

The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy

From Antiquity through the
Seventeenth Century

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THE MUSLIM CONTEXT

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The period with which this chapter is concerned is the heyday of Islamic philosophy, between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, in the area dominated by Islam and stretching between Persia in the east and the Iberian peninsula in the west and as far south as Yemen. Islamic political hegemony over these vast terrains, combined with the ubiquitous presence of the ruling Muslim religion, and the adoption of Arabic as a *lingua franca* for all walks of life and in all cultural milieus, had a unifying cultural effect and created the reality that we call "Islamic medieval culture." In medieval terms, this was a world-culture, encompassing both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and expressed in Arabic as well as in other languages.¹

Jews living in these times and areas were part and parcel of the greater Islamic culture, and their belonging to it was a decisive factor in shaping medieval Jewish thought. We know very little about the Jewish communities during the first two centuries of Islamic rule, but from the beginning of the third Islamic century (which corresponds to the middle of the ninth century CE) a vigorous Jewish culture surfaces. The old learning centers – the *yeshivot* – of Iraq (Baghdad) continued to play a leading role for world Jewry, but other competing centers also flourished: in Palestine and Syria (Jerusalem and Aleppo), North Africa (such as Cairo, Alexandria, and Qayrawan), and in the Iberian peninsula (such as Cordoba and Toledo). Only the language of liturgical poetry remained what it had been before the rise of Islam, that is, Hebrew (a peculiarity that was later extended to include the newly introduced genre of secular poetry). In all other intellectual endeavors – religious law and legal *responsa*, Hebrew linguistics and Bible exegesis, homiletic literature and ethics, science and philosophy, religious polemics and mysticism – Arabic came to replace Aramaic as the language in which Jews normally expressed themselves. More often than not, the Arabic used by Jews (called Judeo-Arabic) was written in Hebrew characters, laced with Hebrew words and interspersed with references to Jewish religious texts. Judeo-Arabic is spoken to this day by oriental Jews, remnants of the communities that lived in Arab countries, but from the ninth to the twelfth

century, this was the main language of the majority of the Jewish world, used in everyday life as well as in learned compositions. Most of the seminal texts of Jewish thought written in this period were thus written in Arabic.

That early medieval Jewish thought should be studied in its Muslim context seems to be widely recognized in modern scholarship. This recognition is usually reflected in what appears to be a commonly held assumption, namely, that to understand the terminology and the concerns of early medieval Jewish philosophy, one must be familiar with Islamic philosophy of the same period. In an article entitled "The Islamic context of Jewish philosophy," Joel Kraemer offers a broad analytical survey of the Islamic background to Jewish philosophy. Kraemer summarizes the legacy of Plato and Neoplatonism, Aristotle and Aristotelianism, and the responses that these legacies found in Islam, as well as the theological and esoteric traditions that developed in the Islamic world. Methodologically, after examining the Islamic context of Jewish philosophy (namely, its Islamic background), one should continue to analyze medieval Jewish philosophy *in* this context (that is to say, the way Jewish philosophy was integrated into the Islamic world). Indeed, many major digests of Jewish philosophy adopt this approach.² This is usually done by setting Jewish philosophy against the background of Islamic philosophy: After presenting a brief description of the history of each philosophical school in Islam, its ideas and main figures, these works discuss in some detail the Jewish philosophers supposedly belonging to that particular school. Saadia Gaon (d. 942) is thus studied on the background of Islamic scholastic theology or *Kalām*, and in particular the school of the *Mu'tazilah*; Isaac Israeli (d. 955) and Solomon ibn Gabirol (d. 1058) – on the background of Neoplatonism; Bahya ibn Paquda (first half of the eleventh century) – on the background of Sufism, and Abraham ibn Daud (d. ca. 1180) and Maimonides (d. 1204) – on the background of Aristotelian philosophy.

The availability of these excellent studies allows us to dispense with the need to repeat here the same schema, or to update it in different terms and with slightly different emphasis. Instead, I will attempt to highlight the implications of the emergence and development of Jewish thought in the Muslim milieu and in the same cultural climate, and to offer some observations pertaining to the unique character of this context. Needless to say, in such a vast area and over a period of several centuries, there are also vast cultural differences: The religious and intellectual climate of Sunni, Abbasid Baghdad in the early ninth century is in many ways unlike that of Fatimide, Ismā'īlī Cairo in the tenth century, or of Almohad Cordoba in the twelfth century. The following pages will attempt mainly to offer general observations that in some manner are relevant to this milieu as a whole.

I. THE EMERGENCE OF JEWISH MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

This seemingly straightforward title calls for some clarifications, as almost each word in it lends itself to more than one understanding.

Emergence

Perhaps the clearest acknowledgment of the significance of the Muslim context for medieval Jewish philosophy is presented by an envious outsider, the "father of the translators" Judah ibn Tibbon (d. 1190). In his Introduction to the Hebrew translation of Bahya ibn Paquda's *Guide to the Duties of the Heart*, Judah ibn Tibbon marvels at the richness and diversity of the literary output of the Jews in Islamic lands: commentaries on the Bible and on the Talmud, original compositions, and *responsa*. Most of these compositions, he says "were written in the Arabic language in all matters, both in the science of the Torah and in other sciences." This practice, according to Judah ibn Tibbon, was typical for the Jews living under Islam, whereas the Jews of Christendom, although great scholars in rabbinic matters, "were not concerned with other sciences, because they made the Torah their sole occupation, and also because they had no access to books in other sciences." Ibn Tibbon thus highlights the pivotal role of the linguistic context for the dissemination of sciences and philosophy among the Jews of Arab lands: Jews of these countries, he says, were all fluent in Arabic, a language that he describes as both rich and supple, amenable to the use in sciences and philosophy, in a way that Hebrew in his time was not.³

Ibn Tibbon is undoubtedly correct in presenting the spread of the Arabic language as a major factor in the development of Judeo-Arabic culture. Jewish communities scattered over a vast area now found themselves in an empire where the same language and the same religion dominated the cultural scene of Jews and non-Jews alike. One cannot overemphasize the earth-shaking impact of this unifying factor for the creation and shaping of Judeo-Arabic culture.

