An Ex-Sabbatean’s Remorse?
Sambari’s Polemics against Islam
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It is well known that ethnoreligious identities constitute multilayered constructions and include elements of reference to and delimitation from other identities. Thus, the “intertextuality” of pre-modern Jewish literature—to use a term coined by literary criticism—refers not only to the vast treasure of rabbinic classics and Jewish folklore but to some extent also to rivaling narratives and canons.1 This statement can also be extended to include pre-modern Jewish historiography, the broader concern of the present article. Yet, while the “midrashic” or homiletic trait of pre-modern Jewish historiography has already been highlighted by Salo W. Baron,2 its intertextual char-

1. Eli Yassif was thinking primarily of pagan motifs in Jewish folklore when he pointed out that the intertextuality of Jewish historical legends extends to alternative, even competitive frames of reference; see idem, “Intertextuality in Folk Literature: Pagan Themes in Folktales of the Early Modern Period” (Hebrew), Jerusalem Studies in Folklore 19/20 (1998): 287–309.

2. Medieval Jewish historiography draws on literary patterns derived from the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature in order to establish the perceived meaning of a historical narrative; see Salo W. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews (New York, 1958), 6:188–219. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zikhron: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle, Wash., 1982), 31–52, therefore questions whether the historical writings of medieval Jewish authors should be regarded as “historiography” in the proper sense—a view fervently criticized by Robert
acter in the described sense, including cross-cultural frames of reference, has received less attention. 3

A work that provides a fascinating and illuminating illustration of this kind of intertextuality is the Hebrew chronicle Divre Yosef (‘Words of Joseph’) written by the seventeenth-century Egyptian Jewish author Joseph Sambari. This chronicle, a history of the Jews in the Islamic world, is prefaced by a lengthy introduction to the origins of Islam in which the author employs biblical allusions and midrashim that would only be understandable to readers familiar with this Jewish interpretative tradition. 4 As I will show, Sambari makes polemical use of exegesis, which serves as a mode of constructing a Jewish religious identity vis-à-vis a competing tradition—Islam. As part of his project, Sambari satirizes Islamic legends about the life of Muhammad—known as sīra in Arabic.

My thesis is that Sambari not only concealed an anti-Islamic polemic within the complex textual allusions of his chronicle but that he also adhered to an anti-Sabbatean agenda. I argue that Sambari’s jibes against

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3. Daniel Boyarin has successfully applied the concept of “intertextuality” to the interpretation of midrash; see his Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington, Ind., 1990). Yet, in the following, the intertextual character of Jewish historiography will not be limited to its midrashic elements but expanded to include non-Jewish codes as well.

4. My considerations have certain commonalities with Jacob Lassner, “Joseph Sambari on Muhammad and the Origins of Islam: A Learned Rabbi Confronts Muslim Apologetics and a Christian Polemical Tradition,” in his The Middle East Remembered: Forged Identities, Competing Narratives, Contested Spaces (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2000), 341–85. Though Lassner also points to Sambari’s use of biblical allusions, he and I differ on the interpretation of the historical background of Divre Yosef. While Lassner believes Sambari to be of “Sephardic” origin (ibid., 341 and 355), a muṭaʿrīb background is much more plausible (see below). More importantly, Lassner assumes that Sambari wrote his chronicle prior to the Sabbatean disaster (ibid., 384: “There is a sense of irony to Sambari’s pleading. Somewhat later [my emphasis], the messianic movement of Sabbatai Sevi swept through the Ottoman Empire . . . ”). However, his chronicle, written in 1673 postdates the disaster of Sabbateanism and clearly reflects the disillusionment with Sabbatai Sevi, as will be argued here. For a well-researched investigation into Sambari’s life and work, see Shimon Shtober’s introduction to his critical edition of Sefer divre Yosef le-Rabbi Yosef Sambari (hereafter DY—by page and line number; Jerusalem, 1994), 13–55 (English abstract, ii–ix).
Islam can be understood as a response to a specific historical event: the failure of the messianic movement around Sabbatai Sevi after the messianic candidate and some of his followers had converted to Islam. This religious crisis had blurred the well-established boundaries between Judaism and Islam; a desire to redraw these lines of difference motivated Sambari—in all likelihood an ex-Sabbatean himself—to compose his chronicle of the Jews in the Islamic world.\footnote{As Sabbateanism found a certain resonance among former conversos (Iberian Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity, and their descendents), who may have been attracted by certain similarities between Sabbateanism and Christian teachings, it had not only blurred the boundaries between Judaism and Islam but also between Judaism and Christianity—though in Ottoman Egypt this was a less pressing problem (see, however, n. 25 below). On the “Christian overtones” of Nathan of Gaza’s concept of faith, see Gershom Scholem, \textit{Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah} (Princeton, N.J., 1973), 211.}

In addition, I shall argue that Sambari’s work echoes a puritanical tendency in seventeenth-century Ottoman Islam that was inspired by the preachers of the Kadızadeli movement and which—while originally directed against certain Islamic Sufi orders—may have conditioned the Ottoman response to the Jewish messianic movement.\footnote{The Kadızadeli involvement in the conversion of Sabbatai Sevi is made plausible by Ottoman sources mentioning that the leader of the movement, Vani Efendi, who served also as the Sultan’s chief preacher, attended meetings with the prisoner that led to his change of religion; this has already been observed by Scholem, \textit{Sabbatai Sevi}, 675; cf. Geoffrey L. Lewis, Cecil Roth, “New Light on the Apostasy of Sabbatai Zevi,” \textit{Jewish Quarterly Review} 55 (1963): 219–25; for a thought-provoking discussion of the Ottoman context that goes much beyond Scholem, see Madeline C. Zilfi, \textit{The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age, 1600–1800} (Minneapolis, Minn., 1988), 153–56.} It seems that pro-Kadızadeli politics in particular were behind certain unusual restrictions imposed on non-Muslims in the late seventeenth century. It is these contemporary phenomena, namely, the puritanical tendencies in Muslim society and the Sabbatean disaster, that in part inspired Sambari to compose his historical work. While Sambari’s lengthy accounts of Islamic narratives might seem paradoxical given that he wanted to prevent his coreligionists from embracing this tradition, his familiarity with precisely the culture he attacked can be explained as the logical result of the cultural ambiguities and immediate events of his age.

**SAMBARI, HIS BACKGROUND, AND WORK**

The only source of biographical information on the author of \textit{Divre Yosef} is the chronicle itself, from which we can establish that Joseph Sambari
lived sometime in the second half of the seventeenth century in Cairo,\textsuperscript{7} then the seat of the Ottoman governor of Egypt. As his familiarity with Islamic rituals and Arabic sources suggests, the author probably belonged to the community of musta’ribu¯n (‘the Arabized’), indigenous Egyptian Jews who shared much in common with their Muslim compatriots in language and customs.\textsuperscript{8} While his occupation is unknown, he may have served as a scribe\textsuperscript{9} to the wealthy Jewish leader Rafael Joseph Çelebi. The latter’s position as civil representative, known by the honorific Ottoman title of çelebi, of Egypt’s Jewish community\textsuperscript{10} was based on the influential offices he held within the financial administration of the land on the Nile: he was not only the Ottoman governor’s chief money-lender,

\textsuperscript{7} For his biography, see n. 4. Probably “Sambari” is a misspelling of the Arabic \textit{samkarı¯}, “tinsmith,” which may have been the occupation of one of his ancestors and then became an epithet of the family; see Shtober, in his introduction to \textit{DY}, 14. Although Strauss-Ashtor has established the years 1640–1703 as Sambari’s lifetime (see A. Strauss, \textit{Tolëbot ba-yebwim be-mikrayim ve-surjåt taḥat šbîlton ba-mamlukim}, vol. 1 [Jerusalem, 1944], 5 [introduction]), there is no basis for this assumption.


\textsuperscript{9} See Shtober, in his introduction to \textit{DY}, 14.

\textsuperscript{10} The history of the communal leadership of Egyptian Jewry, a topic of scholarly debate, cannot be treated here; see, however, the most recent discussion by Shimon Shtober, “The Establishment of the \textit{Ri’a¯sat al-Yahu¯d} in Medieval Egypt as Portrayed in the Chronicle \textit{Divrey Yosef: Myth or History?” Revue des Études Juives} 164.1/2 (2005): 53–54.
arrāf bāṣî; he was also the director of the Cairo Mint, and, in addition, managed the customs revenues at the important sea port of Alexandria as a tax-farm (iltizâm). Expanding a little on Rafael Joseph's life will provide us a glimpse into Sambari's world and shed some new light on his chronicle as well.

