

## Understanding “Banī Isrā’īl”, the “Jews”, “Judaism” and the Religious Sects of the Jews (1)<sup>1</sup>

# The Banī Isrā’īl—Offspring of the Prophet Ya‘qūb (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ)—Were Upon Islām and Tawhīd



الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على أشرف الأنبياء والمرسلين

The Qur’ān distinguishes between the Banī Isrā’īl as a **people**—who are the Asbāt, the Tribes, the sons and offspring of Ya‘qūb (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ)—and between Judaism as a **religion**. The religion of Banī Isrā’īl was that of their

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<sup>1</sup> As Muslims we have been ordered to invite the People of the Book to Islām through the use of wisdom, good argumentation and admonition and in ways that are best. We are also ordered to treat them with justice. This series aims to provide insight into this subject area and to remove many misconceptions that are held: a) whether by Muslims in relation to the topic of “Banī Isrā’īl”, “Jews” and “Judaism” and the religious and political movements of the Jews—these misconceptions often become hindrances to presenting Islām to them—or b) whether by Jews themselves in relation to Islām and Muslims.

forefather, Ibrāhīm (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ), it was Islām, Tawhīd, Ḥanīfiyyah. Ya'qūb was the son of Ishāq (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ), the son of Ibrāhīm (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ), and is given the title of “Asīr ʿĪl” (Servant of God), or “Isrā'īl”. He gave birth to the Twelve Tribes (Asbāṭ) through his twelve sons. They were upon Islām and Allāh raised them over other nations due to their uprightness and firmness upon Tawhīd in that period of time, prior to Mūsā (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ).<sup>2</sup>

As for the religion of “**Judaism**” (al-Yahūdiyyah) as a tribal doctrine, then this was unknown to Ibrāhīm, Ishāq, Ya'qūb, the Asbāṭ, Mūsā, Hārūn, Dāwūd and Sulaymān (عَلَيْهِمُ السَّلَامُ). It was a later development, and appeared after the sixth century BC. The compilation and translation of what is referred to as the “Old Testament” into the Greek language—known as the Septuagint—was undertaken by 70 scholars of the Jews during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC in Alexandria, Egypt. This, “Old Testament”—as the Christians call it—presented a new doctrine centred around a tribal god, a chosen people and a promised land.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To provide a rough frame of reference in terms of time, Ibrāhīm (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) was present around 2000 BC, Mūsā (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) around 1500 BC and Sulaymān (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) around 1000 BC. These are not exact figures but provide a quick and easy frame of reference.

<sup>3</sup> The Jews do not have the original written Torah of Moses, but only what they put into writing as the Torah of Moses based upon their oral traditions which underwent significant loss and change.

The Qur'ān actually refers to three parties: a) **The Banī Isrā'īl** who were upon istiḳāmah (uprightness) and were callers to Tawḥīd b) **“Those who returned, repented”** (الذين هادوا) and they are those who came after Mūsā, and they are referred to as yahūd with the meaning, “those who repented (from the worship of the calf)” and c) **The Yahūd (Jews, Judaism)** upon a tribal doctrine who claim they are chosen with a special covenant and that they are “sons of Allāh”, meaning beloved of Allāh. The leaders of these people and their scholar-scribes who doctored and distorted revelation are subject to criticisms in the Qur'ān for their iniquities and they are the ones to whom 'Īsā (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) was sent.

It is crucial to understand that **Judaism is not a race**, it is a religion. Just like Islām is not a race, it is a religion and likewise Christianity is not a race. You have ethnic diversity among Jews, just as you have among Muslims and Christians. As such, the claim of a Polish, German or Russian Jew that he is descended from Banī Isrā'īl is no different to the claim of a Chinese or Scottish Muslim

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The earliest materials present in Hebrew are from around the 2nd century BC, in the Dead Sea Scrolls. As for the full Hebrew Bible, then it only appeared in the 10th and 11th centuries CE, put together by the Masoretes, or scribe-scholars, with their knowledge that the Greek Septuagint was full of errors. So they tried to reconstruct it in Hebrew but used much guesswork in determining the vocalisation (vowelling) of the text. Due to this, more taḥrīf (distortion) took place in their scripture.

that he is descended from the Arab Quraysh. Adopting Islām does not make one a descendant of the Quraysh. Many ethnicities converted to Judaism over the past 2000 years, including Arabs prior to Islām. These conversions did not confer upon them an ancestry from the original Banī Isrā'īl, the sons of Ya'qūb, who were Muslims upon Islām and Tawḥīd and were certainly not “Jews” upon “Judaism” as these notions were non-existent in that time. There are black Ethiopian Jews, white European Jews, Arab Yemenite Jews, Irāqī Jews, Persian Jews, Chinese Kaifeng Jews and so on, all having different ethnicities.

Consider that there are **Palestinian Jews** who in appearance and genetic constitution are indistinguishable from Palestinian Muslims. This actually makes them Arab Jews, where “Arab” is the ethnicity and “Jew” is the religion. The Jewish Encyclopedia states that Arabs are the purest Semites: “The Arabs in the desert fastnesses of central and northern Arabia have, on account of their isolated position, preserved unchanged more features of primitive Semitic character, custom, and language than any other Semitic nation.”<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of today’s Jews, more than 90% in fact, are **European Ashkenazis** whose ancestors are either raw converts to

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<sup>4</sup> The 1906 edition of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, (Funk and Wagnels) 11/184.

