Between Muslim and Jew

THE PROBLEM OF SYMBIOSIS UNDER EARLY ISLAM

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INTRODUCTION

> How one religion behaves toward other religions, how and what it thinks about the "other"—the whole *theologia religionum*, in other words—is an essential part of the self-understanding of every religion and what it says about itself.
>
> —R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Common Roots"

THE LATE Shlomo Dov (Fritz) Goitein (1900–1985) characterized the central relationship of Jews with Muslims in the first centuries of Islam as one of "creative symbiosis." This usage has been institutionalized in the study of Judeo-Arabica, and shows no immediate signs of being dislodged from its preeminence.[1] The concept *symbiosis* was first transposed from biology to the study of Jewish history by German Jewish intellectuals. Its most salient usage was in reference to their own cultural situation.[2] Alex Bein's influential study, "Discourse on the Term 'German-Jewish Symbiosis,'" appeared at that time, as an appendix to his essay (revealingly enough) on a related biological borrowing, "The Jewish Parasite."[3] After the destruction of the German Jewish community in World War II, the brunt of this debate came to concern the extent to which this vaunted German Jewish symbiosis was simply a Jewish delusion. This position is eloquently, if acerbically, argued by Gershom Scholem.[4] Nonetheless, the term continued to mount in popularity among

[1] I have dealt more fully with some of the recent literature in "Recent Works on the 'Creative Symbiosis' of Judaism and Islam," 43–47, parts of which are used herein.
[2] In the phrase given currency by H. Cohen, these Jews were torn between "Germanism and Judaism" (Deutschtum und Judentum),—a notion S. Schwarszchild explores in "Hermann Cohen's Normative Paradigm of the German-Jewish Symbiosis," 129–72. Martin Buber and others already occasionally borrowed this scientistic metaphor within the lifetime of Cohen (Bein, "Jewish Parasite," 3–40; E. Simon, "Martin Buber and German Jewry," 15 n. 46). Employed sporadically and vaguely until the mid-1960s, the use of *symbiosis* was then both increased and modified. By 1976, Bronsen could publish an anthology with the encompassing title *Jews and Germans, from 1860 to 1933: The Problematic Symbiosis*.
[3] Bein, "Jewish Parasite," 3–40. For the meaning of *symbiosis* in the context of parasitology and in the study of religion, see Smith, "What a Difference"; and Serres, *Hermes* and *Le Parasite*.
[4] Scholem, "Jews and Germans," 71–93. Scholem angrily rebuts all those who suggest that any such phenomenon was anything more than the wish structure of certain German Jews: "To whom, then, did the Jews speak in that much-talked-about German-Jewish dialogue? They talked to themselves" (83). For Scholem, there was no

historians of Judaism operating both inside and outside the German context.[5]

The general success of the historical usage of *symbiosis* in application to Jewish history, and the concurrent polarization of the Germanism and Judaism debate, casts a retrospective shadow over Goitein's influential concept of creative symbiosis. I have therefore necessarily noted the use of *symbiosis* in general Jewish historiography, and especially German Jewish historiography, as background for its use in the Jewish-Muslim context.

Creative Symbiosis: From Coinage to Consensus

A parallel, if comparatively more muted, debate has taken place among scholars of the Jews of Islam concerning the general characterization of Jewish life under Islam. Was it a genuine symbiosis, a Golden Age—or was it a Vale of Tears?[6] No generalization in this debate has approached the success of Goitein's irenic creative symbiosis.

