JEWISH POETS AND ARABIC LITERARY CULTURE IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA: ORIGINS, THEMES, AND QUESTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

Prior to the advent of Islam, Jews had a long-standing presence in Arabia. They migrated to the region and engaged in commercial, political, religious, and especially literary activities. Hence, they both influenced the dominant culture in the region and were influenced by it. Aside from their religious practices, their lifestyle and language were not isolated from the dominant culture. According to historical sources, the Jews of this period composed poems in Arabic, adopting the style of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. They also did not hesitate to write poems on prevalent themes of the Arabic literary tradition. Although Jewish poets and their poems mentioned in historical sources are limited, many of them have survived. The study of these poems provides insight into the literary and cultural practices of the pre-Islamic Jewish community. Additionally, this analysis addresses the debates concerning the authenticity of poems attributed to Jewish poets.

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1. Judaism in pre-Islamic Arabia

The origins of Hebrew communities in Arabia[1] and the extent of their activities in the region are topics that require separate discussions. First, since Judea, which is considered the center of Judaism, is located on the border of Arabia, political and commercial interactions have occurred between these two regions throughout history. There have been numerous waves of migration between the communities living there. It is highly probable that Jews settled *en masse* in Arabia due to major events such as the Babylonian exile, the Makkabi uprising and the Bar Kohba revolt, in addition to continuous individual and small-scale movements. However, determining the exact effect and influence of such migrations is challenging. Nevertheless, it is crucial to highlight the major events that likely facilitated these migrations.

A noteworthy perspective was put forward by Margoliouth. According to his argument, the Hebrews originated in Arabia and later migrated northward, eventually settling in Judea. After their migration, they distanced themselves from the Semitic identity they shared with the Arabs and adopted the sociocultural structure of the Canaanites living in the region. Margoliouth, who presented numerous linguistic arguments to support this claim, suggested that in ancient times, the Hebrews and Arabs of Southern Arabia spoke languages similar enough to allow mutual understanding. However, the Hebrews he refers to are not the same Jewish tribes mentioned by Islamic historians. According to him, these tribes, referred to as Jews in Islamic history, should not be considered Jews in the traditional sense. He argues that this religious group mentioned in the Qurʾān and Islamic history should be called "Rahmanists" and is quite different from the

[1] It is crucial to be cautious about references to Arabia in historical texts. Especially in ancient texts, references to places might not align with the current geographical definition of Arabia. However, we refer to Arabia as it was understood in the history of Islam and as it is recognized today.

institutionalized Judaism of the time.[2] Margoliouth's striking assertions about the pre-Islamic period likely reflect only a fraction of the overall reality. Whereas his views on the ancient period are considered credible, his assertions about the Jews mentioned in Islamic history have not found considerable support.

It is suggested that certain tribes settled in Arabia during the timeframe when the Jews were establishing their own kingdoms in Canaan. In particular, there are suggestions that the nomadic tribe of Shimon, one of the twelve tribes, may have settled in Northern Arabia. However, it is difficult to assert that the origins of the Jewish tribes of the Islamic period can be traced back to the tribe of Simeon.[3] Additionally, many doubts have been raised about the nature of this migration to Arabia. Given the scarcity of sources about that period and the fact that this event is thought to have occurred around the 12th century BCE, it is impossible to make a definitive judgment on this issue.[4]

The Book of Job contains the most conspicuous references to Jews in Arabia among all the texts in the Tanakh.[5] Indeed, the Prophet Job and his three friends, with whom he has extended dialogues, are depicted as residing in cities in Arabia. The most striking feature distinguishing this part of the Tanakh from the other parts is its poetry-like structure and its high level of eloquence.[6] Considering that pre-Islamic Arabs were also renowned for their poetry and eloquence, it is reasonable to infer that there was a strong tradition of poetry in this region. Thus, the events described in this chapter likely took place in or near Northern Arabia. The settlements of Shuʿah, Naʿamah, and Taymāʾ, from which Job's three friends hail, are considered significant cities in Northern Arabia. Furthermore, Taymāʾ, identified as the largest Jewish settlement during the Jāhiliyyah period, is mentioned as a

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2 David Samuel Margoliouth, *The Relations Between Arabs and Israelites Prior to the Rise of Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), 70-71.

3 Gökhan Efe, *İslam Öncesi Arabistan'da Yahudilik* (İstanbul: Marmara University, Institute of Social Sciences, Master's Thesis, 2002), 13.

4 Israel Wolfensohn, *Tārīkh al-Yahūd fī bilād al-ʿArab fī l-Jāhiliyyah wa-ṣadr al-Islām* (Cairo: Lajnat al-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjamah wa-l-Nashr, 1927), 3-4.

