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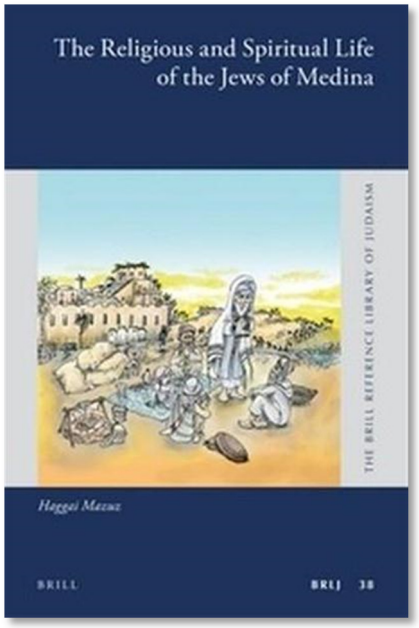

Haggai Mazuz

The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina.

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Although many of the ideas of the so-called revisionist school still meet with resistance from some quarters, their most lasting impact upon the study of the Qurʾan and the career of Muhammad has been to cast doubt on the reliability of the traditional sources for reconstructing Islamic origins. Some of the most radical aspects of the revisionists' arguments have been critiqued severely – sometimes fairly, sometimes not. But the enduring legacy of those scholars who first turned a skeptical eye towards the *sīrah, ḥadīth*, and other sources – Wansbrough, Crone, Cook, Hawting, Burton, Calder, Rippin – is the infusion of a pervasive sense of caution into historical research into the proto- and early Islamic periods. While revisionists have sometimes been tarred by allegations that they seek to discredit and disparage Muslims by questioning the integrity of the tradition, the real target of the revisionist critique was the established tradition of *Western* scholarship, which had failed to recognize that Muslim sources on the revelation of the Qurʾan and the life of the Prophet serve primarily as *Heilsgeschichte* and not as objective history. Thus, as Crone famously put it, much of the research done on Islamic origins in the decades preceding the advent of the revisionists' critical reorientation of the field served simply to translate classical Islamic sources and repackage them for consumption by a Western audience – "Muslim chronicles in modern languages and graced with modern titles."[1]

Even those contemporary scholars who are generally opposed to revisionism usually take this critique of the reliability of the sources seriously. One thinks, for example, of the enormous scholarly output of Harald Motzki, who has convincingly demonstrated that significant parts of the *ḥadīth* corpus

do plausibly go back to the early decades of Islam's development.[2] The studies of Motzki and others seeking to vindicate the traditional sources typically reflect a significant expenditure of effort, as such work usually requires meticulous scrutiny of the sources. Further, Motzki and others who are more sanguine about the possibility of yielding positive results from such scrutiny – retrieving 'real history' from sources not designed to capture and preserve it, as older generations of scholars falsely assumed – tend to be conspicuously aware of the limitations of their methods.

In light of these developments in early Islamic historiography over the past few decades, Haggai Mazuz's *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina* comes as something of a surprise. This work not only seeks to establish the historicity of much of the data the traditional sources offer us on the culture, customs, and traditions of the Jewish communities of the Ḥijāz in Muhammad's time, but proposes to offer a conclusive demonstration of the squarely halakhic nature of these Jews. According to Mazuz, much of what the classical Islamic sources relate about Muhammad's Jewish contemporaries can be correlated with data about Jewish ideas and practices found in the Babylonian Talmud and other mainstream rabbinic sources, which stands as proof that these Arabian communities were essentially rabbinic in orientation. This is a rather ambitious agenda for a book scarcely over 100 pages in length (not including appendices, index, and bibliography), especially considering that both the reliability of the Islamic sources' data on these communities and their relationship to their correligionists in Palestine and Babylonia have been the subject of considerable debate since the publication of Geiger's *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthum aufgenommen?* in 1834.