Goitein is undisputably responsible for the popularization of the concept of creative symbiosis in the historiography of Jewish-Muslim relations. His standard work, *Jews and Arabs*, has introduced students to this subject for an entire generation.[7] In this work, Goitein employs the concept expansively, even enthusiastically. He even organizes the first centuries of Jewish-Muslim relations around this idea, asserting at the outset that "never has Judaism encountered such a close and fructuous symbiosis as that with the medieval civilization of Arab Islam" (130). Creative symbiosis marks Goitein's second stage of Jewish-Arab relations. Following a protracted early period, characterized by intermittant contacts,

> *then came the second* and, in the past, most important, period of creative Jewish-Arab symbiosis, lasting 800 years [from 500 to 1300], during the first half of which Muslim religion and Arab nationhood took form under Jewish impact, while in the second half traditional Judaism received its final shape under Muslim-Arab influence. (10)

This usage, moreover, would become ubiquitous in Goitein's later work. In the second volume of his subsequent magnum opus, *A Mediterannean Society*,

such thing as a German Jewish symbiosis—only the bathetic delusion of Jews who hungered to believe so.

[5] By 1973, C. Roth could describe a Hebrew Bible in the Renaissance "depicting on the first page God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, with opposite Hebrew wording. Here is a striking exemplification of the generous Judaeo-Christian symbiosis of this period" ("Jewish Society in the Renaissance Environment," 245).

[6] Udovitch, "The Jews and Islam in the High Middle Ages"; M. R. Cohen, "Islam and the Jews," 125–37.

[7] Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*.

one finds a chapter entitled "Interfaith Symbiosis and Cooperation."[8] And in his concluding volume 5, Goitein continues to employ it (5:9).

It is no exaggeration to say that nearly every leading scholar in Jewish-Muslim studies has adopted Goitein's usage, with its popularity continuing to increase in the 1980s. Vajda, who after Goldziher could arguably rank alongside Goitein as the leader in this field, spoke of "une symbiose positive" (a positive symbiosis).[9] And Bernard Lewis, whose *Jews of Islam* has now superseded Goitein's *Jews and Arabs* as an introductory text, fully retains this terminology. He proclaims "a kind of symbiosis between Jews and their [Muslim] neighbors that has no parallel in the Western world between the Hellenistic and modern ages."[10]

Among other scholars of Judeo-Arabica, the symbiosis routinely is characterized in equally extravagent terms.[11] Thus we read about "the particular harmony, or symbiosis, in which they usually lived"; "the remarkable symbiosis of Islam and Judaism"; "the most intimate symbiosis of Judaism and Islam"; and "a sort of necessary symbiosis." Indeed, by 1984, the Institute of Islamic-Judaic Studies announced its institution for "those involved in the study of the symbiosis of Islam and Judaism."[12]

This implacably peacable institutionalization of symbiosis among students of the Jews of Islam is all the more remarkable in light of the violent controversy over this term among students of the Jews of Germany. Some dissent, finally, has been registered in recent years. Reviewing Lewis's *Jews of Islam*, Nemoy expresses his concern. "The simple fact is that symbiosis (in Webster's definition as living together to the mutual advantage of both parties) is probably not exactly the right term . . . nor indeed is tolerance." And most recently, Brinner urges that "any approach to the question of what has been called the symbiosis, or mutual influence . . . must make its way with extreme caution."[13]

Now that Goitein's magisterial *Mediterranean Society* is complete, we can examine a mountain of Geniza evidence, most of it uncovered, translated, and synthesized for the first time by Goitein. This achievement surely deserves the

[8] Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* 2:289–99.

[9] Vajda, "Mystique juive et mystique musulmane," 37.

[10] Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 88.

[11] Zafrani, "Maïmonide, pèlerin de monde judéo-arabe," 260. More recently, Zafrani has spoken of an "une symbiose interconfessionelle," in "Judaisme d'occident musulman," 145.

[12] Sadan, "Genizah and Genizah-Like Practices in Islamic and Jewish Traditions," 42; Wansborough, Review of *Jews of Islam*, 28; Fenton, *Treatise*, ix; De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 5; Rippin, *Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies Newsletter*, 5. The senior Tunisian scholar Mohammed Talbi has cast this concept in wider terms: "It is a perfectly obvious and well-known fact that Islam and the West have a long history of symbiosis and exchange" ("Possibilities and Conditions," 185). Stroumsa, Review of *Creazione*, 37–39.

