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Present at the Dawn of Islam

Polemie and Reality in the Medieval Story
of Muhammad's Jewish Companions

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In the year 1859, Abraham Geiger, a prominent member of the scientific movement known as *Die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, completed a dissertation entitled "Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?" (What did Muhammad obtain from Judaism?).¹ In the coming years many scholarly studies have dealt with this question in detail. However, even now, over 175 years after Geiger introduced the question, no exhaustive work has been produced. I do not presume to have exhausted the subject, but I would like to explore the question of Jewish involvement in the creation of Islam from a different perspective.

According to Muslim traditions, documented in the *siḥāh* literature, some eminent Jewish leaders, living in the *Hijāz*, approached Muhammad, associated with him, and soon converted to his religion. This very early Islamic tradition was perpetuated by a similar series of legends, which proliferated in the Middle Ages and were widespread among Jews and Christians, especially in the Muslim East. The core of the legends, each with their variants of the next motifs: (1) A group of eminent Jewish leaders/rages came to Muhammad and tested the credibility of his supposed heavenly mission; (2) soon they converted to Islam out of fear and constraint; (3) those "luminaries" were motivated by the desire to save their brethren from the evil that was awaiting them at the hands

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of Muhammad?² (4) However, Muhammad's new Jewish companions enriched Islam, as they did collaborate with the Prophet in the composition of the Quran.

This study explores the various versions of this medieval story, which occurs in many sorts of literary materials, such as apocalypses, chronicles, and historical tracts. Asserting that this type of legends is fraught with anti-Islamic polemic, I will try to unravel these implicit polemic intents.

1. The Encounters of Muhammad with Jews of the Hijāz

A careful examination of the social environment in which Muhammad operated and of the cultural climate that prevailed in the Arabian Peninsula during the first third of the seventh century indicates that the prophet who brought the word of Islam to the Arabs had already had encounters with Jews in Mekka, his place of birth.³ Furthermore, from the time that he emigrated to Yathrib (later renamed Medina) in 622, these encounters intensified and turned into an open, lengthy, ongoing dialogue with the local Jews. This dialogue, which became increasingly harsh and hostile, extended over the next five years, until 627, the year that Muhammad landed the death blow to the last remaining Jewish tribe in Medina.⁴

The Quran contains only vague traces of these encounters between Muslims and Jews, which were fraught with violence on the part of the Muslims, but they were recorded in detail in the first comprehensive work on the history and deeds of Muhammad, *al-Siḥāh al-nabawīyah*. This biographical work, which is also named *the Siḥāh of Ibn Ishāq*, after its author, was put into writing already at the beginning of the second century of the Hijra.⁵ The different Muslim literary genres report in detail the tradition about individual Jews from the tribes and communities that lived in al-Hijāz who converted to Islam in the last decade of Muhammad's life. They also provide an even broader description of the Jewish tribes of the Banū Qaynqā', Nadir, and Qurayza and of the inhabitants of the desert oasis of Khaybar who clung to the beliefs of their ancestors. Their fate was a bitter one, and when they resolutely refused to adopt Muhammad's new religion, they were exiled from the Arabian Peninsula, some to the north of the Hijāz and some in the direction of the Fertile Crescent. Members of the Qurayza met an especially bitter fate, and many died a martyr's death for their staunch refusal to convert to Islam.⁶

2. The Jewish Companions of Muhammad: 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām, Prototype of a Leader

It should be stressed once again that unlike most of their brethren, only a tiny minority of the members of the above-mentioned Jewish tribes associated with Muhammad and adopted the Islamic faith. As with every subject that involves the history of the Jews in Arabia, here too our information derives from Muslim historical sources, which state that throughout all the years in which Muhammad operated, no more than twenty of these Jews converted to Islam.⁷ I will focus my discussion on one of the unique members of this particular group, who serves as an example from whom we can generalize about the entire group. I am referring to 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām (henceforth AīS), who was one of the first and most prominent Jewish converts to Islam.⁸ In many ways he is representative of his companions. AīS, son of the tribe of the Banū Qaynuqā', who lived in Medina, is described in Muslim tradition as the most prominent member of his tribe socially and as a spiritual sage. In using the word *sage*, I am presuming that the Jews who lived in the Arabian Peninsula at that time practiced normative, rabbinical Judaism.⁹ AīS's views may have been similar to those of the *hanifs*, the pre-Muslim monotheists, as there is evidence that he shared their reverence for the al-Ka'ba and believed that it was the "House of Abraham."¹⁰

The *sīra of Ibn Isḥāq* relates a vivid story of the conversion of AīS to Islam, as he himself reconstructed it:

When I heard about the Apostle, whose description, his name and his time¹¹ [I had known beforehand], I was aware that he was the person whose arrival we had awaited. When he entered Medina I was filled with joy. When he established his residence in al-Qubā, a man came and informed me of this, while I was working at the top of the date palm,¹² and my Aunt Khālidā bint al-Hārith was sitting beneath it on the ground. I began saying the praise *Allāhu akbar*, and reiterated it, until my aunt reproached me and said, "I swear by Allāh that even had you heard that Musā ibn Imrān had arrived, you would not have reiterated the Takbīr (the praise formula *Allāhu akbar*)."¹³ I said to her, "My aunt, he is the brother of Musā ibn Imrān and follows his religion! Their religious mission is one!" She asked me, "Is he the prophet they proclaimed would come at the End of

