CHAPTER 23

Jewish Writing in Arabic in Arabic Characters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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1 Introduction

Jews have inhabited Arab lands since ancient times. The earliest traces of their presence in the Arabian peninsula date from pre-Islamic times. However, the extent to which they were settled in the area and the fact that their tribes occupied important political and economic positions there, leads us to believe that they arrived even earlier, before the 1st century CE (Stillman 1971: 239). From a linguistic point of view, it is not easy to know what languages these tribes spoke. According to Stillman, Jews at the time spoke a language that was a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew (Stillman 1979: 5). As far as written languages are concerned, the situation is more complicated. Certainly, Hebrew, being the language of the Torah, played an important role in the intellectual and religious life of the Jews, just like Aramaic, the language in which both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmud (respectively c. 5th century CE and c. 6th century CE) were written. With regard to Arabic, at the time this language was not yet codified as a written language. The Muslim oral tradition, which is the only available source for this epoch—there being no archaeological evidence—records the existence of some famous Jewish poets who composed verses in Arabic. These poets used to take part in the yearly pan-Arab fair of ʿUkāz, near Mecca, and recite their Arabic verses. Although poetry was mainly recited and transmitted orally, the existence of Jewish poets composing verses in Arabic as early as the pre-Islamic times is nevertheless a sign of their use and mastery of a form of the Arabic language characterised by strict lexical, syntactical, and stylistic rules; a formal, higher language which differed from the spoken Arabic dialects of the time.

This example shows that, while constantly maintaining their attachment to Hebrew and Aramaic, which were the languages closely associated with

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1 Examples include the poetess Sāra al-Qurayziyya, who lived in the 5th century CE, as well as Samawʿal b. ‘Ādiyāʾ (mid-6th century CE) and Kaʿb b. al-ʾAṣraf (7th century CE).
Judaism, Jews were at the same time interacting linguistically, economically, and socially with the people around them. With the Arab conquest, the Arabic language spread beyond the Arabian peninsula and came into contact with the languages of large and diverse populations stretching from North Africa to India. Jewish populations in some of these regions were also concerned at some point by this Arabization, to the point that, for many of them, Arabic became their native language.

However, this fact should not lead to the assumption that, because Jews lived in Arab lands and Arabic was their native language, it would be natural for them to practise this language and its characters in writing. Indeed, this was not really, or not always, the case. As far as written languages are concerned, Jews tended to use Judaeo-Arabic, instead, as their main and favourite way of written expression. In G. Khan's words, Judaeo-Arabic, which is defined as 'any form of Arabic language written in Hebrew characters' (Khan 2002), represents the most widespread practice of Arabic language writing by the Jews throughout their history in the Arab-Muslim world. The written output in Judaeo-Arabic, a linguistic-graphic practice which has now effectively ended, developed from Spain through North Africa, the Middle East, and even India between the 9th and the 20th century, with some earlier traces dating as early as the pre-Islamic times (Newby 1971). Linguistically, despite not being by any means a homogeneous practice—Judaeo-Arabic took different forms according to times and places where it was practiced—one can observe, in all its phases, some phenomena of deviation from what is called “classical Arabic.” These phenomena are a reflection of the dialects spoken in the different regions of the Arab lands where the Jews lived (Blau 1981 and 2002; Larcher 2001). According to Versteegh (1997 and 2014), the fact that Jews used Hebrew characters so predominantly in their Arabic writing can be explained by their special status in the Islamic Empire. As ḏimmī-s, they were granted protection and allowed to practice their religion but, despite that, the social barriers between different groups were still considerable. The use of Hebrew characters in the representation of Arabic language is a sign of this communal inward feeling.

As opposed to such a widespread practice as that of Judaeo-Arabic, that of Arabic language in Arabic characters appears to be more unexpected, or at best, marginal. It may well be that the sources currently available are not all there is, or was, and this for several reasons. For example, it is plausible, as some scholars have explained, that Jews would have taken more care throughout their history in the Arab lands in preserving their manuscripts and writings in Hebrew characters, due to the importance and sacredness they attached to these characters. This would have made the Arabic in Arabic script sources more vulnerable and possibly explain why less sources have made their way