

What Can Medieval Spain Teach Us about Muslim-Jewish Relations?

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Ever since the emergence of Jewish history as a discipline during the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), the topic of Jewish-Muslim relations has been one of central interest. The reasons for that interest, however, have varied greatly. For example, when German-Jewish historians first took up the question (until the mid-twentieth century, professional historical research was mostly the province of Ashkenazic Jews), they did so with an eye to the history of their own homelands. Against a European tradition of anti-Semitism, Jewish historians posed an Islamic tradition of tolerance. Such contrasts were strategic, even educational, intended to help Christian Europeans see the injustice of their treatment of Jews. They invoked the relative tolerance of “backward Orientals” in order to criticize and combat the prejudice of “modern Europeans.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under the pressure of mounting anti-Semitism, this contrast between an idealized experience under medieval Islam and a progression of tragedies under Christendom gained the status of unquestionable truth. It became, as a number of historians have recently put it, a historical myth, an important part of the standard narratives through which European Jews understood their history.

Today, the topic of Muslim-Jewish relations is still of central importance, but for very different reasons. In the latter half of the twentieth century, as the long conflict between the state of Israel and the Arab world became a central axis of Jewish consciousness,

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a number of historians attempted to pull apart the old consensus. Some, quite rightly, criticized the received wisdom as idealized, pointing out that the medieval experience of Jews in Muslim lands was more complex than earlier authors allowed, while nevertheless agreeing that it differed greatly from the fate of Jews in Christendom. Others, more extreme, argued that the hatred of the Muslim for the Jew is even more implacable and immutable than that of the Christian. The polemical stakes in the debate have propelled it from the rarely opened monographs of specialists to the pages of *Ha-Aretz* and *Tikkun*, and attracted a number of new voices to the field of Jewish history.¹ Muslim historians, for example, have taken up the topic, championing the older consensus in order to portray Islam, not as anti-Semitic, but rather as traditionally tolerant.

Whatever their persuasion, the methods of all the historians interested in Muslim-Jewish relations have always been more or less the same. Some sift through archives, accumulating examples of peaceful coexistence; others look for grim evidence of persecution and enmity. We all know examples from both schools. Who has not heard of the “Spanish golden age” of Jews under Islam? How often have we heard invoked the exemplary name of Samuel the Nagid Ibn Naghrela, Jewish courtier, vizier of Granada, general of Muslim armies? And who among us does not know that, when the Jews of Sepharad were exiled from their homes in 1492, it was the Muslim lands of North Africa and the Ottoman Empire that welcomed them? These are but two of the many touchstones mined from history by those who seek historical evidence of a rosy Jewish-Muslim symbiosis.

Those who would paint such a symbiosis in darker colors have found their touchstones as well. To the example of Samuel Ibn Naghrela they oppose that of his son, killed by a Muslim mob that went on to massacre the Jews of Granada. They counter stories of Islamic refuge in exile with accounts of the violence, extortion, and degradation to which the refugees were subjected. And, of course, both sides read founding documents of Islam, such as the Qur’an, very differently. Did not the Prophet forbid “compulsion in religion?” Did he not offer a protected status to Jews and Christians, the “people of the book”? On the other hand, did Muhammad not accuse the Jews of falsifying scripture and of maliciously rejecting, not just his prophecy, but that of Jesus as well? Did he not, after all, exile or extirpate all the Jews he encountered in his own lifetime?

Example and counterexample, quote and counterquote: thus history becomes the battleground on which we fight over the present.

There is no victory possible in such a contest, for its rules of engagement are flawed on several counts. First, no history as long and complex as that of Muslim and Jewish interaction can be explained by exegesis of a single text, even when that text is as foundational as the Bible or the Qur'an. Such prooftexts can sustain any number of interpretations over time, some of them quite contradictory, as anyone familiar with the Talmud (for example) knows. Second, societies cannot be classified as tolerant or intolerant merely through the accumulation of "negative" or "positive" examples. Our understanding of the history of Muslim (or Christian) relations with Jews has to be rich enough to explain both the periods of relatively stable coexistence and the periodic persecution that marked Jewish life in both civilizations. Any account of Muslim-Jewish relations that does not simultaneously make sense of, for example, the brilliant career of Samuel Ibn Naghrela and the terrible massacre that ended his son's life is obviously inadequate, for both are very real products of the same society. And finally, historians are not accountants, toting up the assets and liabilities of this and that society in order to declare a particular tradition more solvent (or in this case, more tolerant) than another. Like the personal experiences of individuals, the historical experiences of peoples resist commodification. That is to say, they cannot be translated into a common currency in order to calculate comparative value or be assigned comparative moral worth.

