Haggai Mazuz


The religious history of the Ḥijāz—the area of western Arabia along the Red Sea that includes the towns of Mecca and Medina—in the centuries leading up to Muḥammad's promulgation of the Qurʾanic revelations in the early seventh century CE has been the focus of a considerable body of research for over a century now. Despite this lengthy history, it also remains a field of research that displays no sign of losing the interest of modern historians. As a result of all this work, it is now clear that communities of biblical monotheists could be found in various parts of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula, from Christians in eastern Arabia, South Arabia and the northern Arabian borderlands of the Roman and Persian empires, to Jewish groups in the northern Ḥijāz and South Arabia. Given that for many of these communities the evidence is good enough to demonstrate that they were there but not necessarily much more than this, it is understandable that studies of their religious beliefs and social structures are rare.

Haggai Mazuz's book thus addresses a considerable gap in scholarship about the religious communities of pre-Islamic Arabia. *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina* starts with an Introduction overviewing a range of the previous scholarship on this community that does exist and some of the methodological problems posed when studying it. The principal question raised, which the book goes on to address, concerns what adherence to Judaism meant in practice in Medina. The bulk of this fairly short book then focuses on four themes in particular: religious and social leadership, law and custom, religious beliefs and external characteristics. The chapter on law and custom is by far the longest section of the book. After a brief Conclusion, Mazuz offers four useful appendices, one a discussion of the presentation of the earliest Muslims in Islamic sources as anti-Rabbinic and then three offering texts and translations of later sources that offer some evidence for Jewish communities in the northern Ḥijāz. One of these is the well-known passage from Benjamin of Tudela's late twelfth-century CE travels; the other two are brief tenth-century CE Gaonic *responsa* that place a Jewish community in Wādī al-Qurā (approximately 170 miles northwest of Medina). Mazuz's ultimate conclusion is unequivocal: “Our findings demonstrate that the Medinan Jews were Talmudic-Rabbinic Jews in almost every respect” (p. 99).

To reach this conclusion, Mazuz confronts an admirably wide range of Arabic sources, from the Qurʾan to prophetic biographies and *ḥadīth* compilations as
well as legal and theological works. The breadth of the evidence provided to support the conclusion about the religious identity of Medina’s Jews is impressive. The two main problems, which will come as no surprise to those familiar with the study of pre- and early Islamic Arabia, are methodological and can be simply stated. First, none of the sources used were produced within Medina’s Jewish community. Second, of all the sources deployed as evidence, only the Qur’an could be labeled contemporary, and that is a text notoriously difficult to interpret in its contemporary setting. Slightly strangely, one other potentially useful piece of possibly contemporary evidence, the so-called “Constitution of Medina,” is barely deployed in this study. In the Introduction, Mazuz does confront some of the methodological problems and fittingly notes, “Some of the conclusions are indeed based on hypothetical assumptions, and cannot formally be considered historical facts” (p. 7).

Although the methodological problems are considered and addressed, none are convincingly dismissed, and a number of key questions remain unanswered: how did ninth-century CE and later Muslim commentators know anything about Medina’s seventh-century CE Jewish community? How can we be sure that they did not simply assume that the Jews of Medina were similar to those they encountered in Palestine, Iraq, and the other conquered territories? The methodological problems actually build still further, since to supplement the material that Arabic sources offer directly on Medina’s Jews, Mazuz also draws conclusions from the application of the principal of mukhālafa, based on the hadīth in which Muhammad commands his followers to “Do the opposite of the Jews” (khālifū al-yahūd) (see esp. pp. 25–26). This offers only a slight basis from which to draw positive conclusions about the Medinan Jews’ religious beliefs and communal organization. It is, furthermore, a pity that much modern scholarship that has analyzed many of these methodological issues in considerable detail passes unmentioned in Mazuz’s bibliography.1

With the Gaonic responsa of the tenth century CE, we have contemporary Jewish evidence that points to the existence of a Talmudic-Rabbinic community in the northern Ḥijāz, but this is four centuries after the period on which the vast majority of the book focuses. There is little in this study to prove demonstrably that Medina’s seventh-century CE Jewish community was Talmudic-Rabbinic. That said, the overall picture presented by Mazuz’s analysis is perfectly plausible, and there also seems to be virtually no evidence to support an argument that Medina’s community was anything other than

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