Mazuz's study consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and a handful of short appendices. In the introduction, he briefly surveys the major research that has been done on the Jews of Arabia in Muhammad's time since the nineteenth century. He acknowledges the fact that, as has often been observed, the Jewish ideas and claims presupposed (or actually related by) the Qurʾan are difficult to reconcile both with other sources on the Jewish communities of Arabia and with what we know (or think we know) about the prevailing forms of Judaism, both Palestinian and Babylonian, of the period. Here Mazuz asserts quite directly that previous debates over the possibly heterodox or heteroprax (that is, non-halakhic) nature of the Jews with whom Muhammad supposedly interacted are ill-founded, and that the textual evidence demonstrates to a significant degree of certainty that the customs and practices of the Jewish tribes of the Ḥijāz conformed by and large to halakhic standards.

In Chapter 1, Mazuz offers a short survey of what we know (or might claim to know) about the leadership of the Jewish tribes of Medina. Here a wealth of information about the prominent men associated with the Banū Qaynuqāʿ, Banū Naḍīr, and Banū Qurayẓah is culled from the *sīrah*, *ḥadīth, tafsīr,* and other sources. These Jews are depicted as frequenting a study hall in Medina (*beit midrash/bayt midrās*), engaging in specific religious activities and practices, and vocally opposing the teachings of the Prophet and the message of the Qurʾan – although some exceptional individuals like

ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām are depicted as accepting Muhammad's message and 'converting' to Islam. The Jews' general opposition to Muhammad is claimed to have been primarily religious in nature, an expression of their serious devotion to Torah observance as modulated through a rabbinically defined orthopraxy. This rabbinic orientation is signaled, in Mazuz's mind, by such factors as the qurʾanic accusation of *taḥrīf* (mendacious misinterpretation of scripture), which he correlates to the Medinan Jews' employment of midrashic approaches to Bible, as well as by the use of such titles as *aḥbār* (from *ḥaverim,* 'rabbis' or 'fellows' of rabbinic academies) for the religious leaders of the community.

This rather literal reading of the sources continues in Chapter 2, dedicated to specific aspects of the religious practice and customs of the Medinan Jews. In some cases, Mazuz finds what he sees as more or less direct correspondences between the practices ascribed to the Jews of Muhammad's time and those found in rabbinic literature. Additionally, he here proposes what he characterizes as a novel analytical technique of inferring the normative practice of the Arabian Jews to be the opposite of that adopted by the early Muslim community based on the principle of *mukhālafah* – the Prophet's explicit recommendation of behavior that reversed that which prevailed among the so-called 'People of the Book', especially the Jews. Thus, if Muhammad is seen to recommend a certain dietary practice to his followers or instructs them to pray a certain way, this suggests, according to Mazuz's reasoning, that the neighboring Jews were doing exactly the opposite.

Chapter 3 discusses a miscellany of theological conceptions that Mazuz proposes, through similar methods as those used previously, to correlate to those broadly current among mainstream rabbinic Jews in Late Antiquity. The prevailing themes dealt with here are eschatology and prophecy; this is unsurprising given that the Islamic sources typically cited the beliefs of Muhammad's Jewish contemporaries in contrast to those propounded in the Qurʾan or the teachings of the Prophet himself (just as Jewish practice is often mentioned in contrast to Muslim practice), and these subjects appear to have been central in such engagements.

Chapter 4 discusses the external appearance of the Medinan Jews. Here Mazuz adduces chronologically and geographically disparate materials pertaining to questions such as whether these Jews wore sidelocks, what their customary dress was, and so forth. This provides him an opportunity to weigh in on the oft-debated question of the historical origins of the Jewish communities of the Ḥijāz, and he favors the view that these groups were remnants of migrants who traveled from Palestine to South Arabia after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

Finally, in a brief conclusion, Mazuz restates his major conclusions, and seeks to anticipate criticism of his findings by dismissing arguments against the historicity of his sources. He does so primarily on the basis of a small handful of documentary and other accounts from a later period that in some way testify to the loyalty of Jewish settlements in northern Arabia (which persisted at least until the 12th and 13th centuries) to the Babylonian gaonate (100-102). Mazuz infers that these later

communities' acknowledgment of Babylonian authority can only be explained as deriving from the ancestral rabbinic orientation of these communities and Arabian Jewry in general.

