Jews of Arab Lands A History and Source Book



NORMAN A. STILLMAN



THE JEWS OF ARAB LANDS

A HISTORY AND SOURCE BOOK

NORMAN A. STILLMAN

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療療療 PREFACE

With the advent of Islam and the great Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries of this era, a new world order was established stretching from India and Central Asia in the east to Morocco and Spain in the west. The majority of world Jewry at that time came under Arab rule. The Jews soon adopted the language of their conquerors, and along with the other peoples of this vast empire, took part in creating a new and vibrant civilization, medieval Islam, which enjoyed the most advanced material culture since the heyday of Rome. In the scientific and intellectual spheres, this civilization was to remain unsurpassed until the Renaissance in Europe. It would continue to evoke the admiration, wonder, and envy of Europeans long after it had been eclipsed.

Jewish culture itself developed and flourished during the Islamic High Middle Ages (ca. 850–1250). This was the period that saw the veritable crystalization and formulation of Judaism as we know it today. During this time, the Babylonian Talmud gradually became the constitutional foundation of Diaspora Judaism, the synagogue service and the prayerbook text took on their familiar form, Jewish theology was systematized, Jewish law codified, and Hebrew language and literature underwent its greatest revival prior to its rebirth in modern times.

By the end of the thirteenth century, however, the center of historical gravity had shifted northward and westward to Europe. So too had the major centers of Jewish population and creativity. Most of the countries of the Arab world came under the rule of non-Arab military

dynasties that imposed a Middle Eastern brand of feudalism upon their domains. The general cultural level and the socioeconomic conditions of Arabic-speaking Jewry stagnated and declined with the decay of the Muslim world and the concomitant rise of the West. This does not mean that Jewish life there was at that time totally barren and sterile. Even during the long centuries of torpor, there were creative impulses that bore fruits. Furthermore, at certain points of osmosis, such as port towns and trading centers, there were enterprising individuals who mediated between the respective economies and cultures of East and West. Nevertheless, for the overwhelming majority of Jews in Arab lands, there was a marked decline in the quality of their life throughout the late Islamic Middle Ages (ca. 1250–1800).

As Europe began its inexorable intrusion into the Muslim East during the nineteenth century, it was the Jews, together with members of other minorities, who were among the first to embrace—to a greater or a lesser degree—Western culture and Western values. Profound changes began to overtake their traditional way of life, and their position in Muslim Arab society was radically altered.

The twentieth century marked an entirely new chapter in the history of the Jews of Arab lands. Colonialism and imperialism in various forms came, conquered, and went. Conflicting Jewish and Arab nationalisms came into being and set out upon a collision course. Today, few Jews remain in the Arab world. The vast majority of those who left are now in the State of Israel. An entirely new generation, whose native language is Hebrew rather than Arabic and whose culture is Israeli, has grown up with its strong Western orientation.

I deliberately chose not to extend the scope of this book beyond the third quarter of the nineteenth century, preferring to leave off at the dawn of a new era in the history of the Jews of Arab lands. The latest era, which has been marked by a rapid concatenation of events leading to the mass exodus of the Jews from the Arab world, deserves to be treated separately and at length.

This book therefore deals with the Jews of Arab lands before the metamorphosis that occurred in this century. It aims to present a historical tableau of the Jewish experience in the traditional Arab world from the rise of Islam to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the forces of change were already well under way in most of the Middle East and North Africa. Because of the enormous temporal and geographical span to be dealt with here, such a tableau can only be painted with broad brushstrokes. A basic problem in pre-

senting such a sweeping panorama is how to avoid "a schematic image which nowhere was a reality." 1

Yet another problem in attempting any assessment of the history of the Jews of Arab lands is the intensity of feelings aroused by the topic itself. The nature of the lewish experience under Islam, generally, and in the Arab world, particularly, has been subject to widely varying assessments. These range from the popular "golden age" school to a revisionist "persecution and pogrom" approach. The present conflict in the Middle East with all its ramifications has made the topic of the historical relations between Iews and Arabs a favorite theme for apologists on both sides. Fortunately, it has also been a subject of investigation for more dispassionate students of history. But with the exception of S. D. Goitein's Jews and Arabs,2 most of these studies have comprised highly specific monographs aimed primarily at other scholars, and they have dealt almost exclusively with intellectual, rather than social, history. In lews and Arabs, Goitein achieved a happy balance between scholarly and popular presentation and between intellectual and socioeconomic content. The book remains the best general introduction to the cultural interaction (or symbiosis, as Goitein terms it) between Arabs and Iews during the classical period of Islamic civilization.

