

A Critical Assessment of Michael Lecker's Interpretation of the Prophet's Migration and His Relations with the Jews

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Abstract

This article critically reassesses Michael Lecker's (2024) interpretation in *Studies on the Life of Muhammad and the Dawn of Islam* regarding the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) migration to Yathrib and his interactions with the Jewish communities of Medina. Focusing on political, social, and tribal factors, Lecker interprets the Hijrah as a response to Yathrib's internal tensions and part of political and social consolidation. He examines the Prophet's (PBUH) relations with Jewish tribes within the context of tribal affiliations, competing interests, and Medina's emerging political order. While this socio-political and historicist approach provides a framework for understanding early Arabian society, it requires further consideration of the religious motivations and theological worldview expressed in the Qur'an, which shaped the self-understanding of the early Muslim community. Drawing on an analytical and critical methodology based on explicit criteria, including historical contextualization, interpretive coherence, and integration of Qur'anic perspectives as a primary source for understanding early Islamic motivations, this study evaluates the scope and limitations of Lecker's interpretation. It argues that although Lecker's analysis highlights socio-political dimensions of the Hijrah and Muslim-Jewish relations, an approach that insufficiently considers the religious and normative dimensions of the Qur'anic worldview provides only a partial account of these formative events in early Islamic history.

Keywords: Michael Lecker, Qur'an, Hijrah, Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Interactions, Jews

Introduction

Michael Lecker, a retired professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is a prominent scholar of early Islamic history whose works focus on pre-Islamic Arabia, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) biography, and the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula. His book, *Studies on the Life of Muhammad and the Dawn of Islam*, compiles 20 articles (1994–2020) addressing topics such as early Islamic history, the Hijrah, relations with Jews and Christians, and the social and economic transformations of that era. Organized into five sections, the book examines pre-Islamic Arabia, the Prophet's migration and political interactions in Medina, his relations with Jewish tribes, Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah*, and early Islamic literature.

A central theme across Lecker's scholarship is his interpretive approach to the Prophet's (PBUH) migration to Yathrib and his interactions with the Jewish clans. Utilizing a meticulous philological and socio-political method, Lecker frequently interprets these foundational events primarily through the lens of tribal tensions, economic pressures, and political consolidation. While this socio-political and historicist framework offers a detailed view of the tribal and political landscape of Medina, it does not fully address the religious motivations and theological worldview expressed in the Qur'an, which frames the Hijrah and community-building as a divine mission aimed at establishing monotheism, implementing Islamic law, and realizing transcendent justice (e.g., Qur'an 4:100, 8:72, 3:64).

Research Gap and Methodological Justification

While numerous scholars have investigated the socio-political background of early Islam—such as Patricia Crone (1987) in the book *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, who emphasized trade structures and commercial motives, and Irfan Shahîd (1995) in *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, who focused on Greco-Roman and Byzantine political interactions—Western revisionist and historicist historiography still lacks a systematic critique that directly engages with Lecker's specific micro-historical and tribal-political methodology. Unlike Crone's macro-

economic model or Shahîd's geopolitical framework, Lecker's distinct contribution lies in his heavy reliance on genealogical and local topographical data to reconstruct Medinan society. However, the limited consideration of theological motivations as active historical factors creates a significant methodological gap.

This article aims to bridge this gap by examining Lecker's interpretations alongside the normative framework of the Qur'an. Rather than assuming the invalidity of Lecker's historical findings from the outset, this study adopts an analytical-critical methodology guided by three explicit evaluative criteria:

1. Textual-Theological Coherence: Assessing whether a predominantly material reading can adequately account for the explicit directives, motivations, and worldview presented in primary contemporaneous sources, specifically the Qur'an.
2. Contextual Completeness: Examining whether interpreting religious and ethical directives primarily through tribal and political dynamics overlooks the independent role of religious motivations in early Islamic state formation.
3. Methodological Synthesis: Investigating how a dialogue between Western historicist analysis (exemplified by Lecker) and internal Qur'anic hermeneutics can yield a more balanced and comprehensive model of early Islamic history.

By reassessing Lecker's perspective through these criteria, this study seeks to demonstrate that while material and tribal factors were undeniably active, interpreting the Prophet's migration and his interactions with the Jews solely through these dimensions results in a partial portrayal that does not fully capture the comprehensive, civilization-building horizon of the Qur'an.

1. Michael Lecker's View on the Hijrah and the Role of External Factors

In his book, Michael Lecker examines the role of the Ghassanids and the Byzantines in the developments of Medina prior to the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) migration. He analyzes this issue from the perspective of how external factors influenced the internal conditions of Medina. Drawing on historical evidence and

source analysis, he explores the familial and political ties between the Khazraj tribe and the Ghassanids, as well as the influence of Byzantine power in the region.

