

“... And the Ishmaelites Honour the Site”: Images of Encounters Between Jews and Muslims at Jewish Sacred Places in Medieval Hebrew Travelogues*

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The anonymous author of *Elleh ha-Massa‘ot* (These Are the Travel Routes), a vademecum for Jewish pilgrims originating from the Holy Land (between the mid-thirteenth century and 1291), mentions that on the altar of Elijah on Mt. Carmel “the Ishmaelites [i.e., Muslims] kindle lights to the glory of the holy place.”¹ Similar statements are made by him, as well as others, concerning a number of sacred places. Both Jewish and Muslim medieval sources frequently mention or allude to the fact that the graves of Jewish saints were also revered by Muslims, and, in the period of the Crusades, also by Christians.² Followers of the three Abrahamic religions intermingled easily, not only at the graves of saints but also at holy places in general, or on the holy days of a particular community. Pilgrimage to the tombs of saints, i.e., *ziyāra* (lit. “visitation”) was a fundamental aspect of religious life throughout the medieval Near East and an expression of both elite status and popular piety.

Rather than attempting to examine these issues exhaustively, this paper primarily seeks to emphasize the variety of images of encounters between Jews and Muslims at sacred places and the tombs of saints, as portrayed in Jewish Hebrew literature, especially the travel writings stemming from the Crusader (1099–1291) and the Mamlūk periods (1250–1517). These images reflect both Jewish-Muslim fraternity and cooperation at jointly revered sites but also the interreligious competition that existed in relation to them. The cult of the dead and the veneration of sacred places also served as a tool for polemics, when the Jews polemicized against the Muslim presence at the “Jewish” holy sites or against Islam *per se*. In this regard, the Jewish travelogues could have served as a channel for communicating, predominantly for European Jewry, polemics against Islam.

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¹ *Elleh ha-Massa‘ot* in *Die Reisebeschreibungen des R. Benjamin von Tudela*, 145. *Elleh ha-Massa‘ot* is analyzed by Elchanan Reiner, “‘Oral Versus Written’: The Shaping of Traditions of Holy Places in the Middle Ages,” 308–45. Jews and Muslims often participated in the veneration of the Prophet Elijah and his Islamic counterpart, al-Khaḍīr. See Josef W. Meri, “Re-Appropriating Sacred Space: Medieval Jews and Muslims Seeking Elijah and al-Khaḍīr.”

² For the participation of Muslims at Jewish sacred places, see Daniella Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria (1146–1260)*.

The medieval Jewish descriptions of the holy places in the Land of Israel in particular and in the Near East in general have several forms. Aside from rather dry lists of “tombs of [the] ancestors” (*qivrei avot*) or “tombs of [the] righteous” (*qivrei ṣaddiqim*), designating mainly the purported tombs and burial sites of biblical figures and rabbinic sages of the Talmudic period, travelogues or itineraries that offer the reader colorful pictures of the land and its peoples also appear, with a natural accent on the Jewish presence.³ The itineraries were a new phenomenon in Jewish literature and their creation in the second half of the 12th century went hand in hand with the upsurge in Jewish pilgrimages to the Holy Land and similar developments in Christian Europe.⁴ The first known works adduce as their authors the French pilgrim Jacob ben Nathanel ha-Kohen (before 1187), the Spaniard Benjamin of Tudela (before 1173), and the Ashkenazi Petahyah of Regensburg (before 1187), who did not confine their descriptions, at least the last two, only to the Holy Land, but the even more colorful picture they offer when writing mainly about the conditions of Jewish life in *Bavel*, i.e., Iraq. However, the majority of travelogues or letters were written in the fifteenth century by Italian Jews, such as Rabbi Isaac ben Meir Latif (ca. 1455), Meshullam of Volterra (1481), and the famous commentator on the Mishnah Rabbi ‘Obadiah of Bertinoro (three letters from 1488, 1489, and 1492). Their narratives usually start with the depiction of a voyage from Italy to the Holy Land, where they arrived directly or via Egypt or Syria. Though these countries also play an important role in their narratives, at their core stands the Holy Land. Unlike Benjamin and Petahyah, these authors never venture further to Iraq. It is superfluous (and, at the same time, impossible) to list and analyze here all the Hebrew itineraries, pilgrim guides, and later also epistolary travel accounts written in the period under study, as this has already been done in a comprehensive way by Martin Jacobs in his latest book.⁵ Just as the writers’ cultural and social backgrounds differed, so did their perspectives and attitudes towards the civilizations they encountered *ultra mare*. Jacobs’ book shows conclusively that “between the twelfth and early sixteenth centuries, Hebrew travel writing underwent fundamental changes in all that concerns perception and representation.”⁶

By monotonously listing or depicting the tombs of biblical figures or the Mishnah and the Talmud sages, the authors of these itineraries and lists of holy places declared the Jews’ rights to the Holy Land over which different nations

³ See Elchanan Reiner, “Tradition of Holy Places in Medieval Palestine – Oral versus Written.”

⁴ On the history of the Jewish pilgrimage see Elchanan Reiner, *‘Aliyah va-‘Aliyah le-Regel le-Ereṣ Yisra’el, 1099–1517*.

⁵ Martin Jacobs, *Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World*.

⁶ Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 207.

wielded political power and which is the object of a promised renewal as a result of the presence of its ancestors and saints. Their Jewish readers could have gained an almost palpable impression of the Jewish presence in the “promised land,” despite the fact that this presence was rather meager in certain periods. The miraculous stories about a saint’s intervention to preserve the Jewish identity of a particular site, or repeated statements that not Muslims, but Jews, held the keys to a holy site, were supposed to convey to the Jewish reader a message that the real owners of these sacred sites and of the Land, and *ipso facto* of the true religion, were in fact the Jews.

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN JEWS AND MUSLIMS AT HOLY PLACES: A SHARED EXPERIENCE

Benjamin Z. Kedar, in an article about Saydnaya, north of Damascus, which was the site of a shared medieval ritual in which both Christians and Muslims venerated a miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary, has proposed a typology of the convergence of worshippers of different creeds. It comprises three types: (i) a convergence that is merely spatial; (ii) an inegalitarian convergence; (iii) an egalitarian convergence at a shared religious ceremony by members of different faiths.⁷ Kedar’s typology also does justice to the stories of encounters between Jews and Muslims in sacred spaces. While the third type is rather rare,⁸ the images of encounters as portrayed in Jewish travel writings from the period concerned mostly serve as illustrations of the first two types. In them it is possible to read time and again sentences such as “the Ishmaelites honor the site and come thither to pray” or “the Ishmaelites light lamps in reverence of the holiness of the place.” Next to the “lighting of lamps,” other terms that appear in the Jewish literature when describing the participation of Muslims, and which specify particular acts of devotion, include: prostration (*hishtahawa*) on the grave of the righteous, and

⁷ Benjamin Z. Kedar, “Convergence of Oriental Christian, Muslim, and Frankish Worshippers: The Case of Saydnaya,” 59–69.

⁸ Kedar mentions only one example: in 1317, Jerusalem experienced a drought and all the wells went dry, except for the Spring of Silwān. All the inhabitants, Muslims, Christian, and Jews, went out to an open space and implored God for rain; their prayers were answered on the third day. It is also possible to cite another case. In 1348, when a plague broke out in Damascus, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims fasted for three days and then marched together in a procession, praying side by side. Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya fi'l-ta'rikh*, 14:226. Both cases concern crisis situations; maybe this explains the willingness of different communities to pray together. But what is significant about this shared prayer experience is that it could only happen out in the open, i.e., on neutral soil, and not on premises sacred to one of the religions.

the further donation of offerings. The pilgrim Samuel ben Samson, who came to the Holy Land in 1210 accompanied by a group of pilgrims from Provence led by Rabbi Jehonathan ha-Kohen of Lunel, observed in his itinerary that Jews and Muslims worshipped simultaneously in several places in Galilee. In Safed, the location of the tomb of R. Ḥanina b. Hyrkanus, he met “two Muslims who continually attended to the lights and supply of oil in honor of the righteous man (*ṣaddiq*). [...] In Kefar ‘Amuqa, we found the grave of Jonatan, son of ‘Uziel, over which there is a great tree. The Ishmaelites bring oil to it and light candles in his honor. They make their vows there, too, to his glory.”⁹

Rabbi Jacob ben Nathanel, a traveler from the second half of the twelfth century, speaks of a cave in Tiberias, known as the burial place of Rabbi Kahana from the third century C.E., where “the people of all nations kindle lights, and the sick and barren women come in order to be healed.”¹⁰ Here, the shared veneration was not perceived as a threat by the Jewish community. A different attitude is adopted in the *taqqanah* (communal statute) emanating from the Cairo Genizah and issued by the Jewish court in Fuṣṭāṭ at the time of the rigorous enforcement of Islamic law and mores by the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim (996–1021).¹¹ The statute censured and prohibited all the alleged abuses in vogue at the Jewish sanctuary of Dammūh, several miles south-west of Cairo-Fuṣṭāṭ, “the most important place of worship for Egyptian Jews.”¹² It stipulates, *inter alia*, that “no [Jewish] visitor should be accompanied by [a Gentile] or an apostate.” From the context it is clear that Muslims were invited by their Jewish friends and even Jewish converts to Islam were unable to withstand the attractions of the cherished visit. Muslim participation in the pilgrimage to Dammūh is actually confirmed around the year 1341 through reference to an incomplete Hebrew written list of pilgrimage sites compiled by an Egyptian Jew named Yitgaddal, the scribe of a certain *nasi* Sar Shalom.¹³ In fact, Yitgaddal mentions Muslim participation in activities at most of the Jewish sacred places he lists in Palestine and beyond the River Jordan. Unlike some other Jewish accounts, Yitgaddal does not polemicize against the Muslim presence at the

⁹ *Mikhtav me-rabbi Shemu'el bar Shimshon 'al pi k'y Parma*, 9–10, 12.

