider that if a prince were to inform you that that particular individual was in his protection that particular day, would you not only refrain from confronting him but also honor him to the utmost? Thus the servant of Allah is to be treated. It is stated in the hadith “Whoso desires to know his rank in the eyes of Allah, let him consider Allah’s rank in his own eyes”.<sup>81</sup> Allah places the servant there where the servant places Him within himself. Grasp this!<sup>82</sup>

The foregoing should not mislead us into thinking that al-Ša‘rānī had a soft spot for Jews. Indeed, in another passage of the same book, where he warns against the errors of incarnation, monism and anthropomorphism expounded in the works of Ibn ‘Arabī and Ibn Sab‘īn, he specifies:

Beware not to associate with the faction who claimed to profess Sufism in the 10th century, flouting the principles of the *šarī‘a*. They err and study of their Sufi books on unification misleads whosoever has an [insufficient] knowledge of their signification. Once, one of them entered my house when I was ailing and my disciples were absent. I asked him who he was. “I am Allah”, he replied. “You lie!”, I retorted. “I am Muhammad, the messenger of Allah”. “You lie!” “I am the devil and I am a Jew!” “Now you have spoken the truth!” I told him. By Allah, had someone else been present to bear witness against him, I would have brought him before the ‘*ulama*’ in order to have him executed according to the noble *šarī‘a*.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, it is noteworthy that Jews continued to copy Sufi texts at least until the 17th century. Among the copyists can be recognized members of the Qaraite sect. Perhaps they had felt a proximity between Sufi asceticism and the austerity of

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from Tanta, related to me that in modern times his coreligionists would visit the local tomb of Aḥmad al-Badawī in order to seek healing.

81 Abū Ya‘lī, *Musnad*, vol. III, p. 390, n°1865.

82 Al-Ša‘rānī, *al-Baḥr al-mawrūd fī al-mawāṭiq wal-‘uhūd*, ed. Muḥammad Adīb al-Gādir, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 2003, n° 108, p. 142.

83 al-Ša‘rānī, *Latā‘if al-minan*, p. 395. Apart from its value as an anecdote, this tale betrays the syncretistic tendency of the Ibn ‘Arabī school which went beyond confessional boundaries.

their own form of Judaism.<sup>84</sup> While it is difficult to estimate the extent and span of the influence of the Judeo-Sufi tendency, it is not improbable that a number of their practices survived in certain circles and were absorbed by later mystical movements such as the Qabbalists of the Holy Land. Indeed, the diffusion of Jewish Sufism during the Mamluk period was not limited exclusively to Egypt. When Sultan Baybars captured the city of Safed in 1266, he made it the capital of a province (*mamlaka*), which covered Lebanon and the Galilee, where David Maimonides visited around 1288. Under the protection of the Mamluks, the Jewish community greatly increased and towards the end of 13th century enjoyed a first cultural and spiritual flowering precisely at the same time as the principal Sufi brotherhoods flourished there. Indeed, a Rifā'ī *zāwiya* dating from 1287, was recently discovered in the city.<sup>85</sup> Hence, it is no wonder that the Qabbalistic author of *Ša'arey šedeq* ('Gates of Justice'), a disciple of Abraham Abū l-'Afiya, written in 1295 probably in Galilee, gives a faithful account of the *dīkr* ritual as practiced by Muslim ascetics.<sup>86</sup> It is highly probable that this Sufi environment had an appreciable effect on the destiny of the Qabbalistic doctrine of which Safed became the centre of gravity.<sup>87</sup> According to information given by the biographer Ibn al-'Imād, not far off, the Jews of Damascus were accustomed to assemble in the house of the Sufi al-Ḥasan ibn Hūd (1235–1299) in order to study under his direction the Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*.<sup>88</sup> Could this mean that they sought to interpret the *Guide* in the light of Sufism? This provides yet another instance of the dynamic religious interaction between Jews and Sufis during the Mamluk era. This bilateral influence of Islamic and Jewish mysticism constitutes one of the most fascinating facettes of the Judaeo-Muslim encounter. If, in the exoteric domain these two traditions remained mutually exclusive, the esoteric domain reveals a mutual receptivity. These reciprocal glances at a time of religious myopia, are of great significance for the history of religions, and open up new perspectives on the impact of Sufism beyond the confines of Islam, which are yet to be fully explored.

84 See on this question P. Fenton, 'Karaism and Sufism', in M. Polliack (Ed.), *Karaite Judaism, A Guide to its History and Literary Sources*, Leiden, Brill, 2003, pp. 199–212.

85 P. Fenton, 'Solitary Meditation in Jewish and Islamic Mysticism in the Light of a recent Archeological Discovery', *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1995), pp. 271–296.

86 See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1955, pp. 146–147.

87 See our article 'Influences soufies sur le développement de la Qabbale a Safed: le cas de la visitation des tombes' in P. Fenton and R. Goetschel (Eds.), *Experience et écriture mystiques dans les religions du Livre*, Leiden, Brill, 2000, pp. 163–190.

88 Ibn al-'Imād, *Šaḍarāt al-ḍahab* vol. V, Beirut, 1979, pp. 446–447. See also on him, I. Goldziher, 'Ibn Hud the Mohammadan Mystic and the Jews of Damascus', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 6 (1893), pp. 526–528; L. Pouzet, 'Maghrébins à Damas au VII/XIIIe siècle', *Bulletin d'études orientales* 28 (1975), p. 180, and J. Kraemer, 'The Andalusian Mystic Ibn Hud and the Conversion of the Jews', *Israel Oriental Studies* 12 (1992), pp. 59–73.

## Eliyahu Ashtor – A Forgotten Pioneer Researcher of Jewish History under the Mamluks<sup>1</sup>

Eliyahu Ashtor was born in Vienna as Ernst Straus (1914–1984).<sup>2</sup> He studied concurrently at the *Israelisch-Theologische Lehranstalt* under the celebrated scholar Samuel Krauss, and also, and at the same time, at the University of Vienna, where in 1936 he received his first doctorate for his dissertation on Baibars and the Bahri Mamluks. In his youth he was an enthusiastic activist of the Zionist movement in Vienna, member of the Zionist sporting club *maccabi* and the author of a wide-ranging article in which he defended Zionism against the Marxist thesis of Auto Heller. In 1938 he escaped to Palestine and worked for several years as librarian at the National Library in Jerusalem. During these years he wrote a second doctoral dissertation, on the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks, later to be published in three volumes.<sup>3</sup> Only in 1949, after the establishment of the State of Israel, did he receive a formal position as full professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he taught until his last days. During the seventies, his focus switched to economic history and he wrote several important articles and books about the commercial relations between the Mamluk Sultanate and Western and Southern Europe, based mainly on the Venetian archives.<sup>4</sup>

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1 An early version of this paper was published as part of a larger article. Miriam Frenkel, “The Historiography of the Jews in Muslim Countries in the Middle East – Landmarks and prospects”, *Pe’amim* 92 (2002), pp. 23–62 [Hebrew].

2 Benjamin Zeev Kedar, “In Memoriam Eliyahu Ashtor”, *Asian and African Studies* 19 (1985), pp. 119–121; Yaacov Lev, “Eliyahu Ashtor (1914–1984) and the History of the Mamluk Sultanate”, in: U. Vrmeulen, K. D’Hulster, J. Van Steenbergen (eds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras VII*, Proceedings of the 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> colloquium organized at Ghent University in May 2007–2009, Leuven 2013, pp. 469–494.

3 Eliyahu Ashtor, *History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks*, vols. 1–3, Jerusalem 1944–1960 [Hebrew].

4 List of Ashtor’s publications, in: B.Z. Kedar and A.L. Udovitch (editors), *The Medieval Levant: Studies in Memory of Eliyahu Ashtor (1914–1984)* (*Asian and African Studies* 22), Haifa: Gustav Heinemann Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Haifa, 1988, pp. 11–33. For a comprehensive review and analyse of Ashtor’s later work see in Lev’s article.



## 1. Scientific Historian in the Service of a National Mission

Ashtor was actually the first scholar in the institutional academy of the young state of Israel to study the Jewish history of the Orient. His research on this subject resulted in a three volumes book entitled: *The History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks*. The book is arranged chronologically. The first volume covers the period between the rise of the Mamluks in the middle of the thirteenth century up to the end of the Bahri Mamluk dynasty in the middle of the fourteenth. The second begins with the rise of the Burgi dynasty in 1382 and ends with the fall of the Mamluks and the rise of the Ottomans at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The third volume, which was published only in 1970, about twenty years after the first had appeared, contains 74 Geniza documents supposed to date from the Mamluk period, together with their translations into Hebrew.<sup>5</sup> Equipped with an orientalist training from the university of Vienna, with a deep knowledge of Judaic culture acquired at the *Israelisch-Theologische Lehranstalt*, and with the help of an assortment of variegated historical sources including Christian and Muslim chronologies as well as with a considerable number of Geniza documents, Ashtor was determined to write a wide-ranging historical work in accordance with academic and scientific criteria, an effort that would compensate for what he considered to be the amateurish and overly literary works of his predecessors, the Jewish scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*:

Since the scholars of the *Wissenschaft* started to study our ancient history and literature according to the methods established by the modern world's nations (*'umot ha-'olam*), much has been written about those many communities which flourished for hundreds of years in Arabic speaking countries. But although these scholars have invested much energy and labor in their research, they have not accomplished a proper summation of this history. There are several reasons behind this situation. Firstly, because of the conditions in which these Jewish scholars operated their research was always the initiative of one individual. Since such research requires a systematic collection of all historical sources, scattered all around the world and written in various languages, an individual enterprise is obviously insufficient and the coordination and support of central institutions is essential for such a research. Secondly, previous scholars have tended to stick to topics which they considered to be attractive, and have either written biographies of great Jewish persons in those lands or have described periods of time in which important literary works were composed while totally neglecting other eras, which remain obscure and unknown. The 260 years of Mamluk rule in Egypt and Syria, between the thirteenth century and the Turkish occupation in 1517, are among those obscure unstudied eras. So unfamiliar is this period of time that distinguished scholars express contradictory opinions about it. On the one hand, one may hear that the

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5 A critical review of this volume was published by S. D. Goitein in *Tarbiz* 41 (1972), pp. 59–81.

Mamluk government was tolerant towards the Jews and hence the Jewish communities thrived during this period, and on the other hand one may hear scholars state that the Mamluks persecuted the Jews under their rule, which is considered by them as one of the darkest periods in Jewish history. These contradictions are the result of inadequate research and insufficient knowledge about this era.<sup>6</sup>

With these words, Ashtor opened his magnum opus on the *History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks*. Hence, although he considered the research done by the scholars of the *Wissenschaft* to be partial and inadequate, he actually perceived of himself as their follower, albeit one who was in a better position to conduct an investigation and produce a deep and comprehensive narrative. The main fault he found in his predecessors' work, beside its scholarly inadequacy, was what he considered to be an exaggerated literary orientation. Ashtor perceived of himself as a positivist historian, one who chose his sources carefully as he searched for the "solid facts" to be extracted from them. His criteria for choosing sources were their level of "objectivity" and their accuracy in copying earlier sources, assuming that the earlier and the closer a source is to the time of the described event the more reliable it is.<sup>7</sup> According to these criteria, the most unreliable are the literary works, which he dismisses as mere myths and fables and regards as mere ornamental additions to solid factual history.<sup>8</sup> On the other side of the scale, the most trustworthy sources are formal documents issued by institutional authorities as close as possible to the time and place of the related event. This is how he explains the qualitative advantage of the Egyptian over the Syrian sources:

The Egyptian historian lived in the capital city and had high-quality information about the deeds of the government and about its external policy, such as diplomatic and administrative emissaries and delegations of all provinces, while the Syrian historians lived far away from the seat of government and could not use the archival material and hence did not include in their works official documents.<sup>9</sup>

This explains why he so appreciated the works of Ibn al Furāt: "This historian quotes in his works official letters, contracts between the Muslims and the Franks, wholly or partially as well as letters of appointment, public talks, etc."<sup>10</sup> Ashtor's approval of formal institutional history was sweeping and was applied also to his conception of the role of the modern historian. As noted above, he ascribed the deficiency in the writings of earlier generations of historians to the lack of any formal institution to back and sponsor their research. As a matter of

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6 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 1, p. I.

7 Op.cit, pp. III–V.

8 Op.cit, p. I.

9 Op.cit, p. VII. See also pp. IV–V.

10 Op.cit.

fact, he regarded himself to be an institutional historian working in the service of a national academic institution. This is how he explained the reason for not including the territory of Palestine in his research:

I [excluded] it because the history of the Land of Israel requires a special detailed investigation in light of the unique role this country has played in Jewish history. The official authorities have acknowledged and decided that such research is to be conducted by an appointed group of scholars.<sup>11</sup>

It could be that this subservient attitude towards academic authorities resulted from Ashtor's vulnerable personal and academic position at the time. It should be remembered that in the years in which he wrote these books, he was still a refugee, depending on academic institutions for his livelihood and deeply grateful to some of the heads of the Hebrew University who had personally helped him to escape the Nazi regime in Austria. Indeed, in the introduction to his book he warmly thanks Prof. Simcha Assaf who "rescued me from the infernal land and who for many years bestows many favors upon me."<sup>12</sup> Be this as it may, it is quite clear that Ashtor's work on the Jews in the Mamluk period was motivated by a deep patriotism and that he apprehended his writing as an implementation of an important national mission. This can be clearly discerned in the words in which he chose to finish his book:

Lo, here come those Jews, riding their donkeys on the straight roads of Damascus, far away, but extremely close, for the blood that flows in their veins flows also in ours. They are the children of Israel who have sanctified the name of God in their lives and in their deaths.<sup>13</sup>

Ashtor thus considered his writing on the history of the Jews in the Mamluk period to be a pedagogical national enterprise. He strived to arouse empathy in his readers towards these figures of the past, aiming at strengthening the sense of a joint origin and a joint past and at presenting this past to his readers as an educational exemplum or as a moral lesson for future generations. A striking example is Ashtor's discussion of Jewish converts to Islam in the fourth chapter of his first volume. Although he can only bring very few examples of converts, most of them intellectuals who converted out of their own conscious and deliberate choice, he calls the phenomenon "the epidemics of conversion" and condemns it wrathfully. This angry denunciation suggests that Ashtor was aiming not so much at the few Jewish converts he could find in the Mamluk

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11 Op.cit, p. XV.

12 Op.cit. p. XVI. I must admit that this compliance and conformity hardly suits Ashtor's eccentric and stormy personality, which I personally encountered in the classrooms of the Hebrew University during the seventies of the previous century.

13 Op.cit, p. XVI.

chronicles, but rather at his contemporary Jewish converts in twentieth-century Western Europe. This is how he scolds the converts:

They have neither power nor passion nor will to preserve the precious cultural assets of Judaism. All they aspire to is to achieve a high social status and gain fame among the gentiles – that’s all they are interested in. Judaism and its high values mean nothing for them and in due time they will not hesitate to abandon their own people and desert the sinking ship.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly enough, Ashtor switches in these passages – probably unconsciously – from past to present tense. Side by side with his pretension to be an objective scientific historian, Ashtor was also, consciously and declaredly, a very tendentious writer.

## 2. The “problem” of Eastern Jews

The leading question in Ashtor’s thesis is grounded in the present, in the time in which the book was written. As he put it in his own plain words:

A deep change occurred during the Mamluk period, which radically transformed the lives of the Jews in Egypt and Syria. Their status within the surrounding Muslim society and their economic and cultural structures were completely altered. The Geniza documents show that the economic structures of the Jews in Egypt and Syria during the tenth to twelfth centuries were variegated and their majority belonged to the middle class. The literary material of the Geniza attests to the rich spiritual activity in those years (although it cannot be compared to the spiritual activity in the big Jewish centers of Europe). But, as time went by the influence of the oriental centers on the whole Jewish people gradually diminished. They become but dry branches, weak members of the Jewish *organismus* and no longer play any significant role in its development. In these very days, the children of Israel return from the Diaspora (*golah*) to their homeland and here, in the land of Israel and around, they meet these deteriorated and stagnant communities of the East. This is exactly the same impression as was rendered by European travelers, who visited these countries in the late Middle-Ages. We are facing here a major problem of Israeli history – the decline of the Jewish Eastern communities, which had begun during the Mamluk period. This is precisely the topic of our book.<sup>15</sup>

We see that Ashtor turns to the Mamluk era in order to find there the solution to what he apprehends as an enigma in the present, namely the deteriorated condition of the Jewish eastern communities in the State of Israel in its first years. His investigation of this enigma is based on a theoretical assumption about the

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<sup>14</sup> Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 1, chapter 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. II.

uniformity of Jewish history. Like his colleagues of the Jerusalem School,<sup>16</sup> he believed that there is one Jewish history, with variegated nuances between East and West to be sure, yet for all that one unique history to be studied as a single inseparable unit since it developed in a different way than any other history and since it was united by a bonding principle, based on “the people’s strong aspiration to stay loyal to their religion and to conduct an independent national life... and the reaction of the non-Jewish world to this aspiration.”<sup>17</sup>

The history of the Jews of Islam was apprehended by Ashtor as an indispensable part of the great Jewish narrative common to the Jews in East and in West. The intensive use of Arab and Muslim sources made by him in this context was only methodological and aimed at delineating the external frameworks of the Jewish history and at compensating for the scarcity of Jewish contemporary sources. It was certainly not a result of any historiographical comprehension in which the Jews were viewed as belonging to the great Islamicate civilization, or of seeing the history of the Jews in Muslim lands as part and parcel of the general history of their countries. On the contrary, Ashtor, with his belief in the unity of Jewish history, tried to detect the sources of the “problem” of the Eastern Jews within the realm of inner Jewish history, blaming the eastern Jews themselves for abandoning the free and creative spiritual life of general studies such as science and philosophy and for preferring the narrow dry study of *Halakha* (Jewish law) and *Qabbala* (Jewish mysticism):

The scanty spirituality still left in the communities of Egypt and Syria was concentrated in the study of the Mishna and of Maimonides’ Code (*Mishneh Torah*). The study of Talmudic law squeezed out all other branches of Jewish studies... The Sephardic Qabbalah penetrated these lands and became exceedingly popular and dominant.<sup>18</sup>

Ashtor perceived himself as a social historian trying to depart from the literary stance of the *Haskalah* scholars, but by identifying rationalist sciences with progress and enlightenment and by associating Jewish mysticism and Halakha with backwardness and obscurantism, he actually used their own analytical categories, as is clearly manifested in his own words:

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16 D. M. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals, and the Zionist Return to History*, New York-Oxford, 1995, pp. 7–9, 109–112; Samuel Ettinger, “‘Zion’ and Contemporary Jewish Historical Research”, *Zion* 50, pp. 9–15 [Hebrew]; Jacob Barnai, “The Jews of Muslim Countries in Modern Times and the ‘Jerusalem School of History’”, *Pe’amim* 92 (2002), pp. 83–116 [Hebrew]; Yaron Tsur, “Israeli Historiography and the Ethnic Problem”, *Pe’amim* 94–95 (2003), pp. 26–33.

17 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 1, p. II.

18 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 2, pp. 56–57.

This is the eternal value of the Renaissance, which liberated the individual and created a new man. This is how the modern era started, but under the sun of the East, nothing was new.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, being committed to the Jewish national discourse, which aimed at constructing an essential modern Jewish identity, beyond place and time, Ashtor could permit himself to analyze the “decline” of the Jewish communities in the East by means of the same categories used by nineteenth-century Jewish historiographers for describing the decline of the Jewish communities of East Europe:

The Egyptian and the Syrian Jew of the fifteenth century no longer resembled his proud predecessors of the Fatimid period... or those Jews who fought the Crusaders defending their settlements in Palestine. The Jews of Egypt and Syria became very similar to the type of the Jew from the ghetto, known from Jewish history in Europe.<sup>20</sup>

The imposition of European terms and conceptions on the history of the Jews of Islam is also evident in Ashtor’s periodization. Although his book is patterned in accordance with Islamic history according to the ruling periods of the various Mamluk sultans and Mamluk dynasties, this periodization serves him only as an external framework, which is divided internally into subsections according to what he considers to be crucial events in Jewish history, more precisely according to the “pogroms” inflicted on the Jewish population. Thus, for example, the fifth chapter, entitled “From the death of al-Mālik al-Nāṣir to the end of the Bahri Mamluks,” is subdivided into the following sections: 1. The black death; 2. The pogroms of 1354; 3. The forced conversion; 4. The end of the Bahri dynasty. This periodization from one pogrom to another is very typical of what was coined by Salo Baron the “lacrimous” historiography of European Jewry.<sup>21</sup> Ashtor is well aware of the similarities between Islamic history and the history of the Eastern Jewish communities, but he refuses at this stage to view Jewish history under Islam as an indispensable part of Islamic history and insists that the similarities are only incidental parallel lines of development in two distinct histories:

The state of Arabic society and culture at the dusk of the Middle-Ages was quite gloomy, and so was the fate of Jewish culture in the East in those days... but the weakness of the

19 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 1, pp. 54–55.

20 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 1, p. 63; Paul mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism, the Ostjuden, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self Affirmation”, in: Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity*, Detroit 1991.

21 Salo W. Baron, “The Jewish Factor in Medieval Civilization”, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 12 (1942), pp. 1–48; Robert Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron: Architect of Jewish History*, New York 1995.

Jews was not a direct result of the decay of Arabic culture, although it stemmed from similar parallel grounds.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Ashtor and the Jerusalem School of History

Ashtor's obstinate refusal at this stage to view medieval Jewish history in the lands of Islam as an integral part of Mamluk history was the only way for him to adjust to the Jewish national narrative of one homogenous Jewish history. His history of the Jews under the Mamluks is indeed confined at this stage to the Zionist discourse of the Jerusalem school. This school envisioned Jewish history as an unbreakable continuum of a unified Jewish entity, which gave rise to a uniform historical process in all places, in East and West and in all times. The unifying factor behind this historical homogeneity was, according to the scholars of the Jerusalem school, the affinity between the people and its historical homeland. Accordingly, only those aspects related to the essential bond between the Jewish people and their historical land were considered to be important factors in Jewish history. Jewish history prior to the establishment of the State of Israel was thus apprehended only as a prelude to the return of the people to its homeland. Within this kind of discourse, medieval Jewish history was actually cut off from its local and historical aspects and was considered as a mere pre-Zionist prologue.<sup>23</sup> Captured by this discourse of a homogenous essentialist Jewish history, Ashtor constructed the history of the Jews during the Mamluk era in patterns very similar to those of medieval Jewish history in Europe and, what is more, made it subject to the Zionist tautological narrative that unavoidably ends with the return of the people to its homeland. He did this notwithstanding his deep acquaintance with Islamic sources and with the Geniza documents which were partially available to him. Ashtor's deep and enthusiastic commitment to the Zionist territorial narrative at this stage of his life is evident even in the way he formulated the date at the end of his introduction: "Jerusalem, June 1949 (the Hebrew date is given here), second year to the renewed state of Israel."<sup>24</sup>

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22 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 1, p. 55.

23 See note 14 above.

24 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 2, p. XVII.

#### 4. The History of the Mamluks and the Theory of Decline

Ashtor considered the Fatimid and Ayyubid eras to be a golden era, an apex of Jewish history, especially in what concerns the self-government of the Jewish communities and their spiritual literary activities.<sup>25</sup> Never the less, from the thirteenth century onwards, Ashtor believes, Jewish history enters a new phase of deterioration and stagnation, one that actually continued down to the very days in which he was writing his book. Unlike the classical periodization of Jewish history, Ashtor did not point at the expulsion from Spain in the fifteenth century as the turning point in Jewish history, but exchanged this internal mark for an external one, namely the ascent of the Mamluks. By doing so, he actually abandoned the paradigm of the unity of Jewish history and viewed the process of decline of the Jewish eastern communities as part of the general decline of the Islamic Orient. Thus, for example, after a long and detailed description of the rise and fall of fourteen Mamluk sultans over the course of the fifteenth century, he writes:

Dear reader, in case you ask whether this story about brutal sultans, who ascended the throne one after the other and wasted their lives performing obscene deeds, matter at all, and whether this chain of upheavals and revolts, successful and unsuccessful have any historical importance, my answer will be that it indeed it does and indeed it has. This long story is but a synopsis of thousands of leaves of Arabic chronicles and it shows how much the history of Egypt and Syria became drained of any interesting content. Boredom hatches out of the sources, because nothing happened in the social life of the Arab-Turkish society of the late Middle-Ages, no turn and no change... in Egypt and Syria towns did not grow, but their industries collapsed, the number of their citizens diminished, the peasants remained the Amirs' slaves, inequality between the social classes did not diminish for hundreds of years and just as social development stood still, so has the Arab culture reached the point of stagnation. Egypt and Syria sank into a decadent culture. Deficiency and lethargy characterize the cultural life of this era... and together with the decay of this culture, the cultural level of its Jews also deteriorated.<sup>26</sup>

This attitude towards Jewish history as part of the Islamic history becomes even more evident in Ashtor's later writings. The change is already manifested in his

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25 The portrayal of the Fatimid-Ayyubid era as a golden age in Jewish history was later developed by S. D. Goitein, who introduced the notion of Jewish-Muslim symbiosis. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, vols. I-V, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1967-1984. Especially, vol. II, pp. 273-310. The concept of symbiosis was largely accepted and developed by Mark Cohen. See, Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, Princeton 1994; Id., "Medieval Jewry in the World of Islam", in: Martin Goodman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, Oxford 2002. See also: Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*, Princeton 1995.

26 Ashtor, *Jews in Egypt*, vol. 1, pp. 39-40.



1959 article “Prolegomena to the Medieval History of Oriental Jewry”, in which he states explicitly:

In order to assess the source material properly, however, it is necessary to treat the history of the Jewish communities as an integral part of the medieval history of the Near East, or, in other words, to sketch the apparently peculiar facts of Jewish history against this background.<sup>27</sup>

The shift in Ashtor’s conceptual paradigm becomes most obvious in a lengthy article on the characteristics of the Jewish community of medieval Egypt, in which he totally deserts his previous assumptions and accepts unambiguously the inseparable linkage between the history of the Jews of Islam and the general history of Islam. In this path breaking article, Ashtor finally abandons the paradigm of the organic unity of Jewish history and departs from the then hegemonic Zionist-territorial discourse of the Jerusalem school. At the same time, this discourse is exchanged with the Orientalist discourse that becomes very central and salient,<sup>28</sup> especially where he discusses the leadership in the Orient, which is depicted as despotic, corrupted and capricious, traits he considers to be typically and essentially “Oriental” as opposed to the neat organized, rationalistic and efficient traits of everything in the “Occident”:

A western man, who reads the stories told by the Arab chroniclers about these “elections,” cannot avoid the comparison to the elections of the medieval German kings... indeed the total absence of any sense of legal and democratic leadership is typical of the medieval Islamic world, which unlike the Christian West did not absorb the heritage of the Roman culture... it is obvious that the Latin Church within which all the civil servants were educated for many generations, preserved the legacy of a public apparatus with its fixed arrangements based on the law and the constitution... On the other hand, in the Eastern lands the lack of any sense of constitution was felt in all aspects of life.<sup>29</sup>

This shift in his historical conceptions unavoidably changed his understanding of the reasons for the decline of Oriental Judaism. While in his book on the Jews of Egypt and Syria he blamed mainly the Oriental Jews themselves and saw them as responsible for their own decline because they abandoned the ways of enlightenment and of free thinking and preferred the stagnant Jewish law (*Halakha*) or the obscurant Jewish mysticism (*Qabbala*), at a later stage he exempted the Jews from blame and transferred the responsibility for their decline to the sur-

27 E. Ashtor, “Prolegomena to the Medieval History of Oriental Jewry”, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1959.

28 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin Books, 1978; Gabriel Piterberg, “The Nation and Its Recounters: Orientalism and Nationalist Historiography”, *Theory and Criticism – An Israeli Forum* 6 (1995), pp. 81–104 [Hebrew]; Id., “Domestic Orientalism: The representation of ‘Oriental’ Jews in Zionist/Israeli Historiography”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 23, 1996, pp. 125–145.

29 Ashtor, *Some Characteristics*, p. 128.

rounding Islamic social environment. The decline was now comprehended as an indispensable part of the overall decline of the Islamic east, emphasizing the social reasons for this decline:

The Jewish leadership was a typical oligarchy in which the rich held the power. Elections were unknown in the Near East in those days, and that's why the heads of the Jewish communities were not democratically elected. It is plausible to assume that the organization of these mostly urban communities was mainly influenced by the overall atmosphere of the Islamic city.<sup>30</sup>

And in his conclusions to this article we find:

Those were typical procedures in the Islamic Oriental society of the late Middle-Ages, painted in the colors of despotism. The Jewish communities, just like the Islamic state, did not have any rules or any legal procedures to arrange the appointment of its leaders and civil servants. The Jewish communities, just like the central Islamic administration and like the judicial apparatus of the Islamic state lack any clear definition of the authorities... the communal activities were not properly financed because there was no organized taxation system, just as in the Islamic state. Education and welfare were considered to be a kind of philanthropy, just as the contemporary Muslims regarded it as a charitable activity and not a responsibility of the state. To sum up, the Jewish community in Egypt at this time was a mirror image of the Islamic state, and how could it not be so after 500 years of Muslim rule?<sup>31</sup>

The reason Ashtor now gave for the decline was no longer spiritual-cultural, but rather structural and organizational, but this does not imply the adoption of a new causal explanation for this historical process. Ashtor, as a matter of fact, sticks to his previous essentialist posture, which is now applied to the entire Muslim culture: The Islamic state, he now argues, did not develop any organized democratic institutions because it lacked an essential "sense for law and order in all aspects of life,"<sup>32</sup> and because it was ruled according to "the despotic code the Muslims inherited from previous Oriental empires."<sup>33</sup> The decline theory of Islamic civilization dominated Orientalist scholarship for a long time. This theory, which was influenced by the nineteenth century focus on the rise and fall of civilizations as a major historical paradigm, considered the first five centuries since the rise of Islam as the period of "classical" Islam, which came to an end in 1258 with the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols, that signified the beginning of a long period of ongoing deterioration.<sup>34</sup> Ashtor's writings on the history of the

30 Ashtor, *Some Characteristics*, p. 128.

31 *Op. cit.* p. 149.

32 *Op.cit.*, p. 128, note 167.

33 *Op.cit.* p. 133. By ascribing the decline of Muslim society to the lack of civic and other institutions which developed in western Europe, Ashtor actually followed max Weber's argumentation. See Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam*, London 1974.

34 This approach is perhaps best manifested in G. E. von Grunebaum, *Classical Islam: A History*,

Jews of the Mamluk Sultanate can be considered a major contribution to this historiographical tendency.

## 5. Conclusions

Two discourses can be discerned in Ashtor's writing: The Jewish national discourse and the Orientalist discourse. Although these are different modes of discourse, they are intertwined in Ashtor's writing such that the Orientalist discourse goes along with the Jewish-National one but also constitutes an indispensable part of it. In his early writings, Ashtor was mainly committed to the Jewish-national discourse in its Zionist-territorial version. This discourse adhered strongly to the paradigm of a united autonomous Jewish history different and separate from the history of its surrounding nations and cultures. According to this ideology, Ashtor shaped the narrative of the Jews under the Mamluks in the classical pattern of what was called "Jewish history" but was actually the history of the Jews in Christian Europe. Accordingly, the narrative depicted by Ashtor develops from one pogrom to another and the social ambiance of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks is described as if it was an east European ghetto. Already in the Jewish-national discourse, typical Orientalist paradigms can be discerned, such as the essentialist attitude towards history, the structured dichotomy between East and West and the paradigm of Enlightenment and progress that incorporates the paradigm of the decline and backwardness of the East. The Orientalist discourse becomes more and more central in Ashtor's later writings and as he departs from the Jewish-national paradigm. Ashtor's academic integrity and his commitment to writing a scientific and objective history, together with the variegated primary sources he had at his disposal and his academic skills, enabled him to free himself from the paradigm of the unity of Jewish history. By doing so, Ashtor advanced the study of Jewish medieval history significantly towards a concrete and historical history of this people. Nevertheless, his research remained confined to the Orientalist discourse.

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600–1258, London 1970. For a detailed review of the reasons ascribed to this "decline" by various scholars, see: Lev, pp. 472–487. The most famous critique on the decline theory is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, New York, 1978. Never the less, as noted by Daniel Schroeter, critical stances towards this approach were already voiced before Said's famed book. Maxim Rodinson, "The Western Image and Western Studies of Islam", in: Joseph Schacht and C. E. Bosworth (eds.), *The Legacy of Islam*, Oxford, 1974; and Roger Owen's review of *The Cambridge History of Islam*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4 (1973), pp. 287–298. See Daniel Schroeter, "From Sephardi to Oriental: The 'Decline' Theory of Jewish Civilizations in the Middle East and North Africa", in: Jeremy Cohen and Richard I. Cohen (eds.), *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization; Reassessing an Idea*, Oxford, Portland and Oregon, 2008, pp. 125–150, especially, p. 129, note 17.

## Conversion Stories from the Mamlūk Period

### Introduction

Jewish communities were an integral social component of the Lands of Islam from the very beginning of the history of this religion. Evidence for the very early communication between Islam and Judaism is attested in the Qur'ān. Three different nouns there name the same particular and distinguished people: Jews, the Children of Israel and the People of the Book (*yahūd*, *banū isrā'īl* and *ahl al-kitāb*).<sup>1</sup> With the consolidation of the Islamic Caliphate, the new polity regulated the conditions of those non-Muslims groups who for many centuries constituted the majority of the population of the Abode of Islam. They were tagged as protected people and were governed by a policy of established discrimination. These inequitable regulations were clearly visible in the domains of the Mamlūk sultanate. Throughout the history of this unique political-social regime in Egypt and Syria, rulers and jurists competed to enforce what they presented as the orthodox interpretation of the holy Islamic law. Yet the history of official measures against the Jews is not linear, but a story of ups and downs, ranging from destruction and humiliation to protection and participation. There is no doubt that conversion of the People of the Book was most welcomed by the Mamlūk military aristocracy (*ahl al-dawlah*) and the religious establishment (*jull al-fuqahā'*) that the regime cultivated.<sup>2</sup> Both wings of the ruling elite were pleased with, and from time to time even took active measures to realize, this goal.

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1 Uri Rubin, "Jews and Judaism," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden, 2006), 3: 21–34; Robert Hoyland, "Jews of the Hijaz in the Quran and their Inscriptions," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'an* (London, 2011), pp. 91–116.

2 On the (Weberian) ideal structure of Mamlūk Egypt society see Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. al-'Alī Maqrīzī (766–845/1364–1441), *Ighāthat al-'umma bi-kashf al-ghumma* ed. M. M. Ziyada & J. M. Ashur (Cairo, 1940; 2003), 72, 75. [Gaston Wiet, "Le Traité des famines de Maqrīzī," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 5/1 (1962): 71–72, 74; Adel Allouche, *Mamluk economics: a study and translation of Al-Maqrizi's Ighathah* (Salt Lake City, 1994), p. 75.]

This chapter aims at analyzing conversion stories narrated by Mamlūk chroniclers.<sup>3</sup> Most of these accounts are well-known to scholars of the period,<sup>4</sup> yet taking into consideration more recent conversion studies, it seems that there is a room for a fresh and critical view of these stories. We should concentrate less on the reconstruction of the past, on the history of events and rather mainly study the chronicles' narratology, the esthetics of the stories, their literary styles and the assumed intentions of the authors. Such an approach contributes to a clearer interpretation of medieval perceptions of religion, social images and of communal and confessional borders. This research methodology seemingly will also enhance our understanding of Mamlūk society in general and of the Mamlūk elite's mind in particular. To reach this goal we will dwell briefly on the legal status of the Jews in Mamlūk society, their image in various literary genres and on reports of anti-Jewish measures before concentrating on several conversion stories.

### ***Ahl al-Kitāb and Dhimma***

With the institutionalization of Islam's hegemony in the lands of the emerging Caliphate, a clear and well-articulated religious-political-social line separated the ruling Muslim elite from the subjected non-Muslim communities. This line was demarcated by Muslim jurists, who standardized the sacred Islamic law and articulated the rules that should dominate the lives of the population within the borders of the Abode of Islam. Alongside the classification of Jews and Christians as "The People of the Book," they were framed in the particular status of protected people (*ahl al-dhimma*).<sup>5</sup> The so-called *al-Shurūṭ al-'Umarīyya*, which received their name from the common believe that they were codified by the caliph 'Umar (r. 12–22/634–644), regulated the inferior status of these non-Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Among other restrictions imposed on them were the prohibition from riding horses and

3 The first attempt to produce a general survey of Jewish history in the years 1250–1517 was written by the late E. Ashtor (Strauss), *Toledot ha-Yehudim be-Mitzrayim ve-Suryah taḥat shilton ha-Mamlukim* [Hebrew: The History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamlūks' Rule] (Jerusalem, 1944–46, 1970), 3 vols.

4 For the state of the art see Paulina B. Lewicka, "Did Ibn al-Ḥājj Copy from Cato? Reconsidering Aspects of Inter-Communal Antagonism of the Mamluk Period," in Stephan Conermann (ed.) *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies – State of the Art* (Bonn, 2013), pp. 231–33.

5 Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Yaḥyá Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī (700–750/1301–1349), *al-Ta'rif bil-mustalaḥ al-sharif* ed. M. Ḥ. Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1988), 190–192; Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Qalqashandī (756–821/1355–1418), *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā fī ṣinā'at al-inshā* (Cairo, 1963), 13: 253–270, 360–377.

6 al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā*, 13: 378–387; For a general survey see Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), pp. 52–72.

the poll-tax (*jizyah* or *jawālī*)<sup>7</sup> stipulations. They were required to dress differently than Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they had had to identify themselves by wearing distinctive colors.<sup>9</sup> Under Mamlūk rule, the sultans nominated the heads of these communities.<sup>10</sup> Several authors, who claim to be contemporary eyewitnesses, report a presumed event in Cairo (in Rajab 700/30 March 1301). A North African visitor criticized the local Christians' prominent and visible place in the political and social arenas. Due to his efforts, a restrictive royal edict was issued (Thursday 20 Rajab 700/30 March 1301). The People of the Book came under heavy pressure. Churches and synagogues were closed. Following the implementation of the new social policy, a group of non-Muslim clerks even converted to Islam.<sup>11</sup> Whether this is a report about a true case or only a literary device, a recipe for a new anti-Coptic policy, does not matter. It is sufficient to point out that these accounts shed light on practical measures that were implemented time and again. No doubt the reports echo popular voices that called for the marginalization of the large Christian population of the sultanate.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this is a crystal clear example of the use of historical stories to bring home an ideological argument. These humiliating and discriminating measures did not bar Jews and Christians from the public sphere. The status of the *Dhimma* did not even prevent non-Muslims from taking a limited role in political life and even in official ceremonies.<sup>13</sup> When the new caliph al-

7 Moshe Sharon, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae* (Leiden, 2007), 5: 167 (an inscription from Hebron).

8 Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Dawādār al-Manṣūrī (ca. 645–725/1245–1325), *Zubdat al-fikra fī ta'riḫ al-hijra* ed. D.S. Richards (Beirut, 1998), pp. 351–52 (AH 700).

9 Abū Hāmid Muḥibb al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Khalīl al-Qudṣī (819–888/1416–1483), *Duwal al-Islām al-sharīfa al-bahiyya* eds. S. Labib and U. Haarmann (Beirut, 1997), p. 68 (AH 754); Marina Russtow, "At the Limits of Communal Autonomy: Jewish Bids for Intervention from the Mamluk State", *Mamluk Studies Review* 13 (2009): 134–35.

10 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umārī, *al-Ta'rif*, pp. 181–82; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā*, 11: 385–92; 12: 294; Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "Christian and Jewish Religious Dignitaries in Mamluk Egypt and Syria: Qalqashandī's Information on Their Hierarchy, Titulature, and Appointment," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3 (1972): 59–74, 199–216.

11 Quṭb al-Dīn Mūsa b. Muḥammad al-Yūnīnī (640–726/1242–1326), *Dhayl mir'āt al zamān* (the years 696–711/1297–1312) ed. H. 'Abbās (Abu Dhabi, 2007), 1: 460–64; Abū Bakr b. 'Abd al-Allāh b. Aybak Ibn Dawādārī (fl. 723–736/1323–1335), *Kanz al-Durar wa-jamī' al-ghurar* vol. 9 *al-Durr al-fāḫir min sīrat al-mālik al-nāṣir* ed. H. R. Roemer (Cairo, 1960), pp. 47–51; Ibn Abī al-Faḍā'il (d. 759/1358), *al-Nahj al-sadīd wal-durr al-farīd fima ba'da ta'riḫ ibn al-'amid* [Histoire des sultans Mamelouks] ed. E. Blochet, part 3 *Patrologia Orientalis* 20/1 (1928): 38–40; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā*, 13: 377–3=78.

12 There is no need to dwell on the source materials here, since these texts were thoroughly analyzed by Gowaart Van Den Bossche (Ghent) in a conference presentation.

13 'Alam al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Birzālī (665–739/1267–1339), *al-Muqtafi alā kitāb al-rawḍatayn* ed. 'Umar A. al-Tadmurī (Sidon/Beirut, 1428/2006), 2/2: 147 (the death in Damascus of the Jewish doctor Mu'āfa' al-ṭabīb Rajab 714/October 1314). On Christian officials in the Mamlūk administration see Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-'Abbās

Mustanşir arrived in Cairo (659/1261), Jews with Pentateuchs in their hands and Christians holding the Gospels participated alongside the sultan Baybars and the Muslim religious establishment in the welcoming reception.<sup>14</sup> The presence of the “constitutive non-normative other”<sup>15</sup> was a crucial component in the legitimating measures that were endorsed by the new political order in Cairo. Accounts of Jewish and Christian delegations are another sort of evidence that illuminates the visibility of the *Ahl al-Dhimma* in the public sphere. A case in point is an account from the last weeks of the life of the dying sultan al-Nāşir Muḥammad (d. 21 Dhū al-Ḥijja 741/7 June 1341). Carrying Pentateuchs and the New Testament and holding burning candles, they descended to the Horse Market and prayed there for the sultan’s recovery.<sup>16</sup> An account of the dwindling of the sultanate’s treasury during the days of al-Ashraf Qayitbāy argues that the lack of money was caused by the over-sized bureaucracy. On the royal payroll were members of the religious establishment, merchants, commoners and “even Christians.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, several scholars were troubled by the integration of various Muslim and non-Muslim worshippers. They were keen to construct a barrier that would prevent people from crossing denominational borders during festivals and local pilgrimages.<sup>18</sup>

## The Representation of Jews in Mamlūk Sources

Before advancing towards the core of this study, namely to an in-depth examination of conversion stories, it seems important to dwell briefly on the double image of the Jews in contemporary Mamlūk society. They are depicted as those who have received the true message and their belief-system contains kernels of traditions that Muslims are familiar with,<sup>19</sup> yet they are blamed for being hostile

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Aḥmad Ibn Ḥijjī al-Sa’dī al-Ḥasbanī al-Dimashqī (751–815/1350–1414), *Ta’riḫ ibn ḥijjī: ḥawādith wa-wafayāt 796–815/1393–1413* ed. A al-Kundarī (Beirut, 2003), 1: 199 (799/1396).

14 Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Aybak Ibn Dawādārī (fl. 723–736/1323–1335), *Kanz al-Durar wa-jāmi’ al-ghurar* vol. 8 *al-Durra al-zākiyya fī akhbār al-dawla al-turkiyya* ed. U. Haarmann (Freiburg, 1971), p. 73.

15 ‘Ammār Muḥammad al-Nahār, “Dawr al-ākhir wa-nishātili’ fī ‘aşr al-mamālik [La perception de l’Autre et la représentation du Souverain],” in Denise Aigle (ed.), *Le Bilād al-Sām face aux Mondes Extérieurs* (Damascus/Beirut, 2012), pp. 239–62.

16 Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr b. Aḥmad Ibn Qāḍi Shuhbah (779–851/1377–1448), *Ta’riḫ* ed. ‘Adnān Darwīsh (Damascus, 1977), 1 (AH741–750): 129 (Dhū al-Qa’dah 741/April 1341).

17 ‘Alī b. Dāwūd Ibn al-Şayrafi al-Khatīb al-Jawharī (819–900/1416–1495), *Inbā’ al-ḥaşr bi-abnā’ al-‘aşr* ed. Hasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1970/2002), p. 36 (873/1468).

18 Y. Frenkel, “Pilgrimages: Spaces of Peace and Conflict,” in Antón M. Pazos (ed.), *Pilgrims and Pilgrimages as Peacemakers in Christianity, Judaism and Islam* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 69–73, 78–81.

19 Abū al-Fidā’ ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Malik al-Mu’ayyad Ismā’il b. ‘Alī b. Maḥmūd al-Shāfi’ī (672–732/1273–1331), *Taqwīm al-buldān* (Paris, 1840), p. 236 (Jericho); Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umārī,

to Islam. This animosity led them to corrupt the Bible (*tahrīf*), they twisted the Truth and rejected it.<sup>20</sup> This is clearly seen in the new approach to the Isrā'īliyyāt that several Mamlūk authors expressed.<sup>21</sup> A different sort of proof of Muslims' familiarity with Jews and Christians, and their joint participation in the social field of the period, is provided by a shadow play from Mamlūk Cairo. Its author, Ibn Dāniyāl, demonstrates a deep knowledge of Christianity and Judaism and does not hesitate to present these people to the audiences of his plays. One of the actors announces:

When a Christian comes of high standing,  
 We say: Oh priest of all churches and places of worship,  
 By Mary the Virgin, the Mother of the crowned Son,  
 By Peter, the first head of the Church of God,  
 And by Mark, who occupied the throne before the (Christian) dynasties,  
 I mean by that the Alexandrian Patriarch, when he received his office,  
 By John, by Luke, and the noble Matthew,  
 By Andrew, who came as successor to the Apostles,  
 By Bartholomew or by Thaddeus the Apostle,  
 By the respect for Simon and Thomas, to whom the greatest honour is due,  
 By Paul with the disciples, who carried on the mission,  
 By the stringing of pearls, found in his book of the Epistles,  
 By the martyrs, slaughtered in glorious martyrdom,  
 Bestow a favour on me, and be generous to me, oh my hope, oh my hope!  
 (Curses against him who does not give.)  
 And when there comes a Jew, distinguished, skilled in  
 debate, Then we say: You who are a jewel among Jews,  
 Oh! Light of the Sabbath of the Synagogue, by the Primeval, by the Eternal,  
 By the scion of Moses, who was addressed by God, the Lord of Religions,  
 By the Ten Commandments, revealed to him on the mountain,  
 By the text of the Thora Bereshit for the intercession,  
 And by the Haphyaras, whose meaning is not unknown,  
 By the family of Jacob and Israel and the intercession,  
 Bestow on me a favour with a red copper penny, Like a glowing coal in my brazier,  
 And do not say to me "Away!" and do not delay like a miser.  
 You think perhaps that I am a boor. No, by Ali! No by Ali!  
 (Curses against him who does not give).<sup>22</sup>

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*Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār: dawlat al-mamālik al-'ūlā* ed. Dorothea Krawulsky (Beirut, 1985), pp. 166, 169 (*arḍ kan'ān*).

20 Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya al-Ḥaranī (661–728/1263–1328), *al-Furqān bayn al-ḥaqq wal-bāṭil* ed. Arnaut (Damascus, 1413/1993), p. 68.