Days (*annah yub'ath ma'a nafs al-Sā'ah*)?" I responded, "Indeed, he is!" And then I went to him and converted to Islam. When I returned to my family, I instructed them to do the same, and they converted.¹³

There are indications that AīS wished to keep the Sabbath and other Jewish laws even after his conversion. But there are many traditions in the *Sīra* literature that claim that from the moment he became a Muslim, he identified with its spiritual world and provided staunch assistance to Muhammad in his frequent theological disputes with the Jews.¹⁴ He clearly expressed his devotion to Islam and his identification with the goals of the developing Muslim community already in the fourth and fifth years of the Hijra (626–27), when Muhammad fought against the large Jewish tribes in Medina—Nadīr and Qurayza—and decimated them. During the siege on Nadīr, 'Abd Allāh enthusiastically cut down the date palms that were his erstwhile brethren's source of livelihood. This constituted the most effective form of pressure, forcing them to surrender to Muhammad. After the surrender of the Banū Qurayza, and before the men were massacred, AīS was appointed to guard their women and children, who had been taken into captivity.¹⁵

The intensity of AīS's faith was unusual, even among Muhammad's Jewish friends, to the extent that Quran commentators found over a dozen different verses in the Quran that presumably allude to 'Abd Allāh's faith in Muhammad's prophetic mission. The following two verses are examples of such statements: "Was it not a sign to them, that it is known to the learned of the children of Israel (*an ya'lamahu 'ulamā' Banī Isrā'īl*)?"¹⁶ "It is He who sent down upon thee the Book . . . and those firmly rooted in knowledge (*wa-al-rrāsikhūna fī al-'ilmī*) say we believe in it!"¹⁷ In these verses and others, most of the commentators identified 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām as the first and foremost of these learned children of Israel.¹⁸ Thus Muslim tradition even further magnified and glorified AīS and his abilities. Inter alia, it attributed to him the ability to prognosticate, primarily because of his knowledge of the Pentateuch and other holy scriptures. For example, AīS stated that the third caliph, 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, was described in the Book of God as "the leader of the deserters and the killers" (*amīr 'alā al-khādhl wa-al-qātil*), and consequently prophesied that he would be murdered.¹⁹ The extent to which the Muslims revered AīS is

reflected in the hadith tradition brought in the name of Sa'd ibn Waqqās, as follows: "I have not heard the Prophet say about any living person on earth that he is of the people of Paradise, except for 'Abd Allāh ibn Salam." Another tradition is brought in the name of Mu'adh, another of Muhammad's companions. According to this hadith, Muhammad is cited as saying that religious information should be sought from four scholars, one of whom is 'Abd Allāh ibn Salam.²⁰ Indeed, the Muslims availed themselves of him extensively to obtain information from the Bible or the *midrašim* or to repeat it in his name.²¹

3. A Collective Portrait of the Jewish Converts to Islam in the *Sīra* Literature

It was stated earlier that in spite of AIS's unique status, he is to be regarded as a particular case from which we can generalize about the entire group.²² The discussion here is thus expanded to include all of Muhammad's Jewish friends, their relationship with the Prophet of Islam, and of course the evolution of the character of AIS. Muhammad's Jewish friends appear over the course of 1,000 years in different historical texts as well as in pseudo-historical texts as a defined group having its own idiosyncratic makeup. Their roots begin in Byzantine chronography and into Jewish history and make their way into Muslim literature, from which they branch out and make their way into Byzantine modern era. It is therefore of toriography of the Middle Ages and the early modern era. It is therefore of interest to follow the recurring appearance of this group in these historical writings and to analyze the fabric of the motifs that make up this tale. The earliest of these texts is found in the *Sīra of Ibn-Ishāq*, which was put into writing already at the beginning of the eighth century, approximately 120 years after Muhammad's death. It reads as follows:

A group of Jewish sages (*naḡar min ahbār Yahūd*)²³ approached the Messenger of Allāh and said, "Oh Muhammad, give us answers to the four riddles that we shall put before you. If you can do so, we shall follow in your footsteps, we will confirm the truth of your teachings, and we will believe in you." The messenger of Allāh said to them, "You must swear to me in the name of Allāh and his covenant that you will confirm the veracity of my words, if I can answer your questions." The sages responded, "We shall!" He said to them,

"Come, ask what you wish." They said to him, "Tell us how the newborn resembles the mother, whereas the seed comes from the man?" ... They said to him, "How do you sleep?" He said to them, "... such is my sleep. My eye is asleep but my heart is awake" (*tanām 'ayni wa-qalbi yaqzan*). They said to him, "Tell us about what Israel [the patriarch Jacob] voluntarily forbade himself and why?" Muhammad answered them, "I swear in Allāh's name and you too know that in the time of Israel, the food and drink he most loved were the milk and meat of the camel. One time he became ill, and Allāh cured him of his illness. Since then he has forbidden himself his much-loved food and drink, as a sign of thanksgiving to Allāh, that is, he forbade himself the meat and milk of the camel." They said to him, "Tell us about the spirit that lay upon him." He said to them, "You know the angel Gabriel. He came to me [in a dream]." They said to him, "We swear in God's name that it is true. But Muhammad is our enemy." (*wa-lākinnaḡhu Muhammad lanā 'aduww*).²⁴

