

## JEWES AND MOSLEMS

The tolerance which the Islamic tradition showed—not in theory alone but in practice as well—toward the infidels, the “protected” (*dhimmi*) Jews and Christians, is well known. In several places in the Koran, Mohammed proclaimed the inalienable right of these two “Peoples of Scripture” to worship the common God of Abraham in their very imperfect fashion. The passages in question ordinarily mentioned *Christians and Jews*, and the imprecations which in another context (in the “Sura of the Cow,” for example) the Prophet hurled against the Jews of Medina who would not recognize him, in no way altered the cardinal principle developed later by the commentators in the *hadith* (“tradition”). The two categories of *dhimmi* were placed under the same legal and political control. In conformity with the “pact” of Caliph Omar (the second successor to Mohammed) the *dhimmi*s had to recognize Moslem supremacy, lavish many signs of subordination and respect upon the true believers, behave as loyal subjects, and above all, pay tribute. By this means the free exercise of their cult under the protection of Islam was assured.

The facts show, however, that the condition of the Christians during the period immediately after the Arab conquest was much better than

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that of the Jews, especially in the territories seized from Byzantium. Three centuries of Christian domination had relegated the Jews to the foot of the social ladder, and this situation lasted for some time. It was intensified because the former administrative organization was at first left in place by the Arabs, who did not have the indispensable office workers and technicians. According to certain traditional accounts, once the conquest was completed Caliph Omar's lieutenants begged him to leave the Christian specialists in their jobs. "Money has grown so plentiful that they alone are capable of counting it," Abou Mouça is said to have written him. "In my province I have a Christian scribe without whom I cannot carry out the tax collection," Moawia is said to have reported to him.<sup>1</sup> It is typical that as late as 693 the official tongue of the Ommiad Caliphate continued to be Greek! And it is not at all surprising that Christianity enjoyed a great prestige in the eyes of the conquerors.

The Caliphs of the great period were the first to struggle against this Christian preponderance. A circumstantial document, the *Reply to the Christians*, by the great writer al-Jahiz (composed no doubt to please Caliph Motawakkil) furnishes us information of the greatest interest:

I shall begin to enumerate the causes which made the Christians more liked by the masses than the Magians, and made men consider them more sincere than the Jews, more endeared, less treacherous, less unbelieving, and less deserving of punishment. For all this there are manifold and evident causes. They are patent to one who searches for them, concealed to one who shuns investigation.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Jahiz perceived a first cause in the prestige of the Christians, who founded or conquered many kingdoms, and who gave the world numerous scholars and wise men:

Moreover, our masses began to realize that the Christian dynasties were enduring in power, and that a great number of Arabs were adhering to their faith; that the daughters of Byzantium bore children to the Moslem rulers, and that among the Christians were men versed in speculative theology, medicine, and astronomy. Consequently they became in their estimation philosophers and men of learning, whereas they observed none of these sciences among the Jews.

1. M. Belin, "Fetwa relatif à la condition des dhimmis," *Journal asiatique*, 1851, pp. 428 ff.

2. This and the following quotations from Joshua Finkel, "A Risāla of al-Jāhiz," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XLVII (1927), 311-34.

The cause for the lack of science among the Jews lies in the fact that the Jews consider philosophic speculation to be unbelief, and Kalām theology an innovation leading to doubt.

On the other hand, al-Jahiz continues, the high social position of the Christians is another title to popular admiration:

they are secretaries and servants to kings, physicians to nobles, perfumers, and money changers, whereas the Jews are found to be but dyers, tanners, cuppers, butchers, and cobblers. Our people observing thus the occupations of the Jews and the Christians concluded that the religion of the Jews must compare as unfavorably as do their professions, and that their unbelief must be the foulest of all. . . .

The third reason for the popularity of the Christians was the social mimicry which they practiced, according to al-Jahiz:

we know that they ride highly bred horses, and dromedary camels, play polo . . . wear fashionable silk garments, and have attendants to serve them. They call themselves Hasan, Husayn, 'Abbās, Fadl, and 'Alī, and employ also their forenames. There remains but that they call themselves Mohammed, and employ the forename 'Abūl-Kāsim. For this very fact they were liked by the Moslems

This last remark touches upon a delicate subject—conversions to Islam for reasons of convenience. The Moslems were not deceived by them. Caliph al-Māmūn said:

their convictions, I am well aware, are just the opposite of that which they profess. They belong to a class who embrace Islam, not from any love of this our religion, but thinking thereby to gain access to my Court and share in the honour, wealth, and power of the Realm; they have no inward persuasion of that which they outwardly profess. . . . And, indeed, I know of one and another . . . who were Christians, and embraced Islam unwillingly. They are neither Moslems nor Christians.<sup>3</sup>

