

## THE IMPACT OF SYRIAC TRADITION ON EARLY JUDAEO-ARABIC BIBLE EXEGESIS

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Although medieval Jewish theology in Arabic is usually depicted as having developed under the overwhelming influence of Muslim Kalam, there are strong indications that Syriac Christianity also played a major role in the formative period of Jewish medieval thought (9th-10th century C.E.). And yet, in the theological writings themselves it is difficult to pinpoint such Christian influence. In the following pages I intend to show that through the examination of exegetical texts it is possible to detect this Christian influence with more certainty than by examining theological works. The paper will include a brief presentation of the methodology, and three examples of its application. The first traces back themes of Judaeo-Arabic exegesis on one specific verse (Gen. 1:1) to their Christian origin; the second is an attempt to detect the traces of those early contacts in the writings of later generations up to Maimonides; the third presents exegetical material that helps elucidate the nature of the continuous contacts between Jews and Christians.

### I. CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM INFLUENCES: A METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

The earliest Jewish theological texts known to us appear in the ninth century, when Muslim Kalam is already well developed.<sup>1</sup> By that time, both Muslim and Christian theology bear the marks of more than two hundred years of interaction and mutual influence. Consequently, theological texts in Arabic from the ninth/third and tenth/fourth centuries share a characteristic language, many basic components of which are common to Christian, Muslim and Jewish texts. To illustrate this point, let us examine the case of Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammiṣ, a Jew from Raqqa, who lived in the first half of the ninth century. In his youth, al-Muqammiṣ converted to Christianity and he then studied for many years in Nisibis with a Christian

<sup>1</sup>9th/3rd cent. *kalam* texts are considered early mostly because of the scarcity of earlier texts. It is nevertheless obvious that even these early texts are too elaborate to represent the very first stages of Kalamic discussions. Muslim tradition usually places the beginning of Kalam in the first half of the 8th/2nd cent. (Stroumsa, S., "The Beginnings of the Mu'tazila Reconsidered", *JSAI*, 13 (1990), 265-293).

philosopher named Nānā (identified by Georges Vajda as Nonnus of Nisibis).<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, al-Muqammiṣ reverted to Judaism, and wrote the *'Ishrūn Maqāla*, the first Jewish *summa theologica* known to us. These biographical data allow us to conclude that, generally speaking, the prevalent influence on al-Muqammiṣ was that of Syriac Christianity.

Nevertheless, when we come to analyse the *'Ishrūn Maqāla*, we find it quite difficult to evaluate more precisely the scope of this Christian influence and to identify its exact expressions. In some cases, especially when al-Muqammiṣ discusses Christian theology, we can detect Christian terminology, imagery and argumentations.<sup>3</sup> But the work as a whole, the *topoi* discussed in it, the order of those *topoi* and the formulas used in the discussion are those characteristic of Islamic theology. One may then legitimately ask about the ultimate origin of these elements: on the one hand, the Christian environment in which al-Muqammiṣ was schooled was also part of a world dominated by Islam and influenced by it; what al-Muqammiṣ received from his Christian mentor may, therefore, have been borrowed from Muslim Kalam.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, we must take into account the probability of some influence of Christian theology on nascent Islamic Kalam; so, Kalam elements in the theology of al-Muqammiṣ and Christian teachers may have been originally Christian.

How difficult it is conclusively to prove the Christian origin of al-Muqammiṣ's theology can be illustrated by his discussion of the divine attributes. Al-Muqammiṣ's argumentation in this discussion, and in particular his polemics against the Christians in this context, makes use of specifically Christian imagery. This, together with what we know of al-Muqammiṣ's life-history, made it seem obvious to me that al-Muqammiṣ's immediate sources for the discussion of divine attributes were the Christians with whom he studied in Nisibis.<sup>5</sup> This conclusion, however, has been questioned by Daniel Gimaret. As this leading scholar of Kalam pointed out, the formulas al-Muqammiṣ chooses to uphold in this discussion (*Allāh ḥayy bi-dhātihī, ḥayy bi-naḥsihī* and even *ḥayy bi-lā ḥayāt*) were also used by the Mu'tazila. Since Islam was the dominant religion of the period, Gimaret presents the very legitimate question of a possible Muslim influence on al-

<sup>2</sup> *Anwār*, 44; on al-Muqammiṣ's life and writings, see my introduction to *IM*, 15-42.

<sup>3</sup> See *IM*, 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> See *IM*, 19, 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> See *IM*, 28-29, 196-199. On the all-important role of Christian theology concerning "the semantic aspect of the Attributes", see Wolfson, H.A., *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 112-132, 205-234.

