

Jewish Accounts of Muhammad and His Apostate Informants

Liran Yadgar

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What was the Jewish knowledge of Islam, its institutions and dogmas, in the pre-modern period? How familiar were Jews living under Islam with its holy scripture, the Qur'an, its contents and its language, and how did they use this book in their works? What was their understanding of the Prophet Muhammad and his role in history, and what did they make of the rise of Islam?

The goal of this short essay is to investigate the Jewish response to the rise of Islam as reflected in narratives from the tenth century CE and later. I argue that Jews living under Islam had profound knowledge of the Qur'an and the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and that they used their knowledge of Islam in order to create narratives of counter-history of its origins in seventh-century Arabia.¹ Written sources indicate knowledge of the Qur'an and Muhammad's biography among Jews of the medieval Islamic lands, as demonstrated, for example, in Samaw'al al-Maghribi's (d. 1175) autobiographical account of his conversion to Islam. This author tells his readers that as a lad, long before adopting medicine and mathematics as his professions, he was engrossed by readings in Arabic such as the romances of 'Antar, Dhū'l-Himma, and the like, as well as the histories of al-Ṭabarī (*Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, the *History of Messengers and Kings*) and Miskawayh (*Tajārib al-umam*, the *Experiences of Nations*), from which he learned the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. These readings eventually led him to the Qur'an. Another Jewish apostate, Sa'īd b. Ḥasan al-Iskandarī, who converted to Islam in 1298, reports that his father, a Jewish scholar (*min 'ulamā' Banī Isrā'īl*), used to teach him the Torah and demonstrate to him the allusions to Muhammad found in the Jewish scriptures, and even influenced him to like the Prophet from an early age (*wa-kāna yuḥabbunī fihī*).²

These accounts originate in polemical writings that were composed by converts in order to attack their former coreligionists, and therefore their testimony should not be taken at face value. The two tracts, Samaw'al's *Iḥḥām al-Yahūd* (*Silencing the Jews*) and Sa'īd b. Ḥasan's *Risāla* (*Epistle*), join a long tradition of attesting the prophecy of Muhammad in the writings of Jews and Christians, which is known as the literature of *dalā'il* (or: *a'lām al-nubuwwa* (proofs/signs of prophecy) that has its origins in the Qur'an. A major part of this literature is devoted to scriptural 'proofs' from the Bible.

Nevertheless, corroborated with evidence from other written sources, Samaw'al and Sa'īd do exemplify the curiosity of Jews about the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet, out of the need for entertainment, study, or polemic. The tenth-century Karaite scholar Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī mentions the most important *sīra* (biography) of the Prophet known to us, the work by Muḥammad b. Ishāq (d. c. 768), in his refutation of the transmission of prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*) in Islam, arguing for the fallacy of the methods used by the 'ulamā' as well as responding to their accusation of distortion (*tahrīf*) of the Jewish scriptures due to unreliable transmission.³

The Jewish versions of the Baḥīrā legend, studied by Shimon Shtober and Moshe Gil, are a fascinating example of intimate Jewish knowledge of Muhammad's biography and qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*).⁴ Let us look at one version of this story, *Qiṣṣat aṣḥābat* (*sic*) *Muḥammad* (*The Story of Muhammad's Companions*), extant in a manuscript fragment from the Cairo Geniza (ms. TS-AS 161.32):



Muhammad's encounter with the Christian monk Bahira, a famous story from early Muslim biographical traditions on the life of the Prophet. The Muslim version of this story uses the encounter to mark the coming of Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an as foretold by earlier prophecies, thus portraying the older traditions as confirming and validating the truths of Islam. Christians and Jews appropriated the story and told their own versions of it to communicate more subversive understandings of the encounter. Detail, *Muhammad and the monk Bahira*, manuscript illumination from the *Jāmi' al-tawārikh (Compendium of Chronicles)* of Rashīd al-Dīn, Tabriz, Iran, 14th c. (Or. Ms. 20, f. 43v; courtesy Edinburgh University Library).

“The Story of the companions of Muhammad and his affair (amr).

