

ON JEWISH INTELLECTUALS WHO CONVERTED  
IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES\*

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"Minorities living amidst a huge majority are prone to be partly absorbed by it," remarks S.D. Goitein in his discussion of converts and proselytes in light of the Genizah documents.<sup>1</sup> From this generalization it is apparent that, in the Islamic world, conversion of Jews to Islam is essentially both a natural and a foreseeable process. Nevertheless, when we scrutinize individual instances of conversion, we are likely to find immediate factors which bring about—or at least hasten—the decision in each case to adopt another faith. In his discussion of Jewish conversion to Islam, Goitein counts among these factors alienation from the Jewish community—both in a geographic and social sense—on the one hand, and attraction to Islam, on the other. In this context, he presents the conversion of Jewish dignitaries to Islam as an expedient measure adopted for the sake of advancement as well as a means of avoiding persecution. Indeed, Goitein's opening sentence cited above reflects his conviction that the conversion of Jews to Islam can be explained by the force of the dominant faith.

Obviously, Jewish intellectuals living under Islamic rule were affected by the same forces of attraction and repulsion which affected the larger Jewish community.<sup>2</sup> On occasion, intellectuals were forcibly converted;<sup>3</sup> we certainly can find instances of Jewish humanists who apostasized half-heartedly—as did Heine in his time solely in order to gain an entrée into society.<sup>4</sup> In devoting a separate study to conversion among intellectuals,

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<sup>1</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), 2:299. See further his comments, 300–301.

<sup>2</sup> For lack of anything better and despite its slightly modern flavor, I have used the term "intellectuals" in this paper to designate those learned individuals whose writings and deeds testify to their particular interest in ideas.

<sup>3</sup> According to Muslim sources, this was the case with Maimonides—see: Ibn al-Qifti, *Ta'arikh al-hukama'*, ed. J. Lippert (Leipzig, 1903), 317–19; B. Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, 1984), 100; D.S. Margoliouth, "The Legend of the Apostasy of Maimonides," *JQR* o.s. 13 (1901): 539–41. The same was true of Joseph Ibn 'Aqnin, as he himself testifies; see Joseph ben Judah Ibn 'Aqnin, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, ed. A.S. Halkin (Jerusalem, 1964), 500.

<sup>4</sup> See *EJB*, s.v. "Heine, Heinrich." A note of skepticism as to the sincerity of Jews converting

however, we begin with the underlying assumption that it is possible to discern some sort of unifying element in their conversion processes—an element bound up with the fact of their being intellectuals. It is possible, moreover, that such a unifying element finds expression in motivations for conversion which do not exist—or at least not to the same degree—among other segments of the population.

Since intellectuals by definition engage in ideas, we might initially expect the influence of the majority upon them to express itself in spiritual and intellectual terms. Some scholars have suggested the attraction to a “wiser,” “more spiritual” religion and to religio-mystical experience as a factor in the conversion of Jews.<sup>5</sup> In support of this theory, it may be noted that Jews who converted to Christianity indeed explicitly expressed their attraction to the more “spiritual” religion.<sup>6</sup> It seems to me, however, that among Jewish intellectuals living in Islamic lands—as among their Christian counterparts—this was not one of the stated factors for conversion to Islam. Even the role of Sufis in disseminating Islam probably expressed itself not so much in their presentation of a more “spiritual” religion, as in other aspects of their activity.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it can be assumed that for the intellectually inclined, the desire to assimilate within the majority society also encompasses a longing to participate in a world of ideas regarded as superior, to be admitted to the cultured world.<sup>8</sup>

Also, because the intellectuals were literarily inclined, we may expect them to have recorded the circumstances of their decisions to convert, thereby affording us a glimpse of the apostates’ inner world. In the writings of those intellectuals who apostasized out of inner conviction we can also hope to find some analysis of those spiritual factors which they found to be superior in their new faith. In instances of opportunistic or forced

to Islam may be discerned in *The Apology of al-Kindi*, which says: “A Jew remains true to his Judaism and preserves the laws of his Torah (even) when he shows himself to be Muslim” (*inna al-yahūdi innamā taṣīḥu yahūdīyyatuhu wa-yahfazu sharā’i tawrātihi idha aẓhara al-islām*), see Georges Tartar, *Dialogue Islamo-chrétien sous le calife al-Ma’mun (813–834), les épîtres d’al-Hasimi et d’al-Kindi; thèse pour le doctorat de 3 cycle* (Strasbourg, 1977), 94.

<sup>5</sup> See Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 95.

<sup>6</sup> This was the case, e.g., with Herman of Cologne—see J. Cohen, “The Mentality of the Medieval Jewish Apostate: Peter Alfonsi, Herman of Cologne, and Pablo Christiani,” in *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, ed. T.M. Endelman (New York and London, 1987), 33–35.

<sup>7</sup> See N. Levtzion, “Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization,” in *Conversion to Islam* (New York and London, 1979), 16–21.

<sup>8</sup> An anonymous polemical treatise found in the Firkovich collection at St. Petersburg (II Firk. Heb.-Arab.I.3022) tells us of the intellectual attraction that Islam had for Jews in his time. The author, writing in tenth-century Iraq, says that Islam was presented to them in a beautiful, logical way, and many converted.

conversion, on the other hand, we may also expect our literary sources to reveal a certain tension between an author’s past and his inner convictions and between the day-to-day existence which he chose to live.<sup>9</sup>

In fairness, it ought to be stated that the study of intellectuals and their religious conversions is necessarily marred by a certain measure of arbitrariness. The limitations of such a study may be illustrated by one defining aspect of these intellectuals, viz. their professions. Learned businessmen and craftsmen were certainly to be found in the medieval Jewish world; by virtue of their employment, however, these people were not considered intellectuals. Even when such individuals appear in texts and documents, what is recorded generally—though not always—reflects their financial problems rather than their intellectual pursuits.<sup>10</sup> By way of contrast, for the period under consideration, physicians were generally regarded as scholars whose intellectual interests were manifest in their profession. Biographical works were, therefore, devoted to them; these enable us to become acquainted with them and their life-stories. Physicians figure prominently, therefore, in our discussion of intellectuals, even though there is no certainty that they actually constituted such a high proportion of the intellectual elite. From the distance of several hundred years, however, we can identify as “Jewish intellectuals who converted” only those individuals who were raised and educated as Jews, who were sufficiently important to have made an impression upon their contemporaries, and whose conversion was, therefore, duly noted. We may well suppose that there were numerous instances of educated individuals and men of letters who converted. If, however, the Muslim chroniclers did not mention them by name or if they themselves left no written accounts, then we have no way of knowing about them or of following their conversion.