21 Ibn Kathīr refutes these legendary non-(true) Islamic stories. Abū l-Fidā' Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr (701–774/1301–1373), *Tafsīr al-qur'ān al-'aẓīm* ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1419/1998), 8:285–277; Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term Isrā'īliyyāt in Muslim Literature," *Arabica* 46/2 (1999): 201.

22 Paul Kahle, "The Arabic Shadow Play in Egypt," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1940): 29.



Moreover, we also came across reports in Mamlūk chronicles that tell of the sultanate's intervention to protect Jews.<sup>23</sup> Thus, for example, a Jew was accused of buying an Ethiopian slave girl. He and the merchant were summoned to the Citadel. The sultan questioned them about the deal and the Jew declared that the girl claimed to be Jew. The sultan is said to be pleased with the answer.<sup>24</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah's letter to the ruler of Cyprus (dated 731/1331) clearly illuminates that the sultans' intervention on behalf of the Jews was not always at odds with the political vision of Mamlūk-period Muslim jurists.<sup>25</sup> As his deliberation's departing point this ardent scholar chooses, not surprisingly, a couple of Qur'ānic verses that mention biblical prophets.<sup>26</sup> Yet, following a long lecture about the right belief system and the wrongdoing of those who reject Islam, there is a surprising twist in the text. Aiming at convincing his Christian addressee to adopt a new policy towards Muslims imprisoned in Cyprus Ibn Taymiyyah introduces a holistic vision.<sup>27</sup> He claims to have negotiated the release of prisoners seized by Mongol intruders with Ghāzān Khān, who headed the Mongol forces that penetrated southern Syria in 702/1303.<sup>28</sup> Ghāzān is said to have agreed to liberate all Muslim prisoners, he himself had converted to Islam (in 694/1295),<sup>29</sup> but he refused to free Christians whom his forces had captured in Jerusalem.

"I told him," says Ibn Taymiyyah, "all those Christians and Jews that are held by you and who are protected by us (*ahl dhimmatinā*) should be released. We shall free all of them and will not leave a single prisoner in your hands, neither Muslim (*ahl al-milla*) nor non-Muslim (*ahl al-dhimma*)."<sup>30</sup>

23 Ibn Ḥijjī, *Ta'rikh ibn ḥijjī*, 159.

24 Ibn al-Sayrafi al-Khatīb al-Jawharī, *Inbā' al-ḥaṣr bi abnā' al-'aṣr*, pp. 518–29 (886/1481).

25 Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyyah al-Ḥaranī (661–728/1263–1328), *al-Risālah al-Qubruṣīyah: kitāb min shaykh al-islām Ibn Taymiyyah ila' Sarjawās malik Qubruṣ* (Algier, 1429/2008); Jon Hoover, "Ibn Taymiyya," in David Thomas, Alexander Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* vol. 4 (1200–1350) (Leiden, 2012), pp. 847–51.

26 Q. 42: (al-Shūrā) 13: "He has laid down for you as religion that He charged Noah with, and that We have revealed to thee, and that We charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus: 'Perform the religion, and scatter not regarding it';" and 33 (al-Aḥzāb): 7: "And when We took compact from the Prophets, and from thee, and from Noah, and Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, Mary's son; We took from them a solemn compact" (trans. Arberry).

27 His major aim was to conclude a prisoners' exchange. Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Risālah al-Qubruṣīyah*, pp. 69–86; see Y. Frenkel, "Fikāk al-Asīr: The Ransom of Muslim Captives in the Mamlūk Sultanat", in Heike Grieser und Nicole Priesching (eds.), *Gefangenensloskauf im Mittelmeerraum* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2015), pp. 143–157.

28 Denise Aigle, "The Mongol Invasions of Bilād al-Shām by Ghāzān Khān and Ibn Taymiyyah's Three 'Anti-Mongol' Fatwas," *Mamluk Studies Review* 11 (2007): 89–120.

29 Reuven Amitai-Preiss, "Ghazan, Islam and Mongol Tradition: A View from the Mamlūk Sultanate," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 59/1 (1996): 1–10.

30 Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Risālah al-Qubruṣīyah*, p. 56.

On the other hand, the denounced image of the Jew is clearly portrayed in the contemporary sources. The biography of the Sufi Ibn Hūd (633–699/1236–1300) is another example of the complex two-edged relations between Muslim and non-Muslims in the Mamlūk domains.<sup>31</sup> His critics nicknamed him “*rayis al-yahūd*” (the head of the Jews). The Mamlūk poet Ibn Ḥajalah blamed him for drinking wine (*bint al-unqūd*) with them. Moreover, it is said that the Jews of Damascus were busy with him (*ishtaghal* “*alayh*”) in reading Maimonides’ *Dalā’il* (*Guide for the Perplexed*).<sup>32</sup> Inter alia, this picture of Ibn Hūd conveys a negative image of the Jews, who are depicted as a corrupting element that lead a unique Muslim figure astray. Yet his story also tells of a situation of blurred communal borders, of religious syncretism. The following story from Damascus also tells us that Jews were viewed suspiciously by their environment. A hearing (*majlis*) was convened to elaborate and determine the case of those Jews who claimed that they were the offspring of the community that was expelled by ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb from the oasis of Khaybar.<sup>33</sup> This community displayed a letter that was said to be handed to their forefathers by the Prophet himself and argued that their ancestors were exempted from the burden of the poll-tax (*jizya*). Not surprisingly, the jurists that studied this document immediately rejected it as a counterfeit deed. By demonstrating the factual mistakes in it the local historian Ibn Kathīr decisively narrates that he composed a specific study (*juz’*) that proved the forgery. Moreover, in his report on the litigation he even inserts an account of the involvement of the famous and highly regarded scholar Ibn Taymiyyah in the proceedings.<sup>34</sup>

Time and again, Mamlūk chronicles reflect anti-Jewish bias. This mode is reproduced, for example, in a condensed history of the Qarmatian sect. The historian incorporates this ninth-century episode into his fifteenth-century composition, and blames this heretic group of being *Yahūd*.<sup>35</sup> The Damascene historian Ibn Ṣaṣrā takes a step further. Into his local chronicle of violent political confrontation, he inserts the following animal story:

31 Ignaz Goldziher, “Ibn Hūd, the Mohammedan Mystic, and the Jews of Damascus,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 6/1 (1893): 218–220; Joel L. Kraemer, “The Andalusian Mystic Ibn Hud and the Conversion of the Jews,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 12 (1992): 59–73.

32 Zayn al-Dīn Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī (952–1031/1545–1621), *al-Kawākib al-duriyya fī tarājim al-sādah al-sūfiyyah aw Ṭabaqāt al-Munāwī al-kubra’* (Beirut, 1413/1993), 2: 399. On Maimonides’ *Dalā’il* see Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allah Muḥammad b. Shākīr al-Kutubī (681–764/1282–1363), *Fawāt al-Wafayāt* ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1973–1974), 4: 176 (no. 538, the biography of the Ra’īs Mūsā al-Qurtubī).

33 L. Vecchia Vaglieri, “Khaybar,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup> (Leiden, 1997), 4: 1140–42.

34 Abū al-Fidā’ Ismā’il Ibn Kathīr (701–774/1301–1373), *al-Bidāya wal-nihāya* ed. ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo, 1998), 18: 9–10 (Shawwāl 701/June 1302); this story is repeated in other periods and lands.

35 Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥimsī (841–934/1458–1528), *Ḥawādith al-zamān wa-wafiyāt al-shuyūkh wal-aqrān* ed. Ḥarfūsh (Beirut, 2000), p. 263 (900/1495).

I went out from Damascus to Jerusalem the Holy for a visit, and on the way I stayed at an inn. It was cold and raining, and a group of us gathered in one of the store rooms of the inn. Among them was an ape trainer with a big ape and his wife and something on which they rode... When all the company slept, the ape sat up, arose and went to where the wife of his master the ape trainer was, to lie with her... When he saw me watching him, he went to his master's saddlebag, rummaged in it, and took out of it a purse of the value of fifty dirhams and came to me with it.... When it was dawn and we arose, the ape trainer sat up, found his saddlebag ransacked and the dirhams missing from it, and said, "Innkeeper, do not open the doors. I have lost *dirhams*, and my ape knows who took them, because he watched us while we slept." ... When day came, everyone who was in the inn assembled. They were few in number, and among them was a Jew. The ape began to examine the people one by one until he came to the Jew. He clung to him and began to shout... My wonder grew at how the ape had clung to the Jew and not to a Muslim.<sup>36</sup>

## Religious violence

The pressure on the non-Muslims was neither limited to calls to prevent Dhimmis from working in the sultanate's administration<sup>37</sup> nor to restrictive anti-Coptic edicts,<sup>38</sup> nor to measure to prevent them from building churches or synagogues.<sup>39</sup> Like the Shi'a, Jews and Christians were also accused of cooperating with the Tatars (Mongols). They were seen by their Sunnī-Muslim neighbors as a fifth column that acted jointly with the Mongols.<sup>40</sup> Now and then Mamlūk chronicles

36 Muḥammad bn Muḥammad Ibn Ṣaṣrā (d. c. 800/1397), *al-Durra al-muḍī'a fī al-dawla al-zāhiriya* ed. and trans. W. M. Brinner (Berkeley, 1963), pp. 126–29 (Arabic)/60–61 (English).

37 Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad bn Abī Bakr Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya al-Dimashqī al-Ḥanbalī (691–751/1292–1350), *Aḥkām ahl al-dhimma* eds. Y. al-Bakrī and Sh. al-Arurī (Beirut, 1418/1997), 1: 448–52, 454–55; Shams al-Dīn Abū Umāmah Muḥammad bn 'Alī Ibn al-Naqqāsh, al-Dukkālī al-Miṣrī (720–763/1320–1361), *al-Madhammah fī isti'māl ahl al-dhimmah* ed. A. al-Turayqī (Riyad, 1995) [F.A. Belin, "Fetoua relative à la condition des Zimmis", *Journal Asiatique* 4/18 (1851): 417–517, 4/1 (1852): 97–140]; Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Durayhim al-Miṣrī al-Shāfi'ī (712–762/1312–1361), *Manhaj al-ṣawāb fī qubḥ istiktāb ahl al-kitāb* ed. Sayyid Kasrawī (Beirut, 2002); al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk li-ma'rīfat duwal al-mulūk* ed. 'Āshūr (Cairo, 1427/2007), 4: 610; David Thomas and Alex Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* vol. 5 (1350–1500) (Leiden, 2013), 123–29, 138–44.

38 Moshe Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamluk Empire," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10/4 (1942): 843–861; Tamer el-Leithy, "Sufis, Copts, and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in 14th-century Upper Egypt" in Adam Sabra and Richard McGregor (eds.), *The Development of Sufism in Mamlūk Egypt* (Cairo, 2006), 113.

39 Seth Ward, "Taḳī al-Dīn al-Subkī on Construction, Continuance, and Repair of Churches and Synagogues in Islamic Law," in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic traditions* (Denver, 1986), pp. 169–79.

40 al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al zamān*, ed. 'Abbās, 1: 318; Cl. Cahen, "L'islam et les minorités confessionnelles au cours de l'histoire," *Table Ronde* 126 (1958): 63–68; Emmanuel Sivan,

report on violent events, and attacks on properties of Christians and Jews are not rare. An example of this point is the story about a church that blocked the digging of a water pool in Cairo and the sultan ordered it destroyed.<sup>41</sup> The capital's mob (*ḥarafish*)<sup>42</sup> seized the opportunity and destroyed several churches in Cairo. The Christians were accused of taking revenge and setting fire to Muslim properties. In retaliation they were punished. The sultan ordered them to dress in blue from top to bottom and to carry bells while using public baths. They were banned from working in the sultanate's offices (721/May 1321).<sup>43</sup> Following a legal dispute, the synagogue of the Karaite community in Damascus was ruined. While the Jews claimed that it was an old construction, the Muslims demanded its reduction to rubble, on the grounds that it was a new building, i.e. built after Islam reconquered the city (721/July 1321).<sup>44</sup> This event took place when letters from Baghdad reached Damascus reporting the conversion of Christians and Jews.<sup>45</sup> A similar legal dispute arose again in Damascus several decades later (in 796/1394). The contemporary Damascene historian Ibn Ḥijjī,<sup>46</sup> who took an active role in the case, summarizes the developments: The Jews claimed that one of their synagogues had been seized illegally and converted to a mosque (c. 794/1392), and that the verdict by the judge al-Bā'ūnī who legitimized this action was wrong, although it was endorsed in Cairo by the sultan's court. When the sultan Barqūq called at Damascus, to subdue the Miṣṣāshīs' revolt,<sup>47</sup> the Jews addressed him and begged him to reverse past decisions. They claimed that they lost the building when the notorious sheikh al-Khaḍīr confiscated it illegally (in 669/1270).<sup>48</sup>

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“Notes sur la situation des chrétiens à l'époque ayyubide,” *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 172/2 (1967): 117–130.

41 Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 18: 206–208.

42 William M. Brinner, “The Significance of the Harafish and their ‘Sultan,’” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6 (1963): 190–215; Ira Marvin Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge MA, 1967/1984), pp. 177–83; Robert Irwin, “Futuwwa: Chivalry and Gangsterism in Medieval Cairo,” *Muqarnas* 21 (2004): 162–63.

43 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, *Masālik*, 27: 341, 358 (on a fire in Damascus 740/1339–40). For additional reports see Abū Shāma 'Abd al-Raḥman b. Ismā'il b. Ibrāhīm al-Shāfi'i (599–665/1202–1267), *Dhayl Kitāb al-Rawdatayn fī akhbār al-dawlatayn al-nūriyya wal-salāḥiyya* ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1422/2002), pp. 318–19; al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al zamān* (Haydar-Abbad 1380/1961), 1: 361–62, 2: 320–312.

44 Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 18: 208–209; Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, *Masālik*, 27: 342.

45 Ibn al-Wardī, *Ta'rikh* (Būlāq, 1285/1868), 2: 272.

46 On him, see Sami G. Massoud, *The Chronicles and Annalistic Sources of the Early Mamluk Circassian Period* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 126–32.

47 Robert Irwin, “Tribal feuding and Mamluk factions in medieval Syria,” in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 258–63.

48 See the biography of al-Khaḍīr in al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, 1: 405–06. On this companion of the sultan Baybars, cf. Peter Malcolm Holt, “An Early Source on Shaykh Khadir al-Mih-rani,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46 (1983): 33–39.

Eventually, legal procedures enabled the Jewish community to reestablish their ownership rights.<sup>49</sup> Some scholars hypothesize that the brutal cases described here reflect the basic hostility of the Muslim public towards their non-Muslim neighbors. Yet, both cases demonstrate that the Jews of the sultanate were able to use political and legal maneuvers to defend their properties, in other words that reality was more complex. We cannot depict them as defenseless victims who were pleading for the compassion of their belligerent neighbors.

## Conversion stories

The spectators who attended Ibn Dāniyāl's theater plays were familiar with renegades and conversion stories. An example of the prevalence of conversion stories is provided by al-Kutubī. He transmits from Ibn al-Abbār the biography of Ibrahim Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī (d. 649/1251–52), a Spanish Jew who converted to Islam. In a *qaṣīdah* the convert to Islam says:

In the love for Muḥammad I have sought diversion from Moses;<sup>50</sup> were there not the guidance of the Merciful, I would not have found the straight path; // Not because of my insufficiency did I separate from the first mentioned person, but it is so that with Muḥammad the Law of Moses has been abolished.<sup>51</sup>

From the biography of Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf b. Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm we learn that his grandfather, Taqī al-Dīn 'Abd Allāh, converted to Islam. The family sobriquet al-Dā' wūdī al-Isrā'īlī is explained by al-Maqrīzī: "They belong to a distinguish family (*ahl al-bayt*). It is widely accepted by the Jews that they are the progeny of King David."<sup>52</sup> Crossing religious frontiers is an old historical phenomenon.<sup>53</sup>

49 *Ta'riḫ ibn ḥijjī*, pp. 74, 76.

50 According to several traditions that circulated in the Mamlūk realm Moses recognized Muḥammad's outstanding qualities and mission, and turning to the Almighty passionately pleaded with Him: "O God make me a follower of Muḥammad's community". Abū al-Fidā Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr (701–774/1301–1373), *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm* ed. Sāmī al-Salāma (Riyad: Dār Ṭayba, 1429/1999), 3: 479 (7: [al-al-a' rāf], 154) [Paul Fenton (ed.), *Maḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Zikrī, Rašf al-ḍarab fī faḍl Banī Isrā'īl wal-'Arab* [On the eminence of Israelites and Arabs: a neo-Muslim apology in defence of the Israelites] (Madrid: CSIC, 2016), 146].

51 al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, 1: 20; Martin Schreiner, "Zur Geschichte der Polemik zwischen Juden und Muhammedanern," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 42 (1888): 643 (with minor changes); for a slightly different translation see A. Schippers, "Humorous Approach of the Divine in the Poetry of al-Andalus: the Case of Ibn Sahl," in Gert Borg and Ed de Moor (eds.), *Representations of the divine in Arabic poetry* (Amsterdam, 2001), p. 128.

52 Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Maqrīzī (766–845/1364–1441), *Durar al-'uqūd al-farīda fī tarājim al-ayān al-mufīda* ed. Maḥmūd al-Jalīlī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb, 1423/2002), 3: 561–562 (1458); *ibid*, *al-Sulūk*, 4: 846 (Rajab 833/March 1430); Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī (831–902/1424–1497), *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi' li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsi'* (Beirut,

Endless accounts tell of transformation of identities, of giving up one belief system and the adoption of another. Max Müller, the founding father of modern *Religionswissenschaft*, i. e. the study of comparative religion,<sup>54</sup> sorted the six great universal religions into two categories: missionary and non-missionary. Islam belonged to the first type, while Judaism to the second. This classification of religions prevailed in Victorian England. No surprise that it served Arnold in his pioneering *The Preaching of Islam*.<sup>55</sup> Arnold could cement his theory by quoting several verses from the Qur'ān that reflect Muḥammad's self-vision. According to him, the Prophet of Islam is portrayed in the Holy Book as a summoner who calls his community to abandon old practices and to observe new manners. This is attested, for example, in the verses: "O thou who are enveloped in a mantle: Arise and warn and magnify thy Lord" and "Call to the path of your Lord."<sup>56</sup> Later Muslim generations would build on these verses the idea of mission to the nations within the Abode of Islam and beyond its borders. This vision of Islam as the religion to all nations prevailed in Mamlūk circles. A man's relinquishment of his ancestors' religion and his joining the Muslim community was viewed by contemporary scholars and poets as a source of pride and pleasure. A couplet of Ibn Nubātah's demonstrates this approach:<sup>57</sup>

O our brother who with us shares Islam the religion of grace, you amused us //  
you were a flame of Hell fire but now you have become a beam of light.<sup>58</sup>

The conditions of the *dhimma* did not prevent Muslims from efforts to convert the People of the Book. Literary texts from the Mamlūk period reflect the salient presence of the conversion idea among wide social circles. Several cases can be selected from pseudo-biographical stories about the virtues of devoted pious Sufis.<sup>59</sup> One example of this point is the fantastic story of Bū Yazīd, a literary

1412/1992), 10: 292 (1143); A. N. Poliak, "The Jews of the Middle East at the end of the Middle Ages (according to Arabic sources)," *Zion* 2 (1937): 265 (note 35; in Hebrew).

53 Donald P. Little, "Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahri Mamluks, 692-755-1293-1354," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976): 552-69; Shaun O'Sullivan, "Coptic Conversion and the Islamization of Egypt," *Mamluk Studies Review* 10 (2006): 65-79.

54 The phrase "He who knows one knows none" is taken from Goethe. John R. Hinnells, *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (2005), pp. 212-13.

55 Thomas Walker Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (London: Constable, 1876; second edition 1913), p. 1.

56 Q. 74: 1-2 and Q. 16: 125.

57 On him see Thomas Bauer, "Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī (686-768/1287-1366): Life and Works-Part I: The Life of Ibn Nubātah," *Mamluk Studies Review* 12 (2008): 1-35.

58 Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī (686-768/1287-1366), *Dīwān Ibn Nubātah* (Beirut, n.d.), p. 239.

59 Abū Madyan Shuayb b. Sa'd b. 'Abd al-Kāfī Ḥurayfīsh al-Miṣrī al-Makkī (d. 801/1398), *al-Rawḍ al-fā'iḳ fi al-maw'iz wal-raḳā'iq* (Cairo, 1304/1887), pp. 109 (Junayd and the monk), 130 (Abū Madyān and the monks). On this author see Brinner, "The Significance of the

piece that was presented to the Mamlūk sultan Qanṣıwah al-Ghawri.<sup>60</sup> The narrative revolves around a polemical debate in Constantinople between the Muslim hero and his Christian rival.<sup>61</sup> The old monk eventually gives in and says:

I will answer the question and you are free to agree with me or to reject my words. The keys to the Garden of Eden are [the declarations]: “I bear witness that there is no god but Allah the One who has no partner. I testify that Muhammad is His servant and His messenger.” Five hundred monks converted immediately with him and on the spot joined Islam. The rest, five hundred strong, stuck to Christianity. They said: “We will not agree with you unless you demonstrate some of the miraculous powers that God provided you with.” (...) All the monks that surrounded Abū Yazīd in the church converted straight away to Islam. They all returned to the monastery in a good mood and with satisfaction. They met the old monk sitting on his chair. He stood up, descended to the ground and in front of Abū Yazīd reiterated the Islamic testimony. At that moment Abū Yazīd heard an inner voice: “O Abū Yazīd, for our cause you tied the girdle around your body, yet we cut one thousand belts for you.” These words pleased him very much and he was very happy.<sup>62</sup>

The paradigm that I use in this article depends heavily on Nock’s thesis.<sup>63</sup> This British-American historian of the Ancient World investigated *The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*. In this classic book he advanced the theory that there are two major types of religious identity changes, of joining a new religion. One is adhesion and the second is conversion. Adhesion, according to Nock, is the crossing of a fence which was cultural but not creedal. In this social reality, a person can have one foot on each side of the fence. He accepts new ways of worships a useful supplement and not as substitutes. It does not involve the taking up of a new way of life in place of the old one. Adhesion, in other words, makes possible the embracing of multiple positions. Conversion, in contradistinction to adhesion, means the reorientation of the

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Ḥarāfish,” 210; Jonathan Porter Berkey, *Popular preaching and religious authority in the medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle, 2001), p. 18.

60 Usually but incorrectly vocalized Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī. P. M. Holt in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup> (Leiden, 1997), 4: 552–553.

61 Non-Muslims are said to voice critical positions during inter-religion polemics and even to question the credo of Islam during these events. See for example Sa’d b. Maṣūr Ibn Kam-mūnah, *Tanqīh al-abḥāth li-milal al-thalāth* ed. Moshe Perlmann (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 71–72 (Arabic)/105–06 (English): “It is possible that Muhammad had read or heard the books of earlier prophets and had selected and compiled what was best in them; or that, attentive to words of men, he studied them, chose and collected the more remarkable expressions and fine points and thus produced the Quran...[and] Even if we should admit that the text of the Quran has been transmitted, we do not concede that particulars of its verses have been transmitted.”

62 JNUL, Jerusalem, ms. Arab Yahuda, 294, ff. 49v–51r; Y. Frenkel (ed.), *The Soirées (majālis) of the Sultan Qānṣıwh: A Collection of Mamlūk Stories and Mirabilia*, (in preparation).

63 A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933).

individual's soul, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.

This view of private conversion as a deep transformation, which is not like adhesion, is supported by the explanation of another great theoretician. In his *Varieties of the Religious Experience* William James claims that:

to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.<sup>64</sup>

In the following we will see that Muslim authors envisioned, out of ideological motivations, the embracing of Islam by Jewish converts in terms similar to James' conversion theory. These writers used a comparable terminology despite the obvious fact that not all the Jews that adhered to Islam did so out of deep religious motivations. This hypothesis can be deduced effortlessly from the sources. Thus for example Ibn Kammūnah (d. 682/1284), a Jewish philosopher from Baghdad, who wrote a book that centers on comparison between the three Biblical religions,<sup>65</sup> provides *inter alia* a condensed explanation of the current social and religious assimilation that he witnessed:

That is why, to this day we never see anyone joining (*dakhala*) Islam unless in terror, or in quest of power, or to avoid heavy taxation (*kharāj*), or to escape humiliation, or if taken prisoner, or because of infatuation with a Muslim woman, or for some similar reason.<sup>66</sup> Nor do we see a respected, wealthy, and pious non-Muslim well versed in both his faith and that of Islam, going over (*intaqala ilā*) to the Islamic faith without some of the aforementioned or similar motives.<sup>67</sup>

It is worth paying attention to Ibn Kammūnah's language. Although he mentions social and religious transformation, he does not use the verb *aslama* to indicate conversion but rather the vague and general verbs *dakhala* or *intaqala*. This is so, I believe, because he comments on adhesion rather than conversion. Critical accounts of Mamlūk-period popular practices fully support this schematic

64 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; Pennsylvania State University An Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2013), p. 188.

65 Schreiner, "Zur Geschichte der Polemik", p. 643; Sabine Schmidke, "Ibn Kammuna," in *Encyclopaedia of Jews in the Islamic World* 506a; *ibid.*, "Studies on Sa'd Ibn Kammuna," *Persica* 19 (2003): 107–08.

66 Cf. the story from Konya on the conversion (*aslamat*) of the Mongol queen that is narrated by al-Dawādār al-Manṣūrī, *Zubdat al-fikra*, p. 32.

67 Ibn Kammūnah, *Tanqīḥ al-abḥāth li-milal al-thalāth*, p. 102 (Arabic)/149 (English).



structure of society, belief-systems and identity changes. Muslim jurists often criticized practices that reflected obliterated inter-communal borders.<sup>68</sup> Looking at the conversion stories, I assume that they have a fictional character. This observation of historical texts follows the method employed by the Indian scholar Gauri Viswanathan.<sup>69</sup> Studying conversion stories, both fictional and historical, he claims that the narrators of these stories fictionalized the crossing of religious boundaries. The story of Bahā' al-Dīn 'Abd al-Sayyid b. al-Muḥadhib, the Jewish jurist and teacher (*dayyān*),<sup>70</sup> attracted the attention of modern scholars already in the closing years of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> The basic outline of the story is simple.<sup>72</sup> A Jewish congregational leader and his sons came to the "palace of justice" (*dār al-'adl*)<sup>73</sup> where the viceroy received them. There they crossed the religious boundaries and publicly converted to Islam.<sup>74</sup> A great number of scholars and jurists joined the gathering. On this occasion other Jews relinquished their old faith and converted to Islam (4 Dhū al-Ḥijja 701/31 July 1302). A week later, the great festival that commemorates the end of the *ḥajj* rituals in Mecca (*'id al-qurbān* or *al-aḍḥā*) was celebrated. The new converts joined the Muslims of Damascus and paraded invoking the slogan "*Allāh*" *akbar* (God [is] the greatest)." Many people honored them.<sup>75</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqālānī based his biography of 'Abd al-Sayyid on the paragraph from Ibn Kathīr's history, yet by augmenting it with additional details he builds up the image of his hero. According to his presentation, 'Abd al-Sayyid was a devoted student of Islam who demonstrated his love (*kān*" *yaḥibb*"") of Muslims prior to his conversion and who studied *ḥadīth* with a celebrated Damascene teacher.<sup>76</sup> Ibn al-Wardī claims in an ego remark that he happened to be in Damascus when 'Abd al-Sayyid passed away (on 6 Jumādā al-Ākhira 715/6 September 1315). The his-

68 Y. Frenkel, "Popular Culture (Islam, Early and Middle Periods)," *Religion Compass* 2/2 (2008): 195–225.

69 G. Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, N.J., 1998).

70 al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'at al zamān* ed. 'Abbās, 1:656; al-Birzālī, *al-Muqtafi 'alā kitāb al-rawḍatayn*, p. 188; Ṣalāh al-Dīn Khalīl. b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī (696–764/1296–1363), *A'yan al-'aṣr wa-a'wān al-naṣr* ed. Alī Abū Zayd (Beirut, 1418/1998), 3: 65 (no. 980).

71 This biography was studied by Ignaz Goldziher, "Mélange Judéo-Arabes," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 43 (1901): 1–2, 60 (1910): 37–38; it is worth mentioning that I was not able to trace this name in Jewish sources, and see next note.

72 For a similar story from Baghdad see Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, *Masālik al-abṣār*, 27: 353 (754/1333–34).

73 Nasser O. Rabbat, "The Ideological Significance of the Dar al-Adl in the Medieval Islamic Orient," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (1995): 3–28; Yasser Tabbaa, *Constructions of power and piety in medieval Aleppo* (University Park PA, 1997), pp. 65–66.

74 On the passing-away of one of his son see Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Ta'rikh*, 2: 112–113 (Rajab 757/July 1356).

75 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wal-nihāya*, 18: 10–11.

76 Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqālānī (773–852/1372–1449), *al-Durar al-kāmina fī a'yan al-mi'ah al-thāmina* (Beirut, n.d.), 4: 380 (bio. no. 1033).

torian says that the deceased was a good Muslim (*ḥasana islāmuh*<sup>77</sup>) and to commemorate him and his conversion he even composed a short stanza:

By converting to Islam he built his household and by doing so he destroyed the mansions of his enemies // Their sorrow destroyed their warehouses yet their conversion pleased Moses.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, Ibn Taymiyyah employs the story of ‘Abd al-Sayyid as a tool in his anti-[unruly] Dervishes campaign.<sup>78</sup> He tells his readers that he met with ‘Abd al-Sayyid prior to his conversion. The sheikh ‘Abd al-Sayyid, who at that time was the judge (*qāḍī*) of the Jews, told him about a meeting he had with a Sufi teacher named Sharf al-Dīn al-Bālīsī.<sup>79</sup> According to Ibn Taymiyyah’s account, ‘Abd al-Sayyid accused the Dervishes of taking up Pharaoh’s path and that they did not deny these charges. It is said that ‘Abd al-Sayyid responded to the Dervish’s call to convert by saying “I will not give up the way of Moses and turn to the path of Pharaoh.”<sup>80</sup> Between the lines of Ibn Taymiyyah’s account we read that a true Muslim savant, like he himself or like the *ḥadīth* scholar Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥujjāj Yūsuf al-Mizzī (654–743/1256–1341), can convince even a devoted Jew to give up his imperfect religion and to convert to the true religion of Islam, an achievement which a Dervish cannot achieve. Yet this is not a report on a change of hearts and minds but a statement on private redemption and Islam’s victory. The Mamlūk accounts – the development is not mentioned in other sources – offer a dramatic cycle of scenes, indoors and in the open public space, official and popular, at day and at night. Following their conversion to Islam, the male members of the Jewish judge’s household were decorated with robes of honor and they traversed Damascus in a ceremonial procession accompanied by bands of drummers and wind instruments. At night a festive ritual of Qur’ān reading took place in the converts’ house. This presentation emphasizes the role of learned Muslims in a supposedly voluntary act that was motivated by true and deep conviction. It is represented as a swift and clear-cut change that left no traces of the past religious identity. My conclusion on the narrative format of Mamlūk accounts on the exchange of religious identity by Jews is supported by additional reports from Mamlūk sources. In several biographies reporting Mamlūk-period conversion, Ibn Ḥajar emplotted (to use Paul Ricoeur’s terminology) an account that emphasizes the role of the ‘*ulamā*’ in the crossing of the

77 Ibn al-Wardi, *Tārīkh*, 2: 263.

78 Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Furqān bayna al-ḥaqq wal-bāṭil* ed. Arnaut, pp. 120–121; the term is taken from Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God’s unruly friends: dervish groups in the Islamic later Middle period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994).

79 Is he Ḥasan ibn Ḥamzah Muḥammad al-Shirāzī (d. 600/1204)?

80 Ibn Taymiyyah concludes his account by stating: “[even] a Jew is better than a Pharaoh (i.e. Sufi).” See Kraemer, “The Andalusian Mystic Ibn Hud”, pp. 65–66.

religious line.<sup>81</sup> The Muslim scholars were presented as playing the crucial role in spreading Islam.<sup>82</sup> In the obituary of Yūsuf b. Abī al-Bayān al-Isrā'īlī (d. 741/1341),<sup>83</sup> the great historian tells that the deceased had converted willingly after conversations with Ibn Taymiyyah and with Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar b. Makkī Ibn al-Wakīl al-Dimashqī (d. 716/1317).<sup>84</sup> Nafīs b. Dā'ūd al-Tabrizī, who migrated to Cairo in the days of the sultan al-Nāṣir Ḥasan (r. 748–752, 755–762/1342–51, 1354–61),<sup>85</sup> had rejected the sultan's pressure to convert but gave in to the intellectual reasoning of Abū Umāmah b. al-Naqqāsh. Under the influence of this scholar he relinquished Judaism and became a true Muslim by the name 'Abd al-Salām. Many Jews followed him and the sultan bestowed rewards on him (*aqṭa'ah<sup>u</sup> iqṭa'<sup>an</sup> wa-ratab<sup>a</sup> lah<sup>u</sup> rawātib*).<sup>86</sup> The account of the conversion of Muḥibb al-Dīn Khalīl b. Faraj b. Sa'īd is in line with this prevailing structure of converts' biographies. Khalīl was born Jew in Jerusalem (in 712/1313) and moved to Damascus where he studied the Islamic sciences and became a devoted Sufi. He even held religious-administrative positions. Shortly after his return to Damascus from Mecca, where he accomplished the duty of the *ḥajj*, he passed away (in 789/1387).<sup>87</sup> The narrative does not center merely on the crossing experience of the new Muslim. It aims to represent the convert as an exemplary devoted Muslim who accomplishes the religious duties in a manner that born Muslims do not. Muslim audiences that read/heard conversion stories were keen to learn that the converts to Islam did so from deep belief in the true and ultimate religion, although this was not always the case. We can reconstruct the Muslim authors' position by following the explanations provided by one of these converts closely. Ḥasan Ibn Sa'īd al-Iskandarānī completed (on 1 Sha'bān 697/13 May 1298) writing a short polemic book. Based upon his reading of the Hebrew Bible and the Syriac Gospel, he endeavored to convince his audience that these sacred books tell of the coming of Muḥammad.<sup>88</sup> Hence he emplots a dramatic scene of a dangerous illness and a miraculous recovery, of a dream and eventually of his union with the genuine believers. Furthermore, he argues that fear for the fate of

81 This in comparison to other accounts that simply say: "God has guided him toward the right path." Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-kāmina*, 2: 366–367 (biography of Sharaf al-Dīn Mūsā b. Kūçük, no. 2419).

82 A brief list of cases was composed by Poliak, "The Jews of the Middle," pp. 265–66, and idem, "Nafīs ben David and Sa'd Ad-Dawla," *Zion* (1928) 3: 84–85 (both in Hebrew).

83 Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-kāmina*, 4: 483 (bio. no. 1326).

84 On him see Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-kāmina*, 4: 115–123 (bio. no. 318).

85 Presumably the report of his arrival at Cairo in AH654 is wrong and the date should be corrected to AH754.

86 Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-kāmina*, 4: 396–397 (bio. no. 1085).

87 Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Ta'rikh*, 3: 227–228.

88 According to the colophon, "This book was composed in the Great Mosque of the capital city of Damascus [the Banū Umayyah mosque], in 12<sup>th</sup> Rabī' the first 720 (22 April 1320)." This is the day of the year when Muslims commemorate the birthday of the prophet Muḥammad.

Islam motivated him to compose this tractate. To protect the community of believers he demands closing the shrines where the protected people worship.<sup>89</sup> This position was in line with the hostile approach that some Mamlūk governors and Muslim scholars adopted during those years. A brief passage from his works illuminates my deductions:

“Know (...) that I was one of the learned men of the Children of Israel, but God bestowed Islam upon me. The occasion was this: I became ill and a physician was attending me. The shroud of death was prepared for me, when I saw in my sleep one speaking who said: “Read the *surat al-Ḥamd* (i. e. the opening al-Fātiḥa) then you will escape death.” So when I awoke from my sleep I immediately sought one of the trustworthy Moslems. He was my neighbour, and I grasped his hand, saying: “I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, he alone, and he has no partner; and I bear witness that Muḥammad is his servant and apostle, whom he has sent with guidance and the true religion, to make it triumph over every religion.” And I began repeating and saying, “O strengthener of the heart, strengthen me in the belief!” Then when I entered the mosque and saw the Moslems in rows like ranks of angels, a voice within me said: “This is the nation concerning whose appearance the prophets preached good tidings”; and when the preacher advanced clothed in black hair-cloth, great reverential fear came over me. And when he struck the pulpit with his sword, his blow shook all my limbs. Now the preacher in the port city of Alexandria at that time was Ibn Al-Muwaffak. (...) And when the prayers began, I was greatly moved, because I saw the rows of the Muslims like rows of angels, and God revealing himself as they bowed in prayer and as they prostrated themselves. Then a voice within me said: “If the revelation of God came to the Children of Israel twice in the course of time, then it comes to this people in every prayer.” Then I was convinced that I was created to be a Muslim only. When I heard the Qur’ān in the month Ramaḍān, I saw in it so great eloquence and such skill of speech that a narrative which is given in the Torah in two portions is given [in the Qur’ān] in one or two verses; and this is great eloquence. At the end of the 700 lunar years from the Hijra of the Prophet, God laid waste the synagogues of the East by the hand of the king (i.e. the Ilkhān) Ghāzān. So Ghāzān overcame the troops of the Moslems. But when the Moslems returned from their rout, God inspired them to close the churches; and they closed them according to the noble and pure Law of Islam. Then the Muslims went forth to meet their enemies at Shaḡhab,<sup>90</sup> and God gave them the victory. Now when the Moslems returned, having been rendered victorious over their enemies, the temples were opened and the oaths were nullified. When I saw this, zeal for God Almighty came over me and fear for the Muslims and for their kingdom at the completion of 700 solar years.”<sup>91</sup>

89 For a similar interpretation of history see Ibn Taymiyyah al-Ḥaranī, *al-Furqān bayn al-ḥaqq wal-bāṭil*, pp. 115–16.

90 On the Ilkhanid Mongols’ campaign, the battle in Marj al-Ṣuffār and the Mamlūk victory (April 1303), see J. A. Boyle, “Dynastic and Political History of the Il-Khans,” in J. A. Boyle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge, 1968), 5: 394.

91 Sidney Adams Weston, “The Kitāb Masālik an-Nazar of Sa’id Ibn Hasan of Alexandria,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 24 (1903): 353–54, 357, 359 (Arabic)/379–380, 382,

Another example of the visibility of the Bible in Mamlūk society, in connection to conversation tales, is provided by al-Biqā'ī, who was familiar with Biblical materials.<sup>92</sup> This historian narrates an episode, which he tags as a “strange story.” The account is rich with details and the plot develops along a path that carries a learned Christian from “the wrong religion” to the light of truth. It tells about a learned Spanish Christian who gained profound knowledge in Christian history and theology, and who read the Bible and the Gospels. This encouraged him to inquire about the meaning of those verses in the Bible and the Gospels that are commonly interpreted as predicting the coming of Muḥammad. At that point he became well-known among the Christians and even gathered a sizable community of followers. Being blocked from acquiring the “true” answers, he went to visit the Pope (*al-Bābā*).<sup>93</sup> Following the conversation with him the priest turned down all offers and, accompanied by hundreds of followers, immigrated to the Abode of Islam, where he and most of his company converted to the “true” religion. Adopting the Arab-Muslim name of Ismā'īl, he traveled to Tunisia and continued to Cairo to Jaqmaq's court (1438–1453). In the capital of the sultanate he was received by high dignitaries who bestowed upon him lavish gifts and facilitated his way to Mecca.<sup>94</sup>

## Summary

The narratives studied by me reveal the world vision of the patriarchal urban elite in Egypt and Syria during the long history of the Mamlūk sultanate. Women's conversion is not mentioned in the sources studied by me,<sup>95</sup> although converted slave girls were not a rare phenomenon.<sup>96</sup> The authors and their audience were keen to depict Islam as the superior and ultimate religion and to portray the act of

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383 (translation; with slight modifications by me) [This book was republished by Muḥammad al-Sharqāwī (Cairo, 1410/1989), pp. 76–78, 79–80, 81].

92 Walid A. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqā'ī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden, 2008).

93 We can tag the data offered here as evidence of syncretism, a situation of vague religious borders that are easily crossed.

94 Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. 'Umar b. Ḥasan al-Biqā'ī (809–885/1406–1480), *Izhār al-'aṣr li-'isrār ahl al-'aṣr* [ta'rikh al-biqā'ī] ed. Muḥammad S. Sh. al-'Awfī (Cairo, 1992–1993), 1: 152–157.

95 On this issue, cf. Maya Shatzmiller, “Marriage, Family, and the Faith: Women's Conversion to Islam,” *Journal of Family History* 21 (1996): 235–66; Marc Baer, “Islamic conversion narratives of women: Social change and gendered hierarchy in early modern Ottoman Istanbul,” *Gender & History* 16:2 (2004): 425–58.

96 Y. Frenkel, “Women in Late Mamluk Damascus in the Light of Audience Certificates (*sa-ma'at*),” in U. Vermeulen and J. van Steenberg (eds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras IV* (Leuven, 2006), pp. 409–24.

those who joined the Muslim community (*milla*), this one and single best congregation which exclude all other people (*al-muslimūn [ummah waḥida] min dūn al-nās*),<sup>97</sup> as a voluntary one (*lā ikrah bil-dīn*).<sup>98</sup> This narratological strategy is in line with the *ṣulḥ-amān* traditions of the early Islamic conquest literature, which presents the surrender of the Byzantine east as a voluntary and peaceful act.<sup>99</sup> According to this paradigm, the conquests of Islam (*futūḥāt*) were not a military onslaught, but the accomplishment of a heavenly-guided program. If this argumentation is accepted as sound and valid, it could also be used to explain the absence of accounts of forced conversion in the Mamlūk chronicles, although these sources report on communal violence; moreover, accounts from earlier periods tell of forced religious conversion. Perhaps the most widespread story is the about the caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh who claimed that the year 400 since the migration of the Prophet Islam marked the expiration of the protection (*dhimma*) for the People of the Book.<sup>100</sup> Another case of Jews' enforced conversion is known from the medieval Moroccan city of Fez (*al-bilādiyyūn* or *al-muhājirūn*),<sup>101</sup> although this policy was in breach of the general stipulations of the Shari'ah. Islamic legal writings commonly permit the conquered peoples to retain their [monotheistic] religions. A second salient feature of the conversions' narratology is the depiction of the move across religious boundaries as a swift transformation. Although conversion is not a simple and absolute break with a previous social life,<sup>102</sup> in the accounts and biographies that I investigated, no traces of the converts' past manners and belief can be detected.<sup>103</sup> In these stories

97 This phrase, in the sense "the Muslims are one party to the contract," appears in the so-called Treaty of Medina. Muḥammad Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (671–734/1273–1334), *ʿUyūn al-aṭhar fī funūn al-maghāzī wal-shamāʿil wal-siyar* eds. M.I. al-Kharawi and M. Matu (Beirut, 1977), 1: 318.

98 "There is no compulsion in religion." Quran 2: 256. This is the traditional Muslim interpretation. For a revisionist's challenging approach, see Rudi Paret who explain it not as tolerance but as accepting undesirables into the new religion. Rudi Paret, "Sure2, 256: *lā ikrāha fī d-dīni*. Toleranz oder Resignation?," *Der Islam* 45/2 (1969): 299–300; Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, 1984), p. 13; Michael Lecker, "Amr ibn Ḥazm al-Anṣārī and Qurʾān 2,256: "No Compulsion Is There in Religion"," *Oriens* 35 (1996): 62–63.

99 Albrecht Noth (in collaboration with L. Conrad), *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: a Source-Critical Study* (Princeton, 1994).

100 D. de Smet (ed. and trans.), *Les Épîtres sacrées des Druzes – Rasāʿil al-Ḥikma* vols. 1 and 2 (Leuven, 2007), pp. 475–77 (Arabic)/143–150 (French; récit no. 3).

101 Mercedes García-Arenal, "Les Bildiyyīn de Fès, un groupe de néo-musulmans d'origine juive," *Studia Islamica* 66 (1987): 113–143.

102 Diane Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction," in Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (eds.), *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham MD, 2003), pp. 1–12.

103 From a legal question that presumably was posted in Tripoli (in 738/1338), we can deduce that liminal situations were not unheard of among converts. The text says: "A Muslim has hired a Jew to work for him for a full month, they agreed that the Saturdays are excluded from the working days. Then the Jew converted to Islam; can he be forced to work on

the convert immediately becomes a devoted Muslim who follows the Shari‘ah to the letter. Nevertheless, we know from conversion histories, narrated in Muslim and non-Muslim sources, that old traditions die slowly and footsteps of past religions can be traced among Muslims. To support this hypothesis it would be sufficient to mention here Goldziher’s studies. We should construe conversion as a passage, in the sense coined by Victor Turner.<sup>104</sup> Although we should not play down the fact that in some cases the appeal of Islam was an element in the conversion of men and women, nevertheless we should emphasize that when we hypothesize mass conversions we should consider social, political and economic factors. In a complex society, as the Mamlūk society was, these factors played a central role and their weight was much heavier than the psychological or devotional one. Hence we may argue that despite the rich and detailed accounts of personal crossings over religious boundaries, the act of crossing by most of those who did so under the Mamlūk sultans should be regarded as adherence or as assimilation.<sup>105</sup> The structure of the conversion stories aimed at masking this social reality. The narratological strategy, that endeavored to project that truth, won.

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Saturdays?” Taqī al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Kāfi al-Subkī (1284–1355/683–756), *Fatāwā al-Subkī* (Beirut, n.d.), 2: 626; see Seth Ward, “Sabbath Observance and Conversion to Islam in the 14th Century – A Fatwā by Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1985), p. 51. Another example is Samawa’il al-Magribī’s claim that immediately after his conversion he set to write a refutation of Judaism, the religion that he gave up. Kraemer, “The Andalusian Mystic Ibn Hud,” p. 63.

104 Victor W. Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in J. Helm (ed.), *Proceedings of the Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society* (Seattle, 1964), pp. 4–20.

105 See the conclusions of Jessica A. Coope, “Religious and Cultural Conversion to Islam in Ninth-Century Umayyad Córdoba,” *Journal of World History* 4/1 (1993): 47–68.

## The Ideology of Decline and the Jews of Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The Ideology of Decline

In his obituary for a Ḥanafī scholar who died in the Spring of 855/1451, Ibn Taghrībirdī notes that the man achieved a remarkable level of respect and happiness during the sultanate of Jaqmaq (r. 842–857/1438–1453). This success was despite the fact that “the rulers of our time are like two blind men: the one putting his hand on the shoulder of the other, wherever the first one goes, the second follows after him.”<sup>2</sup> Such disdain for the ruling class is, of course, characteristic of late Mamluk historiography. Ibn al-Furāt (d. 807/1405), al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874/1470) all complained bitterly about the debased times in which they lived, especially in comparison to earlier eras of imagined glory populated by the likes of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī and al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Baybars.<sup>3</sup>

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1 My sincere thanks to the staff at the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress, who provided me ready access to the African and Middle Eastern Division of the Library as well as a quiet and collegial place to work during the Fall and Winter of 2014–15. I would also like to thank those who read various drafts of this essay. Vincent Gonzalez, Timothy DeBold, Mira Balberg, Dotan Arad, and Marina Rustow all made invaluable suggestions and saved me from a number of egregious errors and oversights. Any remaining errors are my own.

2 Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīya, 1992), 15:283.

