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Source: *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1/2 (Jul. - Oct., 1990), pp. 75-91

Published by: [University of Pennsylvania Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1455255>

Accessed: 04-01-2016 13:49 UTC

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PROSELYTE JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM IN THE THOUGHT OF JUDAH HALEVI¹

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ABSTRACT

The incongruous details included in Judah Halevi's account of the conversion of the king of the Khazars lead to the conclusion that Halevi saw proselyte Judaism as having a different status than that of "native-born" Judaism. This conclusion fits in well with Halevi's explicit statement that proselytes cannot be equal with Jews by birth. This inequality is expressed throughout the Kuzari, and Halevi shows, mainly by the king's constant use of the second person when discussing Judaism, that proselytes are not full participants in the religion.

To understand Halevi's view of proselyte Judaism, it is useful to analyze his attitude towards Christianity and Islam, which, to a certain extent, are inferior forms of proselyte Judaism. Halevi argued, both in the Kuzari and in his poetry, that the two daughter religions of Judaism are poor imitations of the original. They do, however, fulfill the role of preparing humanity to accept Judaism as the correct religion. Their very success is to be attributed to the fact that they imitate the true divine religion; this success, in turn, serves as proof of the truth of Judaism. Eventually humanity will turn to proselyte Judaism which is a more exact imitation of Judaism but still not a perfect copy. Despite their lower status, proselytes may aspire to become pious saints who achieve a form of subprophetic inspiration. Halevi's attitude towards proselytes is a consequence of his theory of Jewish chosenness and may be a result also of his selective, particularistic reading of rabbinic sources.

The story of the conversion of the king of the Khazars, as presented in part 2, chap. 1 of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*, contains a number of surprising elements. According to his fictionalized account of the true story of the Khazarian conversion, the king

¹ This paper was originally delivered as part of the Edelman Lectures at New York University at a conference in memory of Alexander Altmann, December 9, 1987. I first studied Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* with Professor Altmann at Brandeis University, and it was he who directed me to the study of medieval Jewish philosophy. This article is dedicated to his memory.

dreamed a number of times that he should seek out, in the Mountains of Warsan, that action which would please God. He imparted this vision to his vizier, and the two set off for the desert mountains above the sea. One night they found a cave in which Jews would congregate every Sabbath, and it was here that they accepted Judaism and were circumcised. They then returned to Khazaria but hid the fact of their conversion until they were able to convince a number of select people, a few at a time, to adopt the new religion. When the number of such proselytes had increased, the king converted the rest of the Khazars to Judaism. At this point, he invited a group of Jewish scholars, with their books, from various countries to teach the people. The Khazarians then became very successful, capturing many countries and increasing their natural wealth. At the same time, they grew to love their new religion, they respected Jerusalem and made a model of Moses' Sanctuary, and they honored the native-born Jews (צִרְחָאִי בְּנֵי אֶסְרָאִיל) and were blessed by them.²

There are three incongruous items in this description of the conversion of the Khazars. First, the new religion spread slowly. In *Kuzari* 1.80 the king queried his Jewish interlocutor (the *haver*) about the rise of Judaism:

How did your religion arise? Then, how did it spread out and become visible? How was one opinion arrived at after there was disagreement? How long did it take for the religion to become firmly established until it was perfectly completed? All religions necessarily begin with a few individuals who

² Judah Halevi, *Kitāb al-radd wa-l-dalīl fī-l-dīn al-dhalīl* (*Al-Kitāb al-Khazarī*), ed. David H. Baneth, prepared for publication by Haggai Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 42. Neither Hartwig Hirschfeld's English translation, *The Kuzari*, 2d ed. (New York, 1964), pp. 82–83, nor Yehuda Even Shmuel's Hebrew translation, *Sefer ha-Kozari* (Tel Aviv, 1972), p. 46, captures the nuances of the story as they will be discussed in this paper. All English translations are my own, though Hirschfeld's rendition will be taken into account.

The term *ṣarīḥ* means "of pure or unmixed race or genealogy"; see Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, part 4 (London, 1872; reprinted Beirut, 1968), p. 1675. Hirschfeld rendered it "born Israelite"; Ibn Tibbon, *ʿezraḥ*; and Even Shmuel usually glossed over the term. It seems to me that "native-born" captures the nuance correctly.

There are some similarities between the conversion story of the king of Khazars told here and Josephus' account of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene; see Josephus, *Ant.* 20.2.

strengthen each other by supporting the faith which God has revealed, until more people join up as these ideas are strengthened in them, or a king arises who forces the masses to adopt this new faith.³

The *haver* answered: "This is the way in which rational religions whose beginning is by men (אלנואמיט אלעקליה אלתי מברוהא מן) (אלאָנאַטאַן) arise and spread. When such a religion becomes visible and is accepted, it is attributed to God, and the like. But a religion whose beginning is by God (אלנאמוס אלדי מברוהא מן אללה) arises suddenly. It is told to be, and it is, just like the creation of the world."⁴ Judaism, according to Judah Halevi, arose suddenly. Unlike a human religion, it needed no time, persuasion, or coercion in order to exist.

