

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF IBN KHALDUN'S APPROACH TO THE HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL: THE RELATION BETWEEN 'ASABIYYAH AND CHOSENNESS

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Abstract

Ibn Khaldun, in his famous *Muqaddimah*, an "Introduction to History", explains the stages of the rise and fall of nations through his comprehensive theory of history and society, underpinned by the concept of *'asabiyyah* or "group feeling". Ibn Khaldun applies his theory to the main topics of the pre-Islamic religions as well, especially the Jewish religion. This paper aims to look at Ibn Khaldun's interpretation of the history of the people of Israel through his concept of *'asabiyyah* by highlighting some possible implications of it as regards the idea of the election of Israel. An emphasis is also laid on parallels with Spinoza's interpretation of the election of Israel.

Key Words: Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, *'Asabiyyah*, The people of Israel, Election/chosenness, Spinoza.

İBN HALDUN'UN İSRAİLOĞULLARI TARİHİNE YÖNELİK YAKLAŞIMI ÜZERİNE BAZI ÇIKARIMLAR: ASABİYE-SEÇİLMİŞLİK İLİŞKİSİ

Öz

İbn Haldun, meşhur *Mukaddime*'sinde, toplumların yükseliş ve gerileyiş/çöküş evrelerini, merkezinde "asabiye" kavramının yer aldığı kendi kapsamlı tarih ve toplum teorisiyle açıklamaktadır. Bu teoriyi İslam öncesi dinlerin, özellikle de Yahudi dininin temel konularına da uygulamaktadır. Bu makale İbn Haldun'un, asabiye kavramı aracılığıyla İsrailoğulları tarihine yönelik yorumunu ele almayı ve bu yorumun, İsrailoğulları'nın seçilmişliği fikriyle bağlantılı görünen bazı çağrışımlarını gün ışığına çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bunu yaparken İbn Haldun'un İsrailoğulları'na yönelik açıklamaları ve bu bağlamda kullandığı asabiye kavramı ile Spinoza'nın seçilmişlik yorumu arasındaki bazı benzerliklere de dikkat çekilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn Haldun, *Mukaddime*, Asabiye, İsrailoğulları, Seçilmişlik, Spinoza.

Ibn Khaldun, in his famous "Introduction to History", *Muqaddimah*, explains the stages of the rise and fall of nations through his comprehensive theory of history and society, or, even better, sociology, i.e., what he calls *'ilm al-'umran*. He indicates ethnic, religious, economic, geographical, and socio-psychological forces that determine human history and society and thereby proposes some general principles for explaining the nature and working of the societies. What is fundamental to his theory is the concept of *'asabiyyah*, a term which is usually translated as "group feeling", "group solidari-

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ty/loyalty”, “group consciousness”, “social cohesion”, or “communal ethos”¹ Scholars from various disciplines have written on different aspects of Ibn Khaldun’s sociology. What interests this paper, however, is a considerably lesser-examined aspect of Ibn Khaldun’s thought which pertains to his application of his theory and the underlying concept to the main topics of the pre-Islamic religions. In fact, Ibn Khaldun’s approach, in this sense, could be considered a pioneering one, not only in sociology and politics, but also in history of religions, as he demonstrates the dynamics of societies as well as religious groups, especially the people of Israel.

For our purposes what is particularly important in Ibn Khaldun’s theory is his suggestion of a close relation between group solidarity, i.e., what he calls *‘asabiyyah*, prophetic mission, and royal or political authority. This is a crucial point in understanding the relationship between society, religion, and state as a natural process. Ibn Khaldun maintains that both the prophetic mission and royal authority can be fully achieved with *‘asabiyyah*, which “results only from blood relation or something corresponding to it”, and the concomitant superiority.² In other words, prophets and leaders, in order to achieve the goal of establishing a religion and a state, respectively, depend on the help and support of their kinsfolk or tribe. In return, religion, by leading the members of a tribe to a common goal, eliminates rivalries among its different houses or dynasties and thus strengthens the dimension of solidarity in the already existing group feeling of the tribe. Religion, in this way, plays an indirect role in achieving royal authority, which is, for Ibn Khaldun, the ultimate goal of *‘asabiyyah*. For, according to Ibn Khaldun, in the establishment of large states and the attainment of wide political power, in particular, tribal solidarity alone is not sufficient. For this purpose, the unity of

