

Jewish Under Islamic Rule in the Middle Ages

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Abstract

Jews were welcome most time to live there under Islamic rule. The Prophet Muhammad gives Jews the political and cultural exactly as Muslims. They are also granted their freedom of religion. Thereafter, 'Umar gives non-Muslim, including Jews their safety. The status of the Jews under Muslim rule is better than Goths during the Medieval Period. In Iberia, Muslims respect Jews. Abd al-Rahman III hired a Jewish man, Hasadai Ibn Shabrot. Samuel ibn Naghrillah is the most politically influential Jew in Muslims land in al-Andalus.

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Since 622, when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers arrived in Medina (known as the *Hijra*), Jews were welcome to live there under Islamic rule. Prior to this time, relations between the resident Arab and Jewish tribes were characterized by conflicts and blood feuds. To settle these long-standing disagreements and ensure peace among the residents of this area, the Prophet Muhammad brokered an agreement among all the residents of Yathrib (Medina), known as the Constitution of Medina. This constitution is considered the basis of the first Islamic state and specifically includes Jews and other "Peoples of the Book" (*'Ahl al-Kitab*) as well as Muslims by establishing the rights, duties and responsibilities for all. To live in lands governed by the Muslims non-Muslims (including Jews) were required to pay an annual poll tax (*jizya*). Muhammad's decree was designed to contain all under "one community with believers" (*Ummah*) under Muslim rule and the Jewish tribes were considered part of this community even as they were noted to "have their religion and Muslims have theirs"².

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²Berkey, p. 64

The Constitution of Medina clearly gives Jews the same political and cultural rights as Muslims, and while they are granted their freedom of religion, they still have to help Muslims defend Medina if attacked, although they do not have help Muslims in their religious war. At the time of the Constitution, the Jewish tribes acknowledged Muhammad the ruler of Medina, and they agreed to abide by his decisions in all disputes. However, this friendship did not last long, and the relationship between Muhammad and some of the Jews became uneasy. In the Battle of the Trench, pagan Arabs from Mecca came to Medina to fight Muhammad. Reportedly members of Banu Qurayza, the major Jewish tribe that lived in Medina, helped the Arabs from Mecca in their efforts and thus were punished and subsequently expelled from Medina.

In the early days of Islam, it adopted Judaism as a licit religion, yet included the Jews under a broader category of infidels (*dhimmis*). Evidence of this is seen when Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, a fourteenth century Muslim jurist, wrote *The Laws Pertaining to the Protected People (Ahkam ahl al-dhimma)* and Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani writes a long section devoted to the Jews under "On the People of the Book" (*Kitab fi ahl al-kitab*) Juristic scholars (*fiqh*) of that time were known to discuss under marriage (*nikah*) and commerce (*bay*) between and among Jews and Muslims. In the Qur'an, it states: "*Fight those who do not have faith in Allah nor [believe] in the Last Day, nor forbid what Allah and His Apostle have forbidden, nor practice, from among those who were given the Book, until they pay the tribute out of hand, degraded*"³.

The pact of 'Umar gives non-Muslim Christians and Jews (*dhimis*) their safety (*aman*), the security of their persons, their families, and possessions and their religious freedom. However, Jews were required to dress in certain colors to aid in their identification. Additionally, Christians and Jews were prohibited to build or repair their places of worship Islamic lands. In 1038, Jews in Old Cairo (*Fustat*) were accused of renovating a synagogue. The leader of the Jewish community testified to the antiquity of the building, and he brought many Muslim witnesses to support his case. Thus the Islamic judge ruled to save the synagogue⁴.

During the mid-eleventh century, under the Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171) Jewish influence was very prevalent, to which Abu Sa'd al-Tustari says: The Jews of this time have attained their uttermost hopes, and have come to rule.

³Cohen, pgs. 52-53 & 56

⁴Cohen, 1995, pgs.58-59

Glory is upon them, money is with them, and from among them come the counselor and the ruler. O People of Egypt, I advise you, turn Jew, for the heavens have turned Jew!⁵

