# SA'ĪD B. ḤASAN, BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES
# THROUGH THE PRISM OF *MASĀLIK AL-NAẒAR*

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The Islamic polemical tract *Kitāb Masālik al-Naẓar* reveals much about its author, the Jewish apostate Sa'īd b. Ḥasan. Sa'īd plunges into diverse polemic themes, including some with which he is poorly acquainted, and uses sources from all three Abrahamic faiths, showing greater familiarity with Jewish sources than with the Qur'ān. The discussion explores Sa'īd's treatment of various issues in Muslim–Jewish polemics through the prism of his important polemical tract, *Masālik al-Naẓar*, and takes one of the first steps toward lifting Sa'īd out of his undeserved obscurity in scholarship.

*Key words*: Sa'īd b. Ḥasan, *Masālik al-Naẓar*, *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa*, *taḥrīf*, *'iṣma*, Maimonides, Isaac, Ishmael.

## Introduction

Sa'īd b. Ḥasan, descendant of a Jewish family in Alexandria, Egypt, converted to Islam in May 1298 CE in gratitude, he explained, for his miraculous recovery from a severe illness (Weston 1903, pp. 353–355). Twenty-two years later, in April 1320 CE, he wrote a tract titled *Kitāb Masālik al-Naẓar* (Book of the paths of investigation) in Damascus in an effort to demonstrate that the Torah hints at the eventual advent of Muḥammad and that Islam is superior to all other faiths.

The academic literature has overlooked *Masālik al-Naẓar* and made only brief mention of its author.[1] This article examines the contents of *Masālik al-Naẓar* to

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[1] In 1895, Ignaz Goldziher published *Masālik al-Naẓar* in part. See Goldziher (1895). Eight years later, Sidney Adams Weston published a thirty-seven-page critical edition of the entire work and added an English translation. See Weston (1903, pp. 322–359). For the English translation see *ibid*. (pp. 359–383). The present author is currently working on a critical annotated translation into Hebrew.

reveal its author's sources, polemical techniques, and methods. It also demonstrates the nature and uniqueness of this work and its contribution to the field of Muslim–Jewish polemics.

# 1. Sources

Investigation of *Masālik al-Naẓar* demonstrates Saʿīd's far-reaching reliance on Biblical verses, sometimes paraphrased in Arabic and on other occasions transliterated (often badly) into Arabic with a commentary at its side. The commentary is often incongruous with the verse interpreted, i.e., Saʿīd interprets verses in ways that fit his polemical agenda, sometimes inserting source material into the verse that does not appear in the text quoted. For example, he transliterates Gen. 13:17 ("Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto you")[2] as follows: *qūm hith halākh bāūrṣ la-ārka wa'l-raḥba kī lakhā atnanā*.[3] Afterwards, he writes: "The interpretation of these [words is]: Rise up, walk through the land, its length and breadth; to thy offspring we will give it" (Weston 1903, p. 324). The end of his interpretation, however, is taken from the end of Gen. 13:15: "For all the land which you see, to you will I give it, and to your seed forever."[4]

Saʿīd mentions many Biblical personalities such as Jewish Patriarchs (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), kings (e.g., Solomon, Jeroboam, Manasseh), and prophets (e.g., Samuel, Elijah, Obadiah), as well as non-Jews kings who troubled the people of Israel through the generations (e.g., Pharaoh, Sancherib, Nebuchadnezzar). In addition to these Biblical figures, he may even mention the Amora R. Shimon b. Laqīsh in a corrupted way (Samʿūn Ballqīsh) (Weston 1903, p. 338).

Despite his frequent use of Biblical verses and characters, Saʿīd mangles the Biblical chronology and sometimes attributes Biblical characters' words or deeds to the wrong principals. In Chapter 19, for example, he ascribes a prophecy in Is. 11:6 – "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them" – to Samuel (Weston 1903, p. 336).

In a forthcoming article, the present author shows that in addition to Biblical sources Saʿīd was somewhat familiar with texts from sources such as the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, Midrash Rabbah, and *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (*PRE*), and used them for his polemical purposes (Mazuz 2016). Saʿīd claimed to have knowledge of Hebrew (*'Ibrāniyya*) and Aramaic (*Suryāniyya*) (Weston 1903, p. 359) and described himself as having been, before his conversion, "one of the learned men (*'ulamā'*) of the Children of Israel" (Weston 1903, p. 353).