1.1. The Influence of the Ghassanids and Byzantium on the Developments in Yathrib

Lecker emphasizes the deep ties between the Khazraj and the Ghassanids, drawing on sources such as *Jumhurat Ansāb al-‘Arab* and *Wafā’ al-Wafā’*. He shows that certain Khazraj branches were genealogically linked to the Ghassanids and that some Khazrajis had migrated to Syria before Islam, forming alliances with them. According to Lecker, these ties may have enabled the transfer of Ghassanid political and social support to Medina. He further argues that the Khazraj’s role in the pledge of ‘Aqabah—which prepared the way for the Prophet’s (PBUH) migration—may have been facilitated by Ghassanid backing, making this relationship a factor in the Khazraj’s readiness to accept the Prophet (PBUH) as a leader (Lecker, 2024).

A central theme in Lecker’s analysis is the tribal structure and rivalries in pre-Hijrah Medina. He contends that the conflict between Aws and Khazraj destabilized the city and that the Khazraj sought alliance with the Prophet (PBUH) to strengthen their position. The pledge of ‘Aqabah and the Prophet’s migration, he argues, were part of the Khazraj’s efforts to gain political advantage.

Lecker also underscores the role of the Ghassanids—a Christian Arab state under Byzantine patronage—in mediating intertribal relations. Supported by Byzantium, this northern Arab kingdom maintained regional influence (Lecker, 2024). He further discusses Byzantine involvement, proposing that although Byzantium did not directly influence the Prophet’s migration, it indirectly shaped Medina’s political and social developments through the Ghassanids. Lecker suggests that Byzantium may have used these dynamics to weaken the influence of the Jews in Medina, whom it considered Sassanid allies.

Overall, Lecker maintains that developments in Medina before the Prophet’s migration were shaped not only by internal tribal tensions but also by external forces, such as Ghassanid and Byzantine influence. Through historical evidence of Khazraj–Ghassanid ties and regional Byzantine activity—he portrays the broader political and social complexities preceding the Hijrah (Lecker, 2024).

1.2. A Critique of Lecker's View on the Role of the Ghassanids in the Prophet's Migration to Medina

Michael Lecker's interpretation of the Ghassanids' role in the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) migration to Medina suffers from several significant weaknesses. Among them are the following:

1. **Lack of direct historical evidence:** Lecker does not rely on direct and explicit historical sources to support his claim regarding the Ghassanids' alleged influence on the pledge of 'Aqabah and the Prophet's (PBUH) migration. Sources such as *Jumhurat Ansāb al-'Arab* and *Wafā' al-Wafā* primarily refer to genealogical ties and the migration of some Khazrajis to Syria, but they make no mention of any active Ghassanid involvement in the political developments of Medina or of any direct support for the Prophet (PBUH).

For instance, in *Wafā' al-Wafā*, the relationship between the Khazraj and the Ghassanids is discussed only in a limited and indirect manner. Al-Samhūdī (2001, Vol. 1), in parts of his work, refers to the migration of certain Khazrajis to Syria and their alliance with the Ghassanids; however, these references mostly concern genealogy and tribal history. There is no mention of any active Ghassanid role in the developments of Medina or of direct support for the Prophet (PBUH).

2. **Neglect of Internal Factors in Medina:** Lecker, in his analysis, places excessive emphasis on the role of the Ghassanids while neglecting the internal factors within Medina. The long-standing conflict between the Aws and the Khazraj, the Quraysh's oppression of the Muslims in Mecca, and the Prophet's (PBUH) promises to the *Anṣār* regarding the establishment of unity and peace in Medina were among the main factors that paved the way for the pledge of 'Aqabah and the Prophet's migration.

Additionally, one of the most important foundations for the Prophet's (PBUH) migration to Medina was the preaching and cultural groundwork laid before the Hijrah. Prior to his departure, the Prophet (PBUH) sent preachers such as Muṣ'ab ibn 'Umayr to Medina to convey the message of Islam (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, 1992, Vol. 4; Ibn al-Jawzī, 1992, Vol. 3; Ibn Hishām, n.d., Vol. 1; Ibn Sa'd, 1990, Vol. 3), preparing people to receive him. These preachers, through their dedicated efforts,

laid the necessary social and political groundwork for the welcoming of the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions.

Therefore, the role of the preachers and their missionary activities prior to the Hijrah was far more significant and influential than any potential external support—such as that of the Ghassanids. These efforts not only led to the spread of Islam in Medina but also provided a suitable foundation for the Prophet's migration and the establishment of the Islamic state.

3. **Weakness in the Analysis of Political Relations:** Michael Lecker assumes that the genealogical ties and the migration of some Khazrajis to Syria automatically resulted in political and social support from the Ghassanids for the Khazraj in Medina. However, this hypothesis overlooks the complexities of political relations during that era. The Ghassanids, as a Christian tribe under the patronage of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, may not have had any interest in directly intervening in the internal affairs of Medina, which was under the influence of Arab tribal dynamics.
4. **Disregard for Contradictory Sources:** In his analysis, Lecker relies on sources that affirm the Khazraj's connections with the Ghassanids, while overlooking sources that emphasize internal and ideological factors—such as the role of key figures and tribal leaders in the pledge of 'Aqabah. These leaders, driven by sincere faith and conviction, played a pivotal role in embracing Islam and supporting the Prophet (PBUH) (Bayhaqī, 1985, Vol. 3; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, 1995, Vol. 1; Ṭabarī, 1967, Vol. 2). After the Hijrah, these same leaders were instrumental in strengthening the foundations of the Islamic state, defending Medina against external threats, and garnering public support. Their strong faith and loyalty to Islam deeply influenced many of the people in Medina and contributed to their conversion to Islam.

