JEWISH ISMĀ’ĪLISM IN TWELFTH CENTURY YEMEN:
R. NETHANEL BEN AL-FAYYŪMĪ

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The term "Jewish Ismā’īlism" is employed in the following pages with some reservation. First and foremost, I am not trying to make a sweeping case on the order of Crone and Cook's "Sadducee Islam" in reverse order. What I hope to demonstrate is something far less ambitious: that a Rabbinic authority in 12th century Yemen, R. Nethanel ben al-Fayyūmī (author of the work entitled Bustān al-Uqūl), penetrated to no small degree into what we presently regard as the esoteric theology of Islamic Ismā’īlism. We shall see how he deftly employed Ismā’īlī cosmology, prophetology, and hermeneutics in defense of Rabbinic Judaism. Thus it is in this limited but fully accurate sense that I write of a "Jewish Ismā’īlism."

I hope to show that R. Nethanel's response to the Ismā’īlī da'wah of his day was itself cast in a typically Ismā’īlī theological world-view. First, as a dhimmī (non-Muslim subject of the state), Nethanel shared with Ismā’īlism a sense of cosmic injustice in the unfolding of history. Second, as an individual living in a Ṭayyībī Yemenite society, Nethanel evidently shared with Ṭayyībī Ismā’īlism an interconfessionalist ecumenicism that stands as unique within the Jewish and the Muslim Shi’ite worlds respectively.

Rabbi Nethanel first came to the attention of the scholarly community in 1896 when R. Gottheil published a short notice in the Steinschneider Festschrift. In 1908 D. Levine published an edition and English translation of Nethanel's only theological work, the Bustān al-Uqūl ("Garden of Intellects"). A second and more carefully prepared edition with Hebrew translation was published in 1954 by Yosef Qāfiḥ. Only once since Gottheil's

1 "Nathanīel al-Fayyūmī," Festschrift zum achtzigsten Geburtstage Moritz Steinschneider's (Leipzig, 1896), pp. 144–47.
2 The Bustān al-Uḵūl (henceforth LBU), New York, 1908.
first notice has Nethanel been the subject of a study: in 1947 S. Pines published an article on the relationship between Nethanel's work and Ismāʾīlī thought. Pines was of the opinion that a new study of Nethanel was in order even after Levine's earlier investigation, for at the time of Levine's work there was a dearth of published Ismāʾīlī works or studies of Ismāʾīlism.

Today, in the wake of the explosion of Ismāʾīlī studies by such scholars as Corbin, Walker, Makarem, Madelung, Stern, Poonawala, and others, Pines' point made in 1947 is applicable once again. Thanks to these new studies, this paper will raise some new and unexplored issues in our assumptions regarding both Nethanel and Ismāʾīlism.

From its inception, Shi’ism took the form of opposition. At various times throughout the history of the ʿAlid line, factions crystallized, personalities often clashed, and schisms developed. The dissenting factions usually placed their hopes in a person who at least claimed an ʿAlid pedigree. This ʿAlid person would be declared imām, that is to say, spiritual successor of the prophet Muḥammad and charismatic leader of the new faithful.

Of great religious and political significance was the schism which developed around the two sons of the sixth Imām, the pivotal Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. When Jaʿfar's eldest son Ismāʾīl pre-deceased his father in 760, the continuity of the prophetic designation was severely shaken. Five years later, upon Jaʿfar's death, the lines were drawn. Most turned to the younger brother of Ismāʾīl, Mūsā al-Kāẓim, from whom imāmī or “Twelver” Shi’ism originated, while the so-called “extremists” rallied around the pious memory of the now occulted Ismāʾīl. The new Ismāʾīlī dissenters turned to Ismāʾīl’s son Muḥammad, and directed their energies and hopes toward his descendants.

Behind every imām were proponents who formulated positions, preached the new gospel, and mustered support for their potential or actual mahdī; at the same time counterclaims needed to be rebuffed. Proof-texts in the form of pious ḥadīths and esoteric

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4 "Nethanael ben al-Fayyumī et la théologie ismaélienne" (henceforth NFTI), Revue de l'histoire juive en Egypte, 1 (1947), 5–22.
interpretations of the Qurʾān (*taʿwīl*) were invoked by them to defend the belief in their either occulted or living mahdī. Not only did they turn to such fabricated ḥadiths and esoteric (and therefore elitist) Qurʾān interpretations in defense of their mahdist expectations, but they also appropriated from nonpious and Hellenistic material those arguments and doctrines which bolstered their cause. This search took them as far as Ṣufism and even (quite ecumenically) to other religions. From these disparate traditions the dissenting Ṣḥīḥites gleaned their assertions and defenses. Slowly there evolved an entire program rooted in the intellectual *Zeitgeist* of Neoplatonism, and more than any other sectarian movement in Islam the Ismāʿīlīs turned to the heirs of Plotinus for their program. The emanationist scheme of Neoplatonism made the dāʾīʾs claim of divine immanence (in the person of the *imām*) much more palatable. The microcosmic/macrocosmic motif of Neoplatonism also elevated the potential status of humanity’s vicegerent. The abyss between Allāh and the worldly *imām* was thus bridged.

