

Stephan Conermann (ed.)

Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Middle Islamic Period

Bonn University Press

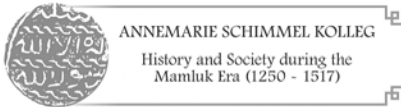


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Jews in the Ayyubid and Mamluk Sultanates
(1171–1517)

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Cover image: Ben Ezra Synagogue, Cairo, Egypt (photographer: Faris Knight, 10/12/2011).

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Introduction

The Middle Islamic Period (twelfth-sixteenth centuries) marked a decline of the Jewish communities in Muslim lands. This deterioration was related to a gradual change in Islamic civilization that started in this period and the general decline in the security and economic at the time. This was especially noticeable in the prominent Islamic centers of this period, Egypt and Syria. Beginning with the Ayyubid Sultanate (1171–1250) and escalating under the Mamluks (1250–1517), Jews and Christians were subjected, more than in any earlier periods, to discriminatory laws, pressure to convert and frequent dismissals from government positions, alongside increasing persecution by the general populace. However, it seems that Jews, as a small minority, were less exposed to maltreatment than Christians. They received occasional protection by the authorities against acts of intolerance, and their integration into Muslim society, as well as their legal conditions, were better than those of their co-religionists in late medieval Europe. The picture we have of Muslim-Jewish relations during the Ayyubid period is fairly adequate, mainly thanks to the abundance of documentary material from the Cairo Genizah. The situation of the Jews during the long Mamluk period is somewhat more problematic to outline, due to the paucity of Genizah documents for most of this period and the general reluctance of Muslim historians to report on Jews or Christians. Still, a picture of the main developments of Jewish life under the Mamluks can be reconstructed from various sources. Interestingly enough, the only comprehensive research on Jews under the Mamluks is Eliyahu Ashtor's (Strauss) "The History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule", written in Hebrew, which was conducted in the 1930s and 1940s.

However, since Ashtor's research (and especially during the most recent decades), dozens of studies concerning the relations between the Muslims and the *dhimmīs* during the Ayyubid-Mamluk period have been published. This progress in research is due to the publication and digitization of literary historical sources from the Mamluk period, the discovery of documentary material and the identification of more material from the Cairo Genizah. Conducted by both orientalist and historians of the Jewish people, these studies shed more

light on various aspects of Jewish-Muslim relations in this period. Considering these developments in research, a more comprehensive examination of the situation of the Jews under the Ayyubids and Mamluks is necessary. Therefore, from October 30 to November 1, 2014, an international conference with a focus on Muslim-Jewish relations during the Ayyubid and Mamluk Periods (1171–1517) was organized at the Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg in Bonn (www.mamluk.uni-bonn.de). Special attention was given to the following issues: (1) the measure of tolerance of the Mamluk rulers and the Muslim populace toward the Jews; (2) Jews in government positions and as court physicians; (3) conversion and attitudes toward converted Jews; (4) the Sufi (mystical) nature of Jewish leadership and its relation to the Sufi Islamic discourse; (5) professional, intellectual and legal interactions between Jews and Muslims. In-depth discussion of the above-mentioned issues and other related topics brought about a more precise assessment of the state of the Jews during this long period, usually labeled as “deteriorating”. Was this decline in the status of Jews a gradual linear process, or rather a continuous static situation? Can a comprehensive process of deterioration be traced in all the above-mentioned points, or was there discernable improvement in certain aspects of life?

Eight colleagues agreed to flesh out their talks and to substantiate their argumentation. Their largely extended and modified papers are presented in this volume of edited articles. These articles will help us to sharpen our understanding of Jewish life during the Middle Islamic Period in the Near East.

