

Norman Golb

The University of Chicago

The Role of Personality in the Transfer of Scientific and Philosophical Knowledge from the Eastern Caliphate Westward, and in its Non-Reception among the Jews of Medieval Northern Europe

The civilization of the Jews of medieval Islamic lands was an amalgam – perhaps the better word is harmony – of several layers of historic experience. To understand its origins and special characteristics, we must turn back to *Iraq*, in the period marking completion of the Babylonian Talmud and its gradual spread to the countries of the Jewish diaspora *circa* 700 C.E.

When this began to happen, the Jews of Iraq, as we all know, spoke neither Hebrew nor Arabic, but Aramaic – the main language of most of the people of pre-Islamic Babylonia. *Christian* Aramaic, otherwise known as Syriac, was written in a somewhat different script than the square characters of eastern Jewish Aramaic, but the Christians and Jews of pre-Islamic Iraq could understand each other's speech perfectly, and any of them who had the will merely to learn another alphabet used for one and the same language were able to read each others' books. There were other Aramaic-speaking groups living then in Babylonia, such as the gnostic Mandaean of the southern swamp-districts and the Sabaeen moon-worshippers living in the north, in Harran and its environs, to whom that same rule would apply.

It was in this latter city, Harran, but also in other localities of northern Mesopotamia, that Aramaic translations and interpolations of many ancient Greek writings, including medical, philosophical, astronomic and mathematical works, were produced by its (still partly pagan) inhabitants in the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries. Even earlier, ancient writings of the Greeks had probably made their way eastward overland from Constantinople, whose main academy had been significantly developed by Theodosius II early in the 5th century. This development was further expanded with Justinian's abolition of the Athenian academies in the 6th century. Christian translators early on, in Edessa, Nisibis and elsewhere, rendered Greek theological writings into Aramaic, and the translation of philosophical, medical and other texts followed. Fresh modes of thinking began to circulate throughout the cities of newly-conquered Iraq, and members of its very large Jewish communities could not have avoided becoming aware of the new ideas.

Yet more decisive cultural progress was achieved during the reign of al-Ma'mun (reigned 811-833), who according to al-Nadim's *Fihrist* (p. 243) sent a deputation to the emperor at Constantinople (this would have been Leo the Armenian) in order to obtain

scientific books for translation into Arabic. The “Banu Musa” of al-Ma’mun’s court “drew translators from distant countries” who rendered into Arabic writings on geometry, astronomy, engineering and various other subjects. The immediate and most famous beneficiary of these efforts was the virtuoso polymath al-Kindi (800-873 C.E.), who initiated philosophy as a discipline among the Arabic-speaking peoples and whose influence can be discerned, for example, in the (9th century) writings of Isaac Israeli of Qairowan, in North Africa.

We can more readily perceive the impact on the Jews of the new knowledge transferred to Mesopotamia in the remarkable development of *medical* theory and practice among its Jewish inhabitants. Of these scholars of medicine, the earliest known is **Masarjawaih of Basra**, who flourished at the time of the Omayyad caliph Omar ibn 'Abd al-Aziz in the first few decades of the 8th century. Then there was the eminent **Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari**, the physician and mathematician who numbered among his students in al-Rayy and Samarra the renowned Muslim doctor al-Razi. **Ali's son Sahl Rabban al-Tabari** was, along with his prowess as a physician and mathematician, also a translator of medical writings. **Furat ibn Shahnatha** was a learned physician of Iraq during the first half of that same 8th century; then there was **Musa bin Israel of Kufa**, the admired physician known everywhere for his moral virtues; **Sind ibn Ali**, who lived in the al-Shammash section of Baghdad in the first half of the ninth century and was a versatile translator of many books; and **Sahl ibn Bishr**, the important Iraqi-Jewish astronomer also of the 9th century. Thanks especially to Ibn al-Nadim, Ibn Khallikan, Ibn Abi Usaibia and still other Muslim biographers and encyclopedists, we know the names of many more Jewish physicians, mathematicians and astronomers who flourished in Iraq during this early Islamic period, who must all have been heavily influenced by the profusion of Aramaic translations of writings on these subjects that reached them from the centers in northern Mesopotamia.

