

Prescribing Messiah: A Case Study concerning Internal Conversion

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'From the midst of Edom and Epher I cry bitterly unto Thee.'
Yudah Halevi

Introduction and Structure

This paper aims to analyse certain issues in the social and religious history of medieval Jewish communities under the rule of Islam. Its focus is an epistle which was sent by Maimonides in 1172 in response to an appeal from a Yemenite rabbi, Jacob al-Fayumi. The letter, commonly known as *Iggeret Teman*, deals with no less than six inter-related topics ranging from family traditions to binding rabbinical instructions. Written at the time of the crusades, the *Iggeret* reveals the anxious responses of marginal communities to the changes in the quality and structure of power in the Middle Eastern region.¹

Maimonides' writings, in particular his epistles, go beyond mere historical circumstances. His lasting authority in speculative theology in contemporary Orthodox Judaism and the incorporation into the daily ritual of his formulated thirteen principles of faith, the 'Jewish dogma' as it is called, point to the continuance of medieval traditions to the present day. In the Yemenite Jewish tradition, Maimonides' name has been added to the daily prayer as a token of gratitude and a pointer towards a social and religious debt.²

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¹ On the necessity to consider marginal communities the better to assess the impact of the crusades and address the striking differences between Christian and Muslim historiographies in matters such as names and dates of important battles, see B. Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, London, 1982, pp. 22-8.

² On the role of Messianic ideas (including Maimonides') in contemporary Judaism, see C. Waxman, 'Messianism, Zionism, and the State of Israel', *Modern Judaism*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1987, pp. 175-92. However, the modern concern for 'rationalised' religion does not always agree with its medieval antecedents. For controversies surrounding Maimonides' writings, see M. Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: from Maimonides to Abarvel*, Oxford, 1986, and E. Shmueli, *Seven Jewish Cultures: a reinterpretation of Jewish history and thought*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 289.

The status of both Christians and Jews in medieval Muslim societies is best described by employing two Qur'anic terms: *ahl-al-kitab* (People of the Book), which denoted the shared religious concerns of the three monotheistic religions, and *ahl-al-dhimma* (Protected People), that reflects the Muslim response towards the Christian and Jewish rejection of Muhammad's revelation and subsequent missions. This inherent tension between common theological disposition and separate religious adherence was mitigated by a variety of legal and economic regulations such as poll tax, marked clothing and restrictions concerning the public display of Christianity and Judaism. In exchange, Christians and Jews were offered protection granted by the central Muslim ruler in charge of their residential areas.³

However, it is mistaken to view the historical condition of the Jew in medieval Islam merely through 'legal eyes'. In addition to the constant financial burden and public humiliation, the Jews of Islam suffered periods of direct and violent persecution. The peculiarity of Yemen's political instability and its geographical proximity to Muslim holy places rendered Yemenite Jewry more susceptible to either local or regional tensions. In the 12th century when a rebellious leader became the chief Yemenite ruler, he issued an order for the conversion of all Yemenite Jewry to Islam. In direct contradiction to the Qur'an which prohibits forced conversion of the *ahl-al-kitab*, the Jews of Yemen were given the option of conversion, death or further exile. Those difficulties prompted the strengthening of inherent eschatological and messianic speculations already reflecting the aftermath of the crusaders' impact. It was the outside as well as inside pressures that promoted the Yemenite scholar to enter into the correspondence with Maimonides, the spiritual and political leader of Mediterranean Judaism.

The structure of this paper generally follows Clifford Geertz's landmark essay, "Internal Conversion" in Contemporary Bali'.⁴ In this essay, Geertz argues against the common misconception which views religion either as immovable fossil or as a precious souvenir continuously threatened by change and progress.⁵ Instead, Geertz offers a model, based on Max Weber's works, of internal conversion. While maintaining Weber's polar opposition between 'traditional' and 'rationalised' religions, Geertz

³ For the different predicament of Jews and Christians under Islam, see M. Gervers and R. Bikhazi (eds), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, Toronto, 1990, and B. Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton, 1987, in particular chs 1 and 2.

⁴ In C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York, 1973, pp. 170-92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

notes the common ground between the two modes of religious expression, namely the seeking of a bridge between the believing person and the almost inaccessible divine. Furthermore, both 'traditional' and 'rationalised' religions offer coherent and self-conscious approaches. Each of them, however, uses different vocabulary and practices, and the 'rationalised' type gives more visible signs of doctrinal generalisation.

