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Fire and the Cross

A Historical Reading of the Anti-Christian Polemic in Two Jewish Arabic Poems from the Cairo Genizah

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ABSTRACT This article explores two fragments of medieval Arabic poetry, written in Hebrew characters, from the Cairo Genizah, one with a lament for the loss of Jerusalem and the other a promise of redemption, return and revenge. Within both poems are explicit polemics against Christians, as usurpers and conquerors, suggesting a background in the era following the arrival of the Crusaders in the eastern Mediterranean (twelfth to thirteenth century), when the Jewish communities there began to see Christians as a direct threat to life and freedom rather than as a more remote intellectual or religio-cultural challenge. Hitherto unknown poems such as these help us to recreate some of the cultural history of the Jewish communities of the medieval Mediterranean and Middle East and allow us a glimpse into their *Weltanschauung*. The huge collection of manuscript fragments in the Cairo Genizah has assisted scholars in revealing hidden aspects of not just Jewish culture and history but also the history of the Mediterranean and Muslim world during the pre-modern era.

KEYWORDS Genizah, Arabic Poetry, history, Judaeo-Arabic, Christians, Crusaders, polemic

Introduction

The Cairo Genizah has greatly enriched our understanding of the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of Jewish life under Islamic rule in the medieval Middle East. Comprising a vast collection of fragmentary texts—literary and documentary—many dating back to the Fatimid period and beyond, the Genizah holds immense historical importance, not only within Jewish studies but also for understanding the broader sociocultural, intellectual, and economic history of the premodern Middle East and Mediterranean.[1] The substantial documentary part [1] of the Genizah—letters, deeds and other writings of everyday existence—paints a detailed picture of Jewish society in Egypt and beyond from 1000 CE onwards, but increasingly has also been recognised as one of the greatest sources of information we have about the Islamic world of the eastern Mediterranean in the Middle Ages.[2]

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[1] For general introductions to the Cairo Genizah, see Hoffman and Cole (2011) and Reif (2000).

One area of study that has not received substantial attention over the decades that Genizah research has been flourishing is the corpus of Arabic poetry, written by Jews, which is preserved in hundreds of fragmentary leaves dating from the eleventh century to relatively modern times—the middle of the nineteenth century. The significance of the Genizah for the study of Hebrew poetry is paramount and well known, and modern research on both the traditional liturgical *piyyuṭ* as well as medieval secular poetry—much of it inspired by Arabic verse in both prosodic structure and content—is hugely dependent on the manuscripts preserved there. Far fewer scholars have worked on the much smaller corpus of Arabic poetry. [2]

Mohamed Ahmed's project *Arabic Poetry in the Cairo Genizah*, which launched in 2021 at Trinity College Dublin, has prioritised the study of Arabic poetry manuscript fragments, and encompasses not only the body of Arabic works composed by Jews but also those copied or owned by Jews as eager consumers of Arabic-Islamic literary culture (Ahmed 2018, 213–14, 232–33). As a linguistic genre, the category includes both religious poetry (mainly extra-liturgical) as well as poems with more secular themes (Ahmed 2018, 214–15). Works are copied in Hebrew characters (commonly known as Judaeo-Arabic) or Arabic characters, or sometimes a mix of both. The output of Dr Ahmed's project will consist of a searchable database of all the Arabic poetry identified among the Genizah fragments, with complete editions and translations of the texts, as well as various studies of the literary genres and historical background that gave rise to them.[3] [3]

The exact moment in history behind individual poems—either their composition or their copying—may often be unknowable, given that poetic fragments are never dated, and only rarely can we match the handwriting to a known figure which occurs in another, dated Genizah record. Nevertheless, they have a potential historical value that plain documentary texts do not: poems composed or recited within a community can provide an insight into the more ethereal aspects of the historical environment that cannot otherwise be easily captured. Potentially, they allow us to capture the feelings, hopes and fears of the community at the time it was composed or over the period in which it was still read. Poetry captures, to a certain extent, the *Zeitgeist*, and provides an insight—a *Weltanschauung*—that can be hard to isolate in other sources, a window into the collective thoughts and feelings of the community that composed, copied or consumed it.[4] Of course, there are questions of historical embeddedness of the particular author of a poem: poems may well be transferred and transplanted from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, as, for instance, was the case with the poetry of Judah ha-Levi, which found eager consumers in Egypt. And the purpose for which a poem was intended is not always clear. To add to the difficulty, the fragmentary character of most of the poems we are studying makes placing them accurately in time and space difficult; it is rare that we can put a name to the composition or that we have the entire text. Often the first line is lacking, and its liturgical or paraliturgical context (if it existed) must be surmised solely from the [4] theme of what remains. This is a constant of Genizah studies, thanks to the counter-archival nature of the Genizah Collection itself.[5] Nonetheless, given the unique nature of many of these compositions, it is a worthwhile endeavour, even if much will necessarily remain unknown or slightly speculative.

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[2] The classic, though now quite dated, introduction is Goitein (1955). His masterwork remains essential reading however (Goitein 1967–1993). The recent work of Rustow (2020) builds on Goitein's early ambitions and recovers a trove of Fatimid history and administrative practice from the Genizah.

[3] See the project website https://apcairogenizah.com (accessed November 18, 2024).

[4] For a useful and, for the present context, highly pertinent discussion of the historical meaning of Jewish poetry, see the introduction to Einbinder's study of medieval Ashkenazi poetic responses to persecution and martyrdom (2002, 1–11).