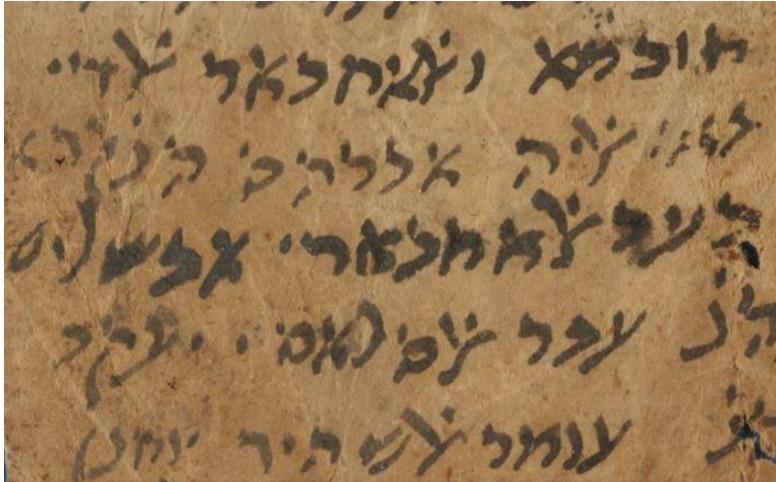
This is the writing (*kitāb*) concerning the story of Muhammad that occurred in Ṣarṣat al-Ghanam, which is called Jabal al-Ḥadīth.⁵ He moved to Ṣarṣa and the Ḥijāz because of the monk who lived in Balqīn [i.e. Balqā' in southern Transjordan] on a pillar called “the sign of the sun.”⁶ [Jewish] scholars appeared before him, and told him how his matter (*amr*) was, and devised a book for him.

They inscribed the name of each of them in the *sūra* of his Qur'an, and wrote secretly and incomprehensibly in it: “Thus did the sages of Israel advise to the wicked 'LM [read: *illem*, “dumb”],” and “Whoever comprehends this book, takes hold of it, and informs somebody of the nations of the world [of its secret contents], is cursed by the mouth of God.”

The name of the monk was Ḥabīb-Bahira [*sic*]... and these are the [Jewish] scholars who came to him [Muhammad]: Abraham, called Ka'b al-Aḥbār; Absalom, called 'Abd al-Salām [*sic*]; Jacob, called 'Umar *al-shahīd* (the martyr)... [etc.]. These are the ten who came and adopted Islam under him in order prevent any harm happening to Israel. They made the Qur'an for him, and inserted their names in it, each of them.”⁷

This story, like other ones that exist in Jewish sources, is in fact a combination of two distinct narratives from the *sūra*: the famous story of Bahira, a monk who identified young Muhammad as the prophet who was indicated in the ancient scriptures, and the rabbis of Medina who contested Muhammad's claims in debates regarding his teachings and rejected his invitation to adopt Islam due to their haughtiness and disdain for the Prophet.⁸ In his short sketch of the Prophet Muhammad, Theophanes the Confessor (d. 818) uses similar elements to those we find in the

Jewish legend, but without connecting this narrative to the monk who is usually known in the Christian sources by the name of Bahīrā or Sergius. Theophanes speaks of ten rabbis (notice the typological number, which also appears in the Jewish tale) who adopted Islam, but were insincere converts and taught the Prophet harmful things against Christianity:



Detail, Geniza fragment [T-S AS 161.32](#), one version of the ‘Story of the Ten Sages’: “... and these are the [Jewish] scholars who came to him [Muhammad]: Abraham, called Ka’b al-Aḥbār; Absalom, called ‘Abd al-Salām...” (courtesy Taylor-Schechter Collection, University of Cambridge Library)

“At the beginning of [Muhammad’s] advent the misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah who is awaited by them, so that some of their leaders joined him and accepted his religion while forsaking that of Moses who saw God. Those who did so were ten in number and remained with him until his [first] sacrifice (*sphagē*). But when they saw him eating camel meat, they realized that he was not the one they thought him to be and were at loss what to do. Being afraid to abjure his religion, these wretched men taught him illicit things directed us Christians and remained with him.”⁹