Of particular interest to our topic is one of the dissenting Ṣḥīḥite movements which broke off from Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlism, namely the schism resulting from the death of the tenth Fāṭimid caliph, al-Āmir bi-Aḥkām Allāh (d. 1130), who was assassinated in all probability by Nizārī insurrectionists. His death rent the Ismāʿīlī movement apart only four decades after an earlier crisis had driven the Nizārīs to the mountains of Gilan. The historical reports are more than unreliable, but it seems that belief in an infant son of al-Āmir, named al-Ṭayyib, motivated many dissenting Ismāʿīlīs to rally round a new flag. When a conniving vizier manipulated a weak cousin of al-Āmir into the office of caliph, the supporters of the now hiding (*satr*) Ṭayyib, direct descendant of the previous caliph, pressed their counterclaim in Egypt and Yemen, and ultimately Sind.⁶

In Yemen in particular the Sulayḥid dynasty, nominal vassal of the Egyptian Fāṭimids, accepted the *daʿwah* of the Ṭayyibīs. The ruling queen al-Sayyidah Arwā privately accepted the claims of the Ṭayyibīs: so far as can be reconstructed from Najm al-Dīn

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Umārah al-Yamanī’s *History of Yemen* and other sources, in 1131–32 she appointed a Tayyibi dāʾī ("preacher") assistant to the dāʾī muṭlaq Dhuʾayb ibn Mūsā. His name was Ibrāhīm ibn Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī, the author of the *Kanz al-Walad* (*Treasure of the Child*) and the first Yemenite to recognize the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* as authoritative. Upon al-Dhuʾayb’s death in 1151, Ibrāhīm became chief dāʾī of the Tayyibi movement in Yemen. When Ibrāhīm died in 1162, his son Ḥātim ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī ruled as dāʾī muṭlaq until 1199.

As the Tayyibi *daʾwah* developed, Yemen fell into anarchy. The Hamdanids, Zurayʿiids, Sulayḥids, and Zaydīs fought for control of the area. Between 1150 and 1173 the Ḥamdanids were particularly hard pressed by ʿAlī ibn Mahdī of the Tihamah, whose vigor was continued by his son ʿAbd al-Nabī ibn Mahdī. After his father’s death in 1159, ʿAbd al-Nabī was able to conquer most of Yemen. Only a combined Zurayʿid/Ḥamdanid force was able to drive him back to his fortress in Zabīd.

Turning to the condition of the Jews in 12th century Tayyibi Yemen, some general observations are in order regarding the relationship between medieval Judaism and Ismāʿīlīsm. First of all, it is clear that messianic sectarianism in the Muslim world was not limited to the machinations and oppositionism of the Shiʿītes. The local Jews, torn from their national homeland long before the Muslims emerged from the Arabian peninsula, hoped for the restoration of the Third Temple and the advent of the Jewish Messiah. While the majority of Jews took the quietist stand of passive Messianic expectation in a world not of their own making, some took to activist messianism in the form of sectarian movements not unlike the dissenting Shiʿī factions.

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8 There are some problems with this chronology. Umārah contradicts Ḥātim’s history of the Tayyibi *daʾwah*; on Ḥātim’s own testimony, we should assume that al-Dhuʾayb was a Tayyibi. See H. C. Kay, *Yaman: Its Early Mediaeval History* (London, 1892), pp. 42–64; and Stern, “Succession,” pp. 212–32.


Many less actively messianic Jews, both Rabbanite and Karaite, found themselves in direct contact with the Ismāʿīlīs as subjects of the Fāṭimids. From the Genizah we learn much about the Fāṭimid polity and its relation to the dhimmī Jews; much less clear is how or to what extent Ismāʿīlism as a redemptive and esoteric theology affected the Jews. Let us consider the latter issue first.

