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The Prophet Muhammad in Pre-Modern Jewish Literatures

Political power and demographic dominance provide not only physical protection for a people or community, they also offer a sense of existential confidence. For some three hundred years after the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, Jews lived as minority communities in most of the Christian world. With the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, Jews lived for the next millennium and nearly another half as minority communities throughout the expanding Christian and Muslim worlds. During most of this period, which S. D. Goitein famously called “a religious age,”¹ Jews interacted with their Muslim or Christian neighbors at all social and economic levels, and during the course of their lives they naturally engaged in discussions about religion, whether intentionally or by chance, directly or obliquely, and whether of their own making or forced upon them. Life is conversation in the broadest sense of the term, from the minimal necessary exchange when buying vegetables from a vendor to formal discussion and debate in the court of a wealthy patron.

In a world that was defined and divided by competing expressions of monotheism, Jews as religious outsiders in all places were subject to – and particularly sensitive to – the normal and natural conversation about religion that saturated life in the medieval world. That conversation naturally included questions and criticisms regarding their faith and religious practice.

Conversation is not restricted to direct person-to-person oral communication. It includes culturally communicated notions and ideas that become deeply integrated into the world views of the inhabitants of a culture or civilization, and these are communicated in a variety of ways. Such “conversation” can occur through visual representation of art and architecture, through musical representation in song or children’s ditties, or through religious sermons that are then repeated or disseminated orally to populations beyond those who were privy to the original delivery.²

As a perpetual minority in the pre-modern world, Jews were subject to a great amount of direct and indirect communication that challenged or threatened their sense of identity. These threats were ubiquitous in medieval culture and society, beginning with the very scriptures that Christians and Muslims heard, read and adored, and which explicitly denigrated Jews, their religion and practice.³ Negative

¹ S. D. Goitein, *Religion in a Religious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974).

² William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View* (2nd Ed. Oxford: Oxford University, 2004); Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

³ See, for example, the classic references of Matthew 23, John 9; Qur’an 2:61, 79; 3:93–94; 4:160–161; 5:12–13.

and degrading rhetoric toward Jews and Judaism naturally developed and flowed from that discourse and was influenced by contemporary local and global issues that might exacerbate or reduce the level of polemic. Lacking political and demographic power, Jews could not respond openly, for they had to be circumspect in their conversations about religion in “mixed company.” They had to be even more so in their writings. Jews therefore wrote many fewer degrading polemical tracts than Christians or Muslims. They tended more to write apologetic materials for internal consumption in order to defend against the polemical attacks of others. But the line between apologetics and polemics can be very fine, and both were far more likely among the Jews to be imbedded within genres of literature outside the categories of formal polemics.

Like Christians and Muslims, Jews were intent in defending their own religion and religious civilization in a world in which it was common to critique and disparage the religious “other.” Jewish references to Muhammad as well as Jesus tend to be oblique in order to protect the writers and their communities from possible or even likely adverse physical reaction. Even the great and respected Moses Maimonides (d.1204) makes clear in his *Letter to Yemen* sent to bolster the Jews of that land whom had come under intense Muslim conversionary pressure, that writing a letter understood to be critical of Islam endangered his own personal safety.⁴

Pre-modern Jewish references and allusions to Muhammad are therefore uncommon. Nevertheless, Jewish literature, ranging from scriptural commentary to folklore, legal responsa, histories, apocalyptic, philosophical tracts and even poetry, occasionally contain references or allusions to Muhammad. These writings make up a fascinating collection, and they inevitably reflect particularist Jewish interests. The range of thematic settings in which Muhammad appears in Jewish texts is relatively broad, extending far beyond scriptural commentaries that defend against Muslim contentions that Muhammad is prophesied in Jewish scripture. Muhammad appears in Jewish versions of the well-known Bahira legends⁵ and purported writs of protection dictated by Muhammad to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and produced by Jews and Samaritans (as well as Christians and probably others) in order to press for special treatment of their communities under the *dhimma*.⁶ There are also legends found in Jewish as well as

⁴ Abraham Halkin and David Hartman, *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 131.

⁵ Shimon Shtober, “The Monk Bahira, the Counselor of Muhammad, and the Jews: Between Polemic and Historiography” (Hebrew), in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* 2.1 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1990), B, vol. 1, 69–76; Moshe Gil, “The Story of Bahira and its Jewish Variants” (Hebrew), in H. Ben-Shammai (ed.), *Hebrew and Arabic Studies in Honour of Joshua Blau* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies and Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation, 1993), 193–210; Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

⁶ Hartwig Hirschfeld, “The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 15 (1903), 167–181; Shelomo Dov Goitein, “From the Genizah of the Library: *Kitab Dhimmat al-Nabi*, A Special Writ of Protection for the Jews by Muhammad” (Hebrew), *Kirjath Sepher. Bibliographical*

Christian and Islamic literatures about Muhammad's "Jewish companions," teachers or informants in the non-Muslim versions, who taught the prophet about monotheism and in some stories actually wrote the Qur'an for him.⁷ Other Jewish texts suggest a role for Muhammad within a Jewish messianic scenario,⁸ and so forth.

Jews rarely referred to Jesus or Muhammad directly.⁹ It was much more common to use code names. In reference to Jesus, for example "that man" (*oto ha'ish*) or "the hanged" (*hatalui*) was a common epithet. Muhammad was sometimes referred to by one of a set of words in a key verse from the book of the biblical prophet Hosea. The reason for the use of soubriquets is both obvious and subtle. On the one hand, Jews would not feel comfortable speaking publicly about the foundational characters of the religions of those whom they considered to be their oppressors. Pressured to abandon their ancestral faith, Jews would likely feel ill at ease being observed by their co-religionists talking about them. Perhaps, heaven forbid, they are considering leaving Judaism for the faith of their oppressors! On the other hand, Jewish references toward Jesus and Muhammad would be predictably negative. If negative references were overheard by members of these faiths, Jews could be endangering themselves and their families and communities. The situation would be even more precarious in writing, since one cannot simply claim that a word was misheard or mispronounced in a written text.¹⁰

Quarterly of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem 9:4 (January, 1933), 505–528; Joseph Rivlin, "A Testament of Muhammad to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib" (Hebrew), in *Minhah LeDavid: Festschrift for R. David Yellin* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1938), 139–156; John MacDonald, "An Unpublished Palestinian Tradition About Muhammad," *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1.2 (1969), 3–12; Reuben Ahroni, "Some Yemenite Jewish Attitudes towards Muhammad's Prophethood," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 69 (1998), 49–98.

