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The Majlis

Interreligious Encounters  
in Medieval Islam

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vocalize the consonants, *ʿarada ʿalayya*, “he showed me.” Others suggest *ʿurida ʿalā*, “he was shown.” They translate: “When the ... Vizier ... was shown a translation ...” They believe that an exalted vizier is unlikely to have shown a Jewish scholar a translation that was made at his request and that it is more plausible the vizier was shown that translation by others in the course of the *majlis*. However, the reappearance of the first person towards the end of the introduction (“I was saddened by what I heard and by what I saw...”) makes our interpretation equally plausible, we believe.

A second and more crucial textual difficulty is to be found in line 13 of the first page of the introduction. These are the words *mā wajaba ʿindahū*. We take the word *mā* to be the negative particle and understand these words to mean “ought not to have vilified ...” Some scholars suggest that the *mā* is a conjunctive pronoun. They understand the problematic sentence as follows: “When the Most Illustrious Vizier Yaʿqūb ibn Yūsuf, may God sustain his high station, showed me (or: was shown) a translation made by a certain Jewish translator, of the ‘Book of Prayers and Blessings’ ... which caused him and the company of thinkers ... to vilify, ridicule, and scorn the entire nation ...” The alternative reading does not solve the difficulties pertaining to the structure of this long, convoluted sentence, written by a man who apologizes for his lack of expertise in Arabic. It simply poses additional difficulties. Furthermore, on this reading, the sentence is devoid of any tone of censure towards the vizier, whose callous attitude towards Judaism is what seems to have driven the author to write the apologetic treatise in the first place.

Whatever the resolution of these philological difficulties, we have an important, first-hand testimony to the existence and nature of a *majlis* in the court of a high ranking official in early Fatimid times. The unusual congruence of Muslim literary accounts (al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Khallikān) and a first-hand Jewish text from the Geniza confirms that Ibn Killis’s *majlis* did, indeed, exist and that it was a forum in which different religions were discussed. Neither al-Maqrīzī nor the Geniza account rests exclusively upon a literary “topos.” Ibn Killis, veteran of the *majālis* of his first Fatimid patron, Caliph al-Muʿizz, where religions were discussed and debated, seems to have replicated the “institution” in his own court.

## Responses to Islamic Polemics by Jewish Mutakallimūn in the Tenth Century\*

David Sklare

Historians have generally thought that Jews did not write books to directly refute Islamic claims. Indeed, one can only point to two relatively late Hebrew works, a responsum, *Maʿamar ʿal Yishmaʿel*, attributed to Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret (c. 1235–c. 1310) and the section on Islam in Simeon ben ūemah Duran’s (1361–1444) *Keshet u-Magen*.<sup>1</sup> Both of these authors came from Christian Spain and, not knowing Arabic, depended on translations of Islamic sources. Recent manuscript research, however, has shown that a small corpus of books of this sort was in fact produced by Jews living under Islam. The works under consideration all stem from the cultural context of tenth-century Baghdad and specifically the sessions for discussion of religious and theological matters (*majlis al-kalām*, pl. *majālis*) conducted there. Authors known to have written such works are the Karaites Yaʿqūb al-Qirqisānī, Abū ʿI-Husayn ibn Mashiah, and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr and the Rabbanite, Samuel ben Hofni Gaon.<sup>2</sup>

The first two, al-Qirqisānī and Ibn Mashiah, lived in Baghdad during the first part of the tenth century and we only know of their books from reports

\* An earlier version of this article was presented to the Workshop on Interreligious Polemics held at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in July, 1995. I would like to thank Prof. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh for inviting me to take part in this workshop and to the participants for their helpful comments. I also express my gratitude to Prof. Sarah Stroumsa who so generously and graciously brought to my attention a number of the Firkovitch manuscripts discussed here.

1. Ibn Adret’s work was published in J. Perles, *R. Salomo b. Abraham b. Adereth*, Breslau, 1863. On it, see also M. Schreiner, “Die Apologetische Schrift des Shlomo b. Aderet gegen einen Muhammedaner,” *ZDMG* 48 (1894), pp. 39–42. The section on Islam in Duran’s *Keshet u-Magen* was edited by M. Steinschneider in *Ozar Tov* (= *Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums*) 8 (1881), Berlin. A German translation was published by Steinschneider in the same *Magazin* 7 (1880).

2. Mention should also be made of a very short work against the Muslim claim of *tahrif* written by the Karaite ʿAlī ibn Sulaymān who lived in Jerusalem and Cairo at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth centuries. This text shows an acquaintance with the Qurʾān. It



about them. Al-Qirīsānī included a short précis of his arguments against Islam in his legal code, *Kitāb al-Anwār wal-Marāqib* and tells us there that he has written another book concerning the prophecy of Muḥammad.<sup>3</sup> Ibn Mashiah's book is mentioned by Yūsuf al-Baṣīr as being the only previous work on the subject which he was able to find.<sup>4</sup> (This, by the way, would indicate that by the latter part of the tenth century, al-Qirīsānī's book was hard to come by and already at that time was not known to interested scholars.)