Bernard Lewis, in a discussion of the social significance of Ismāʿīlism, points to what he calls the interconfessionalism of Ismāʿīlism. In their search for validation, the Ismāʿīlīs turned not only to theisticized Neoplatonism but also to non-Muslim religions. This interconfessional spirit is first expressed in the encyclopedic Rasāʾil Ikhwan al-Ṣafāʾ, a compendium of the supposed sum of all knowledge composed by Ismāʿīlī-leaning philosophers of the 10th century. Lewis produces a series of quotes from the Rasāʾil which attest to the interconfessional, if not somewhat condescending, attitude of the authors toward other religions, for example, “It befits our brothers that they should not show hostility to any kind of knowledge or reject any book. Nor should they be fanatical in any doctrine, for our opinion and our doctrine embrace all doctrines and resume all knowledge.”

Not all of Ismāʿīlism shared in this interconfessional spirit, but to the degree that Ismāʿīlī movements were rooted in the Rasāʾil, there appeared a more pronounced interconfessional tendency. A century after the Ikhwān, for example, the chief dāʾī of the eccentric Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim (ruled 996–1021), Hamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, cited both Christian Syriac and Jewish Hebrew Scriptures transliterated into Arabic characters in defending his state theology. This remarkable citation may be nothing more than part of an anti-Jewish polemic, but it also stands as evidence of a certain limited interplay of religious ideas.

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11 Origins, p. 94.
13 Origins, pp. 92ff.
Despite this Stoic interconfessional approach, the Jewish sources of the Genizah have little to say about Ismāʾīlism per se. Quite possibly because Ismāʾīlī propaganda never won over the local inhabitants of Egypt (witness the smooth transition to Ayyūbid Sunnī rule after the fall of the Fāṭimids), the Jews had little contact with Ismāʾīlism. In a discussion of “anti-Semitism” in Fāṭimid Egypt, Goitein noted that “oddly enough, the only religious group described (by the Genizah documents) as ‘haters’ are the Ismāʾīlīs, a sect usually believed to have been sophisticated with regard to differences in religion.”¹⁶ As a rule, however, the Fāṭimid political administration dealt favorably with the Jews. Only during the reign of al-Ḥākim did wholesale persecution of Jews (as well as Christians) take place,¹⁷ and it is in this episode that Stern has documented Fāṭimid interconfessionalism “in action,” and has suggested that we must be wary of according it undue significance.¹⁸

Generally speaking, and in contradistinction to the episode during al-Ḥākim’s reign, the policy towards the Jews in Fāṭimid Egypt and Palestine was one of toleration. Just as the Muslim bourgeoisie flourished during the 10th and 11th centuries, so did the Jews experience a radical transformation of their economic, political, and cultural status. The Jewish merchants of Egypt benefited as much as their neighbors from the new trade links established in the wake of Fāṭimid expansion.¹⁹ It was, as Goitein wrote, “the golden age of government officials coming from the minorities.”²⁰

Turning to Yemen of the 12th century, our information about Jews becomes much more spotty. ʿUmārah has nothing to say about them in his Taʾrīkh. The one event which can be established from the Jewish sources is the fanatical reign of ʿAlī ibn Mahdī and that of his son ʿAbd al-Nabī. In this we still must

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¹⁸ See his “Fāṭimid Propaganda Among Jews,” Studies in Early Ismāʾīlism, p. 95.
¹⁹ MS, 1, pp. 148–272.
²⁰ Ibid., 2, p. 374.
depend on indirect non-Yemenite sources: Moses Maimonides' *al-Risālah al-Yamanīyah* ("Epistle to Yemen"), written in Egypt between 1169 and 1172\(^{21}\) in response to a query from the Yemenite Jew R. Jacob ben Nethanel (son of our Nethanel), and a second letter composed twenty-two years later to some French Rabbis.

In these letters Maimonides paints a picture of intense confusion accompanied by false Messianic expectations. In the wake of "Abd al-Nabī’s severe persecution of Jews, a Jewish herald and pretender, described by Maimonides as a sick and pitiful character, won over many Jews and Muslims to his cause. In the confusion the nominal head of the Rabbinic Jews of Yemen, R. Jacob ben Nethanel, sent a query to the outstanding Nagid of Egyptian Jewry, apparently expressing in it his own private doubts. In response to it Maimonides composed his *Risālah*, outlining carefully his view of false messianism and of Islamic polemics against Judaism:\(^ {22}\)

You mention that a certain man in one of the cities of Yemen pretends that he is the Messiah. As I live, I am not surprised at him or at his followers, for I have no doubt that he is mad, and a sick person should not be rebuked or reproved for an illness brought on by no fault of his own. Neither am I surprised at his votaries, for they were persuaded by him because of their sorry plight, their ignorance of the high rank of the Messiah, and their mistaken comparison of the Messiah with Ibn Mahdī, whose rise they are witnessing. But I am astonished that you, a scholar who has studied carefully the doctrines of the Rabbis, are inclined to repose faith in him.

