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**Compassion for Wisdom:
The Attitude of Some Medieval Arab Philosophers
towards the Codification of Philosophy**

Introduction: Ambivalence towards Writing

It is well known that medieval Arab philosophers had a rather ambivalent attitude towards committing philosophy to writing. They regarded this act as a dangerous endeavor, one to be undertaken only with great caution. In their view, the nonphilosophical environment in which the philosopher lives and acts imposes on him the obligation to choose his words with care for his own safety as well as for pedagogical reasons. Common people, who are by nature incapable of grasping the truth or have not been properly trained, are likely to misunderstand the truth if it is presented to them in unequivocal terms. They may harm the philosopher, thinking that he represents a threat to society or religion, or – perhaps a still greater danger – they may be led to adopt wrong ideas leading them away from the truth rather than bringing them nearer to it. The danger that truth might fall into the wrong hands led medieval Arab philosophers to resort to an esoteric way of writing. Since they considered the prophets to be true philosophers, they also held that the scriptures propagated by the prophets should be read as esoteric philosophical writings.

The esotericism of medieval Arab philosophers, both Jews and Muslims, has been extensively studied, in particular by Leo Strauss and his followers. Scholars may disagree about the extent to which esoteric writing was actually practiced or its applicability to a given text, but

they generally admit the importance of this feature of medieval philosophy.¹

In studying the ambivalence of medieval philosophers towards the act of writing, scholars have concentrated on the negative attitude expressed either in their reticence to write down philosophy or in the demand to write esoterically. Ambivalence, however, is by definition a compound of negative and positive attitudes. The positive side of this ambivalence towards writing has not yet been fully appreciated. We forget that while musing over the dangers of setting something down in writing, these philosophers discuss mostly *written*, rather than orally transmitted, material – and that they do so *in writing*. Indeed, the basic attitude of medieval philosophers to the decision to commit something to writing, whether made by the prophets, the sages or these medieval philosophers themselves, is on the whole positive. In what follows, I shall first examine the sources, both religious and philosophical, from which these thinkers might have drawn their positive attitude, and then investigate its manifestations in the work of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī and Maimonides.

Codification in the Philosophical^{ers} Legacy

Both the Jewish and the Muslim traditions tell the story of a decision to commit to writing material previously preserved by oral transmission. In both traditions, this decision is recorded in the context of the codification and canonization of sacred lore. These two vast issues: codification and canonization in Judaism and Islam, are, of course, beyond the scope of the present essay. They are relevant to our discussion only to the extent that the decision to codify or canonize is presented as a practical response to the shortcomings of oral transmission. In this respect, the move to codify can be characterized as motivated by the fear of losing crucial material, whereas canonization seems to address the apprehension that unworthy material may infiltrate the revered or sa-

¹ L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York, 1952); M. Mahdi, "Philosophical Literature," in M. J. L. Young et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science, The 'Abbasid Period* (Cambridge, 1990), 76-105.

cred texts. For our purposes, it suffices to cite only a few examples of how the issue is treated in Jewish and Muslim texts.

The Codification of the Mishna

According to the Bible, the entire Torah was written down by Moses himself and put by him in the Ark of the Covenant to be kept for eternity.² The Midrash, however, found this method of safekeeping less than satisfactory and added to it the claim that Moses wrote down not one but thirteen identical scrolls of the Torah, giving each of the twelve tribes a scroll, "so that if a man should seek to forge anything therein, they would refer to the scroll in the ark."³ Concern for the danger of forgery, however, seems to be rather marginal in early Jewish texts. In general, the Rabbinic Jewish tradition took it for granted that the text written by Moses was kept and transmitted in a reliable way.⁴

With regard to the Mishna (the Law that was not part of the Five Books of Moses), the question of reliable transmission appears more frequently and seems to have been of much greater concern. A commonly held view in Jewish tradition is that the Mishna was initially transmitted orally and that it was forbidden to commit it to writing.⁵ According to this tradition, it was Judah Ha-Nassi (in the second half of the second and the beginning of the third century C. E.) who, having realized the immanent danger that the Law might be lost, decided to commit it to writing and codify it.⁶ For example, the tenth-century theologian Saadia Gaon (a great codifier in his own right) is quoted as saying in his *Sefer Ha-Galuy* that "the reason which compelled them

² See Deut. 31:26.

³ *Midrash Rabbah Deuteronomy*, Va-Yelekh, IX, 9, trans. J. Rabbinowitz (London, 1939), 162.