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- 1 Abdul Halim Abdul Karim, “Ibn Khaldun and Confucius: A Preliminary Comparative Analysis between *‘Asabiyyah* and *Wu Lun*”, *al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 1 (2006): 8-14; Fida Mohammad, “Ibn Khaldun’s Theory of Social Change: A Comparison with Hegel, Marx and Durkheim”, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 15, no. 2 (1998): 36-38; Akif Kayapınar, “Ibn Khaldun’s Concept of *Assabiyya*: An Alternative Tool for Understanding Long-Term Politics?” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 36, nos 3-4 (2008): 378; Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1957), 196. For a modern version of a similar conceptualization in classical sociological theory, see Emile Durkheim’s notion of “group-mind” or “collective mind” (*âme collective*) or “collective consciousness” (*conscience collective*) as he proposes in his *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Macmillan, 1984), 39.
 - 2 Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), vol. 2, 264; Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddimah*, ed. Abdes-selamCheddadi (al-Dar al-Bayda [Casablanca]: Bayt al-Fununwa’l-Ulumwa’l-Adab, 2005), vol. 1, 207.

objectives that go beyond kinship is also required.³ In other words, Ibn Khaldun considers both the tribal solidarity (i.e., *'asabiyyah* in the narrow sense) and the unity of objectives (i.e., religion in the narrow sense) as necessary elements for the establishment of societies as well as states; this, for him, is a natural and inevitable process in human history. From this fact it should not be assumed, however, that he denies the metaphysical dimension of social events. On the contrary, in Ibn Khaldun's understanding, which is of an apparent Islamic background, what is natural or social is not independent of God's will; it rather works in accordance to the very design of God. As put by Ibn Khaldun himself, God, in His wisdom, "permit[s] matters to take their customary course".⁴ This, as rightly indicated by Fida Mohammad, is "the inevitable course of historical laws", which are themselves the formation of God; and what is most important about this process is that "by knowing those laws a civilization can prolong itself."⁵

'Asabiyyah of the People of Israel

As suggested by Ibn Khaldun, it is possible to find the actual realisation and the best example of the relation between *'asabiyyah*, religion, and royal authority as well as the dynamics that determine and affect this relation, in the history of the people of Israel. This is why Ibn Khaldun frequently refers in his work to the case of the Israelites. It is an established fact that Ibn Khaldun, in this way, generated an exceptionally objective and scientific approach to the history of the Jewish people, to quote Kalman Bland, "by locating it within the levelling theoretical framework of universal historiography".⁶ To explain the course of Jewish history in the light of universal social laws, as Ibn Khaldun did, also leads to a new way of understanding the qur'anic verses on the Israelites, especially those related to their struggle to become a monotheistic people and remain so, i.e., their achievements as well as their failures;⁷ in this way the Jewish case becomes an example for the general human condition.

It is also possible to argue that the causal rules of Ibn Khaldun's universal theory relate to a central doctrine of the Jewish religion, i.e., the biblical idea of the election of Israel, although Ibn Khaldun never explicitly uses the

3 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 284-286, 313-322; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 226-227, 259-272.

4 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 324; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 270.

5 Mohammad, "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change", 30.

6 Karman Bland, "An Islamic Theory of Jewish History: The Case of Ibn Khaldun", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 18, nos 3-4 (1983): 193.

7 See, for example, Qur'an, 2/47-66; 5/20-26; 7/128-156; 28/5-6.

term.⁸ It is suggested here that, from Ibn Khaldun's viewpoint, what is called chosenness or holiness in Jewish Scripture can be understood to serve for the purpose of creating group solidarity and socio-political superiority. To put in another way, as far as the people of Israel are concerned, chosenness/holiness becomes an essential attribute or property of their *'asabiyyah*.

Ibn Khaldun asserts that the Jews did not have a universal mission, but were "merely required to establish their religion among their own (people)".⁹ The fact that the Israelites were basically an ethnic group, an *'am* as put in the Hebrew Bible, and, in parallel to this, their religious organisation was based on ethnicity (in the sense of Greek *ethnikos*, not in terms of the modern sociological understanding), i.e., kinship, apparently like all other peoples of their time, is well evidenced by the Jewish Scripture itself. For a verification of this, it suffices to recall that in the Torah Abraham, the first patriarch of the Israelites and the first chosen by God, is commanded to spread his message among his children and the household.¹⁰ Again all the first three patriarchs, i.e., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are depicted as being keen to take wives from their own kinsfolk, apparently for both ethnic and religious reasons.¹¹ In parallel to this, the people of Israel, based on the covenant they made with God at Sinai, are frequently warned against taking wives from among other peoples and following their ways.¹² Accordingly, in the Hebrew Bible, a close relation is assumed between the protection of ethnic or tribal unity and the preservation of religion; by the same token, taking wives from outside the clan is seen as an act of the so-called outcast descendants of Abraham, i.e., Ishmael and Esau.¹³ And this relation between tribal unity and religious continuity is formulated in the language of chosenness, that is, the idea of a people singled out or separated from other peoples by God as a holy people, *'am qadosh*.¹⁴ Also, as will be indicated in