Therefore, the internal and ideological motivations of the Khazraj—particularly the role of tribal leaders—were far more significant than any external support, such as their connection with the Ghassanids. Moreover, the tribal system itself helped the Prophet (PBUH) to rapidly establish a strong social and political base in Medina.

5. **Weakness in the Analysis of the Religious Context:** Lecker fails to consider the religious differences between the Ghassanids (Christians) and the Khazraj

(who later became Muslims). As a Christian tribe, the Ghassanids may not have been inclined to support a nascent Islamic movement.

Overall, Michael Lecker's analysis in his book seeks to diminish the divine and spiritual dimension of the Prophet's (PBUH) migration and to reinterpret it as a purely political and social event. By focusing on the pledge of 'Aqabah and the interactions between the *Anṣār* and the Quraysh, he presents the Hijrah as the outcome of political negotiations and compromises among social actors, avoiding any portrayal of it as a divinely guided movement for the establishment of an Islamic community and the realization of justice.

Lecker, by highlighting the gaps and contradictions in historical narratives, attempts to question the credibility of Islamic sources, thereby downplaying the divine narrative of the Hijrah. Moreover, by referring to the role of the *Anṣār* and suggesting possible agreements with the Quraysh, he reduces the Hijrah to a tactical response to political conditions, rather than a predetermined plan carried out under divine guidance.

In sum, this part of Lecker's analysis is centered on offering a human-centered and political interpretation of the Hijrah, aiming to emphasize human factors while marginalizing the divine and spiritual dimensions of this event (Lecker, 2024).

1.3. Lecker's Account of the Migration of 'Utbah ibn Abī Waqqāṣ and the Historical Inconsistencies

Michael Lecker examines the migration of 'Utbah ibn Abī Waqqāṣ to Medina as an example of pre-Hijrah historical precedent for migration prior to the Prophet's (PBUH) own migration. He uses conflicting historical reports in an attempt to analyze the political and social factors in Mecca and Medina that may have influenced such movements.

In pages 67 to 71 of his book, Lecker discusses the details of the episode involving the migration of 'Utbah, a member of the Banū Zuhrah and the brother of Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ. According to Lecker, this migration—which he dates to several years before the Prophet's Hijrah—occurred as a result of 'Utbah fleeing Mecca after committing a murder and attempting to escape the consequences, such

as tribal retaliation or punishment. In order to protect himself, ‘Utbah sought refuge in Medina.

Lecker, drawing on sources such as al-Wāqidī, Ibn Sa’d, and al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār, presents three primary narratives concerning the migration of ‘Utbah and analyzes their inconsistencies. Each account reflects a different aspect of the event:

a) Al-Wāqidī’s Report: According to al-Wāqidī, ‘Utbah migrated to Medina after committing a murder in Mecca and in response to social pressures and threats. He was received and protected by a group from the *Anṣār* and settled in the area of Banū ‘Amr ibn ‘Awf.

b) Ibn Sa’d’s Report: In his work *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, Ibn Sa’d states that ‘Utbah’s migration was driven by the tribal structure of Meccan society and the pressures resulting from social relations. He emphasizes that this migration should be seen as part of the broader social dynamics of the Quraysh.

c) Zubayr ibn Bakkār’s Report: Zubayr ibn Bakkār narrates that ‘Utbah arrived in Medina on his way to Syria. Upon encountering the conflict between the Aws and Khazraj during the Battle of Bu‘āth, he decided to join the war in support of the Aws. He then remained in Medina.

In any case, from Lecker’s perspective, the story of ‘Utbah reflects the interaction between individual migration and social factors such as tribal pressure. Michael Lecker interprets these discrepancies not as flaws in the sources, but rather as tools to better understand the historical and social context of the time. He demonstrates how such conflicting reports illuminate the complexities of Islamic historiography and the role of tribal dynamics (Lecker, 2024).

1.4. A Critique of Michael Lecker’s View on ‘Utbah ibn Abī Waqqāṣ as an Opponent of the Prophet (PBUH)

‘Utbah ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, the brother of Sa’d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, was one of the most prominent opponents of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He played a significant role in the Battle of Uḥud, during which he injured the Prophet by striking him with a stone, breaking his tooth and wounding his lip. Historical accounts indicate that

‘Utbah remained a supporter of the polytheists throughout his life and never supported the Prophet (PBUH).

There is some disagreement among historical sources regarding whether ‘Utbah converted to Islam or remained a disbeliever. However, stronger evidence and more reliable reports support the view that he remained a disbeliever:

a) The View of Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī: Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, one of the foremost scholars of ḥadīth, clearly states that there is no evidence that ‘Utbah ever embraced Islam. He emphasizes that reliable indications point to ‘Utbah dying as a disbeliever (Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 1995, Vol. 5).

b) The Prophet’s Invocation against ‘Utbah: According to several reports, after ‘Utbah injured the Prophet (PBUH) during the Battle of Uhūd, the Prophet invoked God against him, praying that ‘Utbah would die in disbelief before a year had passed. Historical sources report that this invocation was answered, and ‘Utbah died before the year was completed (Ibn al-Athīr, 1989, Vol. 3; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, 1995, Vol. 5).

c) The Report of Ḥāṭib ibn Abī Balta‘ah: Ḥāṭib ibn Abī Balta‘ah reports that ‘Utbah was killed after his aggression against the Prophet (PBUH), and that this occurred before he ever embraced Islam. This narration, recorded in *al-Mustadrak*, affirms that ‘Utbah died as a disbeliever (al-Ḥākim, 1990, Vol. 3).