Implicit in Ibn Tibbon's words is another judicious observation, namely, that, except for a "few grains" of philosophical wisdom that are to be found in the Mishnah and the Talmud, Jewish writing on science and philosophy as Ibn Tibbon understands it was not merely shaped or changed, but actually emerged under Islam. Although Ibn Tibbon refrains from stating this observation too forcefully, his acute awareness of it underlies his analysis.

A similar view is expressed, with a slightly more apologetic twist, by Moses Maimonides. In his *Guide of the Perplexed* (I. 71) Maimonides argues that the components of his own philosophy are all to be found in the Jewish heritage,

both biblical and talmudic. Being aware of the scarcity of evidence available to substantiate this claim, however, he opens the chapter with the following rueful statement:

Know that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth in these matters that have existed in our religious community, have perished.

Although Maimonides insists on the past existence of philosophical knowledge in ancient Judaism, he admits the absence of any systematic philosophical writings in the ancient period. Like Ibn Tibbon, he mentions the "few grains" of metaphysical and physical wisdom in talmudic literature. The "many sciences," however, were handed down only orally, and, with the dispersion of the Jews among "the ignorant nations" have consequently perished.⁴ Maimonides' own philosophy is, therefore, from his own viewpoint, not a continuation but a rediscovery, a re-creation of that ancient lore. Although Maimonides states that this philosophical lore was part and parcel of the ancient Jewish oral legacy, he is aware of the fact that hardly any trace of it remained before the rise of Islam. Maimonides thus implicitly admits that, for all practical purposes, it was under Islam that philosophy was introduced into the Jewish world.

Yet another, more blatant testimony to this effect can be found in the words of the ninth-century Muslim littérateur and theologian al-Jāhiz (d. 868), who says in his *Refutation of Christianity*.

The Jews consider philosophical contemplation heresy, and theology reprehensible innovation. [They think that] it introduces every false idea, and that there is no science except in the Torah and in the books of the prophets; that the belief in medicine and giving credence to the astronomers is among the causes of disbelief; that it leads to materialism and to divergence from the ways of the forefathers and the people who should serve as model. So much so, that they allow shedding the blood of those famous for this [philosophical occupation] with impunity, and they censor the writings of those who follow this road.⁵

The implication of al-Jāhiz's words is that the absence of Jewish philosophical literature is not an accident of history, as it is for Maimonides. Like Ibn Tibbon, al-Jāhiz believes that the Jews opted for an exclusive study of the Torah and assumed that an interest in science and philosophy would be incompatible with it. In al-Jāhiz's description, however, this choice is said to reflect an active Jewish hostility to the sciences, which, he says, continues to his own day.

The observations of these three authors – Judah ibn Tibbon, Maimonides, and al-Jāhiz – speaking each from his own perspective, thus lead to the same conclusion; namely, that there were no Jewish philosophical writings before the rise of Islam, and therefore, the Islamic culture provides not only the context

in which Jewish philosophy must be read, but also the background for its first appearance as philosophy.

Medieval

The combined testimony of Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides, and al-Jāhiz highlights the problematic nature of the term "Medieval Jewish Philosophy." Normally, the term "medieval" implies an intermediate place in a threefold periodization between the classical and the modern. It would, however, be misleading to establish an unqualified use of the term "classical Jewish philosophy." To be sure, the Talmud and the Mishnah include many statements that reflect a philosophical understanding, or rather an interest in problems upon which there existed already a long tradition of philosophical reflection in Greek. We may recognize in these statements the "few grains" referred to by Ibn Tibbon and Maimonides and attempt to uncover their underlying worldview and beliefs.⁶ The rabbis themselves, however, did not bother to develop these reflections to a systematic philosophy. In their thought, philosophical notions took a secondary place and were fitted into a nonphilosophical system.

The one exception to this prephilosophical expression of Jewish thought is of course Philo, in whose writings Hellenized Alexandrian Judaism of the first century C.E. seems to be reflected at its acme. With the destruction of the Hellenized Jewish communities and the disappearance of Greek as a major Jewish language, however, Philo's world was wiped out, and his Greek writings remained inaccessible for the remaining Jewish communities. Philo's principles of exegesis were absorbed by the Christians but had no impact on Jewish thought in the subsequent few centuries. With all due appreciation of Philo himself, this sole author does not entitle us to speak of "classical Jewish philosophy." With the next Jewish philosopher appearing only under the rule of Islam, some 700 years after Philo, what we called "the emergence of medieval Jewish philosophy under Islam" turns out to be, for all practical purposes, the emergence of Jewish philosophy *tout court*. We may call this philosophy "medieval" only insofar as it is contemporaneous with what is called "medieval Islamic philosophy" (also a problematic term, for similar reasons), or that Jewish philosophy that coincides chronologically with the European Middle Ages.

When the first medieval Jewish philosophical writings appear, they already have the full attire of Aristotelian logic, Platonic political thought, and Neoplatonist understanding of God's attributes. Maimonides, who, despite his previously mentioned reluctance, cannot ignore the fact that there were, prior to him, several Jewish thinkers, attributes this pre-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy to the encounter of Jews (the Geonim and the Karaites) with Muslim theology (*Kalām*). Because he regards this theology as a distortion of philosophy, resulting from the encounter

of the Muslim theologians with the (already manipulated and distorted) version of Greek philosophy developed by Christian theologians, he discards them as not worthy of the title "philosophers."

As has been argued by Shlomo Pines, Maimonides is indebted to the Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 942) in his reconstruction of the emergence of Muslim scholastic theology (*Kalām*).⁷ Maimonides develops al-Fārābī's brief sketch and includes in it Jewish thought as another link in the same transmission chain: The encounter of Christianity with Greek philosophy generated the theology of the Church Fathers; the encounter of Islam with Christianity engendered Muslim *Kalām*; and the encounter of the Jews (Rabbanite Geonim and the Karaites) with Muslim *Kalām* fathered Jewish *Kalām*. Maimonides' outline, however, is skewed in that it ignores the multicultural nature of early Islamic society. Contacts in such a society are never neatly arranged in pairs, and influences do not travel in a single linear track. There is no reason to assume, a priori, that, while Muslims met with Christians and were exposed to their theology, their Jewish contemporaries waited patiently on the side until Muslims developed their own theology, and then met with Muslims alone. A more reasonable working hypothesis would be that, once the gates of communication were open, due to the unifying political and linguistic setting, Jews entered the arena along with everybody else.

