

This Noble House: Jewish Descendants of King David in the Medieval Islamic East (Jewish Culture and Contexts)

By Arnold E. Franklin

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This Noble House explores the preoccupation with biblical genealogy that emerged among Jews in the Islamic Near East between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Arnold Franklin looks to Jewish society's fascination with Davidic ancestry, examining the profusion of claims to the lineage that had already begun to appear by the year 1000, the attempts to chart the validity of such claims through elaborate genealogical lists, and the range of meanings that came to be ascribed to the House of David in this period. Jews and Muslims shared the perception that the Davidic line and the noble family of the Prophet Muhammad were counterparts to one another, but captivation with Davidic lineage was just one facet of a much broader Jewish concern with biblical ancestry.

Based on documentary material from the Cairo Geniza, the book argues that this "genealogical turn" should be understood as a consequence of Jewish society's dynamic encounter with its Arab-Islamic milieu and constituted a selective adaptation to the importance of ancestry in the dominant cultural environment. While Jewish society surely had genealogical materials and preoccupations of its own upon which to draw, the Arab-Islamic regard for tracing the lineage of Muhammad provided the impetus for deploying those traditions in new and unprecedented ways.

On the one hand, the increased focus on ancestry is an instance of medieval Jews reflexively and unselfconsciously making use of the cultural forms of their Muslim neighbors; on the other, it is an expression of cultural competitiveness or even resistance, an implicit response to the claim of Arab genealogical superiority that uses the very methods of the Arab "science of genealogy." To be sure, Franklin notes, Jews were only one of several non-Arab minority groups to take up genealogy in this way. At the broadest level, then, *This Noble House* illuminates a strategy that various minority populations utilized as they sought legitimacy within the medieval Arab-Islamic world.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Franklin's rich contribution to the field of Jewish history and culture in the medieval Islamic Near East . . . restores a key aspect of Jewish society to its proper place in historical scholarship, an achievement that is long overdue. Most importantly, Franklin's work fills in a major gap in our understanding of the complex negotiation and confident self-assertion of minority populations within the medieval Islamic world. For his sophisticated synthesis and analysis of a complex web of interconnected topics pertaining to Jewish prestige and power within medieval Islam, scholars of medieval Judaism and Islam alike owe Arnold Franklin a debt of gratitude."—*Jewish History*

"A welcome, thoroughly researched, and important study of the barely noticed shift in the attitude of the Jews of the Muslim East toward genealogy and the ways in which this shift was occasioned by their deep encounter with Islamic civilization. I applaud the ease with which Franklin incorporates such diverse materials."—Ross Brann, Cornell University

"A substantial, rich, and original work that takes a typically Jewish topic into the heart of an Islamic cultural context."—Menahem Ben-Sasson, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

About the Author
Arnold E. Franklin teaches history at Queens College, City University of New York.

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Preface

In reviewing the period of the ancient Israelite monarchy, the tenth-century Judeo-Arabic chronicle *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh* (Book of Chronology) briefly narrates the story of Elijah's triumph at Mount Carmel over the prophets of Baal:

> At the end of the third year [of the reign of King Ahab] all of the people of Israel gathered at Mount Carmel, and challenged the idolaters: "Can your god bring down fire from the heavens to consume this sacrifice?" So they cried out to the idol the whole day and grew weary, yet nothing happened. Then Elijah, peace upon him, prayed to his God, and the Lord, blessed and exalted is He, sent fire down from the heavens to that sacrifice, which had been doused with twelve jugs of water. And [the fire] devoured it, the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water. Then the people fell to the ground in prostration before the Lord and proclaimed: "There is no god but the Lord [*l? il?h ill? 'll?h*]!"

Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh's compressed style, its tendency to reduce historical periods to lists of leaders and important figures, and its often derivative nature might seem to justify its relative neglect by modern historians of Jewish society in the Islamic world. Yet for all of its aesthetic shortcomings, it nonetheless presents an important witness to the way the Jewish past was understood and the way familiar narratives were accordingly reformulated during the Middle Ages. Indeed, the passage quoted above offers a striking illustration of the processes by means of which Jews in Arabic-speaking lands reinterpreted their historical and religious traditions using categories of analysis and modes of expression embedded in the Arabic linguistic medium they shared with their Muslim neighbors.

