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**OATHS IN MODERN SPOKEN EGYPTIAN  
JUDEO-ARABIC WITH A COMPARISON TO OATHS  
TAKEN BY CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS<sup>1</sup>**

**1. Introduction**

The aim of this study is to describe the oath formulas that have been used by the Jews in Egypt, versus the formulas used by Muslims and Christians (mostly Copts). The formulas have been collected through intensive work with informants.

Egyptian Jews speak a distinctive Arabic dialect,<sup>2</sup> differing in a number of respects from the Arabic spoken by Muslims and Christians. Until recently the Arabic spoken by the Jews of Egypt in the twentieth century was thought to have differed very little from that spoken by non-Jews. In a preliminary study of the Arabic of the Jews of Cairo, Blanc (1974: 207) was careful not to label the linguistic variety he was describing as “Jewish Cairene”. He was, however, the one who laid the foundations for a description of modern spoken Egyptian Judeo-Arabic<sup>3</sup>. Beyond his pioneering articles, though, the spoken dialect of the Jews of Egypt has received scant attention, and extremely little has been written on the basis of data collected from Jewish speakers of Egyptian Arabic. Through

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a section from my study on modern spoken Egyptian Judeo-Arabic (forthcoming); some parts of this study were published in Rosenbaum 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2008. I wish to express my gratitude to the many Jewish informants (some of whom are no longer alive) with whom I have been working intensively in the last years, to the many Christian and Muslim Egyptian informants, to Dr. Laila Nabhan and Dr. Giuseppe Cecere who helped in collecting Christian oath formulas, and to Mr. Amr Zakariyya who helped in collecting Muslim and Christian oath formulas.

<sup>2</sup> In the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are very few Jews who live in Egypt, but there are still Jews of Egyptian origin who live outside of Egypt and still speak their distinctive variety.

<sup>3</sup> See also Blanc 1981; 1985.

my continuous and intensive work with a large number of Jewish informants, it appeared that the Jews of Egypt share a variety that contains distinct common elements - in phonology, morphology, and particularly vocabulary - which are not to be found in the dialects spoken by non-Jews. That variety may thus rightly be called Egyptian Judeo-Arabic (EJA). As for phonology and morphology, the unique features of this EJA speech are constant, irrespective of the circumstances of communication. The distinctive lexical features, on the other hand, usually appear only in communications among Jews.

Most of the EJA oath formulas described below contain Hebrew lexical elements that are known to Jews only (only non-Jews who had close contact with Jews and were exposed to their variety might know some of these formulas); they are, therefore, not understood by Muslim and Christian Egyptians.

## 2. Egyptian oath formulas used by Jews

### 2.1. Taking oaths and swearing in the Jewish and Egyptian-Jewish tradition

An oath is

A solemn or formal appeal to God (or to a deity or something held in reverence or regard), in witness of the truth of a statement, or the binding character of a promise or undertaking; an act of swearing; a statement or promise corroborated by such an appeal, or the form of words in which such a statement or promise is made. (*Oxford Dictionary* 1933: vol. 7, O: 7).

Many oath words and formulas appear in the Bible, the Mishna and the Talmud.<sup>4</sup> In Jewish tradition there are cases mentioned in the Bible, and later in the Halacha, the Jewish law, in which one must take an oath; in some circumstances (as in court) it is obligatory. Apart from those cases, however, it is agreed that oaths should be avoided, and this is also the accepted belief in the popular Jewish culture. This objection among Jews to taking oaths and swearing is to a large extent influenced by the Third Commandment:

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. (*Exodus* 20: 7; repeated in *Deuteronomy* 5: 11 [King James version]).

The attitude toward making vows is similar to the attitude toward taking oaths. Although according to the Jewish law and traditions there are cases in which taking oaths and making vows are permitted, the attitude that disfavors these acts frequently appears in early Hebrew sources as well as in later commentaries of the Halacha. A famous and popular book that summarizes the Jewish law

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<sup>4</sup> For concise surveys on taking oaths, swearing and making vows in Jewish tradition, see, e.g., Ariel 1960: 411-413; Eisenstein 1917: 390-392; Greenberg et al. 1971: 1295-1302; Rubin et al. 1988: 390-397.

that dictates religious and daily behavior, the *Kitsur Shulhan Arukh*<sup>5</sup>, contains a section on vows and oaths, in which it says: “One should avoid making vows [...]. One should also avoid taking an oath [...]” (Ganzfried 1961, vol. 2: 51).

However, while in theory people regard taking oaths and swearing as an undesirable action, in practice many tend to take oaths and swear, and Egyptian Jews are no exception.

During my conversations with Egyptian Jews many of them, following the mainstream attitude in Judaism, stated that taking an oath or swearing were reprehensible habits. They also claimed that they themselves did not have the habit of swearing and refrained from taking oaths. Many said that people should not, or that it was better, not to swear, because it was prohibited by the Jewish religion; some of them referred to the Third Commandment as the source of this prohibition.

Those Egyptian Jews who claimed that they themselves refrained from taking oaths and swearing, said that only “the others”, who were considered “simple people”, “uneducated” or “lower class” used to swear. Similar claims were done by Muslims and Christians, too (see below, 3.1. and 4.1.).

However, although Egyptian Jews were generally against taking oaths and swearing, in fact it seems that these were very common and on a larger scale than they were ready to admit.

As mentioned above, the belief that taking oaths and swearing should be avoided is also expanded to making vows and is reflected in the expression *belí néder* (“without a vow”). The formula *belí néder* is said when someone makes a promise, but wants to make it clear that he or she does not take an oath to fulfill that promise. Anyone who has taken a vow but later on realizes that he cannot fulfill it, has to do *hatarát nedarím* (“annulment of vows”), arranged by a rabbi or a rabbinic court, or in the shorter form *hatará* (“annulment”), as in *ħašmil hatará*, “I shall do annulment [of the vows]”).

