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# Hebrew Translations and Transcriptions of the Qur'an

Aleida Paudice

The extremely broad subject of the translation of the Qur'an into Hebrew has not been studied in sufficient detail. Further study would undoubtedly shed valuable light on the relations between the Jews and Islam during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Little is known of the context that produced the Hebrew translations, nor their purpose. One of the reasons is, perhaps, the often ambiguous relationship between the Jews and Islam's sacred text. This relationship speaks directly to issues of religious identity and ethnic belonging, as expressed in the theological and philosophical debate, and implies the acceptance of another conceptual and religious world that also claimed to be the true and last. A translation is never a mechanical process; the translator has choices and linguistic selections to make that often reveal something about his/her world, way of thinking, and the context in which he/she lives.

Aleida Paudice

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Since it was forbidden for non-Muslims not only to translate the Qur'an (whose translation presented the problem both of reproducing in languages different from Arabic its stylistic inimitability and of the recitation of the word of God, given in Arabic, in other languages) but also to learn and study it, it is evident that the Hebrew translations of the Qur'an can be particularly revealing about their reasons, purposes, and the context in which they originated.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, was the attitude of the Jews toward Islam, and what did they know of the Qur'an? During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Jews played a great role in Europe in the teaching of the Arabic language since they were often the only ones able to read it, because they had lived under Islamic rule and worked as traders and merchants in the Ottoman and Arab world.<sup>2</sup>

Here we do not attempt to answer the complex question of the relations between the Jews and Islam insofar as their holy texts are concerned, but we aim to supply a few areas for further investigation toward a better understanding of Jewish knowledge of the Qur'an. What did the Jews know of Islam's holy text and how did they relate to the Islamic faith?<sup>3</sup>

We have to look at the changes that took place in late twelfth-century Iberia and Provence, where it is possible to talk about a “Jewish intellectual revolution,” which involved the translation of Arabic and Judeo-Arabic texts into Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> The translation of Arabic texts became more ambivalent and complex when the holy texts of Islam were translated. Jewish translators often replaced Qur’anic quotations with biblical allusions—effectively de-Islamicizing the texts—in order to acknowledge the Bible alone as the unique source of revealed truth.<sup>5</sup> Jewish anti-Muslim polemics, like Christian polemics, denied the status of the Qur’an as divine revelation and the prophetic role of Muhammad.<sup>6</sup> Although this argument is often disguised in Jewish writings, it is always implied and hinted at by different rhetorical and linguistic means, and it is reflected in the rendering of Qur’anic quotations and Qur’anic language.

As already mentioned, Jews were prohibited from learning the Qur’an, but nevertheless, Jews who lived under Islamic rule and spoke Arabic often knew the Qur’an and quoted from it in everyday life, either consciously or unconsciously, because it was a part of their culture.

It is difficult to establish how the Jews studied the Qur’an and how much they knew of it, but they clearly had some knowledge of the Qur’an, as the references and quotations in Judeo-Arabic texts in particular show.<sup>7</sup> Most quotations of the Qur’an in Hebrew characters are, in fact, found in Judeo-Arabic works. Moses Ibn Ezra and Bahya Ibn Yossef Ibn Paquda quote Qur’anic verses maybe because of their literary and rhetorical value but also with polemical purposes.<sup>8</sup>

*“Jews were prohibited from learning the Qur’an, but quoted from it in everyday life, either consciously or unconsciously, because it was a part of their culture.”*

#### Hebrew translations of the Qur’an

Hebrew translations of the Qur’an are rather late. Let us say a few words on the political and cultural setting that produced the sixteenth-century translation of the Qur’an that served as a model for the Hebrew translations.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the expansion of Ottoman power, its threatening conquests in the Mediterranean, and its increasingly powerful commercial presence in the West were among the causes of the flourishing of Christian and Jewish historiography on the Ottomans, their traditions, and their beliefs. The first half of the sixteenth century is a key period for the creation and development of the image of the Turk in Venice. Prior to the sixteenth century, Venetian readers had to look at works written elsewhere to know about the Turks, but in the sixteenth century many famous historical works on the Ottomans were written and created an image of the Ottomans that lasted for two centuries.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is no wonder

that the Italian translation of the Qur'an was printed in Venice. This translation, *L'Alcorano di Maometto*, though claiming to be a translation from the Arabic is nothing but a translation into Italian of the Latin version of the Qur'an made by Robert of Ketton in 1143 under the orders of Peter the Venerable.<sup>10</sup> The Italian translation, probably produced in the cultural milieu of Italian Reformers, relies on Theodor Bibliander's translation of the Qur'an of 1543.<sup>11</sup> Overall, Christian knowledge of Islam and its doctrine, both among the Catholics and the Protestants, was very poor, and that is why Bibliander's work represents a great novelty.<sup>12</sup>

