

MID-EAST e-NEWS

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Welcome

When I started writing **e-NEWS**, it was as a result of realizing how complex and inter-twined were the issues regarding the Middle East – and how these issues resonate around the world. It is impossible to answer questions concerning the events and culture of the region without either falling into the trap of TMI (too much information), or being hopelessly superficial.

The multitude of references in this edition, suggesting that you look back at earlier issues of **e-NEWS**, is a reminder of how much background is necessary for even a partial grasp of topics.

Write me at pkclark@pmbx.net & let me know what you think.

In the News

At the Arab Summit that recently concluded in Riyadh, the delegates endorsed the 2002 Peace Plan that had been presented by King Abdullah in an earlier, Beirut, summit. This was at the height of the 'Al Aqsa' intifada, and the plan did not gain enough impetus at that point to be properly considered: the Netanya suicide bomb occurred at that time, and the Beirut meeting itself was not well attended (even Arafat's videotaped speech was not shown on schedule).

This month's summit expressed renewed Arab commitment to the peace plan, for which reason its outlines are summarized below. Israeli PM, Ehud Olmert, is quoted as saying that "*This process has brought the influential countries in the Arab world to begin to realise that Israel is not the biggest of all their troubles. This is a revolutionary change in their perception.*" He also added, concerning the willingness of the Arabs to recognize a need to come to some agreement, that the Palestinians "*were nearing the point where they have to make a decision*" and that when that happens "*a breakthrough will be made that will make it possible for us to carry out historical processes.*"

Summary of the Arab Peace Plan: (also see **e-NEWS** 5 & 7)

- calls on Israel to
 - withdraw from all Arab land occupied in the 1967 Middle East war;
 - reach an "agreed, just" solution for Palestinian refugees in line with U.N. Resolution 194;
 - accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with east Jerusalem as its capital.
- In return, Arab states will
 - consider the conflict over and will enter a peace treaty with Israel;
 - achieve comprehensive peace for all the states of the region;
 - establish normal relations with Israel.

Israel paid little attention to the Arab initiative at the time. The suicide bombing in Netanya prompted the military reoccupation of much of the West Bank and a siege of the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah.

Israeli leaders have recently said the Arab plan has positive elements but that other aspects -- including the proposed return to 1967 borders, the status of Jerusalem and how to deal with Palestinian refugees -- are "problematic".

The Palestinian Islamist Hamas movement has not accepted the plan because it conflicts with its ultimate aim of replacing Israel with an Islamic state. Hamas leaders have offered only a long-term truce with Israel inside its 1967 borders.

The Arab plan was mentioned as a foundation for peace in the "road map" announced by the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations in April 2003. (Source: Reuters News web site.)

Resolution 194, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1948 after the war that followed Israel's creation, resolves that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return..."

Two Rabbis – (1) Maimonides

To help us understand the role of the Rabbis in Rabbinic Judaism, we shall look briefly at two near contemporaries: Maimonides and Nahmanides, known in Jewish writing by the acronyms ‘Rambam’ (**R**abbi **M**oses **B**en **M**aimon) and ‘Ramban’ (**R**abbi **M**oses **B**en **N**ahman).

Maimonides (1135-1204) has been called “the most influential figure in Jewish philosophy.” His family had to leave Cordoba when the intolerant Almohad’s took control – if they had stayed it was either ‘convert or die.’ From a family of Rabbis, Maimonides (his name in Greek) studied secular philosophy in Fez (Morocco), and immediately began applying it to his Jewish background. He produced a thorough commentary on the Mishneh in 1168, including his famous *13 principles of faith*, from his commentary on the Mishnaic tract, *Sanhedrin*. (If you are unsure of the role of the Mishneh, see e-NEWS 83.)

In Fostat, Egypt he was the Physician for the Grand Vizier, and has left us a record of his daily activities in a letter he wrote from there. It was while in Fostat that he wrote most of the work for which he is well known.

Maimonides emphasizes the role of the *Oral Torah*, with superficial meanings for the uneducated, normal believer, and deeper, hidden, truths for the scholars, to be explained through their writings – in other words, *esoteric* in nature. He rejects the literal interpretation of Scripture, instead being more concerned with the hidden intent behind the words.

