

# POLEMICS IN THE AGE OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTIONS: MAIMONIDES' ATTITUDE TOWARDS ISLAM\*

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The present paper inquires into Maimonides' attitude to Islam. His halakhic stance towards Islam has been molded in the period of large-scale religious persecutions in Maghreb and Yemen whose repercussions has found the way to his writings dealing with Islam. Both persecutions affected not only local Jewish communities but also Maimonides personally when he had to convert to Islam. The paper analyzes his refutation of the main arguments of Muslim polemics with Judaism: Biblical testimonies to Muhammad; falsification of the Scripture; the abrogation of the Mosaic Law. In his polemical discourse with Islam Maimonides has not introduced much new and in fact reiterates polemical arguments of the older Jewish authorities.

**Key words:** Maimonides, conversion, Islam, polemics, persecution, falsification of scriptures

The Jews, during the 12th century, lived through at least two major religious persecutions which took place at either end of the Islamic world, one in the Maghreb and Andalusia and the second in Yemen. It ought to be said at the outset that both were conducted by extremist Muslim movements. While Maimonides (Moshe ben Maimon, 1138 – 1204), the most influential medieval Jewish halakhist and religious philosopher, experienced the first personally, the second also touched him indirectly. Nevertheless, to both he responded in writing with an effort to comfort and guide victims of these persecutions who were confronted with the acute choice either to accept Islam in order to save their lives, or to sanctify God's name with martyrs' deaths. It is logical that in

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doing so Maimonides also had to voice his attitude towards Islam. The present article endeavours to outline the main paths both of his attitude to and of his polemics with Islam and how, if at all, they were moulded by the current events.

Historians have generally thought that Jewish polemic literature which directly refutes the claims of Islam is meagre both in number and size. Indeed, one can only point to two relatively late Hebrew works, a responsum *Ma'amar 'al Yishma'el*, traditionally attributed to Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret (c. 1235 – 1310), and the section on Islam in Simeon ben Zemaḥ Duran's (1361 – 1444) *Keshet u-Magen*.<sup>1</sup> Both authors come from Christian Spain and, not knowing Arabic, depended on Hebrew translations. New research, however, has shown that a small amount of polemical work was produced by Jews, both Rabbanites and especially Karaites, living in tenth-century Baghdad where sessions for the discussion of religious and theological matters (*majlis al-kalām*, pl. *majālis*) were conducted.<sup>2</sup> The first among the early medieval Jewish sages to lead a systematic polemic against the Muslims, with the goal of defending the Jewish religion, was Saadya Gaon (882 – 942). Even though in his time there already existed a Muslim tradition of polemic literature combating Judaism, he did not devote any special writing to Islam as he did in the case of Karaism or the enigmatic Bible critic Hiwi of Balkh (ca. 875). Nor did Maimonides focus on polemics with Islam in any separate work or essay and his apologetic remarks are scattered throughout many of his writings. Most of his statements concerning Islam are not contained in his philosophical or juridical works but in his correspondence. One such letter written in Hebrew, where he profoundly treats the legal stand of Judaism to Islam, is an answer to rabbi 'Obadya (evidently 'Abdullah), a Muslim convert to Judaism. The second letter of concern is his famous Arabic written *Epistle to Yemen* (1172) directed to Ja'qob b. Nathan'el al-Fayyūmī,<sup>3</sup> the leader of Yemenite community. In the letter Maimonides endeavours to defend vulnerable and downtrodden Yemenite Jews during a time of combined religious persecution and Messianic movement (apparently 1172) and at the same time give these ill-fated co-religionists hope for early deliverance. These two masterpieces of his epistolary art are in many points distinct one from another. While in the first Maimonides articulates his

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Adret's work was published by NAOR, B. *Ma'amar Al Yishma'el. Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret*. The section on Islam in Duran's *Keshet u-Magen* was edited by STEINSCHNEIDER, M. *Ozar Tov*, pp. 3 – 36. Steinschneider's German translation was published in the same *Magazin* 7 (1880).

<sup>2</sup> SKLARE, D. E. Responses to Islamic Polemics by Jewish Mutakallimūn in the Tenth Century, pp. 137 – 161.

<sup>3</sup> Halkin's introduction to his edition, *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen*, pp. v – ix.

moderate legal position towards Islam, which he views as a purely monotheistic religion, in *Epistle to Yemen* he gives vent his feelings influenced by his personal negative experience during the Almohads' rule in the Maghreb and Andalusia. It is interesting to see that even though in *Epistle to Yemen*, written early in his career, he bitterly accuses Islam of the humiliation of the Jewish nation, his legal stand in an answer to a Muslim convert is not tarnished by the private and well-founded grudge he harboured to Islam. In addition to these sources we can make use of his philosophical Magnum Opus *The Guide of the Perplexed* where, in several places, he took a stand against non-Jewish religions in general and to Islam in particular. His theoretical views found earlier practical expression in the halakhic rulings formulated in the *Mishneh Torah*, his major compendium of Jewish law. But as Daniel J. Lasker makes clear, it has to be stated outright that if we consider various elements in Maimonides' attitude towards Islam (and Christianity), there is very little new he added of his own. Almost all of his references have a source in the writings of his predecessors.<sup>4</sup>

At this point a question presents itself: could Maimonides express his opinion concerning Islam freely, or was he forced to fall back upon concealing or masking his true tenets? The Muslim society in which Maimonides lived in Egypt was not tolerant towards any critical, let alone openly hostile, expressions from the ranks of "protected people" or *ahl al-dhimma*, whose polemical utterances on the address of Islam and its Prophet were understood as blasphemy, and as such strictly forbidden under the threat of death. As far as we know, governmental censorship which would oblige the Jews to purge their writings from possible invectives or derogatory statements was not instituted in Islamic countries as was usual in Christian ones.<sup>5</sup> In the Muslim medieval society it is hard to find a few intellectuals able to read in Hebrew or who knew the Hebrew alphabet, which the Jews used for transliteration of the Arabic language. Consequently, when the Muslims needed information about Jews or Judaism, they gained it directly from Jews or Jewish converts.<sup>6</sup> According to Moritz Steinschneider, the reason why Jews in Islamic countries employed Hebrew script for writing in Arabic rests in their ability to freely express their

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<sup>4</sup> LASKER, D. J. Tradition and Innovation in Maimonides' Attitude toward Other Religions, pp. 167 – 182.

<sup>5</sup> Only in the 19th century the Turks enacted a law enjoining every printer in the Ottoman Empire to produce one copy before printing to a special office in Istanbul, and print was possible only after obtaining permission.

<sup>6</sup> The knowledge about Judaism among Muslims deepened and bettered only during 13th and 15th centuries. See STRAUSS, E. *History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Rule of the Mamluks*, Vol. 1, pp. 359 – 361.

polemical opinions in this way. This assumption is untenable.<sup>7</sup> The real threat hanging over the Jews came not from the side of state sponsored censorship but from converts who could divulge the content of Jewish polemics combating Islam to the authorities. Maimonides, however, was aware of such a threat, but he felt obliged by his position not only as a leader of the Jewish community in Egypt but as somebody whom the Jews of Yemen looked up to in the last resort. Maimonides' greatness and bravery lie in his willingness to go through this danger, not without fear, and to overcome it in order to comfort a persecuted Jewish community. He himself speaks openly about fear for his own person at the end of the letter where he urgently cautions the recipient against letting it fall into the hands of converts, but eventually the concerns of Maimonides "the individual" were overruled by responsibility of Maimonides "the leader":

"Take adequate precautions lest its contents be divulged by an evil person and mishap overtake us. (God spare us therefrom.) When I began writing this letter I had some misgivings about it, but they were overruled by my conviction that the public welfare takes precedence over one's personal safety."<sup>8</sup>

Under these circumstances, it should come as no surprise that – with rare exceptions – Jews did not polemicize openly against Islam. We also meet the same caution in the writings of some Karaite authors,<sup>9</sup> albeit their audacity in venting negative opinions concerning Islam (and even in Arabic script) is greater than in the writings of Rabbabites.

#### Physical danger of conversion – religious persecutions

Maimonides' attitude to Islam was not solely moulded by theological considerations but also by his personal experience of persecution during the rule of the Almohad dynasty in the Maghreb and Andalusia. But, at this time, Maimonides is aware that the current persecution whose aim is to obliterate Israel and its Torah, is not the first but rather one link in a long chain of

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<sup>7</sup> STEINSCHNEIDER, M. *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache, zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden*, p. 340. Steinschneider's assumption confutes Ben-Shammai by argument that Karaites, whose texts contain numerous explicit references to Islam, wrote Arabic in Arabic script. BEN-SHAMMAI, H. *The Attitude of Some Early Karaites Towards Islam*, pp. 7 – 8; cf. BLAU, J. *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic*, pp. 42 – 44.

<sup>8</sup> HALKIN, A. S., HARTMAN, D. *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, p. 131 (further only *Epistles*).

<sup>9</sup> FRANK, D. *Search Scripture Well*, pp. 214 – 215.

persecutions of the Jews. He sees throughout history many attempts launched by various leaders with the same goal but with different, or increasing levels of force and sophistication of stratagem. In an *Epistle to Yemen*, where Maimonides speaks about the distinguished position of Jews among the nations he adumbrates three methods fabricated and widely used by different nations or religious leaders with just one intention: to wipe out every trace of Jewish community and vitiate its God's given Law. Maimonides enumerates a long list of warriors from the past, ranging from Amalek and Nebuchadnezzar to Hadrian, whose aim it was to subjugate Israel by force and the sword. More educated nations, as he labels them, like the Syrians, Persians, and Greeks, endeavoured to demolish and abrogate Jewish law by means of arguments and controversies. The last two mentioned "enemies", Jesus and madman (or Muhammad),<sup>10</sup> not only combined force with controversy, but also laid claim to prophethood and to founding new abrogative religions.<sup>11</sup>

Assessing all the persecutions in the history of Israel together, Maimonides sees the hardships the Jews are going through in Islamic countries as the harshest ones. For this reason, in *Epistle to Yemen*, he passes a very severe judgment on Islam:

"Remember, my coreligionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins, God had hurled us into the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us [...] Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase, and hate us as much as they."<sup>12</sup>

This stricture, no doubt written under the impact of news about the persecution of Jews in Yemen and his own sad memories of the fanatical rule of the Almohads in Andalusia and the Maghreb, cannot be accepted as a correct picture of Jewish life-conditions in Islamic countries in general or a balanced

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<sup>10</sup> The word *meshuga* ('madman', equivalent of Arabic term *majnūn* – "possessed with djinns", against which Muhammad strongly protested) was in Jewish medieval polemical texts (except those of Saadya Gaon) one of the most common nicknames for the prophet Muhammad. It is based on Biblical verse in Hosea 9:7 "The prophet is a fool, the man of spirit is mad" – *evil ha-navi' meshuga' ish ha-ruah*; cf. STEINSCHNEIDER, M. *Polemische und apologetische Literatur*, pp. 302 – 303, p. 316. The nickname coined for the first time Karaite author Daniel al-Qūmisī (active ca. 870 – 910). Another abusive term was *qalon* ('disgrace' = the Qur'an), *ṭme'im* ('impure' = Muslims), and *pasul* ('defective', a Hebrew pun on Arabic *rasūl* 'messenger' = Muhammad).