5 Margoliouth, *The Relations Between Arabs and Israelites*, 32.

6 Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs from the Earliest Times to the Present* (London: MacMillan, 1993), 42-43.

commercial city (Job 6:19). This mention of Arabian geography in the Tanakh suggests a cosmopolitan model of Northern Arabia, where Hebrews, Arabs, and various other ethnic groups coexisted. Additionally, the fact that Nabonidus, one of the Babylonian kings, used Taymāʾ as his capital for a time underscores the city's geopolitical importance.[7] There is also a possibility that many Jews accompanied Nabonidus to Taymāʾ during this event following the Babylonian exile.[8]

The first major event in which the Hebrews left Judea en masse and began to live in diaspora was their exile to Babylon in the 6th century BCE, following the attack by Nebuchadnezzar. During this exile, some communities formed diasporas across the Middle East and surrounding regions. It is possible that some tribes sought safety in sheltered cities in the Arabian deserts during these attacks.[9] Similarly, many Jews likely sought refuge in Arabia during the continuous wars and harsh suppression of Jewish revolts under Roman rule in the first two centuries AD. Arabic sources, such as *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, mention two incidents regarding the arrival of Jews in Arabia. The first incident involves a group of Jews who fought with the Amalekites during the time of Moses and were not accepted back due to conflicts, subsequently settling in Arabia. This event is difficult to verify because of its antiquity and inconsistency with historical data. The second event is depicted in meticulous detail, underscoring the oppressive stance of the Roman Empire and offering a comprehensive explanation for Jewish migration to Arabia. The narrative provides the names of the tribes that settled in Hejaz and explains that the Roman armies sent after them perished due to the harsh conditions of the desert.[10] Likewise, the Talmud recounts stories of Jews seeking sanctuary in

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7 C. J. Gadd, "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus", *Anatolian Studies* 8 (1958), 79.

8 Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 39.

9 Ṣāliḥ Mūsá Darādikah, *al-ʿAlāqāt al-ʿArabiyyah al-Yahūdiyyah ḫattá nihāyat ʿahd al-Khulafāʾ al-rāshidīn* (Amman: al-Ahliyyah li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1992), 103-104.

10 Abū l-Faraj ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās - Ibrāhīm al-Saʿāfīn - Bakr ʿAbbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2008), 22/77-78.

Arabia.[11] In parallel with these accounts, many researchers believe that the Jewish groups in Arabia during the Jāhiliyyah period were composed of those who arrived during this coercion.[12] Indeed, among the major events leading to the expulsion of the Jewish population from Judea were the attacks and oppression they faced under Roman rule in the first and second centuries CE.[13]

The deserts of Arabia have served as a natural refuge at various stages of Jewish history. During the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome, Rabbi Akiva travelled to Arabia to seek help from the Jewish communities. Similarly, Paul, a Pharisee, spent three years in Arabia before his conversion to Christianity.[14] Events such as these indicate the presence of Judaism, specifically Pharisaic Judaism, in Arabia.

The aforementioned examples represent only a few instances of the Jewish presence in Northern Arabia, and numerous other significant events are documented in historical records. Substantial evidence and scholarly discourse suggest that Jewish migration to Arabia occurred at various points for diverse reasons, as demonstrated by these events. However, it is important to note that not all Jewish tribes referenced in Arabic sources from the early Islamic period were of Hebrew origin. These data and hypotheses merely demonstrate a continuous interaction between Jews and Arabs throughout history. Individuals and tribes of Hebrew descent inhabited Northern Arabia, establishing Jewish culture and religion in the region. Naturally, the culture and religion practiced by Jews in this region cannot be expected to be entirely identical to mainstream Judaism. They likely adopted a distinct

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11 Moshe Gil, *Jews in Islamic Countries in the Middle Ages*, trans. David Strassler (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2004), 7.

12 Wolfensohn, *Tārīkh al-Yahūd fī bilād al-ʿArab*, 8-9; Darādikah, *al-ʿAlāqāt al-ʿArabiyyah al-Yahūdiyyah*, 105-106; Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 22-23; Newby, "The Jews of Arabia at the Birth of Islam", *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb - Benjamin Stora, trans. Jane Marie Todd - Michael B. Smith (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 41.

13 Seth Schwartz, *The Ancient Jews from Alexander to Muhammad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 85-88.

14 Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*, 30.

way of life and adhered to some apocryphal beliefs.[15] However, the extent to which the practices of the Jews in Arabia paralleled those of mainstream Judaism is a separate issue.

On the other hand, some scholars propose that the Jewish presence in Arabia might have been negligible. The notable absence of any mention of a diaspora in Arabia is particularly striking, given the Jews' strong biblical tradition and extensive historiography.[16] There are only sporadic responsa concerning Jews living in Arab lands (Shabbat 6:6), but despite the extensive compilation of Jewish history by various authors, Arabia is often excluded. For example, in Josephus's account of Jewish uprisings, there is no mention of Jewish groups in Arabia, although Nabataean elements are referenced.[17] This omission challenges the notion of significant Jewish migration and settlement in Arabia throughout history. It is thus imperative to consider why, despite evidence of numerous Jewish elements in Arabia, they are not deemed significant by the Jews of Judea and other regions. Addressing this issue necessitates an examination of the origins of Jewish communities in Arabia and their relationship with mainstream Judaism. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in evaluating the extent and significance of the Jewish presence in Arabia.

The desert climate of Arabia acts as a natural barrier, providing refuge for various groups. However, while it offers defense against external threats, these harsh climatic conditions also shape the way in which the region's inhabitants live. It is evident that a Bedouin who wishes to survive in the desert must be in harmony with its flora, fauna, and landforms. In other parts of the world, humans have domesticated nature and molded it to fit their own cultures. In contrast, for those living in deserts, where life is more challenging, adaptation to nature is necessary. Jewish communities are known to survive long periods of forced exile or long-distance migration without assimilating completely. Nevertheless, after a certain period of time, they become influenced by the societies they live in; their language, cuisine, culture,

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15 Mustafa Baş, "Hicaz Yahudilerinin Menşe Problemi ve Tanrı Algıları", *İsrailiyat: İsrail ve Yahudi Çalışmaları Dergisi* 1 (Winter 2017), 91-104.