The latter two authors, Yūsuf al-Baṣīr and Samuel ben Hofni, lived in the second half of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh. It has been possible to reconstruct their polemical works from manuscript fragments found in collections deriving from the Cairo Genizah and in the Firkovitch collections of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Samuel ben Hofni's work, *Kitāb Naskh ash-Sharḥ* (*Treatise on Abrogation of the Law*), a significant part of the book has survived, while it has been possible to piece together almost all of Yūsuf al-Baṣīr's book on the inimitability of the Qur'ān (*i'jāz al-qur'ān*).<sup>6</sup> In addition to these works, there are also small fragments of another three or four books of this sort which would appear to belong to the same cultural and intellectual context but which at this point in time remain anonymous. A caveat should be made concerning the state of our knowledge of this genre of polemical works. Research in the Firkovitch collections is only at its beginning and there is still much work to be done even with the collections of Cairo Genizah material. It is therefore most likely that more manuscript material relevant to these books will be found and more will be known about them.

3 Chap. 15 of the third *maqāla* of *Kitāb al-Anwār wal-Marāqib* is devoted to a response to the Muslims (L. Nemoy, ed., New Haven-New York, 1940, Vol. 2, pp. 292-301). He mentions his book on Muḥammad's prophecy on pages 284 (ردت جرت كتابا في إفساد نبوة محمد) 292, 301 (وقد جرت كتابا في إفساد نبوة محمد) 292, 301 (وقد أنشئت ذلك بابا في الكتاب الذي ألف عليهم وذكر في أيضا مسائل جرت وبين قوم من متكلميهم) 304. The text was first published by I. Friedländer, "Qirīsānī's Polemik gegen den Islam," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 26 (1912), pp. 77-110.

4 See the text quoted below in n. 18. Most of the little information known about Ibn Mashiah can be found in S. Poznanski, "The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadia Gaon," sec. 6 (reprinted in P. Birnbaum, *Karaite Studies*, New York, 1971, pp. 145-146).

5 The following abbreviations have been used below in references to manuscripts: BL = British Library; T-S = Taylor Schechter collection of the Cambridge University Library; II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. = Second Firkovitch collection of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, Hebrew-Arabic section. (The Russian National Library has recently ceased to use the name Firkovitch for these collections, but the name has been retained here in order to preclude confusion.)

The texts quoted in the notes below are given as found in the manuscripts, except for diacritical marks, usually lacking in the manuscripts, which have been added for the ease of the reader. Lacunae in the manuscripts have been indicated by square brackets.

6 Publication of both of these works with translation is planned after an initial survey of the

A number of reasons have been pointed out to explain why Jews would have refrained from composing books refuting Islam.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most salient was the fear of provoking the ruling religious group and then suffering from their reprisals.<sup>8</sup> A second reason was the lack of a common ground of discourse. The Christians and the Jews shared a Scripture and throughout the Middle Ages they fought a war of verses on a common battlefield. In this sense, Christianity presented a theologically greater threat to Judaism than Islam in that it was seen as attempting to take over for itself God's revelation to Israel. Islam, while claiming like Christianity that the old covenant had been abrogated, had little theological concern for Jewish scriptures.<sup>9</sup> The "playing field," so to speak, for Muslim-Jewish polemics was thus rather constricted. So, while Jews did relate to Islam in an occasional fashion, in responsa, legal works, theological works such as Judah Halevi's *Cuzari*, exegesis, sermons or in histories, they produced few works devoted to responding to the Muslims' polemic.<sup>10</sup>

I review these well-known points in order to emphasize the importance of the cultural context in which the books under consideration were produced. Among the intellectual elite of Buyid Baghdad there was a relatively high degree of tolerance which at times even bordered on skepticism.<sup>11</sup> Meetings

7 For a recent discussion of this phenomenon, see H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, Princeton, 1992, pp. 6-8.

8 Maimonides is quite explicit about this concern at the end of his *Epistle to Yemen* in which he responded to Muslim polemical claims: "Read it (the Epistle) at public gatherings . . . Take adequate precautions lest its contents be divulged to the Gentiles by an evil person and mishap overtake us. When I began writing this letter I had some misgivings about it, but they were overruled by my conviction that the public welfare takes precedence over one's personal safety." (Translation by B. Cohen in A. Halkin, ed., *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen*, New York, 1952, p. xx.)

9 Muslims thus had little interest in studying the Jewish Bible. Muslim attitudes towards the Bible and criticism of it has been discussed by H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*. In general, the amount of Muslim polemical literature directed against the Jews is fairly small. Additional recent studies of Muslim polemics include: M. Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics between Islam and Judaism," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, pp. 103-138; C. Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Leiden, 1996; H. Lazarus-Yafeh, ed., *Muslim Authors on Jews and Judaism: The Jews Among Their Muslim Neighbors* (Heb.), Jerusalem, 1996 (includes an updated version of Perlmann's bibliography).

10 A large amount of material of this sort was collected by M. Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache, zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden*, Leipzig, 1877, Appendix VII (pp. 244-389). See also M. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, Princeton, N.J., 1994, Chap. 9 (Interreligious Polemics), and pp. 154-161 (The Jewish Polemical Response to Islam) in particular.