It goes without saying that the author's agenda appears from the outset entirely too ambitious, since the various facets of the complex topic he proposes to address here receive only summary treatment that can hardly be adequate to resolve debates that have persisted for well over a century. As is only fitting, Mazuz stands on the shoulders of the giants who preceded him, especially M. J. Kister and Michael Lecker, but he proposes to go much further than they in directly asserting rather sweeping conclusions. Overall, Mazuz's project seems deeply flawed, and in some ways represents a regression to scholarly perspectives that prevailed decades ago, before the advent of the revisionist critique of the traditional sources. In some respects, his work actually comes off as less nuanced than that of Abraham Geiger almost two hundred years ago.

The first, and most obvious, problem that one encounters here is that of Mazuz's overarching historiographic credulity. He consistently reads correspondences between rabbinic literature and traditional Muslim sources as furnishing proof that "the Jews of Medina were Talmudic Jews in almost every respect" (67); such a verdict can only be the result of massive oversimplification, requiring dangerously superficial readings of data that is often rather ambiguous. Moreover, it would appear abundantly clear to any scholar familiar with contemporary debates over the historicity of early Islamic sources that the parallels Mazuz observes should most likely be read as evidence that early Muslim tradition, which coalesced in the eighth through tenth centuries CE, particularly in major centers in Syria, Egypt, and especially Iraq, exhibits significant familiarity with Jewish culture and traditions of its time. If we see a general tendency to portray the Jews of Muhammad's time as broadly rabbinic in character in the *ḥadīth, tafsīr,* and the like (and even this much is open to interpretation), such a portrayal more likely reflects the increasing rabbinization of the Jewish communities in the environment in which Muslim jurists, exegetes, and traditionists lived and worked. At the very least, this is the approach to the evidence that is much more typical among contemporary scholars, but Mazuz has, on his own and with little fanfare, decided to abandon the prevailing hermeneutic of suspicion that usually governs the study of this material.

One could adduce many examples from the book that illustrate Mazuz's overconfidence in reading the evidence. Sometimes it is painfully evident that we stand at quite a far remove from the historical milieu that Mazuz is certain can be clearly illuminated through manipulation of the sources; this sometimes seems to lead not only to overinterpretation but to actual distortion of their import, at least in some cases. In his discussion of *mukhālafah,* Mazuz notes a tradition that states that the women of the Jews of Khaybar wore finery during the fast of ʿĀshūrāʾ. Certain that some historical reality lies behind this, despite the fact that such practice is contrary to the attitude of penitence and severity that generally characterizes the Day of Atonement in rabbinic tradition, Mazuz finds a single reference in

the Mishnah to Yom Kippur being celebrated in a festive way, presumably in the time of the putative tradent, Shimʿon b. Gamaliel (a first-generation *tanna* who lived in the mid-first century CE). Mazuz then concludes, on the basis of one *ḥadīth* and one puzzling reference in the Mishnah, that some Jews in antiquity did in fact engage in festivities during a holy day that both biblical and rabbinic tradition almost universally characterize as somber, and thus that the report about the practice of the Jews of Khaybar should be given credence (34).

One supposes that it is at least possible that the Jews of Medina continued the practice of a joyous Yom Kippur to which the Mishnah seems to allude. However, the import of these traditions, both of which are highly anomalous in their respective contexts, is rather difficult to discern, and it seems rather hasty to conclude that the Palestinian custom to which the Mishnah seems to testify and the account in the *ḥadīth* have any direct relevance to one another. Further, the point of the *ḥadīth* is not to comment on the Jews' behavior on the holy day, but rather to commend fasting on that day to the Muslims. However, Mazuz grossly misrepresents the tradition's import: nowhere does it explicitly indicate that "the Muslims were disturbed that the Jews of Khaybar treated *yawm ʿāshūrāʾ* as a joyous holiday," as he states (34). It is something of a stretch even to infer this much from the report, though highlighting the Muslims' purported disapproval has the effect of making it seem like it is centrally concerned with the Jews' festive attire on ʿĀshūrāʾ, lending it a certain air of facticity and thus bolstering Mazuz's argument.[3] This is but one example of the kind of overly aggressive interpretation Mazuz inflicts on the evidence, to say nothing of the overt misrepresentation that the reader can only detect by going back to the original sources.