16 Wolfensohn, *Tārīkh al-Yahūd fī bilād al-ʿArab*, 11.

17 Darādikah, *al-ʿAlāqāt al-ʿArabiyyah al-Yahūdiyyah*, 105.

and even religious rituals reflect elements of the dominant culture.[18] The Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi Jews are examples of this phenomenon, as they retain their distinct identities while resembling their host communities in various respects.[19] For Arabia, this situation tends to favor Arab culture. The Arabization of outsiders was not necessarily due to the strength of Arab culture but rather a natural process driven by the demands of desert life.[20] This process of Arabization may explain why Jewish sources do not consider the Jewish communities in Arabia to be particularly significant. Determining the position of Jews in Arabia within the assimilation – identity preservation dichotomy is challenging. Islamic sources on the subject provide evidence supporting both perspectives. Analyzing the language of the Jewish tribes in Arabia, especially considering their poets, is of particular importance and will be discussed in the next section.

One of the most striking examples of the merging of Judaism with Arab culture in the pre-Islamic period is the presence of Jewish tribes living as Bedouins.[21] These tribes seem to have been neglected by historical sources owing to their relatively minor economic and political influence compared with sedentary Jewish communities.[22] Additionally, upon closer examination, it becomes increasingly evident that these tribes were likely indigenous Arabs who subsequently embraced Judaism. Islamic sources do mention

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18 Erich Gruen, "Diaspora and the 'Assimilated' Jew", *Early Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 2018); William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective", *Israel Studies* 10/1 (Spring 2005), 36-60; Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews, vol. 1: To the Beginning of the Christian Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 118.

19 Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 43-44.

20 Theodor Nöldeke, *Beiträge zur Kenntniss der Poesie der Alten Araber* (Hannover: Carl Rümpler, 1864), 55; Wolfensohn, *Tārīkh al-Yahūd fī bilād al-ʿArab*, 22; Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publ. Soc. of America, 2010), 4-5.

21 Newby, "The Jews of Arabia at the Birth of Islam", 44; Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*, 51.

22 Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*, 55.

individuals who converted to Judaism or converted their children to Judaism.[23] Moreover, there are accounts of some Arab tribes converting to Judaism en masse, presumably continuing their nomadic lifestyle after the conversion.[24] These findings highlight the debate on the ethnic origins of Jews in Arabia, specifically the division between those of Hebrew descent and those of Arab descent, which remains one of the most controversial topics in the context of pre-Islamic Jews. Importantly, Western scholars tend to view these tribes as Arabs who adopted Judaism.[25] Conversely, Islamic history recognizes these tribes as being of Hebrew origin.[26] They are referred to as the Children of Israel in the Qurʾān and ḥadīths and are categorized as having a separate identity from the Arab population, influencing this perception.[27] This point is significant, as it helps us understand where the Jews of the region stood in the dichotomy of assimilation versus preservation of identity. Otherwise, if not properly contextualized, the debate may become one of those trivial early modern arguments about ethnicity. Just as a tribe of Hebrew origin could be considered Arab owing to complete Arabization, a tribe that has been Judaized and lost much of its Arabic identity should be considered Jewish. Throughout this discussion, numerous Hebrew tribes settled in Arabia and plausibly underwent complete Arabization, integrating into the local culture over time. Similarly, it is possible that some Arab tribes were influenced by Jews in certain parts of Arabia, adopted their culture, and came to be seen as Jews. In this case, it would be unnecessary to identify the origin of the tribe as Arab and treat it as non-Jewish on that

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23 Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ashʿath ibn Isḥāq al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Beirut: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿādah, 1950), "al-Jihād" 963 (No. 2682).

24 Abū ʿUbayd ʿAbd Allah ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Andalusī al-Bakrī, *Muʿjam mā istaʿjam min asmāʾ al-bilād wa-l-mawāḍiʿ*, ed. Muṣṭafá al-Saqqā (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1996), 1/29.

25 Efe, *İslam Öncesi Arabistan'da Yahudilik*, 57-58.

26 However, it is possible to find names that constitute an exception to this situation. Al-Yaʿqūbī attributed the Jewish tribes in Medina to the Judhām tribe; Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Abī Yaʿqūb Isḥāq al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh al-Yaʿqūbī* (Najaf: Maṭbaʿat al-Ghurrī, 1939), 2/36, 39.

27 Ahmed Hussein Mohammed al-Isawi, *Arapça Kaynaklara Göre Hz. Muhammed Döneminde Medine Yahudileri* (Çanakkale: Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Institute of Social Sciences, Master's Thesis, 2016), 6-9.

basis.[28] Hence, our attention should be directed toward the life, structure, and language of these tribes. Language is especially significant, as it functions both as a constructor and a carrier of culture. Therefore, the languages spoken by these tribes deserve detailed consideration.

2. Languages Used by Jews of Arabia in the Pre-Islamic Period

It is common knowledge that Jews in this region spoke and wrote in Arabic and had no problems using it. However, it is also possible that there were some Aramaic and Hebrew components in their language.[29] The crucial point to emphasize is which languages, in addition to Arabic, the Jews used and to what extent. In Islamic history, Jews occasionally conversed among themselves in languages[30] other than Arabic and occasionally translated Hebrew phrases from the Torah.[31] It is also narrated that Zayd ibn Thābit was tasked by the Prophet to learn the language spoken by the Jews, referred to as Syriac in some sources and Hebrew in others.[32] By this period, Jews generally did not use Hebrew except for Torah reading and religious rituals, and it was unlikely that the Jews of Medina were an exception. Instead, they likely adopted Aramaic as their vernacular, which is consistent with its widespread use across the Middle East. The term "Syriac" in historical accounts likely denotes the Aramaic language prevalent at the time, whereas confusion with the term "Hebrew" arises from its frequent misidentification by other communities. Of course, it is possible that religious scholars in particular possessed a level of proficiency in Hebrew in addition to Aramaic. Understanding the extent of Aramaic and Hebrew usage among these communities can elucidate their processes of cultural and linguistic assimilation while preserving distinct identities.