11 The intellectual atmosphere of Baghdad at this time and the flowering of a humanistic culture among certain parts of Baghdadi society has been described by J. Kraemer in his *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, Leiden, 1986. Jewish participation in this Arabic humanistic



of intellectuals from various sects and faiths for polemical debates (*majālis*) provided an institutional framework in which the fear of reprisal was lessened and participants could argue in a relatively free fashion (although there were still limits and, as we will see, the element of caution remained). A common ground of discourse for the Jew and Muslim was furnished by Mu<sup>c</sup>tazilite *Kalām*. All of the authors mentioned above were *mutakallimūn* and they shared with their Muslim counterparts a common view of the world, of how religion and revelation worked, and of particular importance, they shared a common conceptual vocabulary for discussing the epistemology of revelation and traditions.<sup>12</sup>

The general nature of the proceedings of the inter-faith polemical *majālis* was described in the famous account of Ibn Sa<sup>c</sup>dī reported by al-Humaydī.<sup>13</sup> To summarize again what al-Humaydī reports: Ibn Sa<sup>c</sup>dī had traveled from al-Andalus to Baghdad in the latter part of the tenth century. After being cajoled into attending a *majlis al-kalām*, he was appalled at what he found. There were representatives of all of the Islamic sects, pagans, Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians who agreed that only rational argumentation could be used within the framework of their polemical discussion. The use of citations from one's own Scriptures was not permissible since these Scriptures were not accepted as authoritative by all present. Not being accustomed to this sort of openness, Ibn Sa<sup>c</sup>dī fled from the gathering. Unfortunately, this report does not inform us as to how the debate proceeded after its formal opening or about its outcome, leaving us in the dark as to the actual arguments used or how the participants were affected by the disputation.

Here the works of Samuel ben Hofni and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr can shed some light. Both of their books were written to be guides or aids for those who found themselves participating in such polemical *majālis* and thus preserve for us some of the argumentation used by Muslims and Jews. As opposed to literary reports of debates which are likely to be fictional, we can presume that these books reflect a fairly accurate picture of what was actually said or

setting has been described in D. Sklare, *Samuel Ben Hofni and His Cultural World: Texts and Studies*, Leiden, 1996, Chap. 4.

12 For a general discussion of Mu<sup>c</sup>tazilite *Kalām*, see G. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbār*, Oxford, 1971; R.M. Frank, "Several Fundamental Assumptions of the Basra School of the Mu<sup>c</sup>tazila," *Sudāia Islamica* 33 (1971), pp. 5–18; J.R.T.M. Peters, *God's Created Speech: A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Mu<sup>c</sup>tazili Qādī l-Qudāt Abū l-Ḥasan 'Abd al-Jabbār bn Ahmad al-Hamadhāni*, Leiden, 1976. Concerning topics particularly relevant to Jewish-Muslim polemics, see D. Sklare, *Samuel Ben Hofni Gaon*, Chap. 5. Materials concerning the phenomenon of the reason-based *majlis* have been collected in S. Wasserstrom, "The Shi'is are the Jews of Our Community: An Interreligious Comparison Within Sunni Thought," *Israel Oriental Studies* 14 (1994), p. 320, n. 76.

13 Muhammad b. Futuh al-Humaydī, *Jadhwat al-Muqtabis*, ed., M. al-Tanjī, Cairo, 1952, pp. 101–102.

at least the sort of proofs and responses that were utilized.<sup>14</sup> For if they were to be useful guides for someone preparing himself to participate in a dispute, they had to contain a realistic account of what that person could expect to encounter. Furthermore, we know that both Samuel ben Hofni and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr themselves participated in such sessions; in Samuel ben Hofni's case, it was a *majlis* conducted in the presence of a *wazīr*.<sup>15</sup> They were thus intimately acquainted with the realities of the *majlis* and the sort of debate that took place there.

The reality of the polemical *majlis* was not necessarily a pleasant one. This was not because of any rude behavior on the part of the Muslim participants towards the Jews, but because of the impact the debate had on the Jewish audience. This impact is described by al-Baṣīr in the introduction to his book in which he tells the reader of his experience in such a disputation: "Many from among us who converted found that the Muslims had argued elegantly concerning the prophecy of their master in the most embellished and beautiful manner and that there was nothing by which they could refute it. So doubt took possession of them, they went astray and were lost." In this context, al-Baṣīr quotes the verse from Daniel 11:34: "In defeat, they will receive a little help, and many will join them because of smooth words." He then continues, "When I learned about that, I was worn out from enduring (the debate) and the doubts which they brought upon me came to me frequently. So I sought to be by myself in order to think and to request of 'He who has created the world' to set my feet firmly in His law so that I would not cease (from holding

14 Examples of literary reports of debates between Christians and Muslims are discussed by Sidney Griffith in his contribution to this volume. Such works seem to have been meant for internal consumption, to shore up the faith of those shaken by polemical claims. They may have formed a literary genre. See Bo Holmberg, "The Public Debate as a Literary Genre in Arabic Literature," *Orientalia Suecana* 38–39 (1989–1990), pp. 45–53.