What, then, should a history of Muslim-Jewish relations look like? This is the question I would like to ask of the sources I have accumulated on the Muslims and Jews of medieval Spain (or, rather, the Iberian Peninsula, since in the Middle Ages the region contained several different kingdoms). Those many of you who know about the particularities of Sephardi historical experience will find the choice of focus a bit odd, perhaps unrepresentative. It is certainly true that the Jews of Sepharad have a long tradition of presenting themselves as different from other Jews, unique in any number of ways. (Moses Ibn Ezra, for example, proclaimed that Spanish Jews excelled all other Jews in poetry.) But in this case, the unique attributes of the Sephardim make them the ideal focus for our concern with Muslim-Jewish relations, for they alone migrated extensively between Islam and Christendom. Three times, at least, Spanish Jewry crossed that frontier. First, in 711, Muslim armies

conquered Christian Visigothic Spain and brought its Jews under Muslim rule. Then, over the next 781 years (until 1492, that is), Christian armies conquered back the peninsula, so that by the mid-twelfth century the majority of Iberia's Jews lived again under "Edom" (or "Esau"), as they called Christendom.² (Other factors, such as the Almohade revolution in Muslim Spain, also contributed to the speed of Jewish migration to Christian Spain.) And as you know, during the expulsion of 1492 a large proportion of the exiles set their course for North Africa or the Ottoman Empire, passing once again under the power of Ishmael, that is, of Islam.

Iberian Jews were unique, then, in that they constituted the only significant Jewish population to have a historical memory of the relative merits of life under Islam and under Christendom. Equally important was the fact that, as Christian armies conquered the peninsula, they absorbed into their kingdoms not only Jews, but also large Muslim populations. This meant that in Christian Spain, for the first time since the Jews' encounter with Muhammad in Medina, and for the last time until the Jewish resettlement of the Palestinian Mandate, we have a large Jewish population living side by side with a Muslim one in a land where the Muslims do not hold the reins of power. Here we have, in other words, a precious example of a society in which Jews and Muslims are able to engage each other in open competition and conflict as they work out the terms of their own coexistence.

Medieval Spanish Jewry can therefore help us to think about two important questions. The first is a precursor to the debate among modern historians about the relative merits of Islam and Christendom. For hundreds of years before the *Haskalah*, Jews asked themselves a similar question. Is Jewish exile more tolerable under Islam or under Christendom? Put another way, who is kinder to the Jews, the Muslim or the Christian?³ Spanish Jews had a number of different views on the subject, as we should expect, given the length and complexity of the Jewish historical experience in Iberia. Maimonides, for example, had a very poor opinion of European culture, and when he himself fled the Almohades, he chose to move to a distant Muslim land (Egypt) rather than to the much closer Christian kingdoms. On the other hand, in his *Epistle to Yemen* he insisted that "no nation has ever done more harm to Israel [than that of Ishmael]. None has matched it in debasing and humiliating us." And at the end of his life, he declared that the

future of Jewish learning lay in Christian Europe, not in the lands of Islam.⁴

This negative view of Islam crystallized into something of an aphorism among Sephardim: "Better under Edom than under Ishmael." According to Bernard Septimus, who has traced the history of this saying, it is based on a Spanish version of the Talmud, "Better under a gentile than under an Ishmaelite." (The version of the text common everywhere else in Europe had the opposite: "Better under an Ishmaelite than under a gentile"! BT Shabbat, f. 11a.) The phrase is first applied to the question of the comparative tolerance of Muslims and Christians by the Kabbalist Bahya ben Asher of Zaragoza in 1295. The saying had a long life, and persisted (somewhat surprisingly) even after the expulsions of 1492.⁵

But a number of Spanish Jews were more realistic, and less dogmatic, than these opinions would suggest. In the fourteenth century, for example, the Talmudist Nissim of Gerona emphasized that persecutions came and went, and that what was needed was a diversity of polities in which to take refuge from the storm of the moment (what an ecologist would call "habitat diversity"). According to Nissim, the linguistic and ethnic pluralism insisted upon by God at the Tower of Babel was a good thing, "for when forced conversion was introduced in the land of Ishmael, the refugees fled to the territory of Edom, and from Edom [they] fled to the territory of Ishmael."⁶

Other Sephardim made a more methodological point, emphasizing that comparative judgments about the severity of *galut* (exile) are always colored by the historical experience of the individual making them. Just after the expulsion from Spain, Abraham Saba imagined a conversation between two exiles, one from Edom and the other from Ishmael:

Each tells of... his exile.... One tells of the evil done to him by the sons of Esau, and the other tells of what the sons of Ishmael have done to him, and each considers his misfortunes to be the worst possible, so that he almost craves the exile of the other.⁷

Saba went on to describe some of the differences between Christian and Muslim treatment of Jews, without pretending that he could rank the tolerance of these religions. Other commentators agreed that the two exiles were very different, without one's being clearly superior. Daily degradations and humiliations were greater under

Islam, according to some, whereas forced conversions and expulsions were more likely in Christendom. A number of Sephardim, in other words, refused to give easy answers to questions about Christian or Muslim attitudes toward Judaism, insisting that such judgments could not be made independent of perspective, and, therefore, the two traditions could not be “measured” against each other. This was a healthy relativism born out of complex experience, one that modern historians of Jewish life under Christianity or Islam would do well to emulate.⁸