3 On the pessimism of late Mamluk historiography, see Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (1310–1341)* (Leiden: Brill: 1995), pp. 3–4; Robert Irwin, “Mamluk Literature,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7 (2003), p. 27; Sami Massoud, “al-Maqrīzī as a Historian of the Reign of Barqūq,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7.2 (2003): 119–136; and idem., *The Chronicles and Annalistic Sources of the Early Mamluk Circassian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 191–192. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī was also convinced he lived in a time of decline and degradation. See Eric Geoffroy, “al-Suyūṭī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; J. C. Garcin, “Histoire, opposition politique et piétisme traditionaliste,” in *Annales Islamologiques* 7 (1967):33–90; and Elizabeth Sartain, *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1975), vol. 1, p. 61. It is clear that Ibn Khaldūn’s theory of dynastic cycles had a strong influence on these historians’ historical outlook. See Anne Broadbridge, “Royal Authority, Justice, and Order in Society: The Influence of Ibn Khaldūn on the Writings



Earlier generations of Orientalists picked up these attitudes in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, often portraying the late Mamluk period as one full of predacious Mamluks raping and pillaging their subjects, indolent scholars on the dole, and an increasingly conservative and zealous population isolated from a modernizing world, all hardly worth the attention of serious historians.<sup>4</sup> Happily, in the last thirty years or so our field has moved well beyond this uncritical generalizing. We choose instead to focus our energies on new and more precisely construed fields of inquiry, using more sophisticated historiographical techniques, and emphasizing accuracy and precision over scope.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite these critical advances the ghost of that earlier scholarship continues to haunt certain sectors of Mamluk studies. This specter lurks in offhanded and typically unsubstantiated references to the economic, social, or cultural “decline” of the late Mamluk era. Historians attribute this decline to the policies and mistakes of the sultans themselves, or to the Mongol advances of the thirteenth century, the drought, famine, and disease of the fourteenth century, the economic rise of Venice and Genoa, or a combination of all these. The common assumption of these narratives is that decline was systematic and inexorable. That is, the end of the Mamluk sultanate was preceded by a chartable downward trajectory keyed to several different kinds of decline: social, political, military, cultural, economic, and so on. This widespread decline is then linked in various ways to the Mamluk defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at Marj Dābiq in 1516 and then finally at al-Rīdāniya in 1517. There is an implicit, yet very clear periodization that structures these accounts: the rise, decline, and fall of the sultanate. David Morgan describes the logic of this kind of historiography as “Gibbon’s Law,” which demands that “Empires may not fall until they have previously undergone a process of decline.”<sup>6</sup> I would suggest that with a few notable exceptions, Gibbon’s Law has determined the periodization and analytic

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of al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7.2 (2003): 231–245; and Nasser Rabbat “Was al-Maqrīzī’s *Khiṭaṭ* a Khaldūnian History?” *Der Islam* 89 (2012): 118–140.

4 See Carl Petry’s remarks in *Protectors or Praetorians?: The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt’s Waning As a Great Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 1–4, and of course Robert Irwin’s survey, “Under Western Eyes: A History of Mamluk Studies,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 4 (2000): 27–51.

5 As far as I am aware, the last monographs in a European language to treat the Mamluk period as a whole were Irwin’s *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1382* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), which only covers the *Bahri* period, and P. M. Holt’s *The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517* (London: Longman, 1986), which of course covers much more ground than the Mamluks. There are a very large number of recent general histories of the Mamluk sultanate in Arabic; these deserve a separate study.

6 David Morgan, “The Decline and Fall of the Mongol Empire,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19 (2009): 427–37, p. 428.

framework of much of Mamluk Studies.<sup>7</sup> But this is not so surprising given that Gibbon's law also rules Abbasid studies, Fatimid studies, Ayyubid studies, and until recently, Ottoman studies.

While a number of Mamlukists have begun to challenge the fact of decline, very few have questioned the historiographical utility of the concept itself.<sup>8</sup> Here I want to do just that by focusing on what I see as the two primary conceptual problems of what many call the "decline paradigm." First, and this is the focus of most critics, it is an outdated artifact of the cyclical history of positivist historiography (e.g. Spengler and Toynbee, not to mention Ibn Khaldūn). This positivist historiography was modeled on the natural sciences and held that every political and cultural system will undergo the same "organic" processes of florescence and decay.<sup>9</sup> This organic conceptual framework results in an overdetermined historiographical Newton's law (what goes up must inevitably come down).<sup>10</sup> The obvious problem here is that if decline is a "natural law" of history, then it becomes all too easy, rather it becomes absolutely imperative to argue that evidence of decline in one area must be indicative of systemic and terminal decay. We are now in a bewildering territory in which decline is both the observable result of particular historical factors as well as the explanatory road map that leads us to our final destination. Decline is both yard and yardstick, describing "what happened" while also explaining "why it ended;" cause and effect are

7 Jo Van Steenberg makes a similar point, arguing that Ibn Khaldūn's influence has "perverted Mamluk studies for far too long now." See his "On the Brink of a New Era? Yalbughā al-Khāṣṣakī (d. 1366) and the Yalbughāwiyah," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 15 (2011): 117–152, quotation on p. 125.

8 Bethany Walker is one of the few to investigate systematically and question the evidence for decline in several studies published in the *Mamlūk Studies Review* related to her field work in Jordan. Others who have challenged the concept of decline as a useful tool include Marshal Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 371–385; Richard McGregor, "Is This the End of Medieval Sufism? Strategies of *Transversal Affiliation* in Ottoman Egypt," in *Le soufisme à l'époque ottomane xvie–xviiiè siècle / Sufism in the Ottoman Era 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologies orientales, 2010), 83–99; Sonja Brentjes, "The Prison of Categories – 'Decline' and its Company," in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*, ed. F. Opwis and D. Reisman (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 133–156; and W. W. Clifford, "Review of Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History*," in *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 179–182. Although here he merely calls for "the need to rethink more incisively what we mean by Mamluk 'decline,'" quotation on p. 182.

9 R. G. Collingwood, "Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles," in *Essays in the Philosophy of History: R. G. Collingwood*, ed. W. Debbins (New York and London: Garland, 1985), pp. 57–75. See also Neville Morley, "Decadence as a Theory of History," *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 573–585.

10 Unbeknownst to me when I wrote early drafts of this article, Richard McGregor, "Is This the End of Medieval Sufism?," also critiques what I here call Newtonian historiography for implicitly adopting a "what goes up must come down" approach to historical change.

trapped in a teleological feedback loop. This wreaks havoc on our ability to imagine and construct alternative narratives, explanations, and analyses of historical change. For this reason alone decline is not a particularly useful analytical category.

But there is another, more serious conceptual problem with decline. Descriptions of decline are fundamentally ideological. In order to posit and describe a trajectory of decline for a certain time and place, one must first have a standard or baseline from which said decline is measured. One must have in mind already at the outset what constitutes the “ideal” or “normal” state of affairs from which subsequent events and conditions have taken a negative turn (and decline is a negative historical judgment). But these ideal or normal conditions (what we used to call Golden Ages) are not innocently self-evident. They are as much a historiographical invention as are the supposed debased state of affairs. This bundle of assumptions about an idealized normal state and a subsequent decline from that state I call the ideology of decline. To attribute decline of any kind to a certain historical time or place is to valorize and normalize certain cultural forms, configurations, relationships, or modes of production over others. Thomas Bauer, for example, has stripped bare the ideological underpinnings of the near ubiquitous periodization of Arabic literature into “Classical,” “Neo-Classical,” and “Post-Classical” divisions, which serve primarily to valorize certain modes of literary production and to mark and lament the “debasement” of others without explicitly doing so.<sup>11</sup> Narratives of decline are fundamentally predicated on these kinds of implicit ideological valorizations that mask their own subjectivity by foreclosing other historiographical possibilities, thereby rendering the narratives immune to falsification. If one has already decided that Classical Arabic is “better” than Middle Arabic, no evidentiary basis exists to challenge that claim.

The Newtonian historiography of decline depends upon these kinds of *a priori* conceptions of the “normal” set of conditions and is blind to the ways in which that ideal is itself constructed and contested. We can see this phenomenon very clearly in what Houari Touati calls the “catastrophic theory of knowledge” among early Muslim scholars.<sup>12</sup> For these scholars, the death of the prophet signaled an irreversible deterioration in both the availability and quality of knowledge (*ilm*). Nevertheless, Ayyubid and Mamluk scholars (not to mention we in the twenty-first century) clearly held up those earlier generations as the pinnacle of achievement in the Islamic sciences from which *they* were in decline. The Ayyubid

11 Thomas Bauer, “In Search of ‘Post-Classical Literature’: A Review Article,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11.2 (2007): 137–167, esp. pp. 141–148. See also Homerin’s comments on treatments of Mamluk poetry in his review essay “Reflections on Poetry in the Mamluk Age,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 63–85.

12 Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*, transl. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 25–28.

and Mamluk valorization of earlier generations is blind to the fact that those earlier generations also imagined themselves to be living in debased conditions and circumstances. Such blinkered historiography is the product of what Marshall Hodgson humorously called “the old man’s attitude to time,” the dreadful sense that everything was better in the past.<sup>13</sup> We should be quite wary of such claims, both then and now. For we find that the deeper we dig into the sources in order to locate the bedrock of the normal or the ideal, all we find are the shifting sands of nostalgia. Once we start digging we realize that it is decline all the way down.

Some might interject here and argue that all historiography is always ideological and therefore we can and ought to make such historical judgments. Fair enough, but I would counter: why embrace the teleology of decline? We are ultimately responsible for the evidence and arguments we present. As R. G. Collingwood wrote in his treatise on historiography: “It is the artist, and not nature, that is responsible for what goes into the picture.”<sup>14</sup> Or, closer to home, Bethany Walker has written that “Decline is in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>15</sup> So we must ask ourselves: Why and to what theoretical end do we posit a decline? What will a description and analysis of decline reveal that would not otherwise be visible when narrated in some other way? I would argue that unless we have very good reasons – clearly articulated and explained with coherent justifications for the positing of a pre-decline norm – there is simply nothing to gain from the inevitable catalogue of distress and dismay that accompanies the ideology of decline. I would suggest instead that we abandon this Newtonian historiography in favor of what we might call a quantum historiography in which we acknowledge that the image of the past is explicitly framed by the positionality and the theoretical aims of the observer. In short, I merely suggest that we subject the ideology of Mamluk decline to the same postmodern critique that has revolutionized so much of contemporary historiography.<sup>16</sup> Instead of decline, why not simply write of change and transformation? That is to say, rather than claim that (debased) condition Y has declined from (superior) condition X, we explain how and why X and Y are different. This is exactly what Hodgson already called for in 1974: to replace the dominant paradigm of decline and decadence that dominated studies of post-Abbasid Islamic civilization with a paradigm predicated on explaining change.<sup>17</sup>

13 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 2, p. 379.

14 Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 236.

15 Bethany Walker, “Sowing the Seeds of Rural Decline?: Agriculture as an Economic Barometer for Late Mamluk Jordan,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11.1 (2007): 173–199, quotation on p. 199.

16 Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

17 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 2, pp. 371–85.

We might look for inspiration in Ottoman studies, where a seismic shift from descriptions of decline to analyses of transformation has revolutionized the field.<sup>18</sup> Similar advances in some areas of Mamluk studies have opened up wide avenues of new research. Think of the sea change wrought by Ulrich Haarmann's studies of the "literarization" of Mamluk historiography.<sup>19</sup> Sherman Jackson has argued that the increasing appeals to *taqlīd* among Mamluk jurists was not a form of decline but a significant development of jurisprudence in its own right.<sup>20</sup> Konrad Hirschler has overturned the universal consensus concerning the decline of libraries in the Middle Period by focusing instead on how libraries and library use changed during this period.<sup>21</sup> And Thomas Bauer has shown that Mamluk poetry is not a "degraded" form of 'Abbāsīd poetry, but rather represents a completely new, more participatory aesthetic.<sup>22</sup> To return to where we began, we might similarly ask whether the monarchical power and authority of historical stars like Saladin and Baybars were the norm from which the Ayyubid princes and Mamluk *amīrs* declined. Or was the post-Saladin, post-Baybars internecine struggle the norm? I think it makes much more sense to describe the supposed chaos of Ayyubid federalism and Mamluk oligarchy as the norm, a norm from which Saladin and Baybars constitute unusual exceptions that require explanation.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, however, whether we see someone like Baybars as the norm or the aberration is inextricably bound up with our own theoretical, analytical, and ideological concerns. Our job as historians should not be identifying and charting decline, but the careful analysis of how and why certain changes occurred at certain times. This is not simply a semantic tweak but a change in historiographical method.<sup>24</sup>

18 See for example Ehud Toledano, "The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites (1700–1900): A Framework for Research," in *Middle Eastern Politics and Ideas: A History from Within*, ed. Ilan Pappé and Moshe Ma'oz (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1997): 145–162; Kafadar Cemal, "The Question of Ottoman Decline," *Harvard Middle East and Islamic Review*, 1999; Donald Quataert, "Ottoman History Writing and Changing Attitudes Towards the Notion of 'Decline,'" *History Compass* 1 (2003): 1–9; and Jane Hathaway, *The Arab Lands Under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1800* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2008), p. 59–62.

19 Ulrich Haarmann, *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit* (Freiburg im Breisgau: K. Schwarz, 1970), pp. 159–183; and idem, "Auflösung und Bewahrung der klassischen Formen arabischer Geschichtsschreibung in der Zeit der Mamluken," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 121 (1971): 46–60.

20 Sherman Jackson, *Islamic Law and the State: The Constitutional Jurisprudence of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

21 Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 124–44.

22 Thomas Bauer, "'Ayna hādhā min al-Mutanabbīl'" Toward an Aesthetics of Mamluk Literature," in *Mamlūk Studies Review* 17 (2013): 5–22.

23 Holt makes this argument in *The Age of the Crusades*, p. 61.

24 Many thanks to Vincent Gonzales for suggesting this clarifying point to me.

## 2. The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History, Revisited

I begin with this lengthy prologue because I believe much of the study of Ayyubid and Mamluk Jewry is still firmly in the grip of the ideology of Mamluk decline. By way of introducing this subject I would like to begin with a joke. ‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Ghuzūlī, a Turkish slave turned litterateur who lived in Damascus in the fourteenth century records the following anecdote in his literary anthology:

A scholar of *ḥadīth* and a Christian met on a boat. The Christian poured something from a skin he was carrying and drank it. He then poured another drink and offered it to the scholar of *ḥadīth*, who took it without thinking or paying any mind. The Christian cried out, “May I be your ransom! That’s wine!” The scholar asked, “Who told you it was wine?” The Christian said, “My servant bought it from a Jew.” The Christian downed another gulp quickly and swore that it was indeed wine. The scholar said, “You simpleton, do you think that we masters of *ḥadīth* would trust a Christian, on the authority of a servant, on the authority of a Jew? My God, I would drink it just because of the weakness of your *isnād*!”<sup>25</sup>

This is an old joke. Abū l-Manṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī (d. 439/1039) records an early version with much more detail – including names, places, extra dialogue, and a longer punch line.<sup>26</sup> These details have been stripped away from later versions, leaving only the most necessary elements. This paring down suggests that while the names and places have lost their cultural relevance, the fundamental social logic of the joke is still salient for al-Ghuzūlī’s readers in the fourteenth century. I thus begin with it here because it underscores several themes that directly impinge upon how I think about the study of Mamluk Jewry and the ideology of decline.

First, the joke is clearly directed at scholars of *ḥadīth* and not at the Christian and Jew who primarily serve as framing elements for the punch line. This is typical of many Mamluk-era texts in which non-Muslims appear primarily as literary types, and are typically anonymous (i.e. “the Jews” or “one of the Jews”).<sup>27</sup> The appearance of the *ahl al-dhimma* in such texts reflects the history of

25 Al-Ghuzūlī, *Maṭāli‘ al-budūr fī manāzil al-surūr*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Būlāq, 1882–3), 1:138–139. On al-Ghuzūlī, see Michael Cooperson, “‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Ghuzūlī,” in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography: 1350–1850*, eds. Roger Allen and Joseph E. Lowry (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), pp. 107–118.

26 Al-Tha‘ālibī, *Laṭā‘if al-zurafā‘ min ṭabaqāt al-fudalā‘*, ed. ‘Adnān Karīm al-Rajab (Beirut: al-Dār al-‘Arabīya li-l-Mawsū‘āt, 1999), p. 122. It also appears in another early text, that of Abū Sa‘d al-Ābī (d. 421/1030), *Nathr al-durr fī l-muḥāḍarāt*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2004), 4:206. I first found the joke in al-Ghuzūlī and was unaware it appeared elsewhere. My thanks to Amir Mazor for alerting me to this fact.

27 Some work has appeared on the treatment of Jews in various genres of Mamluk literature. On heresiography, see Steven Wasserstrom, “Heresiography of the Jews in Mamluk Times,” in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. J. Waardenburg (New York:

attitudes and mentalities, but not necessarily any historical material with which we might write other kinds of history. For example, al-Jawbarī (fl. 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> cent.) claims in his *Kitāb al-mukhtār fī kashf al-asrār* that the Jews of Damascus are expert at making *murqid*, a diabolical potion made from henbane, sea onions, and ear wax. Al-Jawbarī declares that when Jewish doctors “want to destroy someone, they will place *murqid* in his food to put him to sleep. Then they jump on him, overpower him, and kill him.”<sup>28</sup> This outrageous charge clearly speaks to an anxiety about Jewish physicians.<sup>29</sup> These anxieties could have serious repercussions, as when in 852/1448 the Sultan Jaqmaq temporarily forbade Jewish and Christian doctors to work on Muslim patients.<sup>30</sup> But texts like these are not particularly useful for writing about the actual practice of Jewish medicine. Al-Ghuzūlī’s joke serves as a reminder that we must be very careful about how we read and to what uses we put representations of Jews and Christians in these sources.

Second, the framework of the joke relies upon the verisimilitude of a social reality that we know quite well from other sources: that Jews, Christians, and Muslims congregated, talked, ate, and drank together all the time, often while travelling. Despite (or rather, because of) the fulminations of polemicists like Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 737/1336) and Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328), we know that these kinds of contacts were regular and ongoing during the Mamluk period. There are many examples from Mamluk historiography. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) has a great anecdote about a Muslim and Jew drinking together on the latter’s roof in the Jewish quarter of Damascus in the Spring of 764/1363. They both got drunk and

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Oxford University Press, 1999): 160–180; on polemic, see Alexandra Cuffel, “From Practice to Polemic: Shared Saints and Festivals as ‘Women’s Religion’ in the Medieval Mediterranean,” *BSOAS* 68 (2005): 401–19. But as far as I know there are no specific studies concerning the portrayal of Jews in Mamluk historiography, biography, poetry, or literature, although Amir Mazor, “*Asad ha-Yahudi: Rofe’ hazer be-tequfah ha-mamlukit*” in *Zion* (2011): 471–489, discusses the trope of Jewish court physicians in Islamic historiography and biography more broadly.

28 Manuela Höglmeier, *al-Ġawbarī und seine Kašf al-asrār – ein Sittenbild des Gauners im arabischen-islamischen Mittelalter (7./13. Jahrhundert): Einführung, Edition und Kommentar* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2006), p. 137.

29 Pauline Lewicka, “Did Ibn al-Ḥājj Copy from Cato? Reconsidering Aspects of Inter-Communal Antagonism of the Mamluk Period,” in *Ubi Sumus? Quo Vademus?: Mamluk Studies – State of the Art*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2013), pp. 232–261.

30 Ibn Taghribirdī, *al-Nujūm*, 15:137, records this ban without any contextual detail in a list of events from Rajab 852 [September 1448]: “Then the Sultan decreed that Jews and Christians should be forbidden to practice medicine on the bodies of Muslims.” This is the account that most historians cite as evidence of increasing Mamluk hostility to the *ahl al-dhimma*. However, the subsequent account by Ibn Iyās adds an important coda to Ibn Taghribirdī’s notice: “So they obeyed [the decree] for a time. But this decree was later cancelled and everything returned to how it had been.” *Badā’i al-zuhūr fī waqā’i al-duhūr*, 6 vols. ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Cairo: al-Hay’ al-Miṣriya al-Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1982–1984), 2:265.

fell off the roof. The Muslim died. His Jewish friend survived but lost his eye and broke his arm. The *nā'ib* made no official inquiry into the matter.<sup>31</sup> There is also the famous example of the Sufi Ibn Hūd (d. 699/1300) studying the *Guide for the Perplexed* with the Jews of Damascus. He was subsequently arrested for getting drunk with them and walking the streets of Damascus while inebriated.<sup>32</sup> Such interactions did not only happen around food and drink, but in cultic ritual as well. Ibn Shaddād (d. 684/1285) includes in his history of Syria a tantalizing description of a pillar outside Aleppo where Jews, Christians, and Muslims would all go to make vows at the grave of an unknown prophet.<sup>33</sup> And of course there must have been inter-communal romances. When the Egyptian poet Ibn Nabīh (d. 619/1222) visited Damascus he fell in love with a young Jewish boy there. His encounter led him to lament in verse:

From the family of Israel I was drawn to him  
He tormented me with rejection and haughtiness.

I made comfort alight upon his heart  
And he revealed to me his favor.<sup>34</sup>

There are many examples, but my larger point is that the heated rhetoric of Mamluk polemic in combination with these other sources suggests to me, not the isolation or marginalization of the *ahl al-dhimma*, but that inter-communal exchange was continual and widespread through the Mamluk period.<sup>35</sup>

31 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, 21 vols., ed. 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 1997), 18:675.

32 I am currently preparing an article on Mamluk historiographical representations of this episode.

33 Ibn Shaddād, *al-A'lāq al-khaṭīra fī dhikr umarā' al-Shām wa-l-Jazīra*, ed. Dominique Sourdel (Damascus: IFPO, 1953), p. 53. Al-Harawī also mentions this, adding that the visitors would pour rose water on the pillar. *Kitāb al-ishārāt ilā ma'rifat al-ziyārāt*, ed. Janine Sourdel-Thomine (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1953), p. 16. See also the comments in Josef Meri, "Re-Appropriating Sacred Space: Medieval Jews and Muslims Seeking Elijah and al-Khaḍir," *Medieval Encounters* 5 (1999): 237–64; and Miriam Frenkel, "Atrey pulḥan yehudiyim be-Ḥalāb be-yemey ha-beynayyim ha-tikoniyim," in *Erets u-melo'ah: meḥqarim be-toledot qehilat Aram Tsovah (Haleb) ve-ṭarbutah*, 2 vols., ed. Y. Assis, M. Frenkel, and Y. Harel (Jerusalem: Mekhon Ben-Tsvi, 2009), vol. 2, pp. 155–175. On shared religious practice in Palestine from the Crusader and Ayyubid periods, see for example Elchanan Reiner "Aliyyah ve-'aliyyah le-regel le-'erez yisra'el: 1099–1517" (Ph.D. Dissertation: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 254–255; and Daniella Talmon-Heller, "Halvayah, qevurah, ve-ziyarah be-Suriyah ba-tequfah ha-ḡalvanit ve-ha-ayyubit," in *ha-Islam ve-'olamot ha-shezurim bo* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002), 250–281, esp. p. 265. My thanks to Dotan Arad for these two valuable references.

34 *Diwān Ibn al-Nabīh* (Beirut: Maṭba'at Jam'iyat al-Funūn, 1881), pp. 69–70. See the slightly different version in Ibn Shākīr al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-wafayāt*, 5 vols., ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1973–4), 3:67.

35 The notion that the *ahl al-dhimma* were increasingly isolated and marginalized during the Mamluk period is one of the central tenets of the ideology of decline. But see Mark Cohen's



Third, al-Ghuzūlī's text and the anecdotes I cite above represent an underutilized resource for the study of Mamluk-era Jewry: Syrian literature and historiography. While the lament of historians that the pickings are woefully slim for the Jewish history of this period is certainly true in comparison to Fatimid Egypt, there is nevertheless a corpus of material from Syria that contains valuable material about the Jews of Damascus, Aleppo, and elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, this Syrian historiography often stands in stark contrast to the Egyptian sources that have been and continue to be the primary focus of historians of this subject. Much of the ideology of decline – both in terms of Mamluk studies more broadly as well as Mamluk Jewish history more specifically – has been built atop the ideological bedrock of these Egyptian sources.<sup>37</sup> But we can draw on the extant Syrian sources to reexamine long-held assumptions about Mamluk Jewry and to redraw the historical map, a distorted image marred by what Mark Cohen famously called the “neo-lachrymose conception of Jewish history.”<sup>38</sup>

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essay, “Sociability and the Concept of Galut in Jewish-Muslim Relations in the Middle Ages,” in *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication, and Interaction, Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, ed. Benjam Hary et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 37–51. Despite the fact that Cohen argues that Mamluk Jewry was “depressed” and in decline (e. g. pp. 40, 45, and 47), he shows that the Jewish communities of the late Mamluk and early Ottoman realms were not at all excluded from social intercourse with Muslims.

- 36 This is not to say there is nothing in the Genizah from the Mamluk period. See S. D. Goitein, “*Kitvey genizah min ha-tequfah ha-mamlukit*,” in *Tarbiz* 41 (1971): 59–81, and especially the third volume of Ashtor's *Toledot, Te'udot min ha-genizah* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1970), which contains a collection of Mamluk-era Genizah documents. See also the Hebrew letters concerning the Jewish community in Mamluk Jerusalem collected by Avraham David, *Sha'alu shalom Yerushalayim: 'asufat 'iggerot 'ivriyot ba-'inyanah shel qehilat Yerushalayim ve-Yehudiyah ba-tequfah ha-mamlukit* (Tel Aviv: ha-Qibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 2003).
- 37 Bethany Walker makes this argument about Syria in general, noting that “traditional views on Mamluk ‘decline,’ culled largely from Egyptian chronicles, do not do justice to the complexities of economic developments and settlement cycles in Jordan.” See her “Mamluk Investment in Transjordan: A ‘Boom and Bust’ Economy,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8.2 (2004): 119–138, quotation on p. 138.
- 38 Mark Cohen, “The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish-Arab History,” *Tikkun* 6 (1991): 55–59. Norman Stillman, “Myth, Countermyth, and Distortion,” *Tikkun* 6 (1991): 60–64, published a rejoinder in the same issue in which he claimed that Cohen was unfairly critiquing the field based on writers who were not actually part of the academic enterprise, and worse, that he ignored the awful history of Oriental Jewry from the Mamluk period on, a stretch of Jewish history he had famously labeled “The Long Twilight” in *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1979), pp. 64–94. Cohen took this critique to heart and in the subsequent publication of his monograph *Under Crescent and Cross*, his accounting of the neo-lachrymose historiography was more muted. But even Cohen's *Under Crescent and Cross*, whose survey is perhaps the most nuanced of any of the “Jews under Islam” genre, tips its hat to the lachrymose impulse at the end of the book. He writes of the post-Maimonidean Muslim world that “the extent to which one can speak historically of deterioration in the Muslim world simulating if not rivaling the gloomy position of the Jews in medieval Christendom, and the degree to which one might justifiably apply the adjective *lachrymose* to the life and history of the Jews of Islam in recent centuries, are matters beyond

There seems to be a near universal consensus among historians that Saladin and the Ayyubid rulers inaugurated policies and popularized attitudes that led to the decline of the Jewish communities of Egypt and Syria.<sup>39</sup> The Mamluks then intensified these policies and attitudes, leading directly to the dire conditions of Mamluk Jewry that Norman Stillman describes as “the nadir of medieval Egypt Jewry.”<sup>40</sup> Historians imagine this decline to be so relentless that not even the semi-benevolent policies of the Ottomans could completely stem the dismal tide.<sup>41</sup> Syro-Egyptian Jewry was thus irrevocably stunted by a decline that is usually tied to the supposed political, economic, social, and cultural decline of the Mamluk state more broadly.<sup>42</sup> The most detailed and carefully documented version of this argument is certainly the second volume of Ashtor’s history of Mamluk Jewry, a work that still stands as the only synthetic history of the Jews of Mamluk Egypt and Syria. In those pages, Ashtor recounts an unrelenting narrative of Mamluk political fragmentation and disintegration, which he then links to degraded cultural production among the Arabs and ultimately to the declining status, culture, and religion of the Jews.<sup>43</sup> S. D. Goitein likewise refers in several places to the decline of the Jews within the context of Mamluk decline more broadly.<sup>44</sup> As with the Orientalists in Mamluk studies, the ghosts of Ashtor and Goitein lurk in the background of nearly all subsequent work on Mamluk Jewry.

But we have to ask: Are we to believe that from Saladin’s taking power in 1171 until the Mamluk defeat in 1516–17 – a whopping 346 years – and from Aswān to Aleppo – a distance of over 2000 km (1300 miles) – that all the Jews of the realm succumbed to this inescapable and irreversible malaise and decline? While most

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the scope of this book.” Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 199.

39 Like much of the scholarship concerning this subject, the consensus is rooted in the studies of Eliyahu Ashtor. See Strauss [Ashtor], “The Social Isolation of Ahl al-Dhimma,” in *Orientalia a la Memoire de Paul Hirschler* (Budapest, 1950): 73–94, esp. p. 83; and Strauss [Ashtor], “Saladin and the Jews,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 27 (1956): 305–326. Yaacov Lev, *Saladin in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 185–193, tells a much more balanced story.

40 Norman Stillman, “The non-Muslim Communities: The Jewish Community,” *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Volume One, Islamic Egypt: 640–1517*, ed. Carl Petry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 198–210, “nadir” on p. 210.

41 Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 141–143, for example, paints an undulating picture of Abbasid florescence, Mamluk decline, Ottoman florescence in the fifteenth century, and decline again by the end of Ottoman rule. See also Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, pp. 75, and 87–94.

42 The most recent narrative in this vein is Martin Gilbert’s *In Ishmael’s House: A History of Jews in Muslim Lands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), in which a brief chapter on the “Jews and Muslims in the Age of the Crusades” singles out the Mamluks and the Almohads as agents and harbingers of decline and degradation.

43 Eliahu Ashtor, *Toledot ha-yehudim be-Mizrayyim u-ve-Suriyah taḥat shilṭon ha-Mamlukim*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1944–1970), 2:33–57.

44 For the many references, see “decline” in the index volume to *A Mediterranean Society*.

historians would concede that there were a few bright moments along the way, they insist that the trajectory is nevertheless clearly visible. Generalizations of this scope and intensity tend to make historians suspicious, but for the history of Jewish life under Islam, this one elicits nothing more than knowing nods. Why? Why is decline so persistent a metaphor in the literature? It is clear that this ideology of decline is fundamentally predicated upon an idealized image of an interfaith utopia in 'Abbasid Baghdad, 'Umayyad/Ṭawā'if al-Andalus, and Fatimid Egypt. But even as that idealized image has come in for critique and revision, the ideology of decline persists. So while the supposed pre-decline norm is quite clear, the tenacity of the ideology requires more explanation. Here I suggest a few reasons for this persistence before turning to what I think is a viable alternative historiography.

The first reason is a particular strand of historiography that wants to make the case that Jewish life under Islam was and is a bad deal for political and nationalistic reasons. Mark Cohen and Joel Beinin have discussed this subject at length and I will not add to their lucid commentary and analysis.<sup>45</sup>

The second reason is a dependence on older Mamluk scholarship in general and on Ashtor in particular. I mean that many historians of the Jews under Islam take it for granted that the Mamluk Empire, particularly during the Circassian period, was marked by widespread decline.<sup>46</sup> It is quite common to read in these accounts that the decline of Middle Eastern Jewry was a result of and concomitant with the decline of Mamluk society more broadly. Nowhere, I would argue, is the ideology of Mamluk decline so fully embraced as it is in Jewish studies.<sup>47</sup>

The third reason for the persistence of decline is the ostensible absence of a high rabbinic literary culture during this period. With the exception of perhaps the descendants of Moses Maimonides, we see no rabbinic superstars from late Mamluk Egypt or Syria. This rabbinic shortage is assumed to be evidence of decline. For example, Ashtor made his case for decline in part by noting that during the Circassian period, the Jews “nearly ceased literary production en-

45 Cohen, “The Neo-Lachrymose Conception;” Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*; and now especially Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 14–17.

46 Gabriel Piterberg, “Domestic Orientalism: The Representation of ‘Oriental’ Jews in Zionist/Israeli Historiography,” *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1996): 125–145, p. 126, explicitly argues that the decline narrative concerning the Jews of the Islamic world “is underpinned by the Orientalist discourse and, in particular, the Orientalist narrative of the ‘decline of Islamic civilization’ from the sixteenth century on.”

47 I have to wonder if this state of affairs does not also have something to do with Goitein’s influence on the field. The first two essays in his collection *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 2010 [1966]), for example, are some of the clearest statements I have read on the ideology of Islamic decline, which he explicitly pinpoints at 1250 CE.

tirely,” and that there were no great rabbis to be found in greater Syria or Egypt.<sup>48</sup> The assumption here of course is that the production of rabbis and rabbinic literature is the primary indicator of a healthy, normal, non-declined Jewish culture. But I would counter that the absence of famous rabbis is evidence of decline only if we mean the decline of famous rabbis. As Hodgson so eloquently argued, it is the florescence of innovative culture in traditional and conservative societies that demands explanation, not its absence.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, by focusing on elite rabbinics we ignore other possible arenas of cultural production. While it is true that we possess very few texts from Mamluk Egypt and Syria, early Ottoman-era materials reveal a thriving culture with Mamluk roots. On one hand we see a variety of vernacular cultural production, including Judeo-Arabic biblical re-tellings, commentaries, and even some hagiographies.<sup>50</sup> The refusal to see these vernacular cultures as healthy, innovative and worthy of study is an unfortunate survival of the old Orientalist prejudices. On the other hand, we sometimes find completely unexpected cultural production in unimagined places. For example, Ibn Budayr, a barber who lived in Damascus in the eighteenth century records a remarkable scene in his diary:

And in that month [Jumāda II 1166/June 1747] three Jews from the city of Aleppo arrived in Damascus. They announced that they worked as a musical troupe [performing] in coffee houses. So they were put to work in the cafes of Damascus. They were placed upon high stools while the nobles and Muslims sat below them so they could hear the singing and melodies. The people flocked around them (*in'akafat 'alayhim al-nās*) like someone calling out to them with a precious substance.<sup>51</sup>

48 Ashtor, *Toledot*, 2:55–56, quotation on p. 55.

49 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 2:371–85.

50 For example: We have the fantastic Judeo-Arabic “folk tales” about Maimonides collected in Yitzhak Avishur, *Shivḥey ha-Rambam: sippurim 'amamiyim be-'aravit yehudit u-ve-'ivrit me-ha-mizrah u-mi-zefon afriqah* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press of the Hebrew University, 1998), Judeo-Arabic retellings of the biblical story of Joseph in Marc Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph: Narrative Migrations Between Judaism and Islam* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006); and the Judeo-Arabic biblical commentary, probably based upon his own sermons, by R. Aaron Garish (fl. 16<sup>th</sup> century in Aleppo) published in Naḥem Ilan, *Perush "Mezaḥ 'Aharon" le-R. 'Aharon Garish* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1996). Perhaps the most important contribution to the notion of the healthy nature of linguistic innovation and adaption for Judeo-Arabic in the Ottoman/early-modern period is the work of Benjamin Hary, *Multiglossia in Judeo-Arabic: With an Edition, Translation and Grammatical Study of the Cairene Purim Scroll* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), and *Translating Religion: Linguistic Analysis of Judeo-Arabic Sacred Texts from Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

51 Aḥmad Ibn Budayr, *Ḥawādith Dimashq al-shām al-yawmīa min sanat 1154 ilā sanat 1176* (MS Chester Beatty Library Ar. 3551/2, Dublin), f. 39a. My warm thanks to Dana Sajdi who kindly shared her copy of the relevant portion of the manuscript with me. The folio is cited according to her pagination, on which see Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 215, n. 6. A truncated and bowdlerized version of the diary, essentially a unique recension of the

Now I would not be so rash as to assume or claim that this late text proves that the Jews of Mamluk Syria were similarly gifted and socially situated. I would simply point out that this band of Jewish musicians who so thrilled the Ottoman Damascene population are otherwise unknown to us. Ibn Budayr's entry reveals a vibrant cultural tradition that suggests the possibility that many other non-rabbinic forms of cultural creativity existed. My point is that we simply cannot take the absence of one particular kind of literary production as indicative of larger communal degradation.

The fourth reason for the persistence of decline is the clear demographic losses of the Jewish population during this period. This is one of the more slippery aspects of the decline paradigm. It is not always clear whether "Jewish decline" is meant to describe a simple demographic decline, widespread social-cultural decline, or both.<sup>52</sup> Population estimates based upon travelers' reports and the Ottoman census records indicate that the Jewish populations of Aleppo and Damascus did indeed fall drastically around the turn of the fifteenth century. However, by the nineteenth century at the latest these populations had fully recovered.<sup>53</sup> It is quite clear that these losses were due to plague, drought, or warfare, and there is just no simple way to correlate these numbers to other forms

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text by Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qāsimī (d. 1900), is available in print as Aḥmad al-Budayrī, *Ḥawādiṯ Dimashq al-yawmiya, 1154-1175*, ed. Aḥmad 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karīm and Muḥammad Jamil Sulṭān (Damascus: Dār Sa'd al-Dīn, 1997). The portion concerning the Jewish musicians is on p. 158 of that text, but it is substantially edited and missing the detail of the original. On al-Qāsimī's recension see Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus*, pp. 174–204.

- 52 For example, Goitein refers repeatedly in *A Mediterranean Society* to the widespread decline of Jewish life beginning in the thirteenth century. This assertion seems to have been based almost entirely on the dwindling Jewish community in Fustat that suffered during this period from plague and famine. The applicability of this data to communities outside Cairo-Fustat, let alone outside Egypt, and its link to any broader notions of decline, are by no means clear.
- 53 While these numbers should be used with caution, here is what I have found: In the 1160s Benjamin of Tudela has 3,000 Jews in Damascus and 5,000 in Aleppo (*The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, ed. and transl. Marcus Adler [London: H. Frowde, 1907], pp. 30 and 32); R. Petaḥia of Regensburg in the late twelfth century has 10,000 Jews in Damascus (*Travels of Rabbi Petaḥia of Ratisbon*, ed. and transl. A. Benisch [London: Messrs. Trubner & Co, 1856], pp. 52–53); here we have an information gap; in 1481 Meshullam da Volterra has 450 households (= 1800–2200 Jews?) in Damascus (Abraham Ya'ari, *Masa' Meshullam mi-Volterra be-Erets Yisra'el (1481)* [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1948], p. 80); In 1522 R. Moses Bassola d'Ancona has 500 households (= 2000–2500 Jews?) in Damascus (*Masa'ot R. Moshe Bassola in Avraham Ya'ari* (ed.), *Masa'ot erez yisra'el shel 'olim yehudim mi-yemey ha-benayim ve-'ad re'shit yemey shivat zion* [Ramat Gan: Masadah, 1977], p. 152); here we have an information gap; the Ottoman census of 1893 has over 6,000 Jews in Damascus and roughly 10,000 in Aleppo (Kemal Karpat, "Ottoman Population Records and the Census of 1881/82–1893," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9 (1978): 237–264, see p. 263 for Halep province and p. 265 for Süriye Province); at the eve of the First World War both Damascus and Aleppo had populations exceeding 11,000 each, with some estimates going much higher (Tsvi Zohar, "Qehillot Yisra'el she-be-Suriyah: 1880–1918," *Pa'amim* 44 [1990]: 80–109, esp. pp. 81–82).

of supposed decline.<sup>54</sup> In fact, several studies have shown the inverse to be more likely. Şevket Pamuk and Maya Shatzmiller, for example, have recently argued that in the aftermath of plague and population loss, the survivors' standards of living rise dramatically (e.g. food prices fall and wages rise), and in some cases directly contribute to a wider cultural florescence.<sup>55</sup>

Fifth, many historians take as evidence of decline the apparently increasing number of anti-*dhimmī* measures enacted by Mamluk rulers. Subscribers to the ideology of decline catalogue a long lachrymose list of these measures, focusing in particular on the two most famous of 700/1301 and 755/1354, as evidence of the Mamluks' increasingly disdainful treatment of Christians and Jews.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, if one consults the most widely cited authority of the late Mamluk period, Ibn Iyās' *Badā' i al-zuhūr*, one will come away with a gloomy picture indeed.<sup>57</sup> But in most of these cases it is clear that the measures were temporary and often one of several means whereby senior *amīrs* attempted to flex their political muscle, having nothing to do with the *dhimmī* communities at all.<sup>58</sup> In fact, a large

54 Take, for example, the 1434 letter of Elijah of Ferrara in which he notes that in that year alone 500 individuals had died in Damascus from plague. See E. N. Adler, *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages: 19 Firsthand Accounts* (New York: Dover, 1987), p. 152.

55 Şevket Pamuk and Maya Shatzmiller, "Plagues, Wages, and Economic Change in the Islamic Middle East, 700–1500," *The Journal of Economic History* 74 (2014): 196–229. Michael Dols makes a similar argument in *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 259–261, and 264. Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam, 1250–1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 116–129, finds that despite currency fluctuations, household purchasing power increased after the plague. It returned to pre-plague levels within a few decades where it would remain through the end of the Mamluk period. This does not account for periods of famine or shortage, which obviously made life much more difficult (pp. 134–68).

56 For example, two recent reviews of the subject, Yaron Ayalon, "Aleppo [Medieval]," in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), vol. 1, pp. 119–120, and Yaron Harel, "Damascus," in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, vol. 2, pp. 6–12, cite the Mamluk *ghiyār* (clothing differentiation) decrees as signaling a definitive turning point in the history of these communities.

57 The references to *al-yahūd* in Muḥammad Muṣṭafā's indices to this text take up nearly three full columns (*Badā' i al-zuhūr*, index vol. 1, part 2, pp. 589–590). I have looked at all of them and while the majority detail some negative measure or event, there are many in which the Jews and Christians act in solidarity or concert with their Muslim neighbors.

58 For example, in Jumāda I 803 (Winter 1400), while the Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Faraj (r. 801–808/1399–1405) was away in Syria dealing with Tamerlane, Yalbughā al-Sālimī (d. 811/1408; see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi' li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsi'*, 12 vols [Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1992], 10:289–90) enacted an anti-*dhimmī* measure in Cairo. His rival, the vice-regent Timrāz (d. 814/1411–2; see *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 3:38), immediately declared publicly: "Any who are oppressed should report to the house of the *amīr* Timrāz, the vice-regent. For the Jews and Christians should be according to their condition as it was during the time of al-Malik al-Zāhir [Baybars]." Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i al-zuhūr*, 1–2:605–6. This ended Yalbughā's attempt to assert his authority, although slightly after this incident he had some Jews and Christians beaten "for violating the noble law." *Ibid.*, p. 608. In another case in 825/1422 a senior *amīr* actually

number of these anti-*dhimmī* measures correspond very closely with ascensions to the sultanate or other positions of authority. It would seem that in many cases, then, these decrees functioned as formal enunciations of power and not permanent state policy.<sup>59</sup> The question is not to what extent these decrees may or may not indicate decline, the answer to which does not tell us much. The question is rather why they were enacted at certain moments, by whom, and for what reasons. Furthermore, were the regularity of these measures actually a new phenomenon, or do we just happen to know more about them because of the explosion of Mamluk historiography? Moreover, for all his other merits, Ibn Iyās was not the most reliable historian.<sup>60</sup> Nor did he live in Syria or take particular interest in the conditions there among the *ahl al-dhimma*. He has next to nothing to say about the Jewish populations of Damascus and Aleppo. In fact, a very instructive comparison can be made between Ibn Iyās and his Egypto-centric chronicle and Ibn Ṭulūn's chronicles of life in Damascus during this same period.<sup>61</sup> While Ibn Ṭulūn is not nearly as detailed or prolix as Ibn Iyās, his descriptions offer a much different picture of Syria. Upon closer inspection, this turns out to be true to a large measure for all of the Syrian historians. When one compares the historiography, we often find that the draconian measures originating in Cairo were only partially, half-heartedly, and temporarily implemented in the provinces. By focusing on the Egyptian scene, the ideologues of decline have sacrificed the invaluable historiographical tool of careful spatialization to the god of dynastic periodization.<sup>62</sup>

Let us take the two most famous examples, those of 700/1301 and 755/1354. In both cases, events in Cairo precipitated by alleged Christian audacity led to repressive measures against the *ahl al-dhimma*.<sup>63</sup> The Egyptian chroniclers' ac-

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intervened successfully to allow Jews and Christians to retain their official appointments. Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i al-zuhūr*, 2:82.

59 It was Tamer el-Leithy who suggested this interpretation to me when I gave this paper in Bonn, noting that he has mapped the decrees and ascensions together and found they correlate very closely. I performed a similar (albeit much more narrow) investigation using Ibn Iyās and found it to be true there as well. To cite two examples: the anti-*dhimmī* measures of 815 (Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i al-zuhūr*, 2:4–5) immediately followed the beginning of the sultanate of al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (r. 815–824), and the measures of 825 (Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i al-zuhūr*, 2:82) immediately followed the rise to power of al-Malik al-Ashraf Barsbāy (r. 825–841).

60 Massoud, *The Chronicles*, pp. 69–76 and 195–6.

61 On Ibn Ṭulūn, see Stephan Conermann, "Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 955/1548): Life and Works," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8.1 (2004): 115–139.

62 On spatialization and periodization see now Konrad Hirschler and Sarah Savant, "Introduction – What is in a Period? Arabic Historiography and Periodization," in *Der Islam* 91 (2014): 6–19; and Fred Donner, "Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History," in *Der Islam* 91 (2014): 20–36.

63 Things are not quite so straightforward, however, and Tamer el-Leithy's discussion and analysis of the topic is crucial, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1294–1524 A.D." (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2005), pp. 96–97 and 259–260.

counts of these events are indeed depressing, including descriptions of widespread rioting, destruction of churches, public beatings, and many conversions. But if we turn to the Syrian historians we find a much different story.<sup>64</sup> These sources report that the decrees from Cairo were first read and discussed privately among the jurists and politicians in Damascus. The officials then read an abridged version of the decrees to the general public. These measures were enacted half-heartedly and temporarily in Damascus and we hear nothing about Aleppo.<sup>65</sup> In fact, concerning the events of 755, Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba says very explicitly that “what they did in Egypt was far worse than what happened in Syria.”<sup>66</sup> We simply cannot take the context and events of Mamluk Cairo or Egypt as synecdochal for the entire *dhimmi* experience; it is sloppy history.

Finally, I would point to a particularly insidious form of the ideology of Jewish decline under Islam. In a number of cases, authors have attributed the deteriorating status of the Jews directly to Islam. That is, they fault Islam itself as an

64 For the decree of 700, the Syrian historians include al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir`āt al-zamān*, ed. Li Guo (Leiden: Brill, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 208–209; Abū l-Fidā, *al-Mukhtaṣar fī akhbār al-baṣhr*, 4 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Ma`ārif, 1998), 4:46; al-Birzālī, *al-Muqtaṣif alā kitāb al-rawḍatayn*, 4 vols, ed. `Umar `Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Beirut: al-Maktaba al-`Aṣriya, 2006), 3:148; al-Dhababī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 53 vols, ed. `Umar `Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-`Arabī, 1987–2000), 52:105 (along with Tadmurī’s copious references to other sources); al-Kutubī, *Uyūn al-tawārikh* (MS Istanbul Topkapı Saryı, Aḥmet III 2922), 23:99b–100b; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 17:740; and Ibn Ḥabīb al-Ḥalabī, *Tadhkirat al-nabīh fī ayyām al-Manṣūr wa-banih*, 3 vols, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo: al-Hay`a al-Miṣriya al-`amma li-l-Kitāb, 1976–1986), 1:233 For the decree of 755, the sources are less forthcoming. See al-Kutubī, *Uyūn al-tawārikh*, 24:126b–127a; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 18:561–562; and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Tārīkh*, 4 vols, ed. `Adnān Darwīsh (Damascus: IFPO, 1994–1997), 2:60–61. Ashtor is still an excellent collation of material for both these events. For 700 see Ashtor, *Toledot*, vol. 1, pp. 84–103. For 755 see *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 303–310. See also Urbain Vermeulen, “The Rescript of al-Malik aṣ-Ṣāliḥ Ṣāliḥ against the Dhimmīs (755 A.H./1354 A.D.),” in *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 9 (1978): 175–184.