The Jewish sages go to Muhammad to try to get a sense of who he is and to determine whether he is a true prophet. Their questions/riddles were of the type that, in the future, Muslims would term *Dalā'il al-nubuwwah* (proofs that verify the prophecy).²⁵ Argumentation of this sort and endeavoring to gather proof that Muhammad was indeed a prophet generally came into existence in later times as a result of the disputations between Muslims and other monotheists, beginning in the Umayyad period, at the earliest. Thus this reconstruction of the encounter between the "Jewish sages" and Muhammad in the *sīra* may have been an anachronistic description. In any event, this encounter between the two sides is a polemical confrontation that takes place against a theological background. The tension and the hostility between the two sides, as they are described at the end of the episode in Ibn Ishāq's book, reflect to a certain extent the actual state of affairs that existed with regard to Jewish-Muslim relations in the last decade of Muhammad's life. Muhammad seemingly passes the test of his reliability as a prophet, but the Jewish sages nonetheless stubbornly regard him as an enemy. From a literary perspective, this event, a central motif that was repeated in all medieval versions of the story of the interreligious encounter. With time, the story was supplemented

and enlarged both by Islamic materials such as the *hadith*, and by extra-Islamic traditions, thus creating a tale out of the historical kernel underlying the story of Muhammad's Jewish companions.

4. Rudiments of a Legend: From Arabia to Palestine and Byzantium

The first signs of the developing tale already appear in a Hebrew apocalyptic text called *The Secrets of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai*. The earliest version of this pseudo-epigraphic text apparently dates back to the end of the Umayyad period, that is, the first half of the eighth century. The content relevant to this discussion reads as follows:

R. Simeon said, "At the beginning of his reign, he will go out to do evil to Israel and great men of Israel will join him, and give him a wife from amongst them, and there will be peace between him and Israel, and he will conquer the entire kingdom."²⁶

The vicissitudes of the relationship between Muhammad and the Jews are summarized here in a most laconic way some one hundred years after the actual event was recorded in the *sirah*. It is commonly accepted that this section of *The Secrets* existed in one form or another already at the end of the Umayyad period.²⁷ As in the manner of an apocalyptic *midrash* that contains a visionary element, it is written in vague terms. He (Muhammad) will "do evil to Israel," but because "great men of Israel will join him," and they will even "give him a wife from amongst them," this will lead to peace between him and Israel. This is the first time that Muhammad's Jewish companions appear in a Hebrew source, where they are referred to as "great men of Israel," much the same as the *Sirāt Ibn Hishām's* reference to them as sages (*ahbār Yahūd*).

Two motifs emerge from this *midrash*, and both give literary expression to the violent clashes between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes. This somber state of affairs is reflected in one of the motifs, which in the future will be the linchpin that ties together all versions of the tale of the sages who joined Muhammad. This motif explains why these sages were thrust into Muhammad's lap. The text alludes to the Prophet of Islam's desire to do evil to their brethren, while the sages attempt to foil these plans. Why Muhammad wanted to do evil to Israel and what impelled him to do so is not explained in this very short, obscure text. It will be clarified

in later versions of this tale. The second motif—giving a Jewish wife to Muhammad—is unique to *The Secrets of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai*. It is based on the story of the marriage of Safiyya to Muhammad after he conquered the Khaybar oasis in 628/7h. Safiyya was the daughter of Huyayy ibn Akhtab, one of the Jewish leaders of Khaybar and a sworn enemy of Muhammad.²⁸ This motif, whereby the sages assuage the Prophet's rage by giving him a wife, appears exclusively in the apocalyptic *Secrets of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai* and does not reappear in any of the texts that will be discussed below.

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During the first decades of the 'Abbasid period, this legend made its way into the Christian world. Of the stories commonly found in Eastern provinces of Christianity and incorporating this legend, I will discuss its earliest version, which was included in the historical work of the Greek monk Theophanes Confessor, who lived and was active in Byzantium. Between the years 810 and 814, Theophanes wrote his *Chronica*, in which he covered the history of the kings of Rome, Persia, and Arabia. In a story about the life of Muhammad, he incorporated the tradition of the Jews who came to him and adopted his religion.