The available evidence indeed corroborates this working hypothesis. The first Jewish medieval thinker known to us, Daud al-Muqammaṣ, had studied with the Christians in Nisibis (probably with Nonnus of Nisibis, who flourished in the middle of the ninth century). At some point in his life, al-Muqammaṣ had even been a convert to Christianity but then returned to Judaism. The fruits of his long years of Christian education are the first Jewish exegetical works in Arabic, which he translated and adapted from similar works in Syriac;⁸ the first dated Jewish polemical works (mostly against Christianity);⁹ and the first Jewish theological summa, known as *Twenty Chapters*.¹⁰ These works reflect his position as a Jew in the contemporary crossroads, absorbing both Christian and Muslim cultural heritage. Unlike most of his Jewish successors, al-Muqammaṣ writes Arabic in Arabic characters and has little recourse to proof-texts from Jewish sources. Christian literary models and theologumena appear in his work in an Arabic garb, using Arabic formulae and technical terminology and transformed in ways that already bear the stamp of Muslim thought. His borrowed material occasionally betrays its origin in Christian or Muslim texts (as, for instance, where his terminology and his argumentation echo Trinitarian or Christological themes). It is nevertheless clear that he made a conscious attempt to fashion these borrowed ingredients to fit a Jewish theology, and as far as we know, he is the first medieval Jew to do so. Indeed, it is precisely

the occasional awkwardness of his attempts that most clearly reflect his pioneering place in the formative period of Jewish philosophy, navigating his way in what was, apparently, a yet uncharted terrain.

At about the same time as al-Muqammaṣ, or shortly thereafter, the same marks of the formative period appear in the works of the Karaite Daniel al-Qūmisī. Writing in Hebrew, al-Qūmisī's works echo the influence of Muslim *Kalām*: His Hebrew terminology includes Arabic calques, and his theology struggles with ideas that are prevalent in Muslim theology.¹¹

Saadia Gaon, coming at least one generation after these two trail blazers, reaps the fruits of their efforts, and his work demonstrates a rather more mature Jewish thought. His theological summa, *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, has the same structure as al-Muqammaṣ' work. Saadia's theology, however, constantly relates to the Jewish tradition, and his arguments have already been honed to serve as appropriate building blocks for a distinctly Jewish thought. His voice is much more confident than that of his predecessors, and the task he takes upon himself is both more ambitious and more nuanced than theirs: the task of a "culture planner,"¹² a mission that befits the intellectual and spiritual leader of his community.¹³ Saadia broadens the scope of intellectual endeavor, expanding the exegetical project to include all biblical material, venturing into new fields, like linguistics and law, and introducing new literary genres. Having attained the position of Gaon, or head of the rabbinic school in Baghdad, and with the authority that this position entailed, Saadia manages to introduce philosophical, rational discourse into the world of the rabbanite establishment. From that point on, there seems to be no question whatsoever as to the legitimacy of debating theological questions and of having recourse to rational argumentation, or to rationalized interpretation of the sacred tradition. Moreover, Saadia's example seems to have set the tone for future generations, in which Jewish philosophers were often also the leaders of their community, universally recognized as authorities in Jewish law and learning, and sometimes (as in the case of Maimonides and his descendants) also representatives of the community toward the Muslim authorities. Their interest in philosophical questions was perceived as concomitant to their high education, and the various branches of their scholarship, both religious and secular, were often (although not always) seen as both compatible and mutually complementing.

A similar phenomenon appears in the Karaite Jewish community, where Saadia's contemporary Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī combines biblical hermeneutic and theological concerns, to fashion what can be seen as Karaite theology. The full naturalization of rational discourse in Judeo-Arabic thought is noteworthy, in particular, when compared with the situation in the Muslim society, where the legitimacy of such

endeavors never stopped to be questioned, and where those who initiated them were criticized and even persecuted.

Jewish

In medieval Islamic society there are actually two different kinds of Jewish communities: Rabbanites, who follow talmudic tradition and regard it as the divinely sanctioned Oral Law and the only authoritative interpretation of the Bible; and Karaites, who reject this tradition. The origin and development of the schism lie beyond the scope of the present chapter. For our purpose, suffice it to say that toward the end of the ninth century this schism is already an established fact. During the late ninth and the tenth centuries, the heated arguments between these two interpretations of Judaism shook the Jewish world. Thereafter, however, the two communities usually lived side by side, cooperating despite their differences. It is particularly noteworthy that, in their religious self-perception and set against the non-Jewish world, thinkers of both communities most commonly identify simply as Jews. Moreover, as Jews within the Muslim context, their receptivity and response to its intellectual challenges followed similar patterns.

Philosophy

In the medieval Islamic world "philosophy" (*falsafa*) has more than one meaning. Although the term is sometimes loosely used to describe speculative thought in general and the search for wisdom, more frequent is its use in a narrower technical sense, denoting Aristotelian philosophy. Between the eighth and tenth centuries, the "translation movement," a concentrated scholarly effort, supported and subsidized by Muslim rulers, led to a massive translation of scientific and philosophical works, mostly from Greek. A philosopher (*ḥakīm*, pl. *ḥakīmīn*) in the narrow technical sense would be a person schooled in the Aristotelian tradition on the basis of the translated works of Aristotle, his Greek commentators (Themistius and Alexander of Aphrodisias), and their Muslim followers (like al-Fārābī in the east or Averroes in the west). Neoplatonist thinkers were also sometimes called philosophers (like the ninth-century al-Kindī, "The Philosopher of the Arabs"), but more often were referred to by other names, such as "the Wise." Muslim Neoplatonism also developed on the basis of translated texts, but its scholarly tradition was less rigorously monitored. Neoplatonist works of late antiquity circulated in paraphrases rather than in translations, and their authorship was often rather hazy. A partial paraphrase of Plotinus's *Enneads* came to be known as *The Theology of Aristotle*, and a paraphrase of Proclus's *Elements of Theology* circulated as the *Book on the Pure Good*, attributed to a variety of authors.