In a later letter to the Rabbis of Provence, Maimonides recounted the entire incident in greater detail:\(^ {23}\)

A man arose in Yemen about twenty-two years ago who claimed he was a herald of the Messianic King. He told the Jews that the Messiah would reveal himself in Yemen. Many


\(^ {22}\) *Epistle*, English section, p. xvi; text, pp. 84–86.

people—both Jews and Arabs—gathered about him, and they traveled through the hills. And our brothers in Yemen wrote me a long letter informing me of his ways, his laws, and his innovations in the prayer service. They said they had seen his wonders, and they asked me about him. I understood from their words that this poor man was lacking in sense but feared God, yet he had no wisdom. All that they said he accomplished and performed are lies. I feared for the Jews there, and I wrote them three or four letters dealing with the Messiah and his signs. I adjured them to warn this man, lest he destroy himself and the Jews with him. In the end, after a year he was captured and all his followers abandoned him. The king of the Arabs said to him: "What are you doing?" He answered: "I am doing the truth, according to the word of God." The king said: "What is your proof?" He answered: "Chop off my head and I will immediately come to life." The king said: "There is no greater proof—truly, I and the entire world will believe, and I will know that my ancestors fostered lies." Immediately they killed this poor man. May his death atone for him and all Israel. They taxed the Jews terribly afterwards and even today there are fools who say: "He will live and rise momentarily."

It is clear, then, that the Jews of Yemen were not only pressed and persecuted during the life of 'Abd al-Nabī', they were also confused. Living in an area where esoteric messianism abounded, unwilling participants in an anarchic situation, battered from all sides by coercion and subtle persuasion, the Jews had little to rely on. Even the Rabbis wavered. Some Jews succumbed and declared their testimony to Allāh and Muḥammad, others sought refuge in a hopeful messianism, still others remained steadfast in their affirmation of exilic Judaism. But even in their intransigence—not unlike Shī′ite intransigence—some Jews looked to "foreign" philosophies and religions (in this case Islam) to defend their belittled stance.24

Before the coming of the Mahdids in 1150 the conflict of ideas between Jew and Muslim in Yemen was less intensely messianic.

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24 S. W. Baron's description of this struggle for souls is somewhat frenzied, but still informative. See his *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1957), 5, pp. 82–108.
It centered instead on Islamic claims and Jewish resistance to such claims. This Jewish resistance gravitated toward two basic and interrelated questions which challenged significant Rabbinic beliefs:

Can the Hebrew Scriptures be abrogated by a new Word, such as the Qurʾān?

With the prophetic epoch closed (save for messianic tidings), can a new prophet, such as Muḥammad, be a true messenger of God?

Such were the yardsticks by which theological truths were measured.

One man who accepted this challenge was Maimonides, in his letter meant for Jewish eyes only, the Risālah. But nearly a quarter of a century earlier the father of R. Jacob ben Nethanel picked up the gauntlet to defend his faith against Ismāʿīlī Islam. R. Nethanel ben al-Fayyūmī worked hard to combat the well-oiled missionary machine of the Yemenite Ismāʿīlī daʿwah, but his son, soon after his death, seems to have faltered.

As we learn from Maimonides in the Risālah, R. Nathanel was dead by 1165. Yet we are told by many historians that R. Nethanel’s major surviving work, the Bustān al-ʿUqūl was written in 1165. It may well be that the Bustān was Nethanel’s ultimate work. Aside from the textual evidence—a poem by Solomon ibn Gabirol whose date was altered by Nethanel—there is contextual evidence which argues against 1165 in favor of a year earlier.

The date 1147 proposed by Y. Qāfīḥ is inaccurate and is based on faulty arithmetic. The book certainly predates the Mahdid persecutions, which seem to have intensified in 1165, the year of R. Nethanel’s death. In fact, the book was composed in A.H. 559/1164. The whole matter rests on the piyyūṭ by Ibn

25 Epistle, p. 2: “When we departed from the Maghreb... we learned that your father had gone to his eternal rest.” Maimonides left Fez for Palestine in 1165. See Encyclopaedia Judaica, s.v. “Maimonides,” 11, 755.
26 Not to be confused with the Bustān al-ʿAql attributed to the 11th century Ismāʿīlī Nāṣir-i-Khusraw. See Ivanow, Guide, p. 95.
27 See LBU, p. 10; and Pines, NFTI, pp. 5f.
28 The poem appears in J. Schirmann’s Ha-Shīrah ha-ʿIbrū bi-Sefarad u-be-Provans (Jerusalem, 1954), 1, 244-45.
Gabirol and its emendation by R. Nethanel. The poem as it appears in present editions speaks of the 461st year of the rule of Ishmael. However, the emended version in the Bustân speaks of 559 years of the rule of Ishmael, or 1164 C.E. Confirmation for this date may well be provided by the absence of even a hint of Mahdid agitation. In fact, the book can only be understood as written in a relatively tolerant symbiotic society, in which the search for truth could transcend fixed distinctions.