We shall see later the different ways in which the Jews, making compromises with the law of Moses, also conformed to the mores and beliefs of the dominant society; however, a tradition of life in dispersion under foreign dominations, already a thousand years old, had equipped them better for resisting the temptations of apostasy. Moreover, the meticulous piety of orthodox Jews had become so proverbial that the poet Abu Abd el Rahman could risk this comparison: "The appearance of the sun enchants us quite as much as the coming of the Sab-

3. Cf. Sir William Muir, *The Apology of al Kindy* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1882), p. xii.

bath delights the Jews.” This piety had the gift of irritating some other writers and, in this connection, the Jews became the target of converging attacks, for to the animosity of the true faithful was added the hostility of the skeptics and the unbelievers, who were very audacious during the first centuries of Islam. And so the great Andalusian theologian Ibn-Hazm mocked the formalistic practices of the rabbis, describing them as follows:

The Jews are dispersed from the East to the West, and from the South to the North. When one of their communities is visited by a co-religionist who has come from afar, he shows rigorous observance and displays an excess of ceremonial precautions. If he is himself a Doctor of the Law, he begins to dictate his precepts, and to forbid this and that. The more he complicates the Jews' existence, the louder they exclaim: “Truly, here is a real scholar!” For it is the one who imposes on them the strictest abstinences who is considered by them to be the most learned.

At the opposite extreme, the great poet Abu'l-'Alá—who composed a parody of the Koran which he asserted to be superior to the original—aggressively flaunted his unbelief in these terms:

All that ye tell of God is vamped-up news,  
Old fables artfully set out by Jews. . . .

One might say that in the Islam of the great period there was an anti-Judaism of the “Voltairian” or “lay” variety as well as a “theological” anti-Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

It is easily understood why the usual term “anti-Semitism” is not proper here. Indeed, the affinities of language and culture between Jews and Arabs established a particular kind of bond between them. In his clairvoyant analysis, al-Jahiz, a consummate psychologist, did not fail to take this into account in explaining the lack of popularity of the Jews in his time:

Man indeed hates the one whom he knows, turns against the one whom he sees, opposes the one whom he resembles, and becomes observant of the faults of those with whom he mingles; the greater the love and intimacy, the greater the hatred and estrangement.

4. Abu Abd el Rahman, see *Description de l'Afrique septentrionale d'El-Bekri*, ed. Slane (Paris, 1859), p. 158; Ibn-Hazm, see I. Goldziher, “Proben muhammedanischer Polemik gegen den Talmud,” *Jeschurun*, IX (1873), 44; Abu 'l-'Alá al-Ma'aarí, see R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1921), p. 175.

Later, especially against the background of the wars against Byzantium and the first crusades, when Christians often played the role of “fifth column,” the situation was progressively reversed in favor of the Jews, the “Semitic cousins.” We must look more closely at this idea of “kinship,” which is so emotionally loaded and thus constitutes an historical factor.

In truth, nothing permits us to assert that the Jews were more closely “related” to the Arab conquerors than to their neighbors, the Christian fellahs, or to the whole of the Byzantine or Persian population. Moreover, such a biological (“racial”) kinship, even if it had existed, can never be proved. We know that in the opinion of specialists, contemporary peoples represent indefinable mixtures and that probably the same was true in antiquity. Therefore, when understood in this way, the question of kinship is meaningless and consequently uninteresting. But linguistically, Arabic is from the same rootstock as Hebrew and Aramaic, the lingua franca of the time. (These are Semitic languages whose particular structure tends to orient thought in a similar manner.)<sup>5</sup>

The tradition of the common origin of the Jews and the Arabs has its source, as we all know, in the Book of Genesis. Ishmael, Abraham’s first-born, who was driven into the wilderness with his mother Hagar, is said to have become the ancestor of the Arabs (the patriarch is also said to have sent “toward the West” the six sons he had later by

5. Louis Massignon has explained as follows the meaning which this kinship has for the development of religious thought: “. . . the general grammatical conditions (vocabulary, morphology, syntax) of our Indo-European languages determine a presentation of the idea which is quite different from that which it must assume in the Semitic languages. The *Aryan* presentation of the idea . . . is periphrastic, and is made by means of words with unstable, shaded contours, with modifiable endings adapted to appositions and combinations; here the verb tenses soon became relative to the agent, ‘egocentric,’ ‘polytheistic.’ Finally, the word order is didactic, established in a hierarchy of broad periods, by graduated conjunctions. The *Semitic* presentation of the idea is *gnomic* and uses rigid words, with unchangeable, always perceptible roots, admitting only a few modalizations, all of them internal and abstract interpolated consonants, for the meaning, vocalic nuances, for the acceptance. . . . The verb tenses, even today, are ‘absolute,’ and concern only the action; they are ‘theocentric,’ asserting the transcendency and the immanence of the sole Agent. Finally, the word order is ‘lyrical,’ broken up into jerky, condensed, autonomous formulae. This is the cause of misunderstanding for those who, not knowing how to enjoy the powerful and explosive concision of the Semitic tongues, say they are unsuited to mysticism whereas they are the tongues of the revelation of the transcendent God, of the Prophets and of the Psalms” (*Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* [Paris, 1954], p. 48).