## 2.2. Egyptian Judeo-Arabic oath formulas

Most Egyptian Judeo-Arabic oath formulas consist of Hebrew components combined with Arabic oath particles and words. The most commonly used Arabic oath particle is *wi* (or *we*; also *wu* and *wa*: “by..., I swear by”)<sup>6</sup>. Another Arabic oath word is *wiħyāt...* (“by the life of..., I swear by the life of...”). The Hebrew oath particle *be* is similar to the Arabic oath particle *bi*; both function similarly to the oath particle *wi*, but are less common.

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<sup>5</sup> *Shulhan Arukh* (*Šulħán Ārúħ*, lit.: “The Prepared Table”), the Jewish religious code of laws compiled in the 16th century by Yoseph Karo (also: Caro), has been accepted in Judaism as the authoritative book of religious law and behavior; its abridgement (“*kitsúr*”), written by Shlomo Ganzfried (first published in 1864), became very popular and a frequently consulted source among Jews.

<sup>6</sup> In Standard Arabic the only version for this oath particle is *wa*.

In EJA the definite article *il* is also used before words of non-Arabic origin; however, in collocations of Hebrew origin the Hebrew definite article *ha* is retained, as in the oath *be'emét hatorá* (“by the truth of the Torah”; see below, 2.2.1.). In rare cases, the prefixed *ha* is perceived as part of the succeeding word and the Arabic definite article may then be attached as well. Two oath formulas that reflect this phenomenon are *wil-harambām* and *wiš-šehakkól* (see below, 2.2.3.); the latter also contains the subordinating conjunction *še* prefixed to the definite article (the Hebrew *š* is regarded in Arabic as a “sun letter” and is therefore geminated).

### 2.2.1. Swearing by the Torah and Holy Books

The most common and forceful Judeo-Arabic oaths contain words denoting the Torah: *torá* (“Torah”) and *séfer* (lit.: “book”). In Modern Hebrew the word *séfer* may refer to any printed book, and also to a Torah scroll written by hand. In Egyptian Judeo-Arabic, however, this word refers to the Torah scroll only. A very frequent oath is *be'emét hatorá* (“I swear by the truth of the Torah [that my words are true]”). The word *séfer*, in the meaning of a Torah scroll written by hand, appears in a number of oaths, in both the singular form, *wis-séfer* (“I swear by the Torah scroll”) and the plural, *wis-sefarím* (“I swear by [all] the Torah scrolls”). Another version mentions both words, *séfer* and *torá*: *wihyāt is-séfer torá* (“I swear by the Torah scroll”).

The strongest and most binding oath is *wis-séfer kannidré* (“I swear by the Torah scroll of Kol Nidrei”). *Kannidré* in EJA is a distorted version of “Kol Nidrei”, the prayer recited on the evening of the Day of Atonement (Yóm Kippúr). Most of my informants, though not all, knew that the reference was to the Torah scrolls that are taken out of the Holy Ark at the synagogue for that prayer. All of them agreed that this was a very strong oath, which bound its user to telling the truth. Another version of this oath is *wis-séfer kalnidré* (*kalnidré* instead of *kannidré*). Another reference to this day is the formula *wihyāt séfer kippúr* (“I swear by the life of the Torah scroll of the [Day of] Atonement”).

Some people also swear by the book of Psalms: *wit-tehillim* (“I swear by the book of Psalms”).

Another common oath is *wil-muṣḥāf* (“by the prayer book”). The word *muṣḥāf* (with long final vowel) refers to a prayer book, as opposed to either the word *muṣḥaf* (with short final vowel), which Muslims use to refer to a copy of the Quran, or the word *séfer*, which Jews use to refer to a scroll of the Torah written by hand on parchment. The oath formula is very common in EJA, for example: *wil-muṣḥāf ma šuftu* - “I swear by the prayer book that I have not seen him”.

### 2.2.2. Swearing by venerated religious figures

The most admired figure in the history of the Jewish people is the patriarch Moses. A common oath formula is *beMošé* (“by Moses, I swear by Moses”), or *win-nabi Mošé* (“by the prophet Moses”).

Another admired figure is Maimonides, called in Hebrew by his acronym, Rambam, for Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon (usually with the definite article: haRambam; in EJA, the Arabic definite article is added to the Hebrew one: *il-harambām*). A common oath formula is *wiḥyāt il-harambām* or *wil-harambām* (“by the life of Maimonides”). This formula may also mean: “by the Maimonides synagogue” (see below, 2.2.3.). Another way to swear by Maimonides is by using his name preceded with the title *rab* (in Standard Hebrew: *rav*, “rabbi”<sup>7</sup>): *wiḥyāt ir-rab mošé* (“by the life of Rabbi Mošē (Moses [Ben Maimon]”). From some informants I also heard the distorted version *rammošē* instead of *rab mošé*.

Several oaths mention other admired figures in Jewish history, great rabbis, or rabbis who lived in Egypt: *wiḥyāt rabbi Meír Bāṣal han-Nés* (“I swear by Rabbi Meʿīr Baṣal *han-Nés* [The Miracle Maker; lived in the second century]”); *wiḥyāt ir-rabb Ḥayīm* or *wiḥyāt ir-rabb Ḥayīm Kappūsi* (“by the life of Rabbi Ḥayīm Kappūsi [a Rabbi who had a synagogue in his name in the Jewish Quarter; d. 1631]”). Swearing by rabbis who have synagogues in their names, may also imply swearing by the name of their synagogues (see below, 2.2.3.).