15 The participation of Samuel ben Hofni in a debate held by a *wazīr* is reported by al-Baṣīr in his *Naqā 'Alā Shemuel Rās al-Mathība* [Refutation of Samuel (ben Hofni) Head of the Yeshiva] (in ms. II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:3025, f. 38a). Yūsuf al-Baṣīr reports on his own experiences in his book described below. Al-Qirqisāni and Ibn Mashūh also participated in deliberations with Muslims (see the second quote in n. 3 above and n. 22 below) and it is reasonable to suggest that their polemical books also stemmed from their debating experiences. On the participation of Jews in *majālis*, see also D. Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni Gaon*, pp. 100–102, n. 7–9.

It is of interest to note that the Jews also used the term *majlis* for the study sessions of the yeshivot. For example, the author of an anonymous commentary on Psalms comments: כּוּכָה טַמְעָה אֶלְטַעֲדֵי אֶלְטַמְעָרָא רֵאָס אֶלְמַזְבֵּיבָה יִצְחָק בֶּן אֲשֵׁר וְדִיל יִפְסֵר הוּא־אֶלְמוֹמֵר פִּי מְגִילִים כְּלֵאמֹר... II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:1430, quoted in J. Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, Cincinnati-Philadelphia, 1931–1935, Vol. 2, p. 1461, note to Vol. 1, p. 227). Mann suggests that this Isaac b. Asher may have been either the Isaac who was head of the Sura Yeshiva in the period after Hai Gaon's death or the thirteenth-century Isaac ha-Kohen



on to it), as it is said: 'Make my feet firm through Your promise; [do not let iniquity dominate me.]' (Ps. 119:133). I then returned to the *majlis* with renewed strength and it then occurred to me what I should say and I saw what I could use in order to respond.<sup>16</sup>

From this report, we can see that a number of Jews were so impressed by the Muslims' arguments for the authenticity of Muhammad's prophecy that they converted to Islam.<sup>17</sup> It would seem from al-Basīr's words that it was not only the content or the bottom line of the Muslim proofs which swayed the Jewish audience, but also the aesthetic element of the debate, the elegance of the argument. It would also appear from this report that the conversion was not because the Jewish intellectuals lost the debate and were thus forced by the Muslims to convert, but rather it seems to have been the logical outcome of their being unable to respond to the Muslims' argumentation. Even someone of the intellectual stature of al-Basīr was worn down by the debate and found himself overcome by doubts. Therefore, even if the Muslims were on their best behavior during the disputation and the Jews were allowed complete freedom to argue their side of the debate, the *majlis* contained within it a danger for the Jewish participants. As al-Basīr put it, the Muslims' orate argumentation was "a great trial." There was therefore a distinct need for manuals to prepare Jews for the rigors of the *majlis* debate. Al-Basīr himself felt the lack of some source of help, either from a book or from a person, and was thus moved to write his own short guide.<sup>18</sup>

It might be possible to compare the quality of the debate in the sort of *majlis* reflected in these works with what we know of other debates in which Jews participated. In addition to the Baghdadī *majālīs* already mentioned (and here I should add that Saadya Gaon is also known to have participated

16 וְהוּא אֵן נִמְקָן דִּילְךָ וּפְרַעוּ פִי דִּילְךָ כִּן וְנִלְווּ עֵלְיוּ רַבִּי בְּהַלְקִיתָ וְכַתִּיר מִנָּה מִן רַבִּי לְהַלְלָהּ וְהִגִּיד מֵאָה קֵד נִמְקָה מִן אֲלֻכָאָם פִּי נְבוֹה צִאחְתָּהּ עֲלֵי גַוְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ פִּלְם יִכֵּן מֵאָה יִדְעָה דִּילְךָ עֵן נִפְסָה סוּמְכַת אֲלִשְׁבָה מִנָּה פְצִל וְהֵלֵךְ. וְלֹמַר אֲמַלְעָה עֲלֵי דִילְךָ וְרַבְלִית בְּמִקְרָאָתָהּ וְכֹאֲתָה אֲלִשְׁבָה אֱלֹהֵי יְהוּדָיון עֲלֵי תַחְדָּאוֹלֵי פְכַת אֲטַלְב אֲתַפְרֵד בְּנַפְסִי לִלְפִנֵּי פִי דִילְךָ וְכִסְלֵה בְרֵאשִׁית קִדְמִי פִי שְׂרִיעֶתָה וְאֵן לֹא אֹהַל כִּק אֱלֹהֵי עֵ אֵלֶם פְּעַמֵּי הֵן בְּאַמְרוֹתֶיךָ. פְּכַת אֲרִגְעֵי אֵלֵי אֲלִמְגִילֵס גִּידִיד אֲלִקְוֵה יִקֵּד סוּחָה לִי מֵאָה אַעֲרֹדִי בְּהִי I:3022).