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28 Efe, *İslam Öncesi Arabistan'da Yahudilik*, 59-60.

29 Wolfensohn, *Tārīkh al-Yahūd fī bilād al-ʿArab*, 20.

30 Ahlam Sbaihat - Nama' Albanna, "Yathrib Jews' Language(s): A Study Based on Authentic Ḥadiṯs", *al-Jāmiʿah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55/2 (2017), 329-330.

31 Sbaihat - Albanna, "Yathrib Jews' Language(s)", 334.

32 Sbaihat - Albanna, "Yathrib Jews' Language(s)", 343.

The linguistic relationship between Arabic and the language spoken by Jews remains ambiguous. Both languages share the same origins, suggesting a kinship, although it is likely that the Jewish language was a dialect of Arabic rather than a separate language.[33] In this case, the dialect in question is essentially Arabic but exhibits differences in vocabulary and pronunciation. Similar situations have often been observed in other Jewish diasporas. Languages such as Ladino[34] and Yiddish[35] emerged from the interaction between the dominant languages of the regions where Jews lived and the Aramaic and some Hebrew they used at the time. However, these languages belong to the European language families. It is conceivable that the language spoken in Arabia, also referred to as *al-Yahūdiyyah*,[36] was formed in a similar way. It should be noted, however, that the "Judeo-Arabic" spoken by Jews living in Arab lands, now known as Mizrahi Jews, is not related to this language. Indeed, the language known today as Judeo-Arabic should be characterized as a dialect with only minor differences, rather than a distinct language.[37] Similarly, in the pre-Islamic period, it is conceivable that Jews spoke with some pronunciation differences. For example, in some parts of al-Samawʾal's *Dīwān*, the letter "ث" is written as "ت".[38] This seems to reflect a pronunciation difference derived from Aramaic. If such a pronunciation difference existed, it may indicate that they used another language in addition to Arabic.

Another point to be mentioned is the names of Jews in Arabia. Not only individuals but also the vast majority of tribes had Arabic names. Although this provides a clue that the Jews in the region were highly integrated into the local culture, it does not provide any data in terms of the language they spoke. Indeed, the acquisition of names influenced by Arabic culture does not preclude them from being bilingual. In addition, some names may have common usage in both

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33 Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*, 22.

34 "Ladino Language", *Britannica* (Accessed May 23, 2024).

35 "Yiddish Language", *Britannica* (Accessed May 23, 2024).

36 Efe, *İslam Öncesi Arabistan'da Yahudilik*, 93-95.

37 Ella Shohat, "The Invention of Judeo-Arabic: Nation, Partition and the Linguistic Imaginary", *Interventions* 19/2 (February 2017), 153-200.

38 Al-Samawʾal ibn ʿĀdiyāʾ ibn Rifāʿah ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Kaʿb, *Dīwān al-Samawʾal*, ed. and comm. Wāḍiḥ al-Ṣamad (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1996), 85-86.

languages.[39] Tribal names also do not provide information about their origins in this context.[40] For example, historical sources suggest that numerous tribes were designated by the regions they inhabited.[41] Consequently, it is unsurprising that their names are of Arabic origin. Considering that such information is obtained from Arabic sources, the observations presented represent an external perspective on Jewish communities. Therefore, the internal dynamics and treatment of Jews among themselves may have diverged from what is documented.

Thus, it is evident that the Jews had their own dialect and religious understanding and lived with an identity that was distinct from the Arabs, but in certain respects, they were highly integrated into Arab culture.[42] Linguistically, one of the most compelling pieces of evidence of the deep integration of Jews into Arab culture is the literature they produced. In addition to demonstrating their full embrace and skillful use of the Arabic language, their literature also reflects their perceptions of life during that period. Poetry was generally considered the highest form of literature in Arab society, and it was in this field that they displayed their greatest skill. They articulated their emotions through poetry in times of war and peace, during moments of joy and sorrow, and in various significant events throughout their lives. Poets became the leading figures of society and represented their tribes in every field. Given the information shared in this work thus far, it is highly appropriate to conclude that the Jews, while not assimilating, were deeply integrated into Arab culture and language. This assertion is clearly evident in the poetry they produced, which reflects that they integrated into the Arab cultural and linguistic milieu without compromising their own identity. For this reason, an analysis of the literature of the Jews in Arabia, particularly their poetry, offers clearer insights into their relationship with the Arabic language.

3. Jewish Poets in the Main Arabic Sources

At this point, it has been observed that Jews in Arabia had a dialect close to Arabic, although it is possible that they used other languages.

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39 Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*, 74.

40 Wolfensohn, *Tārīkh al-Yahūd fī bilād al-ʿArab*, 15.

41 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh al-Yaʿqūbī*, 2/36, 39.

42 Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 4-5.