Thus, while in many respects *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh* hews closely to the account of the confrontation on Mount Carmel as it is narrated in 1 Kings 18, in rendering the Israelites' reaction to the appearance of the divine fire it deviates from the biblical text to dramatic effect. In the biblical story, the assembled masses proclaim their devotion to the Lord with the words "The Lord is God, the Lord is God (*adonay hu ha-elohim adonay hu ha-elohim*)!" *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh* does not translate this phrase literally, but instead offers an approximation of its meaning using the *tahl&#299l*, a qur'?nic phrase that is also the unmistakable first line of the Islamic confession of faith and part of the traditional call to prayer, frequently given in English as "There is no god but Allah."

While the phrase *l? il?h ill? 'll?h* certainly conveys the general sense of the Israelites' cry, other, more literal options were available to the author of *Kit?b al-ta?r&#299kh*. A medieval Judeo-Arabic translation of the Book of Kings, for example, scrupulously adheres to the Hebrew original when it renders the Israelites' words as *all?h h?wa al-il?h, all?h h?wa al-il?h* ("the Lord is God, the Lord is God"). And this more precise wording is also used in the popular and influential Judeo-Arabic *tafs&#299r* of Sa'adya ben Joseph al-Fayy?m? (d. 942) to translate Deuteronomy 4:35 and 4:39, verses that contain the very same Hebrew phrase uttered by the Israelites at Mount Carmel.

There is, in fact, good reason to believe that medieval Jews consciously associated the Arabic words l? il?h ill? ?ll?h with the Islamic religious tradition. Consider, for example, Bust?n al-'uq?l (The Garden of Intellects), a theological work by the twelfth-century Yemenite scholar Nethanel Ibn Fayy?m&#299. The second chapter of Nethanel's work discusses at some length the significance of the numbers seven and twelve, citing in support of their esoteric meaning evidence from both the natural world and a variety of Jewish religious sources. But Nethanel also adduces proof for their importance from the formula l? il?h ill? ?ll?h, noting that the phrase is made up of a total of twelve letters that in Arabic orthography divide into seven discrete sets. Nethanel is explicit, moreover, about the fact that he is drawing support from an Islamic source, explaining that he has introduced this particular prooftext "in order to demonstrate the similarity between us and them with regard to the numbers seven and twelve."

How, then, are we to understand *Kit?b al-ta?r&#299kh*'s preference for the formula *l? il?h ill? 'll?h* given both its apparent identification with the religious tradition of Islam and the availability of a more literal and neutral alternative? In having the Israelites on Mount Carmel effectively recite the first portion of the *shah?da*, the author of *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh* exposes the complex cultural situation of the Jews living in the medieval Islamic world. On one level, the scene reflects the extent to which Jews could accommodate themselves to, and even identify with, overtly religious elements in the discourse of the dominant culture. And in doing so Jews were apparently not alone. According to the anonymous author of a ninth-century work summarizing the principles of Melkite theology, "When we, the assembly of Christians, say *l? il?h ill? 'll?h*, we mean by it a living God, endowed with a living Spirit which enlivens and lets die, an intellect which gives determination to whatever it wills, and a Word by means of which all being comes to be." Certain Arabic-speaking Christians were, in other words, evidently prepared to make use of the *tahl&#299l* formulation for their own particular religious needs as well.