Rafael Joseph is known to have been one of the major activists in the Sabbatean movement in Egypt and his biography is closely linked to the rise and fall of Sabbatai Sevi. After a first visit to Cairo in 1662, during which the latter had already made the acquaintance of the former, Sabbatai Sevi in early 1664 again came to Egypt as an emissary and fundraiser of the impoverished Jewish community of Palestine. During this second sojourn in Cairo, which lasted nearly two years, he often enjoyed the hospitality of the ċelebi, and Sabbatai Sevi's marriage to Sarah, the “messiah’s consort,” may well have taken place at the residence of the Jewish financier.

Under the influence of Sabbateanism, Rafael Joseph seems to have adopted an ascetic lifestyle, as described by Sambari in the eulogy for his mentor included in his chronicle:

He spent all his days in fasting. While each night the members of his household dined on delicacies, he ate [only] seeds. At midnight he got up and devoted himself to Torah (study) in holiness and purity, immersing himself (in a ritual bath), flagellating himself, and dressing in sackcloth.

Rafael Joseph also engaged in a lively correspondence with the major propagandist of Sabbateanism, the “prophet” Nathan of Gaza. In the fall of 1665, Nathan sent an extended epistle to the leader of Egyptian Jewry in which he went so far as to predict that “within in a year and a few months from today, he (Sabbatai Sevi) will take the government from the Turkish King (melekh ba-Togar, i.e., Ottoman Sultan) without war [vie!], for it is only by (the power of the) hymns and praises that he shall utter,

13. DY 316, 40–45.
that all nations shall submit to his rule.” 14 In 1666, alarmed at the ferment among their Jewish subjects that disrupted business and implicitly challenged Ottoman rule, the authorities jailed Sabbatai Sevi. Wishing to avoid making a martyr of him they persuaded him to convert to Islam. 15

Another contemporary portrait of Rafael Joseph may hold some additional clues to the understanding of Sambari’s patron—though this description of the Jewish financier goes back to Jacob Sasportas (1610–93), one of the most outspoken opponents of Sabbateanism, whose testimony may therefore be rather biased. According to Sasportas, Rafael Joseph had not only embezzled substantial amounts of money (deposited with him by Sabbatean believers) but was also responsible for the death of a competitor prepared to offer a higher bid for the lucrative tax-farm of the Alexandrian port. 16 More importantly, he also notes that Rafael Joseph had converted to Islam in order to avoid being prosecuted for his crimes. Sasportas goes on telling that the governor, however, unimpressed by the çelebi’s change of religion, ordered his assassination. 17

Due to the polemical tone of Sasportas’s report, one may discount his accusations of criminal malfeasance. 18 Still, Rafael Joseph’s alleged acceptance of Islam may be explained by his desire to follow in the footsteps of Sabbatai Sevi and some of his other devotees. 19 As the involvement of

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14. The letter has been preserved within the anti-Sabbatean writings of Jacob Sasportas, Tzisat novel Tzvi, ed. Y. Tishby (Jerusalem, 1954), 7,19–12,10; see the translation and discussion of the letter by Scholem, Sabbathai Sevi, 268–90; for the quotation, see Tzisat novel Tzvi, 10,5–7; cf. Matt Goldish, Sabbatean Prophets (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 76–81.
17. Sasportas, Tzisat novel Tzvi, 6,4–24; cf. Tishby’s short remark, ibid., n. 3, claiming that the whole story of Rafael Joseph’s conversion was invented. In this Tishby follows Heinrich Graetz, Geschicht der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart, vol. 10 (3rd ed.; Leipzig, 1896, 438–39, n. 9). Sasportas, however, mentions Rafael Joseph’s conversion again, Tzisat novel Tzvi, 321,10–11. On Sasportas and his opposition to Sabbateanism, see Elie Moyal, Rabbi Ya’acov Sasportas (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1992); Goldish, Sabbatean Prophets, 150–51. On another Jewish tax-farmer, Joseph (Yasif), who was assassinated by Ottoman soldiers in 1695, see Shtober, “On the Issue of Customs Collectors,” 75.
18. Similar Scholem, Sabbathai Sevi, 366, who also questions Rafael Joseph’s conversion as Sambari, “a man on the scene,” fails to mention it (ibid. n. 75). Yet, Sambari may have intentionally passed over this detail, which would have been highly embarrassing to himself (see in the following).
the ṣarrāf baṣī in the Sabbatean movement threatened Egypt’s economic routine, one may even go as far as to speculate that the Ottoman government pressured Rafael Joseph to convert (just as Sabbatai Sevi had changed his religious allegiance after having been imprisoned by the Ottomans) and ultimately decided to assassinate the financier, when the conversion of the messianic candidate had failed to put an end to the disturbing movement.

In any case, a few months after Rafael Joseph’s death in 1669, the Ottomans reformed the financial administration of Egypt under the newly appointed governor Kara İbrahim Pasha. As the latter was closely tied to one of the reformist grand viziers of the Köprülű dynasty, who headed the imperial government for most of the second half of the seventeenth century, the downfall of Rafael Joseph may have to be understood within the context of the Köprülű era, in which fiscal reforms combined with the puritanical (anti-Sufi) agenda of the Kadızadeli movement.20

While the affair of Sambari’s patron raises more questions than it is possible to answer here, the assumption that Rafael Joseph indeed had embraced the dominant religion opens the possibility to see in Sambari’s polemics against Islam the expression of a very personal disappointment—despite the fact that there is no mention of this highly embarrassing detail in Sambari’s portrait of Rafael Joseph. However, since Sambari describes himself as one of those attendants of the çelevi who lost his means of livelihood when his powerful patron was assassinated,21 it is plausible to assume that Sambari himself had once belonged to the inner circle of Sabbateans in Cairo. But as this argument is based solely on circumstantial evidence, the mere fact that his employer was affected by the Sabbatean crisis should be enough to show the importance of historical context in understanding his chronicle.

Having said this, Sambari’s work reflects the contemporary rabbinic

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20. See Jane Hathaway, “The Grand Vizier and the False Messiah: The Sabbatai Sevi Controversy and the Ottoman Reform in Egypt,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117.4 (1997): 665–71. Though the grand vizier Köprülű Mehmet was an opponent of the Sufis, he was as well suspicious of the Kadızadelis, as they challenged political stability. However, after Sultan Mehmet V came under the influence of the Kadızadelis (as mentioned before, Vani Efendi had become his main preacher), the Köprülű reform and the ideological struggle against Sufism went hand in hand. On the Kadızadeli movement, see Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety*, 129–72; on its relation to the Köprülű era, see ibid., 146–48.

21. See *DY* 316, 51–52: “I the young author had been one of his servants; I ate from his fruit, drank from his water, and found shelter in his shade. But now, in my many troubles, ‘the source has dried up and the tree has been cut off’ (mBB 9.2); and I have no one to rely on.”
indictment of a messianic movement that not long before had been so popular among Egyptian Jewry: A few months after the apostasy of Sabbatai Sevi and some of his followers, Egyptian rabbis not only excommunicated the messianic pretender and other leaders of the movement but went so far as to ban all Sabbatean literature (December 1666). And even Sambari’s work was not spared these acts of purging. Though modern readers would have appreciated his account of the failed movement written just seven years (1673) after the messianic candidate had embraced the ruling religion, the fact that Sambari dared to include in his chronicle a short description of the affair went too far. Thus the pages containing the chronicler’s depiction of Sabbatai Sevi were later cut out of both (surviving) manuscripts of Divre Yosef. Still, based on the few remaining references it is possible to conclude that the Jewish chronicler was highly critical of the enthusiastic outburst—at least in hindsight. In my view, Sambari’s interest in the history of the Jewish Diaspora in Muslim lands can be understood in light of the Sabbatean crisis, and his jibes against Islam are explicable as a reaction to the conversion of the messianic candidate to the religion of Muhammad.