Now when we look at the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism, we see that the process mirrored exactly the manner in which human religions are propagated. First, two special individuals (the king and the vizier) became convinced of the truth of the new religion. They kept their secret until they could convince others to join them. Then the king more or less forced all the remaining Khazarian holdouts to become Jews. The Judaism of the converted Khazars did not arise all at once like a new creation.

The second surprise in the description of the Khazarian conversion is the fact of their material and military success, presumably brought on by their having adopted Judaism. One of the recurring themes of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*, whose formal title is *The Book of Refutation and Proof of the Despised Faith*, is the unreliability of temporal success as a measure of religious truth.⁵ Both Islam and Christianity were much more prosperous than Judaism; still, Halevi maintained, they were not true religions.

³ *Al-Khazarī*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.81, pp. 21–22. Colette Sirat and Yochanan Silman point out the relationship between this statement in 1.81 and the conversion story in 2.1; see Sirat, *Hagut Filosofit bi-Yeme-ha-Benayim* (Jerusalem, 1975), p. 138; Silman, *Ben Filosof le-Navi*² [Eng. title: *Thinker and Seer*] (Ramat Gan, 1985), p. 85. Despite Silman's recognition of this relationship, he argues that the conversion story in 2.1 is part of the first edition of the *Kuzari*, while 1.81 is a product of Halevi's later thought (pp. 111–112). It seems more reasonable to assume that he patterned the conversion story to contrast with the already existing statement in 1.81.

⁵ See, for instance, 1.112–115. Even-Shmuel comments on the fact of Khazarian success after the conversion in *Sefer ha-Kozari*, introduction, p. 28.

Therefore, it appears incongruous that he should point to the post-conversionary success of the Khazars as if it were proof of the truth of their new religion.

The third seeming incongruity is the fact that the Khazars honored the native-born Jews in their midst. This means that in Judah Halevi's *Khazaria* there were two types of Jews, "Old Jews" and "New Jews." The two groups apparently did not mix and intermarry, for otherwise how could the Khazarian converts have honored the native-born Jews in their midst? From the story of the conversion, therefore, it would seem that the Judaism of the proselyte is not exactly the same as the Judaism of the born Jew.

Indeed, the *ḥaver* had already informed the king, before he converted, of the inequality of proselytes. In 1.27 Halevi states explicitly: "Someone who joins us completely from among the nations will enjoy the good which we have but will not be equal to us."⁶ Furthermore, in 1.115 the king is told that "someone who enters the religion of Israel will not be equal to the native-born (אלצריח), for only the native-born (אלצרחא) can achieve prophecy."⁷ The fact of the inequality of native-born and converted Jews is thus stated in theory and then exemplified by the conversion story. A careful examination of the rest of the *Kuzari* reveals that Halevi purposely and continuously emphasized this inequality, and in addition indicated what exactly is the status of the Gentile proselyte to Judaism.

The differences between "Jewish Judaism" and "Proselyte Judaism," in Halevi's view, can be expressed as follows. First, the convert is not a full participant in the religion. Second, the proselyte does not completely share the fate of the People of Israel. Third, the native-born Jew and the convert have a different relation to the Land of Israel and the duty to live there.

Let us look first at the fact that the king/proselyte did not share fully in the Jewish religion. In 3.8, referring to the com-

⁶ *Al-Khazari*, p. 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40. Immediately before this statement, Halevi says that by converting the proselyte can achieve a suitable portion (גז צאלח) of nearness to God for himself and for his progeny (נטלה), indicating thereby that even the children of converts are still not full-fledged Jews. The traditional commentators on the *Kuzari* have noticed the connection between Halevi's theory of conversion and the honoring of the native-born Jews in *Khazaria*; see Judah Moscato, *Qol Yehudah*, and Israel of Zamosc, *ʿOṣar Neḥmad*, ad 2.1.

mandment of circumcision, the king states: “*You* have truly accepted this commandment in a proper manner, and *you* perform it publicly with the greatest zeal and readiness . . . Those other than *you* have tried to imitate *you*.”⁸ The use of the second person here is particularly striking, since the king, who had been converted and circumcised at the beginning of Part 2 and had subsequently converted and presumably circumcised the rest of the male Khazarians, could certainly have said “*we* observe this commandment and *we* have accepted it.”

