

# The Influence of Islam on Judaism

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1. Influence of Judaism on Islam; Jews and Christians termed *Ahl al-kitab*
  - a. The *Qur'an* – numerous passages show parallels with Biblical stories, midrash, Jewish legend and law. E.g. traditions about Abraham reasoning his way to faith in One God (Sura 6:74-82); tradition of Abraham destroying the idols and blaming it on the biggest idol, then being thrown into a fiery furnace (21:51-71)
  - b. The *Isra'iliyyat* – body of explanatory traditions drawn from Jewish midrashic and exegetical sources, used to flesh out and supplement Qur'anic allusions to Biblical stories
  - c. But sometimes Jewish legends are more likely to be based on Qur'anic stories, as in the story of Moses and the servant of God (later known as al-Khidhr in Muslim tradition; Sura 18:65-82), which appears in a eleventh-century collection of Judeo-Arabic tales by Nissim of Kairouan (990-1062) as a legend of Elijah and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi.
2. Islamic culture in the Golden Age – the Abbasids in Baghdad and the Umayyads in Cordova – Geonim and viziers
3. The Muslim challenge to Judaism: Scripture, Karaism, rationalism and scepticism
4. **Saadia Gaon** (882-942)
  - a. *Kalam* – Mu'tazilite theology; *Kitab al-Amanat wal-I'tiqadat: The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* – Mu'tazilite school of rationalist theology: Unity and Justice; emphasises God's utter incorporeality and freedom from any real attributes, and the importance of free will for the justice of God. Includes a brief discourse on (Arab) music and the effects of different rhythmic patterns on the emotions. Slightly earlier Jewish Mu'tazilite philosopher David al Muqammis, perhaps a teacher of Saadia.
  - b. *Fiqh* – systematic jurisprudence
  - c. *Tafsir* – Arabic Bible translation and rationalistic commentary
  - d. Lexicography and Grammar

As the children of Ishmael recount that one of their notables saw that the people did not speak Arabic eloquently and this distressed him, and he composed for them a brief discourse ... so I saw that many of the children of Israel do not know the basic eloquence (Arabic: *fasaha*) of our language, let alone its [rarer] alternatives; and when they speak, much of what they utter is ungrammatical; and when they compose poetry, the primary elements which they elaborate are in the minority, and those which they neglect are the majority ... [and so] I was compelled to compose a book in which I would collect most of the words. (From the introduction to the second edition of the *Agron*.)
  - e. Poetry – mentor of **Dunash ibn Labrat** (c. 920-c. 990) and praised his innovation of writing Hebrew verse in Arabic metre
5. Spanish grammarians
  - a. Controversy of Dunash and **Menahem ibn Saruq** over the use of Arabic to interpret Hebrew words
  - b. Pioneering work of **Judah ben David Hayyuj** (c. 940-c. 1010) on weak and gemmate verbs, and the use of Arabic grammar and terminology