When he [Muhammad] first appeared, the mistaken Hebrews thought him to be their wished-for Messiah. Therefore some of the dignitaries went to him, adopted his faith, and abandoned the religion of Moses, prophet of God. And those who did this were ten in number, and they lived with him until he slaughtered (an animal). However, when they saw him eating the flesh of a camel, they realized that he was not the person they thought him to be. Because they were afraid to leave his faith, these contemptible people taught him vicious things against us, Christians, and went on living with him.²⁹

Theophanes' main purpose in integrating this episode into the section that he wrote about the emergence of Islam was to humiliate Muhammad, the enemy of Christianity. The objective of the Greek monk's stinging attack on the Prophet of Islam was to repudiate the Divine origin of his teachings. In his story about the actions taken by the "Hebrew" dignitaries, he makes it abundantly clear that the beliefs and teachings of Islam came to Muhammad from a human source—the Jews—whose beliefs, as

far as Theophanes himself was concerned, were wrong as well. Thus the Byzantine chronicler simultaneously attacked the beliefs of Christianity's adversaries on two fronts—the Jewish and the Islamic.

As to the substance of the story suggested by Theophanes, it is not difficult to observe the similarity between some of the components of the original story in the *Sīrah of Ibn-Ishāq* (regarding the group of Jews who were keen on visiting Muhammad) and the Greek version. In Theophanes' story, the group that came to Muhammad thought that he might be the Messiah (similar to AīS's hopes). That is why they came to test him and to try to understand him. After their expectations were proven false, they adopted his new religion against their will because they were afraid of him.³⁰ Moreover, the Byzantine chronicle was the first to specify that ten Jews converted to Islam and to characterize them as dignitaries of their community.³¹ With time, this perfect typological number—ten—would become a permanent feature of most of the versions of the tale that were produced in the late Middle Ages. Another element that Theophanes took from the *Sīrah* is the eating of camel meat, which is particularly characteristic of the Arab or Muslim diet.³²

5. Sa'adya Gaon Tells the Story of Muhammad's Companions

Beginning in the tenth century, Jewish versions of the tale, based largely on a common earlier source, spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean Basin.³³ Most of the versions made mention of or developed the basic elements that appear in the Muslim versions as well as in the Christian version of the previous two centuries, some with changes in the story or the addition of new characters. The basic features of the story were expanded into a much more coherent and articulate plot than that of the earlier versions. One of the earliest Jewish versions of the legend, and the most detailed, was written originally in Judeo-Arabic.³⁴ In English translation, it reads as follows:

[And it was] a time of hardship when his kingdom began.³⁵ He claimed that he had the gift of prophecy, and his kingdom would survive until the days of al-Muqtadir.³⁶ But there are those who say that the chronology of these Kings corresponds to the order of the "Jewish" counting [eventually, the Seleucid counting] of "RoF[E]y," that the end of his reign would be the same as the numerical value

of the letters "PeR'E," and he shall be a wild man.³⁷ But God knows all, and neither of the two alternatives should be disregarded: the story of Muhammad's companions and the events of his life. This is the book [that comprises] the story of Muhammad who was in *Šarsa al-Ghanam*, a place [also] named *al-Jabal al-Hadith*, and the events of his life until he moved to *Šarsa* and to the *Hijāz*, on account of the monk who was in Balqin, on a post called "the sign of the Sun." [Now] about the sages who came and told him about the events that had occurred to him and committed the composition of a book. They wrote down their names, each one of them within a *sīra* of his Quran. They interpolated [a verse] and wrote: "Thus did the sages of Israel counsel the wicked ALLAM [violent one]," in a hidden and jumbled way, so that it would not be understood. Let G-d curse the man, to whom this book comes his way, who understands it and informs one of the gentiles. There was a monk named *Habīb Bahīra*, [his name] may it not be remembered. These are the sages who came to him: Abraham, also named *Ka'b al-Aḥbār*; Absalom, also named *Abd al-Salām*; Ya'akov, also named *Umar al-Shahīd*; Yohanan, also named *al-Munhazam ilā al-Janna*; Akivā al-Anṭoki, also named *al-Tā'ir fī al-Janna*; El'azar, also named *Šahīb al-'Asā*; Yiftah, also named *al-Maqtūl fī huḅb al-Nabī*; Shema'yah also named *Murīd al-Nabī ilā al-bayt*; Barūch, also named *al-Maqtūl fī sabīl al-Nabī*; Asāel, also named *Khatan al-Nabī*; Ḥafṣ abū *Šafīyya mar'at al-Nabī*.³⁸ These are the ten [sages] who came to him and were converted to Islam by him, in order to prevent him from harming Israel even in the slightest. They produced a Quran for him and interpolated the writing of their names, each of them [in one *sīra*].³⁹

It seems that the provenance of this story was found in some historical treatise. The proof for this comes from the title of a parallel *geniza* document whose wording is almost identical to that of Gil's document. The title of this second document (Ms. JTS ENA 2554, fol. 2) identifies the story as a supplement to the book of history (*Ilhāq ilā Kitāb al-Tā'irkh*).⁴⁰ Indeed, Gil's document provides us with specific data about the approximate time of the events. The introduction to "The Story of Muhammad's Companions" contains information that places it in the tenth century. The mentioning of the Caliph al-Muqtadir, as well as expressions of the tense

anticipation of the imminent end of the Muslim kingdom, reveal that Moreover, the date that symbolizes "the end of his reign" is represented by the word *RoF'Ey or PeRe*, the numerical value of its Hebrew letters. [1]281 of the Jewish-Selucid counting, which corresponds to the year 969/970. This all points definitively to the period of al-Muqtadir's heirs, the second half of the tenth century.⁴¹ In the case of this particular text, we can establish that the author is Rav Sa'adya Gaon, the author of the above-mentioned *Kitab al-Tarikh*, who was active in the tenth century.