Whereas both these philosophical traditions relied heavily on translated texts, Muslim scholastic theology (*Kalām*) appeared before the full-fledged inception of the translation movement. Already the eighth century sees the emergence of the *Mu'tazilah*, a rationalist school that cultivated speculative thought and attempted to reconcile it with the teaching of Islam. Alongside a highly technical vocabulary and a rigorously structured system of argumentation, the Mutazilites developed rational hermeneutics of the Qur'an, and these traits are also found in other schools of *Kalām*. In modern scholarship, the followers of *Kalām* (*Mutakallimūn*) are usually called "theologians" because of their preoccupation with the religious scriptures. Medieval Aristotelian philosophers like al-Fārābī accuse the *Mutakallimūn* of molding their thought to fit their religion, but there is no reason to doubt their sincerity in their quest for the truth. Moreover, Aristotelian philosophers like Maimonides or Averroes also attempt to offer rationalistic interpretations for problematic scriptural passages, and they too struggle to reconcile their religion with the results of their speculation. Both groups can thus be called "philosophical theologians." Rather than defining each philosopher by attaching him to a certain school, it is often more accurate to name the particular activity in which he engages. A speculative work that does not refer to the revealed scriptures will herein be referred to as philosophical, as distinct from the scripture-oriented theology. More often than not, however, these terms must be used in a relative sense, and the same person may thus write one work that is, on balance, more philosophical (like Maimonides' *Guide* or Saadia's *Commentary on the Book of Creation*) and another that is, on balance, more theological (like the speculative parts of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* or Saadia's *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*).

II. ADAPTATIONS OF THE JEWISH TRADITION IN A MULTICULTURAL SETTING

When attempting to follow the itinerary of ideas, one can often rely on manuscripts, books, and texts in general to provide physical, solid evidence. From the late eighth to the tenth century an impressive number of classical scientific and philosophical Greek texts were translated (via Syriac or Pahlavi) to Arabic. The concerted effort to transmit major parts of the classical library to the Arabic speaking world involved not only intellectuals but also large segments of the ruling classes in the Abbasid Empire. Due to this translation movement, we can follow the route made by books as they traveled from one religious community to the other, and the way ideas were interpreted and transformed in the process. Books, whether bought, copied, or borrowed, changed hands frequently, and around the study of books, in public

or private libraries or in the book market, old ideas were adopted and new ones fermented.

The spread of ideas, however, is often an oral process, and although oral transmission is not as well documented as the written one and is much harder to prove in individual cases, its ubiquitous existence must always be borne in mind. In the multireligious, linguistically uniform setting, everyday-life occurrences such as simple business transactions provided ample opportunities for interreligious encounters and allowed ideas to circulate. In addition to such daily encounters, however, intellectuals had their own, more structured venues for mutual fertilization. It was a common practice for men of letters of all religious backgrounds – scientists, linguists, poets, philosophers, religious scholars, and educated professionals – to get together to discuss and debate ideas. Such sessions (called *majālis* [sing. *majlis*]) were often sponsored by rulers or other prominent public figures, as an intellectual divertissement of sorts. Debates and discussions in the *majlis* had a set structure and were strictly regulated. From numerous preserved records of such sessions it transpires that the discussions covered an impressive array of topics, and allowed for the expositions of diverse ideas. At times, the *majlis* focused on interreligious debate; at others, it examined a philosophical question that cut across religious divides (as, for instance, the relative virtue of logic and linguistics).¹⁴

In addition to such sessions, intellectuals' paths crossed in other, less structured contexts. Many philosophers in this period earned their living as physicians, and a few of the more famous physicians were Jews or Christians. The abundant bibliographical literature on the physicians lists Jews and Christians alongside their Muslim colleagues and bears witness to the fact that members of the various religions worked side by side in the practice of the medical profession. Another popular profession among scholars was bookselling, and the shop of the bookseller (*warrāq*) was a natural focal point, where ideas could be discussed and exchanged.

Whether in writing or by word of mouth, Jews were thus abundantly exposed to traditions of thought of non-Jewish origin and were engulfed in the discussion and elaboration of these traditions. As opposed to Jewish receptivity, however, which is evident in all Judeo-Arabic philosophical works, the active role played by Jews in this process is very difficult to gauge. Occasionally, we find explicit references to Jewish material in a Muslim philosophical text: the work of the first Muslim thinker of al-Andalus, the mystical philosopher Muhammad ibn Masarra (d. 931), reveals his fascination with Jews and Judaism and strongly suggests familiarity with the *Book of Creation* (*Sefer Yetzirah*).¹⁵ The eleventh century Ismā'ili author al-Kirmāni uses Hebrew quotations in Arabic characters.¹⁶ Such explicit references, however,

are both rare and anecdotal. The overwhelming presence of the majority culture usually dominates the final literary outcome.

A rare example of Jewish involvement in the making of Islamic philosophy relates to one of the most important texts of Islamic Neoplatonism, the Long Version of the so-called *The Theology of Aristotle*. This paraphrase of Plotinus' first four *Enneads* introduces major conceptual changes into Plotinus' original text, changes that render it more compatible with a monotheistic system. Perhaps the most conspicuous of such changes is the introduction of Divine Will into the flow of emanation from the One, transforming the ineluctable nature of emanation so that it can conform to the biblical and Qur'anic narrative of creation. This major text of Islamic Neoplatonism was of paramount importance to the Ismā'īlis. These Shi'ite Muslims adopted Neoplatonism as their theology, and it is in their circles, as argued by Shlomo Pines, that the paraphrastic Long Version of *The Theology* must have been composed.¹⁷ Scholars have long noticed the intriguing fact that all existing manuscripts of the Arabic Long Version are in Judeo-Arabic (that is to say, Arabic written in Hebrew characters). It has been suggested that the circle of Jewish scholars around Isaac Israeli, who served as the court physician to the first Ismā'īli Fatimid Caliphs in Qayrawan, may have been instrumental in adapting Plotinus' philosophy to the world of Islamic thought.¹⁸ Be that as it may, the manuscript evidence mirrors the intense Jewish interest and involvement in Islamic Neoplatonist tradition during its formative period.