7 References provided below.

8 Anon., "Vision of the Last War" (Hebrew), in Lewis Ginsberg (ed.), *Ginzey Schechter* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1948), vol. 1, 310–312; Anon., "The Secrets of Rabbi Shimm'on Ben-Yohai" (Hebrew), in Yehudah Ibn Shmuel (ed.), *Midreshey Ge'ulah: Jewish Apocalyptic Materials from the End of the Babylonian Talmud until the Sixth (Jewish) Millennium* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1944), 162–198, 401–405; Bernard Lewis, "An Apocalyptic Vision of Islamic History," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13 (1949–1950), 308–338; id., "On That Day: A Jewish Apocalyptic Poem on the Arab Conquests," *Mélanges d'islamologie: volume dédié à la mémoire de Armand Abel par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis* 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 197–200.

9 Sarah Bunin Benor, "Lexical Othering in Judezmo: How Ottoman Sephardim Refer to Non-Jews," in David Bunis (ed.), *Languages and Literatures of Sephardic and Oriental Jews* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2009), 169–70.

10 This is also one reason for the fact that Jewish texts critical of Islam are inevitably written in Hebrew characters even if the language of writing is Arabic or Farsi, though other factors also influenced the use of Hebrew characters in Jewish writings in these languages. Although the spoken language of most Jews in the medieval Arab world was Arabic, they learned the Hebrew alphabet in order to read Jewish religious literature written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Since the phonetics of Hebrew and Arabic are similar, Hebrew script was reasonably well suited for rendering the sounds of Arabic despite the fact that the Hebrew alphabet is less comprehensive than the Arabic. Because of the separation

Because of the danger, the name Muhammad, or “the Prophet,” is rarely found in Jewish texts that refer to him. Exquisite alternatives were found in Hosea 9:7, a prophetic verse that warns of a dire punishment to come upon Israel (i.e. Jews) for its infidelity to God. According to Hosea, the Jews shall be taken away to Assyria and returned destitute to Egypt: “The days of punishment are come, the days of recompense are come, Israel shall know it. The prophet is a fool, the man of spirit is mad! For the multitude of your iniquity, the enmity is great.”

In the ancient spirit of prophecy, apocalyptic, and the search for meaning, it was natural for Jews living under the sometimes harsh and difficult rule of Islam to gravitate toward these words. Muhammad was thus occasionally deemed the prophet forecast by Hosea in his oracle of retribution and misfortune. Israel would be punished under the rule of yet another mighty power. But despite its strength and control, its leader and founder was not a true prophet, as this verse proved to them. Muhammad was the foolish prophet (that is, a non-prophet) or mad (*meshugga*). He was “the man of spirit,” which was taken to mean “without essence or substance,” for the Hebrew of the idiom can also mean “man of (mere) wind.” Finally, he is *Mastemah*, meaning “animosity” or “hatred,” which early on in Jewish literature became associated with the term *Satan* as “the accuser.”¹¹

The use of the epithet “mad” was likely influenced by the Qur’anic reference to the people of Mecca accusing Muhammad of having been possessed by the *jinn* – the genies of the desert. Take, for example, Qur’an 37:36, that complains against an audience who said, “Would we abandon our gods for a mad (possessed) poet?”¹²

وَيَقُولُونَ إِنَّا لَنَرُكَوَا الْهَيْتَنَا لِشَاعِرٍ مَّجْنُونٍ {36}

This particular term was used by Maimonides in his famous *Letter to Yemen*.¹³ Not all references, however, are so negative. His name is also coded as “the shepherd” (*haro’eh tzon*). The biblical prophet Amos was himself a shepherd (Amos 1:1), and

between Jewish and Islamic cultures, few Jews learned Arabic characters, even to the extent that it was not uncommon for Jews to transliterate works by Muslim authors into Hebrew characters to enable them to be read. They would commonly write to their fellow religionists in Arabic but with the familiar Hebrew characters (Joshua Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 34–36.

¹¹ The similar sound (and meaning) of the Hebrew roots *s.t.m.* and *s.t.n.* was not lost to Jews. *Mastemah* occurs in the Hebrew Bible only in Hosea 9:7–8, but as early as Jubilees (second century BCE) Mastemah is chief of the demons who leads astray the sons of Noah (Jub. 10:8; 11:2–5, 11) and urges God to test Abraham with the binding of his beloved son Isaac (17:16). He is also called “Prince of *mastemah*,” meaning the Prince of Hatred, and this term is found but only occasionally in later Jewish writings (See *Sefer Noah* in Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha-midrash* (Leipzig, 1857, repr. Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1967) Part 3, p. 155. The reader must keep in mind that the person and role of Satan in Judaism is not identical to that of Christianity.

¹² See also Qur’an 7:184; 52:29; 69:41–42.

¹³ Halkin and Hartman, *Epistles of Maimonides*, 107, 121.

according to Islamic tradition itself Muhammad was sent out to live with Bedouin to learn the ways and mores of the traditional, pastoral Arabian life.

These references to Muhammad are overall quite negative. I recognize that the historical use of negative terms by Jews for Muhammad is offensive to Muslims, and that critique and especially scorn and ridicule for the Prophet is a particularly sore spot for Muslim sensibility today as well as in the past. It is important, therefore, to place the negative allusions in their proper context. The Jews of Islam generally felt scorned by their Muslim neighbors, both socially and religiously. On the societal level, evidence confirms that Jews often interacted rather fully in Muslim society. They were occasionally business partners with Muslims and certainly enjoyed personal friendships, but even in the best of times they lived a legally established and regularly enforced second-class status as a community, and that inferior status was recognized publicly through sumptuary laws that were designed to demean non-Muslims. The laws of the *dhimma* reminded both communities in all public social situations from the market to the baths to the time for engaging in prayer, exactly who was privileged and who was excluded from privilege.¹⁴ During times of tension or crisis, the “othering” of the *dhimma* could easily result in physical abuse and death. It should not be surprising to us given the circumstances that the symbols of their oppression would be subject to criticism.