On another level, however, the scene can be read as an expression of competitiveness toward the dominant society and its perceived triumphalism, an attempt to reassert the primacy of Judaism as the ultimate source of a monotheistic belief that was later adopted by Islam. In this regard we would do well to remember that *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh* is, by design, a chronographic work, and the clarification of sequence its very raison d'être. And such a concern with Jewish precedence is in fact made explicit in Nethanel Ibn Fayy?m&#299's discussion of the *shah?da* mentioned earlier. After expounding the hidden meaning of the letters of the Islamic confession of faith, Nethanel tellingly adds that "the principles of this come from us, for we confessed [*nashhadu*] God's unity in this manner before them, as we can see from the words of David, 'For, who is a god but the Lord, and who is a rock but our God?' (Psalms 18:32)." Such claims of Jewish precedence were ubiquitous in the Middle Ages, serving as one of the standard arguments by means of which Jews were able to make sense of the evident cultural affinities that existed between them and their Muslim neighbors. Philosophers, mystics, and poets alike embraced such a perspective, and in so doing justified potentially problematic cultural pursuits as legitimately, authentically, and originally Jewish. A biblical story about the triumph of the Israelites' faith over idolatrous unbelief thus arguably becomes in *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh* a narrative subtly vindicating Judaism in its rivalry with Islam, a vindication made that much more complex by its conspicuous reliance on a formulation drawn from the text of the Qur'?n.

The process reflected in the passage from *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh*, whereby medieval Jewish tradition was shaped by formulations rooted in the religious discourse of Islam, lies at the very heart of the present study. The projection of the *shah?da* onto the canvas of the biblical past, with all the ambivalence inherent in such a maneuver, presents a concise and concrete instance of the kind of cultural reconfiguration with which the present work is concerned. In its interpretive translation of the words of the Israelites, *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh* provides a suggestive model for thinking about the way other, more amorphous elements of the Jewish tradition were similarly translated in order to conform to the normative values and cultural dictates of medieval Arab-Islamic society.

This study focuses on the reimagining of one such element of the Jewish tradition. A close analysis of a little examined social phenomenon, it explores how the meaningfulness of King David's family was understood and articulated in the cultural orbit of Islam between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. David's line has occupied a central place in Jewish reflections on both the past and the future from time immemorial. In Arabic-speaking lands during the Middle Ages, however, the House of David enjoyed a particular and unique status in Jewish society—a prominence reflected not only in the importance attached to the *notion* of the royal family, but in the concern shown to those considered to be its living members as well. This work explores that status, looking both at the cultural roots that nurtured it as well as the various social contexts in which it flourished. It argues that, like the story of the Israelites' declaration on Mount Carmel, Jewish thinking about the Davidic line was profoundly transformed by the medieval encounter with Arab-Islamic civilization, in particular the value that it placed on noble ancestry. Jewish veneration of the family of King David, I argue, like the image of the ancient Israelites reciting the beginning of the *shah?da*, was the result of a dynamic process of cultural translation. And as it happens, in the course of our investigation we will again return to *Kit?b al-ta'r&#299kh*, for in addition to summarizing and recasting biblical history it turns out that that text also preserves an important witness to medieval Jewish society's deep interest in the Davidic line.

The genesis for this book came from a brief but characteristically prescient observation by S. D. Goitein, the towering figure of Geniza research in the second half of the twentieth century. Discussing the numerous Jewish claimants to Davidic ancestry who are mentioned in documents from the Geniza, Goitein succinctly proposed that "their role may be compared with that of the Alids, or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, in the contemporary Muslim society." He offered no evidence to back up his intuitive suggestion, nor did he or any of his students elaborate upon it in subsequent publications. Yet he was surely on to something deserving of further investigation. The present work is in many ways an extended development of Goitein's insightful but largely overlooked observation. As we shall see, both Jews and Muslims did indeed come to

view the family of King David as an analogue to the family of Mu?ammad. In what follows we will explore the processes that were involved in this reconceptualization of the Jewish royal line as well as its ramifications for the Jewish community. But our inquiry will also lead us beyond the narrow confines of the House of David, for, as we shall see, changes in the way the Davidic family was perceived ultimately reflect transformations in Jewish society's valorization of lineage more broadly. Jews, like other non-Arab populations in the Near East and North Africa, embraced the value that Arab-Islamic society placed on noble lineage, and as a result turned with renewed interest to the genealogical traditions that connected them and their forebears to the biblical past. The valorization of Davidic ancestry in the medieval Jewish community thus emerges as the most salient instance of what was in fact a more comprehensive concern with genealogy. Pursuing Goitein's suggestion, then, we arrive at a largely unexplored realm of the dynamic interplay between Judaism and Islam, what Goitein himself referred to in another connection as the "Jewish-Arab symbiosis" of the Middle Ages.

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