¹⁰ Jacob ben Nathanel, *Sippur massa 'ot*, 9.

¹¹ The document was published in Hebrew by Simḥa Assaf, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History*, 155–162; for an English translation see Shlomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 5:21–22.

¹² Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-mawā'iz wa'l-i'tibār bi-dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa'l-āṭār*, 2:464. For the cult at Dammūh, see Joel Kraemer, “A Jewish Cult of the Saints in Fātimid Egypt,” 584–85. The statute was written by Ephraim b. Shemarya, the judge of the Synagogue of the Palestinians (*kanīsat al-shāmīyīn*) court, known today as “The Ben Ezra Synagogue.” See Elinor Bareket, *Fustat on the Nile. The Jewish Elite in Medieval Egypt*, 61–62, n. 144.

¹³ Zvi Ilan, *Tombs of the Righteous in the Land of Israel*, 133–36.

shared holy sites. Without any sign of a grudge, he even imparts the information that the Jews paid a small entrance fee to the Muslim guardians at the grave of the prophetess Huldah.¹⁴ When describing the great miracles that were supposed to have often occurred at Aaron's tomb on *Hor ha-Har* at Petra, he goes so far as to praise the Muslims for their upkeep of the place and prays for the fulfillment of both Jewish and Muslim prayers there:

Many come to bow down (*lehishtahavot*) and prostrate themselves (*lehishtateah*). The Gentiles [*goyim*, i.e., the Muslims] maintain the place in great purity and for the honor of the prophet [Aaron], peace upon him, they pay respect to the Jews and honor them and allow them to enter to prostrate themselves and to pray there. May the Lord answer their and our prayers and the prayers of His nation Israel. Amen.¹⁵

What is more, Yitgaddal exhibits a positive attitude toward Muslim participation at the shared holy places, even when the Muslims prevented the Jews from entering them, as in the Cave of Makhpelah in Hebron, “where they do not let any Jew enter because they [i.e., Muslims] built a house of prayer for the Muslims next to the entrance. The Muslims maintain the place in purity (*tohorah*) and continually attend to the light [...]”¹⁶ In a similar vein, an anonymous pilgrimage guide *Yiḥus ha-Ṣaddiqim* (Lineage of the Righteous) from 1489 confirms that the “Ishmaelites indeed pray there in purity and cleanliness,” but it is due to Israel's sins (*ba-‘avonotenu*) that the Muslims are the guardians of the place.¹⁷ Similarly, while speaking about Aaron's tomb on *Hor ha-Har*, the guide says that though the “Ishmaelites hold Aaron's tomb, the Jews are not hindered to venerate and pray at his grave.”¹⁸

From the end of the twelfth century until the arrival of the exiled Spanish Jews at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the graves of the *tanna'im* sages [i.e., the Rabbinic sages of the Mishnah] Hillel and Shammai in Meron in Galilee were the most important places of the Jewish *ziyāra* in the Holy Land. They start to appear in sources from the mid-eleventh century and from that time on they figure prominently in the travelogues of Benjamin of Tudela, Petahyah of

¹⁴ Ilan, *Tombs of the Righteous*, 133.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Yitgaddal's words contradict the testimony of a German pilgrim, Ludolf von Sudheim (1336–1341), who recounts that while the Muslims did not allow Christians to visit the graves of the Fathers, the Jews, after paying, were allowed to do so. *Ludolph von Suchem's Description of the Holy Land*, 92.

¹⁷ Abraham David, *Iggeret “Yiḥus ha-Ṣaddiqim ve-ha-Ḥasidim ha-niqbarim be-ereṣ ha-qedushah be-Ereṣ Yisra'el” mi-shenat rm*”t, 206.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

Regensburg, Jacob ben Nathanel ha-Kohen, Menaḥem ha-Hebroni, and others.¹⁹ The *ziyāra* and the ritual that stood at its center also played an important role in the life of the local Muslim community. *Elleh ha-Massa'ot* elaborates on an annual *ziyāra* at the graves of Hillel and Shammai, which was attended by Jews and Muslims: “Israelites and Ishmaelites converge there on Second Passover” [14 Iyar].²⁰ The pilgrims, once gathered there, prayed for rain and water, which “miraculously” appeared, which was perceived by all as a sign “that [the next] year will be blessed with rain.” The Jewish and Muslim sources are at one that the day of *ziyāra* in Meron was a time for merry-making for both Jews and Muslims, although the celebration was regarded as a “Jewish holiday” since the place was in the possession of the Jews and *ziyāra* was held annually under their auspices. As *Elleh ha-Massa'ot* says, the water appears at the moment when “the Israelites pray and recite Psalms,” and then “all [i.e., the Jews and Muslims] are cheerful.” This is confirmed by the Muslim geographer al-Dimashqī, who in 1327 elaborated on the miracle of the “water of Meron” that took place at the graves of Hillel and Shammai, and stressed the Jewish character of the *ziyāra* by saying that “one day a year Jews from near and faraway countries gather here and with them [Muslim] peasants [*fallāḥūn*] and other people and they remain here for the whole day [...] It is the day of a Jewish holiday.”²¹ A similar theme, concerning *ziyāra* in Meron, was addressed by an anonymous Jewish traveler from Candia in Crete. He was informed in 1473 by Daniel, a Jewish resident of Palestine, that whenever the pilgrims’ supplications for rain were answered, “the Muslims fill their wells and vessels and then they give the Jews food and drink, all the delicacies befitting a king.”²² Although the traveler’s words do not exactly reflect the make-up of the cult at Meron, they nevertheless rightly suggest the Muslims’ acknowledgement of the Jewish guardianship of the ritual.

An intermingling of various religious communities and their joint veneration at holy places shows that it was a part of a shared popular religious culture, one in which the religious identity of a saint was secondary. What was of import was the magical potential of the place. It was particularly the case in relation to the area of Galilee, which medieval Jewish travelers portrayed as a landscape

¹⁹ For the cult at the gravesites of Shammai and Hillel, see Reiner, ‘*Aliyah va-‘Aliyah le-Regel*, 295–305.

²⁰ *Elle ha-Massa'ot*, 153.

²¹ Al-Dimashqī, Muḥammad b. Abī Ṭālib, *Kitāb nukhbat al-dahr fī ‘ajā’ib al-baḥr*, 118. A very similar testimony was recorded by a Muslim chief, qādī of Safed Muḥammad al-‘Uthmānī, between the years 1372 and 1376. B. Lewis, “An Arabic Account of the Province of Safed, I,” 480–1.