Saʿīd provides no information about the Hebrew sources that he used, how he had accessed them, and who his scholarly colleagues may have been. Neither does he

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[2] Translation taken from *The King James Version of the English Bible* (1941).
[3] Cf. "קוּם הִתְהַלֵּךְ בָּאָרֶץ, לְאָרְכָּהּ וּלְרָחְבָּהּ: כִּי לְךָ, אֶתְּנֶנָּה"
[4] Cf. "כִּי אֶת-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה רֹאֶה, לְךָ אֶתְּנֶנָּה, וּלְזַרְעֲךָ, עַד-עוֹלָם"

explain how and why he learned Hebrew and Aramaic. Since no early source other than *Masālik al-Naẓar* mentions him, these questions remain unanswered. However, *JT*, Midrash Rabbah, and *PRE* have something in common: a clear Land of Israel orientation. This may teach us something about Saʿīd – perhaps his philosophical world, his origin and milieu, and the teachings of the Jews of Egypt at the time.

In addition to Jewish sources, Saʿīd draws on sources from other religions. Although he quotes several Qurʾānic verses in *Masālik al-Naẓar*, his knowledge of the Qurʾān appears to be limited. In Chapter 21 of this composition, for example, he claims that Jesus was crucified (Weston 1903, p. 339). This assertion contradicts an explicit statement in Qurʾān [henceforth Q.] 4:157: "And for their saying: We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allāh, and they killed him not, nor did they cause his death on the cross, but he was made to appear to them as such […]."[5]

In Chapter 22, Saʿīd alleges that the Christians falsified their scriptures and ascribes to Jesus permission to eat carcasses, blood, and pork. To prove his point, he paraphrases Matt. 5:17, according to which Jesus came not to abrogate Moses' religion but to complement it (Weston 1903, p. 340). If so, Saʿīd has some familiarity with the Gospels and even claims to have read them (*ibid.*). Matt. 5:17, however, specifically contradicts Q. 3:50, which allows Christians to consume the substances listed above: "And [I am] a verifier of that which is before me of the Torah, and I allow you part of that which was forbidden to you […]."

## 2. *Dalāʾil al-Nubuwwa*

Saʿīd is one of a series of apostate Jews who wrote anti-Jewish tracts; others are Samawʾal al-Maghribī (see Perlmann 1964; Marzaka et al. 2006), ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī (see Perlmann 1940–1941; Lazarus-Yafeh 1990; Alfonso 1998), and ʿAbd al-ʿAllām (see Sadan 1990). Samawʾal's composition *Ifḥām al-Yahūd* (Silencing the Jews), notwithstanding its hostile anti-Jewish tone, is characterised by rational arguments. ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq's work, *al-Sayf al-Mamdūd fīʾl-radd ʿalā Aḥbār al-Yahūd* (The Outstretched Sword for Refuting the Sages of the Jews), appears to be unsophisticated and popular in nature. *Masālik al-Naẓar*, in contrast, is hard to characterise. Saʿīd was eclectic, combining arguments of many kinds.

Apart from his deliberate distortions and tendentious interpretations of Biblical verses, Saʿīd uses common Islamic polemical arguments that previous polemicists had invoked. One of the most frequent claims among Muslim polemicists is that the Bible alludes to Muḥammad's name but the Jews, in their jealousy, erased the allusions and falsified the verses that contained them. This falsification, known in Islamic sources as *taḥrīf*,[6] was, according to the Muslim sages, thwarted by Allāh in some

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[5] Translation taken from Maulana (1998).

[6] On taḥrīf, see Adang (1996, pp. 223–248); Lazarus-Yafeh (2000, vol. 10, pp. 111–112); Reynolds (2010); Nickel (2011); Griffith (2013, pp. 175–177); Mazuz (2014c, pp. 17–21).

cases, giving evidence of the truth of their religion. Consequently, these verses are often referred to as evidence of prophethood (*dalā'il/ḥujaj al-nubuwwa*) or signs of prophethood (*a'lām al-nubuwwa*), and many Islamic tracts are titled as such.