Bibliander, orientalist and successor of Zwingli as professor of the Zurich Academy, also based his translation on Robert of Ketton's version, but the most interesting part of Bibliander's translation is its commentary.<sup>13</sup> Through Bibliander's work, the Protestant world shows a more open attitude toward Islam and attempts to understand it by means of a more scientific approach rather than by relying on medieval polemical or apologetic writings.<sup>14</sup>

The first translation of the Qur'an into Hebrew dates back to the sixteenth century (Heb. Ms. Brit. Mus. 111, Nr 1156/ British Library 6636), and it is a translation from the 1547 Italian edition of the Qur'an published in Venice by Andrea Arrivabene. In the seventeenth century, Jacob Levi ben Israel from Salonika (d. Zante 1636), a halakhist and rabbi famous for his responsa, wrote another translation, now in Oxford (Cat. Bodl. Hebr. Ms. No. 2207), identical to the above-mentioned sixteenth-century translation. In both manuscripts the

“*The Jews read the sacred texts of their neighbors, Muslims and Christians, to find confirmation of the truth of their faith.*”

Qur'an is divided into 124 suras instead of 114.<sup>15</sup>

Two more manuscripts depend on these translations: one found in the Oriental Studies Center, part of the Russian Academy of Oriental Studies in Saint Petersburg (B155, 234), and the second at the Library of Congress in Washington (MS Hebr. 99).<sup>16</sup>

The translations found in the British Library (Ms. Brit. Mus. 111, Nr. 1156) and those found at the library of the Russian Academy of Oriental Studies in Saint Petersburg (B155, B234) also contain material on the life of Muhammad and the first caliphs following the Italian edition.<sup>17</sup>

A later manuscript translation of the Qur'an into Hebrew was written in Kochi, the southwest coast of India, in 1757, and it is now found in the Library of Congress in Washington (LC, Hebr. Ms. 99). It is a translation from the Dutch into Hebrew (previously translated from the French).<sup>18</sup> It is probably the translation of Jan Hendrik Glasemaker's Dutch translation of the Qur'an, which itself aimed at correcting the mistakes found in the French translation by André Du Ryer (1647).<sup>19</sup> This translation was probably made by an Ashkenazi Jew in Kochi, outpost of the Dutch East India Company in South Asia, around 1757, and according to Weinstein's detailed and fascinating explanation, this could be the same

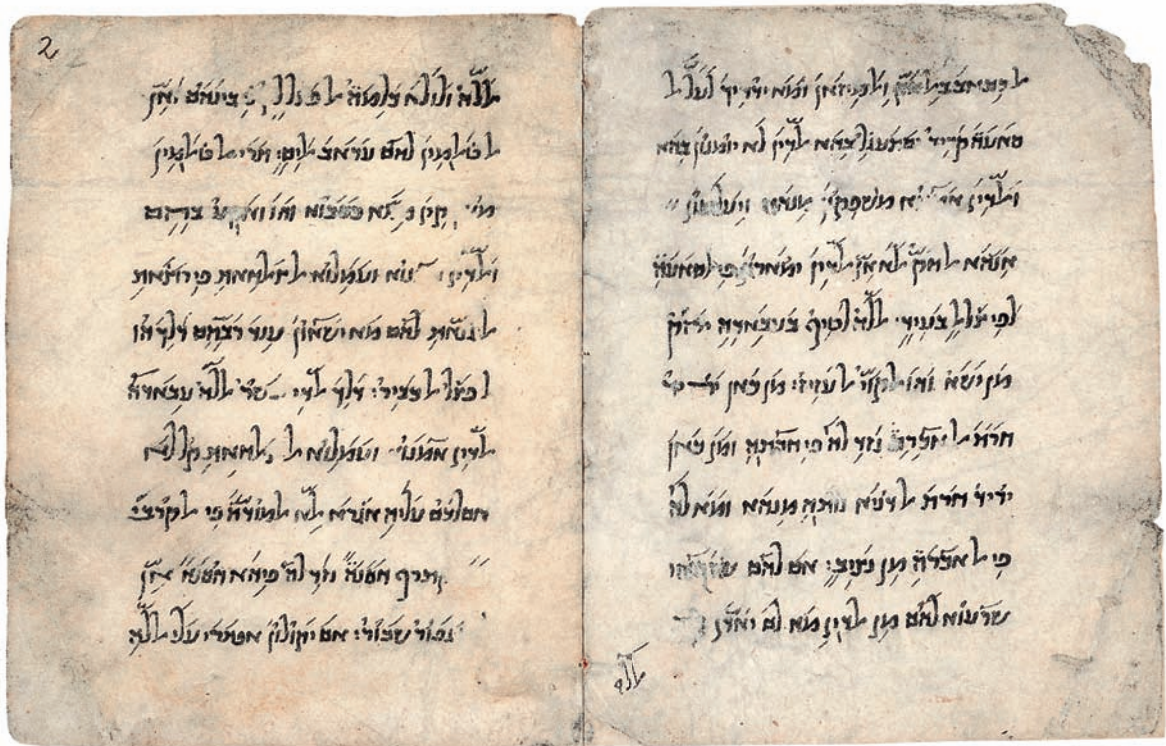
manuscript described by Joseph Wolff in 1831 in Meshhed in the Persian milieu of Jewish Sufis.<sup>20</sup> Weinstein stresses that the translation probably served polemical purposes: the Jews read the sacred texts of their neighbors, Muslims and Christians, to find confirmation of the truth of their faith.<sup>21</sup> The history of Hebrew translation of the Qur'an becomes clearer in the nineteenth century, when Z. H. Reckendorf published the first direct translation of the Qur'an from the Arabic into Hebrew (Leipzig, 1857), later to be followed by J. Rivlin (Tel Aviv, 1936–41) and Aharon Ben-Shemesh (Ramath Gan, 1971).<sup>22</sup> The most recent and scientifically accurate translation is that by Uri Rubin, who has also supplied important material and a detailed and rich commentary for the interpretation of the text.<sup>23</sup>