In the course of examining many dozens of fragmentary Arabic poems from the Genizah, alongside those of a philosophical or playful intent in praise of wine, beauty, or bestowing wisdom, the authors of the present paper have encountered a number that exhibit a polemical theme directed against Christians. In these poems, the Christians are identified with the historical demolishers of Jerusalem's First and Second Temples, the Babylonians and the Romans, and are promised dire punishment when Israel regains the upper hand through redemption. In this regard, the poems fall at the more explicit end of the Jewish-Christian polemic of the Middle Ages, the range of which is described in Daniel Lasker's memorable words: "The Jewish critique of Christianity under Islam runs the gamut from the most sophisticated analyses of the philosophical ramifications of the doctrines of trinity and incarnation to the claim that it is impossible for God to become incarnate since He never would have subjected himself to the indignities of residing in the filthy, disgusting female innards before birth" (Lasker 1990–1991, 128). While Lasker is referring to medieval polemical prose works, Jewish poets, especially in the Golden Age of Hebrew letters in Spain, developed a significant strand of polemical poetry in Hebrew too. In his examination of the polemical element in Spanish Hebrew poetry, Norman Roth concluded that they should not be mined too literally for historical attitudes to Christians or Muslims in medieval Islamic Spain, and he disagreed with the two radically contrasting opinions that saw, on the one hand, a greater weight of ire directed against Muslims than Christians in the poems, and, on the other, Christians as the real object of hatred behind the poetry (Roth 1989, 154–56). Roth's conclusion was that the religious sentiment being expressed by the poets, and therefore presumably shared by their audience, was a desire to be free of Gentile domination, a desire manifested over the long durée of Jewish history in exile. Such sentiments are not driven by individual historical events but by the "total history of the Jewish experience," and therefore the literary historian should not aim to pin them down in this way (Roth 1989, 177). Roth's focus was on the Hebrew poetry of Islamic Spain, but Susan Einbinder's "Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France" (2002), examines the martyrdom poetry precipitated by Christian persecution of the Jews of northern France and the Rhineland. Here, on the other hand, the laments commemorate specific historical events of rampages, state-sanctioned punishments, and punitive killings of individual members of the Jewish communities of Ashkenaz. When Judah bar Qalonymos of Speyer wrote of Christian worship of Jesus that "The image of your worship is sealed in his grave!" (Einbinder 2002, 36), it was occasioned by the very real and recent massacre of nine members of his community in 1196 in the fervid atmosphere of the Third Crusade (Chazan 1994, 403). So Roth's strictures on the interpretation of the Other in the Hebrew poetry of Spain do not necessarily apply wholesale to Medieval Hebrew poetry: yes, some of the laments in Einbinder's corpus use the language and topos of the timeless complaints over exile and [5] rule by the Gentiles, but they are at the same time precipitated by very real atrocities from the Christian communities of Ashkenaz.[6]

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[5] For what this means, see Paul (2018). But, in short, it's not an archive, because it was not brought together in order to be retained for future consultation, but was collected through a counter-archival process—it was in fact thrown away, but only thrown away as far as Jewish law allowed, which was into a cupboard or grave.

[6] Coming to the two Arabic poems that are the subject of this study, we can see that they evince long-standing poetic themes of lament and redemption, and both were likely used in a liturgical or para-liturgical context by a Jewish community, probably in Egypt where the fragments were found. The first poem is likely a lament for the Ninth of Av, when the destruction of the Temple is commemorated; the second is similar, but with a promise of redemption and of "comforting" Jerusalem (נחמו, comfort!). In this regard the poems are unremarkable for all but their Arabic language, as most such compositions, especially if they were used during the synagogue service, would be in Hebrew (or perhaps Aramaic). But what makes both poems stand out is the pointed naming and condemnation of the Christians as agents of the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah (destroyed 586 BCE) and on whom Jews will ultimately gain revenge. With Roth's criticism in mind, we nevertheless find it hard to see these two poems as being products of a period in which Christianity was a distant, abstract or intellectual threat alone. There is, it seems to us, more of an immediacy in the polemic, suggestive of a change in attitude towards Christianity, and Christians, occasioned by the political and military events of the eastern Mediterranean in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries.

[7] Three themes stand out in the Arabic poems, which will be discussed in turn: the destruction of the Temple linked to Christians; the ongoing presence of Christians in the Temple or on the Temple Mount; and a desire for revenge on the Christians.

Linking the Destruction of the Temple with Christianity

[8] The first poem is not preserved in full, but a substantial part of it is extant on a single torn paper folio, *Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.37.162* (see fig. 1). The paper is Middle Eastern laid paper, made from rags, the usual form of paper used for manuscripts from the Classical Genizah Period (1000–1250 CE), and the handwriting probably dates to the late twelfth or thirteenth centuries. The fragment is written in Arabic in Hebrew characters, Judaeo-Arabic—a variety of Middle Arabic characterised above all by its use of Hebrew script, but which also often contains Hebrew or Aramaic lexical elements (Khan 2016, 22–24, 47–50). Specifically, this can be classified as Classical Judaeo-Arabic, the variety used approximately from the tenth to fifteenth century (Khan 2016, 26). It is written neatly, with dots to distinguish consonants, a few Tiberian (Hebrew) vocalisation signs to mark vowels (in line 2 of the poem, marking the /-a/ internal rhyme on three words), and a single Arabic *shadda* to mark gemination of *yod/yāʾ* in וקידהם (وقيّدهم). The text is laid out poetically: each stich begins a new line on the page (though each runs over one line on the page), and the end of each stich is marked with two short diagonal strokes, like a *tanwīn fatḥ* sign. Each stich has a changing internal rhyme, and a fixed end rhyme in /-li/ (לי- or لي-). The poem ends midway on verso, and the scribe has written כמלת (i.e., كملت, *kamaltu*, "I have finished") under the last line to indicate this. The rest of the folio is blank.

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[6] Though not strictly medieval, but emerging from the misty world of late antique Palestine, we could also mention the historical poetic laments on the occasion of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius' re-conquest of the Holy Land, and related piyyuṭim from that period. On their historical value in general, see Y. Tobi (2004, 44).