17 Al-Basīr at one point refers to his Mu'azilite opponents as "those who cause to stumble" (II Firk. Y evr.-Ar. I:3022, f. 16b): וְשׁוֹחֵק צְמוֹת עֵסִי וְגִידְרֵמָה: וְיִכֵּן מֵאָה יִדְעָה דִּילְךָ עֵן נִפְסָה... קִד בְּשׂוֹרָה בְּהַ וְשׁוֹרָה לֵה לֵה וְהוּ אֲפַצִּיל מִן גִּמְרֵדָה פְּוֹדֵה לֹא מִחֲאֵלָה אַעֲסִי מִן תַּחְדָּוִיָה וְנִמְנָה וְהִנְאֵה אֲלִמְגִילֵס לִיעֵיִן אֱלֹהֵיָה בְּהִי אֲכַתְרוּ אֲלֻכָאָם פִּי דִילְךָ וְעֵסִימוּ פִיָּה רִגְאֵן אֵן יִתְבַּת לֵהֵם בְּהִי אַמְרֵי וְפִי מִתְלֵ דִילְךָ קִזְלֵ (אלְהָבָה וְהוּהוּ בְּוִה דִּיָּן וְהִנֵּה סוּחֵים אֹתוֹ תַפְלֵ)

18 מִלְמָה עֲלֵמָת אֵן לִיס כֵּל אַחַד יִתְמַכֵּן מִן דְּפַע דִּילְךָ עֵן נִפְסָה וְעֵלְמָת עֵסִי אֲלִמְתָּה בְּמֵאָה קִד נִמְקָה מִן דִּילְךָ וְלֵם יִכֵּן לְאַחְזָבָה כֵּלָאָם פִּי דִילְךָ פִּירְגֵעֵ אֲלִמְתָּה וְאֲלִמְתָּה אֱלִיָּה פְּכַת דִּילְךָ וְאֲקִלְקֵי לֵאֲנִי כְּתִיר מִן אֲלֹאֲקֵת כְּתָה אֲתִמְנָה אֵן יִכֵּן פִּי דִילְךָ אֲלִקְוֵה כְּתָב פִּירְגֵעֵ אֱלִיָּה וְאֲקִיבָה מִנָּה אֵן אֲנִסְאֵן אֲלִקְוֵה פִּסְמַע מִנָּה וְלֵם אֲגִיד אֲלֵה לְשׁוֹרָה אֲבִי אֲלִחְסִין אֲבִן מִשִׁיָּה רִיאֵתִי וְקִרְאָתָה שִׁיָּה מִמָּה קִזְלֵ וְלֵם יִכֵּן יִפְסִיגֵי דִילְךָ לִכֵּן אֲלֵהָ תִי לִפְנֵי וְכַפֵּה וְרִאֵתִי תֵלִיָּתִי הִדִּיָּה אֲלִמְפִּתְצֵר פִּי דִילְךָ אֲלִמְפִּתְצֵר בְּהִי אֲלִמְפִּתְצֵר מִנָּה תַעִי רִיאֵתִי אֵיָּה פִּיָּה עֵסִי אֲלִמְפִּתְצֵר וְכַפֵּה וְרִאֵתִי תֵלִיָּתִי הִדִּיָּה אֲלִמְפִּתְצֵר פִּי דִילְךָ אֲלִמְפִּתְצֵר מִנָּה תַעִי רִיאֵתִי אֵיָּה פִּיָּה עֵסִי אֲלִמְפִּתְצֵר (ibid., f. 1a-b).

in the *majlis* of the *wazir* ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā<sup>19</sup>), we know of *majālīs* conducted in the Fātimid realm in which Jews participated. Most notable in this regard is an anonymous text in which it is told how the Jewish prayers were derided and criticized in the *majlis* of the Fātimid *wazir* Ibn Killis.<sup>20</sup> This work, which has a very Muʿtazilite quality to it, was then written in order to defend Jewish prayer and, evidently, Judaism as a whole. Yefet ben ʿElī in his commentary on Daniel also mentions *majālīs* which were ostensibly held to examine various religions (which he calls *majālīs al-nazar fi dhikr al-madhāhib*), but which were actually conducted by Fātimid propagandists who attacked Judaism. Jews were generally forced to attend these sessions and quite understandably came to hate them.<sup>21</sup> If we can generalize on the basis of such slim evidence, it would seem that in the Fātimid *majālīs* the attack on Judaism was much more frontal and aggressive than what we find in Baghdad. From Yūsuf al-Basīr's book, it would appear that the Muslims' side of the debate did not include attacks on Judaism *per se* (except to prove that it had been abrogated). Rather, their argument seems to have concentrated on proving the authenticity of Muhammad's prophecy to the Jews. Al-Basīr thus did not feel it necessary to provide his readers with a means for structuring a Jewish apologetic.

In addition to the formal confrontations in the *majlis*, the cultural atmosphere of tenth-century Baghdad also encouraged conversations or debates between individuals of various faiths. In this case, of course, the nature of the dialogue depended considerably on the personalities of the people involved. Just to give one example I might mention the discussions the Christian theologian Abū ʿAlī ʿĪsā ibn Zurʿa conducted with his Jewish friend, Abū ʿl-Khayr Dāwūd ibn Mūsaj, Bishr b. Finhās ibn Shuʿayb and with our Ibn Mashiah.<sup>22</sup>

19 This is reported by al-Masʿūdī, *al-Tanbīh wal-Ishrāf*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1894, pp. 112–114.