In the following pages I neither claim to describe a social stratum nor offer a comprehensive sociological analysis of Jewish intellectuals who converted within the Islamic world. The quantity of factual evidence available to us does not, in my opinion, warrant such an analysis. Historians and sociologists must necessarily make do with the “socio-biographical” description of isolated instances that have come down to us. What follows is an attempt to analyze some such isolated instances from the perspective of intellectual history.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Heine’s “Hebrew Melodies.”

<sup>10</sup> An exception to this can be seen in the *Kitāb al-manāẓir*, which records the weekly scholarly meetings of learned merchants and artisans in tenth-century Mosul. See H. Ben-Shammai, “A Philosophical Study Group in Tenth Century Mosul—A Document for the Socio-Cultural History of a Jewish Community in a Muslim Country” (Hebrew), *Pe’amim* 41 (1990): 21–31.

*Ka'b al-Akhbār*

For the period of Islamic origins we lack real documentation relating to the subject of this inquiry.<sup>11</sup> The Muslim tradition literature relates that Ka'b al-Akhbār awaited the advent of the Prophet foretold by the Scriptures, even before he became the first Jew to convert to Islam. It is further related that his expectations were strengthened and fuelled by dream visions; ultimately he converted, having recognized in Muḥammad the likeness of the expected prophet. Numerous Jewish traditions (*isrā'iliyāt*) have been transmitted in Ka'b's name. The figure of Ka'b thus personifies the processes of Jewish influence upon early Islam. Certain features of Ka'b's story which recur frequently in the conversion accounts of intellectuals shed light upon the individual's personal process of conversion to Islam: the tendency to provide intellectual justification by citing and analyzing biblical prooftexts; the production of supernatural justification in the form of dream-experiences<sup>12</sup>; and the attempt to preserve a cultural and spiritual continuity between the old and new faiths even after the conversion had taken place. At the same time, however, it must be said that the figure of Ka'b belongs more to the realm of myth than of history.<sup>13</sup>

More detailed documentation concerning conversion becomes available for the third Islamic century; even here, however, our information remains scarce indeed. There is a gap of some three centuries between the first and second documented instances of conversion by Jewish intellectuals. I shall deal below with these two examples from the classical period of Islam. It must be emphasized, however, that the chronological gap between these two cases makes it impossible to argue that they are in any way representative of the period as a whole: the most that can be said is that they contribute to our understanding of the conversion phenomenon among Jewish intellectuals.

<sup>11</sup> I refer here to the first and second centuries A.H., i.e. the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. This is the period commonly referred to as "The Early Islamic Middle Ages," a term which reflects the periodization of European historiography. It may be more appropriate to speak of "the period of high caliphate," as suggested by M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. I: *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago and London, 1979), 234–35. On the question of periodization, see also B. Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 107–11; R. Brague, "Elargir le passé, approfondir le présent," *Débats* 72 (1992): 34.

<sup>12</sup> On dreams paving the way for conversion see, for instance, H.J. Fischer, "Dreams and Conversion in Black Africa," in *Conversion to Islam*, 218–19, 231–35.

<sup>13</sup> See *Et*, 2d ed., s.v. "Ka'b al-Akhbār" and Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 96–97.

*Conversion to Christianity under Islamic Rule: Dāwūd al-Muqammaṣ*

We begin with the conversion of Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ (ninth century C.E.). The Karaite al-Qirḡisānī reports that al-Muqammaṣ converted to Christianity and lived for many years among the Christians of Nisibis.<sup>14</sup> Under Islamic rule, the Christians were designated a protected minority (*ahl al-dhimma*). The protection, however, depended on the good will of the ruler, and the Christians were sometimes persecuted. Thus, the Christian theologian, Nonnus of Nisibis, who was probably al-Muqammaṣ's teacher, languished for many years in prison where he had been cast by the Caliph al-Mutawakkil.<sup>15</sup> We certainly cannot maintain, therefore, that someone converting to Christianity under Islamic rule was attracted either to the power of the dominant religion or to the convenience of the majority faith. Moreover, since Islamic law does not permit any conversion within its realm save to Islam, such an act could even entail some danger.<sup>16</sup> We have, however, no evidence to suggest that al-Muqammaṣ in any way endangered himself by converting to Christianity. It is possible that the Muslim authorities refrained from interfering with the domain of the Christian academies; it is also possible that the conversion of a Jew to Christianity was sufficiently rare in this period to be conveniently ignored by the Muslim authorities.

Al-Qirḡisānī does not attempt to describe the psychological changes experienced by al-Muqammaṣ at the time of his conversion to Christianity; al-Muqammaṣ, for his part, does not inform us of his innermost feelings. We may assume that we have before us a classic instance of *conversio*—the adoption of Christianity out of a real change in faith.<sup>17</sup> If this was indeed the case, it would seem that al-Muqammaṣ found the experience to his taste, for he indulged in it a second time: from his writings it appears that subsequent to becoming a Christian, he returned to Judaism, devoting his best literary efforts thereafter to refuting Christianity.