65 Even some Egyptian sources make this clear. For example, the polemical tract of Ibn al-Naqqāsh, *al-madhamma fī isti`māl ahl al-dhimma*, *apud* Muḥammad ibn al-Durayhim, *Manhaj al-ṣawāb fī quḥb istiḥtib ahl al-kitāb*, ed. Sayyid Kasrawī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`ilmīya, 2002), pp. 251–327. Here, on pp. 323–4, Ibn al-Naqqāsh quite explicitly highlights the different way in which the decrees from Cairo were implemented in Damascus in 700/1301. Ibn al-Naqqāsh’s account is, incidentally, nearly identical to the version offered by Ibn Shākīr al-Kutubī in his *Uyūn al-tawārikh*, 23:99b–100b. The two were contemporaries and I do not know who relied on whom or whether they both rely on a third source.

66 Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Tārīkh*, 2:60–1. Ashtor, *Toledot*, 1:101, does actually acknowledge that the Syrian context was very different for the events of 700 but makes no analytical hay of this. Rather, he focuses on the events in Egypt as an example of the “increasing religious zealotry” of the Muslim populace at large, which he then links to “the entire Near East in those days.” *Toledot*, 1:103. This latter point is part of Ashtor’s argument that Mamluk persecution of the *dhimmi*s was also the product of an attempt to appear as defenders of Islam in the face of the Mongol threat.



inherently anti-Semitic religious ideology.<sup>67</sup> Eliyahu Ashtor, S. D. Goitein, Norman Stillman, and Jacob Lassner have put forward an attenuated version of this argument. They attribute the decline of Middle-Eastern Jewry to the purportedly waning influence of Hellenism within Islam.<sup>68</sup> They argue that the civilizing and moderating effect of Hellenism, particularly during the Abbasid period, provided the fertile cultural ground from which the great Judeo-Arab symbiosis sprang. It was then the supposed dramatic disappearance of that Hellenism that could no longer stem the repressive impulse of Islam or Islamic culture, resulting in the deteriorating condition of the Jews. This is nothing but a not-so-cleverly masked critique of “Islam” as an inherently atavistic force. Without the restraining and moderating influence of Hellenism – here clearly and unproblematically read as existing prior to, outside of, and thus not the patrimony of the Islamic world – Islam will revert back to its old desert ways.<sup>69</sup> This is not history but polemic, and in its most extreme formulation is plainly Islamophobic. Islam is a discursive and practical tradition, a highly variegated one at that, and it cannot be construed as historically active or causative in such an uncritical way.

These factors, in various combinations, have contributed to the enduring predominance of the ideology of decline in the study of Ayyubid and Mamluk Jewry. While I have offered some counterarguments here, I do not wish to “prove” that a decline did not occur; this would be futile. Decline is a conceptual metaphor that organizes historical data according to an implicit ideological judgment and is not subject to falsification. Rather, I suggest that Jewish decline

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67 One of the clearest examples is Andrew Bostom (ed.), *The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), which is a collection of material, both medieval and modern, meant to catalogue the inherent “anti-Semitism” of the Islamic tradition and its many manifestations across time and place. Not surprisingly, the editor draws upon and reprints much of the academic literature I have discussed here.

68 Ashtor, *Toledot*, vol. 2, p. 52; Stillman, “Myth, Countermyth;” and Lassner, *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 210. Goitein is not as explicit as the others about linking the waning influence of Hellenism to the decline of the Jews. However, his thinking on the subject in at least one essay is quite clear. In his essay, “The Intermediate Civilization,” (in *Studies in Islamic History in Institutions*) p. 68, for example, he argues that Hellenism begins to disappear in the thirteenth century CE, producing a situation in which “both the spirit of research and that of tolerance dwindled rapidly and became next to extinct by the end of the fifteenth.”

69 The severing of Greece from “the Orient” and its concomitant repatriation in “the Occident” is one of the bedrock foundations of Orientalism and the construction of the Orient as Other. It has now also become the conceptual battleground of educated Islamophobia, or *l’islamophobie savante* of those like Sylvain Gouguenheim, whose recent monograph, *Aristote au Mont-Saint-Michel: les racines grecques de L’Europe chrétienne* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), rejects the Muslims’ role in transmitting and systematizing Greek philosophy, arguing that the Arabic language is not conducive to rational philosophy. See the essays in response to Gouguenheim in Büttgen, de Libera, Rashed, and Rosier-Catach, eds., *Les Grecs, les Arabes et nous: Enquête sur l’islamophobie savante* (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

is simply not a particularly useful heuristic because it prevents us from imagining other narratives and uses of the data. But once we jettison the metaphor, a number of analytical possibilities emerge. In the remaining pages I briefly outline an alternative historiography that might make better use of the limited sources we have at our disposal.

### 3. Jews as Agents in Mamluk Syria

One of the corollaries of the ideology of Jewish decline is the notion that Jews, as *dhimmi* subjects were the passive victims of Ayyubid and Mamluk policies. But if we abandon the decline paradigm we create a conceptual space to imagine and portray these Jewish communities as deliberate and thoughtful actors in their own right. Thus, in addition to a more theoretically informed focus on change and transformation, we can write about the many different ways that Jews acted in pursuit of their own interests. Such a move reflects a broader historiographical turn to theorize the agency of subaltern actors rather than simply recapitulate majoritarian narratives about them.<sup>70</sup> Critically, this theoretical turn stresses that “resistance to power” is not the only way that social actors exercise agency.<sup>71</sup> Just because the Jews of Mamluk Syria were not in open rebellion against the state does not mean they did not act in their own interests. Ideally, we would theorize and recover this agency using a combination of Jewish and non-Jewish texts.<sup>72</sup> Here I will focus solely on Mamluk Syrian historiography in order to demonstrate the potential value in these texts, hopeful that those historians more familiar with Jewish texts and documents might combine them with the Mamluk sources. The question is, can we mine this historiography for examples of Jews acting for themselves and in their own interests – either collectively or individually? The answer is a resounding yes. While there is not as much material as we might like, there is enough for us to get a clear sense of the ways that Jews pursued and secured their interests in a variety of settings. My examples here will be brief and anecdotal – a reflection of the nature of the sources – but they are indicative of the kinds of strategies these communities employed.

70 I am thinking here of course of the Subaltern Studies Collective, particularly their early work.

71 On a construction of agency that is not predicated upon resistance to power, see Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2005). For an example of precisely what I suggest here, see Marina Rustow, “At The Limits of Communal Autonomy: Jewish Bids for Intervention from the Mamluk State,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 13.2 (2009): 133–59.

72 I attempt something along these lines in “Scriptural Substitutions and Anonymous Citations: Judaization as Rhetorical Strategy in a Jewish Sufi Text,” *Numen* 61 (2014): 364–395.

One set of anecdotes highlights the ways in which Jews were integral actors within the larger social fabric of the city. In many of these cases, Jews quite often paraded with their Muslim and Christian neighbors during times of thanksgiving or celebration, as in when sultans or dignitaries visited the city after a military victory.<sup>73</sup> In other cases, we find Jews demonstrating publicly in times of distress, particularly during periods of plague, famine, or drought.<sup>74</sup> One particularly striking incident happened in 747/1347 when the Jewish women of Aleppo publicly demonstrated in solidarity with all the women of the city to protest the disfigurement of a Muslim woman at the hands of her husband. The women came together, marched together, and collectively held a mourning ceremony for the woman in the middle of the city.<sup>75</sup> This is a remarkable account, evincing not only an inter-communal solidarity but the women's collective activism as well. Events such as these indicate not only the extent to which Jews were integrated into the urban fabric of these cities, but that their social and political interests often overlapped with those of their Muslim and Christian neighbors.

Another set of anecdotes involve the Jews of Damascus and Aleppo using well placed bribes to get out of trouble, reopen synagogues, and secure or retain employment.<sup>76</sup> While some might take the necessity of bribes as itself evidence of declining status, I would counter that bribery and extortion were widespread and rampant; Muslims and Christians necessarily operated within and exploited the exact same system.<sup>77</sup> And speaking of matters financial, the Syrian historian Ibn

73 One example is after al-Malik al-Ashraf Khalil (r. 689–693/1290–1293) conquered Acre and several coastal cities from the Christians in 690/1291, he triumphantly processed to Damascus. On the outskirts of the city, which had been elaborately decorated, the inhabitants went out to greet the victorious sultan: “Each person was carrying a candle, including the scholars, judges, preachers, *shaykhs*, Christians, and Jews.” Al-‘Aynī, *al-Iqd al-jumān fi tārikh ahl al-zamān: ‘aṣr al-salāṭīn al-mamālik*, 5 vols, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā’iq al-Qawmiya, 2010), 3:65. Most all Mamluk historians record this event, but I have found no other historian, Egyptian or Syrian, who includes the final detail about the inter-communal display.

74 A famous example is the procession that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa witnessed in 749/1348 in which the Muslims, Christians, and Jews of Damascus all marched together from the Umayyad mosque to the Mosque of the Two Footprints two miles south to pray for relief from the plague. See *Rihlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1992), p. 100.

75 Abū l-Fidā, *Mukhtaṣar*, 4:146.

76 Examples include: the Jewish community in Aleppo bribes the authorities to repossess a synagogue that had been confiscated (al-Ṣafādī, *A’yān al-‘aṣr wa-a’wān al-naṣr*, 6 vols, ed. ‘Alī Abū Zayd et al [Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1998], 4:632); a Jewish *mustawfi* in Aleppo bribes the governor to get his job back (al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, 29 vols, ed. Aḥmad al-‘Arna’ūt and Turkī Muṣṭafā [Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2000], 7:82–83); the Samaritans of Damascus buy their safety from an unruly mob (Ibn Ṭulūn, *Ilām al-warā bi-man waliya nā’iban min al-atrāk bi-Dimashq al-Shām al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad Duhmān [Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1984] p. 300).

77 On bribery during the Mamluk period see the fascinating study by Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Rāziq

al-Ḥimṣī (d. 924/1527) relates in great detail a particularly fascinating account of one Jewish merchant's expert manipulation of the local lead market for profit in Damascus in 885/1480.<sup>78</sup>

Far from being the passive victims of Muslim aggression or repression, these examples underscore the ways that Jews could and did act in their own interests. Whether parading, marching, demonstrating in solidarity with the rest of the city, or manipulating local economies of bribery and markets, Jews could and did act in pursuit of their own interests throughout the Mamluk period.

But there is a much more interesting and theoretically useful corpus of anecdotes that reveal a great deal not only about the Jewish communities of Syria, but about Mamluk social process more widely. These examples involve the careful use and preservation of documents by Jews to secure their communal or personal interests. This is a topic that Tamer el-Leithy has treated at length in an essay in which he theorizes and describes "the agency of social actors who strategically produced, preserved, and deployed documents in specific historical conflicts, real or imagined, current or anticipated."<sup>79</sup> Likewise Marina Rustow has examined a number of Genizah documents in which we see Jews in Cairo securing their interests via careful documentation.<sup>80</sup> While in the cases I examine here the archival documents in question no longer exist as far as I know (unlike some of the examples Rustow and el-Leithy examine), the references to these documents in Mamluk historiography provide us with an alternative means of narrating Syrian Jewish history during this period.

A very early example is from Zengid Aleppo. In this case, a Jewish physician named Sukkara al-Ḥalabī used to treat the Sultan Nūr al-Dīn Zengī whenever he was in town.<sup>81</sup> On one occasion it happened that a woman whom Nūr al-Dīn loved

Aḥmad, *al-Badhl wa-l-barṭala zaman salāḥīn al-mamālīk: dirāsa 'an al-rashwa* (Cairo: al-Hay' a al-Miṣrīya al- 'Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1979).

78 Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādiṭh al-zamān wa-wafayāt al-shuyūkh wa-l-aqrān*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz Fayyāḍ Ḥarfūsh (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 2000), p. 155.

79 Tamer El-Leithy, "Living Documents, Dying Archives: Towards a Historical Anthropology of Medieval Arabic Archives," in *al-Qantara* 32 (2011): 389–434, quotation on p. 394. I would add here that Konrad Hirschler has offered another critical intervention in this respect by suggesting that in addition to more typical forms of documents (*awqāf* and manuscript notes being the most widely used in Mamluk studies) we treat biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt* or *mā'ājim*) as archival sources. Konrad Hirschler, "Studying Mamluk Historiography: From Source-Criticism to the Cultural Turn," in *Ubi Sumus? Quo Vademus? Mamluk Studies – State of the Art*, ed. S. Conermann (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2013): 159–186, esp. pp. 175–180.

80 Marina Rustow, "At The Limits of Communal Autonomy," esp. pp. 146–51.

81 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *'Uyūn al-anbā' fi ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*, ed. Nizār Riḍā (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, 1965), p. 637–8. There are also references to Sukkara's son, 'Afif, treating Nūr al-Dīn's son al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl (d. 577/1181) in Ibn al-'Adīm, *Zubdat al-ḥalab fi tārikh Ḥalab*, ed. Khalīl al-Manṣūr (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1996), pp. 378–379; idem, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fi tārikh Ḥalab*, 12 vols., ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1988),

fell very ill and was confined to the Citadel in Aleppo. Fortunately, Sukkara was able to heal her of her malady after all other physicians had failed. Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a reports that after curing her, Sukkara asked the woman to “write a letter (*kitāban*) to the Sultan for me that explains how sick you were and how I cured you.” After reading the letter, Nūr al-Dīn summoned Sukkara and asked him what he would like in reward. Sukkara asked for ten *faddān* of land around Aleppo, which Nūr al-Dīn granted him “lock, stock and barrel, to remain his in perpetuity, and wrote up a document to that effect.”<sup>82</sup> Here we have two striking examples of the strategic use of documents. With the first document Sukkara secured special favor with Nūr al-Dīn. With the second document he ensured that the land would stay in his family’s possession for generations.

There is an utterly fascinating case from fourteenth century Damascus in which a Jewish group produced a document that purported to exempt them from paying the *jizya*. It is well known that in 20/640–1, the Caliph ‘Umar relocated the Jews of Khaybar to Syria.<sup>83</sup> The Khaybarī Jews retained their unique communal identity thereafter and sometimes used it to obtain special favor by claiming that Muḥammad had explicitly exempted them from the *jizya*.<sup>84</sup> In one of these cases, occurring in 701/1302, a *majlis* was convened to force them to pay. According to Ibn Kathīr, in the course of the disputation the Khaybarī Jews “produced a document (*kitāban*) in their possession, which they claimed was from the prophet and that exempted them from the *jizya*.”<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately for them, the

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4:1825–6; and al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 40:236–237. See also Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, *Uyūn al-anbā*, p. 638.

82 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, *Uyūn*, p. 638.

83 As far as I can tell, none of the earliest sources specify the precise place of relocation. Al-Wāqidi has an account of one of the Jewish descendants of these Khaybarīs explaining that ‘Umar expelled his family simply to “al-Shām.” Al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, 3 vols., ed. Marsden Jones (Oxford University Press, 1966), 2:654. And Ibn Sa‘d has a notice that ‘Umar, “expelled the Jews from the Ḥijāz and resettled them from the Arabian peninsula into al-Shām. He expelled the Jews from Najrān and settled them in Kūfa.” Ibn Sa‘d, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, 11 vols., ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad ‘Umar (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānījī, 2001), 3:263. On this topic in general, see the wealth of references and discussion of sources in Leone Caetani, *Annali dell’Islām* (Milan, 1905–1926), 4:359–366, as well as in Gordon Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 99–104. As for the identity of the Khaybarī Jews, Goitein argues that Jews from the Fatimid-Mamluk periods who actually came from Arabia were known as Ḥijāzīs and that those called Khaybarī were probably from Iraq, “and had no real connection with their region of origin, the oasis of Khaybar.” *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2, p. 387. Nevertheless, the salient feature here is that they retained the collective memory, both communally and documentarily, of their exile from Khaybar.

84 Moshe Gil makes brief mention of this practice in *Jews in Islamic Countries in the Middle Ages*, transl. David Strassler (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 290.

85 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 18:9. There are actually extant copies of these kinds of documents from the Cairo Genizah. One is reproduced by Hartwig Hirschfeld, “The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge,” in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 15 (1903): 167–81. The document,

Muslim jurists determined the document to be a forgery based on its grammatical mistakes, problematic dating, and suspect signatories. This diagnosis was confirmed by none other than Ibn Taymīya. Ibn Kathīr himself had opportunity to examine the document and confirmed its inauthenticity.<sup>86</sup> While this particular attempt was ultimately unsuccessful, it is a salient example of a group of Jews preserving and employing documents to further their own interests and is part of a long history of Khaybarī Jews attempting the same stratagem, in some cases successfully.<sup>87</sup> In one early Mamluk document preserved in the Cairo Genizah a man obtained a document certifying that he was a Khaybarī and thus “one of the pardoned Khaybarī Jews (*min khayābarat al-yahūd al-maghfurīn*).”<sup>88</sup>

I will end with what is to me the most interesting of cases, one that involves the notorious Sufi agitator, Khaḍīr al-Mihrānī (d. 676/1277), and the repercussions of which would last for some 130 years. Al-Mihrānī was, of course, the favored and trusted *shaykh* and advisor of the sultan Baybars.<sup>89</sup> Before Khaḍīr fell out of

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written in Arabic with Hebrew characters, purports to be a letter from Muḥammad to the Jews of Khaybar granting them exemption from the *jizya* as well as a number of other favors. The Judeo-Arabic text is on pp. 177–179. Hirschfeld argues that the document is authentic (p. 173–4), based, among other things, on the fact that al-Balādhurī in his *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill), p. 60, claims that his copy of a very similar letter to the Jews of Maqnā was obtained from a man who copied the original from the Jews in Egypt and that the “spirit of the letter is so much against Moslim tendency that it is out of the question to assume that it was a Jewish fabrication.” I do not find this argument convincing.

- 86 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 18:10. He notes that it contained the signatory witness of several persons who had either died before the alleged date of the document or had not yet converted to Islam – like Mu’āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān – and that it contained grammatical errors attributed to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Interestingly enough, the letters preserved by al-Balādhurī (*Futūḥ al-buldān*, p. 60) and Hirschfeld (“The Arabic Portion”) do indeed contain the same grammatical error “‘Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib,” which error Hirschfeld argues (contra Ibn Kathīr) testifies to its authenticity.
- 87 Thus, for example, al-Hilāl al-Ṣābī, *Tuḥfat al-umarā’ fī tārikh al-wuzarā’*, ed. ‘Abd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (Maktabat al-A’yān), p. 78, records an account of a Jew who came to the vizier Ibn al-Furāt (d. 312/924) claiming to have a document from Muḥammad exempting the Khaybarī Jews from the *jizya*. When Ibn al-Furāt examined the document he declared that it was a forgery “because Khaybar was conquered 67 days *after* the date of your document.” Ibn al-Furāt nevertheless exempted the man his *jizya* payment because his only fault was in trusting the person who had originally vouched for the document. There is another interesting case from eleventh century Baghdad in which “one of the Jews produced a document he claimed was a letter from the messenger of God exempting the people of Khaybar from the *jizya*, containing the signatory witness of a number of companions, and in the handwriting of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.” But the *khaṭīb* Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) determined it to be a forgery according to the same criteria Ibn Kathīr used in his case. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārikh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, 18 vols., ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā and Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992), 16:129.
- 88 Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), doc. 49, p. 243 l. 4. See also Marina Rustow’s comments in “At the Limits of Communal Authority,” p. 149–50.
- 89 Eliyahu Strauss (Ashtor), “Scheich Ḥiḍr: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Juden in Damaskus,”

Baybars' favor and was exiled, Baybars allowed him to take over a synagogue in Damascus in 669/1271 to celebrate a military victory. Al-Mihrānī and his associates looted the synagogue, burned the Torah scroll, and then held a massive feast in the sanctuary during which the singing and dancing reached such raucous proportions that the cakes baked for the occasion were all trampled underfoot.<sup>90</sup> The Mamluk sources are exceedingly confused on what happened next. Some claim that al-Mihrānī converted the existing structure into a mosque; some say it was a *zāwiya*.<sup>91</sup> Others claim that he destroyed the building altogether before building a new *mosque* or *zāwiya* on the spot.<sup>92</sup> So far solachrymose. However, a few of these accounts add that the synagogue was actually returned to the Jews some time later, although they do not specify when or under what circumstances.<sup>93</sup> None of the sources actually put all the pieces of this puzzle together coherently, but my reading of the sources suggests the following. Al-Mihrānī abused the synagogue for his celebrations in 669/1271. The building was badly damaged or even destroyed by the great flood of Damascus (*ḥadīth al-sayl*) some days later.<sup>94</sup> Eventually the Jewish community reclaimed and repaired or rebuilt the damaged structure.

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*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 44 (1937): 227–230; Louis Pouzet, “Ḥaḍīr ibn Abī Bakr al-Mihrānī,” *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 30 (1978): 173–183; and P.M. Holt, “An Early Source on Shaykh Ḥaḍīr al-Mihrānī,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46 (1983): 33–39.

90 As far as I can tell the earliest account is that of al-Ṣuqā'ī, *Tālī kitāb wafayāt al-a'yān*, ed. J. Sublet (Damascus: IFPO, 1974), pp. 69–70. On the burning of the Torah scroll, see Ibn Shaddād, *al-A'lāq al-khaṭīra fī dhikr 'umarā' al-shām wa-l-jazīra*, ed. Sāmī al-Dahhān (Damascus: IFPO, 1956), p. 274.

91 Al-Birzālī, *al-Muqtafī*, 1:235; al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 49:56–57; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 17:495 and 508; and al-'Aynī, *Iqd*, 2:78.

92 Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥuṭayṭ (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983), p. 273; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, 33 vols., ed. Muḥīd Qamiḥah et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2004), 30:242; al-Yūnīnī, *Dhāyḥ mir'āt al-zamān*, 4 vols. (Hyderabad: Dār al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniya, 1955–1961), 3:6; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmi' al-ghurar*, 9 vols., ed. Bernd Radtke et al. (Cairo: al-Ma'had al-almānī li-l-Āthār bi-l-Qāhira, 1960), 8:222; Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, *al-Nahj al-sadīd wa-l-durr al-farīd ba'd tārīkh Ibn al-'Amīd* in “Histoire des Sultans mamlouks,” *Patrologia Orientalis* 14 (1920), p. 459; al-Kutubī, *Fawāṭ al-wafayāt*, 5 vols., ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1973–4), 1:405; al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, 29 vols., ed. Aḥmad al-Arna'ūt and Turkī Muṣṭafa (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2000), 13:207; and Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh Ibn al-Furāt*, vols. 7–9, ed. Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayq (Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Amīrkāniyya, 1939), 7:102–103. Holt, “An Early Source,” p. 35, argues that Ibn Shaddād's account in *Tārīkh al-malik al-Zāhir* was the source for al-Jazārī's account that was then picked up by Ibn al-Dawādārī and Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il. Holt's argument is confirmed by the lengthy quotation from al-Jazārī's *Tārīkh* in al-Nuwayrī's *Nihāyat al-arab*, 30:241–244, which is indeed the source for the later accounts.

93 The origin of this narrative strand is most likely al-Birzālī's *al-Muqtafī*, which was then picked up by al-Dhahabī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-'Aynī.

94 While al-Ṣuqā'ī claims the flood was on the same day, Ibn Kathīr has the flood on the very

The entire affair would appear impossible to parse in any more detail and thus fodder for the ideology of decline but for the fact that we possess invaluable testimony on the subject from almost 130 years later. The Damascene historian Ibn Ḥijjī (d. 816/1413) describes a *majlis* he attended held at the ‘Azīziya *madrasa* in Damascus on the eleventh of Shawwāl 796 (the ninth of August 1394).<sup>95</sup> The purpose of the *majlis* was to determine the status of this very same synagogue. It seems that two years previous, the chief Shāfi‘ī judge al-Bā‘ūnī (d. 816/1413) and the vice-regent of the city had declared the synagogue in violation of the Pact of ‘Umar. They then sought and received permission to turn it into a mosque from the sultan Barqūq (r. 784–791 and 792–801/1382–1389 and 1390–1399).<sup>96</sup> But when Barqūq visited Damascus in 1394, the Jewish community sent a delegation to him to contest that ruling and he convened the *majlis* at the ‘Azīziya.<sup>97</sup> During the course of the proceedings, Ibn Ḥijjī tells us that

the Jews produced a document (*maktūban*) containing the information that during the time of al-Zāhir Baybars, *shaykh* Khiḍr ibn Abī Bakr [al-Mihrānī] had taken the synagogue from them by force and political influence and that it remained in his possession for eight years, from 669 until 677. At that point it was returned to [the Jews] by written decree (*bi-l-mahḍar*) confirming that it had been taken without legal cause. And furthermore that the ‘*ulamā*’ of that time had issued a *fatwā* that it should be returned [to the Jews].

So here we have a remarkable situation in which Mamluk officials had attempted to wrest the synagogue away from the Jews, who were able to block the illegal seizure by producing a document, written and witnessed by Muslim jurists all the way back in 677, declaring that the synagogue was licit. Their case was made even stronger a few days later when they came to the Muslim authorities a second time, now at the Dār al-Sa‘āda, and brought with them another document (*al-khuṭūt*) in their possession. It seems that this *khuṭūt* was the original *fatwā* signed by the Chief Shāfi‘ī Judge Ibn Ṣaṣrā (d. 723/1323), who in 713/1313–4 had declared that the synagogue was the licit property of the Jewish community.<sup>98</sup>

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next day, al-Nuwayrī and al-Dhahabī place it a few days later, while Ibn Shaddād says it was a month later.

95 Ibn Ḥijjī, *Tārīkh Ibn Ḥijjī*, ed. Kundaṛī (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2003), pp. 74 and 76. Ibn Ḥijjī’s student Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Tārīkh*, 3:519, also records these events but the account is not as clear nor as detailed as Ibn Ḥijjī’s.

96 On al-Bā‘ūnī, see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Daw‘ al-lāmi*, 2:231–3.

97 Ibn Ḥijjī adds the interesting bit of gossip that the Ḥanafī and Mālikī judges testified to the Sultan that al-Bā‘ūnī “had written to the Sultan without any certainty [as to the facts of the case], as was his custom, and that he had an ulterior motive to defend himself against [certain] accusations made against him with the Jews.” The subject of these accusations is a blank spot in the manuscript! *Tārīkh Ibn Ḥijjī*, p. 74.

98 *Tārīkh Ibn Ḥijjī*, p. 76. On Ibn Ṣaṣrā, see al-Kutubī, *Fawāt*, 1:125–7; al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā*, 10 vols., ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Mu-



All these cases attest to the variety of strategies and means available to the Jewish communities of Damascus and Aleppo to pursue and retain their personal and communal interests during the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras. While much more needs to be done to theorize more precisely how and to what extent we can recover these interests, these examples suggest a way of narrating an agentive Jewish history and an alternative to the vectored ideology of decline. Again, to be clear, I am not trying to argue that these cases “prove” that Ayyubid and Mamluk Jewry were not in decline. Rather, I merely suggest that the ideology of decline prevents us from seeing these other possibilities and narratives. These examples indicate that as political and social conditions changed, the Jewish communities of Damascus and Aleppo adapted to them in several ways and with a variety of deliberate strategies. Nor have I attempted to be systematic or comprehensive in my survey of the sources. My goal has only been to suggest possible avenues for future research. In particular, Mamluk Syrian historiography offers us an often exclusive view of the subject, one that differs in many instances quite substantially from the scene in Cairo. Ultimately, while no history of the Jews of this period would be complete without ample reference to the polemics, accusations, conversions, and restrictions that impinged on Jewish life, they are not the whole story.

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ḥammad al-Ḥulw (Cairo: ‘Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1964–1976), 9:20–22; al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-kāmina fī a’yān al-mi’ā al-thāmina* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1993), 1:263–4; al-Suqā’ī, *Tālī kitāb al-wafayāt*, p. 190; and Ibn Taghribirdī, *al-Manhal al-ṣāfi wa-l-mustawfi ba’d al-wāfi*, 12 vols., ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn et al. (Cairo: al-Hay’ā al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1984–2006), 2:97–99.

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Paulina B. Lewicka

## Healer, Scholar, Conspirator. The Jewish Physician in the Arabic-Islamic Discourse of the Mamluk Period

The present paper is a part of a broader research project aimed at investigating the ways in which religion and inter-faith relations affected the medical culture of the pre-Ottoman Near East. It is specifically focused on the attitude of Muslims towards Jewish physicians who lived and worked within the Muslim society of Egypt and Syria in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. While aiming at tracking the discursive shift which occurred in the approach to those physicians, the study examines the manner the Jewish physicians were presented in historiographical narratives written by Muslim authors between ca the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As an area of research, the intersection of medicine and inter-faith relations constitutes a rather complex puzzle, in which the issues of sickness and health are interwoven with ideology/religion, politics, law, propaganda, customs, mentality, and broadly understood culture. Under such circumstances, forming any generalized or final judgments or definitions is risky and rarely possible. All the more so that the Arabic-language narratives, when used as sources for studies of Jewish physicians, have features which might easily confuse the picture of the past. One of these features is related to the otherwise obvious fact that Jewish physicians who lived and worked within the Muslim society belonged to the entity which in the Arabic-Islamic discourse of the Middle Ages was called *ahl adh-dhimma*, or the “protected” non-Muslim communities. Jewish doctors shared this particular affiliation with their Christian colleagues, for which reason it is generally impossible to differentiate between the two groups when the term *dhimma* is used in the Arabic text related to medical professionals. Consequently, any discussion of Jewish doctors has to consider the records referring to *dhimmi* doctors.

Another problem refers to the selective character of references to Jewish doctors, a feature due to which we know only those few of them whose names were, for various reasons, immortalized in the records. This group generally included recognized authorities in the field of medicine, persons celebrated for their knowledge and authorship of books (who, moreover, had famous teachers and students), as well as those who served as doctors to rulers and state officials.

But apart from those who achieved social prestige and rank there was also a crowd of Jewish physicians who lived their ordinary lives in ordinary neighborhoods of Syria or Egypt and earned their income by attending to ordinary patients. This group constituted a majority of Jewish doctors living and working within the Muslim society; however, by virtue of its ordinariness this majority is generally missing from the Arabic-Islamic historiography – as is usually the case with ordinary people. This implies that our picture of the past will always be somewhat distorted with respect to the present topic.<sup>1</sup>

These and other features of the source material – such as the fragmentariness and ambiguity of the information retrieved from it – increase the probability of misconstruing the text. In order to minimize this risk, I have adopted an assertion that the text is not a record of facts (i. e. true, or real events) but, rather, a record of the state of knowledge and mind of the author. Such an assertion implies, on the one hand, that “the fact” has, above all, “a linguistic existence, as a term in a discourse”<sup>2</sup> and, on the other, that in the discussion of the discourse the intentions of an individual author do matter. This means, in turn, that the full meaning of a text is determined both by the individuality of its author and by the community to which the author belonged. In the context of the present study the community is particularly important, as it not only shaped the author and influenced him, but was also in turn itself influenced by and through his texts in a kind of “feedback.”

Such an approach allows one to ignore the question of what “really” happened or whether it happened at all, and to focus instead on the discourse – understood as literary expressions of thoughts, disputes, beliefs, convictions, stereotypes and values that made the cultural climate and social mood of the times. In other words, it gives one a chance to apprehend what inspired the authors to write what they wrote and, this way, to try to grasp what people were thinking and saying.

The task of analyzing the Arabic-Islamic discourse in the context of the Jewish presence in medical culture requires taking into consideration a variety of re-

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1 The Jewish doctors whose names had been mentioned in the Arabic sources were carefully listed by Max Meyerhof in his “Mediaeval Jewish Physicians in the Near East, from Arabic Sources,” *Isis* 28/2 (1938), pp. 432–460 and “Notes sur quelques médecins juifs égyptiens qui se sont illustrés à l’époque arabe,” *Isis* 12/1 (1929), pp. 113–131 (both generally for pre-Mamluk times) as well as by Eliyahu Ashtor in his *The History of Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Rule of the Mamluks*, 2 vols., Jerusalem 1944–1951 (in Hebrew) (for the age of the Mamluks). In his “Jewish Court Physicians in the Mamluk Sultanate during the First Half of the 8th/14th Century,” *Medieval Encounters* 20 (2014), pp. 38–65 Amir Mazor discussed at length three Jewish doctors who served Mamluk sultans and high-ranking officers. Those whose names had been preserved in the archives of the Cairene Geniza are mentioned in numerous studies by S.D. Goitein, Richard Gottheil, H.D. Isaacs, Efraim Lev, Leigh Chipman or Colin F. Baker.

2 See Roland Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” tr. by Stephen Bann, *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981), pp. 7–20.

CORDS. This being the case, the genre of writing cannot be considered a criterion – what matters are references to Jewish doctors, authors of those references, and the multi-dimensional context of the text. Consequently, the collection of sources used for the present study includes items as diverse as bibliographical dictionaries, annalistic works, chronicles, and variety of religious treatises, including the genre known as *ṭibb an-nabī*, or medicine of the prophet.

In her important study of the image of the physician in Arab biographies Doris Behrens-Abouseif pointed some decades ago to a number of features that differentiated biographical dictionaries written in the Ayyubid period from those produced in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. She observed, for example, that Mamluk and Ottoman authors of biographical dictionaries, unlike their predecessors from the Ayyubid period, had not referred to their contemporary non-Muslims unless the latter were *masālima*, or converts to Islam. According to her, this was because those authors “dealt essentially with the elite of their time”<sup>3</sup> and non-Muslims could be “no means belong to the elite selected in biographical encyclopedias for the simple reason that this elite was essentially orthodox Islamic.”<sup>4</sup> This course of action was to reflect “the Mamluk attitude toward the *dhimmīs* which was not as tolerant as that of the Ayyubids.”<sup>5</sup>

Noteworthy as they are, observations presented in Doris Behrens-Abouseif’s article are, however, based on a limited number of sources, due to which they propose a somewhat simplified, if not distorted, picture of the past. This is especially true of the suggestion that there was a cause-and-effect connection between the change of attitude towards non-Muslims and the change of the ruling dynasty, which would suggest a lack of continuity between the Ayyubid and the Mamluk Near East. In fact, the fall of the Ayyubids and the Mamluks’ takeover were not really a reason behind the change of attitude towards non-Muslim doctors – the differences between “the Ayyubid-era” biographies and “the Mamluk-era” ones notwithstanding. The discursive shift in the approach to non-Muslims (Jewish physicians included) did not occur at a sudden turning point. It was a complex, multi-current development which, moreover, expanded in time. And it could not be otherwise – after all, this shift was a manifestation of a major societal, cultural and mental transformation which was taking place in the region from ca. the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and which reached its climax in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Prompted by the process of radicalization and “Islamization” of Islam, this transformation affected also Muslims’ attitude to the religious Other, which category covered Jewish doctors as well. The fall of the

3 Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “The Image of the Physician in Arab Biographies of the Post-Classical Age,” *Der Islam* 66/2 (1989), p. 336.

4 Behrens-Abouseif, “Image,” loc.cit.

5 Behrens-Abouseif, “Image,” loc.cit.

Ayyubids and the Mamluks' takeover might have stimulated the tendencies which were already on the rise for some time. But it did not generate them.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, the boundary between what was Ayyubid and what was Mamluk in this respect could not be as explicit as it may sometimes appear. True, relative neutrality and absence of religious bias *were* a distinctive feature of medical discourse of the pre-Mamluk times. Generally, religion was rarely used as an argument in the pre-Mamluk medical culture – medical errors or charlatan practices were not associated with religious denomination. Generally, authors pointed to a doctor's religious affiliation in order to provide details regarding his identity and not to use it as a pretext for prejudiced comments, unfounded accusations or a criterion for negative categorization and discrimination. Such was the general trait to which, however, there were exceptions. The exceptions are important as they represent harbingers of the coming change and demonstrate that the process which reached its climax in the late Mamluk period started before the fall of the Ayyubids.

As far as the Ayyubid period is concerned, the indication of a new current in thinking manifested itself in the form of biased remarks, or hate speech, included in a very peculiar work on fraudulent practices titled *Kashf al-Asrār* and produced by certain Zayn ad-Dīn al-Jawbarī (fl. 1222), presumably a Syrian dervish but in fact a rather shady character of the last decades of the Ayyubid period.<sup>7</sup> Some parts of this manual, which was written in a quite coarse and disorderly style, deal with Jews as medical charlatans and as physicians and, apart from offensive adjectives, include also information on how those physicians kill their non-Jewish patients whenever they have a chance.<sup>8</sup> It is probably one of the earliest examples of incorporating unfounded, irrational accusations motivated by religious prejudice into the Arabic-Islamic medical discourse.<sup>9</sup>

6 The intersection of medicine and inter-faith relations in the Mamluk Near East was discussed by Paulina B. Lewicka in, for example, "Did Ibn al-Ḥājj Copy from Cato? Reconsidering Aspects of Inter-Communal Antagonism of the Mamluk Period," in: Stephan Conermann (ed.), *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies – State of the Art*, Bonn University Press 2013, pp. 231–61; idem, "Medicine for Muslims? Islamic Theologians, Non-Muslim Physicians, and the Medical Culture of the Mamluk Near East," *ASK Working Paper 03*, Bonn, July 2012; also in: Stephan Conermann (ed.), *History and Society during the Mamluk Period (1250–1517)*, Bonn University Press 2014, pp. 83–106.

7 Zayn ad-Dīn 'Abd ar-Raḥīm al-Jawbarī, *Al-Mukhtār fī Kashf al-Asrār*, Cairo, n.d.

8 Al-Jawbarī, *Al-Mukhtār*, pp. 28–9. The fragment is quoted and discussed by Moshe Perlmann, "Notes on the Position of Jewish Physicians in Medieval Muslim Countries," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972), p. 317; also Peter E. Pormann, "The Physician and the Other: Images of the Charlatan in Medieval Islam," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 79/2 (2005 Summer), pp. 220–21.

9 One of the very few examples of associating *dhimmi* physicians with dishonest practices in the Abbasid literature is certain al-Kaskarī, himself a physician from the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Baghdad, who in his *Compendium (Kunnāsh)* refers to Jewish doctors from Kufa as being "fond of using

While what he wrote was new, al-Jawbarī was not really ahead of his time. In the late-Ayyubid epoch this kind of thinking did not seem to be unique. There apparently were others who considered the presence of non-Muslims in medicine problematic. This can, for example, be concluded from Ibn al-Fuwaṭī's obituary of Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Faḍlān (d. 631/1233–4), a Shāfi'ī *faqīh*, an *ʿālim*, and one of teachers of al-Mustanṣiriya madrasa in Baghdad.<sup>10</sup> According to Ibn Yaḥyā ibn Faḍlān's views – which he expressed in his letter to the Abbasid caliph an-Nāṣir – the *dhimmī* doctors were dishonest and enjoyed significant but undeserved profits; moreover, they had no idea about medicine and, being incompetent doctors, they were in fact serial killers.<sup>11</sup> At more or less the same time Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a reported of a famous Damascene physician of the epoch, Raḍī al-Dīn al-Raḥbī (d. 631/1233–4) who, as a professor of medicine, was very careful not to teach medicine to *dhimmīs* and who, having educated many successful and famous doctors, was very proud to maintain that during his entire life had never taught medicine to a *dhimmī*.<sup>12</sup>

However important these narratives are, they do not dominate medical discourse: dislike for non-Muslim doctors and pathological medical procedures allegedly carried out by them against their Muslim patients are still rare in the intellectual debate of the period. In fact, in the last decades of the Ayyubid rule a more common approach seems to have been that represented by Ibn al-Qiftī (ca. 1172–1248), a scholar, writer and bureaucrat of Egyptian origin who spent most of his life in Syria.<sup>13</sup> In his dictionary of learned men<sup>14</sup> entries featuring Jewish, Samaritan, Christian and Muslim physicians are presented side by side

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falsehood and deceit.” See Pormann, “Physician,” pp. 211–12. The important feature of this text, however, is that it does not accuse Jewish doctors collectively or points them out as those who deliberately harm their Muslim patients. The text mentions only one specific example of dishonesty practiced by Jewish doctors in one specific place. As such, it does not necessarily imply prejudice or forging/spreading false, negative and overgeneralized stereotypes. See a discussion of this fragment by Pormann, whose conclusions sometimes seem somewhat far-fetched; Pormann, “Physician,” loc. cit.

10 Ibn Faḍlān's other public functions of influence included a teaching position in the Nizāmiya madrasa and supervision of the 'Adūdī hospital in Baghdad. He also was *qāḍī al-quḍāt*, supervisor in *dīwān al-ḥisba*, supervisor of *waqfs* of madrasas and *ribāṭs*, supervisor of *dīwān al-jawālī* (or a bureau which dealt with collecting taxes from non-Muslims).

11 Kamāl ad-Dīn Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, *Al-Ḥawādīth al-Jāmi'a wa-l-Tajārūb al-Nāfi'a fī al-Mi'a as-Sābi'a*, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth 1987, pp. 37–40.

12 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *'Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'*, Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-Wahbiyya 1299/1883, II, pp. 192–95 (“Raḍī ad-Dīn ar-Raḥbī”); Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad adh-Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām an-Nubalā'*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 2004, XIV, p. 74 (“Al-Raḥbī”). There were two exceptions, though: he taught medicine to 'Imrān al-Isrā'īli and Ibrāhīm Ibn Khalaf as-Sāmīri.

13 For Ibn al-Qiftī's biography see A. Dietrich, “Ibn al-Qiftī,” *EI2*, III.

14 Ibn al-Qiftī, *Kitāb Ikhbār al-'Ulamā' bi-Akhhbār al-Ḥukamā'*, Cairo: Maṭba'at as-Sa'āda 1326 H.

and the achievements or virtues of those physicians are praised regardless of their religious affiliation, which is never used as a pretext for biased comments of any kind.<sup>15</sup> Ibn al-Qifṭī's death coincided with the fall of the Ayyubids in Egypt. However, the "old" attitude he represented did not die together with the Ayyubid rule.

In the first decades of the Mamluk period it was continued by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (1203–1270), a Damascene historian of medicine whose dictionary of physicians covers the largest number of biographies of non-Muslim doctors.<sup>16</sup> Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a spent over half of his lifetime under the Ayyubids; he was socialized and educated according to the norms, patterns and views typical for the culture of this period. And while completing his dictionary under the Mamluks, he fashioned this work according to the model that was worked out for the genre before the Mamluk takeover.<sup>17</sup> With his mindset formed by the cultural climate of the past, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a wrote according to its norms and atmosphere. His dictionary was shaped by the same social function that had shaped the work of Ibn al-Qifṭī, and was a part of the same intellectual debate that absorbed Ibn al-Qifṭī. The biographies he compiled were presented in the form in which such problems had previously been treated.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, himself a physician from a family of physicians, he shared with other doctors the spirit of professional community, one's faith notwithstanding. But what he stuck to, and what he continued to promote, seemed to be fading away.

The next generations of authors/biographers – most of whom were Islamic theologians – gradually broke the traditional mold and contributed to creating a new trend which favored writing for Muslims and about Muslims. This new trend reflected the Islamic society's decreasing interest in non-Muslim personalities and, at the same time, promoted diminishing their presence in this society's consciousness and its broadly understood cultural domain. As far as bibliographical dictionaries were concerned, this implied focusing on biographies of eminent Muslims and neglecting those of non-Muslims, no matter how distinguished they were.

However, the entries featuring Jewish (or Christian) doctors did not disappear from biographical dictionaries. Against all odds, the style of Ibn al-Qifṭī and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a had followers. Contrary to what has been suggested, some of the Mamluk-era authors, while essentially dealing with the orthodox Islamic elite of

15 Cf. Behrens-Abouseif, "Image," p. 333.

16 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn*, ed. by August Müller, 2 vols., Königsberg 1884; repr. by Nizār Riḍā, Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayā 1965; Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-Wahbiyya 1299/1883.

17 Cf. Felix Gilbert, "Intellectual History: Its Aims and Methods," *Daedalus* 100/1 (Winter 1971): *Historical Studies Today*, p. 91.

18 Gilbert, "Intellectual History," loc.cit.

their time, dealt with non-Muslims, too.<sup>19</sup> One such author was Ibn Khallikān (1211–1282), a theologian and jurist of Kurdish origin who spent his life in Damascus and Cairo, and who in his dictionary of eminent men<sup>20</sup> included a number of entries featuring Jewish and Christian doctors of earlier centuries.<sup>21</sup> And he was not an exception. As far as the recognition of merits and achievements of non-Muslims is concerned, even more important was Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī (1301–1349), a Damascene bureaucrat and writer from a family of bureaucrats who, however, had temperament of a scholar. Al-‘Umarī is famous for being an author of *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, a voluminous encyclopaedic compendium on the Mamluk Empire. One volume of this work, written very much in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a’s style, is devoted to biographies of famous thinkers, physicians and philosophers – Jewish, Christian, Samaritan and Muslim alike.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Ibn Khallikān, al-‘Umarī was not a theologian.

Another author to include in his works a number of entries devoted to Jewish physicians was Khalīl Ibn Aybak aṣ-Ṣafadī (1297–1363), an all-round intellectual, poet and biographer from Syria. Like al-‘Umarī, aṣ-Ṣafadī was not a theologian.<sup>23</sup> Somewhat unexpectedly, one can also find such entries in *Tārīkh al-Islām* written by Muḥammad adh-Dhahabī (1274–1348), the otherwise rigid Damascene Shāfi’ī theologian and historian who in this very “Islamic” work included a number of biographies of Jewish physicians, only one of whom was a convert to Islam.<sup>24</sup> Maimonides himself (ca. 1135–1204) is presented as someone who converted but then returned to his former religion – which is, by the way, a presentation of Maimonides typical for Islamic biographies which were based, it seems, on the information first provided by Ibn al-Qiftī.<sup>25</sup>

The pattern according to which those authors selected biographies of Jewish physicians is not obvious. Some of those individuals were the authors’ contemporaries; the great majority of them, however, were for them historical figures whose biographies they found in the dictionary of Ibn al-Qiftī or Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a. In some cases, the emphasis is put on those doctors’ enormous wealth

19 Cf. Behrens-Abouseif, “Image,” p. 336.

20 Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A’yān wa-Anbā’ Abnā’ az-Zamān*, 8 vols., ed. by Iḥsān ‘Abbās, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir 1994.

21 Cf. Behrens-Abouseif, “Image,” p. 331.

22 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār*, IX: *Mashāhīr al-Ḥukamā’ wa-l-Atibbā’ wa-l-Falāsifa*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya n.d.