This relativism is the first “lesson” the Sephardim offer the modern student of Muslim-Jewish relations. The second lesson is much more complex, and perhaps also much more important. When we talk of “Muslim-Jewish relations,” we tend to assume that we are talking of an autonomous dialogue between two religious communities. For particular times and places this assumption may be justified. But in many cases, this way of posing the problem is misleading, for often a third voice intrudes in the Jewish-Muslim dialogue: that of Christianity and Christendom. As I mentioned earlier, most Jewish contact with Muslims in the Middle Ages occurred in Muslim lands. Such interaction was therefore governed by Islamic law, which treated Jews and Christians as a protected minority, distinctly inferior to Muslims, it is true, but to be tolerated so long as they knew their place and engaged in no public confrontation with the true faith. Even within the “House of Islam,” however, Christian ideas about Jews played an important part in forming Muslim ones. We know that during the first, formative century of Islam, Muslim ideas about Jews were influenced by the views of the millions of Christians whose lands they conquered. Moreover, in many Muslim lands, such as Egypt, large Christian communities and (much smaller) Jewish ones competed for status and influence throughout the classical period of Islam. In that competition neither group hesitated to deploy its most negative portrayals of the other in order to influence their Muslim overlords. Finally, over the course of the Middle Ages, large populations of Christians living in Muslim lands converted to Islam, and they brought their Christian anti-Jewish traditions with them. It is a revealing fact that converts from Christianity wrote many of the most important Muslim anti-Jewish polemics in the classical period of Islam.⁹

The importance of including Christianity in the dialogue, however, becomes most obvious in contexts where Christian, and

not Muslim, law structured Muslim-Jewish interaction. Such contexts have the added attraction that they approximate modern conditions, in which Jews are not *a priori* subjugated to Muslims, but, rather, the two groups are free to compete under rules of engagement set by a small group of (largely European and Christian) world powers. There are no true medieval precursors to such a situation, but the interaction of Jews and Muslims in the Christian kingdoms of Spain comes close. The conquest of large parts of Muslim Spain by Christian armies created what might be called the first Muslim Diaspora. For the first time, sizeable populations of Muslims lived in lands where Islamic law did not reign supreme. This was a transformation with many consequences, but the most important one for our topic is that it uncovered a much more competitive world of Muslim-Jewish relations, a world over which Christians were the ultimate arbiters.

Aspects of this newly competitive landscape became apparent early on. Recall, for example, the adventures of that most famous of reconquerors, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, the Cid. The roles of Jews and Muslims in the best-known literary portrayal of the reconquest, the *Poem of the Cid*, are not overtly competitive. Christians, and not Jews, conquer the Muslims and demand tribute from them. But the role of the two Jews in the poem, Raquel and Vidas, hints at a new political reality. They finance the Cid's expedition (though it is not clear that the Cid ever intends to repay them). That is all the poem has to say about the Jews, but a Muslim chronicler (Ibn ʿIdhari) tells us more. According to him, the Cid appointed a Jewish official over the city of Valencia once he had conquered it.

The Jew—God curse him—caused the Muslims to suffer the most cruel vexations, and others of his coreligionists became enraged against the [Muslim] Valencians, who attained the heights of the greatest humiliation. Jews also were the tax collectors, officials, scribes of the chancery, and those employed in land and sea services. A Jew acted as magistrate, and as such sentenced [Muslims] to punishment of whipping or lashes.¹⁰

The Muslim chronicler presents the Jews' behavior as the product of Jewish enmity toward Muslims, but, in fact, it was a symptom of a new political reality. In order to exploit their conquests, the conquerors needed trustworthy and bilingual officials. For this they might draw upon Muslim elites in the lands they had con-

quered, but they could also call upon the Jews. Fluent in both Romance (Spanish, Catalan, Aragonese) and Arabic, without any loyalty to the Islamic polities across the frontier, completely at the mercy of their Christian lords, the Jews were both qualified and dependable (because dependent). The result was that Muslims found themselves competing with Jews for authority over their own communities. And although the Muslims had been conquered by Christians and not by Jews, they sometimes found powerful Jews mediating between themselves and their Christian overlords.

Such mediation took many forms. Linguistically, for example, Jews translated diplomatic documents, business contracts, and scientific texts from Arabic into Romance and vice versa.¹¹ Even more important was the Jews' role as administrative and financial mediators. Often Jews acted as notaries, collected taxes, reviewed accounts, and otherwise supervised the administration of Muslim communities. In modern terms, they exercised power over Muslims as "colonial agents" for the Christian conquerors. The conflict inherent in such roles often pitted Jews and Muslims against one another, and sometimes resulted in violence, such as the killing of Jewish tax collectors by Muslims, or the imprisonment of Muslims at the behest of Jewish officials. Muslim resentment over this type of relationship characterized the entire period of Muslim-Jewish coexistence in Christian Spain. When Granada, the last Muslim kingdom of the Iberian Peninsula, negotiated its surrender treaty in late 1491, it included the clause that "their highnesses would not permit the Jews to have power or command over the Moors, or to be collectors of any tax." And this just a few months before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain!