⁴ For a discussion of the Midrashic tradition, see H. Lazarus-Yafeh, "Tahrif and Thirteen Torah Scrolls," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 19 (1995), 81-88, esp. 82-84, incl. 83, n. 12.

⁵ See Midrash *Tanhuma*, Va-Yera 5, trans. J. T. Townsend (Hoboken, 1989), 93; Ki Tissa 17; B. T., Qodashim, Temurah 14a-b.

⁶ See, for instance, H. Albeck, *Mavo la-Mishna* (Jerusalem, 1959), 65-84, 99-109 and esp. 111-115. On the various traditions regarding the codification of the Mishna, see also E. E. Urbach, art. "Mishnah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 11 (Jerusalem, n. d.), 93-107, esp. 105. On the written and oral methods of preserving the Mishna and the actual role played by Yehuda Ha-Nassi, see S. Liberman, *Greek and Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1984), 213-224 (in Hebrew).

[i.e., the sages] to compose it [i.e., the Mishna] was that after the cessation of prophecy, they realized that they were dispersed [i.e., in the Diaspora] and they were afraid that the tradition might be forgotten, and they put their trust in the written [text]. Therefore they collected the sum of the opinions which had been kept by memory and wrote it down."⁷

The Collection of the Qur'ān

In the Muslim tradition, a similar process is described regarding the codification of the Qur'ān. According to a widespread tradition, during Muḥammad's lifetime and shortly thereafter, the Qur'ān was memorized and transmitted orally; only parts of it were written by individuals of their own endeavor. At the battle of Yamāma, however, so many Qur'ān readers were killed that ʿUmar, realizing the danger that the revelation might be lost, was able to convince the Caliph Abū Bakr to collect the verses of the Qur'ān and have them written down. The task fell to Zayd ibn Thābit, the Prophet's secretary. The tradition records the reluctance of both Abū Bakr and Zayd to do something not sanctioned by the Prophet. Zayd is recorded as saying, "By God, had they imposed on me to displace one of the mountains, it would not have been as difficult for me as their command that I should collect the Qur'ān."⁸ Yet Zayd, too, was won over to the idea, acknowledging the necessity of preventing the catastrophic loss of the revelation.

This story has a second episode, that of the canonization of the text of the Qur'ān. With the expansion of the Muslim empire, when the Muslim armies reached as far as Armenia and Azerbaijan, it became apparent that the already collected and codified Qur'ān existed in various versions. Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yamān is said to have approached the

⁷ See A. A. Harkavi, *Zikaron la-Rishonim* I, 5, 194: "ve-da' to hi she-ha-siba she-hikhrikha otam le-ḥabra hi she-akharei she-pasqu mehem ha-nevi'im ve-ra'u ʿazmam mefuzarim ḥasheshu pen tishakakh ha-qabala ve-samu bitkhonam ʿal ha-katuv [ba-sefer] lakhen asfu et klal ha-deʿot ha-nishmarot [ba-zikaron] u-khtavuhu." Note that although Saʿadya does not explicitly mention a previous prohibition against writing things down, he insinuates that the sages were reluctant to do so and that they acted only when compelled by historical circumstances.

⁸ Cf. *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* of Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 316 H), in A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān* (Leiden, 1937), 4-26; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muṣṭafā Dīb al-Bughā (Beirut, 1987), I, 181-199, esp. 182.

Caliph ʿUthmān and urged him to "regain control over the Muslim nation, lest it become torn by disagreement, as was previously the fate of the Jews and the Christians." It was also Zayd ibn Thābit who, following the Caliph's instructions, prepared copies of the authoritative text of the Qur'ān (four or five, according to the most widely recognized traditions), dispatched them to the main Muslim strongholds and eliminated all other copies.⁹

This classical description of the codification and canonization of the Qur'ān has been questioned in modern scholarship.¹⁰ In the present context, however, it is the official view which is of interest, regardless of its historicity.

In both the Jewish and the Muslim traditions, other accounts of the same stories allow for the existence of a written text before the supposed compilation. In both cases, the version describing the codification as a salvatory act in a state of emergency, one carried out despite initial hesitation, predominates, having become with time the most popular version of the codification of revered wisdom.