The above story of Muhammad's companions is broader than the earlier stories. Motifs and figures were added to those that appeared in the Muslim *Sira* and Theophanes' *Chronica*. The plot branches out and develops beyond what we have seen in the earlier versions above due to the appearance of a new character—the Christian monk Bahīrā. He was not mentioned in any of the earlier texts that deal with the Jewish sages. Based on the Muslim tradition of the story, which took shape in the eighth century, this monk, Bahīrā, was Muhammad's confidant from the time that the future prophet of Islam, as a young lad accompanying his uncle, Abu Talib, came to the monk's cell in Busrā in southern Syria at the end of the sixth century.⁴² The monk revealed to Muhammad during a feast he [Bahīrā] had made in honor of the lad that he was destined to be a prophet. Although not indicated in Gil's version of the story, it is important to mention Bahīrā's intense hatred of the Jews. According to the early version of the Jewish story about Bahīrā, which originated close in time to the Muslim version, the monk persuaded Muhammad to do evil to the Jews. That is why in the supplement to *Kitāb al-Tarikh*, the unflattering "(his name) may it not be remembered" was wished upon Bahīrā.⁴³ In order to ward off the harm that might befall their people, ten Jewish sages went to Muhammad, outwardly adopted his religion, and became his companions. As part of this friendship, these Jewish sages produced sections of the Quran for him and interpolated their names in different verses of it.⁴⁴ The Jewish sages, the heroes of this version of the story, were ten in total, a number with which we are already familiar from the episode described by Theophanes, a typological number that symbolizes a perfect formulation. In contrast to what we have seen up until now, here the names of the ten learned men are specified, and each is given his own identity. We no longer have a collective group of anonymous people. In this document, the Jewish sages are identified not only by name but also by their titles.⁴⁵ Moreover, AīS appears again as one of their leaders.

According to this version, he is listed second after Ka'b al-Ahbār, who is also a well-known figure—a Muslim born to a Jewish father of Yemenite origin who converted to Islam; Ka'b died in 731/113h.⁴⁶ In the list of the ten sages, particular note should be taken of the Judaizing of an important Islamic figure, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph in the history of the Muslim kingdom. This pattern of peopling the group of Jewish sages with key Islamic figures and attributing them Jewish origin is in keeping with the ancient Jewish account of the active presence of Jews in the creation of Islam.

6. An Early Version of the Jewish Legend Encapsulated in a Late Seventeenth-Century Chronicle

The early Jewish story about Bahīrā and the group of Jewish sages who joined Muhammad and converted to Islam was preserved almost in its entirety, although in some different form, in a later historical work. It is found in the first three chapters of the *Sefer Divrey Yosef* (The Book Containing the Sayings of Joseph, henceforth *SDY*), which describes the beginnings of Islam. The author of this sweeping historical work, Yosef Sambari, wrote it in the second half of the seventeenth century.⁴⁷ Due to its length, I will present below only a small part of the contents of these chapters, with major deletions:

And a new king arose, with renewed decrees⁴⁸ in the land of the East, and his name was Muhammad b. 'Abd Allāh. He was a hero and a soldier and a successful man and his time was auspicious for him, [but] wherever he turned he did evil, through his good friend and loyal ally, the great astronomer . . . the uncircumcised Buḥayrān.⁴⁹ Muhammad was joined by two wise men to do evil, rather than good. One was named Turhān, and the second was a prominent sage among the wise men of Israel, and he changed his name to al-Imām 'Alī. Both of them strengthened his [i.e., Muhammad's] hand to set up a new religion in the world. In addition, Muhammad decreed to the Muslims [laws], according to what is written in their books. He called the name of this book "Quran" and he said that he had brought down this book for them from Heaven. . . . And this man [Muhammad] knew not how to write, but he knew how to put it together, and the Imam 'Alī wrote it in ink.

After these events, Buḥayrān, the uncircumcised, advised Muhammad to destroy, to kill, and to exterminate all the seed of the Jews who did not come to his aid and keep his covenant. And when one of the Jewish sages saw . . . all the troubles that befell Israel, and he saw that Muhammad waxed great . . . he went and made a pact with him, and he became his soldier hero, and changed his name to Abū Bakr. Nonetheless, he remembered Israel, and he and al-Imān 'Alī made a covenant that they would kill the Gentile [Buḥayrān] and they conspired against him to slay him.⁵⁰

The motif of the Judaizing of the founders of Islam, which appears succinctly in the tenth-century geniza document,⁵¹ has been considerably expanded here. That document identified 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb among the ten sages, whereas here we have the addition of another two Caliphs—founders of Islam. According to Sambari, Abū Bakr and 'Alī had previously been Jews, and they converted to Islam in order to help Muhammad create his new religion and also in order to save their brethren. The mad empowerment of some of these Jewish sages in Sambari's book and in Gil's version of the story, and their identification as Muslims who had held high office in the nascent days of the Muslim state, may have been intended to lend credibility to the "fact" that they had participated in the creation of Islam. The plot of the Jewish Abū Bakr and 'Alī to kill Bahīrā, who had conspired to do evil to the Jews, was put into effect during a wine feast which the monk gave in honor of Muhammad and to which the two were invited as well.⁵² That is the continuation of the story in the *SDY*. Sambari's motif of the feast is testimony to the antiquity of the material that he incorporated into his work, as its source is the *Sirah of Ibn-Ishāq*.⁵³ This motif does not appear in a single one of the extra-Islamic medieval versions of the story, except for the *SDY*.