An additional biographical aspect of importance to the understanding of Sambari’s work consists in the sources available to him. At Abraham Skanderi’s yeshiva in Cairo he had access to one of the richest Jewish libraries of the Mediterranean region, which included rare Jewish manu-

22. The ban formula too is transmitted by Sasportas, Tesdait novel Tovi, 197.27–199.15; see Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi, 750–51; cf. Jacob Barnai, “A Document concerning Shabbetai Zvi from the Geniza” (Hebrew), Pemim 44 (1990): 41–45; there, Barnai discusses a Genizah fragment mentioning the ban over a leading Jewish personality in Egypt. Though assuming that the person under discussion was Rabbi Jacob Fala’i, Barnai considers the possibility that the text refers to Rafael Joseph.

23. Cf. Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi, 179: “Sambari could have given us a firsthand description of Sabbatai; in fact, he did, and it is one of the ill-fated vicissitudes of Jewish historiography that the precious pages have been torn out of the only two extant manuscripts of his chronicle.”

24. DY 312, 27–28: “Now we shall report matters of controversy, fights, and battles that (were conducted) with spears and swords in market places and streets . . .” then the text breaks off. See Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi, 179; Shtober in his introduction to DY, 44–45, 63, who also holds that Sambari had once been a Sabbatean.

25. Interestingly, Abraham Miguel Cardozo, a former converso who later was to become one of the leading Sabbatean theologians, also seems to have studied at Abraham Skanderi’s yeshiva, although most probably during the 1650s, i.e., prior to Sambari; see Abraham Miguel Cardozo: Selected Writings, ed. D. J. Halperin (New York, 2001), 115.
scripts, a wide range of sixteenth-century Hebrew books printed in Italy, and Islamic literature as well. Thus, in addition to his profound knowledge of the Jewish exegetical tradition, Sambari was acquainted with medieval and early modern Jewish chronicles from Christian Europe, as well as with classical Muslim historiography. He translated extensive excerpts from his Arabic sources into Hebrew, which he then included in his own historiographical writing. The ideal research conditions he found in the Skanderi library enabled him to write a truly intertextual work of Jewish-Muslim history.

Sambari’s chronicle encompasses a time span of more than a millennium; it starts with the rise of Islam in the early seventh century and ends shortly before the completion of the work in 1673. He opens his historical narrative with an account of various legends about the rise of Muhammad and the early Islamic period and then provides a brief overview of the succession of caliphs and sultans, from the Umayyads (661–750 C.E.), through the ‘Abbásids (750–1258), the Fāṭimids (909–1171), the Mamluks (1250–1517) up to the Ottomans (who conquered Egypt in 1517). In Divre Yosef this chronological history of the Muslim rulers serves as the framework into which he inserts passages relating to Jewish history, which to Sambari was the history not of political rulers—the kind of which Judaism obviously lacked—but of learned rabbis and influential community leaders.

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29. For details, see my Islamische Geschichte, 114, 118–20. However, in equating Jewish history with the succession of rabbinic teachers, Sambari was in line with many pre-modern Jewish chroniclers. The fact that Jews had no military or dynastic history to write about left Jewish authors with few other choices; see
Already the very first sentence of *Divre Yosef* hints to Sambari’s polemical intentions. Here the author justifies his way of arranging Jewish history according to Muslim chronology with an allusion to Genesis 36.31: (These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites). A closer look at Sambari’s reworking of the biblical verse illustrates his characteristic blending of historiography with playful exegesis. The first example will be the opening of *Divre Yosef*:

These are the kings who reigned in the land of Babylon, Egypt, and Constantinople, after sovereignty (malkhut) had ceased among the Israelites and after our magnificent temple had been destroyed.

While Jewish exegesis traditionally interpreted Edom as the forbearer of Rome and Christianity, Sambari, who is not particularly interested in the Jewish encounter with Christianity, replaces “Edom” with “the kings who reigned in the land of Babylon, Egypt, and Constantinople.” As quickly becomes clear, what the author has in mind are the subsequent Muslim caliphates of the ‘Abbāsids, Fatimids, and Ottomans whose centers of power were located in “Babylon, Egypt, and Constantinople.” In this way he reflects an exegetical tradition going back to Saadia Gaon and Abraham Ibn Ezra, both of whom already questioned the widespread equation of the “fourth beast” in Daniel 7 with Edom (Christian Rome) but identified it with Ishmael (namely, Islam). In order to understand Sambari’s use of Saadia’s and Ibn Ezra’s exegesis, it is necessary to make a short excursus into the history of the interpretation of Daniel 7, the biblical prooftext that served almost all pre-modern Jewish writers as a model for the interpretation of world history.

In Jewish exegesis the four “beasts” mentioned in the apocalyptic visions of Daniel 7 had traditionally been understood as symbols of the

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31. This verse is verbally quoted in 1 Chr 1.43, a case of inner-biblical exegesis.

subsequent empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The “fourth beast” (Dan 7.7), commonly identified with Edom/Rome and, after Rome’s conversion, with Christianity, was supposed to be the final kingdom before the messianic redemption. While Saadia (tenth century, Baghdad) only hinted that he believed Islam to be the fourth beast, the twelfth-century Jewish exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra (who had fled in Christendom from the Almohad invasion of Spain) made this identification explicit and declared the rule of Islam, malkhut Yiśma’el, to be the last empire of world history. Sambari, aware of Ibn Ezra’s replacement of “Edom” by “Ishmael” as the fourth beast of Daniel’s vision, went a step further and even replaced the “Edom” in Gn 36.31 with “Ishmael” — standing for the subsequent Muslim dynasties of the ‘Abbāsids, Fāṭimids, and Ottomans.

Moreover, while the biblical verse reads “These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites,” Sambari speaks of the Muslim rulers reigning after the end of Jewish statehood. This serves two purposes. First, he justifies his use of Islamic chronology for dating Jewish history by pointing to the fact that the Bible itself refers to non-Jewish kings when it speaks about periods when there were no Jewish rulers. Second, he stresses the contrast between Muslim sovereignty and the diasporic existence (galut) of the Jews. In this way, at the very outset, Sambari hints at one of his major themes: the social marginalization and humiliation of the Jews under Muslim rule—as he perceived it.

Sambari was well aware when he introduced his work with an over-


54. See below n. 40.


56. See below. On the understanding of galut as social marginalization, see Mark R. Cohen, “Sociability and the Concept of Galut in Jewish-Muslim Relations in the Middle Ages,” Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Inter-
view of Muslim dynastic chronology that pious Jews were divided on the question of the value of studying non-Jewish history. In his own defense, he quotes a classical midrash, the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el* (hereafter *Mekilta*):

Should the Hebrew slave (ba-’eved ba-’ivri) ask, Why should we be interested to know the chronology of the kings of Ishmael, whether they ruled or not? Answer him what our sages of blessed memory said about the chronology of the kings of Media and Persia (Est 10.2). They (the sages) said: Since they (the Jews) did not want to count the years according to their own (chronology) they shall count (them) according to (the chronology) of others; as (Scripture) says in the second year of Darius (Hag 1.1), in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2.1), etc. (That is to say) Since you did not want to be subjected (le-bishta’ahed) to heaven, you shall be subjected to the Arab peoples (goyim ’araviim).49

Sambari refers to the biblical use of non-Jewish chronology in speaking about times when there were no Jewish kings. Consistent with Jewish tradition, he believes the loss of a Jewish sovereignty to be a punishment for Israel’s sins. By citing the Mekilta he explains the need to use a foreign chronology for dating Jewish history as an expression of the Jewish experience of subjection (le-bishta’ahed): this also explains why he addresses the reader as the “Hebrew slave” (ba-’eved ba-’ivri, deriving from the same Hebrew root as le-bishta’ahed). Moreover, interpreting Jewish history as a series of “subjections” Sambari reflects Saadia Gaon’s commentary to Dan 7.7, who already said Israel would be “subjected” to the

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39. *DY* 77, 4–6. The last sentence too occurs in Meikilta, a few lines later; cf. ed. Horovitz and Rabin, 203, 15–16, *li-fegume goyim ‘araviim*, “to the blemished,” or “inferior Arab people,” which could also mean that it is prohibited to intermarry with them. (The printed editions read *li-fne goyim*, “to the non-Jews”.) Interestingly, Sambari does not quote *fegume*; if his Meikilta version did not differ from the edition by Horovitz and Rabin, this could mean that he softened the polemical tone of the quotation to some extent.