23 Khalīl Ibn Aybak aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafayāt*, 29 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyā’ at-Turāth al-‘Arabī 2000; see also idem, *A’yān al-‘Aṣr wa-A’wān an-Naṣr*, 6 vols., Damascus: Dār al-Fikr 1998.

24 Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad adh-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām wa-Wafayāt al-Mashāhīr wa-l-A’lām*, 52 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī 1990–2000.

25 Adh-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, XLIII, *Ḥawādīth wa-Wafayāt 601–610 H.*, p. 396; Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ikbār*, pp. 209–10; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, *‘Uyūn* (ed. Cairo), II, p. 117; Muḥammad Ibn Shākīr al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir n.d., IV, pp. 175–6.



or on the ruler's favors which they enjoyed; in others, their wisdom, erudition, and expertise in medicine is stressed. Sometimes they point to their personal acquaintance with one doctor or another. Only few of those physicians were converts to Islam.

It seems that being a Muslim was not a condition *sine qua non* for a doctor to have his name eternalized in an Arabic-Islamic biographical dictionary of the Mamluk period. In fact, only few Mamluk-period authors of biographical dictionaries did not care about non-Muslim members of the society's elite. This was the case of Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (ca. 1287–1363), Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (1372–1449), Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān as-Sakhāwī (1428–97) or Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (1445–1505). But al-Kutubī's *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*,<sup>26</sup> al-ʿAsqalānī's *Ad-Durar al-Kāmina*,<sup>27</sup> as-Sakhāwī's *Ad-Daw' al-Lāmi*<sup>28</sup> and as-Suyūṭī's *Ḥusn al-Muḥaḍara*<sup>29</sup> were not meant to be universal dictionaries of famous physicians, philosophers and scholars. Nor were they compiled independently of religious divisions. The concerns of their authors, most of whom were religious scholars of Shāfi'ī school,<sup>30</sup> had little to do with the approach of biographers such as Ibn al-Qifṭī, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, Ibn Khallikān, aṣ-Ṣafadī and al-ʿUmarī. But the contents of their dictionaries, while pointing to the declining role of the non-Muslims in the Islamic society (Jewish physicians included), reflects also a general change of priorities prevailing in this society's way of thinking.

The new attitude towards Jewish physicians did not manifest itself only in the selection of entries according to religious affiliation of persons. Consideration given to one's conversion and reduction of the presence of non-Muslims in the records of history by ignoring their biographies was one thing. Fashioning a reference by presenting Jews in a negative light or avoiding the appreciation of their achievements was something else.

As far as this aspect of texts is concerned, references to converts are very meaningful. In fact, conversion was always an issue, also in the pre-Mamluk times; the dictionaries compiled by Ibn al-Qifṭī and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a attest to this phenomenon. They include a number of biographies of Jews who converted to Islam; of these biographies, later authors liked some particularly well – or at least

26 Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, 5 vols., Beirut: Dār Ṣādir n.d.

27 Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī *Ad-Durar al-Kāmina fī A'yān al-Mā'a ath-Thāmina*, 4 vols., Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' at-Turāth al-ʿArabī n.d.

28 Shams ad-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān as-Sakhāwī, *Ad-Daw' al-Lāmi' li-Ahl al-Qarn at-Tāsi'*, 10 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Jil n.d.

29 Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-Muḥaḍara fī Tārīkh al-Qāhira*, ed. by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 2 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1998.

30 Al-Kutubī was not a Shāfi'ī theologian, but the influence of Shāfi'īs (such as adh-Dhahabī) on him is very likely.

replicated them more willingly. Such was the case of the biography of Awḥad az-Zamān Abū al-Barakāt Hibat Allāh Ibn ‘Alī Malkā (d. ca 1164–5), a Jewish physician in the service of the Baghdadi caliph al-Mustanjid bi-Allāh (1160–1170). “They say that the reason behind the embracing Islam by Abū al-Barakāt was that when one day he entered the caliph’s hall, all those, who were present there stood up except for the chief judge. He was also present, but did not consider it necessary to stand up with everybody because Abū al-Barakāt was a *dhimmī*. ‘Oh Prince of the Believers’ [– Abū al-Barakāt addressed the caliph –] ‘if the judge does not agree with the rest just because he sees that I belong to a different religious community than he, I will embrace Islam right now in front of you, my Master, so that he cannot degrade me this way anymore.’ And he embraced Islam.” But what was probably even more entertaining in the story of Abū al-Barakāt was that after his conversion he begun to dislike his ex-community. “May God curse the Jews” – he used to say. “And their sons as well” – he heard once from Ibn Tilmīdh, the Christian physician and his rival.<sup>31</sup>

The story of Bahā’ ad-Dīn ‘Abd as-Sayyid Ibn al-Muhadhdhab Ishāq Ibn Yaḥyā, who converted and made his family do the same, was also repeated by a number of authors. Another replicated biography is that of Maimonides, who was said to have converted to Islam while in al-Andalus but returned to his religion upon his arrival in Egypt. This otherwise unacceptable move is never commented upon by any of the authors who quoted this information. Even adh-Dhahabī does not say a word, apart from the fact that he uses Maimonides’s biography as one of the reasons to curse Jews.<sup>32</sup>

Although conversion was an issue also in the pre-Mamluk times, it seems that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century it gained new overtones. Clearly enough, this problem was much more complex than a simple change of one’s affiliation from erroneous to the correct community under the pressure of the radicalized social mood. There are in aṣ-Ṣafadī’s dictionary two entries which are particularly intriguing in this respect and include a number of interesting threads. One of those entries is devoted to Usayda, a Jewish doctor, ophthalmologist and surgeon who was contemporary to aṣ-Ṣafadī. The other deals with Abū al-Ḥasan Ibn Ghazāl, a doctor and a politician who lost his life at the very outset of the Mamluk rule and whose biography can be also found in the dictionary of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a and al-‘Umari.

31 See, for example, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, *‘Uyūn* (ed. Beirut), pp. 374–6; also aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, p. 178; adh-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, XXXVIII, *Ḥawādith wa-Wafayāt 551–560 H.*, p. 372. Interestingly, Ibn al-Qiftī’s biography of Abū al-Barakāt (*Ikhbār*, pp. 224–7) differs from that included by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a in *‘Uyūn* (and, consequently, from those which were copied from *‘Uyūn*).

32 Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ikhbār*, pp. 209–10; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, *‘Uyūn* (ed. Cairo), II, p. 117; al-Kutubī, *Fawāt*, IV, pp. 175–6; adh-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, XLIII, *Ḥawādith wa-Wafayāt 601–610 H.*, p. 396.

As for Usayda (d. after 727/1327),<sup>33</sup> he had – if we are to believe aṣ-Ṣafadī – no equals as far as the expertise in setting broken bones was concerned. He performed significant surgeries on a number of high Mamluk officers,<sup>34</sup> and was familiar with writings of ancient philosophers. Usayda converted to Islam, but for some people his conversion seemed to have been problematic. Some said there were witnesses in Ṣafad who claimed that he had converted but then abandoned his new faith and returned to Judaism (*aslama thumma tahawwada*). Some of Usayda's statements, presumably related to religion, were controversial enough to cause his imprisonment. However, having spent some time in jail, Usayda decided to accept Islam again “to appease” the situation.

So, at least, says aṣ-Ṣafadī who, clearly proud to have met Usayda a number of times, does his best to confirm religious correctness of the doctor. Usayda is said to have frequently met two Islamic shaykhs and to discuss things with them. One of those shaykhs was such a religious hawk as Ibn Taymiyya whom, by the way, aṣ-Ṣafadī held in high esteem.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, al-Malik al-Mu‘ayyad Abū-l-Fidā‘, the ruler of Hama is said to have been in close relations with Usayda and liked him a lot, so much so that he bequeathed some of his books to him. Moreover, aṣ-Ṣafadī maintains he never knew a *Muslim* who would master *firāsa* (physiognomy)<sup>36</sup> as well as Usayda. And, as if he wanted to convince those who doubted the sincerity of Usayda's conversion, aṣ-Ṣafadī says that Usayda was not really a Jew but only pretended to be one (*lam yakun yahū-diyyan illā yatasayyaru bi-dhalika*).<sup>37</sup>

This statement reminds one of another biography that can be found in aṣ-Ṣafadī's dictionary, namely that of Abū al-Ḥasan Ibn Ghazāl, a Samaritan who had converted to Islam. According to an opinion quoted by aṣ-Ṣafadī, Ibn Ghazāl “was not a Samaritan nor a Muslim but was only hiding behind Islam” (*mā kāna sāmariyyan wa-lā musliman bal kāna yatasayyaru bi-l-islām*) and, moreover, “exaggerated in destroying religion.”<sup>38</sup> Somebody was even said to have told him: “if you stuck to your religion, it would be better for you (...), because now you swing like a pendulum and belong neither to those nor to the others.”<sup>39</sup> A

33 Aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, IX, pp. 7–8; also shorter version in idem, *A'yān* 488–90. Cf. Usayda's biography as discussed by Mazor, “Jewish Court Physicians,” pp. 54–60.

34 Usayda's patients included *amīr* Badr ad-Dīn Baydarā, al-Ashraf's governor in Akka and *amīr* 'Alam ad-Dīn Sanjar ad-Dawādārī. Sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad called Usayda to Cairo to treat *amīr* 'Izz ad-Dīn Aydamur al-Khathīrī, who suffered from hemiplegia.

35 The other was Ṣadr ad-Dīn Ibn al-Wakīl (d. 1317), a scholar knowledgeable in many branches of knowledge and an associate of sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad.

36 *Firāsa* was a branch of knowledge that combined psychology and physiognomy, mastering of which presumably allowed one to read people's characters from their appearances.

37 Aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, IX, p. 8.

38 Aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, XII, pp. 65–7.

39 Aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, loc.cit.

physician but also a high official at the service of Syrian Ayyubids, Ibn Ghazāl was imprisoned – as a consequence of factional struggle in the last days of the Ayyubid rule – in the Citadel of Cairo and then hanged in the year 648/1250, immediately after the Mamluks' takeover. According to aṣ-Ṣafadī, after his death indescribable riches and jewels were found in his place in Damascus, as well as ten thousand volumes of precious books.

No matter how innocent it sounds, the charge is meaningful – coupled with the information on Ibn Ghazāl's insincere conversion, it seems to have followed a pattern typical for the anti-*dhimmī* propaganda of aṣ-Ṣafadī's times.<sup>40</sup> The message included in the text composed by aṣ-Ṣafadī was relatively clear – Ibn Ghazāl converted to Islam not for his appreciation of Islam's superiority, but for the sake of his offices. Moreover, it confirmed the commonly "known" truth that Musālīma, or converts to Islam, were in fact worse than those who remained non-Muslims. It confirmed their greed and perfidy in robbing Muslims of their wealth.<sup>41</sup>

The contents of Ibn Ghazāl's biography as composed by aṣ-Ṣafadī is even more meaningful when we compare it with the entry devoted to this person and composed much earlier by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a. Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, who met Ibn Ghazāl personally and who even wrote a long poem in his praise, did not say a word about the insincerity of Ibn Ghazāl's conversion, which detail fundamentally affects the meaning of the biography. The text composed by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a presents Ibn Ghazāl as a person who made career as a high official at the courts of the Syrian Ayyubids. Very fond of wealth and riches, during his service for al-Malik aṣ-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'il in Syria Ibn Ghazāl amassed a giant fortune, mostly

40 Although in the case of Ibn Ghazāl it was apparently a softer version of the pattern. Cf., for example, the case of Sharaf ad-Dīn al-Nashw, the popularly hated inspector of an-Nāṣir Muḥammad's private treasury and a convert from Christianity. In 740/1339–40 an-Nashw's powerful enemies forced the sultan to arrest him and have him and his family tortured to death. As soon as an-Nashw died, the news was spread that undisputable proof of guilt had been found in his home and pantries: 200 containers of salt-fermented fish, significant reserve of pig's meat, 4,000 jugs of wine, a huge amount of expensive jewels and garments, as well as a gold cross and a jeweled hand of the Virgin Mary. The collection, if used to prove its owner's dishonest amassing of fortune and insincere intention while converting to Islam, was a perfect *corpus delicti*. See Paulina B. Lewicka, "Projecting the Enemy: Non-Muslims and *Ummage-meinschaft* in the Mamluk State," forthcoming.

41 In fact, the lust for wealth and high positions seems to have characterized other members of Ibn Ghazāl's Samaritan family, too; however, very much like in the case of the Barmakids in Abbasid Iraq, it is not obvious whether the steps taken by authorities in Syria against the Samaritans were aimed at curtailing their influence, power and insatiability or simply at confiscating their enormous wealth; see Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn* (ed. Beirut), pp. 721–3 (*tarjama* of al-Muḥadhdhab Yūsuf Ibn Abī Sa'id Ibn Khalaf as-Sāmīri); al-'Umārī, *Masālik*, IX, pp. 290–1 (*tarjama* of al-Muḥadhdhab Yūsuf Ibn Abī Sa'id Ibn Khalaf as-Sāmīri) and 291–3 (*tarjama* of Abū al-Ḥasan Ibn Ghazāl Ibn Abī Sa'id as-Sāmīri).

at the expense of the Damascenes whose goods he confiscated.<sup>42</sup> The difference of meaning of the two texts is fundamental – the picture of Ibn Ghazāl as drawn by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a presents a careerist and a rapacious person who robbed his subjects, and not a greedy convert who robbed Muslims of their wealth.

Aṣ-Ṣafadī’s obituaries of Abū al-Ḥasan Ibn Ghazāl and Usayda, and specifically aṣ-Ṣafadī’s own involvement in the public discussion on Usayda’s religious correctness, are important for a number of reasons. For one, they indicate that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century one’s religious affiliation mattered much more than before; two, that the issue of conversion gained new overtones in the 14<sup>th</sup> century; three, that a doctor’s conversion could be *the* issue not only in the medical, but also in public discourse; four, that a person who converted to Islam was watched carefully, if only because one’s conversion to Islam was a source of Muslims’ anxiety which manifested itself in suspicion and accusations caused by the presumed insincerity of this conversion; and five, that accusations of false conversion, generally voiced against converted Christian Copt officials,<sup>43</sup> could be also directed at Jewish or Samaritan convert physicians and functionaries.

The religion-related nuances notwithstanding, aṣ-Ṣafadī’s biography of Ibn Ghazāl does not really differ from that written by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a as far as acknowledgement of this doctor’s merits and achievements is concerned. This is, in fact, typical for aṣ-Ṣafadī who, like his contemporary al-‘Umarī subscribed, in a way, to the style which favored flexibility towards the religious Other rather than dislike.

Others, however, were somewhat less positively disposed towards non-Muslims; their approach to the Jewish figures in their dictionaries was certainly more stiff, and the entries devoted to them were generally quite brief. Adh-Dhahabī did not devote too much space to appreciate their merits. He very briefly acknowledged the books they wrote, and in few words recognized their knowledge or expertise in medicine. And, to maintain equilibrium, he also often wished Jews – and sometimes Jewish doctors personally – a curse of God.

But there were also other tendencies that could be observed in the evolution of medical discourse. In the entry featuring al-Muwaffaq Ibn Shū’a (d. 579/1183), a distinguished Jewish scholar, physician, surgeon and ophthalmologist in personal service of sultan Saladin, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, who represented the old ways of thinking of both medicine and the religious Other, reports the story of how the doctor was hit by a stone thrown by a zealous *faqīh* and Sufi named al-Khūbishānī. Al-Khūbishānī was obsessed with non-Muslims riding on horse-/mule-back, which Jews and Christians living in the Islamic world were forbidden to do

42 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, *‘Uyūn* (ed. Beirut), pp. 723–8; see also his biography in al-‘Umarī, *Masālik*, IX, pp. 291–3.

43 See Lewicka, “Projecting the Enemy,” loc.cit.

on the basis of a sumptuary law known as the ‘Umar’s code.<sup>44</sup> So al-Khūbishānī, whenever he spotted a non-Muslim riding, would assault and try to kill him. Unluckily for Ibn Shū’a, his ride in the streets of Cairo did not escape al-Khūbishānī’s notice. The stone the latter threw cost the royal doctor his eye.<sup>45</sup> The story, however old, apparently annoyed Ibn Abi Usaybi’a – his narrative of the incident leaves no doubts what he thought of the primitive, dull, religiously inflexible and wily Muslim *faqīh* who attacked decent, outstanding Jewish physician.

In a few years, this kind of comment, unique anyway, would become unthinkable. Adh-Dhahabī cared to summarize the story in his *Tārīkh al-Islām*; obviously enough, his version of events was deprived of the praise of both the doctor’s merits and remarks about the boorishness of the *faqīh*,<sup>46</sup> a move which of course entirely changed the meaning of the story: now the Jewish doctor was a perpetrator of an illegal deed and the *faqīh* was a righteous executor of the law.

A strikingly similar though different story, quoted by a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Yemeni author named al-Khazrajī, radiated with educational overtones, too. It featured a pious and noble Yemeni *faqīh* (d. 638/1240–1) and a Jewish physician who, disrespectfully enough, dared to ride a fine mule and, moreover, was wearing a fine dress and was accompanied by a number of servants. As the story has it, the pious local *faqīh* threw the doctor down from the mule, took off his shoe, and severely beat him with it. He did so because the doctor “exceeded the limits of what was allowed to him and by doing this he deprived himself of the protection of the Islamic law and deserved humiliation.” As if this was not enough, the *faqīh*

44 The so-called code of ‘Umar, that is a set of discriminatory regulations named after caliph ‘Umar, but in fact composed long after the caliph’s death, is discussed at length by Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence*, Cambridge: CUP 2011; idem, “Shurūṭ ‘Umar and its Alternatives: the Legal Debate on the Status of the Dhimmīs,” *JSAI* 30 (2005), pp. 170–206; also Mark R. Cohen, “What Was the Pact of ‘Umar? A Literary-Historical Study,” *JSAI* 23 (1999), pp. 100–57.

45 Ibn Abi Uṣaybi’a, *Uyūn* (ed. Cairo), II, pp. 116–7. It is very likely that Saladin’s announcement of 577/1181–2 which restated that the non-Muslims were forbidden to ride horses or mules was his reaction to this particular event. The announcement also stressed that no physician or scribe was exempted from the prohibition; see Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb as-Sulūk li-Ma’rifat Duwal wa-l-Mulūk*, ed. M. Mustafa Ziada and Said A. F. Ashour, Cairo: Maṭba’at Lajnat at-Ta’lif wa-t-Tarjama wa-n-Nashr and Maṭba’at Dār al-Kutub 1956, I/1, p. 77. After all, Saladin tended to support radical theologians, numerous Christian and Jewish doctors in his service notwithstanding. Besides, he knew *shaykh* al-Khūbishānī well and submitted to his influence (see adh-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, XLI, *Ḥawādith wa-Wafayāt 581–590 H.*, pp. 278–82 [*tarjama* of al-Khūbishānī]).

46 Adh-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, XL, *Ḥawādith wa-Wafayāt 571–580 H.*, p. 299 (*tarjama* of Ibn Shū’a); idem, *Tārīkh*, XLI, *Ḥawādith wa-Wafayāt 581–590 H.*, p. 278–82 (*tarjama* of al-Khūbishānī).

also admonished the local ruler that this was the only way for a Muslim to behave. The ignorant ruler politely complied.<sup>47</sup>

Other voices were less subtle, as some authors went much further than promoting radical ways of brave, pious *faqīhs* in their writings. The medical discourse of the 14<sup>th</sup> century underwent much more than that. In the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century a new value, just signaled in a rather primitive way by al-Jawbarī almost a century earlier, now reappeared in a more open and self-confident manner. The biased references to Jewish/*dhimmī* doctors now grew in number and were inserted into various kinds of religious literature, from anti-*dhimmī* texts, to legal/normative treatises, to sermons, to handbooks of prophetic medicine.

Usually voiced by zealous religionists, the passages denouncing Jewish/*dhimmī* doctors had diverse contents. They could involve a warning accusation in al-Jawbarī's style, such as that included in a treatise written in the early 1290-ties by Ghāzī Ibn al-Wāṣitī (d. 1312)<sup>48</sup> and featuring the story of Moses Maimonides confidentially advising al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil never to visit a Jewish doctor, because Jews "are allowed to kill anyone who does not observe the Sabbath."<sup>49</sup> It could be a warning accusation such as that presented by Ibn al-Fuwaṭī (1244–1323), a Baghdadi chronicler, who quoted in his chronicle a text which presented *dhimmī* doctors as dishonest and having no idea of medicine or, in fact, as serial killers.<sup>50</sup> At more or less same time a similar language was used in Cairo by Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 737/1336–7), who in his *Madkhal* inserted a story of an anonymous Jewish doctor murdering his noble Muslim patient.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, after Ibn al-Ḥājj this kind of warning accusation almost disappeared from the medical discourse.<sup>52</sup>

Somehow more popular was the idea that Jews took over the control of medicine from Muslims and did so with some evil intention in mind. One could

47 'Alī Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Khazraǧī, *Kitāb al-'Uqūd al-Lu'lu'īyya fī Tārīkh ad-Dawla ar-Rasūliyya*, 2 vols., Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, I, pp. 68–9.

48 Ghāzī Ibn al-Wāṣitī, *Radd 'alā Ahl adh-Dhimma wa-Man Tabī'ahum*, better known as "An Answer to the *Dhimmi*," transl. by Richard Gottheil, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 41 (1921), pp. 383–457.

49 Gottheil, "Answer," p. 430; the story provoked a contemporary scholar to accuse Ghāzī Ibn al-Wāṣitī of anti-Semitism; see Leon Nemoj, "A Scurrilous Anecdote Concerning Maimonides," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 62/3 (1972), pp. 188–92. The fragment is also mentioned by Eliyahu Ashtor (Strauss), "The Social Isolation of Ahl adh-Dhimma," in: *Études orientales à la mémoire de Paul Hirschler*, ed. O. Komolós, Budapest 1950, p. 16.

50 Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, *Ḥawādith*, pp. 37–40; see above, p. 125.

51 Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥājj Al-'Abdarī, *Al-Madkhal ilā Tanmiyat al-A'māl bi-Taḥsīn an-Niyya*, 4 vols., Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-Miṣriyya bi-l-Azhar 1929, IV, p. 110.

52 It seems to have reappeared only once, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of a Ḥanafite scholar Sinān al-Dīn al-Amūsī known as al-Wā'iz al-Makkī (d. 1591), whose accusations against non-Muslim physicians seem to resemble very much those expressed some 250 years earlier by Ibn al-Ḥājj. As I was not able to consult the original, I have used Strauss's summary of al-Amūsī's text; see Ashtor (Strauss), "Social Isolation," p. 93.

find such suggestions in the above-mentioned treatise by Ghāzī Ibn al-Wāṣitī, according to whom Christians and Jews “had gone out as physicians and as scribes, in order to steal [Muslims’] souls and reaches.”<sup>53</sup> As usual, Ibn al-Ḥājj went much further – in a passionate attempt to warn Muslims about the danger to which they were exposed, he devoted an entire chapter of his *Madkhal* to teaching that non-Muslim physicians conspired to kill the entire Muslim elite.<sup>54</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj denounced the *dhimmi*s as those who deliberately “took over the control of medicine, ophthalmology and accounts in order to harm/destroy Muslims.”<sup>55</sup> Similar words were used some years later by a Shāfi’ī scholar Ibn ad-Durayhim (d. 1361) in his anti-*dhimmi* treatise titled *Manhaj aṣ-Ṣawāb fī Qubḥ Istiktāb Ahl al-Kitāb*: “and I wondered, how Muslims could, despite soundness of their minds and power of their thought, surrender themselves to Jewish doctors and their goods to Christian bureaucrats and thus give power to their enemies over themselves and their riches.”<sup>56</sup>

Interestingly enough, this construct looks quite like a paraphrased version of statements ascribed to Imām ash-Shāfi’ī (d. 204/820) and Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) as quoted in majority of treatises on prophetic medicine (*aṭ-ṭibb an-nabawī*) that were produced in the Mamluk period. Based on the indisputable authority of the two founding fathers of Islamic legal system, these statements were used to indicate that Christians and Jews were, in fact, intruders in medicine and that Muslims should not seek medical advice from Jewish or Christian physicians. Ash-Shāfi’ī, according to whom medicine was one of the most noble fields of knowledge, reportedly lamented about how much of this science had been lost by Muslims, and used to say: “they lost one third of human knowledge and entrusted it to Jews and Christians.” “People of the Book dominated Muslims in medicine” – he was to have concluded.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the authority of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal warned Muslims against the suspected contents of medicaments prescribed by Jewish or Christian doctors. “Medicaments such as pastes and cooked preparations that *ahl al-dhimma* prepare are hateful,” read a wisdom

53 Ghāzī Ibn al-Wāṣitī, in: Gottheil, “Answer,” p. 427.

54 Ibn Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, IV, p. 109.

55 Ibn Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, IV, pp. 113, 115.

56 ‘Alī Ibn Muḥammad Ibn ad-Durayhim, *Manhaj aṣ-Ṣawāb fī Qubḥ Istiktāb Ahl al-Kitāb*, in: *Manhaj aṣ-Ṣawāb fī Qubḥ Istiktāb Ahl al-Kitāb li-sh-Shaykh al-Imām Abī-l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Ibn Muḥammad Ibn ad-Durayhim, wa-yalihi Al-Madhammah fī Istī māl Ahl adh-Dhimma li-sh-Shaykh al-Imām Abī Amāmah Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī Ibn an-Naqqāsh*, ed. by Sayyid Kisrawī, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 2002, p. 200. The fragment (as quoted from the British Library Ms. Or. 9264) is mentioned by Donald S. Richards, “Coptic Bureaucracy under the Mamluks,” in: *Colloque international sur l’histoire du Caire. 27 mars-5 avril 1969*, ed. Ministry of Culture of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization 1972, p. 380, n. 35.

57 Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad adh-Dhahabī, *Aṭ-Ṭibb an-Nabawī*, ed. Aḥmad Rif’at al-Badrāwī, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-‘Ulūm 1990, p. 228.



ascribed to him by adh-Dhahabī.<sup>58</sup> Adh-Dhahabī was, by the way, one of the first authors to use this kind of references in his handbook of *aṭ-ṭibb an-nabawī*.<sup>59</sup> Most of the later authors of this genre followed the pattern set by adh-Dhahabī or some of his predecessors. This was the case of Shams al-Dīn Ibn Muflīḥ, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Ḥanbalī scholar from Damascus, who inserted quotations from Ibn Ḥanbal and Imām ash-Shāfi'ī in the medical chapters of his *Al-Ādāb ash-Shar'īya*,<sup>60</sup> of Ibn Ṭūlūn ad-Dimashqī who did the same in his *Al-Manhal ar-Rawī fī aṭ-Ṭibb an-Nabawī*,<sup>61</sup> and of as-Suyūṭī who repeated this in his *Ṭibb an-Nabī*.<sup>62</sup> Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān as-Sakhāwī (1428–1497), quoted ash-Shāfi'ī in his biography of Abū Zakariyyā an-Nawawī, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Syrian theologian of the Shāfi'ī school.<sup>63</sup>

Warnings against the suspected contents of medicaments prescribed by non-Muslim physicians were substantiated, in a way, by “true life” examples. Kamāl al-Dīn 'Umar Ibn al-'Adīm (1192–1262), a historian and biographer from Aleppo, tells how Ibn Sukra, the Jewish doctor of al-Malik aṣ-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'il Ibn Nūr ad-Dīn Zankī, the ruler of Aleppo, secretly suggested to his noble patient that wine was the only medicament to cure his illness and, moreover, proposed to the ruler that he gets this wine for him without letting anybody know.<sup>64</sup> Sukra al-Ḥalabī, Ibn Sukra's father, passed into history as the physician who cured a concubine of Nūr ad-Dīn Maḥmūd Ibn Zankī of Aleppo by giving her wine to which she was anyhow accustomed.<sup>65</sup> Abū Ja'far Ibn Ḥasday, a Jewish physician

58 Adh-Dhahabī, *Ṭibb*, p. 224.

59 I have had no opportunity to consult any of the two works which preceded adh-Dhahabī's *Aṭ-Ṭibb an-Nabawī*, that is *Ṣaḥīḥ aṭ-Ṭibb an-Nabawī* by Shams ad-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Abī al-Faṭḥ al-Ba'li (d. 709/1309), a Ḥanbalī, a jurist and a *ḥadīth* scholar (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Ḥadīth 2000); and *Al-Aḥkām an-Nabawīyah fī aṣ-Ṣinā'a aṭ-Ṭibbīyah* by 'Alī Ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Ibn Ṭarkhān al-Ḥamawī, known al-Kaḥḥāl Ibn Ṭarkhān (d. 720/1320), a physician-oculist (ed. by Aḥmad 'Abd al-Ghanī Muḥammad an-Najūlī al-Jamal, Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm 2004). For concise descriptions of both texts see Irmeli Perho, *Prophet's Medicine: A Creation of the Muslim Traditionalist Scholars*, Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society 1995, pp. 55–8.

60 Shams al-Dīn Ibn Muflīḥ al-Muqaddasī, *Al-Ādāb al-Shar'īyah*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭ and 'Umar al-Qayyām, 2 vols., Beirut: Mu'assasat ar-Risāla 1999, II, pp. 427–37.

61 Shams al-Dīn Ibn Ṭūlūn ad-Dimashqī, *Al-Manhal ar-Rawī fī aṭ-Ṭibb an-Nabawī*, ed. Zuhayr 'Uthmān al-Ja'id, Beirut: Dār Ibn Zaydūn 1996, pp. 11 and 289.

62 Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *Ṭibb an-Nabī*, transl. by Cyril Elgood, “Tibb-ul-Nabbi or Medicine of the Prophet,” *Osiris* 14 (1962), pp. 126, 127, 129; transl. by Ahmad Thomson, *As-Suyuti's Medicine of the Prophet*, London: Ta-Ha Publishers 1994, pp. 126, 127 and 129.

63 Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān as-Sakhāwī (1428–1497), *Al-Manhal al-'Adhb ar-Rawī fī Tarjamat Quṭb al-Awliyā' an-Nawawī*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 1971, p. 14.

64 Kamāl ad-Dīn 'Umar Ibn al-'Adīm, *Zubdat al-Ḥalab fī Tārīkh Ḥalab*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 1996, p. 379.

65 Al-'Umarī, *Masālik*, IX, pp. 277–8; the information provided by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, whom al-'Umarī quotes, is not so obvious in this respect: Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a speaks of SH-R-Ā-B, which may designate both *sharāb*, or wine, and *shurāb*, or medicinal syrup; 'Uyūn (ed. Beirut),

who had moved from al-Andalus to Fatimid Egypt was a playful alcohol addict who frequented wine-dealers' premises.<sup>66</sup>

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya reminded his readers about the "poison which the Prophet received from Jews in Khaybar," and "the spells which Jews casted on him."<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, the story about Abū Bakr dying of poisoned food which Jews had given him a year before his death was quoted by Ibn al-Athīr (1160–1233),<sup>68</sup> but does not seem to have been circulated by the Mamluk-period authors. However, Badr ad-Dīn al-'Aynī (1360–1453), a Ḥanafī scholar, a Sufi and a historian, quoted a story which, although it generally mocked a Mamluk official's ignorance, should also have made one think twice before asking a Jewish physician for advice. As the story had it, a Jewish doctor prescribed an enema to amīr 'Alam ad-Dīn Arjawān Ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Manṣūrī. When amīr 'Alam ad-Dīn was about to drink it, somebody explained to him what exactly it was and how it was supposed to be applied. Having learned the details, amīr 'Alam ad-Dīn felt deeply humiliated and got furious, so he ordered his mamluks to fetch the Jewish doctor and make him drink the liquid, after which the doctor died next day.<sup>69</sup>

The same can be said of the wisdom of mythical sages which allegedly warned Muslims against the intrusive omnipresence of the Jewish doctors as early as in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Now, many centuries later, this too was "confirmed" by true-life contemporary examples. "Down in Cairo, if a physician is not an old Jewish *shaykh* with his neck bowed and the saliva spilling from his mouth, the Cairene women would not seek an advice from him!" – said a Muslim physician in aṣ-Ṣafadī's (d. 1363) bibliographical dictionary.<sup>70</sup> True, this Muslim physician, once in the service of sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad, could have felt embittered, if only

pp. 637–8. Interestingly enough, Ibn al-Athīr (1160–1223), an Iraqi-Syrian chronicler whose lifetime coincided with that of Ismā'il Ibn Nūr ad-Dīn Zankī and who described the illness and death of the latter, did not say a word about the Jewishness of the doctor: "and when his [i. e. aṣ-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'il's] illness intensified, the doctors prescribed him drinking of wine to cure him..."; Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī at-Tārīkh*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 2003, pp. 106–7.

66 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn* (ed. Beirut), p. 499; Al-'Umarī, *Masālik*, IX, pp. 318–19.

67 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Aṭ-Ṭibb an-Nabawī*, ed. 'Abd al-Majīd Ṭ. al-Ḥalabī, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rafa 1998, pp. 100–103.

68 Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh ar-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif bi-Miṣr, III, p. 419; Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī at-Tārīkh*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 1987, II, p. 267.

69 Badr ad-Dīn Mahmūd Al-'Aynī, *Iqd al-Jumān fī Tārīkh Ahl az-Zamān*, ed. by M.M. Amīn, Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmiyya bi-l-Qāhira 2010, IV, pp. 204–5.

70 The words were reportedly pronounced by Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Nāṣir ad-Dīn (1291–1348), a physician of sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad after a colleague of his (who was aṣ-Ṣafadī himself) had suggested he should try to earn his income by sitting in the pharmacist's shop (*dukkān al-aṭṭār*) in Cairo and attend to patients; aṣ-Ṣafadī, *A'yān*, V, pp. 180–2; repeated by al-'Asqalānī in *Durar*, IV, pp. 190–1; for the English translation of the anecdote see Pormann, "Physician," p. 214.

because after moving from Cairo to Damascus he had to subsist on a rather meager income. But the sense of the “omnipresence” of Jewish physicians in Egypt was reflected also in other texts. A few decades later Ibn al-Ukhūwwa, a Cairene author of the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, lamented in his handbook for the market inspector that “in many towns [in Egypt] there were no physicians other than those from the *ahl adh-dhimma*” and that one could not find Muslims engaged in medical practice.<sup>71</sup> Later authors expressed this kind of thinking, too. As late as in the 16<sup>th</sup> century ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 973/1565) noted that many Muslims, including ‘*ulamā*’ and pious individuals, sought medical advice from *dhimmi* physicians, especially Jews, and complained that occasionally Muslims even asked Jews to help in the circumcision of their sons.<sup>72</sup> More or less at the same time Dāwūd al-Anṭākī (d. 1008/1599), a physician from Syria, maintained that he witnessed a situation in Egypt that the *fakīh*, who was the source of religious sciences, would run to the lowest Jewish physician when it came to medical care.<sup>73</sup>

The above observations mention just a few out of many references to Jewish physicians that can be found in the Arabic historiographical literature of the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. These examples were chosen, somewhat arbitrarily, as they relatively well illustrate features typical for the long process of evolution of the Muslims’ attitude towards Jewish physicians and the discursive shift which reflected this evolution. The change manifested itself differently in works by different authors and in different genres. Nevertheless, one can observe a number of regularities. They can be arranged in two main categories, according to the strategy applied.

1) The strategy of selection. It promoted *absence* and consisted in the author’s failing to recognize eminent Jewish/non-Muslim physicians and their achievements, a measure which might have been a reason behind the insignificant presence, in the writings produced in the mid- and late Mamluk period, of outstanding Jewish individuals who in one way or another distinguished themselves in medicine. Such a feature is particularly visible in some biographical dictionaries written by religious scholars, but also in those parts of chronicles

71 Ibn al-Ukhūwwa, *Kitāb Ma‘ālim al-Qurba fī Aḥkām al-Ḥisba*, ed. Muḥammad Maḥmūd Sha‘bān, Cairo: Al-Hay‘a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Kitāb 1976, p. 254.

72 ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ash-Sha‘rānī, *Lawā‘ih al-Anwār al-Qudsiyya fī Bayān al-‘Uhūd al-Muḥammadiyya*, Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘a al-Maymaniyya 1321/1903–4 (Princeton Library copy), p. 238; Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt. Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books 1982, pp. 283, 285–6.

73 A situation which, as he explained, became a reason behind his decision to practice and teach medicine in Egypt; Dāwūd al-Anṭākī, *Tadhkirat Ūlī al-Albāb wa-al-Jāmi‘ li-al-‘Ajab al-Ujāb*, Cairo: Shirkat Maktaba wa-Maṭba‘a Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awladuhū bi-Miṣr 1925, I, p. 5.

written by such scholars that included obituaries of eminent persons. It should be kept in mind, however, that not all of these works covered their authors' past as well as present; some of them, such as dictionaries written by al-'Asqalānī or as-Sakhāwī, were devoted solely to persons who lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, i. e. who were contemporaries or almost contemporaries of the authors.

2) The narrative strategy. It was more complex and generally consisted in applying *negative propaganda* of various kinds. Or, more specifically, in forging and/or spreading false, overgeneralized and negative stereotypes referring to Jewish doctors (and *dhimmī* doctors in general), as well as in encouraging uncompromising attitude towards them. As can be inferred from pieces of information provided by various texts, this strategy had two main manifestations:

2A) Individual physicians were relatively often linked to a suspicious issue of some sort, such as insincerity of their conversion (they converted for the sake of their career or to save lives) or violation of the code of 'Umar by, for example, accumulating riches or riding a horse/mule and thus breaking away from the zone of inferiority to which they were assigned. In such cases, a pious, righteous, lone *shaykh* bravely defended the honor of Muslims and their religion. From time to time, one can come across a case of a Jewish doctor who murdered his Muslim patient, used wine as medicament or was addicted to drinking. In some cases, God's curse wished upon Jews by the author provided his narrative with a negative overtone. However, the picture was not entirely black – some of those doctors did have achievements and conversion of some was not perceived as dubious; some converts, moreover, made their families follow their steps, while others started to hate their former community and cursed it.

2B) As a group, "Jewish physicians" – very often together with their Christian colleagues – were either blamed for taking medicine away from Muslims and appropriating it or appeared to seriously threaten their Muslim patients, or both. Sometimes they harmed Muslims by their ignorance, at other times they conspired to harm or kill Muslims on purpose. The words of sages such as Ibn Ḥanbal or Imām ash-Shāfi'ī, while lending credence to '*ulamā*'s words, confirmed the intrusive nature of the Jewish (non-Muslim) doctors' presence in the medical domain as well as their evil intentions. They also indicated that seeking medical advice from those doctors was incorrect for Muslims – after all, Jews bewitched and planned to poison prophet Muhammad, and, very much like Christian physicians, they could try to cure Muslims with wine.

These two strategies, while revealing a change of attitude of Muslims towards Jewish or, in fact, non-Muslim physicians, can only be properly understood if seen as an aspect of the profound discursive shift which occurred at the intersection of medical and religious concerns in the Ayyubid period and then developed throughout the Mamluk period. At the same time, this shift needs to be perceived primarily as a reflection of a complex and long-lasting process, which

involved radicalization of Islam and its growing tendency to dominate the entire, multi-faceted cultural capital of the Islamic domains.

As a manifestation of this process, the evolution of attitude of Muslims towards Jewish physicians carried a certain message present in a variety of texts. Despite appearances, however, those texts were not numerous and most of them, if not all, were written by authors who were members of one particular social group, i. e. that of rather radical religious scholars. The identification of authors with religious circles is important, if only because it implies that their voices represented the way of thinking of this particular social group and not that of the entire Muslim community. The authors who were not theologians or religious lawyers by profession (however scanty they were) did not follow the new tendency, which also implies that the change did not involve all of the educated people in the same way. Meaningfully enough, the folk literature such as *1001 Nights* did not reveal any signs of religious bias as far as Jewish physicians were concerned.<sup>74</sup>

Now, what kind of a problem did radical religious scholars have with Jewish physicians? And why did they have it? Clearly enough, from the point of view of those scholars, the presence and activity of Jewish physicians (as well as of their Christian colleagues) in the Islamic society was an unwelcomed development. In their own words, the essence of the problem consisted in those physicians' numerical advantage over Muslim practitioners as well as in the good reputation they enjoyed. This led to their popularity among Muslim patients and, at the same time, contributed to the unpopularity of Muslim physicians. Overwhelmed with the sense of mission of Islamizing the entire space of Dār al-Islām, the religious scholars saw that Jewish physicians unacceptably occupied a fragment of this space.<sup>75</sup> The authors of such texts clearly meant to cleanse Dār al-Islām from alien elements and to make it Muslims' own.

Seen from this perspective, the presumed strategy of ignoring biographies of eminent Jewish physicians can be perceived as a manifestation of the Islamic theologians' lack of interest in, if not rejection of, Jews as non-Muslims who would have otherwise shared with Muslims the merit of contributing to the Islamic culture. Such an approach, if it indeed occurred, contributed to diminishing the presence of the eminent Jewish doctors in the consciousness and collective memory of the Muslim community, and thus in the broadly understood cultural domain. The absence of eminent Jewish/non-Muslim doctors (and maybe also of other professionals?) may have served to prove that the elite of the Arabic-Islamic world was, and had been, Islamic.

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74 See, for example, "Tale of the Jewish Doctor" of the Hunchback cycle.

75 See Lewicka, "Medicine for Muslims?," pp. 87–8; idem, "Did Ibn al-Ḥājj Copy from Cato?," p. 234.

However, insignificant presence of outstanding Jewish physicians in the writings produced in the late Mamluk period might also have been caused by other reasons – at least as far the physicians of this particular period are concerned. As observed elsewhere,<sup>76</sup> in the Mamluk period the importance attached to various kinds of knowledge shifted, so that the Islamic religious education and skill started to count above all else. One of the consequences of this process was that the erudite physician of earlier periods was transformed into the erudite religious scholar or *fakīh* who also studied medicine.<sup>77</sup> As theoretical medical education became the domain of the ‘*ulamā*’, medical practice was left to professionals who were not the ‘*ulamā*’ – such as Christians and Jews.<sup>78</sup> In other words, Jews and Christians could be “ordinary” medical practitioners but, as non-Muslims, had little chance to become distinguished, learned physicians, famous for their books, knowledge or high positions at the rulers’ courts – all the more so that the legal circumstances were becoming less and less favorable for them.<sup>79</sup> As generally neither Jewish nor Christian physicians were welcomed among the elite anymore, a path to ambitious goals and success almost invariably included conversion. And some chose to change their faith rather than give up career.<sup>80</sup> All this may imply that the authors of the biographical dictionaries of the late-Mamluk period did not necessarily ignore famous and distinguished Jewish/non-Muslim physicians. Rather, the intellectual elite did not include non-Muslims anymore. In other words, non-Muslim physicians could by “no means

76 See Lewicka, “Medicine for Muslims?,” pp. 89–92.

77 Behrens-Abouseif, “Image,” p. 341.

78 The medical craft was thus deprived of the scholarly ground on which it once flourished, while the practicing physicians became “mere” craftsmen; see Behrens-Abouseif, “Image,” p. 341.

79 Cf., for example, the discriminative provision included in the *waqfiya* for Qalāwūn’s hospital of 1286 and the two decrees prohibiting Christians and Jews to practice medicine – of which one was issued in 1354 and the other in 1448–9; for more details see Lewicka, “Medicine for Muslims?,” pp. 97–9 and the references therein.

80 This was, most probably, the case of Ibn al-‘Afif who, while being one of the Jewish physicians of sultan al-Ashraf Barsbāy (825–842/1422–1438), converted to Islam because conversion was apparently required for the position of the chief physician of the Qalāwūn’s hospital in Cairo. Al-Ashraf Barsbāy had two Jewish physicians – Ibn al-‘Afif and Khidr Zayn ad-Dīn. In 1438 both were executed for being unable to cure Barsbāy; the sultan’s violent decision had nothing to do with any of the two doctors’ religious affiliation; see al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, VII, pp. 353–6 and Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *An-Nujūm az-Zāhira fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya 1992, XIV, pp. 280–2; Ibn Iyās, *Badā‘i’ az-Zuhūr fī Waqā‘i’ ad-Duhūr*, ed. by M. Mostafa, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag 1972, II, p. 185; also Mayerhof, “Mediaeval Jewish Physicians,” p. 458; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “Fatḥ Allāh and Abū Zakariyya: Physicians under the Mamluks,” *Supplément aux AI* 10, Cairo: IFAO 1987, p. 16; see also Paulina B. Lewicka, Gad Freudenthal, “Medicine: The reception and practice of rationalist medicine and thought in medieval Jewish communities, east and west”, in: Josef Meri (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Muslim-Jewish Relations*, New York: Routledge 2016, pp. 95–114.

belong to the elite selected in biographical encyclopedias for the simple reason that this elite was essentially orthodox Islamic.”<sup>81</sup>

Due to the unclear and puzzling historical evidence, hypotheses regarding the reasons behind presence or absence of Jewish physicians’ biographies in the dictionaries have to remain rather vague, for the time being at least. However, this reservation does not necessarily have to apply to the problem of false, over-generalized and negative stereotypes of Jewish/non-Muslim doctors that appeared in theologians’ writings. Popularized and promoted in oral and written texts, most probably transmitted in private conversations and less private discussions, repeated at home in the form of biased gossips, they discouraged members of the community from using services of Jewish physicians. Or, at least, they were meant to discourage. Moreover, from time to time Mamluk rulers issued legislation forbidding Jews and Christian to practice medicine, which move not only sanctioned the call of the ‘*ulamā*’, but also strengthened the impression, however vague, that there was something bad about Jewish/Christian doctors.<sup>82</sup>

And yet, despite the omnipresence and influence of men of religion, and despite the role they played in the culture-making process in the post-Fatimid Near East, the community did not respond with general enthusiasm. Against all odds, Jewish doctors did not disappear from the medical culture. Moreover, some texts present them as actually dominating the domain of medical practice in Dār al-Islām, while their Muslim patients – a number of Ayyubid and Mamluk sultans included – saw nothing wrong in using their services. This is an interesting development, all the more so if we consider Dan Sperber’s views regarding the epidemiological nature of the process by which ideas or mental representations spread through society. According to Sperber, some representations spread better than others, and are more widely distributed, because human cognitions and communicative abilities work better on some ideas than on others. The ideas that tend to be favored in this way are those which make intuitive sense. But there are also other factors – how well a new idea sits with an existing belief system, how well it fits in with what people have already observed or whether the source of the new idea is trusted or authoritative.<sup>83</sup>

81 Behrens-Abouseif, “Image,” loc.cit. As for those, who served at the courts of the Mamluk sultans we know – apart from Khiḍr Zayn ad-Dīn and Ibn al-‘Afif who were employed by al-Ashraf Barsbāy (see above, n. 80, and the references therein) – also the names of two Jewish physicians of an-Nāṣir Muḥammad: as-Sadīd ad-Dumyāṭī and Faraj Allāh Ibn Saghīr. The latter two were discussed in detail by Amir Mazor, “Jewish Court Physicians,” pp. 43–54.

82 See above, p. 141, n. 79.

83 Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: a Naturalistic Approach*, Oxford: Blackwell 1996. Discussed in: Valerie A. Curtis, “Dirt, disgust and disease: a natural history of hygiene,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 61(8) (2007), pp. 660–4.

When applied to the situation of Jewish medical practitioners in the Ayyubid and Mamluk Near East, Sperber's findings make one conclude that the change of attitude towards the religious Other, even if it affected a majority of Muslims, did not necessarily translate into applying religious preferences to the choice of the doctor. Apparently, not all Muslims were vulnerable to all the ideas spread by the religionists. In this case, the intuition, experience and habit seemed to have taken the precedence over the power of religious authority.