For example, in their religious literature, it appears unlikely that they relied on Arabic sources. Instead, it is more plausible that they utilized sources in languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic and perhaps texts translated from these languages into Arabic. Inferences from the Qurʾān and other sources show that the Jews had literature that was appreciated by the Arabs.[43] Western scholars have often emphasized these points and attempted to demonstrate the influence of Jews on Arab culture in general and on Islam in particular.[44] However, in addition to their religious literature, Jews in Arabia had other cultural practices with profane characteristics. The Jews could not remain detached from the tradition of poetry, which held an important position due to the social structure in the region. In addition to the odes of *ḥamāsah*, *fakhr*, and *hijw* common among the Arab tribes, they also composed many brief lines to express themselves. Moreover, considering that the available sources illuminate only a portion of the cultural resources, the evidence suggests that the Jews had a considerable poetic literary culture in Arabia.[45]

In *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, one of the oldest anthologies of Arabic poetry, a Jewish poet is mentioned anonymously.[46] The poem, whose title and period remain unknown owing to its anonymity, was later referenced in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* along with its story in relation to a Muslim individual.[47] It is common in oral cultures for a poem to circulate and be recited by different people. Therefore, different people may recite a poem in a manner that reflects their own contexts. However, al-Ḍabbī emphasizes the poet's Jewishness despite not identifying him. Considering the understanding of an omnipotent God in the final part of the poem, where submission to fate is emphasized as necessary, highlighting the poet's Jewishness seems fitting:

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43 Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933), 31.

44 Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 107.

45 It has been said that since Jews were less likely than polytheists to have embraced Islam, their poetry was less likely to be transmitted to later ages; see Wolfensohn, *Tārīkh al-Yahūd fī bilād al-ʿArab*, 25-26.

46 Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Mufaḍḍal ibn Muḥammad ibn Yaʿlá al-Ḍabbī, *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir - ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 179-180.

47 Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 12/171.

وَلكِنْ لهَا آمِرٌ قَادِرٌ إِذَا حَاوَلَ الأَمْرَ لا يُغلَبُ

But this is the work of a powerful ruler,
who cannot be resisted when he wishes something.

In another anthology compiled in the early period, *al-Aṣmaʿiyyāt*, two Jewish poets are mentioned, each with an ode. The first is Saʿyah ibn Ghurayḍ, and the other is the famous poet al-Samawʾal, who is mentioned in the book as his brother.[48] Of these, Saʿyah's poem is a classic example of *fakhr* poetry.[49] However, in addition to emphasizing the concept of an omnipotent God, al-Samawʾal's poem contains many implicit and explicit religious elements.[50] It is surprising that al-Samawʾal, who likely wrote many other poems, has only this work included in the anthology. Apparently, in the early period, such religious elements were associated with the literature of the Jews. Thus, poems with these elements were considered more valuable for quotation and were directly attributed to some Jews, such as al-Samawʾal. Indeed, the pre-Islamic Arabs, although they may have had a perception of a creator deity, did not possess the mindset offered by monotheistic and systematized religions. In contrast, a polytheist would have been drawn to exhortations about the randomness of life and the necessity of struggling against it. In addition, although at first glance the poem appears to be by a Jew, closer examination has raised serious doubts about its authenticity and its fabrication during the Islamic period.[51] Scholars have justifiably criticized the poem, on the basis of its references to the Qurʾān, which give the impression that it was retrospectively composed in the post-Islamic period.[52] There are other *dīwān* poems that have been subjected to historical and

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[48] Abū Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Qurayb al-Aṣmaʿī, *al-Aṣmaʿiyyāt*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir - ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 82-86.

[49] The first couplet of the poem: ألا إني بليت وقد بقيت ... وإني لن أعود كما غنيت

[50] It also contains some Jewish elements: وأتتني الأنباء عن ملك داود ... فقرت عيني به ورضيت (The stories of the kingdom of David came to me, and I was glad and happy).

[51] The first couplet of the poem: نطفة ما منيت يوم منيت ... أمرت أمرها وفيها بريت al-Samawʾal, *Dīwān al-Samawʾal*, 82-88.

[52] D. S. Margoliouth, "A Poem Attributed to al-Samau'al", *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (April 1906), 363-371.

linguistic analyses, raising doubts about their authenticity.[53] Moreover, early literary scholars often debated the attribution of these poems. Considered together, such doubts also extend to the authenticity of other poems mentioned in historical sources and in the *dīwān*.

Another book compiled after these two anthologies, which also contains many poems from the early period, is Abū Tammām's *al-Ḥamāsah*. Only one Jewish poet and poem are mentioned in this book. This poem, attributed to al-Samawʾal, is considered one of the most classical examples of the genre owing to its eloquent and fluent style.[54] As one might infer from this, the poem adheres to the strict structure of classical Arabic *fakhr* themes and lacks any indication of Judaism or a monotheistic understanding. In reality, a sentence in the book preceding the poem hints that it could be the work of someone else.[55] In addition to this suspicion, the poem does not appear in the other two earlier anthologies. Moreover, considering that al-Aṣmaʿī quoted the poetry of al-Samawʾal, it is unexpected that he did not include this prominent poem in his book. Upon consideration of these two factors, the poem's attribution to al-Samawʾal weakens remarkably. Furthermore, according to al-Marzūqī, one of the book's commentators, the poem was written by ʿAbd al-Malik al-Ḥārithī, although he also admitted the possibility that it could be the work of al-Samawʾal.[56] It seems that he considers it less likely that the poem is the work of the former. Another commentator, al-Ṭabrīzī, first attributed the poem to al-Samawʾal and provided an extensive biography of him. He then suggested that it might have belonged to ʿAbd al-Malik al-Ḥārithī.[57] To summarize, different aspects of the poem's attribution have been highlighted, but since it contains no

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[53] Tadeusz Kowalski, "A Contribution to the Problem of the Authenticity of the Dīwān of as-Samau'al", *Archiv Orientální* 3/1 (April 1931), 156-161.

