

Muslim Perceptions of Sephardic Exceptionalism in Christian Iberia

From the eleventh century until the fall of Granada in 1492, the Muslims from al-Andalus gradually came under Christian rule and acquired the status of protected religious minorities, or *Mudejars*. Despite being cut off from the major Muslim centers of their time, the Mudejars of Christian Iberian lands were able to preserve Muslim knowledge and religion, even after they were eventually forced to convert to Christianity and became *Moriscos*. They carried forward these efforts until their final expulsions from Spain in 1609–1614. In the passage from Muslim to Christian rule, however, the Muslim legacy was not only handed down, but also actively adapted to the needs of their communities, whose members were in a Christian-majority context and in direct competition with the religious minorities of Jews. Mudejars and Moriscos appropriated specific Muslim ideas that entered the peninsula directly or through nearby North Africa, and made their own interpretations of them. One such case is the Mudejar and Morisco understanding of “Sepharad,” the dwelling place for Jewish exiles from Jerusalem, in the prophecy of Obadiah (1:20) and its subsequent identification with the Iberian Peninsula.

In the Middle Ages and even up to the present day, Sephardic Jewry in Iberia has been celebrated for its excellence and distinction. In a number of narratives, peninsular Jews are linked to a nobility of exiles and to their Iberian ancestors, who in the eleventh and twelfth centuries preserved and expanded Jewish knowledge during the so-called “Golden Age.” Iberian Jews are often portrayed as carriers of distinctive forms of culture and religious practices, encapsulated by the term Sefarad. Such notions, Ross Brann notes, can be traced back to Jewish intellectuals in Umayyad Córdoba like Ḥasdai Ibn Shaprūt (tenth century) and, more generally, can be read alongside the notions of the exceptionality of the Andalus elite, who were eager to become independent from the political and cultural ties of eastern Islam. Iberian Jews expressed their Islamic ideas by identifying al-Andalus with the entirety of Sepharad. However, the borders (both real/political and imagined/sociocultural) of al-Andalus and of Sepharad were always fluid, rendering the synonymy problematic.

Jewish and Muslim notions of exclusivity are not only articulated in cultural terms, but also in terms of a social preeminence that finds an outlet



Christoph Weiditz,
Trachtenbuch [1530/1540]
Germanisches National
Museum (Nürnberg)

in religious polemics. For example, a narrative discussed by Adam Beaver posits the antiquity of Sephardic Jewish culture, tracing it back to the Jewish legions that purportedly were sent to the Iberian Peninsula by King Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BCE). Obadiah's references to Sefarad and the Babylonian exile (586 BCE) are integrated into a single narrative by the twelfth-century writer Moses ibn Ezra, where reference is made to the arrival to the Iberian Peninsula of a party of Jews prior to exile. The idea that the Torah brought by these Jews was the original, unaltered, revelation by God that escaped Nebuchadnezzar's destruction provided a powerful argument to counter Muslim claims of *tahrif*, or the notion that the transmission of the

Torah had been subject to historical change and corruption. Beaver insightfully points out that the focus moves from textual criticism to the noble origins of the peninsular Jews, that is, to their social excellence. Whereas in al-Andalus this narrative was inspired by Judeo-Muslim polemics, from the expulsions of 1492 onward it became important in the relations between Jewish *conversos* and Old Christians. Exceptionalism, one could say, is part of a shared intellectual legacy in the Iberian Peninsula and beyond.

From these considerations follows the importance of research on the Muslim ideas of Sephardic exceptionalism in Christian Iberia that are, moreover,

situated in the juncture where the experience of the diaspora and the legitimization of traditions intersect. In the intervening period between the Andalusī splendor and the banning of Islam from Spain, Muslim polemicists attached little or no importance to the exceptionalism of Iberian Jews and did not differentiate between Jewish communities in the peninsula and in the East. Anti-Jewish Muslim polemics followed well-established claims against Jews and Judaism like those composed by early ninth-century Muslim scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, who took recourse to Jewish sources to prove that Islam came to supersede Judaism and God's commands had been falsified. However, they did not elaborate the topos of a Sephardic distinction beyond the well-known Islamic views classifying Jews as "people of the Book." Muslims in the Christian territories similarly adhered to the view that living Jews of flesh and blood were not following the beliefs and practices of their ancestors because they had lost and distorted the original Scripture. Accordingly, Sephardic Jews were not portrayed as being either more or less wicked or corrupted than their coreligionists elsewhere—an element found in Nebuchadnezzar's Jewish legions narrative. Thus, the attacks on their communities were articulated by means of a historical critique centered around temporal considerations. In it, Jewish beliefs and praxis remain unaffected by territorial constraints.

The latter aspects—geographical place and local practice—are, indeed, barely discussed either in the anti-Jewish literature of free Muslims from the Christian territories or in that of Moriscos. An outstanding example of the former is the treatise known as *Ta'yīd al-milla* [The Fortification of the Faith, or Community], the lengthiest work of polemics against Jews and Judaism produced in the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa during the Mudejar period, longer even than the prolific production of the Andalusī polygraph Ibn Ḥazm. The absence of Sephardic exceptionalism in works like this brings about the question of how to reconcile the experiences of Muslim contact with real Jews on a daily basis and the literary depictions of "biblical" Jews. This apparent contradiction can be attributed to a number of factors, not least of which is the exceptionality that characterized the existence of Muslim communities in Christian territories (and, hence, the need of Muslims to legitimize themselves as pious believers). This could have been a sound reason to prevent Muslims from falling back on claims of exceptionalism, whether of the Jews or of the Muslims themselves. ●