Keturah, another concubine; see Genesis 25:1-6). In Isaiah (21:13) the Arab caravans are called "caravans of Dedanites"—another proof of kinship for the commentators, since "Dedanite" meant cousin. Furthermore, Moslems are generally called Ishmaelites in the Jewish sources. The Koran also adopts a similar interpretation: Not only is Abraham the common ancestor of the Jews and the Arabs, but he and his son Ishmael built the Temple of Mecca together (Sura 2:121). Numerous verses of the Koran are devoted to the glorification of the Jewish patriarchs and prophets; for example, to cite Sura 6:84-86:

and among the descendants of Abraham [we guided] David and Solomon, and Job and Joseph, and Moses and Aaron: Thus do we recompense the righteous:

And Zachariah, John, Jesus, and Elias: all were just persons:

And Ishmael and Elisha and Jonas and Lot: all these have we favoured above mankind.

Later, Islamic theology was formulated, particularly in Bagdad—that is, in Mesopotamia, which for centuries had been the stronghold of Jewish tradition and where the Babylonian Talmud was developed. Many an analogy of construction has been cited between the Talmud and the "hadith" or interpretative commentary of the Koran, to which Jews who had been converted to Islam (among them Abdallah ben Salem and Kaab al-Ahbar) contributed, determining its form and methods. And the folklore of the early centuries of Islam was enriched from the Jewish stock, with its marvelous stories of the Haggadah about the patriarchs and the prophets. These legends, known under the significant title of "Israyilli'at," have remained popular to our day. Thus the awareness of a kinship between Jews and Arabs was confirmed in different matters and in different ways. Let us bear in mind that the jealous barrier which rises between the circumcised and the uncircumcised was not, in this case, playing its indefinable but sure role, nor were the observances concerning the pure and the impure and the food prohibitions sources of irritation. In the final analysis, all these multiple factors must have contributed to the rapid improvement of the prestige and social status of the Jews.

There are numerous legends and sayings attesting to the fact that the Jews preferred Islam's domination to any other. People even went so far as to put into the mouth of Rab (one of the earliest third century codifiers of the Talmud) this prophecy: "Rather under Ishmael than under a foreigner!" According to a book of revelations dating from

about 750 (“The Secret Visions of Rabbi Simon ben Yochai”), the “Kingdom of Ishmael” was destined by God to re-establish the House of David upon its throne, after having overthrown “the domination of Edom” (that is, the domination of the Christians). A legend told that the exilarch Bostanaï, first head of the Mesopotamian Jews under Moslem domination, was formally placed on the throne by Caliph Omar, and Omar was said to have had this descendant of King David marry a captive Persian princess.

The quasi-royal powers of the exilarchs and the prestige they enjoyed at the court of the caliphs are excellent evidence of the respect which the Moslems showed for the House of David. A Talmudist of the tenth century, Nathan ha-Bibli, has left us the following description:

When the exilarch leaves his abode, he travels in a fine carriage, accompanied by a suite of some fifteen persons and many slaves. Like the other palace officials, he never goes forth without his retinue. If he has some business matter to present to the caliph, he requests an audience. When he enters the palace, the caliph’s servants rush forward to meet him, and while they are leading him to the royal apartments, he distributes small coins among them. He kneels before the caliph, but the prince signals to his servants to raise him up and to lead him toward the seat reserved for him. The caliph then inquires about the health of his visitor and the matter which has caused his visit. The exilarch then asks to speak, bows before the caliph according to ancient custom, and eloquently seeks to convince him, until he acquiesces in his demand. This done, the exilarch takes leave of the caliph and returns home, his heart light and his brow serene.

Benjamin of Tudela, the famous twelfth century traveler, was likewise amazed, in his Jewish *amour propre*, by such glory:

The Prince of Believers . . . has ordered both Jews and Ishmaelites to stand, as a sign of respect, before him [the exilarch Daniel], and to bow to him. The same order is given to all other peoples, of whatever belief they may be. Anyone who does the contrary is punished with a hundred blows! When this Daniel goes forth to find the king, he is accompanied by a great number of horsemen, both Jews and Gentiles, with a man at their head shouting: “Make way for the lord, the son of David, how just is he!”