When the glimpses of Arabian Jewish life that Muslim sources grant us fail to correlate to the rules and standards established in normative rabbinic literature, Mazuz simply concludes either that the Jews of Arabia were ignorant of a particular rule or, more stupendously, that they were aware of the rule but *deliberately flouted it*. Mazuz observes the case of a marriage contracted between Banū Naḍīr and Banū Qurayẓah (both Jewish tribes that reportedly claimed priestly descent) that violates rabbinic rules governing priestly marriage as adumbrated in the Bavli. Goitein interpreted this as "a sign of weak religious observance, as occurred in other Jewish priestly communities in the Diaspora"; Mazuz concludes, in contrast, that this flouting of the rules was a deliberate and necessary concession to political exigencies and other pragmatic considerations (42-43). The underlying assumption is that the halakhic standard was known to this community and understood to be authoritative, but it had been suspended under the circumstances in which these communities found themselves. The logic here is stunningly circular: Mazuz advances numerous arguments in support of the idea that these communities observed rabbinic halakhah, then seeks to explain the lack of evidence of such observance in a particular case as an example where the halakhic rule must have been deliberately neglected – asking us to take for granted the very point that he seeks to establish. If the halakhic standard is not

seen to be in effect in a specific case, there can be no basis for the claim that it *should* have been, or was at some point, but had been suspended for pragmatic reasons.

Granted, the basic guidelines governing priestly marriage are provided by Leviticus 21, and it is certainly plausible that tribes that claimed priestly descent would have adopted some customary rules meant to implement the biblical injunction to preserve priestly purity. But this is not Mazuz's argument; his argument is that these Jews knew the Bavli's definition of the rules (b. *Yevamot* 61b); that they should have prevailed here; and that we can discern specific reasons from the surviving evidence why the rules adumbrated in the Talmud had to be circumvented or suspended, though there is nothing explicit in the tradition that suggests this was actually the case. Mazuz brushes up against an historically viable judgment when he states that "[i]t appears that the Medinan priests did not consider marriage with divorced women inappropriate"; however, he then concludes the passage by questioning whether at least some of the members of these 'priestly' tribes "could have been considered halakhically priests at all" (44). The more obvious question here is whether it makes sense to assume that rabbinic rules that became widely normative only at a later date must have applied here, or if it is responsible for a scholar to assert that it was so.

There are no doubt strands of authentic historical memory to be found in the received tradition as represented by the extant Islamic sources, but extricating them from the dense layers of literary tradition surrounding them is complicated, difficult work that demands caution. But Mazuz consistently employs a technique of assuming that halakhic standards applied, or should have applied, among Arabian Jews in the seventh century and then reading the literary evidence as representing either fidelity to or deviance from those halakhic standards – an enormously problematic way to proceed through this forbidding, tangled terrain.

Another major problem with Mazuz's approach is that his positivist reading of the evidence forecloses other interpretive possibilities – in particular, it keepshim from recognizing the basically stereotyped nature of the portrayal of the Jews of Muhammad's time in classical Islamic sources. This pertains especially to the principle – or rather trope – of *mukhālafah*. That what became standard Muslim practice regarding menstruation, ablution, sexual ethics, etc. is commonly portrayed as having been defined as the diametrical opposite to what Jews do (or purportedly do) speaks above all to the religious, social, and ideological work to which an image of Jewish practice is put in early Islamic discourse. Sometimes the practices attributed to Arabian Jews do correlate in some way to halakhah as presented in classical rabbinic texts; but again, even though these practices are depicted as prevailing among Medina's Jews in the time of Muhammad, this speaks not to historical reality but rather to the cultural and religious resources available to jurists and traditionists operating in a rather different milieu decades and centuries later.[4]