8 As to the reason why Ibn Khaldun did not make any –direct–reference to the term the election of Israel, I could suggest that because it was not quite a qur'anic term. Although there are references in the Qur'an to God's favour and preference for the people of Israel (*tafđil* and *ikhtiyār*) in five passages altogether (Qur'an, 2/47, 122; 7/140; 44/32; 45/16), a more frequently used qur'anic term to explain the relation between God and the people of Israel is "covenant/promise" (*'ahd/mithāq*). Probably this is why Ibn Khaldun, while discussing the *'asabiyyah* of the Israelites, rather referred to the divine promise and favours, instead of election.

9 Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 473-476; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 388-390.

10 Genesis 18:19.

11 Genesis 24:1-9; 28:1-5.

12 Exodus 34:15-16; Numbers 25:1-9; Deuteronomy 7:1-6; I Kings 11:1-8.

13 See Genesis 21:20-21; 26:24.

14 Leviticus 20:26; Deuteronomy 4:20; 14:2. The Hebrew word for 'holy' is *qadosh*. Its root q-d-sh (קדש), which means 'to separate/dedicate', is considered to be related to the root q-d-d

the biblical passage quoted below, the election of the Israelites seems to serve primarily for their socio-political prosperity in their own land, which is also the main goal of *'asabiyyah* as defined by Ibn Khaldun.

If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all His commandments...the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you...Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field... The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you...He will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. The Lord will establish you as His holy people...¹⁵

Ibn Khaldun, in a parallel way, writes that the people of Israel

had one of the greatest 'houses' in the world, first because of the great numbers of prophets and messengers born among their ancestors...and next because of their group feeling and the royal authority that God had promised and granted them by means of that group feeling.¹⁶

According to this, the people of Israel were a people who attained superiority at a highest level and it was due mainly to their *'asabiyyah*, the driving force in every society that leads to the state, as well as their prophetic tradition, which was somewhat peculiar to the people of Israel. In fact, it is possible to see the expressions "holy (separated) people" and the "people with *'asabiyyah*" as parallel terms, for the main function or goal of both seems to be Israel's socio-political prosperity.

Apparently, one of the early stages in the creation of *'asabiyyah* in the history of the Israelites after the times of the patriarchs is the period of forty years following the Exodus; this was a time in which the children of Israel who escaped from bondage in Egypt had to wander in the desert before entering Syria, i.e., the land of Canaan. As opposed to most classical Muslim scholars, who consider this period to be mainly and solely a punishment, Ibn Khaldun interprets it mainly with reference to its sociological significance or purpose. Accordingly, the rebellious attitude of the Israelites towards God's

(קָדַשׁ) with the meaning of 'to cut' (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996, II, 1072). In this sense 'holiness' becomes tantamount to 'separation' of something or someone from others for a particular purpose.

15 Deuteronomy 28: 1-9.

16 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 275; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 217.

command to fight and conquer the land, depicted in the Qur'an¹⁷ as well as in the Torah,¹⁸ refers to what has become the nature of the Israelites due to their long subservience to the Egyptians. Thus, Israel's wandering forty years in the desert and the land being forbidden to them¹⁹ is explained by Ibn Khaldun as a kind of preparatory or disciplinary measure to make the people of Israel overcome the psychology of enslavement and disgrace, which is the indicator of the loss of *'asabiyyah*, and to transform them into a new people with self-esteem, power and group solidarity, that is a people with *'asabiyyah*. As this could only be achieved when the first docile and weak generation disappeared and a new strong one, born and brought up free in the desert environment and never experienced servitude like their fathers, took their place.²⁰ For, as asserted by Ibn Khaldun, the best *'asabiyyah* and the concomitant superiority are found among nomadic peoples, i.e., the peoples of the desert. Thus the desert becomes the best place for the purpose of creating *'asabiyyah*.