Nevertheless, Michael Lecker, in his analysis, presents ‘Utbah ibn Abī Waqqāṣ as an example of early migrants to Medina prior to the Prophet’s (PBUH) Hijrah. He interprets this case within the broader context of the social and tribal dynamics of the time, attempting to show that migration to Medina had already occurred among certain individuals of the Quraysh before the Prophet’s own migration. However, Lecker:

- Avoids addressing ‘Utbah’s opposition and hostility toward the Prophet (PBUH).
- Ignores explicit and conclusive evidence regarding ‘Utbah’s death as a disbeliever.
- Relies on narratives that implicitly portray ‘Utbah as having a noteworthy social and political role.

1.5. The Fundamental Difference Between the Purpose of the Hijrah in Michael Lecker's View and the Qur'anic Perspective

According to the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) migration (Hijrah) was a divinely ordained mission with objectives far beyond managing the local crises of Yathrib. In contrast to Michael Lecker's analysis—which frames the Hijrah as merely a political and social maneuver aimed at resolving tribal conflicts between the Aws and Khazraj and capitalizing on external influences such as the Ghassanids and Byzantium—the Qur'an emphasizes the spiritual and monotheistic purposes of this pivotal event.

In the Qur'anic perspective, the Hijrah is presented as part of *jihād fī sabīl Allāh* (struggle in the path of God), whose primary aim is liberation from the domination of *tāghūt* (false powers) and the realization of sincere servitude to God. In Mecca, Muslims were subjected to intense persecution by the Quraysh and were unable to implement Islamic laws. Migration to Yathrib thus became a means of rejecting non-divine authority and establishing a monotheistic society.

Qur'anic verses such as those in surahs an-Nahl (Qur'an 16:110) and al-Anfāl (Qur'an 8:26) highlight the connection between persecution, migration, divine support, and the establishment of a believing community. They portray the Hijrah not merely as a physical movement but as a transformative step from oppression and vulnerability toward faith-based solidarity and divine empowerment. As stated in surah an-Nahl (Qur'an 16:110):

(ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا فُتِنُوا أَنْ جَاهِدُوا وَصَبَرُوا إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنْ بَعْدِهَا لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ)

“Then, indeed your Lord, for those who emigrated after they had been persecuted, then struggled and remained patient—indeed, your Lord after that is Forgiving and Merciful.”

Similarly, surah al-Anfāl (8:26) describes the condition of the early Muslims before migration, emphasizing their state of weakness and fear, followed by divine protection and support:

(وَادْكُرُوا إِذْ أَنْتُمْ قَلِيلٌ مُسْتَضْعَفُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ تَخَافُونَ أَنْ يَتَخَطَّفَكُمُ النَّاسُ فَآوَاكُمْ وَأَيَّدَكُمْ بِنَصْرِهِ وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ)

“And remember when you were few and oppressed in the land, fearing that people might seize you, then He sheltered you, strengthened you with His support, and provided you with good things so that you might be grateful.”

The Qur'an also presents the Hijrah as a civilizational movement—one whose goal was not merely to bring stability to Yathrib but to establish the Islamic *ummah* and offer a universal model of a society based on monotheism and justice. Under divine guidance and through the drafting of the Constitution of Medina, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) created a political and social structure grounded in divine law (*Sharī'ah*). This global mission elevated the Prophet beyond the role of a mere political leader; his aim was not simply to resolve tribal disputes but to spread the message of *tawhīd* and establish a unified Islamic community.

From a Qur'anic perspective, the Hijrah was not merely a physical relocation or a response to immediate social pressures; rather, it represented a broader process of establishing a believing community based on faith, mutual support, and divine guidance. The Qur'an refers to migration as a movement undertaken in the path of God and associated with new opportunities and expanded possibilities for believers. As stated in surah an-Nisā' (4:100):

(وَمَنْ يُهَاجِرْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ يَجِدْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُرَاعِمًا كَثِيرًا وَسَعَةً وَمَنْ يَخْرُجْ مِنْ بَيْتِهِ مُهَاجِرًا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ثُمَّ يُدْرِكْهُ الْمَوْتُ فَقَدْ وَقَعَ أَجْرُهُ عَلَى اللَّهِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا)

“And whoever emigrates for the cause of Allah will find on the earth many [alternative] locations and abundance. And whoever leaves his home as an emigrant toward Allah and His Messenger and then death overtakes him—his reward has already become incumbent upon Allah. And Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful.”