According to Geertz, 'internal conversion' is the process by which 'traditional' religion undergoes systematic construction of its legal and moral codes, which assists in its turning into 'rationalised' religion. In this paper Geertz's model is used to reexamine a particular set of historical and literary phenomena in medieval Judaism. The paper offers new insights into Maimonides' contribution to medieval Jewish thought and aims to address questions concerning conversion from inside one tradition rather than between two or more religious traditions.⁶

The paper is divided into three parts. The first outlines the 'traditional' form of Yemenite Jewish religion by observing its main features and their possible origins. The second considers Maimonides' epistle as a facilitating agent for 'rationalised' religion, and the third will examine the extent of internal conversion in Yemenite Judaism insofar as it might have occurred.

'Traditional' Yemenite Judaism: Methodology and Features

There is no historical documentation regarding Yemenite Jewry prior to the tenth century. It was only then, with the rise of the Fatimid empire whose centre was in Tunisia, and with the European awakening during the Carolingian renaissance, that Yemen reestablished itself as an essential link between the West and India. Most of this documentation comes from the Fostat *geniza*, the 'book store-house', and serves as a witness to the prosperity of the Yemenite Jewry. The general success of their commercial enterprises could be seen from extant letters from Jewish merchants, artisans, women; they were almost always the givers of charity and not the recipients.⁷

The commercial links with India were primarily within the domain of import, although some marginal export activity also took place, including the 'export' of Jewish brides to Indian agents. The nature of the imported

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁷ S. Goitein, 'Yemenite Jewry and the India Trade', in S. Goitein, *The Yemenites: History, Communal Organisation, Spiritual Life: Selected Studies* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1983, pp. 33-52.

goods, mainly spices and tin kitchen utensils, fell within the sphere of Jewish dietary laws and required authoritative religious advice. This was sought from the Yemenites' closest and most influential neighbours, the Jews of Egypt. These queries of theirs provided the background for al-Fayumi's appeal to Maimonides, who was then serving as head of the Egyptian Jewry.⁸

The *geniza* provides inexhaustible information concerning the written interactions between medieval Jewish communities. It assists in locating shifts in the political and economic spheres by affording the social historian a window through which members of the Jewish communities become almost real and present through our insights into their daily concerns.⁹

Furthermore, the *geniza* records point to transformation in the religious organisation of medieval Mediterranean Judaism. When the Abbasid empire of Iraq fell, and the centre of Islam passed from there to Fatimid Tunisia, the rabbinical colleges of the Jewish Babylonian tradition, which had been long established in southern Iraq, were affected and faced difficulties. The leaders of dispersed Jewish communities were forced to adopt a regional rather than a central model of authority. Regional authorities were in a position to decide on most religious matters, but their rulings were effective only within local boundaries not in the universal domain. This change created a need for a set of symbols and metaphors which at first foreshadowed and then legitimised religious transformation.¹⁰

Even if one leaves aside the different oral traditions which link the Yemenite Jews to the political and religious upheavals during the time of the first and second temples, it seems likely that Yemen experienced five major waves of Jewish migration prior to the tenth century. These may be summarised as follows.¹¹

1. The first evidence of Jewish life in Yemen comes from a burial cave in the Be'it Shearim necropolis east of Haifa. This burial cave dates to the

⁸ For discussion concerning medieval Jewish communal organisation, see I. Baer, 'The Origins of the Organisation of the Jewish Community of the Middle Ages' (in Hebrew), *Zion*, 15, 1950-1, pp. 1-41, and M. Cohen, *Jewish Self-government in Medieval Egypt: the origins of the office of head of the Jews ca. 1065-1126*, Princeton, 1980.

⁹ For comprehensive discussion concerning the *geniza*, see S. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza* (6 vols), Berkeley, 1967-93.

¹⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, 'The Influence of Religious Symbols on Social Change; A Place on Which to Stand', in his *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Chicago, 1993, pp. 129-46.

¹¹ The model for five waves of migration is taken from Goitein, 'Yemenite Jewry', in particular pp. 37-8.

third century and contains the graves of Jewish merchants from Himyar in Yemen. According to early Muslim writers, this layer of Jewish life had all but disappeared by the time of the Muslim conquest of Yemen in 628 C.E. Yet the influence of the Himyarite Jews on pre-Islamic Yemen and the role of Judaism (or rather of Jewish-like traditions) on the formulation of Islam in the Arabian peninsula can be seen from epigraphic evidence dating to the Himyarite kingship.¹²

2. Refugees from Byzantine persecutions and economic restrictions imposed during the reign of Justinian. The evidence for the second wave of migration lies in the traditional crafts of Yemenite Jews and styles in silversmithing, goldsmithing and embroidery.