Muqammiṣ. Altogether, al-Muqammiṣ's case, which at first sight seems as clear an example of Christian influence on Judaeo-Arabic theology as one could hope for, turns out to be rather complex.<sup>6</sup>

In order to disentangle this complexity, we must search for elements that are clearly identifiable as belonging to one specific religion, and that cannot be easily adopted by adherents of other religions. In theological texts, the identification of such earmarked components is definitely *min laṭīf al-kalām*, the results of which are apt to remain controversial. The Bible and its exegesis, on the other hand, offer a whole body of texts that is shared by the Jews and Christians, but not by Muslims (or at least, not in the same way). Our task, then, is to isolate Biblical material that does not appear in the Qur'ān and is discussed in a similar way by Jews and Christians. If the discussion is not found in pre-Islamic Jewish texts, we may argue for Christian influence on the Judaeo-Arabic exegetes.<sup>7</sup> In this quest, it is essential to distinguish between the proximate channels through which the exegetical material has reached the Jewish authors and the ultimate source of this material.

The search for such Biblical material may be approached in one of two ways: (a) we may look for themes that are altogether outside the Muslim tradition, or (b) we may concentrate on exegetical material that relates to the specific wording of the Hebrew Bible. This may allow us to identify Christian material even when dealing with subjects that in themselves do interest Muslim authors. In what follows, I shall take the second approach, and examine the first verse of the Bible, and then three verses of Psalms.

## II. TRACING BACK SYRIAC-CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS: GEN 1:1

Judaeo-Arabic philosophical exegesis, like Judaeo-Arabic theology, begins with Dāwūd al-Muqammiṣ. The tenth century Karaite al-Qirḡisānī tells us that al-Muqammiṣ translated two Syriac commentaries into Arabic: one on Genesis, called *Kitāb al-khalīqa*, and one on Ecclesiastes.<sup>8</sup> Al-Qirḡisānī also says that, in his own commentary on Genesis, he relied

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Gimaret's review of *IM*, in *Bulletin Critique des Annales Islamologiques*, 7 (1990), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Then, of course, one must still take into account the possibility that, in an earlier stage, now lost Jewish interpretations had influenced Christian commentators; for Rabbinic influence on Patristic exegesis, see, for instance, Loewe, R., "The Jewish Midrashim and Patristic and Scholastic Exegesis of the Bible", *TUGAL* 63, 492-514, and Stroumsa, G., "Old Wine and New Bottles: On Patristic Soteriology and Rabbinic Judaism", in Eisenstadt, S.N., (ed), *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilisations*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 151-160. But this lies beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>8</sup> *Anwār*, 44: "fa-innahu naqala min kutub al-naṣārā wa-taḥṣirihim tafsīr Bereshit wa-asmāhu (!) Kitāb al-Khalīqa wa-tafsīr Qohelet": Hirschfeld, 40; Vajda, 222-231, and see esp. 224:

heavily on al-Muqammiš.<sup>9</sup> Al-Muqammiš's exegetical writings are mostly lost, and al-Qirqisānī is our main source for reconstructing these writings. Recently, however, a fragment of al-Muqammiš's exegetical work has been identified among the Geniza documents preserved in Cambridge.

TS Ar. 52.184, one page written in two long columns, contains the end of the fifth chapter and the beginning of the sixth chapter from a *Kitāb al-Khalīqa*. The name *Kitāb al-khalīqa* (and *tafsīr kitāb al-khalīqa*) appear in the preserved text, and on this basis Haggai Ben-Shammai identified it as al-Muqammiš's commentary on Genesis.<sup>10</sup> There are, indeed, many indications that point in the same direction. All quotations from the Hebrew Bible in the fragment are given in Arabic; this was not a common practice in Judaeo-Arabic texts, but it was indeed al-Muqammiš's usage in the *'Ishrūn Maqāla*. The designation of chapters by the word *maqāla* (rather than *bāb* or *faṣl*) is also reminiscent of the *'Ishrūn Maqāla*. But above all, it is the contents and wording of the fragment which point to al-Muqammiš as its author.