²² Abraham M. Haberman, ed., “*Ziyāra de-Ereṣ Yisra’el le-Rabi Aharon Švi Ashkenazi*,” 237; A. Ya’ari, ed., *Massa’ot Ereṣ Yisra’el*, 113.

with a special sanctity, dotted with the purported tombs and burial sites of biblical figures and rabbinic sages.²³ The travelers and guidebooks often record with surprising ease and without polemical undertones the Muslim presence at the “Jewish” sacred sites, their intermingling with the Jews at the shared sites, or even the Muslim custodianship of the sites and the Islamic character of the religious structures marking them. This is especially true of the guidebook *Elleh ha-Massa‘ot*, which often states that Muslims pray at “Jewish” burial sites or build a house of prayer over them. Thus, the Ishmaelites have a “place for prayer next to the tomb [of Phinehas, son of Eleazar]” or at the gravesite of the seventy elders “the Ishmaelites have a prayer place [*meqom tefillah*].”²⁴ Speaking about the burial site of Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, at Kefar Hittim in Galilee, whom the Druze and the Muslim tradition identifies with Nabī Shu‘ayb, a prophet mentioned in the Qur’ān, the guidebook mentions the “beautiful building” of an Islamic sanctuary built over Shu‘ayb’s grave without considering it to be an encroachment upon the Jewish identity of the site. What is more, the presence of an Islamic sanctuary seems to affirm the sanctity of the “Jewish” site, for “the Ishmaelites turned it into a prayer house [*bet tefillah*] since it is the custom of the Ishmaelites to pray next to [the tombs of] the righteous.”²⁵ Similar vocabulary is employed about the gravesite of the sons of Jonah ben Amittai, or Nabī Yūnis, in Kefar Kana: “Over [the tomb of Jonah’s sons] is a beautiful building, a prayer house [*bet tefillah*] for the Ishmaelites.”²⁶ In the early 1520s, the Italian rabbi and kabbalist Moshe Basola similarly points out in his travel account that a “large distinguished building has been erected on his [Jonah’s] tomb, which is in Muslim hands.”²⁷

The author of *Elleh ha-Massa‘ot* even describes as “very splendid” and having a “very very nice cupola” the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, standing over the Foundation Stone (*even shetiyya*) in *qodesh ha-qodashim*, or the Holy of Holies, “that was built by the Muslim kings,” and where “the Ishmaelites congregate on the day of their feast.” Moreover, he likens the dancelike circuits made by the huge crowd of Ishmaelites around the Dome (*meqifim le-oto maqom kemo maḥol*) to the circuits which the Israelites had made on the seventh day of Sukkot (*kemo she-hayu ‘osim Yisra’el*). His description is not only devoid of any polemical

²³ See, for example, Joseph W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*, 242–50.

²⁴ *Elleh ha-Massa‘ot*, 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156–57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 157. Cf. David, *Iggeret ‘Yiḥus ha-Ṣaddiqim ve-ha-Ḥasidim*, 217.

²⁷ Moshe Basola, *In Zion and Jerusalem. The Itinerary of Rabbi Moses Basola (1521–1523)*, 18 (Hebrew), 70 (English).

bias, but even suggests the continuation of the shared rituals in the holiest place of Judaism.²⁸

Rabbi Samuel ben Samson (1210) even goes so far as to call the mosque in the Cave of Makhpelah in Hebron a Temple, *bet ha-miqdash*, a term that is usually reserved for Jerusalem's temple. By way of comparison, a few lines earlier, Samuel identifies a church on the Mount of Olives as a place of polytheism, '*avodah zarah*.²⁹

Probably the most positive image of encounters and of respectful sharing and co-existence at holy sites comes from Solomon Shlumil of Dreznitz (Strážnice in Moravia), writing from Safed in 1607. Though his narrative already falls into the Ottoman period and thus goes beyond the chronological span of the study, it may well reflect similar encounters in the previous Mamlūk period. Solomon, aiming to praise the Holy Land and especially Safed, the center of the Kabbalah at that time, states in a letter to his friends at home that

The Muslims [*goyim*] dwelling in the land of Israel all yield and bend in front of the holiness of the people of Israel. Even when we stand during the whole day in prayer shawl and phylacteries in the fields and pray and loudly praise God, our Lord, in front of the graves of the righteous, it does not come to the mind of any of them to approach the place where the Jews pray, or, God forbid, to deride our prayer. They all go by their road and, thanks to God, no one opens his mouth, or chirps. Quite the opposite, they conduct themselves with utmost respect at the graves of holy *tanna'im* and in the synagogues. They light up lights on the graves of the righteous and take pledges to donate oil to the synagogues. In the villages of 'Ayn Zaytūn and Meron there stand – because of our sins – deserted and dilapidated synagogues with numberless scrolls of the Torah in the arks of the Law. The Muslims, who hold the keys, show them deep respect. They revere them and light up lights in front of the arks. None of them dares to approach and do harm to the scrolls of the Torah.³⁰

Members of different religious communities were able to share a mutually revered shrine even if they disagreed over the identity of the person interred there. A case in point is, for example, the grave of the prophetess Huldah at the Mount of Olives, where the Muslims venerated the she-mystic Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (8th century), while the Christians held the place to be holy because it was the

²⁸ *Elleh ha-Massa'ot*, 149. The traveler Nāṣer e-Khosraw, who visited Jerusalem in 1047, wrote that the people unable to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca instead visited Jerusalem, where they performed the *hajj* rituals, including the circuits. He estimated their numbers as being up to twenty thousand. Nāṣer e-Khosraw's *Book of Travels (Safarnāma)*, 21.

²⁹ *Mikhtav me-rabbi Shemu'el bar Shimshon*, 6–7.

³⁰ Abraham Ya'ari, ed. *Iggerot Ereṣ Yisra'el*, 199.

resting-place of St. Pelagia, the Penitent from the fifth century. All three religions admit that a holy woman is buried here; only their understanding of her identity differs.³¹ Similarly, while Jews believed that a certain tomb in Yavneh (south of Jaffa) belonged to Rabban Gamliel, a founding figure of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the Muslims revered the tomb of Abū Hurayra, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, at the same site. The anonymous author of *Elleh ha-Massa 'ot* places both traditions next to each other without any sign of conflict over the sacred space, but uses, as usual, a neutral phrase, a “prayer house [*bet tefillah*] for the Ishmaelites,” when writing about the magnificent building that is “called by the Ishmaelites Abū Hurayra.”³²

IMAGES OF SHARING IN IRAQ

While many sacred sites in the medieval Holy Land became arenas where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities both intermingled and vied for ownership or supremacy, it is also of interest to look at evidence of interreligious mingling at popular holy tombs in Iraq. Jewish travelers report the existence of several reputed Jewish holy sites in “Babylonia” that were revered by Jews and non-Jews, i.e., Muslims, alike and that supposedly mainly contained the tombs of biblical figures associated with the Babylonian captivity, such as Ezekiel, Ezra, Daniel, and others.

Benjamin of Tudela and Petaḥyah of Regensburg, the main Hebrew sources concerning these holy places, pay special attention to the burial place of the prophet Ezekiel (*qever Yehezqel*), which, at least from the 10th century onwards, became the most important pilgrimage site for Iraqi Jews, or, in Benjamin’s words, *miqdash me’aṭ*, a “lesser Temple.”³³ The significance of the site for the Jews is also confirmed by Muslim sources, such as Yāqūt’s geographical lexicon *Mu’jam al-Buldān* (d. 1228) and al-Harawī’s guide for pilgrims, *Guide to Knowledge of Pilgrimage Sites (Kitāb al-ishārāt ilā amākin al-ziyārāt*, d. 1215).³⁴ However, from Benjamin’s and Petaḥyah’s narratives it follows that Ezekiel’s burial place also drew many Muslim worshippers, who considered the site to be

³¹ See Ora Limor, “The Tomb of Pelagia – Sin, Repentance, and Salvation on the Mount of Olives”; idem., “Sharing Sacred Space: Holy Places in Jerusalem Between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam,” 227–29; Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage*, 145, 170–71.

³² *Elleh ha-Massa 'ot*, 158.

³³ See Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 117–24; Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 229–40.

³⁴ Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī al-Rūmī, *Mu’jam al-buldān: Jacut’s Geographisches Wörterbuch*, 1:594, 3:335; ‘Alī ibn Abī Bakr al-Harawī’s *Kitāb al-Ishārāt ilā Ma’rifat al-Ziyārāt*, 198–99.

no less hallowed than did the Jews. Both travelers offer colorful pictures of the interreligious festivities that played an important role in the religious as well as commercial lives of both communities. And neither author polemicizes either against the Muslim presence at this holy compound during Jewish festivals, nor their participation in the veneration at the holy tomb, which was perceived by both religious communities as belonging primarily to the Jews, “The Jews possess the keys,” as Petaḥyah’s *Sibbuḅ* puts it, or, in al-Ḥarawī’s words, *li-l-yahūd min al-mazārāt hunāka*, “the Jews have pilgrimage places there [in Shusha].”

Ezekiel is known in Muslim tradition as Ḥizqīl and is identified with a Qur’ānic prophet, Dhū ’l-Kifl, whose name means the “guarantor.” But probably the main reason for the tomb’s popularity among Muslims was its geographical location. Being situated on the Euphrates at a place that in al-Ḥarawī’s and Benjamin’s time was called Bar Malāḥa (currently known as al-Kifl), “a day’s or half a day’s journey from Baghdad,” according to Petaḥyah, between Karbalā’ and Najaf, which is on the traditional route of *hajj* caravans from Iraq and Iran on their way to Mecca and Medina, the shrine was a guaranteed “must” on the pilgrimage route. Petaḥyah was aware of this: “Every Ishmaelite who goes to that place where *Maḥmat* [is buried; i.e., Medina, but he could also have erroneously meant Mecca]³⁵ goes via the tomb of Ezekiel and gives a donation and free-will offering to Ezekiel and makes a vow and prays, saying: Our lord Ezekiel, if I return, I will give you so and so.”³⁶ According to Petaḥyah, in addition to the *hajj* pilgrims, the site was also sought out by childless men and women, who donated votive deposits to the tomb in the hope that the prophet would help them to conceive or even to ensure the fertility of their animals. Petaḥyah mentions another function of the holy sites, as places where pilgrims could deposit valuables, such as money, books, and the like, for safekeeping when traveling to distant lands. A deposit was accompanied by a prayer to Ezekiel, who would protect the items that had been deposited.³⁷ Ezekiel’s efficiency as a “guarantor” and “protector” is illustrated by a story concerning the punishment of a violator. “Therefore everyone fears Ezekiel.”³⁸

In the phrase “everyone” (*kol ha-’olam*, literary “the whole world”) Petaḥyah included both Jewish and Muslim devotees alike. They generally gathered at fixed times, set in accordance with the Jewish religious calendar. Petaḥyah relates that during the week of Sukkot, people from all countries converged on the courtyard

³⁵ See note 76.