In 2.81, the last section of that part, the king provides the transition by asking, “I desire an explanation of what *you* [pl., the Jews] consider to be a servant of God; then I will ask you [sing., the *haver*] for *your* [pl.] answers to the Karaites; then I will ask you [sing.] for the principal opinions and beliefs; then I will ask you [sing.] about the ancient sciences which have survived among *you* [pl.]”⁹ The king still presents himself as an outsider. In 2.47 the king states: “I have read in *your* books,” and then proceeds to quote Deuteronomy and Micah.¹⁰ In 2.57, commenting on all the commandments of Judaism, the king remarks: “At present *you* are in great confusion concerning those heavy duties. What nation could observe such regulations?”¹¹ A few paragraphs later, in 2.63, the king comments, “I see that *your* law (שריעתכם) includes all sorts of profound and wondrous sciences, missing in all others.”¹² The constant use of the second person regarding the Jewish religion seems to indicate quite clearly that the king was not a full participant in Judaism. In fact, there appears to be only one place in the *Kuzari* where the king refers to the practice of Judaism in the first person. In 4.26 he quotes the daily prayers, prefacing them with “as we say (כמא נקור).”¹³

⁸ *Al-Khazarī*, p. 96; all emphases in this article have been added.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 184. Leo Strauss (“The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” *PAAJR* 13 [1943]: 73, reprinted in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* [Glencoe, IL], 1952, [reprinted, Westport, CT, 1973], p. 119) notices the king’s transition in 4.26 to the use of the first person and understands that “it was the scholar’s account of the *Sefer Yeşirah* [in 4.25] that brought about the king’s complete and final conviction of the truth of the Jewish faith.” Strauss further contends that the sketch of philosophical teachings was postponed until Part 5, at the end of the conversation, “considerable time after the king had begun to consider himself a

Let us look now at the king/proselyte's relation to the Jewish people. In 2.29, the king states: "Today, *you* are only a body without a head and without a heart."¹⁴ Referring to the special light belonging to the People of Israel, the king says in 4.20: "The light of which *you* speak has gone out . . . there is no hope that it will be rekindled." The *haver* responds (4.21), "It is extinguished only for him who does not see *us* with an open eye, who infers the extinction of *our* light from *our* degradation, *our* poverty, and *our* dispersion." The king then compares the poverty of the Jews with the ideal of self-imposed asceticism of some Christians and Muslims, arguing that Jewish suffering was not for the sake of God. The *haver* answers, "You are right to reproach *us* concerning this; *we* have suffered this degradation without any benefit."¹⁵

In 3.10 the king discusses the commandments. "I have often thought about *your* situation," he states. "I see that God has some secret in preserving *you*." The king goes on to state that the Sabbath and the holy days have preserved "*your* strength and splendor." The nations broke "*you*" up and made "*you*" their servants. If it were not for the Sabbaths and holidays which "*you*" were commanded, not one of "*you*" would ever put on clean clothes; "*you*" would never gather as a congregation if it were not for these laws, "*you*" would not enjoy even a single day of "*your*" lives.¹⁶ We see, therefore, that the king did not see himself as participating in the fate of the People of Israel. He was not persecuted and despised. After all, he was both a king and a convert, not a native-born Jew.

In terms of his relationship to the Land of Israel, the king/proselyte simply did not see himself in exile. He was king of an

normal Jew." We argue here that, as Halevi presented it, the king never saw himself as a normal Jew. At the beginning of Part 5 the king admitted that he had not reached the highest level of belief and referred to the "wickedness" (כִּבְהָ) of his heart (*Al-Khazarī*, p. 191). In 5.19, the king asks the *haver* for "*your* principle of faith" (עֲקִידַתְךָ), *ibid.*, p. 216). The conclusion of the book indicates most clearly that the king never fully identified with the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. He could not understand the *haver's* desire to leave Khazaria and settle in the Land of Israel, since the Land of Israel did not have any significance for the king as a proselyte Jew (see below). Since the king said very little in Part 5, except at the very end, it is hard to judge whether or not there is any significance to the use of the first person in 4.26.

¹⁴ *Al-Khazarī*, p. 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 170–172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

independent Jewish state, and he did not see anything special about the Land of Israel. Furthermore, from Judah Halevi's point of view, there was no reason why the king should go the Land of Israel.

In 2.23, the king tells the *haver*, “You are deficient in observing *your* law if *you* do not go to that place and make it *your* place of life and death.” If the *haver* did not go to the Land of Israel, then “*your* bowing down and *your* kneeling in its direction are acts of hypocrisy or thoughtless worship.”¹⁷ Did not the king himself pray in the direction of the Land of Israel?