A characteristic feature of al-Muqammiš's writing is his combination of Kalamic and Aristotelian elements. Thus the *'Ishrūn Maqāla*, which is built like any other Kalam work, also presents a repetitive structure of the four Aristotelian noetic questions.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Geniza fragment is on the whole very "kalamic". But it is also presented as "our opinion concerning the wherefore of [the fact that] the world was created containing diversity"; this seems to indicate that the fragment deals with the last of the four noetic questions.<sup>12</sup>

The fragment deals with the existence of diversity in this world, which the author sees as evidence of God's wisdom. In order to make his point, the author discusses the differences between three types of agents: those whose behaviour is determined by nature, those who act by virtue of innate instincts, and the true agents, who act by choice. Fire and snow have only one natural effect, which they cannot choose to alter. Certain living creatures, such as the spider, the bee and the silkworm, may perform sophisticated acts, but these cannot be called "wise" acts (*ḥakīm*) for their "agents" (if agents they are) have not deliberately chosen to do them. The

<sup>9</sup>"naqalahu min tafsīr a-suryāniyyīn, c'est à dire le commentaire dont il s'agit n'était qu'un adaptation d'un commentaire Syriaque Chrétien sur la Génèse, plus exactement peut-être d'un *Hexaéméron*."

<sup>9</sup>Hirschfeld, 40; Vajda, 224.

<sup>10</sup>Genizah Fragments, No 15 (April 1988), 3.

<sup>11</sup>IM, 23-24.

<sup>12</sup>"Qawluna fī lamiyyat khalq al-khalq mukhtalafan".

fact that God's creation contains such opposites as fire and snow, heat and cold, shows God's ability to choose. According to the author of the fragment, God's purpose in creating the world with this diversity was to indicate to us His wisdom and omnipotence.<sup>13</sup>

The discussion of the deliberate versus the instinctive act cited here provides us with the conclusive proof of the author's identity. A similar discussion is part of the twelfth chapter of al-Muqammiš's *summa*, and the similarity of structure and of the wording leave no doubt that both discussions were written by the same person.<sup>14</sup>

If we turn now to examine the Syriac exegetical tradition, we find confirmation of al-Qirqisānī's claim that al-Muqammiš translated his commentary from Syriac.

(1) Theodore bar Khoni (8th cent.), who offers a synthesis of the earlier Syriac exegetical tradition, can help our comparison: In *Mimra* 1, 96H, he deals with the first verses of Genesis and with the question of how God gave the power of will to His creatures. He begins by pointing out the difficulty of answering this question, since God's acts are multiple and varied. He then discusses the various grades of the gifts accorded to us by God: we share with other creatures sense-perception, which the four basic elements lack. But rationality and intellectual capacity were accorded to us humans alone. Bar Khoni then says: "With the knowledge and discernment which He gave us, God gave us likewise the power of liberty and free will". God could have made us innately good, but He decreed in His wisdom that we should have the choice between good and evil. As examples of beings whose actions are based on instinct, Bar Khoni too mentions the bee, the ant, the spider and the silkworm.

The discussion of the free versus the instinctive act is a staple component in Kalam texts, and the examples of the bee, the spider and the silkworm (drawn ultimately from Aristotle) are also commonplace. It is therefore impossible, when this theme appears in a theological text like the *'Ishrūn Maqāla*, to make any claims concerning its origin. We can only point out parallel Jewish, Christian and Muslim texts.<sup>15</sup>

But the appearance of this theme in exegetic texts enables us to be more

<sup>13</sup>"Li-yadullana 'alā annahu ḥakīm qādir 'alā mā yashā'u wa-kayfa shā'a wa-matā shā'a ... fa-dhālika qawluna fī lamiyyat khalq al-khalq mukhtalafan mutashattitan", and again: "Allāh 'azza wa-jalla innamā khalaqa al-khalā'iq mukhtalafa li-yadullana 'alā fī'l ḥakīm qādir mukhtalafan mukhtār limā fa'ala ..."

<sup>14</sup>See IM, 243-245. An example of al-Muqammiš's distinctive vocabulary is the word *quzza* (silkworm), which appears in this fragment and in IM, 243-245, and see also 129, n.10.

<sup>15</sup>See IM, 30-31, 243-245, and notes there.

specific. Al-Muqammiṣ and Bar Khoni adduce the theme in the context of the same biblical verse; they both connect it with another common theme (the existence of plurality in this world) and they both draw from it the same conclusion: God's omnipotence and benevolence. Bar Khoni's main point, which is human freedom of action, is included in al-Muqammiṣ's fragment, and it is also the main point in the parallel discussion in the *Ishrūn Maqāla*. Clearly, al-Muqammiṣ and Bar Khoni draw from the same exegetical tradition.