The Codification of Medicine

The theme of the writing down of important texts as a safeguard against loss and forgery appears in many other contexts and is so common that it can be regarded as a topos. It can be found in accounts of the codification of Muslim oral traditions¹¹ as well as in those of the codification of Arabic poetry.¹² It is also part of Persian traditions con-

⁹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, I, 187.

¹⁰ According to J. Wansbrough, the codification came about much later, while J. Burton claims that it was carried out much earlier, by Muḥammad himself; A. Brocket argues that "the transmission of the Qur'ān has always been oral, just as it has always been written." ("The Value of the Ḥafṣ and Warsh Transmissions for the Textual History of the Qur'ān," in A. Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān* [Oxford, 1988], 31-45, esp. 44-45.) This last view leaves unanswered the problem of verses which, according to Muslim tradition, were transmitted orally but never written, such as the "stoning verse."

¹¹ See, for instance, Ibn Dāʿūd, *ʿilm*, 3, quoted in J. Robson, art. "Ḥadīth," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden/London, 1971), III, 24; Muḥammad Abdul Rauf, "Ḥadīth Literature – I: The Development of the Science of Ḥadīth" in A. F. L. Beeston et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), 270.

¹² Cf. M. J. Kister, "The Seven Odes," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 44 (1970), 27-36.

cerning the assembly of the Avesta which seem to have circulated among intellectuals and Hellenized philosophers.¹³ The topos could thus have been transmitted to Arab intellectuals from more than one source. One such source, however, is of particular relevance when it comes to Arabic philosophy.

There is a tradition regarding revered, even divine, wisdom which is recounted with respect to the science of medicine. Quoting Galen, the eleventh-century Abū al-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī says that "in the past, the people of Asclepius were sworn by oaths and vows which forbade them to teach medicine to anyone but their own kin. They taught medicine only to their own children in the schools designated for this ... where it was taught only orally, from person to person. Then Hippocrates was moved by compassion for the art, [and fearing] lest it perish, he secured it in a book for eternity. This thing which they recount is one of the causes which preserved the art from the introduction of false material into it."¹⁴

There are at least two important points to be gained from this short text. The first relates to the reluctance to set down in writing the secret, salvific wisdom (the Art *par excellence*, that is, the art of medicine). Indeed, the reluctance to disclose knowledge was not an invention of the Middle Ages, nor was it the monopoly of the religious elite. Al-Bīrūnī's story probably reflects his awareness of the continuity between his own day and elitist practices of late antiquity unrelated to the monotheistic scriptures.¹⁵ The second point relates to the evaluation of

¹³ See S. Pines, "Ahmad Miskawayh and Paul the Persian," *Irān-Shināsī* 2, no. 2 (1971), 121-129, esp. 126. I am indebted to Shaul Shaked for this reference.

¹⁴ "Wa-qāla jālinūs innahu kāna fimā madā bayna āl Asqibiyūs aymān wa-uhūd tamna'uhum 'an ta'ālīm [read: ta'lim] al-ṭibb aḥadan ghayrahum fa-yaqsurūnā 'alā awlādihim fī madārisihī ... wa-yuwārithūnāhu min falaq afwāhihim ilā an ašfaqa buqrāt 'alā al-šinā'a an taḍī'a fa-ḥalladahā fī kitāb; wa-hādha 'llādhī ḥukiya 'anhum huwa aḥad al-asbāb al-ḥāfiẓa li'l-šinā'a 'an al-taḥālīt." *Épître ... contenant le répertoire des ouvrages de Muḥammad b. Zakarīya ar-Rāzī*, ed. P. Kraus (Paris, 1936), 26. A shorter version of this account is mentioned by the tenth-century bibliophile Ibn al-Nadīm. According to him, Hippocrates was the first to teach medicine to "outsiders" (*ghurabā'*), thus treating them as if they were his children, because he feared for the science of medicine (*ḥāfa 'alā al-ṭibb*), lest it disappear from the world. See Ibn al-Nadīm *Fihrist* (Beirut, n. d.), 400 (= ed. Flügel, 293).