At this point, Shlomo (Salomon) Pines points out a striking resemblance of Ibn Khaldun's analysis of the forty years wandering in the desert to the explanation that Maimonides gave in his famous *Dalalat al-Hairin* and suggests that Ibn Khaldun was possibly familiar with Maimonides' proposition²¹ and adapted it to his own theory.²² This seems quite possible but what is more interesting than this apparent resemblance is the subtle, yet significant, difference between the biblical and the qur'anic accounts of the story and the fact that Ibn Khaldun –and Maimonides as well– follows the latter. For, in the qur'anic account, the question seems to be less a 'sheer punishment of a sinful generation', as it is the case in the Torah, to specify, in the book of Exodus where the story is told in detail ("surely none of the people who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land...because they have not unreservedly followed me").²³ Although the punishment idea is not totally denied in the Qur'an, nor by Ibn Khaldun himself, the emphasis here is rather on the Israelites' being 'destined to wander in the wilderness'; this is apparently in order to turn them into a different kind of people, a better generation ("For this the land will surely be

17 Qur'an, 5: 24-26.

18 Deuteronomy 1:26, 43.

19 Qur'an, 5: 24.

20 Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 230-231; *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 287-289.

21 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), vol. 2, 527-528.

22 S. Pines, "Ibn Khaldun and Maimonides, A Comparison between Two Texts", *Studia Islamica* 32 (1970): 265-274.

23 Numbers 32:11-12.

forbidden them for forty years that they will wander in the earth, bewildered" (24). So, the interpretation of Ibn Khaldun –as well as of Maimonides– proves to be more in keeping with the qur'anic verse, which lays emphasis on the Israelites' being subjected to 'wandering in the desert for forty years', whereas in the book of Exodus, the emphasis is placed on the doom of the Exodus generation, 'perishing in the desert without seeing the land'.²⁵ In this way, Ibn Khaldun seems to take account of the qur'anic implication, whereas other classical Muslim scholars go in parallel with the biblical implications. Having said that, one should also note a passage in the book of Deuteronomy, which, in a similar way to the qur'anic verse and as against the emphasis in the book of Exodus, implies a broad disciplinary measure for the wandering in the desert: "And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not."²⁶

As for the significance of the period of forty years, this corresponds to the shortest period for the rise of a new generation, as indicated by Ibn Khaldun²⁷ and also by Maimonides. Indeed, only after this period did the people of Israel, whose 'asabiyyah was also supported with God's special help (i.e., miracles) and guidance (i.e., prophets), achieve superiority. As a result, they managed to subdue the neighbouring peoples and settled the land of Canaan, as promised by God. Moreover, even if not in such a short period of time, under the leadership of King David and King Solomon, the Israelites were to establish a powerful kingdom and rule over other peoples. As pointed out earlier, for Ibn Khaldun the ultimate goal of 'asabiyyah is the establishment of a royal authority and this is true for the 'asabiyyah of the people of Israel as well.²⁸ But the Davidic kingdom did not last very long and internal rivalries led to its separation first into two kingdoms and then the total destruction of both. But this is again in line with Ibn Khaldun's theory, namely that "a dynasty rarely establishes itself firmly in lands with many different tribes and groups". For this reason Ibn Khaldun maintains that the Israelites "never had a continuous and firmly established royal authority...they were overpowered by the Persians, then by the Greeks, and finally

24 Qur'an, 5/26.

25 Cf. Joshua 5:9.

26 Deuteronomy 8:2ff.

27 Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 209, 224, 287-289; *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 265, 282, 343-344.

28 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 284-286; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 226-227.

by the Romans, when their power came to an end in the Diaspora".²⁹ At this point, one should recall the fact that of the two kingdoms, the kingdom of Judah, which is said to inherit the Davidic dynasty and was based on the tribe of Judah, the largest of all, and that of Benjamin, lived longer than the separatist kingdom of Israel, which was established on ten different tribes and, therefore, ruled by competing dynasties. According to Ibn Khaldun,³⁰ going under the yoke of other peoples is both the cause for and a symptom of a weakened '*asabiyyah*'. Thus, the principles put forward by Ibn Khaldun as regards the functioning of '*asabiyyah*' apply to both the rise and fall of societies and, therefore, in the case of the people of Israel, these principles determine not only the establishment of their '*asabiyyah*', but also the loss of it. In other words, the same principle that helps them build their '*asabiyyah*' becomes the reason for their deprivation of it in the reverse condition.