On the religious level, the Jews were confronted with an unending Islamic critique that threatened the very essence of their religious identity. From the Jewish point of view their divinely ordained religious practices were denigrated by the Qur’an which Muslims claimed was itself a divine text, and which disparages Jewish laws and customs.¹⁵ The Qur’an also proclaims that the Torah of Moses, by which Jews lived and for which they died, was flawed and even distorted by the Jews themselves, to be corrected or replaced by the arrival of a new prophet and the new and perfect divine revelation of the Qur’an.¹⁶ Many tracts, public sermons, and simple common idioms publicized this “fact of life” in the Muslim world, and this of course caused significant resentment among Jews. The two incontrovertible facts from the Muslim perspective, being the true and final prophethood of Muhammad and the perfectly revealed literal word of God in the Qur’an, were unproven myths from a Jewish point of view that could and must be challenged. This was carried out formally – but only rarely for the reasons cited above – through scriptural commentary and exegesis.¹⁷ It was carried out indirectly and more frequently through safer, less formal discourse, with caution

¹⁴ Claude Cahen, “Dhimma,” *EF*, 2:227–231; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ahkam ahl al-dhimma*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-‘ilm lil-malayin, 1961).

¹⁵ Qur’an 2:172–174; 4:160; 5:5; 6:146.

¹⁶ Qur’an 2:75, 79; 3:78; 4:46; 5:13, 15; 9:33; 13:38–39.

¹⁷ In the medieval Christian world, Jewish books were often censored by Christian authorities, and those Jews who tried to reverse the damage of the censors or hide their beloved books from the censor were severely punished (William Popper, *The Censorship of Hebrew Books* [New York: Knickerbocker, 1899]).

to be sure, and usually in code because of the danger that such challenges posed to both the individual and the community.

To this end, a variety of soubriquets may be found in Jewish literature that refer to Muhammad indirectly and, for the most part, negatively. One must assume that they were used in private oral discourse as well. Epithets of one form or another may be found in virtually all Jewish literary genres though they are not common in any of them, but are most pronounced in Kara'ite biblical exegesis.¹⁸ Samau'al al-Maghribi (d.1170), a Jewish apostate who converted to Islam in 1163, wrote an anti-Jewish polemic in Arabic that provides some of the negative epithets Jews applied to Muhammad based on his own personal experience. He writes, "as to our master, the Messenger of God – may God pray over him and bless him – only two names for him are current among the Jews – may they be accursed by God, the angels, and all men. One of the names is *pasul* meaning 'vile',¹⁹ the other *meshugga'* meaning 'madman.' As to the glorious Koran, they call it *Qalon*²⁰ which in their tongue is a name for turpitude; they mean thereby that it is a disgrace of the Muslims."²¹

While most references to Muhammad are understandably negative, a small number suggests that Muhammad is truly a prophet, though for Gentiles and not for Jews. The most well-known source for this is the twelfth century Yemenite scholar, Netan'el ben al-Fayyumi.²² Some scholars see this perspective in some of Maimonides'

18 For a sample of Kara'ite polemics in which such soubriquets are found, see Haggai Ben-Shammai, "The Attitude of Some Early Kara'ites Toward Islam," in Isadore Twersky, *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), vol. 2, 3–40; and Daniel Frank, *Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 232–247.

19 The meaning of the Hebrew *pasul* is closer to "unfit, invalid, disqualified," as in disqualified as a legal witness (*pasul le'eidut*).

20 The similarity in sound between *qalon* and Qur'an, and between *pasul* and *rasul*, was both noted and appreciated by Jewish audiences. On the use of such techniques in polemical arguments between Jews and Muslims as recorded in Islamic tradition, see Reuven Firestone, "The Failure of a Jewish Program of Public Satire in the Squares of Medina," in *Judaism*, 46:4 (1997), 438–452.

21 Moshe Perlmann (ed.), "Samau'al al-Maghribi, *Ifhām al-Yahūd: Silencing the Jews*," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 32 (1964), Arabic p. 67, English p. 62. See also, Moritz Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1877), 302–303. One particularly creative custom among some Jews of Yemen was to write Muhammad's name without the middle letter *mim*, thereby rendering it *maḥad* (محد), meaning "no-one", "nobody" (Reuben Ahroni, "Some Yemenite Jewish Attitudes towards Muhammad's Prophethood," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 69 (1998), 61). On the other hand, because Jews in the Arab world spoke and wrote in Arabic and were sensitive to Arabic and Islamic cultural terminology, they occasionally referred to Jewish prophets such as Elijah as *Rasul Allah* (رسول الله) or even the Hebrew Bible as *al-Qur'an* (אלקראן) (Blau, *Emergence*, 159).

22 David Levine, *The Bustan Al-Ukul by Nathanael Ibn Al-Fayyumi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908. See http://archive.org/stream/bustanalukul00levigoog/bustanalukul00levigoog_djvu.txt); Shlomo Pines, "Nathanael ben al-Fayyumi et la theologie ismaelienne," *Revue de l'Histoire Juive en Egypte* 1 (1947), 5–22; Reuben Ahroni, "From *Bustan al-'uqul* to *Qisat al-batul*: Some Aspects of

writings as well, though Maimonides is also famously known for referring to Muhammad as *meshugga*‘.

In the following pages I reproduce two short Jewish versions of a tale in which Jewish sages befriend Muhammad. I then provide a far more elaborate version of the same story. The fact of their multiple occurrence attests to their importance, but limited space in this volume allows only for a general synopsis and brief discussion.²³

The two short versions consist of manuscripts found in the Cairo Geniza and date to the eleventh or twelfth centuries.²⁴ One is in Hebrew and the other in Judeo-Arabic (henceforth, I refer to the latter as the Arabic version). The versions have been compared to a Christian, ninth century Greek rendering by Theophanes (his *Chronicle*) already in the early part of the last century.²⁵ In the Jewish versions, learned Jews come to Muhammad and befriend him. The names of the Jews are given in these texts, and some of them are quite familiar from Islamic history. So, for example, the Jewish Avshalom joins Muhammad as ‘Abd al-Salām or Abdullah ibn Salām,²⁶ and a Jew named Avraham is known as Ka‘b al-Aḥbār,²⁷ despite the fact that according to Islamic literature, Ka‘b al-Aḥbār did not become Muslim until after Muhammad’s death. The Hebrew version only provides three names, the Arabic version the full ten.²⁸

Jewish-Muslim Religious Polemics in Yemen,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 (1981), 311–360; Ronald C. Kiener, “Jewish Isma‘ilism in Twelfth-Century Yemen: R. Nethanel Ben Al-Fayyumi,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 74 (1984), 249–266.

23 I am currently organizing material that I hope to publish in a monograph that will treat the full range of references to Muhammad in pre-modern Jewish literatures.