<sup>11</sup> *Epistles*, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Epistles*, p. 126.

historical judgment, but rather as an expression of anger.<sup>13</sup> As already aptly pointed out by David Hartman “the *Epistle to Yemen* ought not to be used to reconstruct Maimonides' general approach to Christianity and Islam”, which differs in important respects from his treatment of these topics in his major legal works, but one should better consider the audience of this epistle: a community gripped by the danger of conversion and thirsty for an evaluation of their present suffering.<sup>14</sup>

### The Almohads and persecutions of Jews

The victory of the Almohad dynasty (*al-muwaḥḥidūn*), ‘those who proclaim the unity of God’ (*tawḥīd*) over their predecessors, the Almoravids in North Africa, was accompanied by the wholesale slaughter of Christians, Jews and dissenting Muslims.<sup>15</sup> Thus abruptly ended the long-standing tradition of tolerant policies toward the region’s *dhimmi* (Jewish and Christian) population. During the three or four years following the death of the Almoravide ruler ‘Alī ibn Jūsuf in 1143, the Almohades under the ruler ‘Abd al-Mu‘min (1130 – 1163) were able to seize the North African domains of the Almoravide dynasty. The Almohad dynasty instituted a program of extortion and religious persecution. According to Jewish, as well as Muslim sources, most of Jewish society stayed put and accepted – albeit for the sake of appearances – Islam. On Moroccan soil thus developed a phenomenon of Muslim crypto-Jews very similar to that of the Marranos in Christian Spain of later centuries. But after four generations of the clandestine professing of Judaism, the Jews were allowed to return to the faith of their ancestors and practise Judaism openly. Compared to Judaism, Christianity in North Africa did not survive the pressure of Islamization and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. LEWIS, B. *The Jews of Islam*, pp. 102 – 103.

<sup>14</sup> *Epistles*, p. 153, p. 157. Rule of Islam considered as the harshest of all previous nations and creeds also Karaite authors, Salmon ben Jeruḥīm and Jefet ben Eli. See BEN-SHAMMAI, H. *The Attitude of Some Early Karaites towards Islam*, pp. 10 – 12. On the contrary, Saadya Gaon strokes to Islam a very mild standpoint. See SCHLOSSBERG, E. R. R. *Saadia Gaon's Attitude towards Islam*, pp. 32 – 34. The “terrible conditions and intense sufferings” metaphorically expresses also Nathan’el ibn Fayyūmī: “We are like the sparrow in the hand of a child who plays with it until the bird is half dead, and the child has no compassion!” LEVINE, D. (ed.), NATHANEL IBN AL-FAYYUMI, *Bustān al-‘uqūl*, p. 110 (Eng.), p. 70 (Arab.).

<sup>15</sup> LE TOURNEAU, R. *The Almohad Movement in North Africa in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*.

actually disappeared from this homeland of St. Augustine.<sup>16</sup> Some historians even claim that the scope of the atrocities and destruction committed by the Almohads was comparable to the fate of the Jews in the Rhine area during the Crusades, but compared with the amount of dirges (*qinot*) depicting the suffering of European communities, the agony of their African and Andalusian coreligionist lacks its poets.<sup>17</sup> We can get only a partial view of the incurred persecutions and conversions as well as destructions from a scant amount of contemporary or later poetic and historical sources. The only dirge (*Ahah jarad 'aley Sepharad*) bewailing the destruction of several communities in Africa and Andalusia stems from the pen of Abraham ibn 'Ezra, famous poet and commentator of Bible.<sup>18</sup> Also Abraham ibn Daud and with him several other Jewish historians, weeps over the destruction of Torah centres and the decline of its learning after the wave of conversions in 1141 – 1142 which stretched from the shores of Morocco to al-Mahdīyah in Tunis:

“Those destined for death were put to death, those destined for sword to sword, to hunger to hunger, those intended for captivity to captivity... and apostasy (*lašet min ha-kelal*). And the name of Israel was not mentioned any more.”<sup>19</sup>

We even get the same image of events from Muslim historians. Al-Dhahabī,<sup>20</sup> in the name of 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākeshī hands down an account of the

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<sup>16</sup> For reasons of a different fate, which met Jewish and Christian communities in North Africa, see LEVZION, N. Conversion and Islamization in the Middle Ages, pp. 8 – 15. For differences among Jews living in Christian and Islamic countries in their stance to sanctification of God's name see BEN-SASSON, M. Memory and Forgetfulness of Religious Persecutions: A Comparative View, pp. 29 – 72.

<sup>17</sup> COHEN, M. R. *Under Crescent and Cross*, pp. 180 – 189.

<sup>18</sup> ROSIN, D. Reime und Gedichte des Abraham Ibn Ezra, pp. 29 – 32. Another expounded version based on findings from the Cairo Geniza contains several names of African towns not mentioned in traditional version; see HIRSCHBERG, H. Z. *A History of the Jews in North Africa*. Vol. 1, pp. 133 – 136.

<sup>19</sup> ABRAHAM IBN DAUD. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 88. Rabbi Joseph ha-Kohen in *Sefer 'Emeq ha-bakha* copies from Abraham ibn Daud without mentioning his source. See *Sefer 'Emeq ha-bakha*, p. 19. Cf. JACOBS, M. *Islamische Geschichte in jüdischen Chroniken*, p. 194. David Gans in *Zemah David* directly says that his words are based on Abraham ibn Daud and *Shevet Yehuda* of Ibn Verga, see *Zemah David*, p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> Historian Shamsuddīn al-Dhahabī (1275 – 1348) was born in Damascus.

discussion, or better polemic, between 'Abd al-Mu'min and the assembled Jews and Christians of the conquered Moroccan town (1147), Marrakesh:

“After the capture of Marrakesh 'Abd al-Mu'min summoned Jews and Christians and told them: 'Have you not denied, you and your fathers, the mission of our prophet Muḥammad, and refused to believe that he was the Messenger promised in your Scripture? Haven't you stated: 'He, who will come in the future, will come only to confirm our Law and strengthen our faith.' 'Yes,' they answered. Thereupon he responded angrily: 'And where is he on whom you wait? Your ancestors have asserted that he would appear no later than after five hundred years [since the advent of Muhammad]. Now these five hundred years of our religion have passed and no messenger or prophet has arisen among you. We will not let you to persevere in your error; nor do we desire any of your tribute. You have only the choice of Islam or death.' Afterwards he awarded them some time to stay in order to be able to get rid of heavy belongings and to sell their real estate and to leave his country. Most of the Jews quickly accepted Islam even if it was for appearance sake, and retained their property. The Christians crossed to Andalusia and just a few of them accepted Islam. They destroyed churches and hermitages in the whole sovereignty and there is not one idolater or disbeliever who would show of his disbelief openly.”<sup>21</sup>

Apart from the terse notes of Jewish chroniclers, we can consult the relatively detailed account of Solomon Cohen, native of Sijilmāsa, who sojourned in Fustāṭ in 1148 and had heard about the events in the Maghreb from Jewish and Muslim eyewitnesses who had succeeded in escaping to Egypt. He recounts territorial gains made during the campaign by 'Abd al-Mu'min, to whom the citizens of Sijilmāsa (the important caravan city in Maghreb) willingly handed over their town. Maybe due to peaceful handover, it was also here that the Almohads tried to entice Jews by religious disputations but after protracted and unsuccessful discussions lasting seven months, during all of which the Jews fasted and prayed, a new governor appointed by this dynasty arrived and put a more persuasive argument before the Jews: Islam or death. They refused and a hundred and fifty men were put to death in sanctification of God's name (*yīḥud ha-Shem*), while the others, headed by *dayyan* Joseph ben 'Amrān, in order to

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<sup>21</sup> MUNK, S. Notice sur Joseph Ben-Iehouda, pp. 42 – 43.



survive accepted Islam. In Fez, according to Solomon Cohen's letter, even if the numbers cannot be taken literally, the Almohads killed 100 000 persons (Muslims and Jews) and in Marrakesh 120 000. He adds that many Jews were killed and many converted and could not openly practise Judaism. Finally he mentions the places which were conquered covering a huge area in Andalusia stretching from Seville to Tortosa.<sup>22</sup>

### Maimonides' conversion to Islam

The question of whether Maimonides himself was forced to pronounce the *shahādah*, or profession of faith in order to save his life has been debated, sometimes passionately, from the very beginning of *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* and many Jewish scholars have expressed their views for and against his alleged apostasy to Islam. The first assertion found staunch supporters for example in such eminent scholars and historians as Salomon Munk,<sup>23</sup> Abraham Geiger<sup>24</sup> or Heinrich Graetz<sup>25</sup> but in spite of their authoritative judgement other scholars with no less scholarship have done their best to prove the opposite. Among them we can mention Michael Friedländer,<sup>26</sup> David S. Margoliouth<sup>27</sup> or Adolf Berliner.<sup>28</sup> The mooted question, however, remains up till now unresolved and even contemporary scholars pass judgment on the topic in accordance with their personal evaluation of available sources. On the one hand Herbert A. Davidson concluded that "Maimonides' conversion to Islam must be viewed as unproved at best. Indeed, there is no evidence that the Maimon family was ever touched in any way by the Almohad religious persecution."<sup>29</sup> Somewhere in the middle stands Mordechai A. Friedman who apparently refuted the objections of deniers but at the same time admitted that the sources at our disposal do not allow us to resolve the question decisively.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand Joel L. Kraemer maintains that Maimonides was undoubtedly

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<sup>22</sup> TOLEDANO, J. M. *Manuscript Documents*, pp. 449 – 458; cf. HIRSCHBERG, H. Z. *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, Vol. 1, pp. 127 – 128.

<sup>23</sup> Notice sur Joseph Ben-Iehouda, p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> *Moses ben Maimon*, pp. 9 – 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis die Gegenwart*, Vol. 6, p. 269, note 3: "Diese Tatsache (of Maimonides' conversion) steht nach dem jetzt vorliegende Iggeret ha-Schemad und mohammedanischen Zeugnissen von Zeitgenossen so stet, das nur die Kritiklosigkeit sie ableugnen kann."

<sup>26</sup> In Introduction to his translation of *Guide for the Perplexed*, p. xviii.

<sup>27</sup> The Legend of the Apostasy of Maimonides, pp. 539 – 541.