After visiting all the countries of the Orient, Benjamin of Tudela mentions several times the harmony between Jews and Moslems. Of Caliph Abaridas Achmed he says: “This great king . . . has great love for the Israelites, applies himself with diligence to the reading of the law of Moses, and knows Hebrew very well, reading and writing it to perfection.” Describing the tomb of Esdras (who, according to tra-

dition, probably died in Persia), he states: "The Jews have erected a great synagogue before his sepulchre, and the Ishmaelites have also built a prayer-house on the other side, out of the great veneration which they have for his memory, which is the reason why the Jews are greatly liked by the Ishmaelites who come to pray there." Benjamin of Tudela also tells us that Jews and Moslems would go together to pray at the tomb of the prophet Daniel.

Documents found in Cairo and recently deciphered allow us to establish the fact that in the eleventh century the Egyptian caliphs of the famous Fatimid dynasty paid a regular contribution for the maintenance of the Talmudic academy which operated in Jerusalem! These caliphs, who surrounded themselves with Jewish ministers and counselors, were so famous for their "Judeophilism" that their enemies, following a practice which was not invented yesterday, accused them (quite erroneously) of being themselves of Jewish stock.<sup>6</sup>

Everything leads us to believe that an equally favorable condition, coming from a common cultural background, contributed to make Jewish thinkers and theologians receptive to Arab thought. Indeed, on this level, the close Judeo-Arab interpenetration was made evident by influences which operated in both directions. If Jews contributed to the molding of the doctrines of Islam, the infatuation of Arab thinkers with profane studies, with the "Greek sciences," at that time stirred deep echoing responses among the Jews. Whereas efforts at "Hellenization" made a thousand years before had given no lasting results and had even provoked revolts like that of the Maccabees, Jewish thought opened widely under Islam to Greek rationalism. On the extreme fringe were Jewish free thinkers who openly propagated highly heretical theories. In the early ninth century, a certain Hayawaih of Balkh did not hesitate to doubt the biblical miracles and rebelled against the very idea of the Chosen People: "How can God divide peoples into his people and foreign peoples, and assert that he destines his heritage only to the people of Israel?" That he was not the only doubter is brought out by another manuscript dating from the same period in which this "biblical criticism" is carried still further in the name of the very ethics of the Decalogue: the anonymous author of this work

6. S. D. Goitein, "Congregation versus Community . . .," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, XLIV (1953-54), 304; B. Lewis, "La Légende sur l'origine juive des califes fatimides" (in Hebrew), *Mellilah*, III-IV (1950).



wonders how the Eternal could have ordered his prophet Hosea to take a prostitute for a wife, and so on. But such bold attacks were undertaken only by a few isolated thinkers, while the main current of that period led to a harmonious conciliation between the biblical revelation, interpreted as allegory, and Greek science and philosophy. This effort was begun by the famous Saadiah and other Talmudists and found its definitive expression, for several centuries, in the monumental work of Moses Maïmonides, whose memory remains equally revered in our times by Jews, Moslems, and Christians.

This opening of the mind, this new receptivity by Judaism to outside influences, has long impressed historians, who have explained it in diverse ways, all of which doubtless contain a share of truth. The essential elements can be summed up briefly: because of its very high level, Arab civilization had values to offer the Jews and formulated and presented them in a way and in a language which was accessible and familiar to the Jews. Moreover, we know that Hebrew grammar and syntax, as well as the pointing of vowels, date from this period—the creation of the anonymous “Masoretes,” who undoubtedly worked under the influence and in imitation of the learned Arab philologists. On the other hand, Arabic had become the ordinary language of the Jews, and even writings of a strictly religious nature were often produced in that language (which, according to Maïmonides and other writers, was only an inferior form of Hebrew). In the content itself, certain Islamic emphases can sometimes be seen. Thus in a letter of exhortation to his persecuted brethren, Maïmonides’ father, himself a renowned Talmudist, spoke of God and of his Apostle (Moses) in terms partially borrowed from the Koran and designated Abraham with the circumlocution “Mahdi of God.”<sup>7</sup> There is no heterodoxy here, and in the same way, we must not think that the high culture and broadmindedness of Maïmonides himself made him deviate by one iota from the traditional commandments of Judaism. All we need do is read his “Iggereth Téman” (pastoral letter to the persecuted Jews of Yemen”) to see the ingenious and eloquent way in which he explains the past and present persecutions to which the Jews are subjected by “nations driven by envy and impiety.”

However, in another celebrated epistle, “Iggereth ha-Chemad” (Mes-

7. L. M. Simmons, “The Letter of Consolation of Maimun ben Joseph,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, II (1889-90), 65.

sage to the Apostates”), the same Maïmonides absolves the Jews who, threatened with death, have accepted Islam, though halfheartedly. It is meritorious, he says in substance, to forfeit one’s life in such a case, but it is not in any way a question of an imperative order. In support of this thesis, he notes particularly that the persecutors are most often satisfied if they cause to be uttered the brief profession of faith, “Allah is One and Mohammed is his Prophet,” and for the rest they let the Jews live according to their customs and practice the commandments of the Torah.