At first glance, then, it would seem that this example is in no way

<sup>14</sup> See Ya'qūb al-Qirḡisānī, *Kitāb al-anwār wa'l-marāqib*, ed. L. Nemoy (New York, 1939), 1:44. Concerning al-Muqammaṣ, see S. Stroumsa, *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ's 'Ishrūn Maqāla* (Leiden, 1989). On the vocalization of his name, see S. Stroumsa, "La perception maïmonidienne du kalām juif; sa véracité et son influence" *Genos* (Lausanne, forthcoming), n. 12.

<sup>15</sup> On Nonnus see A. Van-Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe, traité apologétique* (Louvain, 1948).

<sup>16</sup> See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:305 and A. Fattal, *Le Statut légal des non musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> On the distinction between "conversion" and "adhesion" see A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford, 1933), 7ff.

representative of the conversion of Jews under Islamic rule and that it offers us nothing beyond the eccentric deeds of one individual. In fact, the eccentric elements which we observe in al-Muqammaṣ's behavior reflect the typical peculiarities of an intellectual: the search for education and learning wherever they can be found, the quest for religious truth, and the tendency to identify the place of religious truth with the place of education and learning.

Certain scholars have cast doubts upon the reliability of al-Qirḳisānī's assertion that al-Muqammaṣ actually converted to Christianity; others emphasize that we lack explicit evidence for his reversion to Judaism.<sup>18</sup> It seems to me, however, that taken together, both conversions may be accepted as true facts. Both conversions may be explained not only on the basis of the information in our sources but also on the basis of al-Muqammaṣ's personality and the cultural world in which he lived. For while it is true that during the third Islamic century there existed a Muslim intellectual elite—whose influence upon al-Muqammaṣ was considerable—its prestige at the time was still outstripped by Christian superiority in the study of philosophy and the sciences. The prestige enjoyed by Christians manifested itself in their status as translators, as appointees to positions in the Royal Library (*bayt al-ḥikma*), and as court physicians; it also aroused the jealousy of their Muslim neighbors.<sup>19</sup> While al-Muqammaṣ's writings do not, in fact, reflect great intellectual depth, a true intellectual curiosity is discernible in them. It was natural for such a person, determined as he was to study philosophy, to be attracted to the centers of Christian learning. If this was the situation in his day, we may suppose that such an attraction existed—perhaps to an even greater degree—in the first and second Islamic centuries. The letters of Bishop Timotheos I (eighth century, Baghdad) mention a learned Jew who was preparing to convert to Christianity. Like al-Muqammaṣ, Timotheos's Jewish novice reveals an interest in the archaeological discoveries of the day and in their significance for the history of religions.<sup>20</sup> If we do not maintain that these two apostates were one and the same person—a claim rendered problematic by chronological considerations—it appears that in the early Islamic period, Chris-

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., the relevant article in *EJB*.

<sup>19</sup> Through the special honors accorded them, Christians frequently incurred an additional measure of hatred; see, e.g., al-Jāḥiẓ, "Al-radd 'alā 'l-naṣārā" in *Thalāth rasā'il*, ed. J. Finkel (Cairo, 1344/1926). And see also A.S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects* (London, 1970), 92–95.

<sup>20</sup> See O. Braun, "Ein Brief des Katholikos Timotheos über biblische Studien des 9 Jahrhunderts," *Oriens Christianus* 1 (1901): 299–313.

tianity held a fascination for a certain type of Jewish intellectual.

On the other hand, as we have already said, al-Muqammaṣ lived in a period when Muslims had already begun to compete with Christians in the fields of theology and philosophy. Traces of Muslim arguments against Christianity are observable in al-Muqammaṣ's writings. That same curiosity which had brought him to Christianity in the first place, also spurred him to become acquainted with the Muslim polemics against Christianity. We may suppose that such confrontations between Christianity and Islam sharpened his doubts—doubts which in the end led him back to Judaism.

### *Jews who converted to Islam*

If we accept the premise that al-Muqammaṣ's attraction to intellectual superiority played a decisive role in his conversion to Christianity, we may also presume that Christianity lost its attractiveness for Jews living in Islamic lands when the Muslims achieved supremacy in philosophy and the sciences during the following centuries.<sup>21</sup> Sa'd b. Manṣūr Ibn Kammūna, a thirteenth-century Jewish intellectual—who, it has been suggested, may also have apostasized—summarized the reasons for converting to Islam as follows:

That is why, to this day we never see anyone converting to Islam unless in terror, or in quest of power, or to avoid heavy taxation, or to escape humiliation, or if taken prisoner, or because of infatuation with a Muslim woman, or for some similar reason. Nor do we see a respected, wealthy, and pious non-Muslim well-versed in both his faith and that of Islam, going over to the Islamic faith without some of the aforementioned or similar motives.<sup>22</sup>

Ibn Kammūna thus explicitly rejects the possibility of conversion to Islam for any but the most pragmatic of motivations—especially in cases involving individuals who are "well-versed in both their own faith and that of Islam," i.e., people possessing religious learning.

We will examine below Ibn Kammūna's categorical statement concerning those Jewish intellectuals whose conversion to Islam left traces in the literary sources. The number of these individuals is extremely limited and

<sup>21</sup> However, the tenth-century Karaite author Japheth b. Eli, in his commentary on Deut. 4:28 (B.L. ms. Or. 2478, fol. 42a, lines 4–6) still speaks of Jews whom "you can see today apostasizing and converting to Christianity." For this reference I am indebted to Daniel Frank.

<sup>22</sup> See M. Perlmann, *Ibn Kammūna's Examination of the Three Faiths* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), 149. For the Arabic text see idem. ed., *Tanqīḥ al-Abḥāth li'l-Milal al-Thalāth* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), 102.



the impression made by their conversion to Islam is not sufficiently detailed to permit us any certain conclusions; what follows, therefore, should not be taken as anything more than reasonable postulation.