### 2.2.3. Swearing by objects

In Jewish tradition there is a practice of taking an oath while holding or touching a holy object, such as a printed copy of the Torah. This is called in Hebrew *nišbáʕ bineqitát ḥéfets* (“take an oath while holding an object”). This has been a common practice among Egyptian Jews, too, and there are a number of oaths that mention objects of this sort. However, such an oath may be taken with reference to a certain object which is in the vicinity of the person taking the oath without touching it or even without seeing it. Examples of such oaths include the following:

*wit-tefillím* (“by the phylacteries”); phylacteries are two small black leather cubes that contain a piece of parchment inscribed with biblical verses and are worn by men during the morning prayers. These objects play an important role in the life of religious Jews or Jews who keep the traditions of prayers.

A common oath formula is *wil-muṣḥāf* (“by the prayer book”; see above, 2.2.1.). Another example is *wiḥyāt iš-šhakkól* (“I swear by the drink”). This last oath has its origin in the Hebrew blessing *šhakkól niḥyá bidvaró*, (“[Blessed art Thou, Lord, king of the universe], by whose word everything was created”) recited before imbibing a drink. This is mostly said when holding a drink, or

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<sup>7</sup> The phoneme /b/, which in Hebrew is pronounced either as a stop [b] or as a fricative [v], is always pronounced b (as a voiced bilabial stop) in EJA.

when there is a drink in the vicinity of the person who is pronouncing the oath. Jews also swear by names of synagogues: *wit-turkiyya* (“by the Turkish synagogue” [a synagogue of Jewish immigrants from Turkey, in the Jewish quarter]); *wil-harambām* (“by the Maimonides synagogue” [also: “by Maimonides”; see above, 2.2.2.]); *wiḥyāt ir-rabb Ḥayīm Kappūsi* (“by the life of the synagogue of Rabbi Ḥayīm Kappūsi” [also: “by the life of Rabbi Ḥayīm Kappūsi”]).

#### 2.2.4. Common non-Jewish oaths used by the Jews

In addition to the distinctly Judeo-Arabic oath formulas, Jews also swear by using common oaths in Egyptian Arabic that are not of an explicitly Islamic nature and thus may be easily adopted by Jews. Such oaths are *wirabbina* (“By our Lord”), *wallāhi* (“by God”), *win-niʿma* (“by [God’s] grace”), *wiraḥmit ʔabūya* (“by the soul of my father”), etc. (on these oaths see below, 4.2.).

### 3. Egyptian oath formulas used by Christians

#### 3.1. Taking oaths and swearing in the Egyptian-Christian tradition

Egyptian Christians (most of whom are Copts) believe that taking oaths and swearing are forbidden by their religion. This belief is based on the following verses in Matthew:

“But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth [...]. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head [...]. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay [...]. (*Matthew 5: 34-37* [King James version]).

This is the reason why many Egyptian Christians, instead of swearing when trying to convince that they speak the truth, tend to use the phrases *šaddaʔni* (“believe me”), *bil-ʔamāna* (“honestly”) and *biʔamānit rabbina* (“by God’s trust”). These phrases are typical to Christians, and Muslims have told me that they identify people who use them as Christians.

However, although Christians claim that taking oaths and swearing are forbidden and therefore they avoid them, they do have their own formulas that they use. Like the Jews, most of them claim that such oaths are said by the less educated or the lower classes.

As is the case in EJA, in which the oath formulas are connected to the Jewish religion and traditions, the Christian oath formulas are likewise connected to the Christian religion and traditions. The linguistic background of using oath formulas among the Christians, however, is different. Egyptian Christians speak Egyptian Arabic; the Coptic language, unlike Hebrew among the Egyptian Jews, is no longer used for any daily purpose (except for some words which have been

adopted by Egyptian Arabic and became part of its vocabulary, shared by both Christians and Muslims), and is no longer known to the Coptic community. Thus, the Christian formulas can be understood by Muslims but are not known to most of them, not because of a language barrier, but rather because the Christians use these formulas between themselves and only rarely when speaking with Muslims (similarly to the Jewish usage of oath formulas; in the latter case, however, oath formulas could not be understood by most Muslims and Christians because they are based on Hebrew components). It should be noted, however, that the word *māri* (“saint”, usually written *مار* but pronounced *māri*), used in the Coptic language (derived from Syriac), is known to most of the Egyptian Muslims.

The formulas below have been collected from Christians who belong to different sects of the Christians in Egypt (mostly Copts), and also from Muslims who heard Christians uttering them.

### **3.2. Egyptian-Christian oath formulas**

#### **3.2.1. “Bypassing” taking oaths**

The following expressions (mentioned above, 3.1.), said in order to avoid swearing, are very common among Christians: *šaddaʔni* (“believe me”); *bi-l-ʔamāna* (“honestly”); *wiʔamānit rabbina* (“by God’s trust”).

#### **3.2.2. Swearing by God**

*Wallāhi -l-ʕaʕīm it-talāta* (“[I swear] by the Great God three times”). This formula, similar to a formula said by the Muslims (see below, 4.2.1.), is understood by some Egyptians (mostly Muslims) as referring to the Holy Trinity (“by the Great God The Trinity”); most Christians, however, do not accept this interpretation.

#### **3.2.3. Swearing by Christ**

*wiḥyāt il-masīḥ* (“by the life of Christ”); *wil-masīḥ il-ḥayy* (“by the living Christ”); *wigasad il-masīḥ* (“by the body of Christ”); another variation of this oath is less frequent: *wigasad il-masīḥ widammu* (“by the body of Christ and his blood”).