Indeed, this interpretation by Ibn Khaldun was quite a new attempt to explain the 'humiliated and impoverished' condition of the Jews in the light of a universal law of the attainment and loss of group feeling. But apparently, this does not mean that the Jews were absolute victims of the social realities they encountered, as asserted by Bland.³¹ At this point it would be imperative to take into account the key importance of the 'covenant' for the attainment and continuity of the '*asabiyyah*' of the people of Israel. And this might allow us to consider the people of Israel, like any other people, as an active party in their own destiny, to a certain extent. As pointed out earlier, by knowing the socio-historical laws, which cause societies to rise and fall, 'a society can prolong itself'. In the case of the Israelites, be they familiar or unfamiliar with those laws, the covenant rules as directly ordained by God were meant to ensure their compliance with those laws in an indirect way. So, recognizing the covenant rules worked towards the same ends as knowing the socio-historical laws. For what lies at the heart of the covenant is the principle that the children of Israel should establish themselves as a monotheistic –or monolatristic–people by obeying the commands of (one) God of their fathers and keep themselves away from other peoples and, most importantly, from their polytheist idolatrous ways. As indicated earlier, in the Torah, this religio-ethnic group feeling is often presented in the form of chosenness. In fact, at that time not only the people of Israel, but also other neighbouring peoples had made covenants with their kings, as representa-

29 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 332-334; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 277-278.

30 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, 287; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 230.

31 Bland, "An Islamic Theory of Jewish History", 194.

tive of their tribal gods,³² and, with their own understanding of chosenness, or *'asabiyyah*, built their own states. As regards the covenant of the people of Israel, it is written in the Torah that when they accept and obey the covenant obligations there will be 'life', 'blessing', and 'prosperity', but when they reject and disobey these, there will be 'death', 'curse' and 'destruction'.³³ In a similar way, in the Qur'an, in addition to some religious and ethical principles, the socio-political prohibitions against shedding blood of their own people and turning a party of their people out of their dwellings, which are essential to their social cohesion, are counted among the rules of the covenant.³⁴ When one reads such passages in the light of Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'asabiyyah*, it becomes apparent that the covenant, with its both dimensions, that is in terms of a relation between God and the people of Israel and also relations within and without the people, serves to transform the children of Israel into a group with *'asabiyyah*, a group that is superior to others both religiously and socio-politically.³⁵ In parallel to this, in a reverse condition, that is in the case of disobedience to the covenant, which is apparently prepared by some social factors as well, it results in Israel's losing their *'asabiyyah* and also their socio-political superiority and independence. Accordingly, when the people of Israel, partly according to their own will and partly as a consequence of social factors, fail to follow the covenant rules, which are intended to make them a proper and strong people with their own (religious) law, land and state, they end up falling under the influence of other peoples. And this makes them, in metaphysical dimension, deprived of God's special guidance and support and, in social dimension, bound 'directly' with general social dynamics, like all other peoples; and, as a consequence, they lose their *'asabiyyah* and fall apart until they live under the rule of other peoples. This is why Ibn Khaldun, by paraphrasing certain Qur'anic passages,³⁶ argues that the Israelites, being divested of prophets, group feeling and royal authority, "were destined [to humiliation, and ordained] to live as exiles on earth. For thousands of years, they knew only enslavement and unbelief. Still, the delusion of (nobility) has not left them" (square brackets are added based on the original Arabic text).³⁷ Here Ibn Khaldun seems to refer not only to the 'social reality' of enslavement befalling the

32 For this, see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 30ff.

33 See Deuteronomy 30:19; 28:1, 15; 11:26-28.

34 Qur'an, 2: 84.

35 See Leviticus 25:18; Deuteronomy 5:31-33.

36 See Qur'an, 3:111; 59:3.

37 Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 217; *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 275.

Israelites, but also to their 'failure' of obedience to God; these two, i.e., social factors and religious neglect feed one another apparently.

Thus, according to Ibn Khaldun, the ultimate turning point in the history of Israel which indicates the loss of *'asabiyyah* and concomitant superiority for the people of Israel is their falling under the rule of other nations, the Romans, in particular. For in the times of the Romans the Israelites were expelled from their land and this marked the beginning of the longest exile in the history of Israel; a time when they were ruled by different peoples and went through sometimes compulsory and sometimes natural intermingling with other nations. At this point, Ibn Khaldun makes it clear that the Jewish claim to a 'continuous' and 'unbroken' *'asabiyyah* and superiority or nobility is just a delusion. In other words, a belief that the *'asabiyyah* and superiority held by the people of Israel when they were at their zenith continued to exist in the Jewish people in the same and unbroken way does not correspond with reality. In fact, in rabbinic tradition, an asymmetry is assumed between what is called overt and covert histories of the people of Israel; the people of Israel, despite their socio-political inferiority, are considered to be chosen and superior in a metaphysical sense.³⁸ Ibn Khaldun, on the contrary, considers the metaphysical and social dimensions of historical events as not being in conflict, but rather as complementary and therefore parallel.

