

Lasting Legacies: Jewish Life Under Medieval Muslim Rule

Elizabeth Ho

University of California, Los Angeles

ABSTRACT

The history of religious coexistence—particularly that of Islam’s relationship with Judaism—has often seen both periods of peace and of war. In light of modern political and religious tensions, the periods of peace and thriving are doubly important, as they provide both a precedent and a sign of hope for the future. During the rise and spread of the Muslim dynasties in the medieval period, two dynasties in particular—the Umayyads and the Fatimids—defied conflict-driven discrimination in favor of ensuring the safety and consequent success of their Jewish subjects. Both dynasties’ uniquely implemented policies and societal standards ultimately freed their Jewish dhimmis to make lasting contributions to the fields of literature, diplomacy and religious scholarship. This paper seeks to show how just as these contributions continue to benefit modern scholarship today, so must the legacy of the Fatimids and the Umayyads continue to inform the future of religious coexistence across the globe.

Keywords: Judaism, Islam, Umayyads, Fatimids, Dhimmis, Jizya

Lasting Legacies: Jewish Life Under Medieval Muslim Rule

By Elizabeth Ho¹
University of California, Los Angeles

INTRODUCTION

Since its conception as a monotheistic religion under Muhammad, Islam has shared a continually fluctuating relationship with the Jewish people. The Middle Ages—during which Jews under Muslim rule went from being viewed as compatriots and equals to categorized as separated *dhimmi*s—were no exception to this. Following the Quran’s establishment of *jizya* and *dhimmi* policy, a document known as the Pact of Umar became a major influence in the development of standard Islamic rule—a standard which ultimately classified the Jewish people as second-class citizens to be regulated and restricted. Though social and political conditions also played a hand in determining how Jewish communities fared under Muslim rule, the Umayyads and Fatimids demonstrated how abstaining from the legalization of discrimination could produce citizens like Jewish courtier Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, the innovators he sponsored, and the scholars of Kairouan—all of whom left a lasting impact on the world through their contributions to society and modern scholarship.

JEWISH LIFE UNDER MEDIEVAL MUSLIM RULE

When Muhammad first began preaching Islam as a monotheistic religion throughout polytheistic Arabia, the Prophet and his followers viewed the Jewish people as *Ahl al-Kitāb*, or “People of the Book,” whom they

¹ Elizabeth Ho, UCLA Class of 2017, studies Judaism, Islam and Semitic languages, and hopes to continue in these fields throughout her post-graduate studies.

believed would support Islam’s message to the world.² Judaism’s similarities to Islam in both scripture and the centrality of monotheism initially seemed to place the Jews in a position to be both friend and ally to Muhammad in his fight against paganism. Due to this assumed connection between the two religions, the Prophet issued a document upon his relocation to Medina known as the “Charter of Medina,” which essentially stated that “the Jews [would be] guaranteed complete protection with a social and political status not less viable than what was envisaged for the Muslims.”³ Throughout the language of the Charter, it is evident that initial policy regarding the Jews under Muslim rule had every intention of creating an environment of interreligious equality and partnership. Conflict and tension, however, soon supplanted this promising start when the Prophet’s message was met with both scholarly and religious opposition among the Jews of Medina.⁴ As the divergence between the two ostensibly similar faiths continued to grow, the Quran’s portrayal of the Jewish people began to shift further away from the egalitarian stance proposed by the Charter of 622. Unlike Muhammad’s earlier preaching, which featured the Jews in a more positive light, many of the “koranic revelations that Muhammad received in Medina frequently mention[ed] the Jews in a negative context,” and the development of a new policy regarding the Jews commenced.⁵ What eventually came to replace the Charter of Medina was the concept of the Jews as *dhimmi*—minorities who would be protected so long as they submitted to paying *jizya*. In reference to this notion of Islamic rulers extending protection to their Jewish subjects, the Quran necessitated that Jewish minorities “pay tribute (or *jizya*) out of hand and with willing submission” in order to

² Norman A. Stillman, “The Jewish Experience in the Muslim World,” in *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 85.

³ Ahmad Ziauddin, “The Concept of Jizya in Early Islam,” *Islamic Studies* 14, no. 4 (1975): 295.

⁴ W.N. Arafat, “New Light on the Story of Banū Qurayza and the Jews of Medina,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1976): 100.