The illustrious **Thabit ibn Kurra**, the most renowned of the Sabaeans translators of Harran, had a Jewish disciple in philosophy and medicine, namely **Judah ibn Joseph ibn Abi al-Thana**, who, in Rakkah, defended the Torah against the doctrine of “abrogation of the law” (*naskh al-shariah*). This doctrine was, in its essentials, to the effect that the Torah had been superseded by a divinely imposed Christianity and, all the more so, by Islam. It was a doctrine dangerous to the future of Judaism, being intensively urged then by certain Muslim and Christian thinkers. Joseph and other Jews fought back freely in their own writings.

As the Aramaic translations of Greek writings increasingly came to be rendered into Arabic by Hunain ibn Ishaq and various other translators, particularly during the ninth century, classical learning, in Arabian linguistic garb, spread throughout Mesopotamia, causing increased intellectual ferment but also heightened debate on the fundamental beliefs of revealed religion, among Muslims, Christians, Jews and others. (Witness al-Humaidi’s description, in his *Kitab al-muqtabis*, of the far-ranging philosophic argumentation and repartee underway in Bagdad towards the end of the 10th century.)

Among the writings of Mesopotamian *Jewish* scholars, it is Saadia's *al-Amanat w'al-i'tiqadat* that most fully describes and reflects the discordant state of affairs that prevailed at the beginning of the 10th Century regarding philosophical reason and religious belief. Saadia's writings make clear that he considered his own primary role to be that of defender of the doctrines of traditional Judaism as expressed in the old rabbinic writings, rather than the exponent of any of the new "beliefs and opinions" of the various writers he alludes to without ever revealing their names or identities. Personality-wise, Saadia appears to have been very much an isolate, of brooding mien, keen to vanquish his learned foes in literary debate, while seeming not at all interested in reaching out to Jewish communities in distant lands in order to inquire of their welfare or state of learning.

But the thought-processes unleashed through the translations of the classical Greek writings could not easily be reined in by Jewish authorities. After the death of Saadia in 942, his son Dosa continued the family tradition of scholarship, including the pursuit of Talmudic studies and publication of a treatise against the Aristotelean view of the eternity of matter.

Word of Dosa's activity in some way reached Andalus, and in due course a letter was sent by Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, the Jewish major domo in the court of 'Abd al-Rahman III in Cordova, requesting of Dosa a composition describing Saadia's life and times. Dosa obliged him with this text, which has since been lost. Today this episode mainly serves the purpose of illustrating the efforts of Hasdai to secure what knowledge he could of the Hebraic culture of his people wherever it might be found.

Hasdai, hailing originally from Andalusian Jaen, arrived in 'Abd al-Rahman III's caliphal city early in the latter's reign, and in ways unknown to us soon became a favorite, perhaps as early as 930 or 935 C.E, in the caliph's court. He is chiefly known among Muslim writers as a brilliant physician who was first brought into the caliph's court in a medical capacity. While his own book on the thoriac, referred to by his near-contemporary Muslim physician Ibn Juljul, is no longer extant, we do know of the important role he played in translating into Arabic, in cooperation with the Greek monk Nicholas, Dioscorides' work on botanical medicaments, which the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII had sent in 949 with his ambassadors as one of the gifts to be bestowed on 'Abd al-Rahman in order to encourage an alliance between the two rulers.

Hasdai then embarked on a brilliant career as international statesman, diplomat, military tactician, Nestor of medical practice and Maecenas of learning, a career unique in the history of medieval Andalus and unparalleled in the annals of the Jewish people.

Hasdai's letter to King Joseph of the Khazars bears the very hallmarks of historical authenticity. It is a diplomatic letter having its counterpart, both as to style and specific content, in Hasdai's epistles to the Byzantine royal court, the genuineness and historical specificity of which cannot be seriously doubted. The inquisitiveness of Hasdai as to the welfare of this far-away tribe of the Jewish people, his determination to learn about their land, customs, and beliefs, the description of the diplomatic missions sent out

by him in pursuit of these goals – including even the minute geographical elements marking these enterprises and, as well, Ibn Hauqal’s explicit description of the mountains of Khazaria based, as he states, on Hasdai’s own eyewitness description – all this leaves no room to doubt that his letter to Joseph, along with the texts preserved in the Genizah, are fragments pointing to Hasdai’s great enterprise in the role he assumed as chief representative of the Jewries of the western caliphate.

