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## Review of Haggai Mazuz, The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina

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**Haggai Mazuz** *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina*. (The Brill Reference Library of Judaism 38) Leiden: Brill, 2014. ISBN 978-90-04-25062-8. xvi + 132 pp.

**Reviewed by Ilkka Lindstedt (University of Helsinki)**

Haggai Mazuz's main argument in the book at hand is that the Jews living in Medina around the time of the Prophet Muḥammad were Talmudic-Rabbinic Jews following *halakha*, Jewish law, in most or all aspects. Unfortunately, to me the study reads like an apologetic attempt to prove the "orthodoxy" of Medinese Jews. It furthermore fails because the principal evidence used in the study, Islamic-era Arabic literature, is, in the main, unreliable and unusable for studying the question of the religious nature and identity of the Jewish inhabitants in Medina. The book's premises, then, are problematic. Furthermore, awareness of the newest research on pre- and early Islamic Arabia is not displayed in it. Because of my own background, I will comment on the book largely from the point of view of Islamic studies, even though there would probably be much to take issue with from the perspective of Jewish studies too. One would, for example, have hoped a discussion on the position of the Talmud in the sixth–seventh century Near East more generally.

Scholarship on early Islam has undergone massive changes since the 1970s. In 1977, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published their revolutionary book *Hagarism*, which questioned all use of Arabic literature as evidence for early Islam. They also presented a new reconstruction of Islam's formation based on non-Arabic sources. Even if their reconstruction has been generally rejected, it is widely acknowledged by Arabists and Islamicists today that the Arabic literary sources are, save for the Qur'ān, late, reaching their final written form from c.800 CE onwards. They are also often tendentious and, thus, very problematic for studying the history of Arabia before, during, and immediately after the life of Muḥammad (d. 632 CE). Indeed, Arabic historiography and the difficulties in reconstructing early Islamic history have spawned a huge scholarly literature since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, while it has been suggested with solid methodological grounding that some earlier, seventh–eighth century CE, Arabic works can be reconstructed (Görke & Schoeler 2008; Schoeler 2011), Fred Donner (1998) has forcefully and credibly argued that interest in historical narration among Muslims began only towards the end of the seventh century CE. Only fluid oral lore was transmitted before that, and there is not much reason to suggest that Arabic literature would form a very reliable corpus for studying Islamic origins. Historians such as Donner have called for the use of contemporary and/or documentary evidence, which should form our starting point for any historical studies. Contemporary evidence consists of the Qur'ān, papyri, epigraphic and numismatic record, archaeological remains, and

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Cameron & Conrad 1992; Crone 1980; 1987; Cook 1981; 1983; Hawting 1999; Wansbrough 1977; 1978 – all of which are missing in Mazuz's bibliography, and the implications of which are not taken into account.

some non-Arabic literary texts (discussed in Hoyland 1997). If we want to reconstruct “what really happened” in the early Islamic era, we should try to exhaust the contemporary evidence first, and only then take into account the Arabic literature, which is non-documentary and non-contemporary (if not demonstrated otherwise).

In general, the Israeli scholarship has continued to study late antique Arabia and the Near East in traditional manner. Meir Kister (1980; 1990) and Michael Lecker’s studies (1989; 1995; 2005)<sup>2</sup> are examples of such approaches in which the Arabic sources are merely used, and, usually, are not critically discussed. Although their scholarship is very impressive in itself, it seems to have been more or less insulated from the theoretical and methodological discussion undertaken by the Islamicists in Europe and the United States. Other Israeli scholars have, of course, taken part in this discussion. Among them is Amikam Elad (2002) who, however, has rejected revisionist criticism. Elad (2002: 245, 300) claims, contra Donner, that historical writing among Muslims began very early; as to historical consciousness, Elad opines that it was already very much present among the pre-Islamic Arabs. However, there is no tangible evidence to recommend the idea of such an early Arabic historical narration, let alone writing. Indeed, even more traditionally-minded scholars utilizing the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, such as Gregor Schoeler, have come up with results similar to Donner’s.

The author of the monograph under review, Haggai Mazuz, also belongs to the school of traditional scholars. The information proffered by the Arabic texts is accepted at face value and their possible problems as historical sources are mentioned only in passing (pp. 7, 99–102). Even *ḥadīths*, Prophetical sayings, are quoted (e.g. p. 1) as evidence for what the historical Muḥammad thought, although the great majority of Western scholars have approached them as texts that originated with the later generations of Muslims and that are not traceable back to the Prophet. This has been the more or less generally accepted view since Goldziher (1890). Historiographical naiveté is a problem that afflicts the whole of Mazuz’s book and its arguments even though, it must be said, it does not necessarily make the study unimportant. The Arabic sources can still offer interesting material on how the later, ninth century, Muslims viewed the Medinese Jews and how they weaved these narratives into the grand narrative of Islamic sacred history; modern studies on these questions can be illuminating. However, Mazuz clearly pursues something other than narratological analysis.

What he attempts to show is that the Medinese Jews were Talmudic-Rabbinic in their religious outlook. How is he to accomplish this? On page 25, we learn that his methodology consists of, firstly, comparison of the Muslim sources to the Jewish sources, especially the Hebrew Bible, the Mishna, and the Talmudic sources, chiefly the Babylonian Talmud. What is perhaps more novel in Mazuz’s approach is his argument that many Islamic rites and dogmas were created in contrast with Jewish ones and, thus, the “juxtaposition of Islamic sources together with Jewish sources often demonstrates Islam’s attempts to differentiate itself from Talmudic law in many areas. We can therefore deduce that many of laws and customs attributed to Medinan Jews were likely Talmudic in origin” (p. 26).