The Muslim polemicists were specifically drawn to four Biblical verses (Gen. 17:20, Deut. 18:15/18, and Deut. 33:2); one may find them or their paraphrases in almost every anti-Jewish polemical Islamic tract, including Sa'īd's. In Chapter 3, Sa'īd cites Gen. 17:20 in a poor transliteration.[7] Other polemicists argue that the words *bi-me'od me'od* ("very-very", i.e., exceedingly) allude to Muḥammad's future advent because their *gematria* (the sum obtained by adding the numerical values of the Hebrew letters) is equal to that of Muḥammad's name (92) (e.g., Perlmann 1964, pp. 31–32). Sa'īd, in contrast, discusses what he presents as an interpretation bruited by "scholars of the Hebrew language". These scholars, he claims, interpreted *me'od me'od* (here he leaves off the prefix *bi*) in several ways: "Some of them said that [the words] mean Aḥmad, Aḥmad; others say very, very; still others say great, great" (Weston 1903, p. 325). Sa'īd repeats this argument in basically the same manner in Chapter 30 (Weston 1903, p. 347). The identity of his sources is vague and the entire commentary is opaque. Still, this may represent an attempt on his part to refute Moses Maimonides' (1138–1204 CE) writings in the *Epistle to Yemen*.

The contents of the *Epistle* suggest that a Jewish convert to Islam challenged the Yemenite Jewish community by presenting the community with several *dalā'il*, leaving the Jews perplexed due to their inability to cope.[8] One of this apostate's arguments was that Gen. 17:20 alludes to Muḥammad's future arrival. In response, Maimonides wrote the following:

וממאי יגׄב אן תעלמה אן אלאסם אלדׄי תזעם אלישמעאלים אנה מכתוב פי אלתורה,
אלתי יתעלק בה אלפושעים מן במאד מאד, ליס הו מים חית מים דאל, בל אנה אלף חית
מים דאל. הכׄא נׄין קולהם יגׄדונה מכתוב פי אלתורה ואלאנגׄיל אסמה אחמד, וליס עדד
במאד מאד מׄתׄל עדד הׄדׄא אלסאם אלדׄי זעם אנה מכתוב פי אלתורה.

It is important that you know that the name that the Ishmaelites argue is written in the Torah, the one that the apostates rely on, I mean to *bi-me'od me'od*, is not *mīm*, *ḥeit*, *mīm* and *dāl*, but *alif*, *ḥeit*, *mīm* and *dāl*. So it is explicitly stated: They find him mentioned in the Torah and the Gospels as Aḥmad. The numerical value of *bi-me'od me'od* is not equal to that name, which, they claim, is written in the Torah (Maimonides 1952, pp. 42–44).[9]

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[7] وﻝ يشماعل شمعتيخا هنني بيراختي اث وهفريتي اث وهرباتي اث بماذ ماذ Cf. ‏"‏וּֽלְיִשְׁמָעֵאל,. הִנֵּה בֵּרַכְתִּי אֹתוֹ וְהִפְרֵיתִי אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֹתוֹ, בִּמְאֹד מְאֹד: שְׁנֵים-עָשָׂר נְשִׂיאִם יוֹלִיד, וּנְתַתִּיו לְגוֹי שְׁמַעְתִּיךָ-- גָּדוֹל"‏ (Gen. 17:20). ("And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation").

[8] For detailed elaboration on this point, see Mazuz (2014b).

[9] Translation taken from Halkin and Hartman (1985), modified somewhat by myself to reflect the Judaeo-Arabic more accurately.

Maimonides was referring to the following Qur’ānic verse: "And when Jesus, son of Mary, said: O children of Israel, surely I am the messenger of Allāh to you, verifying that which is before me of the Torah and giving the good news of a messenger who will come after me, his name being Aḥmad […]" (Q. 61:6). Consequently, Sa‘īd tries to broaden the common Islamic interpretation of *bi-me’od me’od* and apparently does this in response to Maimonides, who had lived in Egypt about fifty years before his lifetime.

Deut. 18:15 reads: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet in your midst, from among your brethren like myself; him you shall heed."[10] Farther into the chapter, a similar verse appears: "I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren like unto thee; [I] will put My words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him" (Deut. 18:18).[11] The Muslim polemicists argue that the phrases "from among your brethren" and "from among their brethren" refer to Muḥammad (e.g., al-Rāzī 1977, p. 195). Most of them do not explain how they reached this conclusion; to the best of my knowledge, Samaw’al al-Maghribī is the only exception in this regard (Perlmann 1964, pp. 29–30). Unlike previous polemicists, Sa‘īd adds to the verse the words "from the children of Ishmael":

ومّما يدلّ علي نبوّته صلّي الله عليه وسلّم نصّ صريح في السفر الخامس من التوراة كلّم الله موسي تكليمًا قل لبني إسرايل باللسان العبراني نابي اقيم لا هام مقارب أحي خام مبني يشماعل. تفسير ذلك سنرسل إليكم نبيًّا من قرايبكم من أولاد أخيكم إسمعيل […].[12]

An additional proof among the proofs of his prophethood, *pbuh*, is an explicit text in the fifth book of the Torah, [in which] Allāh told to Moses, 'Speak to the children of Israel in the Hebrew language: a prophet I shall appoint for you from among your brethren, from the children of Ishmael'. The meaning of these [words is]: We will send unto you a prophet from your kindred, of the children of your brother Ishmael […] (Weston 1903, p. 327).