24 Jacob Mann, “A Polemical Work against Karaite and Other Sectaries,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, new series 12 (1921/2), 123–150; idem, “Kara’ite Works: Addenda to JQR XII,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* XVI (1925–1926), 89–93; Jacob Leveen, “Mohammed and his Jewish Companions,” *ibid.*, 399–406; S. Gantz, “Notes on Mr. Leveen’s Article JQR XVI 399–406,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* XVII (1926–27), 235–237; Jacob Leveen, “Mohammed and His Jewish Companions: Additions and Corrections to JQR XVI 399–406,” *ibid.*, 223. On the Cairo Geniza, see S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 6 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967–1993), vol. 1, 1–28.

25 Moshe (Max) Schwabe, “Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions” (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 2 (1931), 74–89.

26 Abdul-Malik Ibn Hisham, *Al-sira al-nabawiyya*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-thiqaqa al-‘arabiyya, n.d.), 2:516–517; English translation: Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 240–241.

27 Moshe Perlmann, “A Legendary Story of Ka‘b al-Aḥbār’s Conversion to Islam,” in *The Joshua Starr Memorial Volume* (New York: Conference on Jewish Relations, 1953), 85–99.

28 Leveen and Gantz disagree over the number because it is not clear whether the last name, which would be number eleven by Leveen’s count, is a separate name or description of the previous character. I consider it the latter. Judeo-Arabic: עשאל הנקל פתן אלנבי הפץ אבי צפיה גאריה אלנבי, which I transliterate for Arabists to *Ḥatn al-nabi ḥafẓ abi ṣafīya jāriya al-nabi*: “Father-in-Law of the Prophet, guardian of the father of Safiyya, wife of the Prophet” (or “concubine of the Prophet,” which is the usual meaning of the Arabic, *jāriyah*). “Son-in-Law” is the more common meaning for *khatan*, but the term may refer to any relative on the side of the wife (J. G. Hava, *AlFarā‘id* [Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1982], 157). According to Ibn Ishaq (Guillaume, *Life*, 511, 514–517) Safiyya bt. Huyayy b. Akhtab was a Jewess captured at Khaybar and taken by Muhammad as a wife after the defeat of the Khaybaris. She had been married previously to Kināna b. al-Rabī‘ b. Abul-Huqayq, a leader of the Jewish tribe of Nadhir who was killed

The others in the Jewish lists seem not to be mentioned in the *Sira*, and some of them have fanciful names such as Yohanan, whose Muslim sobriquet was *al-munhazam ilal-jannah* (“the one routed into the Garden”), or Yiftah, called “Killed through Love of the Prophet,” and so forth. While it is clear that these Jewish stories are part of the larger *genre* of Bahira Legends, the Judeo-Arabic version here explicitly mentions that the Christian monk, Bahira, had nothing to do with those Jews who assisted Muhammad.²⁹

In the short versions the sages join Muhammad in order to protect their people from what was somehow known to them would become the overwhelming power of the Muslim empires and the coming degradation of the Jewish people. Exactly how these sages knew the future is not explained, though an explanation is given in the more elaborate later version provided below. Both short versions are incomplete and are damaged, which has made portions difficult to make out.³⁰ In the Hebrew Geniza version, “The ten elders (*‘asara hazeqenim*) [...] came to him and made for him the Qur’an.³¹ Each one of them wrote and then inserted their names [within it], and also wrote in code in [chapter 2, called] ‘The Cow’,”³² “Thus do the sages of Israel counsel the dumb, wicked man.” All this was to save the people of God so that he would not harm them through his dealings as those who came after them did with the shepherd.³³ The Arabic version is longer and refers to Muhammad by name.

This document (*kitāb*) is the story of Muhammad, who was in Sūr‘ā’ al-Jūsī, which is called Jabal al-Ḥadīth [or, “New Mountain”], and about how things went for him until he set off for San‘a and the Hijaz on account of the monk who was in Balkin on the pillar called “Mark of the Sun,” and about his followers among the [Jewish] sages (*aḥbār*) who came and communicated to him his affairs and [wrote] for him a book. They compiled and wrote their names in the beginning of a chapter of his Qur’an, and they compiled and wrote “Thus did the sages of Israel advise the dumb wicked man” hidden and confused so that he would not understand and become cursed for [...]”³⁴, as those sages said to whomever would understand [the code] so as not to join up with the Gentiles³⁵ [...] They made for him a Qur’an and wrote and compiled their names, each one in a chapter without cause for suspicion.

by Muhammad after the fighting when he refused to divulge the location of a cache of treasure owned by his defeated tribe.

²⁹ ואלרהב יקאל בחירה לא יזכר.

³⁰ See Mann, “A Polemical Work,” and Leveen, “Mohammed and his Jewish Companions,” for details on the manuscripts.

³¹ *ot haqalon*, meaning “the sign of disgrace” (see above).

³² “*Vekhen katuv behaf gatz haparah*” (וכן כתוב בחף גץ הפרה).

³³ It is not clear to me what this phrase refers to. The continuation refers back to an earlier topic and ends the treatment of our theme.

³⁴ I understand ל ואר'ור as the Hebrew “cursed” (*arūr*). The text then becomes unclear.

³⁵ ומן ג'א מן אלאחבאר אלדין צארו אליה דכרו לה אמרה והג'ו לה כת' ורכבו וכתבו פי אול סורה מן קראנה אסמהם ורכבו וכתבו כך יע'צ'ו ח'כמ'י יש'ר'א'ל'י ל'א'ל'ם ה'ר'ש'ע' מסתור משוש חתי לא יפהם ואר'ור ל'..

According to this story, Jewish sages feigned joining Muhammad and then counseled him in the writing of the Qur'an, and in the course of doing so they imbedded proof within it to prove that it was a human document and not the word of God. Exactly how this was done is not obvious, but it seems clear that the device is associated with the so-called "mysterious letters" of the Qur'an as well as hidden codes within the suras through which the names of the ten sages can be derived.³⁶ According to this narrative, the "mysterious letters" were actually codes imbedded within the Qur'an by Muhammad's Jewish companions, which when decoded, reveal that the Qur'an is not divine and therefore cannot possibly supersede the sanctity of the Torah.