R. Nethanel apparently lived in Ṣanʿā'. Aside from the fact that Ṣanʿā' was a major Jewish center in South Arabia, Rabbi Yosef Qāfiḥ reports an ongoing oral Yemenite Jewish tradition to the effect that R. Nethanel indeed lived there.

The Bustân contains seven chapters beside the introduction:

chapter 1: God's unity (al-tawḥīd)
chapter 2: Man as a microcosm
chapter 3: obedience to God
chapter 4: repentance unto God (al-thawbah ilā Allāh)
chapter 5: reliance on God (al-tawakkul ʿalā Allāh)
chapter 6: the excellences of the Messiah (faḍāʾil al-mashīḥ)
chapter 7: description of the world to come

What immediately strikes the reader who is acquainted with Ismāʿīlī and related theologies is chapter 2. On the one hand, that an entire chapter of the book (and one of the longer ones, at that) is devoted to man as a microcosm (ʿālam ṣagḥīr) is rather extraordinary in a Jewish work. This theme was adopted by other Jewish philosophers, but the length and detail of R. Nethanel's exposition is decidedly not characteristic. Only one other medieval Jewish author has devoted an equally lengthy discourse to the microcosmic man—the Spaniard Joseph Ibn Ṣaddiq (d. 1149).

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29 Schirmann, Ha-Shīrah, 1, 245, l. 17.
30 See LBU, p. x, English, pp. 111f.; Arabic, pp. 70f.
33 See S. Horowitz, Der Mikrokosmos des Josef ibn Saddiq (Breslau, 1903), pp. viiiif., text, pp. 19f.
The only prior source which contains a similar meticulous account of this subject is letters 23–26 in the Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ. In these four letters the anatomy of man is discussed, and human physiology is consistently linked to universal cosmology. Typically, such linkage is expressed in numerically ascending order, and each organ (or set of organs) corresponds to a number, thereby relating the multiplicity of created man to the oneness of God. Man as a physiological organism is likened to a smoothly run political unit, and by extension to the ultimate physical unit, the universe.

To the nine heavens there correspond the nine substances of the body . . . and to the twelve signs of the Zodiac the twelve openings of the body . . . . The seven planets . . . correspond to the seven spiritual powers . . . . The five senses correspond to the five moving planets . . . .

The Rasāʾil were a crucial document in Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlism. The first reference to the Rasāʾil in Yemen occurs in the Kanz al-Walad of the dāʾī Ibrāhīm ibn Husayn al-Ḥāmidī. From that time on the Rasāʾil were often cited by members of the Ṭayyibī daʿwah. The Neoplatonic and ġAlid character of the Rasāʾil, along with its Ismāʿīlī flavor, made it a favorite amongst the Ṭayyibīs down to the present time.

R. Nethanel, in this Ṭayyibī intellectual climate, also turned to the Rasāʾil. He never explicitly refers to them, but he does quote numerous Arabic poems without attribution; he occasionally talks of the Islamic ʿulamāʾ, but he never speaks of the Ikhwān. He begins the chapters of his book with precisely the same literary formula found at the beginning of many of the Rasāʾil: “Know, my brother—may God strengthen both of us with His spirit—.”

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34 Rasāʾil (Cairo, 1928), 2, 318–88; 3, 3–24.
36 Nasr, Doctrines, p. 100; Rasāʾil, 3, 9.
37 KW, p. 112.
39 Cf. QBU, p. 7 with Rasāʾil, 3, 3. See also QBU, editor’s introduction, pp. 6f. Pines’ observation (NFTI, pp. 19f.) should be corrected accordingly.
Such literary evidence is incontrovertible proof that R. Nethanel drew from the *Rasā'il*.