#### **3.2.4. Swearing by the Virgin Mary**

*wil-ʕadra* (“by the Virgin [Mary]”); a variation that contains the name Mary is rare, and many Christians claim that this formula does not exist: *wil-ʕadra Maryam* (“by the Virgin Mary”); *wiḥyāt is-sitt il-ʕadra* (“by the life of the Lady Virgin”). It should be noted that when Muslims refer to Mary they usually say *sittina Maryam* (“Our Lady Maryam”; the name Maryam, however, is not used in oath formulas said by Muslims); *wiʔumm il-muḥalliṣ* (“by the Savior’s

mother”), or *wiḥyāt ʔumm il-muḥalliṣ* (“by the life of the savior’s mother”). Mary is also called *Umm al-Nūr* (lit.: “Mother of light; she who has the light”), and Christians also swear by this nickname: *wuUmm in-Nūr* (“by Umm in-Nūr”), or *wiḥyāt Umm in-Nūr* (“by the life of Umm al-Nūr”).

### 3.2.5. Swearing by Angels

*wiḥyāt il-malāk Miḥaʔil* (“by the life of the angel Michael”); *wiḥyāt il-malāk iṭ-ṭāhir* (“by the life of the pure angel”; possibly the angel Michael is generally the intended referent here).

### 3.2.6. Swearing by holy objects or symbols

*wil-ʔingīl* (“by the New Testament”); *wiṣ-ṣalīb* (“by the cross”; mostly used in Upper Egypt).

### 3.2.7. Swearing by fasting days

The Copts in Egypt have many days of fasting, and this is reflected in some oath formulas which may be said during (but not only) the days of fasting: *wiḥyāt il-ʔayyām iṭ-ṭahra* (“by the pure days [of fasting]”); *biḥaʔʔ iṣ-ṣiyām* (“by the truth of fasting”); *wiṣiyāmi* (“by my fasting”).

### 3.2.8. Swearing by venerated religious figures

*wimāri Girgis* (“by Saint George”) or *wiḥyāt il-māri Girgis* (“by the life of Saint George”); *wiḥyāt il-bāba Korollos* (“by the life of patriarch Cyril”). Cyril of Alexandria is a famous saint admired by the Copts; *wil-bāba Šnūda* (“by the patriarch Šenūda”); although many Copts denied the possibility of swearing by a living person, some others admitted that this oath formula did exist.<sup>8</sup> In addition Copts, especially in the villages, may swear by a saint admired in a certain area.

### 3.2.9. Common non-Christian oaths used by the Christians

In addition to their distinct oath formulas Christians, like Jews, also swear by using common oaths of Egyptian Arabic that are not of an explicitly Islamic nature. Thus, Christians, like Jews and Muslims, may use oath formulas such as *wirabbina* (“By our Lord”), *wallāhi* (“by God”) or *win-niṣma* (“by [God’s] grace”), and any common oath that is not of a distinctly Islamic nature; on these oaths see above, 2.2.4. and below, 4.2.).

## 3.3. Christian oath formulas in Egyptian literature

Unlike the frequent use of Muslim oath formulas in literature (see below,

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Šenūda III, the head of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox church, died in March 2012, after those informants have been interviewed.



4.3.), the use of Christian oath formulas in literature is scarce. The following is an example of the use of a Muslim oath formula versus a Christian one; the little Muslim girl is swearing by the formula *win-nabi* (“by the Prophet”; see below, 4.2.5.), while the Christian man is swearing by the formula *wil-ṣadra* (“by the Virgin”). It is taken from *Bāb muḡlaq* (“Locked Door”), a short story about a Christian couple who took in the little daughter of their building’s *bawwāb* (“doorkeeper”) who passed away, but had to send her out of their home due to the pressure of their Muslim neighbors who suspected that they wanted to convert the girl to Christianity. At the end of the story, the narrator creates the feeling of an ongoing dialogue by just repeating the two different oath formulas:

البنيت خارج الشقة، ملتصقة بالباب المغلق، تخمشه كالقطة وتبكي: أنا زعلتك في حاجة؟  
والنبي دخلني. دخلني والنبي يا عم موريس. تفر دموع موريس وراء الباب المغلق يقول:  
ما أقدرش يا بنتي.. والعدرا ما أقدر.  
والنبي، والعدرا، والنبي. والباب مغلق وخلف كل ناحية شخص وحيد بحاجة للآخر.

The girl is out of the apartment, clinging to the shut door, scratching it like a cat and crying: Have I made you angry with anything? By the Prophet, let me in. Let me in, by the Prophet, “uncle” Moris. Moris’ tears are flowing behind the locked door while saying: I can’t, my girl, by the Virgin I can’t.

By the Prophet, by the Virgin, by the Prophet. And the door is locked and behind each side there is a lonely person in need of the other. (Al-Hamīsi 2010: 44).

## 4. Egyptian oath formulas used by Muslims

### 4.1. Taking oaths and swearing in the Muslim and Egyptian-Muslim tradition

According to Islam, as revealed by traditions from the mouth of Prophet Muḡammad (*ḡadī*), a Muslim is allowed to swear by God only. Swearing by other names or objects is forbidden, and is regarded as *ṣirk* (idolatry, giving associates to God). Muslims, like Jews and Christians, tend to claim that it is better not to swear, but in practice they do swear, not by God only but by other names and objects, too. There is a large repertory of oath formulas in Egyptian Arabic which is used in daily speech and also represented in written literature. Egyptian Muslims use oaths frequently, and as is usual in other Muslim societies, the most common oath formulas mention God, the Prophet Muḡammad, the religion of Islam and the Quran. They also frequently swear by life: The life of the Prophet, the life of the speaker or those dear to him - people, eyes, etc.<sup>9</sup> While

<sup>9</sup> See also Amīn 1999: 385-386; Lane 2003: 114, 277; 304-305.

in Standard Arabic the particle indicating an oath is *wa*, in Egyptian Arabic this particle may be articulated as *wi*, *wa* and *wu* (see above, 2.2.). The most common oaths involving God use the words *Allāh* (“God”) and *rabbīna* (“our Lord”); swearing by the Prophet Muḥammad is usually done by mentioning his title, *in-nabī* (“the Prophet”) or his epithet, *il-muṣṭafa* (“the Chosen One”). The most common formulas are described below; there are, however, quite a few other variations to these formulas.