The existence of Jews in positions of power over Muslims is only the most extreme result of the new kinds of competition that Christian hegemony made possible. In nearly every aspect of their commercial and economic relations, Muslims and Jews might find themselves competing with one another much more openly than they could have in Muslim lands. The competition sometimes made for strange bedfellows. When the Jewish butchers of Daroca succeeded in acquiring a royal monopoly on selling *halal* meat to Muslims, the Muslims joined with the Christians in lobbying to have the Jewish meat market shut down. Moreover, the winner was not predetermined. In one town, the Jewish *qehillah* pawned the silver Torah crowns to a Muslim moneylender; in another, the Muslim town council mortgaged all its income and lands to a Jew.

In short, the situation was, for the first time in the history of Muslim-Jewish relations, remarkably fluid.¹²

Rather than pile anecdote upon anecdote in an attempt to describe these many forms of competition or the fluidity they created, let me just present one example as paradigmatic: the struggle for precedence in parades. In the Middle Ages, where one marched in a parade was an indicator of rank and status. Parades and processions were therefore a frequent scene of conflict between groups eager to assert their higher status. Fights over lineup were common, for example, between the various Christian guilds and confraternities. Of course, such conflicts never broke out between Christians and minorities, for everyone knew that the Christians were on top. There was no obvious consensus about the relative status of Muslims and Jews, however, and the two communities often came to blows over the issue. In 1324, for example, the Muslims of Huesca were fined a staggering sum for attacking the Jews as they processed in a parade celebrating a royal military victory. Twenty Jews were seriously injured. Later in the century, Muslims and Jews attacked one another in Daroca as both paraded "leaping, dancing, and making many other expressions of joy," in celebration of the birth of Prince Ferdinand. The attack was described as "in the fashion of public war." Two years earlier, King John had charged the Muslims of Fraga an enormous fine for assaulting the Jews during a solemn procession mourning the death of John's father, King Peter. The two groups had argued over who should have precedence, and the Muslims attacked the Jews when the Jews marched first.¹³

In all these examples, the competition for prestige between the two minority groups becomes violently apparent. At other times, communities pursued the same struggle through more subtle means. In 1392 the Muslims of Huesca purchased a royal edict assigning them pride of place. The decision was justified with the argument that Muslims fought in royal armies, whereas Jews did not, and that honor should be commensurate with risk. A little over a decade later, however, the Jews of Santa María de Albarrazin purchased a decision that they should march before the Muslims, this time with the argument that Judaism is older than Islam, and antiquity deserves precedence. The episode is revealing in that it confirms an important point: Christians were the ultimate arbiters in this competition between Judaism and Islam. Hence, any argu-

ments in the contest needed to be made with an eye on the Christian audience.¹⁴

It is this last point that needs stressing. The positions Jews and Muslims took vis-à-vis each other in Christian Spain cannot be understood in any simple sense as the products of “Jewish” or “Islamic” cultural attitudes toward one another. They were that, of course, but they were also very much influenced by what Jews and Muslims understood to be Christian interests and ideologies. Sometimes the arguments were purely economic or pragmatic. No medieval Muslim or Jew would have been surprised, for example, by the advice that Queen Elionor of Aragon gave to her son, Prince Martin, in 1374, when she told him to ignore the complaints of several Muslim communities about their debts to the Valencian Jew Jafuda Alatar. After all, Jafuda alone paid more taxes to the Crown than virtually all the Muslim communities of the kingdom of Valencia combined.¹⁵ But at other times the issues were much more pointed, with Jews and Muslims arguing explicitly about the relative merits of their respective religions, and especially about the nature of their relationship to the Christianity of their overlords. It is in these more ideologically inflected arguments that we can begin to see how Jews and Muslims adopted the prejudices of their Christian rulers, and adapted them in an attempt to gain a competitive advantage over their rival minority faith.

Perhaps the clearest examples of explicit appeals to Christian ideology by the two non-Christian communities occurred in the course of competition over converts. In the Middle Ages, conversion was supposed to take place in only one direction, toward truth (what truth was depended on the religion of whoever was in charge). Changes of mind in the other direction were not conversion, but apostasy or perversion. Cases of conversion thus required explicit comparisons of the religions involved. In a Christian land, of course, the question of truth was addressed in relation to the true religion, Christianity. This meant that cases of conversion between Islam and Judaism had to be argued in the language of Christianity, and before Christian judges. We could ask for no better circumstances under which to observe the borrowing of Christian ideology by Islam and Judaism.