In the next chapter, after the story of Bahīrā in the *SDY*, 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām returns as the leader of that same group of Jewish sages that come to Muhammad.⁵⁴

And there were four learned men of Israel in Damascus, great and wise sages and their sin(!) was their leader,⁵⁵ 'Ovadyahū b. Shalom, who did not fear God. And they came to Muhammad to test him with riddles and were ensnared in his trap. They became part of his entourage and adhered to his covenant. And 'Ovadyahu b. Shalom introduced the following law for them: a woman who is divorced

from her husband and married another man, and the latter hated her, her first husband who sent her away, shall not be allowed to take her for a wife until she defiles herself with another man, and then she is permitted to her first husband.⁵⁶

This too is a reworking of the ancient story, because the motif of probing Muhammad by means of riddles and the ensnarement of the Jewish sages in Muhammad's trap originated in the *sira* and the *hadith*⁵⁷ and is not to be found in any of the other versions of the story. Even though the story evolved over the course of 1,000 years between the writing of the *sira* and the writing of the *SDY*, and the venue was moved from Medina in al-Hijāz to Damascus, it is this later work which reintroduces AīS. It also resurrects his image as he was in the very early sources—in the Quran and the *sira*. Moreover, AīS's connection with the Quran is also mentioned here explicitly. His contribution to the creation of Islamic law is expressed in this medieval story, by attributing to him the divorce law that was incorporated into the Quran. This contribution of AīS to a book that according to Muslim belief is of divine origin implies that he and his companions were responsible for writing it. We have seen above the deeds of the other nine sages, of whom AīS was one of the leaders, who also participated in the writing of the Quran and interpolated their names into its verses which they themselves wrote. In this work, Sambari joins those who contest the divine origins of the Quran and who denounce it as the product of human creation.

Summary

Muhammad's contact with the Jewish communities in al-Hijāz in the first three decades of the seventh century resulted in violent clashes. His encounters with members of those communities culminated in the expulsion of the Banū Qaynuḡā' and the Banū Naḍir tribes and the massacre of the Banū Qurayza and of some of the Jews living in Khaybar. In terms of polemics and religious persuasion, the preaching of the Prophet of Islam produced meager results. Very few indeed were the number of Jews in Arabia who converted to Islam. Islamic historical tradition, and the *sirah* literature in particular, include a story of a group of Jewish sages who come to test Muhammad with riddles, are convinced of the veracity of his religious mission, and adopt his religion. In those sources, AīS

is presented as the most respected, learned member of this group. These sources give literary shape to AIS, according him breadth and individual characteristics, in contrast to the other Jewish sages who came to Muhammad. An examination of the different texts of the tale of Muhammad and his Jewish companions leads to the conclusion that 'Abd Allāh served as the exception from which we can generalize about the entire group of Jewish sages. This group, like Christian figures such as Bahīrā, served as an effective tool in the propaganda machine of the expanding Islam, which resolutely went about acquiring followers to the new religion. The propaganda claim that is implied by the very existence of such a group could be worded as follows: If learned figures from among the *Ahl al-Kitāb* [the People of the Book] adopt Muhammad's new religion, all the more so the rest of their brethren. The rejoinder of the opposing side to this claim is expressed in the various transformations, which the Jewish tale about Muhammad's Jewish companions underwent. Primarily, the Jewish sages converted against their will and out of fear, and then they brilliantly aided Muhammad in writing the Quran and interpolated their names into its verses.⁵⁸ By so doing, they answered the Muslim allegation that they had tampered with the text of the Bible in order to conceal the proofs therein regarding Muhammad's religious mission.⁵⁹ Here the Jewish sages retaliated by relating how they had ruined the Quran by incorporating their names into it. They were thus hinting, so to speak, that they did not touch their own scriptures, but instead wrote their opinion of the holy book of the Muslims and its lack of validity. It can thus be said that the "sages," such as AIS and his associates who had accomplished their bold feat, were enlisted in this tale to serve as a mirror reaction to the religious struggle that existed in those days. This Jewish reaction was intended, inter alia, to stem the tide of conversion of the members of their community to the Muslim religion that was making inroads both politically and militarily. Apparently, this was the *Sitz im Leben* of the string of tales that we have discussed here. We can regard these stories as folklore and the like, but we still have to remember that those who, at the time, copied and disseminated them regarded them as the truth and used them as an effective weapon in the interreligious dispute in which they were engaged.