## 4.2. Egyptian Muslim oath formulas

### 4.2.1. Swearing by God

*wallāhi* (“by God”). This formula, sometimes also pronounced *walla*, is one of the most common oath formulas; very often it is also used automatically just to emphasize a phrase; at times it is said in the interrogative: *wallāhi?* (“really?”); *wallāhi -l-ṣaḏīm* (“by the Great God”); *wallāhi -l-ṣaḏīm talāta* (“[I swear] three times by the Great God”); *talāta bil-lāhi -l-ṣaḏīm* (“[I swear] three times by the Great God”); *ḏuqsīm bil-lāh* (“I swear by God”). In this, as well as in some other formulas borrowed from Standard Arabic, the standard realization of the consonant *q* as a uvular stop is preserved (as opposed to its realization as a glottal stop in Cairo and the cities of Lower Egypt); *ḏuqsīm bil-lāhi -l-ṣaḏīm* (“I swear by the Great God”); *qasaman bil-lāh* (“I swear by God”); *qasaman ṣaḏaman* (“I swear with a solemn oath”). The latter is often said as part of a threat, as in *qasaman ṣaḏaman law ḥaragti min il-bēt min gēr ḏizn mantīs ragṣa tāni* (“I swear with a solemn oath that if you go out of the house without permission you’ll not come back again”), or *qasaman ṣaḏaman law ma ṣamalti kida latkūni ṭāli?* (“I swear with a solemn oath that if you don’t do that you’ll be divorced”); *qasaman bil-lāhi -l-ṣaḏīm* (“I swear by the Great God”). The latter is similar in usage to *qasaman ṣaḏaman*; *wiṣizzit il-lāh* (“by the glory of God”); *wiṣizzit galālt il-lāh* (“by the glory of God’s sublimity”); *bil-lāhi ṣalēk* (“I exhort you by God”); this oath formula is said in exhortation, as in *bil-lāhi ṣalēk lanta ḏāṣid titgadda maṣāna* (“I exhort you by God to stay and eat with us”), or *bil-lāhi ṣalēk lanta ḏāyil ḏēh ḏilli ḥaṣal* (“I exhort you by God that you tell what happened”); *wirabbīna* (“by our Lord”); *wirabbī wima ḏaṣbud* (“by my Lord and what I worship [i.e. God]”), as in *wirabbī wima ḏaṣbud ḏana ma ruḥtiš hināk ḏabl-i kida* (“by my Lord and what I worship, I never went there before”); *wirabbīna -l-maṣbūd* (“by our Lord who is worshipped”); *wirabb ik-kaṣba* (“by the Lord of the Kaṣba”). *K* is often treated as a “sun-letter” in Egyptian Arabic, therefore the consonant *l* of the definite article is not pronounced and the following consonant is geminated; *win-nabī wimīn nabba -n-nabī nabī*, also in the less common version *win-nabī wi-lli nabba -n-nabī nabī* (“by the Prophet and by Him who made the Prophet a Prophet [i.e. God]”); *wiṣahd allāh* (“by God’s commitment”); *wi-lli gammaṣna min gēr maṣād*, also in the version *wimīn*

*gammaʕna min gēr maʕād* (“by Him who made us meet without an appointment [i.e. God]”). This formula is said by people who meet by chance after not seeing each other for a long time; *wiyamīn allāh* (“[I take an oath] by God”), also in the less common version *wiyamīn rabbina* (“[I take an oath] by our Lord”).

#### 4.2.2. Swearing by religion

*widīni* (“by my religion [i.e. Islam]”); *widīni wiʔislāmi* (“by my religion and my Islam”); *widīni wima ʔaʕbud* (“by my religion and what I worship [i.e. God]”); *waʔaymanāt il-muslimīn* (“by all of the faiths of the Muslims”); *ʕalayya -l-ḥarām min dīni* (“[I swear that] I shall be deprived of my religion [i.e. will become an infidel]”). This is regarded as a very strong oath, since it involves leaving the Islamic faith, and is meant to show that the speaker is definitely telling the truth. Another version is *ʕalayya -l-ḥalāl min dīni* (lit.: “[I swear that] I shall be allowed to have my religion”) said in order to avoid mentioning the possibility of leaving Islam, and may also possess a humoristic overtone.

#### 4.2.3 Swearing by the Quran

Swearing by the Quran is often done without holding or touching it. However, swearing by the Quran while holding it makes the oath more powerful.

*wil-qurʔān* (“by the Quran”); *wil-muṣḥaf* (“by the volume [of the Quran]”). Compare the formula *wil-muṣḥaf* said by the Jews (see above, 2.2.1).

When holding or touching the Quran, or when it is in front of the speaker, the demonstrative *da* (“this”) may be added to the oath formula.

*wil-qurʔān da* (“by this Quran”); *wil-muṣḥaf da* (“by this volume [of the Quran]”); *wil-muṣḥaf iṣ-ṣarīf* (“by the honorable volume [of the Quran]”); *wiktāb il-lāh* (“by the book of God [i.e. the Quran]”), also in the version *wiktāb rabbina* (“by the book of our Lord”); *wil-ḥatma* [also: *wil-ḥitma*] -ṣ-ṣarīfa (“by the honorable recitation [of the entire Quran]”). *Ḥatma* (or *ḥitma*) is the recitation of the entire Quran from beginning to end, and also the memorization of the whole Quran by heart. This oath formula is another way of swearing by the Quran.

#### 4.2.4 Swearing by other holy symbols

*wik-kaʕba* (“by the Kaʕba”); *wik-kaʕba -ṣ-ṣarīfa* (“by the honorable kaʕba”); *wiḥyāt biyūt rabbina* (“by the houses of our Lord” [i.e. mosques]).