3. Jews from Iran and Iraq migrated by land through Yemama together with the Zaidi Imams, who became the rulers of Yemen and whose origin was in North Iran around the Caspian Sea. The historical proof for this wave is found in the constant reference to Jews in the Zaidii religious treatises.

4. Migration from Iraq from about the eighth century to the tenth by sea. The historical evidence is provided by the examination of Talmudic reading techniques and the preservation of modes of studying with the daily division between the communal and the private, synagogue and father's house, respectively. These techniques were brought directly from the Talmudic institutions in Iraq which had been disrupted by the collapse of Abbasid hegemony.

5. Jewish migration from Fatimid Egypt and elsewhere in the Mediterranean region in order to take part in trade with India.

'Rationalised' Medieval Judaism: *Iggeret Teman*

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, in Hebrew Rambam and elsewhere Maimonides (1135-1204) is the most noted of Jewish medieval thinkers. A follower of Aristotelian philosophy, Maimonides aimed at merging Jewish theological concerns with Hellenistic metaphysical speculations. Like other medieval thinkers, Maimonides combined communal commitment with a detached and somewhat esoteric writing career throughout his life. His theology

¹² For more details concerning Himyar, see H. Hirschberg, 'The Jewish Kingdom of Himyar' (in Hebrew), in Y. Yesha'yahu and Y. Tobi (eds), *The Jews of Yemen: Studies and Researches*, Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 19-27.

represents medieval rationalism and *Iggeret Teman* is example of erudite yet sensitive Jewish polemical literature.¹³

The *Iggeret* is complex in structure and laden with rhetorical devices. Although the epistle is composed as an answer to urgent matters, Maimonides adopts the device of deferring authoritative solution while first seeking to address more general issues. These are: the phenomenology of Jewish history, speculations based on biblical verses, Jewish doctrinal assertions, relations between Judaism and both Christianity and Islam, a refutation of Muslim biblical hermeneutics, and Jewish messianic calculations. The question of whether Maimonides is consciously engaged in a process of 'internal conversion' must remain open. Nevertheless, by using domestic idioms and referring to members of families, he is seeking transformation from the inside.

You write that the hearts of some people have *turned away*, uncertainty befalls them and their beliefs are weakened ... And now, my coreligionists, it is essential for you all to give attention and consideration to that which I am going to point out to you. You should *impress it upon* the minds of your women and children, so that their faith which may be feeble and impaired may be strengthened ... (pp. 438-9, italics mine)

Following this request, Maimonides proceeds to supply Yemenite Jewry with tools in order to deal with the urgent situation and, moreover, to help them reinterpret their tradition in a more 'rationalised' and 'worldly' form. His authoritative advice could be summarised as follows.

1. Phenomenology of Jewish history

Instead of focusing his attention on Yemen, Maimonides directs his readers' attention to the 'lachrymatory' nature of Jewish history. Converting local concerns to a universal truth-claim, Maimonides presents the macrocosm rather than the microcosm, allowing Yemenite Jewry to belong to the wider world both contemporaneously ('For these are evil tidings ...') and historically ('Therefore all the nations instigated by envy and impiety rose up against us ...'). In other words, by attempting to place the local danger

¹³ All quotations from *Iggeret Teman* in this paper are taken from B. Cohen (trans.), 'Epistle to Yemen', in I. Twersky (ed.), *A Maimonides Reader*, New York, 1972, pp. 437-63.

faced by Yemenite Jewry within the universal Jewish tradition, Maimonides translates the idioms of Yemenite local and domestic concerns into medieval historical theory.

2. Speculative exegesis

He next addresses himself to the matter of the study of the Hebrew Bible. Utilising a variety of sophisticated exegetical methods, Maimonides presents an intertextual approach by which each verse is made dependent on others for the correct and complete meaning. His main concern is with the book of Daniel, the most eschatological of all in the Hebrew Bible, but his method is applied throughout the whole epistle to the Yemenites. In articulating intertextuality, Maimonides advocates a dialectical approach which enables the transition from oral tradition, which relies on memory, to literate scholarship, which is bound by constant textual reference. In other words, he aims at moving from the traditional structure of Jewish scholarship to medieval Jewish scholasticism.

3. Jewish doctrinal assertions

In contrast to the traditional halachic reading of biblical law, Maimonides urges his readers to engage in a more symbolic interpretation.

If he [the biblical reader] could only fathom the inner intent of the law, then he would realise that the essence of the divine true religion lies in the deeper meaning of its positive and negative precepts, every one of which will aid man in his striving after perfection, and remove the impediment to the attainment of perfection ... (pp. 442-3)

Maimonides' articulation of perfection, which was to be achieved through esoteric or occult reading of the law, allows for a redefinition of Jewish principles and then for a modification of community self-definition.

