Chapter 8

Messianism and the Shadow of History

Judaism and Islam in a Time of Uncertainty

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1 Introduction

Despite the fact that we know next to nothing about the Jews with whom Muḥammad ostensibly interacted, this has not stopped many from making historical pronouncements about them.1 There exists no material or other archaeological remains that tell us how they lived, no contemporaneous textual evidence of what they believed, and thus little to no idea who they were, let alone how they conceived of Judaism. This historical aporia, however, has not prevented the subsequent projection of a later ethnic and religious normativity onto these “Jews.” The transformative result of this Orientalist imaginary further sustains the myth of a monolithic “Judaism” present at the birth of “Islam,” nudging it along and providing the prime monotheistic matter for its subsequent genesis. Indicative of this are the comments of Shlomo Dov Goitein (1900–85), the pioneering scholar and interpreter of the documents associated with the Cairo Geniza,2 who could proclaim, against all the evidence, “that Judaism was a fully developed system at the time when the Arab Muslims made their first conquest.”3

It is important to note, however, that Goitein inherited a basic narrative scripted by a generation of German Jewish intellectuals intent on showing

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1 This comprises a lengthy genre that goes back at least to Abraham Geiger’s Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?, Bonn 1833, which was translated into English as Judaism and Islam, trans. F.M. Young, Madras 1835, repr. New York 1970. More recent iterations include Gordon D. Newby, A history of the Jews of Arabia. From ancient times to their eclipse under Islam, Columbia, SC 1988, and, most recently, Haggai Mazuz, The religious and spiritual life of the Jews of Medina, Leiden 2014.


3 Shlomo Dov Goitein, Jews and Arabs. Their contact through the ages (New York 19553), 60. In this he developed the notion of “symbiosis” to describe the relationship between Judaism and Islam, a trope that was subsequently recycled by the likes of Bernard Lewis, The Jews of Islam (Princeton 1984), e.g., xi, 77, 191, and Sarah Stroumsa, Maimonides in his world. Portrait of a Mediterranean thinker (Princeton 2011), 3–6.
the universal significance of Judaism. Their goal was nothing less than to demonstrate how Judaism functioned as the bedrock from which Christianity and Islam were hewn.\textsuperscript{4} Judaism, it is frequently assumed in this literature, bequeathed its message of unadulterated monotheism to these other religions, and today it can now stand alongside them as a \textit{primus inter pares}.\textsuperscript{5} The apologetic as opposed to historical intent of such an utterance, however, should be readily apparent.

Although scholars of Christian origins have begun to show how the emergence of Christianity and Judaism was much more complex than our traditional narrative would have us believe, there has been a surprising reluctance when it comes to “the parting of the ways” between Judaism and Islam in the century or so following the death of Muḥammad.\textsuperscript{6} This is not to say that there have not been pioneering works devoted to the study of Islamic origins,\textsuperscript{7} only that it is a topic that is surprisingly moribund within the larger context of Jewish studies.\textsuperscript{8} Yet, if the field of Jewish studies is unwilling to examine the Arab-Jewish or Judeo-Arabic tribes of Arabia in its historical context, why is it content simply to recycle nineteenth-century tropes that reveal more about the people who coined them than the actual historical record?


\textsuperscript{6} I think, for example, of the pioneering work of Daniel Boyarin. See, for example, his \textit{Border lines. The partition of Judaeo-Christianity}, Philadelphia 2014; Daniel Boyarin, \textit{The Jewish gospels. The story of the Jewish Christ}, New York 2012. More recently, see John G. Gager, \textit{Who made early Christianity? The Jewish lives of the Apostle Paul}, New York 2015.