At the end of the *Kuzari* the *haver* announces to the king his intention to leave Khazaria and emigrate to the Land of Israel. The king's response is the assertion that there was no longer the divine presence (“Shekhinah”) in that country, and hence no reason to go there. The *haver* replies, “The visible Shekhinah is missing . . . but the hidden spiritual Shekhinah is with every native-born Jew (מֵעַ אֲסֵרָאִי לִי צְרִיחַ) who performs virtuous acts and has a pure heart and an upright mind before the Lord of Israel. The Land of Israel (אֶרֶץ אֱלֹשֶׁאִם) is special for the God of Israel, and only there can divine service be perfected.”¹⁸ The Land of Israel is necessary for the perfection of the divine service of native-born Jews; obviously a convert, who is not perfectible anyway,¹⁹ has no need for this country.

This point is additionally expressed by Judah ha-Levi's parable of the vineyard. The beginning of Part 2 of the *Kuzari* is devoted to praise of the Land of Israel and its inhabitants. The king states in 2.11 that “I have never heard that the inhabitants of the Land of Israel (אֱלֹשֶׁאִם) are any better than other people.” The *haver* responds with the parable of the vineyard:

It is like this mountain of yours on which you say the vine flourishes. Were it not properly planted and cultivated, it would not produce grapes. The special quality belongs first and foremost to the people who are the pick and the heart of the nations . . . Then the quality is assisted by the Land with its acts of worship and the laws dependent upon the Land, which are comparable to the cultivating of the vineyard. This special

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 227–228.

¹⁹ At least not in the sense of being able to achieve prophecy.

people, however, can cleave to the divine influence (אָמַר אֱלֹהִים) only in this place, while a good vineyard can be planted somewhere other than on this mountain.²⁰

This is the reason why, according to Halevi, prophecy can be achieved only in the Land of Israel.²¹ The divine influence present in the Land of Israel conjoins with the inborn divine influence of the native-born People of Israel to produce the possibility of prophecy. A proselyte, lacking the divine influence, has no reason to live in the Land of Israel, since even the “spiritual hidden Shekhinah” rests only on the native-born.²²

In sum, then, Judah Halevi maintained that a proselyte can never be a true Jew, and proselyte Judaism can never be true Judaism. If that is the case, how did he view the nature and stature of the religion of the converts? How does so-called natural-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 47. Halevi's theory of the superiority of the Land of Israel was influenced by Greek theories of climatology; see Alexander Altmann, “Torat ha-²Aqlimim le-R. Yehudah ha-Levi,” *Melilah* 1 (1944): 1–17.

²¹ Or for its sake; after all, Halevi could not deny the biblical evidence that some prophecy took place outside Israel; see *al-Khazari*, 2.14, pp. 47–50. The rabbinic source for this statement is *Mekhila*, Pisha, 1 (ed. and tr. Jacob Lauterbach [Philadelphia, 1933], 1:3–11); see also *LamR*, Petiḥta 24 (ed. Salomon Buber [Vilna, 1898/99; reprinted Tel Aviv, n.d.], p. 23).

²² This interpretation of Halevi's view may not be entirely correct. While proselytes cannot become prophets, they may become saints (Arabic: *أولياء*; Hebrew: *חסידים*) or sages (Arabic: *عُلماء*; Hebrew: *חכמים*); see 1.115, p. 40, and see below. The Land of Israel, for climatological reasons, does promote sainthood (see Altmann, “Torat ha-²Aqlimim,” p. 15). Therefore, even without the divine influence and the “spiritual hidden Shekhinah” converts might want to move to Israel to increase their chances of becoming saints. Nevertheless, the king is presented as having no desire to go to the Land of Israel, and one can assume that for Halevi the king represents the view of most proselytes. It should be noted in addition that it is possible that the climate of the Land of Israel also promotes the achievement of philosophy, since the philosopher is one whose natural qualities are perfected and in equilibrium (2.14, p. 50). Just as Halevi did not believe that non-Jews should go to the Land of Israel to become philosophers, he probably did not think that proselytes should go there to become saints.

For discussions of the אָמַר אֱלֹהִים and Halevi's view of prophecy, see Harry A. Wolfson, “Halevi and Maimonides on Prophecy,” *JQR* 32 (1942): 345–370; 33 (1942): 49–82, reprinted in his *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 2:60–119; Herbert Davidson, “The Active Intellect in the *Cuzari* and Halevi's Theory of Causality,” *REJ* 131 (1972): 351–374; Howard T. Kreisel, *Theories of Prophecy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1981), pp. 85–123.

ized Judaism compare with native-born Judaism? In order to answer these questions, it would be useful to analyze his attitude towards Christianity and Islam. These daughter religions of Judaism have a certain affinity to their mother, and Halevi went so far as to state in 4.11 that he would have considered Christians and Muslims to be proselytes (the Hebrew term גרים is used) who had accepted the commandments in general but not their details, were it not for their actions which belie their professed beliefs. Despite their ostensive respect for the Land of Israel, Halevi declared, in actuality Christians and Muslims do not face toward it while praying but rather face in the direction of what was once idolatry (i.e., the Muslims toward Mecca and the Christians toward Rome). These two religions continue to observe pagan holidays, and by adoring a piece of wood (the Christians) and a stone (the Muslims), they maintain idolatrous practices.²³ Still, Halevi recognized that there were elements of proselytization to Judaism in these two religions, and by understanding his attitude towards them, we shall be better able to discern his theory of proselyte Judaism.