In continuation of his interpretation of Gn 36.31 (step 1), Sambari juxtaposes the “kings,” whom he had already identified with the rulers of “Babylon, Egypt and Constantinople” (step 2), with the “Arab people” mentioned in the Mekilta (step 3):

Truly, these are the kings (Gn 36.31), i.e., the empire of the ‘Abbāsids and the caliphs who ruled in Baghdad, i.e., “Babylon.” They are descendents of their prophet (i.e., Muhammad), who belongs to the “Arabs.”\footnote{41. DY 77, 8–9.}

In this way, Sambari hints at the genealogical claim of the ‘Abbāsīd dynasty that derived its lineage from al-‘Abbās Ibn ‘Abd al- Muṭṭalib Ibn Ḥāshim, the uncle of “their prophet,” Muhammad. In addition, the Jewish chronicler was aware of the Islamic tradition according to which Muhammad descended from Ishmael, and to him, ‘Abbāsīd rule vividly manifested the subjection of the Jews by the malkhut Yisḥaḥel, as among all Muslim dynasties the ‘Abbāsīds held the caliphate for the longest period: first from 750 until the Mongol conquest of Baghdad (1258), and subsequently again as “shadow” caliphs of Cairo by the grace of the Mamlūks who were the real rulers. Since the Mamlūk period ended with the Ottoman conquest of Egypt (1517), the end of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate was identical with the beginning of contemporary history from Sambari’s viewpoint.

Having explained his use of Islamic periodization from a Jewish perspective, Sambari embarks on the historical narrative of his chronicle with a chapter about the rise of Islam, which he entitles “Story about the prophet who presumes to speak in the name of the Lord.” This is a clear allusion to Dt 18.20 and Sambari’s polemical intention becomes obvious when we take into account the second part of this biblical verse, which reads in full:
Any prophet who presumé to speak in my name a word that I did not command him to utter, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet shall die.

That Sambari did not quote the last part of the verse may be attributed to the caution of the author who did not want to be accused of cursing the prophet of Islam (a potentially very dangerous act). Nevertheless, he could be sure that his Jewish readers would immediately understand the hidden message of his allusion. He may, however, also have omitted the biblical clause about a prophet “who speaks in the name of other gods” because he was fully aware of the strictly monotheistic character of Islam: Despite his otherwise negative opinion of the Qur’an, Sambari states that “in this book” Muhammad “expressed the Oneness of God in perfect unity.” It seems to be exactly that ambivalent attitude toward Islam—oscillating between the rejection of its prophetic origin and the recognition of its strictly monotheistic message—that characterized Sambari’s (and other Jewish writers’) view on the religion of Muhammad, an ambivalence that became especially problematic after the “prophet” Nathan of Gaza had declared Sabbatai Sevi to be the messiah and the messianic candidate himself had accepted Islam.

While the chronological framework of Divre Yosef is primarily an Islamic one, Sambari also tries to relate the events of Muslim history to a Jewish periodization—thereby questioning any kind of Muslim supersessionism that might be implied in an exclusive usage of Islamic chronology.


45. DY 92, 44–45: U-ve’i’to ba-sefer yih’d with el be-takhlit ba-yih’bud. In another chapter, based on Capsali’s chronicle (see below n. 48), Sambari (DY 151, 14–152, 27) points out that some of the hajj rituals that go back to pre-Islamic times—such as the stoning of the pillars at Minâ—have completely lost their polytheistic connotations (while Capsali, living in Venetian Candia, characterizes these rituals as idolatry). In this he follows Maimonides’ earlier assessment of the same ritual; see his famous responsum to the proselyte Űvadyah, Teḥuwot ba-Rambam, ed. J. Blau (Jerusalem, 1986), 2:727, no. 448. For a detailed discussion, see my Islamische Geschichte, 229–31.

44. Yet, on the background of the Sabbatean movement, Sambari would probably not argue that, under coercion, Jews might consider conversion to Islam without compromising the prohibition of idolatry. Although Maimonides in his famous discussion on forced conversion to Islam points out that he did not regard Islam as idolatrous, on a theoretical plane, his attitude toward Islam was more negative too; see David Novak, “The Treatment of Islam and Muslims in the Legal Writings of Maimonides,” Studies in Islamic and Judaic Tradition, ed. W. M. Brinner, S. Ricks (Atlanta, Ga., 1986), 233–50; Eliezer Schlossberg, “The Attitude of Maimonides towards Islam” (Hebrew), Pe’amin 42 (1990): 58–60.
Combining biblical phrases with allusions to midrashim and medieval Jewish historical literature, Sambari dates the rise of Muhammad according to Jewish history:

_It happened in the days when the judges ruled_ (Ruth 1.1)—woe is to the generation [whose judges are judged and woe is to the generation whose judges need to be judged].

(It happened) at the end (of the period) of our masters, the Savora’im, Rav Ḥinenay and Rav Ḥana, and at the beginning (of the period) of the Ge’onim, Rav Yitshak Ga’on:

_There arose a new king_ (Ex 1.8) who gave new decrees (gezerot) in the country of the East and his name was Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdallah, whose genealogy goes far back, as far as Kedar, the son of Ishmael, the son of Abraham.

The first line is a quotation from the midrash to Ruth 1.1. By alluding to this biblical book, Sambari makes clear that, in his opinion, the rise of Islam marked the beginning of a troublesome period for Judaism. Moreover, assuming a learned Jewish audience that would associate the immediate continuation of the midrash (“woe is to the generation whose judges are judged and woe is to the generation whose judges need to be judged”), Sambari seems to hint that the rise of Islam was a divine punishment for the sins of the Jews (and their judges).

In the second paragraph, he refers to two classical historical writings of medieval Judaism, Rav Sherira Gaon’s _Igeret_ (‘Epistle’) from the late tenth century (986) and Abraham Ibn Da’ud’s _Sefer ha-Kabalah_ (‘Book of Tradition’) from the twelfth century (1160/61), both of which represent the earliest Jewish chronological systems mentioning Muhammad. Harmonizing between the somewhat diverging chronological systems of Sherira and Ibn Da’ud—one puts Muhammad in the period of the Savora’im (sixth-seventh–century Babylonian sages) while the other synchronizes him with the subsequent Ge’onim—Sambari goes much further than these medieval Jewish chroniclers. While Sherira and Ibn Da’ud aimed

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45. This is a quotation from _Midrash Ruth Rabbah_, 1.1, the continuation of the quotation as marked by the brackets is mine; see the traditional Vilna edition (repr. Jerusalem, 1970), 2b.
46. _DY_ 90, 5–8.
only at synchronizing the history of Jewish scholars and early Islam, Sambari undoubtedly sets out to portray the history of Islam in judgmental terms. To him, the rise of Muhammad does not mark the beginning of a new era (according to which even Jewish history would have to be dated) but it is just another punishment brought upon the Jews for their transgressions.

In a similar polemical vein, Sambari makes use of another biblical allusion, Ex 1.8: By depicting Muhammad in the language the Bible uses for Pharaoh, he conveys the implicit message that the rise of Islam meant the subjugation of Jews. This hint made much sense to a Jewish community living in (Ottoman) Egypt for whom the Exodus story must have been especially evocative and who, moreover, had recently experienced the disillusionment of all their hopes of delivery with the failure of Sabbateanism.

The polemical tone gets even stronger in Sambari’s reworking of a classical Islamic legend, in the course of which he again makes a specific use of biblical allusions:

(A) He (i.e., Muhammad) was a mighty and successful warrior and fortune smiled on him. (But) wherever he turned he put (it) to the worse (1 Sam 14.47) through (the influence of) his intimate friend and follower, the great astronomer Buḥairan, who was uncircumcised in spirit and flesh (Ez 44.9).

(B) He (Buḥairan) told his (Muhammad’s) father ‘Abdallah: A son shall be issued of your loins (1 Kgs 8.19) whom you shall call Muhammad. He shall be a wild ass of a man (Gn 16.12); and his fame shall spread out throughout (Josh 6.27) the countries.

(C) His (Muhammad’s) father (‘Abdallah) kept the matter in mind (Gn 37.11) and waited full of hopes until his prediction came true and the decree of the Lord purged him (Ps 105.19). The boy grew up (Jgs 48). Cf. Lassner, “Joseph Sambari,” 546–47. In speaking of a “new king who rose in the country of the East,” Sambari alludes not only to Ex 1.8 but, moreover, draws on another important source of his work: Elijah Capsali’s Ottoman Chronicle (Seder Eliyahu zuta, written in Candia in 1523), that also contains a chapter on the origins of Islam; cf. Seder Eliyahu zuta le-Rabbi Eliyahu Kapsali, ed. A. Shmulevitz, S. Simonsohn, M. Benayahu (Jerusalem, 1975), 1.36: “In these days rose in the land of the East a mighty and strong king whose name was MSMT.” On Capsali’s depiction of early Islam, see now my Islamische Geschichte, 128–40; as well as my “Exposed to All the Currents,” esp. 49–58.