These commands will enable the strong and elite to acquire moral and intellectual qualities, each according to his ability. Thus the godly community becomes pre-eminent, reaching a twofold perfection. By first perfection I mean, man's spending his life in this world under the most agreeable and congenial conditions. The second perfection would

constitute the achievement of intellectual objectives, each in accordance with his native powers. (pp. 442-3)

Maimonides' twofold perfection is the basis for his entire theological discourse. In order to combat medieval polemics against Judaism, Maimonides puts a seal on hermeneutics concerning the biblical interdictions: first by noting the difference between inner and outer, and then through the process of reintegration. He thus achieves the concept of double perfection for the whole community while maintaining balance between the elite and the common folk.

4. Judaism as opposed to Christianity and Islam

Perhaps one of the striking features of medieval society is the anomalous relations between Judaism on the one hand and Christianity and Islam on the other. While Christianity and Islam accepted biblical revelation and acknowledged the temporal priority of Judaism, medieval political structures marginalised the Jews by selective overrepresentation: in taxation, in specialised clothing and in spatial enclosures. Maimonides' epistle seeks to redress the political situation through employing theological underrepresentation of the two later faiths. Pointing to the history of both Christianity and Islam, Maimonides reclaims Jewish theological incomparability as the only true original religion.

The tenets of other religions which resemble those of Scriptures have no deeper meaning, but are superficial imitations, copied from and patterned after it. They modelled their religions upon ours to glorify themselves, and indulge the fancy that they are similar to so and so. However, their counterfeiting is an open secret to the learned. Consequently they became objects of derision and ridicule just as one laughs and smiles at an ape when it imitates the actions of men. (p. 443)

In contradiction to the political situation where the Jew was the ridiculed, grotesque relic of an irrelevant past, Maimonides created a theological utopia in which Jews hold power over both Christianity and Islam, so building an inverted universe where Judaism through religious antecedence reigns supreme.

5. Refutation of Muslim biblical hermeneutics

The cluster of metaphors in the preceding quotation from *Iggeret Teman*, counterfeit, forgery and so forth, alludes to the Muslim critique of the Hebrew Bible. By viewing the Mosaic codex as a corrupt message, the Qur'an (Sura VII.150-70) aims at undercutting the basis of Torah and the Gospels while creating the ground for the perfected message of the last prophet, Muhammad. Maimonides retaliates by refuting Muslim claims concerning veiled allusions to Muhammad in the Hebrew Bible. After citing the alleged references, Maimonides moves to overturn the critique.

These arguments have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating. It is not enough to declare that they are altogether feeble; nay to cite as proofs these verses is ridiculous and absurd in the extreme ... The motive for their accusation lies, therefore, in the absence of any allusion to Muhammad in the Torah ... (pp. 449-50)

While there is not much medieval Jewish polemic against Islam, there is enough anti-Christian literature composed by Jews living in Muslim countries to allow for genre analysis. In a recently published article, Daniel Lasker divides medieval Jewish polemics into three types: exegetical, historical and rational.¹⁴ In the *Iggeret*, Maimonides employs all three throughout his argument. Historically he proves that the Bible had been translated into a variety of languages before Muhammad. Rationally he states that all biblical traditions are uniform and thirdly, exegetically he demonstrates that there is no allusion to Muhammad in the Hebrew Bible.

6. Messianic calculations

It is in fact possible to claim that throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries the three monotheistic traditions experienced what might be called 'messianic fervour'. Jewish calculations, which aimed at determining the year of the Messiah, fixed it at (according to tradition from the Creation) 4854-5/1096 C.E. Pope Urban II, outside the gates of Clermont, spoke of the need to salvage Christian brethren in 1095. The Almohads' rise around the Mediterranean forced conversion on Jews and Christians since 500 years had passed since Muhammad preached in Yethrib-Medina. It lies beyond this paper's scope to detail the reasons which led to this

¹⁴ 'The Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages', *American Academy for Jewish Research Proceedings*, vol. 57, 1990-1, pp. 121-53.

seemingly historical coincidence. Suffice it to note that during these two centuries, there were at least eight Jewish messianic movements: the first was in France in 1087 and the last in Yemen in 1172.

Maimonides' *Iggeret Teman* was written in response to the Yemenite messianic movement. He constructs sophisticated rhetorical devices and continuously juxtaposes biblical and rabbinical arguments with scientific observations. These latter are contrasted with astrological claims which predicted an imminent messianic arrival.