<sup>28</sup> Zur Ehrenrettung des Maimonides, pp. 104 – 130.

<sup>29</sup> *Moses Maimonides*, pp. 17 – 28.

<sup>30</sup> *Maimonides. The Yemenite Messiah and Apostasy*, pp. 31 – 37.

forced to practice Islam.<sup>31</sup> It is not my ambition to settle any disputes between titans, rather my intention here is to present some sources on which they base their discussions and to outline in brief the historical circumstances of Maimonides' "conversion" as it might import the formation of his attitude to Islam.

Among the towns the Almohads conquered were Sevilla, whose Jewish community was almost entirely destroyed and Córdoba, the hometown of Maimonides, which the Almohads seized in 1148 when he was ten years old. The conqueror proposed that the *dhimmīs* were either to convert or to emigrate. For this reason, before the Almohads even reached the city, many inhabitants of Córdoba took refuge in Christian domains in northern parts of Spain while others converted, at least outwardly, to Islam in order to save their lives and properties. Such too, was the fate of Maimonides' family, which wandered for ten years through Andalusia in order to escape from persecutions. Maimonides speaks about these days of wanderings in his *Epistle to Yemen*<sup>32</sup> and about the uncertain condition and humiliation of the Jews of Andalusia. This was also lamented by Rabbi Maimon ben Joseph, Maimonides' father in his *Iggeret ha-Neḥamah* or *Letter of consolation*, which was written upon his arrival to Fez in 1159 in order to comfort *anusim*, or the forcibly converted.<sup>33</sup>

Towards the end of his rule 'Abd al-Mu'min probably took a more lenient standpoint to Jews. Of course *anusim* who seemingly admitted the prophecy of Muhammad during the time of the first persecutions in the forties, were compelled to continue to act as Muslims outwardly, but in private it seems that there was no special supervision over their orthodoxy. Maimonides' family, which left the Iberian Peninsula and, in 1159, turned to Fez in the hard land of Almohads (probably in order to practice here Jewish rites more freely as crypto-Jews)<sup>34</sup> also bears testimony to this turnaround. But in 1165, the new Almohad ruler, Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf (1163 – 84), decreed a new wave of extorted

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<sup>31</sup> *Maimonides*, pp. 123 – 124. Bernard Lewis first classifies the pros and cons for Maimonides' putative conversion as a "draw" ('Avar be-sifrut 'Arav, pp. 171 – 180), while in *The Jews of Islam*, p. 100, he outright speaks about his conversion as about a fact.

<sup>32</sup> *Epistles*, p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> SIMMONS, L. M. The Letter of consolation of Maimun ben Joseph, p. 71. The authenticity of the letter recently contested WASSERSTEIN, D. J. The Date and Authorship of the Letter of Consolation Attributed to Maymūn b. Yūsuf, pp. 410 – 418.

<sup>34</sup> For this opinion goes in BARON, S. W. *A Social and Religious History of Jews*, Vol. 3, p. 126, p. 291. Scholars usually sought to connect the settlement of Maimonides' family in Fez with Maimonides' wish to study Torah with rabbi Judah ibn Shushan. Cf. ZEITLIN, S. *Maimonides: A Bibliography*, p. 7.

conversions and persecutions upon the Jews of Fez, to which rabbi Judah ibn Shushan, Maimonides' teacher fell victim when he refused to profess Islam. This calamity prompted Maimonides' family to emigrate to the East.<sup>35</sup> The fate of his family and the Jews generally in Maghreb during the Almohads persecutions completes the story in *Lexicon of Sages (Ta'riḫ al-ḥukamā')* written by Jamāl al-Dīn Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Yūsuf Ibn al-Qifṭī (1172 – 1248) under the entry Mūsā ibn Maimūn. Ibn al-Qifṭī relates here that when 'Abd al-Mu'min took hold of Maghreb he promulgated expulsion of Christians and Jews from his domains, assigned them a deadline and promised the same livelihood conditions as Muslims to whoever would accept Islam. Everyone who maintained his own religion, however, must leave before expiry of the term, otherwise forfeit his life and property and the sultan's favour.<sup>36</sup> Among those afflicted, who accepted Islam under duress, was probably the family of rabbi Maimon, who soon afterwards sought refuge from *shemad*, or apostasy, in Eretz Yisrael.<sup>37</sup> Maimonides thus fulfilled precisely the guidance he proposed in *Iggeret ha-shemad*, or *Epistle on Forced Conversion [or Martyrdom]* (1164/5), to all Jews afflicted by persecutions in Maghreb, and not only there:

“What I counsel myself, and what I should like to suggest to all my friends and everybody that counsels me, is to leave these places and go to where he can practice religion and fulfil the Law without compulsion or fear. Let him leave his family and his home and all he has... He must make every effort to do so although he may expose himself to danger...

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<sup>35</sup> The situation deteriorated in the time of reign of caliph Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Manṣūr (1184 – 1199) when almost all Jews had to accept Islam. Even after their forced confession they were due to their doubtful loyalty to a new faith put under strict supervision. According to various sources the Jews had to wear distinctive signs, clothing of absurd appearance and of different colours, and were treated more or less as outlaws. If proved guilty of secret practising of Judaism they were stripped of their property and their wives and children turned over to Muslims, and in order to break down their obstinacy they were even prohibited from engaging in commerce, the main Jewish occupation. See HALKIN, A. S. *The History of the Forced Conversion in the Days of the Almohads*, pp. 101 – 110; BEN-SASSON, M. *On the Jewish Identity of Forced Converts – A Study of Forced Conversion in the Almohade Period*, pp. 16 – 37; CORCOS, D. *The Attitude of the Almohad Rulers toward the Jews*, pp. 137 – 160.

<sup>36</sup> IBN AL-QIFṬĪ, *Ta'riḫ al-ḥukamā'*, pp. 317 – 318.

<sup>37</sup> Maimonides writes in a letter about his journey to Eretz Israel and his five month sojourn in Akko including three days visit of Jerusalem and Hebron to Yefet bar Elijah ha-Dayyan. SHAILAT, Y. *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*. Vol. 1, p. 225.

He must under no circumstance continue to reside in the land of persecution.”<sup>38</sup>

Paradoxically, even though Maimonides perceives the rule of Islam as the cruellest among the nations, about the persecutions that have occurred, he states that “there has never yet been a persecution as remarkable as this one, where the only coercion is to say something (i.e. to acknowledge Muhammad’s apostleship).”<sup>39</sup> In *Epistle on Martyrdom* Maimonides was confronted by a dilemma: to recommend that the Moroccan community either bear the burden of God’s covenant with Israel, even at the cost of death, or that they succumb to the pressure and make the public declaration demanded by the Almohads, but continue to live a Jewish life in private.<sup>40</sup> His prime concern was to safeguard the hope of staying in the fold of Israel for those who had been guilty of “nonheroic behaviour”. He vindicated his position by affirmation that persecutions were of short duration and mild in form which did not hinder the performance of religious commandments: “We have a continuous divine assurance that whenever a decree of apostasy is passed against us and wrath breaks out, God will ultimately terminate it.”<sup>41</sup>

“But in this persecution they are not required to do anything but say something, so that if a man wishes to fulfil the 613 commandments secretly he can do so... This compulsion imposes no action, only speech. They know very well that we do not mean what we say, and that what we say is only to escape the ruler’s punishment and to satisfy him with this simple confession.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Epistles*, pp. 31 – 32; cf. *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, p. 106, where he proposes Yemeni Jews “to escape and to flee to the desert and wilderness, and not to consider separation from family or loss of wealth.”

<sup>39</sup> It is obvious that Maimonides’ advice would be absolutely different in the case of profession of Christianity.

<sup>40</sup> If someone finds it impossible to leave for the time being, he must not become careless in dietary laws and to desecrate the Sabbath. “Let no one conclude that he may freely disregard the less important ceremonies without liability to penalty because he has under duress committed some major sins,” *Epistles*, p. 106.

<sup>41</sup> *Epistles*, p. 101.

<sup>42</sup> *Epistle of Martyrdom* in *Epistles*, p. 30. In another place he expresses it in other words: “But in this persecution to which we are subjected we do not pretend that we are idolaters, we only appear to believe what they assert. They fully understand that we do not mean it at all, and are simply deceiving the ruler.” *Epistles*, p. 20; cf. *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, p. 106.

Maimonides' example of abandoning the hostile territory as soon as possible was followed by others, including his pupil Joseph ben Jehuda ibn 'Aqnin, friend of Ibn al-Qifṭī, who contrary to Maimonides, rated Almohad's persecution as the harshest in the history of Jewish nation.<sup>43</sup> Maimonides emphatically rejected the opinion advocated by some rabbis who considered the Jews who had been forced to profess Islam to be apostates<sup>44</sup> and even that their continuing, secret, fulfilment of religious duties (for example prayer) was committing a sin. Maimonides, who had to act as a halakhist and leader at the same time, stressed the importance of fulfilling the slightest of commandments even under duress. In his standpoint he emulated the halakhic position of his father who, in the *Letter of Consolation*, insisted urgently on observing the precepts as much as possible in times of persecution and particularly stressed the importance of prayer, even said in silence.<sup>45</sup>

The affirmation that, in the Maghreb, Maimonides along with his family, converted for effect to Islam, not by free will but out of compulsion of persecution, and lived, at least in front of Muslim society, as a Muslim, is corroborated two Arabic sources: Aḥmad b. al-Qāsim Ibn Abī Uṣajbi'a (d. 1270) and the aforementioned Ibn al-Qifṭī. Ibn Abī Uṣajbi'a, who worked as a physician in the hospital of Cairo castle along with Abraham, son of Maimonides,<sup>46</sup> writes about his conversion later in his *Dictionary of Physicians* (*Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*):

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<sup>43</sup> About him writes Ibn al-Qifṭī: "When were Jews and Christians in these lands made to take choice between Islam or expulsion, he concealed his religion and when it was pretended to wish to move <with his business> to Egypt. He was successful and departed with money, arrived to Egypt and joined Mūsa ibn Maimūn al-Qurṭubī, head of Jews in Egypt." IBN AL-QIFṬĪ, *Ta'riḫ al-ḥukamā'*, p. 392. Ibn 'Aqnin dedicated to persecutions of Almohads sixth chapter in his *Ṭibb al-nufūs* [Hygiene of the Soul]. See TOBI, J. The Sixth Chapter of Rav Joseph ibn 'Aqnin *Ṭibb al-nufūs*, pp. 311 – 342.

<sup>44</sup> The same defending attitude as Maimonides took Saadya ben Maimūn ibn Dannān from Granada (second half of 15th century), Sheelah ' "d ha-anusim, pp. 13a – 16b. Of opposite opinion was Yom Ṭov Ishbīlī (Saragossa, ca 1250 – 1330) who admitted that Muslims "do not worship idols at all" but claimed that law demands death rather than transgression by conversion. See ROTH, N. *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain*, p. 228.