Between Goitein's introduction and the specialized monographs, there has remained a considerable gap. This gap has been all the more formidable because most of the sources for a history of the Jews of Arab lands are written in one of several Near Eastern languages and scripts, which are read only by a small circle of scholars in the West. Relatively little has been translated into English or any other Western languages. The lack of primary materials in English translation has been noted by scholars and educators. In a recent bibliographical essay, Mark R. Cohen wrote: "A major desideratum for the purposes of college-level instruction is a collection of translated sources devoted exclusively to the Jews in the Islamic world."

The present book aims at filling these gaps in some measure. As the problem was twofold, the book was conceived in two parts. Part

¹ S. D. Goitein, "Jewish Society and Institutions under Islam," in *Jewish Society Through the Ages*, ed. H. H. Ben Sasson and S. Ettinger (New York, 1971), p. 172.

² 3rd ed. (New York, 1974).

³ Mark R. Cohen, "The Jews under Islam: From the Rise of Islam to Sabbatai Zevi," in *Bibliographical Essays in Medieval Jewish Studies*, vol. 2 (New York, 1976), p. 173.

One consists of five chapters that offer a survey of Jewish social history in the Arab world and that at the same time provide the framework for the sources presented in Part Two. The second part is a kind of mirror image of the first. It is divided into five sections corresponding to the chapters in Part One. Thus, I have tried to present the reader with a picture of sufficient breadth and sweep, on the one hand, and, on the other, the elements of fine detail as found in the sources themselves. Indeed, it is the sources that have been allotted the lion's share in this book. They form their own colorful mosaic alongside the synthetic tableau. Most of the material in Part Two has been translated from Arabic and Hebrew, some from Aramaic, Persian, and Turkish, and the rest from various European languages. Most of the translations are my own, although in several cases I have included translations by others. There is also some material from English-language sources.

The importance of the sources presented in Part Two lies not so much in whatever concrete facts or hardcore data they may contain. Some do offer precise, quantitative information. Unfortunately, sources of this sort, especially from earlier periods, are few. The real value of much of the source material presented here is that it speaks with the voices of the participants in this historical drama or, at least, in the voices of firsthand observers. Many of the texts translated here came from published works: however, many of the readings were also drawn from hitherto unedited archival materials from Middle Eastern and European archives and manuscript collections. Through these sources, which include historical narratives, literary works, official documents, and personal correspondence, we see how Arabs and Jews viewed each other and how they related to one another. From the Iewish sources, we also get some idea—and this is no less important of how the Jews viewed themselves. The reports of occasional visitors from outside the Arab world offer yet another perspective. So too, do the extensive European diplomatic and consular records from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Some of the sources are downright contradictory vis-à-vis others. This is to be expected. History, like beauty, is frequently in the eye of the beholder. Many of the sources reflect the biases of the individual writers and of the community they represented. For example, the report of the downfall of the Ilkhanids' Jewish vizier Sa°d al-Dawla (see pp. 262–63) gives no indication at all of the great vision and administrative skill of this talented individual. The writer Gregory Bar Hebraeus, who was a Christian polemicist, was primarily interested in

showing the justified humiliation and degradation of the Jews. But these biases are themselves historical "facts" reflecting spiritual and social realities. Still, these documents are in many cases raw material that need interpretation. Most of the sources have been well annotated with footnotes. The subject matter and the historical context of the source material are referred to throughout the text and footnotes in Part One, which is itself interpretative.

I realize that in addressing this book to both an academic and a general readership I run the risk of satisfying neither. However, I have tried like Koheleth "to find acceptable words, honestly written, expressing truth" (Eccles. 12:10).

This book could not have been researched or written without the generous support and good will of numerous individuals and institutions. It is my pleasant duty to acknowledge their assistance.

I am deeply indebted to Professor Bernard Lewis for his continuous encouragement and counsel. He graciously read the entire manuscript, which has benefited from his suggestions and criticisms.