Dotan ARAD's contribution to this volume discusses how the Jewish community adopted strategies under Mamluk rule for dealing with the laws governing dhimmis and the various restrictions imposed on them. Under Mamluk rule, various dhimmihood laws were not only revalidated, but were also supplemented by new stipulations. This included prohibitive laws, one against the erection of buildings standing taller than Muslim edifices and one towards the laws of inheritance. In addition to the laws of dhimmihood, Jews frequently had to cope with interreligious hostility, acts of fanaticism and various forms of harassment. Focusing on the fields of synagogues, clothing and inheritance, Arad points out that a wide array of “coping strategies” existed for Jews. These strategies ranged from quiet compliance, lobbying and exploitation of the Shari‘a law in their favor to the violation of the laws through subterfuge, disguise and dissimulation. Officially, Muslim law forbade Christians and Jews to build new prayer houses that had not existed prior to the Muslim conquest and to enlarge existing structures. Furthermore, while cases of damage and destruction were not a daily phenomenon, Jewish synagogues were still under continual threat. To protect the houses of prayer and to prevent interreligious conflict, the Jewish community adopted several strategies designed to hide the happenings of the synagogue from the hostile gaze of Muslim neighbors. They created an im-

pression of antiquity that would gain them legal protection. On a visible level, synagogues were striking in their modesty, built to a very low height and refrained from using visible religious symbols. To safeguard them, Jews constructed historical narratives, linking them to local traditions and legends concerning the establishment of synagogues. They even affixed forged inscriptions on the buildings bearing earlier dates. In the case of clothing, the laws of dhimmihood included the obligation to outwardly distinguish oneself from Muslims. Despite this, sources prove that Jews regularly failed to comply with this rule, dressing quite similarly to their Muslim neighbors during the “Classical Genizah” period (tenth-thirteenth centuries), as well as through the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. However, there was greater sensitivity to religion during the Mamluk period, resulting in obligations to distinguish every community with different colored head coverings. Arad argues that, to a certain extent, each group adopted the color assigned to them as a mark of identity and sign of self-definition. However, in contrast to the issue of building or renovating synagogues, the legal restrictions concerning clothing had little adverse effect on Jewish life under the Mamluks. While some saw Muslim clothing as a distinct advantage, as it gave Jewish travelers and city dwellers a sense of security, it also carried great risks if the subterfuge was discovered. Furthermore, the clothing in Mamluk society carried strong religious implications, as it signified religious affiliation. Jewish religious law mirrored the Muslim dress code and prohibited a Jew from wearing a white turban. The turban turned into a religious artifact and was forbidden by Halacha, as it could be construed as indicating the acceptance of heresy. However, Jewish society under the Mamluk rule cannot be understood as a homogeneous and monolithic block. While traditional groups were establishing a clear divide between Jews and Muslims, Jewish migrants, particularly those from the Spanish kingdom, were less conservative. In terms of inheritance issues, the Jewish community was faced with the most severe changes through new laws during this time period. Inheritance belonging to deceased dhimmis was frozen until their heirs could prove that they were eligible to inherit in accordance with Muslim law. Any estate without an heir was to transfer to the sultan’s treasury. The most prevalent reaction of the Jewish community to this serious restriction was the establishment of an endowment in a form of the Muslim *waqf*. This Jewish trusts prevented the transfer to the authorities, guaranteeing that it remained in the family’s hands (*waqf ahli*, *waqf dhurri*) or community’s hands (*waqf khayri*). To avoid confiscation of inheritances, the Jewish community in Jerusalem even went so far as to introduce a ruling that obligated those dying without heirs to consecrate their estate to the community. However, even if a person failed to do this, the estate was still considered the community’s property after their death.