Ibn Kammūna's words, which unequivocally reject any possibility of an intellectual attraction to Islam, reflect a polemical stance. It is certainly reasonable to suppose, however, that not only did such an attraction actually exist but that it may even have caused certain individuals to convert. All the same, can we speak of a more general phenomenon of conversion to Islam due to intellectual motives?

#### A. Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī

The next apostate whom we will discuss—and who represents, incidentally, the next instance of a Jewish intellectual's conversion to Islam which is documented in some detail—has led scholars to posit the existence of just such a wide-spread phenomenon. Three Jewish scholars in twelfth-century Baghdad converted to Islam. Of this group, the two younger men—the poet Isaac ben Abraham Ibn Ezra and the mathematician, physician and polemicist Samuel Ibn Abbās ha-Ma'aravi (Samau'al al-Maghribī)—were the disciples of the third—the philosopher, “Netanel, the Unique One of His Generation,” i.e. Ḥibat Allāh Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī. Various scholars have been inclined to suppose that the two younger men converted to Islam under the influence of their master.<sup>23</sup> From this, apparently, they have inferred the existence of a learned Jewish “circle,” whose studies and discussions prompted its members to recognize the truth of Islam. Such a circle would offer an ideal object for the study of conversion among intellectuals in general. Before adopting such a theory, however, we ought first to re-examine the accuracy of the description upon which it is grounded.

Our knowledge of Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's conversion to Islam derives solely from Muslim sources; the Jewish sources are utterly silent on the matter. In the literary debate between Maimonides and Samuel ben 'Eli, Abū'l-Barakāt's name is mentioned without any derogatory epithet.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Moshe Perlmann mentions this as a coincidence deserving of note, without insisting upon any necessary connection between the three instances; see the introduction to his “Ifḥām al-Yahūd,” *PAAJR* 32 (1964): 16. See also: Menahem H. Schmelzer ed., *Isaac Ben Abraham Ibn Ezra: Poems* (New York, 1980), xi; N. Ben-Menahem, *Isaac Ibn Ezra: Poems* (Jerusalem, 1950), 44; and J.L. Fleischer, “Le-qorot yiṣḥaq ibn 'ezra,” *Sinai* 21 (1947): 263–76. See also *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, s.v. “Ibn Ezra, Yiṣḥaq ben Avraham.”

<sup>24</sup> See J. Finkel ed., “Maimonides' Treatise on Resurrection,” *PAAJR* 9 (1938–1939): 12–13 of the text; S. Stroumsa, “On the Maimonidean Controversy in the East: The Role of Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī” (Hebrew), in *Hebrew and Arabic Studies in Honour of Joshua Blau*

This fact was noted with mild surprise by scholars.<sup>25</sup> There is, in fact, no cause for astonishment: the Genizah documents record no custom of cursing apostates,<sup>26</sup> and it seems that instances of conversion to Islam whose pragmatic benefits were obvious were received with a measure of understanding.<sup>27</sup> While it is true that Abū'l-Barakāt's philosophical writings were not widely disseminated in Jewish intellectual circles, it appears that there was no connection between this fact and his conversion to Islam; his lack of popularity ought not to be regarded as evidence of any ban against him. The fact that his writings belong to the realm of general philosophy and that they were originally set down in Arabic rather than Hebrew script led to their not being classified as works of a specifically Jewish character but rather as philosophy proper.<sup>28</sup> And in this category there were other writers whose works were preferred to those of Abū'l-Barakāt among both Jewish and gentile audiences.

There are four reports extant concerning Abū'l-Barakāt's conversion to Islam.<sup>29</sup> All four recount that he became a Muslim at a very advanced age, and that the recognition of Muḥammad's prophethood was not a factor in his decision. Two of the reports connect his conversion to a craving for honor and the realization that he would not receive the respect due a court physician so long as he remained Jewish. According to Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah, Abū'l-Barakāt was enraged when the Chief Justice (*qāḍī al-quḍāt*) remained seated before him and did not rise out of respect.<sup>30</sup> Ibn al-Qiftī recounts that Abū'l-Barakāt was insulted by a satiric ditty composed against him by Ibn al-Aflaḥ.<sup>31</sup> The other two reports indicate that the elderly philosopher converted to Islam out of fear for his life: in this connection, Ibn al-Qiftī mentions a royal patient who died in Abū'l-Barakāt's care,<sup>32</sup> while al-Bayhaqī records that the decision to convert came when Abū'l-Barakāt

*Presented by Friends and Students on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. H. Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem, 1993), 415–22.

<sup>25</sup> See Pines, “Studies in Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Poetics and Metaphysics,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 6 (1960): 121 [= idem., *Studies in Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī: Physics and Metaphysics* (Jerusalem, 1979), 260].

<sup>26</sup> See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:301.

<sup>27</sup> As, for example, in the case of Ibn Killis—see Goitein, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> On a copy of his main composition in Hebrew characters see Tzvi Langermann, “A Fragment of Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's *al-Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*” (Hebrew), *KS* 61 (1986–87), 361–62.

<sup>29</sup> For a summary of the four reports see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:303 and Pines, “Studies in Abū'l-Barakāt,” p. 121, n. 4.

<sup>30</sup> See Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Kitāb 'uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*, ed. N. Riḍā (Beirut, 1965), 375.

<sup>31</sup> See Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ta'rikh al-ḥukamā'*, 343.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

was in captivity.<sup>33</sup> From all of these accounts a self-evident conclusion emerges, viz. that under an Islamic regime it was much more pleasant and secure to be a Muslim.

