What was the Jewish knowledge of Islam, its institutions and dogmas, in the pre-modern period? How familiar were Jews living under Islam with its holy scripture, the Qur’an, its contents and its language, and how did they use this book in their works? What was their understanding of the Prophet Muhammad and his role in history, and what did they make of the rise of Islam?

The goal of this short essay is to investigate the Jewish response to the rise of Islam as reflected in narratives from the tenth century CE and later. I argue that Jews living under Islam had profound knowledge of the Qur’an and the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and that they used their knowledge of Islam in order to create narratives of counter-history of its origins in seventh-century Arabia. Written sources indicate knowledge of the Qur’an and Muhammad’s biography among Jews of the medieval Islamic lands, as demonstrated, for example, in Samaw’al al-Maghribi’s (d. 1175) autobiographical account of his conversion to Islam. This author tells his readers that as a lad, long before adopting medicine and mathematics as his professions, he was engrossed by readings in Arabic such as the romances
of Ḍhūʾl-Himma, and the like, as well as the histories of al-Ṭabarī (Tārīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulāk, the History of Messengers and Kings) and Miskawayh (Tajārib al-umam, the Experiences of Nations), from which he learned the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. These readings eventually led him to the Qurʾan. Another Jewish apostate, Saʿīd b. Ḥasan al-Iskandarī, who converted to Islam in 1298, reports that his father, a Jewish scholar (min ʿulamāʾ Banū Isrāʾīl), used to teach him the Torah and demonstrate to him the allusions to Muhammad found in the Jewish scriptures, and even influenced him to like the Prophet from an early age (wa-kāna yuḥabbibunī fihiṭ).

These accounts originate in polemical writings that were composed by converts in order to attack their former coreligionists, and therefore their testimony should not be taken at face value. The two tracts, Samawʾalʾs Ḥifḥam al-Yahūd (Silencing the Jews) and Saʿīd b. Ḥasanʾs Risāla (Epistle), join a long tradition of attesting the prophecy of Muhammad in the writings of Jews and Christians, which is known as the literature of dalāʾīl (proofs/signs of prophecy) that has its origins in the Qurʾan. A major part of this literature is devoted to scriptural ‘proofs’ from the Bible.

Nevertheless, corroborated with evidence from other written sources, Samawʾal and Saʿīd do exemplify the curiosity of Jews about the Qurʾan and the life of the Prophet, out of the need for entertainment, study, or polemic. The tenth-century Karaite scholar Yaʿqūb al-Qirqisānī mentions the most important sīra (biography) of the Prophet known to us, the work by Muhammad b. Ishāq (d. c. 768), in his refutation of the transmission of prophetic traditions (ḥadīth) in Islam, arguing for the fallacy of the methods used by the ʿulamāʾ as well as responding to their accusation of distortion (tahrīf) of the Jewish scriptures due to unreliable transmission.

The Jewish versions of the Bahūrā legend, studied by Shimon Shtober and Moshe Gil, are a fascinating example of intimate Jewish knowledge of Muhammadʾs biography and Qurʾānic exegesis (tafsīr). Let us look at one version of this story, Qisṣat asḥābāt (sic) Muḥammad (The Story of Muhammadʾs Companions), extant in a manuscript fragment from the Cairo Geniza (ms. TS-AS 161.32):

“The Story of the companions of Muhammad and his affair (amr).

This is the writing (kitāb) concerning the story of Muhammad that occurred in Ṣarṣat al-Ghanam, which is called Jabal al-Ḥadīth. He moved to Ṣarṣa and the Hijāz because of the monk who lived in Balqīn [i.e. Balqāʾ in southern Transjordan] on a pillar called “the sign of the sun.” [sic] [Jewish] scholars appeared before him, and told him how his matter (amr) was, and devised a book for him.

They inscribed the name of each of them in the sūra of his Qurʾan, and wrote secretly and incomprehensibly in it: “Thus did the sages of Israel advise to the wicked LM [read: ʾillem, “dumb”], and “Whoever comprehends this book, takes hold of it, and informs somebody of the nations of the world [of its secret contents], is cursed by the mouth of God.”

The name of the monk was Ḥabīb-Bahūrā [sic]… and these are the [Jewish] scholars who came to him [Muhammad]: Abraham, called Kaʾb al-ʿAbbār; Absalom, called ʿAbd al-Salām.
This story, like other ones that exist in Jewish sources, is in fact a combination of two distinct narratives from the *sīra*: the famous story of Bahīrā, a monk who identified young Muhammad as the prophet who was indicated in the ancient scriptures, and the rabbis of Medina who contested Muhammad’s claims in debates regarding his teachings and rejected his invitation to adopt Islam due to their haughtiness and disdain for the Prophet. In his short sketch of the Prophet Muhammad, Theophanes the Confessor (d. 818) uses similar elements to those we find in the Jewish legend, but without connecting this narrative to the monk who is usually known in the Christian sources by the name of Bahīrā or Sergius. Theophanes speaks of ten rabbis (notice the typological number, which also appears in the Jewish tale) who adopted Islam, but were insincere converts and taught the Prophet harmful things against Christianity:

“At the beginning of [Muhammad’s] advent the misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah who is awaited by them, so that some of their leaders joined him and accepted his religion while forsaking that of Moses who saw God. Those who did so were ten in number and remained with him until his [first] sacrifice (sphagē). But when they saw him eating camel meat, they realized that he was not the one they thought him to be and were at loss what to do. Being afraid to abjure his religion, these wretched men taught him illicit things directed us Christians and remained with him.”

The Jewish legend of Bahīrā, to which we now return, is a sophisticated response to the Islamic narratives of the emergence of Islam:

A) The Jews who joined Muhammad’s movement remained in fact crypto-Jews, “secret agents” who destroyed the Islamic message, the Qur’an, from within.