¹⁵ Cf. G. Stroumsa, "Paradosis: Esoteric Traditions in Early Christianity," in *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden, 1996), 27-28.

codification. In this text, the setting-down in writing is initially done, as in the case of Judah ha-Nassi's codification of the Mishna and 'Umar's collection of the Qur'ān, with reluctance and in a state of emergency in order to prevent the art from falling into oblivion. Al-Bīrūnī's last remark is closer to the story of the 'Uthmānic collection, in which not the survival of the tradition is endangered, but rather its authenticity and purity. As al-Bīrūnī records Galen's opinion, not only the continuance of the medical tradition but also its accuracy depends upon the fact that its transmission was not entrusted to human memory alone. This last remark changes the evaluation of setting something down in writing: it is no longer a desperate act, performed only as a last resort, but instead the preferable method of transmission. It has become an expression of "compassion" (*ṣafaqa*) for wisdom, whereas oral transmission, once the only respectable method, is now viewed as irresponsible and thus heartless behavior.¹⁶

Philosophical Accounts of the Decision to Commit Philosophy to Writing

The medieval philosophers could thus find the theme of the decision to commit knowledge to writing in their religious as well as their scientific legacy. The impact of this theme on their own thought can be seen in the way in which three of these thinkers describe their own philosophical tradition and their place within it.

Al-Fārābī

In a text preserved for us by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, the tenth-century Muslim philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī gives a bird's-eye view of the devel-

¹⁶ An emotional affection towards wisdom is reflected also in the words of the Jewish theologian Sa'adya Gaon, who, in the Introduction to his *Book of Creeds and Beliefs*, urges his readers to read the book critically and correct any mistakes they may find. For, says Sa'adya, "scholars have compassion (*ṣafaqa*) for wisdom (*ḥikma*, or perhaps Wisdom, that is, philosophy), and they feel towards it tenderness (*ḥanīn*) as the tenderness of blood-relatives, as it is said [*Prov.* 7:4]: 'Say to Wisdom: thou art my sister.'" Cf. *Kitāb al-amānāt wa'l-i'tiqādāt*, ed. J. Qāfiḥ (Jerusalem, 1960), 6. Compassion (*iṣfāq*) for the sciences is mentioned also by Abū Ma'ṣar as the motivation for the construction of weatherproof libraries by the Persian kings. Cf. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 334.

opment of the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to his own time. In the days of Aristotle and thereafter, says al-Fārābī, philosophy was popular among the Greeks. He does not tell us how philosophy was transmitted then, but he does tell us that it was kept "unchanged" through twelve generations of teachers, one of them being Andronicos. After Augustus defeated the Greeks and killed their queen (Cleopatra), "he inspected the libraries and the manufacturing of books; and he found there manuscripts of Aristotle's works, written in his lifetime and in that of Theophrastus."

The implication is that these were "good" manuscripts preserving Aristotle's teaching as written down close to his lifetime and transmitted unchanged for generations. Indeed, according to al-Fārābī, Augustus "ordered the books written in Aristotle's lifetime and in that of his pupils to be copied and used as textbooks and all the other books to be excluded."

We do not know what "all the other books" were. They could have been other books composed by teachers and philosophers to explain the topics (*maʿānī*) discussed by Aristotle, or they could have been other manuscripts of the same texts. At any rate, according to al-Fārābī, Augustus went about his task methodically: "He appointed Andronicos to supervise this task. He ordered him to copy manuscripts and take them to Rome and to leave additional copies at the school in Alexandria. He also commanded him to leave a teacher as his deputy in Alexandria and to travel to Rome with him. In this way it happened that philosophy was taught in both places."¹⁷

The mythical character of this text has been noticed by scholars;¹⁸ and there is indeed little in it which is historically true. The text is intended to serve al-Fārābī's polemic, which is directed mostly against the *mutakallimūn*. Al-Fārābī seems to be making a conscious effort to divide the history of the philosophical tradition into a "good" period, in which texts were properly preserved, and a "bad" period, following the ad-

¹⁷ Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ* (Beirut, 1965), 604 ff. Cf. F. Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, trans. E. and J. Marmorstein (London, 1992), 50-51.

¹⁸ For example, cf. G. Strohmaier, "Von Alexandrien nach Baghdad – eine fiktive Schultradition," in J. Weisner, ed., *Aristoteles, Werk und Wirkung, Paul Moraux gewidmet* (Berlin, 1987), II, 380-389; F. W. Zimmermann, *Al-Fārābī's Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* (Oxford, 1981), xcvi-cviii.