Later, one of his successors in the fourteenth century, Moses of Narbonne, even went so far as to claim that the Moslems’ prayer is irreproachable, since they profess the oneness of God, and are circumcised.<sup>8</sup> Given such laxity on the part of the masters, there is nothing surprising in the fact that many of the simple faithful applied themselves to following the law of Moses and that of Mohammed at the same time, to which practice a Spanish cabalist, Joseph ben Schalom, gave a characteristic description. Having noted that “the Christians are all idolaters,” and that “the Moslems . . . also devote themselves to an idolatrous cult,” this rigorist, an enemy of philosophy, continued in this vein:

Consider closely the stupidity of our co-religionists who praise and exalt the religion of the Moslems, thus transgressing the precept of the Law: “Find no grace in them.” Not satisfied with that, when the Moslems profess their faith at their meeting hour in the mosques, those Jews who are poor in spirit and who do not share in religion, associate with them, reciting for their part the “Hear, Israel.” Then they actively praise the nation of that wretched individual [Mohammed]. The result of this action is that they attach themselves and their children to the Moslems, vilify the holy religion of Israel, deny the law of the Lord of the Armies, and follow emptiness and vanity. I am not surprised, moreover, to see the simple folk of our nation allowing themselves to praise the Moslems; what grieves me is the fact that the very ones who claim to be versed in the religion of Israel, I mean certain notable persons in our communities, proclaim the law of the Moslems and talk of their unitary faith.<sup>9</sup>

Such views and practices enable us to make clearer the relationship between Judaism and Islam, and the way in which it differed from the Judeo-Christian relationships of the same period. In addition to the

8. M. Steinschneider, “Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache,” *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, VI (1877).

9. Georges Vajda, “Un chapitre de l’histoire du conflit entre la kabbale et la philosophie,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*, 1956, p. 135.

affinities of language and culture, the strictly religious teaching of Islam facilitated the integration of Jews and Moslems to the extent that it sometimes led to the idea that, since there were no incompatibilities, one might follow the two faiths at the same time. In the beginnings of Islam, there was, in truth, a proliferation of Jewish schismatic sects (Isawites, Judganites, Muchkanites, etc.) who professed that Mohammed was a prophet sent by God to the Arabs or even to the whole human race, with the exception of the Jews alone. Arab theologians were not deceived by these subtleties, and one of them, al-Scheybani, wrote, about 800:

Today the Jews recognize in the areas of Iraq that there is no God other than Allah and that Mohammed is God's envoy, but they claim that he was sent only as a prophet to the Arabs, and not to the Jews. . . . If a Jew then recognizes that Mohammed is an envoy of God, he still cannot be regarded as a Moslem, until he declares that he has broken with his former religion and clearly avows that he has embraced Islam. . . . Therefore, where they are concerned, the name of Moslem which they use does not prove that they have the true faith; it is also necessary that they declare that they have repudiated their old religion. Likewise, if a Jew says: "I have left Judaism," and if he does not add: "I have entered Islam," he must not be considered to be a Moslem, for after having left Judaism, it is still possible that he may have entered Christianity. If he states on the contrary that he has entered Islam, only then does no more ambiguity exist.<sup>10</sup>

The preceding shows how the tradition of the *inouss*, of Judaism practiced in secret in case of necessity, under the mask of Islam, was truly a constant element among the Jews whose history unfolded in the shadow of the Crescent—to the point of producing later, in territory which had become Christian, the extraordinary phenomenon of *marranism*, a mode of adaptation entirely unknown to the purely European Jewish communities in northern and eastern Europe.

In connection with Jewish sectarian movements, we must mention particularly the Karaites, who rejected the Talmud totally. Judging its traditional interpretation of the Old Testament to be no longer valid in the Islamic era, they maintained that Holy Scripture should henceforth be interpreted in a different way, through a new, attentive reading (whence the name of the sect: "Ka Ro," "to read"). Here also, the influence of Moslem theology and of its immense effort to interpret the Koran played a definite role; on the other hand, it is also possible

10. I. Goldziher, "Usages juifs d'après la littérature des Musulmans," *Revue des études juives*, XXVIII (1894), 91.

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to compare the position of the Karaites with that of the Protestant reformationists. Karaite was so successful that it led to a veritable schism in the center of Judaism, the only one in its history. For centuries it flourished in Persia, Palestine, and Egypt. Later it was propagated in Spain and in Poland and has had zealous followers down to our day.