Translation of the Qur'an in Modern Hebrew by Uri Rubin. University of Tel Aviv, 2005.

### Transcriptions of the Qur'an in Hebrew script

Alongside translations of the Qur'an there are also transcriptions in Hebrew script.<sup>24</sup> Most of the transcriptions of the Qur'an were also late, and the majority of them were written in countries under Muslim rule where Arabic was the spoken language. Bodleian Manuscript Hunt 529 is the only complete transcription of the Qur'an and the most precise and accurate from the point of view of the Hebrew and Arabic language.<sup>25</sup> The Bodleian manuscript was written in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, probably in the south of Iraq. It also contains a prayer in Arabic and several notes, which has led scholars to advance various hypotheses on the identity of the copyist who inserted polemical notes both against Christianity and Islam: maybe he was a Jew who converted to Islam but kept good relations with Jewish laws and customs, or a Jewish copyist who copied both the Gospels and the Qur'an and attacked



Transcription of the Qur'an in Hebrew characters. Manuscript "Arab 5," Crimea, eighth to ninth centuries. Halle, Library of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft.

both religions. Sometimes a Jewish copyist addressed his polemical comments, like the Karaite al-Qirqisani, both against Christianity and Islam.<sup>26</sup> Ms. Arab 5 from the library of the Morgenländische Gesellschaft in Halle contains another transcription, and it was described for the first time in detail by Emil Rödiger in 1860.<sup>27</sup> The manuscript, written on linen paper and consisting of eight folia, was found in the Crimea and donated by Pinsker in Odessa to the Morgenländische Gesellschaft in Halle in 1859.<sup>28</sup> It is a fragment of the Qur'an written in Oriental handwriting containing eighty-five *āyat* starting from sura 42:13 (14 in the Egyptian standard edition of the Qur'an) and ending at sura 43:45. The manuscript does not present notes or indications about the identity of the copyist; it is written in a rather clear hand, but it is partially damaged. The transcription was written between the late thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth century. The text is vocalized, although the Arabic vocalization is neither precise nor correct, and the transcription of Arabic consonants is at times inconsistent. Rödiger identifies two hands, both Jewish; the second hand wrote a comment on the margin of folio 6a. The manuscript was written for a Jewish audience and reminded them of



Fragment of the Qur'an in Judeo-Arabic from the Cairo Geniza. Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter Geniza Collection, T-S Ar. 51.62.

the uniqueness of their religion as opposed to the Muslim faith.<sup>29</sup> Ms. Arab 5 is only one example of several Hebrew transcriptions of the Qur'an.<sup>30</sup>

### Treasures of the Geniza

In the Cairo Geniza other transcriptions of the Qur'an in Hebrew characters are preserved, in addition to fragments of the Qur'an in Arabic.<sup>31</sup> The Cairo Geniza is one of the richest and most precious sources of Arabic and Judeo-Arabic manuscripts on all kinds of subjects from theology, the Bible, and the Masora to philosophy, literature, and medicine.<sup>32</sup> The language of the Arabic fragments in general is a "form of Middle Arabic that deviates from Classical Arabic in that it reflects some Neo-Arabic dialectic features and pseudo-corrective elements."<sup>33</sup>

The Geniza manuscripts show how the Jews of Egypt (Fustat) enjoyed relative freedom compared to Jews in medieval Europe. They were not confined in a Jewish quarter and entertained lively and intense relations with the Muslims; in some cases they even turned to Muslim authorities to solve disputes and matters in which only

Jews were involved.<sup>34</sup> The manuscripts also reveal frequent religious contacts and influences between Muslims and Jews. For example, manuscript T-S AS 182.291 concerns the practice of genuflection and prostration introduced by the circle of

“*Considering the prohibition on using the Arabic script, the presence of fragments of the Qur’an in the Geniza lets us suppose that this prohibition was not so strict.*”