Furthermore, surah al-Anfāl (8:72–75) highlights the formation of a new social bond among the believers through the relationship between the Muhājirūn (emigrants) and the Anṣār (supporters), presenting migration, faith, and mutual assistance as foundations for the emerging Muslim community:

(إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَهَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا بِأَمْوَالِهِمْ وَأَنْفُسِهِمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَالَّذِينَ آوَوْا وَنَصَرُوا أُولَئِكَ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ...)

“Indeed, those who believed and emigrated and strove with their wealth and their lives in the cause of Allah, and those who gave shelter and aided—those are allies of one another...”

In addition, surah al-Hajj (22:41) describes the responsibilities of those who are granted authority on earth, emphasizing the establishment of religious and ethical values within society:

(الَّذِينَ إِنْ مَكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَاللَّهُ عَاقِبَةُ الْأُمُورِ)
“[They are] those who, if We give them authority in the land, establish prayer and give zakāh and enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. And to Allah belongs the outcome of all matters.”

Taken together, these verses provide a Qur’anic framework in which the Hijrah is understood not only as a response to persecution but also as a transition toward the formation of a community grounded in faith, social solidarity, and divine-oriented values.

In contrast to Lecker’s view—which reduces the Hijrah to a political tool and emphasizes the influence of external actors—the Qur’an frames this migration as a divine initiative aimed at achieving spiritual and civilizational goals. The Hijrah served as a means to spread the message of *tawhīd*, realize justice, and establish a God-centered society. This Qur’anic perspective offers a comprehensive portrayal of the event, highlighting its spiritual, civilizational, and universal dimensions.

1.6. Historiographical Context: Watt, Rubin, and the Limits of Reductionist Approaches

In contrast to Michael Lecker’s micro-historical and predominantly socio-political approach, other Western scholars of early Islam have emphasized the importance of ideological, religious, and textual factors alongside social and political conditions. W. Montgomery Watt, in his seminal work, *Muhammad at Medina*, acknowledges the tribal conflicts and political circumstances of Yathrib; however, he argues that the success of the Prophet’s migration and the acceptance of his leadership cannot be explained solely through political calculations or tribal alliances. Rather, the religious authority of the Prophet and the search for a unifying framework beyond persistent tribal rivalries played a significant role in the emergence of the Medinan community (Watt, 1956).

Similarly, Rubin (1995), through his studies of early Islamic traditions and Qur’anic narratives, highlights the importance of religious concepts, salvation

paradigms, and communal identity in shaping the self-understanding of the early Muslim community. Examining key milestones such as the ‘Aqaba meetings and the foundational dynamics of the Medinan order, his analysis demonstrates that the formation of the Medinan community and its inter-communal relations should be evaluated not merely through pragmatic political or socio-tribal arrangements, but primarily through the overarching theological and prophetic worldview reflected in early Islamic texts.

Examining Lecker’s micro-analytical model in light of these broader approaches suggests that an exclusive emphasis on genealogical, tribal, and material factors may overlook other dimensions that contributed to the formation of the early Islamic community. A comprehensive historical analysis of the Hijrah therefore requires consideration of both socio-political circumstances and the religious meanings that shaped the worldview of the first Muslims.

2. Michael Lecker’s View on the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) Interactions with the Jews of Medina After the Hijrah

Michael Lecker examines the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) interactions with the Jews of Medina after the Hijrah through a critical and socio-political lens, treating this topic—long debated by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars—as one shaped by tribal affiliations, familial ties, and contextual needs. His analysis, grounded in Islamic historical reports and their contradictions, focuses on events such as Banū Qurayzah, the conquest of Khaybar, and the alleged Jewish ancestry of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq. Lecker argues that many reports emerged within Anṣārī historiography and may reflect political motivations aimed at amplifying the role of Arab tribes while reducing the status of the Jews.

Using terms such as *kā’ilah* and *jo’alah*, Lecker (2024) interprets Jewish–Arab relations as contractual arrangements centered on mutual agreements, rewards, and protection rather than evidence of Arab dominance. He further maintains—based on various sources—that Jewish communities in Medina, Fadak, and Wādī al-Qurā were autonomous groups with independent social and political authority. The economic relations between Jews and Arab tribes, he contends, were reciprocal and founded on bilateral agreements rather than on one-sided dependency.

Overall, Lecker seeks to portray the Jewish tribes of Arabia as autonomous and influential actors, calling for greater caution in evaluating traditional narratives. While his approach may prompt a reassessment of early Islamic historiography, critics argue that his overemphasis on political and tribal dimensions produces a one-sided and incomplete interpretation.

2.1. The Report of the Killing of Ibn Sunayna and the Role of Familial Narratives

In one section of his book, Michael Lecker analyzes the incident involving the killing of Ibn Sunayna, a Jewish merchant, by Muḥayyiṣa ibn Mas'ūd. He presents this event as an example of the complex interactions between Muslims and Jews in Medina. According to historical accounts, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) issued a general directive for the killing of certain Jews present in Medina. Muḥayyiṣa carried out this order by killing Ibn Sunayna.

Following the incident, Ḥuwayyiṣa, Muḥayyiṣa's brother—who had not yet embraced Islam—criticized his brother's action. Muḥayyiṣa responded by saying that had the Prophet ordered him to kill even Ḥuwayyiṣa himself, he would have obeyed. This response had a profound effect on Ḥuwayyiṣa and ultimately led him to convert to Islam (Lecker, 2024).