All this fermentation was not unrelated to the charges which took place at this time within the large mass of the Jews, a matter of capital importance in their history. First, on the eve of the Arab conquest, the Jews withdrew, especially into agriculture, a situation which is reflected in the numerous discussions of agrarian law in the Talmud. Three or four centuries later, we find that they have become a people of tradesmen and craftsmen, a city people par excellence. This is a case of a true socioeconomic mutation, and history offers other examples of it—the Armenians, for instance who were still farmers and craftsmen at the end of the Middle Age, were the principal tradesmen of the Ottoman Empire from the Renaissance on. In the final analysis, it is difficult to clarify the reasons for such phenomena. In the case of the Jews, we must taken into account the economic upheavals caused by the Arab conquest, the prosperity of the towns and the poverty of the rural areas, the “bourgeois revolution” of Islam (to use Professor Goitein’s terms). In that period commerce experienced an impressive rise. From Scandinavia all the way to China, daring Arab wayfarers were sailing the seas, navigating the rivers, and setting up trading posts. In Islam, trade was considered to be one of the most honorable professions, and even pleasing to God; had not the Prophet himself, like many of his companions, practiced it? The turntable of these international activities was Baghdad, at the center of a region where there was a dense Jewish population. And no provision of law nor any social barrier prevented the Jews from going into trade.

As a result, one could say that at the end of this revolution the structure of Judaism was not unlike the structure it had, for example, in the tolerant Europe of the nineteenth century. The Jewish communities which swarmed throughout the Moslem empire were composed, on the one hand, of craftsmen and small shopkeepers and, on the other, of bankers and businessmen with international connections. Sometimes two or more communities, the local Jews and those who had come

from other provinces, lived in the same city. As the Onomastic teaches, this period was marked by the migrations of Jews from east to west, and many of them in Egypt or in North Africa bore the names of Persian or Mesopotamian cities. These communities were governed in oligarchic fashion. Very often the rich members, the financiers, carried out—and passed down from father to son—the functions of “nag-gid,” or king of the Jews, who was responsible for relations with the authorities, and the functions of the “pakid-ha-scharim,” a sort of consul charged with the protection of the commercial interests of local and foreign Jews, both functions sometimes being exercised by the same person.

Despite the scarcity of documents, it is sometimes possible to reconstitute the profile of certain persons. We learn for instance, from Arab sources about the bankers Joseph-ben-Phineas and Aaron-ben-Amram, who flourished in Baghdad under Caliph al-Muqtadir (908–32):<sup>11</sup>

Ben-Phineas and ben-Amram directed a banking firm and profited from their vast influence with rich Jews and with non-Jews who deposited their capital with them. In addition, the vizier deposited with them the amount of the fines exacted from prevaricating functionaries who had enriched themselves too quickly. In this way, the bankers could advance to the treasury, at the beginning of each month, the 30,000 gold dinars required for the payment of the troops (amounting to several hundred million francs). They were not always reimbursed with exactitude, but their situation allowed them to engage in many other profitable operations and speculations. They maintained regular cross-desert caravan service between large cities, organized maritime expeditions to India and China, and took black slaves on the east coast of Africa. They knew all about the art of financial arbitration, based on the fundamental fact that the Abasside Caliphate was bimetallic, the former Byzantine provinces had held to the gold standard (gold dinars), and the Persian provinces had retained the silver standard (silver dirhams). The ratio between the two monies, varying over the years between 1:14 and 1:20, opened up great possibilities for real

11. Based on W. J. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Mediaeval Islam* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1937), and on L. Massignon, “L’Influence de l’Islam au Moyen Age sur la fondation et l’essor des banques juives,” *Bulletin des études orientales*, I (1931).

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stock market speculation. The financial technique of this era already included not only the use of letters of credit (*sustaja*) but also of bills of exchange payable to order (*sakḳ*, from which “check” is etymologically derived). The Arab chronicler speaks of this as follows:

The Vizier Ibn al-Furāt then took his ink-pot and wrote an order to his banker (*jahbadh*) Aaron b. Amram, telling him to pay from his account and without further notice 2,000 dinārs to 'Ali b. 'Īsā, as a subvention towards the payment of a fine imposed upon him. Muhassin b. al-Furāt also ordered his banker to pay this 'Ali b. 'Īsā 1,000 dinārs from his account that was in Aaron b. Amram's bank.<sup>12</sup>

Kings of finance in Baghdad and bankers to the caliphs for a quarter of a century, ben-Phineas and ben-Amram may have been the first such persons, but they were not the only ones. Another chronicle tells us that most of the merchants of Tustar in Persia were Jews. At Ispahan, called “the second Baghdad” because of its flourishing trade, the *yahuddiah* quarter was the center of business dealings. The governor of the province of Ahwaz also resorted to the services of several Jewish bankers (the source mentions Yakub, Israel ben Salih, Sahl ben-Nazir). Siraf, the main port of the caliphate in the tenth century, apparently even had a Jewish governor named Ruzbah (the Persian equivalent of Yom-tov).