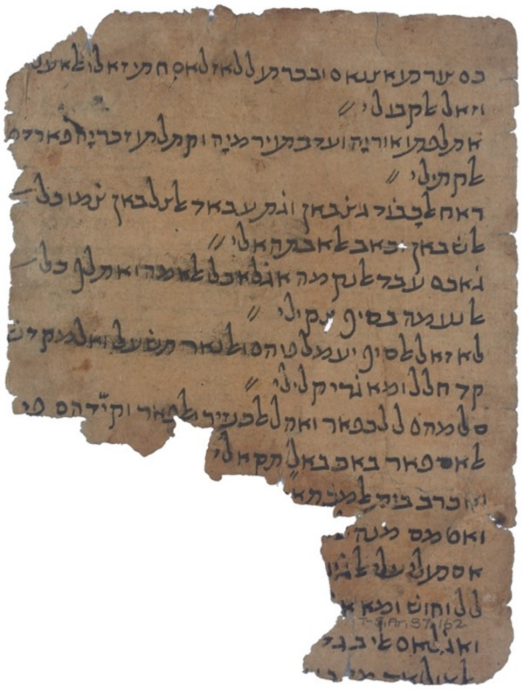

Figure 1 Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.37.162

The first six stichs of the poem are fully preserved. Line numbers of the text on the page are given in brackets, and we have supplied a transcription into Arabic characters beneath each line of the poem: [9]

[10] (1) כם צורתו אצנאם ובכרתו ללאזלאם חתי זאלו אלאעל[אם] (2) וזאל אלקבולי
كم صوروتو اصنام وبخرتو للازلام حتى زالو الاعلـ[ـلام] وزال القبولي

[11] (3) אתלפתו אוריָה ועדבתו ירמיָה וקתלתו זכריָה פארד[תו] (4) אלקתילי
اتلفتو اوريه وعدبتو يرميه وقتلتو زكريا فارد]يتو القتيلي

[12] (5) ראח אל כָבוֹד ג̇צ̇באן וג̇ת עבאד אלצלבאן צ̇מו כל (6) אלשבאן וכאב אלאבתהאלי
راحر الكبود غصبان وجت عباد الصلبان ضموكل الشبان وخاب الابتهالي

[13] (7) גאכם עבד אלנקמה אג̇לא כל אלאמה ואתלף כל (8) אלנעמה בסיף צקילי
جاكم عبد النقمه اجلا كل الامه واتلفكل النعمه بسيف صقيلي

[14] (9) לא זאל אלסיף יעמל פיהם ואלנאר תשעל [ואלמקדש (10) קד חלל ומא ג̇רי קלילי
لا زال السيف يعمل فيهم والنار تشعلوالمقدش قد حلل وما جرى قليلي

[15] (11) סלמהם ללכפאר ואהל אלכנזיר ואלפאר וקי̈דהם פי (12) אלאספאר באכ̇באל תקאלי [”]
سلمهم للكفار واهل الخنزير والفار وقيّدهم في الاسفار بأكبالٍ تقالي

[16] (13) ואכרב בית אלמכתא [...]
واخرب بيت المختا[...]

Translation [17]

> (1) How many graven images did you make and how many idols did you perfume, before the temptations (2) ceased, and the tradition came to an end? [18]
> (3) You exterminated Uriah, you tortured Jeremiah, and you killed Zechariah, (4) with a deadly blow.
> (5) The Glory was forced to depart. The Worshippers of the Cross came and seized all (6) the young men, and prayer was unsuccessful.
> (7) The servant of vengeance came to you and drove away all the people and destroyed all (8) the delight with a shining sword.
> (9) The sword did not cease performing its work among them, as the fire blazed, and the Temple (10) was profaned—what further happened was not slight.
> (11) He delivered them up to the Infidels, and to the Nation of Pigs and Mice, and he bound them up in (12) scrolls, with heavy shackles.
> (13) And the House of the Chosen One was destroyed […].

Notes on the translation: [19]

(1) Idols, *lil-azlām*, “divining arrows,” according to Blau (2006, 275) Saʿadya Ga’on extended the pre-Islamic meaning of “arrows used for divination” (the practice of belomancy) to “idols” in general, a meaning repeated in a manuscript of Ibn Janāḥ’s *Kitāb al-Tanqīḥ* where it is glossed with אלאצנאם, “idols, [graven] images” (*al-āṣnām*, الاصنام). Temptations, *al-aʿlām*, reconstructed for the internal rhyme in /-ām/, means signs, but tests or temptations better fits the meaning. Saʿadya Ga’on uses this Ar. word for Heb. *massot* (מסות, “tests”) in his translation of Deut. 7:19 (“the great trials that your eyes saw…”). Tradition is a translation of *al-qubūlī* based on the root’s sense of “receive.” Blau (Blau 2006, 527), citing Qirqisānī (fl. tenth century), gives such a meaning for *qabūl/qubūl*. It possibly refers to the ending of the “tradition” in the Temple, the cultic service, but perhaps a meaning more in line with *qabīl*, “tribe, nation” is intended. The manuscript clearly reads a *waw* however. [20]

(3) Uriah was the prophet who prophesied against Jerusalem in the book of Jeremiah (26:20–23), and for which he was put to death on the orders of the King of Judah Jehoiakim (r. 609–598 BCE).[7] Jeremiah, the eponymous prophet of the same book, was persecuted and tortured on the orders of the Judean rulers, for his prophesying of the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Zechariah is likely the priest Zechariah ben Jehoiada who was stoned to death in the Temple on the orders of King Jehoash (2 Chronicles 24:21), and is renowned as the last martyr in the Hebrew Bible (Macpherson 1897, 26–31). All three figures prophesied against Jerusalem, blaming the people, and its rulers, for having forsaken the Lord and bringing disaster on themselves. Uriah and Zechariah are the only two prophets whose martyrdom is described in the Hebrew Bible (Winkle 1986, 165).[8] [21]

(5) The Glory or “the Honour” is a Hebrew noun with the Arabic definite article, *al-kavod;* the use of Hebrew elements embedded in the Arabic structure of the text is characteristic of medieval Judaeo-Arabic [Blau (1999), 44–5; 140–3]. It refers to the manifest glory of God, which resides in the Temple, e.g., Psalms 26:8 “O LORD, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.” [22]

(8) The delight, Arabic *niʿma*, “blessing, favour,” is cognate with Heb. *noʿam* (נעם), which [23]

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[7] For more see Jewish Encyclopedia: https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8562-jehoiakim

[8] In midrash and pseudepigraphic literature, Jeremiah is also described as having been martyred for his prophecies against Jerusalem (Ginzberg 1913, vi:399–400). And the maltreatment of Jeremiah is occasionally given in Jewish sources as a reason for the destruction of Jerusalem, e.g., Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) 49:6–7.

resides in the Temple in Psalms 27:4 “to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty (*bə-noʿam*) of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.”