- c. **Jonah Ibn Janah** (Abu 'l-Walid Marwan ibn Janah, first half of 11<sup>th</sup> century) expert in Arabic grammar and literature; his comprehensive grammar and dictionary, *al-Tanqih*; "His dependence on the methods and systems of the Arab grammarians can be felt in almost every chapter" (E. Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain*, vol. III, p. 27), justified by appeal to the precedent of Saadia Gaon; critique of Hayyuj and controversy with **Samuel ha-Nagid** of Granada.
6. Spanish poets – Arabic rhyme, metre and genres; sacred and secular themes: drink, love, war, friendship, praise of patrons and attacks on enemies
7. **Bahya ibn Paquda** (c.1050-c.1120) and Sufism. *Al-Hidaya ila Fara'id al-Qulub* (The Book of Direction to the Commandments of the Hearts) Follows the exact pattern of Sufi devotional manual, in ten sections, culminating in the love and union with 'the Supernal Light.' Religion divided into two parts, the external duties of the limbs and "the internal knowledge of the secret duties of the heart" ... "the inward knowledge, the light of the heart, the fire of the soul" ... [Tale of the Sage who, left alone with his companions after public audience, said] "Now let us have the secret light." Less ascetic than most Sufi texts, and more reserved on the question of union with the divine. States the principle: "Whoso pronounces a word of wisdom, even a Gentile, is to be called a wise man" (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 16a). Huge influence on kabbalists, especially reflections on solitary meditation, and on Hasidim and Musar movement. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, first Hasidic author, quotes Bahya's quotation of a "Sage" who said: "You have returned from the lesser war, now prepare for the greater war (struggle: *jihad*; i.e. the struggle with one's own nature) – a well-known *hadith* attributed to Muhammad!
8. **Judah Ha-Levi** (c. 1075-1141) the *Kuzari* and Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). Key term in his thought is the Arabic *amr ilahi*, derived from Isma'ili mystical thought (= the divine itself; I. Efros "Some Aspects of Yehuda Halevi's Mysticism" in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 1874, p. 146: "It is union with this *amr ilahi*, therefore, the divine essence itself, and not with any intermediary, that constitutes the highest attainment of man; and in his expressions for this ecstatic state, Halevi goes even beyond al-Ghazali. ... Halevi ... uses *ittasal* most commonly ... though he avoids the term *ittahad* except in the exposition of the philosopher's idea of the Active Intellect.") This *wusul* (attachment) is experienced through *dawq* = taste, intuition, versus reason.
9. Moses Maimonides (Moshe ben Maimon, Abu Imran Musa ibn Maimun, Rambam, b. Cordoba c. 1135 d. Cairo 1204)

Principles of faith (*Commentary on the Mishnah*), structured law (*fiqh*) and philosophy – emulating Islamic models, establishing Judaism as an intellectually respectable religion: The motive for the *Mishneh Torah*, culmination of Jewish *fiqh* literature.

Philosophical influences: From Maimonides' letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon, translator of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalalat al-ḥa'irin, Moreh Nevuchim*), 1199:

Aristotle's intellect represents the extreme of human intellect, if we except those who have received divine inspiration. ... The works of Aristotle are the roots and foundations of all works on the sciences, but they cannot be understood except with the help of commentaries, those of **Alexander of Aphrodisias** [late 2<sup>nd</sup> century], those of **Themistius** [317 – ?390], and those of **Averroes** [Ibn Rushd, 1126 – 1198, Spain]. ... I tell you: as for works on logic, one should only study the writings of Abu Nasr **Al-Farabi**. All his writings are faultlessly excellent. One ought to study and understand them. For he is a great man. ... Though the works of **Avicenna** [Ibn Sina, c.980 – 1037, Persia] manifest great accuracy and subtle study, [they] may give rise to objections and are not as good as those of Abu Nasr al-Farabi. Abu

Bakr al Sa'igh was also a great philosopher, and all his works are of a high standard. [Ibn Bajja, Avempace, d. 1138, Spain; Maimonides states that he read texts under the guidance of one of his pupils]

From Al-Farabi: prophet as Platonic philosopher prince.

Moses or Muḥammad? Guide of the Perplexed II, 40:

You will also find laws which, in all their rules, aim, as the law just mentioned, at the improvement of the material interests of the people: but, besides, tend to improve the state of the faith of man, to create first correct notions of God, and of angels, and to lead then the people, by instruction and education, to an accurate knowledge of the Universe: this education comes from God; these laws are divine. The question which now remains to be settled is this: Is the person who proclaimed these laws the same perfect man that received them by prophetic inspiration, or a plagiarist, who has stolen these ideas from a true prophet? In order to be enabled to answer this question, we must examine the merits of the person, obtain an accurate account of his actions, and consider his character. The best test is the rejection, abstention, and contempt of bodily pleasures: for this is the first condition of men, and *a fortiori* of prophets: they must especially disregard pleasures of the sense of touch, which, according to Aristotle, is a disgrace to us: and, above all, restrain from the pollution of sensual intercourse. Thus God exposes thereby false prophets to public shame, in order that those who really seek the truth may find it, and not err or go astray; e.g., Zedekiah, son of Maasiah, and Ahab, son of Kolaiah, boasted that they had received a prophecy. They persuaded the people to follow them, by proclaiming utterances of other prophets: but all the time they continued to seek the low pleasures of sensual intercourse, committing even adultery with the wives of their companions and followers. God exposed their falsehood as He has exposed that of other false prophets. The king of Babylon burnt them, as Jeremiah distinctly states: "And of them shall be taken up a curse by all the captivity of Judah, which are in Babylon, saying, The Lord make thee like Zedekiah, and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire. Because they have committed villainy in Israel, and have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives, and have spoken lying words in my name, which I have not commanded them" (Jer. xxix. 22, 23). Note what is meant by these words. (Trans. Friedländer)