Maimonides attempted to distinguish between Aristotelian and Jewish philosophy, harmonising where possible and clarifying their distinctives where necessary (as in his 1190 Guide for the Perplexed). He reduces miracles to natural phenomena, but refuses to accept the physical nature of resurrection into the *Olam Haba* (the ‘world to come’), but only spiritual (for instance, in his 1191 Treatise on resurrection). For some of his comments he was charged as a heretic, during his lifetime and later. In the next generation Nahmanides would find reason to both defend and criticize Maimonides. Even today the positions of these two thinkers are representative of the major stands of Judaism.

Maimonides argued that Moses established a social order because he saw that the knowledge of God from the ‘first principles’ of Adam & Abraham would be insufficient to prevent the Israelites from straying. There was an explicit philosophy of the Patriarchs, which was lost (according to Maimonides) when Israel was exiled & persecuted, but which the *Oral Torah* reconstructs.

Maimonides’ greatest work, however, which encapsulated his faith and philosophy, was his Mishneh Torah. This is a wide-ranging work in 14 volumes, an accumulation of the Jewish laws of the Talmud, and a compendium of the rulings of the earlier scholars, the *Geonim*.

Maimonides died in Fostat, but was buried in Tiberias, beside the Sea of Galilee. (For more information see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maimonides/>)



Maimonides statue in Cordoba

Maimonides’ Day

I dwell at Fostat, and the sultan resides at Cairo [about a mile-and-a-half away].... My duties to the sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day, early in the morning, and when he or any of his children or any of the inmates of his harem are indisposed, I dare not quit Cairo, but must stay during the greater part of the day in the palace. It also frequently happens that one of the two royal officers fall sick, and I must attend to their healing. Hence, as a rule, I leave for Cairo very early in the day, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Fostat until the afternoon. Then I am almost dying with hunger. . . I find the antechamber filled with people, both Jews and gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes-a mixed multitude who await the time of my return.

I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, go forth to my patients and entreat them to bear with me while I partake of some slight refreshment, the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours. Then I go forth to attend to my patients, and write prescriptions and directions for their various ailments. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two hours or more in the night. I converse with and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue; and when night falls I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak.

In consequence of this, no Israelite can have any private interview with me, except on the Sabbath. On that day the whole congregation, or at least the majority of the members, come to me after the morning service, when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week; we study together a little until noon, when they depart. Some of them return, and read with me after the afternoon service until evening prayers. In this manner I spend that day.

from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html>

Maimonides (Moshe Ben Maimon – “Rambam”) 1135 - 1204	Cordoba (Spain)	1130	Nahmanides (Rabbi Moshe Ben Nahman – “Ramban”) 1194 - 1270
	Fozat, Egypt	1140	
		1150	
	Fozat, Egypt	1160	
		1170	
	Fozat, Egypt	1180	
		1190	
	Gerona	1200	
		1210	
	Jerusalem	1220	
1230			
Jerusalem	1240		
	1250		
Jerusalem	1260		
	1270		