Although in theory punishable by death, conversions between the two religions were relatively common, especially before the massacres of Jews in 1391, and nearly all involved Muslims converted to Judaism. We have only one recorded case of Jewish

conversion to Islam before 1391. In 1280, a flurry of documents was issued concerning the conversion to Islam of three Jews from the hinterlands of Zaragoza. The Jews were arrested, prosecuted, and put to death, all apparently at the insistence of an important Jewish courtier and royal official, Jucef Ravaya, the king's treasurer and himself a collector of Muslim taxes. Much more common, and much more tolerated, were conversions in the other direction. A number of Muslims, some slaves of Jews, others free, converted to Judaism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and, in all the cases I know of, the conversion was permitted in exchange for a cash payment by the convert or the Jewish community.¹⁶

This profit-motivated ecumenicism, however, declined markedly in the much more anti-Jewish climate after 1391. Muslim conversions to Judaism did occasionally occur in the fifteenth century, but they were now highly conflictual affairs. The conversion of a young woman in Talavera sometime in the first half of the fifteenth century, for example, apparently provoked a "great and scandalous discord." The trial record, copied at the request of the famous convert Alfonso de Cartagena, bishop of Burgos, contains few details of the conversion itself. The Muslim woman is not named, and we are told only that Yuda, a Jew from Talavera, "took a young Moorish woman from her father's house and converted her to Judaism." Whether this occurred with or without her consent is considered irrelevant, though we are told that Yuda had been "mixing" sexually with the young woman for some time before the conversion. Instead of giving us details, the two sides (Christian lawyers and the Muslims on the one hand, the Jews and their Christian lawyer on the other) focus most of their arguments about the permissibility of the conversion upon one issue: Are the Jews or the Muslims closer to Christ? The debate is worth describing, because it shows how both Muslims and Jews attempted to borrow from Christian polemics against the other minority group.

The Jews begin by citing canon law and arguing that conversions among non-Christian groups are not the business of the Christian church. Having said that, they proceed to argue why the Church should allow Muslim conversions to Judaism, and bar them in the other direction. Clearly, they argue, a Muslim, "who has a lying prophet and an inane and ridiculous law, can receive the law of the Jews." The only doubt is whether "the Jew, who has laws and prophets which we revere and honor as saints, can receive the law of the Moors." In short, a Muslim becoming Jewish is a step up,

a conversion, and therefore legal. A Jew becoming a Muslim is a step down, apostasy, and therefore illegal. To argue this point, the Jews bring in Christianity. They maintain that their law is better than the Muslim law because it comes from God, whose authorship of Mosaic law is accepted by all three religions, and because it contains the laws and prophecies that proclaim the coming of Christ. Christian law was grafted onto Jewish law, so the Jews are closer to Christ. "It follows that the Jew is closer to the Church, who is a branch cut from the olive that is Christ and has a greater part in Him, than the Moor, who has no connection with Him." Satan, on the other hand, authored Muslim law. The Qur'an is a joke, not a law of God. Further, unlike Jewish law, it is full of blasphemy, for although it accepts that "Our Saviour was a holy prophet and Saint Mary was a Virgin," it nevertheless states that Christ is not God and that he neither died nor was resurrected. Finally, when the Church prays for heretics and pagans, it says "remove iniquity from their hearts," but when it prays for the Jews, it says "remove the veil from their hearts." It is better to have the truth, even veiled, than to have only lies and falsehoods.

Like the Jews and their lawyer, the spokesmen for the Muslims dedicate most of their energy to a comparison of Muslim and Jewish affinities to Christianity. The Muslims' advocates do not mince words:

The Jews, in the rites of their religion as they currently practice it, are to a great degree of worse condition and more damnable and more abhorred by the Lord, and more corrupting...of us, than are the Moors who live among us.

The Moors, to be sure, are "bestial" and "filthy," but they have never received true law. The Jews have and have rejected it. Rejecting their prophets, they have become a synagogue of Satan, losing all title to Mosaic law and to the name of "Jews." It follows that whereas the Jews are blasphemous, blind, and obstinate, the Muslims are only blind, because their "evil way of life is only a manner of bestial superstition and blind ignorance." Moreover, rather than blaspheme, as the Jews do, the Muslims accept Christ:

They confess him and say he was a very holy envoy of God, conceived through the Holy Spirit in the womb of the glorious one Our Lady, she birthing without corruption, remaining virgin before and after the birth.

Over and over again the relative affinity of Muslims for Christianity is stressed. Muslims, the judge was told, make more sincere converts to Christianity. Nor do they seek to destroy Christianity as Jews do. Indeed, if the Church teaches that Muslims are to be avoided as much as Jews are, it is only because Muslims have been contaminated by Jewish ways, such as circumcision. The same argument is applied to the apocalypse. The Antichrist will be born of the Jews. The Jews are serpents, poison, deliberately malicious. The Muslims are, at worst, ignorant and misinformed.