#### 4.2.5. Swearing by the prophet

*win-nabi* (“by the prophet [Muḥammad]”), also often said in exhortation; *win-nabi Muḥammad* (“by the prophet Muḥammad”); *wirasūl il-lāh* (“by the messenger of God [i.e. Prophet Muḥammad]”); *wil-muṣṭafa* (“by the Chosen [i.e. Prophet Muḥammad]”). Other less common versions are *wiḥyāt il-muṣṭafa* (“by the life of

the Chosen”) and *waʔaymanāt il-muṣṭafa* (“by all of the faiths of the Chosen”); *win-nabi ʔilli haṭṭēt ʔīdi ʕala šibbāku* (“by the prophet who on his grille [at the entrance to the Prophet’s tomb] I put my hand”). This is said by people who have gone on pilgrimage to Mecca and al-Madīna (in the *Hajj* or in the *ʕumra*, the minor pilgrimage), and visited the Prophet’s tomb in the prophetic mosque in al-Madīna. Another version of the latter is *win-nabi ʔilli zurtu* (“by the prophet whom I have visited [at the Prophet’s tomb in the prophetic mosque]”); *win-nabi wimīn nabba -n-nabinabi* (“by the Prophet and by Him who made the Prophet a Prophet [i.e. God]”); see also above, 4.2.1.); *wiḥyāt raḥmit in-nabi* (“by the life of the soul of the prophet”).

#### 4.2.6. Swearing by objects

When swearing by a certain object, one may hold that object, as is sometimes the case when swearing by the Quran. When holding the object, or when it is in front of the speaker, the demonstratives *da* or *di* (“this”) are added to the oath formulas, as is the case when swearing by the Quran: *win-niʕma* (“by the grace of God [i.e. the bread, food or drink that we have]”); *win-niʕma -š-šarīfa* (“by the honorable grace of God”); *win-niʕma di* (“by this grace of God”); *win-niʕma -š-šarīfa di* (“by this honorable grace of God”); *waʕalayya -n-niʕma min niʕmit rabbi* (“I swear by the grace of my God”); *wil-mayya -ṭ-ṭahra di* (“by this pure water” [said while holding water]); *wil-mayya di walla dammi yigri zayyaha* (“by this water or my blood will flow like it”); *wiṣ-šāy da walla dammi yigri zayyu* (“by this tea or my blood will flow like it”); *win-nār di* (“by this fire [of the cigarette]”), said when holding a cigarette; *win-nār di walla ʔawallaʕ fiha* (“by this fire [of the cigarette] or I’ll be burnt by it”), also in the versions *win-nār di walla gismi yiṣbaḥ zayyaha* (“by this fire [of the cigarette] or my body will become like it”), and *win-nār di walla ʕaḍmi yibʔa zayyaha* (“by this fire [of the cigarette] or my bones will become like it”). All of these formulas are said while holding a cigarette.

#### 4.2.7. Swearing by family members of the speaker or the addressee

*wiḥyāt ʔibni* (“by the life of my son”); *wiḥyāt binti* (“by the life of my daughter”); *wiḥyāt wilādi* (“by the life of my children”); *wiḥyāt wilādak* (“by the life of your children”); *wiḥyāt ʕiyāli* (“by the life of my children”); *wiḥyāt ʕiyālak* (“by the life of your children”); *wiḥyāt banāti* (“by the life of my daughters”); *wiḥyāt ʔabūya* (“by the life of my father”); *wiḥyāt ʔummi* (“by the life of my mother”); *wiḥyāt ʔilli ḥallifūk* (“by the life of those who have procreated you”, i.e. “your parents”).

#### 4.2.8. Swearing by deceased family members of the speaker or the addressee

*wiraḥmit ʔabūya* (“by my father’s soul: [lit.: “by my father’s compassion, mercy]”); *wiraḥmit ʔummi* (“by my mother’s soul”); *wiraḥmit il-ḡālī* (“by the soul of my [or: your] dear [male relative]”); *wiraḥmit il-ḡalya* (“by the soul of my [or: your] dear [female relative]”); *wiraḥmit ʔilli matūlak* (“by the soul of

your deceased relatives”); *witurbit ʔabūya* (“by the grave of my father”). This formula may be said also while mentioning other people, as *witurbit ʔabūk/ʔummak* (“by the grave of your father/mother”).

#### 4.2.9. Swearing by venerated religious figures

In addition to the Prophet Muḥammad, there are many religious figures admired by the Muslims in Egypt who may swear by their names and sometimes by their *maʔām* (*maqām* in Standard Arabic, a burial place):

*wiḥyāt il-Ḥusēn* (“by the life of Ḥusayn [the son of ʕAlī and Prophet Muḥammad’s grand-son]”), also in the version *wil-Ḥusēn* (“by Ḥusayn); *wis-Sayyid il-Badawī* (“by al-Sayyid al-Badawī” [the venerated saint of Ṭaṭṭa]); *wil-Mursi Abu -l-ʕAbbās* (“by al-Mursi Abū al-ʕAbbās” [the venerated saint of Alexandria]); *wis-Sayyida Zēnab* (“by Sayyida Zaynab” [Prophet Muḥammad’s grand-daughter]). Sayyida Zaynab is the most popular and venerated female saint in Egypt; *wiṭ-ṭahra -š-šarīfa* (“by the pure and honorable”, i.e. Sayyida Zaynab); *wis-Sayyida* (“by Sayyida Zaynab”); *wiḥyāt maʔām il-Ḥusēn* (“by the grave of al-Ḥusēn); *wiḥyāt maʔām is-sayyida Zēnab* (“by the grave of Sayyida Zaynab”). There are many other local religious figures and saints, in Cairo and in other places in Egypt, by whose names oaths are taken.