III. MUSLIM SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT, JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS

The realization of the intensity of Jewish interest in the philosophical developments in the Islamic world lies behind the prevalent scholarly approach mentioned previously, to wit: the taxonomy of mediæval Jewish philosophy according to Islamic schools of thought. This taxonomy, however, is known to be problematic also beyond Judaism, in the study of Islamic philosophy itself. For instance, as demonstrated by the case of the *Theology of Aristotle*, Neoplatonist books circulated in Arabic under the name of Aristotle, and Neoplatonist elements are thus prominent in the thought of the so-called Aristotelians. The schematic taxonomy, however, is kept in use, as a convenient device for the categorization of thinkers. We thus distinguish between mystical thought, or Sufism, philosophy itself divided between the Aristotelian and the Neoplatonist schools, and dialectical theology or *Kalām*.

The problematic nature of this categorization seems even more pronounced regarding the Jewish philosophers. A closer examination of each Jewish thinker forces us to qualify whatever affiliation we ascribe to him. The writings of Saadia Gaon, a *Mutakallim*, include many Aristotelian and Neoplatonic components; and in the writings of the Neoplatonist Isaac Israeli, there is clear evidence of *Kalām* influence. Bahya ibn Paquda is sometimes classified as a Neoplatonist, but the first chapter of his book is strongly influenced by *Kalām*, and the impact of the mystical-ascetic tradition of Sufism is evident throughout his work.

A case in point is Maimonides, who undoubtedly regarded himself as an Aristotelian philosopher. In his correspondence with his student Joseph ibn Shim'on (d. 1226) and with his translator Samuel ibn Tibbon (d. 1230), Maimonides instructs them to follow the time-honored school curriculum and indicates to them the authoritative texts of Aristotle and his Alexandrian commentators.¹⁹ In another instance he takes pain, almost pedantically, to note his personal connection to the school: He read texts under the guidance of a pupil of one of the contemporary masters, Ibn Bajja, and met the son of another, the astronomer Ibn al-Aflahī.²⁰ Yet, even Maimonides, a self-declared Aristotelian, exhibits both *Kalām* and Neoplatonic tendencies.²¹ It is also noteworthy that, although both Muslim and Christian Aristotelians compose commentaries on works of Aristotle and of his followers, Maimonides chooses to comment only on the *Mishnah*. In this context, it is interesting to note that Maimonides' Aristotelian predecessor, Abraham ibn Daud, did write a commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*.²² The few extant lines of this unique Judeo-Arabic commentary demonstrate that Jews were conversant with the school tradition and able to participate in its discussion. At the same time, the fact that Jewish philosophical tradition did not see fit to preserve this text by copying it, despite the fact that it has no parallel in the Judeo-Arabic tradition, may also be significant. The conspicuous absence of commentaries on Aristotle from the preserved Judeo-Arabic philosophical output may indicate that, rejecting the distinctive genre of the school, Judeo-Arabic philosophers opted out of actually belonging to the school. As recipients, they were assiduous students who wholeheartedly absorbed the school's teachings. As authors, however, they addressed their teaching to the educated elites of the Jewish community, and the audience dictated different forms of writing.

Another example of the relative literary independence of Jewish authors can be seen in the works of Jewish *Kalām*. Al-Muqammaṣ and Saadia each wrote a full theological *summa*, which in many ways follows Muslim *Kalām*: Both works are written in the same formulaic language as Muslim *Kalām*, use a similar terminology, discuss identical topics, and often propound the same ideas. Yet, although the structural similarity of these works to Christian *summae* was noted by Shlomo

Pines,²³ one is hard put to find an exact Muslim antecedent to them, and the closest Muslim parallel – the *Book of Unity* by the tenth century al-Māturīdī – is much less rigorously structured than either of these two Jewish works. The independence is not only literary: both works exhibit familiarity with nonkalamīc material, both Aristotelian and Neoplatonist. In the case of al-Muqammaṣ, this peculiar combination can be attributed to the education he received in the Christian academies, where Aristotelian logic was integrated into theological teaching in the school curriculum, but it is noteworthy that Saadia displays a similar admixture. One may argue that al-Muqammaṣ set the example in this respect for Saadia. This may well be the case, but as the case of the Jewish Aristotelians shows, we seem to have here a phenomenon that goes beyond the *Mutakallimūn* and may apply to all Judeo-Arabic thinkers.

Indeed, although each one of the emblematic writings of Jewish philosophers reveals its author's proximity to a certain school in Islamic philosophy, none of them duplicate that school's typical literary genre. In one way or another, they are all theological works, aimed at demonstrating the compatibility of the Jewish canon with the prevalent philosophy. They develop their own version of whatever genre they use and are relatively flexible in adopting ideas from other schools. The applicability and usefulness of the concept "philosophical schools" in medieval Judeo-Arabic thought remains, therefore, highly questionable.

One conspicuous exception to the rule is the case of the Karaite Jews, who wholeheartedly adopted Mutazilite *Kalām*. Both their theology and their biblical exegesis are built on Mutazilite principles, couched in the unmistakable Mutazilite technical language. Furthermore, Karaites studied the works of their Muslim colleagues and participated in Mutazilite scholarly sessions. As in the case of the *Theology of Aristotle*, here too it is the material manuscript evidence that most strikingly demonstrates this connection. The *Mu'tazilah* played a decisive role in shaping Muslim theology in its formative period, and during the ninth century parts of it were even included in the "state theology." After the eleventh century, however, the *Mu'tazilah* became marginalized and in fact, ostracized in Muslim circles, and Mutazilite works were actively shunned by Muslims (with the exception of the Zaydi Shi'ites). Karaite Jews, on the other hand, continued to study Mutazilite works and to copy them assiduously. As a result, much of the massive Mutazilite literary output is preserved in Judeo-Arabic manuscripts. In particular, the now available Firkovich manuscript collection in St. Petersburg contains a large quantity of Mutazilite texts, many of which were until recently considered lost.