[24] (9) The Temple is again a Heb. noun with an Ar. definite article, *al-miqdash*.

[25] (10) Profaned, חלל, could be “undone” > “destroyed,” in the sense of Ar. حل, *ḥalla*, but it likely has the sense of the Heb. root here, *ḥalal*, used in the passive with the meaning “polluted, desecrated, profaned.” Blau (2006, 142) cites Qirqisānī and Saʿadya Gaʾon using the IV and V forms with this meaning.

[26] (11) The Nation of Pigs and Mice is derived from the description of idolaters in Isaiah 66:17 ‘Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the center, eating the flesh of pigs, vermin, and rodents, shall come to an end together, says the LORD’.

[27] (12) Scrolls, Arabic *asfār*, sing. *sifr*, book, but used in the Heb. sense (*sefer*, pl. *səfarim*) of the Torah scroll of Jewish scripture, central to the Temple and Synagogue service and a venerated holy object in its own right. One of the Ten Martyrs murdered by the Romans of the Hadrianic period (117–138 AD) was Ḥanina b. Teradyon (first half of the second century CE) who, according to the story in the Babylonian Talmud (*ʿAvoda Zara* 18a), was wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned alive. Though here the wrapping in a scroll appears to be used as a trope of punishment and persecution, rather than a reference to this specific act of martyrdom.

[28] The theme of the poem is a lament for the destruction of the Temple, which is blamed on the sinful acts of the Israelites. The punishment that God bestows is inflicted through various agents of vengeance, who commit acts of killing, enslavement and torture against the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Temple and the city of Jerusalem’s destruction is a theme that first emerges in the biblical book of Lamentations, the earliest parts of which probably date from soon after the destruction of the First Temple in 587 BCE. There, the causal link between Israel’s sins and the destruction is established, e.g., Lamentations 1:18 “The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear, all you peoples, and behold my suffering; my young women and young men have gone into captivity” (S. Cohen 1982, 25–26). The portrayal of the Temple’s destruction as a paradigm of God’s punishment received further impetus from the outrages that befell the Second Temple, ending in its complete destruction by the Romans on the ninth of Av, 70 CE. The theme was cemented in post-biblical midrashic (interpretative) literature, and formed a poetic genre of its own in piyyuṭ, the *qina* (“dirge” or “lament,” pl. *qinot*), which came to be recited on the ninth of Av to commemorate the destruction and other tragedies (Elbogen 1993, 183–84). Lamenting the loss of Jerusalem and Temple, and blaming it on the people’s sinful behaviour, remained a central element of Jewish lament well into the Middle Ages.

[29] The themes of the Arabic poem preserved in *T-S Ar.37.162* fall well within this genre of lament for the destruction of the Temple (“the House of the Chosen One was destroyed”), which leads to the divine presence leaving Jerusalem (“the glory was forced to depart”) and the end of the cultic service (“the tradition came to an end”). Blame is placed on the Israelites’ worship of idols (“how many graven images did you make and how many idols did you perfume?”), and on the wilful persecution of the prophets and righteous (“You exterminated Uriah, you tortured Jeremiah, and you killed Zechariah”)[9]—all sources of blame in the paradigm of national lament. Historically speaking, the figures of Uriah, Jeremiah and Zechariah fit the

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[9] Similar accusations form part of the Church Fathers’ attacks on the Jews, who see Jesus as the last in a line of prophets to be murdered by the Jews: Jerome, commentary on Zephaniah 1:15, ‘Until this very day those hypocritical tenants are forbidden to come to Jerusalem, because of the murder of the prophets, and the last of them – the Son of God’ (cited in Gil 1992, 69).

period prior to the destruction and plundering of the First Temple by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE. Yet, the lament does not mark a historical destruction, but a general topos of destruction, exile and loss, characteristic of the *qina* genre. The image of binding victims up in scrolls reflects a tale from the second century CE, decades after the destruction of the Second Temple, though again it is likely a lasting trope of sacrilegious violence—violence against the person and the sacred liturgical object. The agents of destruction that God has assigned to the task of national punishment are blatantly ahistorical, however: "the worshippers of the cross," "the infidel," and the "nation of pigs and mice."

[30] Of the three designations for God's chosen avengers, two—"worshippers of the cross" (*ʿubbād al-ṣulbān*) and "infidels, unbelievers" (*kuffār*)—are Arabic expressions common within the medieval Muslim tradition. While "infidel" is sufficiently general to denote any follower of another religion or of no religion at all, "worshippers of the cross" refers to Christians. Indeed, roughly contemporary with the copying of this poem, the Ayyūbid Sultan Saladin himself adopted the title (among others) of "Conqueror of the Worshippers of the Cross" (قامع عبدة الصلبان, *qāmiʿ ʿabadat al-ṣulbān*).[10] The title was known and used by a Jewish petitioner whose formal petition to Saladin is preserved in the Cairo Genizah (*Cambridge University Library T-S K2.96*, l. 7-8; Khan 1993, 361–64).