#### 4.2.10. Swearing by honor

*wišarafi* (“by my honor”); *bišarafi* (“by my honor”); *wišarafak* (“[I exhort you] by your honor”); *wišaraf ʔummi* (“by the honor of my mother”); *wišaraf ʔummak* (“[I exhort you] by the honor of your mother”). The latter has been often used by the late movie actor Farīd Šawqī in his films.

#### 4.2.11. Swearing by body parts

*wil-ʕašara dōl* (“by these ten [fingers]”); said while shaking hands, as in *hāt ʔīdak wil-ʕašara dōl ma ḥašalš* (“give me your hand [to shake it], I swear by these ten [fingers] that this never happened”); *wirās ʔabūya fi turbitu* (“by the head of my father in his grave”); *wiḥyāt nūr ʕiyūmi* (lit.: “by the light of my eyes”, i.e. “by my sight”).

#### 4.2.12. Swearing by divorce

*ʕalayya -t-ṭalāʔ* (“[I swear that] I shall divorce [my wife, if so and so does not happen]”). Another version is *ʕalayya -l-yamīn* that means the same; *ʕalayya -t-ṭalāq bit-talāta* (“[I swear that] I shall divorce [my wife] by three [times of saying “you are divorced”, if so and so does not happen]”).

The two following formulas also refer to the relation between husband and wife: *ʕalayya -l-ḥarām min bēti* (“[I swear that] my wife will be forbidden for

me”). The version *ṣalayya -l-ḥalāl min bēti* (lit.: [“I swear that] my wife will be allowed to me”) may be said so that this formula will not be valid.

#### 4.2.13. Swearing by friendship

*wil-ṣēš wil-malḥ* (lit.: “by the bread and salt [that we have shared]”, i.e. “by our long acquaintance and friendship”); *wil-ṣišra ṯilli bēnna* (“by the long friendship between us”).

#### 4.2.14. Talking about taking oaths

Some proverbs and idioms refer to taking oaths. The following two proverbs reflect the notion that taking an oath is easy and does not guarantee that the person who takes it is telling the truth: *ṯālu lil-ḥarāmi ṯiḥlif ṯāl gālak il-farag* (“they told the thief to swear, and he said: you are saved [because it is very easy to swear and get away]”); *tiḥlif li ṯaṣaddaṯak ṯašūf ṯumūrak ṯastaṣgib* (“when you swear to me I believe you, but when I see what you are doing I wonder [because your deeds contradict your oaths]”).

The following formulas refer to the act of taking an oath: *ḥiliftlak bil-ḡāli* (“I swore to you by the dear person” [any person who is dear to either the speaker or his addressee]); *ḥalliftak bil-ḡāli* (“I exhort you by your dear person” [any person who is dear to you]); *ṯaḥliflak biṯēh ṣašān tiṣaddaṯni* (“with what should I swear to you so that you’ll believe me?!”); *ṯaḥliflak biṯēh* (“with what should I swear to you [so that you’ll believe me]?! *law ḥiliftlak ṣala -l-mayya tigmad win-nār tihmad barḍu miš haṣaddaṯni* (“even if I would swear to you by the water that will freeze and the fire that will die out, still you will not believe me”). Another version is: *law ḥiliftli ṣala -l-mayya tigmad win-nār tihmad barḍu miš ḥaṣaddaṯak* (“even if you would swear to me by the water that will freeze and the fire that will die out, still I shall not believe you”); *min ḡēr ḥilfān* (“without swearing”, i.e. “you don’t have to swear”), said to someone who is swearing or is about to swear, to show that he is believed without having to swear; *wallāhi wima lik ṣalayya ḥilfān* (“I swear by God although I don’t have to swear to you”); *ḥilif yamīn* (“took an oath”), and the version *ḥilif mūt yamīn* (lit.: “took one hundred oaths”, i.e. “swore many times”; said in exaggeration); *wiḥyāt/wiraḥmit... ṯilli ma ṯaḥlif bīh kidb-i ṯabadan* (“by the life/the soul of... by whom I never take a false oath”), also in the version *wiḥyāt/wiraḥmit... ṯilli Sumri ma ṯaḥlif bīh kidb* that means the same.

#### 4.2.15. Coarse swearing

*wiḥyāt kuss -ummak* (“by your mother’s cunt” [in threatening or during a quarrel, as in *wiḥyāt kuss -ummak lawarrīk* (“by your mother’s cunt I’ll teach you a lesson”). Milder versions of this formula are *wiḥyāt mayyitīn ṯummak* (“by your mother’s dead [family members]”) and *wiḥyāt dīn ṯummak* (“by your mother’s religion”).

#### 4.2.16. Oaths in special circumstances

*wil-ḡayyām il-muftaraga di* (“by these joyful days”), said during religious Feasts and days: the month of Ragab, the month of Šaṣbān, the Feast of Sacrifice, the Feast of Breaking the Fast, and (mostly) during the month of Ramaḡān.

Oaths may be adjusted by some people to certain conditions and circumstances, as in the following: *wiḡyāt iš-šidda ḡilli ḡana fīha* (“by the hardship which I am going through”), said by people who are going through a difficult condition; *wiḡyāt ḡilli f baḡni* (“by the one who is in my belly [womb]”), said by pregnant women; *wiḡyāt iṭ-ṭarīḡ ḡilli bamši ṡalēh* (“by the road on which I am going [or driving]”), said mainly by drivers.

#### 4.3. Muslim oath formulas in Egyptian literature

Oath formulas said by the Muslims appear frequently in Egyptian literature. Usually they appear in the dialogue; sometimes, in the narration there is a report on the act of swearing. The most common formulas which appear in the literature are *wallāhi* (“by God”) and *win-nabi* (“by the Prophet”). Many other formulas are also used in Egyptian literature. The following are just a few examples:

وحياة مقام الحسين وأم هاشم إنك خسارة فينا (“by the graves of al-Ḥuṣēn and Umm Hāšim [a nick name of Sayyida Zaynab], you are too good for us”; Nigm 2008: 97).