Paul B. FENTON's contribution focuses on the bilateral influence of Sufis and Jews in Mamluk Egypt. The resulting different religious mysticisms constitute one of the most fascinating facets of the Judaeo-Muslim relationship. The spiritual torpor caused by the Mamluks' suspicions towards philosophy and their rigorous legalism concerning religion was offset by their favorable attitude towards Sufism. During their reign, Egypt became a haven for Sufism, which resulted in the establishment of brotherhoods, the rise of the saint cult and several influential mystics who rose to eminent positions in the society. This rise was facilitated by the Mamluk sultans, who eagerly imposed themselves as Muslim sovereigns, following the example set by their Ayyubid predecessors in extending their patronage to the mystical brotherhoods. The model set by the sultans was emulated by the emirs and the governors of the Mamluk realm, who all contributed to the rapid proliferation of Sufi foundations by constructing an impressive number of lodges, hermitages, *zāwiyas*, *ribāṭs* and *ḥānqāhs* to shelter Sufis. Due to high financial allocations by the state, Sufism was transformed into an institutionalized movement in the Mamluk period. The *ḥānqāh* was transformed into a state institution, which was eventually influential enough to compete with the *madrasa* in offering instruction for students. This had an enormous impact on the local Jewish community, particularly in the urban centers which opened the doors of the synagogue to the revitalizing influence of Islamic mysticism. Fenton argues that this was due to a certain symmetry which existed at this time in the respective religious situations of Judaism and Islam. In addition to religious persecutions, the Jews shared the brunt of natural catastrophes with their fellow Muslim citizens. Social instability caused by such natural catastrophes led to a mystical longing to transcend painful reality. Fenton points out that the Sufi presence constituted a direct spiritual model for the Jewish population. In particular, Muslim and Jewish refugees that had been forced out of their Andalusī and Mağribī homeland by the increasing intolerance of the Mālikī 'ulamā' served as bridges for an exchange of ideas. This interaction facilitated contacts between mystic schools on both sides (which were suspiciously observed by the official clergy) and led to a profound effect of Islam on Jewish spirituality: a new form of Jewish pietism which integrated elements of Sufism and adopted models of Muslim piety. Followers of this movement referred to it as *derek ha-ḥasīdūt* 'The Path' or *derek la-šem* the 'Way to God', expressions which are reminiscent of the Arabic *ṭarīq*, a term by which the Sufis designated their spiritual discipline. The *derek la-šem* produced a rich and varied literary output that transposed Sufi concepts and terminology into the biblical and rabbinical texture. The movement gained momentum under the impetus of one of the most prominent political figures of the Ayyubid era, Abraham Maimonides. This leader of Egyptian Jewry even advocated for the establishment of a Jewish type of *ḥānqāh*. However, the attempt to integrate elements from Islamic

mysticism both in the cult and credo of the Jews provoked strong opposition by the conservative forces of the *ḥasīdīm*. Despite Abraham Maimonides' political and religious prestige, these forces denounced the pietists to the Muslim authorities. Accusations ranged from the use of improper language to diffusing "false ideas" to introducing "illicit changes" and "non-Jewish customs" into the synagogue. Fenton argues that this strong contestation was one of the factors that led to the pietists' failure to impose their way on the community at large. The other factor was that the pietist way was reserved for an elitist minority which gradually fell into total oblivion with the general decline of Eastern Jewry. However, while the outreach estimate of this Judeo-Sufi movement is difficult to determine, Fenton hypothesizes that a number of their practices survived in certain circles and were absorbed by later mystical movements, such as by the Qabbalists of the Holy Land.

Miriam FRENKEL focuses on the life and work of the Austrian-Israeli historian Eliyahu Ashtor (1914–1984). While Ashtor is well known for his important contributions to Islamic social and economic history in the Near East during the Middle Ages, Frenkel strives to emphasize his pioneering contributions to the history of Jewry under Mamluk rule. Born to a Zionist family in Vienna, Ashtor escaped to Palestine in 1938 following the "Anschluss" to Nazi Germany. It was not until 1949, after the establishment of the State of Israel, that he received a formal position as full professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This is where he taught until he passed away in 1984. In the young State of Israel, Ashtor was the first scholar in the institutional academy to study the Jewish history of the Orient, resulting in his three-volume magnum opus *The History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks*. Ashtor perceived himself as a positivist historian, carefully searching for "solid facts" with the aim to scientifically improve the scientific quality of the works of his predecessors, the Jewish scholars of the "Wissenschaft des Judenthums." Frenkel argues that his scholarly contributions follow two broad discourses, a Jewish national and an Orientalist discourse – which, although different methods, should be seen as deeply intertwined. This resulted in the fact that these discourses not only went along with each other, but also substantiated each other. In his early writings, Ashtor primarily dedicated himself to the Jewish national discourse in its Zionist-territorial version. This discourse aimed at constructing an essential modern Jewish identity, transcending place and time, and adhered strongly to the paradigm of a united autonomous Jewish history different and separate from the history of its surrounding nations and cultures. Ashtor followed the idea that only one unique and inseparable Jewish history exists. This was supplemented by the bonding idea that people strongly aspired to stay loyal to their religion and to conduct an independent national life. Accordingly, Ashtor's work on the Jews in the Mamluk period was motivated by a deep patriotism. He used his writing as an im-