Further to the west, we note the meteoric career of the Banu Sahl brothers, Abu Sa'd and Abu Nasr, favorites of the Fatimid caliphs az-Zahir and al-Mustansir,<sup>13</sup> whose prosperity has contributed to many an Arab legend. The palace that Abu Sa'd built in Cairo was said to have 300 silver vases on the veranda, “each with a tree planted in it.” The brothers are said to have given az-Zahir's widow a silver ship. This widow was, in fact, a former black slave whom the brothers had sold to az-Zahir and who had become his favorite wife; after his death, she acted as regent in the name of his son al-Mustansir and made Abu-Sa'd her confidential adviser and vizier. This allowed the brothers to increase their fortune greatly, but it also led to their destruction. The regent asked Abu Sa'd to recruit a personal guard for her, composed of black soldiers, and soon the Negro and the Turk parties were opposing

12. W. Fischel, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 68 ff., “The Banu Sahl of Tustar.”

each other at the court. The latter finally won, and the Banu Sahl brothers were assassinated in 1047.

However, from all that has preceded, we must not conclude that finance and trade had at any time become a Jewish monopoly. Both Christians and Moslems continued to excel in them, but because of the scarcity and lack of precision of the sources, it is impossible to furnish any indication of the relative shares of the groups. Moreover, the Arab sources mention only the leaders, telling us practically nothing of the activities of small or average merchants. To get some idea of this, we must turn to a Jewish source, extraordinarily rich in a case of this kind (but unfortunately, it is the only case)—the *Geniza* (“secret room”) of the synagogue of old Cairo.

In keeping with the old Jewish usage, no document bearing the sacred name of God—and practically, that meant no document of any kind at all—was to be destroyed. However insignificant the contents, the document was carefully preserved in a *Geniza*, which most synagogues had. But the vicissitudes of fate, wars, and persecutions, combined with the destructive work of time, have caused the disappearance of these precious archives, which once went back ten centuries—with the exception of those of Cairo, preserved by the dry climate of the Nile Valley. For two or three generations, scholars have been devoting themselves to deciphering this inexhaustible mine of information on the intellectual, social, and economic life of the Jews and non-Jews of that time.

Thus we learn that Jewish merchants, big and small, made money and goods circulate among all the cities of the immense Islamic empire and that their activity was carried on even outside it. They were found in great numbers in all the ports of East Africa, India, and Ceylon, having come not only from the big cities of North Africa—Tangiers, Kairwan, Tripoli, Alexandria—but also from humble villages whose names are forgotten. What did they trade? One of the foremost specialists on the Cairo *Geniza*, S. D. Goitein, says that they imported from India

spices, aromatics, dyeing and varnishing plants and medicinal herbs; iron and steel . . . brass vessels. This group may be a special case. I have the impression that North African Jews, especially one, of whom we have many documents, developed this industry in an Indian town with the help of Yemenite Jewish

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craftsmen . . . because the raw materials . . . were shipped to India from the West.

They also imported from India "silk and other textiles and clothes; pearls, beads, cowryshells and ambergris; Chinese porcelain . . . tropical fruits."

They exported to India textiles, household goods (frying pans, tables, carpets, mats), medicaments, soap, paper, books, cheese, sugar, and olive oil. India and Africa exported raw materials and metals in particular, while the Near East furnished manufactures and consumer goods, some for the use of Westerners living in India and in Africa. "The situation has some similarity to the relations of Europe with her spheres of colonial expansion in modern times."<sup>14</sup>

Such being the case, everything leads one to believe that the old Jewish colonies of Mesopotamia had become centers of an international trade which was just as successful as trade was in the colonies of North Africa. Unfortunately for our knowledge of these colonies, there is no source for them comparable to the Cairo *Geniza*, which gives us many other details about the life and customs of the Jews of that era. We learn, for example, that contrary to the accepted opinion, monogamy was their rule and was expressly stipulated in marriage contracts. It is typical of the high status of the Jewish woman of this period that many of these contracts contain a clause according to which the husband cannot go on a business trip without the wife's consent. Of course, these trips were in those days daring and lengthy enterprises. Perhaps this clause can be compared with another bit of evidence, according to which the young Jewesses of Yemen, renowned for their beauty, were a supplementary attraction for many a traveler. . . . In any case, we may conclude that there was, among the Oriental Jews, a feeling of romantic love completely unknown at that period in the austere ghettos of Europe. Moreover, other documents show that the Eastern Jews had a tendency to scorn their unfortunate European brethren and to consider them of inferior origin.