Renewal of *'Asabiyyah*: Religious Reforms of Ezra and Jesus Christ

However, Ibn Khaldun also suggests that *'asabiyyah* can be re-established, as happens with the Israelites' sojourn in the desert and again in the Hasmonean period when, Ibn Khaldun indicates, "the Jews rose against the Greeks and made an end to their domination over them".³⁹ In fact, it is also possible to see the two other movements within the course of Jewish history, i.e., the religious reform of Ezra and even that of Jesus Christ, as similar attempts for the renewal of *'asabiyyah*, that is to re-establish the Israelites as a separate (monotheistic) group which is the very aim of chosenness. As depicted in the Hebrew Bible, Ezra, in order to rectify the consequences of the (Babylonian) exile and assimilation, tried to gather the people, both the returnees and the ones left in Judea, around the principles of "holy seed" (i.e., the Judeans) and pure religion (i.e., the teachings of the Torah). Thus, those who did not belong to the Israelite (or Judean) tribes and the Israelite (or Judean) religion

³⁸ See Jacob Neusner, *Torah Through the Ages: A Short History of Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 60.

³⁹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 475; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 390.

were left behind.⁴⁰ Although Ezra's reform seem to have aimed at an apparent democratization of the society at the beginning, as demonstrated in the event of a renewed covenant, which included every segment of the Jewish community,⁴¹ this reform eventually led to a hierarchical society, with the Temple worship being placed at the centre and the priestly class (Kohens and Levites) at the top. And, having come to the time of Jesus Christ, under the Roman rule, this hierarchical social structure became obvious, as it is seen in the hierarchical structure of the Herodian Temple.⁴²

As for Jesus' message, Ibn Khaldun indicates that it was spread through his apostles to the Roman and Greek communities. Yet, as stated earlier, Ibn Khaldun also emphasises that, unlike Muslims, neither Jewish nor Christian groups were meant to have a universal mission, but "merely required to establish their religion among their own (people)".⁴³ Indeed in the Gospels, on the contrary to the universal mission idea of the Epistles of Paul, the main emphasis is placed on the idea that Jesus, as a saviour messiah of the Jews, took upon, first and foremost, the mission of reconciling the sectarian conflicts within the Jewish community.⁴⁴ When Jesus' reform is examined in the light of the concept of *'asabiyyah*, it is possible to see it as aimed at establishing a new egalitarian *'asabiyyah* as opposed to the former hierarchical one. The old *'asabiyyah*, with the help of some other factors –including the Greco-Roman influence–apparently, resulted in a society that was based on the authority of some privileged classes (i.e., Kohens, rabbis and ordinary Israelite men) and one that created sectarian divisions (i.e., Saducees and Pharisees), with its emphasis on the Temple purity and the Torah aristocracy. Jesus' ideal community, on the contrary, assumed to eliminate the differences between priestly/rabbinic classes and ordinary Jews and to embrace some disadvantaged groups, who were mostly excluded from the Temple worship and Torah study, such as women, widows in particular, also the disabled, and even the Samaritans who were totally excluded from the Jewish community.⁴⁵ Thus, it is possible to think that Jesus Christ, as depicted in the Gospels, did not so much seek to universalize the Jewish religion as he tried to develop a more comprehensive group solidarity and society.

40 Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah 8-10.

41 Nehemiah 8: 2-3; 10: 1-29.

42 See Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 134-140.

43 Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 473-476; *al-Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, 388-390.

44 Matthew 15:24: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." See also 10: 5-6.

45 This is particularly obvious in the accounts of miracles performed by Jesus. See, for example, Matthew 15: 21-30; Luke 10: 29-37; John 4: 1-42; 10:16; Acts 8: 14-16.