[31] The last designation used in the poem, "the Nation of Pigs and Mice," is intrinsically Jewish, even if Muslims too refer to Christians as consumers of swine. As noted above, it comes from the book of Isaiah where, in its original context—Isaiah chapter sixty-six probably dates from the sixth century BCE—it does not refer to Christian nations. By the Middle Ages, however, the connection with Christianity has been made in Jewish interpretation. David Qimḥi's (d. 1235 CE) commentary on this verse states: "the eaters of swine's flesh: these are the Christians."[11] Moreover, Qimḥi states that "most commentators" see those "that sanctify themselves" as being the Christians too—since they make signs (of the cross) on themselves. Qimḥi, however, interprets the presence of Muslims too: the eaters of "the abomination, and the mouse: these are the Ishmaelites (Muslims)." Moreover, they both—Christians and Muslims—"shall be consumed together … in the war of Gog and Magog" (in the end times). The all-embracing interpretation of Qimḥi, who was from Provence (though his father had been born in Al-Andalus, and fled the Almohad persecution), need not underlie the use of the "pigs and mice" expression here in the poem, and the co-location of "pigs and mice" with "worshippers of the Cross," and even "infidels," more strongly suggests that Christians are the designated target. Although perhaps an undertone of the Muslims also might have been apparent to a sophisticated hearer of the poem. With these expressions, the Arabic poem is reflecting the style of the Hebrew poetry of the Middle Ages, which employs very similar terms for Christians, e.g., the twelfth-century Qaraite poet, Moses Darʿī, who calls them "worshippers of idols" and "pork-eaters," among many other opprobrious epithets (Yeshaya 2014, 71).

[32] The destruction of the Temple, through repetition and its monumental place in the national memory of Judaism, is a timeless motif of Jewish exile and loss of statehood. Israel's misbehaviour invoked God's ire, and He acted through his chosen agents of vengeance. That the identity of those agents is, in this poem, seemingly the "Worshippers of the Cross," is

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[10] As, for instance, reported by Bahāʾ al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād (d. 632 AH/1234 CE), a jurist who knew Saladin, in his chronicle of the Ayyūbid sultan. The introduction of Ibn Shaddād's work refers to Saladin thus: مولانا السلطان الملك الناصر جامع كلمة الإيمان وقامع عبدة الصلبان, "our master, the Sultan, al-Malik al-Nāṣir (the victorious king), the Uniter of the Word of Faith, and the Conqueror of the Worshippers of the Cross" (Ibn Shaddād 2016: 7).

[11] The authors would like to thank Kim Phillips for drawing Qimḥi's commentary on the verse to our attention.

itself clearly an anachronism. We can encounter similar seeming anachronisms in the Hebrew poetry of Spain, for instance, in a poem by Dunash b. Labraṭ (d. 990 CE) where the refusal of an invitation to a wine party gets heavy very quickly, “How dare you suggest this when the holy House, God’s dwelling, belongs to the uncircumcised?!” (quoted in Roth 1989, 155). Dunash was active in the mid-tenth century, and had studied in Baghdad with Saʿadya Gaʾon, and thus there can be no doubt that he was aware of Muslim hegemony in Jerusalem. We can therefore see the reference here in this Arabic poem in the same spirit, with Roth’s comments in mind—that of the timeless nature of Israel’s exile from Jerusalem under the constant oppression of its Gentile usurpers. On the other hand, this poem was for sure copied after the arrival of the Crusaders in the Holy Land and their establishment of Christian Outremer (though we cannot say when it was originally composed), and therefore to its hearers, at the very least, its apportioning of blame for the ravaging of Jerusalem onto the “Worshippers of the Cross” would have seemed urgent and apt. Even were it a composition of an entirely different era, its reception would have evoked a chilling immediacy, with the most recent capture of Jerusalem likely still raw in the memories of the Jewish communities of Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean.

Furthermore, the poem aligns with historical contexts in which the Temple Mount served Christian purposes during the Byzantine Christian rule of Jerusalem, predating the Islamic conquest and the subsequent Crusader period (1099–1187). In the Byzantine era, the desolation of the Temple Mount symbolized God’s abandonment of the Jewish people, reinforcing Jesus’ prophecy about the temple’s permanent destruction (Giebfried 2013). During the Crusader rule of Jerusalem (1099–1187), the Dome of the Rock and the *al-Aqṣā* mosque were transformed into Christian locations known as the *Templum Domini* and the *Templum Salomonis*, which was mentioned by Latin contemporary sources like the anonymous chronicle, the deeds of the Franks (Hil 1967, 91–92, 99) and pilgrims like called Qualiter, Saewulf and others (see Wilkinson and Hill 2017, 90–91, 94–116). The *Templum Domini* was converted into a church, and the al-Aqṣā mosque was redefined as Solomon’s house, serving as a royal palace for the Kings of Jerusalem and later becoming the Knights Templar headquarters (Giebfried 2013). [33]

Indeed, some of the images expressed in the poem become lasting and ingrained in the Jewish lament tradition. We can find the same sombre view of Jerusalem as under the domination of the church in two fragments of late laments, probably for the Ninth of Av, from the Ottoman period. More explicit in their character, both of them evoke the symbol of the ‘cross’ and use a similar phrase to describe the fate that has befallen the Temple and, by extension, Jerusalem. [34]

Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.8.28, a copy from perhaps the sixteenth or seventeenth century of a long lament in colloquial Arabic, in Hebrew characters. *Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.8.28*, f. 2v, l. 6 reads [35]

צאר בית קדסךּ [ווחשךּ] לל מעביד ואל צולבאן [36]
صار بيت قدسك [...] لل معبيد وال صولبان

> Translation: The house of your holiness [and your ruins] have become [a place of] shrines and crosses [37]

Shrines is Ar. *maʿabīd*, which can be taken as *maʿābīd*, the plural written defectively, or as a variant of *maʿabūd,* “idol, temple.”[12] The sense is of “[non-Jewish] place of worship.” The [38] implication is likely "churches," from the juxtaposition with "crosses," but, given the status of Jerusalem in the Ottoman period, a veiled allusion to Muslim places of worship is possible too, "mosques and crosses." Although a general lament that Jerusalem is overrun with non-Jewish places of worship and symbols is the underlying message. Your ruins is reconstructed from the parallel line in the following poem (which reads "my ruins"). The house of holiness and the ruins form a hendiadys for the Temple, which is both God's holy of holies and, since 70 CE, in ruins. The expression echoes in form and meaning biblical verses on the destroyed Temple of Solomon, such as Ezra 9:9 "to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins.""