<sup>45</sup> SIMMONS, L. M. The Letter of consolation of Maimun ben Joseph, pp. 62 – 101 (Eng.), pp. 1 – 25 (Arab.).

<sup>46</sup> See MEYERHOF, M. Medieval Jewish Physicians in the Near East, in the Arabic Sources, pp. 451 – 452.

“It is said that the head of Jews, Mūsā, who became a Muslim in Morocco (*kāna qad aslama fī'l-Maġrib*), knew Qur'an by heart (*ḥafīẓa al-Qur'ān*) and occupied himself with religious law (*ishtaġala bi'l-fiqh*). Afterwards he headed for Egypt and resided in Fuṣṭāṭ next to Cairo and renounced Islam (*irtadda*);<sup>47</sup> it means he returned back to Judaism.”

To this information concerning Maimonides, Ibn al-Qifṭī in his *Ta'riḫ al-ḥukamā'*, adds that he stayed in Maghreb and when “he showed the outward signs of Islam, he also complied with details (*iltazama bi'l-juz'īyyāt*), such as reading the Qur'an and prayer. He did this until he found an opportunity to travel. After assembling his possessions in the time that was needed for this, he left Andalus and went to Egypt.” Ibn al-Qifṭī, after depicting Maimonides' scholarship and his medical career at sultan's court, reports further that towards the end of his lifetime Maimonides was accused of apostasy (*irtidād*) by Andalusian jurists (*faqīh*) named Abū al-'Arab ibn Ma'tsha, who has happened to visit Cairo and came across Maimonides whom he knew as a Muslim in Andalusia. Maimonides' apostasy, which according to Islamic law is punished by the death penalty, angered this jurist and he wanted to denounce him at the court of law as an apostate from Islam. But luckily, at court of sultan Salāḥ al-Dīn b. Ayyūb, Maimonides had a powerful protector in the person of his companion and patron, the judge (*qādī*) 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn 'Alī al-Fāḍil al-Baisānī (d. 1200), who dismissed the charge on the basis of the Qur'anic claim (2:256) that if a man was forcibly converted to Islam, his conversion is invalid.<sup>48</sup>

#### Imitations and copies – Maimonides and other religions

It is possible to label Maimonides' attitude towards other religions as substantially negative. The reasons for this are historical and halahkic. Maimonides considered all religions as intentionally false and unsuccessful imitations of Judaism, and every imitation as an inevitably distortion of the original form which it strives to imitate:

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<sup>47</sup> IBN ABĪ UṢAYBĪ'A. *Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-a'ṭibbā'*, Vol. 2, pp. 117 – 118.

<sup>48</sup> IBN AL-QIFṬĪ. *Ta'riḫ al-ḥukamā'*, pp. 318 – 319. English translation of B. Lewis in *Islam*, pp. 189 – 192. For 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn 'Alī al-Fāḍil al-Baisānī's relationship to Maimonides see KRAEMER, J. L. Maimonides' Intellectual Milieu in Cairo, pp. 25 – 27.

“All religions are stolen from our religion – one adds and other detracts, some makes changes and another one lies, and falsely says incorrect things about God, and yet another destroys pillars of religion or speaks perversities.”<sup>49</sup>

However, Maimonides expressed a more lenient opinion concerning two of Judaism’s daughter religions, Christianity and Islam, which he knew from his personal experience.<sup>50</sup> His criteria for assessing them are purely theological, and any differentiation between them follows from it.

Maimonides likens ‘true’ religion, by which he naturally means Judaism, and other religions to a live being and its substitution or mere likeness or statue, whose similarity to the original could be mistaken only by an ignorant person who does not possess knowledge of ‘true religion’ (Arabic *dīn al-ḥaqq*, Hebrew *dat ha-emet*) as he calls Judaism in several places:

“All of these men <Jesus and Muhammad> wish to liken themselves to the divine religion. But only a simpleton who lacks knowledge of both establishments will liken the divine institutions to human contrivance. The difference between our religion and the other denominations that liken themselves to us is like the difference between the living, rational individual and the statue skilfully moulded out of marble, wood, silver, or gold that looks like a man [...] But the informed person, who knows the interior of both, knows that the internal composition of the statue betrays no skilful workmanship at all, whereas the inward parts of man are truly marvellously made, a testimony to the wisdom of the Creator [...] Likewise a person ignorant of the secrets of the revealed books and the inner significance of our Law will be led to believe that our religion has something in common with the established confession if he makes a comparison between the two [...] The pretentious religions contain matters that have no inner meaning, only imitations, simulations, and copies (*muḥākāt wa-tashabbuh wa-tamaththul*).”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Tshuvot ha-Rambam*, Vol. 2, p. 728, No. 448; SHAILAT, Y. *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*, Vol. 1, p. 240.

<sup>50</sup> David Novak by contrast claims that Maimonides’ “knowledge of Christianity was not the result of firsthand experience.” See NOVAK, D. *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, p. 57. This assumption seems to me unfounded as at his time numerous Christian communities still lived both in Muslim West and especially in Egypt.

<sup>51</sup> *Epistle to Yemen in Epistles*, 99–100. The same idea seeing in Christianity and Islam only unsuccessful “imitations” (*tashbīhāt*) of Judaism expressed before Maimonides Jehuda Halevi in *Kuzari*, 3:8–9; 2:30–32. Interestingly, the same notion we find in a

Not enough that other religions or “all nations on the earth” are trying in vain to imitate (of course unsuccessfully) only the external features of Judaism, but they instigated by envy against the pre-eminence over other nations manifested by God’s law intent to undermine the religious law of Israel: “Ever since the time of revelation every despot or rebel ruler, be he violent or ignoble, has made it his first aim and his final purpose to destroy our Law, and to vitiate our religion.”<sup>52</sup>

Although Maimonides’ uncompromisingly orthodox attitude regarding Judaism alone as a true religion was shared by most of the Jewish Arabic writing authors, it definitely was not accepted by all. Another, more liberal, point of view is exemplified by Nathan’el ibn Fayyūmī of Yemen, father of the recipient of Maimonides’ letter to Yemen, for whom different religions are like various medicines, each fitting the people to whom they are applied according to the different tempers of men, but essentially are all alike.<sup>53</sup> The willingness of some Jews to recognize Muhammad as a prophet and still retain their Judaism can be seen in the second Islamic century Jewish apocalypse, *The Secret of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, which saw in the spread of Islam the first step in the coming of the messiah and in Muhammad a true prophet.<sup>54</sup> Goitein has stated that in this text is discernible the influence of ‘Īsāwīyya,<sup>55</sup> messianic

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letter from Cairo Geniza (1355 – 1367) written by a woman complaining to David, the last scion of Maimonides family holding the office of Nagid, of her husband who used to join Sufi gatherings at the hill Muqaṭṭam at the outskirts of Cairo. The woman conveys her fear of husband’s eventual conversion to Islam, “although these <mendicants> have only the semblance, but not the essence, of religion” (*wa lahum al-zāhir mā lahum al-bāṭin*). GOITEIN, S. D. A Jewish Addict to Sufism: In the Time of the Nagid David II Maimonides, pp. 37 – 49.

<sup>52</sup> *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> “Not one people remained without a law, for all of them are from one Lord and unto Him they all return. [...] A proof that He sends a prophet to every people according to their language is found in this passage of the Koran, “We sent a prophet only according to the language of His people.” [...] But Muhammad’s message was to a people whose fathers had not been warned and who had no Divine Law through which to be led aright; therefore he directed them to this law since they were in need of it. [...] It is not proper to contradict those who are of another religion since their religion and their punishment are not our concern but that of the Praised and Exalted One.” LEVINE, D. (ed.), NATHANEL IBN AL-FAYYUMI, *Bustān al-‘uqūl (Garden of the Intellects)*, pp. 108 – 109, (English section), pp. 68 – 69 (Arabic section).

<sup>54</sup> EVEN-SAMUEL, Y. *Midreshei Geulah*, pp. 161 – 198.

<sup>55</sup> GOITEIN, S. D. *Jews and Arabs*, p. 170. For ‘Īsāwīyya see WASSERSTROM, S. M. *Between Muslim and Jew*, pp. 71 – 82.



movement called according its leader Abū ʿĪsā al-Īṣfahānī (8th century). Abū ʿĪsā and his sect accepted the prophethood of Jesus and Muhammad, but denied that their law would also be binding for Jews.<sup>56</sup> The same attitude is found in al-Shaibānī, the student of the jurist Abū Ḥanīfa, writing around 800, who says that “today the Jews in the areas of Iraq recognize that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God, but they claim that he was sent as a prophet only to the Arabs, and not to the Jews.”<sup>57</sup>

### Maimonides’ halakhic attitude towards Islam

Before speaking about Maimonides’ attitude to Islam, it is necessary to sketch briefly his halakhic attitude toward Christianity, which is much more stringent than to Islam. While Islam is an unconditional monotheistic religion without the blemish of idolatry, as we shall see, the Christian religion, which he takes to be a later invention that attached itself to the name of Jesus,<sup>58</sup> Maimonides marks in three places as a form of idolatry. Accordingly he rules that the Christians are subject to all the disabilities placed on idolaters by rabbinic law. The reason for not considering Christianity to be a monotheistic religion lies in its doctrine of the Trinity which he regarded to be a basic compromise of the monotheism required of all persons.<sup>59</sup>

- 1) “Christians are polytheists and it is forbidden to derive monetary profit from their wine” (MT *Ma’akhalot asurot* 11:7).
- 2) “And know that this Christian nation which claims the claim of the messiah, in all their various sects, all of them are idolaters (*ovedey avodah zarah*) ...” (commentary on the Mishnah, *Avodah zarah* 1:3).
- 3) “*Adumim* (Romans=Christians) are idol worshipers, and Sunday is their festival. Accordingly, in Eretz Yisrael, it is forbidden to conduct transactions

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<sup>56</sup> AL-QIRQISĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-anwār wa’l-marāqib*, Vol. 3, pp. 283 – 284; AL-BĀQILĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-tamhīd*, p. 161, pp. 189 – 190. Cf. BARON, S. W. *A Social and Religious History of Jews*. Vol. 5, pp. 191 – 193.

<sup>57</sup> GOLDZIHNER, I. “Usages juifs d’après la littérature religieuse des Musulmans”, pp. 338 – 339.

<sup>58</sup> In general, both Muslim and Jewish polemicists maintained that Paul was the founder of Christianity. See LASKER, D. J. *Tradition and Innovation*, p. 172.