The Talavera dispute is a peculiar case, but it is representative of the struggle between Muslims and Jews for Christian authorization in their relations with one another. Each group in this struggle attempted to deploy Christian stereotypes and prejudices against the other. But in this sphere of competition over control of Christian anti-Judaism, it seems that Muslims had the upper hand. It was a well-known fact in medieval Spain that Muslims accepted Mary's virginity after conception and considered Christ a prophet, whereas the Jews were thought of as killers of Christ. When the Muslims were able to define an argument convincingly in terms of their relationship to Jesus, as they did at Talavera, the conclusion was more likely to be to their liking.

In light of the Christian affinity for such arguments, we should not be surprised to find Muslims adopting a strategy of invoking Christ and the Virgin in their competitions with the Jews. Of course, such invocations were not completely alien to more traditional Muslim criticisms of Judaism. The Qur'an itself stated that the Jews had been damned because (among other reasons) they refused to believe Mary and defamed her, rejecting the prophecies of her son (Surah 4 ["Women"], 156). But classical Islam tended to play down the role of the Jews as killers of Jesus since, according to Islamic tradition, God had frustrated the Jews in their designs so that they had not actually killed him. As the Qur'an puts it, "[The Jews] schemed against Jesus, but God also schemed, and God is the best of schemers" [3:54].

Spanish Muslims were not so reticent. They went far beyond traditional Islam both in their devotion to the Virgin Mary and in their expansion and embroidery of the Jewish role in the killing of Jesus. Hundreds of pages of Spanish Muslim legends survive, detailing Jewish conspiracies with the Devil to eliminate Jesus and dwelling lovingly on the vengeance that would befall the Jews for this perfidy. An Aragonese Muslim writing in 1360, for example,

explained that God had cursed the Jews for their rejection, first, of Jesus as prophet of God, then, of Muhammad. For the first of these they were besieged in Jerusalem, expelled from their promised land, and sentenced to perpetual enslavement. For the second, they would all be executed at the end of days, and Jesus would be the executioner. Like many other Spanish Muslim writers, this author had adopted all the central tenets of Christian anti-Judaism: (1) that the Jews crucified Jesus; (2) that the siege and destruction of Jerusalem were punishment for this act; (3) that the Diaspora and “servitude” of the Jews were evidence of their infidelity; and (4) that these unfaithful Jews would all be slaughtered at the End of Days.¹⁷

In short, the situation of open competition with Judaism encouraged Spanish Muslims to adopt a number of Christian anti-Semitic themes (like that of the Jews as synagogue of Satan and of the vengeance of Jesus) that were relatively rare in Islamic countries.¹⁸ Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is that of Muslim participation in Christian anti-Jewish violence. Each year during Holy Week, in Spain and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, crowds of Christian clerics and children participated in ritualized stonethrowing attacks on Jewish quarters called “killing the Jews.” In 1319, a group of Muslims tried to make the practice their own:

We have learned [wrote King James of Aragon] that some Muslims living in Daroca, despite a proclamation that no one, during the eight days of Easter, dare stone or throw stones at our castle of Daroca where the Jews live, scaled the walls of that castle and then attacked the Jews living in that castle with rocks and swords, seriously injuring some of them and committing many other enormities against those Jews.¹⁹

In this violent act the Muslims of Daroca proclaimed their acceptance of the prophecy of Jesus, and their willingness to avenge his murder against the Jews. By attacking the Jew on Easter, in other words, they asserted their common cause with Christians.

From the vantage point of this heap of anecdotes, an abstract point becomes clear. We should not speak of “Muslim-Jewish relations” in medieval Christian Spain, for these relations are not autonomous. Rather, they are in constant dialogue with the views of those with the power to arbitrate the shape of those relations, in this case, the views of Christian Europeans. This simple but important insight can be generalized, I believe, to the study of modern

Jewish-Muslim relations, both in the colonial (i.e., pre-World War II) period, and in the half-century since the establishment of the State of Israel.

Before the expansion of Western European colonial powers such as Russia, Germany, France, and Britain into Muslim North Africa and the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century, the traditional idiom of Muslim tolerance for protected religious minorities like the Jews remained operative. But European colonialism quickly brought about a change in style. Colonial powers often claimed a special protective relationship to religious minorities living in Muslim lands, and used them as intermediaries or colonial agents in their dealing with those lands. France, for example, intervened frequently to protect Catholic populations in Syria, while Syrian Christians grew wealthy in the service of French colonialism.

Jews in Muslim lands were something of an anomaly in this respect. Poorer than Christians and without a Jewish colonial power with whom to cooperate, they were not at first important as European colonial agents in the Muslim world. This changed as countries like Britain cast about for native minority groups that could be offered protection and used as intermediaries. Near Eastern Jewry quickly became a candidate for such a role. The idea was that Britain would protect Near Eastern Jews and the Jews would represent British interests. In fact, the Jewish role in European colonialism would not become significant until the twentieth century, but it had a much earlier effect on the Muslim adoption of Christian anti-Semitic motifs in the Near East.