Judaism (upon the disputed Khazārian hypothesis) or the produce of intermingling and dilution (upon the Rhineland hypothesis).<sup>5</sup> The ideological and political

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<sup>5</sup> The origin of European Jews is somewhat disputed. There are supporters of the Khazārian hypothesis and supporters of the Rhineland hypothesis. However, neither is true on its own. Rather, the truth is that the origin of European Jews comes from a mixture of conversion and migration, intermarriage. Refer to “*A substantial prehistoric European ancestry amongst Ashkenazi maternal lineages*” by Marta Costa et al. published in Nature (Nature Communications) 8th October 2013. The paper concludes based on mitochondrial DNA variation studies that “The great majority of Ashkenazi maternal lineages were not brought from the Levant, as commonly supposed, nor recruited in the Caucasus, as sometimes suggested, but assimilated within Europe.” The Scientist magazine, commenting on this research notes, “The Ashkenazi Jews make up the majority of Jews today and most recently have ancestry in central or Eastern Europe.” *Genetic Roots of the Ashkenazi Jews*, The Scientist, 8th October 2013. And in Live Science, “All told, more than 80 percent of the maternal lineages of Ashkenazi Jews could be traced to Europe, with only a few lineages originating in the Near East.” *Surprise: Ashkenazi Jews Are Genetically European* Live Science, 8th October 2013. And in the New York Times, “The finding establishes that the women who founded the Ashkenazi Jewish community of Europe were not from the Near East, as previously supposed, and reinforces the idea that many Jewish communities outside Israel were founded by single men who married and converted local women.” *Genes Suggest European Women at Root of Ashkenazi Family Tree* New York Times, 8th October 2013.

concept of “Jewishness” or “Judaism” as a **distinct genetic race** is baseless. This is acknowledged by Jews themselves. For example, Dr. Samuel Lebens of Yeshivat Har Etzion, chair of the Association for the Philosophy of Judaism, writes in Haaretz, “There is no such thing as a racially pure Jew. We are not a race.”<sup>6</sup> There is an ongoing battle among Jewish academics and researchers regarding this issue. The first camp consists of those who—being objective and lacking any agendas—have accepted the factual realities, that Jews are not a race based on genetics. This should be plainly obvious and all that is needed to prove it is to put pictures of Polish, Russian, Iranian, Yemeni, Chinese and Ethiopian Jews right next to each other and ask if they are of the same race. The second camp contains propagandists with ideological and political objectives. Their position is becoming more and more untenable and unjustifiable in light of ongoing research findings, though they are active in crafting and presenting their own studies for ideological reasons.

We can summarise this article with the following main points:

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to “*Jews are not a race, but a nation*” in Haaretz, 14th June 2012. Another book which addresses this topic is by Shlomo Sand, Professor of History at Tel Aviv University, titled, “*The Invention of the Jewish People*.” Sand refutes the claim of ethnic and racial purity of the Jews.

Firstly, the difference between the historic Banī Isrā'īl as a people, a tribe, a nation with blood-ties and relationships who were upon Islām and Tawḥid, and between what developed into Judaism, well after the time of Mūsā and Sulaymān (عَلَيْهِمَا السَّلَامُ) and which today is a religion, not a distinct race or tribe.

Secondly, the distinction between Mūsā and the Torah that was revealed to him, and between what the Jewish scholars penned down as the Torah of Moses in the Greek language more than a thousand years later in Egypt during the 3rd century BC. This is not the same as the actual Torah of Moses, just like the Gospels in the New Testament are not the actual Gospel of Jesus, but the writings of evangelists and storytellers in the Greek language aimed at converting pagans and in which there are remnants of the actual Gospel of Jesus.

Thirdly, one should be able to see through the clever use of the words “Jew”, “Jewish” and “Judaism” as if they span over the last 4000 years of history and as if they are tied to genetics. In reality, neither Abraham, Ishāq, Ya'qūb or the Banī Isrā'īl in the time of Mūsā (عَلَيْهِمَا السَّلَامُ) knew of any religion called “Judaism” and nor of any tribal concept of “Jewishness”. Allāh (عَزَّوَجَلَّ) stated in this regard: **“Or do you say that Ibrahīm and Ismā'īl and Ishāq and Ya'qūb and the Asbāṭ (the Twelve Tribes) were Jews or Christians? Say, ‘Are you more knowing or is Allāh?’”** (2:140). In this verse

is a distinction between a people connected by lineage, from Ibrahīm to Banī Isrā'īl, and between a tribal religion, which is Judaism, and which came afterwards, as did Christianity.

Once all of this is clear, then we must also understand that the Jews are not a single, united entity. Rather, they have many religious sects and political movements, often at odds with each other and sometimes with tremendous animosity. We have been informed in the Prophetic traditions that the Jews had split into seventy-one sects. Ignorance in this regard will lead to errors being made and to injustices being committed when individuals or groups of Jews are accused of things they are innocent and free of.

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