B) They were the teachers of Muhammad, and inserted “non-Islamic” contents into the Qur’an and inscribed their names in it.

C) The ‘disjointed letters’ (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭāt*a*) that appear at the beginning of several *sūras* are abbreviations of cryptic messages; for example, the letters *alif-lām-mīm* in Qur’an 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, and 32 represent a pejorative against Muhammad (spelling Hebrew *illem*, “dumb,” probably after Is. 56:10), as well as *kāf-hāʾ-yāʾ-ʿayn-ṣād* in Q. 19 (representing the first two words of the Hebrew phrase *kakh ya ašu ḥakhme Yisraʾel*, “Thus did the sages of Israel advise”).

D) The object of these crypto-Jews was to save the Jewish people from any harm. In contrast to Islamic tradition, which holds that Muhammad was harassed and ridiculed by the Jews, or endangered by their schemes, here it is the Jews who are the victims of constant harassment and persecutions and decide to fight back *sub rosa*. Among the ten Jews in the Jewish versions of this tale, two are known from the Islamic tradition: ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām (here he is named ‘Abd al-Salām, and is given the Hebrew name Absalom), the first Jew to join Muhammad’s cause, and Kaʾb al-Aḥbār, a convert to Islam in the caliphate of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644) who was, according to the Jewish
legend, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. These two figures were among the most known transmitters of Jewish materials (isrāʾ ʿilḥyāʾ) into early Islam. Muslim scholars of later generations were reluctant to assess their role in Islamic tradition in a positive manner; moreover, some of them criticized ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām and Kaʾb al-Aḥbār outright for introducing foreign elements to Islam. According to Samawʾal al-Maghribiʾs anti-Jewish tract, Jews used to credit ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām with teaching and instructing Muhammad in the Torah, and for interpolating into the Qurʾan “the marriage law that a wife, after her third divorce from her husband, shall not be permitted to re-wed him until she has been married and divorced from another man, the purpose being, in their contention, to make mamzerim [illegitimate children] of the children of the Muslims… For, in their law, if the husband takes back his wife after she has been married to another man, her children are considered illegitimate.” The reference here is to Q. 2:230.

In conclusion, even though the Jewish legend of the ten Jewish sages is not designed to thoroughly disprove Islamic doctrines regarding the prophecy of Muhammad and the Qurʾanic revelation, it should be considered to include polemic intentions. This legend is an entanglement of Muslim and Jewish traditions: some rely on details from the sīra of the Prophet, the Qurʾan and its exegesis, and others are inventions from the realm of Jewish folktales. The goal is to distort the Islamic narratives on the rise of Islam, and reconstruct a counter-narrative that will serve the self-image of Jews living under Islam. It is the story of triumphant Islam through the looking-glass.

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[10] See the accusations that Muhammad relied on teachers or informants, for example, in Qurʾan 25:4-5 and 16:103; Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān, s.v. “Informants” (Claude Gilliot).


[12] In the Muslim versions of the Bahtrā story, the monk warns the relatives of Muhammad about the malevolence of the Jews (Ibn Ishāq, The Life of Muhammad, 81; Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahtrā, 50).
In the Christian accounts, Bahîrâ encourages Muhammad to detest the Jews and curse them due to their rejection of Christianity and for crucifying and killing Jesus. See Ruggema, *ibid.*, 455, 465 (Bahîrâ inserts the verse 5:82 into the Qur’an); Baneth, “On ‘Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions,’” 113.


[16] Yossef Rapoport writes: “Jewish law allows a man to remarry his ex-wife only if she did not marry another man in the meantime; thus, in Jewish law a *taḥlit* marriage has the opposite effect of making the wife forbidden, rather than permitted, to her first husband” (*Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 99 n. 51). Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s (d. 1350) usage of the Hebrew word *mamzerim* (Rapoport, *ibid.*, 99) is another indication of his reception of Samaw’al’s *Ifḥâm al-Yahûd*, which has already been noticed by Perlmann (“Samau’al al-Maghribi,” 24 and n. 30).

[17] Even if one agrees with Baneth’s argument that the Jewish tale of the ten Jewish sages originated in the Christian Bahîrâ legends, this does not change the idea that Jews had their own polemic intentions in undermining the Islamic narratives about the rise of Muhammad’s movement. See Baneth, “On ‘Mohammed’s Ten Jewish Companions,’” 114-116.

*Figure 1* (above): Muhammad's encounter with the Christian monk Bahîrâ, a famous story from early Muslim biographical traditions on the life of the Prophet. The Muslim version of this story uses the encounter to mark the coming of Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur’an as foretold by earlier prophecies, thus portraying the older traditions as confirming and validating the truths of Islam. Christians and Jews appropriated the story and told their own versions of it to communicate more subversive understandings of the encounter. Detail, *Muhammad and the monk Bahîrâ*, manuscript illumination from the *Jâmiʿ at-tawârikh* (*Compendium of Chronicles*) of Rashîd al-Dîn, Tabriz, Iran, 14th c. (Or. Ms. 20, f. 43v; courtesy Edinburgh University Library).
Figure 2: Detail, Geniza fragment T-S AS 161.32, one version of the ‘Story of the Ten Sages’: “… and these are the [Jewish] scholars who came to him [Muhammad]: Abraham, called Ka’b al-Aḥbār; Absalom, called ’Abd al-Salām…” (courtesy Taylor-Schechter Collection, University of Cambridge Library).

Figure 3: The opening of Sūra 19, with the ‘mysterious’ or ‘disjointed’ letters kāf-hā’-yā’-‘ayn-ṣād. According to some Jewish accounts, this and other sequences of these letters were placed in the Qur’an to signal that Muhammad was tutored by Jews. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.