48. Cf. Lassner, “Joseph Sambari,” 546–47. In speaking of a “new king who rose in the country of the East,” Sambari alludes not only to Ex 1.8 but, moreover, draws on another important source of his work: Elijah Capsali’s Ottoman Chronicle (Seder Eliyahu zuta, written in Candia in 1523), that also contains a chapter on the origins of Islam; cf. Seder Eliyahu zuta le-Rabbi Eliyahu Kapsali, ed. A. Shmulevitz, S. Simonsohn, M. Benayahu (Jerusalem, 1975), 1.36: “In these days rose in the land of the East a mighty and strong king whose name was MSMT.” On Capsali’s depiction of early Islam, see now my Islamische Geschichte, 128–40; as well as my “Exposed to All the Currents,” esp. 49–58.

49. Here I am translating according to the Masoretic text of Ps 105.19 that has tserafathu (‘purged him’), while Sambari reads serafathu (‘burnt him’). On Sambari’s polemical play on Ps 105.19, see below.
13.24) and was successful, so that his father saw that none of the words of the uncircumcised were said in vain.50

Here, Sambari refers to the well-known Islamic tradition according to which a Christian monk recognized Muhammad’s future mission when the latter was still a child.51 One of the main versions of this legend is found in the Life of Muhammad (Sı¯rat Rasu¯l Alla¯h) compiled by Ibn Ish. a¯q (a work that was revised by Ibn Hisha ¯m in the early ninth century). According to this version, the boy Muhammad once accompanied his uncle Abū Ṭālīb on a caravan from Mecca to Syria. When they arrived in the Syrian city of Bosra, a monk, whose name is given here as Bah. ı¯ra¯, noticed the so-called seal of prophethood (Arabic: khātam al-nubuwa) between the shoulders of the child. Then, Ibn Isḥaq tells us,

He (Bah. ı¯ra¯) went to his uncle Abū Ṭālīb and asked him what relation this boy was to him, and when he told him he was his son, he said that he was not, for (according to a book read by Bah. ı¯ra¯) it could not be that the father of this boy was alive. “He is my nephew,” he (Abū Ṭālīb) said, and when he asked what had become of his father he told him that he had died before the child was born. “You have told the truth,” said Bah. ı¯ra¯. “Take your nephew back to his country and guard him carefully against the Jews, for by Allah! If they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil. A great future lies before this nephew of yours, so take him home quickly.”52

50. DY’90, 8–91, 14.

Sambari is obviously alluding to this legend, although not necessarily to Ibn Ishāq’s version; contrary to Islamic tradition, he connects the story to Muhammad’s father, not his uncle. The Jewish chronicler can trust that his audience will be acquainted with a story familiar to almost anyone living in an Islamic environment. Moreover, the author of Divre Yosef seems to be ridiculing the Bahārā-figure by calling him Buhairān which sounds like a diminutive form of the name as he is known in Islamic literature.

In the Islamic context, the monk Bahārā serves as a Christian witness to the truth of Islam. At the same time, the story is also polemically directed toward Judaism. Convinced of Muhammad’s prophetic mission, the monk admonishes Abū Ṭaḥlib to protect his nephew from the Jews. It may be this anti-Jewish strain in the original story that leads Sambari to describe the Christian, whom he characterizes with a quotation from Ezekiel, as “uncircumcised in spirit and flesh,” as the one behind all the evil that Muslims will do to the Jews. Furthermore, by depicting Christianity as the source of Muslim anti-Judaism, Sambari may have had in mind apologetic considerations aimed to mitigate somewhat his anti-Muslim polemics.

What is especially noteworthy in Sambari’s reworking of the Bahārā-legend is his use yet again of biblical allusions. His technique of casting the Bahārā legend into a biblical language has certain similarities with the narrative strategy of “oicotypification”—a term used in the study of folklore to describe how a tradition originating in one cultural framework is adapted to a new context. However, Sambari goes far beyond a simple adaptation of an Islamic narrative for a Jewish readership in his sophisticated utilization of ambiguous semantics.

A close look at how the author builds his text by interweaving snippets from biblical verses reveals a possible double message: On the one hand, he puts Muhammad into a biblical context by attributing to him verses from the stories about Solomon (1 Kgs 8.19), Joshua (Josh 6.27), Joseph (Gn 37.11), and Samson (Jgs 13.24)—which may be distantly echoing the Islamic view of Muhammad as the “seal of the prophets.” On the other hand, Sambari uses biblical allusions with a polemical intention.

53. However, he found an echo of this legend in Capsali’s chronicle (Seder Eliyahu zuta, ed. Shmuelevitz et al., 1:38–39). Capsali’s version goes back to the Christian Bahārā legend; see my Islamische Geschichte, 136–37, as well as my “Exposed to All the Currents,” 55–56.

One of the most important prooftexts for Jewish polemics against Islam is Gn 16.12 (cited in lemma B of the last quotation from Divre Yosef) where the pregnant Hagar is told the following about her (yet unborn) son Ishmael:

He shall be a wild ass of a man; his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him.\(^55\)

In medieval Jewish literature, Ishmael represents the forbearer of the Arabs and Muslim nations in general. Among others, Ibn Ezra, whose commentaries were frequently used by Sambari, takes this verse as a prophecy of Islam’s future conquests and wars:

Insofar as he was “wild,” his hand was against everyone, and insofar as he was a “man,” everyone’s hand will be against him (Gn 16.12). The correct meaning, in my opinion, is that he will be among men like a wild person and will be victorious over everyone, but later on everyone’s hand will be against him.\(^56\)

Unlike Ibn Ezra, Sambari does not quote the second part of Gn 16.12 (his hand [will be] against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him) but cites Josh 6.27 instead. However, since the Joshua story has an especially bellicose character, this actually strengthens the interpretation of Gn 16.12 as a prediction of Islam’s future wars. This fits well into Sambari’s account of Muslim history that (in the fashion of most pre-modern historiography) largely consists of military and dynastic history.

In another case, his playful use of biblical language works like a pun (here I return to a paragraph already quoted above [C]):

(C) His (Muhammad’s) father (‘Abdalla¯h) kept the matter in mind (Gn 37.11) and waited full of hopes until his prediction came true and the decree of the Lord purged him (Ps 105.19).\(^57\)

By slightly altering the spelling of the word tserafathu (“purged”) in Ps 105.19 Sambari creates a text that has to be decoded in two ways simulta-

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\(^{56}\) Mikra’ot gedolot ha-keter: Mahadurat yesod h. adashah, ed. M. Cohen (Ramat-Gan, 1997), 1:150.

\(^{57}\) DY 90, 8–91, 14; cf. Shtober, DY, 91, n. 10; Lassner, “Joseph Sambari,” 555–56.
neously. First, the reader is expected to recall the original verse, “Until his prediction came true the decree of the Lord *purged him* (*tserafatbu*),” and to understand it as a hopeful prediction in the sense of the Islamic Bahîrâ legend: “Until Bahîrâ’s prediction came true, the decree of the Lord” prepared Muhammad for his mission. However, by replacing in *tserafatbu* (“purged him”) the letter *tsade* with a *sin*—both of which in Sambari’s (“oriental”) pronunciation of Hebrew must have sounded very similar—the author turns the biblical allusion into a curse on Muhammad: “The decree of the Lord may *burn* him (*serafathu*).” The reader of *Divre Yosef* is expected to have both meanings in mind, the traditional wording of Ps 105.19 and its persiflage. Or as Boyarin has described a similar phenomenon, “by calling up two intertextual codes” he “generates two possible decodings of the text.”

As documented by this and other examples, despite Sambari’s polemics against Islam, he takes certain precautions when referring to the Prophet of Islam. Besides hiding his maledictions on Muhammad behind biblical allusions that were only understandable to a Jewish audience trained in a specific interpretative tradition, he tends to shift the responsibility for the tensions between Muhammad and the Jews onto Christianity. This tendency can be furthermore discerned in the following paragraph taken from his account of Muhammad’s life:

> Afterwards the uncircumcised Buhairân advised Muhammad to destroy, massacre, and exterminate (Est 3.13) all the descendents of the Jews, who did not come to help him and did not observe his covenant.