(2) So far we have seen nothing that is inherently Christian in the interpretation of the first verse of the Bible: the same interpretation of the word "God" is used by the Jewish and the Christian commentators, but this interpretation could be adopted - or indeed invented - by a Muslim.<sup>16</sup> The claim that the combination of opposites in this world proves God's omnipotence also appears in Muslim Kalam texts.<sup>17</sup> Only the fact that we find this interpretation linked to the same verse of the Bible ties the Judaeo-Arabic exegesis to the Christian rather than to the Muslim tradition.

But the fragment of al-Muqammiṣ also contains an element of a distinctly Christian character. When al-Muqammiṣ argues that "the diversity of the creation indicates (God's) ability and immense power" he mentions Ps. 33:6: "By the word of the Lord were the Heavens made; and all the hosts of them by the breath of his mouth".<sup>18</sup> The connection of this verse to the issue of diversity in the world is not self-evident; in fact, the integration of this verse into al-Muqammiṣ's text is rather awkward. When we examine the works of Christian exegesis, we find that they, too, connect this verse of Psalms with the first verse (or verses) of Genesis; but in the Christian writings the reason for the association of the Word of God (the Logos, identified with the Son) with the creation is very clear, and its Christological implications are made explicit.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that in Rabbinic sources this verse of Psalms was already sometimes connected to the first verse of Genesis. But it was not associated with either God's wisdom or with the diversity of His creation.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup>On the name "God" (*ilāh*), see *IM*, 30 and notes 97-99; Gimaret, D., *Les Noms divins en Islam-Exégèse lexicographique et théologique*, (Paris, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>See Abrahamov, B., (ed & trans), *Al-Kāsim b. Ibrāhīm on the Proof of God's Existence: Kitāb al-Dalīl al-Kabīr*, (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1-2. Abrahamov argues for the Christian origin of this argument in Muslim texts.

<sup>18</sup>TS Ar. 52.184 1r: "wa-qāla aydan wa-huwa yuridu an yu'abbira anna ikhtilāf al-khalq dalīl 'alā al-qudra wa'l-quwwa al-'azīma qāla bi-kalimat Allāh khuliqat al-samā' birūh fīhi kull [junūdi]ha".

<sup>19</sup>See, for instance, Isho'dad, 14.

<sup>20</sup>BT Rosh Ha-Shana 32a, Megilla 21b. I am indebted to Yehuda Liebes for this reference.

Now in al-Muqammiṣ's work the three components of the discussion (i.e. the verse of Genesis, the verse of Psalms and the theological argument concerning versatility) appear in one cluster, just as they do in the works of Bar-Khoni or of Iso'dad of Merv. This, I believe, proves beyond doubt that al-Muqammiṣ's immediate source for the whole cluster was one and the same, and that it was a Christian Syriac rather than a Jewish source.

(3) Also significant is the translation of "the word of God" in Ps. 33.6 by the Arabic word *kalima* - the common Arabic equivalent of the *Logos*. This is not a self-evident Arabic translation of the Hebrew *davar*: *kalām* for example, would suggest itself more readily. Al-Muqammiṣ apparently used an Arabic translation of this Psalm which reflects the Christian interpretation, and he stuck to the word - *c'est le cas de le dire* - of his source. Despite his known polemical anti-Christian campaign, Al-Muqammiṣ seems to have followed the Christian tradition with little reserve.<sup>21</sup>

### III. TRACES OF EARLY CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE IN LATER LITERATURE FL

The case of al-Muqammiṣ seems thus quite clear: the overwhelming dependence of his exegesis on the Syriac-Christian tradition is, I believe, established beyond reasonable doubt. It is also certain that al-Muqammiṣ's commentaries, charged as they were with Christian traditions, played a role in the development of later Judaeo-Arabic exegeses.<sup>22</sup> The question is, how large a role? How much of the early Christian influence survived in later generations of Jewish exegetical writings in Arabic?

Any attempt to answer this question requires a survey of the literature on a scale which obviously lies beyond the scope of the present study. But I believe that if we are attentive to the *possibility* of a Christian impact, we are apt to find much more of it than has been admitted until now. To illustrate this point we can examine the way that the Bible verses we have seen in the fragment of the *kitāb al-khalīqa* are treated by three major commentators.

#### (a) *Al-Qirqisānī*:

As mentioned above, al-Qirqisānī's *Commentary on Genesis* relied on al-Muqammiṣ's *Kitāb al-Khalīqa*. The importance of Qirqisānī's writings as a source for identifying Christian influence was noted by Bruno Chiesa, who has studied the exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis, and, in particular,

<sup>21</sup>For another example of al-Muqammiṣ's close dependence on Christian exegesis, see Stroumsa, S., "What is Man?": Psalm 8:4-5 in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Exegesis in Arabic", in *Henoch*, 1992, fasc. 3 (to appear).