The point to be emphasised in these two examples is that every reform attempt in the history of Israel can be seen to aim at re-establishing Israel's '*asabiyyah*', with or without making a reference to chosenness. By the same token, it is also possible to see the Zionist movement and the creation of the modern state of Israel as a process for the establishment of a new, Jewish-Zionist, '*asabiyyah*' and a new superiority in Jewish history. In fact, an emphasis on a new group feeling, in terms of identity making, was embedded in the Zionist ideology, especially at the beginning, and this was declared by the leading Zionists of the early 20th century, as they wanted to promote a strong and active profile for the Jews instead of a humiliated and passive one of the past.⁴⁶

Ibn Khaldun and Spinoza: A Comparison

Accordingly, Ibn Khaldun's approach to the history of the people of Israel is a pioneering one in explaining this history with reference to universal rules of history and society. As it is shown in this paper, it may also be considered a pioneering approach in terms of its implications which open the way to see the election and concomitant superiority within the context of '*asabiyyah*' and, therefore, as something applicable to similar cases. At this point one should notice an obvious parallel between the views of Ibn Khaldun and Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza, Dutch philosopher of Jewish descent, who lived three centuries later than Ibn Khaldun. When one takes account of this parallel or reads Ibn Khaldun through the lens of Spinoza, the connection between '*asabiyyah*' and chosenness becomes even more obvious.

In fact, Spinoza's explanation of the idea of the election of Israel with reference to socio-political reasons was quite a new attempt in Jewish history.⁴⁷ It is not an easy task to determine the sources of Spinoza's views on the election of Israel or to relate it to Ibn Khaldun in particular. However, it is possible to assume that there are some strong parallels between their approaches to the idea of the election, but certainly with clear differences. First of all, Spinoza denies the idea of a personal and transcendental God, i.e., the God of the Bible, who interferes in history or gives laws or chooses one people

46 See Michael A. Meyer, *Jewish Identity in the Modern World* (Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 1990), 64f.

47 Although Spinoza was an excommunicated Jew, it would not be wrong to place him within 'Jewish' history, due to his contribution to the understanding of the Jewish religion and Jewish identity in the modern period as well as his engagement with earlier Jewish philosophy. Not to mention the fact that he remained a 'Jew', at least in the eyes of non-Jews. For more on this, see Steven Nadler, "The Jewish Spinoza", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 3 (2009): 492ff.

over others. Since, in Spinoza's thought, there is no (being of) God beyond or separate from nature, the biblical notion of the election of Israel, as well as the related concepts such as divinely given law or divinely made covenant can only be understood in a metaphorical sense.⁴⁸ In other words, according to Spinoza, what are called the divine laws or eternal decrees of God are nothing other than the universal laws of nature, "according to which all things happen and are determined" and "which always involve eternal truth and necessity".⁴⁹ Although for Ibn Khaldun, too, societies are governed by universal laws, the existence of these laws is the result of the divine will, in the sense that they are the instruments of God in conducting the ways of human history. Thus, for Ibn Khaldun, neither God nor the will of God refer to some metaphors. For Spinoza, however, everything real is what is natural or what is in nature and there is no real or separate Being beyond that.

Although Spinoza, based on his understanding of God or Nature, envisages a strict determinism in nature, he makes a categorical difference between the universal/eternal and particular/temporary necessities of nature and, thus, refers to what he metaphorically calls the internal/inward and external/outward helps or aids of God. What Spinoza calls the internal help of God, which pertains to 'understanding and virtue', solely depends on human nature and therefore is equally attainable by all human beings; the external help of God, on the other hand, which pertains to 'social security' of a society, lies in some external and temporary motivation and is therefore limited with particular conditions.⁵⁰

This is, in fact, the point upon which Spinoza's explanation of the idea of election is based. According to this, one can mention, albeit in a metaphorical way, God's choosing the people of Israel; but this is not for the purpose of their wisdom and virtue in philosophical or ethical terms, but due to their social organization and material prosperity.⁵¹ And this is what Ibn Khaldun called social solidarity, i.e., '*asabiyyah*', and political authority, i.e., the ultimate goal of '*asabiyyah*', respectively. As a matter of fact, what Spinoza means by God's external help towards Israel's social organization and mate-

48 For Spinoza's explanation of God's nature, see the first part ("Concerning God") of his *Ethics* (trans. A. Boyle, London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1938), especially the Appendix at the end of the part. For Spinoza's identification of God with Nature, see also Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics: an Introduction* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 81-83.

49 Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden/New York: E.J. Brill, 1991), 89.

50 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 90, 100.