The letters that preface the second chapter of the actual Qur'an, called "The Cow" are *alef lam mim*. In the Hebrew version of the story, the code to decipher the meaning of the three letters is given as *haf gatz*, which may be a substitution of letters through which a hidden message is revealed. Mann considered the words, בהך גץ to be instructions for decoding the verse by substituting the first two letters of *alef lam mim* according to הך, meaning by the letter nine spaces onward in the Hebrew alphabet (the distance between 'ח and 'פ in the alphabet), and to substitute the third letter by the distance between 'ג and 'צ, to arrive at ישו, meaning Jesus. When the word is substituted for *alif lam mim* in the inserted sentence, he arrived at "Thus did the sages of Israel advise the evil Jesus," Jesus, then, being the "sign of disgrace" (*ot haqalon*).³⁷

Elkan Adler, according to Leveen,³⁸ was the first to associate the phrase with Isaiah 56:10: צפו צפיו עורים בלם לא ידעו בלם כלבים אלמים לא יוכלו לנבח הוים שכבים אהבי לגום: ("The watchmen are blind, all of them, they perceive nothing; they are all dumb dogs that cannot bark; they lie sprawling, they love to drowse"). The three letters, *alif lam mim* spell אלם in Hebrew, which is the common word for "dumb," meaning unable to speak. By association, therefore, the mysterious letters thus refer to Isaiah 56:10 and mean "dumb," thus serving as proof that Muhammad is a false prophet.³⁹

The Christian version preserved by Theophanes takes a different approach. In this version, the Jews join up with Muhammad because they foolishly mistake him for a true prophet or messiah. In the course of their mischief, these Jews teach Muhammad to hate Christians and distort Christianity, thereby explaining both the erroneous depictions of Christianity found in the Qur'an regarding the Crucifixion, for example, and the anti-Christian Qur'anic material in general.⁴⁰

³⁶ See Jeremy. Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters of the Koran. Old Abbreviations of the *Basmalah*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993), 562–73; Alfred Welch, "Kur'an," *EP*, 5:412–414; K. Massey, "Mystery Letters of the Qur'an," *Arabica* 43 (1996), 497–501.

³⁷ Mann, "A Polemical Work," 131.

³⁸ Leveen, "Muhammad and his Jewish Companions," 401.

³⁹ The method suggested by Adler/Leveen, ("Muhammad and his Jewish Companions") follows a Jewish hermeneutical principle called *gezera shava*, through which one can infer from the same word or phrase occurring in different verses that what is expressed in the one also applies to the other.

⁴⁰ Harry Turtledove (ed. & transl.), *The Chronicle of Theophanes* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 34.

The story became more elaborate over the centuries. An elaborate Hebrew version was found in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York by Bernard Cohen and published in 1929.⁴¹ Cohen places the manuscript in seventeenth-century Italy. It is written in a pseudo-biblical style with many biblical phrases and idioms embedded in the story that give it a feeling of antiquity and anticipation and that would be immediately associated with biblical narratives by a Jewish audience. Most biblical references are noted in my translation below, but many other simple idioms or stylistic turns from biblical narrative are not noted specifically.

The idioms and images immediately recall stories of victory and woe from the Bible. One such lively section of the story has the demonic angel Asmodeus standing before Muhammad with his sword drawn., The episode recalls the language of Numbers Chapter 22, where an angry and confounded Gentile prophet named Balaam is confused when he fails to see the angel of God standing before him with drawn sword. The association with Balaam is reinforced when Asmodeus visits a second time while Muhammad is standing with his donkey. Jewish readers would also associate the narrative episode with Joshua's meeting of the frightening angelic captain of the Lord's armies in Joshua 5:14. The confronting angel in the story is made to say, "If you are indeed a prophet of God, then [I can inform you that] *I am captain of the Lord's host*" (Josh. 5:14),⁴² thus providing the opening to suggest that Muhammad may indeed be a prophet, though a prophet to the Gentiles and not to Israel.

Muhammad has a dream in the story in which a great tree with shallow roots sprouts up from his left hand and attracts all the birds of the air and the animals of the land to live in its branches and under its shade. His right hand then battles his left, which is eventually destroyed by a divine fire allowing the right hand to prevail. Muhammad seeks out a Jewish sage to interpret the dream and the sage knows immediately that the left hand signifies the great and powerful community that Muhammad is destined to lead, while the right hand represents the Jews. The Jews will prevail under God's providence, but he also knows that the Jews must be proactive in order to save themselves.

The image of Muhammad in the story is of a gullible man with good intentions but swayed to cruelty by his naiveté and material success, and of course the story conveys to the Jewish reader that Muhammad is not a prophet nor is his revelation divine. When the Jews learn through their esoteric wisdom that fate will bring Muhammad great military success, they set out to infiltrate his community with the purpose of preventing their own destruction. The Jews are portrayed as uncomfortable with their role of tricking Muhammad. There is no glee in their actions, no satisfaction in their deeds. They grudgingly take the necessary steps because of the great danger that Muhammad poses to their survival. There is even recognition that they sin before God in their behaviors, but that their sins must be forgiven because they will save the

⁴¹ Boaz Cohen, "Une Légende Juive de Mahomet," *Revue des études juives* 88 (1929), pp. 1–17.

⁴² Biblical quotes are written in italics for clarity.

lives of countless people. The story's association with the biblical Book of Esther is clear, and it fits into a biblical and rabbinic historiography that recognizes the truth of biblical prophecy while denying any truth claims for revelation after the last biblical prophets, Haggai Zakhariah and Malachi.⁴³ It “proves” the lack of divine authority behind the Qur'an and behind the leadership and prophethood of Muhammad.

While the story denies the divine origin of the Qur'an, it provides a plausible Jewish explanation for the many similarities between the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible. It also provides irreligious etiologies for some important religious practices in Islam, such as the fast of Ramadan that is associated with the revelation of the Qur'an, including the “Night of Power” that some Muslims observe on the twenty-seventh of the month of Ramadan.⁴⁴ It provides an explanation for the custom of oral recitation of the Qur'an and an origin for the accusation recorded in the Qur'an that Muhammad was mad (37:36; 68:2, 51), and it also refers to the annual pilgrimage to the holy sites in Arabia, both in terms of the sacrifice that is made at the end of the Hajj, and the associated visitation to Muhammad's home in Medina.