At the beginning of chapter II of the *Bustān* one finds an elaborate number symbolism of the organs based on the 22nd epistle of the *Rasā'il*.\(^{40}\) Not only does R. Nethanel link the various component parts of the human body with numbers and the natural universe, but he also establishes a correspondence between these component parts and various aspects of the Jewish Biblical and Rabbinic tradition. The bifurcation of soul and body not only represents heaven and earth but also Moses and Aaron, Written Torah and Oral Torah, and the two tablets of the Decalogue.\(^{41}\) Corresponding to the five senses there are not only the five planets but also the five books of the Pentateuch and the five prayer services of the Day of Atonement.\(^{42}\) The seven openings of the head (or the soul's seven spiritual powers) have many correspondences, the most significant one being the seventh day of rest.\(^{43}\) This subtle infusion of Jewish symbolism into the microcosmic exposition of the *Bustān* is to be expected from a defender of the Jewish faith. It is clear, however, that the literary and ideational foundation of this exposition is drawn from the *Rasā'il*.

R. Nethanel devotes much of chapter II of the *Bustān* to the numbers 7 and 12. Now it is indeed possible to view such an emphasis as the result of the significance of these numbers in the Jewish tradition alone (7 days of creation, 12 tribes of Israel, etc.). But if we consider the theological environment of 12th-century Yemen, we are quite naturally led to the “Sevener” Shīʿites, armed with a septimal cyclism and duodecimal political hierarchy of *hujjahs* (“proofs”) who represent the absent Mahdī on earth.

R. Nethanel imparts an esoteric ambiance to the numbers 7 and 12: the true meaning of these numbers, we are told, are hidden (*mughaṭā*), to be revealed only to the enlightened elect.\(^{44}\) The numbers themselves are referred to by him as “the subtle secrets” (*al-asrār al-latīfah*), and much space is devoted to their astrological, calendrical, and ritual importance. Even the Qurʾān

\(^{40}\) See *QBU*, pp. 13–14.
\(^{42}\) *QBU*, p. 22; *LBU*, English, p. 21.
\(^{43}\) *QBU*, pp. 23ff.; *LBU*, English, pp. 22ff.
\(^{44}\) *QBU*, p. 29; *LBU*, English, p. 27.
is invoked by R. Nethanel as evidence of the significance of the numbers 7 and 12. Quoting the central monotheistic creed of Islam, 

(lā ilāha illā Allāh, “There is no God but Allah”), R. Nethanel performs his own kind of ta’wil on the orthographic features of the statement. The credo breaks down into twelve letters in seven connected sets. To this R. Nethanel remarks:

It is our purpose here only to explain the parallelism between ourselves and them with regard to 7 and 12. Aside from this we would not have mentioned it simply for the fact that they do. Furthermore, it is crucial to them, as when he said, “Over them are nineteen” (Qurʾān 74:30). Some of them say it is a reference to the ummah; that seven refers to the nātiqs and twelve refers to the hujjahs.

Pines observed that such an interpretation was current in Ismāʿīlī circles, but a Ṭayyibī source is unknown to me. As a methodological premise, Pines compared R. Nethanel to Central Asian authors, particularly Nāṣir-i-Khusraw. Yet, Ivanow adds, “his works probably were never known to the Western Ismāʿīlī world.”

Since G. Vajda uncovered a 12th-century Ismāʿīlī work reproduced in Judeo-Arabic, it is not strange to find a Jewish religious and communal leader explaining details of an Islamic esoteric doctrine to a Jewish audience. Familiarity with some of the more ramified concepts of Ismāʿīlism is indeed evidenced in the Bustān, but what is unique is that they are presented in the spirit and language of a particularly Jewish context.

Even an echo of the prophetic cyclism of Ismāʿīlism is also to be found in the Bustān, revised sufficiently to refute the particular claims of the Ismāʿīlī propagandist. In the long panegyric to the number 7, R. Nethanel says:

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45 QBU, pp. 31–32; LBU, English, pp. 29–30.
46 NFTI, pp. 17–19.
49 QBU, p. 26; LBU, English, p. 25.
And our master Moses ben Amram (peace be upon him) was the seventh from Abraham; and they are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, Amram, and Moses was the seventh.

In this same passage R. Nathanel projects the cycle of 7 back to Adam and forward to near-contemporary times.

Cosmological speculations have always played an important part in any Neoplatonic explanation of the structure of being. The early pagan Neoplatonists, following the lead of the entire Platonic tradition which preceded them, divided the universe into two distinct realms—the intelligible world of forms and the sensible world of matter. Standing ontologically above these two realms was the One or the Good, beyond being itself. Theistic Neoplatonism adopted the same structure, but instead placed above the intelligible world a transcendent and purposeful God. Theistic Neoplatonism was thus plagued with the necessity to explain how the transcendent Godhead initiated and brought about the unfolding of being. In Ḥisāmītīism two basic cosmologies were developed to describe this unfolding process, one characteristic of Central Asian thinkers, the other limited to the Western lands. The Central Asian cosmology was expressed by the Ikhwān, Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī, and Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Nasafī (both died 942). In this system, God emanates or brings into existence the divine command (al-amr; based on Qurʾān 36:82), which begins the unfolding of the intelligible and sensible worlds.