plementation of an important national mission which was meant to promote empathy towards the figures of the past and to provide a moral lesson for future generations. He turned to the Mamluk era in order to search for an answer to what he viewed as an enigma in the present, namely the deteriorated condition of the Jewish eastern communities in the State of Israel in its first years. According to Ashtor, from the thirteenth century onwards, Jewish history began to enter a new phase of deterioration and stagnation, one that has actually continued until today. The study of this topic is based on the theoretical assumption of the uniformity of Jewish history. As a consequence, Ashtor shaped the narrative of the Jews under the Mamluks as an indispensable part of the great Jewish narrative common to the Jews in the East and the West, following the classical pattern of what was called “Jewish history” but was actually the history of the Jews in Christian Europe. The narrative depicted by Ashtor develops from one pogrom to another, and the social ambiance of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks is described as if it were an eastern European ghetto. His intensive use of Arab and Muslim sources solely served the methodological purpose of delineating external frameworks of Jewish history to compensate the scarcity of Jewish contemporary sources. It was certainly not a result of any historiographical comprehension in which the Jews were viewed as belonging to the great Islamicate civilization, or of seeing the history of the Jews in Muslim lands as part and parcel of the general history of their countries. On the contrary, Ashtor, with his belief in the unity of Jewish history, tried to detect the sources of the “problem” of the Eastern Jews within the realm of inner Jewish history, blaming the Eastern Jews themselves for abandoning the free and creative spiritual life of general studies such as science and philosophy and for preferring the narrow study of Halakha (Jewish law) and Qabbala (Jewish mysticism). In his later works, however, Ashtor abandoned the conceptual paradigm of the organic unity of Jewish history and departed from the then hegemonic Zionist-territorial discourse of the Jerusalem school. Contrary to his previous assumptions, he now unambiguously accepted the inseparable linkage between the history of the Jews of Islam and the general history of Islam. Frenkel argues that in place of the Jewish national discourse, the Orientalist discourse became dominant central, particularly in analysis of the leadership in the Orient. Ashtor portrayed these leaders as despotic, corrupted and capricious, traits he considered to be typically and essentially “Oriental” as opposed to the neat, organized, rationalistic and efficient traits of everything in the “Occident”. This shift in historical conceptions unavoidably changed Ashtor’s understanding of the reasons for the decline of Oriental Judaism. While he had originally blamed the Oriental Jews for their decline, he now transferred this responsibility to the surrounding Islamic social environment. With this, he exempted the Jews from blame and conceptualized the decline as an indispensable part of the overall decline of the Islamic East,

emphasizing rather structural, organizational and societal reasons. However, this did not result in the adoption of a new causal explanation for this historical process. Instead, Ashtor applied his previous essentialist posture on the entire Muslim culture. He now argued that the Islamic state could not develop organized democratic institutions as it not only lacked essential sense of law and order, but also because it was governed following “the despotic code the Muslims inherited from previous Oriental empires”. With these theories of decline, Ashtor was a dominant representative of this historiographical tendency in scholarship for many years. However, as Frenkel points out, while he advanced as a scholarly pioneer of Jewish medieval history, he also remained confined to the limits of the Orientalist discourse in his own research.

