THE JEWISH REACTION TO THE ISLAMIC CONQUESTS

Michael Lecker

1. Early Jewish Converts to Islam

Muḥammad’s Companion Muʿādh ibn Jabal who was probably a former Jew⁴ officiated towards the death of the Prophet Muḥammad as the governor of Janad in central Yemen. At that time most of the inhabitants of Janad and of the rest of the Yemen were Jewish. Muʿādh led a mass conversion of Jews at the mosque of Janad on the first Friday of Rajab (the seventh month of the Islamic year) which was later commemorated by an annual visit to that mosque.² Muḥammad’s own success among the members of the Jewish tribes of Medina was far less spectacular, since only a handful of them embraced Islam. We probably know about these converts because those who embraced Islam from among “the people of a sacred book” (ahl al-kitāb) play a role in anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemics by providing “proofs that Muḥammad was a true prophet”. Such a role is played, for example, by ʿAbdallāh ibn Salām who was the most famous Jewish convert at the time of Muḥammad.³ The latter reportedly expressed his resigna-

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² Muʿādh brought a letter from Muḥammad to the dominant group among the Sakāsik tribe, the Banū l-Aswād, who were the inhabitants of the Janad region. His sermon on the first Friday of Rajab was attended by former Jews from this tribe who had already converted to Islam before his arrival. Among them there was a group of Jews who questioned him about the keys of Paradise. He not only gave them the right answer, but also told them that Muḥammad had anticipated their question, and hence they converted to Islam. Miraculously every year it rains on that Friday or on the Thursday that precedes it; Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Janadi, al-Sulūk fi ṭabaqāt al-ʿulamāʾ wa-l-mulūk, ed. Muḥammad ibn ‘Ali ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Akwa’ al-Ḥiwalī, Ṣanʿā’: Maktabat al-Irshād, 1414/1993–1416/1995, 2 vols., I, 81–82; M. Lecker, “Judaism among Kinda and the ridda of Kinda”, JAOS 115 (1995), 635–650, at 638–639.

³ His tribal affiliation and the time of his conversion were disputed and regarding both we should opt for the less flattering version: he did not belong to the main Jewish tribe Qaynuqāʾ but to the marginal tribe Zaydallāt; and he embraced Islam some
tion with regard to the small number of converts from among the Jews of Medina: “Had ten Jews followed me, every single Jew on earth would have followed me”, he said.⁴ In another version of his utterance the ten Jews that should serve as an example for the rest of the Jews are learned men (aḥbār) rather than ordinary people.⁵ Muḥammad and the Jews whom he encountered in Medina were on a collision course from the outset. The war against them ended with Muḥammad’s total victory, but it still haunts Jewish-Muslim relations due to the image of the Jewish “enemies of Allāh” as it comes through in Muḥammad’s biography.

2. The Trials and Tribulations of the Conquests

Rape, enslavement and corvée usually accompany conquests, and the Islamic Conquests of the 7th century were no exception. Some comparative evidence can be found in connection with an internal Muslim war that took place some half a century after Muḥammad’s death, namely the conquest of Medina by the Umayyad army following the

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⁴ See Suhaylī, al-Rawd al-unuf, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Wakīl, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1387/1967–1390/1970, 7 vols., IV, 409–410 (islām ‘Abdillāh ibn Salām), who claims that only two Jews converted to Islam at the time of Muḥammad (lawīttaba‘ānī ‘ashara mina l-yahūd lam yabqa fī l-ard yahūdī illā ttaba‘ānī). The Jewish convert Ka‘b al-Aḥbār claimed (on the basis of Qur’ān 5,12) that the required number of Jewish converts was twelve, which brought about a harmonizing version: both claims are correct, Muḥammad meant ten converts in addition to the above mentioned two.

⁵ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad, Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Maymaniyya, 1313/1895, reprint Beirut, 6 vols., II, 346, l. 12 (law āmana bī ‘ashara min aḥbāri l-yahūd la-āmana bī kull yahūdī ’ala wajhi l-ard). The word aḥbār is part of the nickname of the above mentioned convert Ka‘b al-Aḥbār who converted to Islam at the time of the second caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb; see e.g. his entry in Encyclopaedia Judaica. In Sarah Stroumsa, “On Jewish intellectual converts to Islam in the early middle ages”, Peamim 42 (1990), 61–75, at 63 (Hebrew); and in: idem, “On Jewish intellectuals who converted in the early middle ages”, in: Daniel Frank (ed.), The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society and Identity: Proceedings of an International Conference held by the Institute of Jewish Studies, University College, London, 1992, Leiden: Brill, 1995, 179–197, at 182, his name is misprinted as Ka‘b al-Akhbār; he was not the first Jew who converted to Islam.