This enterprise contained several main branches. There was, first of all, the encouragement, through patronage and other means, of the growth of Hebraic knowledge within Andalusia, as we infer, e.g., from ample texts describing his patronage of Menahem b. Saruk, Dunash b. Labrat, and the southern Italian Talmudic master Moses b. Hanokh. Closely allied with this effort was that of securing, and bringing together in Cordova, learned writings, that he was given leave to secure in abundance from the Jews of the *eastern* realm of Islam, as the Muslim writer Ibn Abi Useibia makes a special point of declaring. (I quote):

Hasdai b. Isaac was a learned authority of the Jews, advanced in the knowledge of their law. He was the first to disclose to the Jewish inhabitants of Andalus their knowledge of jurisprudence, chronology, and other subjects; for they had earlier on been obliged to rely — with respect to the authoritative understanding of their religion, the years of their chronology, and the dates upon which their festivals fell — upon the Jews of Baghdad, so that they would have to import, from amongst the latter, a number of computations of the yearly cycles by means of which they might know the onset of their seasonal holidays and the beginnings of their years. So when Hasdai corresponded (with them) concerning this matter, exercising therein the utmost good will, he was able to secure by this means the importation of those books of the Jews of the east that he sought. Of those matters that the Jews of Andalus had previously been ignorant, they thus gained knowledge, and were thereby enriched after suffering their earlier hardship.” (My translation, *apud* ‘*Uyun al-anba fi tabaqat al-atiba*, ed. Beyrouth 1965, p. 498.)

It was apparently Dosa himself who organized the project of shipping the books to Hasdai. The works thus secured would certainly have included writings of the Geonim on Jewish law and calendarics but, judging by Hasdai’s inquisitiveness and supreme energy in seeking cultural knowledge of the Jewish ecumene, could hardly have failed also to include copies of medical, mathematical, and astronomical writings of the 8th- and 9th-century C.E. Jewish Mesopotamian scholars. The books sent by Dosa to Hasdai could, *a fortiori*, hardly have failed to include writings of Dosa’s own father Saadia. Hasdai’s successful effort to secure a copy of the *Sefer Yosippon* in Sicily— one of the subjects of the Genizah letter by the Italian Jewish dignitary addressed to him (JTS Adler 2156) — reads not only as an interesting sidelight to his vastly more important cultural contacts with the Jewish scholarship of Iraq, but likewise hints at his interest in importing to the Andalusian communities writings of cultural and otherwise useful value.

Another vital enterprise of Hasdai’s was his effort to protect from persecution, by diplomatic means, the Jewish masses in non-Muslim countries, and the systematic effort to determine the extent of the spread of Judaism throughout the then known world and to encourage the welfare of its adherents, wherever they might be found.

Compare, for example, the following evidence: (a) the urgent quality of the detailed letter from the Italian-Jewish dignitary to Hasdai detailing the persecutions of Jews in Byzantine regions of southern Italy; (b) the letter of the Provencal communities describing the *colaphus judaeorum*, or wounding blow to the

neck of a Jewish representative, administered each Easter by the archbishop of Toulouse, and the communities' appeal to Hasdai that he make efforts towards stopping that practice; (c) the letter, undoubtedly addressed to Hasdai, from a Jew of Palermo describing the suffering of his community there during internecine warfare (circa 956 C.E.) between Byzantine and Muslim forces; (d) Hasdai's own letter to King Joseph in which, inter alia, he urgently request of the king to inform him of the state of the Jews in his realm; and (e) the letter of Dosa to Hasdai in which he complains in bitter detail of the poor treatment rendered to Saadia by the Babylonian exilarch of that time, David b. Zakai. No other medieval Jewish figure is known whose influence and fame were of such an international character.