At the beginning of the *Kuzari* the king called on the representatives of these two religions to explain their beliefs and modes of worship. He found their expositions unconvincing, and he was forced, as it were, to give a Jewish scholar a hearing. Christianity was rejected because it required its worshipers to accept doctrines which were contradicted by reason. The king, not having grown up as a Christian, was not accustomed to these beliefs and was unprepared to accept them at this late date without an adequate cause. Islam, on the other hand, was not irrational, but the king could discern no reason to adopt it. He could not be impressed by the claimed divine nature of the Qurʾān because he did not know Arabic. The only public miracles which the Muslims cited are those experienced by the Jews. Christianity and Islam did not fulfill the king's needs, so he investigated further.²⁴

²³ *Al-Khazarī*, pp. 162–163.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.4–9, pp. 6–9. Various scholars have commented on the literary structure of the *Kuzari*, especially the framework story at the beginning. Eliezer Schweid, for instance (*Ṭaʿam wa-Hagashah* [Ramat Gan, 1970], pp. 37–79), has argued that the king's initial appeal to Christianity and Islam and his refusal even to try Judaism was meant to heighten the tension of the story and to point out the king's mistaken approach in his search for truth. This is certainly true, but in

The king, however, continued to be intrigued by these two competing rivals of Judaism which by all human criteria were much more successful than their original religion. He remarked about their after-worldly promises and how much more attractive they are than the rewards offered by Judaism.²⁵ He was aware of the wars fought between the two religions²⁶ and of the fact that both religions considered the Land of Israel holy.²⁷ The king also wondered whether Christianity and Islam were closer to Judaism than philosophy, or whether the *haver* saw more affinity between Judaism and philosophy.²⁸ While Christianity and Islam were not obvious major concerns of the *Kuzari*, their presence hovered in the background.²⁹

Halevi's attitude toward the competitor religions can be discerned both in the *Kuzari* and in a number of his poems. In 3.8, for instance, in a discussion about circumcision, the king states that while the Jews fulfill this commandment meticulously, anyone else who has tried to be similar to the Jews has only suffered the pain of this commandment and has not enjoyed its benefits. The benefits were available solely for those who realize the true reason for circumcision. The reference is, of course, to the Muslims, who adopted circumcision, and not to the Christians, who rejected it.³⁰

addition, as will be made clear below, we see the opening of the *Kuzari* as an indication that Christianity and Islam, in spite of themselves, lead humanity to proselyte Judaism.

The assertion that someone who has not grown up as a Christian cannot possibly accept the rationally contradictory doctrines taught by that religion is a common theme of Jewish anti-Christian polemics; see Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977), pp. 25–28.

²⁵ *Al-Khazari*, 1.104–111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.2. The reference to Christian-Muslim wars is obviously an anachronistic one to the Crusades which took place several hundreds of years after the conversion of the Khazars but were contemporaneous with Halevi. It is interesting to note that although the king himself had no interest in the Land of Israel, he knew that the competitor religions were fighting over it. He also knew that the Land of Israel was holy to these two religions; see next note.

²⁷ *Al-Khazari*, 2.23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.12.

²⁹ Of course, Halevi stated at the very beginning of the *Kuzari* that the book was intended as an answer to philosophers, Christians and Muslims, and Karaites, so even though the two competing religions are not mentioned often, their presence is felt throughout the book.

³⁰ *Al-Khazari*, p. 96.

The *haver*, for his part, immediately (in 3.9) cites another example of imitation, which pertained to both Christianity and Islam. “Look at those,” he says, “who have taken a day of rest in place of the Sabbath. They can no more imitate us than the forms of statues can imitate the forms of living men.”³¹ Furthermore, the *haver* states in 2.32 that those “dead nations” which have imitated the “living nation” had achieved only a certain similarity to Judaism, no more.³² The fact that both Christians and Muslims consider the Land of Israel to be holy can also be seen as an attempt to imitate Judaism.³³