“The Ten Sages Who Join Muhammad”

In the days of Tzedekiah, king of Judah, [*Tzedekiah*] *did what was displeasing in the eyes of the Lord* (Jer.52:1–2).⁴⁵ So [God] sent the king of the Chaldeans against them for the trespasses that they trespassed against Him, and He exiled them to Babylon. But they continued to sin against Him, so He sent to them the prophet Ezekiel. But they did not listen to his voice. *They stiffened their necks; they acted worse than their fathers* (Jer.7:26). So He punished them even more and said to them, *Turn back to the Lord your God* (Joel 2:13), lest He bring against you the days about which you will say, “*we have no pleasure in them* (Eccl. 12:1), by establishing His word that he spoke through Hosea, saying *The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come; Israel shall know it: the prophet is a fool, the man of spirit is mad; because of the multitude of your iniquity* (Hosea 9:7)

באו ימי הפקדה באו ימי השלם ידעו ישראל אויל הנביא משגע איש הרוח על רב עונך ורבה משטמה:
Ezekiel told them of [the future] *days of punishment* (Hosea 9:7) *so that they would recount it to a future age* (Ps. 48:14). *They kept the matter in mind* (Gen. 37:11), desiring to cleanse themselves before the Lord, the God of Israel; but they continued to

⁴³ Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b.

⁴⁴ Roxanne Marcotte, “Night of Power,” *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 537–539; Reuven Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 23, 169.

⁴⁵ Biblical citations are not always entirely accurate. When a common biblical idiom is used, only one or at most, two references are given.

stumble for some fifteen hundred years,⁴⁶ *and they called out to the Lord* (Josh.24:7), for the exile was oppressive to them.

Once upon a time, there was a Jewish sage who was a trader *with all powders of a merchant* (Song 3:6). His word was like the word of a *man of God* (1 Sam. 9:6) because of his ability to interpret dreams, so many peoples⁴⁷ paid attention to him. One day there was a man standing at his doorway as the sun was setting and said to him, “*I have a dream, but no one can interpret it* (Gen.41:15), so I came to you today.” He answered, “*Speak, for interpretations are from God* (Gen.40:8).” [The man] said, “In my dream, it is the middle watch and I am standing in the midst of a large forest, *and it was overgrown with thorns* (Prov. 24:30) on my right and on my left. An almond tree springs up from my left hand, and it has twelve roots and twelve branches and much shade. But its roots are few, and all kinds of birds and winged things build many nests on it and all the animals of the land lie down underneath it. I was so astonished and said to myself, how can my hand hold up such a great burden? I saw in my dream that it remained on my hand for eight days and eighteen hours, [13] and my right hand battled with my left throughout [those] days, and when those days passed a fire of God fell from heaven and devoured the hand and all that was on it, and the right hand prevailed over it. I was astonished and then woke up and knew that it is a dream. I was terrified and wanted to know its interpretation, so I came to tell you.”

Upon hearing his dream, *the man was terribly afraid and squirmed* (Ruth 3:8). He said to himself, “*Woe is us, for the days of punishment have come* (Hosea 9:7), the days *have come for which you say, ‘I have no pleasure in them!’*” (Eccl. 12:1) So he said to the prince,⁴⁸ “*God has spoken to you, and I will tell you [its meaning].*”

The man then left him and the Jew *rushed home* (Esther 6:12) and locked the door, and then went to the house of God. *He gathered* (Ex. 35:1) all the leaders⁴⁹ together and the rest of the people who were in Tarshish, about ten thousand people and they all came to the house of God. *He cried out loud* (Gen. 45:2) *and he put on sackcloth and ashes* (Esther 4:1). The people of the place asked him, “What happened to you today?” He answered, “*Solemnize a fast! Proclaim a solemn assembly!* (Joel 1:14, 2:15), and pray to God, for *the days of punishment have arrived, the days of requital have come* (Hosea 9:7) that Ezekiel prophesied in the name of Hosea, saying, ‘*Israel shall know it: the prophet is a fool, the man of spirit is mad*’ (ibid), *what will you do on that solemn day, on that day of God?* (Hosea 9:5)”

He told them about the man and about his dream that he told him, and he said to them, “This is its meaning: The man will reign for some nine hundred years, as

⁴⁶ The awkward Hebrew has, literally, “about five hundred ten years” (*kechamesh me’ot ‘esreh*) but probably reflects metathesis. The corrected number reflects a better chronology from the perspective of the medieval writer.

⁴⁷ That is, his fame spread beyond his own community of Jews to non-Jews as well.

⁴⁸ Here the man is referred to as a prince or chief (שר).

⁴⁹ Hebrew: הכהנים והלויים.

the days that the fire remained on his hand.⁵⁰ The twelve roots are twelve princes of Ishmael.⁵¹ The twelve branches are the children of Keturah.⁵² The animals are the rest of the peoples who will believe in him, saying, “You are a prophet of God, *and anyone who flouts your commands shall die* (Josh. 1:18). So now, *Let us deal shrewdly with him* (Ex.1:10) and *let us confound his speech* (Gen. 11:7). *Let us destroy the tree with its fruit* (Jer.11:19) so that he will not go down to Sheol in peace.⁵³ Perhaps a weight will be lifted from the house of Israel. So choose from among yourselves ten men, one for each thousand, knowledgeable in learning and understanding and with the strength to stand at the gate of the king and bring advice from afar as if it were routine. And in the course of speaking with him, they will tell him about the generation of Enosh, the Flood and the Dispersion,⁵⁴ what happened to Abram in Ur of the Chaldeans, and what happened to those who bow down to the works of heaven as they speak with him,⁵⁵ what God did to Sodom and Gomorra, the binding of Isaac and the story of Jacob and Esau, the selling of Joseph and all of his honor in Egypt, how Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt by God’s word and the labor that was imposed upon them by the Egyptians, all that Moses did to the Egyptians before their eyes and all the things that God commanded Noah after the Flood, all the frightening things of the Torah, and about heaven and hell,⁵⁶ and that God assigns to each and every man [recompense] according to his behaviors. All of these words will be written down in a book in impressive spoken language so *that the ears of everyone who hears about it will tingle* (2 Kings 21:12). He will consider this the word of God that no human could create and they [the sages] will call it “al-Qur’an.” They will give it to the man, and each one [of the ten men] will go before him so to deceive [him], but he will not know, and they will remain within his court forever.⁵⁷

The entire community responded by choosing ten wise, intelligent, shrewd men who had the power to function in the royal palace and who spoke the Arab tongue, and they informed them of their task [14]. These [ten] then left them and sat together for two months writing *all that their spirit moved them* (Ex. 35:21) in a book. They then fashioned sixty stone tablets and wrote on them everything that was written in the

50 The discrepancy between this retelling and dream narrative suggests a scribal error or a conflation of manuscripts or versions.