Thanks are due also to Professors Theodore Rabb, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, and David Biale, each of whom read part of the manuscript and made valuable comments. Professor Rabb was particularly helpful in establishing contacts for me in London.

My mentor, Professor S. D. Goitein, discussed this project with me at every stage. Whatever training I have as an Arabist and as a historian of the Jews of the Islamic world must be credited to him. My profound indebtedness is indicated by dedicating this book to him.

My teacher and friend, the late Professor Richard Ettinghausen, made several suggestions for possible illustrations and kindly provided me with the photograph of the Turkish shadow puppet in illustration 5.

Mrs. Rachelle Moore and the staff of the State University of New York at Binghamton Interlibrary Loan Office cheerfully processed over 1,000 requests for books and periodicals not available to me in Binghamton. She took a personal interest in this project and did everything possible to expedite my requests. Thanks are also due to my graduate assistants at Binghamton: Christopher Ferguson, Charles Williams, and Joan Creatura, for a variety of services. My colleague, Dr. Samuel Morell, on several occasions aided me in tracing down elusive talmudic references.

Mr. Maurice Woolf, Mr. Allan Gossels, and the staff of the

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In Rabat, my work was made easier by the kindness of Prof. Germain Ayache; Dr. Abdelhadi Tazi, Directeur du Centre Universitaire de la Recherche Scientifique; and Mr. Abderrahman El Fasi, Directeur de la Bibliothèque Royale.

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My own university has been most supportive of my research. I was granted Release Time during the Spring of 1977 and a Title F Leave during the Spring of 1978. Financial aid for my research came from the SUNY Research Foundation and also from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Some of the material for this book was collected in conjunction with another research project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Science Research Council, and the SUNY Foundation. To all these institutions my sincere thanks.

I would be remiss in not acknowledging the unflagging support of The Jewish Publication Society of America and its editor, Mr. Maier Deshell. My grateful thanks are also extended to Mrs. Frances Noyes of the JPS editorial staff. Tirelessly, and with unfailing good spirits, she guided the manuscript from the copy editing stage to the final printing.

It is customary for an author to conclude his acknowledgments with thanks to his wife—usually for taking care of the children and being "a helpmate fit for him." My case is special. This book was originally planned as a joint effort by us both. However, my wife and colleague, Yedida, had several other important research commitments and had to see her own book through the press. She was thus unable to join me in this project. Nevertheless, she helped me translate several Arabic and Hebrew documents in Part Two and was always ready with her advice, criticism, and comment. The verses from Proverbs 31 on the "Woman of Valor" recited by me each Friday evening in her honor are not mere rote as far as I am concerned.

Norman A. Stillman Binghamton, N.Y.

NOTE ON STYLE

Foreign terms are always explained or translated at their first occurrence and are italicized throughout. The transcription of Arabic names and words follows the system employed in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, with the usual exception made by most English-speaking Arabists of j for dj and q for k. Place names are given in their familiar English forms and without diacritical marks.

Hebrew and Aramaic words have been transcribed according to a simple, standardized system that is on the whole compatible with the Arabic transcription. Common biblical Hebrew names are rendered in the accepted English forms. Most of the translations of biblical passages are my own. Occasionally, I have used the translation of *The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956).

Total consistency seemed impossible in the case of Ottoman Turkish words and names. In general, purely Turkish words appear in the orthography adopted by the Republic of Turkey, whereas proper names and some common terms appear in their Arabic form.

Most of the documents in Part Two are unabridged. In those instances where minor deletions have been made, I have indicated the ellipses with the usual system of points. A full line of points indicates a major deletion; however, deletions at the end of paragraphs have not been indicated. Parentheses are usually used for interpolations, which I have made for clarification of the reading, although they may also indicate parenthetical remarks in the texts themselves. In several instances, I have made slight revisions in the punctuation and spelling within a document in order to bring these into line with standard modern usage. Most of the archaisms of spelling, punctuation, and style have been left untouched so as not to detract from the period flavor.

The few abbreviations used in the text are mostly self-evident. For readers not familiar with Hebrew or Arabic, the abbreviation b. between two personal names indicates "son of" or "daughter of." The unabbreviated forms (Ibn, Ben, Bint, Bat) are used when the first name is omitted. The various Hebrew titles of respect (Rav, Rabbi, Rabbenu) are all abbreviated R.