Appendix: Additional Sources of the Medieval Story about the Jewish Companions of Muhammad

As argued above, "the story of the companions of Muhammad" (*Kissat aṣḥābat* [!] Muhammad), the first detailed Jewish version, appeared in the tenth century.⁶⁰ From this point on, the story reappeared in different literary forms, up to and including Sambari in the seventeenth century.

These are the texts extant today:⁶¹

1. *Al-Bukhārī*,⁶² *Al-Sahīh*, 3:51 (written in Arabic):

The section of the coming of the Jews to the apostle when he arrived at al-Madīna . . . Abū Hurayra in the name of the apostle, who said, "Had ten Jews believed in me, then all the Jews would have believed in me."

2. *Kissat aṣḥāb Muhammad*, Ms. JTS ENA 2554, fol. 2 (written in Judeo-Arabic):⁶³

The story [about] the friends of Muhammad. Appendix to the Book of History. This is a book that comprises the story of Muhammad, who dwelt in the grazing field that is called *al-Jabal al-Hadth*, and how he fared until he went up to *Ṣan 'ā'* and to *al-Hijāz* owing to the monk who was in Balqin on a post called "the sign of the Sun." They that came from among the sages went over to him and reminded him of his affairs and composed the book [the Quran] for him and interpolated and wrote at the beginning of a *sūra* of his Quran their names. They interpolated [a verse] and wrote: "Thus did the sages of Israel counsel the wicked *ALLAH* [violent one]," in a hidden and jumbled way, so that it would not be understood. Let God curse the man, that this book comes his way and would explicate this to one of the nations. There was the monk named Bahīrā, [his name] should not be mentioned. These are the sages who came to him: Abraham also named Ka'b al-Ahbābar; Absalom also named 'Abd al-Salām; Ya'akov also named 'Umar al-Shahīd; Yōḥanan also named *al-Munhazam ilā al-Janna*; 'Aktivā al-Anṭoki also named *al-Tā'ir fī al-Janna*; El'azar also named *Ṣahīb al-'Aṣā*; Yiftah also named *al-Maqīl fī huḅb al-Nabī*; Shema'ayah also named *Murīd*

al-Nabi ilā al-bayt; Barūch also named *al-Maqūl fī sabīl al-Nabī*; Asa'el also named *Khātan al-Nabī*; Ḥafṣ abū Saḥyā mar'at al-Nabī. These are the sages who came to him and were converted to Islam by him, in order to prevent him from harming Israel even in the slightest. They produced for him a Quran and interpolated the writing of their names, each of them within a *sūra*, without ground for suspicion. And they wrote in the *sūra*: "Thus did the sages of Israel counsel the wicked ALLaM in the name of Allāh."

3. Ms. Cambridge University Library T-S 8K 20.2, fol. 2a-b (written in Hebrew):⁶⁴

And if they had done to us as our enemies⁶⁵ who were brought by Essar Ḥadon [an Assyrian emperor] from Kutha had wrought us and like those who came after them with the shepherd [Muhammad] had done, the one who sojourned in the place known as the New Mountain. He had dealings with the monk [Bahīrā] who dwelt in the place named Balqin, perched on a post known by the name of the Sign of the Sun. He had likewise dealings with the ten elders: Abraham also named Ka'b al-Aḥbār; Absalom also named 'Abd Allāh b. al-Salām; Ya'akov also named 'Umar al-Shahīd and Yoḥanan also named *al-Munhazam ilā al-Janna* and their friends, each by his name and his titles. They came to him and composed that shameful sign [the Quran], and so they wrote and interpolated their names, each and everyone. And so it is written in the *sūra* of the Cow:⁶⁶ "Thus did the sages of Israel advise the wicked ALLaM [Muhammad]." All this was done in order to save the people of the Lord so that he does not harm them with his plottings.

4. The Commentary of Abū al-Faraj Furqān b. Asad⁶⁷ on Deuteronomy 32:28; manuscript of the Russian National Library, Firkovitch Collection II, no. 2086, fol. 87 (written in Judeo-Arabic):

And he said that the meaning of the phrase "void of counsel" (Deuteronomy 32:28) refers to the counsels of the ten [sages] who say that they have composed this one, single book [the Quran]. And here ^{וְכִי} [the threat of] annihilation of Israel.

5. Al-Samā'ual al-Maghribī, *Ḥikāmat al-Yahūd*, pp. 57–58 (written in Arabic):

The Jews assert that Muhammad had dreams indicating that he was to be a head of state (*sāhib dawla*), that he traveled to Syria on business of Ḥadīja, met Rabbis and told them his dreams, and that they recognized that he was to be a head of state. Then they attached to him a companion, 'Abd Allāh b. Salām, who instructed him for some time in scholarship and jurisprudence of the Torah. They go so far in their claim as to ascribe the miraculous eloquence of the Quran to its compilation by 'Abd Allāh b. Salām. They also maintain that it was he who stipulated in the marriage law that a wife after her third divorce [*sic!*] from her husband shall not be permitted to remarry him until she has been married and divorced from another man, the purpose being, in their contention, to make the children of the Muslims *manzerim* [illegitimate children].⁶⁹