This may be an allusion to the Islamic traditions about the battles between Muhammad and the Jews who had then been living in the region of Medina. According to a tradition recorded in Ibn Ishaq’s biography of Muhammad, the Jewish tribe of the Banû Qurayṣa violated an agreement they had made not to align themselves with the enemies of Muhammad. Later, having been defeated by the troops of the Prophet, Sa‘ad Ibn Mu‘âd, appointed by Muhammad to serve as arbiter, decreed that in punishment, all the men of the Banû Qurayṣa were to be massacred and the women and children sold into slavery.

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59. *DY* 93, 52–54.
In speaking about this highly sensitive issue in the history of Jewish-Muslim relations (one that seems to have been consciously overlooked by almost all pre-modern Jewish writers), Sambari is very cautious. He only hints at the tradition about the Banū Qurayza, which in Islamic tradition was often used as to justify a hard-line position toward Judaism. Due to the fact that in seventeenth-century Egypt non-Muslim minorities found themselves in a weaker position (see below) than in the earlier period of Ottoman rule, Sambari had to be especially careful. And this may explain why Sambari accuses Muhammad’s Christian advisor—and not the Muslim Sa‘ād Ibn Mu‘ād—of having instigated the Prophet to kill the Jews “who did not come to help him and did not observe his covenant.” To this aim, Sambari uses the language of the biblical book of Esther and depicts Buhairān as a kind of Haman, the notorious instigator against the Jews. When in the following Sambari tells how Buhairān was killed by Abū Bakr61 he could be sure that his Jewish audience would joyfully recall the fate of the infamous Haman.

In another case, Sambari again refers to classical Islamic traditions about the life of Muhammad (ṣīra), stories that reflect about the relationship of early Islam and Judaism: Ibn Ishāq relates that four Jewish sages (abḥār al-yahūd) approached Muhammad with questions and having been impressed by his answers embraced Islam. 62 In Sambari’s rendering this story is told in the following way:

There were four Jewish sages in Damascus, very wise and discerning (men)—among them is mostly to blame ‘Ovadyahu Ben Shalom who did not fear the Lord. They came to Muhammad in order to test him with riddles. But they were caught in his net, as they (themselves) did not withstand the test. Thus they also joined his fellowship and became observers of his covenant.63

‘Ovadyahu Ben Shalom is a Hebrew rendering of the Arabic name ‘Abdallāh Ibn Salām, who according to Ibn Ishāq was one of the Jewish sages of Medina (not Damascus) and converted to Islam after Muham-

61. Sambari here uses a story he found in Capsali’s chronicle, according to which Muhammad’s Christian friend arranged a banquet in the course of which everyone fell asleep except Abū Bakr, who took Muhammad’s sword and killed the Christian (Sēvēr Eliyahu zuta, chapter 5, 1:38–39); on Capsali’s version and its Christian origin, see my “Exposed to All Currents,” 55–57.
63. DY’95, 91–94.
mad’s arrival in the city. Here again Sambari does not depend on Ibn Ishāq’s version but alludes to narratives that in one form or another would have been familiar to a Jewish audience living in a Muslim environment. The reason the author of Divre Yosef refers to these stories, however, is because, to him, they illustrate the danger posed by any convert.

In Sambari’s telling, the apostasy of the four Jewish sages led to the drafting of the so-called Pact of ‘Umar (in Arabic called ‘ahd ‘Umar or ḫurūṭ ‘Umarīyya, ‘Umarian conditions’), a legal document that was designed to define the status of Jews and Christians in the Islamic world for future generations:

When Muhammad saw that the uncircumcised (i.e., Buḥairān) who was his advisor and his leader had been killed and that the Jewish sages entered into his covenant, they (the Muslims) made a compromise with the Jews and imposed on them the conditions (the Pact of ‘Umar), remembered and practiced by every generation and family. And these conditions apply to Jews and the uncircumcised (Christians) ones (equally).

In the following, Sambari offers a Hebrew translation of the Pact of ‘Umar according to a version known from the eleventh-century Muslim jurist al-Mawardī, which lists the regulations and restrictions under which members of the “people of the book” (Arabic: abl al-kitāb)—a phrase jointly applied to Jews and Christians—would be granted the status of “protected” minorities (abl al-ḥimmā; the individual is called dhimmī). Among other restrictions, Jews and Christians were obliged to

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66. DY 95, 98–101.
distinguish themselves in their dress from their Muslim overlords and refrain from conducting religious ceremonies in public spaces.

Historically the Pact of 'Umar must be regarded as a social modus vivendi that, on the one hand, ensured Muslim supremacy but on the other enabled Jews and Christians to participate in (pre-modern) Islamic societies. The interpretation and enforcement of its stipulations varied over time depending on the relative strength of the government and other factors, as clearly illustrated by the fact that Jews served prominently in the financial administration of Ottoman Egypt. While the general principle that non-Muslims should not hold any governmental authority over Muslims was often overlooked, the lofty position of a Jew could always place him in a vulnerable position—as documented by the rise and fall of Rafael Joseph.

Yet, Sambari could not take such a detached position concerning the Pact of 'Umar. To him, these restrictions symbolized the status of subjection experienced by Jews under the rule of Islam, a subjection that was characteristic of the Jewish existence in Diaspora. Moreover, while, generally speaking, the situation of the Egyptian Jews had improved after the Ottoman conquest of the country (1517), their position progressively deteriorated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the later Ottoman period, Egypt witnessed ongoing rivalries between Ottoman governors, the military elite, and Muslim religious leaders (‘ulama’). Though the central government managed to regain some control over the

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69. See on this Cohen, Crescent and Cross, 65–68.


provinces through the political and financial reforms of the Köprülû grand viziers,72 these reforms coincided with a new religious fervor inspired by the Kadızadeli movement (as mentioned above) that was influential in Egypt as well. Their teachings found an especially receptive audience among demobilized mercenaries who poured into Egypt (as into other provinces) in the aftermath of the protracted Ottoman wars against the Hapsburgs. Considerations of space do not allow for an extended discussion here of this sociopolitical background,73 but it is safe to conclude that both inner-societal tensions and the new puritanical spirit created an atmosphere detrimental to non-Muslim minorities.

Sambari gives an example for the deterioration of dhimmı status in the late seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire: One of the last events recorded in his chronicle is a decree from the year 1671–72 prohibiting Jews from the production and possession of wine, a decree that went along with the destruction of wine stocks in Jewish homes.74 This represented a clear violation of the Pact of ʿUmar on the part of the Muslim authorities, since, as Sambari quotes the Pact, the dhimmı were only forbidden to “entic[e]” Müslıım “into drinking wine”: they themselves were not forbidden to possess or drink it for ritual purposes.75 However, it was the puritanical agenda of the Kadızadeli leader Vani Efendi, who as sultan Mehemet V’s personal sheik had considerable influence at court, that had caused similar prohibitions to be issued in other cities of the empire (such as Edirne, Bursa, and Izmir) where Christians and Jews were also forbidden to make or use wine—decrees that proved impossible to enforce for very long. While the decree of 1671–72 may be seen as a temporary aggravation aimed at placating Kadızadeli tendencies in parts of Muslim society, to Sambari it represented the general condition of the Hebrew slave who was subjected to the rule of Islam.

Sambari links the Pact of ʿUmar to a classical Islamic narrative according to which “four Jewish sages” joined Muhammad and accepted Islam. While there is evidence of Jews converting to the ruling religion over the entire period of Islamic history, the number of Jewish converts seems to have generally been limited (with the relatively rare exception of forced

72. See n. 20.
74. DY 316, 56–317, 69.
75. DY 99, 181–82; al-Māwardī, al-Aḥkām al-sultānīya, 129, reads “that they (i.e., the dhimmı) are forbidden to drink their wine in public.” The shorter version of the Pact of ʿUmar as represented by al-Ṭūrṭūshī says that they are prohibited from “selling” wine; see Sīrāj al-mulāk, 253.
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conversions). However, Sabbateanism caused the porous boundaries between Judaism and Islam to erode and made the phenomenon of conversion existentially threatening. This may explain why in Divre Yosef the danger posed by apostates to the Jewish community at large gets especially highlighted. It is probably for this reason too that Sambari expands on the case of one of the most famous-infamous Jewish converts to Islam, Samaw’al al-Maghribī (c. 1125–75), who later would become an influential Muslim polemicist against Judaism.