During the Diaspora, which began after the Roman conquest of Judea and the destruction of Jerusalem, many Jews migrated into Europe, at that time largely populated by pagans and ruled by the Romans. Prior to the Islamic conquest of al-Andalus, many Jews had migrated to the Iberian Peninsula, and were concentrated in its major cities and the southern regions of al-Andalus such as Granada, Lucena, Malaga, Bjana, and al-Meria because of the welcoming climate, the fertility of the land, the many cities on trade routes, and proximity to Cordoba and North Africa. Some historians think that the status of the Jews under Muslim rule increased due to the great injustice they endured under the pagan Goths during the Middle Ages, since as a result, Jews were willing to assist and were accepted by Muslims to fight the Goths and other pagans. A Jewish historian, Simon Dobnov, asserts that the Muslim army, who conquered al-Andalus, had among its ranks Jewish soldiers from the Berber tribes in Morocco. However, Muslim historians, including Khaled al-Khaidi, largely reject this view⁶. When Muslims conquered al-Andalus, Muslims found Jews living there and had kept their rituals, customs, and beliefs largely intact. From the time that Muslims conquered al-Andalus in 711 AD until the Umayyad Caliphate declined in 1008 AD, many Jews remained in al-Andalus and the ensuing relationship between Muslims and Jews was one of peaceful coexistence. Many historical references confirm that there are Jewish neighborhoods in many Andalusian cities, and they continued to thrive throughout the period of Muslim rule of al-Andalus.

Particularly in al-Andalus (Iberia), Muslims dealt with Jews in a respectful way according to their legitimacy as people of *dhimmah*, which is a historical term that is referring to non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic land. As a result, the Jews in Granada, as in other cities of al-Andalus, lived in relative tolerance, justice, and prosperity. News spread that Muslims practiced tolerance toward Jews, and therefore, many more Jews migrated to al-Andalus. As one of the major Andalusian cities, Granada had a large share of these immigrants under the rule of Badis Ibn Habus.

⁵Cohen, 1995, p.67

⁶ From Khaled al-Khaidi, in his book, *Al-Yahud That Hukem al-Muslimin fi al-Andalus* (Jewish Under Muslim Rule In Iberia)

The number of Jews in Granada increases significantly during his reign and under the administration of two Jewish ministers, Ismail Ibn al-Nagirlah and his son Yusuf.

When Granada was captured by Spanish Christians in 1492 AD, Castile Ferdinand expelled the Jews from Granada and destroyed their synagogue replacing it with a cathedral for the Virgin Mary. During the time of Islamic rulers Almoravid and Banu Al'ahmar in Granada, many of these Jews returned to Granada and were welcomed by the Muslim community. Another southern city, Lucena, about forty miles of Cordoba, was a spiritual center and one of the most important Jewish communities in al-Andalus. According to some historians, Lucena had a majority Jewish population within the city center, while Muslims inhabited the outskirts.

One example, again from Khaled al-Khaldi's book, describes how the ruler Abd al-Rahman II's son, Muhammad, took a woman from her Jewish owner and enslaved her without paying the proper fee. The ruling Islamic judge, Suleiman Ibn al-Aswad, forced Muhammad to pay the Jew his rightful fee, illustrating how Muslims regularly treated Jews with respect and justice. That the Umayyads also entrusted some Jews to collect tribute (*jizya*) from other Jews also shows how Muslim rulers often trusted Jews. The Umayyad caliph, Abd al-Rahmman III hired a Jewish man, Hasadai Ibn Shabrot, and put him in charge of financial management. Ibn Hayyan mentions that Abd al-Rahmman III relied on Hasadai to negotiate with Christian kings because of his intelligence and financial knowledge. Hasadai also helped his fellow Jews all over al-Andalus, and in nearby Rome. Al-Mustansir, a Muslim contemporary of Abd al-Rahmman III also hired another Jew, Ibrahim Ibn Jacob to negotiate with the Christians. After 1008 AD, there is civil conflict between Muslims over their continued rule in al Andalus.

Because of that, many Jews migrated from cities in conflict like Cordoba to more peaceful areas such as Toledo and Zaragoza. Samuel ibn Naghrillah (*Isma'il bin al-Naghrillah*) is an important figure and exemplar of the Muslim- Jewish relationship. The most politically influential Jew in Muslims land in al-Andalus, he is appointed as a *katib* (ministerial secretary) to the Islamic ruler, Habus⁷. Then, he becomes minister to the ruler's son, Badis ibn Habus primarily because Ibn al-Nagirlahis as a non-Arab will not compete with Badis ibn Habus for power.

⁷From IbnHazam, In his book *Al-Radd 'ala Ibn al-Nighrilal wa-ras 'il ukhra*

Another minister of the ruler of the city of Almeria, Ibn Samadh, was also Jewish as well as Hasadai Ibn Yousef who is appointed as al-Muqtadir's minister, Almoravid's rulers were generally tolerant in their dealings with Jews, and for example, Yusuf Ibn Tashfin, one of Almoravid's princes chose Suleiman Ibn al-Mu'lim to be his doctor.