³⁶ Petaḥyah, *Sibbuḅ ha-Rav Rabbi me-Regensburg*, ed. L. Grünhut, 15.

³⁷ The same function of the holy place among the rural Arab population in Palestine at the beginning of the 20th century is addressed by Tawfik Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine*, 102–13.

³⁸ Petaḥyah, *Sibbuḅ*, 15.

of Ezekiel's tomb: 60,000 to 80,000 Jews as well as Ishmaelites.³⁹ Benjamin, who adduces as the time of the annual assemblage festivals at Ezekiel's sepulcher (*keneset Yehezqel*) the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, also speaks about a "great gathering" with the participation of the Jewish Exilarch (*rosh ha-golah*) and the heads of the Jewish Academies from Baghdad. An annual fair that was held during the religious festivities also attracted "Arab (i.e., Muslim) traders" (*soharei 'Arav*). The crowd purportedly filled an entire campground "about two miles" in length.

A similar sort of cohabitation reigned at the tomb of Ezra the Scribe (in Arabic 'Uzayr), situated on the western shore of the Tigris, north from Basra. In his *Massa 'ot* Benjamin of Tudela portrays the relations between Jews and Muslims on this spot in an exceedingly colorful way: "In front of his tomb (*qever*), [the Jews] built a large sepulcher (*keneset*). And on the other side, the Ishmaelites built a prayer house [*bet tefillah*, i.e., a mosque], on account of their great devotion [to Ezra]. They love the Jews on this account and the Ishmaelites come there to pray."⁴⁰ Despite the peaceful sharing of the holy site, the two communities did not intermingle, and each venerated in their own place, adjacent to the tomb: the Jews in the *keneset*, and the Muslims in the mosque, or "prayer house," a term devoid of any polemical reference. Here, the word *keneset* – lit. "gathering" does not designate a synagogue, as it is usually translated,⁴¹ but describes "a holy place" in general.⁴² The author provides the reader with several hints that the custodians of the place were Jews and that their right to it was acknowledged by the Muslims. First, while the Muslim mosque was "only" "on the other side" of Ezra's tomb, the Jews' *keneset* was "in front" of it. Second, the sepulcher was built by the Jews. Moreover, the Muslims venerated the "Jewish prophet"⁴³ and

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 48–49.

⁴¹ Ibid., 51 (English); Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 121.

⁴² This is the original meaning of the word *keneset*, i.e., "a holy place," as can be seen from perhaps the oldest list of holy places in Galilee (the late Byzantine or early Muslim periods) attributed to the prophet Eliyah, and referred to as the *kenesiyot Eliyahu* (the Sanctuaries of Elijah). See Reiner, "'Oral Versus Written,'" 317–18. Ezra's sanctuary is mentioned for the first time in a letter from Samuel ben Hofni, who uses the word *keneset* when speaking about the sanctuaries of Ezekiel, Daniel, and *keneset* [...] *Ezra ha-Sofer*. Salomon Schechter, *Saadyana. Geniza Fragments of Writings of R. Saadya Gaon and Others*, 123. However, Sherira Gaon (987) writes in his *Iggeret* about Ezra's *bet midrash*. See Adolf Neubauer, *Medieval Jewish Chronicles*, 1:26.

⁴³ Benjamin's words about the Muslims' devotion to Ezra, generally identified as 'Uzayr of the Qur'an (Sūra 9:30), are unusual because of his ambiguous image in the Islamic tradition. Here, he figures both as the loyal restorer of the lost Biblical text and as its deliberate falsifier. It stands to reason that his later image, introduced to Islam by Ibn Hazm, probably had no influence on the local cult. See Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds, Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, 50–74.

on this account paid their respects, literally “love” (*ohavim*), to the Jews. Unlike Benjamin, Petaḥyah writes about the Jewish custodianship explicitly: “All the Ishmaelites worship there (*kol ha-Yishma‘elim mishtaḥavim sham*), but the keys are in the hands of the Jews.”⁴⁴ His words are confirmed by Yāqūt, who mentions the Jewish custodians of the sanctuary (*yaqūmu bi-khidmatihī al-Yahūd*), to whom religious endowments (*wuqūf*) also belonged.⁴⁵

WHO IS THE OWNER OF THE KEYS?

After the Crusaders were forced to leave the Holy Land, Muslims became the keepers or owners of many, if not the majority of holy places in the Holy Land. Some of these places also became points that were contested by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, with many of the contemporary Jewish travelogues reflecting interreligious competition over jointly revered sites. Naturally, it particularly concerned tombs associated with the key figures within the Abrahamic religions, whose sanctity derived from sacred texts, such as David’s Tomb on Mount Zion or the tombs of the Patriarchs in Hebron. As was the case during the previous era, in the Mamlūk period the authors of travelogues pay attention to the issue of “who holds the keys,” in other words, who is the owner of a holy site and determines its rituals. In Isaac ibn Alfarā’s (1441) words: “the Ishmaelites are the keepers, they light up lights at the graves [...] and open to the Jews.”⁴⁶ The Jewish-Italian pilgrim Meshullam of Volterra (1481) states, concerning the tomb of King David: “The Ishmaelites hold the key, and they venerate the place and worship there.”⁴⁷ Meshullam bears witness to both the sharing of the holy places

⁴⁴ Petaḥyah, *Sibbuḅ*, 20.

⁴⁵ Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, 4:714–15. The same wording may be found in Qazwīnī’s (d. 1283) *Āthār al-bilād wa akhbār al-‘ibād*, 464. Cf. a letter from Gaon Daniel ben El‘azar of Baghdad (1201), who writes about the appointment of a *shammash* (beadle) at Ezra’s tomb, made by the head of the Yeshivah and Exilarch, i.e., the leaders of the Babylonian Diaspora, that suggests the prestigious nature of the position. See J. Leveen, “A Letter of Daniel Ben Eleazar he-Hasid, Rosh Yeshibah shel Golah,” 395–97.

⁴⁶ Abraham Zacut, *Sefer yuḥasin ha-shalem: Liber Juchassin sive Lexicon Biographicum et Historicum*, 228.

⁴⁷ *Massa‘ Meshullam mi-Volterra be-Ereṣ Yisra‘el bi-shenat 1481*, 74. The tomb of David on Mount Zion, contested by both Christians and Jews, was converted into a mosque in 1452, although it was later, albeit briefly, restored to Christian hands. Finally, in 1524, the Franciscans were driven out and the chapel on Mount Zion became the “Ibn Dāwūd” mosque and both Christians and Jews were forbidden entry. See Elchanan Reiner, “‘Ve-ejkh? She-harey Yerushalayim laḥud ve-Šiyon laḥud!’ Ha-shekhunah ha-yehudit be-Yerushalayim le-aḥar ha-tequfah ha-ṣalbanit (hame’ot 13.–15.),” 277–321.

and the competition between the parties over their exclusive rights of ownership. While writing about “Jewish” graves around Jerusalem, he states that the local Muslims not only shared traditions concerning holy places with the Jews, but also served as a resource for those pilgrims seeking the identification of “Jewish” graves: “The Ishmaelites honor all these places and they also have an oral tradition like ours. They say to the Jews: Why don’t you go to the grave of such a righteous one or to the grave of the prophet whose name is such?”⁴⁸ But in the very next sentence the image of the two groups harmoniously sharing sites gives way to a description of vying for exclusive control: “The Ishmaelites attempted several times to close some of these tombs and to turn them into sanctuaries under their control (*bi-qedushah taḥat yadam*), but the Lord thwarted their plans and would not listen to them, for ‘He that keepeth Israel doth neither slumber nor sleep’ [Ps. 121:4].” As Martin Jacobs noted, “though Meshullam believes that Islamic veneration confirms the sanctity of the ‘Jewish’ sites, at the same time he portrays the Jews’ position at these sites as being precarious under Muslim domination.”⁴⁹ Meshullam is not unaware of the enduring efforts of the Muslim majority to win exclusive control over these sites and to change their religious identity. Thus, securing access rights was viewed by the Jewish religious minority as a result of divine intervention.