Yehoshua FRENKEL focuses on conversion stories narrated by Mamluk chroniclers. His analytical focus is less on a reconstruction of the past, but rather concentrates on the chronicles’ narratology, their aesthetics, literary styles and the assumed intentions of the authors. This methodology, Frenkel argues, provides a clearer interpretation of medieval perceptions of religion, social images and of communal and confessional borders in Mamluk society in general, and of the urban elite’s mind in particular. Based on the thoughts of the Indian scholar Gauri Viswanathan, Frenkel argues that the narrators of these conversion stories highly fictionalized the crossing of religious boundaries. Due to ideological motivations, Muslim authors envisioned the embracing of Islam by Jewish converts in solely positive terms. Frenkel argues that these rich accounts of personal conversions follow a clear narratological strategy. As a primary narratological strategy, the authors depicted Islam as the superior and ultimate religion, portraying the act of those who joined the Muslim community as merely voluntary based on a deep personal transformation. They paid no tribute to the obvious fact that not all Jews that adhered to Islam did so out of religious motivations, but instead may have been motivated by factors of adhesion, integration or pressure. This narratological strategy is in line with the *ṣulḥ-amān* traditions of the early Islamic conquest literature, which portrayed conquests of Islam (*futūḥāt*) not as a military onslaught, but as an accomplishment of a heavenly-guided program. Frenkel assumes that if this narratological framing was accepted as legitimate, it could explain the absence of accounts of forced conversion in the Mamluk chronicles. A second salient feature of the conversions’ narratology represents the depiction of the move across religious boundaries as a swift transformation. Although conversion is not a simple and absolute break with a previous social life, no traces of the converts’ past customs and beliefs can be found in the assessed accounts and biographies. Many narratives do not depict conversion in the sense of a longer lasting passage, but speak of the converts as immediately becoming devoted Muslims who follow the *Sharī‘ah* to the letter. This stands in strong contrast to other conversion narratives from Muslim and

non-Muslim sources, which state that old traditions die slowly and footsteps of past religions can be traced among Muslims. Based on this, Frenkl argues that these narrative strategies primarily served the purpose of masking a much more complex reality of the Mamluk society. While we should not underestimate the fact that the appeal of Islam was an element of conversion in some cases, we should also consider social, political and economic factors of the time. In a complex society, such as the Mamluk society, these factors played a central role and their weight was much heavier than psychological or devotional factors. For Frenkl, the act of conversion should consequently be seen mostly in light of assimilation.

Nathan HOER's article challenges the conceptual usefulness of historians' narratives of decline in the study of Ayyubid and Mamluk Jewry. Many historians describe the Syro-Egyptian Jewry as irrevocably stunted by a decline that is usually tied to the broader decline paradigm of the Mamluk state in general. The idea of decline of the Mamluk Empire is still a paradigm of historical research on the period, following an implicit, yet very clear periodization that structures these accounts: rise, decline and fall of the sultanate. The common assumption of these narratives is that decline was systematic and inexorable, caused by social, political, military, cultural and economic factors. While a number of Mamlukists have begun to challenge the idea of decline, only a few have yet questioned the historiographical utility of the concept itself. Following this latter line of argument, Hofer strives to shed light on primary conceptual problems. On a general theoretical level, Hofer identifies two main conceptual problems of the "decline paradigm". First, this paradigm should not be seen as a helpful analytical category, but rather as an outdated artifact of the cyclical history of positivist historiography, postulated by scholars such as Spengler, Toynbee and Ibn Khaldūn. Modeled on the premises of natural sciences, it stipulated a narrative of "organic" processes of florescence and decay. From a conceptual perspective, decline served, in the words of Hofer, as a yard and yardstick, describing "what happened" while also explaining "why it ended", resulting in the fact that cause and effect were trapped in a teleological feedback loop. Second, Hofer sees the most severe conceptual problem to be the fact that the decline narratives organize historical data according to an implicit ideological judgment and are not subject to falsification. The positioning and description of a trajectory of decline for a certain time and place is based on a standard, an idea of a "normal" state of affairs from which this decline is measured. However, the conceptualizations of a "normal state" of a Golden Age are in no way innocent, but instead are historiographical inventions to the same extent as the supposed debased states of affairs. Hofer judges these narratives of decline as predictions which mask their own subjectivity by foreclosing other historiographical possibilities, thereby rendering the narratives immune to falsification. In the study of Ayyubid and