Hasdai served 'Abd al-Rahman, and undoubtedly his successor al-Hakim also, as both a skilled and cunning diplomat and military tactician. John of Gorze, sent by emperor Otto I with others on a delicate mission to the court of Abd-al-Rahman III, later wrote that he had never encountered "a personage of such shrewd intellect as the Jew Hasdeu" (Pertz, *MGH* IV, p. 371). It is impossible to believe that Hasdai would not have taken advantage of the intense personal contact with John and his Germanic colleagues to inquire about the state of affairs of the Jews of their realm, and to initiate cultural (if not also political) contacts with the latter — just as he did elsewhere throughout the Jewish ecumene.

Dunash in his poem of praise to Hasdai informs us that it was he who, by his cleverness, "conquered ten fortresses" — quite obviously alluding to the continuous triangular warfare between the Navarrese, the Leonese-Castillians, and the Muslim forces of 'Abd-al-Rahman during the entire period of the latter's caliphate, in which the back-and-forth capture of fortresses in Pamplona, the upper marches of the Caliphal territories, and the County of Castille, play such a salient role in the documentary records. Philoxene Luzzato — relying as early as 1852 on specific details in those records, as well as on the wording of Dunash's description of the powerful Navarrese Queen Toda humbly arriving in Cordova to do the bidding of Hasdai — has cogently argued that it could have been no one else but Hasdai who cured her nephew Sancho of his obesity and who engineered the alliance between the Muslims and the Navarrese that so effectively reduced the military power of the ambitious Castillians. In addition, as Hasdai himself writes, it was he who also served as chief customs inspector in 'Abd al-Rahman's domain, if not also afterwards when al-Hakim ruled. All these many deeds of Hasdai— of whose record only relatively small fragments survive today — were benevolently sanctioned by these most powerful of Andalusian Muslim rulers.

We may infer, by the totality of evidence now known, that for a span of perhaps as much as five decades during the 10th century, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut of Cordova became a unique figure in the annals of diasporan Jewish history. A trusted counsellor in the caliphal court, and a Jew to all appearances suffering no discomfort in its Arabo-Islamic milieu, he enhanced, by virtue of his wise and unerring diplomacy, the international prestige of Andalus. In this way he also came to exert an influence of singular importance upon the affairs of other states and kingdoms with respect to the Jews, their safety and well-being, whose effects were to last long beyond the fall of the western caliphate. As concerns the Jews of Andalus itself, it was mainly through Hasdai's efforts that well-established institutions of Judaic learning and culture came to be established there.

In brief, the remnants of extant manuscript texts indicate that it was by virtue of the dynamic leadership and universal vision of this man — that is, through the unique qualities of his own personality — that the seeds of the Judaeo-Arabic culture took root in Andalusia and eventually began to flourish. He was followed less than a century later, of course, by Samuel Hanagid — a personality who rose to the main seat of power in

Granada and was in many respects akin to Hasdai, except that he was also a great poet while never engaged in international diplomacy, but by actions of his own continued to further the cause of liberal and useful learning. In the cause of brevity, allow me to quote a portion of Dozy's estimation of this figure:

".....the Arabs could not but admit Samuel's commanding genius. His erudition was, in fact, both wide and deep. He was a mathematician, a logician and an astronomer, besides being familiar with seven languages. To poets and scholars he showed great liberality.... He published, in Hebrew, an introduction to the Talmud, and 22 grammatical treatises...." (R. Dozy, *Spanish Islam*, p.).

After a brief gestation period, various branches of philosophy and science began to blossom in Andalus. This eventually led, among the Jews, to the spread of a growing intellectual discourse there and, later, in cities of the northern Iberian kingdoms and the Provençal communities. This activity was in turn facilitated by Hebrew versions of the works of an Arabized Aristotle and other ancient thinkers as well as their early medieval interpreters — renditions composed by at least three hundred Hebrew translators, and which were accompanied or followed by interpretive writings pertaining to those texts. Abraham bar Hiyya "Savasorda" epitomized this activity in Barcelona at the beginning of the 12th century, and there were a few others like him later on in Italy, but the main activity took place in Provençal localities. During the twelfth century, the earliest known Hebrew translator-interpreters active there were Judah ibn Tibbon in Lunel, and Abraham ibn Ezra in Beziers; and many more followed, in various locales, during the two succeeding centuries.