If Jews were prevented by Muslims from entering a holy place, the authors sometimes related miraculous narratives about God’s punishment of the Muslims for their impertinence. Such was the case concerning the tomb of the prophet Samuel (Arabic: Nabī Ṣamwīl), northwest of Jerusalem. From the Ayyūbid period onwards, Nabī Ṣamwīl became the second central point in the calendar of an annual Jewish pilgrimage in the Holy Land during the feast of Shavuot.⁵⁰ From the mid-fifteenth century onwards the accounts of Jewish travelers reflect the recurrent vying for control of the site between Jews and Muslims.⁵¹ The

⁴⁸ Meshullam of Volterra, *Massa’ Meshullam mi-Volterra*, 75. The author of *Toṣ’ot Ereṣ Yisra’el* (“Extremities of the Land of Israel,” an expanded version of *Elleh ha-Massa’ot*, probably between 1270 and 1291) similarly says that in the town of Bar’am in Galilee, “an Ishmaelite showed us [a tomb] of a righteous Jew, but we did not know his name.” Yaari, *Massa’ot Ereṣ Yisra’el*, 91.

⁴⁹ Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 112.

⁵⁰ On Jewish pilgrimages to Nabī Samwīl, see Reiner, ‘*Aliyah va-’Aliyah le-Regel*, 306–19.

⁵¹ This vying is treated by Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 112–13. These Muslim efforts overlap with attempts to appropriate the so-called “Naḥmanides Synagogue” in Jerusalem and its destruction and subsequent renovation. See Mujīr al-Dīn al-’Ulaimī, *Al-Uns al-jalīl bi-ta’rikh al-Quds wa’l-Khalīl*, 2:300–14. The synagogue was definitively taken from the Jews in 1586. See Shelomo D. Goitein, “Ibn ’Ubayya’s book on the destruction of the Synagogue of the Jews in Jerusalem in 1474,” 18–32; E. Strauss (Asthor), *Toldot ha-Yehudim be-Miṣrayim ve-Suriyah taḥat shilṭon ha-Mamlukim*, 2:401–416. Cf. *Iggeret ’Yihus ha-Ṣaddiqim u-ve-Ḥasidim*, ’ 208.

Italian pilgrim Isaac ben Meir Latif (1455) tells a story in which Samuel himself intervened against the Muslims (*ha-‘Aravim*) who were preventing Jewish pilgrims from entering the anteroom of his tomb. While holding a Muslim by the throat, the prophet allegedly said: “‘Return the key to the Jews. They shall guard my doors, since they are my children, not you.’ And he returned it immediately.”⁵² The narrative seems to provide an answer to the question as to who the sepulcher’s legitimate custodians actually were, and the return of the key to the Jewish community affirms its right of ownership of its prophet’s grave. The success of “Samuel’s intervention” is confirmed by Rabbi ‘Obadiah of Bertinoro’s account (1489), according to which: “The tomb of our lord Samuel of Ramah is today in the hands of the Jews. Every year, they come there from all the nearby areas to prostrate themselves on 28 Iyar, the day of his death.”⁵³

In the aftermath of the Ottoman conquest of the Holy Land in 1516, it was the Qaraites who struggled with the Rabbanites for supremacy over Samuel’s tomb. Because of the importance attributed to the pilgrimage to Samuel’s tomb, the site did not cease to be a source of conflict and local Muslims, time and again, prevented Jews from making *ziyāra*.⁵⁴ Thus, because of the constant challenges to Jewish rights at the site, Nabī Ṣamwīl ceased to play the leading role in the annual *ziyāra* of the Jewish pilgrimage. Its place was taken by Meron and the grave of Shim‘on bar Yoḥay, the “author” of the book *Zohar*, which itself eclipsed the *ziyāra* during the 16th century at the graves of Hillel and Shammai.⁵⁵

“THERE WAS NO GOOD EITHER IN MUHAMMAD OR HIS RELIGION”: POLEMICS DIRECTED AGAINST ISLAM

As has been shown so far, the Hebrew travelogues’ response to the Muslim presence at, or sharing of, Jewish holy sites, as well as the language they used to describe the phenomenon, was mostly unbiased. However, polemical language is not lacking either, whether they write about the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim pilgrims, Muslim sacral houses, shared holy sites, or sites venerated exclusively by Muslims. Besides jibes and derogatory language, the travel narratives also convey their polemics through a variety of stories that aim either to demonstrate the power of the Jewish

⁵² Naftali ben Menaḥem, “Iggeret r. Jiṣṣḥaq bar Me’ir Laṭif me-Jerushalayim,” 261.

⁵³ *From Italy to Jerusalem: The Letters of Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro from the Land of Israel*, 84.

⁵⁴ On these repeated attempts to expropriate the synagogue and prevent the Jews from entering it, see Amnon Cohen, *Jewish Life under Islam: Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century*, 101–4.

⁵⁵ See Boaz Huss, “Holy Place, Holy Time, Holy Book: The Influence of the *Zohar* on Pilgrimage Rituals to Meron and the Lag Be-Omer Festival,” 237–56.

prophets and sages buried at these sites over non-Jewish intruders who dare to challenge their Jewish identity, and thus to reclaim it for a Jewish readership, or to proclaim the falsity of Muhammad's prophethood and of Islam.

Thus, in a rather cryptic passage of his itinerary, Samuel ben Samson writes about the "caliph *Mahmat ta'utam*," i.e., "Muhammad, their [the Muslims'] error."⁵⁶ The form of the Prophet's name *Mahmat* very much resembles the way it is used in medieval Latin literature⁵⁷ and, along with Samuel, it is only Petahyah of Regensburg who uses it in this form in the medieval Jewish travel literature.⁵⁸ Benjamin of Tudela employs two names for Muhammad (according to Adler's edition), which bear witness to his cultural background: *Muhammad* and *meshugga*.⁵⁹ In the case of the first name, which Benjamin employs three times, the author correctly transliterates the Prophet's name, which points to his acquaintance with Arabic. The derogatory substitute "Madman" (*meshugga*) commonly stands for the Prophet Muhammad in the pre-Modern Jewish literature of Islamic countries, being derived from Hosea 9:7: "The prophet was distraught, the inspired man driven mad [*meshugga*]." ⁶⁰ Its use by Benjamin (five times)⁶¹ shows that he drew his information about Muhammad and Islam from the Judeo-Arabic tradition, unlike Petahyah and Samuel, who belonged to the Ashkenazi environment and therefore did not feel a need to hide their polemic within a pun.⁶² Obviously, the rhetorical function of these and other invectives is to deny

⁵⁶ *Mikhtav me-rabbi Shemu'el bar Shimshon*, 7.

⁵⁷ To Mahmet or Mahumet, see John Tolan, *Saracens. Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, 79, 118, 123, 125.

⁵⁸ Petahyah, *Sibbuv*, 11, 15. While Grünhut's edition reads "all Ishmaelites that go to that place where Mahmat is" on page 15, Abraham David's edition, which is based on the Warsaw manuscript, has "all Ishmaelites go to a place called Mahmat," regarding Mahmat as a toponym. Abraham David, "Sibbuv r. Petahyah me-Regensburg be-nusah hadash," 262. In his letter to Pablo Christiani (composed in around the 1260s) Jacob ben Eliyahu uses the form מהומט, *Mahumet*. J. Kobak, ed., "Iggeret (vikuah) R. Ya'akov mi-Winišiya," 13, 15. The same form of Muhammad's name appears in medieval chronicles for an idol that is supposed to be in the temple of Solomon. See Tolan, *Saracens*, 109, 119.

⁵⁹ *The Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 40.

⁶⁰ See Yishak Avishur, "Hebrew Derogatories for Gentiles and Jews in Judaeo-Arabic in the Medieval Era and Their Metamorphoses," (Hebrew) in *Hadassah Shy Jubilee Book: Research Papers on Hebrew Linguistics and Jewish Languages*, 98–103; Paul B. Fenton, "Jewish Attitudes to Islam: Israel Heeds Ishmael," 91–93.

⁶¹ *The Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 35, 36, 40, 44, 45.

⁶² It is noteworthy that Asher's edition (London and Berlin, 1840–41) omits the whole passage where Adler's edition uses the name *Mahmad*. Moreover, Asher's edition omits the term *meshugga*. Ms Rome reads "the Madman who is called Muhammad" (*The Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 38, n. 11), which may be intended as an explanation for European readers unfamiliar with this polemical pun employed by the Jews in Islamic lands.