N. A. S.

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CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

70	Fall of the Second Temple
132-35	Revolt of Bar Kokhba
ca. 425	Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud
517–25	Dhū Nuwās, Jewish king in Yemen
571	Probable birth of Muḥammad
ca. 610	Muḥammad receives his first revelations
622	Muḥammad's Hijra from Mecca to Medina
624	Muslim victory over the Meccans at Badr; expulsion
	of the Banū Qaynuqā ^c
625	Muslim defeat at Mount Uhud; expulsion of the
	Banu l-Naḍīr
627	Muslims repel Meccans at the battle of the Trench;
	extermination of the Banū Qurayza
628	Muḥammad attacks and subjects the Jewish oasis
	of Khaybar
630	Mecca surrenders to Muḥammad
632	Muḥammad dies; Abū Bakr, first caliph
634–44	Caliphate of cUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb; Jews exiled from
	the Hijaz
633–38	Arabs conquer Syria and Iraq
639–42	Arabs conquer Egypt
651	Death of Yezdegird III, last Sasanian shah; one of
	shah's daughters given to Jewish Exilarch Bustanay
656	Murder of Caliph ^e Uthmān; first civil war in Islam
658	R. Isaac Gaon of Pumbeditha and thousands of
	Jews welcome Caliph ^e Alī into Firuz-Shapur
61–750	Umayyad Caliphate

711–12	Muslims conquer Spain, receive widespread Jewish support
717–20	Caliphate of ^c Umar b. ^c Abd al- ^c Azīz; hardening of attitude toward <i>dhimmīs</i>
750–1258	
750-1258 762	Abbasid Caliphate
	Baghdad founded; rise of Middle Eastern bourgeoisie
ca. 767	Anan b. David founds Karaite sect
813–33	Caliphate of al-Ma'mūn; beginning of Hellenistic renaissance in Islam
909	Fatimid caliphate established in North Africa;
	flourishing Jewish center in Qayrawan
916	Death of Nețīra, founder of a great Jewish banking
	house in Baghdad
928-42	Sacadya Gaon of Sura: translates the Bible into
	Arabic; redacts the first standard prayerbook; writes
	the first systematic work of Jewish theology
929	Umayyad prince of Spain assumes title of caliph
969	Fatimid conquest of Egypt
973	Fatimid caliph enters the new capital, Cairo; rise of
	Egyptian Jewry
975	Death of Hasday b. Shaprūt, the great patron of
	Jewish letters in Spain
1007-19	Persecution of Christians by Fatimid Caliph
	al-Hākim
1012-19	Persecution of Jews by al-Ḥākim
1015	Abraham b. 'Ațā' becomes first nāgīd in Qayrawan
1027	Samuel b. Naghrēla becomes first nāgīd in Granada
1038-56	Samuel b. Naghrēla is vizier of the Berber king of
	Granada
1047	Assassination of Jewish courtier Abū Sacd al-Tustarī
	in Cairo
1050-57	Banū Hilāl Bedouin ravage Ifrīqiya
1066	Assassination of Joseph ha-Nagid; massacre of the
	Jews of Granada
1085	Christians recapture Toledo
1090	Almoravids conquer Muslim Spain; Jewish quarter
	of Granada destroyed a second time
1096-99	First Crusade
1099-1187	Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem
ca. 1139	Judah ha-Levi, Jewish poet laureate of Spain, com-
	pletes final draft of The Kuzari, glorifying rabbinic
	Judaism and rejecting philosophy
1140	Judah ha-Levi leaves Spain for Egypt and Palestine
1147–60	Almohads conquer the Maghreb and much of