<sup>59</sup> See Maimonides’ words at the beginning of his *Essay on Resurrection* to Deut 6:4 “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.” *Epistles*, p. 211. Cf. *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:50. On the role this verse played in the Jewish-Christian debate in the Middle Ages see BARON, S. W., *A Social and Religious History of Jews*, Vol. 5, p. 120; BERGER, D. *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, p. 265.

with them on Thursday and Friday each and every week, and, needless to say, on Sunday itself, when transactions are forbidden everywhere” (MT *Hilkhot 'ovde kokhavim u-mazalot* 9:4).<sup>60</sup>

Such is not the case with Islam. Even though Maimonides raises charges against Islam, he did not, in contrast with his treatment of Christianity, criticise it *per se*. Mostly he only criticises Muslim charges against the veracity of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition in general. In contrast to Christianity, Maimonides from the halakhic point of view regarded Islam as being different and superior to any other non-Jewish religion and designated it as potential Judaism. This uncompromisingly positive attitude was not as a matter of course commonly shared among all contemporary Jewish intellectuals, as we can learn from the question sent to Maimonides from Rabbi 'Obadyah, a proselyte from Islam, who was perplexed and hurt by his teacher's wholesale condemnation of his previous religion by indicating that Muslim veneration of certain shrines was idolatrous, hence Islam was idolatry. His master's, and undoubtedly also others,<sup>61</sup> reason for such a statement was based on two assumptions which did not lack some logic: first, Ka'aba with black stone symbolize idolatry; second, religious rituals performed there during the Muslim ḥajj were still to be taken for the continuation of ancient paganish rituals. Nevertheless, Maimonides made a straightforward and decisive statement denying the charge altogether and rebuking the teacher for insulting Rabbi 'Obadyah who maintained a correct opinion, keeping thus with the Talmudic approach which forbade confronting a convert with his past.

Maimonides' firm character could be seen right from the prologue to his legal opinion: he does not consider it proper to repay Muslims with the same coin “for lies which they invent falsely about us” and to take revenge by lying about their religious persuasion and to smear them with a label of idolatry: “Muslims are not idolaters at all. <Idolatry> has already been cut from their mouth and

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<sup>60</sup> Maimonides' marking Christianity as idolatry does not constitute a generally accepted notion among the Jews in the Middle Ages, on the contrary, Christianity – especially in Christian countries – was excluded from the category of idol worship. Mentioned should be in particular attitude of Rabbenu Gershom and Rabbi Menaḥem ha-Me'iri from Provence. See KATZ, J. *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, pp. 32 – 36, pp. 114 – 128.

<sup>61</sup> For example the rabbi on whose opinion Maimonides reacts in *The Epistle on Martyrdom* in *Epistles*, 21. The Karaites, such as Daniel al-Qūmisī and Yefet ben Eli, generally ruled that Islam is idolatry. BEN-SHAMMAI, H. *The Attitude of Some Early Karaites towards Islam*, pp. 14 – 16.

heart and they are totally and properly committed to One God (*yihud ra'uy*) without flaw.”<sup>62</sup>

Maimonides rejects the first charge with the argument that although these places have been ancient shrines of paganish gods, Muslims who pray in their direction (*qibla*) and make pilgrimages towards them today, do not have idolatry in mind at all, and so they are not even considered idolaters by the Jewish law:

“And if somebody says that the house that they praise (al-Ka'ba) is an idolatrous shrine and an idol is hidden in it, which their fathers used to worship – what's wrong about it? Those who prostrate themselves today in its direction, have on their minds only God (*eyn libbam ella le-shamayim*). The sages in Sanhedrin had already explained that if somebody prostrates themselves in the direction of an idolatrous shrine whilst he <mistakenly> thinks that it is a synagogue, his heart is turned to God<sup>63</sup>. Equally all these Muslims today, including children and women, idolatry is cut off from their mouth... In the question of oneness of God they are not deceived at all.”<sup>64</sup>

The second charge puts forward the same argument: even though during this time religious rituals performed during the pilgrimage are originally “borrowed” from a paganish Arab past, as Muslims themselves admit, their content is re-interpreted in order to suit monotheistic ritual practice. Three ancient cults practised there are already known from Talmud:

“It's true that, in the past, Muslims in these places had three kinds of idol worship: Peor, Merqulis and Kemosh; they themselves admit it today and call them by Arabic names. The worship of Peor rested on complete undressing in front of him and bending the head and sticking the backside out toward him, as do today Muslims in prayer prostration. Merqolis was worshiped by throwing stones and Kemosh by letting the hair grow and by wearing seamless clothes. These things were all explained and known to us before coming of Muslim religion.”<sup>65</sup>

Maimonides offers several explanations put forward by Muslims in order to elucidate and re-interpret these ancient ritual acts of paganish worship, but in spite of their emulation by Muslims during pilgrimage, they are not considered

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<sup>62</sup> *Tshuvot ha-Rambam*, (ed. J. Blau). Vol. 2, p. 726.

<sup>63</sup> T. B. Sanhedrin 61b.

<sup>64</sup> *Tshuvot ha-Rambam*, (ed. J. Blau). Vol. 2, p. 726.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 726 – 727.

by Maimonides as idolaters. Letting the hair grow and wearing seamless clothes should symbolize a humbleness before God and serve as a remembrance of how people will stand out of grave; throwing stones is intended to confuse Satan, or to show contempt for idols, and some even say it is simply a habit. Maimonides summarizes the defence of Islam with the words:

“To sum it up, in spite of the fact that originally it was an idol worship, nobody amongst those, who today throw pebbles, bow to these places and carry out all these mentioned rituals, does it in the name of idol worship, either by mouth, or by heart; but their hearts are devoted to God.”<sup>66</sup>

The difference Maimonides makes between Islam and Christianity can also be clearly seen in his treatment of the question of gentile wine (*stam yenam*), which is according to the teachings of Talmudic sages forbidden to Jews for drinking or deriving any monetary benefit from it. The reasons for such rulings were two: to minimize social contact with gentiles, which could lead to intermarriage and perhaps to idolatry, and according to the second reason all gentile wine was assumed to be dedicated to idolatry.<sup>67</sup> Even upon the question of Muslim wine Maimonides followed his halakhic tendency (though this could be due to the strict Qur'anic prohibition on drinking any alcoholic beverages,<sup>68</sup> we learn, if only hypothetically, from *The Arabian Nights* that the practice was rather different, at least until the extension of coffee consumption). He ordained that Jew may not drink the wine of Muslims, but he may derive monetary benefit from it:

“As we have explained, it is prohibited to drink the wine of a resident-alien (*ger toshav*), that is one who has accepted the seven commandments, but it is permitted to derive monetary benefit (*muttar be-haniyyah*) from it. ... And so it is with any gentile who does not practise idolatry like these Muslims: their wine is prohibited for drinking but permitted for monetary benefit. And so rule all the *geonim*.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 727. Maimonides' attitude to the Muslim pilgrimage and towards their alleged idols worship there recounts Josef Sambari (1672) in exactly the same words in *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, pp. 151 – 152.

<sup>67</sup> NOVAK, D. The Treatment of Islam and Muslims in the Legal Writings of Maimonides, p. 236.

<sup>68</sup> Qur'an 5:92–93; “Wine”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Vol. 5, pp. 481 – 483.

<sup>69</sup> MT *Hilkhot Ma'akhalot Asurot* 11:7. In the same place Maimonides rules that if a gentile, for example Muslim unintentionally touched Jewish wine or a wine barrel, the

Another ruling concerning the topic is mentioned in the responsum sent by Maimonides to Aleppo where he responds to the question of the permissibility of listening to Muslim music and drinking their wine. In his answer (written probably before completion of *Mishneh Torah*) Maimonides says:

“Concerning these Muslims, they are – as I said – as far from idolatry as a one-day-old child. ... Ultimately all of the *geonim* took a lenient stand towards their wine pronouncing it permitted for monetary benefit, but no more; what concerns drinking of it is something that has not been heard of from any of them who proclaim halakhic rulings (*fatāwā*). This is accepted practice by all the *geonim* of the West (Andalusia): when it happens that a Muslim touches our wine with a touch that could entail religious significance (*nisuch*),<sup>70</sup> they prohibited drinking it but permitted selling it, just like Muslim wine itself.”<sup>71</sup>

We can see that Maimonides in the mentioned sources played down the Talmudic rationale for prohibiting both drinking and selling of gentile wine in order to minimize social contact and avoid wine dedicated to idolatry. The reason for such a standpoint is obvious: Muslims are not idolaters and consequently there are no grounds for hindering social contact with them.<sup>72</sup>

From Islam’s unambiguous monotheism, Maimonides draws another halakhic consequence concerning circumcision:

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wine is permitted for drinking. For some gaonic rulings permitting Jews to derive monetary benefit from wine of Muslims see responsa of Rav Hai Gaon. ABRAHAM BAR JIṢḤAQ, *Sefer Ha-Eshkol*. Vol. 2, p. 74, pp. 77 – 78. Selling of wine by Jews (or any non-Muslim) to Muslims was of course strictly forbidden by Muslim law. TRITTON, A. S. *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects*, p. 13. Nevertheless, such cases often happened; see HEYD, U. *Ottoman Documents on Palestine 1552 – 1615*, p. 160; and cf. as well *The Itinerary of Rabbi Moses Basola*, p. 31.

<sup>70</sup> Pouring water or wine (on the altar) for religious purposes. Rabbi Yehuday, gaon of Sura in the middle of the 8th century, expressed apprehension concerning permissibility of wine of inhabitants of Persia and Babylonia, since even after acceptance of Islam they tend to keep their previous paganish religion. ABRAHAM BAR JIṢḤAQ, *Sefer Eshkol*, Vol. 2, p. 74. Similar opinion expressed in *Geonic Responsa from Geniza Mss.*, p. 192.

<sup>71</sup> SHAILAT, Y. *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*, Vol. 1, p. 426.

<sup>72</sup> Maimonides advises in case a gentile (Christian) or Muslim entered a Jewish drinking party, to dilute wine (*nabīdh*) with honey since honey was forbidden in the Temple service (Leviticus 2:11); consequently, its admixture converts this beverage into religiously unfit and by so permissible for sharing with Muslims; cf. GOITEIN, S. D. *A Mediterranean Society*. Vol. 5, pp. 39 – 40.