Mamluk Jewry, the ideology of decline prevents other ways of narrating and conceptualizing their histories. Hofer analyzes six factors for the enduring predominance of the ideology of decline as a main heuristic. As a first reason, there is a strand of historiography that attempts to make the case that Jewish life under Islam was and is a bad situation for political and nationalistic reasons. Second, a strong dependency on older Mamluk scholarship and on the work of Eliyahu Ashtor has existed up to present times. Third, the ostensible absence of a high rabbinic literary culture during this period has fueled this narrative of decline. Fourth, the Jewish population faced clear demographic losses during this period. Fifth, many historians take the apparently increasing number of anti-*dhimmī* measures enacted by Mamluk rulers as evidence of decline. Sixth, in a number of cases, authors have attributed the deteriorating status of the Jews directly to Islam, narrating Islam polemically as an inherently anti-Semitic religious ideology. While Hofer offers several counterarguments to this reasoning, his main argument is that Jewish decline is simply not a particularly useful heuristic, because, on a theoretical level, it prevented the occurrence of other historical narratives or usage of the data at hand. Constructing an alternative historiography to the vectored ideology of decline, future research should aim at narrating an agentive Jewish history. Instead of conceptualizing Jewish communities as passive *dhimmī* subjects of Ayyubid and Mamluk policies, they could be seen as deliberate and thoughtful actors in their own right. With the help of exemplary sources, Hofer points out that the Jewish communities of Damascus and Aleppo adapted to the changes in the political and social landscape in several ways and with a variety of deliberate strategies.

Paulina B. LEWICKA's contribution examines presentations of Jewish physicians in historiographical narratives written by Muslim authors between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Lewicka focuses on Muslim discourses during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods in Egypt and Syria, which she understands as the literary expressions of thoughts, disputes, beliefs, convictions, stereotypes and values that created the cultural climate and social mood of these times. Investigating discursive shifts in the portrayal of those physicians, the study extracts historical narratives from a variety of sources. These encompass bibliographical dictionaries, annalistic works, chronicles and religious treatises, including the genre known as *ṭibb an-nabī*, or medicine of the prophet. Lewicka conceptualizes these different sources – characterized by fragmentariness and ambiguity of information – not as a record of facts (i. e., true, or real events) but, rather as a record of the state of knowledge and mind of the author. Based on the theoretical ideas of Roland Barthes, a text's meaning and "truth" is primarily constituted by both the individuality of its author and by the community to which the author belongs. In the case of Jewish physicians during the Ayyubid and Mamluk times, the discourse's content differs from genre to genre and from