In Granada, Muslims made Jews wear a particular dress and a yellow bonnet to distinguish them from Muslims. When the Christian kingdoms in other parts of Europe started to persecute the Jews, destroying their temples, and attempting to force them to convert to Christianity, many Jews migrated to Islamic Granada in al-Andalus, where they could practice their religion freely. Jewish communities existed alongside Muslims in al-Andalus for more than eight centuries. Many of these Jews were acculturated and adopted many of the ruling Muslims' customs and traditions. However, within their own communities, they practiced and preserved their own religious practices. The Jews under Muslim rule enjoyed more freedom and were much more prosperous than under Christian rule, and in some cities gained prestigious positions as government bureaucrats.

The three religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common origin in the Middle East and there has been considerable and continued physical, theological, and political overlap between these faiths in the subsequent 1,400 years. In this respect, they share many similar legal, political, social values, traditions and principles. After migrating to Arabia, emigrant Jewish tribes spoke Arabic, and in many cases they adopted Arab names, including Ka'b al-Ahbar and Isma'il bin al-Naghrillah (Samuel ibn Naghrillah), and they can read the Qur'an. However, those who lived in Christian-ruled area cannot read the Old Testament. Jewish scholars such as Maimonides noted the close relationship between Islamic and Jewish law and Maimonides himself, it has been argued, was influenced by Islamic legal thought. From the time the Muslims conquered al-Andalus in 711 AD until the Umayyad caliphate declined around 1008 AD, Jews enjoyed religious freedom and Muslims rarely forced them to convert to Islam. The Islamic rulers allowed Jews in al-Andalus to participate in the intellectual renaissance especially in its cultural and religious aspects. Jewish scholars were particularly interested in linguistics, literature, and other subjects, largely due to Islamic influence.

Jews living in the period of Mishna (the third century of the Common Era) buried some of their writing in a *geniza* (burial place), which is located in a cemetery⁸. This finding which Biblical, Talmudic, and Rabbinic works in Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic has become an important source documenting the historical life of those who worshiped in synagogue in Old Cairo (*Fustat*)⁹. The Cairo Geniza contains both religious and secular writings, showing the history of the Jews in Middle East and North Africa. These manuscripts are written on vellum, papyrus, cloth, and paper and in the familiar language, show us the economic and cultural life of Jews, in the tenth to thirteenth centuries. Various scholars have studied these texts –Simon Gelderen was the first European to visit and report on the Cairo Geniza and reported about that.

Also, Jacob Saphir and Taylor Schechter have contributed to scholarly works on the Geniza archives. One of Geniza documents, written by Maimonides, he wrote, “The greatest misfortune that has befallen me during my entire life—worse than anything else—was the demise of the saint, may his memory be blessed, who drowned in the Indian sea, carrying much money belonging to me, him, and to others, and left with me a little daughter and a widow. On the day I received that terrible news I fell ill and remained in bed for about a year, suffering from a sore boil, fever, and depression, and was almost given up. About eight years have passed, but I am still mourning and unable to accept consolation. And how should I console myself? He grew up on my knees, he was my brother, and he was my student”¹⁰.

Abraham ibn Daud was a Jewish historian and philosopher in Cordoba in the Medieval Ages. He wrote numerous works which were preserved from this time, including the *Sefer ha- Kabbalah* (Book of Tradition) and an Arabic language text *al-‘Akidah al-Rafiyah* (The Sublime Faith). His writing shows a strong connection between philosophy and religion. One notable aspect which shows how ibn Daud was influenced by Muslim culture is that his doctrine of God is the same as Arabic interpreters of Aristotle’s thoughts on this subject. He refers to al-Farabi and ibn Sina in many issues of prophecy, and makes a connection between the intellect (*‘aql*) and the words of the prophets.

⁸Cohen, 2005, p.4

⁹Cohen, p. 59

¹⁰Goitein, p. 207

Saadia Gaon (*Sa'id bin Yusuf al-Fayyumi*) is another Jewish philosopher in the Medieval Age. He is one of the oldest of Hebrew grammarians and one of few Jewish rabbinic figures to write both in Hebrew and Arabic, and translated the Torah from Hebrew to Arabic, adding an Arabic commentary. Saadia was a prolific author, including the *Halakha* and many works of Jewish philosophy.

Samuel ibn Naghrillah (*Isma'il bin al-Naghrilah*) was a Talmudic scholar, grammarian, philologist, soldier, politician and a famous Hebrew poet of the Medieval Age in Iberia. Fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic, he wrote *Ben Tehillim* (Son of Psalms), *Ben Qoheleth* (Son of Ecclesiastes), and *Ben Mishlei* (Son of Proverbs), an Arabic treatise on biblical Hebrew grammar, as well as authoring poetry on the battlefield with Granada's Muslim kings.