6. Abraham Zakkut, *Sefer Yuhassin*, Ms. Bodleian Library, Oxford, Heb. d 2798, fol. 63 (written in Hebrew):

In the year 794 ca.⁷¹ Muhammad [appeared, and the Christians said] that his father was an Arab Gentle and his mother was a Jewess of an Ishmaelite descent. He was a scion of all religions. These were three men who completed with him the book he wrote [the Quran]: Sirgo, Esseno—a false Christian—who began as a preacher of the Christian religion in Egypt. After this event he and a Jewish sage, Ben Yoḥanan of Antioch converted to his religion.⁷² It is said that he [Muhammad] was thirty-four years old and died in the year 632 of the Common Era.⁷³

7. "The Tale of Muhammad," ed. B. Cohen (written in Hebrew):⁷⁴

And it came to pass in the days of Zedegiah the King of Judah, and he did evil things in the eyes of the Lord. And He sent against them the King of the Chaldeans . . . and He drove them into the Exile of Babylon . . . and they went from bad to worse for some fifteen hundred years for the Exile was heavy upon them. And it came to

pass in those days and behold a man, one of the sages of Israel . . . and his word was like that of a man of God who would listen to a dream and interpret it. And there came a day and behold a man is standing at the entrance of the house at sunrise and said to him, I dreamt a dream and there is none who can interpret it, therefore I came to you this day. And he said, in my dream I am standing in the midst of a large wood at the end of the middle-watch . . . and behold there grew an almond-tree in my left palm and it had twelve sinews [i.e., branches] . . . and behold the fire of God fell from Heaven and consumed the hand with all that were in it. And when he heard the dream, the man was increasingly afraid and felt faint . . . and said in his heart: "Woe unto us for the days of visitations have come upon us." Then he assembled all the people and he said to them: "Sanctify yourselves for fasting, call for the [holy] gathering and pray to God, for the days of visitations have come of which there is a prophecy [by] Hosea, saying Israel knows that the prophet is a fool and mad is the man of spirit."⁷⁵ Then he told them about the man and his dream . . . and he told them: "This is the interpretation: This man [Muhammad] will rule for about nine hundred years. . . . The animals are the rest of the nations who will believe in him, saying, 'Verily the prophet of the Lord art thou. . . . Now let us take clever counsel and bring confusion to his tongue and destroy his livelihood, lest he becomes a stumbling stone for the House of Israel. And choose from among yourselves ten men, one out a thousand, who know science and grasp knowledge and who have strength to stand at the royal gates and bring there counsel from afar." It came to pass while they were talking with him and told him about the generation of Enoch and of the Flood . . . and all that happened to Abraham in Ur-Kasdim . . . and all the words of the Torah that are fearful about Hell (*Gehinōm*) and the Garden of Paradise. All these matters will be written in a book using haughty language, so that all that hear it their ears will ring and will say that its contents are from God, that no man or woman born could have made them, and the name thereof will be *al-Qur'ān*. They will put it into the hands of the man. And they went before him each on his own and he knew not, and they were among those that ate from his table all the days. And the whole congregation heard it and they chose ten men clever, wise ones, men of understanding and of fame . . . who

spoke in Arabic. They [the ten sages] sat for two months and wrote in the book whatever their hearts offered . . . and they gathered the congregation and they replied with these words saying, our souls we offer to die in your stead and you shall carry our sins for we acted treacherously against the Lord in following this man. The One who tries the hearts, the Lord knows that not in rebellion nor treachery was this deed done, but in order to turn his heart backwards . . . and in order to be for you a great deliverance. It is better that we ten leave the congregation to save you, so that a whole congregation perishes not from Israel with their children after them. Then there came a day when he [Muhammad] lifted his eyes and he saw, behold, a wise man come to meet him and he fell on his face to the ground before Muhammad. He said unto him: "I beseech you my lord, a vision appeared to me and behold the angel of the Lord rose up in flight . . . and he was carrying you on his shoulders, mounted the throne of the Lord and the Lord placed his hand upon your head. Then I heard them say that the whole world was created for his sake, for he is the chosen of the Lord." Muhammad was greatly amazed, but when he heard it he took courage and his heart grew increasingly haughty. After ten months, there came all the sages and they brought counsel from afar, estranged his friend, and stole his heart on that day, and Muhammad's hands strengthened and he arose and he set them up as the heads of the people, and they were among those who partook of food at his table.

Notes

1. Geiger's *Was hat Mohammed aus des Judenthums aufgenommen* was published in Bonn in 1833. It was translated into English under the title *Judaism and Islam*.

2. In some versions of the legend, the hostility demonstrated by Muhammad toward the Arabian Jews is already taken into account, and therefore the authors of these versions have provided another explanation for the act of conversion.

3. See Aloys Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed*, 2d ed. (Berlin, 1899), 1:490; W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 158-61; Watt, *Muhammad's Mecca* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), 36-38, 44-45.

4. The exhaustive study on this issue is A. Jan Weinstock, *Mohammed en de Joden te Medina* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1908). Cf. Frantz Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammads*, 2d ed. (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1930), 211-77. On the extermination of the last tribe, the Banū