author to author. However, Lewicka argues that several regularities are evident, regularities which can be sorted into two main strategies reflecting a process of radicalization of Islam and its growing tendency to dominate the entire, multi-faceted cultural capital of the Islamic domains. First, authors promoted a “strategy of selection”, not recognizing eminent Jewish/non-Muslim physicians and their achievements. This feature is particularly evident in some biographical dictionaries written by religious scholars, but also in the parts of chronicles written by such scholars that included obituaries of eminent persons. At the current state of research, the reasons for this absence are rather vague. Lewicka proposes two main arguments: On the one hand, this absence could be influenced by a negative bias towards non-Muslim physician. On the other, their absence could reflect a shift towards a conceptualization of the superiority of Islamic religious education and skills. As a consequence, theoretical medical education became the domain of the ‘*ulamā*’, while medical practice was left to professionals who were not the ‘*ulamā*’ – such as Christians and Jews. Hence, Jewish or Christian physicians were excluded as part of the “elite” who were famous for their books, knowledge or high positions. Instead, these physicians were merely perceived as “ordinary” medical practitioners who were not “worthy” to be mentioned. As a second strategy, several authors followed a narrative of negative propaganda, such as spreading false, overgeneralized and negative stereotypes relating to Jewish doctors (and *dhimmī* doctors in general), as well as encouraging negative attitudes towards them. These two strategies of religious bias were by no means used by the entire Muslim community, but primarily by radical religious scholars. The success of Jewish physicians and their generally good reputation and popularity (as well as that of their Christian colleagues) among Muslim patients was perceived as weakening Islam. Overwhelmed with the sense of mission of Islamizing the entire space of Dār al-Islām, these radical religious forces believed that Jewish doctors were occupying important fragments of this space. Consequently, the primary aim of the authors of such overgeneralized and negative stereotypes was to cleanse Dār al-Islām from “alien” elements. Lewicka differentiates between two main manifestations: On the individual level, physicians were linked to allegations of charlatan practices or insincerity. Exemplary narratives focused on Jewish doctors accumulating wealth. On the collective level, Jewish physicians were often characterized as having “evil intentions.” They were blamed as a group of taking medicine away from Muslims or of seriously threatening their Muslim patients’ lives. At times, they were portrayed as harming Muslims by their ignorance, while at other times they were portrayed as conspiring to harm or kill Muslims on purpose. Seeking medical advice from those doctors was characterized as improper for Muslims. Lewicka argues that while these negative stereotypes certainly had some influence on the majority of Muslims, this did not necessarily translate into applying

religious preferences to the choice of physician. Intuition, experience and habit seemed to have taken precedence over the power of religious authority.

Elisha RUSS-FISHBANE's article assesses the impact of natural disasters on the Jewish community in early thirteenth-century Egypt. During this period, a series of crippling natural disasters left a considerable impact on the Egyptian population, resulting in unemployment, resettlement, illnesses, impoverishment and hunger. Earthquakes, famines and plagues took not only a strong toll on the population in general, but also called for decisive action on the part of the local leadership. There are indications that the disasters particularly impacted religious minorities due to their vulnerable status. In the case of the protected minority of the Egyptian Jewry, relatively rich documentation exists in the papers of the Cairo Genizah. These Jewish documents, as well as reports by the Muslim polymath and physician 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī (d. 1231), paint a variegated picture of a community in crisis due to the spread of plague and the severity of the ensuing economic situation, each of which affected all strata of society to differing degrees. As such, these accounts of natural and social upheavals serve as a lens to daily life in Ayyubid Egypt, forming a critical backdrop to the transformations that unfolded within Egypt's Jewish population. These episodes of suffering in the Jewish community ultimately led to a large-scale population shift from the city of Fustat to Cairo, possibly in expectation of better living conditions and medical care. The most severe natural disaster period was between 1200 and 1202, when a combination of earthquakes, famine and plague overwhelmed Lower Egypt. The population of *dhimmīs* was particularly affected by additional political and social factors in the country. While the Ayyubid administration had already pursued a heavy-handed policy of taxation upon its *dhimmī* communities before the fall of 1200, it chose to put even more pressure on them during this difficult time in order to collect additional funds without a recourse. The government raided private storehouses of grain and other provisions at will. During the second and third decades of the thirteenth century, Egypt witnessed further episodes of plague and economic depression. With these events followed an intensification of Jewish welfare work and communal leadership to meet the needs of the indigent. This has been interpreted by the historian S. D. Goitein as a shift towards an administrative centralization of the negidate. Based on the primary sources at hand, Fishbane argues that Goitein's theory should be modified due to three reasons. First, the activities, responsibilities and prerogatives of the Nagid in the first half of the thirteenth century followed the same general model set by previous communal heads. Second, the Nagid's intimate involvement in social services did not extend beyond Fustat and therefore still very much adhered to the principle of local organization argued by Goitein. Third, the forty-five money orders that are the basis for the claim for increased centralization all stem from a single circumscribed period, the spring of 1218.