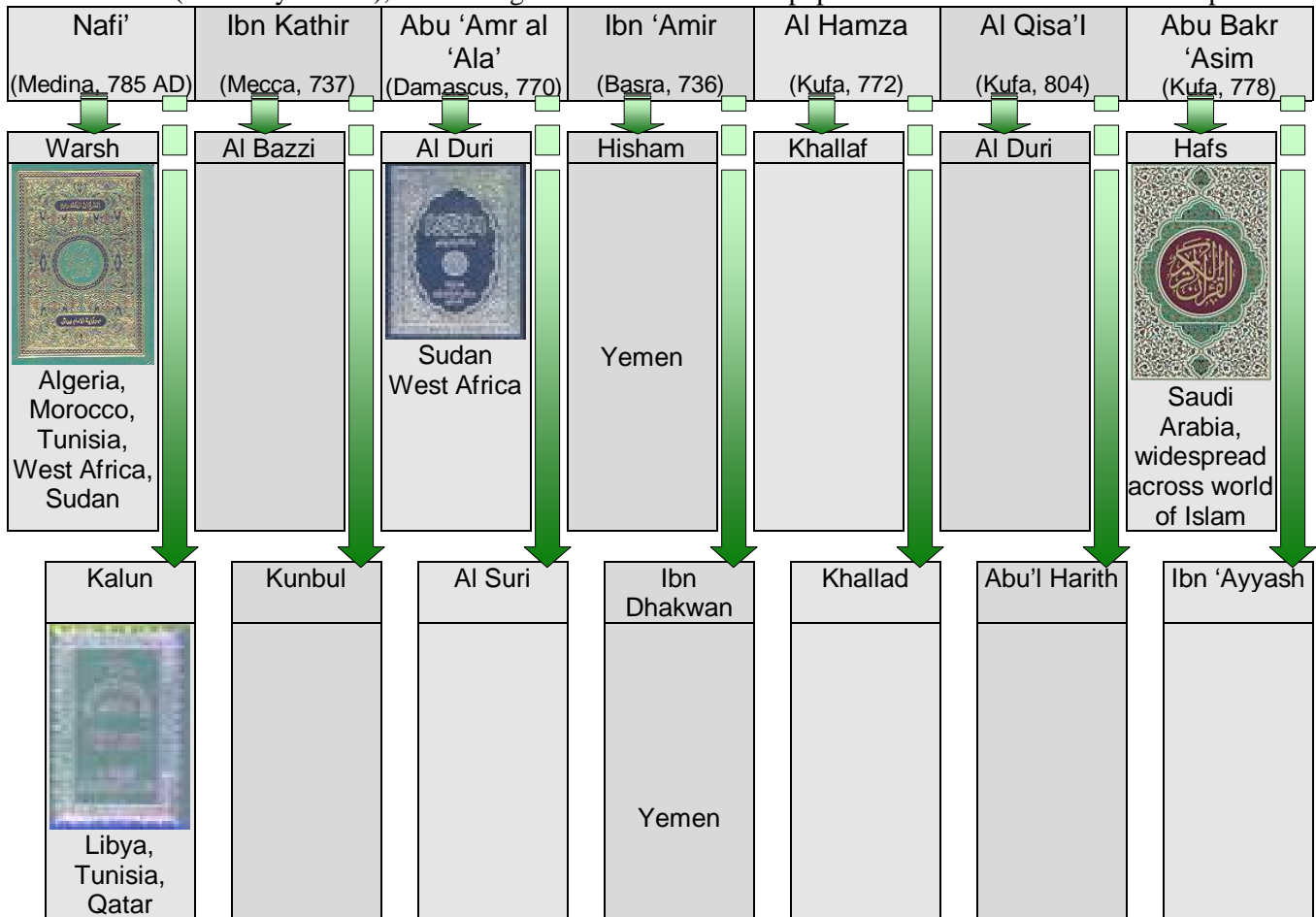
Koran Versions

(In e-NEWS 39 & 40 some aspects of the origin of the Koran were covered, and the reader may wish to review these.)

It is often stated by Muslim apologists that the Koran does not have variant readings as does the Bible, and this is then used as an argument against one and for the other. That there are alternative readings for a number of Biblical passages in some minds is a weakness. In fact, it seems that when one considers the different versions of the Koran, more than half of the verses have variant readings.

The text of the Koran has reached Muslims through the early scholars who would recite the Koran to the congregations. There are ten of these *Readers* that are recognized. This oral reading was eventually written down by the *Transmitters*, who had to be sure that the notation they made of the spoken words was accurate. In the fourth Islamic century (tenth century AD) the leaders of Islam wanted to ascertain which of the multiple extant versions was most accurate. For each of the earliest readings (between 7 and 10th & 8th century readings are generally accepted) two written versions were taken. There are more early readings that were circulating at this time, but either 7 or 10 *Readers* are commonly accepted. Each of their readings exists in two versions, one for each of the *Transmitters* selected in the 10th century.

The table below summarizes the versions of 7 most commonly accepted Readers (top row, in grey), their two Transmitters (linked by arrows), and the regions in which the most popular of these 14 versions are accepted:



As can be seen from the chart, there are about six transmissions of the Koran that are in general use in specific regions. (I do not at present have examples of the covers of the two Yemeni versions.) The version that is most commonly used is the *Hafs*. Originating in Saudi Arabia, it is distributed widely by that country, and is even given out freely in book fairs and on the streets across the Muslim world.

Next Week: Examples from the texts