Jewish pietists, whose most famous leader during the thirteenth century was the son of Moses Maimonides, Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237).<sup>35</sup> The pietists adopted some practices of Sufism, claiming them to also be ancient Jewish practices, but were opposed by other members of the Jewish

community.<sup>36</sup> This document shows how Jewish mysticism was influenced by Muslim mysticism. Moreover, it also proves how the Muslim rulers were asked not only for rulings on Islamic practice but also on the rituals and liturgy of the other faiths of the *dhimmī*, like the Jews.<sup>37</sup>

From the manuscripts, it emerges that the Jews were acquainted with the Qur’an, although it is not possible to establish to what extent and how they learned it, since the majority of the Jews “were not proficient in the reading and writing of Arabic script,” as the much greater number of fragments written in Hebrew characters shows.<sup>38</sup> This can also be explained by the later prohibition on using the Arabic script imposed upon the *dhimmī* by their Muslim overlords.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, in all the collections of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection (Old, New, and Additional Series), a number of fragments of the Qur’an have been preserved. The majority of them are in Arabic script, but there are also a few fragments in Judeo-Arabic. Although the presence of Arabic fragments is neither exceptional nor extraordinary, the Arabic fragments of the Qur’an found in the Geniza raise important questions: How did they become part of the Geniza and why? Were they studied and then transcribed into Hebrew characters? Considering the prohibition on using the Arabic script, the presence of fragments of the Qur’an in the Geniza lets us suppose that this prohibition was not so strict. Skimming through these fragments, I have noticed that many of them are written only on one side, which means that they were not reused for Hebrew writings, and some of them are written in a neat and clear handwriting, often without vocalization, but in some cases with clear vocalization, along with red dots to indicate the end of the *āya*.<sup>40</sup> T-S Ar. 39.460 is a fragment with writing exercises and jottings that include verses from the Qur’an. T-S NS 305.210 and T-S NS 306.145 contain theological texts with references to Qur’anic verses, and T-S NS 306.206 includes variants of the Qur’an 2:19, 17–18, and 172. These are only a few examples of Arabic fragments of the Qur’an found in the Cairo Geniza, and they are most fascinating and of great interest for scholars of various disciplines. Their characteristics are interesting because sometimes Qur’anic verses are included in a tale (T-S Ar. 40.197), in other cases they are quoted in a theological work (T-S NS 305.210), or they are cited for the purposes of grammatical analysis (T-S NS 327.62). The best-



preserved and clearest Judeo-Arabic fragment of the Qur'an is T-S Ar. 51.62, which is reproduced in the catalog *Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections Arabic Old Series (T-S Ar. 1a-54)*, edited by Colin F. Baker and Meira Polliack (Cambridge, 2001), plate 20.

### The Mithridates Qur'an

Vat. Ebr. 357 is a product of a very different environment, and it is unique in many ways. It is probably the most complex of the manuscripts examined here from the point of view of its redaction and the cultural environment that produced it. In fact, it should be examined within the context of the study of the Qur'an and of the Hebrew and Arabic languages by Italian Renaissance humanists. Vat. Ebr. 357 takes us into a very broad field of investigation of the social and cultural environment within which the knowledge of Arabic was exchanged: Who were the protagonists of this renewed interest in Arabic, and what purpose did it serve?<sup>41</sup> The codex consists of the Qur'an (ff. 51–156) and of two Arabic treatises on herbal remedies and medicine (ff. 1–50).<sup>42</sup> It is written on watermark paper of the Palermo 1409 type. We can therefore say that it was written sometime in the fifteenth century in Sicily.<sup>43</sup> The Arabic text is transcribed into Hebrew characters and is not vocalized. The titles of the suras were added later in red ink. The text of the Qur'an is mutilated and starts at sura 2:85, and due to the misplacing of some pages, the order of the suras is not respected (ff. 51 and 52v are between ff. 141v and 142). The most important characteristic of this manuscript is the presence of at least two hands that translate the Qur'anic text and comment on it. It is possible to detect four different hands at work and to identify two of them with that of Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola and of Flavius Mithridates (Guillelmus Raimundus Monchates).<sup>44</sup> The manuscript bears the signature of Flavius Mithridates; it probably belonged to Mithridates's father and was sold thereafter to Pico Della Mirandola.<sup>45</sup> The annotations and the commentaries, written in brown ink in distinction to the interlinear Latin translation, which is written in red ink, are of a different nature, consisting of historical, philological, exegetical, theological, and even mythological notes. They examine different aspects of the suras, make reference to Islamic tradition (hadith), and analyze in particular the most significant aspects of the Qur'an for a comparison of the Islamic faith to the Christian doctrines. It is, in fact, one of the most important commentaries of the Qur'an in Renaissance Europe. Italian humanistic culture was familiar with Islamic literature, and in particular with the Qur'an, since the role of Islam and the importance of Christianity in the Muslim faith, the prophetic role of Muhammad, and so on were at the center of theological and philosophical debates.