vent of Christianity, when texts were tampered with and censured.¹⁹ Gotthard Strohmaier has also noted the affinity of al-Fārābī's description to patterns of *ḥadīth* literature, according to which an unbroken transmission (recorded in the form of the *isnād*) provides the source of authority.²⁰ It seems to me, however, that not only the detail of an unbroken chain of transmission but the entire mythical presentation resembles, reflects and imitates the model of the Muslim tradition. The similarity to the tale of the ʿUthmanic collection of the Qurʾān is striking. Al-Fārābī's model of the "good" period includes the choice of good manuscripts and their faithful transmission, the elimination of competing texts, the nomination of a supervisor for the process and, finally, the securing of several copies in various cities in order to ensure the preservation of the good tradition.²¹

Of course, it is likely that al-Fārābī was also aware of traditions about the transmission of philosophical and medical lore similar to the one recorded by al-Bīrūnī. For medieval philosophers, the medical, Galenic tradition was closely associated with the Aristotelian one.²² Al-Fārābī must have been familiar with such traditions, just as he must have been familiar with that about the collection of the Qurʾān. He interiorized both traditions, consciously or unconsciously using the same pattern in his description of the transmission of Aristotle's legacy.

¹⁹ Cf. S. Stroumsa, "Al-Fārābī and Maimonides on the Christian Philosophical Tradition: a Re-evaluation," *Der Islam* 68 (1991), 263-287.

²⁰ Cf. Strohmaier, "Von Alexandrien nach Baghdad," 388-389.

²¹ A parallel account is given by al-Masʿūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh waʾl-iṣrāf*, ed. ʿAbdallāh Ismaʿīl al-Ṣāwī (Cairo, n. d.), 105 (= ed. M. Y. De Goeje [Leiden, 1984], 121-122). Al-Masʿūdī refers the reader to another book of his in which he gives a fuller version of the story. This last book (*Al-funūn waʾl-maʿārif wa-mā jarā fī al-duḥūr waʾl-sawālif*) has been lost, and we have no way of evaluating the version it included. In al-Masʿūdī's extant account, however, there is no discernable imitation of the tradition concerning the Qurʾān.

²² When Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq records the curriculum of medical teaching in Alexandria, he probably does so for the benefit of the philosophers just as much as for that of the practitioners of the art of medicine. Cf. G. Bergsträsser, "Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-Übersetzungen," *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes XVII* (Leipzig, 1925).

Al-Baghdādī

Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher (d. ca. 1164) who converted to Islam in ripe old age, was known first and foremost as a physician. His excellence in this art won him the title "The unique of his time" (*awḥad al-zamān*).²³ In the introduction to his philosophical work, the *Kitāb al-muṭabar*, Abū al-Barakāt describes the transmission of philosophical knowledge and analyzes it as having passed through the three consecutive stages of oral transmission, esoteric writing and explicit writing.

The first stage, that of oral transmission, is characterized by strict regulation of the teaching: "The practice of the ancient philosophers in teaching the sciences to their students, who would then transmit them, was to teach by word of mouth and to recount rather than to write and read. They used to say and disclose whatever they did [only] to those students who were worthy of it, at the appropriate time, in the formulation which was most suitable for the student's understanding and according to the amount of knowledge which he had already acquired. [This was done] to prevent their science from reaching people who were unworthy of it,²⁴ or people who were worthy of it but at the wrong time, or not in the manner appropriate for their knowledge, wisdom, wit and intelligence."²⁵

This system, says Abū al-Barakāt, functioned perfectly well in its time: "In those days, scholars and students were many and lived long, and they transmitted the sciences from generation to generation in full and in the most perfect manner, so that nothing was lost or forgotten, nor did they reach anyone who was unworthy of it."

Sociological and biological changes brought about the second stage: "As the number of philosophers and students decreased and their life-

spans became shorter, and as the aspiration [for science] diminished and many sciences became extinct due to the scarcity of students and transmitters, scholars began to compose books so that the sciences would be preserved through them and transmitted from worthy people to worthy people over the succeeding periods and in distant places. In many of these writings, they employed obscure expressions and enigmatic allusions which could be understood [only] by intelligent people and known [only] to clever scientists in order to preserve the sciences from reaching people unworthy of them."

This second stage, that of esoteric writing, was, however, only an intermediate stage. Due to the continuous deterioration in the state of philosophy, the technique of esoteric writing became outdated, just as the method of oral transmission had become: "As [the number of] philosophers continued to diminish and they became more scarce from generation to generation, modern [philosophers] began to explain these obscure and difficult passages and to clarify these secret writings in a simple and detailed way, repeating and expanding upon them until books and compositions proliferated to the extent that the unworthy intermingled with the worthy people and the words of the noble and excellent became mixed with those of the incapable and ignorant."