In this context, Sambari offers extensive paraphrases of al-Maghribī’s polemical work titled Ifḥām al-yahūd (‘Silencing the Jews’), composed after the latter had embraced the dominant faith in 1163 (in Marāghra, Azerbaijan). Most tellingly, Sambari voices his feelings about this book when he says that it should have more appropriately been titled “Humiliating the Jews.” Among the passages of Ifḥām al-yahūd discussed by Sambari is a dream vision that al-Maghribī says was the cause of his change of religion. Sambari rejects this explanation and attributes al-Maghribī’s conversion not to a transcendental vision but to a mundane interest in securing his career as a physician. In Sambari’s rendering, al-Maghribī’s vision of the Prophet Muhammad is as follows:

He told the reason (for his conversion) in his book: One night in a dream he had a great vision and saw a great light and fire was blazing

76. On Jewish conversions to Islam in the Middle Ages, see Nehemiah Levtzion, “Conversions and Islamicization in the Middle Ages: How Did Jews and Christians Differ?” (Hebrew), Pe’amim 42 (1990): 8–15; see also Sarah Stroumsa, “On Jewish Intellectual Converts to Islam in the Middle Ages” (Hebrew), Pe’amim 42 (1990): 61–75 (see other contributions included in the same issue of Pe’amim). The forced conversion of Jews and Christians violated Islamic law. Therefore, when dhimmis had been forcibly converted, they often were granted to return to their original religion later on. On the known persecutions of Jews in Islamic lands during the Middle Ages, see Cohen, Crescent and Cross, 163–70. According to Cohen (ibid., 169), “the Jews of Islam did not experience physical violence on a scale remotely approaching Jewish suffering in Western Christendom. By and large, even when dhimmis as a group experienced growing oppression and persecution in the postclassical period [of Islam, my emphasis], the grim conditions found in Europe were not matched.”

77. DY 146, 13–14.

78. To be exact, al-Maghribī tells about two dreams: In the first he claims to have encountered the Prophet Samuel, his namesake; in the second he saw the Prophet Muhammad; see Ifḥām al-yahūd (Silencing the Jews), ed. M. Perlmann (Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research 32 [New York, 1964]): 107–20 (Arabic text), 81–88 (English translation). Sambari conflates elements of both visions into one.
up next to him. In front of him sat a man on a chair, (who wore) a band on his forehead and an elegant white turban (that measured) 200 \[\text{sic}\] cubits on his head. The hair of his beard reached down to his navel. And in his hand was an open book.\textsuperscript{79}

Despite the dramatic elements he employs, Sambari is obviously satirizing al-Maghribi’s conversion story and gives a grotesque portrayal (one may liken it to a caricature) of Muhammad, who is said to have worn an extremely oversized turban and to have sported an unusually long beard.\textsuperscript{80} In his retelling of how Muhammad addresses al-Maghribi, Sambari again subverts the text by inserting into the Prophet’s speech a derogatory remark based on Hos 9.7:

He called him (al-Maghribi) and said: Jew! Why don’t you believe in me and in my prophethood and why don’t you heed me although we are brethren? I will give you a proof from your book, the Torah of Moses.

He was amazed about the vision and said: Who is the lord that speaks ‘Here I am’ (Isaiah 52:6)?

He answered him: I am Muhammad!—(The prophet is foolish) the inspired man driven mad (Hos 9.7)!—The Lord has sent me to care for my people (2 Sam 7.7; 1 Chr 17.6). Come closer to me...

By inserting the quotation from Hosea, Sambari is able to imply that Muhammad was “foolish” (Hebrew: evil) and “mad” (meshugga’).\textsuperscript{82} Long before Divre Yosef, this verse had become a topos of Jewish polemics against Islam and may have originated as an allusion to the Qur’anic tradition according to which some disbelievers called the Prophet of Islam a “possessed one” (Arabic: majnun).\textsuperscript{83}

The centerpiece of the conversion story, both in Sambari’s rendering and in the original Ifḥām al-yahad, is a discussion of a Torah quotation, Dt 18.15. I will again cite Sambari’s reading:

\textsuperscript{79} DY 147, 16–19.

\textsuperscript{80} Cf. in contrast Ifḥām al-yahad, 83–84, where al-Maghribi describes the Prophet as an ideal example of moderation in every sense: “He was clad in white, his turban was moderately elegant; . . . and his moustache and beard were of medium length” (my emphasis); for the Arabic text, see ibid., 111–12.

\textsuperscript{81} DY 147, 23–26.

\textsuperscript{82} While both manuscripts of DY omit the first clause, its wording would be associated by an audience sharing Sambari’s cultural background.

\textsuperscript{83} Cf. Qur’an 7.184, 37.56, where Muhammad is compared to a “possessed poet” (li-ṣbā’irin majnūnīn).
He (Muhammad) showed him (al-Maghribi) the (following quotation) from Scripture, written in the writing of Ishmael (Arabic characters) but in the language of Israel (Hebrew): The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from your midst (mi-kirbekha), from among your brethren (me-ah. ekha), like myself; him you shall heed (Dt 18.15). And he (Muhammad) explained for him the verse as (referring) to himself, as he belongs to the descendents of Ishmael, the brother of Isaac.84

Dt 18.15 and the almost parallel passage in Dt 18.18 were classical proof texts for the claim of certain Muslim theologians that the Torah prophesized the future mission of Muhammad, as “from the midst of his brethren” (Hebrew: mi-kerev ah. ehem, v. 18) was interpreted literally (Arabic: min wasat.in ikhwatihim)85 as to apply to the “descendents of Ishmael, the brother of Isaac.” There can be no doubt that since Islam does not share sacred scriptures with Judaism, their controversy over the correct exegesis of the Hebrew Bible did not carry the same weight as in the Christian-Jewish dispute; still, probably because of the Christian influences found in early Islam, Muslim theologians did refer to a set of biblical quotations—among them most prominently Dt 18.15 and 18—that were commonly understood to refer to Muhammad.86

Related to this kind of “typological” interpretation of the Torah is another Islamic doctrine according to which the text of the Hebrew Bible as preserved by Judaism has been “corrupted.” Inter alia, this claim was used in order to explain why there was such a limited number of biblical verses that could be said to predict the appearance of Muhammad as the final prophet—and why even these verses were not unequivocally clear about this prophecy. Among the classical topoi of Muslim polemic against Judaism are the accusations of tabāf (‘alteration,’ ‘corruption’) and tabād (‘replacement’) according to which the Jews were said to have tampered with the text of the Torah and replaced certain passages in it.87 It was this

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85. *Ishām al-yahūd*, 108 (Arabic text); for the English translation, see ibid., 81.


87. One of the often quoted Qur’ānic prooftexts for this theory is Qur’ān 2.75: “Are you then so eager that they (the Jews) should believe you, seeing there is a party of them that heard God’s word, and then tampered with it (yuḥarrifunahu, which has the same root as tabāf), and that after they had comprehended it, wittingly?” On the doctrine of tabāf, see Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 19–28; Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 225–48.
tampering that, in the Islamic view, made necessary a second revelation of the original monotheism of the biblical prophets, this time to Muhammad in the form of the Qur’an. Hence the Qur’an abrogated the Torah, and along with taḥrīf and taḥdīl, the concept of “abrogation” (naskh in Arabic) becomes one of the central concepts in classical Islamic thought. As these claims play an important role in Iḥām al-yabūd, Sambari refers to them as well, presenting the arguments of his counterpart in much detail:

He (al-Maghribi) maliciously accused us that the Torah has been altered (muḥlefet) and that we left out and added (certain parts of it). And in order to verify his words he built a line of chaos (Is 34.11; that is, he made inconsistent arguments): He wrote that Ezra the Scribe left out, added, and replaced (parts of the Torah).

As a proof he argued that the Torah had not been given to the masses (of the Israelites) in its entirety but only to the priests. The masses of the people were only given the poem Ha’azinu (Dt 32.1–43), as it says Therefore write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel (Dt 31.19). However, he gave the complete Torah to the priests, as it says: Moses wrote down this Torah and gave it to the priests, sons of Levi (Dt 31.9).