The transcriptions of the Qur'an examined here show how each one was produced in a different milieu and served specific purposes. While we can compare those fragments from the Cairo Geniza and the Halle manuscript that served similar polemical purposes and were written in countries under Muslim rule, where knowl-

edge of Arabic was important for the relations with the authorities and, certainly in Egypt, was a part of everyday life, the Vatican manuscript places itself in a very different context, that of the cultural milieu of Jewish and Christian philosophers and scholars in the period of the Italian Renaissance.

1. On the translation of the Qur'an, see the entry by R. Paret, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 44–45. See also the entry by Hartmut Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'an," in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 5:340–58. On the prohibition of the study of the Qur'an, see Hava Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds, Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Jerusalem: Mosad Byalik, 1998), 157. Jews and Christians nevertheless acquired knowledge of the Qur'an but not in public nor openly.
2. This was the case especially during the Middle Ages. See Karl H. Dannenfelt, "The Renaissance Humanists and the Knowledge of Arabic," *Studies in the Renaissance* 2 (1995): 96.
3. See Hava Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 156–64.
4. Judeo-Arabic is an ethnolect (a linguistic entity with its own history and used by a distinct language community) that has been spoken and written in various forms by Jews throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Two main distinguishing features of Judeo-Arabic are the use of the Hebrew script and the frequent occurrence of Hebrew (and Aramaic) words and phrases. See J. Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1985), 215. See also Jonathan P. Decker, "The Rendering of Qur'anic Quotations in Hebrew translations of Islamic texts," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96, no. 3 (2006): 336.
5. Decker, "The Rendering of Qur'anic Quotations," 338. An example of this practice is found in a Hebrew manuscript, Ms. Dd.4.1, in the Cambridge University Library. See *Hebrew Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library: A Description and Introduction*, ed. Stefan C. Reif (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 397.
6. On Jewish polemics against Islam, see M. Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1966 [1st ed., 1877]), 244–387.
7. See Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 158.
8. See the article by Ryan Szpiech, "Citas árabes en caracteres hebreos en el Pugio fidei del dominico Ramón Martí: Entre la autenticidad y la autoridad," *Al-Qantara: Revista de Estudios Árabes* (Madrid: CSIC, 2011).
9. On the history of the Venetian historiography on the Ottomans, see Paolo Preto, *Venezia e i Turchi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1975), 13–22.
10. On the Italian translation, see Carlo De Frede, *La prima traduzione italiana del Corano sullo sfondo dei rapporti tra Cristianità e Islam nel Cinquecento* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1967).
11. See the entry by Hartmut Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'an," in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 346.
12. See Victor Segesvary, *L'Islam et la Réforme: Etudes sur L'Attitude des Réformateurs Zurichois Envers l'Islam, 1510–1550*, 13. Islam was considered a Christian heresy by the Christian world, and it was believed that people of the Arabian Peninsula were Christians before the advent of Muhammad. For a brief study on Latin translations of the Qur'an, see Ulli Roth and Reinhold Gleis, "Die Spuren der lateinischen Koranübersetzung des Juan de Segovia: Alte Probleme und ein neuer Fund," *Neulateinische Jahrbuch* 11 (2009): 109–53.
13. See Victor Segesvary, *L'Islam et la Réforme*, 13.
14. *Ibid.*, 15. See Roth and Gleis's study on the earlier translation of the Qur'an by Juan de Segovia and its novelty, "Die Spuren der lateinischen Koranübersetzung," 113–20.
15. See Hava Lazarus Yafeh, "Jewish Knowledge of the Qur'an," *Sefunot* 5 (1991): 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 42, and see *Intertwined Worlds*, 165. On Jacob ben Israel, see the entry by Joseph Hacker in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1971), vol. 11, col. 83, and also "Patterns of the Intellectual Activity of Ottoman Jewry in the 16th and 17th Centuries," *Tarbiz* 53, no. 4 (1984): 590. On this translation, see also M. Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden*, 315.
17. See Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 165.
18. See Myron M. Weinstein, "A Hebrew Qur'an manuscript," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 10 (1971): 19–52.
19. *Ibid.*, 29.
20. See Weinstein, "A Hebrew Qur'an manuscript," 38–40. We do not know how the manuscript reached Meshed from Kochi.
21. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
22. See the entry by J. D. Pearson, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 48, and Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 165, where she also mentions the first partial Yiddish translation of the Qur'an.