Even in this case, however, one should note the peculiar position of Karaites vis-à-vis "their" school. Whereas Muslim Mutazilites refer to the school's authorities

as "our masters," Karaites refrain from using this honorific title and refer to them by name. Karaites also do not belong to the school in the sense that the school does not count them as members: In the biobibliographical literature of the *Mu'tazilah's* "generations," Jews are never listed. The proximity of their theology was, of course, noted by Muslims, and the historian al-Mas'ūdi (d. 957) can say that the Karaites are *like* the *Mu'tazilah*. In Islam as in late antiquity, however, philosophical schools had also a social function. As a school, the *Mu'tazilah* was a Muslim school, with legal as well as theological concerns, and Jews did not belong there.

IV. THE MUSLIM CONTEXT

That the *Mu'tazilah* preserved a strong religious identity, to which Jews remained outsiders, should not come as a surprise. It should be emphasized that although medieval Islamic culture encompassed both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, the place of Islam in this culture was not on a par with the religions of other communities. As underlined by Shlomo Dov Goitein, the society of the medieval Islamic world was a religious society.²⁴ Social boundaries between the communities were respected, and the minority status of the Jews was rarely forgotten even among philosophers. Moreover, the fact that Islam was the religion of the majority naturally favored the dissemination of ideas associated with Islam. In our attempts to do justice to the multicultural character of medieval Islamic society, the consequences of the fact that Islam was the dominant religion should not be underestimated.

The difficulty of isolating distinct Muslim influences (that is to say, influences that are specifically tied to the Muslim religion) in the work of Jewish philosophers is a tribute to the literary achievements of these philosophers. Their integration of Muslim material is often artfully realized, and the resulting work does not always reveal the borrowed elements that went into its making. Nevertheless, our working hypothesis must be that Jews in general had frequent contacts with their Muslim neighbors and that Jewish thinkers, motivated by intellectual curiosity, sought out such contacts. If we bear this in mind as we approach the texts, then we may become more sensitive to the existences of such borrowed elements and more likely to uncover them, and the result may be very instructive.

The polemical milieu, which provided a fertile ground for an exchange of ideas, also provides us with clues to identify specifically Muslim elements. In espousing a belief in a sole God, Islam had no argument with either Christianity or Judaism. The disagreement with the other two monotheistic religions focused on Muhammad's prophecy, a belief central to Islam and rejected by both Jews and Christians. The veracity of Muhammad's prophecy, the characteristic traits that prove his prophecy,

and in general the role and characteristic traits of a prophet (e.g., moral integrity, intellectual superiority, and a record of performing miracles) thus became essential to Muslim thought, apparent in all its expressions. In the attempts to prove the veracity of Muhammad's prophecy, Muslim theologians developed a literary genre of "signs of prophecy." Muslim philosophers identified the Prophet with Plato's philosopher-king, and developed a political philosophy in which the philosopher ruled the virtuous city. Muslim mystics and pietists modeled the saints on the figure of Muhammad, creating a cult of the Prophet and his family. The centrality of prophetology can thus be regarded as an identifying *shibboleth*, a characteristic trait of Muslim thought and its specific contribution to the multireligious discussion.

Jewish thinkers adopted the centrality of prophecy quickly and wholly, adapting it, of course, to their own religion, and replacing Muhammad with the biblical prophets and in particular with Moses. Jewish theologians thus offer lengthy discussions of the proofs of prophecy, aimed to uphold the veracity of Moses' prophecy and its finality. Jewish philosophers discuss political philosophy, depicting Moses as the model philosopher-king, and Jews writing in the mystical vein (whether pietists or Neoplatonists) dwell on the revelation on Mt. Sinai as an emblematic mystical experience. The significance of this Jewish whole-hearted adaptation of Muslim prophetology can be better appreciated if we compare it with the almost complete absence of prophetology from Christian-Arabic literature. For the Christian Arabs, the model figure was that of Jesus, the son of God, and there was no reason to downgrade him to the rank of a prophet. Consequently, instead of "signs of prophecy," Christian-Arab theologians, like the ninth-century 'Ammār al-Baṣri or the tenth-century Theodore abū Qurra, develop lists of signs for the true religions;²⁵ and political philosophy is hardly represented in the writings of Christian-Arab philosophers such as the tenth-century Yahyā ibn 'Adī.

The impact of Islam is not only apparent in the common interest and common topics; it is also attested by the Jewish adoption of typically Muslim language. Instances of terminological borrowings are many and varied. Perhaps the most striking example of the adoption of Muslim terminology is the usage of the term Qur'an to denote the Hebrew Bible. Such borrowings were so frequent that they must have been done unconsciously, and can be said to have become an integral part of Judeo-Arabic thought. The integration of Muslim religious material – Qur'an and prophetic traditions (*hadith*) – into Jewish texts is less frequent, and their significance is more difficult to assess. When Maimonides or Saadia, for instance, use Qur'anic verses or locutions,²⁶ one suspects that they were conscious of their source and used it for a purpose. Such borrowings may also reflect a high level of familiarity with Muslim texts. Philosophers such as Maimonides or like Ibn Gabirol, who belonged

to a minute intellectual elite, were avid readers. They were curious about other cultures, and (as explicitly stated by Maimonides)²⁷ did not apply self-censorship to their readings. Ibn Gabirol may thus use in his religious poem the *Royal Crown* a Hebrew calque that depends on Avicenna's *Commentary* on a chapter of the Qur'an;²⁸ Maimonides may integrate Almohad theology, which treats anthropomorphism as heresy, into his Thirteen Principles, thus fashioning a Jewish Credo on the basis of a Muslim catechism.²⁹