(Note, however, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite Jewish philosopher Nethanel ben al-Fayyumi, who, in his work *Bustan al-'Uqul* [*The Garden of the Intellects*] acknowledges Muhammad as a true prophet sent to the Arabs. His work shows deep Ismaili influence and contains numerous expositions of Qur'anic verses.)

Avicenna's proof from necessary existence, influential not only on Maimonides (and Christian scholastics) but also Crescas and ultimately Spinoza

*Zahir* and *Batin* (clear and concealed, or exoteric and esoteric) – did Maimonides conceal his true thoughts?

Maimonides himself may well have been influenced by the Islamic Sufi ideal of complete proximity to God in the midst of a crowd (cf. Guide III, 51); as one 11<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi teacher put it, "The true saint goes in and out amongst the people and eats and sleeps with them and buys and sells in the market and takes part in social intercourse, and never forgets God for a single moment" (quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 243).

10. **Abraham Maimonides** (1186-1237), and the Maimonidean dynasty: Sufism (known in Jewish context as *hasidut*) and proper worship. Paul Fenton: "probably the most intimate influence of Islam on Judaism." (*The Treatise of the Pool*, London 1981, p. 1)

Do not regard as unseemly our comparison of [the true dress of the prophets] to the conduct of the Sufis, for the latter imitate the prophets [of Israel] and walk in their footsteps, not the prophets in theirs. (*Kifayat al-'Abidin* [The Compendium for the Servants of God] II, p. 320)

Thou art aware of the ways of the ancient saints [*awliya'*] of Israel, which are not or but little practised among our contemporaries, that have now become the practice of the Sufis of Islam, "on account of the iniquities of Israel," namely that the master invests the novice with a cloak as the latter is about to enter on the mystical path (*tariq*) ... This is why we moreover take over from them and emulate them in the wearing of sleeveless tunics and the like. (ibid., p. 266)

We see also the Sufis of Islam practise self-mortification by combatting sleep and perhaps that practice is derived from the words of [king] David ... observe then these wonderful traditions and sigh with regret over how they have been transferred from us and appeared amongst a nation other than ours whereas they have disappeared in our midst. My soul shall weep ... because of the pride of Israel that was taken from them and bestowed upon the nations of the world. (ibid., p. 322)

Advocates the Sufi practice of *halwa*, forty-day spiritual retreats, in emulation of Moses, involving solitary meditation in darkness, requiring "strong inner illumination (*nur batin*)".

Relationship of master and disciple

Attempted reforms in worship strongly opposed – reported to the Sultan for innovations (*bida'*) – but separate Jewish sufi prayer-halls established

Even supported delaying marriage till the age of 40 (in supposed emulation of Isaac); letter to David b. Joshua Maimonides from a woman complaining that her husband was neglecting his duties because of the time he spent in a Sufi retreat in the mountains near Cairo.

Sufi tradition continued to last Maimonidean scion, David ben Joshua Maimonides, d. 1415, influenced by Illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi (Persia, 1155–1191)

Sufi influence traced in Jerusalem, Baghdad, Damascus and Yemen

11. **Averroës** (Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198) and his influence (e.g. Moses Narboni, Gersonides), lasting and controversial
12. **Abraham Abulafia** (d. c. 1295) meditation, combination of letters, as in mysticism of Ibn Arabi (d. 1240)
13. **Lurianic Kabbalah** (Safed also an important Sufi centre in 16<sup>th</sup> century; veneration at tombs of saints). Hayyim Vital relates in his diary that his theological discussions with Muslim dignitaries prompted him to acquire a better grasp of Arabic.

14. Conclusion