Against this background, another story becomes all the more striking: it is said that Abū'l-Barakāt demanded as a condition for his conversion—and in contravention of Islamic law—that his Jewish daughters be granted the right to inherit him.<sup>34</sup> Now, we know of instances in medieval Europe in which pressure was exerted upon Jews to become Christians, while at the same time some effort was made to take their backgrounds and former lives into consideration.<sup>35</sup> From the story in which Abū'l-Barakāt lays down his conditions for conversion, however, a different picture emerges. Whether or not the account is historically accurate, it most certainly does not depict a fanatical Muslim regime whose Jewish subjects are forced to convert, while being permitted to retain their social fabric. On the contrary, the story presents a respected man who sets forth his conditions from a position of power, knowing even in that very moment of weakness that his adoption of Islam will meet with admiration.

It should be added that from the geonic responsa we learn that the phenomenon of an apostate leaving his property to his Jewish heirs was well-known and quite common. In this connection Maimonides writes:

Cases of this kind are brought before us every day . . . and we always handle them in the same manner: the estate of anyone who apostasizes is distributed among his (Jewish) sons. Should he have no Jewish sons, it is transferred to another suitable heir.<sup>36</sup>

If this is the case, it is indeed possible that the story of Abū'l-Barakāt's laying down prior conditions before converting to Islam reflects a historical reality. Against the background of Maimonides' statement it becomes necessary to examine the possibility that the conditions laid down by Abū'l-Barakāt testify not only to the apostate's strong personality but also to the strength of a Jewish community whose laws achieved, at times, a certain priority over the laws of Islam.

<sup>33</sup> See Zāhir al-Dīn Abū'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Zayd al-Bayhaqī, *Tatimmat siwān al-ḥikma*, ed. Muḥammad Shāfi' (Lahore, 1935), 151–52.

<sup>34</sup> See Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ta'rikh al-hukamā'*, 343.

<sup>35</sup> They were not, for example, required to annul existing marriages which—for reasons of consanguinity—would have been forbidden under canon law; see Cohen, "The Mentality of the Medieval Jewish Apostate," 22.

<sup>36</sup> See Moses Maimonides, *Responsa*, ed. J. Blau (Jerusalem, 1960), 2:657. And see on this S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2d ed. (New York, 1957), 3:143–44 and pp. 300–301, nn. 26–28.

This description of Abū'l-Barakāt's own conversion offers sufficient grounds to call into question the argument that his two disciples adopted Islam under his influence. When we come to examine his relationship with these students, our doubts are heightened. Samau'al recounts that he studied medicine and pharmacology with Abū'l-Barakāt. By his account, it is apparent that Samau'al was no more than a young man at the time and that he pursued these studies some time—perhaps even several years—before reaching his decision to convert. His remarks in no way suggest that there was any theological dimension to his meetings with Abū'l-Barakāt.<sup>37</sup>

### B. Isaac Ibn Ezra

The story of Isaac Ibn Ezra's conversion to Islam is more complicated.<sup>38</sup> As J.L. Fleischer showed, Isaac most likely converted to Islam outwardly and without conviction—before reverting to Judaism once he was in a position to do so.<sup>39</sup> At one time, the prevailing scholarly view held that Isaac's entire conversion process took place in Baghdad but this theory is now difficult to accept. As we have mentioned above, the Seljuk regime in Baghdad was not particularly zealous in this period. Moreover, it is difficult to conceive of a zealous regime which would both compel Jews to become Muslims and permit them to revert to Judaism with impunity. According to Islamic law, Jews may not be forced to convert; once they have become Muslims, however, they are liable to capital punishment should they return to their original faith.<sup>40</sup> In attempting to resolve this difficulty, Goitein posited that Isaac was forced to travel abroad to Christian lands in order to return to Judaism.<sup>41</sup>

Our information about Isaac's conversion to Islam derives entirely from two sources: his own verse and certain statements made by Judah al-Ḥarizi concerning him. In one poem attributed to Isaac he acknowledges that "he kept neither the oath sworn by his mouth nor all the laws learned from his prophet's lips." In another poem ("Yerivuni alei ozvi berit el") he explains that his profession of Islam—i.e., the *shahāda*—is entirely external:

<sup>37</sup> "Islām al-Samau'al" in Perlmann, "Ifḥām al-Yahūd," 97.

<sup>38</sup> Concerning him see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:302 and Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 99.

<sup>39</sup> See: Fleischer, "Le-qorot yiṣḥaq ibn 'ezra," 263–76; N. Ben-Menahem, "Kelum hemir yiṣḥaq ibn 'ezra et dato?" *Sinai* 12 (1943): 443–50.

<sup>40</sup> See Fattal, *Le Statut légal des non musulmans*, 165–68 and Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:304.

<sup>41</sup> See Goitein, *ibid.*, 303.

But if I still begin each prayer  
by professing a madman to be God's prophet,  
I do this with my lips alone, my heart responding,  
"You're a liar and your testimony is invalid."

Asserting that he has never tasted ritually unfit food he adds:

I have come back beneath the shadow of Your wing;  
I ask You, God, for Your forgiveness.<sup>42</sup>

While some doubt exists concerning the attribution of these poems, there is an additional poem, whose attribution to Isaac is beyond question, in which the author refers to himself with the following words: "Embracing the faith of strangers I estranged myself from the speech of my fathers."<sup>43</sup> The identity of our author with Isaac ben Abraham Ibn Ezra is consistent as well with the testimony of al-Ḥarizi who recounts concerning Isaac:

When he came to the lands of the East, the glory of the Lord did not shine upon him and he discarded the precious garments of the faith. He stripped off his garments and put on other vestments.<sup>44</sup>

Menahem Schmelzer, who published the poems from which the above citations were taken has shown that they were composed while Isaac was still in Egypt.<sup>45</sup> In this connection Schmelzer mentions an episode in which Judah Halevi was also involved. As is well known, Isaac arrived in Egypt as Judah Halevi's travelling companion.<sup>46</sup> From the Genizah documents we learn that one of Halevi's fellow travelers had been asked to convey a sum of money to a certain apostate in Alexandria, that Halevi had attempted to bring this apostate back to the fold of Judaism, that the apostate denounced Halevi to the authorities, and that only by virtue of Halevi's eminence did the affair conclude satisfactorily for him—the Muslim mobs venting their wrath, in the end, upon the hapless apostate.<sup>47</sup> Schmelzer suggested that Halevi's companion, Isaac Ibn Ezra, was involved in this affair and as a consequence was forced to "abandon the covenant."<sup>48</sup>