Lecker (2024) analyzes this incident within the framework of familial narrative construction, emphasizing that such accounts often involve the magnification of certain individuals' roles, the preservation of family honor, and tribal motivations. He also draws attention to the contradictions found in the various reports of this event, interpreting them as signs of political and social agendas shaping the formation of historical narratives.

The killing of Ibn Sunayna is examined as a minor yet symbolic event in the broader context of Muslim-Jewish interactions in Medina. This narrative illustrates how personal decisions and actions could be framed within a context of religious loyalty or allegiance to a spiritual leader. Additionally, it indirectly highlights the influence of tribal affiliations and social dynamics in the early Islamic community.

It is worth noting that the story of Ibn Sunayna's killing is found in several Sunni historical sources (al-Maqrizi, 1999, Vol. 1; al-Tabari, 1967, Vol. 2; al-Waqidi, 1989, Vol. 1; Ibn al-Athir, 1989, Vol. 1, 1965, Vol. 2; Ibn Kathir, 1986, Vol. 4).

2.2. Critique of Lecker's Analysis: Overlooking the Historical Context in the Case of Ibn Sunayna

In his analysis of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) orders regarding certain Jews of Medina—particularly the directive to execute some individuals—Michael Lecker adopts an approach that overlooks the historical context and the specific circumstances of that period. His interpretation treats these events outside of their real framework, failing to account for the depth and complexity of Muslim-Jewish relations in Medina. As a result, the Prophet's (PBUH) orders are interpreted in a reductionist manner, detached from their historical and situational context.

Following the breach of the treaty by some of the Jewish tribes in Medina, the Prophet (PBUH), in response to their acts of treachery and the emerging security threats, issued an order for the execution of certain Jewish men. This directive—given after the assassination of Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf and in reaction to the hostile actions and betrayals of specific Jewish elements—was carried out by Muḥayyiṣa ibn Mas'ūd, resulting in the killing of Ibn Sunayna, a Jewish merchant.

After the assassination of Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, the Prophet (PBUH) ordered: "Whoever you find among the men of the Jews—kill him" (*man ṣafirtum bihi min rijāl al-Yahūd faqtulūh*) (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, 1992, Vol. 4, p. 1463; Ibn Kathīr, 1986, Vol. 4, p. 8; al-Maqrīzī, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 126; Ibn Sa'd, 1990, Vol. 2, pp. 24–25). This order was issued in response to the acts of treachery and hostility by some of the Jews of Medina, especially Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf.

Following this event, the Jews of Medina became deeply fearful, and many of their leaders went into hiding out of fear for their lives (al-Maqrīzī, 1999, Vol. 1; al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, 1993, Vol. 6; al-Wāqidī, 1989, Vol. 1).

Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, one of the Jewish leaders of Medina, incited the Quraysh and insulted the Prophet (PBUH) after the Battle of Badr, thereby threatening the security of the nascent Islamic community. His assassination, along with the Prophet's subsequent orders, were defensive measures intended to counter acts of treachery

and preserve the security of the emerging Muslim society (al-Maqrīzī, 1999, Vol. 12; al-Wāqidī, 1989, Vol. 1).

After the assassination of Ka‘b ibn al-Ashraf, Ibn Sunayna, a Jewish merchant, was also killed by Muḥayyiṣa ibn Mas‘ūd. This incident reflects the Muslims’ decisive stance against betrayal and their efforts to establish security in Medina.

Following the killing of Ibn Sunayna, the Jews of Medina came to the Prophet (PBUH) and requested a new treaty. The Prophet told them that had Ibn Sunayna acted like others and refrained from hostility toward Muslims, he would not have been killed. However, due to his enmity and harm toward the Muslims, he deserved death. The Prophet (PBUH) then concluded a new pledge with the Jews and warned them that anyone who behaved like Ka‘b ibn al-Ashraf and Ibn Sunayna would face the same fate (al-Maqrīzī, 1999, Vol. 1).

In his analysis of this event, Michael Lecker examines the Prophet’s (PBUH) orders outside the historical framework and the specific circumstances of the time. He interprets these commands as though the Prophet acted without just cause—motivated solely by political or tribal considerations. This approach suffers from several major shortcomings:

- **Lecker fails to consider the particular conditions** under which these directives were issued. The treachery and hostility of certain Jewish individuals—such as Ka‘b ibn al-Ashraf—posed a serious threat to the security of the Muslim community. The Prophet’s (PBUH) orders were issued as a defensive response to these threats.
- **Lecker reduces the Prophet’s directives to merely political or tribal actions**, whereas in reality, they were part of a broader divine mission aimed at protecting the emerging Islamic society.
- **Lecker disregards the spiritual and divine dimensions** of these commands. As the Messenger of God, the Prophet (PBUH) was entrusted with the mission of establishing a society based on justice and monotheism. These actions were consistent with that mission and constituted not simply political maneuvers, but measures grounded in the imperative to protect the community and realize the aims of the prophetic message. The Prophet’s (PBUH) orders regarding the execution of certain Jews in Medina were issued under specific

circumstances and in response to acts of treachery and serious threats against the Islamic community. This incident highlights the importance of loyalty to covenants and the consequences of violating them within the Islamic framework.