Although Abū al-Barakāt does not say so explicitly, his words suggest that in his view it was mostly the ignorant who decided to explain, repeat and expand upon the texts. These developments were presented by Abū al-Barakāt as the background for his own commitment to writing, when he felt called upon to rectify two opposite wrongs: "Much of what the ancients say is difficult to understand because of its brevity, because it provides little and [thus] little is gained by it and because it is expressed in a corrupt way, due to the fact that it was translated from one language to another." "What the moderns say is [also difficult to understand] because of its length and because the demonstrations it contains are too far from what they intend to demonstrate."

Keeping these problems in mind as he was reading through philosophy and examining what he calls the "Book of Nature,"²⁶ Abū al-

²³ Cf. S. Pines, art. "Abū'l-Barakāt," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden/London, 1960), I, 111-113.

²⁴ In his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Abū al-Barakāt expresses his view that not only philosophy but all fields of human activity are gravely affected if opened to the wrong people. Commenting on Ecc. 10:4, he says: "fa-mā fasada akthar al-ṣanā'i wa-dā'a akthar al-faḍā'il illā bi-duḥūl man laysa ahl lahā fihā." (S. Pines, "Contribution to the Study of Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Commentary on Ecclesiastes," *Studies in the History of Jewish Philosophy: The Transmission of Texts and Ideas* (Jerusalem, 1977), 79 [in Hebrew]).

²⁵ *Al-Kitāb al-Muṭabar*, ed. Sereffettin Yaltakaya (Hyderabad, 1357 H), I, 2-3.

²⁶ Literally: "The Codex of Being" (*ṣaḥīfat al-wujūd*); cf. S. Pines, "Nouvelles études sur Awhād al-Zamān Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī," *Mémoires de la Société des Etudes Juives* I (Paris, 1955), 10, n. 2 (rpt. in *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines I: Studies in Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Physics and Metaphysics* [Jerusalem, 1979], 99).

Barakāt took notes. He did not, he assures us, rely on his memory, but instead wrote his notes securely on pieces of paper, intending to consult them in the future.²⁷ Indeed, these written, detached *pensées* later became the basis of his *Kitāb al-mu^ctabar*.²⁸

The late Shlomo Pines observed the similarity of Abū al-Barakāt's description of oral transmission to the Jewish tradition as well as to that of medical doctrine.²⁹ Pines, however, saw the connection to lie mostly in the esotericism of medieval philosophers. Even more prominent in Abū al-Barakāt's words than the need to be secretive, however, is the conclusive preference for writing things down, a preference which must be seen against the background of Abū al-Barakāt's sensitivity to the frailty of human knowledge. He was keenly aware that all knowledge is apt to disappear as a normal consequence of historical development. The example of the intellectual and scientific losses suffered by the Jews in the course of their turbulent history heightened his sensitivity. In his Commentary on *Ecc.* 12:9, he says that "many sciences are extinguished along with nations³⁰ and obliterated with them. This nation [i.e., the Jews] had wandered³¹ and had suffered the vicissitudes of wandering in a way which destroyed its virtues along with its virtuous people. [Only] a small portion of the precious [knowledge] which was transmitted to them by the prophets survived."³²

It is certainly possible that in formulating his preference for writing material down, Abū al-Barakāt was drawing on extant Jewish and medical traditions. Yet if this is the case, it should also be noted that he added some touches not found in either of these sources. He states clearly that after the decision was made to write down the wisdom of the ancient philosophers, this was done in an esoteric way. This is not

²⁷ "Wa-kāna dhālika lā yandabītu bi'l-ḥifz bal yuta^callaqu fī awrāq."

²⁸ A French translation of these passages is given in S. Pines, "Nouvelles études," *Mémoires de la Société des Etudes Juives* I (Paris, 1955), 8-10 (= *Collected Works* I, 97-99); cf. also S. Pines "Studies in Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Poetics and Metaphysics," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* VI (Jerusalem, 1960), 123-124 (rpt. in *Collected Works* I, 262-263).

²⁹ Cf. Pines, "Nouvelles études," 13-14 (= *Collected Works*, I 102-103), n. 3.

³⁰ I read "al-umam" instead of "al-ams."

³¹ *Jālat*, perhaps: "was exiled," since Abū al-Barakāt may have in mind the Hebrew "galut."