51 Gen. 17:20, 25:14.

52 Gen. 25:1–4.

53 That is, so that he will not live out his life to accomplish the deed (Cf. 1 Sam. 2:6; 1 Kings 2:9; Prov. 5:5).

54 These are references to Enosh son of Seth and grandson of Adam and Eve (Gen. 4:26) and the stories of Noah and the great flood (Gen. 6–9) and the Tower of Babel and the great dispersion of humankind in its aftermath (Gen. 11).

55 Cohen’s footnote: “*Omettre ces deux mots.*” [I AM ABROAD AND DO NOT HAVE THE ARTICLE AT HAND. I CAN CHECK IN ANOTHER MONTH. RF]

56 “Gehenna and the Garden of Eden.” All of these themes are actually found in the Qur’an.

57 Lit: “Those who eat at his table.”

book. They then gathered with the community and were answered [by the community] with these words: “*Our lives are pledged to yours, even to death* (Josh. 2:14) by doing this thing. You [ten sages] carry the guilt of all of us,⁵⁸ for we will be transgressing against God if we follow this man. *The Lord examines the heart* (Prov. 17:3), knowing that we do this thing not in rebellion or transgression, but rather to turn his heart around so that they will obey him, acting today *for the survival of many people* (Gen. 50:20), *and to save your lives through a great deliverance* (Gen. 45:7). It is right for ten to leave the community in order to save us all, so that the entire community of Israel not perish along with their descendants after them.”

They all responded, “*Our lives are pledged for yours* (Josh 2:14). Do not fear. Do what God puts in your hearts, and may God be with you!”

Each [of the ten men] went home and swore to his fellow not to reveal their secret and not to come before the man on the same day, to pretend not to know their fellows by saying, “*Who is this man?* (Gen. 24:65) What is his line of work, and from what nation is he?⁵⁹ [All this] was in order to deceive the man lest he understand their counsel that they shared with each other. They took the sixty stones to the home of the interpreter of dreams and each went his own way. They remained away for many days.

One day the peddler looked up *and saw the dreamer* (Gen. 37:18–29) standing next to him. He said, “Where were you? I have not seen you until today!” He answered, “I was very sick, but despite that I have not forgotten you. I have been searching my collection of explanations all this time in order to answer you, so now hear the word of God!”

“Your star has risen, fight your enemies, *set your nest among the stars* (Obad. 1:4), your fame will be known throughout the earth. You are the tree that you saw. The roots and the branches are the children of Ishmael and the children of Keturah. The beasts and animals and birds of the heavens are all the nations that will gather to you and serve you. You will be their God⁶⁰ and your kingdom will rise for nine years. Happy will be those who believe in you,⁶¹ for you will be a prophet among the [Gentile] nations.⁶² Through you God will give them a new teaching,⁶³ His book whose name is Al-Qur‘an, and your fame shall spread throughout the land.”

When he heard the words of the peddler he was astonished. He said, “Who am I, least among the thousands of my ancestors,⁶⁴ that God would make me leader and officer this day!” The peddler answered, “*Do not let your courage falter* (Deut. 20:2),

⁵⁸ Cf. Num. 14:34, 18:11.

⁵⁹ Cf. Jonah 1:8.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ex. 6:7.

⁶¹ Cf. Ps. 1:1.

⁶² כי נביא תהיה בגוים.

⁶³ “a new torah.”

⁶⁴ Cf. Micah 5:1.

for this is easy for God⁶⁵ to accomplish. Now I will give you much silver and gold to build a great house in which to gather companions. Give food and drink to whomever asks. When the money is used up, come back to me. I will give you more and more, for there is no limit to God's salvation."

So he left and did as the man told him. Many gathered to him, and he provided them food to eat. Thus he did for twenty-eight months. One day he looked up and saw a sage coming toward him. He bowed his face to the ground before Muhammad.⁶⁶ "O my lord (Jud. 15:8), a vision has appeared to me in which an angel of God is hovering in the heavens, whose visage is like a man. [15] He lifted you onto his shoulders and ascended to a great and mighty throne (Isaiah 6:1). It looked like the throne of the Lord. The Lord placed His hand on your head and I heard it said, 'the world was created for him, for he is the chosen of the Lord'" (2 Sam. 21:6). Muhammad was greatly astonished.

The sage saw the peddler standing nearby but he pretended not to recognize him and said to Muhammad, "O my lord, who is this man standing next to you this day?" He answered, "He is a Jew, and he also told me such things as you are speaking." The sage feigned surprise and asked, "How was it revealed to him?"

Muhammad heard and believed, and his heart was lifted (2 Chron. 17:6) very much because he believed them. All of the sages came [before Muhammad] by the end of ten months and brought their advice [as if they were] from afar, pretending not to recognize one another, and they [all] deceived him just as on that day. Muhammad became increasingly powerful. He placed them as leaders over the people and they constantly ate at his table.

One day the sages of Israel brought Ashmedai⁶⁷ into the plot and said to him, "Go to Muhammad and speak to him: 'God wants your involvement, and He sent me to tell you. Now a copy of the book of the Torah and prophets and gospels will be given to you, its like never before seen in all the earth.'" So [Ashmedai] went to him stealthily at night, gripped him by his forelocks with his sword drawn in his hand (Num. 22:23, 31; Josh. 5:13). The man was terrified and pleaded that he not be killed.⁶⁸ Ashmedai said to him, "Since you are indeed a prophet of God, [I can inform you that] I am captain of the Lord's host (Josh. 5:14). I have come to tell you that God has given you His book, the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 2:7). I foretell the end from the beginning, things that have not been seen before (Isaiah 46:10), for He desires you more than all men.⁶⁹ For this reason I have come to you to inform you."

⁶⁵ Cf. 2 Kings 3:18.

⁶⁶ This is the first time the name Muhammad appears in the story.

⁶⁷ Ashmedai is also known as Asmodeus and is often portrayed as king of the demons, though in Jewish rabbinic literature he is not particularly malevolent as this portrayal would suggest. Nevertheless, Ashmedai was not human and had extraordinary powers (Jewishencyclopedia.com: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=2019&letter=A>, accessed 21.01.10).

⁶⁸ שאל את נפשו למות, meaning literally, "he wished to die," which I understand idiomatically.

⁶⁹ Cf. Deut. 7:7.

In the morning [Muhammad] called all his wise men⁷⁰ and told them all these things. They were overjoyed and told him, “*Be strong and resolute* (Deut. 31:7), seclude yourself again for perhaps the angel who spoke to you⁷¹ will return a second time so you can ask him about the book and when it will be given to you, and if the people should prepare themselves before its coming.” He answered just as they wished, “I will do it this very day.”