[13] Nemoy, Review of *Jews of Islam*, 186; Brinner and Ricks, *Studies*, ix.

nearly unanimous acclamation it has continuously received since its first volume was published in 1967. But what is its relevance to the critical study of religions?

Goitein reserved his study of Geniza-era daily life—including religion—to this final volume. Still, of the ten massive chapters of his masterwork, only one section of this final volume deals with religion as such (323–415). Throughout his pentalogy, to be sure, he does consider relevant topics, as in his extended study of sacred time and sacred space, which opens his final volume (5–45). Indeed, now, in volume 5 of *A Mediterranean Society*, Goitein provides some generalizing, concluding assessments.

These final observations may be compared instructively to those he expressed earlier, in his propaedeutic essay "Religion in Everyday Life as Reflected in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza":

> The religion of the Geniza people was a stern, straightforward, Talmudic type of piety, concerned with the strict fulfillment of the commandments and with the pursuit of the study required for their knowldege. This somewhat jejune character of their religiosity was enhanced by the rigorous rationalism embraced by Jewish orthodoxy in the wake of centuries of sectarian and theological controversies.[14]

Goitein never changed his judgment in this regard. In a summary statement on "the religion of the Geniza people," he provides similarly provocative generalizations, final words that reconfirm his previous judgment on:[15] the sociability of these people (5); "the openness of Mediterranean society during the good years of the High Middle Ages" (6); the inclination of the Geniza man to "[leave] too much to God and [do] too little himself—especially to alleviate human suffering or work to perfect himself" (8); "the physical and educational symbiosis between Muslims and Jews, experienced during the preceding centuries, which eased the transition to the dominant faith [i.e., Jewish conversion to Islam]" (9).

On the very last page of *A Mediterranean Society*, Goitein concludes, "With the exception of the few really pious and God-possessed, religion formed the frame, rather than the content, of the daily existence" (502). In short, Goitein's concern with the content of daily existence resulted in the "thick description" of his magnum opus, which "sociographically" depicts the Jewish world of the Geniza documents. Only rarely did he examine their religion as such. Perhaps this neglect may be explained by Goitein's conviction that this society's religiosity was primarily "jejune" and "bourgeois."

In any case, the glaring fact remains that *A Mediterranean Society*—and Jewish-Islamic scholarship in general—infrequently deals directly with fundamental questions in the critical study of religion. This is not to deny that any subsequent work on the religion of the Jews of the Geniza period must now follow from the "sociography" so assiduously crafted by Goitein.

[14] Goitein, "Religion in Everyday Life," 8.
[15] Goitein, *Mediterranean Society* 5:5–10.

Bernard Lewis, like Goitein, is not a religionist. But his *Jews of Islam* has become a standard text in the field of Judeo-Arabic studies and has, in this capacity, sustained the institutionalization of symbiosis. However, like *A Mediterranean Society*, *The Jews of Islam* only indirectly considers the issues that are central to religious studies. His long first chapter, "Islam and Other Religions," fortunately provides a signal contribution to this rich, neglected area.[16] Even so, Lewis does not analyze the problems and phenomena that religionists routinely investigate. Still, the critical student of religion must turn to his fourth chapter, "The End of the Tradition," for a model study of a model breakdown in interreligious relations.[17] No fuller synthetic study of the horrific disintegration of the Jewish-Muslim symbiosis exists.[18]

Symbiosis in the Critical Study of Religion

From the standard text of Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, to that of Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, the study of religion has barely begun to integrate the extraordinary phenomenon of Jewish-Muslim symbiosis, much less rethink the paradigm itself. The sizable volume of research in this area incorporates new assessments, some of considerable importance, but they rarely shake any overarching consensus. Creative symbiosis remains in place, yet to be properly assessed from the perspective of the critical study of religion.