³² Pines, "Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Commentary on Ecclesiastes," 81.

part of the common tradition about the codification of the Mishna and is not to be found in Galen. He also realizes that commentaries became part of the process of recording philosophy in writing. Perhaps most significantly, he adds his own bold decision to spell out the difficulties in esoteric writing while correcting the mistakes of the "modern." The boldness of this decision is strengthened by Abū al-Barakāt's insistence on the fact that even in clarifying things for himself, he wrote them down. Both oral transmission and esoteric writing were now considered to be bankrupt. Thinking and learning had now to be written down and publicized.

Maimonides

Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) was certainly familiar with the prohibition against writing things down and the circumstances of the decision to break this interdiction; but he does not always uphold this version of history. An examination of the instances in which he chooses to ignore this story as opposed to those in which he adopts it is revealing.

In the Introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishna*, Maimonides describes the transmission of the Torah as the process of repeated oral teaching and memorization finalized in writing by Moses himself.³³ Maimonides' declared purpose is to show that both the Torah and its interpretation were revealed on Mount Sinai.³⁴ When describing the codification of the Mishna, Maimonides plays down the decision to commit the oral tradition to writing. He does not present Rabbi Judah's act as a revolutionary decision in a time of crisis, but rather as the natural culmination of an ongoing process: "Therefore [i.e., because of his various merits described above], he bestowed generously on scholars and seekers after knowledge, divulging the Torah in Israel and

³³ Concerning the text of the Torah itself, Maimonides adds the Midrashic element according to which Moses himself prepared thirteen identical Torah scrolls. See Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna*, ed. Qāfīh, 3-4; *Mishneh Torah. The Book of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. M. Hyamson (New York, 1981), 1. On the possible polemical implications of this claim, see H. Lazarus-Yafeh, "Taḥrīf and Thirteen Torah Scrolls".

³⁴ Not surprisingly, although the story he tells comes from the Talmudic tradition, the Arabic vocabulary he employs is very similar to Muslim Qur'ānic vocabulary.

collecting the traditions and sayings and the various opinions from Moses to his own day."³⁵

Indeed, Maimonides is considered to be a representative of the trend which held that "each sage committed the Oral Torah to writing for himself" and not that "nothing was written down in earlier times."³⁶ In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, however, in his polemic against the *mutakallimūn*, Maimonides reviews the disappearance of philosophy from Judaism. In this context, he seems to adhere to the view that *halakhic* matters were transmitted only orally: "Know, that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters that have existed in our religious community have perished ... because, as we have made clear, it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people. You already know that even the legalistic science of law was not put down in writing in the olden times because of the precept, which is widely known in the nation: 'Words that I have communicated to you orally, you are not allowed to put down in writing.'"³⁷

It should be noted, however, that legal matters are merely a peripheral issue for Maimonides. He reserves dramatic descriptions of the prohibition against writing down the teaching and of the drawbacks of oral transmission for the sages' refusal to write down the "secrets of the Torah," that is, physics and metaphysics: "Now, if there was insistence that the legalistic science of law should not, in view of the harm that would be caused by such a procedure, be perpetuated in a written compilation accessible to all people, all the more could none of the mysteries of the Torah have been set down in writing and made accessible to the people. On the contrary, they were transmitted by a few men belonging to the elite to a few of the same kind."³⁸

Maimonides fully understands and supports the interdiction against writing things down, yet he concludes this passage by saying that "this

³⁵ Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna*, 15.

³⁶ Urbach, art. "Mishnah", *Encyclopedia Judaica* 12, 106.

³⁷ B. T., Gittin, 60b.

³⁸ See also the Introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed*, where Maimonides explains the interdiction against writing down the secrets of Physics (*ma'ase Beres-hit*) in this way: "if someone were to explain all these matters in a book, it would be as if he preached them to thousands of people." *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1963), 7.

was the cause that inevitably brought to the disappearance of these great roots of knowledge from the nation."³⁹

Maimonides recounts here the story of crucially important knowledge which was endangered – in fact, lost – because it had been transmitted orally. His model is clearly the tradition about the codification of the Mishna, yet in his account it is not *halakha* but rather the philosophical teaching which is at stake. Like al-Fārābī, Maimonides shapes his account of the development of philosophy using themes found in his religious tradition. Like Abū al-Barakāt, he is aware of the damage which the dispersion of the Jews has done to their scientific knowledge. In his own presentation, these elements are combined and synthesized.