Michael Lecker's analysis is incomplete and inaccurate due to his neglect of the historical context and his reductionist approach. By failing to consider the specific conditions and divine objectives behind these directives, Lecker presents a distorted understanding of the events. A proper understanding requires situating these actions within their historical framework and acknowledging their defensive and divine nature.

Lecker interprets the Prophet's (PBUH) commands as merely political or tribal actions, detached from their real context. He overlooks the betrayals and enmity of certain Jewish figures, and the exceptional circumstances in which the Prophet (PBUH), as a divinely guided leader, issued these orders as defensive measures.

The Prophet's (PBUH) orders were not arbitrary or politically motivated decrees, but rather responses to the violations of established treaties and threats to the security of the nascent Muslim society. Recognizing this context—along with the divine mission of the Prophet (PBUH) to establish justice and monotheism—offers a more accurate and nuanced understanding of these events. They cannot be properly interpreted apart from their historical and theological setting.

2.3. Analysis of Historical Narratives Concerning Banū Qurayzah and the Impact of Intertribal Marriages

Lecker (2024) examines the fate of Banū Qurayzah after their siege by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), focusing particularly on two pre-Islamic marriages between the Qurayshi sisters Sukhayla and 'Ātika and two brothers from Banū Qurayzah. Drawing on sources such as *al-Mathālib* by Ibn al-Kalbī, he argues that these intertribal marriages likely influenced the Prophet's (PBUH) decision to spare the women and their families, demonstrating the significant role of kinship ties in determining individual and tribal outcomes.

Lecker highlights that these familial connections illustrate the broader importance of intertribal marriages in early Islamic society and how such

relationships shaped social relations and even the destinies of tribes. He also notes contradictions in the historical narratives concerning Banū Qurayṣah—particularly in reports by al-Wāqidī and al-Zuhrī—which he attributes to the political and social contexts in which the accounts were produced. Some narrations, he suggests, may have been crafted to soften portrayals of violence or emphasize the involvement of the Prophet’s (PBUH) relatives.

Overall, Lecker seeks to provide a nuanced reconstruction of the Banū Qurayṣah episode by examining historical reports alongside their social and political contexts, arguing that many narratives were shaped by non-religious factors—including tribal and social considerations—which must be taken into account for an accurate reading.

2.4. A Critique of Michael Lecker’s Approach to Representing the Prophet’s (PBUH) Interactions with Banū Qurayṣah

In examining the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) interactions with Banū Qurayṣah, Michael Lecker highlights intertribal marriages and the involvement of the Prophet’s (PBUH) relatives, implying that his decisions were shaped more by personal and political ties than by religious or moral principles. By selectively drawing on lesser-known sources—such as Ibn al-Kalbī—Lecker constructs an alternative narrative of early Islamic history that downplays divine guidance and ethical considerations.

Lecker’s focus on social relationships between Jews and Arabs in Medina suggests that the Prophet’s (PBUH) actions toward Banū Qurayṣah were primarily politically motivated. His reinterpretation of the role of Jewish tribes within Medinan society forms part of a broader attempt to redefine their place in early Islamic history. This approach risks portraying the Prophet’s (PBUH) decisions as products of tribal and social dynamics rather than expressions of divine principles, casting doubt on the religious legitimacy of his actions and amplifying the political significance of Jewish groups in Medina.

2.5. The Background of Yasār and Cultural Influences on the Historiography of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq

In another part of his analysis, Michael Lecker discusses the Jewish background of *Yasār*, the grandfather of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq—the prominent biographer of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Lecker emphasizes that *Yasār* may have been a descendant of Jews. According to historical accounts, *Yasār* was captured during the Battle of ‘Ayn al-Tamr. After being brought to Medina, he was entrusted to the family of Qays ibn Makhramah from the Banū al-Muṭṭalib clan. He was later freed after converting to Islam. Lecker argues that this background could suggest a possible influence of Jewish culture on subsequent generations, including Ibn Ishāq himself. Lecker also provides additional evidence indicating that *Yasār* and other captives from ‘Ayn al-Tamr were held in a place that may have been a synagogue. According to these reports, they were engaged in reading Jewish or Christian scriptures. From Lecker’s perspective, this is further evidence of interreligious cultural interaction, which he sees as having influenced the development of Islamic historiography.

Lecker highlights this background as a significant factor in shaping the historical perspectives and narratives of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq. He argues that *Yasār*’s possible Jewish ancestry may have led to the incorporation of specific viewpoints within Islamic historiography and, at the same time, reflects the broader interreligious and intercultural influences present in early Islam. According to Lecker, these cultural interactions may have shaped the way Ibn Ishāq presented historical narratives and influenced his perspective on key events.

By focusing on this lineage, Lecker aims to show that Ibn Ishāq’s narratives are not merely reflections of Islamic culture, but rather products of a broader network of intercultural and interreligious exchanges. While this interpretation may shed new light on certain aspects of early Islamic history, it also selectively targets specific features of Islamic historical tradition, potentially challenging the religious and cultural authenticity of some of its foundational narratives.