But when the sins caused the wicked Nebuchadnezzar to destroy the Temple he burnt the Torah and exiled Israel to Babylon. (There) they forgot the Torah . . . until one of them appeared who was a priest named Ezra and who knew some chapters of the Torah that had been transmitted to him since the time of Moses. He (Ezra) made them one (copy of the) Torah according to his (faulty) understanding.88

Sambari reports al-Maghribi’s discourse quite faithfully. The theory that the Torah was recreated by Ezra the Scribe after its original version had vanished with the destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent Babylonian Exile, however, is much older. In an Islamic context, it was, for example, elaborately developed by the eleventh-century Andalusian Ibn Ḥazm,89 whose classical critique of the Hebrew Bible was used by al-


Maghrībī. For his part, Sambari is less interested in a detailed refutation of Islamic Bible criticism (this may explain why he does not refer to Ibn Ḥazm himself); he is interested rather in using al-Maghribī’s polemics to illustrate the dangers posed by Jewish apostates.

There is yet another context, however, in which Sambari uses the Islamic doctrine of tahrīf and tabdīl in a polemical attack against Islam itself. He does so in a comparison of Jewish and Islamic ritual, a juxtaposition that made much sense to an audience that was familiar with the way of life of both Jewish and Muslim communities. That Sambari sees Islamic ritual as itself an “alteration” of Jewish precepts is the subtext of the following paragraph from Divre Yosef:

He (Muhammad) founded a new religion for them (the Arabs) in which he set up commandments that are in part from our Holy Torah and in part from other laws. And he left out and added (certain precepts) as it seemed appropriate to him and to the people with him.\footnote{DY 92, 28–30.}

Subsequently, Sambari offers a synopsis of Islamic rituals and their putative Jewish origins. This list is based on the writings of Rabbi Shim’on b. Tsemāḥ Duran (known under the acronym Rashbats), who in his polemical treatise against Christianity and Islam (Keshet u-magen, ‘Bow and Shield,’ composed in the early fifteenth century in Algiers)\footnote{This polemical treatise was first published as a part of Duran’s commentary to the mishnaic tractate Avot (called Magen avot, “Shield of the Fathers”) but is known as Keshet u-magen since it was first separately printed (Livorno, 1785; photographic reproduction: Jerusalem, 1970). A critical edition of Keshet u-magen that is based on the Bodleian MS 151 (and includes a rather questionable translation) can be found in Prosper Murciano’s New York University Ph.D. dissertation from 1975, “Simon ben Zemah Duran, Keshet u-magen” (microfilm publication,} had already compared the following Jewish and Islamic precepts:

\footnote{90. The only two Jewish writings that make the refutation of Ibn Ḥazm’s biblical criticism one of their major topics were written by Shlomoh Ibn Adret of Barcelona in the thirteenth century and Shim’on b. Tsemāḥ Duran at the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth; on Ibn Adret, see Camilla Adang, “A Jewish Reply to Ibn Ḥazm: Solomon b. Adret’s Polemic against Islam,” Judíos y musulmanos en al-Andalús y el Magreb—Contactos intelectuales: Actas reunidas y presentadas por Maribel Fierro (Madrid, 2002), 179–209; on both Ibn Adret and Duran, see my “Interreligious Polemics in Medieval Spain: Biblical Interpretation between Ibn Ḥazm, Shlomoh Ibn Adret, and Shim’on Ben Şemah Duran,” Gerhomb Schelom (1897–1982): In Memoriam, vol. 2, ed. J. Dan (Hebrew and English; Jerusalem, 2007), English part, 55–57. Inter alia, Adang and I differ on the question of Ibn Adret’s purpose when writing a refutation of Ibn Ḥazm.}
When he (Muhammad) saw that Yom Kippur is the most revered day of prayer and repentance in Judaism and that it includes five prayer (times), he established for his people five daily prayers.

And (when he saw) that Elul is a special month during the year for fasting and praying, he established for them also thirty days of fasting (the month of Ramadān).

When he saw that in Israel men who are (polluted by) semen wash themselves in (a quantity of) nine kabin of water, he established for (his people) the washing of hands and feet before prayer according to the Jewish custom.

(In thus doing) they (the Muslims) completely overdid it.93

While Sambari abbreviated certain parts of Duran’s discourse, his own primary addition is his concluding remark that the Muslims “completely overdid it.” To the author of Divre Yosef, Muhammad was not a legitimate prophet nor could Islam claim to be a revelation-based religion. According to Sambari, Muhammad not only imitated Judaism when he founded his religion but in exaggerating certain precepts he did exactly what Muslim polemicists said of Ezra: he distorted the one holy religion and replaced it with his own inventions, thereby abrogating the true Torah and instituting a “New Torah.” This is what he means when Sambari has Muhammad saying: “God has ordered me to found a new religion that did not exist (before) and a New Torah will come forth from my mouth.”94

It was in much the same way that Jacob Sasportas, an early and very outspoken critic of Sabbateanism, accused Sabbatai Sevi (and Nathan of Gaza) of creating a “New Torah.”95 If my interpretation is correct and Sambari—after his disillusionment over the mystical messiah—indeed came to similar conclusions as Sasportas, then he may have seen a point of comparison between Muhammad and Sabbatai Sevi in that they both claimed authority to abrogate the Torah with their own new teachings. Given that Sambari depicted Jewish history mainly as a succession of

94. Dy 92, 25.
95. Sasportas, Tsitsat novel Tovi, 43, 5; cf. Goldish, Sabbatean Prophets, 143–47, some of whose arguments I here apply to the reading of Sambari’s work. On Sasportas’s opposition to Sabbateanism that preceded the conversion of the messianic candidate, see above nn. 14 and 17.
rabbinitic luminaries (a topic that goes beyond the limits of this study), the implicit motivation of his chronicle seems to have been a defense of rabbinitic authority against the threats of Islam, and Sabbateanism, or any other self-proclaimed prophethood or messianism. In this respect, he closely echoed the official line adopted by the Egyptian rabbinate after the Sabbatean disaster.

CONCLUSIONS

In his chronicle Divre Yosef, Joseph Sambari reappropriates a Jewish exegetical tradition that goes back to medieval commentators such as Saadia Gaon and Ibn Ezra. Although Sambari is certainly not the first Jewish chronicler to weave a new text out of allusions to the Bible and rabbinic literature, the way in which he juxtaposes different quotations results in a subversive subtext designed to be decoded solely by a Jewish audience trained in that tradition. Relying on his readers to recognize both the original context of his allusions and his own modifications and wordplay, he is able to safely convey his anti-Islamic polemical message. In so doing, he both satirizes classical Islamic traditions regarding the life of Muhammad and recounts an alternative narrative about the origins of Islam.

Sambari’s purposeful use of a language of ambiguity and the cautious way in which he disguises his anti-Muslim polemic behind biblical allusions can be explained against the background of the specific situation of the Jewish community in seventeenth-century Egypt. As the puritanical Kadızadeli movement came to influence intra-Islamic discourse, non-Muslim minorities also began to feel threatened by this new religious fervor. In addition, the dhimmī-legislation during this time tended to be enforced more strictly than it had been at the beginning of Ottoman rule over the country on the Nile. Most importantly, however, Egyptian Jews were especially fearful that their coreligionists would follow the example of Sabbatai Sevi and some of his close companions who had converted to Islam.

It was in response to Sabbateanism’s challenge to the well-established boundaries between religions that Sambari seems to have felt the need to redefine the lines separating Judaism and Islam. To this aim he counters the Islamic doctrine of taḥrīf and taḥdīl (‘alteration,’ and ‘replacement’) according to which the Jews had tampered the text of the Torah and turns it into an accusation against Islam. For Sambari, Muhammad had created an imitation of Judaism and thereby “altered” the true religion. This claim (expressed by some earlier Jewish writers as well) took on a

96. See, however, n. 29.
new meaning in the light of the Sabbatean crisis: Those who had followed
the false messiah in embracing Islam were also guilty of the sins of *tabrīf*
and *tabdīl* and had abandoned the true religion for its counterfeit.

Having said this, Sambari’s profound knowledge of Islamic literature
and traditions is also evidence of the high degree to which Jews shared
the culture of the majority. By alluding to the texts of both Judaism and
Islam, he assumes a readership equally educated in both traditions. Thus
*Divre Yosef* proves to be a fascinating case for how rabbinic discourse may
also embrace and reflect the complex codes of a Jewish life lived within
an environment that is dominated by a competing canon. Despite its man-
ifestly polemical intent, Sambari’s historiographical writing also provides
testimony to the intertwined civilization of Jews in the lands of Islam,
and to the interplay of symbiosis and polemics between two related, but
rival faiths.
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