<sup>22</sup>See *IM*, 34-35.



the *Commentary* of Qirqisānī. Chiesa shows that Qirqisānī's interpretation points in various places to Christian exegesis as its ultimate source.<sup>23</sup> The new fragment from al-Muqammiš's commentary enables us to follow the transmission of Christian exegesis from al-Muqammiš to al-Qirqisānī. For in his commentary on Gen. 1:1 al-Qirqisānī uses the same Christian argument used by al-Muqammiš: the word "God" indicates His wisdom and His absolute freedom. And al-Qirqisānī too associates the interpretation of this word with the variety that exists in this world, which proves that, unlike natural phenomena, such as heat and cold, God's are the acts of a free, wise agent.<sup>24</sup>

(b) *Sa'adya*:

The tenth century Rabbanite Sa'adya Gaon cites Ps. 33:6 in his *Kitāb al-amānāt wa'l-i'tiqādāt*. In the context of his polemics against Christian trinitarian exegesis of the Bible, Sa'adya says: "Likewise, I have found that some of them (i.e., the Christians) attempt to bring as evidence [for their dogmas] what the Scriptures say, that the Spirit (*rūḥ*) of the Lord creates... and that His Word (*kalima*) creates".<sup>25</sup> Sa'adya associates *rūḥ* and *kalima* with Christianity. This is probably the reason for the fact that in his own translation of the same verse, Sa'adya seeks to avoid this Christian translation of the verse and proposes a very different rendering: *bi-amrihi šuni'at al-samāwāt wa-biqawlihi jamī' juyūshiha*.<sup>26</sup>

(c) *Maimonides*:

1) The possibility of Christian influence on Maimonides has already been suggested by Shlomo Pines. Pines has shown the similarity between Maimonides' explanation of the Biblical commandment of sacrifices and certain Christian theological texts, some in Arabic (Abū Rā'īṭa) and others, which are pre-Islamic, in Greek texts. There is also a resemblance to the view of al-Qirqisānī.<sup>27</sup> These similarities led Pines to the conclusion that:

<sup>23</sup>Chiesa, 61-65, 95-97, 198-199. Of the two methods suggested above, Chiesa's initial method is the second: the examination of Jewish and Christian exegesis of particular verses. But in a way Chiesa combines with it also the first method (that is, isolating particular themes). For, of course, the Fall of Man, although treated by the Qu'rān and by Muslim tradition, can be regarded as "a Christian theme", in the sense that it preoccupies Christian authors much more than their Muslim (and Jewish) counterparts.

<sup>24</sup>Ben-Shammai II, 21, II. 18-30. 23, II. 85-91.

<sup>25</sup>Sa'adya b. Yūsuf al-Fayyūmī, *Kitāb al-amānāt wa'l-i'tiqādāt*, II 85, Landauer, S., (ed), (Leiden: Brill, 1880), p. 88 = Qafih, S., (ed), (Jerusalem), 92.

<sup>26</sup>Sa'adya, *Psalms*, 105.

<sup>27</sup>Pines, S. "Some Traits of Christian Theological Writing in Relation to Moslem Kalam and to Jewish Thought", *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, V (1973), 109 and notes there.

There seems thus to be some reason for thinking that, as regards the point we are discussing, Maimonides was influenced by Christian theological writings either directly or through the intermediary of Jewish sources. An explanation of Biblical commandments concerning sacrifices would have hardly interested a Moslem author.

Since, however, Maimonides' discussion of sacrifices was an isolated case, Pines was very careful, even hesitant, in his assessment of its implication. According to him,

A direct impact of Christian doctrines could also no doubt be found in other Jewish philosophical or theological texts written in Arabic. However, during the period with which we are concerned - the one ranging from the eighth or ninth till the twelfth century - this impact, in so far as it bypasses the intermediary of Islamic writers, was only a subsidiary (though by no means negligible) factor in the constitution and development of Jewish thought within the boundaries of *dār al-islām*.

To my mind, the fact that al-Qirqisānī's explanation of sacrifices is similar to Maimonides' suggests a more precise chain of transmission than is admitted by Pines. As we have seen, al-Qirqisānī says that he made very liberal use of al-Muqammiš's exegetical work, including the latter's Christian heritage. It is likely that Qirqisānī's (and Maimonides') explanation of sacrifices in their historical context, which Pines has shown to derive ultimately from Christian sources, found its way to the Jewish texts via al-Muqammiš.