20 The initial publication was in M. Cohen and S. Somekh, "In the Court of Yaʿqūb ibn Killis: A Fragment from the Cairo Genizah," *JQR* 80 (1990), pp. 283–314. The theological section of the fragment was published in S. Somekh, "Fragments of a Polemic Treatise from the Cairo Genizah" (Heb.), in I. Gluska and Ts. Kessar, eds., *Sefer Shivtiel*, Tel Aviv, 1992, pp. 141–159, and see also their article in the present volume.

21 See S.M. Stern, "Fatimid Propaganda Among Jews According to the Testimony of Yefet b. ʿAlī the Karaite," in his *Studies in Early Islamism*, Jerusalem-Leiden, 1983, pp. 84–95.

22 Ibn Zurʿa wrote a treatise explaining the basic differences between Judaism and Christianity at the request of Bishr ibn Shuʿayb (published in P. Spath, ed., *Vingt Traités Philosophiques et Apologetiques d'Auteurs Arabes Chrétiens du IX<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, Cairo, 1929, pp. 19–52), in which he also mentions his contacts with Dāwūd ibn Mūsaj (op. cit., p. 47). His debates with Ibn Mashiah, who was evidently a rather disputatious character, are mentioned by Ibn al-Hittī (C. Margoliouth, "Ibn al-Hittī's Arabic Chronicle of Karaite Doctors," *JQR* o.s. 14 (1902), p. 434). One might also mention the much earlier debate on the issue of *naskh* between an-Nazzām (d. 846) and a Jew named Yassā ibn Sālih which, however, might be a literary fiction. This was published in L. Cheikho, *Vingt traités théologiques*



The point to be made here is that in this cultural milieu, contacts of various sorts between intellectuals from different religions were not uncommon.<sup>23</sup>

After this rather lengthy introduction, I would like to turn to Samuel ben Hofni and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr themselves and their polemical works.<sup>24</sup> Samuel ben Hofni was probably born in the second quarter of the tenth century and died in the year 1013. He was the scion of one of the leading families which made up the oligarchic leadership of the gaonic yeshivot and was originally a member of the Yeshivah of Pumbedita.<sup>25</sup> Sometime in the middle of the last decade of the tenth century, he was appointed to be the Head of the Yeshivah of Sura as part of the effort to keep it open and perhaps also to settle the political tensions which existed within Pumbedita itself. Samuel ben Hofni thus became one of the leaders of Rabbanite Jewry. By this point in time, the yeshivot of both Sura and Pumbedita had moved to Baghdad and it was thus easier for their members to be part of the city's intellectual life. Samuel ben Hofni was very prolific, producing more than sixty books in the areas of law, biblical exegesis, legal theory, polemics and *Kalām*. His works show him to have been deeply immersed in Arabic intellectual culture.

He was quite clearly a follower of the Basran school of the Muʿtazila and can be considered the first to introduce Muʿtazilite thought into Jewish literature in a full-fledged manner. Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, who was his younger contemporary, met him in Baghdad and even recorded for us the name of Samuel's teacher in *Kalām*, an individual named Ibn Tihān or Thayhān, with whom Samuel was said to have studied the *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl* of Ibn Khallād (d. c. 950).<sup>26</sup> Al-Baṣīr also tells us that he was forced to write a work criticizing

<sup>23</sup> *d'auteurs Arabes Chrétiens*, Beirut, 1920, pp. 68–70 and is translated and analyzed in J. Wansbrough, *The Sectararian Milieu*, Oxford, 1978, pp. 110–112.

<sup>24</sup> For further examples, see Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, pp. 13, 59, 75–86.

<sup>25</sup> A fuller description of the known details of Samuel ben Hofni's life and intellectual activities can be found in D. Sklare, *Samuel Ben Hofni Gaon and His Cultural World: Texts and Studies*, Leiden, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> At present, the best survey of the gaonate, its literature and its institutions is S. Assaf's somewhat outdated work, *Tequfat ha-Gaonim ve-Sifrutah*, Jerusalem, 1955. A survey based on current scholarship will be soon available with R. Brody's forthcoming *Zion Between the Rivers: The Geonim of Babylonia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997. A four-volume study of the gaonic period (a narrative history plus three volumes of genizah documents) by Moshe Gil entitled *Be-Malkhut Yishma'el bi-Tequfat ha-Geonim (In the Kingdom of Ishmael in the Gaonic Period)* will also be published in 1997. Pumbedita was later known as Anbar, possibly to be identified with present-day al-Fallūja west of Baghdad. Sura was located south of Baghdad near the diffluence of the al-Nīl canal and the east branch of the Euphrates.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Baṣīr's report of his meeting with Samuel ben Hofni is found in his *Naqd ʿalā Shemuel Rās al-Mathība*; לביאור אלמנטים: ודאי אליבא סלך מסלכה דודא עליה עלי מא ילוח ... בל דדיא לביאור אלמנטים: ודדיא עלי רבי יעקב פאנן תרזאן אלקותי בה בבגדאד קיל אנה דרס עליה שוח אצול בן כילאור ולקד כלמני

Samuel ben Hofni because of the great impression his works on *Kalām* had made on some of the Karaites. While Samuel ben Hofni may have had a reputation as a *mutakallim*, al-Baṣīr says that he discussed an issue of *Kalām* with Samuel and found his responses to be rather weak. This, however, might be the reaction of a young upstart.