The awareness of the grave consequences of oral transmission is apparent also in Maimonides' explanation of his own decision to write down his philosophical knowledge.⁴⁰ In the Introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides spells out both his reticence and his resolution: "God, may He be exalted, knows that I have never ceased to be exceedingly apprehensive about setting down those things that I wish to set down in this treatise; none of them has been set down in any book – written in the religious community in these times of exile –, the books composed in these times being in our hands. How then can I innovate and set them down? However, I have relied on two premises, the one being [the sages'] saying in a similar case, 'It is time to do something for the Lord,' and so on;⁴¹ the second being their saying, 'Let all thy acts be for the sake of heaven.'" "To sum up: I am the man who, when the concern pressed him and his way was straitened and he could find no other device by which to teach a demonstrated truth other than by giving satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thou-

³⁹ Pines' translation, 17. In the *Guide* II, 11, however, Maimonides seems to assume the existence of a (written) composition containing scientific and philosophical wisdom destroyed along with the people who possessed this knowledge. See p. 276 in Pines' translation; and cf. S. Klein-Braslavi, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem, 1987), 22 (in Hebrew), who suggests that this latter passage relates not specifically to sciences and philosophy, but rather to other books.

⁴⁰ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, "Introduction" (Pines, 16), and I, 71 (Pines, 175-176).

⁴¹ Ps. 119:126, a verse quoted in the Talmud (B. T., Berakhoth, 63) to justify the pedagogical need to compile the Torah, an association which was undoubtedly intended by Maimonides. I am indebted for this observation to M. Halbertal.

sand ignoramus – I am he who prefers to address that single man by himself, and I do not heed the blame of those many creatures."⁴²

Like Abū al-Barakāt, Maimonides justifies boldly – even more boldly than his predecessor – the compelling need to spell out the truth and to ensure that he is understood by his intended audience, even at the expense of secrecy. If we take as our guide the three stages of development sketched out by Abū al-Barakāt, we could say that Maimonides adopts the second stage, but presents it as if it were the third: he opts for writing things down in an esoteric way, but portrays it as a daring and desperate decision to be explicit. The rhetoric of both authors is aimed at highlighting their contribution to the development of philosophy through breaking the taboo on writing.

Maimonides knew of Abū al-Barakāt and of his book, but it is not clear whether he had actually read it.⁴³ If he had, it is quite possible that in his boldness he was inspired by Abū al-Barakāt; but whereas the *Kitāb al-Muṭabar* has hardly any specific Jewish characteristics, the *Guide* is a book of Jewish philosophy. It thus combines traditions about the decision to commit to writing both philosophical wisdom and religious secrets.

Conclusion

The medieval philosophers inherited various traditions recounting the circumstances in which the seminal sacred texts became scripture. In the texts cited above, Maimonides and Abū al-Barakāt seem to recur to the ancient theme of committing the Mishna to writing. In much the same way, the Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī appears to draw on the tradition of committing the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* to writing. Each philosopher knew such traditions as part of both his religious legacy and his scientific education. Each interiorized this topos and used it in his apologetic attempt to justify the practice of writing down philosophy, despite the fact that this practice went against his accustomed esoteric grain. At the same time, this topos served to promote the authenticity of the written text and enhance its authority

⁴² Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 16.

⁴³ Cf. Pines, "Studies in Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Poetics and Metaphysics," 122 (= *Collected Works* I, 261).

The attitude towards knowledge transmitted in writing reflects the attitude towards authority. As such and despite widespread apologetic traditions, writing things down is viewed by the philosophers not just as a last resort. Instead, it is regarded as a legitimate and laudable activity, an obligation that the philosopher has towards his fellow-philosophers in generations to come and an act of compassion for endangered wisdom.⁴⁴

Abstract

In studying the attitude of medieval philosophers towards the act of writing, scholars have tended to concentrate on their esoteric tendencies and their reluctance to commit philosophy to writing. The basic attitude of medieval philosophers to the decision to commit something to writing, whether it be that made by the prophets, the sages or the medieval philosophers themselves, however, is on the whole positive. This article examines the sources – both religious and philosophical – from which this positive attitude stems and then discusses its manifestations in the work of three medieval thinkers: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī and Moses Maimonides.

⁴⁴ An earlier version of this essay was read at the Conference on *Autorité, Tradition, Critique* held in Jerusalem December 4-6, 1995; and it benefited from the comments of the participants. I also wish to thank Moshe Halbertal and Guy Stroumsa for their valuable comments.