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[12] Compare, for instance, defective /ā/ a late fifteenth-century letter: במביעה אלממ ובמביעה זין אלדין “in the bill of sale of the slave (abb.) and in the bill of sale of Zayn al-Dīn” (Bodleian MS Heb.c.72/39, 1r. 9)

Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.37.24, a later manuscript, perhaps from the eighteenth or nineteenth century, contains a long lament, in *zajal* form, again in colloquial Arabic written in Hebrew characters (Late Judaeo-Arabic, see Khan 2016, 28–30). Though a different poem, it has a very similar line about Jerusalem (*Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.37.24*, f. 6v, l. 6): [39]

צאר בית קדסי ווחשי : לל מעבוד ואל צולבאן [40]
صار بيت قدسي ووحشي : لل معبود وال صولبان

> Translation: The house of my holiness and my ruins have become [a place of] shrine and crosses [41]

By the Ottoman period, this image of Jerusalem—if not the Temple Mount (Ḥaram al-Sharīf) itself—is correct. Christian places of worship in the Holy City had been suppressed with the return of Muslim rule over the city in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, but under Ottoman rule, they were allowed to resume and continue functioning. A *firman* of 1589 was even issued to explain the comparative indulgent treatment of Christians—who were recognised as twice submitting their sanctuaries to Muslim rule—compared to Jews, whose sanctuaries did not even exist at the time of the original Muslim Conquest of Jerusalem. This justified why Jewish places of worship, such as the Ramban Synagogue, were closed and annexed, while the various Christian institutions endured (Peri 1999, 102–3). [42]

What all three texts demonstrate is a strong theme of blame against the Christians for the current state of the Holy City, on the one hand equating—essentially identifying—the "worshippers of the cross" with the rampaging Babylonians and Romans of Antiquity, and, on the other, seeing the enduring and burgeoning Christian presence in Jerusalem as a constant reminder and affront that it is no longer in Jewish hands. [43]

In the second medieval Arabic poem, the Christians reappear though this time with their ascendancy challenged by God's promise to return Israel to its land. This poem can be roughly dated to a similar period as the first, and its language can thus be classified, like the first, as Classical Judaeo-Arabic (Khan 2016, 26). It is found in *Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.37.230 P1* on a single leaf of Middle Eastern rag paper written in a hand and style probably of the twelfth–thirteenth centuries (see fig. 2). The poem, which is in rhyming couplets (AA, BB, CC etc), uses many Hebrew loanwords. It evokes themes of redemption, return, repentance, and fiery revenge. [44]

(MSA:*mubāyaʿat Zayn al-Dīn*) مبايعة corresponds to Modern Cairene Arabic pronunciation [mubayʕa], in Connolly (2024).

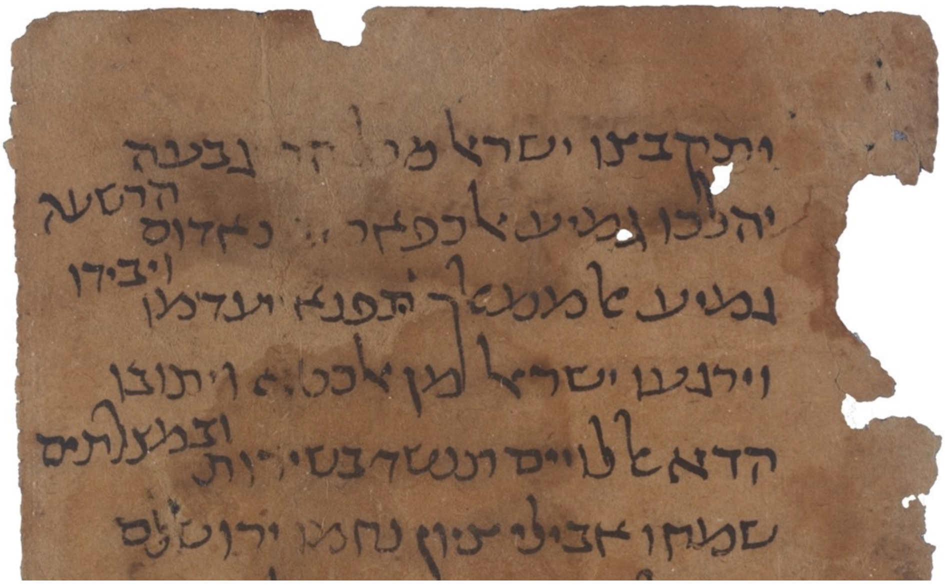

Figure 2 Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.37.230 P1, recto ll. 1–6

Beginning and end of the poem are missing from this leaf, which opens: [45]

(1) יתקבצו ישראל מכל הר [ו]גבעה [46]

(2) יהלכו גמיע אלכפאר [..]אדום הרשעה [47]
يهلكو جميع الكفار [..] אדום הרשעה

(3) גמיע אלממאלך תפנא יעדמו ויבידו [48]
جميع الممالك تفنا ويبيدو

(4) וירגעו ישראל מן אלכטא ויתובו [49]
ويرجعو ישראלمن الخطا ويتوبو

(5) הדא אללויים תנשד בשירות ובמצלתים [50]
هذاالל וייםتنشد בשירות ובמצלתים

(6) שמחו אבילי ציון נחמו ירושלם [51]

Translation (Hebrew words given in italics) [52]

(1) *Israel will be gathered in from every mountain and hill* [53]
(2) All the unbelievers will perish [..] *evil Edom*
(3) All the kingdoms will pass away—they will be destroyed and exterminated
(4) And *Israel* will turn away from its sins and return
(5) These *Levites* will sing out *with songs and with pairs of cymbals*
(6) *Rejoice O Mourners of Zion, comfort Jerusalem!*

(2) Evil Edom—there's a small piece of text missing before this, with only part of the last letter from the missing word visible.[13] Possibly it was a verb, giving a parallel phrase with a sentiment along the lines of 'evil Edom will die.' [54]

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[13] The surface of the paper is damaged, and no ink remains to be read.