Muhammad any true prophethood and to shower contempt on the most sacred concepts of Islam. The Jewish travel literature adds further designations for Muslims and their holy sites or the commonly shared sites to these terms. Muslim (as well as Christian) pilgrims are therefore ordinarily called *to'im*, errant ones, or, rarely, *to'im*, mistaken ones.⁶³

While *Elleh ha-Massa'ot* uses the neutral phrase *bet tefillah* for Muslim houses of prayer at “Jewish” holy places, some other authors employ rather derogatory language, displaying clear polemical barbs. Samuel bar Samson denotes the shrine standing over the tomb of the prophet Nathan as *bet margiz* or *mergaz*, “a vexing structure,” a term based on Job 12:6 *margizei el*, “they that provoke God,” which the Talmudic tradition relates to Ishmaelites, i.e., Arabs.⁶⁴ Moshe Basola uses the same term three times when speaking about the graves of Jewish prophets and saints over which the “Ishmaelites built a *mergaz*,” i.e., sanctuary.⁶⁵ In a similar polemical vein, Benjamin of Tudela calls the tomb of ‘Ali Ibn Abī Ṭālib at Najaf (which he erroneously locates in nearby Kūfa) *bamah*, the Biblical term for an idolatrous “high place.” Because the shrine of ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and “son-in-law of the Madman” (*meshugga*’),⁶⁶ is the burial site of a saint not recognized by Judaism, Benjamin considers the burial place idolatrous. It must be said that he employs the same epithet for Christian churches such as the Holy Sepulcher. The derogatory language in this case indicates a shift in Benjamin’s attitude toward Muslim sacral buildings or shrines, which he usually refers to in neutral terms, such as “houses of prayer” (*bet ha-tefillah*), or “assembly”/“sanctuary” (*keneset*) when writing about the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus or the Congregation Mosque of Manṣūr in Baghdad.⁶⁷

Hagiographic literature abounds in stories where offenders against a saint or desecrators of his tomb are immediately chastised through a punitive miracle. The same topos is often employed in Jewish medieval travel writings in order

⁶³ See, for example, *The Itinerary of Benjamin*, 35. The term *to'im* is used by r. Isaac ben Meir Latif for Christian pilgrims. See Abraham David, ed, *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem: An Anthology of Hebrew Letters from the Mamluk Age* (Hebrew), 97. Italian authors such as Meshullam of Volterra and the rabbi Israel of Perugia (1517–23) use the Italian term *pellegrini* (פלגריני) for Christian pilgrims.

⁶⁴ *Mikhtav me-rabbi Shemu'el bar Shimshon*, 6. See Samuel Krauss, “Talmudische Nachrichten über Arabien,” 328. The same term for a mosque, *mergaz eḥad le-Yishma'elim*, is employed by Rabbi Ḥayyim Viṭal in *Sha'ar ha-gilgulim* (1570–75). *Sha'ar ha-gilgulim*, 182. The only list of holy places in the Holy Land that uses the term *misgad* (מיסגד) for a mosque is *Seder qivrei avot*, from the beginning of the 14th century. Ilan, *Tombs of the Righteous*, 118.

⁶⁵ Moshe Basola, *In Zion and Jerusalem*, Hebrew part, 17, 21, 27.

⁶⁶ *The Itinerary of Benjamin*, ed. Adler, Hebrew part, 45.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37. The term *keneset shel Yishma'elim* for a mosque is also used by Jacob ben Nathanel, *Sippur Massa'ot*, 12, 14.

to exemplify that only a Jew can approach the sacred place, while a non-Jew is miraculously either blown away by a gust of wind or injured or killed. In the twelfth and partially the thirteenth centuries there appear, together with polemical passages against Christianity, stories demonstrating the superiority of Judaism over Islam by showing that a Muslim must submit to the power of a Jewish saint. The message that these stories intend to deliver to the predominantly European Jewish reader is that contrary to the reality of the Holy Land, where the political power was wielded by Christians or Muslims, the real owners of the Land, and *ipso facto* of the true religion, are in fact the Jews. It is not by chance that such passages in relation to Islam do not appear in the travelogues of Benjamin of Tudela, but are related by Petahyah of Regensburg and the French pilgrim Jacob ben Nathanel, who had no previous experience of Islam. Somewhat surprisingly, in Petahya's travelogue miracles occur not in the Holy Land but in the realm of the Babylonian diaspora. These miracles are not wrought per se but convey an apologetic and polemical message. Thus, in his *Sippur Massa'ot* (second half of the twelfth century) Jacob ben Nathanel tells a story that was intended to demonstrate the power of a Jewish saint and at the same time to polemicize against a "false" Christian interpretation of the place and its cult:

When the Provençal knight saw Christians [*'arelim*, i.e., uncircumcised] light many lamps he said to them: Whose grave is it? They replied: "Of a righteous Jew who heals the sick and helps infertile women." "Fools, how come you pay such respect to a Jew?" and he grabbed a stone and threw it to the ground. Then he took another and lifted his arm in order to throw it but because he was sitting on a horse, he immediately fell off it and died. Instantly the bishops and monks gathered [and said]: "This did not happen to him because of the Jew but because he sinned by offending Jesus' teacher; that's why he got angry at him and killed him;" and they said all this before the country folk.⁶⁸

The clergy in the story came up with the invented story of Jesus' Jewish teacher in order to explain away the punitive miracle wrought by a deceased Jewish saint against the Christian knight for the desecration of his grave, but, undoubtedly, the Jewish reader knew better. With the fall of the Holy Land into the hands of the Muslims, the travelogues bring forth other folktales expressing similar sentiments but now concerning Muslims. Moses Basola tells the tale of a Muslim woman who (with the intention of picking the fruit) climbed an almond tree that

⁶⁸ Jacob ben Nathanel, *Sippur Massa'ot*, 9.

grew next to the grave of Rabbi Judah bar Ila‘i, whose tomb was situated in the Upper Galilean village of ‘Ayn Zaytūn:

They say that once a Muslim woman climbed the tree on the grave in order to gather almonds, upon which the other women told her first to ask the ḥasid’s permission. But she showered them with curses. She fell out of the tree, breaking all her limbs. She then pledged the gold bracelets on her hands to the *ṣaddiq*, purchasing olive trees with them. Subsequently others made pledges as well, and at present he [the *ṣaddiq*] has four hundred olive trees.⁶⁹

While Basola was only aware of the story that supposedly explained the origin of the shrine’s endowments, twenty-six years before him Rabbi ‘Obadiah of Bertinoro’s anonymous student (1495) recounts in his travel diary a similar story with the same message.⁷⁰ Moreover, he alleges that he personally interviewed the woman during his pilgrimage to Judah bar Ila‘i’s grave.

I saw and spoke with the Ishmaelite woman who fell down from the almond tree over the tomb of the aforementioned *ḥasid* or the pious man. That woman spoke ill of him [...] The woman told me how she saw with her eyes youths who pushed her and cast her forty cubits away from it and [how] the bones in her body broke. She also said that the *ḥasid* came to her in a night vision. Consequently she renounced her evil and lit candles over his tomb and was healed. Ishmaelites honor this place. Many [Muslims] light candles there.⁷¹

Both depictions emphasize the Jewishness of the saint and the pilgrimage site. As in the aforementioned story the Christian knight symbolizes Christianity, so the Muslim woman symbolizes Islam. Both are depicted as outsiders who were punished for their disrespect toward a Jewish holy place. However, while the knight died on the spot, the Muslim woman was given a chance to repent as a result of her dream or vision of the saint. This same sequence of repentance followed by healing is expressed in Basola’s version by pledging donations to the saint, which inspired other Muslims. Similarly, ‘Obadiah’s student’s version results in the proper conduct of worship at the site, e.g., the lighting of candles, which inspires other Muslims to follow suit. Both accounts are obviously meant to explain to the anticipated Jewish reader both the character of the Muslim

⁶⁹ Moshe Basola, *In Zion and Jerusalem*, Hebrew part, 65.

⁷⁰ Cf. Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 115–16.

⁷¹ Adolf Neubauer, ed., “Ein anonymen Reisebrief vom Jahre 1495,” 278; David, ed., *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem*, 156.

presence at the mutually revered holy site, made concrete in the endowment of olive trees and shared worship, and to bolster Judaism's claim to it. Although Muslims take part in its veneration, the religious identity of the local saint, who punishes any act of disrespect wrought by a non-Jew, is Jewish, and consequently the real owners of the site are the Jews.