Given the Arabic literature’s historiographical problems that I have already explored, I do not find this argument for Talmudic-Rabbinic outlook very well grounded (it is, of course, totally plausible, but so are other options). In all fairness, Mazuz does explore some contem-

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2 Oddly enough, I do not see any references to Lecker 1995 in Mazuz’s book even though Lecker’s monograph deals with the very same question (Jews in Medina) as Mazuz’s, and even though Lecker is thanked in the acknowledgements of Mazuz’s book!

porary evidence, such as Qur'ānic passages (e.g. pp. 17–23) that in Mazuz's opinion support his arguments. Arabic literature, on the other hand, is a different story, and there is no evidence that the beliefs and opinions attributed to the Medinese Jews by Muslim Arabic historians and theologians were really held by them. Remember that Arabic literature is late and, furthermore, was mostly written in Iraq; hence, it is completely possible that the Muslim authors were projecting the religious outlook of their contemporary Iraqi Jews to sixth–seventh century CE Medina.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, many of the narratives concerning and beliefs ascribed to Medinese Jews were clearly written by the Muslims in polemical vein.

It is my contention that more important than dwelling on the Arabic literature would have been a discussion of the late antique context of the Hijaz and areas nearby, especially Yemen to the south and Palestine and Iraq to the north. Since scholars have better sources at their disposal, Judaism in Yemen and Iraq is rather well known and has been discussed in recent scholarship. This is all the more significant since Medina (Yathrib) was part of the inland routes connecting Yemen with Syria, Palestine, and Iraq, so we can imagine religious and cultural ideas flowing from the north to the south and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> This picture of Judaism in the late antique Near East could then have been weighed against contemporary Medinese evidence, especially the Qur'ān (which is, it must be admitted, rather often polemic towards the Jews) and the so-called Constitution of Medina (accepted by most Islamicists as an authentic and contemporary document, although its interpretation is disputed). Then, with great care and critical acumen, what would have been gleaned through this study could have been compared with Arabic narratives on Medinese Jews. The so-called *isnād-cum-matn* method might have been used to recover the earliest layers of those narratives. On page 1, Mazuz states that because of the lack of outside sources on Medinese Jews, “we are forced to rely almost exclusively on Islamic sources”. This is to some extent true, but even so, we would have to make a distinction between the Qur'ān (which is contemporary) and the rest of the Arabic literary material (which is not). Furthermore, it is not acceptable to use the Muslim sources uncritically.

The discussion by Mazuz on Judaism in Yemen (pp. 83–87) is weak. He takes as his starting point a legendary idea that Jews came to Yemen no later than 586 BCE (destruction of the First Temple). But of course we have no evidence for that. The earliest records of Judaism in Yemen are from the late fourth century CE, that is, the Himyarite era. What is more, it is likely that the appearance of Jews there is more due to conversion by the Himyarites than due to the settlement of diaspora Jews, though it is naturally possible that some Jews moved to Yemen from, for example, Sasanid Persia. It has also been shown by Christian Robin (2003) and Iwona Gajda (2009; 2010) that Judaism in Yemen possessed some unique features, at least on the level of religious vocabulary and formulae. For instance, peculiar to the Ancient South Arabian epigraphic record is that the Jewish God is usually called *rḥmnn*, ‘the Merciful’. Pre-Islamic Yemen has a somewhat well-preserved history of over a millenium because of the survival of some 10,000 Ancient South Arabian inscriptions. Mazuz does not show awareness of the epigraphic record or recent scholarship on Ancient South Arabia. Rather, he refers (pp. 85–87) to early modern

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3 On pp. 100–102, Mazuz explicitly rejects this projection. But his arguments are hardly convincing. He refers to three non-Arabic sources of c. tenth–twelfth centuries CE that describe Talmudic-Rabbinic Jews living in Wādī al-Qurā. How this relates to the sixth–seventh centuries Medina and the Jews living there eludes me.

4 It might be noted that Mazuz (p. 86) argues that Jews that went to Yemen “from the Land of Israel” passed through Medina, even if the dating of this is completely fantastic (“between the sixth and eighth centuries BCE” p. 87).

Yemenite Jews who have expressed views of their own origins – scarcely objective or reliable evidence, and 1,000–2,000 years later than the events discussed.

This book can be recommended for researchers wishing to learn how Medinese Jews were portrayed in Muslim religious and historical literature. The Arabic texts are indeed handled skillfully, as far as they go. There are also thought-provoking comparisons between Muslim and Jewish texts. Unfortunately, the study, although short, is not really worthwhile reading for a student or scholar interested in actual historical details of Medinese or Arabian Jews or their late antique context. On page 7, when momentarily discussing (but then mostly forgetting) the historiographical caveats involved in his study, Mazuz notes:

The problematic nature of Islamic sources with regard to the Jews of Medina raises the question of whether comprehensive scholarly research into this subject is at all possible. Indeed, if these sources are found to be essentially useless, then nothing certain can be said regarding the Jews of Medina, let alone their religious and social customs.

I could not agree more. It is a pity that the pitfalls involved are not really explored in Mazuz's monograph. In addition to historiographical problems, Mazuz should have dealt with questions of ethnic and religious identity in late antiquity and what kind of Islam we can talk about during the life of the Prophet and the decades after him.

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