Mazuz's inability or unwillingness to perceive the actual purpose behind the portrayals of Medinan Jews and their affairs in Muslim sources colors everything in his study and repeatedly leads him to misapprehension of the evidence. Another example: at one juncture he surmises that Banū Naḍīr and Banū Qurayẓah were overall more observant and dedicated to their religion than other Jewish groups because of their resistance to the Prophet and willingness to oppose him; in contrast, Banū Qaynuqāʿ are understood as less observant because they were more willing to reach an accommodation with Muhammad and his community. However, it is unlikely that the varying degree of opposition of the Jewish tribes to Muhammad depicted in the *sīrah* reflects the religious motivations of these groups; rather, it serves a literary function, in that the theme of the escalating hostilities between the Medinan Jewish tribes and the *ummah* is more likely to reflect the deliberate structuring of the accounts of the Medinan period in such a way as to make the elimination of the Jews seem both inevitable and warranted. In the *sīrah,* the exile of Qaynuqāʿ signals the beginning of a fracture in the coalition assembled by means of the so-called Constitution of Medina; the total elimination of Qurayẓah a few years later, following upon the gradual escalation of hostilities between the *ummah* and its enemies, serves to demonstrate that accommodation between the community and the Jews was hopeless. These are events that can only be viewed through a veil draped over them by collective memory, to say nothing of the literary agendas of the compilers of *sīrah* works who lived many years later.

It has long been recognized that numerous events portrayed in the *sīrah* tradition are likely to have been invented to provide a revelatory context for various ambiguous qurʾanic verses. However, Mazuz exhibits no understanding of the exegetical function that depictions of the Jews of Muhammad's time frequently play in the tradition. He does note that the interpretation of the Qurʾan often features prominently in portrayals of exchanges between Muhammad or his Companions and the Jews of Medina, but he seems to assume that such portrayals reflect the reality of debates over scriptural interpretation or Muhammad's prophetic credentials among specific, identifiable historical persons. At best, the interactions between Muhammad and various Jewish interlocutors can be read as pointing to an historical *Sitz im Leben* in which debates over the Qurʾan were central in the nascent community, but it can hardly be taken for granted that these debates involved the actual historical personages said to be involved in the *sīrah*. It is not even certain that these events must necessarily have involved Jews. However, Mazuz reads such encounters as indisputable historical fact, seeking to extrapolate genuine information about the Jews of Medina from them.

A final methodological problem one might raise in critiquing Mazuz's approach is the rather retrograde conception of the status of rabbinic tradition in the late ancient period that prevails in his work. For decades, scholars of late antique Judaism have become increasingly cautious in not overstating the predominance of rabbinic authority before the period in which the Babylonian Talmud

became normative throughout the Jewish world, a gradual process that was likely completed only well into the geonic era, perhaps only in the early Middle Ages. In the context of this development in Jewish historiography, few scholars would still wholeheartedly embrace the idea that the Jews of Arabian communities, as elsewhere on the imperial margins between Rome and Persia, could or would have adhered to a straightforwardly halakhic Judaism as defined by what would become the normative sources of rabbinic tradition. It is one thing to suggest parallels between the Qur'an and indisputably older and widely distributed traditions found, for example, in the Mishnah or some of the older midrashim (or, for that matter, in ancient Jewish sources not associated with the rabbinic movement at all). It is another to assume that apparent parallels between behavior ascribed to Medinan Jews and the Babylonian Talmud must imply the authority of the latter among these communities. This betrays an anachronistic essentialism that is sometimes characteristic of the work of older scholars such as Geiger or Goitein, but is wholly out of step with contemporary work on late antique Judaism, which approaches rabbinization with considerable nuance and historiographic self-awareness.[5]

Overall, Mazuz's work comes at a particularly unfortunate time. No doubt due to the prominence of the revisionist critique, many scholars who work on the Qur'an have been hesitant to engage in writing positive history of the milieu in which the scripture was revealed and the early Muslim *ummah* emerged. The best attempts at returning to a more positivist mode in the study of this subject over the last several years – Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), Shoemaker's *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) paramount among them – succeed specifically because they take revisionist critiques of the sources seriously and strive to balance skepticism with positivism. We are just beginning to undertake this difficult task of reevaluation, and so it is depressing to see a work that is so dangerously retrograde in taking the sources simply at face value enter the field and claim to resolve complex historiographic problems by offhandedly dismissing the deep methodological concerns that now haunt the study of this material. The book's brevity, sad to say, is not accidental: a more in-depth confrontation of the critical issues would have demonstrated that the author's method is self-evidently problematic and his conclusions facile. The book's Library of Congress subject heading classifies this work as history, while Google Books categorizes it as social science, though it is really neither; in fact, it is so out of touch with contemporary historical perspectives and historiographic trends that it barely merits being called scholarship at all.