Judah Halevi expressed the idea that the other religions are merely unsuccessful imitators of Judaism in his poetry as well as in the *Kuzari*. This can be seen, for instance, in the Sabbath poem *Yeqar Yom ha-Shabbat*. The Sabbath, Halevi asserts, separates Israel from the nations. Edom (i.e., Christianity) pushed the Sabbath up to Sunday; Ishmael (i.e., Islam) pulled it back to Friday. How, the poet asks, can the deceptions of these nations cause those who recognize the truth to consider the dead and the living as equal?³⁴

The assertion that Christianity and Islam are poor imitations of Judaism may also have been expressed in the poem *Yom le-Yabashah*, recited on the seventh day of Passover and also at a ritual circumcision. Halevi says, “Those who come with you in the covenant of your seal are circumcised to you from birth. They show their signs to all who see them, for they make fringes on the corners of their garments. For whom is this one inscribed? Recognize the truth; who has the seal and who the fringes?”³⁵ The Christian does not have the seal of circumcision, the Muslim has the seal but not from birth, and neither one has the fringes. Christian and Muslim claims of belief in the true religion are not to be accepted.

While Halevi may have considered Christianity and Islam as merely fraudulent imitators of Judaism, he still had to account

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 64.

³³ Ibid., 2.23, p. 57.

³⁴ Dov Jarden, *Shire ha-Qodesh le-R. Yehudah ha-Levi* (Jerusalem, 1982), 3:641–643. This poem was discussed by Isaac Heinemann, “Ha-Pilosof ha-Meshorer: Bi’ur Mivhar Piyyuṭim shel R. Yehudah ha-Levi,” *Keneset* 9 (1945): 181–186.

³⁵ *Shire* (Jerusalem, 1979), 2:404–405.

for their success. His answer was simple: the two daughter religions of Judaism were so successful specifically because they were imitations of the true religion. Jews living in exile spread the true religion; Christianity and Islam were the temporary beneficiaries of the Jewish teachings.

In 4.23, the *haver* says:

God has a secret and wise design concerning us, comparable with the wisdom of the seed which falls into the earth. There the seed apparently changes into earth, water, and soil, and disappears from the sight of him who watches it. But in truth it is the seed which changes the nature of the earth and water into its own nature and carries them from stage to stage until it refines these elements and transfers them into something like itself.

Eventually, the plant will grow and become capable of receiving the divine influence. The resulting tree will be like that from which the seed had originally come.³⁶

This parable of the seed was explained as follows: The religion of Moses is like a seed. The religions which came after Judaism will eventually become like Judaism, even if temporarily they appear to overwhelm their source, just as earth, water, and soil overwhelm the seed. Christianity and Islam are, in truth, a preparation for the Messiah, who is the fruit, and they will become his fruit. If they accept the Messiah, they will become one tree; then the nations will revere the root which they had previously despised.³⁷

This imagery of Christianity and Islam returning to the tree of the true religion, which is Judaism, was particularly appropriate for Halevi's polemic with the competing religions since its origin is the New Testament. In the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 11, Paul compares the Jews to branches of an olive tree which have been cut off from the trunk. Onto the original trunk were then grafted new branches, namely, the Gentiles. When the Jews eventually recognize the truth of Jesus as the Messiah, they will then be grafted back unto the tree trunk from which they were removed. Halevi's point is clear: Judaism is the original tree, and

³⁶ *Al-Khazarī*, p. 172.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 172–173.

the Jews were always part of it. Eventually other nations will be grafted onto this tree, but they will recognize their naturalized status and revere the original native-born part of the tree.

The worldly success of Christianity and Islam and the worldly suffering of Judaism, therefore, provided Halevi with proof of the truth of Judaism. Jews may suffer now, when it appears that the seed is about to disappear, but that is only meant to spread the true religion. The other religions may appear to succeed, despite their theoretical advocacy of the life of poverty and denial, but that is only because they imitate Judaism. Eventually, Christians and Muslims will see the truth and convert to Judaism. In the framework story of the *Kuzari*, Christian and Muslim scholars unwittingly laid the groundwork for the king's turn to Judaism. This, according to Halevi, is indicative of the divine plan, because it is these two daughter-religions of Judaism which, almost against their wills, eventually will bring humanity to the true religion.³⁸

We return now to the conversion of the king of the Khazars. As mentioned above, there are three incongruous parts in this story: 1) the new religion spreads slowly; 2) after conversion, the Khazarians have temporal success; and 3) the new converts respect the native-born Jews. These surprising elements of the conversion story are intended to draw our attention to the similarity between the religion of the proselyte, on the one hand, and Christianity and Islam, on the other. The two daughter-religions 1) spread slowly in the past; 2) they are now temporal successes; and 3) in the messianic future, their adherents will become proselytes who respect native-born Jews and Judaism.