	islamic Spain; widespread massacres and forced conversions of Jews
1165	
	Maimonides family emigrates to Palestine
1171	End of the Fatimid Caliphate; Moses Maimonides becomes leader of Egyptian Jews for several years
1171-1250	
1171-1250	Ayyubid Dynasty established in Egypt and Syria by Saladin
1180	Moses Maimonides completes his great law code,
	the Mishneh Torah
1187	Saladin defeats Crusaders at the Horns of Hattin;
	fall of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem
1190	Moses Maimonides completes Guide of the Per-
	plexed, synthesizing Judaism and Aristotelianism
1198-1202	Forced conversion of Jews in Yemen and Aden un-
	der self-styled Caliph al-Malik al-Mucizz Ismācīl;
	Maimonides writes Epistle to the Yemenites
1204	Death of Moses Maimonides; leadership of Egyptian
	Jewry becomes hereditary within the Maimonides
	family
1237	Death of Abraham Maimonides, Moses' son and
	successor
1250–1517	Mamluk Empire in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine
1258	Baghdad captured by the Mongols under Hülagü:
	end of Abbasid Caliphate and beginning of Ilkhanid
	dynasty; no distinction between Muslim and
10/0	dhimmīs
1260	Mamluks turn back the Mongols at Ayn Jalut
1291	Assassination of Sacd al-Dawla and other Jewish
1201 1254 1410	officials of the Ilkhanids; anti-Jewish riots in Iraq
1301, 1354, 1419	Crackdown on dhimmis in the Mamluk Empire;
1201	strict enforcement of the Pact of 'Umar
1391	Jewish refugees from Catalonia and Majorca arrive
1438	in Tunisia and Algeria
1453	First mellāh established in Fez
CCT1	Ottomans capture Constantinople; demise of the
1465	Byzantine Empire
140)	Revolt brings down the Merinid Dynasty in Morocco;
	Ibn Batash, Jewish vizier, slain; massacre of the
1492	Jews in Fez and throughout the country
1497	Expulsion of Jews and Moors from Spain Expulsion of Jews from Portugal
1517	Ottomans conquer the Mambala E
-521	Ottomans conquer the Mamluk Empire; usher in a period of Jewish economic and cultural revival in
	the Levant; widespread messianic anticipation

1523	Adventurer David Reubeni arrives in Palestine claiming to be a prince from a distant Jewish
1520	kingdom
1538	Jacob Berab and scholars in Safed try to revive
15/0	ancient rabbinical ordination
ca. 1560	Doña Gracia and Don Joseph Nasi begin rebuilding
15/0 50	of Tiberias as a Jewish center
1569–72	Isaac Luria teaches kabbalah in Safed
1574–95	Reign of Murad III; reintroduction of the sumptu
	ary restrictions for dhimmis
1575	Death of R. Joseph Karo, author of the Shulhan
	°Arūkh in Safed
1577	Hebrew printing press established in Safed-first
	press east of Constantinople and west of China
1586	Nahmanides Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in
	Jerusalem, confiscated by the Muslim authorities
1639	Iraq permanently recaptured by Ottomans from the
	Persians
1665	False messiah Sabbatay Şevi appears in Gaza and is
	widely accepted by Jews the world over
1666	Apostasy of Sabbatay Şevi in Adrianople; beginning
	of a period of socioeconomic and intellectual decline
	for Middle Eastern Jewry
1683	Failure of the Ottoman siege of Vienna; beginning
	of a series of Turkish defeats in Europe
1699	Treaty of Karlowitz marks decline of Ottoman
	power in Europe
1798-1801	Napoleon occupies Egypt
1805-48	
1005 10	Muhammad Alī independent ruler of Egypt under
	nominal Ottoman suzerainty; introduction of
	European-style reforms in administration, military,
1830	and economy
1831–40	France invades Algeria
1031-40	Egyptian occupation of Syria and Palestine; non-
1027	Muslims benefit, especially Syrian Christians
1836	Beginning of regular British steamship service to
1020	Egypt and Syria
1839	Khaṭṭ-i Sherif improves civil status of dhimmis in
1040	Ottoman Empire; Britain occupies Aden
1840	Damascus Affair; Montefiore and Crémieux appear
	before Muḥammad 'Alī and Sultan 'Abd al-Maiīd:
	beginning of organized European Jewish efforts on
	hehalf of oriental Javana

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- 4. The remains of the Naḥmanides Synagogue in Jerusalem, confiscated from the Jews in 1598
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- 6. Doña Gracia Nasi, patroness of Ottoman Jewry, from a portrait medal by Pastorino de Pastorini, 1553
- The mystical prayer book known as Siddūr ha-Arī. Moroccan ms. dated 1790
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- Carpet page from Ōṣerōt Ḥayyīm (Treasures of Life) by R. Isaac Luria, ha-Arī. Moroccan ms. dated 1760
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- A typical side street in the Gā^c al-Yahūd (Jewish Quarter) of San^ca, Yemen
- 13. Inside a synagogue in Sanca (early twentieth century)
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