[54] The first couplet of the poem: إذا المرء لم يدنس من اللؤم عرضه ... فكل رداء يرتديه جميل

[55] Abū Tammām Ḥabīb ibn Aws ibn al-Ḥārith al-Ṭāʾī, *Dīwān al-Ḥamāsah*, ed. ʿAbd al-Munʿim Aḥmad Ṣāliḥ (Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd, 1980), 42.

[56] Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Marzūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Ḥamāsah li-Abī Tammām*, ed. Gharīd al-Shaykh (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), 1/82-83.

[57] Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyá ibn ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Ḥamāsah li-Abī Tammām*, ed. Gharīd al-Shaykh (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2000), 1/85-86.

Jewish elements, no effort has been made to ascertain its origin on a religious basis.

After Abū Tammām, the other fundamental book in the genre of *ḥamāsah* is the work of al-Buḥturī. However, there are no odes attributed to any Jews in this work. There are only two short fragments of poems on specific topics. The first is a two-couplet poem on the subject of friendship, which is attributed to Shurayḥ ibn ʿAmrān.[58] The other is attributed to Waraqah ibn Nawfal, who is identified as a Jew in the work and whom the Prophet consulted when the first revelation came.[59] However, this second poem fragment is attributed to al-Samawʾal in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*. In addition, many other names have been suggested as possible authors of the poem. One such name is Waraqah, to whom al-Buḥturī also attributes the poem.[60] The fame of this short poem stems from the widespread belief that it was heard and approved by the Prophet. Literary books generally quote the couplets in the context of this event. Moreover, the incident is found not only in anthologies but also in ḥadīth literature. The fact that in the ḥadīths, the Prophet refers to the poet as a Jew without naming him seems to have led to various speculations about the poem's authorship.[61] An examination of the content of the poem reveals that it focuses on the necessity of helping the weak. However, this help is not underscored as a religious or moral obligation; rather, it is anticipated as a reciprocation for mutual benefits.

Following these anthological collections, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, one of the most extensive works in Arabic literature, references several Jewish poets. In addition, al-Iṣfahānī dedicates a specific section to the Jews of Yathrib in his work and then proceeds to recount a selection of

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[58] The first couplet of the poem: آخ الكرام إذا وجد ... ت إلى إخائهم سبيلا Abū ʿUbādah al-Walīd ibn ʿUbayd al-Ṭāʾī al-Buḥturī, *al-Ḥamāsah*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ḥuwwar - Aḥmad Muḥammad ʿAbīd (Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage, 2007), 138.

[59] The first couplet of the poem: ارفع ضعيفك لا يحربك ضعفه ... يوما فتدركه العواقب قد نما al-Buḥturī, *al-Ḥamāsah*, 488.

[60] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 3/79.

[61] Abū Bakr Ahmad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Bayhaqī, *al-Jāmiʿ li- shuʿab al-īmān*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAlī ʿAbd al- Ḥamīd Ḥāmid (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2003), 11/388.

stories and poems.[62] Almost none of these poems contain any reference to Judaism or religion. There is only one poem in which a Jewish man bids his wife who has converted to Islam to return. The remainder of the poems are classical Arabic pieces, dealing with specific subjects akin to those of the pre-Islamic era. The book continues with a chapter on al-Samawʾal and the story of his reputation for loyalty.[63] Although some short fragments of poetry are included in this story, the main focus lies in the events described. After al-Samawʾal, Saʿyah ibn Ghurayḍ, his grandson, is mentioned under a separate heading. Saʿyah seems to have attracted interest primarily because of his distinguished grandfather and his embrace of Islam. After Saʿyah, the next name in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* is Rabīʿ ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq from the tribe of Qurayẓah, who is mentioned in a short story and some descriptive poems he recited with al-Nābighah.[64] Similarly, Rabīʿ's poetry does not differ from what is known in classical Arabic poetry. He was followed by Kaʿb ibn al-Ashraf, who was known for his hostility to Islam.[65] His recognition among Jewish poets stems from his creation of poems that vehemently opposed and humiliated the Prophet. His life and the fragments of his poetry are usually mentioned in this context. Kaʿb, like many other poets who denounced Islam and the Prophet, was assassinated at the Prophet's orders.

In addition to these anthologies, many biographical dictionaries were written in the early Islamic world. These dictionaries aim to collect poets who lived in the Arab world and quote some of their poems. Al-Jumāḥī's *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ*, one of the most prominent of these works, includes a separate section titled "شعراء يهود" (Jewish Poets). The poets mentioned in this section are al-Samawʾal, Rabīʿ ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq, Kaʿb ibn al-Ashraf, Shurayḥ ibn ʿAmrān, Saʿyah ibn Ghurayḍ, Abū Qays ibn Rifāʿah, Abū Zayd, and Dirham ibn Zayd.[66] Since the work aims to collect biographies, it provides only short examples of poetry after the names. For this reason, although the

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62 Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 22/79-83.

63 Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 22/84-86.

64 Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 22/91-93.

65 Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 22/94-95.