Such polemical stories provided Jewish readers in Europe with a message that was meant to bring hope and solace: the People of Israel have not ceased to be God's chosen people, wherever they are. Buried prophets, saints, and scholars preserve their "Jewishness" in spite of also being venerated by other religious communities, with the desecrators of their graves being punished or killed. This process is tellingly exemplified by Petaḥyah's story about a sultan who wanted to see the prophet Ezekiel in his tomb. The sultan was told by Rabbi Solomon:

You cannot see him, for he is holy, nor must you uncover his grave. The monarch replied that he would explore it. Then Rabbi Solomon and the elders said to him, My lord and king, Baruch, son of Neriah, his disciple, is buried near the enclosure of the prophet. If it be your will uncover his grave. If you can see his disciple then you may try to see his master. He then assembled all the princes, and commanded them to dig. But everyone that dug into the grave of Baruch, son of Neriah, fell down immediately and died. There was an old man there, an Ishmaelite, who said to the monarch: tell the Jews that they should dig. The Jews replied: we are afraid. But the king said: if you keep the law of Baruch, son of Neriah, he will not hurt you, for every Ishmaelite that dug fell down dead. Then Rabbi Solomon said: Give us time, three days, so that we may fast in order to obtain his pardon. After three days the Jews dug, and were not hurt.⁷²

Similarly to the anti-Christian polemical stories concerning David's grave on Mount Zion, where a Christian patriarch conceals the entrance to David's "true" tomb, and a Christian door-keeper does the same in relation to Hebron's "true" Tomb of the Patriarchs, only Jews are worthy of entering the holy place or are allowed to come near it; non-Jews are intruders and, as such, are prevented by God's power from reaching it.⁷³ This motive is widely used, particularly by Petaḥyah, who explains (or rather, the editors of his travelogue do so) in another story the reasons why the grave of a righteous Jew is revered by Muslims. The

⁷² Petaḥyah, *Sibbuḥ*, 11.

⁷³ See the article by Elchanan Reiner, "Overt Faleshood and Covert Truth: Christians, Jews, and Holy Places in Twelfth Century Palestine," 157–88. (for a short English version see: Alfred Haverkamp, ed., "A Jewish Response to the Crusades. The Dispute over Sacred Places in the Holy Land," 209–31.)

story recounts that a sultan wanted to steal a stone from the grave of Rabbi Meir. The Rabbi came to him in a dream and seized him by the throat as though he was going to choke him (that is why the Ishmaelites call him *Khanīq*), saying to him: “Why did you carry away my stone? Do you not know that I am righteous and beloved by God? The sultan then begged the rabbi’s pardon.” Rabbi Meir was willing to pardon him only if as a penance he carried the stone back on his shoulder before the eyes of the people, expressing his regret for what he had done.⁷⁴ It is not only ordinary Muslims who cannot remain unpunished when offending a righteous Jew and his gravesite, but the same law applies to sultans as well. As mentioned, the prophet Samuel tried to choke a Muslim who had prevented Jews from entering his sepulcher and Rabbi Meir, in a dream or vision, did the same to a sultan who had dared to steal a stone from his grave. The real power is wielded by the dead Jewish righteous, who can subjugate even a sultan and force him to make public penance. The story reverses the place of the *dhimmī* (“protected non-Muslim”) in relation to the Muslim – the righteous Jew in the grave, the protector of his community, has the power to subjugate a Muslim ruler. The aim of Petaḥyah’s story concerning Ezra ha-Sofer’s tomb, which, at the same time, comes to explain the origin of the shrine, is the same. The story tells of a shepherd whom Ezra, in a dream vision, instructed to tell a sultan to unearth his bones with the help of the Jews, since his old grave was in ruins, and to re-bury them in a certain place. “If not, all his people will die. However, the sultan did not heed the matter, and so many people died. Therefore, the Jews were called upon, and they re-buried him with honor.” A magnificent shrine was erected on the spot, where “all the Ishmaelites worship” but “the keys of the houses over the graves are in the hands of the Jews.”⁷⁵ In this story too the sultan must yield to the authority of the Jewish righteous, whose wish he is able to fulfill only with the help of the Jews who alone are entitled to come into direct contact with the holiness, in this case the saint’s bones.

Another story in Petaḥyah’s travelogue also conveys a straightforward polemic against Islam and its prophet by comparing a righteous Jew and the prophet Muhammad. Although Muhammad is not mentioned by name, it is obvious from the context that he is being referred to. Grünhut’s and David’s editions differ slightly here. The narrative is framed in a story about a sultan who sees a bright light ascending from the grave of the aforesaid Baruch, son of Neriah, with his prayer scarf sticking out from between two stones. The sultan assembled all his viziers and all the people and

⁷⁴ Petaḥyah, *Sibbuḅ*, 18.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

...went to the city of [Mecca],⁷⁶ to see his [Muhammad's] tomb; and behold, there was a decayed and putrefied corpse, from whose grave such a disagreeable smell arose that nobody could bear it. He then said to his people that there was no good either in [Muhammad] or his religion, for they knew that [the body of] Baruch, son of Neriah, was preserved, that his prayer scarf protruded from [or: was preserved in] his tomb, from which emanated fragrance, and he was [only] a disciple to a prophet. The Ishmaelites who dug up his grave perished, whilst the Jews who dug were not hurt; and that, therefore, it might be known that the Jews hold the law kept by Baruch, son of Neriah. He [the sultan] [wanted to convert and convert all his people and built a great structure over his tomb]; however, he had no time to become a convert before he died, and thus the resolution he had formed of converting all his people came to nought.⁷⁷

A Jewish reader, informed by the Talmud, would understand very well the polemical message of the story, since according to its teachings the bodies of the Patriarchs do not decay.⁷⁸ The Iraqi Jews, who were probably Petaḥyah's informers, knew it not only from their own traditions, but also from the traditions of the Muslim community. It teaches that the "graves of the prophets are the cleanest places (*aṭhar al-biqā'*) and that "God does not allow the soil to devour their bodies, and they stay intact in their graves."⁷⁹ According to the notions generally accepted by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, fragrance emanates from the graves of prophets and the righteous. This is supported by Petaḥyah, who mentions when referring to the grave of Judah ha-Nasi, the so-called codificator of the Mishnah: "A pleasing fragrance ascends from his grave. This fragrance is smelt at the distance of a mile from his grave."⁸⁰

Muhammad's rotting corpse is a well-known topos of Christian anti-Islamic polemics, that Petrus Alfonsi in his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* (1110), closely following the widely read *Risālat al-Kindī*, introduced into European Christian anti-Islamic polemics.⁸¹ Petaḥyah's travelogue, to my best knowledge, is the only work of Hebrew

⁷⁶ Grünhut's edition omits the name of the town; David's reads והלך למק' לראותו בקברו (266).

⁷⁷ Petaḥyah, *Sibbuv*, 27; David's edition, 266–67. The translation takes both editions into account.

⁷⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Masekhet derekh zuṭa, 1:17.

⁷⁹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ighāthat al-lahfān min maṣāyid al-shayṭān*, 1:178.

⁸⁰ Petaḥyah, *Sibbuv*, 29.

⁸¹ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews* (Sixth Titulus); *The Apology of el-Kindi: Risālat 'Abd Allāh ibn Isma'īl al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Iṣḥāq al-Kindī wa-Risālat al-Kindī ilā al-Hāshimī*, 109. For the *Risāla*, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 86–88, 167. The *Risāla* was one of the Arabic texts that Peter the Venerable allowed to be translated into Latin in 1142, as a result of which it became the most widespread source of information about Islam in medieval Europe. See James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and*

medieval literature that mentions it. By contrasting the pleasant smell emanating from the grave of the righteous Jew and the stench of Muhammad's grave in Mecca (sic!), the author supplied his intended readers with evidence of the truth of the Jewish faith and, at the same time, Islam's falseness. While the Christian patriarch in Jerusalem and the door-keeper of the Patriarchs' tomb in Hebron tacitly recognized the authority and authenticity of the Jewish tradition (*verus Israel*), the sultan in Petaḥyah's story openly confesses the falsehoods associated with his faith and his wish to profess the faith of the Jews, together with all his people. Only his premature death prevents him from realizing his wish. The offended righteous Jew in the grave has the power not only to humiliate the sultan and force him to perform public soul-searching actions, but also, by proving his "sanctity," to encourage him to convert.

Naturally, the Christian or the Muslim presence at, and their claim to, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the holiest place of Judaism, also elicited a polemical response in the medieval Jewish literature, including travelogues. Their polemical narratives are mostly associated with the Gate of Mercy (*sha'ar ha-rahāmim*) in the eastern wall of the Temple compound because of its connection with eschatological traditions. Through this gate the *Shekhinah* (the Divine Presence) departed from the Temple Mount after the destruction of the Temple, and in the future it will return through it – it is the place of both *Galut* (Exile) and *Ge'ulah* (Redemption).⁸² For this reason it played a significant role in the Jewish pilgrimage ritual in Jerusalem.⁸³ This popular tradition was based on a Biblical verse: "And the Lord said to me; This gate shall be closed, it shall not be opened, and no man shall come through it, for the Lord God of Israel comes through it, and it shall be closed" (Ezekiel 44:2). And since "this gate shall be closed," any attempt to open it would count as a violation of God's order and a willful effort to hasten the redemption. In Petaḥyah's narrative such an attempt is punished by an earthquake and chaos:

No Jew is allowed to enter it, let alone any gentile. Once the gentiles wanted to remove stones and lime and to open the gate, but an earthquake made the whole land of Israel tremble and there was chaos in the city until they desisted. And there

Islam, 101–7. Cf. Thomas E. Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050–1200*, 95–96, 121–23. In the same manner the Legend of Sergius (Baḥīrā) says concerning the failed prophecy of Muhammad's resurrection on the third day after his death: "And after three days they [i.e., the Muslims] opened the door and nobody could enter the house because of the foul smell of Muhammad's body. And no one needs to investigate what happened to it." Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*, 335, cf. 305; cf. Tolan, *Saracens*, 92, 181.