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[1] Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 13. Crone's historiographic remarks in Chapter 1 in this book and Chapter 9 of her *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) still make for exhilarating reading. The application of the term *Heilsgeschichte* to the traditional sources on the origins of Islam, borrowed from Biblical Studies, was introduced by Wansbrough; though the term appears only sporadically in his classic *Quranic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), the underlying concept pervades his work and that of the other scholars of the revisionist school whom he inspired.

[2] For a kind of *summa* of Motzki's methods and ideas in English, see his *Analysing Muslim Traditions: Studies in Legal, Exegetical, and Maghāzī Ḥadīth* with Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort and Sean W. Anthony (Leiden: Brill, 2010) and compare the similarly magisterial *summa* of the work of Gregor Schoeler on the *sīrah*, *The Biography of Muḥammad: Nature and Authenticity*, tr. Uwe Vagelpohl (London: Routledge, 2010).

[3] The mishnaic tradition in question is the dictum of Shimʿon b. Gamaliel in m. *Taʿanit* 4:8 describing both Yom Kippur and Tu b'Av as holidays involving festivity, the wearing of fine clothes, and dancing, whereas one would expect only Tu b'Av to be described this way. The *ḥadīth* in question is *Ṣahīḥ Muslim* no. 1131 according to the conventional numbering, which is actually two variations of a tradition from the Companion Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī referring to the Prophet's prescription of ʿĀshūrāʾ as a fast day for his community, seemingly in imitation of the Jews. (Muslim cites this tradition in support of the better-known tradition that states that the Muslims will fast on ʿĀshūrāʾ because they are closer to Moses than the Jews.) The first version of the Abū Mūsā tradition only mentions the Jews fasting and treating ʿĀshūrāʾ as a holy day, and cites the Prophet's command that his community should fast as well. The second version, however, adds a brief note about the Jewish women wearing their finery and jewelry on that day. This additional detail goes completely without comment in the *ḥadīth,* and so one wonders how Mazuz can conclude that this tradition is really about *mukhālafah* at all, since no contrast is explicitly drawn between what the Jews do and what the Muslims should do; Mazuz simply infers that "the joyfulness of the Jews seemed inappropriate to them" (34), without any textual basis for this claim or defense of such an inference.

[4] For a significantly more sophisticated approach to this material, see Ze'ev Maghen, *After Hardship Cometh Ease* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), which discusses *mukhālafah* as a device deployed by Muslim jurists and exegetes who drew on the resources provided by the Qurʾan and *ḥadīth* in creating an image of the stringent and difficult Jewish law to which Islamic law supposedly stands in contrast. Mazuz cites Maghen's work but seems to miss the broad implications of his analysis, which shows that *mukhālafah* is a trope, an interpretive tool deployed by the later tradition, and so the reports associated with the Prophet's interactions with the Jews of his time are of questionable historicity.

[5] Mazuz's essentialism is signaled by the fact that citations of the Bavli in his work vastly outnumber those of the Mishnah, and even slightly outnumber those of the Hebrew Bible. A far more plausible approach to correlating the "data" about the Jews of Medina offered by the classical Islamic sources to talmudic tradition would have been to use the Yerushalmi, a corpus with much greater traction as a source of genuinely pre-Islamic elaborations of rabbinic law. Notably, the only midrashic source cited (and that only once) is Exodus Rabbah, one of the latest parts of the anthology commonly called Midrash Rabbah. This source was almost certainly edited well after the rise of Islam. One would be much more impressed by the discovery of correlations between Islamic traditions on the Medinan Jews and the older halakhic midrashim, or (in the case of exegetical or theological traditions) the indisputably early source Genesis Rabbah. In these cases one could much more convincingly argue that Arabian Jewish communities preserved authentically ancient Palestinian Jewish beliefs or practices.