66 Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Sallām ibn ʿUbayd Allāh al-Jumaḥī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (Jeddah: Dār al-Madanī, n.d.), 280-296.

names we see in the work offer some insight into the number of Jewish poets, they fall short of providing comprehensive information about the subjects and motifs they used. Nevertheless, all of them, with the exception of al-Samawʾal's poem, are in the style of classical Arabic poetry. Al-Samawʾal's poetry, however, is a subject for the next chapter.

Another important biographical dictionary is al-Marzubānī's *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, which is quite extensive. However, since not all of this work has survived, we can only see the Jewish poets mentioned in some parts of it. These poets are ʿAmr ibn Abī Ṣakhr,[67] al-Qaʿqāʿ ibn Shibth,[68] Kaʿb ibn al-Ashraf,[69] Kaʿb ibn Asad,[70] Kinānah ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq,[71] Rabīʿ ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq,[72] Abū Athāyah, Abū l-Dhayyāl, Abū l-Qarthaʿ, and Abū Yāsir.[73] Although al-Marzubānī includes more Jewish names than other anthologies and dictionaries do, this number is still small considering the breadth of the book.

4. The Treatment of Jews in Islamic History and Some Doubts about Their Poetry

Although this study focuses primarily on Jewish poets in pre-Islamic Arabia, examining their trajectory into the early Islamic period is largely essential. The transition from the pre-Islamic period to the advent of Islam provides a critical context for evaluating Jewish poetic literacy. While this study centers on pre-Islamic Jewish poets, the early Islamic period, especially its poetry, represents a direct continuation of pre-Islamic traditions. Importantly, the poets who composed and circulated poetry during this period acquired their poetic skills before they became acquainted with Islam. Thus, many poets who were active before and after Islam were known as *mukhaḍramūn* and continued to adhere to pre-Islamic styles and themes, despite substantial shifts in the political and religious landscape. Additionally,

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67 Abū ʿUbayd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿImrān ibn Mūsá al-Marzubānī, *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, ed. Fārūq Aslīm (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2005), 84.

68 Al-Marzubānī, *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, 252.

69 Al-Marzubānī, *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, 276.

70 Al-Marzubānī, *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, 277.

71 Al-Marzubānī, *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, 293.

72 Al-Marzubānī, *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, 303.

73 Al-Marzubānī, *Muʿjam al-shuʿarāʾ*, 583-599.

it should be remembered that the scholars who wrote about the Jews compiled their works during the Islamic period and within the context of that era.

Thus far, this work has identified the names and poems of many Jewish poets from both the pre-Islamic era and the early Islamic period. In addition, there are poems collected by Niftawayh under the name *Dīwān al-Samaw'al*. Some of the poems in this *dīwān* are found in the aforementioned anthologies. Nevertheless, the fact that Niftawayh, one of the leading linguists of the early period, attempted to compile this poet's poems shows that he was a remarkable poet.[74] However, the same cannot be said for the other names mentioned in historical sources. Owing to the important position of poetry in Arab society, it is possible to find this art in every aspect of their lives. The presence of thousands of Arab poets in biographical dictionaries compiling the lives of poets clearly illustrates this situation. Therefore, it would be incorrect to assume that every aforementioned poet was among the prominent and well-known figures of the period. This is clearly seen in the poets mentioned in the history of *sīrah*. Many Jewish poets who criticized and were subsequently assassinated by the Prophet are included in these works. However, these poets should not be considered those who took poetry as a profession or were famous for their poetic skill. They merely expressed their opposition to Islam and the Prophet through poetry, in accordance with the spirit of the time.

Among the names of those who were assassinated for their harsh criticism of the Prophet are Abū ʿAfak, Sārah al-Quraẓī, Asmāʾ bint Marwān, and Kaʿb ibn al-Ashraf.[75] With the exception of Kaʿb ibn al-Ashraf, these names were not included in the anthology books or dictionaries. To summarize, although these names have an important place in the history of *sīrah*, they are negligible in terms of literary history. A similar situation applies to the poets of Medina. The fact that most of the names we see in historical sources are from the Naḍīr and

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[74] Yusuf Buhan, *Niftaveyh ve Maksûr-Memdûd Literatürü* (Bursa: Emin Yayınları, 2022), 86-87, 103.

[75] Esat Ayyıldız, "Klasik Arap Edebiyatında Yahudi Şairlere Düzenlenen Suikastlar", *Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 18 (October 2020), 129-138.

Qurayẓah tribes is due to the frequent mention of these tribes in Islamic history. Notably, the documentation and study of Arabic history, especially the history of Arabic literature, began with the advent of Islam. Therefore, upon analysis of these disciplines, it cannot be denied that there is an Islam-centered perspective. For example, in *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ*, which can be considered the most important of the abovementioned works, al-Jumāḥī begins by saying, "The Jews in and around Medina have quality poetry". Yathrib, a Jewish city, became known as Medina after the Prophet's migration there. Some of the Prophet's greatest battles were fought to break the power of the Jews in this city. Therefore, it is natural for such books to focus on the Jews in the heart of Medina.

The exception to this is the city of Taymāʾ and its poet al-Samawʾal, famous for his loyalty. Indeed, al-Samawʾal is a character who left his mark on the Arab imagination by exhibiting desert virtues in addition to his poetic prowess. His story involving Imruʾ al-Qays became famous enough to be the subject of poems by later poets.[76] Moreover, this event has no close connection with the emergence of Islam. Thus, the information that al-Samawʾal's story provides may paint a more realistic picture than what is said about other poets. Contrary to initial expectations, the corpus of poems attributed to him and the accounts concerning his life significantly surpass those of other Jewish poets in both quantity and detail. For this reason, in discussions of Jewish poets, al-Samawʾal is typically cited as a primary reference.