What would such an assessment entail? What, precisely, is the character of this sharing? Is it a sharing of the *sancta* posited by Mordechai Kaplan in his architectonic constructions toward an American Judaism? Kaplan, for example, states that "religions are not necessarily mutually exclusive; they are so only when their *sancta* are interpreted as implying contradictory doctrines."[19] Or is this symbiosis to be construed as those shared civilizational components in an area demarcated as "Islamicate" by Marshall G. S. Hodgson?[20] Or is it in fact a form of civil religion?[21] Again, one wonders whether some other metaphor from the natural sciences—say, co-evolution—might not be more appropriate. Gregory Bateson calls co-evolution a "stochastic system of evolutionary change in which two or more species interact in such a way that changes in species A set the stage for the natural selection of changes in species B. Later changes in species B, in turn, set the stage for the selecting of

[16] Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 3–67.
[17] Ibid., 154–91. This study has already been substantially amplified by Lewis himself, in his recent *Semites and Anti-Semites*.
[18] Norman Stillman, however, has now completed his ample anthologies, *Jews of Arab Lands* and the *Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*.
[19] Kaplan, "Reconstructionism," 437.
[20] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*.
[21] See Robert Bellah's influential formulation in "Civil Religion in America." For a provocative exploration of the sociological interaction of Jews in American society, see John Murray Cuddihy's *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste*.

more similiar changes in species A."[22] Perhaps it would be helpful to consider the notion of social henotheism.[23]

It may also be useful to recall that symbiosis has entered the study of Judaism along with its shadow, parasite.[24] Fortunately, as a means of rethinking its applicability to the study of interreligious relations, two approaches have emerged recently that reconsider symbiosis in its parasitological sense. First, the French interdisciplinary thinker Michel Serres has developed a theory of communication that concentrates not on the Other, but on the third party: "To hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him; a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man. The most profound dialectical problem is not the problem of the Other, who is only a variety of—or a variation—of the Same, it is the problem of the third man."[25] This third man Serres calls the "demon," the "noise," or the "parasite".[26] Like Serres, Jonathan Z. Smith has begun a serious reflection on the problem of otherness by means of a reconsideration of the category of parasite.

> While at one level the taxonomy of parasites (and, hence, of otherness) appears to be reducible to the ancient legal question, *Cui bono*? at another level the distinctions between "parasitism," "symbiosis," "mutualism," "commensalism," "epiphytism" and the like are distinctions between types of exchange. A "theory of the other" must take the form of a relational theory of reciprocity. "Otherness," whether of Scotsmen or lice, is a preeminently political category.[27]

In my own way, I have chosen to interrogate the central construct in the study of early Jewish-Muslim relations, creative symbiosis.[28] If, minimally,

[22] Bateson, *Angels Fear*, 207.

[23] "Henotheism: a stage in religious development antedating radical monotheism, in which one believes in one supreme god for one's own particular region, race or nation, without denying the existence of other gods for other regions, races or nations. The tolerant message of henotheism is: to each his own" (Cuddihy, *No Offense*, 44). Cuddihy also cites H. Richard Niebuhr to the effect that the history of Israel "is marked by an almost continuous struggle between social henotheism and radical monotheism" (Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 57). The concept of social henotheism seems especially apt in regard to the 'Isawiyya, studied in chapter 2 below.

[24] Bein, "Jewish Parasite," 3–40.

[25] Serres, *Hermes*, 67.

[26] Serres, *Le parasite*.

[27] Smith, "What a Difference," 10.