Yūsuf al-Baṣīr might be considered Samuel ben Hofni's Karaite counterpart.<sup>27</sup> He was apparently born in Baṣra in the last part of the tenth century and after a possible interlude in Baghdad, he moved to Jerusalem in order to join the fertile and exciting Karaite community which had been established there at the beginning of the century.<sup>28</sup> In Jerusalem he studied with Yūsuf ibn Nūh and became one of the leading legal authorities and theologians of the community. He evidently died in Jerusalem some time shortly after the year 1040. He, like Samuel ben Hofni, was quite prolific, producing important works in the areas of law, legal theory and *Kalām*. He seems to have had a particularly polemical bent and wrote a number of books against the Rabbanites (including the work mentioned above against Samuel ben Hofni), Muslims and Samaritans, but apparently not against the Christians. He, too, was a thoroughly Basran Muʿtazilite. The references to books by other authors in his major *Kalām* work, *Kitāb al-Muhtawī*, show that he kept up to date on the most recent literature in the field.<sup>29</sup>

יובא פי מסלה בן עלם אילכלאם פוגי'ת זן זעק נפסה מא לם אבן אטינה בה לאני מצי'ת אלי אלעיאק ואלתיקת בה בעד מא עסיס אטמה במא צננה ונמק כתבה באלכלאם ולם יכין מן עאדה גי'רה מתיל דילך ואנא דירכת מתיל דהיא לאן מן סאלני בקיך כלמה ערפני עטימה פי נפוס בעיך אלקראיין פצילא ען מביא'פיה'ת וטינו אן אליך קד אורדה ממה קד תפאצה בה בדיכר תואתר אליכ'ב וכון אלקראיין מפבוקן אילגלא אלי סאיך

<sup>27</sup> מא דירכה מן אלשה אלקוי'ב פי אנפסתם פאחמג'ת אן אבן רכאכה דילך 52b). On Ibn Khallād, the pre-eminent disciple of Abū Hāshim, see the article by J. Schacht in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Vol. 3, p. 832.

<sup>27</sup> For further information on al-Baṣīr and his writings, see D. Sklare, "Yūsuf al-Baṣīr: Theological Aspects of His Halakhic Works," in D. Frank, ed., *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, and Identity*, Leiden, 1995, pp. 249–270. Al-Baṣīr's major work of *Kalām*, *Kitāb al-Muhtawī*, was published by G. Vajda, *Al-Kitāb al-Muhtawī de Yūsuf al-Baṣīr*, ed. D. Blumenthal, Leiden, 1985. See the reviews by H. Ben-Shammai in *Kiryat Sefer* 62 (1988), pp. 407–426 (referred to below as Ben-Shammai, "Review") and B. Chiesa, "Due note di letteratura karaïta: I. II 'Kitāb al-Muhtawī,'" *Hemoch* 10 (1988), pp. 355–376.

<sup>28</sup> For secondary literature on this community and its central figures, see S. Poznanski, "The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadiyah Gaon," reprinted in *Karaite Studies*, ed. P. Birnbaum (New York, 1971), pp. 142–183 in particular; Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (Philadelphia, 1935), II:3–155; Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634–1099* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 784–820; H. Ben-Shammai, "The Karaites," in *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period (638–1099)*, eds. J. Prawer and H. Ben-Shammai, Jerusalem, 1996, pp. 201–224.

<sup>29</sup> He refers a number of times to the writings of his older contemporary ʿAbd al-Jabbār (c. 935–1025), the main representative of the Basran school of the Muʿtazila at that time, and of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's student, Abū Muhammad al-Labbād. Al-Baṣīr also wrote a commentary on al-Labbād's *Kitāb al-Uṣūl*. See H. Ben-Shammai, "Review," p. 424.



As mentioned above, the book by Samuel ben Hofni which interests us here is his *Kitāb Naskh ash-Shar*.<sup>30</sup> As its title indicates, this work deals with the Muslim claim that the Torah has been abrogated by the subsequent revelations of Jesus and Muhammad.<sup>31</sup> The impetus for writing the book was a query from someone whom Samuel refers to as “the distinguished Shaykh from among the people of learning and culture.” This scholar had evidently experienced the rigors of the polemical debate and sought guidance. We can hear the echoes of the battle in the book’s introduction where Samuel writes: “I have written these ten chapters to be a weapon in the hands of our compatriots who are fighting with the nations” and he then quotes the verse from Isaiah 49:2: “He made my mouth like a sharpened blade, He hid me in the shadow of His hand, And He made me like a polished arrow; He concealed me in His quiver.”<sup>32</sup> The book evidently met a felt need and was in fairly large demand, as seen by the fact that the fragments of the book found so far represent at least eight different manuscripts, a substantial number by Genizah standards.

As described in the introduction, the book has ten chapters, logically and systematically arranged as are most of Samuel ben Hofni’s works. As in many Muslim treatments of the subject, the first few chapters are devoted to definition of terms. Here, he defines the term *naskh* (abrogation), making use of the same lexicographic examples to be found in Muslim treatises<sup>33</sup>, and discusses at length what sort of Biblical passages and traditions might be theoretically subject to abrogation and which ones not. He then goes on to distinguish abrogation from *badā’* (changing one’s mind due to new circumstances) which both sides of the debate agreed was not admissible of God.