In conclusion, the works of the Jewish poets, including al-Samawʾal's poems and other Jews about whom short fragments have been narrated, did not deviate from Jāhiliyyah poetry in their style and themes.[77] The only case that is considered a clear exception, al-Samawʾal's unusual *dīwān* poetry, which contains religious elements, is also subject to doubt, as discussed in the previous chapter. These uncertainties make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions from al-Samawʾal's poetry, despite his status as the most prominent Jewish poet at that time. Nevertheless, several assertions can still be made about Jewish poets and their poems in pre-Islamic Arabia.

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[76] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 22/86-87.

[77] Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*, 55-56; Nöldeke, *Beiträge zur Kenntniss der Poesie der Alten Araber*, 56-57.

The records presented throughout this work reveal that the Jews adhered to pre-Islamic poetic styles and themes when composing poetry in the Arabic language. One might also argue that it is wrong to draw conclusions from these records because of the deep suspicions about their authenticity. Nevertheless, the later literati of the Arab world readily attributed many skillfully structured and metered poems to pre-Islamic Jewish figures. It is clear from historical sources that the Jewishness of the poet was not considered a major factor affecting the poetry. The characterization of a poet as "Jewish" was not related to their poetry but served merely as an identifier. Therefore, although it is difficult to identify the poems of Jews and their authors definitively, we can still assert that these Jews wrote poems in Arabic and adhered to the pre-Islamic style and themes in their poetry.[78] Such an outcome would be expected from a community that spoke the Arabic language and adopted the Arab tribal structure. Accordingly, just as an Arab tribe in Arabia valued poetry and used it for survival, it would have held the same value and played a similar role for a Jewish tribe. Thus, there should be no difference in the styles and themes of poetry. In contrast to popular belief, poetry is not merely the product of spontaneous emotional outbursts or enthusiasm. While there is some emotion at the forefront of poetry, it is still built on traditionally established templates such as set meters, rhyme, wordplay, and emphasis. Therefore, whether of Arab or Hebrew origin, the poetry written in the prevailing Arabian context naturally conformed to the poetic traditions of the region.

Conclusion

Many ideas have been proposed concerning when and why Jews came to Arabia in the pre-Islamic period. Theories such as Babylonian attacks, Roman attacks, and commercial and social factors have been discussed both throughout Islamic history and in modern times. Following these ideas, the extent to which Jewish communities assimilated after migration and the degree to which they retained their identity have been debated. There is some evidence to suggest that the

[78] James T. Monroe, "Oral Composition in the Pre-Islamic Poetry", *Early Islamic Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Variorum, 2009), 6.

Jews of Arabia were positioned close to both sides of this dilemma. However, it can be argued that the Jews in Arabia were highly integrated into Arab culture, both socially and linguistically. The harsh conditions of the desert climate may have forced them to more fully integrate into the region. In addition, it should be noted that there were Arab tribes that adopted Judaism. The Jewish presence in Arabia was composed of Hebrew tribes who migrated there and integrated into the dominant culture of the region, as well as some Arab tribes who adopted Judaism.

The situation becomes clearer when examining the languages employed by the Jews of this period. The Jewish tribes were proficient in both speaking and writing Arabic, although it is believed that they concurrently utilized another language. Furthermore, they engaged in poetry, the most prevalent form of artistic expression of the era. Given the harsh conditions of the Arabian deserts, poetry was an indispensable tool for a community striving for survival. The preservation of tribal honor, the satire of enemy tribes, and the composition of didactic poetry imparting life advice were of paramount importance for these tribes. Consequently, it is entirely plausible for Jewish tribes to participate in poetry and exhibit their prowess in this domain.

When the sources compiled in Islamic history are examined, many Jewish names emerge as prominent figures. The poems attributed to Jewish poets, especially the renowned al-Samawʾal, are often in a pre-Islamic style. The themes addressed and the styles employed align with those of pre-Islamic poetry. The only exceptions that come to mind in this context may be those few poems that reflect traces of a monotheistic or omnipotent worldview. The attribution of these poems to Jews may indicate such a tendency in their literature in pre-Islam. However, both historical sources and contemporary academic studies have highlighted certain deficiencies. The authenticity of the poems has been questioned, revealing that some do not originate from the pre-Islamic period. There are numerous doubts, especially concerning poems that contain religious elements. Consequently, it is plausible to assert that there are some uncertainties regarding the poems and *dīwān*s attributed to Jewish poets.

Although there are doubts about some of the poems, the available data indicate that pre-Islamic Jews composed poetry in Arabic.

Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the theme or style of their poetry compared with the broader corpus of pre-Islamic poetry. This is a natural phenomenon among individuals or tribes who wish to compose poetry in a particular language. Considering the robust tradition of poetry during the pre-Islamic period, it is difficult to envision poetry that does not draw upon this tradition in terms of meter, rhyme, wordplay, and emphasis. Additionally, given that poetry serves as a social tool, it is essential to consider it not only from the perspective of the poet or tribe reciting it but also from the perspective of the audience receiving it. A poem that is composed with the aim of gaining widespread popularity and appreciation must inevitably adhere to these accepted conventions. The Jews, who possessed a distinct religious literature during the pre-Islamic period, were no exception.

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