## **Earthquake, Famine, and Plague in Early Thirteenth-Century Egypt: Muslim and Jewish Sources**

The turn of the thirteenth century witnessed a series of crippling natural disasters in Egypt and the Levant. Each of these left a considerable impact on the local population, altering urban demography for decades to come. The toll in each case on human lives, unemployment, resettlement, and the strain on charitable resources was considerable and called for decisive action on the part of the local leadership. In addition to the physical casualties and economic toll suffered along with the rest of the population due to the environmental calamities, there are indications that the disasters uniquely impacted religious minorities as a result of their vulnerable status. As one of the protected minorities for which we have relatively rich documentation through the papers of the Cairo Genizah, Egyptian Jews experienced both occasional exploitation (both official and unofficial) and vital protection by members of the ruling majority.

The natural and social upheavals of those years is of major importance for a reconstruction of daily life in Ayyubid Egypt and forms a critical backdrop to transformations that unfolded in Egypt's Jewish population in the midst of severe crisis. The pages that follow will assess the extent and range of the environmental and human crises facing the Egyptian population as a whole, and its Jewish community in particular, in the early years of the thirteenth century. For the early period, much valuable evidence derives from the first-hand report penned by the Muslim polymath and physician, 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī (d. 1231), who sojourned in Cairo during the troubled years of massive earthquake and famine at the dawn of the thirteenth century. Fragmentary reports from the Cairo Genizah papers are likewise crucial first-hand documentation for the impact of the catastrophe on the country as a whole and on its Jewish community.

The second half of this essay examines additional episodes of plague and economic depression in Egypt during the second and third decades of the thirteenth century. Genizah documents from these years paint a variegated picture of a Jewish community in crisis due to the spread of plague and the severity of the ensuing economic situation, each of which affected all strata of society to differing degrees. This period marks an intensification of Jewish welfare work to

meet the needs of the indigent, including the personal attention of the head of the Jews to the smallest minutia of social services within the community. After the crisis reached its peak, the Jewish communal establishment sought creative new methods to keep the worst effects of economic depression at bay during future crises.

## 1200–1202: The Environmental Calamity and its Human Toll

The most severe of the natural disasters struck between 1200 and 1202, when a combination of earthquakes, famine, and plague overwhelmed Lower Egypt and the Levant, ultimately diminishing the local population to half its former size.<sup>1</sup> The situation was compounded by the general impoverishment in Lower Egypt during the period preceding the calamities.<sup>2</sup> The coincidence of earthquakes of unprecedented dimensions and consecutive years of minimal rainfall was to have tragic consequences for the inhabitants of the Nile. A period of slow growth did eventually commence but was halted by another onslaught of famine and plague, albeit less severe than the first, between 1216 and 1218, and again during the 1230s. As a result of these catastrophes, many residents fled their homes and the plague in search of safe haven and some form of government-sponsored relief. In the Jewish community, these episodes ultimately led to a large-scale population shift from Fustat to Cairo, perhaps in expectation of better living conditions and medical care, though Cairo was not without its own troubles in these precarious times.<sup>3</sup>

1 An ancient Greek proverb – “first famine, then plague” – reflects the fact that the two frequently came in tandem. See Samuel Cohn, *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 211, n. 21.

2 We learn from a letter sent from a Jewish physician in Alexandria to a wealthy businessman in Fustat during the late twelfth century that the dire situation in the port city had begun to erode the resources of the rich along with the poor. He alluded to an imposition of seven dinars on the Jewish community of that city which, though in better times was not an inordinate amount, was at that time beyond the capacity of the impoverished Jews. See TS 20.133r, ll. 15–22, esp. ll. 21–22 (*wa-qaḏ halaka al-mastūr wa’l-ša’lūk*: “rich and poor [alike] are perishing”), and see also v, ll. 14–18. The letter was published and translated into Hebrew by Joel Kraemer, “Four Geniza Letters Concerning Maimonides” (Hebrew), in *Mas’at Moshe: Studies in Jewish and Islamic Culture Presented to Moshe Gil*, Ezra Fleischer et al. ed. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1998), pp. 394–398. For S. D. Goitein’s tentative dating of this letter to ca. 1200, see idem, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–1988), vol. I, p. 79, and vol. II, p. 393. As Kraemer has argued, the letter should be dated closer to ca. 1170. See idem, “Four Geniza Letters Concerning Maimonides,” p. 395. The translation of these lines offered here follows Goitein’s rendering, but note Kraemer’s reservations that it refers not to rich and poor but to different strata of the poor, *ibid.*, p. 398, n. 83.

3 It is interesting to recall in this context the observation of Benjamin of Tudela that the Jews of

Contemporaneous accounts depict the human cost of years of severe drought, prolonged famine and plague from a dangerously low Nile, and dire levels of impoverishment throughout the population. Genizah documents from this period suggest that a majority of Fustat Jews, about whom our information is most extensive, relied on welfare doles during the worst periods of famine, while a quarter of the community benefitted on average from public charity during the first half of the century.<sup>4</sup> Conditions in Cairo appear to have been less severe than in Fustat, presumably due to its location at the political heart of the realm, whereas those without the means to move stayed behind in an increasingly depleted city.<sup>5</sup> Although the population of Fustat, and Egypt more generally, stabilized somewhat by the fourteenth century, it did not see any substantial improvement in its economic condition until the early Ottoman period.<sup>6</sup>

Even before the devastation of the early thirteenth century, Egypt was no stranger to drought and its related ills, as the prolonged famine of 1063–1073 aptly attests.<sup>7</sup> Egypt was dependent on good rainfall for a flooding of the Nile to secure the health of agricultural growth for the following year. The absence of sufficient rainfall led to disastrous consequences in food supply and was inevitably followed by periods of plague and increased impoverishment.<sup>8</sup> This was precisely the situation in 1200–1202 as contemporary accounts reveal.<sup>9</sup> The

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Cairo (called *Ṣoʿan*) in the 1160s were numerous and known to be exceedingly wealthy. See Marcus Nathan Adler ed. and tr., *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), p. 63 (Hebrew), and p. 71 (English).

- 4 The shift away from Jewish Fustat by the middle of the thirteenth century is reflected in the Genizah by a decrease in the overall flow of documents, marking the end of what S. D. Goitein called the classical Genizah period. For Goitein's assessment of the evidence, see idem, "Evidence on the Muslim Poll Tax from non-Muslim Sources: A Geniza Study," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6 (1963): 279, and "The Social Services of the Jewish Community as Reflected in the Cairo Geniza Records," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 26 (1964): 12, 78, and see *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, pp. 141–142.
- 5 See the remarks of Mark Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 31.
- 6 For documents reflecting the needs of the poor and the role of the communal leadership in alleviating them in the fourteenth century, see Goitein, "The Twilight of the Maimonidean Dynasty: The Character and Communal Activity of R. Joshua Nagid" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 54 (1985): 104–167. The documents were translated into English by Mark Cohen, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages: An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 191–198.
- 7 Egypt suffered from multiple smaller famines during the eleventh and twelfth centuries but none as devastating as this ten-year span. It should be noted that the horrific fire that destroyed much of Fustat in 1168 (at the hands of a Fatimid minister named *Shāwar*) did not have the same ripple effect on society and, as a result, the city recovered much faster compared with the prolonged effects of natural disasters.
- 8 On the effects of the Nile on famine and its domino effect, see Stanley Lane-Pool, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co., 1936), pp. 135, 215–216.
- 9 This is attested by 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī in his account of his stay in Egypt, *Kitāb al-ifādah*

famine and plague of these years were compounded by a series of massive earthquakes that struck Lower Egypt and the Levant, creating ripple effects throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East between June of 1201 and May of 1202. Although no casualty figures are given in contemporary documents, later Arab chroniclers estimated the death toll at 1,100,000, which, if even remotely correct, would constitute the largest death-toll for any earthquake in recorded history.<sup>10</sup> This figure most likely combined the estimated loss of life from the effects of the famine, plague, and earthquakes that together made this one of the most horrific periods in Egyptian history.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the human devastation should be reckoned the extensive property damage. A deed of transfer dating to the end of the first decade of the thirteenth century indicates that much property in Fustat remained uninhabited and in ruins. Much land, including quite a few buildings that had been leveled from the earthquakes, could be purchased for a fraction of the cost of a single home in ordinary times.<sup>12</sup> For property that had remained intact, sale and rental prices remained fairly stable although a sizeable number of housing units were left vacant.<sup>13</sup> Those who did remain were much shaken by the experience. A letter from an Egyptian trader in India or Yemen to his wife in Fustat dating to the early thirteenth century testifies to the fact that nothing comparable in intensity or impact had struck Egypt in recent memory. The husband expressed relief “that you are well and healthy and that you have escaped from those great terrors, the likes of which have not been experienced for many generations.”<sup>14</sup>

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*wa'l-i'tibār*, in the edition and translation of Kamal Hafuth Zand et al., *The Eastern Key* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1965), pp. 250–254.

- 10 See the report by Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Al-'Abar fī khabar man ghabar*, ed. Salāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Kuwait: n.p., 1963), vol. IV, pp. 295–296. Dhahabī (ibid., p. 296) described it as “the greatest earthquake, affecting most of the world” (*al-zalzalah al-'uzmā allatī 'ammat akthar al-dunyā*). Ibn al-Athīr, for his part, was more specific, identifying part of Iraq, the entire Ḥijāz, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Lybia, Lebanon, and even parts of Byzantium as being hard-hit, if not completely demolished, by the earthquakes. See his *Al-Kāmil fī'l-ta'rīkh*, ed. 'Umar Tadmuri (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1997), vol. X, p. 181.
- 11 For an analysis of the earthquakes that hit the Levant and Egypt since antiquity, including those of 1201–1202, see M. R. Sbeinati et al., “The Historical Earthquakes of Syria: An Analysis of Large and Moderate Earthquakes from 1365 B.C. to 1900 A.D.,” *Annals of Geophysics* 48 (2005): esp. 389–391.
- 12 See the document detailed by D. S. Richards, “Arabic Documents from the Karaite Community in Cairo,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 15 (1972): 107–108, no. 5, tentatively dated 1209.
- 13 See TS Box K 15.54, published by Moshe Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), pp. 378–382, no. 101. Cf. also Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, pp. 281, 294–296.
- 14 ENA 2739.16, tr. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 222. The letter was originally listed by Goitein as *India Book*, no. 176. According to the new list of the “India Book” documents in the edition produced by Mordechai Friedman, the letter is currently listed as VII.60. See Goitein and Friedman, *India Book I*:

Of the Arab chroniclers who described the events of 1201–1202, only one of them, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, was a personal witness to the devastation of those years during his visit to Cairo at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> While a good measure of caution is required in reading ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s depictions of his contemporaries, his first-hand account of the natural disasters of these years is invaluable for our reconstruction of the state of utter desperation that prevailed throughout the region.<sup>16</sup> The low Nile caused the price of wheat to rise to as much as five dinars for a single *irdabb*,<sup>17</sup> while the same amount of beans and barley sold for four to six dinars.<sup>18</sup>

While all were no doubt profoundly affected by the crisis, the scarcity of food hit the poor with particular ferocity. According to ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, without any reserves or other resources, the poor took to eating “carrion, corpses, dogs, and the excrement and the filth of animals.”<sup>19</sup> Eventually, the desperation caused by the famine reached the point at which many of the poor turned to cannibalism, including resorting to kidnapping and murder in order to obtain meat. It was not for long, however, that the horror of these developments was confined to the poor. Nor did they remain for long an object of disbelief in the eyes of the population at large.

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*Joseph Lebdi, Prominent India Trader – Cairo Geniza Documents* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2009), p. 348. The seventh volume currently awaits publication. See also Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (“*India Book*”) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), pp. xxiv and 848. A similar assessment to that of ENA 2739.16 was made by “one of the oldest men in Damascus” regarding the massive earthquake that struck the following year on the 26th of Ša‘bān, 598 (May 21, 1202). This elderly witness attested that he had never experienced an earthquake of such magnitude in his lifetime. For the Damascene letter, transcribed by ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī in his *Kitāb al-ifadah wa’l-i’tibar*, see Zand et al. ed. and tr., *The Eastern Key*, pp. 270–272.

15 Three chroniclers in particular deserve mention as important for this period: Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1234) in his *Kāmil fī’l-ta’rīkh*, Sibṭ ibn al-Jauzī (d. 1256) in his *Mir’āt al-zamān*, and Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Wāṣil (d. 1298) in his *Mufarrij al-kurūb fī aḳbār banī ayyūb*. None of these, however, had themselves personally witnessed the events of these years in Egypt. On the general merits of these three chroniclers for our period, and particularly for the history of Egypt, see Stephen Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: The Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193–1260* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), pp. 394–397.

16 In spite of their utter horror, we are bound to believe that much of what he recorded as having personally witnessed did in fact occur. There is reason to doubt ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s credibility in other areas, however, as in his prickly assessment of a number of his contemporaries, evident in some of his other writings. See S. M. Stern, “A Collection of Treatises by ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī,” *Islamic Studies* 1 (1962): 59–61, 64, 66, 67.

17 An *irdabb* is a dry measure, roughly seventy kilograms in weight. Wheat was traded in *irdabb*, worth approximately two and a quarter *dīnār* in ordinary times. See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, p. 437, n. 96.

18 See ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s report in the *Ifadah wa’l-i’tibar*, ed. and tr. Zand et al., *The Eastern Key*, p. 254, and see also *ibid.*, p. 206, on the low Nile.

19 See *ibid.*, pp. 222–223.

When the poor people began<sup>20</sup> to eat human flesh, the horror and astonishment caused by these extraordinary meals were such that the crimes became the subject of all conversation, and they never tired of this subject. But subsequently they accustomed themselves to such things, and conceived quite a taste for these detestable foods, and saw men make it their ordinary nourishment, to eat as a treat, and to make reserves of it. They devised various ways of preparing this meat and, its use being once introduced, it propagated in the provinces so that there was no part of Egypt where one did not see examples of it. It no more caused surprise; the horror they had had to begin with, entirely vanished. They spoke of it and heard it spoken of as a thing indifferent and ordinary.<sup>21</sup>

As ‘Abd al-Laṭīf confirmed with examples later in this chapter, some of the wealthy succumbed to cannibalism along with the poor.<sup>22</sup> Women and children became particularly vulnerable to attacks and, as the passage suggests, both the murders and the meals of human flesh were perceived for a time as *de rigueur*.<sup>23</sup> Eating one’s own loved ones was felt by many to be a greater mercy to the deceased than to have them eaten by strangers.<sup>24</sup> Despite a vigorous effort by the authorities to punish those committing these atrocities,<sup>25</sup> they became commonplace throughout Egypt and even beyond until the early months of 598/1201,<sup>26</sup> when a modest inundation of the Nile combined with a sharp decrease in the population to make cannibalism less and less the norm.<sup>27</sup>

20 Bodl. MS Pococke 230 (printed by Zand et al. p. 224) reads *nashshama*, although *nassama* is clearly the preferred and intended reading. Due to multiple errors such as this in the manuscript, Lutz Richter-Bernburg recently argued against the notion that this manuscript is an authentic autograph of ‘Abd al-Laṭīf. See idem, “Past Glory and Present Ignorance – ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġdādi on ‘Ayyūbid Egypt,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, ed. U. Vermeulen K. D’Hulster (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2007), vol. V, p. 350, n. 3. The English translation of Zand et al. has also been subjected to critique by R. B. Serjeant in his review in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29 (1966): 378–379, in comparison with the classic French translation (and historical notes) by Silvestre de Sacy, *Relation de l’Égypte* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, chez Dreuttel et Wurtz, 1810).

21 Zand et al., *Eastern Key*, pp. 224–225.

22 See *ibid.*, pp. 228, 234.

23 See *ibid.*, pp. 228–230; 224–226; 232–234.

24 ‘Abd al-Laṭīf related a story told him by “one whom I trust” that a woman was observed “who had in her arms a dead body swollen and corrupt, and that this woman ate of the flesh of the thighs of this corpse. Being reproached with the horror of such an action, she replied that the corpse was that of her husband. Nothing was more ordinary than to hear the eater saying he was eating his son, or his wife, or some other near relative. An old woman was seen to eat a small child, in excuse saying it was the son of her daughter and not a strange child, and that it was better that it should be eaten by her than by another.” See *ibid.*, pp. 236–239.

25 This included the burning of the perpetrators of the crime, which was often followed by the eating of the burnt flesh of the criminals. See *ibid.*, pp. 224–226, 228.

26 The first of Muḥarram, 598 A.H., corresponds to early January, 1201 C.E.

27 See *ibid.*, pp. 238 and 254, but see also p. 264, an account of an old Jewish physician in Fustat, known curiously in the narrative as “the Jew of Fustat” (*yahūd miṣr*), who was attacked in the hopes of obtaining his flesh for food by a formerly respectable individual and regular patient

While ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s detailed report furnishes the only eye-witness account of these terrifying events from the literary sources of the period, we do possess two other contemporaneous accounts, both of which were preserved in the Cairo Genizah.<sup>28</sup> The first of these, a fragment of what must have been a Hebrew chronicle of the horrific events by a learned Egyptian Jew, adds some interesting details of the economic devastation to what we learn from ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s account.

The inhabitants [of Egypt lived in times of plenty until] “the days of evil”<sup>29</sup> arrived with the onset of the year 1513, according to [the era of] documents.<sup>30</sup> The Nile had not risen and the famine began in the beginning of the year 1512, growing very heavy, “and the land of Egypt languished.”<sup>31</sup> In spite of all this, war raged between the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan. The suffering became so great<sup>32</sup> that one measure of wheat that had formerly sold for a single *dinar* now sold for ten *dinarin*. A majority of craftsmen were without work, merchants sad idle, while [the land]<sup>33</sup> perished...<sup>34</sup>

The chronicler<sup>35</sup> interrupted his account of the prolonged famine with the ironic observation that two years of agricultural and commercial depression in Egypt

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of the physician. Such cannibalistic attacks on physicians visiting the sick were not uncommon at this time. See *ibid.*, pp. 230–232.

28 The only other chronicler of the early thirteenth century to include a lengthy description of these horrors was Sibṭ ibn al-Jauzī, although his account was clearly based on the observations of ‘Abd al-Laṭīf. See Ibn al-Jauzī, *Mir’at al-zamān fī ta’rīk al-a’yān*, ed. Yūsuf ibn Qiz’ūghlī (Ḥaydar Ābād al-Dakn: Maṭba‘at Majlis Dā’irat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Uthmāniyah, 1951–1952), vol. VIII, pp. 477–479. Ibn al-Jauzī went beyond his source, however, in accounting for this mass suffering by pointing to the religious laxity and negligence of the populace. See *ibid.*, p. 479. Ibn al-Athīr and ibn Wāṣil both gave much more abbreviated accounts of the events of this period, the latter not even taking note of the earthquakes. For the former, see *Al-Kāmil fī l-ta’rīk*, ed. Tadmurī, vol. X, p. 181; for the latter, see *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, ed. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Jāmi‘at Fu‘ād al-Awwal, 1953–1977), vol. III, p. 127.

29 The phrase, *asher hig’ū yeme ha-ra’ah ‘u-va’ah shenat...*, echoes Eccl. 12:1, leading to my choice to fill in the preceding *lacuna* with ‘ad, “until.”

30 1513, according to the Seleucid “era of documents” (*shetarot*), corresponds to 1201–1202 CE.

31 This phrase, together with the preceding one, was taken from the biblical description of the famine in Egypt during the days of Joseph, Gen. 47:13.

32 See Job 2:13.

33 My choice of “the land” (*ha-areṣ*) to fill the *lacuna* is based on the fact that the number and gender of the last verb in the litany switch from plural masculine to singular feminine (ll. 11–13: *ve-shavtu ... u-vaṭlu ... ve-khaltah ...*). An alternative would be “the community” (*ha-qehilah*), although the passage in question, albeit fragmentary, appears more concerned to describe Egyptian affairs than the Jewish community in particular.

34 MS Albert Wolff 22 (Dresden), published by David Kaufmann, “Beiträge zur Geschichte Ägyptens aus jüdischen Quellen,” *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 51 (1897): 448.

35 Kaufmann, followed by Shaul Shaked, *Tentative Bibliography of Geniza Documents* (Paris: Mouton, 1964), p. 247, believed the fragment to be a letter or a draft of a letter, although both



could not deter the Ayyubid Sultan, al-Malik al-ʿĀdil, known in Arabic chronicles as *saif al-dīn* (“sword of the faith”) and in those of the Latin west as Saphadin, from carrying out his military campaign for the strategic city of Damascus.<sup>36</sup> To the troubled inhabitants of Egypt, such political and military exploits for the unity of the empire were utterly incomprehensible, only adding to the crushing burden of the population. Later Arab chroniclers assert that al-ʿĀdil provided for the poor of Egypt during the period of 1199–1200, before departing for his campaign in Syria later in 1200.<sup>37</sup>

The selective reference in the Genizah chronicle to the heavy burdens experienced by craftsmen and merchants, as opposed to the more immediate plight of farmers and laborers, may be explained as a reflection of the author’s economic perspective as a member of the largely urban Jewish community. The occupations of Egyptian Jews in this period often involved agricultural and farm-based products, such as wine, cheese, silk, and sugar candy, although not typically in the capacity of growers.<sup>38</sup> The steep rise in the price of wheat echoes the observations

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the language and style indicate that it must have been part of a longer chronicle. This was also the view taken by Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, p. 383, n. 1.

- 36 The “land of Canaan” in the chronicle is a Hebrew substitution for Syro-Palestine, designated *al-shām* in Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic sources alike. See W. Bacher, “Scham (שחם) als Name Palastinas,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 18 (1906): 564–565. Ayyubid military campaigns in Syria were frequent during this period. For the years under consideration, see Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, pp. 120–122.
- 37 See the remarks of Yaacov Lev, “Saladin’s Economic Policies and the Economy of Ayyubid Egypt,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, ed. U. Vermeulen K. D’Hulster (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2007), vol. V, pp. 344–345, and n. 82. Lev argued that al-ʿĀdil’s move to leave Egypt for Syria at this time “was a conscious decision dictated primarily by the wish to protect his army from the impending famine” (ibid., p. 345). Al-ʿĀdil left his son, al-Kāmil (d. 1238), as successor in Egypt in his place, but no similar policy of bread or grain distribution was known to have been pursued by the latter.
- 38 Given the stigma attached to wine-making in the Muslim world, its production was frequently conducted in private homes, as is testified by a variety of Genizah documents. See Goitein’s remarks in “A Letter to Maimonides on Donations and New Information on His Descendants, the Negidim” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 34 (1965): 243. A. L. Motzkin, “Elijah ben Zechariah, A Member of Abraham Maimuni’s Court: A Geniza Portrait,” *Revue des études juives* 128 (1969): 345–346, and idem, “A Thirteenth-Century Jewish Teacher in Cairo,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 21 (1970): 54. Both the production and trade of cheese was common among Egyptian Jews. A legal query sent to Abraham Maimonides preserved in a Genizah fragment (without the answer) concerns the milking of cows on the sabbath. See TS 13 J 9.10, published and translated into Hebrew by Shim’on Shtober, “Questions Posed to R. Abraham Maimonides: New Material from the Genizah” (Hebrew), *Shenaton ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri* 14–15 (1988–1989): 249–251, and see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. I, p. 124, and vol. V, p. 487. The silk trade had been among the most lucrative in the second half of the eleventh century and throughout the twelfth, when the India trade was a staple of the Egyptian middle class, including a smaller but not insignificant number of Jews. The silk trade became less common in the thirteenth century with the decline of the India trade among members of the middle class, being replaced in large part by trade in sugar candy and related products. See TS 16.200, dated 1225,

of ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, a hint of the scarcity of food and occasional hoarding of the times, something not unknown in Egypt during periods of particular distress.<sup>39</sup>

## 1200–1202: Impact on Minority Communities

If the natural devastation of these years hit all sectors of society without exception, the population of protected religious minorities (*dhimmīs*) was even more severely affected by additional political and social factors in the country. Even before the autumn of 1200, the Ayyubid administration pursued a heavy-handed policy of taxation upon its *dhimmī* communities. A study of official tax policy during the Ayyubid period suggests that, soon after its rise to power, the regime relied on a lenient Shāfi‘ī position permitting taxation of even the poorest and most vulnerable members of society.<sup>40</sup> Given the fact that the Ayyubids were known to have taxed minors, the elderly, and the infirm,<sup>41</sup> there is reason to suspect that they relied more on self-interest than on Shāfi‘ī doctrine. It may nevertheless have been pursued with the blessing of the jurists, much as Saladin had earlier abolished Fatimid tax policy not in keeping with religious law.<sup>42</sup> There is, however, no question that in tax policy the Ayyubids squeezed the *dhimmī*

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and see Goitein, “The Exchange Rate of Gold and Silver Money in Fatimid and Ayyubid Times,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965): 34, no. 74, and Motzkin, “Elijah ben Zechariah,” p. 345. See also MS Frankfurt a. M., now lost but published by J. Horovitz with a German translation, “Ein arabischer Brief an R. Chananel,” *Zeitschrift für hebräische Bibliographie* 4 (1900): 155–157, and reproduced with a Hebrew translation by Goitein, “R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge, Son of Samuel ha-Nadiv, Brother-in-Law of Maimonides” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 50 (1981): 379–382. For an overview of the India trade of the eleventh and twelfth (and, to a lesser extent, the first half of the thirteenth) centuries, see Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, pp. 3–25.

39 See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. I, p. 368.

40 See Eli Alshech, “Islamic Law, Practice, and Legal Doctrine,” *Islamic Law and Society* 10 (2003): 348–375. The reality of Islamic tax policy in general, without specific reference to the Ayyubids or Shāfi‘ī doctrine, was discussed by Goitein, “Evidence on the Muslim Poll Tax from Non-Muslim Sources,” 278–295, reprinted with slight modifications and additions in *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, pp. 380–394. Alshech pursued Goitein’s argument that Shāfi‘ī legal theory played a part in this transformation with rich documentation.

41 See, e.g., TS Arabic Box 30.163r (for taxation of a minor), and TS 12.3 (for taxation of the old and infirm).

42 The most significant of these changes in 1171 was the abolition of the customs taxes (*al-mukūs*) and the institution of greater economic freedom of trade. See the description of these changes by Lev, “Saladin’s Economic Policies and the Economy of Ayyubid Egypt,” pp. 325–334. Numerous jurists and members of the ‘*ulāmā*’ were employed by Saladin, both out of religious piety and political interests. See *ibid.*, pp. 335–336. It is worth noting, however, that in spite of his pious gestures in the elimination of prohibited taxes, Saladin pursued vigorous policies of economic exploitation of the *dhimmī* population. See *ibid.*, pp. 330–331, and *idem*, *Saladin in Egypt*, pp. 187–190.

population for revenue well beyond its means. Though the poll-tax (*jizyah*) of the indigent could be deferred, at most until the beginning of the next Muslim year, it could never be defaulted altogether.<sup>43</sup>

In difficult times, the *dhimmi* population could likewise be singled out and exploited for additional funds for which there was no recourse. In a Genizah letter dating from the turn of the thirteenth century or the period immediately preceding, we learn of a special tax levied by the Ayyubid sultan exclusively on the Jewish community, perhaps in anticipation of the impending famine.<sup>44</sup> The imposition was perceived as a heavy burden during a time in which all strata of society, rich and poor alike, were already struggling.<sup>45</sup> Such sudden seizures on the part of the government were not unknown in Egypt during times of famine and severe shortage. During particularly difficult times, the government raided private storehouses of grain and other provisions at will. One poignant letter describes how the government, described as the “wicked Haman,” seized a private Jewish storehouse of wheat and wine, among other supplies. The writer of the letter complained that, while the government raided the warehouses belonging to Muslims, Christians, and Samaritans as well, the Jews suffered the greatest losses and were left destitute as a result.<sup>46</sup>

Another Genizah document provides additional clues both on the sense of despair that beset the population in the initial period of famine and on the perception of vulnerability on the part of the Jewish community in particular. The source, a fragment of a letter from Alexandria from the autumn of 1200, is the earliest documentary evidence currently known on the scarcity and hardship that ensued. The writer described the widespread unrest in the port city as a result of low wheat supply. He himself was quite well off, as can be deduced from the fact that he was able to acquire a hefty supply of wheat for his family and had enough resources to purchase more. He wrote to a relative in Fustat on intimate

43 This is the case in TS Arabic Box 38.95, published by Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1993), p. 493. The overlap suggests that the documents stem from the same period at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

44 See TS 20.133r, ll. 20–21 (*šarat al-qaṭī’ah ‘alainā nahñū millat al-yahūd...*), on which see above, n. 2.

45 See above, n. 2, and see Lev, “Saladin’s Economic Policies and the Economy of Ayyubid Egypt,” pp. 345–346. For other examples of the middle class and even the upper middle class sinking into poverty from this general period (though specific dates cannot be confirmed for these documents), see TS 10 J 17.4v, ll. 13–20, in which the letter writer noted that he used to wear specialty clothing from the east (for references on the terms *niṣāfi*, *šābūrī*, and *mutakhkhat*, see Cohen, *Voice of the Poor*, p. 46, nn. 60–62); and see MS Frankfurt a. M., published by Horovitz, “Ein arabischer Brief an R. Chananel,” pp. 155–156, reproduced by Goitein, “R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge, Son of Samuel ha-Nadiv, Brother-in-Law of Maimonides,” pp. 379–380.

46 See TS Box G 1.1r, ll. 3–19.

terms with communal leaders there (including Moses Maimonides and R. Anatoli, a noted French judge)<sup>47</sup> of the grave shortage affecting all strata of society, albeit to differing degrees.

Alexandria is in great distress... People consume one another! The calamity came upon the people very suddenly, may God relieve them in His mercy. [I] have been able to acquire only three *irdabb* [of wheat] and most of it is already consumed. May I request that you obtain [additional] wheat in whatever way possible? [Your] servant<sup>48</sup> is your own family... Kindly instruct the Muslim [intermediary] in charge of [conveying] the wheat to demonstrate his high rank upon entry to the city [of Alexandria]. The [Jewish] people are watched closely by the Muslims, who threaten them with pillage on a daily basis.<sup>49</sup>

The vivid picture in this letter recalls the parallel account of desperation and chaos depicted by ‘Abd al-Laṭīf from the perspective of one of the wealthier Jews of Alexandria. The reference to people consuming one another may be an oblique allusion to the cannibalism that took hold of the country during this period but it may likewise refer to the pillaging and looting of wealthy families by members of the poorer class.<sup>50</sup> The fact that our letter writer admits to having purchased three *irdabb* (equivalent to no less than one year’s supply of wheat for an individual

47 Anatoli arrived in Alexandria from Provence during the period of Maimonides and served (on the master’s recommendation) as judge (*dayyan*) in that city. See the remarks of Jacob Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970; reprint of 1920–22 edition), vol. I, pp. 247–248, and Isaac Shailat ed., *Iggerot ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem: Shailat Publishing, 1995), vol. II, pp. 465–466. Anatoli’s biography has been significantly enhanced by the research of Miriam Frenkel, “*The Compassionate and Benevolent*”: *The Leading Elite in the Jewish Community of Alexandria in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 128–133, and, more recently, Friedman, “Maimonides Appoints R. Anatoly *Muqaddam* of Alexandria” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 83 (2015): 135–161, including 153, n. 72, in which Friedman questions some of the chronology provided by Frenkel.

48 “[Your] servant” (*al-mamlūk*) was a typical manner for a letter writer to address himself with feigned humility during the classical Genizah period.

49 ENA NS 19.10r, ll. 10–20, and v, ll. 5–8. The letter was translated (with slight variations from my translation above) by Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, p. 239.

50 According to a variety of Genizah sources, Alexandria was home to a number of class-related incidents. There is mention of a class conflict in the city in 1180 between “the elders” and “the community,” also called “the Jews.” The document reveals that the so-called elders were the local administrative body of the community, most likely appointed by the *muqaddam* of the city. The latter appear to have been insufficiently responsive to the needs of the poorer working class (called *al-safāsif* in the document, a term of derision for the poor), who organized themselves into some kind of resistance. We learn of this on the testimony of an Alexandrian *dayyan*, accused by one of the elders before the Muslim authorities of inciting poor workers to overthrow and “rule over” the elders. See TS 16.272, and see Goitein, “The Local Jewish Community in the Light of the Cairo Geniza Records,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 12 (1961): 148, and Eliyahu Ashtor, “The Number of the Jews in Medieval Egypt,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* (continued) 19 (1968): 8, 10. A major (and potentially violent) conflict erupting in Alexandria over wheat supply ca. 1230 will be discussed below.

and several months' worth for a family) during the worst famine in recent memory, is likely an example of the kind of hoarding alluded to earlier.<sup>51</sup> But it is noteworthy that the writer attributed special acts of looting not to fellow Jews but to his Muslim neighbors. Members of the *dhimmī* class appear to have been particularly vulnerable to pillaging by some local Muslims, who may have taken advantage of these relatively defenseless communities with little recourse from acts of mob violence, let alone official exploitation, during periods of economic distress. In response to the situation, several Jews resorted to hiring a Muslim to convey wheat to their city in the hopes of concealing the destination of the needed supplies.<sup>52</sup>

The combination of severe food shortage and the ensuing chaos among the populace emerges with increasing clarity from the contemporaneous sources. Both the populace and the government appear to have been unprepared for the prolonged shortage that swept the region. The tragic impact on Egyptian society can be gauged from the steep decline in its population, whether from death or from flight. The case of Fustat, which before the onset of the calamities surpassed even Cairo as the metropolis and cultural hub of Egypt, is particularly revealing. In the travelogue of Benjamin of Tudela, who visited Fustat around 1168, the Jewish population of the city was estimated at some 2,000 souls.<sup>53</sup> Based on information on charitable donations and the size of the average family in Fustat in the second half of the twelfth century, scholars have suggested between 1,500 and 3,300 Rabbanite Jews in old Cairo.<sup>54</sup> The most important impression from

51 On hoarding in anticipation of hard times, see Lev, "Saladin's Economic Policies and the Economy of Ayyubid Egypt," p. 344, and Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, p. 239. Another Genizah letter, noted earlier, describes government confiscation of needed goods and provisions, in which all religious communities were affected but, in the eyes of the Jewish writer, "they stipulated the most from the Jews, who were reduced to poverty" (*wa-qāsū al-yahūd aktar min al-kull waftaqarū*). See TS Box G 1.1r, ll. 7–8. The writer went on to record how huge quantities of food hoarded by his uncle, including seventy *irdabb* of wheat (roughly equivalent to seven year's worth of bread for an individual), was pillaged by the authorities. See the letter above, ll. 16–18.

52 It is also conceivable that it was considerably cheaper to hire a Muslim to do the delivery than to have a Jew do the same, for which one would have to pay the *jizyah* up front for permission to leave the city. As Goitein has shown, individuals who wanted to leave their city of residence were compelled to carry a *barā'ah*, a document confirming payment of the poll-tax for that year. See idem, "Evidence on the Muslim Poll Tax from Non-Muslim Sources," p. 283, and *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 384.

53 See A. Asher ed. and tr., *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela* (London: A. Asher and Co., 1840–41), vol. I, p. 96. The Adler edition reads 7,000 instead of 2,000, clearly a scribal or printing error. See Adler ed. and tr., *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, p. 62.

54 See Eliyahu Ashtor, "Prolegomena to the Medieval History of Oriental Jewry," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 50 (1959): 56–61, idem, "The Number of the Jews in Medieval Egypt," p. 20, and Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, pp. 140–142. But see the remarks by Norman Stillman in his *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: The Jewish

either estimate is of a large and flourishing Jewish community in the generation before the disasters at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Two sources from the Genizah bear witness to a stark depletion of the Jewish population of Fustat, respectively from the beginning and end of the career of Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237), head of Egyptian Jewry during these crucial years (known as *raʿīs*, or *rayyis*, *al-yahūd* in Arabic and “Nagid” in Hebrew).<sup>55</sup> In both documents, the number of adult (Jewish Rabbanite) males in the city is given at less than 200. The first of these, dating to 1219, consists of a letter from an opponent of Abraham Maimonides discussing the latter’s efforts to gather the signatures of all the men in the community in his defense on a charge of religious reform. The letter was composed by a loyal member of the Palestinian synagogue and recounts an effort to denounce the Nagid to the Ayyubid authorities for his unlawful changes in the synagogue. The denunciation was either intercepted or shown to the Nagid by the Sultan’s court, prompting him to pen a rebuttal, in which he insisted that he at no time compelled the community to accept his pietist changes. Abraham succeeded in gathering nearly two hundred confirmations from members of the community testifying to the veracity of his claims. According to the letter from his communal opponent, “[the Nagid] called upon the Jews with the assistance of his staff, on his own, and through his assistant and father-in-law,<sup>56</sup> saying to each of them, ‘Have I compelled you in my prayers or changed anything in your synagogue?’ to which each responded, ‘No.’ He enjoined the entire community in this, close to two hundred people...”<sup>57</sup>

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Publication Society of America, 1979), p. 48, n. 21, where he suggests that Ashtor’s estimate could only have been accurate after the period of 1201–1202. In light of the present discussion, Stillman’s critique of Ashtor may be revisited.

55 On Abraham Maimonides and his unique attempts at religious reform in the Jewish community of Egypt during the first three decades of the thirteenth century, see my *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

56 On the identification of Abraham Maimonides’ father-in-law as Ḥananel b. Samuel, see Goitein, “R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge, Son of Samuel ha-Nadiv, Brother-in-Law of Maimonides,” p. 376.

57 TS Arabic Box 51.111r, ll. 13–15, published by Goitein, “New Documents from the Cairo Geniza,” in *Homenaje a Millás-Valllicrosa* (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1954–56), p. 717, under the old shelf mark, Hirschfeld Boxes, I, XV, 111. In his account of the document, Goitein suggested that the letter proves that Abraham Maimonides sought to impose his pietist reforms upon the community. As I understand the letter, the evidence suggests that, while the Nagid did impose changes upon the Palestinian liturgical rite in Egypt (of which the author of the letter was a prominent member), there is no evidence that he sought to impose pietist reforms in the community at large. On the question of whether or not Abraham Maimonides imposed pietist reforms, including the position of most scholars (following Goitein’s hypothesis) compared with my position, see my *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt*, pp. 142–149.

The second document, dating to 1235, concerns a charitable appeal to the community of Fustat for an emergency sum of 300–500 dirhems. A note to a draft of the appeal questioned the attainability of this goal: “But how can this be achieved, seeing that the number of adult males in Fustat today does not even reach 200?”<sup>58</sup> Based on the estimates of average family size suggested by Goitein for the twelfth century, this would bring the total population of the city to somewhere around 600 individuals. Compared with the estimated population figures for the 1160s, this would indicate a reduction of sixty to eighty per cent of the original population. These figures alone speak volumes of the state of the city’s decline and its inability to immediately recover from the severe blows of the early years of the century.<sup>59</sup>

The appeal from 1235 is noteworthy not only for the statistics it affords for a depleted city but for the fact that, over thirty years after the initial crisis, between one third and one fourth of the population remained on charitable doles. There is an indication that communal officials in 1201 believed that the crisis, as severe as it was, would soon settle back to normalcy. In an effort to relieve some of the initial burden on the poorest residents, officials broke with tradition, foregoing the collection of rent in buildings belonging to the communal charity fund (*qodesh*).<sup>60</sup> But the elimination of rent, as appropriate as it was as an emergency measure, was unsustainable in the long run, especially since about a fifth of the units for lease went unoccupied in the initial period alone. The revenue from the rent of the *qodesh* went directly to fund charitable programs within the

58 TS Misc. Box 8.99, unpublished but see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, pp. 492–493, App. C 55.

59 The same bleak situation can be seen by comparing the number of recipients of charitable doles in Fustat in the second half of the twelfth century, roughly six per cent of the population, with those in the thirteenth, an estimated twenty-five per cent. For the first figure, based on a reference to some two hundred recipients during Moses Maimonides’ time, see TS 13 J 34.8, published and translated into Hebrew by Kraemer, “Four Geniza Letters Concerning Maimonides,” 385–387. See also Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, p. 371. In his account of the devastations of 1201 (597 A.H.) in his *Ifādah wa’l-i’tibār*, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf observed that hordes (*kaḷq ‘aẓīm*) of villagers took refuge in the larger towns, which included Fustat and Cairo. See Zand et al., *The Eastern Key*, pp. 222 and 242. Later, in his account of 1202, he noted that the markets of Fustat, formerly thronged by crowds, had been completely deserted but for a stray passerby and mountains of corpses and body parts. See *ibid.*, pp. 248 and 276–278. A sense of the prior importance of Fustat as an Egyptian metropolis can be deduced from ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s comparison of the city to Baghdad in Iraq, an analogy legitimated by the relative population and cultural importance of the two cities in their respective countries. See *ibid.*, p. 8.

60 See BM Or. 5549.6, published by Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, pp. 386–387, no. 102. The document dates to September, 1201, some three months after the initial earthquake.

community.<sup>61</sup> What one hand gave in free lodging, the other took away in less charitable aid for food and clothing.

In a reversal of its earlier policy, Jewish communal officials in Fustat re-instituted their previous rental conditions, although it is impossible to date with accuracy at what point the new policy was implemented. It is clear from the Genizah sources that a significant number of residents did not accept the reversal, perhaps believing themselves worthy of official exemption or, at the very least, deserving of a lower payment. Interesting evidence to this effect can be found in an official ban, in the form of a communal ordinance, dating to around 1215, intended to be hung publically in the synagogues.<sup>62</sup> A ban of excommunication was proclaimed on any tenant who did not pay the monthly rent, even if the latter was a regular recipient of charitable aid.

[We have proclaimed the ban in the name of God that no one may] excuse himself from paying the rent every month, whatever his circumstances may be, even if, just as he begs and receives alms for his food, he should receive alms to pay the rent with them. We have also proclaimed the ban in the name [of God] against whomever lives in a compound or an apartment (*tabaqah*),<sup>63</sup> without [paying] the price fixed by three Jews such that, whenever such a person refuses to pay the sum imposed on him by the assessors (*al-muqawwimīn*), he shall be [placed] under the ban... We also proclaim the ban in the name [of God] against whomever tries to evade [payment] or asks for the mediation of any gentile concerning his lodging in the *waqf* or the reduction of his rent as assessed against him. Whoever violates these bans is wretched (*huwa al-miskīn*) and brings danger upon himself and his property...<sup>64</sup>

It is evident from the communal declaration that, in addition to those who refused any payment, other tenants argued that the fixed rate was set unfairly high. The scroll mentions no less than three times a conflict between the tenants and the communal assessors. Many residents were willing to pay a monthly rent but demanded a reduced amount. Though it is not possible to detect any clear indication of a sustained class conflict, the poorer tenants were unquestionably threatened into compliance by the communal establishment. From their lack of

61 The communities of Egypt during the Genizah period did not tax their members as a collective, in order to give the funds to the authorities as a lump sum, as did their counterparts in Christian Europe. Instead they relied on private donations and revenue from the seventeen compounds, plus shops and inns, belonging to the communal *qodesh*, also called *waqf* in the Genizah sources.

62 This much is clear from the fact that the scroll was written in an elegant calligraphic script, intended for public display.

63 Although this word denotes a story of a building in contemporary usage, its meaning in the present document clearly is that of an individual apartment. See Goitein, "Urban Housing in Fatimid and Ayyubid Times (as illustrated by the Cairo Geniza documents)," *Studia Islamica* 47 (1978): 15.

64 TS 13 J 21.31, published by Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, p. 411, no. 112.



regard for the indignity of the poor, who were compelled as a result to receive a handout for payment of rent, one may assume that the assessors belonged to the upper class. In this light, the threat against resorting to the Muslim courts implies that the tactics of some of the poorer residents in the face of communal intransigence was to appeal to the Muslim authorities, thereby going above the heads of the Jewish establishment. It would not be the first or the last time that the Jews of Egypt circumvented, or sought to circumvent, communal channels by appealing to Muslim courts.<sup>65</sup> But regardless of the internal divisions within Jewish society, it is clear that the communal charitable fund, known in Arabic as the *waqf* and generally in the Genizah sources as the *qodesh* or *heqdesh*,<sup>66</sup> could no longer sustain a free-rent policy during challenging economic times.<sup>67</sup>

## 1216–1228: Ensuing Crisis and Communal Leadership

If the calamitous events at the dawn of the thirteenth century set in motion a period of economic decline in Egypt, subsequent episodes of famine and plague were not long in coming.<sup>68</sup> It is in these later instances that the particular response of Jewish communal leadership emerges with increasing clarity in the Genizah sources. The most significant period of distress in Fustat, for which we have relatively rich documentation, occurred between 1216 and 1218.<sup>69</sup> It is all the more striking that the most vivid accounts we have of this crisis concern Abraham Maimonides' own brush with death, together with his daughter, during the plague. We possess two letters, the first of which dates from the period of Abraham's sickness, while the second describes him as having already recovered.

65 Numerous rabbinic and documentary sources testify to this phenomenon and how it was accommodated and at times resisted by communal and legal authorities. For *dhimmī* use of Islamic courts through the formative period of Islamic civilization, see Uriel Somonsohn, *A Common Justice: The Legal Allegiances of Christians and Jews under Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

66 On these technical terms, see Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, pp. 3–4.

67 It may be wondered what communal officials gained by sending poor tenants to receive communal aid rather than granting them free rent in the first place. The simple answer is that the community would not grant this aid out of their own coffers but would appeal to wealthy donors for contributions. The result would allow the tenants a measure of assistance while not draining the *waqf* of its revenue.

68 There is no reason, in my opinion, to assume a different rate of recovery of the general population from that of the Jewish community, *pace* Lev, "Saladin's Economic Policies and the Economy of Ayyubid Egypt," p. 347, n. 88.

69 What was called the "terrible plague" in the letter cited immediately below was already in full swing by November of 1216, as we learn from TS Arabic Box 54.91, on which see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, p. 538, n. 375 (who accidentally wrote l. 91 rather than f. 91). It should be noted, however, that none of the Arab chroniclers cited above for the 1200–1202 disasters made any mention of these later famines and plagues.

Both sources reflect the deep affection held for the Nagid within sectors of the community and, in general, vividly portray the desperate conditions of those years.

As for our condition [in Fustat], [our] lord (*al-maulā'*), the chief (*al-rayyis*), the Nagid, may his honor increase...., is gravely ill [due to] the greatest [of plagues] – may God heal him and his daughter! He is unable to remain by [her] side, but is confined to his b[e]d. For the entirety of a week, he could not get down [from his bed], whether at night or during the day, which caused him great distress as a result, may God grant him [a recovery]! Yesterday, I received a letter from [the Nagid]’s father-in-law (*ṣihrihi*), our master Ḥananel, the chief judge, may his honor continue, saying: “Truly these days are like the day of judgment. Each person is concerned only with himself!” We do not occupy ourselves with [anything else] whatsoever. There is no help but in God...! We are all perishing and everyone here is in a [desperate state on account of the] terrible plague. There is not a house in Fustat and Cairo, whether belonging to the prominent people [of the city]<sup>70</sup> or of everyone else, in which there are not one or several sick people. Everyone is in great distress. They are [all] concerned with themselves and cannot care for anyone else, let alone a stranger [in need].<sup>71</sup>

The letter in question was written by an anonymous man from a prominent Fustat family, who was clearly on intimate terms with the Nagid.<sup>72</sup> The moving description of conditions inside the Nagid’s private home indicates that he was either close to the family or a communal dignitary (or physician) visiting the *ra'īs*. The reference to the latter’s daughter is particularly noteworthy, including Abraham’s personal anguish in being unable to treat her or stay at her side as a result of his own condition. His helplessness with his daughter appears to have weighed heavily on the Nagid, as it is again mentioned in a poem composed in honor of his recovery from illness.<sup>73</sup> The letter and the poem are the only direct references to the Nagid’s daughter that we possess.<sup>74</sup>

70 The phrase begins with the Hebrew *ḥashuve*, clearly followed by *ha-’ir*, although the fragment is illegible at this point.