Consider the case of one of the earliest ritual murder accusations in the Muslim world, the Damascus case of 1840. The case began when a Catholic monk and his servant disappeared. The other monks, supported by the French consul general in Damascus, accused the Jews of the town of murdering the missing cleric for ritual purposes. The governor of the region, who depended on French support to keep him in power over British opposition, did not hesitate to order the arrest and torture of the Jewish notables of Damascus. One died under questioning and several confessed under torture to the murder. The whole affair was extensively covered by the French press, which used it as an opportunity to attack the Jews in France as well as those in Syria. The point is that the stereotype of Jewish ritual murder first entered the modern Islamic world as a technique of one minority, the Christians, agents

of one colonial power, France, against another minority, the Jews, perceived as agents of Britain, a rival colonial power. The accusation quickly became popular in the Middle East and, indeed, one still sometimes hears officials of Muslim countries state in public that Jews are obliged by their Talmud to drink the blood of a non-Jew once a year.²⁰

It is fair to ask why the Jews of Islam and not the Christians became the most frequent targets of such attacks (the Christians were more important as agents of European colonialism in the nineteenth century). The answer, I think, lies in the fact that those same European governments who claimed to protect the Jews were themselves producing the anti-Semitic rhetoric with which the Jews could be attacked. For example, at the same time that the French government was supporting and encouraging the establishment of schools throughout the Ottoman Middle East to teach Jews French and enlist them in support of French commercial interests, it was also fomenting anti-Semitism through show trials such as that of Captain Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army who was wrongly convicted in 1894 on the charge of selling military secrets to Germany. He was declared innocent and restored to his rank in 1906, but the translation into Arabic of French pamphlets about the affair provided a critical infusion of European and Christian anti-Semitism into the Muslim world.²¹

The point I want to stress is that Muslims in the modern era attacked the Jews as agents of colonial powers in language borrowed from, and addressed to, the dominant colonial powers themselves. This has become only more evident in the twentieth century, with the establishment of the British Mandate and subsequently of the State of Israel. It is instructive to note how accurately Muslim opponents of Israel have calibrated their criticism of Zionism to the intellectual fashions of dominant powers. Thus, in the 1930s, many Arab leaders denounced Jewish settlement as British imperialism and looked to Nazi Germany for support. During the height of anti-communist paranoia in the 1950s, opponents of Israel played to American sensibilities by denouncing Zionism as communism. In the late '60s and early '70s, at the height of Western concern about racism, the equation of Zionism with racism gained so much momentum as to be approved by the U.N., whereas in the late '70s and '80s, with Western Europe increasingly resistant to American hegemony, Israel was (and continues to be) portrayed as a tool of American imperialism.

Muslims, of course, do not have a monopoly on this practice. Jews, too, have played to European views of Islam in any number of ways, frequently invoking "Orientalist" tropes about the corrupt, despotic, and irrational tendencies of Islam in order to present Israel as the only possible representative of the enlightened "West" in the region. Whether deployed in the interest of Israel or of Arab polities, all these strategies reflect the concerns of world powers more than particularly "Jewish" or "Muslim" views of each other. They are meant to appeal to public opinion in nations with power, those of the first world, and their success often depends on how well they echo the prejudices of that public.

This conclusion will not surprise you, for we have all come to understand the importance of American and European political and public opinion in shaping the possibilities of the Arab-Israeli relationship. What is surprising is the extent to which historians of Muslim-Jewish relations have been willing to ignore similar processes in the past. By and large, they continue to search Islamic and Jewish traditions for some essential key to understanding contemporary relations between the two religions. If such a key exists (there is reason to be skeptical), it will not be found by focusing on the history of Jews under Islam, for we are not looking for lessons on how to be a subject people in religiously hierarchical societies. We need to study those periods when Muslim-Jewish relations were more competitive: medieval Spain, the colonial period, modernity, and Zionism. And we need to realize that in such periods we are never talking of a dialogue between two religions, but among three, for Christendom is always looming in the background, sometimes too large to be seen.

Though the Christian Middle Ages may seem impossibly distant from the modern Middle East, the comparison has the advantage of bringing to the foreground that almost invisible Christian interlocutor. It also reveals with depressing clarity the persistent power of a central anti-Semitic trope: the Jew as killer of Christ. Compare this 1964 broadcast from Radio Amman with my description of fourteenth-century Spanish Muslim arguments:

Some two thousand years ago the Jews crucified Jesus, after beatings, humiliations, and tortures that heap shame upon mankind everywhere. And fifteen years ago, in the most cruel manner, the Jews overran Palestine. They attacked its innocent, unarmed citizens and subjected them to the most villainous atrocities....Thus

do the Jews prove their responsibility for the infamies of their forebears, and for the crucifixion and humiliation of Christ nineteen centuries ago.