“Our sages said that the sons of Keturah, who are of the seed of Abraham, who came after Ishmael and Isaac, are obliged to be circumcised. And because today the sons of Ishmael have assimilated (*ve-nit'arvu*) with the sons of Kethura, all of them are obliged to be circumcised on the eighth day.” (MT *Hilkhot melakhim* 10:8)

According to one rabbinic opinion, Kethura is another name for Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, whom Abraham remarried after the death of Sarah (Genesis Rabbah 61:4). David Novak, when analyzing this passage, contends that “Maimonides saw the Islamic practice of circumcision, most prevalent among Muslim Arabs, as coming from Judaism and something which Judaism sees as a requirement for Arabs, and a requirement not originally Islamic.”<sup>73</sup> Because circumcision was, according to Maimonides, not just intended for Israelis but for all who believe in the *unity of God* from the sons of Abraham (namely sons of Ishmael who assimilated with the sons of Kethura = Muslims), one bodily sign uniting them, he recognized Muslim circumcision and made from it religious commandment and symbol of monotheism.<sup>74</sup>

It goes without saying that in the case of circumcision of non-Jews, as in many other questions Maimonides differs from the attitude of Jehuda Halevi (ca 1075 – 1141) who refuses to attribute any religious status or merit to Islamic circumcision and doesn't see any difference between Islamic circumcision and the Christian practice of resting on Sunday. Both are only empty imitations.<sup>75</sup>

### Maimonides' respond to Islamic polemic

Religious persecution was then more perilous in Maimonides' view by compelling Jews to succumb to the call of religious polemics. Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim debates in the early Middle Ages differed markedly in substance and in detail. While the former focused on the nature of God and the identity of the Messiah, the latter centered on the final revelation and its prophet. Maimonides in his writings reacts, although not with the same measure, on three main theses of Islamic polemic with Judaism:<sup>76</sup> A) Jews

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<sup>73</sup> NOVAK, D. *The Treatment of Islam*, pp. 240 – 243.

<sup>74</sup> See PINES, S. *Maimonides: The Guide of the Perplexed*, chapter III, p. 49, pp. 609 – 610. RAVITZKY, A. *Maimonidean Essays*, pp. 113 – 115.

<sup>75</sup> See note 51.

<sup>76</sup> For rudimental studies on Islamic polemic against Judaism see GOLDZIHNER, I. *Ueber muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-kitāb*, pp. 341 – 387; SCHREINER, M. *Zur Geschichte der Polemik zwischen Juden und Muhammedanern*, pp. 591 – 675;

falsified/alterd or changed the text of the Torah (*taḥrīf/tabdīl*);<sup>77</sup> B) they deleted from the Torah verses prophesying Muhammad's coming and his apostleship (*a'lām al-nubūwa*); C) Islam abrogates the Torah (*naskh*).

Maimonides starts his apologetic response in *The Epistle to Yemen* with refutation of the three biblical verses most often adduced for the claim that Muhammad's mission is foretold in the Scriptures (Gen 17:20; Deut 33:2; Deut 18:15).<sup>78</sup> *The Epistle to Yemen* is actually the only place where Maimonides squares up with this claim. He points out that arguments for this claim have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating and are altogether feeble, nevertheless, his awareness of the dire situation of the Yemeni community compelled him to cope with the question.<sup>79</sup>

1) "And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and I will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation" (Gen 17:20). It is no surprise that Muslims, who were by universal agreement considered to be descendants of Ishmael, took this passage (and the whole cycle of stories about Hagar and Ishmael) as a direct reference to a future mighty Islamic community. Muslims derived from the same passage, by a rather Jewish technique of computation called "gematria", another allusion to the coming of Muhammad, namely the Hebrew expression *bi-me'od me'od* "exceedingly", since the numerical value of the consonants *B M ' D M ' D* gives 92 which equates to the numerical value of letters of the Prophet's name – *M Ḥ M D* (Muhammad). Whereas Muslims apply the words "I will make of him a great nation" to their prophet, Maimonides relates that they imply neither prophecy nor a Law, but merely a large number of Muslims. As much of *B M ' D M ' D*, which correctly according to "gematria" equals *M Ḥ M D* but the name mentioned in Qur'an is *A Ḥ M D* (Aḥmad = 53).<sup>80</sup>

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PERLMANN, M. *The Medieval Polemics between Islam and Judaism*, pp. 103 – 138; ADANG, C. *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*.

<sup>77</sup> To this we could add the accusation of unreliable transmit of tradition (*tawātur*).

<sup>78</sup> STRAUSS, E. *Darkhei ha-pulmus ha-Islami*, pp. 182 – 197.

<sup>79</sup> At that time fanatical ruler 'Abd al-Nabī ibn Mahdī attempted to force the Jews to convert to Islam. The continuing pressure led on the one hand to the appearance of a Jew who sparked Messianic hopes and pronounced himself Messiah, and on the other to a Jewish proselyte who incited Jews to convert to Islam, seeking to prove Muhammad's prophecy using Biblical texts. See TOBI, J. *The Jews of Yemen*, pp. 41 – 42.

<sup>80</sup> *Epistle to Yemen in Epistles*, p. 109. Maimonides refers to Sūra 61:6 where Jesus heralds to the children of Israel that after him will come messenger "whose name shall be Aḥmad". The *gematria* at this verse employed Jewish convert to Islam and the most

2) “The Lord came from Sinai, He shone upon them from Seir, He appeared from Mount Paran” (Deut 33:2-3), which Muslims take for prophesy of the rise of three religions in three successive revelations: Sinai symbolises Judaism, Seir Christianity and Paran Islam.<sup>81</sup> First of all, if the verb “he appeared” (*hofi'a*) points to Muhammad, Maimonides argues, then it would have to be used in a future tense, and secondly, the verse describes the revelation at Mount Sinai: “It did not descend suddenly like a thunderbolt, but came down gently, manifesting itself gradually first from the top of one mountain, then from another, until it came to rest on Sinai.” Seir and Paran are in Maimonides' understanding mountains near to Sinai, Seir being nearer and Paran further away.<sup>82</sup>

3) “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people like me [...] I will raise up a prophet for them from among their own people, like yourself” (Deut 18:15–18). After a short admonishment not to draw any evidences before grasping the author's aim and the context of the said, Maimonides dismisses the Muslim argument by claiming that the verses do not enounce the coming of a new prophet bringing a new law, but only a prophet sent to relieve Israelis of the need to turn to diviners and astrologers in order to

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influential polemist Samau'al al-Maghribī, *Iḥām al-yahūd* [*Silencing the Jews*], pp. 31 – 34. Gematria games widely used in his polemical pamphlet also another Jewish convert to Islam with expressive name 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī (ca. 1390, Morocco), who finds in the Scriptures with help of this method many allusions to Muhammad or Mecca. See PERLMANN, M. 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī, A Jewish Convert, pp. 180 – 183. The use of numerology (*ḥisāb al-jumal*) strictly deprecated al-Bīrūnī since with help of it can be demonstrated or predicted anything. AL-BĪRŪNĪ. *Kitāb al-āthār al-bāqiya 'an al-qurūn al-āliya*, p. 18f. According to Jehuda Halevi the words of Gen. 17:20 refer “only to worldly happiness” (*Kuzari*, II:14).

<sup>81</sup> 'ALĪ B. RABBAN, who about 855 wrote at the request of Abbasid caliph al-Mutawwakil the polemical book *The Book of Religion and Empire* says that Paran is a village where lived Ishmael “and everybody knows that Ishmael lived in Mecca”, *Kitāb al-dīn wa'l-dawla*, pp. 138 – 139. Cf. STRAUSS, E. Darkhei ha-pulmus ha-Islami, p. 192, n. 14.

<sup>82</sup> *Epistle to Yemen in Epistles*, p. 109. Somewhat different reasoning proposed Saadya Gaon for whom these are only distinct appellations for Mount Sinai that towers over three neighbouring countries, which each of them names it differently. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, p. 165. Abraham ibn 'Ezra, when commenting this verse, wrote: “Those lacking faith said that ‘from Seir’ refers to the religion of Edom (i.e., the Christianity), and Paran is the religion of Ishmael, and they are wrong” (*Khamisha khumshey Torah – Torat ḥayyim*, p. 298). Al-Qarāfi (d. 1285), who besides using twice name Muhammad in translation of this passage, claims that Paran, where according to *al-tawrāt* lived Ishmael, point to coming of Muhammad. AL-QARĀFĪ. *Al-ajwiba al-fākhira*, p. 178.



arrive at a foreknowledge of the future. The words “from among their own people”, according to Muslim exegesis, allude to the descendents of Ishmael. However, because of the Arabic translation of the passage *min wasaṭ ikhwātihim*, “from among their brothers”, Maimonides asserts that the words purport that Israel will not be compelled to go in search of him in a distant countries.<sup>83</sup>

However, it doesn't mean that Maimonides categorically rejected the idea that the Holy Write should contain allusions to Islam (along with Christianity) and Muhammad. He identified Islam with Daniel's prophecy about “the tents of Kedar” (Ps 120:5) which he evidently equates with Kuraish, the tribe of Muhammad,<sup>84</sup> and the “small horn” of Dan 7:8 in which he sees obvious allusion “to the person who will found a new religion similar to the divine religion and make claim to a revelation and to prophecy.”<sup>85</sup> The prophet Daniel not only foresaw the coming of Islam but also alluded to Israel's humiliation and degradation *like the dust in threshing* (2 Kings 13:7) “suffered only at the hand of the Arabs, may they be speedily vanquished.”<sup>86</sup>

Contrary to Saadya Gaon, who didn't touch on the theme of falsification of the Scriptures at all in his writings, Maimonides pays at least some attention to the allegation that Jews altered the Torah. This allegation belongs to the main arguments of the Muslim polemics with the Old and New Testament and appears many times in the Qur'an already.<sup>87</sup> Muhammad himself had no precise idea to which places in *al-tawrāt* and *al-injīl* this relates, but he used this motive in order to explain away discrepancies between the Scriptures and verses in the Qur'an to which his attention was annoyingly called by the Median Jews.

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<sup>83</sup> *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, pp. 109 – 111. See PERLMANN, M. *Samau'al al-Maghribī: Ifḥām al-yahūd (Silencing the Jews)*, pp. 29 – 31. In *MT Hilkhoh 'ovde kokhvim u-mazalot 9:2* Maimonides explains the verse differently: “He is not coming to establish a [new] faith, but rather to command the people [to fulfil] the precepts of the Torah and to warn against its transgression.” For exegeses of this verse by Karaites see FRANK, D. *Search Scripture Well*, pp. 234 – 247.

<sup>84</sup> *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, p. 126.

<sup>85</sup> *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, pp. 100 – 101. Here he followed suit of some Karaite authors. See BEN-SHAMMAI, H. *The Attitude of Some Early Karaites towards Islam*, p. 21.

<sup>86</sup> *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, p. 127.

<sup>87</sup> For example 2:73; 2:75; 2:59; 3:78; 5:44 – 49. Motive of falsification developed already in pre-Islamic period where it was used by pagans, Samaritans and Christians for discrediting of Jews and their Holy Writ. See LAZARUS-YAFEH, H. *Intertwined Wolds*, pp. 19 – 20.