Deut. 33:2 reads: "And he [Moses] said, the Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints: from his right hand went a fiery law for them." This verse, the Muslim polemicists claim, alludes to Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad: Sinai to Moses, Seir to Jesus, and Paran to Muḥammad (e.g., Perlmann 1964, pp. 34–36; al-Rāzī 1977, p. 195). Their explanation is that Paran is Mecca. Here Sa‘īd follows his predecessors' lead: "The people of the Hebrew language agree that the mountains of Paran are the mountains of Mecca", adding, "The ten thousands of his saints are the people of the sacred house" (Weston 1903, p. 328), i.e., the Ka‘ba.

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[10] Cf. "נָבִיא מִקִּרְבְּךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ כָּמֹנִי יָקִים לְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵלָיו תִּשְׁמָעוּן"

[11] Cf. "נָבִיא אָקִים לָהֶם מִקֶּרֶב אֲחֵיהֶם כָּמוֹךָ וְנָתַתִּי דְבָרַי בְּפִיו וְדִבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶם אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוֶּנּוּ"

[12] Authors or copyists of certain mediaeval texts did not distinguish between *yā'* to *alif maqṣūra* and the *lacuna* recurs in Weston's critical edition. In many cases, *alif*s (especially in first names) and *hamza*s were omitted as well.

## 3. *'Iṣma*

According to Jewish thought, no man is perfect; everyone, including the Patriarchs, sins: "Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins" (Ecs. 7:20). Most Muslim theologians, in contrast, attribute to the prophets – at least once they have begun their mission – the characteristic of *'iṣma* (infallibility).[13] This is one of the disputed issues between Jews and Muslims; the latter are unable to fathom how the Jews ascribe sins to the Patriarchs and consider it a *taḥrīf*.

   Although Sa'īd does not mention *'iṣma* specifically, he appears to have been familiar with the term and adopted it. I Kgs. 11:7–13 states that God deprived Solomon of his kingdom because he allowed his wives to worship idols. In Chapter 22 of *Masālik al-Naẓar*, Sa'īd downplays the idolatry that was practiced in Solomon's home, claiming instead that Allāh took away his kingdom because of a picture that had been painted in his home, of which Solomon was unaware (Weston 1903, p. 339). By so arguing, Sa'īd absolves Solomon of responsibility for the idolatry in his home and cleanses him of sin.

## 4. Ishmael and Isaac

In several chapters of *Masālik al-Naẓar*, Sa'īd presents Ishmael as Abraham's favoured son. His purpose is to show that Ishmael – ancestor of Muḥammad and the Arabs in Islamic eyes[14] – is the successor to Abraham, the first man who returned to monotheism after many generations of idolatry, and that Isaac is not.[15] By implication, Muḥammad is Abraham's spiritual successor, making Islam and not Judaism the true faith.[16]

   In Chapter 20 of *Masālik al-Naẓar*, Sa'īd depicts Ishmael as Abraham's favoured son by putting forward an altered transliteration of the first part of Gen. 22:2. The verse reads: "And he said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and get you to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I will tell you." Sa'īd argues that the words "your only son" can refer only to Ishmael because Ishmael is the elder son (Weston 1903, p. 337). However, he ignores the rest of the verse, which clearly speaks of Isaac. By so doing, Sa'īd presents a different Biblical narrative, according to which the bound son is

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[13] On *'iṣma*, see Zucker (1966); Madelung – Tyan (1978, vol. 4, pp. 182–184); Bar-Asher (1999, pp. 159–180).

[14] On Ishmael as the progenitor of the Arabs and on the Arab genealogy and its *problematique* in tracing the historical origins of Ishmael and the Arabs in the Biblical period, see Eph'al (1976).

[15] On some Muslim sages' attempts to belittle Isaac relative to Ishmael, see Mazuz (2014a).