First, this divine command—also called “the cause of causes” (ʿillat al-ʿilal)—creates ex nihilo (abdaʾa) the intellect, which then emanates (inbaʿatha) the universal soul (al-nafs al-kullī). A clear distinction is drawn between the creation of the first intellect and the emanation of the soul. From the universal soul emerges the sensible world, in the guise of classic medieval spherical astronomy and physics. The transcendent God thereby remains to a large degree aloof in this chain of being, maximally described as “the Causer” (al-muʿīll or al-ʿall) of the “cause of

50 Nasr, Doctrines, pp. 1–22.
52 W. Madelung, “Ismāʿīliyya,” EI², 4, 204. For the Ikhwān, see Nasr, Doctrines, pp. 51–66.
causes.” The abyss of transcendence and immanence is thus bridged by a typically complex Neoplatonic waffling.

The chief dāʿī of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim, Ḥāmid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. shortly after 1017), elaborated and to some degree altered this Central Asian system. Al-Kirmānī was known to the Ṭayyibī propagandists as an opponent of the Central Asian thinkers already mentioned, and the Yemenite dāʿī Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī quoted him extensively. Al-Kirmānī adjusts the ontology of the upper triad considerably. God creates ex nihilo the first intellect, which is also now identical with the divine command, the will (irāḍah), and the logos (kalimah). The second intellect is no longer the universal soul but the first emanated being (al-munbaʿīth al-awwal), and is emanated as a consequence of the first intellect’s self-contemplation. From the second intellect emerges the third intellect, which in this system is identified with original matter and form. In the Central Asian system, the upper triad constitutes the spiritual realm and from it springs forth nature. In al-Kirmānī’s cosmology the intellectual world (ʿālam al-uqūl) is much broader, for beneath the upper triad are not sensible spheres but spiritual intellects, seven in all, the last being the active intellect (al-qāl al-faʾl). Following the Aristotelian/Neoplatonic cosmological archetype, the lower seven intellects are efficient causes of the sensible spheres and their motion.

Upon al-Kirmānī’s cosmology al-Ḥāmidī superimposes a gnostic drama of spiritual septimal cyclism which mirrors the earthly cycle of prophecy and redemption. Due to a dynamic rivalry within the upper triad the third intellect is expelled from the divine pleroma. The third intellect struggles to ascend through the seven ranks and thereby recapture its previous stature. In doing so, a complete cyclical prophetic epoch unfolds and begins again.

In an earlier study, S. Pines sought to relate R. Nathanel’s cosmology to that of the Central Asian Ismāʿīlīs (such as Nāṣir-i-

54 S. N. Makarem, The Doctrine of the Ismailis (Beirut, 1972), pp. 17–19. Makarem’s study is somewhat inaccurate in that he blends Central Asian and Western systems into one homogeneous cosmology.
55 Madelung, “Ismāʿīliyya,” p. 204.
Khusraw), with some degree of success. At first glance such a comparison is at least phenomenologically viable, but it is lacking in historical precision. For it is now known that the Eastern Ismāʿīlīs were not known to the Ṭayyibīs, and in particular Nāṣir-i-Khusraw’s Persian writings were unknown to them. Apparently only the Rasāʾīl were available. Hence we should examine to what extent al-Kirmānī and al-Ḥāmidī were known to R. Nethanel—his reliance on the Rasāʾīl has already been indicated.

R. Nethanel’s Neoplatonic cosmology is permeated throughout with Ismāʿīlī terminology and structure, although not with a degree of consistency that would point to the Ṭayyibīs as his exclusive source. In the Bustān God is also described as the “Causer” of the “cause of causes.” But between this “cause of causes” and the transcendent Creator is a hypostasized intermediary, the divine command/will. The “cause of causes” is, as in the Central Asian system, the result of God’s volition, and is the universal intellect (al-ʿaqī al-kullī) and the first originated being (al-mubdaʾ al-awwal). From this universal intellect the universal soul is emanated, and thereupon seven intellects issue forth. These seven intellects enliven the spheres and produce the universe of generation and corruption.