23. See Uri Rubin, *The Qur'an: Hebrew Translation from the Arabic, Annotations, Appendices and Index* (Tel Aviv, 2005).
24. On the Qur'an in Hebrew writing, see E. Mainz, "Koranverse in hebräischer Schrift," *Der Islam* 21 (1933): 229.
25. For a detailed description of the manuscript, see Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 166–72; the same description is also found in "Jewish Knowledge of the Qur'an," 43–47.
26. See Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 171–72.
27. See Emil Rödiger, "Mitteilungen zur Handschriftenkunde: Über ein Koranfragment in Hebräischer Schrift," *ZDMG* 14 (1860): 485–89 and *ZDMG* 13 (1859): 341, no. 271. See also the short description by Ernst Roth, *Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1965), 110.
28. See also Hans Wehr, *Verzeichnis der Arabischen Handschriften in der Bibliothek der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (Leipzig: Kommissionsverlag F. A. Brockhaus, 1940), 2. On the role played by Simhah Pinsker in the study of Karaism, see Haggai Ben-Shammai, "The Scholarly Study of Karaism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Karaite Judaism*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 12.
29. For a more detailed analysis, see my article "On Three Extant Sources of the Qur'an Transcribed in Hebrew," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 2, no. 2 (2008): 213.
30. See M. Steinschneider, *Hebräische Bibliographie* (Berlin: Benzian, 1860), 3:113.
31. For a list of the manuscripts of the Qur'an in Judeo-Arabic and Arabic in the Cairo Geniza, see my article "On Three Extant Sources." I am indebted and grateful to the late Dr. Friederich Niessen from the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit for the dating of the fragments.
32. The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection contains about 140,000 fragments, of which a considerable proportion is in Judeo-Arabic. Most of the fragments date from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, but there are also examples of late Judeo-Arabic from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. See Colin F. Baker, "Judeo-Arabic Material in the Cambridge Genizah Collections," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 58, no. 3 (1995): 445–54.
33. See the introduction by Meira Polliack in *Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections Arabic Old Series (T-S Ar. 1a-54)*, ed. Colin F. Baker and Meira Polliack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.
34. See Paul Fenton, "Jewish-Muslim Relations in the Medieval Mediterranean Area," in *The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance*, ed. Stefan C. Reif (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 152–59.
35. See Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 293–94.
36. See Paul Fenton, "Jewish-Muslim Relations in the Medieval Mediterranean Area," 158.
37. On liturgical disputes, see T-S Ar. 41.105, also described by G. Khan in *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections*, 293–94.
38. See Paul B. Fenton, "Judaeo-Arabic Literature," in *Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 464.
39. *Ibid.*, 465. The prohibition became stricter in the sixteenth century in the Ottoman Empire. See M. A. Epstein, *The Ottoman Jewish Communities and Their Role in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz, 1980), 38: "Despite the desire to expose the Jews to the correctness of Islam, late in the sixteenth century, when restrictions on protected persons were being more rigorously enforced than before, it was ordered that all copies of the Koran or Muslim religious tracts in the possession of Jews be seized."
40. For unvocalized fragments, see, for example, the well-preserved and ornamented fragment T-S Ar. 20.1 (photo published in *Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections Arabic Old Series (T-S Ar. 1a-54)*, ed. Colin F. Baker and Meira Polliack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), plate 11, but also T-S Ar. 38.39. For vocalized fragments, see, for example, T-S NS 183.79 and the three fragments that form part of the same manuscript T-S NS 192.11A, T-S NS 192.11B, and T-S NS 192.11C, where the red dots often indicate the end of the *āya*.
41. See A. M. Piemontese, "Le iscrizioni arabe nella Poliphili *Hypnerotomachia*," in *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. C. Burnett and A. Contadini (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1999), 199–217.
42. See A. M. Piemontese, "Il Corano latino di Ficino ed i Corani arabi di Pico e Monchates," *Rinascimento* 36 (1996): 227–73. Piemontese gives a detailed description of the manuscript and of its history.
43. *Ibid.*, 64: "Testo arabo in elegante, nel carattere ebraico di tipo rabbinico a inchiostro marrone, linee 27."
44. On Flavius Mithridates, see the introduction by Haim Wirsbuski in Flavius Mithridates, *Sermo de Passione Domini*, ed. with introduction and commentary by Haim Wirsbuski (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1963), 49–50 and 93–94.
45. Benoît Grévin published, together with Giuseppe Mandalà, the first detailed critical edition and analysis of Vat. Ebr. 351. See also Benoît Grévin, "Un témoin majeur du rôle des communautés juives de Sicile dans la préservation et la diffusion en Italie d'un savoir sur l'arabe et l'Islam au xv<sup>e</sup> siècle: Les notes interlinéaires et marginales du 'Coran de Mithridate' (ms. Vat. Ebr. 357)," in *Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans dans la méditerranée médiévale: Etudes en hommage à Henri Bresc*, ed. B. Grévin-Annliese Nef-Emmanuelle Tixier (Paris: De Boccard, 2008), 45–56, and "Le Coran de Mithridate (ms. Vat. Ebr. 357) à la croisée des savoirs arabes dans l'Italie du xv<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Al Qantara* (forthcoming).