2) When Maimonides discusses the question of the creation of the world, he dwells on the meaning of the word *bereshīt* ("at the beginning"). He says that it must not be understood as meaning *fi'l-awwal*, since this implies temporal order. It means rather *fi'l mabda'*: this implies that God brought about the creation of the world, but not necessarily that there was some particular point in time at which the world was created.<sup>28</sup> For Maimonides, this distinction is the key to the correct understanding of Gen. 1:1:

The word that implies the sense of *al-mabda'* is *reshīt*. For it derives from [the word] *rosh* [head] [and the head], given its location [on the body] is the *mabda'* of animals. Now the world

<sup>28</sup>*Dalāla*, II/30 (*Guide*, 346).

was not created at a temporal *mabda'*... The correct translation of this verse is: In the *bad'a*... This is the translation that fits in with creation in time.<sup>29</sup>

A similar analysis of this verse and of this word is offered by the ninth century Nestorian Isho'dad of Merv, who relies on the commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia. According to Isho'dad, the first verse of Genesis indicates, "firstly, the beginning of creation and its temporal and finite character; and secondly, the creative activity of God, His eternity and infinity".<sup>30</sup>

(Moses) said "at the beginning" and not "at first", because the word "beginning" signifies anteriority more than the word "first". For "first" is said in relation to that which follows, whereas "beginning", although it is the beginning of something, may nevertheless be said disregarding that which follows, according to the Interpreter.<sup>31</sup>

And like Maimonides, Isho'dad (following the Greek) connects this interpretation with the etymology of the first word of the Bible:

The Greek says:<sup>32</sup> "In the head<sup>33</sup> God has made the heavens and the earth"; meaning [by "in the head"], "before everything", as the head is the first part of the body.<sup>34</sup>

The exegesis of Isho'dad and that of Maimonides have several points in common: they relate the first word of the Bible to the word "head"; they juxtapose *reshit* / "commencement" with *tehillā* / "the first [of something]"; and they connect the wording with the question of temporal creation (although Maimonides' philosophical position is different from that of Isho'dad, in fact quite opposite to it).

Now the etymology *reshit-rosh*, which is used by both Isho'dad and by Maimonides, could be either Syriac/Aramaic or Hebrew,<sup>35</sup> and therefore its

<sup>29</sup>*Dalāla* II/30 (compare *Guide*, 349). The obvious contradiction between Maimonides' starting point and his conclusion at the end of this passage illustrates the difficulty in determining Maimonides' real opinion concerning the creation or eternity of the world; see Klein-Braslavy, S., *Perush ha-Rambam le-sipur beri'at ha-olam* (= *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation*), (Jerusalem, 1987), 114-123.

<sup>30</sup>Isho'dad, 12.

<sup>31</sup>Isho'dad, 13.

<sup>32</sup>On the Greek text used by Isho'dad, see Van den Eynde's Introduction, XXIII.

<sup>33</sup>*Berasha*, a common translation of the Greek: *en arkhein*. (My translation, like the French one, attempts to preserve the etymology, despite its awkwardness in English; see Isho'dad, 14. The excessive literalness of the translation is noted by Van den Eynde, 14, note 1.)

<sup>34</sup>Isho'dad, 13 (text, 12:5-8).

<sup>35</sup>Isho'dad alludes to the Hebrew word *reshit* a few lines before, in a different context (13-14).

ultimate source may have been a Jewish text; but the explicit connection of this etymology with the philosophical discussion could not have come from a midrashic source. Maimonides' discussion of the philosophical question of creation *ex nihilo* versus temporal creation is cast in the language common to the Arabic philosophical texts. Yet, obviously, its connection with the first word of the Bible could not have come from a Muslim source. It is therefore possible that, in this case too, Maimonides' ultimate source was some Christian tradition, which put together the midrash on *bereshit* with the theological discussion of the creation of the world.

In order to draw the picture in all its complexity we must note that what is extant of Qirqisānī's *Commentary on Genesis* does not include this etymology of *bereshit*, and that the translation that Qirqisānī chooses for this word is exactly the one Maimonides rejects: "*fi'l-awwal*". Yet Qirqisānī, too, links the word *bereshit* to the issue of creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>36</sup> It seems therefore that in this case Maimonides did not derive his "Christian" interpretation through the chain al-Muqammiṣ-Qirqisānī. At the present stage of our knowledge, it is impossible to say whether Maimonides received this interpretation via a Jewish source, or whether he had direct access to Christian exegesis, either through books or through personal encounters.