Why this great surge of intellectual activity did not seriously carry on into the northern European lands during the Middle Ages is a question that should probably, in effect, be reduced to the problem of such failure during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when Hebrew translations of the philosophical and scientific texts came to be widely dispersed in the Provençal communities. Earlier on, the linguistic medium of transmission was Arabic, often in its Judaeo-Arabic form, and the barrier thus presented to the Jewries of Northern Europe would appear to be self-evident.

Nevertheless, an old translation of the ethical portions of Saadia's *Emunot* was evidently circulating among French Jews by the 11th century, if not earlier. Moses ibn Jiqatiliyah had led the way, already by the middle of that century in translating grammatical treatises of Judah Hayyuj into Hebrew for the use of the French Jews. As for scientific writings, there were a few efforts made, early in the 12th century, to bring this type of learning to the attention of the Jews of France; Abraham bar Hiyya, for example, purposely wrote his scientific treatises in Hebrew for their benefit. Rabbenu Tam, in the Champagne during the mid-12th century, took vicarious sides in the old grammatical quarrels between Dunash and Menahem, proving that writings of theirs had eventually arrived in his region, and he was even able to write laudatory poetry in the style of the Andalusians; but to the best of my knowledge he never utters a word in any of his writings that betray a hint of recognition of, or receptivity to, the philosophical or scientific writings by then beginning to circulate in Hebrew form. The notable severity and unyielding nature expressed in his correspondence (i.e., his responsa) is very much

in the mold of Saadia, or, in Andalusia, of Joseph Ibn Megas and other masters of the Lucena yeshivah.

In this context, we must take account of the notable efforts of Abraham Ibn Ezra towards scientific and philosophical enlightenment. After his various peregrinations in North Africa, Italy, and the Provence, Ibn Ezra headed northward, circa 1150, to the Angevin lands, sojourning several years in Rouen before moving on, for a shorter period, to England. He wrote a number of his Biblical commentaries, occasionally second versions of them, in Rouen, and had students there (the best known of whom was Joseph of Morville). Beyond his well-known discussions of Hebrew grammar and Biblical exegesis, the lectures he gave to those students — incorporated at least in part in his writings of that period — contain various observations on his part relating to astronomy, calendarics, the natural sciences, physiology, the customs and habits of foreign peoples, and philosophical — especially Neoplatonic — speculations.. Ibn Ezra's final writings on astronomy and astrology date to the period of his Rouennaise sojourn; with the exception of a few treatises rendered into French by certain "Hagin le Juif," they were eagerly translated into French and Latin by Christian scholars and, during the fourteenth and later centuries, actively came to be studied in Paris and elsewhere in Europe.

By contrast, however, the reception by rabbinical figures in Rouen and England to Ibn Ezra's ideas on these and his other subjects does not appear to have been a positive one. We find not a single word of praise by any rabbinical authority either in Normandy or England heralding his stay there, or speaking of any contributions he may have made in the course of his writings or lectures. The eminent Rashbam, who headed the Rouennaise yeshivah when Ibn Ezra arrived there, does not mention him in any of his writings, while we find Ibn Ezra eventually alluding, in disparaging manner, to views and opinions of the great rabbinic master. Berakhiah ben Natronai's experience, later in the twelfth century, does not seem to have been far different: this author of the effervescent *Mishle shu'alim* and perceptive interpreter of the Biblical writings also composed a *lapidarium* known by the title *Ko'ah ha'abanim*, a writing clearly influenced by one or more of the many Arabic compositions on the characteristics of stones that were in circulation since approximately the 9th century. Dividing his time between Normandy and England, he also reworked and developed, in Hebrew, the well-known *Questiones naturales* of Adelard of Bath as well as editing (in an ethical work known as the *Musar*) portions of the old Hebrew translation (i.e., the one long predating the mid-12th century rendering of Judah Ibn Tibbon) of Sa'adiah's *Emunot*, abetted by supporting statements of his own and of several earlier Jewish thinkers and those of the pseudonymous author of the *Musar aristoteles*. Another more original work on ethics was his *Sefer masref*, which contained a systematic discourse on ethics and the afterlife. But as Ibn Ezra, so he as well to all available evidence did not secure the support or approbation of any of the rabbinic figures of the north, neither those in England, France, or the German-speaking lands, for these latter writings.