[28] I shall not offer a definition of this term. For the reader who needs such a thing, consult Goitein's characterization cited above. "But it seems to me that people who have as many things to investigate as we have do not dispute about a name" (Plato, *Republic*, 185). "The refusal, for reasons of scientific integrity, to work with any concepts other than clear and unambiguous ones, becomes a pretext for putting the interests of a self-legitimizing research industry before those of the subject-matter itself. With an arrogance born of ignorance the objections of classical philosophers to the practice of definition are consigned to oblivion; that philosophy banished as a remnant of scholasticism is still being perpetuated by unreflecting individual sciences in the name of scientific exactitude" (Adorno, "Sociology," 242–43).

symbiosis suggests mutual benefit, what then is meant by *mutual*, and what by *benefit*? At a minimum, the notion of *benefit*, as employed by the religionist, should remain properly problematic, for symbiosis, ultimately, will remain a fruitful problem, a problem of genuine mutuality and authentic benefit both, only if it is allowed its delusions and its dominations, its manipulations and exploitations, its half-baked altruisms and its full-blown fusions. Symbiosis, as a thinly happy and monovalently positive benefit, did not happen. Its complexity is reduced to *mere* benefit only by a tendentious dilution. It does suggest, however, a view of real relations sufficiently capacious to include the means by which harm helps. A. R. Ammons articulates this painful paradox with poetic insight as he evokes it in "Negative Symbiosis":

> even the
> rattler,
> his neck
> gagged with
> fur,
>
> trims up
> the world so
> something
> tiny can
> come
> through.[29]

For Muslims and for Jews today, it may seem that something tiny indeed has come through. For the historian of religions, however, "the living God lurks in detail."[30] Scholem believed, in fact, that Revelation itself precisely is found within the scintilla and iota of history. "Today [1937], as at the very beginning, my work lives in this paradox, in the hope of a true communication from the mountain, of that most invisible, smallest fluctuation in history which causes truth to break forth from the illusions of 'development.'"[31] Without resorting to a definition of symbiosis, then, I will employ the notion of symbiosis insofar as it arises from the *imaginaries* of development, for symbiosis unfurls out of that most invisible, smallest fluctuation for which subtle historical change I find the notion of the imaginary to be the most apposite.[32]

[29] Ammons, *Sumerian Vistas*, 125–26.

[30] This was the motto of Aby Warburg, subsequently taken up by Scholem. See also the final philosophical statement of Alexander Altmann, where he cites John Locke to the effect that in religion there are no *adiaphora*, "things indifferent and insignificant." Altmann explains that "every single detail in prayer and ritual held some significance for the believer. One may add that in other language-games, too, minutiae are of the essence" (Altmann, "God of Religion," 295–96).

[31] Scholem, "Candid Word," 32.

[32] For the concept of *imaginary*, see chapter 5 below.

And, insofar as such historical change bespeaks the capacity to change as such, I adhere to the dictum of Isaiah Berlin. The human capacity to change history, he observes, "is all that the sense of history, in the end, comes to; that upon this capacity all historical (as well as legal) justice depends; that it alone makes it possible to speak of criticism, of praise or blame, as just or deserved or absurd or unfair."[33] The study of symbiosis, in this sense, necessarily is a study of historical change.

Modes of Accommodation

Granted, then, that *benefit* may remain a slippery notion, and *mutual* must be understood dialectically. Still, the issue remains: into what arena of enlightening analysis can one logistically frame—so best to still see, and not dispel—the penumbral sharing known as symbiosis? If there is little dispute concerning the general significance of the Jewish-Muslim symbiosis, there is enormous uncertainty concerning its specific anatomy. The obscure history informing this apparently hyperbolic assertion, that is, is both too well known and too little known: too well known, I believe, because its status as a rarely disputed historiographic assumption allows us to forget that the symbiosis was creative, indeed, that it created us.[34] And, on the other hand, it is too little known, insofar as the details of this creative symbiosis remain obscure almost beyond exaggeration.

In my study of the Jewish group known (to the Muslim heresiographers) as the ʿIsawiyya, I note that the militant uprising of this group represented a breakdown in its otherwise accommodationist approach to the prophethood of Muhammad.[35] But Muslims, as well, needed to accommodate themselves to Jews and Judaism, despite the obvious disparity in raw power. It has been helpful, therefore, to sketch the modes of accommodation that both Jews and Muslims developed in response to one another. In this way I have tried to develop a model according to which Jews and Muslims operated as necessary components in the respective self-definitions of the other.