[16] The idea that Abraham is not Jewish (and not Christian) appears in the Qur'ān itself: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian but [an] upright [man], a Muslim; and he was not one of the polytheists" (Q. 3:67).

actually Ishmael – who, his reader should infer, received the Abrahamic legacy, to the exclusion of Isaac.[17]

In Chapter 9, Saʿīd intertwines Deut. 9:27 ("Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; look not unto the stubbornness of this people, nor to their wickedness, nor to their sin") into the account of Moses' war against the Amalekites in Exodus. What Moses actually said, according to Saʿīd, was "Remember Your servants, Abraham and Ishmael" (Weston 1903, p. 328). By deleting Isaac and Jacob from the verse, he ignores Isaac – Abraham's spiritual successor according to Judaism – and Jacob, who is also known as Israel. Thus, Saʿīd again puts forward a Biblical narrative that identifies Abraham's successor as Ishmael and not Isaac.

It is possible that, by touting Ishmael's supremacy over Isaac, Saʿīd is actually trying to refute Maimonides' remarks in the *Epistle to Yemen*. Indeed, Maimonides dedicated several pages in the *Epistle* to the argument that Ishmael, the bondwoman's son, is inferior to Isaac, Abraham's true heir and spiritual successor. The chain of succession that Maimonides presents excludes not only Ishmael but Esau as well:

וֹתֻם ביין פי יצחק אן תלך אלברכות אלתי ועד בהא אברהם, מן גֻמלתהא אן יכון פי בניה
שריעֹה אללה ודין, כמא ועדה פי נסלה וקאל והייתי להם לאלהים. וֹתֻם בֿצֿין יצחק ען
ישמעאל בגֿמיע דֿלך, כמא ביינא בביאן. בֿצצה באלדין דון ישמעאל, הו קולה ואת בריתי
אקים את יצחק בעד קולה פי ישמעאל הנה ברכתי אתו. וביין לנא אללה תעׄ עלי ידי
יצחק אן יעקב קד בֿצֿ בגֿמיע דֿלך דון עשו, והו קול יצחק לה ויתן לך את ברכת
אברהם. פקד תביין מן נצוץ אלתורה אנה פֿצֿילֹה אלדין אלמועוד אלמוֹעוד בהא אברהם, אלמעהוד
עליהא, אנהא סתכון פי בניה; בֿצצת ביצחק, תֻם יעקב מן נסל יצחק. והוא קול אלנבי
שאכרא ללה עלי הדֿה אלנעמה אלטֿולי אשר כרת את אברהם ושבועתו ליצחק ויעמידה
ליעקב לחק לישראל ברית עולם.

Afterwards, he explained in regard to Isaac that these blessings, addressed [by God] to Abraham, mean collectively that God's teachings and faith will belong to his offspring, as He had intended in regard to his offspring, as is stated, "And I will be a God unto them". Then, He separated Isaac from Ishmael in all these respects, as we explained. He separated him by giving him the faith to the exclusion of Ishmael, as He says: "I shall establish My covenant with Isaac", after He had said in regard to Ishmael, "Behold, I will bless him". Blessed God explained to us through Isaac that Jacob is separate from Esau in all these [matters], as Isaac said to him, "And may He give you Abraham's blessing". Verses in the Torah [already] make it clear that the exaltedness of the faith that was promised to Abraham, on which a covenant was concluded with [Abraham] for his offspring, was meant first for Isaac alone and later for Jacob, born of Isaac's seed. So the prophet spoke in gratitude to God for this great goodness, "which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac, and confirmed the same to Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an eternal covenant" (Maimonides 1952, p. 42).

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[17] On the switching of the bound son's identity in Islamic sources, see Firestone (1989, especially pp. 98–99, 113, 127 and 129); Doukhan (1994, p. 34); Mazuz (2015).

# Conclusion

Saʿīd b. Ḥasan made a dual transition in mid-life: from Jew to Muslim and thence to Muslim polemicist against Judaism. His treatise *Masālik al-Naẓar* is a groundbreaker in the genre of Muslim polemics, invoking the full set of tools of this trade including expanded use of *dalā'il* and recourse to Jewish sources as diverse as the Talmuds and the Midrashic compilations in their original languages. Saʿīd may have made an attempt to refute Maimonides' writings in the *Epistle to Yemen*. He even resorted to Christian source material to prove his points. He often misquoted, misinterpreted, or misrepresented his sources and even displayed inferior familiarity with the Qur'ān, possibly due to his late conversion. Saʿīd plunged fearlessly into topics that strained his expertise. None of this detracts from his importance in the constellation of Muslim–Jewish polemics.

The discussion above takes one of the first steps toward rescuing Saʿīd from the research obscurity that has typified him to date. Although it does not produce a systematic biography of the apostate-polemicist, the analysis of *Masālik al-Naẓar* yields a number of implications that shed light on the author and his strategies, tactics, and aims.

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