We may object, however, that such an episode—whose ultimate victim proved to be the apostate, Halevi escaping unharmed—can hardly have

<sup>42</sup> Schmelzer, *Isaac Ibn Ezra*, 146–47 and Ben-Menahem, *Isaac Ibn Ezra: Poems*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Ben-Menahem, *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Judah al-Ḥarizi, *The Tahkemoni*, "The Third Gate," trans. V.E. Reichert, vol. 1, (Jerusalem, 1965), 79. For the Hebrew text see Tahkemoni, ed. Y. Toporowski (Tel Aviv, 1952), 45.

<sup>45</sup> *Isaac Ibn Ezra*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Goitein even maintains that Isaac was Judah Halevi's son-in-law; see *Mediterranean Society*, 2:303. This view is rejected by Schmelzer, *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Goitein, *ibid.*, 304.

<sup>48</sup> Schmelzer, *ibid.*, 11.

brought about Isaac's conversion. Moreover, it is scarcely possible that Isaac could have renounced Islam under the same Muslim regime that he had previously embraced it. It seems to me, therefore, that Goitein was probably right in assuming that Isaac's conversion to Islam was undertaken strictly for appearance's sake. It was not, however, performed out of compulsion but rather for convenience. This being the case, it should in no way be connected with the aforementioned episode.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, from the poems published by Schmelzer it appears that by the time Isaac departed from Egypt, his "Muslim phase" was already past. Schmelzer attempted to add a second act: according to him, when al-Ḥarizi mentions Isaac's apostasy "upon his arrival in eastern lands," we must assume that he converted a second time in Baghdad, under the influence of Abū'l-Barakāt.<sup>50</sup> Now while it is true that Isaac was apparently a complicated person,<sup>51</sup> it seems most unlikely that he apostasized twice. Such fickleness would be much more natural for a person like al-Muqammaṣ who related to theology on a far more profound level. There are no signs of any such profundity in Isaac Ibn Ezra; his relationship to religion bears the stamp of a suffering, unfortunate personality. It seems more reasonable to me that by "lands of the East," al-Ḥarizi intended those countries to which Isaac journeyed from the "lands of the West," i.e. Spain. From al-Ḥarizi's perspective, once Isaac had left Spain, it made little difference whether he apostasized in Egypt or in Baghdad.

We see, therefore, that there are no grounds for connecting the conversions of Samau'al and Isaac with that of Abū'l-Barakāt. Each had his own motivations for becoming a Muslim which were unconnected to those of his fellows; these motivations, moreover, were probably unconnected to their mutual acquaintance, either causally or temporally. We cannot, in any event, speak here of a phenomenon: these three instances of conversion neither indicate the presence of a small circle of intellectuals whose intellectualism led them to embrace Islam, nor suggest the existence of any such widespread pattern of behavior.

### C. Samau'al al-Maghribī

At the same time, Samau'al's autobiographical account of his conversion offers us a way of comprehending the phenomenon of conversion to

<sup>49</sup> Goitein, *ibid.*, 303.

<sup>50</sup> Schmelzer, *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> From two of Isaac's letters which have been preserved in the Genizah, Goitein concludes that he was "a rather strange person." (p. 303)



Islam—not as some prevailing fashion but as a phenomenon within the realm of the individual.

Of the three instances discussed, Samau'al's conversion is the only one presented as being theologically motivated. Ibn Kammūna, who was familiar with Samau'al's writings, cast aspersions both upon the purity of his motivations and the power of his intellect. He rejects one of Samau'al's arguments as being "too unsound to be discussed seriously"<sup>52</sup>; elsewhere, he suggests that Samau'al's conversion to Islam was motivated less by his inner convictions than by a desire to enrage the Jews (*'ānada al-yahūd wa-aslama*).<sup>53</sup> As Samau'al mentions repeatedly, his relationship with his father was a factor in his own religious behavior. (As he puts it, his fear of his father and his reluctance to offend him prevented him from converting at a much earlier date.) Comments of this nature lead us to wonder how a psychologist of religion might analyze his case. In this respect, Samau'al matches the general picture sketched by Goitein,<sup>54</sup> for he converted only after he had become geographically separated from his father. Nevertheless, the fact itself remains before us: Samau'al did convert publicly and of his own volition. In doing so, moreover, he acted out of sufficient conviction to record the story of his conversion in writing. We cannot, therefore, subscribe to Ibn Kammūna's assessment and permit ourselves to judge Samau'al's truthfulness.

According to Samau'al, the turning point in his conversion came with his dreams, in which the prophets Samuel and Muḥammad were revealed to him. The dream as an incitement to conversion is a well-known topos, one we have already encountered in the case of Ka'b al-Akhbār. Samau'al, however, seeks to play down the dream's value in this context. He recounts that over the course of several years he refused to publicize the matter, because he sensed that his dreams would be regarded with scorn. Repeatedly, he emphasizes that his dream did not cause him to realize the soundness of Islam; it represented, rather, the crucial event which forced him to take the final step of severing himself from his faith and his father's house.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See Ibn Kammūna, *Examination of the Three Faiths*, 143 (= *Tanqīh al-Abhāth*, 97).