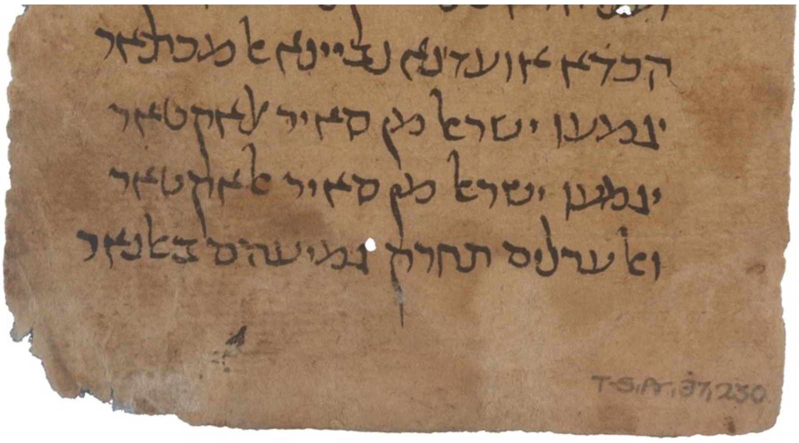

Figure 3 Cambridge University Library T-S Ar.37.230 P1, verso ll. 9–12

(5) Levites is the Heb. proper noun (retaining the Hebrew plural morphology) with an Ar. definite article: *al-leviyyim*. [55]

Here the poem offers deliverance to Israel, including a return to Jerusalem, where the Levites will resume their role in the Temple service, singing and playing instruments. God will bring Israel back into the fold and wipe out the unbelievers, who are the Christians. The biblical nation of Edom was identified in rabbinic interpretation with Rome and the Romans from the first century CE (Cohen 1967: 22–3), and by the Middle Ages the meaning—often used in Hebrew poetry—had long been transferred to Rome's heirs, the Christian world.[14] As Cohen (1967, 28) puts it "To the Jew of the high Middle Ages, even more than to his Christian contemporary, Rome was very much alive. If anything, the Jew required even less persuasion than his Christian neighbour that the ancient imperium had never disappeared but rather enjoyed an uninterrupted translation from one Caesar to another." The "kingdoms" may refer to the Four Kingdoms of the book of Daniel, whose identity was subject to change over time, but by the Middle Ages included Christianity as the third kingdom (produced from the earlier third kingdom, Greece, and fourth kingdom, Rome, combining the eastern and western churches), and, as the new fourth kingdom, Islam (Roth 1989, 158). Later in the poem the enemies of Israel are named again (see fig. 3): [56]

(1) הכדֿא אועדנא נביינא אלמכתאר [57]
هكذا اوعدنا نبيينا المختار

(2) יגמעו ישראל מן סאיר אלאקטאר [58]
جمعو ישראל من ساير الاقطار

(3) יגמעו ישראל מן סאיר אלאקטאר [59]
جمعو ישראל من ساير الاقطار

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[14] Norman Roth writes an interesting correction to the view that "Edom" always represents Christianity in the Hebrew poetry of Spain, pointing out that sometimes it can only be understood as referring to contemporary Muslim rule (1989, 158–60). There is often a timelessness to the topos of foreign domination of the Temple and Jerusalem, however, which renders some of his argument on the specific historical circumstances difficult to accept wholeheartedly. Alfonso (2007, 66, 144n68) points to the "multiple Other" of Samuel ha-Nagid's war poems, where the enemies are rival Muslim *ṭaʾifa* kingdoms, but concedes that "uncircumcised" and "idol worshippers" can only refer to "Christians, perhaps mercenaries, and not to Muslims." Nevertheless, it is important to examine the context of the wider poem before assuming that 'Edom' is naturally the Christians.

[60] (4) ואלערלים תחרק גמיעהם באלנאר
والערלים تحرق جميعهم بالنار

[61] Translation (Hebrew words given in italics)

[62] (1) Thus our chosen prophet promised us:
(2) *Israel* will be gathered in from the rest of the lands
(3) *Israel* will be gathered in from the rest of the lands
(4) And the *uncircumcised,* all of them shall be burned in the fire!

[63] (4) The uncircumcised is a Heb. noun with the Ar. definite article.

[64] The refrain here of “Israel will be gathered in” returns to the first extant line of the poem, which was in Hebrew (“Israel will be gathered in from every mountain and hill”). This was followed there by prophecies of destruction for the unbelievers, Edom, and the kingdoms. Here, the poem again returns to this theme of retribution and divine punishment of the non-Jewish nations: “the uncircumcised” will be destroyed in the fire. This is a pretty unambiguous reference to Christians. In the Medieval Hebrew idiom of the communities of the Middle East, the previous catch-all term for non-Jews in the Bible, *goyim*, “nations,” comes to be used specifically for “Muslims,” and another biblical word, *ʿarel*, is used for Christians who, unlike Muslims, do not practise circumcision (Goitein 1967–1993, II:278). The epithet is very common in the Medieval Hebrew of the Islamic East—and, as a loanword, when Jews wrote Arabic—, even in relatively formal contexts. For instance, a halakhic question in Judaeo-Arabic addressed to the Nagid (Head of the Jews in Egypt under Ayyubid rule) Abraham Maimonides, dealing with the permissiveness of Muslim and Christian wine, refers to the wines as נביד (نبيذ) אלגויים ואלערלים, *nabīḏ al-goyim wa-l-ʿarelim*, “wine of the Muslims and of the Christians.”[15]