I doubt whether this disregard, either in the case of Rashbam, Rabbenu Tam or the other well-known 12th-century rabbinic authorities, was due to callousness or even insensitivity. The austere and meticulous savants who dominated the academies of the

north were in essence, by their training, their teaching, and their studied outlook based on long experience, not conditioned to readily accept the new ideas; they must have perceived that those ideas carried within them the potential to lead the wisest of their students and younger colleagues into what Tam and Rashbam both would have considered to be heresy. (By the same token, we can find no evidence of *secular poetry* amongst the compositions of the northern *paytanim*.) The Judaism that Rashbam and Tam (as well as their forebears) had cultivated over the centuries, and which would continue to be maintained by their successors until and beyond the expulsion of 1306, can legitimately be characterized as representing a purer kind of belief and practice, Hebraic in essence, strictly ecclesiastical in structure, unwelcoming to foreign ideas, and theologically unchallenged from within. Moreover, the First Crusade and the mortal toll it inflicted on the Jewish masses and on Judaism could not have been blotted out from the consciousness of the two great 12th-century Talmudic masters; while afterwards, by contrast, few and far between were the cases of apostasy that they would encounter during their own subsequent rise to eminence. In particular, the burden of responsibility for the welfare of the Champenois Jews as a whole must have rested heavily upon the shoulders of Rabbenu Tam, all the more so in the years before the Second Crusade (1147), when he served in Reims as advisor in the court of Louis VII.

One cannot perceive that the reception in the north to philosophic and scientific ideas was any greater in the 13th century than it had been in the 12th, and there are additional reasons, beyond those cited for the 12th century, why this should have been the case. Foremost among them, at all events in France, was the growing antagonism towards the Jews instigated both by royal figures and by the clergy — the details of which have been described by numerous writers and need no elaboration on my part. The acrid smell of the burning wagons of Hebrew books in and after 1240 in Paris and elsewhere, and the need to seek their replacement at all costs, was reason enough for even the most thoughtful of Jews not to seek new horizons of intellectual enlightenment beyond the confines of rabbinic learning.

These pressures were moreover compounded by events taking place in the Provence that were internal to the Jewish polity itself. I refer of course to the internecine controversy ignited initially by the anti-Maimonists Abraham Ibn Da'ud and Meir Abulafia, which spread throughout the Provence, reaching both Spain and the north of France and setting Jew against Jew over the issue of allowing or prohibiting the study of books of philosophy and science. Roughly five years before Christians were setting Hebrew books on fire in northern France, Jews themselves were the cause of bonfires in Montpellier — bonfires fueled by pages of the writings of Maimonides.

Although in Rouen Cresbia ben Isaac was himself independent enough to render the 613 commandments as construed by Maimonides into rhyming form in his *Azharot maimuniot*, the main 13th-century rabbinic authorities of the north appear to have been united in their opposition to philosophic and scientific study; witness, for example, the statements issued on this matter by, among others, Simson of Sens, Samuel of Falaise, and Moses b. Hasdai Tachau. In the *Provence*, however, despite the heated opposition of *rabbinic* authorities to the study or acquisition of the writings of philosophers and

scientists (an opposition which continued for at least a century beyond the actual expulsion of the Jews from royal France in 1306) — in the Provence, Hebrew translations of Arabic writings on philosophy and science appeared abundantly during the 13th and 14th centuries, and persevered beyond that period as well. Steinschneider counts approximately 160 translators known by name, and lists about 150 more who (mostly) remain anonymous.

By way of summarizing the above, I suggest that the writings of ancient scientists and philosophers in Arabic translation first began reaching Andalus some time in the mid-10th century, in large measure as a result of the keen personal interest of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut and the support of his correspondents in Mesopotamia. The interest continued to grow in the 11th century, and the first few translations of those writings into Hebrew followed in the ensuing century. The 13th and 14th centuries marked the heyday of Hebrew translations from the Arabic. The Jewries of medieval Northern Europe did not, on the whole, ever come to secure or appreciate this literature because of a complex of historical circumstances, including decisions of the rabbinical authorities in those lands. We know of virtually no figures in the north whose personalities were of such nature as to allow or encourage them to oppose the rabbinical opposition and reach out to the new modes of learning embraced by so many of their brethren in regions to the south.

Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem
10 January 2008