<sup>53</sup> *Tanqīh al-Abhāth*, 95. Perlmann renders *'ānada* "turned against"; see *Examination of the Three Faiths*, 139. From al-Ḥarizi's words it is clear that Samau'al truly enraged the Jews. The latter is treated much more harshly than Isaac Ibn Ezra. See al-Ḥarizi, *Tahkemoni*, trans. V.E. Reichert, 1:79 (= *Tahkemoni*, ed. Toporowski, 45): "He [i.e. Judah Ibn Abbas] too begat a renegade son who acted with amazing and impudent shamelessness." On this passage see also H. Schirrmann, *Ha-shirah ha-'ivrit bi-sefarad u-ve-provans*, 2d ed. (Jerusalem, 1960), 3:112, lines 173–79 and the notes ad loc.

<sup>54</sup> Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:299.

<sup>55</sup> "Islām al-Samau'al" in Perlmann, "Ifḥām al-Yahūd," 118–20.

According to Samau'al's conception, religious experience does not constitute a legitimate argument for conversion; the only legitimate argument is a rational one.

Samau'al describes his path to Islam as an intellectual process of study and systematic analysis. We have already seen how Ka'b employed his learning to argue that the Bible attests to the prophethood of Muḥammad. In his book *Ifḥām al-Yahūd* (*Silencing the Jews*) Samau'al discusses similar biblical verses at great length. In his account of his conversion, however, they appear only as part of his dream, i.e. at a secondary, experiential stage of his conversion. In the first stage, which he terms the intellectual-rational stage, there is no mention of the biblical verses. In his autobiography, Samau'al describes the course of his education—his curriculum included medicine, logic, history, and literature—leading up to his study of different religions. He writes as follows:

Then . . . I asked myself about the differences among men in religious faiths and tenets. I received the greatest impulse to inquire into the subject from reading the epistle of Bardhayayh the physician, in the book *Kalila wa-Dimna*.<sup>56</sup>

The conclusion to which this book led him was that "reason is the final arbiter" and that rationally speaking, no one religious tradition is superior to any other; we therefore ought either to accept or reject all of them. Samau'al elects to accept them all.

An examination of "The Book of Barzawayh (Burzoe) the Physician" confirms that it served Samau'al as the source for these arguments. "Barzawayh the Physician" is presented as a spiritual autobiography. Like Samau'al's, it opens with Barzawayh's genealogy (*nasab*), an account of his parents' lives, and the education which they gave him. Barzawayh begins his account as well with the assertion that reason is God's greatest gift to man. He too passes on to a discussion of religions, stating:

I found that there are many religions and creeds and that the followers of these creeds differ one from another. Some inherited their religion from their ancestors, others adopted it on account of fear and coercion, yet others hoped by means of it to acquire worldly goods, pleasures, and prestige. But every one of them claims that his religion is the true and correct one and that whoever contradicts him lives in error and deception . . . I decided to frequent the scholars and leaders in every religious faction and to examine what they teach and stipulate in the hope that

<sup>56</sup> Trans. M. Perlmann in "The Medieval Polemics Between Islam and Judaism," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S.D. Goitein (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 115; Arabic text in idem., "Ifḥām al-Yahūd," 103. The English translation of the autobiography in N. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands* (Philadelphia, 1979), 118–20 omits the passage relating to "The Book of Barzawayh the Physician."



perhaps I could learn to distinguish truth from falsehood and attach myself confidently to the truth without having to accept on the authority of others something that I could not know or understand by myself. I pursued this plan, investigated and studied. But I discovered that all of these people merely repeat what was handed down to them. Each one praises his own religion and curses the religion of those who disagree with him. It became clear to me that their conclusions are based on illusions and that their speech is not motivated by a sense of fairness. In not one of them did I find that degree of honesty and rightmindedness which would induce rational persons to accept their words and be satisfied with them.<sup>57</sup>

The equality of religions and the fact that they contradict each other leads Barzawayh to reject them all. He chooses instead an ethical, ascetic way of life as a certain truth upon which all religions agree. Now Samau'al's explicit statement, that his familiarity with the argument for the equality of religions derived from Barzawayh, implies that he had seen both Barzawayh's argument and his atheistic conclusion. Samau'al's own innovation, in this case, is to impose a conclusion upon the argument which is diametrically opposed to the one originally presented, viz. the affirmation of belief in all religions and—it goes without saying—in Islam, the final revelation which encompasses all others.

Further support may be offered for our claim that Samau'al was familiar with the argument for the equality of religions in its atheistic context. As far back as the tenth century, there were those who maintained that the autobiography of Barzawayh was actually composed by Ibn al-Muqaffa' who sought to introduce skepticism into the Muslim world.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, arguments similar to Barzawayh's and similar universalistic conclusions were used by some notorious Muslim free-thinkers. These arguments are present in somewhat veiled form in the writings of Ibn al-Rāwandī, who championed—in the name of the Indian Barāhima—the superiority of reason, deducing thereby the invalidity of revealed religions.<sup>59</sup> More explicitly, they are to be found in the works of the tenth-century philosopher Muḥammad b. Zakariyā al-Rāzī, who states:

We have seen that those who hold fast to tradition [...] believe in the truth of their religion, basing themselves upon their faith in the truth of their ancestors' words. . . . He said: If this (religion) is true for this reason, then all faiths—Juda-

<sup>57</sup> Trans. F. de Blois in *Burzoy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalilah wa Dimnah* (London, 1990), 26; see the discussion on 28–32. For the Arabic text see Ibn al-Muqaffa', *Kalila wa-Dimna*, ed. L. Cheikh (Beirut, 1905), 33–34; see also esp. 42–40.

<sup>58</sup> On the authenticity of Barzawayh's autobiography, see now M. Chokr, *Zandaqa et Zindiqs en Islam au second siècle de l'hégire* (Damascus, 1993), 179–208.