2.6. A Critique of Michael Lecker’s View on *Yasār*’s Background and Its Influence on Ibn Ishāq’s Narratives

Michael Lecker, by emphasizing the Jewish background of *Yasār*, the grandfather of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, attempts to reinterpret traditional Islamic narratives from a critical perspective. He argues that *Yasār*’s connection to Judaism—and his possible

role as a captive during the Battle of ‘Ayn al-Tamr—significantly influenced the formation of Ibn Ishāq’s historical accounts. This claim clearly transcends mere historical analysis and appears intended to undermine the credibility of early Islamic narratives.

By linking Yasār to a synagogue or church and stressing the potential influence of Judaism, Lecker seeks to portray Ibn Ishāq’s narratives as the product of intercultural exchanges rather than purely Islamic tradition. In doing so, he questions the authenticity and "purity" of these accounts. This approach, however, disregards broader historical and cultural contexts and tends to exaggerate the role of Jewish elements in early Islamic history, offering an alternative image of the formative period of Islam.

Such an interpretation is based on clear presuppositions, attempting to suggest that Islamic historical narratives are dependent on, or heavily influenced by, non-Islamic sources—an assumption that calls into question their independent value and originality.

Lecker, by emphasizing the Jewish background of Yasār and its connection to the narratives of Ibn Ishāq, not only seeks to undermine the credibility of these accounts but also subtly conveys the message that early Islamic historiography was more influenced by external cultural and religious traditions than commonly assumed. This viewpoint effectively calls into question the authenticity of early Islamic sources and attempts to cast doubt on their originality.

Although Lecker’s approach is outwardly framed as historical scholarship, it is grounded in ideological presuppositions. His insistence on Yasār’s alleged Jewish origins appears less aimed at clarifying the complexities of early Islamic history and more at redefining the role of Jews in that history and amplifying their influence. Rather than relying on solid and comprehensive evidence, his analysis selectively highlights certain data points that serve a particular narrative.

Furthermore, Lecker, by focusing on narrow aspects and relying on selective reports, presents a one-sided and incomplete picture of early Islamic history. His excessive emphasis on the supposed Jewish background of Yasār leads him to neglect a more holistic and balanced consideration of the broader social, cultural, and religious factors that shaped the historical record. In doing so, he forgoes a

multidimensional analysis in favor of a singular focus, which—although seemingly compelling at first glance—ultimately results in a distorted and inaccurate portrayal of Islamic history.

Lecker's presentation of these views goes beyond the bounds of objective academic inquiry and appears to pursue specific ideological aims. By focusing on the alleged Jewish background of Yasār and emphasizing the role of Jews, he effectively attempts to undermine the credibility of Islamic sources, portraying them as impure and shaped by external religious and cultural influences. This approach clearly seeks to cast doubt on the authenticity of Islamic historiography.

Lecker's methodology is not only open to scholarly critique but also carries serious consequences for a proper understanding of Islamic history. His overemphasis on a single aspect—while ignoring broader historical and cultural contexts—does not result in a clear or comprehensive picture. Rather, it generates confusion and skepticism. Instead of contributing constructively to historical scholarship, this approach functions more as a tool for advancing particular ideological views and weakening the perceived integrity of Islamic sources.

Conclusion

This study conducted a methodological and historical assessment of Michael Lecker's interpretations regarding the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) migration to Yathrib and his relations with the Jewish tribes of Medina. Rather than approaching Lecker's arguments through a merely theological response, this research examined his micro-historical and socio-political framework by applying explicit analytical criteria, including source evaluation, historical contextualization, and the consideration of religious motivations as historical factors.

The findings indicate that several aspects of Lecker's interpretation require further critical examination. In particular, his arguments concerning issues such as the role of the Ghassanids in the developments leading to the pledge of 'Aqabah and the interpretation of certain migrations as precedents for the prophetic Hijrah are challenged by limitations in the available evidence and by unresolved questions regarding the relationship between historical sources and the conclusions drawn from them. These observations suggest that some elements of Lecker's

reconstruction remain dependent on interpretive assumptions rather than direct historical evidence.

Furthermore, this study demonstrated that while Lecker's socio-political and tribal analysis contributes to a better understanding of the social environment of Medina, an approach primarily focused on political alliances, economic interests, and tribal dynamics, does not fully explain the religious motivations and normative framework that shaped the self-understanding of the early Muslim community. The Qur'an, as a central source for understanding this worldview, presents the Hijrah not only as a historical movement but also as a process connected with faith, social solidarity, and the establishment of a community based on divine guidance and ethical principles.

The contribution of this research lies in proposing a more comprehensive framework for studying early Islamic history—one that recognizes the importance of socio-political factors while also considering religious beliefs and textual sources as significant elements in historical analysis. Accordingly, the study argues that a balanced understanding of the Hijrah and the formation of the Medinan community requires an approach that avoids reducing these events either to purely political processes or to exclusively theological interpretations.

Future studies may further examine the interaction between conditions, social structures, and religious worldviews in the formation of early Islamic communities, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the historiography of early Islam.

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