We can conclude, therefore, that for Judah Halevi native-born Judaism is the only real and perfect religion, and it acts as the model for proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Proselyte Judaism is a relatively successful imitation of Judaism, but Christianity and Islam are in truth very inferior copies of it, demanding less yet promising more.³⁹ Once we perceive the relationship between the religions in this manner, it is easier to understand why Christianity and Islam were more successful in

³⁸ See above, n. 24.

³⁹ They demand less by accepting only the roots and not all the branches (details) of the law; see *Al-Khazarī*, 4.11, p. 162. The king comments on the greater rewards promised by Christianity and Islam in 1.104, p. 35.

propagating their messages. Judaism, as the true original, provided believers with the greatest reward but made the most demands. Christianity and Islam promised the same results as were achieved by Judaism but with much less effort. It is no wonder that these two religions were more successful in temporal terms. Yet it is the very success of the imitators which proves the truth of the imitated. The temporal success of Christianity and Islam is the greatest proof of the truth of Judaism.⁴⁰

What then of the religion of the proselyte? It is a more successful imitation of Judaism, but it is still an imitation. Since it made almost as many demands as native-born Judaism,⁴¹ it had not found as many adherents as had Christianity and Islam. Yet it promised fewer rewards than original Judaism: converts never become real Jews, and even when adherents of the other religions convert to Judaism, they will not be true Jews. Like the king of the Khazars before them, they will not identify fully with the Jewish religion, they will not see themselves as part of the Jewish people, and they will not have a special relationship to the Land of Israel. Despite the standard Jewish belief that converts become

⁴⁰ If one may borrow computer terminology, Christianity, Islam, and proselyte Judaism are Judaism-compatibles. Proselyte Judaism is a high-grade compatible; it can do almost everything that the original can do except achieve prophecy. Christianity and Islam are cheap compatibles, "pirated clones" as it were, often breaking down and missing instructions. They come without guarantees. Using this metaphor, it is no wonder that Christianity and Islam are temporarily more successful. Judaism did all the difficult research and development, while the cheap competitors got the sales. Proselyte Judaism, being similar in price to the original, is not as attractive to potential customers as the cheaper models. (Philosophy is obviously a noncompatible system; it is certainly a worthy competitor to Judaism, specifically because it makes no pretense of being a similar system.)

⁴¹ While Halevi never indicates explicitly that there are different halakhic requirements for native-born Jews and proselytes, the issue of residence in Israel reveals that there are different standards for the two groups. It would seem that he did not consider residence in the Land of Israel as a positive commandment in a legal sense, but he obviously felt that native-born Jews are subject to some requirement to live there. A proselyte, to whom residence in the Land of Israel cannot bring prophecy, would have little reason to move there, since, even when there is no prophecy, the "hidden spiritual Shekhinah" rests only on the native-born Jews (*Al-Khazarī*, 5.23). Both native-born Jews and proselytes can dispense with commandments which are connected with the Land (המצוות התלויות בארץ) while living outside it.

It should be remembered that according to normative halakhah a convert has a marriageability status different from that of a native-born Jew; see next note.

full members of the Jewish people and religion,⁴² Judah Halevi maintained that the most to which they could aspire was the status of fellow-travelers, imitators.

If proselyte Judaism is inferior to native-born Judaism, why should a non-Jew wish to convert? First of all, it is the only option available for one who was not born a Jew and wishes to become as close to God as possible. More important, however, is the fact that the status of a fellow-traveler or imitator is not a negligible status. Halevi states explicitly that the convert can achieve the rank of saint (וְלִיָּא) or sage (עֲלָם).⁴³ As is clear in other passages of the *Kuzari*, the rank of sainthood is just one step short of that of prophecy. Both prophets and saints are described as the choicest human beings (צִפּוֹרֵה אֱלֻצְפוֹה) and whereas only prophets can work miracles, saints can achieve divine illumination (אֱלֻהָא).⁴⁵ The divine influence pursues, as it were, people who are worthy of conjunction (אֲתִצְאֵל) with it, and they are the prophets and the saints.⁴⁶ Only God, the prophets, and the saints know the reasons for some of the commandments.⁴⁷ Therefore, while proselyte Judaism is an imitation, it is still very close to the original, and one should not denigrate it.⁴⁸

⁴² See bYeb. 47b: “[A convert] is like an Israelite in all matters.” There are certain laws which are somewhat different for converts and native-born Jews, e.g., a proselyte may marry a זָמֹזֵר; see mQid 4.1; tQid 5.1 (ed. Zuckerman, 341). There are also certain aggadic statements which denigrate the converts; see below. The status of converts is discussed by Bernard J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period*, 2d ed. (New York, 1968), pp. 60–123.