Fishbane argues that beyond his attentiveness to individual solicitations for aid or intervention, there is no evidence that the Nagid was increasingly involved, whether before or after 1218. While the Nagid's responses to the economic downturn went beyond the ad hoc emergency measures in some cases, these activities should generally not be seen as steps towards centralized authority. Rather, they should be understood as a reflection of an engaged, overextended leader with limited resources at his disposal during a time of exceptional crisis. Often the option to delegate the responsibility to other officials was simply not available. Despite the ongoing efforts of the Nagid and other communal officials to deal with the crises' dire consequences, it was a long time until conditions would improve for the community. Mamluk trade restrictions in particular were a considerable impediment towards a sustained economic recovery.

Last but not least, Walid A. SALEH's contribution focuses on the controversy around the multi-volume Qur'an commentary of al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-al-suwar*. The extensive quotations from the Arabic versions of the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and the four Gospels) in order to interpret biblical references in the Qur'an made the commentary revolutionary in the annals of Islamic religious practice. Never before had a Muslim medieval scholar so approvingly quoted from these scriptures and used the Bible to illuminate the content of the Qur'an. In parallel, this return to the Bible in the medium of *tafsīr* was also accompanied by a decline in the significance of the already extensive Islamicized biblical lore, *Isrā'īliyyāt*, which was available in the Qur'an commentary tradition. The consequences of this new approach were far reaching: Not only was the Qur'an interpreted with the aid of the Bible, but al-Biqā'ī appointed himself as a judge over the Islamic biblical lore, the *Isrā'īliyyāt*. He sometimes completely ignored this material, sometimes corrected it, and at other times gave the Islamic version as an alternative, weaker interpretive opinion. This strong dependency on the Bible resulted in an acrimonious public controversy over the practice of using the Bible to interpret the Qur'an. This "Bible controversy" forced al-Biqā'ī to write the apologia *Aqwāl al-qawīmah fī ḥukm al-naql min al-kutub al-qadīmah* (*The Just Verdict on the Permissibility of Quoting from Old Scriptures*). It remains one of the most extensive reviews of Islamic religious attitude towards the Bible in Islam. To defend himself, al-Biqā'ī relied on a strategy of book reviews as well as the solicitation fatwas on the practice of quoting the Bible from several leading scholars of the time. In his article, Saleh offers a preliminary analysis and a partial translation of these fatwas in order to spur future detailed analysis by scholars. Saleh states that the fatwas are unique documents as they represent major jurist opinions from all of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence and offer the opinions of the leading scholars of Cairo and Damascus on the issue of the Bible in Islam. He argues that it is exactly this line of prominent scholars (including the four chief judges) who were part of a

well-crafted propaganda campaign by al-Biqā'ī, which made it impossible for critics to ignore or criticize him. The various pieces of polemical and judicial opinions by these authoritative figures supplied al-Biqā'ī with major arguments and methods of defending himself. Saleh asserts that al-Biqā'ī followed a common stratagem perfected by the scholars of medieval Islam: the construction of networks in their struggle over ultimate authority in the field of religious teaching. These competing networks of scholars (which were constantly shifting) were based on a system of colleagues helping one another and were essential in creating blocks that acted in unison in times of crisis. Their cohesiveness was achieved through the medium of fatwas. They were paying each other in words, and were unwilling to allow any of their members to suffer the ultimate prize: death at the hands of the Mamluks due to a conceived infraction of the religious law. This network of authorities helped al-Biqā'ī to narrate himself as part of the establishment and to portray his approach as normative. This primarily served the objective of preventing his portrayal as an innovator and as falling into *muwālāt* (of loving) the Jews and the Christians, accusations which were indeed levied against him during his lifetime.

The reader of the proceedings of the conference will receive a broad and insightful perspective on the position and the life of the Jews during the Ayyubid-Mamluk period, a period which is still less studied than either the so-called “Classical Age” preceding it and the Ottoman period that followed it. In addition, these insights could contribute to the overall history of medieval Jewry as a basis for a comparative study of the position of the Jews in Christian Europe in the Late Middle Ages.