Moses Maimonides (*Musa ibn Maymun*) a Sephardic Jewish philosopher, physician, and astronomer, is one of the most influential figures in medieval Jewish philosophy and one of the most famous Torah scholars. He wrote many of his works while traveling in Spain, Morocco and finally Egypt. His work was held in great esteem by most Jews, however, in Spain, there were critics of some of his writings. He wrote in Arabic *Delalatul Ha'green* – the Guide for the Perplexed.

Jacob al-Kirkisani wrote of the Jewish precepts in his book *al-Anwar wal-Marakib* in Arabic. He posed many questions of rabbinical Judaism and examined the development of the various Jewish groups. Another is Moses ben Nahman, a Spanish Talmudist and physician, who was influenced by Greco-Arabic philosophy in Spain.

Under Abd al-Rahman III and Al-Hakam II of the Umayyad Caliphate, the city of Cordoba became as important as Baghdad, and many of the Jews of Spain abandoned their ties with Jewish communities in Iraq and independently developed their own culture. In Muslim Spain, Jewish thinkers followed in Muslim footsteps and applied the same kind of scholarly exploration of Hebrew linguistics and Hebrew grammar that Muslim scholars did with Arabic, ultimately creating the form of Hebrew grammar which exists today¹¹.

¹¹www.projetaladin.org/holocaust/en/muslims-and-jews/muslims-and-jews-in-history/muslims-and-jews-in-history.html

Under the influence of Muslim scholars, the Jews of Cordoba began to experiment with new cultural forms -- poetry, science, philosophy, and mathematics in Hebrew, which complemented their interest in the Bible and the Talmud.

Many intellectuals, writers, and celebrities like Benjamin al-Tootalai (d.1190), who authored the book "*Hmsauut*" (Journeys), and Isaac Ibn Kstar, a scholar of medicine, philosophy, Hebrew, and Jewish law belonged to the vibrant Jewish community of Toledo. Isaac Ibn Ezra, the son of Ibrahim Ibn Ezra, a poet and writer in Toledo moved first to Egypt, and then to Iraq where he converted to Islam along with the famous Jew Ntaniial known as Abu Baraka Hadiat Allah. This shows how easy the relations were between the two religious cultures in al-Andalus. Similar to the way Muslim scholars utilized Arabic language and literature, Jews started to study the Hebrew language and write works of literature. Abraham Ibn Ezra is notable as a

Jewish scholar who introduced literature written in ancient Hebrew form to Jews in al-Andalus. One of the first Jews who wrote about Hebrew grammar is Menachem Ibn Sarouk. Another Jew, Donash Ibn Labrat Halevi studied Arabic language and literature, wrote poems in Arabic, traveled to Cordoba and became one of the intellectual Jewish leaders. He wrote the first educational work about grammar in poems from Hebrew literature. He encouraged Jews in Cordoba to write their poems with Arabic-style rhymes. However, many Jews did not accept that approach, for example, Isaac Ibn Cypron, a leading Hebrew poet. Ibn Labrat developed Hebrew poetry by adding new subjects like *al-khmriaat* (describe the wine), new descriptions, and new spellings.

The al-Andalus Jews advanced Hebrew poetry and literature to a level not known before. Early Jewish poetry was confined to religious subjects and without rhyme. The Andalusian Jews introduced writing in various subjects other than religion using rhyming style. Nasim al-Israeli says the Jews in al-Andalus wrote poems in both Arabic and Hebrew. Menachem Ibn Sarouk is one first talented Hebrew poet in al-Andalus and the best-known poet of his time, and wrote several poems in praise of Hasadai Ibn Shabrot. Isaac Ibn Mrchal wrote Hebrew poet by using Arabic rhyme, and he pioneered many new ideas in his poems.

Jewish religious thought was also influenced by the Islamic tradition of religious freedom of thought.

Ibn Shabrot, a famous scholar and collector of Jewish literature, invited Jewish Talmudic scholars from other parts of the world to al-Andalus, where life was free and promised to support them in their studies. Examples of these prominent Jewish scholars in al-Andalus were Maimonides and Solomon Ibn Gabirol. There were many intellectual debates between Jews and Muslims in al-Andalus because they both shared intellectual freedom. Additionally, many Jews knew Arabic, some Jews had important government positions, and they were allowed to maintain their beliefs. One of the famous debates between Jews and Muslims in al-Andalus was between Ibn al-Nagirlah, a famous Jewish scholar and politician and Ibn Hazm, an equally famous Muslim scholar.

Jewish religious philosophy and intellectual growth can clearly be seen as evolving in Islamic lands, during the Middle Ages, and under Islamic rule. One Jewish historian is Ibn Daud, who the history of the Talmud in his book *Hebala*. He wrote about how the center of spiritual activity of the Jews moved from the east to the west under tolerant Islamic rule. He also mentions in his book some stories about the social life the Jews enjoyed in al-Andalus.

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