V. METAPHORS AND METHODOLOGY

As already mentioned, the relevance of the Muslim context is commonly admitted by scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy. This in itself is not self-evident: In studying Jewish philosophy in other periods, scholarly methods vary, and scholars disagree in the evaluation of the relevance of the non-Jewish context. Whereas Shlomo Pines emphasizes the cultural circles that nurture Jewish philosophy, Eliezer Schweid views the development of Jewish philosophy as mainly an internal process, in which Jewish thinkers carry on a dialogue with previous generations of Jewish scholars. Regarding the early medieval period, however, Schweid too accepts the existence of direct influences of the immediate non-Jewish environment on Jewish thought. What remains in dispute are subtler nuances regarding the scope and nature of this influence. For Schweid, the Islamic world (and the non-Jewish world in general) provides the background to Jewish philosophy, within which we can distinguish "a continuous Jewish speculative literature, with a fair amount of internal influence." Pines, on the other hand, states that in this period, "in the sphere of philosophical literature . . . Jewish thinkers had recourse primarily to the books of their Muslim counterparts," whereas "rare and of secondary significance is that relationship to the teaching of their Jewish predecessors."³⁰ Rather than admitting occasional influences, this last approach assumes medieval Jewish philosophy to be shaped and impregnated by the surrounding culture. It would be impossible, according to this view, to correctly understand medieval Jewish philosophers outside the Islamic context, just as it would be impossible to understand them correctly if we ignored their Jewish identity.

In the attempts to fathom, in a more subtle and nuanced way, the complex relations between Jewish thinkers and their surrounding culture, scholars often revert to metaphors. Contemporary scholarship on Judeo-Arabic culture often resorts to the term "symbiosis." The usage of this term became widespread following Goitein, who borrowed the term from the field of biology to characterize the nature of contacts between Jews and the Muslim world in all matters. This term illustrates the

separate identity that Jews managed to preserve within the dominant culture, while being full participants in it.³¹ As the previous discussion of Jewish participation in the philosophical schools shows, in social terms the notion of symbiosis is indeed correct. Regarding the contents of Jewish philosophy, however, the involvement of Jews in the Muslim surrounding world often extends beyond a symbiosis, and participation becomes full integration. An extreme example is found in the case of several Jewish philosophers, whose writings betray no sign of their Judaism: Solomon ibn Gabirol, whose *Fons Vitae* was long mistakenly thought to be written by a Muslim Avicenna, or Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghādī (d. after 1165), whose work was studied by Muslims but had little impact on Jewish thought.

The term "context" used in the title of the present chapter is also a metaphor, borrowed from the world of textiles. It recalls the fabric (that is to say, the material of the textile), and the harmonious texture created by the mutual dependence of the warp and weft of the woven cloth. This metaphor thus aptly depicts the multiple directions of contact between Jewish and Muslim, or Jewish and Christian, philosophers and the mutual dependency between them. This is clearly the case in Jewish philosophy as well as in the sciences, although the contact is not necessarily harmonious in all domains. A philosopher such as Maimonides, who may adopt the ideas of his Muslim colleagues and speak about them in laudatory terms, may also polemicize fiercely with Islam and denigrate it. Both expressions accurately reflect different ways in which Jews experienced their contact with the Islamic society, different threads in the same context. The textile imagery of the word "context" remains, however, two-dimensional and rather static, whereas the interchange of philosophical ideas was highly dynamic and multifaceted. Ideas, their elaborations and their interpretations, were swiftly exchanged between intellectuals, and more or less adapted to the overall system into which they were grafted.

In the domains of theology and of polemics, this dynamism has been depicted by the metaphor of a marketplace, where the same coins change hands. This metaphor is also misleading because in the fiscal transaction the coins remain intact and unchanging (except for the usual wear by continuous use). In the medieval intellectual marketplace, on the other hand, ideas and motifs moved from one religious or theological system to another, slightly modifying the system into which they were adopted, and, in the process, undergoing some transformation themselves. Like colored drops falling into a whirlpool, new ideas were immediately carried away by the stream, coloring the whole body of water while changing their own color in the process. In the swift flow of ideas that characterized the Islamic world, it is rarely possible to follow neat trajectories of "influences" or "impacts" that allow us to isolate the source of the influence and to accurately measure the

force of its impact. Moreover, when such trajectories are occasionally traced, this is sure to satisfy our detective curiosity, but it does not necessarily reveal the balance of the full picture. To give just one example: Medieval Jewish discussions of the divine attributes bear the marks of medieval Muslim thought. They struggle with the same questions (such as the issues summarized by Harry Austryn Wolfson as "the antinomies of free will"³² or the relations between God's essence and His attributes), expressed in the same Arabic formulae. A correct analysis of the evidence, however, will necessarily take into account the *direct* influence of pre-Islamic Christian thought, as well as the indirect influence of this same Christian thought, which, filtered through Muslim thought, reached Jewish thinkers through Muslim channels. The inherent complexity of the picture cannot be overemphasized, and it would be a mistake to simplify it.

An interesting and important new methodology was introduced into the discussion by Rina Drori. Drori points out the limitations of both the historical philological and the comparative literary approaches for a fruitful discussion of the contacts between the Jewish and Arabic cultures. Instead, she offers the poly-system theory as a conceptual framework for the study of the Judeo-Arabic heterogeneous literary corpus.³³ Drori examines what she calls "The Jewish Literary System" at the beginning of the tenth century, and she characterizes the Rabbanite system as both canonized and stagnant, and therefore impermeable to outside influences. The emerging Karaite system, on the other hand, was yet noncanonized, and therefore more receptive to the new literary models of the Arabic world. "The models appropriated from Arabic entered Jewish literature mainly through noncanonized sections, such as Karaite literature," Drori argues. In her view, it was Karaite Judaism that adopted the Arabic model of a cultural system centered on the holy book, as well as the specific genres of philosophy, exegesis, and linguistics. It then remained to Saadia Gaon, who rose up to the Karaite challenge, to reshape Jewish Rabbanite culture by creating a new repertoire of literary models, adopted from the Arabic.³⁴