#### IV. LATER CONTACTS BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

The existence of intellectual contact between Jews and Christians under Islamic rule throughout the 10th and 11th centuries is an attested fact.<sup>37</sup> The question is again one of quantity: how much contact, and with how much influence?

A rather famous case may offer us some clues towards an answer. It is described by Joseph ben Yehudah Ibn 'Aqnīn (d. 1220) in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Ibn 'Aqnīn derives it from Shmū'el ben Ḥofnī (d. 1013), who relates the following story about his son-in-law, Hai Gaon (d. 1038):

One day, during the study session, it happened that someone

<sup>36</sup>Ben Shammai, Vol. II, p 19, Appendix 1, fragment 1; "*fa-qawluhu fi 'l-awwal ya'nī anna dhālika awwal lā awwal qablahu ghayr al-khāliq wa-annahu ibtada'ahu wa-khalaqahu a'nī al-'alama lā min shay' wa-lā fī zamān*".

<sup>37</sup>Beside well known instances of multi-religious *majālis* (such as al-Humaydīs *Jadwā al-muqtabas fi dhikr wulāt al-andalus*, al-Tanjī, (ed), ,Cairo, 1352H), 101-102), there is ample evidence that Jews consulted Syriac texts. See, for instance, *Perush ha-geonim le-seder taharot* (= *The Gaonic Commentary On the Order Toharot Attributed to Rav Hai Gaon*), Epstein, J.N. (ed), (Jerusalem, 1982), Introduction, 51, 72-73, 132. I am indebted for this reference to Uri Melammed.

mentioned the verse *shemen rosh al yani roshi*.<sup>38</sup> The people present disagreed concerning its interpretation,<sup>39</sup> so Hai Gaon directed Rav Mazliaḥ to approach the Christian Katholikos and ask him what tradition he possessed concerning the interpretation of this verse. Rav Mazliaḥ resented this request, and Rav Hai saw that it [i.e. the request] was very difficult for him. So the Gaon rebuked him, saying, "Our holy ancestors and forefathers used to search among the various peoples for variant readings and for interpretations. As it is well known and told, they used to ask even shepherds and cow-herds!" Thereafter he [i.e., Rav Mazliaḥ] approached him [i.e., the Katholikos] and asked him, and he [i.e., the Katholikos] told him that the reading they have in his Syriac language is: *mashḥa dareshi'a lā 'ad reshey*.<sup>40</sup>

A close examination of this oft-cited story sheds light on several aspects of Jewish-Christian contacts in the eleventh century.

(1) It reflects deeply ambivalent feelings towards consulting Christians: apparently, the more prominent Jews were more open in this matter, while others were more reluctant. It took the authority of Hai Gaon to bring about this consultation.

(2) The Syriac reading (like that of the Septuagint) relects an original (*rasha'*) which differs from the Masoretic text (*rosh*). The Gaon seems to be aware that different understandings of the verse result from different readings.<sup>41</sup> He explicitly says that one of the reasons for turning to the gentiles is the search for variant readings (*lughāt*).

(3) Apart from the *lughāt*, one is authorized to turn to non-Jews for the interpretations (*shurūḥ*). But as the story clearly shows, this was not an everyday practice at the time of Hai Gaon. I believe that it was not even the regular practice when a particularly difficult text presented itself, and that Christians were consulted only when there was a specific reason to suspect that they had something to contribute to the discussion.

<sup>38</sup>Ps. 141:5.

<sup>39</sup>The difficulty of the verse is also reflected in its English translations: *The Authorised Version* translates: "It shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head", whereas in the *The New English Bible* the same verse is rendered: "My head shall not be anointed with the oil of wicked men".

<sup>40</sup>Ibn Aqnin, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Halkin, A., (Jerusalem, 1964), 494. For the Syriac text, compare *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta version*, pt. II, fas. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 164.

<sup>41</sup>Sa'adya's translation of this verse differs considerably, in the understanding of the words as well as in the punctuation, from the Syriac. He translates: "*dhāka duhn ra's wa-lā yantahirni*" (Sa'adya, *Psalms*, 278).

I would like to conclude by suggesting one area that was probably considered to be, so to speak, a Christian speciality, namely, Christology and anything related to the Messiah. The verse discussed in Hai Gaon's *majlīs* alludes to anointing oil, and this may be the reason why the Gaon thought the Katholikos might possess some helpful tradition.