The Jewish legend of Bahīrā, to which we now return, is a sophisticated response to the Islamic narratives of the emergence of Islam:

- A) The Jews who joined Muhammad’s movement remained in fact crypto-Jews, “secret agents” who destroyed the Islamic message, the Qur’an, from within.
- B) They were the teachers of Muhammad, and inserted “non-Islamic” contents into the Qur’an and inscribed their names in it.¹⁰
- C) The ‘disjointed letters’ (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta‘a*) that appear at the beginning of several *sūras* are abbreviations of cryptic messages; for example, the letters *alif-lām-mīm* in Qur’an 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, and 32 represent a pejorative against Muhammad (spelling Hebrew *illem*, “dumb,” probably after Is. 56:10), as well as *kāf-hā’-yā’-‘ayn-ṣād* in Q. 19 (representing the first two words of the Hebrew phrase *kakh ya’asu ḥakhme Yisra’el*, “Thus did the sages of Israel advise”).¹¹



The opening of Sūra 19, with the ‘mysterious’ or ‘disjointed’ letters *kāf-hā-yā-ʿayn-ṣād*. According to some Jewish accounts, this and other sequences of these letters were placed in the Qur’an to signal that Muhammad was tutored by Jews. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

D) The object of these crypto-Jews was to save the Jewish people from any harm. In contrast to Islamic tradition, which holds that Muhammad was harassed and ridiculed by the Jews, or endangered by their schemes, here it is the Jews who are the victims of constant harassment and persecutions and decide to fight back *sub rosa*.¹²

Among the ten Jews in the Jewish versions of this tale, two are known from the Islamic tradition: ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām (here he is named ‘Abd al-Salām, and is given the Hebrew name Absalom), the first Jew to join Muhammad’s cause, and Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, a convert to Islam in the caliphate of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644) who was, according to the Jewish legend, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad.¹³ These two figures were among the most known transmitters of Jewish materials (*isrā’īliyyāt*) into early Islam. Muslim scholars of later generations were reluctant to assess their role in Islamic tradition in a positive manner; moreover, some of them criticized ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām and Ka‘b al-Aḥbār outright for introducing foreign elements to Islam.¹⁴ According to Samaw’al al-Maghribī’s anti-Jewish tract, Jews used to credit ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām with teaching and instructing Muhammad in the Torah, and for interpolating into the Qur’an “the marriage law that a wife, after her third divorce from her husband, shall not be permitted to rewed him until she has been married and divorced from another man, the purpose being, in their contention, to make *mamzerim* [illegitimate children] of the children of the Muslims... For, in their law, if the husband takes back his wife after she has been married to another man, her children are considered illegitimate.”¹⁵ The reference here is to Q. 2:230.¹⁶

In conclusion, even though the Jewish legend of the ten Jewish sages is not designed to thoroughly disprove Islamic doctrines regarding the prophecy of Muhammad and the qur’anic revelation, it should be considered to include polemic intentions.¹⁷ This legend is an entanglement of Muslim and Jewish traditions: some rely on details from the *sīra* of the Prophet, the Qur’an and its exegesis, and others are inventions from the realm of Jewish folktales. The goal is to distort the Islamic narratives on the rise of Islam, and reconstruct a counter-narrative that will serve the self-image of Jews living under Islam. It is the story of triumphant Islam through the looking-glass.

Notes

[1] On “counter-history,” see Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (University of California Press, 1993), 36-40.

[2] Moshe Perlmann, “Samau’al al-Maghribī: *Iḥām al-Yahūd*, Silencing the Jews,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 32 (1964): 5-136, 77-79 (trans.), 100-103 (Arabic); Dennis Halft, “Sa’īd b. Ḥasan al-Iskandarī: A Jewish Convert to Islam. *Editio princeps* of the Later Recension (732/1331) of His Biblical ‘Testimonies’ to the Prophet Muḥammad,” *Mélanges de l’Institut dominicain d’études orientales du Caire* 30 (2014): 267-320, 314 (Arabic). On the romances mentioned by Samaw’al, see *EF*², s.v. “Sīrat ‘Antar” (B. Heller) and “Dhu ’l-Himma” (M. Canard).