Drori's general approach offers a fruitful methodology for the analysis of cultural changes. By focusing on the question of newly introduced literary genres, she presents an excellent criterion to recognize major shifts in cultural trends and to follow their itinerary. If examined in the realm of philosophy in particular, her approach allows us to see the emergence and early development of Jewish philosophy in the wider context of the development of Judeo-Arabic culture. Some of her particular suggestions regarding the speculative domain cannot, however, be accepted. One should first of all note the lack of evidence for the claim that Karaites preceded Rabbanites in writing philosophy or systematic exegesis or that they were more receptive to the cultural novelties offered in Arabic. In fact, the

available evidence suggests the contrary: Although the exact dates of the first Jewish philosopher, Daud al-Muqammas, are not known to us, there is nothing in his writings to suggest any awareness of the Karaite-Rabbanite schism, a schism that he probably predates. Furthermore, and somewhat paradoxically, Drori's broad and ambitious theory unduly narrows the parameters of the discussion. Her analysis focuses on the developments *within* the Jewish world, comparing them with what had happened previously in the Muslim world. This approach underestimates the effect, both immediate and enduring, of Jewish exposure *in real time* to the powerful cultural storms that shook the world of intellectuals outside Judaism. To assume that Judaism – Rabbanite Judaism – could have remained untouched by these storms until the first half of the tenth century is to assume a completely isolated Jewish society within the Islamic world: a society that, despite everyday contacts, a common language, and a unifying politicoreligious dominant system, could remain impermeable to revolutionary intellectual torrents outside it. Such a presentation not only counters common sense but also contradicts the evidence at our disposal.

Philosophy was indeed a genre that, until the rise of Islam, remained foreign to the canonical Rabbanite literary corpus. Its emergence, however, predates the Rabbanite-Karaite schism. Although it first appears outside the center of the Jewish establishment (to which al-Muqammas, like the Karaites, did not belong), it emerges in Judaism in the same way that it emerged in Islam, and in the same place: gradually, through contacts with Christians, and in the interface between the Arabic and Syriac cultures in the Christian centers. Saadia follows al-Muqammas' example and refines it, further adopting the theological-philosophical literary model of the *summa* to Jewish readership, interlacing it with proof-texts from the Jewish canon and imprinting it with a specifically Jewish character. One must, however, take full cognizance of the gradual absorption of new ideas, where isolated texts allow us to draw the chart of continuously growing expressions of previously heard ideas.

VI. CONCLUSION

As far as we know, Jews played a very minor role in the first, oriental "translation movement," in which scientific and philosophical texts passed from Greek into Arabic. By contrast, they played a decisive role in the second, western "translation movement," which, beginning in the eleventh century, transmitted Arabic texts (both translations and original compositions) to Latin, often via Hebrew and the vernaculars. The two translation movements mark two crossroads of paramount importance in the relay race that produced our civilization. Bracketed between these two is the heyday of Islamic science and philosophy. The discrepancy between

the Jewish role in the first and second brackets demonstrates the radical change in Jewish involvement in philosophy. From the middle of the third Islamic century, Jews came to be full participants in the culture ensuing from the first translation movement, part and parcel of the adaptation and appropriation process of the Greek philosophical and scientific legacy.

Several centuries later, along with the vicissitudes of political power, the linguistic scene also changes. Abraham ibn Ezra (d. 1167) and Abraham bar Hiyya (d. 1136), although steeped in Arabic culture, write their works in Hebrew, inventing a suitable Hebrew vocabulary as they go. European Jews such as Judah ibn Tibbon, humbled by the achievements of their oriental coreligionists, use translations into Hebrew to absorb the Judeo-Arabic cultural heritage and make it their own. Subsequent luminaries of medieval Jewish philosophy, such as Nahmanides and Gersonides, thus became heirs to the Islamic philosophical tradition. Arguably, they too must be studied in the Islamic context. In their case, however, the context is indeed only the background.

NOTES

- 1 On the term "Islamic," see Kraemer 2003, note 5, p. 62; Nasr and Leaman 1996, Introduction.
- 2 Guttman 1964; Vajda 1947; Sirat 1985; Frank and Leaman 2003.
- 3 Bahya 1928, p. 2.
- 4 *Guide* I. 71, Maimonides 1963, pp. 175-7.
- 5 Finkel 1926, p. 16.
- 6 As was done, for example, in Urbach 1975.
- 7 Maimonides 1963, p. lxxxv.
- 8 See Stroumsa 2002.
- 9 See Lasker and Stroumsa 1996, Introduction.
- 10 On al-Muqammaṣ and his works, see Stroumsa 1989.
- 11 Ben-Shammai 2003a, pp. 341-4.
- 12 Drori 2000, chap. 5.
- 13 See Ben-Shammai 1993.
- 14 On various aspects of the *majlis*, see Laszarus-Yafeh et al. 1999.
- 15 Stroumsa 2006.
- 16 Kraus 1930; De Smet and Van Reeth 1998, pp. 148-51.
- 17 Pines 1954.
- 18 Fenton 1986.
- 19 Marx 1935; Maimonides 1963.
- 20 *Guide* II. 29, Maimonides 1963, p. 269; and see Kraemer 1999.
- 21 See Strauss 1952 (who calls him "an enlightened *mutakallim*"); Ivry 1991a.
- 22 Identified in a Genizah fragment by Krisztina Sziladgyi, in the framework of the Friedberg Genizah Project.
- 23 Pines 1976.
- 24 Goitein 1971, p. 273, and see Goitein 1974.
- 25 Stroumsa 1985.

- 26 Cf. W. Harvey 1989; Freidenreich 2003.
- 27 *Guide* III. 26.
- 28 Pines 1980-1.
- 29 Stroumsa 2005.
- 30 Pines 1967, p. 1; Schweid 1970a, pp. 18-9.
- 31 Goitein 1955, pp. 127-38, 140-54.
- 32 H. Wolfson 1976.
- 33 Drori 2000, p. 127-9.
- 34 Drori 2000, chap. five.