[65] Moreover, Latin Christians, particularly those responsible for the massacres of Jews in Mainz during their journey to the Holy Land, were referred to specifically as “uncircumcised” in contemporary sources. This term appears in the twelfth-century chronicle by Albert of Aachen (2007, 52–53) stating: “Mothers with children at their breast—who [were] horrible to relate—would cut their throats with knives, would stab others preferring that they should die thus at their hands, rather than be killed by the weapons of the *uncircumcised.*”[16]

[66] Evidently Israel’s redemption relies on the destruction of all the rival kingdoms, which have featured in Jewish apocalyptic since first being introduced in the book of Daniel (2:37–41). They need to be destroyed in order for Jews to return to Jerusalem and resume the Temple service. A particular venom is reserved for uncircumcised Christians; they will meet a fiery death in the final line of the poem—the last line that is preserved in the fragment anyway.

[67] What are we to make of this singling out of Christians in both these Arabic poems? It is clear that ire is directed at them, rather than more broadly at “the Other,” and it is noticeable that there are no specific references—only potential inferences—to the likely current hegemonic power, Muslims. The poetry of the roughly contemporary Qaraite poet *Moses Darʿī*, for instance, shows considerable hostility to Christians, but Islam is marked for censure as well, perhaps less vituperatively. In Darʿī’s poetry, Muslims, personified as Ishmael, appear as the “wild donkey”

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[15] Preserved in a fragmentary manuscript, *Cambridge University Library T-S 8J21.21* (https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-00008-J-00021-00021/1). Abraham Maimonides was the son of the sage Moses Maimonides, and was himself ‘Head of the Jews’ and ‘the Great Rav’ (Grand Mufti), a halakhic authority able to issue responsa (non-binding legal opinions).

[16] Matres pueris lactentibus, quod dictu nefas est, guttural ferro secabant, alios transforabant, unolentes pocius sic propriis minibus perire, quam *incircumeisorum* armis extingui (Albert of Aachen 2007, 52).

of Genesis 16:12 (“He [Ishmael] shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin”) or the “son of the slave woman” (i.e., the son of Hagar, Abraham’s wife and an Egyptian slave)—distinct and unequivocal references. In our two poems, we see nothing as clear, and only a potential inference that Muslims, as one of the four kingdoms of the book of Daniel, will get their comeuppance in the end times. True hostility is reserved for Christians.[17]

Conclusion

Given that both these poems are preserved in copies of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, we must assume that they present views that were likely popular in their day, even if we cannot be sure of when exactly the poems themselves were composed. The anger and blame directed almost exclusively at Christians, who had ravaged and occupied the holy places in Jerusalem, must reflect the post-First Crusade era when the presence of belligerent Christian invaders in the Holy Land presented not only a real danger to Jewish life in Palestine and neighbouring lands, but also yet another blow to Jewish hopes of redemption and return of the *Har ha-Bayit* (Temple Mount) to Jewish hands. Unlike the polemical Hebrew poetry of Spain, we do not find an assault on the intellectual or spiritual basis of Christianity—questioning the birth or death of Jesus, or the make-up of the Christian God—nor do we find an even-handed reproof of Islam and the Christians. Instead, we see a more deep-rooted and immediate attack on Christians, which casts them as the new Babylonians, the equal of the cruel Romans, and condemns them to a fiery end. Goitein (1952, 162) noted seventy years ago that “So far, not a single Jewish literary source, bearing on the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, has come to light.” [68]

We do not think that the poems we have presented here can be fixed to that specific point in time or that they necessarily relate to the crusader capture of Jerusalem in a historical sense. However, we would suggest these laments reflect very much the agonies that the Jewish community, echoed also by Muslims, felt following the conquest of Jerusalem and the re-emergence of Christian power in the Holy Land (that had previously for centuries, in Palestine and in Egypt, oppressed them). Consequently, they are part of an ongoing literary reaction to the Crusades in the eastern Mediterranean, which combined traditional lament for the Temple with images of the militancy of contemporary Christianity, and promised a violent redemption. [69]

Was this style of polemical Arabic poetry popular among the eastern Jewish communities in the wake of the Crusaders’ triumphant capture of Jerusalem and their apparent settlement of a permanent presence in the Holy Land? With the evidence at hand, it is hard to say, but given the comparatively small amount of Arabic poetry preserved in the Cairo Genizah (when compared to the huge mass of Hebrew poetry), one could argue it is a persistent strand of anti- [70]

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[17] Indeed, it is not a given that they should express hostility to the current Muslim rulers of the Holy Land at all. Following the Franks’ conquest of Jerusalem in which, it was widely believed, they slaughtered Muslim and Jew indiscriminately, at least one letter-writer, writing perhaps about 1100, expressed confidence in the Muslim government to right matters militarily: ‘Now all of us had anticipated that our Sultan—may God bestow glory upon his victories—would set out against them [the Franks] with his troops and chase them away … and, if God grants us victory through him [the Sultan] and he conquers Jerusalem … I for one shall not be amongst those who will not linger, but shall go there to behold the city’ (*Bodleian MS Heb. b. 11/7* cited in Goitein 1952, 176). This is not an isolated sentiment in the Genizah documents of the time, and similar sentiments can be found in letters written during the Jarrāḥid wars of the early eleventh century and the Saljuk invasions of the second half of that same century, where the writers look forward to the return of the rule of law under a tolerant Fāṭimid government.

Christian feeling that runs from the twelfth or thirteenth century and still finds echoes in the eighteenth and nineteenth. Eventually, therefore, the analysis of these poems underscores the power of literature and poetry to capture the intellectual, religious, social, and cultural climate of a specific historical period. In this instance, the polemical nature of the poems suggests anti-Christian sentiment within the Jewish community, likely arising during or following the Crusades.

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