⁵ Stillman, “The Jewish Experience,” 86.

receive their legal designation as *'Ahl Al-dhimma*, or “people of the pact of protection.”⁶ This ruling was twofold—while the Jews under Muslim rule were now being offered the benefit of protection, receiving such benefits would mean submitting to the role of “humbled tribute bearers”—the latter of which would be construed in a variety of ways throughout the Middle Ages.⁷ As the Quran provided no further clarification regarding the exact nature of *jizya*, or what “willing submission” entailed, early Islamic rulers found it within their jurisdiction to interpret the enigmatic verse as they saw fit.⁸ Ultimately, anything from a caliphate’s religious stance to current social or political pressures—such as the wars and plagues that took place throughout the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries—could lead Islamic rulers to view *jizya* as either an opportunity to promote the protection and tolerance of the Jewish people, or an occasion to emphasize their second-class status. On the more xenophobic end of the spectrum, some rulers went so far as to implement *jizya* as a form of humiliation and punishment, for to them it was proof that “the treachery of the Jews [had] deprived them of the rights and privileges” previously accorded to them in the Charter of Medina.⁹ Other rulers, however, chose to fall more in line with the Prophet’s initial hopes for equality and Judeo-Muslim friendship by intentionally setting aside *jizya* or other discriminatory measures in favor of promoting true protection.

Following the Quran’s mention of *jizya* and *dhimmis*, the next major development regarding the status of Jews under Muslim rule came in form of the Pact of Umar, which became an essential component of the Islamic legal system during the early Abbasid period.¹⁰ The document, which was

⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ziauddin, “The Concept of Jizya,” 303.

⁹ Ibid., 298.

¹⁰ Charles H. Parker, “Paying for the Privilege: The Management of Public Order and Religious Pluralism in Two Modern Societies,” *Journal of World History* 17, no. 3 (2006): 278.

likely issued by caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab, came to be seen as the archetypal example of how Muslim rulers should deal with their protected minority subjects.¹¹ This particular elaboration of the Quran's *dhimmi* policy expanded the "submission" of protected peoples to include a variety of requirements, including wearing distinctive clothing and agreeing not to bear arms, build new synagogues, or pray too loudly.¹² Outside of the general consensus that *dhimmi*s were subordinate to their Muslim rulers, the Pact introduced several of these additional measures that further restricted Jewish life and were especially enforced during periods of social, economic or political pressure.¹³ Throughout the following centuries, the Pact of Umar and Quranic injunction regarding *dhimmi*s and *jizya* came to play a central role in influencing how Muslim rulers interacted with their Jewish subjects. As a result, this period of medieval Islamic rule saw times of both Jewish constraint and isolation, as well as times of Jewish self-determination and equality. Two caliphates in particular—the Fatimids and the Umayyads—exhibited the more positive end of the spectrum by casting aside the restrictions of the Pact of Umar in favor of extending equality to their Jewish populations. These periods of endorsed tolerance towards Jewish *dhimmi*s eventually left their mark on the medieval and modern world through the examples they set of thriving interreligious communities, as well as the resulting growth in medieval diplomacy, scholarly developments and the arts.

The Fatimid caliphate, which ruled over much of North Africa from 909 to 1171, created one such legacy through their particularly tolerant attitude towards the Jews under their jurisdiction. Due to a series of firsthand documents recovered from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, known today as the Cairo Geniza findings, much about the quality of life for Jews under

¹¹ Stillman, "The Jewish Experience," 88.

¹² Parker, "Paying for the Privilege," 278.

¹³ Stillman, "The Jewish Experience," 88.

Fatimid rule has come to light.¹⁴ Among those records is proof that the more religiously moderate Fatimids not only ignored “the discriminatory tariffs prescribed by orthodox Islam, but also employed non-Muslims in their civil service.”¹⁵ This open-handedness in dealing with their *dhimmi* population was partially influenced by outside political pressures—the Fatimids were a Shia minority ruling over an antagonistic Sunni majority and, as a result, “preferred to rely on Christians and Jews, elevating them to high positions in government and finance.”¹⁶ Sectarianism and internal conflicts within the Muslim majority thus benefitted the caliphate’s Jewish population by removing them from the defaulted position of “other,” and placing them into a third category that was far more neutral than that of the Sunni opposition’s.

In addition to this, the Fatimids also offered their Jewish subjects positions of leadership and a higher degree of autonomy as a means of lessening *dhimmi* dependence on nearby rivals, the Abbasids.¹⁷ As a result, both rivalries for power among the caliphates and religious tensions may have played a role in encouraging the already-liberal Fatimid caliphate to further embrace their Jewish *dhimmi*s. Regardless of which factors had the greatest impact on Fatimid policy, an influential position known as “Head of the Jews,” or *Ra’is al Yahud* was born to meet both the needs of the caliphate and their Jewish population.¹⁸ Records show that this office of *Ra’is al Yahud* worked so seamlessly with its Muslim rulers that even the well-respected Jewish religious leaders of the day—such as the Gaon of Babylonia—utilized this system and Jewish representatives at the Fatimid

¹⁴ S.D. Goitein, “The Cairo Geniza as a Source for the History of Muslim Civilisation,” *Studia Islamica* 3 (1955): 76.