## Jewish Views on the Birth of Islam

Jews witnessed the emergence and development of Islam and therefore had an inside view: their position was, by force of circumstance, ambivalent. Jews wrote about Islam and about the Muslim communities in which they lived, but like all minorities that suffered from limited legal and social rights, they were scant with praise and cautious in their critique. Islam emerged into history within a religious context. Jews were a part of that context and thus experienced the birth of Islam in relation to paradigms with which they were already familiar. Because the first Muslims were Arabs and the great conquest of the early period of Muslim expansion occurred under Arab military and religious leadership, Jews experienced that great success according to their traditional understanding of Arab peoples. Jews knew about Arabs from as early as the Torah, which identifies Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael as a progenitor of Arab peoples. His genealogy in Genesis chapter 25 contains Arab names such as his son Hadad, a common name to this day that means "smith" in Arabic. Other sons' names relate to geographical locations in Arabia, such as Dumah, perhaps Dumat al-Jandal, a stop on the ancient caravan route to the east of the Nabataean city of Petra in today's Jordan. Another son is named Yetur, which corresponds to an oasis in the Nejd region of Arabia. Another set of Arab names derives from Abraham's offspring through Qeturah in the same chapter, and together they reappear later in the Hebrew Bible among peoples who are identified clearly as Arabs. This is one of the reasons that the sages of the Talmud tended to identify Qeturah with Hagar, Ishmael's mother.<sup>1</sup>

The early Muslims were therefore identified and typed by Jews according to their experience and knowledge of Arabs in general. Some Arabs are depicted in the Bible as enemies of Israel. One

group, called Hagarites after their matriarch, Hagar, are identified according to names of Ishmael's sons and lived east of the Jordan River in today's Jordan (1 Chronicles 5:10–22). Others are depicted positively in visions of redemption, such as those leading the camel caravans of Midian and flocks of Qedar, both of whom were progeny of Ishmael and Hagar/Qeturah (Genesis 25:4, 13), and who were expected to herald the glories of God according to Isaiah 60:4–7. The Talmud contains stories and references to Arabs as well, and identifies them also as Ishmaelites or Tayay'e, probably originating from the Arab Tayyi' tribe.<sup>2</sup> As in the Bible, some Arabs are depicted negatively as uncivilized, violent, and sexually aggressive.<sup>3</sup> In other references, however, Arabs are associated with messianic redemption (Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 2:4) and the wisdom of the desert (Baba Batra 73b).

The Talmud was completed just about the time of the Muslim conquest, so it predates Islam, as does the Bible. However, some early post-Talmudic Jewish texts view the appearance of the Muslim armies in a very interesting light. Living a second-class legal status for centuries under the rule of the Christian Byzantines or Zoroastrian Persians, Jews yearned for a time of redemption. The arrival of the rapid and extremely successful military advance of a new community of monotheists from Arabia looked to some as if it were the vanguard of that redemptive process.

The setting of the following text is Roman Palestine after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, where the second-century Palestinian sage and mystic Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is pleading with God to respond to his prayer for redemption. Suddenly the secrets of the end time are revealed to him, and he sees visions of the coming of the "kingdom of Ishmael," a common Jewish reference for the Muslim world:

When he saw the kingdom of Ishmael that was coming, he began to say: “Was it not enough, what the wicked kingdom of Edom<sup>4</sup> did to us, but we must have the kingdom of Ishmael too?” At once, Metatron,<sup>5</sup> the prince of the [divine] countenance, answered and said, “Do not fear, son of man, for the Holy One only brings the kingdom of Ishmael in order to save you from this wickedness. He raises up over them a Prophet according to his will and will conquer the land for them and they will come and restore it in greatness, and there will be great terror between them and the sons of Esau. . . . when he, the rider on the camel, goes forth, the kingdom will arise through the rider on an ass.”<sup>6</sup>

Another text found in the Cairo Geniza, *Hizayon ‘al hamilchamah ha’acharona* (*Vision of the War of the End Times*),<sup>7</sup> has also been considered by some to be a witness to the early conquests, though others consider it to refer to the Crusader wars that some Jews hoped would result in a destruction of both Christian and Muslim powers as part of the final redemption.

The case of Yemen might be particularly instructive, since a number of Jewish writings from Yemen have been preserved that articulate Jewish attitudes toward Islam. Jews had lived in Southern Arabia for many centuries prior to the rise of Islam,<sup>8</sup> and Jews continued to live there throughout the entire period of Muslim rule to this day. A very old tradition that is codified in a series of Jewish texts written in classical Arabic teaches that Jews in Arabia supported the Prophet Muhammad and fought on his behalf during his lifetime. The earliest version of this tradition is dated from the tenth century,<sup>9</sup> and it is found in at least four other versions, all of which come from Yemen.<sup>10</sup> The tradition asserts that Jews assisted Muhammad when he was weak and suffered attacks from Arabian polytheists. They could accept his prophetic leadership over the Arabs though not over themselves, and because both communities were monotheist in the face of the physical oppression of polytheists, they supported one another:

The Children of Israel fought on [Muhammad’s] side until Friday noon, when the Prophet forbade the Children of Israel from fighting, saying to them: O Children of Israel, go and observe your Sabbath as God has commanded you through Moses the son of ‘Imran, the one who conversed with God, peace be upon him. Do not be negligent of the law of Moses, peace be upon him. Then the Children of Israel accepted from him that which God commanded him to do, and they departed to keep their Sabbath. But after that, the enemies wanted to be victorious over the Prophet, him and his people, so the Children of Israel went out alone on their Sabbath day and prevailed [*jādū*] over the heathens, and killed of them seven thousand horsemen and five hundred infantrymen. Then the Prophet came to know about this and he rejoiced and laughed, and said: You strove well, O Children of Israel! By God the great, I shall reward you on this good deed, by God’s will. And I shall grant [lit., “write”] you my protection, my covenant, my oath and my testimony, as long as I live and my people endure on the face of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

The tradition is interesting for many reasons that cannot be examined adequately due to the limitations of this general overview. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that it serves to overturn the limitations of second-class status imposed by Islamic law through the laws of the *dhimma*, and, in fact, the manuscript translated above is entitled, “This is the Writ of the *Dhimma*.” It reverses virtually all of the social restrictions of the Islamic sumptuary laws, and one version actually lists some twenty individual privileges or protections that Muhammad decreed for the Jews in gratitude for their vital support in time of crisis. Historians and critical scholars consider the writ to have been fabricated by Jews in order to protect themselves against the legal restrictions and physical abuse that was the normal status of being a minority in the medieval world in general, and being Jewish in Yemen in particular. When trouble would arise, they could bring out the

Writ of Protection that they claimed was dictated by the Prophet to his son-in-law, 'Ali, and even signed by Muhammad himself, in order to demand protection.

The document can thus be seen as a complex statement that attests to the ambivalent situation of Jews living in the Muslim world. It can be read as evidence that Jews suffered so much they needed to concoct a potentially dangerous forgery to relieve the difficulties of their life under Islam. On the other hand, the document appears to attest to Muhammad's true monotheism and authentic prophethood in Jewish eyes. While most Jews in the medieval world would have agreed that Islam is indeed an expression of true monotheism, it was rare for Jews to consider Muhammad a true prophet. The disagreement over the prophethood of Muhammad would be the greatest theological bone of contention between Jews and Muslims throughout the centuries. Nevertheless, occasional Jewish voices are willing to ascribe a limited prophetic status to Muhammad, and one of those voices is a Yemenite scholar and community leader of the twelfth century named Nathanael Ibn al-Fayyumi. Al-Fayyumi wrote an introduction to Jewish theology in which he quotes not only the standard Jewish authorities of the Bible, Talmud, and responsa literature, but also the Qur'an and a number of other sources that cannot be identified today.<sup>12</sup> In his work "The Garden of Intellectuals," Ibn al-Fayyumi writes:

The Creator—magnified be His praise!—knows the ruin of this world and the abode of the future world. He therefore sends prophets in every age and period that they might urge the creatures to serve Him and do the good, and that they might be a road-guide to righteousness . . . It is incumbent, then, upon every people to be led aright by what has been communicated to them through revelation and to emulate their prophets, their leaders, and their regents. . . . All call unto Him, all turn their faces unto Him, and every pious soul is translated to Him, as it is written, "And the spirit returns unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).<sup>13</sup> ●

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1. See Fred V. Winnett, "The Arabian Genealogies in the Book of Genesis," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, ed. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), 171–96; James Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934); D. S. Margoliouth, *The Relations between Arabs and Israelites Prior to the Rise of Islam* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1924).
2. See Richard Kalmin, *Sages, Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 263–72; Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002), 501–2.
3. Ketubot 36b, Sukkah 52b, Kiddushin 49b.
4. The kingdom of Edom is a reference in rabbinic literature to the Roman Empire, and later, the Christian Byzantine Empire. Edom is associated with Isaac's older son Esau in Genesis 36:1, and both serve as a type of code for Christians or Christian rule.
5. Metatron does not occur in the Bible, but in rabbinic literature, he is the highest of angels.
6. The text cited here is found in Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der ältern jüdischen Literatur* (Vienna, 1853–78; repr., Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1967), 3:78.
7. In *Ginzei Schechter*, 1:310–12; English translation is "On That Day: A Jewish Apocalyptic Poem on the Arab Conquests," trans. Bernard Lewis, in *Mélanges d'islamologie: Volume dédiés à la mémoire de Armand Abel* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 197–200.
8. Gordon Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).
9. Hartwig Hirschfeld, "The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 15 (January 1903): 167–81.
10. Reuben Ahroni, "Some Yemenite Jewish Attitudes towards Muhammad's Prophethood," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 69 (1998): 49–99.
11. *Ibid.*, 94, with minor adjustment for clarity.
12. Nathanael Ibn al-Fayyumi, *The Bustan Al-Ukul*, trans. David Levine (New York: AMS Press, 1966), x–xi.
13. *Ibid.*, 108.