In the case of Ps. 141, the Christological connotations are rather vague, but the phenomenon of consulting the Christian exegesis for verses related to the Messiah is attested in a still unpublished Judaeo-Arabic *Commentary on Psalms*.<sup>42</sup> Commenting on Ps. 80:16-18,<sup>43</sup> the anonymous exegete says:

As to his words: "and the son thou madest strong for thyself", in the Syriac tradition it is said that this is Christ, for whom the author of this Psalm prays, by virtue of prophetic inspiration. The Hebrews say that it is rather the awaited king...and he is also the Messiah, but the difference between "was" and "will be" is well known.<sup>44</sup>

As this commentary clearly shows, Jews were aware that Christians had a store of traditions concerning Christology, and considered it worthwhile to check these traditions, even though they did not necessarily accept them.

## CONCLUSION

The Muslim impact on Judaeo-Arabic thought is uncontested: it was constant and it affected all levels of the Jewish literary activity in Muslim countries.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the Christian influence appears to have been uneven, and to have worked in more subtle ways than the Muslim influence. After a short period of apparently extensive Christian influence in the ninth and early tenth centuries, Jewish acquaintance with the Syriac Christian tradition was preserved through the writings of earlier Jewish authors or

<sup>42</sup>St. Petersburg, II Firk. Heb. Ara. I. 1430, No 45169 in the Institute for Hebrew Manuscripts of the National Library in Jerusalem. I am indebted to Zvi Langermann for the reference to this passage.

<sup>43</sup>"Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself". Isho'dad of Merv neatly ignores any Christological interpretation of this verse, when he says: "He calls the people 'man' and 'son of man'" (*Commentaire d'Iso'dad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament, VI. Psaumes*, Van den Eynde, C., (ed & tr), (Louvain, 1981, CSCO Vol. 433, 124; trans. Vol. 434, 136). On Isho'dad's rejection of allegorical interpretations (following Theodore of Mopsuestia), see Vosté, J.-M., "Mar Iso'dad de Merv sur les Psaumes", *Biblica*, 25 (1944), 261-291, and esp. 282.

<sup>44</sup>Fol. 41a. See also 53b.

<sup>45</sup>On the Muslim influence on exegetical literature in Judaeo-Arabic, see, for instance, Moshe Zucker's Hebrew introduction to his edition and translation of Sa'adya's *Commentary on Genesis*, (New York, 1984), 35-69; see also Drori, R., *The Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century*, (Tel-Aviv, 1988), (in Hebrew).

through occasional renewed contacts. Any attempt to depict the formation of Judaeo-Arabic literature without a proper understanding of the influence exerted upon it by Syriac Christianity is bound to produce a distorted picture. In the quest for a better appreciation of this evasive Syriac influence, the exegetical literature promises the clearest evidence of its presence and its scope.<sup>46</sup>

#### ABBREVIATIONS OF FREQUENTLY QUOTED WORKS

- Anwār* = Ya'qūb al-Qirgīsānī, *Kitāb al-anwār wa'l-marāqib, Code of Karaite Law, I-V*, Nemoi, L., (ed), (New York, 1939-1943).
- Bar Koni = Théodore bar Koni, *Livre des Scolies (recension d'Urmiah)*, Hespel, R., (ed & tr), (CSCO 447-448, Louvain, 1983).
- Chiesa = Chiesa, B., *Creazione e caduta dell'uomo nell'esegesi giudeo-araba medievale*, (Studi Biblici 85; Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1989).
- Dalāla* = Moshe ben Maimūn, *Dalālat al-ha'irīn*, Munk, S. & Joel, I., (eds) (Jerusalem, 1929).
- Guide* = Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Pines, S., (tr), (Chicago/London, 1963).
- Hirschfeld = Hirschfeld, H., *Qirgīsani Studies*, (Jews' College Publications, VI, London, 1918).
- IM* = *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqannīs's Twenty Chapters ('Ishtir'ūn Maqāla)*, Stroumsa, S., (ed & tr), (Leiden; Brill, 1989).
- Isho'dad = *Commentaire d'Iso'dad de Merv sur l'ancien Testament, I. Genèse*, Vosté, J.-M. & Van den Eynde, C., (eds) (CSCO Vol. 126, Scriptores Syri 67; Louvain, 1950). French trans. Cestas van den Eynde (CSCO 156; Louvain, 1955).
- Sa'adya, *Psalms* = *Tehilim 'im tirgūm ve-perush ha-Ga'on Sa'adya ben Yosef fayyūmī*, Qafih, J., (ed), (Jerusalem, 1966).
- Vajda = Vajda, G., "Du prologue de Qirgīsānī a son commentaire sur la Genèse", in Black, M. & Fohrer, G., (eds), *In Memoriam Paul Kahle*, (Berlin, 1968), 222-231.

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