¹⁵ Stillman, “The Jewish Experience,” 100.

¹⁶ Elinoar Bareket, “The Head of the Jews (ra’is Al-yahud) in Fatimid Egypt: A Re-Evaluation,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 67, no.2 (2004): 185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

Court to ensure that their voices were heard.¹⁹ Several Cairo Geniza documents also report that beyond rejecting the discriminatory measures favored by orthodox caliphates, the Fatimids went directly against the Pact of Umar's instructions by aiding their Jewish courtiers with restoring razed synagogues and implementing tax alleviations for the Jews.²⁰ The ensuing flourishing of Jewish autonomy and well-being under Fatimid rule—owed in part to a unique political and religious atmosphere, as well as the caliphate's moderate religious stance—resulted in great contributions to medieval religious scholarship and literature.

The metropolis of Kairouan, which functioned as an important center for Jewish thought, provides a unique window through which these results can be most clearly seen. It was in this city that the scholars of Kairouan gained renown for their contributions to both secular and religious Hebrew literature and two Jewish academies for higher education were founded.²¹ As an important medieval community of scholars and religious sages, Kairouan produced many important Judeo-Arabic works on the Talmud and Hebrew literature—including one Talmudic commentary by Rabbi Hananel that is still included in standard versions of the Talmud today.²² The city was an epicenter for Jewish thought that embodied the great heights to which truly supported religious minorities could rise when encouraged by their rulers and local environment—higher education, typically a marker of privilege and wealth, was an integral part of the community. Both the scholarly work produced there and documents found in the Cairo Geniza, have illuminated the implications of this vibrant community and its significant contributions to the development of modern religious scholarship. Beyond its impact on Hebrew literature and Judaic thought, Kairouan also served as proof that Jews and Muslims are capable

¹⁹ Ibid., 190.

²⁰ Ibid., 191.

²¹ Stillman, "The Jewish Experience," 100.

²² George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2001), 350.

of not only surviving, but thriving together. The Fatimids, through utilizing the tensions of their day to create an environment conducive to tolerance and interreligious partnership, thus benefitted both themselves and their Jewish population in a way that has continued to remain significant for a multitude of reasons.

Though vastly different from their rivals the Fatimids, the Umayyads also set an important precedent for history through the welcoming environment they produced for Jews and Muslims alike. Under Umayyad rule, al-Andalus in particular became known for its support of “fruitful intermarriage [...] and the quality of cultural relations with the *dhimmi*,” all of which contributed to the legacy of a ruling elite that uniquely “defined their version of Islam as one that loved dialogues with other traditions.”²³ One figure in particular, Jewish courtier Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, embodied the pinnacle of *dhimmi* mobility in Umayyad society through his career as a court “physician, diplomat, finance minister, and factotum” to two consecutive caliphs—Abd al-Rahman III and al-Hakam II.²⁴ Shaprut was also a *nāsī*, or “secular head of Andalusian Jewry,” who functioned as the representative of various Jewish communities throughout the Iberian Peninsula in dealings with the Islamic rulers of the day.²⁵ As a high-ranking aristocrat, Shaprut was even sent out to negotiate with Christian rulers—making him a unique figure whose *dhimmi* status did not restrict him, but rather enabled him to facilitate unity between three different religious groups as the Jewish representative of an Islamic ruler in a Christian court. His influence grew so great that when Byzantine Jewry found itself under persecution at the hand of Emperor Romanos Lekapenos, it was Hasdai—the Jewish courtier in a Muslim court—whom

²³ Maria Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little Brown, 2002), 21.

²⁴ Walter P. Zenner, “Jewish Retainers as Power Brokers,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 81 no. 1/2 (1990): 128.

²⁵ Stillman, “The Jewish Experience,” 102.

they requested mediate on their behalf.²⁶ In his work on “Jewish Retainers as Power Brokers,” Walter Zenner states that this Umayyad-assisted “Muslim Golden Age in Spain” saw a multitude of men like Shaprut—“powerful minority officials and courtiers [who] were mediators, not merely clients, that served several interest groups.”²⁷ The Umayyads, who offered a wealth of opportunities to their Jewish subjects, reached this pinnacle in Islamic history partly due to their successful relationship with the *dhimmis*. Rather than restricting their Jewish residents to a second-class status perpetuated by a series of humiliating regulations, the Umayyads chose to create an environment in which upward mobility among even their religious minorities was possible. The result of this openhanded treatment was powerful courtiers like Shaprut—men who capitalized on the self-determination and freedom available to them in al-Andalus, then in turn went on to invest that freedom by acting as patrons to pioneering scholars and artists. Hasdai Ibn Shaprut’s patronage, in particular, “played a dominant part in the development of Jewish culture in Moslem Spain,” and aided several key thinkers whose works have had a great influence on modern scholarship today.²⁸ One such innovator sponsored by Hasdai’s patronage was Menahem ben Saruk, a classical Hebrew grammarian who founded a Hebrew grammar school in Cordova then went on to publish his *Mahberet*, or “Hebrew Dictionary.” Saruk’s *Mahberet* was not only the “earliest attempt at a complete vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew under a systematic arrangement,” but also the first Biblical Hebrew dictionary to be written in Hebrew, rather than Arabic.²⁹ Yet another unique individual encouraged by Hasdai’s support was Hebrew poet Danush ben Labrat, whose use of Arabic themes and metrics