71 TS NS 321.93r, ll. 8–14, and v, ll. 1, 3–6, partially published by Goitein, “R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge,” p. 375, and cf. n. 14. The same state of affairs may be described in the fragment of another letter addressed to relatives in Fustat, referring both to the household of Ḥananel and that of the Nagid (*wa-bēt al-rayyis al-a’zam*), expressing the wish that “perhaps they are safe from this disease!” See TS 8 J 13.2, and see Goitein, *ibid.*, p. 374.

72 The man bore the title “prince” (*nasi*), of the Davidic line. His reference to the *ḥashuve ha-’ir* reflects the perspective of a nobleman concerned with other members of his class. On heirs of the Davidic line in the medieval Near East, see Arnold Franklin, *This Noble House: Jewish Descendants of King David in the Medieval Islamic East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

73 The poem, composed by Gamaliel b. Moses, survives in fragmentary form as TS NS 108.50, published by Haim Schirrmann, *New Hebrew Poems from the Genizah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1965), pp. 128–129.

74 We do hear of a certain Abū’l-Riḍā Yahya b. Samuel, mentioned in a court document from May of 1238, as Abraham Maimonides’ son-in-law (about half a year after the Nagid’s death).

The description of human suffering in the letter, according to which “each person is concerned only with himself,” recalls the desperation of the earlier years but must nevertheless be taken with a grain of salt. In its worst phase, the major cities of Fustat and Cairo were paralyzed by famine and plague. But the writer’s report, while reflecting his own experience, was also intended to produce a desired impression.<sup>75</sup> It is noteworthy, moreover, that plagues affecting one or even more than one city did not necessarily spill over into a region-wide disaster. In the present case, we are told of devastation in the two sister cities, while a second letter, also informing us of the Nagid’s illness, suggests that the plague had not spread to Alexandria. “Our hearts and our eyes were uplifted to God, may He be praised and exalted. [We appealed to Him] with fasting and by other means,<sup>76</sup> and offered up a prayer<sup>77</sup> that [He] rescue Israel from the plague that was in your midst.”<sup>78</sup> One senses the anxiety that the plague could infest Alexandria,

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The Nagid may very well have had more than one daughter, but there is no known mention of another one in the sources that survive. It is interesting to note that Abū’l-Riḏā was also the name of the Nagid’s first cousin (Yūsef Abū’l-Riḏā), the son of Maimonides’ sister and Abū’l-Ma’ālī. See Salomon Munk, “Notice sur Joseph Ben-Jehouda, ou Aboul’Hadjadj Yousof Ben-Yahya al Sabti al-Maghrebi, disciple de Maïmonide,” *Journal Asiatique* (third series) 14 (1842): 32–33 and n. 3. Abū’l-Riḏā was not an uncommon Arabic cognomen (*kunyah*) and the two may well have been of no relation. Indeed, Ber Goldberg, in his edition of Abraham’s defense of his father’s code, *Sefer Birkat Avraham* (Lyck/Elk: n.p., 1859), p. 8, considered the latter to be Joseph ibn ‘Aqnin, while both Samuel Poznański and A. H. Freimann considered it a reference to Moses Maimonides’ son-in-law. See Poznański, *Babylonische Geonim im nachgaonäischen Zeitalter* (Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1914), p. 33, n. 1, and Freimann, “The Genealogy of the Maimonidean Family” (Hebrew), *Alumah* 1 (1936): 15. It was, however, quite common in the classical Genizah period for marriages to be arranged between close cousins. See, e.g., Motzkin, “Elijah ben Zechariah,” p. 346, and idem, “Thirteenth-Century Cairo Teacher,” p. 57, n. 59. In his English translation of ENA NS 18.36v, l. 21, Paul Fenton suggested that *al-ṣabīyah* may be a reference to his own daughter. See Fenton, “A Judeo-Arabic Commentary on the Haḏḏārōt by Ḥanan’el ben Šēmū’el (?), Abraham Maimonides’ Father-in-Law,” *Maimonidean Studies* 1 (1990): 53.

- 75 The final lines cited above (TS NS 321.93v, ll. 5–6) were clearly intended to emphasize to the recipient of the letter the writer’s (or the community’s) inability to provide charitable assistance during such trying times. The claim that no one can care for anyone else must therefore be appreciated for its rhetorical effect.
- 76 The phrase, *bi’l-ṣiyām wa-ghairihi*, presumably alludes to almsgiving as the counterpart to public prayer for relief from suffering.
- 77 The term, *al-du‘ā*, common in Arabic sources for non-statutory prayer, is used elsewhere in the Genizah for prayer vigils on behalf of someone ill. See, e.g., the *du‘ā* performed on behalf of the sister of Abū’l-Majd, cantor in Fustat, on which see the following note.
- 78 TS 16.305v, ll. 24–27, published and translated into Hebrew by Frenkel, “*The Compassionate and the Benevolent*,” pp. 365–372, no. 32. The letter was written by Judah al-‘Ammāni, of the well-to-do al-‘Ammāni family of Alexandria, thanking and extolling the Nagid for settling a family dispute. The worsening conditions of Fustat can be illustrated from another letter, TS Arabic Box 30.163, in which an Alexandrian man wrote to Abraham Maimonides asking for funds to pay for the *jizyah* for his young son. The father insisted that, despite every effort, he was unable to find any employment in Fustat, even though he would have been quite satisfied

but that the community was fortunately spared from harm. It is interesting to note that a similar vigil had been held by Alexandrian Jews during the period of the Nagid's illness, presumably also including fasting and prayer.<sup>79</sup>

There is no question that, once the Nagid was well enough to rise from his bed, he returned to caring for the sick of his household and perhaps even to his regular medical duties in the sultan's court.<sup>80</sup> The letter cited above alluding to the Nagid's illness used the same language to describe his own grave condition and his distress at his inability to help his daughter when she fell ill.<sup>81</sup> A letter penned by Abraham Maimonides during this period to his brother-in-law, Ḥaim b. Ḥananel, refers to the dire conditions of his extended family and of the city in general. Although it clearly reflects a time when he was still ill, he was now well enough to care for his loved ones. He described working tirelessly, with barely enough time "to eat [a bit of] bread in peace, except here and there while on [my] feet."

As for me, my own condition and [my] concern for the condition of [your] father do not allow me time to think [of anything], not even of the barest necess[ity]. For [your] father's condition has become critical and severe beyond [...].<sup>82</sup> We are in the midst of a grave danger (*va-anaḥnu 'omdim be-sakanah gedolah*).<sup>83</sup> I cannot relate any of the details for I know the great despair it would cause my lord<sup>84</sup> upon hearing it, so I have decided to forgo them and not inform you of any of them. Let our lord not stop pray[ing on our behalf], for "a prisoner cannot free himself [from captivity]."<sup>85</sup> As for my lord's

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earning one silver dirhem a day. Evidently even the lowest paying jobs could not be found in Fustat during this period.

79 See the letter cited in the previous note, ll. 9–12, although there the vigil is described as a *ṣalāh* in an individual's home.

80 If we follow Mark Cohen's suggestion that AIU VII E 119, published by him in "The Burdensome Life of a Jewish Physician and Communal Leader: A Geniza Fragment from the Alliance Israélite Universelle," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 16 (1993): 127, may have been a description of Abraham Maimonides during the plague of 1216–1217, we would possess an indication that the Nagid went back to working more than full time soon after his recovery. See *ibid.*, pp. 135–136.

81 Note the same word in TS NS 321.93r, ll. 9 (*marīd fī shiddah*) and 11–12 (*wa-huwa min dhālik fī shiddah 'aẓimah*).

82 Only the first letter of this word (*"ghāin"*) is preserved. Fenton suggested to fill the *lacuna* with *gh[āyah]*, which he translated as "exceedingly." See *idem*, "A Judeo-Arabic Commentary on the Haftārōt by Ḥanan'el ben Šēmū'el (?), Abraham Maimonides' Father-in-Law," pp. 50, 52.

83 Despite the switch to Hebrew, Abraham Maimonides does not appear to have a traditional citation in mind. The use of *sakanah* in reference to illness was already made in classical rabbinic literature. See, e.g., Tosefta Sukkah, 2:2 (*holeh mesukan*), and the *baraita* in Babylonian Talmud (BT) Sukkah 26a (*holeh she-yesh bo sakanah*).

84 As odd as it may sound to our ears, the Nagid's use of "my lord" (*sayyidunā*) to refer to his brother-in-law and of "[your] servant" (*al-mamlūk*; see *ibid.*, r, ll. 3, 22) to refer to himself was entirely in keeping with the formalities of the time. See above, n. 48.

85 This is a citation of a talmudic expression (see, e.g., BT Berakhot 5b) which, in its original

additional rebuke that my letters in response are [too] short and that [your servant] has little regard for the well-being of my lord, allow me to explain. My lord is exceedingly prolix in what he writes to [his servant], thinking this to be beneficial. I am unable to read [my lord's letters] and their benefit is lost on account of their length. The truth is that there is no free time in [my schedule] to eat [a bit of] bread in peace, except here and there while on [my] feet [...], on account of the hardships that come in quick succession and the afflictions that have befallen us. But praise be to Him who has made His decree (*fa-subhāna man ḥakama*)!<sup>86</sup>

Abraham's comments to his brother-in-law are revealing in more ways than one. His responsibilities during the extended period of hardship on account of the plague extended his already consuming schedule as public physician and communal authority. Abraham's notoriously brief letters are here put in their proper context as the result of a grueling routine on behalf of those in his immediate and

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context, is a metaphor for a similar sentiment to that expressed here, namely that one who is ill is in need of the help of others to recover from one's illness. Fenton has suggested that this phrase may have another interpretation, namely that Abraham and his father-in-law, Ḥananel, were in fact held in government custody due to communal allegations in the pietist controversy. He supported this hypothesis with another fragment, TS 6 J 7.3, which Goitein had published in "A Letter to Maimonides on Donations and New Information on His Descendants, the Negidim" (Hebrew), pp. 240–241, and dated to the late 1240s, during the contested negidate of Abraham's son, David, but that Fenton suggested may in fact refer to Abraham himself. See Fenton, *Deux traités de mystique juive* (Lagrasse: Éditions Verdier), pp. 88–89, and idem, "A Judeo-Arabic Commentary on the *Haḥṭārōt* by Ḥanan'el ben Šēmū'el (?), Abraham Maimonides' Father-in-Law," pp. 29–30, and 52, n. 48. While it is true that the undated fragment published by Goitein, TS 6 J 7.3, refers to an anonymous *al-rayyis* (r, ll. 8, 11, 16) that may just as well refer to Abraham as to his son, David, we do not currently possess sufficient evidence to the effect that Abraham or David was incarcerated. The letter (TS 6 J 7.3) does indicate that David's private prayer hall was closed, requiring him to attend the service in the main synagogue on fast days and other holidays (ibid., ll. 8–10), but nothing to suggest that he was imprisoned. As for Ḥananel, the letter informs us that he "has gone into hiding (*taghayyaba*) on account of the quarrel of our fellow [Jews] with the Nagid" (ibid., ll. 10–11). Although the language here is very suggestive, there is no indication that it refers to a government arrest. The document we possess on the effort to malign Abraham Maimonides before the Muslim authorities (TS Arabic Box 51.111), itself attests to the latter's position of strength with the sultan and his court over against his detractors among the loyalists of the Palestinian liturgical rite in Egypt, on which see above. For these reasons, and in light of strong internal evidence, I read this letter as a reference to the plague in Fustat in 1216–1217. We do possess another fragment referring to Ḥananel as gravely ill (*fī shiddah*, the same language used of Abraham's condition above) that likely stems from the same period. See TS NS 321.13, published by Motzkin, "The Arabic Correspondence of Judge Elijah and His Family," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1965, p. 175, and see Goitein, "R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge," p. 382.

86 ENA NS 18.36r, ll. 5–20, published by Fenton with his own English translation in an appendix to his "A Judeo-Arabic Commentary on the *Haḥṭārōt*," pp. 49–54. Such praises of God in the midst of calamity are not uncommon in Genizah letters. See, e. g., TS 16.286, l. 33 ("All that the Merciful One does is good"), the end of a letter describing personal misfortune, on which see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, pp. 51 and 56.

extended care.<sup>87</sup> As for the condition of Ḥananel b. Samuel, Abraham Maimonides' father-in-law,<sup>88</sup> we are informed by subsequent Genizah documents that he did in fact recover from death's door, with the care and constant solicitude of his son-in-law, and continued to function as a vital communal leader in Fustat until the middle of the thirteenth century.<sup>89</sup>

There is further testimony that other Jewish communal officials, including those in charge of aid distribution, were personally afflicted by this plague no less than were Abraham and his family.<sup>90</sup> Those officials who were not ill were required by the Nagid to work overtime. In a letter to his brother-in-law in Alexandria that may be tentatively dated to this period, Elijah b. Zachariah, a respected judge and the chief official in charge of charitable distribution in Fustat, pleaded to have his wife sent back to the city because his services were needed where he was and he was consequently unable to visit her: "We are in a terrible spot. There is no one here who can take care of our needs... Let my wife know that the *ravyis* has prevented me from going down to Alexandria. Help her prepare to return to Fustat."<sup>91</sup>

87 On Abraham's brevity in his correspondence, see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, p. 486.

88 Ḥananel was first identified as Abraham's father-in-law by Goitein, "R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge," pp. 371–395. See also Fenton, "More on R. Ḥananel b. Samuel the Judge, Leader of the Pietists" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 55 (1986): 77–107, and idem, "A Judeo-Arabic Commentary on the *Haḥḥārōt* by Ḥanan'el ben Šēmū'el (?), Abraham Maimonides' Father-in-Law," pp. 27–56. Additional information on Samuel has been provided by Friedman, "The ibn al-Amshāḥī Family, In-Laws of Maimonides" (Hebrew), *Zion* 69 (2004): 289–295.

89 On the interesting documents referring to Ḥananel as Nagid in the period following Abraham's death, see Friedman's discussion, *ibid.*, pp. 292–295, and idem, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, pp. 114–116.

90 We hear, for instance, of Abū'l-Majd, a cantor in charge of communal disbursements under Abraham during this period, who was bedridden with sickness and unable to perform his functions in the synagogue, let alone for the *qodesh*. See ENA NS 22.9, and see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, p. 537, n. 354. R. Anatoli, judge during the time of Maimonides and his son, was among those who received reduced rent in 1201. See Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, pp. 386–387, no. 102. In 1219, we find the former cantor of the Palestinian synagogue, Jeduthun ha-Levi, asking for bread but requesting that it be provided in secret so as to protect his dignity. See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, pp. 89 and 531, n. 223. Jeduthun was also known to have officiated at the funeral services of the poor, for which he was compensated by communal funds.

91 See TS 20.138, published by Motzkin, "The Arabic Correspondence of Judge Elijah and His Family," pp. 58–59, and see idem, "Elijah ben Zechariah," pp. 344, 346. Friedman cited a separate portion of the letter, ll. 30–35, in connection with Jewish women from Palestine taken captive by the Crusaders. He noted that the letter was penned by Solomon b. Elijah. See idem, "Geniza Sources for the Crusader Period and for Maimonides and His Descendants," in N. Waldman ed., *Community and Culture: Essays in Jewish Studies in Honor of the Ninetieth Anniversary of Gratz College* (Philadelphia: The College, 1987), p. 58. Elijah was known as a high-ranking judge (often called *ha-dayyan ha-mufla'*, on which term see Motzkin, "Elijah ben Zechariah," p. 343, and *dayyan al-yahūd*, on which see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*,

Due to the diminished size of the Fustat community in its impoverished state, Elijah b. Zachariah would have come in contact with many if not most of its Jewish residents at one time or another. People informed Elijah of their needs and he arranged for the distribution of aid on an individual basis.<sup>92</sup> But, as we learn from a variety of Genizah documents, he was solicited for aid from cities and towns across Egypt. We hear, for instance of two women, one in Alexandria and the other in the town of Bilbays requesting assistance for basic necessities.<sup>93</sup> In another letter to Elijah, we find a request for funds from the collection for orphans (distributed weekly in Fustat), of which this period could claim more than its usual share.<sup>94</sup> Are we to believe that no resources were available in any of these communities for charitable assistance? We must conclude that these letters each stem from a period when the needs of the poor and the orphans overwhelmed the limited capacity not only of the smaller towns but even of the port city of Alexandria. Jews from across Egypt looked to Fustat, itself in dire straits, for emergency relief.

In the midst of the crisis afflicting Egypt, Abraham Maimonides employed every resource available to him within his capacity as head of the Jews. As can be seen from the preceding case, he restricted the movement of his chief relief worker, and perhaps other officials, whose services were desperately needed during a period of crisis. But his oversight of charitable assistance did not end there. As we know from a cache of some forty-five money orders written in his hand during the spring of 1218, the Nagid personally attended to the minutest details of disbursements from the community charity funds. In his description of Abraham's extensive communal activities, S. D. Goitein observed that his personal attention to such minute cases were unbecoming to his high office. In light of the large number of money orders in the Nagid's hand, Goitein concluded that the latter pursued a policy of administrative centralization similar to that found

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vol. II, pp. 326–327), but it is clear that in this case it was his services as charitable distributor that were required in Fustat.

92 See, e. g., the short note, Bodl. MS Heb. e 94.27, in which a poor man informed Elijah that he had gone days without eating anything. On the “cry of hunger” in Genizah sources, see Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, pp. 163–166.

93 See TS 8 J 23.14 and TS 13 J 22.7 respectively, published and discussed by Motzkin, “The Arabic Correspondence of Judge Elijah and His Family,” pp. 73–94, 133, 142–143, and idem, “Letters of Women from the Genizah” (Hebrew), *Mehqarim be-Toledot ‘Am Yisrael ve-Eres Yisrael* 2 (1972): 84–88.

94 See TS 8 J 17.6, and see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, pp. 105–106. Sibṭ ibn al-Jauzī, in his *Mir’at al-zamān fī ta’rik al-a’yān*, ed. Ibn Qiz’ūghlī, p. 479, wrote that, after the events of 1201–1202, “orphans and widows grew numerous in the world” (*wa-kathurat fī’l-dunyā al-yatāmā wa’l-arāmil*). While those orphaned during the first two to three years of the thirteenth century were no longer legal orphans by the time of the next famine, there no doubt were many orphans in Egypt at this time, due to the prolonged famine and plague of the later period.

in the Islamic environment of the same period. In Goitein's words: "[A]bove all, [the Nagid] was in charge of the social service. In better times, as the documents of the tenth through the twelfth centuries show, the latter was the domain of the *parnasim*, social officers... With the decline of Egyptian Jewry, the old Jewish democratic *kehilla*, community or congregation, gave way to the Muslim autocratic order of things, where the qadi, or judge, united in his hands much of the civil authority, including the social services, insofar as they existed."<sup>95</sup>

Goitein's remarks on what he considered Abraham's centralization of the *negidate* should be understood in light of his debate with earlier scholars on the relationship between centralized Jewish leadership and local communal organization in medieval Egypt. In contrast with the older school represented by Jacob Mann, Yitzhaq Baer, and Eliyahu Ashtor, Goitein emphasized the role of local leadership and organizational duties alongside the more symbolic role of headship.<sup>96</sup> The evidence of Abraham Maimonides' first-hand involvement in the social services of the community was therefore interpreted by him as the beginning of the end of the model that had prevailed for three centuries.

There are at least three reasons why Goitein's theory of a shift from local organization to greater centralization should be modified in light of the available sources. To begin with, the activities, responsibilities, and prerogatives of the Nagid in the first half of the thirteenth century can be shown to have followed the same general model set by previous communal heads.<sup>97</sup> Second, the Nagid's intimate involvement in social services did not extend beyond Fustat and therefore still very much adhered to the principle of local organization argued by Goitein. Third, the forty-five money orders that are the basis for the claim for increased centralization all stem from a single circumscribed period, the spring

95 See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, p. 488, where in the following paragraph he regarded it as an "appalling fact that [Abraham Maimonides] attended to all these variegated duties in person."

96 In a recent article on the subject, Mark Cohen surveyed the approach of these historians and then raised the possibility of more informal governing structures among the communities of the Islamic world. See his "Jewish Communal Organization in Medieval Egypt: Research, Results and Prospects," in Norman Golb ed., *Judaeano-Arabic Studies* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), pp. 73–86. Cohen himself nuanced Goitein's position by stressing both the informal organization as well as the fusion of centralized and local leadership in the communal life of Egyptian Jewry. See *ibid.*, pp. 85–86, and *idem*, "Review of Elinoar Bareket, *Shafir Mitzrayim*," *Jewish History* 12 (1998), pp. 139–140.

97 This is not the place to expatiate on the functions and authority of the headship of the Jews during Abraham's tenure, although the main lines are familiar from Cohen's survey of Mevorakh b. Se'adiah (1094–1111) in his *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 232–261. Goitein himself observed that Maimonides, no less than his son, dealt with communal matters concerning no more than a few dirhems. See *idem*, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 37.



of 1218. Beyond his attentiveness to individual solicitations for aid or intervention, of which the Genizah sources are full of examples, there is no evidence for an increased preoccupation with social services on the part of the head of the Jews, whether before or after 1218.<sup>98</sup>

In point of fact, not all of the money orders written by Abraham Maimonides in 1218 represent an aberration from business as usual. One such case, an order of payment to the treasury of the sultan, reflects an arrangement familiar from other documents in the Genizah. The order reads as follows: “The noble *shaikh*, Abū’l-Majd, may his Rock preserve him, should kindly expedite [the payment of] eighty-one dirhems to the *qāḏī*, Shams al-Dīn, [for] the balance remaining to him for the poll-taxes (*jawālī*) of the year 614.”<sup>99</sup> As Goitein already observed, the model prevalent in Christian Europe of a Jewish community taxed and making payments as a lump sum paid up front did not exist in Judaeo-Arabic societies during the classical Genizah period.<sup>100</sup> Tax collectors sought out *dhimmīs* on an individual basis, often leading poor residents to hide in their homes or to have themselves registered as absent by the revenue authorities.<sup>101</sup> This method was

98 Personal appeals to the Nagid from desperate and disenfranchised Jews were commonplace in medieval Egypt. Three illustrative examples from this period will suffice: TS Arabic Box 30.163, the case of the Alexandrian father already cited above, n. 78; TS 10 J 17.4, translated by Goitein into Hebrew in “R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge,” pp. 377–378, and into English by Cohen, *Voice of the Poor*, pp. 45–46, and again by Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, pp. 548–549, an appeal to the Nagid for aid, to which the latter responded with letters to wealthy members of the Fustat community requesting donations on his behalf; and a group of three letters, TS 8 J 22.22, TS 18 J 3.12, and CUL Or. 1080 J 285, all published by Friedman, *Jewish Polygyny in the Middle Ages: New Sources from the Cairo Genizah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1996), pp. 230–231, 233–235, and 237–239, respectively. The letters concern a woman named Milāḥ bint Surūr, whose case came before the Nagid with grievances against her husband. For the typical involvement of the *rayyis* in cases of debt and insolvency, see the case dated 1210, discussed by Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 36, and more recently by Mordechai Friedman, “Responsa of Abraham Maimonides on a Debtor’s Travails,” in Joshua Blau and Stephan Reif ed., *Geniza Research after Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo-Arabic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 82–92.

99 TS Box K 25.240.11, ll. 1–4, published by Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, p. 416. The Hijri year 614 ended in the spring of 1218 CE.

100 See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, pp. 389–392.

101 See CUL Or. 1081 J 13, a request to have the same *qāḏī* and administrator of revenue, Shams al-Dīn, register him as absent. The document was translated by Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, p. 194, and partially by Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 382. On this practice, see Alshech, “Islamic Law, Practice, and Legal Doctrine,” p. 367, n. 63, who also cited TS NS J 3 in this context. In both documents, the writer recommended to his correspondent that “[y]our only salvation is to be registered as absent.” This may have been the meaning of the enigmatic words of a Jewish goldsmith, whose sons-in-law in the Egyptian town of Sunūh were being pressured by the government to pay their taxes, when he wrote that he would be forced to take matters into his own hands and wait things out. See University Museum Pennsylvania E 16517r, l. 37 (...*amshī ma’a al-zamān kamā yamshī*), and see Goitein, “The

not always taken by those with due concern for their immediate relatives, as the government had adopted the strategy of imprisoning a family member of the defaulter when the individual in question could not be found.<sup>102</sup>

In keeping with established Ayyubid policy, already observed regarding the crisis of 1200–1202, indigent *dhimmi*s were not exempted from payment of the poll-tax for religious minorities (known as the *jāliyah* or *jizyah*), adding to the heavy burden on the population. One letter written by Ḥananel b. Samuel to a relative in Alexandria, flatly observed that, “during this difficult time, the treasury (*al-dīwān*) abuses its power and acts capriciously, pursuing those from whom it is illegal [to exact the tax], and all the more so those from whom it is legal. They do whatever they can get away with (*wa-mahmā ṭālat yaduhum ilaihi fa‘alū*) and there is no one to prevent them.”<sup>103</sup> But while Ayyubid policy did not grant tax exemptions to the needy, it nevertheless permitted a brief deferment of payment until the beginning of the following year.<sup>104</sup> An Arabic document dating to the beginning of the thirteenth century requests from the Muslim authorities deferred payment for 150 indigent Jews from Fustat and Cairo and reduced payment for another 150.<sup>105</sup>

The money orders in the Nagid’s hand from 1218 add an interesting element to what is known from the first source. In lieu of private donations, all defaults on the poll-tax of the poor at the beginning of the year fell to the local Jewish authorities, who were then compelled to pay the balance without delay or face property seizures by the treasury of the Sultan. When the community submitted only a partial payment, as it was periodically compelled to do, it did so at its own peril.

The *shaikh*, the noble cantor, Abū’l-Majd, may his Rock preserve him, should hand over to the noble *shaikh*, al-Thiqah, may his Rock preserve him, thirty-five dirhems from the funds of the [Jewish] estate, to cover the remaining balance from Cairo to the treasury of the Sultān, for which the community compound was pledged [as collateral] (*dhami-*

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Geniza Collection of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 49 (1958): 47.

102 This is the background behind the sentiment of Mishael b. ‘Uzziel (d. 1222), brother-in-law of Maimonides, when he fell into hard times and could not pay the poll tax. See MS Frankfurt a. M., published by Horovitz, “Ein arabischer Brief an R. Chananel,” pp. 155–156, and reproduced by Goitein, “R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge,” pp. 379–380.

103 TS 16.293r, ll. 27–28, and v, ll. 1–3, published by Goitein, “R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge,” pp. 389–390. By “illegal,” Ḥanan’el meant the tax on the indigent, prohibited under Muslim law but the unofficial policy of the regime.

104 The *jāliyah* was due for the rest of the community at the end of each Muslim year.

105 The document, TS Arabic Box 38.95, was described by Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 468, App. B 110, and published by Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents*, p. 493.

*nahu bi-dār al-jamā'ah*). He should do this urgently, in whatever manner and with whatever means. For there is no means of escape from the hounding of the treasury.<sup>106</sup>

In this note, as in the preceding one, the Nagid was fulfilling his official role as intermediary between the Ayyubid government and the Jewish community. Less than one month after the beginning of the new Muslim year, the tax collectors demanded the balance from the Nagid without delay. In contrast to less pressing cases of poll tax assistance collected from individual donations toward the end of the year (for which the Nagid was also known to have been personally solicited),<sup>107</sup> the last-minute funds required by the treasury had to be taken directly from the communal estate (*min jihat al-rab'*). As we learn from other cases recorded in the Genizah, the payment of the *jāliyah* of the poor during times of scarcity could be a major undertaking that temporarily depleted the charitable fund of its resources. Thus we read in one characteristic note sent from officials in Fustat to a town in the Rif: "Kindly take care of this man and his large family, as we are busy with collecting money for the poll tax of the poor. We have already paid for ninety of them."<sup>108</sup>

If Abraham Maimonides functioned in these payments well within his official capacity, the same cannot be said for the others. The remaining orders that are legible show the Nagid stepping unequivocally into the role of social service worker. He gave instructions for orders of such routine matters as compensation of communal officials and of a mason for street repairs.<sup>109</sup> Most remarkable,

106 TS Box K 25.240.12, ll. 1–6, published by Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, p. 417.

107 See, e.g., TS 13 J 22.9, published by Motzkin, "The Arabic Correspondence of Judge Elijah and His Family," pp. 144–146, and see Goitein, "Evidence on the Muslim Poll Tax from Non-Muslim Sources," pp. 279–280, and idem, *Jewish Education in Muslim Countries* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1962), pp. 82–84, no. 6. See also TS 10 J 17.4, for another appeal to the Nagid for charitable relief, although with no mention of the *jāliyah*. The letter of appeal was translated into Hebrew by Goitein, "R. Ḥananel the Chief Judge," pp. 377–378, and into English by Cohen, *Voice of the Poor*, pp. 45–46. Those who were not officially registered for assistance by the community, but who could not pay the tax collector by the end of the year, faced imprisonment until someone else paid it on their behalf, a duty equivalent to "redeeming captives" in medieval Jewish society. In addition to the letter cited above (TS 13 J 22.9), see TS 12.289 and TS 10 J 14.5, l. 17 and the lines in the margin, both published by Goitein, "Abraham Maimonides and his Pietist Circle: New Documents from the Genizah" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 33 (1964), pp. 189–190, 192–193, and cf. Bodl. MS Heb. d 46.144, ll. 16–17, published by Friedman, "The Inheritance of a Man Who Had Two Wives: Two Responsa from the Genizah" (Hebrew), *Dine Yisrael* 13–14 (1986–1988): 261–262, and cf. 257–259. On bailing out prisoners as akin to redeeming captives, see Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, pp. 133–136.

108 See CUL Or. 1080 J 87, and see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 95. This example nicely illustrates how public aid for the poll tax of the poor was a charitable collection raised on an *ad hoc* basis rather than a communal tax.

109 TS Box K 25.240, nos. 21, 29–32, 40, published by Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious*

however, is a series of notes ordering the administering of funds from a special *waqf* established by a local physician named al-Muhadhdhab for the care of the sick and the poor.<sup>110</sup> A certain R. Yeshu‘ah, teacher of the poor and the orphans, was to receive twenty dirhems for his services.<sup>111</sup> Other individuals, noted by the Nagid by name and described simply as ill (*marīd*), make up a series of money orders in the latter’s handwriting.<sup>112</sup> The Nagid’s solicitude in dispatching other orders for the needy during the same period can be seen in fragments indicating that certain individuals be granted assistance “by order of our lord.”<sup>113</sup>

Due to the circumscribed period to which this flurry of communal and charitable activity belongs, it is difficult to sustain Goitein’s hypothesis that Abraham Maimonides, on the model of the *qādī*, “united in his hands much of the civil authority, including the social services.”<sup>114</sup> The timing of his involvement can only be explained in terms of the exigencies of the hour. As we have already seen from a number of sources dating to the period of 1216–1218, the cities of Fustat and Cairo suffered devastating famine and plague that nearly collapsed the operations of the Jewish social services altogether. Communal officials, including both Abraham Maimonides and Abū’l-Majd, fell ill along with the rest of the population. The Nagid’s activities during this crisis are a reflection of an engaged, overextended leader with limited resources at his disposal. The option to delegate the responsibility to other officials was not always available. The strains on the social service workers of Fustat are apparent from the retention of Elijah b. Zechariah in the city during the crisis and in the most unusual involvement of the Nagid himself in routine matters of maintenance and charity.<sup>115</sup>

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*Foundations*, pp. 417–421, nos. 116, 118–122. R. Jephthah in these documents was a judge in the Nagid’s court and is known from earlier sources. See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 515, no. 28, and Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, p. 106.

110 On this al-Muhadhdhab, see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, pp. 420–421, App. A 48–92 and 94, Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, p. 418, n. 1, and Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, p. 241. See also TS 20.44, col. 3, ll. 12, 18, 43, published by E. J. Worman, “Two Book-Lists from the Cambridge Genizah Fragments,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (o.s.) 20 (1908): 462–463, and TS 6 J 7.3r, l. 4, published by Goitein, “A Letter to Maimonides on Donations and New Information on His Descendants, the Negidim,” p. 240.

111 TS Box K 25.240, no. 26, published by Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, p. 418, no. 117: (ll. 4–5) ... ‘*an ta’līm al-fuqarā’ wa’l-yetomim*... The charitable service of community-supported teaching for the poor and the orphans most likely reflects the efforts of the Jewish establishment to care for its needy children in the wake of the plague.

112 See TS Box K 25.240, nos. 33–37, not published by Gil. Some of these are more legible than others but the handwriting is unmistakably that of the Nagid. See also Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, p. 172.

113 This addition is found twice in TS Box K 15.90v, ll. 28 and 36, on which see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 450, no. 40, and Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, pp. 214–215.

114 See above, n. 95.

115 In addition to the crushing famine and disease of these years, Egypt was struck by yet another blow in 1219, when the strategic port city of Damietta was attacked and briefly

In two ways, however, Abraham Maimonides' response to the economic downturn went beyond the *ad hoc* emergency measures of 1216–1218 toward more proactive measures. From a letter dating to around 1220, we learn that the Nagid conducted periodic inspections of communal operations and charitable services in towns throughout the realm via an emissary of the court. According to the letter, an inspection of Bilbays discovered a French rabbi not sufficiently supported by the local charity fund and compelled to take shelter in a room of the synagogue. After a formal rebuke by the emissary of the Nagid, communal officials promptly collected forty dirhems on behalf of the poor scholar.<sup>116</sup>

Even more important is a letter dating to 1227 or 1228 that gives a vivid impression of another famine in the port city and the social unrest that prevailed as a result. In the decade since the previous famine, communal life continued to

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seized by Crusading armies during the fifth Crusade. Two letters survive from the Genizah testifying to the terrifying and impoverished conditions of this year: TS 16.286 and TS 8 J 20.26. The second document refers to the ditches being built in Alexandria in anticipation of a Crusader attack on that city and the closing of the public markets, presumably in preparation for war. See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. V, pp. 55–56. The Crusaders later ventured an attack on Cairo in the summer of 1221 that ultimately proved futile, but that had succeeded in terrifying the local population in its already fragile state. The first document (TS 16.286) was published by Frenkel, “*The Compassionate and Benevolent*,” pp. 359–364, no. 31. Note also the letter addressed to Abū'l-Faraj, brother-in-law of Elijah the judge, in which we learn of Palestinian Jewish women taken captive by the Crusaders, on which see n. 91 above. It is interesting to note the extraordinarily glowing praise of the Ayyubid government by Judah al-Ḥarizi around 1216–1218, in response to their victory over the Crusaders and governmental support of the Jewish community during the years of war. Here are a sampling of his words on the Ayyubids and the Muslim community that protected its Jewish population against the invading Crusaders: “[The Jews] have certainly been saved through the kind acts of this leader and the benignity of his bounties... In that affliction his hidden virtues were revealed, and the praiseworthy deeds of his community... Through these misfortunes God showed the fairness of their faith, and the sincerity of their belief... [The Jews] had sank [!] to the depths of misery's ocean..., until God moved the hearts of the Muslim sultans, who, aided by Divine assistance, gained a great and everlasting victory... All this through the succor of Ayyubid sultans, who arose as the sun of fortune in the highest heaven, and through whom God gave victory to spiritual and temporal power.” See *Kitāb al-Durar: A Book in Praise of God and the Israelite Communities* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009), ed. Blau et al., pp. 78–79 (English) and 108–110 (Judaeo-Arabic), and see S. M. Stern, “An Unpublished Maqama by Al-Harizi,” *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 1 (1964): 195. For al-Ḥarizi's allusion to a period of famine in Egypt, see idem, *Taḥkemoni, or The Tales of Heman the Ezraḥite, by Judah Alharizi*, ed. Joseph Yahalom and Naoya Katsumata (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010), p. 549, ll. 446–454, Maqamah 50, no. 57.

116 See TS 13 J 20.24, published by Motzkin, “The Arabic Correspondence of Judge Elijah and His Family,” pp. 131–133, and see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 122. It is significant, nevertheless, that homelessness does not generally figure in the Genizah sources. See *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 235. In Fustat, we learn of a house owned by the *qodesh*, located between the “two synagogues” (the Babylonian and the Palestinian), perhaps used to house travelers as well as the local indigent. See *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 140.

experience a general dearth of basic supplies.<sup>117</sup> The letter was addressed to the Nagid by an Alexandrian charitable official (*parnas*) in fear for his life. The circumstances are revealing not only for the volatility of the port city, but for the information it provides on the leadership of the Nagid. The *parnas* in question, along with other communal officials, was authorized by the Nagid to store surplus grain during a time of relative abundance in anticipation of future emergencies. Experience in Egypt had taught that the operating question for famine, and the devastation that came with it, was not so much a matter of whether it would come but when. Learning from the lessons of past famines, the Nagid appears to have issued directives intended to prepare the Egyptian communities for times of hardship in the hopes of averting an even graver crisis.<sup>118</sup>

The immediate effect of such rationing on the poor of Alexandria, however, raised fears of a present shortage and elicited accusations that community officials were hoarding supplies for themselves.<sup>119</sup> The Alexandrian official wrote to the Nagid of the popular outcry that he had pilfered some of the stored grain for himself while providing insufficient handouts to the poor. As the letter elaborates, an unnamed elder from the community decided to take matters into his own hands:

[This elder] took action and raised close to two *irdabb* [of wheat] and distributed it in his home as he saw fit, without my knowledge or that of the *dayyan*, our master, Isaac, may his Rock protect him, or that of any one of the elders. When I approached him to find out if this was true, he told me: "We have no need of you!" But this wasn't enough for him. He summoned the elder, Abū Surūr, [his]<sup>120</sup> middleman, before him, and declared ... that your servant stole and similar [accusations]... He then entered the communal building (*al-moshav*) and declared that the distributor of the store [of

117 An indication of the depletion of communal resources can be seen from a record of a loan from 1225 to pay for imported branches for the Sukkot holiday which clearly proved too onerous for the community to pay without being underwritten by a wealthy donor. See TS NS 321.79, ll. 6–8, partially transliterated by Goitein in "The Exchange Rate of Gold and Silver Money in Fatimid and Ayyubid Times," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965): 35, no. 75, and reprinted in *Mediterranean Society*, vol. I, pp. 385–386.

118 Although the letter alludes only to directives issued to Alexandria, there is no reason to suppose that the Nagid's proactive efforts to stave off a future emergency were limited to that city.

119 In addition to what I have already noted on hoarding during times of scarcity, we are informed in another thirteenth-century letter of bakers hoarding bread during a shortage scare until the governor and market superintendents threatened to burn down their stores (or perhaps their homes). See TS 12.305, translated by Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, p. 238, and see vol. V, pp. 71 and 236. Mention should also be made in light of this letter of an accusation found in another (undated) fragment that a Nagid stored extra grain in a village during a period of scarcity. See TS Arabic Box 18 (1).183, and see Goitein, "The Title and Office of the Nagid: A Re-Examination," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 53 (1962): 115, n. 59.

120 The fragment is smudged at this point and the wording is difficult to make out.

wheat] (*quppah*) did such and such. The esteemed master and priest, our teacher and rabbi, Yeshu'ah, may he be protected from all ill, answered him that this was a lie, but this was not enough for the *shaikh*... He proclaimed his story before everyone in both synagogues on the sabbath and blasphemed and cursed (*wa-heref wa-gidef*)..., but this was still not enough for him. He took from the store our master had given to the elder, the chief, Abū Zikrī, and the store of the *dayyan*, the son of [your] servant, demanding whatever you raised..., but this was [still] not enough for him. In the month of Sivan, a man came to me and pounded on my house..., saying: "If you don't distribute the store [of wheat], I will kill you in your bed (*dhabahtuka fi farshatika*)..." I related the incident to R. Abraham b. R. Ṭahor, may his Rock preserve him, and to the eminent elder, R. [...] b. R. Joseph, may the Omnipresent be at his side. They encouraged me to bring them to justice, but I am very afraid to do this and am holding back from legal action until my master [instructs me how to proceed] with his noble letter... May the crown be restored to its former glory and may the peace of our lord increase forever!<sup>121</sup>

The state of affairs described in this letter is a vivid reflection of the turmoil that gripped the Jewish community of Alexandria during a crisis of grave food shortage. Given past experience of famine in the first two decades of the century, the Nagid provided communal leaders with directives for emergency stores to be rationed out conservatively in good times in anticipation of a future shortage.<sup>122</sup> This policy aroused anxiety and uproar among some members of the community, particularly the poor and certain individuals who acted on their behalf. One in particular, the man referred to in the letter anonymously as "the elder," set himself in opposition to the administrators of the communal store (*quppah*) by establishing a rival distribution of wheat and waging both public and private assaults on the latter, including public accusations and the threat of violence. The desperation of the times is vividly portrayed in this extraordinary document. Unfortunately, the Nagid's reply, for which the Alexandrian *parnas* and his fellow administrators anxiously awaited, has not been found in the Genizah.<sup>123</sup>

In spite of the ongoing efforts of the Nagid and other communal officials to quell the impoverishment of Egyptian Jewry, it would be a long time until conditions would improve for the population at large, and for the Jews and other *dhimmi*s in particular. As Eliyahu Ashtor and others have shown, Mamluk trade

121 TS 10 J 16.6r, ll. 3–16, 18–26, and margin, ll. 7–11, published by Frenkel, "The Compassionate and Benevolent," pp. 469–470, and see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 111.

122 The Nagid's policy bears a striking resemblance to the famous story of Joseph, who preserved grain for a future shortage (Gen. 41). While communal emergency stores appear to have been a novelty in this period, private hoarding was well known and appears to have been the source of the rival *shaikh*'s source to supply to the needy of the city. For another fascinating example of private hoarding that was raided by the government, see TS Box G 1.1r, ll. 7–8, and see above, n. 51.

123 It goes without saying that the Cairo Genizah does not contain letters destined for other cities, such as Alexandria, other than drafts or letters that were ultimately not sent for one reason or another. No such draft or other report of this matter has surfaced to date.

restrictions would prove to be a considerable impediment to a sustained economic recovery.<sup>124</sup> In a letter from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, we learn of a communal lottery established in Fustat to appoint alms collectors on a weekly rotation.<sup>125</sup> The writer of the letter, concerned with the religious observance of the community, went on to warn his readers of the ban imposed upon anyone who declined the rotating office when selected by lottery.

Given what we know of the economic and demographic state of Fustāṭ in the thirteenth century, the lottery rotation clearly reflects a time when the burdens on the *parnas*, due to widespread poverty (and the likelihood of being selected with some frequency), were quite high. The fact that the rotation was conducted on a weekly basis itself reinforces this assumption.<sup>126</sup> The letters of Abraham's great-grandson, Joshua b. Abraham II Nagid (1310–1355), provide a rare window into the economic decline of Cairo in the fourteenth century.<sup>127</sup> Unlike the emergency services performed by the latter's great-grandfather and predecessor, the charitable work conducted by Joshua was to become a permanent feature of the Egyptian Jewish Nagidate in its waning years.

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124 For economic policies and condition during the Mamluk period, see Eliyahu Ashtor, *History of the Jews of Egypt and Syria under the Rule of the Mamluks* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1944–1970), vol. I, pp. 13–25, 172–205.

125 See TS Box J 2.25, and see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, p. 503, App. C 118.

126 See Cohen, *Poverty and Charity*, p. 213.

127 A number of the letters of Joshua Nagid were published and translated into Hebrew by Goitein, "The Twilight of the Maimonidean House," pp. 67–104, and into English by Cohen, *Voice of the Poor*, pp. 191–198.





## The Status of the Bible in 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> Century Cairo: The Fatwas collected by al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480)

The multi-volume Qur'an commentary of al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-al-suwar*, represents a departure from the tradition of Tafsir.<sup>1</sup> Both the author and his contemporaries were aware of the novelty of this work and the work received immediate attention, both hostile and favorable, from the moment the first volume started to circulate.<sup>2</sup> The most controversial aspect of this work was its extensive quotations from the Arabic versions of the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and the four Gospels) which were used by al-Biqā'ī to interpret biblical references in the Qur'an. The scale and manner of the quotations were such that the Qur'an commentary was revolutionary in the annals of Islamic religious practice.<sup>3</sup> Never before had a Muslim medieval scholar quoted so approvingly from these scriptures and moreover used the Bible to illuminate the content of the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup> This return to the Bible in the medium of Tafsir was also accompanied by a downgrading of the already extensive Islamicized biblical lore, *Isrā'īliyyāt*, which was available in the Qur'an commentary tradition. The consequences of this new approach were far reaching, for not only was the Qur'an being interpreted with the aid of the Bible, but al-Biqā'ī appointed himself as a judge over the Islamic biblical lore, the *Isrā'īliyyāt*. He sometimes completely ignored this material, in others he corrected it, and in some other times he gave

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- 1 On al-Biqā'ī and his life and works see my "al-Biqā'ī." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE, edited by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. 2012.
  - 2 Already al-Biqā'ī knew to report to us about what his contemporaries and he himself thought of the novelty of the work, see his discussion in *Maṣā'id al-naẓar li-al-ishrāf 'alā maqāsid al-suwar*, ed. 'Abd al-Samī' Ḥusayn (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1987), v. 1:111–112.
  - 3 For a discussion of the uniqueness of this Qur'an commentary see my *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqā'ī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 13–20.
  - 4 For the ways he quoted the Hebrew Bible see my "Sublime in its Style, Exquisite in its Tenderness: The Hebrew Bible Quotations in al-Biqā'ī's Qur'an Commentary," in *Adaptations and Innovations*, ed. Tzvi Langermann (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2007), pp. 335–380. For his use of the Gospels quotation see Walid Saleh and Kevin Casey. "An Islamic Diatessaron: al-Biqā'ī's Harmony of the Four Gospels." In *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text-Critical and Literary Aspects*, edited by Sara Binay and Stefan Leder, (Beirut: Ergon Verlag Wuerzber, 2012), pp. 85–115.

the Islamic version as an alternative weaker interpretive opinion. The dependence on the Bible to interpret the Qur'an, therefore, did not go unnoticed and soon an acrimonious public controversy broke out in Cairo over the practice of using the Bible to interpret the Qur'an.