From the Muslim side, I discriminate between discourse directed toward Jews and a discourse that was inner directed, so to speak. The Muslim discourse directed toward Jews established a set of inviolable criteria into which all Jews had to fit. Jews were located, on this scheme, by the respective criteria of Ahl al-Kitab (People of the Book); Ahl al-Dhimma (People of the Pact of Toleration; Tributaries); Banu Isra'il (Children of Israel); and Yahud (Jews). They could also be depicted, less juridically and more culturally, as secret agents of foreign heresies. The Muslim inner-directed treatment of Jews and Judaism likewise followed several fairly well defined pathways. They characterized the other as the Jews *had been* (in the time of the prophets); as the Jews *did* (they prayed the evening prayer when the stars shone brightly and picked their leader according to the length of his arms, for example); as the Jews *were* (they *were* anthropomorphizers); and even as the Jews *would be* (they will be activists on behalf of the Antimessiah, Dajjal).

From the Jewish side, the response toward Islam could take the form of revolt (ʿIsawiyya); rejection (polemics);[36] debate (in salons, homes, and marketplaces); or conversion (ʿAbdallah ibn Salam). Inner-directed Jewish accommodations to the coming of Islam included new forms of authority structures (a shake-up in the exilarchate); new movements (the Karaites and others); Messianism (apocalyptic movements and writings); and halakhic retrenchment (culminating in Saadia Gaon).

Jew, then, served as an essential and necessary catalyst in the self-definition of Islam; and *Muslim*, likewise, operated in synergy with a Jewish effort at self-legitimation. The other—whether as myth or as history, image or enemy, precursor or opponent—had its uses. The uses of the other, in the end, produced a kind of symbiotic interdefinition.

What does this pattern of interactions imply? I would suggest a few tentative approaches toward an answer. First of all, in terms of historiography, the use of Muslim sources is simply vital for the student of this period.[37] There is much Jewish history to be written with the use of Muslim sources; obviously, this is most especially true with regard to the question of Jewish-Muslim symbiosis. Moreover, the symbiosis can be understood only in terms of mutual self-definition, insofar as these traditions (so I will argue) operated in synergy with one another.[38] Finally, I would emphasize that the debtor-creditor model of influence and borrowing must be abandoned in favor of the dialectical analysis of intercivilizational and interreligious processes.[39]

As for historical generalizations, only a few can be rendered responsibly. First, the first three centuries of Islam were a time of extraordinary Jewish mobility: all manner of change—social, economic, political, and religious—overtook the old ways. As Goitein put it: "Every aspect of what we regard today as Judaism—the synagogue service and the Siddur, law and ritual, theology and ethics, the text of the Bible, the grammar and vocabulary of the Hebrew language—was consolidated, formulated and canonized during that

[33] Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 250.
[34] See the chapter 6 below.
[35] See chapter 2 below.
[36] See especially Perlmann's "Medieval Polemics betweeen Islam and Judaism" for the definitive overview of Jewish-Muslim polemics.
[37] Many of the finest scholars of Judeo-Islamica—Goldziher, Vajda, Goitein, Nemoy, Lewis, Brinner, Lassner, Lazarus-Yafeh—were trained as Islamicists.
[38] Sanders, Baumgarten, and Mendelson, *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*.
[39] Ultimately this inquiry should be undertaken in the context of world history, as Marshall G. S. Hodgson properly urged ("Hemispheric Interregional History," 715–23). For a later period, we now have the makings of a serious world-historical approach to periodization developing. See especially the signal contribution of Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*. I have found helpful the review of this work by Andre Gunder Frank, "Thirteenth-Century World System," 249–58.