[3] Haggai Ben-Shammai, “The Attitude of Some Early Karaites towards Islam,” in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, Vol. II (Harvard University Press, 1984), 3-40, 37. See also a tradition by al-Wāqidī (*Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, the *Book of Expeditions*) in a Geniza fragment published by Shammai Fishman, “A Section of an Arabic Composition on the Life of the Prophet Muhammad Rendered in Hebrew Letters” [Heb.], *Ginze Qodem* 7 (2011): 167-170. On al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith, an opponent of the Prophet Muhammad who is mentioned in this fragment, see Rizwi Faizer (ed.), *The Life of Muhammad: al-Wāqidī’s Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, trans. Rizwi Faizer, Amal Ismail, and Abdulkader Tayob (Routledge, 2011), 53, 67; Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of [Ibn] Ishāq’s Sīrat rasūl Allāh*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford University Press, 2010 [1955]), 136, 162-163.

[4] Shimon Shtober, “Muhammad and the Beginning of Islam in the Chronicle *Sefer Divrey Yoseph*,” in M. Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon* (Brill, 1986), 319-352; *idem*, “Present at the Dawn of Islam: Polemic and Reality in the Medieval Story of Muhammad’s Jewish Companions,” in Michael M. Laskier and Yaacov Lev (eds.), *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam: Religious, Scientific, and Cultural Dimensions* (University Press of Florida, 2011), 64-88; Moshe Gil, “The Story of Baḥīrā and Its Jewish Versions,” in *idem*, *Related Worlds: Studies in Jewish and Arab Ancient and Early Medieval History* (Variorum, 2004), art. VIII. See also Reuven Firestone, “The Prophet Muhammad in Pre-Modern Jewish Literatures,” in Christiane Gruber and Avinoam Shalem (eds.), *The Image of the Prophet between Ideal and Ideology: A Scholarly Investigation* (W. de Gruyter, 2014), 27-44.

[5] *Ṣarṣat al-Ghanam*: According to D. Z. Baneth, this could be a corruption of *mar’ā al-ghanam* (pasturage of the sheep). In other versions of the Jewish tale, Muhammad is identified as a shepherd. See Baneth, “On ‘Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions,” [Heb.], *Tarbiz* 3 (1931): 112-116, 113. On Muhammad being a shepherd, see Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 72. Gil reads instead: *Sūr’ā al-Ghanam* (“The Story of Baḥīrā,” 6). *Jabal al-Ḥadīth*: Perhaps a corruption of *Jabal Ḥīrā’*, a mountain outside Mecca that was Muhammad’s favorite spot for religious seclusion. See Baneth, *ibid.*, 116 n. 4; *EF*², s.v. “Ḥīrā’” (T.H. Weir-[W. Montgomery Watt]).

[6] I.e. this monk was a stylite. On this phenomenon see Brandie Ratliff, “The Stylites of Syria,” in Helen C. Evans with Brandie Ratliff (eds.), *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th-9th Century* (Yale University Press, 2012), 94-95. For *Balqā’* as the location of Baḥīrā’s monastery, see Gil, “The Story of Baḥīrā,” 6; Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Brill, 2009), 45. *Balqīn* in the text might be, however, a corrupt name for *Dayr al-Bā’iqā*, a monastery in the area of Bosra (modern Syria). See Baneth, “On ‘Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions,” 116 n. 4; Roggema, *ibid.*, 45.

[7] Gil, “The Story of Baḥīrā,” 17; the translation is the present author’s. The text is rather unintelligible and includes several repetitions. Cf. the Geniza document published by J. Leveen, “Mohammed and His Jewish Companions,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, N.S., 16 (1926): 399-406 (errata: *Jewish Quarterly Review*, N.S., 17 (1926): 237; S. Gandz, “Notes on Mr. Leveen’s Article,” *ibid.*, 235-236).

[8] Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 79-81, 239-240, 246-270.