He secluded himself a second time, and at midnight he went to his donkey, where Ashmedai appeared standing at its head. The man was terrified, spun around and pleaded that he not be killed. Ashmedai answered, “Why are you so terrified of me?” He said, “*Because I am yearning so greatly* (Gen. 31:30) to know about the Book of the Covenant that you told me about. If perchance, how may I honor it on this day?” Ashmedai answered, “*Purify yourselves for tomorrow* (Num. 11:18; Josh. 7:13), *practice self-denial* (Lev. 16:31; Num.29:7)⁷² for twenty-seven days. But you may eat all the night up to the morning watch because thus have I been commanded. In the night darkness, under the light of the moon, sixty tablets of hewn stone will descend to you written with the finger of God.⁷³ You must teach all that is written on them to your children by heart.”⁷⁴ Then he went up and left.

He [Muhammad] got up in the morning and told his wise men all these things. They listened to his voice and did all that he commanded them. At the end of twenty-seven days⁷⁵ the sages again sent Ashmedai to him. He went to his bed, *and struck him with madness, blindness and dismay* (Deut. 28:28). He said to him: “Get up! Go out and take the Book of the Covenant that God has sent to you!” His house had gone entirely dark and all its inhabitants were terrified. [16] [Meanwhile,] the sages had gone and brought the 60 stones and put them here and there at the entrance to his house. No one saw them.

In the morning he saw the stones, written by *seal engraving* (Ex. 28:11) on both sides. Muhammad was greatly astonished. He lifted his hand and took the first one, and he saw that many of his followers had come to him and desired to read it, but they were unable. They said, “*What is this that God has done to us* (Gen. 42:28)? What shall we do with these stones?” He asked his wise men, who said, “It is best that you practice self denial for three more days to complete a full month.⁷⁶ Perhaps with

⁷⁰ The wise men were of course the Jewish sages.

⁷¹ Cf. Ezek. 1:9, etc. (this is a common idiom found in the book of Ezekiel).

⁷² Often translated biblically as “and afflict your souls.”

⁷³ Cf. Ex. 31:18.

⁷⁴ Deut. 6:6–7.

⁷⁵ According to Islamic tradition, the twenty-seventh day of the month of Ramadan is the “Night of Power” (*laylat al-qadr* - Cf. Qur’an 97:1–5), during which divine revelation of the Qur’an began to be conveyed to Muhammad.

⁷⁶ This may be an attempt to explain the traditional Islamic practice of *i’tiqāf* in which some Muslims during the last days of Ramadan go into a kind of religious retreat, often in a mosque, where they engage in fasting, prayer and Qur’an recitation.

the unveiling of the new moon will also come to us the unveiling of the secret of the letters. Or perhaps God will have mercy and will send His angel to you as before. “He answered,” I will do as you say today.”

The sages took a stone tablet and wrote on it twenty-seven Arabic letters and gave it to Ashmedai, who took it to [Muhammad’s] chamber in the dark of night. He did not notice. In the morning he found the stone and brought it to the elders of his people, who said, “This must be the key to the writing on the other stones!” And they read the key to the stones until daylight. They brought the stones together and said, “This must be *alif*, and the second is *bā*’⁷⁷ and they did this until they finished. The sages read everything that was written on them and taught his followers. The fame [of the stones of revelation] became known throughout the land. Many came from distant lands and wrote *in their own script and in their own language* (Esther 8:9) everything that was written on them. They then returned to their land. [The sages] commanded them, saying, “Not a single one of you may consider interpreting anything from all that is written in this Book of the Covenant.” Thus they believed all the fabrications within it.

Muhammad saw that his followers had increased greatly and he became very proud.⁷⁸ He began to make war against all the peoples that did not obey him, for he decided upon destruction at that time. He fought the nations close to him and forced them to join him. Many followed him and believed in his teaching⁷⁹ because fear of him had fallen on all the nations.

One day he said to the sages, “Many now obey me among the families of nations, and every day people come to hear my teaching that they witnessed came from the Lord in heaven, that being the Book of Instructions.⁸⁰ Why are you in the House of Israel too stiff-necked to obey me and refuse to accept instruction to this day?” The sages who served him answered, saying, “When their eyes are opened to recognize you they will come to you just as we did. They will bow to you and will also believe in you forever. They will not be stiff-necked as they are today.”” He said, “No, for I will send *a sword of vengeance to avenge the covenant* (Lev. 16:15) against them until they believe in me, *and we shall see what comes of their dreams*” (Gen. 37:20). They answered, “What our lord is saying is not right. You must give them a deadline. If at the end of the year they do not believe in you, do to them whatever God puts in your heart.” But Muhammad did not speak to them about this again.

He took one of the women of Israel as a wife and loved her very much. He wrote to her father and her family that they would pay no taxes all the days of his kingdom, and he allowed that forever. They saw *that he acted crazily* (2 Kings 9:20) and that *every day his thoughts are evil* (Ps.56:6), and they feared lest he command his followers to

⁷⁷ These are the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet.

⁷⁸ Lit. “*and his heart was lifted* (2 Chron. 17:6) very much.”

⁷⁹ Lit. “Many believed in his Torah.”

⁸⁰ פתשגן התורות.

do evil to the seed of Israel. [17]. They said, “*Let us deal wisely with him,*” (Ex.1:10) so they took council with his wife *to destroy the tree with its fruit* (Jer.11:19). He weakened and fell onto his bed.⁸¹ When his illness increased he commanded his retinue and said to the sages, “Write and seal in my name that if the House of Israel does not believe in me by the end of nine years, they will all be killed *and their goods plundered* (Esther 8:11).” The sages took the writing utensils and wrote “at the end of nine hundred years.” His anger burned like fire and he spoke again, saying to them, “Write also in my name that on every single festival, one Jew will be hung on a gibbet.” But they wrote, “One lamb will be slaughtered, written and sealed by the seal of the king.”

When they saw that he sent his hand against the Jews to destroy them, the sages came and killed him, but they did not spill his blood, so he died as he lay on his bed giving counsel. They opened the door and his followers came and found him lying dead on his bed. They cried and mourned over their lord [...] and they built a house in his name there. The Ishmaelites go there every year from every land in which they live to this day.

The end.

⁸¹ Islamic tradition accuses Jews of bewitching the Prophet (al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan*, with commentary of al-Suyūṭī, 8 books in 4 vols., Cairo 1987, 7:112–113).