Very early Muslim theologians perceived *taḥrīf* of Jewish Scriptures (including oral tradition) in two ways: 1) tempering of the meaning (*taḥrīf al-maʿānī*),<sup>88</sup> or 2) tempering of biblical text itself (*taḥrīf al-naṣṣ*). But from the 11th century onwards among the majority of Muslim polemicists (most emphatically represented by the eleven-century Andalusian theologian and belletrist Ibn Ḥazm) the notion prevailed that the Torah, which Jews possess nowadays (as opposed to the Torah given by God to Moses) was wilfully corrupted by Jews, moreover by no one lesser than Ezra the Scribe – ‘Azrā al-Warrāq.<sup>89</sup> The Jews perpetrated this falsification by erasing any mention of the prophet Muhammad or his mission from the only one copy of the Torah left in the Temple to the mercy of the High Priest and his fellow priests. Maimonides, in dealing with *taḥrīf*, refutes the putative proofs of this accusation, under which Muslim authors had already commenced to operate in 10th century in order to explain “differences” between three Bibles: Hebrew, Bible of Samaritans and “Greek Bible”, i.e. Septuagint. The Muslims were well informed about the history of its emergence from *The Letter of Aristeas*.<sup>90</sup> Maimonides considers that:

“the falsity of this argument can be easily demonstrated to one and all by the fact that the Torah had been translated into Syriac, Greek, Persian, and Latin hundreds of years before the appearance of the ‘prepostle’, (*pasul*) and by the fact that it is an unbroken tradition in the East and the West, with the result that no differences in the text exist at all, not even in vocalization, for they are all correct. Nor do any differences affecting the meaning exist. Only the absence of any allusion to him <Muhammad> in the Torah compelled them to rely on these weak proofs.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Among the advocates of the first assumption was for example historian AL-MASʿŪDĪ. *Murūj al-dhahab wa maʿādin al-jawhar*, Vol. 1, pp. 117 – 119.

<sup>89</sup> He bases his assumption on: a) chronological, numerical and geographical inconsistencies, b) theologically impermissible passages. See IBN ḤAZM. *Al-radd ʿalā Ibn al-Naghrīla al-yahūdī*; about Ezra see *ibid.*, p. 77; *idem.*, *Kitāb al-ḥiṣāl fīʾl-milal waʾl-ahwāʾ waʾl-niḥal*, Vol. 1, p. 287; PERLMANN, M. Samauʾal al-Maghribī: *Ifḥām al-yahūd*, p. 51. For Ezra in Muslim tradition see LAZARUS-YAFEH, H. *Intertwined Worlds*, pp. 50 – 74.

<sup>90</sup> VAJDA, G. *La Version des Septante dans la littérature Musulmane*, pp. 65 – 70; ADANG, C. *Muslim Writers on Judaism*, pp. 131 – 133.

<sup>91</sup> *Epistle to Yemen in Epistles*, p. 107; SHAILAT, Y. *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*, Vol. 1, p. 93.

A similar argument from the translation of the Bible is to be found in the works of al-Muqammaṣ<sup>92</sup> and Jehuda Halevi.<sup>93</sup> Lazarus-Yafeh even traces Maimonides' response to accusation of the falsification of the only copy of the Torah in the Temple at the very beginning of his great Code of Law where Maimonides claims that Moses presented a scroll of Torah to each tribe and deposited one in the Ark for testimony, e.i. he has written twelve additional copies of the Torah.<sup>94</sup> The feebleness of the arguments for the distortion of the text of the Torah or the expunging of allusions to Muhammad, is according to Maimonides, obvious not only to Jews or apostates, whose "sole purpose in citing these verses is to win favour in the eyes of the gentiles." Muslims themselves do not believe in these arguments and propound them just because they cannot find in the entire Bible a single reference, or possible allusion to their prophet "that they could utilize [and therefore] they are compelled to accuse us, saying: You have altered the text of the Torah, and expunged every trace of the name of Muhammad therefrom."<sup>95</sup> It is not clear where Maimonides has got the impression that Muslims do not admit or cite these arguments, since the whole weaponry of Islamic polemics with Judaism (based especially on Samau'al al-Maghribī) was tediously repeated in polemic literature throughout the centuries (al-Qarāfi, al-Rāqilī). The only Muslim author, I can detect, who did not accept the concept of *taḥrīf*, is the famous late historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) who in his *Prelogomena (al-Muqaddima)* spurns the allegation that Jews would temper with the Torah.<sup>96</sup> Probably the only one among the Muslim theologians who accepted the argument for the impossibility of the expurgation of Muhammad's name from the Scripture was Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1351) who conceded that it is absolutely false to believe that "Jews and

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<sup>92</sup> STROUMSA, S. *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammiṣ's* Twenty Chapters (*ʿIshrūn Maqāla*), pp. 268 – 269; cf. idem, *Jewish Polemics against Islam and Christianity in the Light of Judaeo-Arabic Texts*, p. 249.

<sup>93</sup> He emphasized the agreement among all the Jews in the world concerning the truth of the Torah (*Kuzari* 1:45–48). Mention should be made of a very short work against the Muslim claim of *taḥrīf* written by the Karaite ʿAlī ibn Sulaymān who lived in Jerusalem and Cairo at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelve centuries. It was published by HIRSCHFELD, H. *Ein Karäer über den Mohammed gemachten Vorwurf jüdischer Torahfälschung*, pp. 111 – 113.

<sup>94</sup> LAZARUS-YAFEH. *Taḥrīf and Thirteen Torah Scrolls*, pp. 81 – 88.

<sup>95</sup> *Epistle to Yemen in Epistles*, p. 107; SHAILAT, Y. *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*, Vol. 1, p. 93.

<sup>96</sup> IBN KHALDŪN. *Prelogomena*, p. 13. The passage is missing in most editions. Cf. FISCHER, W. J. *Ibn Khaldūn: On the Bible, Judaism and the Jews*, pp. 147 – 171.

Christians living in all parts of the world should have uniformly expurgated from their Scripture the name of Muhammad.”<sup>97</sup>

If Maimonides does not expatiate on the questions of falsification and predictions of Muhammad's mission, then the third thesis of the Muslim polemic with Judaism – the accusation of abrogation of the Mosaic Law (*naskh*) and its substitution by Islam, God's final revelation and valid dispensation for mankind – he considered to be of a special importance and danger and contested it at length and in many places of his halakhic and philosophical oeuvre. According to Maimonides, it was again the prophet Daniel who with the words “*And he shall seek to change the seasons and the law*” (7:25) foresaw the prophet Muhammad “who will endeavour to alter this Torah and abolish it.”<sup>98</sup> Maimonides in his concern for the question of abrogation reassumed and expanded on the work already done by Saadya Gaon in *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* and Nathan'el ibn al-Fayyūmī in *Garden of the Intellects*. Also in them the treatment and refutations of the accusation of abrogation constitutes the centrepiece of their works.<sup>99</sup> Even if we concede with Daniel Lasker, that arguments of Saadya Gaon are taken largely from the Jewish-Christian debate,<sup>100</sup> the discussion of *naskh* in the works of al-Qirqisānī<sup>101</sup> or Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon<sup>102</sup> were aimed directly at the claims of the Muslims. Maimonides had already come out against the Muslim polemical conception of abrogation in his *Commentary on the Mishnah (Kitāb al-sirāḡ)* and included it in VIII and IX of his Thirteen Principles upon which Judaism is based:

(VIII) The Eighth Fundamental Principle is that the Torah came from God. We are to believe that the whole Torah was given to us through Moses, our Teacher, entirely from God. [...] (IX) The Ninth Fundamental Principle is the authenticity of the Torah (*naskh*), i.e. that this Torah was precisely transcribed from God and no one else. To the

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<sup>97</sup> GOLDZIHNER, I. Ueber muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-kitāb, p. 373.

<sup>98</sup> *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, p. 101.

<sup>99</sup> SCHLOSSBERG, E. R., R. Saadia Gaon's Attitude towards Islam, pp. 40 – 48. Nathan'el ibn al-Fayyūmī does not mention the question of sign of Muhammad's mission and with the topic of falsification and abrogation he deals jointly. *Bustān al-ʿuqūl*, pp. 103 – 109 (Engl. section), pp. 65 – 69 (Arab. section).

<sup>100</sup> LASKER, D. J. Saadya Gaon on Christianity and Islam, pp. 165 – 177.

<sup>101</sup> AL-QIRQISĀNĪ. *Kitāb al-anwār wa'l-marāqib*, Vol. 2, pp. 440 – 453.

<sup>102</sup> SKLARE, D. E. *Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon and His Cultural World*, pp. 28 – 29.

Torah, Oral and Written, nothing must be added nor anything taken from it, as it is said, “You must neither add nor detract.”<sup>103</sup> (Deut 13:1)

He uses almost the same words in *Mishneh Torah* (MT *Hilkhot melakhim*, 11:6):

“This Torah, its laws and judgements will never be changed. Nothing must be added or anything taken from it. Everybody who adds or detracts or interprets the Torah falsely and takes words of commandments out of their plain meaning is surely a sinner and a heretic.”

Maimonides emits the same idea in *The Guide of the Perplexed* II, 39:

“It is a fundamental principle of our Law that there will never be another Law. Hence, according to our opinion, there never has been a Law and there never will be a Law except the one that is the Law of *Moses our Master*.

Maimonides most emphatically refutes the possibility that any religion, including Islam, could supplant Judaism. He bases the irreplaceableness of Mosaic Law (*sharī‘at Mūsā*) on unmatched prophetic rank and the unique position of Moses and the Torah among other prophets and laws, since no one who is on a lower spiritual level can ever bring a better law that would abrogate the Mosaic Law. In many places in his writings, and probably most explicably in *The Guide of the Perplexed* II, 39, Maimonides goes as far as excluding Moses’ prophethood from the traditional category of prophecy, and claims that his prophecy and the form in which he received it and passed it on, differs in essence from any other prophecy of any bygone or future prophet. The word prophet applied to Moses and other prophets is actually only a homonym. He stands in a class by himself, higher than all the others:

“God is one in a unique sense of the term. And Moses, His prophet and spokesman,<sup>104</sup> is the greatest and most perfect of all the seers. To him

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<sup>103</sup> TWERSKY, I. *A Maimonides Reader*, pp. 420 – 421.