<sup>59</sup> See P. Kraus, "Beiträge zur islamische Ketzer-geschichte, das *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* des Ibn al-Rāwandī," *RSO* 14 (1934): 93–129; 15 (1934): 335–79.

ism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and others—are valid as well, since they employ the same demonstrative method as does Islam.<sup>60</sup>

Like Barzawayh, al-Rāzī derives the refutation of all revealed religions from the fact that they employ equivalent arguments to demonstrate their validity. This indeed is the logical conclusion to the problem as it is presented by Barzawayh. It stands to reason that Samau'al was acquainted with al-Rāzī's medical works; there is reason to believe, moreover, that he was acquainted as well with al-Rāzī's other writings—including this particular argument. Now, even if it were possible for him to have ignored Barzawayh's conclusion rejecting all religions, it is difficult to suppose that he could have ignored the same argument in the writings of al-Rāzī, who was well-known to have been an unbeliever. I am inclined, therefore, to suppose that Samau'al was conscious of the fact that he was adapting atheistic argumentation to the exigencies of a religious argument. Were al-Rāzī his only source in arguing for the equivalence of religions, it is doubtful whether Samau'al would have drawn upon him: aside from medical matters, in which he was regarded as a great authority, al-Rāzī was denigrated as an unbeliever. We may assume that Samau'al would not readily have mentioned such a dubious source in his autobiography. *Kalila wa-Dimna* on the other hand—including "The Book of Barzawayh the Physician"—was a much more acceptable source, which might well be cited in polite company.

The argument for the equivalence of religious traditions made its way as well into orthodox Islamic circles and is widespread in theological writings.<sup>61</sup> I am unaware, however, of any other place in which the equivalence of religious traditions in and of themselves—without any further development—is taken as a proof for the validity of Islam. For comparative purposes, I shall bring one example which occurs as well in the context of religious conversion. 'Alī b. Rabbān al-Ṭabarī was a Christian intellectual who, like Abū'l-Barakāt, converted to Islam at an advanced age. Like Samau'al, al-Ṭabarī attacked his former faith, while seeking to justify his new one. According to al-Ṭabarī, he is writing so that slanderers may not assert that he converted to Islam out of a pursuit of temporal pleasures. Like Samau'al, al-Ṭabarī too hastens to assert the superiority of reason as a fundamental principle. Al-Ṭabarī does not, however, in any

<sup>60</sup> P. Kraus, "Raziana," *Orientalia* n.s. 5 (1936): 363, 367.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., the spiritual autobiography of Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl wa'l-mūsīl ilā dhī al-'izza wa'l-jalāl*, ed. J. Šaliba and K. 'Ayyād (Beirut, 1981), 81–82; trans. W.M. Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī* (London, 1953), 21–22.

way allow for the possibility that all religious traditions are of equal value. His entire aim is to show the absolute superiority of the Islamic tradition on the one hand and the logical and historical distortions of the Christian tradition on the other.<sup>62</sup> Reliance upon reason is part of the Arabic polemical tradition; this is evident from the discussion's framework, a theological engagement of intellectuals. Any inclination toward religious relativism such as we may encounter with Samau'al, however, belongs to this tradition only in a polemical way, as a strawman to be destroyed.

*Summary: Relativism as a Factor in Conversion*

It is possible to dismiss Samau'al's relativism as the weak argumentation of an eclectic theologian who sought to combine incompatible ideas. Such a view, at any rate, is expressed by Perlmann, who regards Samau'al's spiritual autobiography as no more than a youthful essay.<sup>63</sup> It seems to me, however, that the very presence of the argument in Samau'al's work has more to teach us than does the quality of his theology. In his day, the relativist argument was undoubtedly widespread and well-known in various versions, but always with the same atheistic conclusion. The fact, moreover, that Samau'al employs this as the single decisive argument which logically demands acceptance of Islam confirms the view that this argument was particularly widespread. It is possible as well that the relativist atmosphere prevailing in certain intellectual circles helped facilitate the transition between different religions—especially, of course, conversion to the dominant faith from an intellectual perspective.<sup>64</sup> To put it differently: although we have not encountered any systematic conversion of intellectuals to Islam in organized groups and under the influence of spiritual teachers, it appears that the subjects discussed by intellectuals during this period enabled them to adopt a detached position vis-à-vis reli-

<sup>62</sup> See A. Khalife and W. Kutsch, "Al-Radd 'alā-n-naṣārā de Alī at-Ṭabārī," *Mélanges de l'université Saint Joseph* 36 (1959): 115. Chokr, *Zandaqa et Zindiqs*, regards Barzawayh's introduction as a literary convention rather than an expression of true skepticism. On pp. 204–205 he cites examples where authors, like al-Ṭabārī, start their quest for the true religion with the assumption of the primacy of the intellect and with a detached, objective examination of all religions. In none of these examples, however, does the author conclude with the equivalence of religions. Whereas the primacy of the intellect is indeed a commonplace theme in theological literature, the skeptical conclusion is not.

<sup>63</sup> See M. Perlmann, "Ifḥām al-Yahūd," 23.

<sup>64</sup> See M. Perlmann ed., *Tanqīh al-Abḥāth*, X–XII. On relativistic expressions in relation to all religions see also Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 88 and p. 206, n. 29.

gion in general, a position which in certain circumstances, could lead them to embrace a new faith.

This relativism leads us again to Ibn Kammūna, with whom we will conclude: the claim that he converted to Islam is, apparently, incorrect. While Ibn Kammūna definitely drew upon Samau'al's anti-Jewish polemic, *Ifḥām al-Yahūd*, we do not know whether he was familiar with the latter's autobiography. And although it is true that Ibn Kammūna too mentions the relativist argument, this argument was, as we have seen, sufficiently widespread and well-known for him to have received it from many other sources. To a certain degree, Ibn Kammūna confirms the impression that relativism typified the spirit of the age: his detached, objective attitude toward the three faiths is generally presented against the background of toleration which characterized the Mongol regime prior to its conversion to Islam. There is certainly a great deal of truth to this. It seems, nevertheless, that we must factor in as well the relativist tradition in Islamic philosophy—a tradition which paradoxically expressed itself in the polemical words of Samau'al the apostate.