⁸² For traditions associated with the Gate of Mercy, see Vilnay Ze'ev, *Jerusalem – Encyclopedia*, 1190–96.

⁸³ See Reiner, *'Aliyah va-'Aliyah le-Regel*, 172–79.

is a tradition among the Jews that the Divine Presence was exiled through this gate and through it would return.⁸⁴

Petahyah's story, which reflects local Jewish traditions, is undoubtedly a polemical response to the Christian presence in Jerusalem in the Crusader period and particularly to the processions on Palm Sunday and on the Feast of the Exaltation, during which the 'Golden Gate' (Porta Aurea), as it is called in the Christian tradition, was opened.⁸⁵

While the eschatological traditions connected with the Temple Mount and Gate of Mercy are hardly mentioned in the travelogues from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, they reappear in the fifteenth century in a letter of Isaac Latif (1455). Isaac is eager to introduce a new story (*shemu'ah hadashah*) he was told by a Jewish inhabitant of Jerusalem, according to which the Muslims closed a house on the Temple Mount because some Muslims who had slept there were found torn to pieces (*hatikhot hatikhot*). "There are many houses on the Temple Mount (*miqdash*) that the uncircumcised and unclean ('*arel ve-tame*') [i.e., the Christians and the Muslims]⁸⁶ cannot enter. The Muslims themselves said so."⁸⁷ And a few lines further on Isaac states that when "the Muslims ('*Araviyim*) tried to open [the Gate of Mercy], they died."⁸⁸ In a similar vein, Rabbi 'Obadiah of Bertinoro (1488) states that the Muslims' repeated attempts to open the gate failed.⁸⁹ The motif of a closed gate and the Christians or the Muslims trying in vain to open it, which we met for the first time in Petahyah's *Sibbu*v, gradually evolved into one of the signs of redemption (*simanei ha-ge'ulah*) that appear frequently in letters, epistolary travel accounts, and other documents of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Petahyah, *Sibbu*v, 34–35.

⁸⁵ Adrian J. Boas, *Jerusalem in the Time of Crusades: Society, Landscape and Art in the Holy City Under Frankish Rule*, 63.

⁸⁶ For these derogatory epithets, which are derived from Isaiah 52:2, see Moritz Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden*, 331.

⁸⁷ David, ed., *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem*, 96.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁹ *From Italy to Jerusalem*, 87.

⁹⁰ Probably the best example of such accounts is a letter sent by the Jerusalem judges to the Jews of Corfu (1454): "In the morning we have seen even a greater miracle: The Gate of Mercy, which is plunged into the ground [...] rose more than six ells. The Muslims were seized with terror and the Muslim guardian of the Temple Mount wanted to guard it and to disperse the gathered crowd, but he did not succeed. Thank God, he died an unnatural death." David, ed., *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem*, 82–83. Cf. a similar story from Rabbi Yisra'el of Perugia (1517). Adolf Neubauer, "'Inyanei 'aseret ha-sheva'im," 27; followed by Ya'ari, ed., *Iggerot Eres Yisra'el*, 172.

These edifying and sought-after stories served Jewish readers in Europe not only as a constant reminder of the concern of Providence for the Children of Israel, but also as a confirmation that despite the reality it is not the Christians nor the Muslims but the Jews who are the real owners of the holiest places of Judaism. And whoever violates God's order, that is, "tries to open the gate," is punished either by an earthquake or by death.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a kaleidoscope of images of encounters between Jews and Muslims at sacred sites, as portrayed in Jewish travel writings from a period that, from a European perspective, is considered the High and Late Middle Ages. These images range from examples of shared ownership and practices to situations where different parties vied for control and ownership. The narratives contained in these sources, written predominantly by European authors for a European readership, strive to confirm the Jewish identity of the sacred sites in the Holy Land and Babylonia and the Jews' rights of ownership to them. Their purpose was to strengthen the morale of Jewish readers by assuring them that despite their social and religious inferiority, they, and not the Christians or Muslims, were the owners of the holy places and their holy sages exerted power even over their oppressors. Although Muslims are the rulers of the land, they pay respect to the Jewish righteous and prophets and venerate their gravesites, thus endorsing their sanctity. In such cases, the language used in these narratives when referring to the Muslim presence at the sites is mostly neutral, or even positive. However, in cases where disrespect toward the Jewish site, or even its takeover, is indicated, the authors are skilled at relating stories in which chastisement or punishment befalls the Muslim transgressor. Thus, these stories not only reverse the relationship between the ruler and the ruled but, at the same time, they convey the message that the real owners of the holy places connected with the narratives of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish history, and *ipso facto* of the true religion, are the Jews. Their prophets and sages who are buried at these sites have the power to punish every non-Jewish intruder, including sultans, who dares to challenge the Jewish identity of the site. What is more, it is even enough to infringe on the sanctity of a prophet's disciple, as is shown by Petahya's stories.

Beside this, these stories may also have served the European Jewish reader as a unique channel through which he could encounter – though in a distorted way – some basic notions of Islam. In fact, his options as to from where he could draw information about Islam were rather meager, and moreover this information was tinted with polemics. When one does not count two relatively late Hebrew

works – *Ma'amar 'al Yishma'el* (*Treatise against the Muslim*) of the Barcelona rabbi Shlomoh ibn Adret (written 1304)⁹¹ and *Qeshet u-magen* (*Bow and Shield*, Livorno, 1785–90) by Shim'on b. Şemaḥ Duran of Algiers (written 1423)⁹² – the only Hebrew books dedicated exclusively to a polemic against Islam, the medieval Hebrew reader may have mainly drawn some knowledge of Islam from those writings of Se'adya Gaon (d. 942), Jehuda ha-Levi (d. 1141), Abraham ibn Dāwūd (d. ca 1080), and Maimonides (d. 1204), to name the most famous authors, that touched upon anti-Islamic polemics. The polemical response of these and other authors was mainly theologically oriented: they focused, each with a different stress and at different length, on the set of traditional Muslim polemical claims raised against Judaism: Muhammad's claim to prophethood, the revealed nature of the Qur'ān, the abrogation of Moses' Law, and the falsification of the Hebrew Bible.⁹³ Unlike them, the authors of the adduced travelogues and lists of holy places did not plunge into theology based on citations from Scripture or rational argumentation, but defended the truth of their faith with the help of stories. The language of their polemic is different. It also refutes the claim of the abrogation of Moses' Law or Muhammad's claim to prophethood, but it does so through stories about Jewish saints buried in tombs that subdue sultans or punish their desecrators and about the foul smell that arises from Muhammad's tomb. Nevertheless, both sorts of literature strive to achieve the same aim: to proclaim the Jewish identity of the shared sacred sites and the ownership of the true religion. Jewish travel writings therefore served European Jewish readers not only as a vehicle for spreading the knowledge of the sacred topography, but also as one of the avenues for conducting polemics against Islam.

⁹¹ Joseph Perles, *R. Salomo ben Abraham ben Adereth. Sein Leben und seine Schriften, nebst handschriften Beilagen*, Appendix, 1–24. From Perles' edition the text was reedited by Bezalel Naor, *Ma'amar Al Yishma'el. Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret*, and Ḥajim Z. Dimitrovsky, *Teshuvot ha-Rashba' le-rabenu Shelomo b. r. Avraham ben Adret*. Cf. Camilla Adang, "A Jewish Reply to Ibn Ḥazm. Salomon b. Adret's Polemic against Islam" 179–209; Harvey J. Hames, "A Jew amongst Christians and Muslims. Introspection in Solomon ibn Adret's Response to ibn Hazm," 203–12.

⁹² Moritz Steinschneider, ed., *Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 8 (1881): Hebrew part, 1–35, and translated into German by Steinschneider, "Islam und Judenthum: Kritik des Islam von Simon Duran (1423)." New edition with English translation prepared by Murciano Prosper, *Simon ben Zemah Duran, Keshet u-Magen. A Critical Edition*. See also Martin Jacobs, "Interreligious Polemics in Medieval Spain. Biblical Interpretation between Ibn Ḥazm, Shlomoh ibn Adret, and Shim'on ben Şemaḥ Duran," 35–57.

⁹³ See, for example Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, and my "Entangled Arguments: A Survey of Religious Polemics between Islam and Judaism in the Middle Ages."

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