Before drawing any conclusions it should be noted that the Bustān does not contain the slightest trace of al-Ḥāmidī’s gnostic drama in the pleroma of the intellects. Nor does its cosmology correspond to al-Kirmānī’s system, at least as far as the upper triad is concerned. R. Nethanel does indeed prefer Intellects over spheres, and this rejection of Ptolemaic cosmology is a significant break from the doctrine of the Ikhwān and the Central Asian Ismāʿīlīs, which was current a century and a half before him. In the realm of the upper triad, the speculation of R. Nethanel resembles most that of the Ikhwān. But the rest of his cosmology is strikingly similar to that of al-Kirmānī. In the light of what was sketched above regarding the literary dependence of the Bustān

56 See above, note 47.
57 QBU, p. 1; LBU, English, p. 1.
58 QBU, p. 45; LBU, English, p. 42.
59 QBU, pp. 2–5; LBU, English, pp. 2–4.
60 NFTI, pp. 16f.
upon the \textit{Rasā’il}, and its wholesale adoption of the \textit{Rasā’il}’s microcosmic motif, it is safe to assume that above all else, the \textit{Rasā’il} were the dominant influence upon R. Nethanel’s cosmology, and that the intellectualist type of Ismā’īlīsm of al-Kirmānī and al-Ḥāmidī had some impact upon it. This admittedly vague conclusion is somewhat similar to the conclusions reached by D. Blumenthal in his study of the 15th-century Yemenite theologian Ḥoṭer ben Solomon: “the evidence indicates distinct Ismā’īlī influence, of the intellectualist type, though the exact channels of this influence remain unknown.”

I have now sketched an almost complete picture of a Jewish proponent of Ismā’īlīsm cosmology in defense of his own faith. Nethanel, a true uninitiated outsider if there ever was one, had penetrated to no small degree into Ismā’īlī esotericism and created his own specifically Jewish Ismā’īlīsm. For just as the Muslim Ismā’īlīs appropriated their own Islamic symbols in order to give expression to their system (the pen as the second intellect, the tablet as the third), so did R. Nethanel also draw upon his own tradition in order to provide a Jewish \textit{ta’wil} for his cosmology.

R. Nethanel accepted the challenge created by Ismā’īlī Islam and strove to defend his faith against that challenge. His defense is certainly not the firm stand of a Maimonides, but is far more akin to the relativism of a Franz Rosenzweig. For beyond the Neoplatonic cosmology and the macrocosmic contemplations of unity, the very spirit of Ismā’īlī interconfessionalism (most notoriously prevalent in the \textit{Rasā’il}) is central to the \textit{Bustān}.

In R. Nethanel’s relativism Muḥammad is a prophet of the God of Israel and the Qurān is indeed His prophetic communication. R. Nethanel states that God sent to mankind prophets both before the Sinaitic revelation and afterwards, just as His abundance flows unceasingly to this coarse and profane material world. Muḥammad is a messenger of God, but the Jews are not

\begin{itemize}
  \item 61 See his \textit{The Philosphic Questions and Answers of Ḥoṭer ben Shelōmō} (Leiden, 1981), p. 22.
  \item 63 How different is this attitude when compared to Maimonides, who referred to Muhammad as “the madman” (\textit{ha-meshugga}). See Halkin, \textit{Epistle}, p. 14.
  \item 64 \textit{QBU}, p. 115; \textit{LBU}, English, pp. 104f.
\end{itemize}
the intended recipients of his Arabic furqān. Muḥammad’s mission is to the pagans who remain ignorant of the one God:65

But it is His way to continually command whomever He wishes and send whomever He wishes to whomsoever He chooses. For all the worlds are His possessions and in His grasp. A proof that He sends a messenger to every people according to their language is found in the Qurʾān (14:4): “We have sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people.” Consequently had He sent a messenger to us, he would have surely been of our language; and further, had [Muḥammad] been for us, why did God say to him, “You are one of the messengers/sent to warn a people whose fathers I have not warned” (Qurʾān 36:2/6)? God meant the people who worshiped Allāt and al-‘Uzzā.

Al-Kirmānī citing Hebrew and Syriac Scriptures, an Ismāʿīlī tract in Judeo-Arabic guise, R. Nethanel affirming the revelation of Muḥammad and quoting it as an authoritative religious document on behalf of his own interests—no greater testimony can be offered to the interconfessional cultural tone fostered by Ismāʿīlism, both Muslim and Jewish.

Three hundred years later Ḥoter ben Solomon, also of Yemen, composed a number of theological works which, according to the recent studies of D. Blumenthal, show Ismāʿīlī influence precisely through the same intellectual Ismāʿīlī mediators, al-Kirmānī and al-Hadīdī.66 The Ismāʿīlī legacy of Nethanel continued in this post-Maimonidean Yemenite Jew. Thus R. Nethanel can be now seen more clearly as laying the Ismāʿīlī/Jewish groundwork for the so-called “Eastern tradition” of Maimonidean interpretation.

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65 *QBU*, p. 121.