It would be erroneous to conclude from the preceding material that the Jews always flourished in Islam. In the eastern part of the territory of Islam there were sporadic persecutions which were generally directed

14. S. D. Goitein, "The Cairo Geniza as a Source for the History of Muslim Civilization," *Studia Islamica*, III (1955), 81-83.



against the Jewish and Christian *dhimmis* at the same time. The most famous one, and perhaps the most cruel, was that undertaken by Caliph Hakim; in 1012, he ordered all the churches and synagogues in Egypt and Persia destroyed and forbade the practice of religion other than that of Islam. It is significant that Moslem historians have been unable to explain this decision other than by attributing it to the madness which is reported to have come suddenly on the caliph. In the western part (Barbary), from which Christianity had disappeared in the twelfth century although Judaism prospered (a disparity which reminds us of the extent to which Judaism was better fitted for living under a foreign domination), there were, first under the Almoravid dynasty, then under the Almohads, ferocious persecutions which extended to Moslem Spain.

It has been observed that these persecutions were almost all of Berber origin, the expression of the excessive zeal of new converts rather than of consistent dynastic policy. The explanation is worth what it is worth—interpretations of this kind are perhaps more valid in the case of princes belonging to the Shiite sect, always intolerant, and by doctrine. Indeed, we observe that many of the known persecutions were the work of Shiites—for example, those in Yemen (one of them, about 1172, stirred Maïmonides to write the epistle mentioned earlier) and those which were endemic in Persia in the more recent past. Certainly what we know is much scantier than what we do not know. In this connection, the following laconic sentence from the chronicler Ibn-Verga, a Spanish Jew is typical: “In the big city of Fez, a great persecution took place; but since I have never found out anything precise about it, I have not described it more fully.”

It seems clear that the Jews were included in the anti-Christian persecutions in Egypt under the Mameluke domination, extending from the mid-thirteenth century to the mid-fifteenth. Yet in any case, however numerous and intense these tribulations may have been, the list of them, full of lacunae and established according to the hazard of the chronicles, does not constitute any probing clue to the attitude of Moslems toward Jewish infidels. From this point of view, the trades and ways of life of the Jews as we have just outlined them, the wide range of their professions, contrasting with the situation of a caste relegated to one humiliating trade, furnish a better indication. The study of the

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tradition of Islam, of its literature and its legends, its tales and its fables, is quite as instructive on this point.

When everything is taken into consideration, we do not find any great difference between the image of the Jew and the image of the Christian in Moslem literary tradition. Both are *dhimmi*s, tributaries, and the scorn which the true believers have for them is not malevolent. According to the legist Mawerdi, tribute "is demanded with scorn because it is a question of a payment owed by the *dhimmi*s for their infidelity, but it is also demanded with gentleness, since it is a question of payment stemming from the quarter which we have given them."<sup>15</sup>

Among many other literary indications, this little story reflects clearly the impartiality of the Moslems concerning the different categories of tributaries:

A Christian and a doctor of the Koran were on board a ship. From a wine-skin he had with him the Christian poured some wine into a bowl, drank it, then poured again and offered it to the doctor, who took it from his hands without thinking.

"May my life serve as ransom for yours," said the Christian, "but take care, that is wine!"

"And how do you know it's wine?"

"My servant bought it from a Jew who swore it was wine."

Thereupon the doctor drained the bowl and said to the Christian, "Fool that you are! We traditionalists consider as uncertain the statements of . . . (the doctor cited the names of several companions of the Prophet) and should we give any credence to the statement of a Christian who reports his fact on the authority of a Jew! By God! I only drained the bowl to show the little belief that one should place in such statements."<sup>16</sup>

Let us recall in conclusion that, faithful to the Koran's teachings on charity, its doctors prescribed that charity should be extended to the infidels. The following fable cites Omar the Implacable as a witness:

Caliph Omar was passing in the street when he noticed a beggar, very old, and blind. He touched him on the forearm and said, "Who art thou?"

"I am an adept of the revealed religion."

"And of which one?"

"I am a Jew."

"And who is it who forces thee to do what I see?"

15. Mawerdi, *Les statuts gouvernementaux*, ed. Fagnan (Algiers, 1915), p. 208.

16. Ahmad al-Absihi, "De la prohibition du vin," *Al-Monstratif* ("Recueil de morceaux choisis çà et là . . ."), ed. G. Rat (Paris, 1899).

“I am begging for the amount of my tribute, and for enough to meet my needs and supply my food.”

Then Omar, taking him by the hand, took him to his home, where he gave him alms; after which, he sent this message to the keeper of the public Treasury: “Behold this man and those like him! We are not just toward them; after profiting from their youth, we humiliate them in the time of their decrepitude. Have him share in the alms tithes of the Moslems, for he is one of those whom Allah calls indigent, saying: *the alms tithes are only for the poor and the indigent* . . . the Moslems are the poor, but this man is an adept of the revealed religion.” And the caliph exonerated the old man and his fellows from the tribute.<sup>17</sup>

We know that Western Christian tradition contains many an unforgettable lesson in exemplary piety—but it would be vain to seek there a figure of a Jew, poor and worthy of pity.

17. Abu Yusuf Ya'kub, *Le Livre de l'impôt foncier*, ed. Fagnan (Paris, 1921), p. 194.