51 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 91.

rial prosperity is nothing but Israel's perception of God through national laws, around which they built their society, instead of a universal truth. So, what is referred to as the election of Israel is a means to ensure Israel's survival as a people, and not a sign of Israel's superiority over other peoples in respect of its understanding or virtue, the attributes that are common to all humankind by nature. In other words, in order to establish Israel as a secure society, the prophets of Israel, Moses first of all, presented God in terms of particular instructions and precepts of religion, by means of which the Israelites would be "well united in a particular territory to form a political union or state".⁵² So this is what Spinoza calls the external help of God.

It is important to note that although Spinoza does not deny the uniqueness of the Israelites' chosenness in terms of God's giving them particular laws solely designed for them (as a people), he is inclined to think that it could be applied to other peoples as long as they had the same kind of understanding of God.⁵³ He also declares, evidenced from Jewish Scripture, that "other nations also had their own state and special laws by God's external guidance".⁵⁴ So, according to Spinoza, this kind of vocation of God, which is involved solely in the material prosperity of the Israelites, had in fact been performed in previous times for some other peoples as well, with or without the help of prophecy. Before the Israelites, the land of Israel was allocated to the Canaanites in the same way; that is, they were meant to settle down and establish a social organization there.⁵⁵

Spinoza, in this way, proclaims that God's decrees, which are in fact the laws of nature, are realized in the world either as eternal universal or temporary particular divine acts; the latter pertains only to matters of social well-being, as was the case with the people of Israel. Since the Israelites did not recognize these as a universal truth, i.e., as the universal laws of nature, Moses presented them as the "precepts and teachings of God", namely as the practice of religion, and so he imagined God as a "ruler" and a "legislator".⁵⁶ However, as this was solely meant for their material prosperity, it related to the Israelites as long as they lived under a social organization, namely as

52 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 107.

53 For more information, see Michael A. Rosenthal, "Why Spinoza Chose the Hebrews: The Exemplary Function of Prophecy in the *Theological-Political Treatise*", in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*, ed. Heidi M. Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 231-242.

54 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 92.

55 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 98.

56 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 107.

long as they remained as a state in the land of Israel.⁵⁷ As put by Spinoza himself,

[T]heir election and vocation consisted only in the material success and prosperity of their state...in return for their obedience the Law promises them nothing other than the continuing prosperity of their state and material advantages, whereas disobedience and the breaking of the Covenant would bring about the downfall of their state and the severest hardships.⁵⁸

Accordingly, in Spinoza's understanding, the biblical concepts of covenant and divine law, as well as chosenness and superiority are just metaphors which were used (by Moses) for the organization of the Israelites as a sovereign people in their own land and with their own state. So, for Spinoza, as long as the Israelites were not a nation living in their homeland, the (metaphoric) language of chosenness and superiority, which only served for their social organization and material prosperity, was no longer required or valid. For Ibn Khaldun, on the other hand, the loss of socio-political prosperity was itself the result of the loss of group solidarity and concomitant superiority.

Concluding Remarks

The parallels between Ibn Khaldun and Spinoza in their –indirect or direct– interpretations of the election of Israel are too obvious to ignore. Although they apparently have different starting points –for Spinoza it is the question of what is exceptional about the case of the people of Israel and for Ibn Khaldun it is what ties it with the case of other peoples–, the main point that seems common to both interpretations is that the chosenness of the Israelites means or aims at creating a group solidarity and in this way, either as a religio-ethnic (Ibn Khaldun) or a merely ethnic (Spinoza) people, establishing a social and political sovereignty. Accordingly, what is presented as chosenness in the Hebrew Bible in reality refers to a sociological or socio-religious and not an ontological fact and, therefore, is not 'exclusively' peculiar to the people of Israel. As for the Jewish insistence on the idea of an eternal chosenness or nobility, it stems, apparently for both Ibn Khaldun and Spinoza, from a mistaken perception that transforms a sociological or socio-religious law, which is valid in certain conditions, into an ontological one. Yet, for Spinoza, this ongoing insistence on chosenness and separation, in return, becomes, the reason behind the survival of the Jewish people, in which, as he puts, there is nothing surprising or marvellous. Here Spinoza

⁵⁷ Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 112.

⁵⁸ Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 91.

refers to a 'universal hatred' that the Jews drew upon themselves "through their external rites alien to the rites of other nations", as well as "through the mark of circumcision, which they most religiously observe" as a sign of separation.⁵⁹ And it looks that this dialectic of separation and survival also fits in well with Ibn Khaldun's marvellous concept of 'asabiyyah.

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59 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 99f. For a discussion on this passage, see Jay Geller, "Spinoza's Election of the Jews: The Problem of Jewish Persistence", *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture and Society* 12, no. 1 (2005): 39-63.

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