[9] Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Darwin Press, 1997), 506 (cited here with a minor change); and see the prohibition on eating camel meat in Deut. 14:7. The *sīra* and *ḥadīth* literature indeed mention Jews questioning Muhammad regarding Jacob’s avoidance of eating camel meat. See Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 255; Brannon M. Wheeler, “Israel and the Torah of Muhammad,” in John C. Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur’an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 61-85, 70-78; Ze’ev Maghen, *After Hardship Cometh Ease: The Jews As Backdrop for Muslim Moderation* (W. de Gruyter, 2006), 112-116. On Theophanes’ version of the Baḥīrā story, see Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, 182-184.

[10] See the accusations that Muhammad relied on teachers or informants, for example, in Qur’an 25:4-5 and 16:103; *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, s.v. “Informants” (Claude Gilliot).

[11] The Arabic letters *kāf-hā* should stand for *koh* rather than *kakh* (both meaning “thus”). For other explanations of this kind in the Jewish accounts see Gil, “The Story of Baḥīrā,” 13. Notice that the combination *alif-lām-mīm-rā* (Q. 13) could mean here: “the wicked (Hebrew: *rasha*), dumb person.” See also the discussions between Muhammad and the Jews regarding the numerical value of the ‘disjointed letters’ in Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 256-257. In the Christian legends, Baḥīrā is the source for the ‘disjointed letters’ *alif-lām-mīm*, *kāf-hā*’-*yā*’-’*ayn-ṣād*, and *ṭā*’-*hā*’ (Q. 20), but no explanation is given there to their meaning. See Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 427, 523; Baneth, “On ‘Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions,” 114.

[12] In the Muslim versions of the Baḥīrā story, the monk warns the relatives of Muhammad about the malevolence of the Jews (Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 81; Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 50). In the Christian accounts, Baḥīrā encourages Muhammad to detest the Jews and curse them due to their rejection of Christianity and for crucifying and killing Jesus. See Roggema, *ibid.*, 455, 465 (Baḥīrā inserts the verse 5:82 into the Qur’an); Baneth, “On ‘Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions,” 113.

[13] See Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, 240-241; Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 175-180; *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, s.v. “‘Abd Allāh ibn Salām” (Steven M. Wasserstrom) and “Ka’b al-Aḥbār” (Shari Lowin).

[14] See, for example, a critique of the reliance of early Qur’an exegetes upon the materials transmitted by ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām and Ka’b al-Aḥbār, in Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, vol. 2, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton University Press, 1980 [1958]), 445-446 (I owe this reference to Professor Camilla Adang); and cf. Reuven Firestone, “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam,” in David Biale (ed.), *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (Schocken, 2002), 267-301, 291-298. For a debate regarding ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām’s motives in adopting Islam, see Jon Hoover, “The Apologetic and Pastoral Intentions of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s Polemic against Jews and Christians,” *The Muslim World*, 100 (2010): 476-489, 483-485, 487.

[15] Perlmann, “Samau’al al-Maghribī,” 58 (trans.), 58 (Arabic). The issue of *mamzerim* is discussed several times in Samaw’al’s tract. See further Stephen M. Passamanek, “Some Medieval Problems in *Mamzeruth*,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966): 121-145.

[16] Yossef Rapoport writes: “Jewish law allows a man to remarry his ex-wife only if she did not marry another man in the meantime; thus, in Jewish law a *taḥlīl* marriage has the opposite effect of making the wife forbidden, rather than permitted, to her first husband” (*Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 99 n. 51). Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s (d. 1350) usage of the Hebrew word *mamzerim* (Rapoport, *ibid.*, 99) is another indication of his reception of Samaw’al’s *Iḥām al-Yahūd*, which has already been noticed by Perlmann (“Samau’al al-Maghribī,” 24 and n. 30).

[17] Even if one agrees with Baneth’s argument that the Jewish tale of the ten Jewish sages originated in the Christian Baḥīrā legends, this does not change the idea that Jews had their own polemic intentions in undermining the Islamic narratives about the rise of Muhammad’s movement. See Baneth, “On ‘Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions,” 114-116.