“the oath that every husband takes: “by the honorable God’s grace, I have never known any girl until I met you”; Maṡāṭī 2003: 9).

وحياة رحمة ابويا - اللي بحلف بحياته وهو عايش، كأنه ميت - ما كنت فاهمة اي حاجة! (“by my father’s soul - he by whose life I swear while he is alive as if he is dead - I did not understand anything”; ṡAbd al-ṡAzīz 2009: 49).

وحياة النبي محمد اما تخرج تكتب عما شاهدته (“by the life of the Prophet Muḡammad, when you go out you shall write down what you have witnessed”; al-Minšāwī 2008: 22).

وحلف عليّ بالتلاتة ليسبني ويمشي (“and he swore three times [by divorcing me] that he would leave me and go away”; Gumṡa 2009: 7).

تعرفي بأختي والله ومالكيش عليا حلفان ابني ده دوخت عليه السبع دوخات عند الشيوخ (“you know, my dear, by God, although I don’t have to swear to you, I had a lot of trouble going with my son to the sheiks”; ḡarīb 2009: 17).

عليا نازلة من البيت (“by my divorce you are not going out of the house”; Fārūq 2009: 59).

يا رب، حلفتك بالحسين وام هاشم والسيدة نفيسة والإمام الشافعي exhorted you by Ḥusayn and Umm Hāšim and Sayyida Nafīsa and the Imām al-Šāfiṡī”; al-Qaṡīd 1994: 220).

وحياة المصطفى ما عاد ناقصه الا عروسة (“by the life of the Chosen [Prophet Muḡammad], all it [the door] needs now is just a bride; al-Ḥūlī 1988: 13).

وشرف المصطفى ما شفت تذاكر (“by the honor of the Chosen [the Prophet] I didn’t see any tickets”; Ḥigāzī 1972: 53).

وديني ما انت خارج من هنا سليم (“by my religion, you won’t get out of here in one piece”; al-Ṭūḥī 1983: 108).

As in real life, sometimes oaths are improvised or changed in order to adjust them to certain circumstances or to create humor, as in *وحياة سنان بابا* (“by daddy’s teeth”; ṢAbd al-ṢĀl 2008: 47). The following monologue, taken from a satirical short story, contains many oath formulas that do not exist in Egyptian Arabic; all are improvised by Ibrāhīm who is talking to Suhēr while referring to events in their lives:

طب وحياة كل اللي عملتهولك يا سهير.. وحياة كل رغيف عيش وقفت في الفرن بسببه ساعتين عشان تدوقيه.. وحياة كل لتر بنزين دورت عليه في كل بنزينات مصر وما لقيتهوش عشانك.. وحياة امتحانات الثانوية العامة اللي دخلتها تاني عشان خطر ك عشان احسن تعليمي وجالي بسببها بله منغولي على كبر.. وحياة كل مرة حلفتيني اني اتفرج على برامج المنوعات في التلفزيون وانت عارفة اني مش ناقص هطل.. وحياة كل ده هتندمي يا سهير.. هتندمي يا سهير!!

OK, by the life of everything I have done for you, Suhēr. By the life of every bread loaf for which I was standing two hours at the bakery so that you would taste it. By the life of every liter of kerosine that for you I looked for in all the gas stations of Egypt [or: Cairo] but did not find. By the life of the matriculation examinations that I did for the second time for your sake in order to improve my education and from which I got crazy imbecility at old age. By the life of each time you exhorted me to watch variety programs on television while knowing that I do not lack nonsense. By the life of all of this, you will regret, Suhēr, you will regret, Suhēr!! (Tawfīq 2008: 60).

## 5. Conclusion

Members of all three religious communities believe that in all or at least most cases taking oaths and making vows are undesirable or forbidden, but in practice many of them do swear and use oath formulas in daily life.

All of the Judeo-Arabic oath formulas are connected to the Jewish religion and tradition; usually they make use of Hebrew words or names, are said among Jews only, and consequently are not known and not understood by the non-Jews. Karaite Jews share many of the oath formulas pronounced by the Rabbinic Jews, but they avoid using formulas that are identified with the Rabbinic tradition, and thus do not use the formula *wit-tefillim* (“I swear by the phylacteries”), since they reject the Rabbinic tradition of putting on the phylacteries. Also, they avoid swearing by names of Rabbinic rabbis.



In general, the Christians (most of whom are Copts) are against taking oaths, too, but still use them in daily life. All of their oath formulas are connected to religion, but unlike the Hebrew formulas are based on Arabic vocabulary. Still, most Egyptian Muslims do not know the Christian formulas, or may know just a few of them, because they are said among Christians only. However, since all of these oath formulas make use of Arabic vocabulary, Muslims can understand them upon hearing them.

Muslims are permitted to swear by God only, and do so very often. Many believe that although swearing by God is permitted, this is undesirable and it is better not to swear at all. Swearing by anything else, the Prophet included, is regarded by Islam as *širk* - idolatry, giving associates to God, and this was mentioned to me many times during my conversations with Muslims. However, there are many oath formulas of this sort, some of which are very common and used very often, sometimes even automatically and unconsciously.

Members of the three religious communities use their own oath formulas; the Jewish formulas and the Christian formulas are not known (or only partly known) to members of the other communities, while most of the Muslim formulas are known to all. Some common Muslim oath formulas which are not distinctly identified with Islam are shared by members of all three religious communities. Muslims, on the other hand, never use Jewish or Christian oath formulas.

Members of the three religious communities also share a strong objection to taking oaths and making vows, as well as the practice of taking them in spite of their attitude against so doing.

The large variety of Muslim oath formulas in the oral tradition is also widely used in Egyptian literature and has become a common element of its style.

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