For while the Gentiles believe that our nation will never constitute an independent state, nor will they even rise above their present condition, and all the astrologers, diviners and augurs concur in this opinion, God will prove false their views and beliefs, and will order the advent of the Messiah. Again, it is Isaiah who makes reference to this event in this verse: 'That frustrates the tokens of the imposters, and makes the diviners mad; that turns wise men backward, and makes their knowledge foolish ... That says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited (Is. 44:25-6) ... This is the correct view that every Israelite should hold, without paying attention to the conjunctions of the stars, of greater or smaller magnitude. (p. 453)

According to Maimonides the reason for the Yemenite messianic movement was a reaction to the decree of forced conversion. Maimonides' sympathetic concern with Yemenite distress sees him compose a list of preconditions, so that the true Messiah could be distinguished from imposters. The list or prescription is the first of its kind in Judaism. Since then, it has become the crucial element in Jewish teaching concerning the awaited Messiah.

It is, my coreligionists, one of the fundamental articles of the faith of Israel, that the future redeemer of our people will spring only from the stock of Solomon, son of David. He will gather our nation, assemble our exiles, redeem us from degradation, propagate the true religion, and exterminate his opponents ... (pp. 456-7)

Maimonides' innovative approach towards Judaism was quite revolutionary. Using a variety of techniques he managed to shift the Jewish theology from Talmudic discourse into theological and rational religion. By prescribing the messianic qualities, he gave the future Jewish authorities

analytical tools to examine rather emotional and sensitive aspects of the religion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is need to answer three questions. First, whether Maimonides' attempt at 'rationalising' Yemenite Judaism was successful; second, whether the 'internal conversion' was accomplished, and third, what can be learned about conversion through the example of this case study.

Maimonides' attempts were successful insofar as they contributed to averting some dangers associated with messianic movements. As far as historical evidence shows, it seems that Yemenite Jewry retained its communal cohesion without major friction. However, one year after the composition of the *Iggeret*, Egypt conquered Yemen and under Egyptian orders forced conversion of Jews was brought to an immediate halt. It should be noted that Muslim forced conversions during the Middle Ages were rare and the Yemenite example was, according to Goitein, 'an act of a crazed ruler and in contradiction to Muslim law'.¹⁵

Regarding the second question, the answer is rather complicated. Throughout history each ethnic community within Judaism developed certain customs which distinguish it from the rest. Although most communities differed in minor domestic aspects such as unique food, major rituals and regulations are shared by almost all communities. However, Yemenite Judaism differed from others in one crucial matter. While all Jewish communities banned polygamy around the tenth century, Yemenite Jewry held fast to its practice until the arrival of most Yemenite Jews in Israel in 1948. Although polygamy is but one aspect of late antique Judaism, Yemenite Jews kept most of their traditional customs intact. It is, therefore, correct to assert that, insofar as Maimonides' teachings were incorporated into Yemenite Judaism, 'internal conversion' was accomplished. However, his teachings did not stop certain aspects of the tradition and due to its geographical isolation, Yemenite religion continued to exist by combining the 'traditional' and the 'rational' side by side.¹⁶

¹⁵ Goitein's remark is quoted in Y. Tobi, 'Conversion to Islam among Yemenite Jews under Zaidi Rule - the Position of Zaida Law, the Imam and Muslim Society' (in Hebrew), *Pe'Amim*, 42, 1990, pp. 105-26.

¹⁶ On the continuation of traditional messianic calculations in Yemenite Jewry after Maimonides' letter see Y. Ratzahbi, 'Apocalypses and Reckoning of the End of Days

The contribution of the 'internal conversion' model to studies concerning conversion is multifarious. First, it shows that religious traditions are subjected to constant transformation and are able to reinvent themselves to address internal and external political pressure. Second, it exemplifies that the functions fulfilled by religion are maintained although their expressions might vary. Third, the model of 'internal conversion' allows 'traditional' to coexist with 'rational' religion rather than placing the two modes of religion in opposition. Fourth, the model allows the phenomenon of conversion to shift from a matter of limits (between religious traditions) into an issue at the heart of the central authority. By subtle and careful mobilisation, Maimonides was able to transcend local issues and reach towards universal truth claims. This was achieved not by reaching outwards but by shaking the religious foundations and turning inward.

among Yemenite Jewry' (in Hebrew), in *Folklore Research Center Studies*, vol. I, ed. D. Noy and I. Ben-Ami, Jerusalem, 1970, pp. 295-323.