<sup>104</sup> Arabic term *kalīm allah* is epithet of Moses in the Qur’an. From Maimonides’ writings I know only about this case where he uses it. It was probably common designation of Moses among Yemeni Jews because the only to me known case of its occurrence is in Natan’el ibn al-Fayyūmī’s book *Bustān al-‘uqūl* where he used it twice (p. 106 and p. 108 Engl. section, pp. 68 – 69 Arab. section).

was vouchsafed the knowledge of God, that has never been vouchsafed to any prophet before him, nor will it be in the future. [...] It [the Torah] will never be abrogated or superseded, neither supplanted nor abridged. Never shall it be supplanted by another divine law containing positive or negative duties.<sup>105</sup>

This prophet Moses our Master, foremost among all the prophets, whose colloquy with God we heard, and in whom we reposed implicit faith [...] assured us that no other Law remained in heaven that would be subsequently revealed, nor would there be another divine dispensation, as He says: *It is not in the heavens.*”<sup>106</sup> (Deut 30:12)

Maimonides tries to undermine Muhammad's claim to prophethood, even though he does not mention him by name, in *The Guide* II, 40 where he teaches that one of the signs of a false prophet is his plagiarized work and the way to single out a true prophet from a false, is to consider the perfection of that individual, his actions and his way of life:

“The strongest of the indications you should pay attention to is constituted by his renunciation of, and contempt for, the bodily pleasures, for this is the first of the degrees of the people of science and, all the more, of the prophets. In particular this holds good with regard to the sense that is a disgrace to us – as Aristotle has set forth – and especially in what belongs to it with regard to the foulness of copulation. For this reason God has stigmatized through it everyone who lays a claim to prophesy.”<sup>107</sup>

In chapter 36 Maimonides reflects on the qualities of a true prophet who “will have detached his thoughts from, and abolished his desire for, bestial things – I mean the preferences for the pleasures of eating, drinking, sexual intercourse.” Maimonides' readers, whom he admonishes to “understand this intention”, undoubtedly understood his allusion to Muhammad's many wives and his proclivity for worldly pleasures: attributes disqualifying him in Maimonides'

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<sup>105</sup> *Epistle to Yemen in Epistles*, p. 103. Muhammad's coming has predicted according to Maimonides prophet Daniel who said that in the future “will appear a person with a religion similar to the true one, with a book and oral communications, who will arrogantly pretend that God has vouchsafed him a revelation [...] He will produce much talk and will endeavor to alter this Torah and abolish it, as He states: *And he shall seek to change the seasons and the law* (Dan 7:25). *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111 – 112.

<sup>107</sup> *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, p. 384. See SHAMIR, Y. Allusions to Muḥammad in Maimonides' Theory of Prophecy in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, pp. 212 – 224.

eyes from being a true prophet. Medieval commentaries on Maimonides have already suggested that this is a veiled allusion to Muhammad.<sup>108</sup>

Maimonides rejects the idea of abrogation and supersession of the Torah, Written as well as Oral, by another law on the basis of the uniqueness of the revelation at Mount Sinai, witnessed by the whole nation, which was never granted to any other nation.

“It is the pivot of our religion and the proof that demonstrates its veracity [...] great, incomparable, and unique covenant [...] the best evidence [...] For never before or since has a whole nation heard speech of God or behold His splendour. This was done only to confirm us in the faith, so that nothing can change it. He says that Solomon has compared Israel to a beautiful woman and adherents to other religions to seducers trying to entice her to their convictions, but she challenged them: If you can furnish me with something like the theophany at Sinai, in which the camp of Israel faced the camp of the divine presence, then I shall espouse your doctrine.”<sup>109</sup>

The importance of the publicness of *ma'amad har Sinai*, or the Revelation, played a central role also in the thought of Jehuda Halevi<sup>110</sup> and Abraham ibn Daud.<sup>111</sup> In *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides rejects the possibility of the Torah's temporality on scriptural grounds and adduces several Biblical verses (Deut 13:1; 29:28; 30:12) conveying the notion of eternity of Mosaic Law and inalterability of Moses' words by whoever claims to bring a new revelation. Such a person is a false prophet:

“It is clear and explicit in the Torah that it is [God's] commandment, remaining forever without change, addition, or diminishment. [...] Therefore, if a person will arise, whether Jew or gentile, and perform a sign or wonder and say that God sent him to: a) add a mitzvah, b) withdraw a mitzvah, c) explain a mitzvah in a manner which differs from the tradition received from Moses, or d) if he says that the mitzvot commanded to the Jews are not forever, but rather were given for a limited time, he is a false prophet. He comes to deny the prophecy of Moses and should be executed by strangulation because he dared to

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<sup>108</sup> ROTH, N. *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain*, p. 220.

<sup>109</sup> *Epistle to Yemen* in *Epistles*, pp. 104 – 105. This is according to Maimonides metaphorically expressed in Song 7:1.

<sup>110</sup> *Kuzari*, I:83–88.

<sup>111</sup> ABRAHAM IBN DAUD. *Sepher Emunah Ramah*, pp. 77 – 78.

make statements in God's name, which God never made. God, blessed be His name, commanded Moses that this commandment is for us and our children forever, and God is not man that He speaks falsely.”<sup>112</sup>

#### Practical consequences of polemics

Even though Maimonides' theological attitude toward Christianity, which he labelled as a form of idolatry, was more stringent than toward Islam, a pure monotheism, he includes both religions – followers of Jesus (*ha-yashu'im*) and Hagarians=Muslims (*ha-hagarim*) – among “deniers of the Torah” (*kofrim be-Torah*).<sup>113</sup> But in one practical aspect the Christians are better off: it is possible to teach them the Torah. When asked whether or not the Talmudic ban on teaching gentiles over and above the seven Noahide commandments still stands or is permissible to teach the Torah to *goy*, Maimonides answered strongly in the affirmative, but added:

“It is permissible to teach the Christians commandments and to draw them to our religion, but nothing similar is permitted concerning the Muslims because, as you already know, they believe that this Torah is not from the Heaven, and, thus, if they were taught something from the books [of the Torah] and found it contradictory to [notions] they had forged according to confused stories and twisted meanings [of their tradition] it would not be for them a proof about incorrectness of their tradition; on the contrary, they would explain it with the help of their false premises and would answer to us according to their allegations and would mislead every proselyte and simple-minded Israelite. It would become a stumbling-block for Israel who is, on account of its sins, trapped among them. But the uncircumcised (*al-'arelim*) [the Christians] believe that the text of the Torah is unchanged and only interpret it faulty with their false commentaries and [bring] to it allegorical expositions that just they know. But if one draws their attention to the right explanation, it is possible that they would turn away [from their false interpretations]. And if they won't turn away [from them] – but their turn – away is welcomed – it won't be a stumbling-block for us, since they won't find in their Scriptures anything contradictory to ours.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> MT *Hilkhot yesode ha-Torah* 9:1. *Mishneh Torah, A new translation with commentaries and notes by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger.*

<sup>113</sup> MT *Hilkhot teshuvah* 3:8.

<sup>114</sup> *Tshuvot ha-Rambam*, (ed. J. Blau), vol 1, pp. 284 – 285, no. 149.



While it is possible, with the help of the Torah (which Christians accept as the original and unaltered revealed text) and with “correct exegesis” (*al ha-perush ha-nakhon*, meaning a postbiblical Jewish teaching) to point out the Christians’ “faulty interpretations” of the Scriptures and by doing so leading them, if they succumb to reason, onto the track of “correct” interpretation, Muslims are not susceptible to such corrections. On the contrary, the systematic pointing out of “confused stories and twisted meanings [of their tradition]” would only, due to their concept of *tabrif*, reassure them in their conviction that Jews falsified the Scriptures. In addition, the discussion with them could, for converts and the uneducated, be misleading and eventually even harmful for the whole community.

**מישרי דרך למלך המשיח**  
Islam as a paver of the way for Messiah

At the end of the article I would like to touch upon the question of the role which Islam plays in God’s plan for mankind in history. As we have seen, in Maimonides’ thinking Islam is despite Muhammad’s false prophethood and teachings replete with “mistakes and foolery” (*ta’utam ve-tipshutam*),<sup>115</sup> a fully-fledged monotheistic religion. Despite the shortcomings of Islam and Christianity, in the Mishneh Torah Maimonides accords upon them a limited but positive historical function, which he sees in their spreading the knowledge of the Scriptures and the idea of commandments among nations which would not have otherwise received them. Islam, on the one side with its pure monotheism but denial of the absolute authority of the Scriptures, and Christianity on the other side with its acceptance of the Scriptures (despite wrong exegeses) but its idolatry, are functioning in the world as *praeparatio messianica*, they plant seeds which will reach fruition in the messianic era when the pure monotheistic doctrine of Judaism would be universally accepted. Maimonides sees Christianity and especially Islam as being “contributing factors to the universal rejection of overt idolatry, which is needed as a historical precondition of the future Messianic era.”<sup>116</sup>

“But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator; for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite [Muhammad] who arose after him only serve to clear the way for King

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<sup>115</sup> *Tshuvot ha-Rambam* (ed. J. Blau), Vol. 2, p. 726.

<sup>116</sup> NOVAK, D. *The Image of the non-Jew in Judaism*, pp. 141 – 142.

Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written, *For then I will turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent* (Zeph 3:9). Thus the Messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become a familiar topic – a topic of conversation (among the inhabitants) of the far isles and many peoples, uncircumcised of heart and flesh. They are discussing these matters and the commandments of the Torah. Some [Muslims] say: Those commandments were true, but have lost their validity and are no longer binding. Others [Christians] declare that they had an esoteric meaning and were not intended to be taken literally; that the Messiah has already come and revealed their occult significance. But when the true King Messiah will appear and succeed, be exalted and lifted up, they will forthwith recant and realize that they have inherited naught but lies from their fathers, that their prophets and forebears led them astray (MT *Hilkhot melakhim* 11:4 [uncensored version]).<sup>117</sup>

Maimonides, as we can see, regarded both Christians and Muslims as paving the way for the coming of the Messiah, meaning the full restoration of Jewish political sovereignty and the full hegemony of the Torah and monotheism among a mankind. He was not the first among Jewish philosophers who assigned this role to Islam and Christianity. Before him the famous poet and adversary of philosophy, Jehuda Halevi in *Kuzari* (4:23) expressed this idea when he attributed these words to *ḥaver*'s: “these religious communities [i.e., the Christians and the Muslims,] are only a preparation and prelude to the awaited *Messiah* (*tawṭi'a wa muqaddima lil-mashiah al-muntazar*), who is the fruit [of this process]. All of them will come to be his fruit when they acknowledge him, and the tree will also become one.”<sup>118</sup> Jehuda Halevi and after him Maimonides thus reversed the successionist claims of both Christianity and Islam which perceived themselves to be the true fulfilment of (initial) Judaic monotheism and the final embodiment of God's revelation to mankind. Rather than improvement, succession is the dilution of the original revelation.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> I have followed the translation of TWERSKY, I. *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (Mishneh Torah), p. 452.

<sup>118</sup> The quotation follows the yet unpublished translation of Barry S. Kogan and Lawrence V. Bernan. Cf. SCHREINER, S. Irrtum, Torheit oder falsche Religion – Christentum und Islam nach dem Urteil Moshe b. Maimons, pp. 46 – 52.

<sup>119</sup> NOVAK, D. *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, pp. 57 – 64.

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