The Bible controversy, as I have termed the controversy over the status of the Bible in Islam in medieval Cairo, forced al-Biqā'ī to write an apologia for the permissibility of quoting the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity.<sup>5</sup> The apologia, *al-Aqwāl al-qawīmah fī ḥukm al-naql min al-kutub al-qadīmah* (*The Just Verdict on the Permissibility of Quoting from Old Scriptures*), remains one of the most extensive reviews of Islamic religious attitude towards the Bible in Islam.<sup>6</sup> I have already discussed the content and the arguments of al-Biqā'ī in the treatise and there is no need to repeat these here.<sup>7</sup> The apologia mentions the various individuals that took part in the controversy and far more important it also preserves various opinions from different individuals on the status of the Bible in Islam. It is unfortunate that the counter apologia written by al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1492) in support of the traditional ban on the use or perusal of non-Muslim scriptures did not survive.<sup>8</sup> Al-Sakhāwī, however, will preserve for us many details about the controversy and the individuals who took part in it, and it is thanks to him that we can reconstruct the lives of the names mentioned by al-Biqā'ī as part of the story. The individuals who were pulled into this controversy are many, and can be divided into supporters and opponents of al-Biqā'ī. Part of the strategy of al-Biqā'ī in defending himself was to solicit fatwas on the practice of quoting the Bible and he managed to enlist the leading judges of the day. Moreover, he also sought out book reviews (taqrīz, or taqārīz) on his Qur'an commentary. Both the fatwas and the book reviews came from the leading scholars in Cairo and beyond. These fatwas and book reviews constituted the content of chapter one of his apologia, and they represent the most important witness to what major jurists and judges thought of the status of the Bible in Islam and of al-Biqā'ī's book. They are unique documents since they represent opinions from all the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence and offer the opinions of the leading scholars of Cairo and Damascus on the issue of the Bible in Islam. Many of these documents are worthy of detailed analysis and the partial translations here are meant to spur other scholars to pay more attention to them. In

5 On the Bible controversy see my *In Defense*, pp. 21–35.

6 For the edition of the treatise see *In defense of the Bible*, and also my "A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist: Al-Biqā'ī's Bible Treatise and His Defence of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qur'an." *Speculum*, vol. 83, no. 3 (2008): 629–654.

7 See the literature cited above.

8 The title of the anti-Bible treatise of al-Sakhāwī is *al-Aṣl al-aṣīl fī taḥrīm al-naql min al-Tawrāt wa-al-Injīl* (*The Most firm Foundations on Prohibiting the Quoting from the Torah and the Gospels*). For information on this title see my *In Defense of the Bible*, p. 32, esp. note 98.

this article I will offer a preliminary analysis and a partial translation of these fatwas, thus making them available to scholars interested in the status of the Bible in Islam. Al-Biqā'ī has quoted 13 testimonies (book reviews, fatwas and finally quotations from letters of support), and I will translate several of these here, and comment on all of them. I have numbered them consecutively as they appeared in his chapter.

1) The first testimony was written by the Shafi'ite chief judge in Cairo, Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad al-Munāwī (d. 871/1467), one of the leading jurist in Cairo, and a traditional sufi who was an adamant foe of Ibn al-'Arabī and his writings. The biography in al-Sakhāwī's *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi* is hyperbolic in its praise, "he was the blessing of the age, perfect in rectitude, piety, perfect follower of the Sunnah, full of humbleness, and generosity."<sup>9</sup> Clearly one of the leading jurists in the city, al-Sakhāwī is at a loss as to why he would come to the defence of al-Biqā'ī. Al-Sakhāwī, an unrelenting enemy of al-Biqā'ī, could not understand why an unblemished scholar like al-Munāwī would care to defend al-Biqā'ī, and was especially troubled by his testimony, which was quoted by al-Biqā'ī and is translated below. Al-Sakhāwī was even troubled that al-Munāwī had helped al-Biqā'ī financially during the Bible controversy;<sup>10</sup> but al-Sakhāwī has a more frightening reason as to why this magnanimous scholar might have defended al-Biqā'ī: al-Sakhāwī claimed that al-Munāwī, by his defence, was trying to prevent anyone from harming or seeking revenge from al-Biqā'ī.<sup>11</sup> The text of the testimony of al-Munāwī, as quoted by al-Biqā'ī, runs as follows:

"I have read this fine work (meaning the Qur'an commentary of al-Biqā'ī). It is a fine and well-crafted work, and this clearly points to the fact that its author is a leading scholar, who has written a correct and justified work, having gathered it from correct sources. One should not construe too much out of the fact that he quoted on some occasions from the Torah and the Gospels since he was just following the pious ancestors, the theologians and the founders, like 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar, who was following the example of our Prophet, Muhammad, the master of humanity; and al-Biqā'ī was following the example of all the leading scholars after these two. It is thus clear that this act is permissible for those who are capable of doing it, and not permissible for those who are incapable of doing it. This work is thus worthy of being favorably received, and one should not give heed to the disparagements of a jealous and blaming scholar. May God keep its author a fountain for the thirsty, and keep the benefits that come from him flowing to the Muslims. Written on the 19<sup>th</sup> of Sha'bān year 868 H (April 27, 1464)."<sup>12</sup>

9 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi*, v. 10: 254–258. The quotation here is from page 256. For his opposition to Ibn al-'Arabī see p. 256.

10 Ibid. v. 10:257.

11 Ibid. The biography ends with the paragraph about the relationship between al-Biqā'ī and al-Munāwī, all indications that al-Sakhāwī could not get al-Biqā'ī out of his mind.

12 Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 65.

2) The second book review-fatwa came from the Chief Hanafite judge in Cairo, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Shiḥnah, Muḥibb al-Dīn (d. 890/1485), one of the leading scholars of the Mamluk dynasty. Ibn al-Shiḥnah had a controversial full life, spent between Aleppo and Cairo. He was embroiled in many dubious financial affairs and power struggles that saw him ousted from his native town Aleppo only to settle in Cairo and attempt to establish a power base. His was as such a typical scholar's life; he was too tempted by the financial benefits of overseeing charitable foundations and was not above the buying of judicial positions to advance his career. All of these travails are chronicled by al-Sakhāwī in a long 10 pages biography.<sup>13</sup> Of this long forgotten life I would like to highlight two points raised by al-Sakhāwī; the first is the accusation that he was obsessed with a hatred for Ibn al-‘Arabī, and as such was a natural ally of al-Biqā‘ī, who was also a detractor of Ibn al-‘Arabī.<sup>14</sup> This affinity and brotherhood of hatred for Ibn al-‘Arabī, which united al-Biqā‘ī and many scholars in Cairo, was a contributing factor for their decision to stand behind him. The second piece of information about Ibn al-Shiḥnah is that he was a bibliophile, just like al-Biqā‘ī, and apparently a notorious book thief, who pilfered books from all his friends and from the Madrasa libraries, especially the Maḥmūdīyah library.<sup>15</sup> Al-Sakhāwī then sarcastically comments that Ibn al-Shiḥnah benefitted little from these books and would only lend them to the mighty and powerful.<sup>16</sup> The book review is long and ornate, starting with a relatively long introduction full of praise and allusions to the books of al-Biqā‘ī, and al-Biqā‘ī duly draws the attention of the reader to this fact just in case the reader is unaware of this allusion to the books of al-Biqā‘ī. The translation omits the introduction and is not literal in the ornate parts (which are almost impossible to translate). The Translation starts with the beginning of the defense (after the Arabic *ammā ba‘d*):

“I, the humble despicable creature, have read this composition, which is unequal among books, and it has gathered pure healthy water from a pure source. It is full of his brilliant original ideas which are unattainable to those who are lazy and slumberous. He (al-Biqā‘ī) has paved a path that few have walked before; he has searched with his brilliant mind and gathered material and used arguments that are incontestable in their cogency and brilliance. He has only done so following the already set example which we find in our holy book (the Qur’an) when God said: “say: bring forth the Torah and recite it if you

13 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’*, v. 9:295; see also al-Zirkī, *al-A‘lām*, v. 7:51, and *In Defense*, p. 204 for more references.

14 On Ibn al-Shiḥnah’s hate of Ibn al-‘Arabī see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’*, v. 9:296 “ghayr annahu kān mumtaḥanan bi-Ibn ‘Arabī” (he was afflicted with an obsession with Ibn al-‘Arabī) and v. 9:301 “shadīd al-inkār ‘alā Ibn ‘Arabī wa-man naḥā naḥwahu” (denouncing Ibn al-‘Arabī and those who thought like him).

15 Ibid. v. 9:309: “‘aẓīm al-‘ināyah fī taḥṣīl al-kutub wa-law bi-al-ghaṣb wa-al-jaḥd.”

16 Ibid. : ḥādhā wa-huwa lā yahtadī li-al-kashf min kathīr minhā, wa-lā ya‘bur minhā illā li-man lahu shawkah.

were truthful.” (Q. 3:93) Thus surely to use the uncorrupted parts of the Bible as proof in arguments is the most cogent of arguments, especially since God and his Prophet have narrated this (the rule to use their books as argument) to us without stating that it is forbidden to our Prophet. And what proof is more cogent and more solid than quoting the word of God. Our colleagues (meaning jurists) have stated that God’s eternal speech, when uncorrupted or altered, if written in Arabic then it is the Qur’an, and if written in Hebrew it is the Torah and if written in Syriac it is the Gospels. They also stated that His speech does not contradict itself, only the phrasing is different, just as deeds differ by intentions. Now look at our master ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb; he used to frequent the Jews and hear them recite the Torah and he used to wonder how the Torah confirms the truth of what is being revealed in the Qur’an. This is a tradition narrated by al-Ṭabarānī (on the authority of al-Sha’bī) in several places in his writings. Now, the injunction to suspend our judgment by neither believing nor disbelieving what the people of the Book say in their books should be understood to cover matters that are not covered by the two possibilities where our Law either contradicts their statements or confirms them. Thus in either case (when our Book confirms their book, or contradicts it), we have a resolution and a clear judgment and we are not in a state of suspension of judgment; thus either we believe them, since our Law confirms them, or we disbelieve them since our Law contradicts them. The author (al-Biqā’ī) has justified his practice by citing the Qur’an and the Sunnah using proofs that he was the first to invent and the first to articulate. There is thus no need here to mention them again. May God preserve the author, and keep him on the path of revealing more truth. This statement was written extemporaneously and hastily by me Muḥammad b. al-Shiḥnah, may God cover my sins and forgive me, written on the 27<sup>th</sup> of Sha’bān 868 H. (May 5, 1464).”

3) The third book review is from the leading Judge of the Malikites, Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, known famously as Ibn Ḥurayz (d. 873/1469).<sup>17</sup> The book review is full of praise and raises no legal point, nor does it allude to the issue of quoting the Bible. Ibn Ḥurayz was a respectable scholar, universally liked, and even al-Sakhāwī finds nothing ill to report about the man and the biography is full of praise. Like al-Biqā’ī, he was a bibliophile who sought valuable manuscripts. The book review was written in Ramaḍān 868 H (May 1464).<sup>18</sup>

4) The fourth book review is from the chief judge of the Hanbalites, Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm (d. 876 H. /1471). This judge was universally acknowledged as the leading figure in his school, of impeccable ethics and a highly regarded author. His book review is the first that alluded to jealousy as being the main issue behind the attack on the author; professional jealousy was the main point that al-Biqā’ī had said was behind the whole affair, dedicating the introduction of his defense to this issue.<sup>19</sup> The review reads:

17 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’*, v. 7:191–193.

18 Al-Biqā’ī, *In Defense*, p. 67.

19 Al-Biqā’ī, *In Defense*, p. 63–65.

“I have read this work, this unique and marvelous work, which made me remember what I know of its author of high intelligence and high morality. The work is not to be discredited by the fact that it has quoted from previous scriptures. We already see support for this practice in the Qur’an and the Sunnah and the fact that previous scholars, both ancient and modern, have themselves quoted these books. Yet for every good deed there is someone who says it is a bad deed. We ask God to protect us from jealousy that blinds and prevents us from judging with equity. May God keep the life of its author and raise him in honor. Written on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Ramaḍān 868 (May 17, 1464).”<sup>20</sup>

5) The author of the fifth book review is Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad al-Aqṣarā’ī (d. 880/1475), the leading Hanafite scholar of Cairo and the Mamluk realm, and the chief judge of the Hanafites.<sup>21</sup> He was famous for standing up to the Mamluk sultan al-Ashraf who wanted to confiscate the endowments to equip his army, on the pretext of an emergency. He was the first to raise in his defense of al-Biqā’ī the issue of the impossibility of conducting a debate without quoting one’s opponents. This is a point that al-Biqā’ī and others would use to defend the practice of quoting non-Muslim works. I have so far not mentioned that al-Biqā’ī in the introduction to each book review or fatwa kept score of whether the quoted scholar had stood with al-Biqā’ī in his later more famous controversy, the Ibn al-Fāriḍ controversy. In this sense, al-Biqā’ī was as vindictive as any of his opponents. The four previous scholars either supported him, or died before the controversy and as such he is full of praise for them. Yaḥyā however was a defender of Ibn al-Fāriḍ and al-Biqā’ī did not fail to note this and bemoan this failing on the part of his old friend. Al-Sakhāwī will himself point out this vindictiveness on the part of al-Biqā’ī in his biography of Yaḥyā.<sup>22</sup> This is one of many examples which show that al-Sakhāwī read everything written by al-Biqā’ī. I will translate here the relevant parts of the book review omitting the introduction:

“As to the matter regarding what he (al-Biqā’ī) had quoted from the words of an opponent and their arguments, we say, that one does that for many reasons. One reason to quote the opponents is to refute them and to confirm that this is what the opponent is saying; the other is to clarify what the opponent is saying, thus pointing out to them the consequences of what they are holding to be true. It may happen that in certain instances some of what they say coincides with the truth of our Law. The proof of the validity of quoting them is already clear in the Qur’an and the Sunnah. But let us not forget that the books of Kalam (theology) are always filled with the arguments of the opponents. One cannot deny this aspect of polemical works. May God give the author all

20 Ibid. p. 67.

21 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Daw’*, v. 10:240–243.

22 Ibid. p. 243, it is the last paragraph in the biography.

the rewards for what he has suffered in writing this book. Written on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Ramaḍān 868 (May 13, 1464).<sup>23</sup>

6) The sixth book review, like the third above, is simply a string of hackneyed phrases and benedictions on the author. It is written by 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Yaḥyā (d. 880/1475). The biography of al-Sakhāwī is full of praise of a man who was harmless and pious.<sup>24</sup> Al-Biqā'ī does not forget to tell us what the position of this scholar in the Ibn al-Fāriḍ controversy was; he informs us that he was neutral (sākin).<sup>25</sup>

7) The seventh testimony is a fatwa proper. It is the longest of the defenses cited by al-Biqā'ī, and is written by a leading intellectual figure of Mamluk Egypt. His name was Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Kāfiyājī (d. 879/1474), a Hanafite scholar who hailed from the Ottoman domains and came to Cairo, and became one of its well established scholars. He was a prolific author.<sup>26</sup> He was on the side of al-Biqā'ī in the controversy over Ibn al-Fāriḍ.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that many of the points raised by al-Kāfiyājī would be elaborated and used by al-Biqā'ī later on in his treatise. The fatwa runs as follows:

“Thanks be to God who made scholars the inheritors of Prophets, and who sent his most pure Prophet as a mercy. I say: the matter regarding this book is complicated and needs elaboration. First, writing books is a lawful act, since God has stated in his Book, ‘the good deeds are better in the eyes of God and of better reward’ (Qur’an 18:46), and also because the Prophet said, ‘that which Muslims see as good is good in the eyes of God,’ and other proofs. The second issue, transmitting and quoting statements and stories which import guidance and advice, is permissible by law, whether the statements copied were known to be factually true or we cannot know their veracity. As for transmitting truthful statements, it is incumbent to transmit them because of the dire need to know them. As for transmitting statements whose veracity is unknown, it is done so that truthful statements become more prominent (by comparison) and to verify them in the future to see whether they are true or false. Let us not forget that in sciences things are clear by comparing them to their opposites, and untrue things are cited so that one gets to know them and become careful, just as in medicine one learns about poisons and other harmful things (to avoid them). The poet once said: ‘I came to know evil not for its own sake, but rather to avoid it, and one ignorant of evil among people will suffer it.’ That is why scholars have stated that it is not necessary to procure good things in

23 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 68.

24 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, v. 4:158–159.

25 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 68.

26 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, v. 9:259–261; see also the introduction to the edition of his *al-Taysīr fi qawā'id 'ilm al-tafsīr*, ed. Nāṣir al-Maṭrūdī (Dimashq, 1990). I briefly discuss this fatwa in my “A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist,” *Speculum*, 83 (2008), p. 642–643.

27 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 68.



totality, while it is necessary to avoid harmful things in totality.<sup>28</sup> Don't you see that many scholars including jurists quote the statements of their enemies including contradictory statements, whether it be true or false statements? The third issue: it is permissible to quote the Torah and the Gospels in works in our age for purposes like admonition and advice, although it is not permissible to use these two books to deduce laws or principles of laws, as stated by scholars in their books. This is comparable to the situation of prophetic statements whose veracity we are not in a position to verify, which nevertheless can be used but can also be discarded. Similar to this reasoning is the opinion of the Hanafites, who state that the law of previous communities is our law by default if it was narrated to us without it being refuted or rejected, just as God said in his book, 'and we ordained for them (Israelites) that a soul for a soul' (Q. 5:45). It is clear thus that copying a chapter from the Torah or the Gospels or other such works is permissible by Islamic Law, and is a lawfully non-equivocal matter, although it might seem of dubious legality in some delusional thinking. Such prohibitions which are based on speculation are baseless as is clear in the books of the foundation of law (uṣūl). Add to that what has been reported in the two books of hadith (Bukhārī and Muslim), as narrated from 'Abd Allāh b. 'Amr, that he said that the Prophet said: 'narrate from me if even one verse, and narrate from the Children of Israel without any fear.' The knowledgeable people of hadith have claimed that what is meant here is narrating stories and news, since in these one can learn admonition. As for the prohibition of copying of the Torah and the Gospels in totality (by Muslims), beyond copying the stories from them, one can resolve this contradiction in several ways. Some believe that this prohibition of copying any parts of the Bible was enforced before the Qur'an was famous and established, to prevent confusion and contamination. Don't you see that the writing of hadith was also prohibited before the Qur'an became established, and after the Qur'an was established, the copying of hadith became permissible? This is the same as the case of the Torah and the Gospels. Al-Bayḏāwī said in his commentary on the verse 'God does not shy from giving a parable' (Q. 2:26), that God has compared in the Gospels the evil in the hearts to sawdust, and compared callow hearts to rocks, and compared the act of talking to the riffraff to the act of stocking a hive of wasps. The likes of such citations have occurred in many a Qur'an commentary, like *al-Kashshāf* of al-Zamakhsharī and the *Major Commentary* of al-Rāzī and in the books of hadith like al-Bukhārī and many others. It is also found in books of theology like *al-Ṣaḥā'if* and *al-Mawāqif* and others, and is also found in books of jurisprudence (uṣūl) like the work of al-Bazdawī in uṣūl and many like it. It has been mentioned in history books that stories and fables like the story of 'Uwaj b. 'Unuq and the like of it can be written down and copied, although its veracity is unknown, simply because such stories can teach a lesson and a moral; do you not see that the Qur'an says 'in their stories there is a lesson for those who are wise' (Q. 12:111), and also (remember) the known adage that one does not discard something completely simply because it is not fully comprehensible. For knowing some parts of something is better than complete ignorance about it. God has said in his Book 'Lord make me wiser.' The poet has also said: 'One learns from every human being unless they are proved wrong.' The fourth issue is the fact that copying stories and news from the

28 There is a sentence here that I have been unable to translate, since it makes a comparison to the sense of touch and how it engulfs all the body but the liver.

Torah and other works has become such a widespread phenomenon in our time, and it is clear and manifest such that it constitutes a case of universal tacit consensus (*ijmā' sukūti*) among Muslims that it is an acceptable practice. That is why copying from old scriptures can be seen in the books of early generations and no one objected to it. Thus it is unusual that people are attacking the book *Nazm al-Durar* (the Qur'an commentary of al-Biqā'ī), and unacceptable as we have been showing. Now if one is to object and say 'how do we accept your argument here when in theology works we find the statement that previous scriptures have been abrogated completely, made null and inadmissible both for reading or copying,' I would answer that I am not denying this, but rather saying that what was forbidden to copy was parts of the Torah that are of legal content and which contradict our Law, and this prohibition is not concerning parts of the Bible that are not dealing with such issues, and thus the two positions are not contradictory. In any case you should be aware that the final word on issues of legality is not what theologians say but rather what we jurists decide, since we are the ones who are the experts on the law. You are also aware of the legal dictum that abrogating an obligatory obligation does not necessarily mean that you can't fulfill that obligation as a pious act, like the abrogation of the fasting on Yom Kippur, which though is no longer obligatory for Muslims to fast, is still allowed if they would want to fast it."<sup>29</sup>

The fatwa then shifts into a book review style, praising the work of al-Biqā'ī and al-Biqā'ī himself. The author dates his fatwa to 20<sup>th</sup> of Ramaḍān 868 (May 27, 1464).

8) The eighth book review is from Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Shumunnī (d. 872/1468), named Aḥmad in his biography in *al-Ḍaw'* by al-Sakhāwī.<sup>30</sup> Al-Shumunnī was a towering figure in the constellation of scholars in Cairo, acknowledged by all, of impeccable reputation, incorruptible and a first-rate scholar. Al-Sakhāwī is full of praise of this scholar, and yet unable to accept the fact that al-Shumunnī wrote a laudable good review for al-Biqā'ī. How could such a scholar be fooled by that charlatan? Al-Sakhāwī, who was close to al-Shumunnī, reports that he asked him about this book review and this is what he reported:

"Sometimes he (al-Shumunnī) could not help it but write approvingly on things he did not necessarily consider good, in order to affect a good deed. This is the case when he wrote a good book review for al-Biqā'ī's Qur'an commentary. He (al-Shumunnī) told me when I reproached him about this and confronted him, 'I only wrote this book review to prevent the Sultan Mamluk Tambughā from destroying him, by God I did not read the book and this al-Biqā'ī is not of the scholars in my opinion."<sup>31</sup>

The issue here is clear that scholars were looking after each other and al-Sakhāwī is so full of hate that he is unable to accept class solidarity as a way of conduct. Al-

29 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 68–72.

30 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, v. 2:174–178.

31 Ibid. v. 2:177 lines 18–19.

Biqā'ī in his introduction of al-Shumunnī's book review comments that he died before the Ibn al-Fāriḍ's controversy, clearly alluding to the fact that al-Shumunnī was a staunch opponent of the theology of Ibn al-'Arabī.<sup>32</sup> The review is clearly written by someone who indeed did not read the book, and as such is full of pleasantries and platitudes.<sup>33</sup> He wrote it on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Ramaḍān 868 (June 1, 1464).

9) The ninth book review is by one of the leading professors of Cairo, originally from central Asia where he studied with the most illustrious scholars of the 'Ajamī tradition. This Shafite scholar, Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad al-Ḥiṣnī (d. 881/1476) became one of most influential teachers in Cairo.<sup>34</sup> The book review however, is like the previous one, full of praise and of no specific substance.<sup>35</sup> What is interesting is that this scholar became one of the most determined opponents of al-Biqā'ī in the controversy over Ibn al-Fāriḍ and apparently wrote a fatwa preventing al-Biqā'ī from quoting the Bible and the Gospels. This information is given by al-Sakhāwī and there is no reason to deny it, since the book review has nothing to say about the issue of the status of the Bible.<sup>36</sup> Al-Sakhāwī this time insists that al-Ḥiṣnī wrote his book review to prevent the killing of al-Biqā'ī (qaṣdan li-al-difā' an 'unuqih).<sup>37</sup> This understanding of some of the motivation of the scholars who wrote for al-Biqā'ī cannot be discounted, and I will have occasion to discuss this aspect of the affair later in the article.

10) So far all the book reviews and the fatwas have come from Cairo and they stem from the first phase of the Bible controversy; that is, the year 868.<sup>38</sup> Al-Biqā'ī however will further bring a long fatwa from a scholar in Damascus and a book review from a scholar in Mecca. Both were Shafī'ite and both were judges. The first was Yūsuf b. Aḥmad al-Bā'ūnī (d. 880/1475), the leading judge of Damascus, and a well-regarded administrator. Al-Biqā'ī would only know of this fatwa after he moved to Damascus in 880/1475 from Cairo, and was shown the fatwa by the son of al-Bā'ūnī, after the father has died.<sup>39</sup> As such, this was an unsolicited fatwa, and points to the fact that Damascene scholars did not want to be left out of the debates in Cairo. The fatwa however belongs to the second phase of the Bible

32 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 72. For his opposition to Ibn al-'Arabī see the remarks in al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, v. 2:175.

33 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 72–73.

34 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, v. 11: 76–77.

35 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 73.

36 See the discussion of *al-Sakhāwī* about this matter in v. 11:77.

37 *Ibid.*

38 On the two phases of the Bible controversy see Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 24–33.

39 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 73.

controversy and stems from the end of the year 872/1468. The fatwa is long and is actually made up of two major parts, the book review section which opens the fatwa, and the fatwa proper, which is what will be translated here<sup>40</sup>:

“Now we turn our attention to those who censured the book for quoting stories from the Torah and the Gospels. The author (al-Biqā'ī) did this for a good purpose. The objector, may God forgive him and enlighten his mind by removing jealousy from his heart, has been deluded by what al-Zarkashī had stated that there is a consensus among Muslims that one should not copy or attend to these scriptures, also basing themselves on the anger of our Prophet at 'Umar (b. al-Khaṭṭāb) when he saw him with a folio containing something of the Torah and said: 'were Moses to be alive now he could only have become a follower of mine.' Already our teacher Ibn Ḥajar has disputed the issue of the existence of a consensus among Muslims regarding this matter and his refutation is sufficient for us. The gist of the argument of Ibn Ḥajar is this: how could one state that there is a consensus when there is a dispute over whether the corruption of the Bible is textual and interpretative or simply a corruption in its interpretation, the latter being a position held by al-Bukhārī? And how can one claim there is a consensus when there is a dispute whether corruption has affected all the Bible or simply parts of it? Now we all know the dispute over this matter; it is a well-known dispute and as such, one cannot claim there is a consensus among Muslims on this matter. Add to that that the aforementioned hadith is a weak hadith. True, it has come in various lines of transmission, but they are all weak. Yet one can see that it could not be a complete fabrication, given that it is narrated by many (although all of them weak). Now even if this hadith was a true hadith, there are enough indications that we are allowed to copy and use the Bible. Now we (Ibn Ḥajar) say that reading and copying the Bible was disliked and not forbidden, since there is no indication in the word “angry”, which was in the hadith quoted above, to indicate that the intent was to forbid him from doing what he was doing. The Prophet can become angry at something distasteful or disliked (makrūh) or angry at someone who ought to behave better than doing what they did. Compare this to his anger when Mu'adh lingered in reciting the Qur'an in his morning prayer. Thus it is better to differentiate between readers of the Bible: those who are weak of faith who should be forbidden to read the Bible, and those who are firm in their faith, especially when there is a need among Muslims to read these books. This is a summary of the arguments of our teacher Ibn Ḥajar. Now if you take the two hadiths that scholars use in this matter, the one that is used for prohibition, the hadith of 'Umar who was reading a folio, and the hadith of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar (the one cited in number 7 which states that one should narrate from the sons of Israel without fear) which allows the act, then we can reconcile these two contradictory hadiths by stating that the folio in the hands of 'Umar contained laws that had been abrogated by Islam. Thus the anger of our Prophet can be attributed to two possible reasons. Either because corruption in the Bible had happened mostly in the legal parts unlike stories which were not corrupted; or because the whole legal dispensation of Moses had been abrogated (although as such not corrupted) by our law and it was inappropriate of 'Umar to busy himself with that which had been abrogated instead of with the new dispensation. Now this second explanation is more likely to be

40 The translated parts starts from p. 75 onwards.

the case, since our Prophet was angry and stated that Moses will have to follow him, implying that Moses' law was no longer operative now that Muhammad had come. As for the hadith of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar, one can understand the material to be narrated from the Jews to be about the foretelling of Muhammad which they knew about in their books, such that Muslims use these stories as evidence against the Jews, and thus point to their arrogance in refusing the Prophet Muhammad while he was mentioned in their books. Thus it is clear that those who opposed the book of al-Biqā'ī have no grounds to stand on, and anyone who is claiming otherwise is refuted.<sup>41</sup>

The fatwa is dated by the author to the year 872/1467.

11) This is the second item that comes from outside of Cairo. It is a book review that comes from the Shafī'ite Chief judge of Mecca, Ibrāhīm b. Zuhayrah (d. 891/1486).<sup>42</sup> Its significance comes from the fact that this judge was the leading figure in Hijaz and universally acknowledged since he was the custodian of the Kaaba. Al-Biqā'ī portrays him as obsessed with trying to get copies of his Qur'an commentary, pestering his book dealer in Cairo to hurry up and send him copies of the volumes as they become available. The book review is actually culled from the letters sent by Ibn Zuhayrah to his book dealer in Cairo. The book review mentions nothing about the quotations from the Bible and is mostly concerned with the munāsabāt aspects of the work. Munāsabāt was a hermeneutical theory that al-Biqā'ī claimed was the basis of his Qur'an commentary. Al-Sakhāwī could hardly let this book review go unmentioned in his biography of Ibn Zuhayrah, accusing al-Biqā'ī of making a mountain out of molehill, and that al-Biqā'ī was a hypocrite and unseemly in his praise to the man.<sup>43</sup>

12) Al-Biqā'ī then shifts the time frame in his chapter after this book review, thus pointing to the two phases of the controversy. He states that recently, i. e. in the year the apologia was written, 872, the issue has flared up again.<sup>44</sup> The book review and fatwas cited so far mostly came from the 862/1457 phase of the Bible controversy (apart from no. 10). But as we know the controversy did flare up again in 873/1468, and it is also the year that al-Biqā'ī wrote his apologia. Al-Biqā'ī informed us that in this year one of his enemies was running around with a fatwa question phrased anonymously such that it targeted al-Biqā'ī without naming him, and this enemy was obtaining answers to this question that were in effect undermining the standing of al-Biqā'ī. This opponent, who is left unmentioned in the chapter as it stands now, was circulating the question with the answers already obtained and gathering, as much as possible, new fatwas against

41 Ibid. pp. 75–76.

42 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, v. 1: 88–99, the year of death is given on page 98.

43 Ibid. v. 1:92.

44 Al-Biqā'ī, *In Defense*, p. 78.

any Muslim who quotes the Bible approvingly. Luckily for al-Biqā'ī, in one such gathering, in the presence of the scholar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Muqṣī (his full name is 'Uthmān b. 'Abd Allāh), it happened that this opponent produced the question and the fatwas he had gathered in order to obtain a new fatwa. There happened to be a student of al-Biqā'ī present who objected to this fatwa and forced al-Muqṣī, who was being duped, to inquire and sent after al-Biqā'ī to probe the matter further.<sup>45</sup> Al-Muqṣī, having realized his mistake, asked al-Biqā'ī to send him a fatwa question so that he can answer it and clear the name of al-Biqā'ī. Al-Biqā'ī then got the chance to formulate his fatwa question in such a form that it was a defense of his practice. The form of the question of al-Biqā'ī, written in the third person singular, is:

“What do you say about a person who wrote a book in defense and praise of Islam and its adherents and in censure of falsehood and its people, and quoted in support of the truth of the religion of Islam and the foretelling of the coming of its Prophet, some of the previous scriptures? He, this author, also showed the misguidance of those enemies of Islam and refuted what they believe. He did that following the practice of previous scholars, those who have written on the Life of Muhammad (Sirah), hadith scholars and Qur'an commentators, and jurists and theologians. People like al-Bukhārī and Muslim, Ibn Ishāq, al-Wāqidi, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, al-Baghawī, al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī, al-Aṣḫānī, Abū Ḥayyān, and the people who have written on sects, all of whom quoted the falsehoods of opponents in order to show their falsehoods. This author who has done so is also known to be a scholar famous in knowledge, who has already received many good book reviews from famous scholars on many of his books. Now suddenly, a nobody has come up against him, calumniating against him, and hurting him simply because of what he has done, and accuses him of committing a sinful prohibited act, wanting to harm him by word and deed. Tell me what should be done to this hateful person who is going after this author? Give us a fatwa, may you be rightly guided and keep you as a succor for Islam.”<sup>46</sup>

The fatwa question is clearly feeding the answer already. The answer of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Muqṣī was:

“Praise be to the Lord who guides to truth. I have known the author and what he has written, and he is worthy of praise, and worthy of God's mercy. And why not, when this author is a servant to the Sunnah of Muhammad, devoting himself to servicing it. I have also seen his work in which he quotes from the old scriptures in Arabic, a translation that is to be trusted. There is no harm or censure on those who follow the previous scholars, rather they are to be praised. The method of this author is the same as the method of previous scholars who were rightly guided, I have not seen anything wrong in his quoting the Torah although he was aware of its corruption. Anyone who accuses him of breaking the law or accuses him of quoting them maliciously is wrong and is raising a

45 For the biography of al-Muqṣī see Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, v. 4:131–133.

46 Ibid. p. 78–79.

false accusation. Such an accuser should be censured and brought to heel and punished, hopefully by the ruler. May God reward the scholars who defend Islam and make sure that the law is upheld. Written by ‘Uthmān b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥusaynī al-Shāfi‘ī.<sup>47</sup>

13) The final book review is from Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Jawjarī al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 889/1484). It is not clear why al-Biqā‘ī added this book review here since it clearly belongs to the first phase of the Bible controversy. It is however undated, and since there are indications that the author waded on the side of al-Biqā‘ī in his last controversy in Damascus against the teachings of al-Ghazālī (which happened after 880/1475), there is the possibility that it could have been written after al-Biqā‘ī moved to Damascus. The book review is vacuous, and if we are to believe al-Sakhāwī, al-Jawjarī was an easy reviewer; he even manages to quote a book review of his written on a book written by a stable boy (groom) that was not worthy of any such praise.<sup>48</sup>

## Commentary

The material translated or mentioned above is extensive; in all we have 17 pages in the Arabic edition of the work. Al-Biqā‘ī gathered this material to support his case, but also, if we are to believe al-Sakhāwī, to prevent the authorities from arresting him or putting him on trial. These testimonies however were not the only material on the topic. His enemies were doing the very same thing, if in the opposite direction: one of them was running around actually soliciting fatwas from scholars to denounce al-Biqā‘ī and his method. We, unfortunately, don’t have these fatwas, or the counter treatises against al-Biqā‘ī, of which we know there were at least two (one by al-Sakhāwī himself). The material preserved by al-Biqā‘ī thus represents unique evidence from the event. We are able to see what the major figures of the Cairo religious establishment thought of the topic, and guess at what the opponents were saying. The diverse individuals that authored the testimonials is the first point I want to highlight. It shows that the controversy was a major event, not a minor skirmish. Some of the leading figures of the age waded into the affair, including the four chief judges of the time. Indeed, scholars were wading into the matter even unsolicited; that is, although most of these testimonials were solicited by al-Biqā‘ī, a few were not, and some were prompted by genuine interest in the matter on the part of the scholars who wrote them. Moreover, although most of the testimonials stem from the year 868 (1463), some were written much later, one stemming from 870 (1465), and another from 873

47 Ibid. p. 79.

48 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’*, v. 8:123–126.

(1468), indicating a continuous interest in the matter beyond the first initial wave of the scandal. The depth and the entanglements of the controversy is not only evident from the testimonials cited in this chapter (and by inference from the evidence that there were counter fatwas and testimonials) but also from the intricate commentary on the controversy by al-Sakhāwī in his biographical dictionary *al-Daw' al-lāmi'*. To clarify here, our ability to measure the implications of this controversy and our ability to investigate the authors of the testimonials is only possible because of the other major protagonist in the controversy, al-Sakhāwī, who, by his meticulously detailed biographies of the various protagonists, made it possible to reconstruct the nexus of relationships between the various participants. What we know about these 14 individuals we know mostly through al-Sakhāwī's biographical dictionary, and there it is clear that he kept tabs on their endorsement of al-Biqā'ī. Indeed, al-Biqā'ī was not exaggerating when he accused al-Sakhāwī of being obsessed with him. Al-Biqā'ī appears unexpectedly and repeatedly in the biographical dictionary, and this fight over the Bible was far more significant than I at first realized. The second point I want to raise is that the fatwas and testimonials were, despite their serious scholarly content, a well-crafted propaganda campaign by al-Biqā'ī. There is no denying that the list of names, which included the leading figures of Cairo all lining up to defend him, was impossible to ignore or belittle; even al-Sakhāwī was at a loss of how to undermine this strategy of his enemy. The list is a "who's who" of the Cairene establishment and they are impressive by any standard. That the four chief judges were among the roster is only an indication of how well planned this campaign was on the part of al-Biqā'ī. But other very serious scholars were among the list, and to add a sense of genuineness to the presentation, there was an unsolicited posthumously discovered testimonial that was added to the list years later when al-Biqā'ī moved to Damascus. These testimonials were touching in their affection for the author, testifying to al-Biqā'ī's piety as well as his scholarship. Al-Biqā'ī could maximize the impact of the list because he had also cultivated his reputation as a serious pious scholar (someone who was engaged in *al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-al-naḥy 'an al-munkar*: commanding good and forbidding evil), with hardly any foibles to pick on by his enemies. He wanted the reader to be convinced that there was a conspiracy against him, and that professional jealousy was at the heart of the attacks of his enemies, and not serious scholarly objections or genuine religious piety.

The testimonials were capped by a brilliant paragraph that was sure to maximize the impact on the reader, an anguished cry against his enemies and their hypocrisy: the attack against his book was the height of insincerity and carried out because of personal grudges, for how can anyone take them seriously when they are busying themselves with attacking his book when real genuine heretical works (like the works of *al-Kashshāf* of al-Zamksharī, the *Epistles of Ikhwān al-*



*ṣafā*, the book of *al-Filāḥah* of Ibn al-Waḥshīyah, and the *Fuṣūṣ* of Ibn al-‘Arabī) were openly being sold in the book market with not one complaint on their part?<sup>49</sup> When they were preventing orphaned non-muslim kids from being converted to Islam? When some of them loved to socialize with the qibṭ (the Christian Egyptians)? Al-Biqā‘ī was telling his reader he is not any less a Muslim for quoting the Bible; he actually is a staunch conservative on legal matters concerning non-Muslims. His Bible usage is an Islamic practice, a venerable one; this was a scholarly practice that did not originate from any love or inclination towards Jews or Christians (the dreaded *muwālāt al-yahūd wa-al-naṣārā*). The third point to highlight about the testimonials is that these were well crafted nuggets of polemical and judicial opinions that, I am now convinced, influenced how al-Biqā‘ī himself argued his case. The fatwas were thus an integral element of the campaign of al-Biqā‘ī to exonerate himself; they supplied him with major arguments and ways of defending himself. Al-Biqā‘ī admits as much when he says in the concluding remarks for this chapter that “what was mentioned in passing in these fatwas in my defence will be elaborated later on in the book.”<sup>50</sup> The testimonials are to be seen as part of a nexus of connections constructed by al-Biqā‘ī to make himself part of the establishment and to portray his approach as normative, thus preventing anyone from using the major weakness of his position against him, that he was indeed being an innovator, and a radical one at that. Al-Biqā‘ī was in a weak position, for he was courting becoming portrayed as an innovator, *mubtadi‘*, and as falling into *muwālāt* (of loving) the Jews and the Christians, accusations which were indeed levied against him. There was no denying it; yet, by weaving the names and opinions of these scholars into his apologia, al-Biqā‘ī neutralized any such attacks, and made the matter an issue of absence of consensus (*ijmā‘*). This was a matter of *khilāf*, legal disagreement, and as such, there were at least two possible positions on the matter, which meant that he stood justified, even if mistaken.

We have to see in what al-Biqā‘ī did a form of machination, a stratagem perfected by the scholars of medieval Islam, a form of constructing networks, in their struggle over ultimate authority in the field of religious teaching. These competing networks of scholars (which were ever shifting) were based on a system of paybacks by colleagues, and essential in creating blocks that acted in unison in times of crisis; their cohesiveness was achieved by the medium of fatwas. They were paying each other in words, and ultimately unwilling to allow any of their members to suffer the ultimate prize: death at the hands of the Mamluks due to a conceived infraction of the religious law. For as much as they needed the Mamluk system to advance their careers, there was a tacit under-

49 Al-Biqā‘ī, *In Defense*, p. 81.

50 Ibid.

standing, articulated by al-Sakhāwī's rueful remarks in the biographies of many of the participants, that even though, as one of them admitted, he had not even bothered to read the book of al-Biqā'ī, he was willing to write the fatwa to prevent the authorities from laying their hands on al-Biqā'ī. The Bible controversy moreover has to be seen as a continuum in a long series of Mamluk controversies, like the one about Ibn Taymiyya, or Ibn al-Fāriḍ, at least historiographically; Muslim scholars were seeing these controversies as connected and interrelated. These controversies have to be seen as part of the manner in which the system worked – and many of the controversies were orchestrated to keep a topic alive. These were issues in which one took a position to signify one's outlook and standing and where one belongs on a spectrum of religious outlook.



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## Authors

**Dotan Arad** (Ph.D. Hebrew University, 2013) is a lecturer in the Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry in Bar-Ilan University. His research interests include the Jews of Egypt, Palestine and Syria in the Mamluk and early Ottoman period, the Karaite Jews in those times, Responsa literature of the Jewish sages in the Ottoman Empire, Judaeo-Arabic literature and the Cairo Genizah documents. Dr. Arad is co-editor of *Yuvalin – A Multidisciplinary Journal of Genizah Research*. His recent book (with Esther M. Wagner), *Wisdom and Greatness in One Place: The Alexandrian Trader Moses Ben Judah and his Circle* (Leiden: Brill), will be published soon. His current research focuses on the Karaite Jews in the Ottoman Empire, mainly in the Arab provinces. The aim of this research is to prepare a comprehensive monograph on the Karaites in Ottoman Egypt, Syria (Damascus), and Palestine (Jerusalem and Hebron).

**Stephan Conermann** (Ph.D. Kiel University, 1996) is director of the Department of Near Eastern History and Languages at the University of Bonn, where he has been a professor of Islamic Studies since 2003. He is series editor of “Bonner Islamstudien” (BIS), “Bonner Asienstudien” (BAS), “Bonner islamwissenschaftliche Hefte” (BiH), “Narratologia Aliena” and “Mamluk Studies”. His research interests include narrative strategies in historiographic texts, transition periods, mobility and immobility, global history and rule and power. He focuses on the Mamluk and Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire and the Crossroads Area “Transottomanica”. His latest publications include *Mamlukica – Studies on the History and Society during the Mamluk Era/Studien zu Geschichte und Gesellschaft der Mamlukenzeit* (2013); (ed.) *Everything is on the Move: The ‘Mamluk Empire’ as a Node in (Trans-)Regional Networks* (2014); (ed.) *Kulturspezifische Erzählstrategien in “nicht-abendländischen” Lebensdarstellungen* (2015); (ed.) *Innovation oder Plagiat? Kompilationstechniken in der Vormoderne* (2015); (ed., with Gül Şen) *The Mamluk-Ottoman Transition Continuity and Change in Egypt and Bilād al-Shām in the Sixteenth Century* (2017).

**Paul B. Fenton** (Ph.D. Sorbonne, 1976) is co-director of the Department of Arabic and Hebrew Studies at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne, where he has been a professor of Hebrew Language and Literature since 1996. His research interests cover various aspects of Jewish civilization in the medieval Muslim world, particularly in the fields of philosophy and mysticism. He has carried out extensive research on the Cairo Genizah manuscripts and has written widely on the Judeo-Sufi movement in medieval Egypt, notably in his *Deux traités de mystique juive* (1987). Among his other books are *Moïse Ibn 'Ezra, philosophe et poète andalou du XIIIe siècle* (1997), *Le commentaire kairouanais sur le Livre de la Création* (2002), *Joseph Ibn Waqâr, The Principles of the Qabbalah* (2004), *Judah Ibn Malka. La consolation de l'expatrié spirituel* (2007), and *Juda al-Harizi, Kitâb al-Durar, The Book of Pearls* (2009). Two of his most recent books, *Muhammad Ibn Zikri (17th c.). On the Eminence of Israelites and Arabs* (2015) and *Exile in the Maghreb* (2016), have focused on the legal and social history of Jews under the Crescent in Muslim North Africa.

**Miriam Frenkel** (Ph.D. Hebrew University, 2001) is an associate professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel). Her research interests cover social and cultural history of the Jews in the medieval Islamic world. Her first book explored the medieval Jewish community of Alexandria and was based mainly on Genizah manuscripts. It was entitled *The Compassionate and Benevolent: The Leading Elite in the Jewish Community of Alexandria in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem 2006). She has also published many articles on various aspects of medieval Jewish life in Mediterranean lands: literacy, poverty, charity, pilgrimage, slavery, Jewish historiography and medieval cultural encounters between Judaism and Islam. She is currently engaged in a project on books and book culture in the medieval Jewish world under Islam.

**Yehoshua Frenkel** (Ph.D. Hebrew University) is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Haifa. His research interests and teaching fields include the social and legal history of the pre-modern Arab-Muslim lands. Recent publications are “Animals and Otherness in Mamluk Egypt and Syria”, in Francisco de Asís García García/Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo/María Victoria Chico Picazabar (eds.), *Animals and Otherness in the Middle Ages: Perspectives across Disciplines* (Oxford, 2013), 49–62; “Pilgrimages: Spaces of Peace and Conflict”, in Antón M. Pazos (ed.), *Pilgrims and Pilgrimages as Peacemakers in Christianity, Judaism and Islam* (Farnham, 2013), 63–83; and “Alexandria in the Ninth/Fifteenth Century: A Mediterranean Port City and a Mamlük Prison City”, *al-Masaq* 26.1 (2014): 78–92.

**Nathan Hofer** (Ph.D. Emory, 2011) is an associate professor of Islam at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri (USA). His research interests include Arabic historiography, the political economy of the Mamluk Empire and the social and political history of Sufism in the medieval Arabophone world. He has written a number of articles on the history of (Jewish and Muslim) Sufism in medieval Egypt. His first book, entitled *The Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt: 1173–1325* (Edinburgh 2015), explores the socio-political processes involved in the widespread adoption of Sufism in Ayyubid and early Mamluk Egypt. He is currently at work on two monographs dealing with the history of biographical and hagiographical textual production in Arabic.

**Elisha Russ-Fishbane** (Ph.D. Harvard) is an assistant professor of Hebrew & Judaic Studies and Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies at New York University in New York, NY (USA). He is a historian of Jewish life and culture in the Islamic world and of the religious and cultural encounters between Judaism and Islam. He is the author of a book on the Jewish-Sufi movement of thirteenth-century Egypt, entitled *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Circle* (Oxford University Press, 2015). He is currently at work on a history of old age in medieval Jewish society of the Mediterranean region.

**Paulina B. Lewicka** (Ph.D. Warsaw, 2000) is an assistant professor in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw. Her fields of research include the history and social history of the Arabic-Islamic world (up to 1517), the history of daily life, the Mamluk epoch, medieval Cairo, Arabic-Islamic cities in the Middle Ages, medieval Arabic-Islamic medicine and dietetics and *ahl al-dhimma* in Dar al-Islam of the Middle Ages. She is the author of *Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī's Biography of the Mamluk Sultan Qalāwūn. Introduction, Edition, and Commentary* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 2000) and *Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes: Aspects of Life in an Islamic Metropolis of the Eastern Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill 2011). She is currently working on a monograph dealing with the social and cultural history of medicine in pre-modern Egypt.

**Walid A. Saleh** (Ph.D. Yale, 2001) is a professor of Islamic Studies and the director of the Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada. He is a specialist on the history of the Qur'an and Tafsir. His monographs include *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition* (Brill, 2004) and *In Defense of the Bible* (Brill, 2008). He has also co-edited *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin* (Brill, 2017). Saleh has published several articles on the exegetical

works of al-Wahidi, Ibn Taymiyya, al-Biqā'i and al-Maturidi, among others. He is currently writing an introduction to the genre of Tafsir.