²⁶ Jacob Reiner, “The Original Hebrew Yosippon in the Chronicle of Jerahmeel,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 60, no. 2 (1969): 128.

²⁷ Zenner, “Jewish Retainers,” 143.

²⁸ M. S. Stern, “Summary: Two New Data About Hasdāi B. Shapirūt,” *Zion* 10 (1944/45): viii.

²⁹ Morris Jastrow, “Jewish Grammarians of the Middle Ages,” *Hebraica* 4, no. 1 (1887):26.

in his poetry was previously unheard of, and who went on to “set the standard for medieval Andalusian Hebrew poetry.”³⁰ The implications of Saruk’s *Mahberet* and Labrat’s groundbreaking poetry would not be known today had it not been for the support that both scholars received from a Jewish man who was himself supported by his Muslim rulers. In what is perhaps most indicative of Jewish status under Umayyad rule, Hasdai not only wielded great influence among Jews, Muslims and Christians, but also “had a grand vision of Sepharad as a leading seat of world Jewry.”³¹ The environment and policies of the Umayyad caliphate during Hasdai’s time were so tolerant and egalitarian towards the *dhimmi*s, that this diplomat and patron was able to envision Jews as not only flourishing under Islamic rule—but even reaching new pinnacles of philosophy, art and innovation.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Middle Ages, the quality of Jewish life under Muslim rule was largely left at the mercy of either current political and economic conditions or the religious beliefs of current rulers. The Prophet himself shared a varying relationship with the Jews from Mecca to Medina, which ultimately reflected itself in the text of the Quran and the development of the Jews as *dhimmi*s subjugated to *jizya*. While the designation of Jews as *‘Ahl al-Kitāb* was interpreted in a variety of ways—most notably in the Pact of Umar, which significantly chose to further “humble” these religious minorities with far more than *jizya*—there were also important periods in which the *dhimmi*s lived with the full support and encouragement of their Muslim rulers. Amidst an environment in which discrimination was both legalized and normalized, the Umayyads and Fatimids left a lasting mark on history by promoting equal treatment, higher learning and cultural

³⁰ Stillman, “The Jewish Experience,” 103.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

assimilation for their Jews. Whether it is through the scholarship and innovation that their truly protected *dhimmis* produced, or the fact that both caliphates demonstrated to the world that Jews and Muslims are fully capable of cohabitating and thriving together, the Umayyads and Fatimids left a mark on history that has remained significant even today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arafat, W. N. "New Light on the Story of Banū Qurayza and the Jews of Medina." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1976): 100-7.
- Bareket, Elinoar. "The Head of the Jews (ra'is Al-yahud) in Fatimid Egypt: A Re-Evaluation." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 67.2 (2004): 185-97.
- Goitein, S. D. "The Cairo Geniza as a Source for the History of Muslim Civilisation." *Studia Islamica* 3 (1955): 75-91.
- Jastrow, Morris. "Jewish Grammarians of the Middle Ages." *Hebraica* 4, no. 1 (1887): 26-33.
- Menocal, Maria. *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. Boston: Little Brown, 2002.
- Parker, Charles H. "Paying for the Privilege: The Management of Public Order and Religious Pluralism in Two Early Modern Societies." *Journal of World History* 17.3 (2006): 267-96.
- Reiner, Jacob. "The Original Hebrew Yosippon in the Chronicle of Jerahmeel." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 60.2 (1969): 128-46.
- Robinson, George. *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2001.
- Stern, M.S. "Summary: Two New Data about Hasdāi B. Shapirūt." *Zion* 10 (1944/45): ii-ix.
- Stillman, Norman A. "The Jewish Experience in the Muslim World." In *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion and Culture*, edited by Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin, 85-112. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Zenner, Walter P. "Jewish Retainers as Power Brokers." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 81 no. 1/2 (1990): 127-49.
- Ziauddin, Ahmad. "The Concept of Jizya in Early Islam." *Islamic Studies* 14.4 (1975): 293-305.