Similar parallels were drawn from the recent visit of Pope John Paul II to the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. Syria's minister of religious affairs did not use the occasion of the visit, the first ever by a pope to a mosque, to proclaim a new age of interfaith dialogue. Instead, he invoked what he called a shared enmity: "We must be fully aware of what the enemies of God and malicious Zionism conspire to commit against Christianity and Islam." President Bashar al-Assad had greeted the pope the previous day with similar words, reviling those "who try to kill the principles of all religions with the same mentality with which they betrayed Jesus Christ."²² It may be tempting to characterize such pronouncements as examples of a peculiarly Islamic anti-Judaism. But if we pause long enough in our indignation to hear in these words an echo of our own European ideologies, we will have learned a lesson from history.

Notes

1. See, for example, Norman Stillman, "Myth, Countermyth, and Distortion," *Tikkun* 6, no. 3 (May–June, 1991), pp. 60–64.
2. See G. Cohen, "Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, S. Altmann, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), pp. 19–48.
3. The most extensive exploration of these questions is that of Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Cohen, however, largely sets aside Iberian evidence, focusing instead on northern Europe.
4. *Igrot ha-RaMBaM*, Y. Sheilat, ed. (Maale Adumim: Maaliyot, 1988), I, pp. 108f.; II, pp. 558f.
5. Bernard Septimus, "Hispano-Jewish Views of Christendom and Islam," *In Iberia and Beyond: Hispanic Jews between Cultures*, Bernard Dov Cooperman, ed. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), pp. 43–65, here p. 45.
6. Similar views about the benefits of a world with diverse polities were expressed by Joshua ibn Shueib, a qabbalist and student of Solomon ibn Adret's who taught in Navarre in the 1320s and 1330s. Interpreting "If Esau comes to one camp {and attacks it, then the other will escape}," [Gen. 32:9], he writes: "This informs us that Esau's descendants will not pass a decree to obliterate our name entirely. They will

- harm only some of us. One of their kings may pass a decree in his country against our wealth or our persons, while another king will show compassion and save the refugees." See M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching 1200–1800: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 148.
7. The text is cited in H. H. Ben Sasson, *Reẓef u-Tmura* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984), pp. 220–26, and translated in Septimus, *op. cit.*, n. 5.
 8. For another view on the particularities of Hispano-Jewish attitudes toward Muslims, this one focused on a slightly later period, see Eleazar Gutwirth, "Hispano-Jewish Attitudes to the Moors in the Fifteenth Century," *Sefarad* 49 (1989), pp. 237–61.
 9. Moshe Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics between Islam and Judaism," *Religion in a Religious Age*, S. D. Goitein, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 103–38, here p. 106.
 10. The translation is from Norman Roth, *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. 134.
 11. Though diplomatic and business translations were by far the more common, most scholarship has focused on the role of Jews in the translation of Arabic scientific and philosophical literature. See for example Marie Thérèse d'Alverny, "Avendauth?" *Homenaje a Millás-Vallícosa*, vol. 1 (Barcelona: C.S.I.C., 1954), pp. 19–44; and her "Translations and Translators," *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 421–62.
 12. The text of the surrender treaty is translated into English in L. P. Harvey, *Islamic Spain, 1250–1500* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 314–23. All the examples of social and economic conflict and interaction are borrowed from David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), chap. 6.
 13. Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, pp. 180–82.
 14. The arguments are preserved in the Archive of the Crown of Aragon, Royal Chancery, [=ACA:C] register 1903, fols. 52v–53r (1392/8/12), and ACA:C 2212:188v–89r.
 15. The queen's advice is from ACA:C 1582:107r–8r (1374/11/1). See J. Riera i Sans, "Jafudà Alatzar, jueu de València (segle XIV)," *Revista d'Història Medieval* 4 (1993), pp. 65–100, here pp. 76, 79.
 16. These cases, and that of Talavera, below in the text, are discussed in my *Communities of Violence*, pp. 184–95.
 17. *Ta'yi-d al-milla*, Arabic ms., Colección Gayangos 31, Real Academia de Historia de Madrid. See the edition by L. Kassin in his "A Study of a Fourteenth-Century Polemical Treatise Adversus Judaeos" (Ph. D. dissertation; Columbia University, 1969).
 18. One of the boldest examples is much later, from the Granada of Phillip II, where Moriscos (descendants of Muslim forced converts to Christianity) forged Arabic texts purportedly written by Arab disciples of

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St. James the Apostle and hidden in Granada, that they might be revealed near the end of days as correctives to the corruption and sectionalism of Christianity. The forgeries sought to create a foundational role for Arabs in Christianity, and to represent Muslims and Moriscos as the guardians of true Christian religion and uncorrupted gospel. Aiming perhaps at the conversos (descendants of converts from Judaism), the texts explicitly denigrated Jews as deniers of Christ, and invented a prophecy for St. Peter that Jerusalem would be destroyed because of this denial. See M. Hagerty, *Los libros plúmbeos del Sacromonte* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1980), pp. 123–24, 208.

19. ACA:C 245:121r (1319/4/30).
20. See most recently Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
21. Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 184–89.
22. The New York Times, May 7, 2001, p. A1.