⁴³ *Al-Khazarī*, 1.115, p. 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.44, p. 68.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.20, p. 220; cf. also 5.10, p. 200. For the usage of אֱלֻהָא in Islamic contexts as a subprophetic level of inspiration, see B. D. Macdonald, “Ilhām,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden and London, 1971), 3:1119–1120.

⁴⁶ *Al-Khazarī*, 2.14, p. 50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.49, p. 129.

⁴⁸ Other references to the status of אֱלֻיָּא are 1.4, p. 7, and 3.19, p. 109. The high status of God’s saints (אֱלֻיָּא אֱלֻלָּה) is recounted in the *Epistles of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, a work which apparently influenced Halevi; see Shlomo Pines, “Shiʿite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 186–189.

In addition to וְלִיָּא, Halevi used other Arabic terms which are normally translated into Hebrew as חֲסִיד, e.g., כִּיר (3.2–11), and פִּאֲצֵל (3.17); see also Silman, *Thinker and Seer*, p. 128, n. 6. A study of the implications of Halevi’s use of different terms for saints or pietists is still a desideratum.

Even if proselyte Judaism has a relatively high status, just below that of native-born Judaism, the question remains as to why Halevi distinguishes between the two forms of Judaism in spite of the traditional Jewish teachings concerning the full participation of proselytes in the Jewish religion? While he might have been influenced by certain trends in the Islamic world,⁴⁹ the probable answer is that he was unable to accept a proselyte as a full and equal member of the religion because the hereditary superiority of the Jewish people is the cornerstone of his entire philosophy. Jews are the chosen people because they are carriers by birth of the divine influence. For him a non-Jew just cannot acquire this special inborn quality by conversion.

In addition, rabbinic writings are not monolithic on the question of the status of converts. There are quite a number of statements which view proselytes negatively. Thus Halevi was able to find enough justification in the tradition to support his view, even if it was a minority one. One possible influence on his theory is the talmudic statement: "R. Ḥamma the son of R. Ḥanina said: The Holy One, blessed be he, does not cause his Shekhinah to rest except upon the pedigreed families of Israel. . . . Rabba the son of Rav Huna said: This is the extra advantage which Israel has over the proselytes. . . . R. Ḥelbo said: Proselytes are as bad for Israel as scabs."⁵⁰ Halevi's discussion of proselyte

⁴⁹ See Bernard Lewis, ed., *Islam: from the Prophet Muhammed to the Capture of Constantinople* (New York-Oxford, 1987), 2:199–208; Pines, "Shi'ite Terms," pp. 165–251; Nehemia Allony, "Ha-Kuzari le-R. Yehudah ha-Levi be-Or ha-Shu'ubiyah," *Bitzaron* 65 (1974): 105–113.

⁵⁰ See bQid 70b; tQid 5.1 (ed. Zuckerman, p. 341) records R. Judah's opinion that converts form their own subcategory of Jews (קהל גרים) along with priests, Levites, and Israelites. There are also a number of other regulations in which the convert has a slightly different status from born Jews; see n. 42, above. Obviously the rabbis diverged regarding the status and desirability of proselytes, and Halevi chose the more negative views on the subject. It can probably be shown that when he had two rabbinic traditions on a particular issue, one "universalistic" and other "particularistic," he invariably chose the particularistic tradition.

It is somewhat remarkable that given Halevi's view that proselytes can never equal native-born Jews, the king of the Khazars was convinced by the *haver's* arguments. This emphasized Halevi's contention that eventually all humanity would convert to proselyte Judaism despite its lower status. At that time all would recognize the priority of the Jewish people.

Halevi's distinction between proselyte and native-born Jew very likely influenced Jewish mysticism; see Jochanan H. A. Wijnhoven, "The *Zohar* and the Proselyte,"

Judaism can be seen as a rational explanation of the rabbinic statement that God's presence (the Shekhinah) does not rest on proselytes; this is the case, from Halevi's point of view, because they lack the divine influence. The most a convert can hope for is to be an adherent of a religion which is very similar to Judaism; but, as he stated most clearly, "anyone who enters the religion of Israel will not be equal to the native-born, for only the native-born can achieve prophecy."⁵¹

in Michael A. Fishbane and Paul R. Flohr, eds., *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday by his Students* (Leiden, 1975), pp. 120–140.

⁵¹ The question might also be asked why Halevi had a relatively positive view of Christianity and Islam, regarding them as unwitting propagators of Judaism. The answer may be that since he believed in divine providence that ruled the world, he had to explain why God allowed the two competitor religions to be so successful. By finding a divine purpose behind the spread of Christianity and Islam, Halevi was able to explain their temporal achievements. Their success, however, will be short-lived.

Some of the issues discussed in this paper were addressed by Lippman Bodoff in "Was Yehudah Halevi Racist?" *Judaism* 38 (Spring, 1989): 174–184.