In the sixth and seventh chapters he describes the various schools of thought among the Jews concerning abrogation. He lists three groups. The first are

30 This book is described in Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni Gaon*, pp. 28–29. A fragmentary reconstruction of the text is available in D. Sklare, *The Religious and Legal Thought of Samuel ben Hofni Gaon: Texts and Studies in Cultural History*, Ph. D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1992, Appendix 3. This preliminary edition does not include ms. II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:3024 mentioned below.

31 A good summary of the issue of abrogation (*naskh*) can be found in H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, pp. 35–41; C. Adang, *Muslim Writers of Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, Leiden 1996, pp. 192–222. See also J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, Oxford, 1977, pp. 192–202 and idem, *The Sectarian Milieu*, Oxford, 1978, pp. 109–113. *Naskh* is also an internal issue of Islamic legal theory. Treatments of this perspective can be found in J. Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’ān*, Cambridge, 1977, pp. 46–104; idem, *Abū ‘Uбайд al-Qāsim b. Sallām’s K. al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 1–44.

32 T-S Ar. 47.238, f. 1a.

33 For example, the same examples are found in the *Kitāb al-Nāsikh wal-Mansūkh* by Abū Ja‘far al-Nabhās (d. c. 949) and in the *Kitāb al-Mu‘tamad* by Abū ‘I-Husayn Muhammad al-Baṣrī (d. 1044).

the Karaites who claim that abrogation is rationally impossible, a view connected to their position that the commandments are pre-existent and eternal.<sup>34</sup> The second group, to which belongs the majority of the Jews, maintains that abrogation is rationally admissible, but that revelation and tradition have informed us that it is not possible. And third, there is a small group which holds that abrogation is admissible both from the point of view of reason and revelation. This categorization parallels almost exactly al-Bāqillānī’s (d. 1013) description of the positions of the Rabbanites and the Karaites in his *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*.<sup>35</sup> Al-Bāqillānī also describes a third group, the followers of Abū ‘Isā al-Isfahānī, who accepted Jesus and Muhammad as true prophets sent to their own peoples, but who did not abrogate the Torah. It is possible that this is the third group referred to by Samuel ben Hofni. Samuel himself, of course, belongs to the second group, but he does not base the rejection of abrogation on biblical verses as did some. Instead he claims that his position is supported by an authentic *tawātur* tradition (a tradition transmitted by large groups of people in an unbroken chain) from Moses to the effect that the Torah will not be abrogated.<sup>36</sup>

In the eighth and ninth chapters he disputes with those who would deny the existence or authenticity of such a tradition and claim that the Torah has been indeed abrogated. The debate in these chapters will clearly revolve around the issue of traditions. The tenth chapter thus discusses the nature of traditions and how to determine the veracity of those who transmit them, both by way of intuitive knowledge and by rational proof.

A large part of the ninth chapter has survived and it is of particular interest to us.<sup>37</sup> In this chapter Samuel contends with the arguments of Ibn Khallād and his main pupil, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Baṣrī, whom he refers to as “the leading theologians.” Both of these scholars were indeed central figures of

34 This might be compared to al-Qirṣānī who says that this is true of the Ananites and some of the Karaites who maintained the pre-existence of the commandments because of their concern for the Muslim claim of abrogation. There are also, he says, some Karaites who do not hold that all of the commandments were pre-existent, but still maintain that abrogation is impossible. See *Kitāb al-Anwār*, Vol. 2, pp. 440–441.

35 See al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, ed. R. J. McCarthy, Beirut, 1957, p. 160 who refers only to the Ananites, although many Arabic authors used the term Ananites to include Karaites. On Jews accepting the logical possibility of *naskh*, see H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, p. 39 n. 56 (where she does not mention what al-Bāqillānī says concerning about the difference between Rabbanites and Karaites). On Baqillānī and his polemics against Judaism in *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, see R. Brunschvig, “L’argumentation d’un théologien musulman du Xe siècle contre le Judaïsme,” in *Homenaje a Millás-Vallicrosa*, Barcelona, 1954, pp. 225–241.

36 T-S Ar. 47.238, f. 2b.

37 This section is preserved in ms. II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:3024 which contains the end of the ninth chapter and the beginning of the tenth chapter.







gives us a sense of what sort of argumentation was deemed inappropriate in the contemporary *majlis al-kalām*.

Both Ibn Khallād and Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣīr connected the discussion of the abrogation of the Torah with the idea of the inimitable character of the Qurʾān (*iʿjāz al-qurʾān*). For the Muʿtazila, the only real basis for the veracity of the Qurʾān was its miraculous and incomparable nature.<sup>45</sup> The miracles performed by Muḥammad were known for the most part only through individual reports which could not be accepted as an absolutely trustworthy source of knowledge and hence these miracles could not be used to prove the authenticity of Muḥammad's prophecy. If the Torah of the Jews was to be seen as abrogated, the Muslims had to demonstrate that there was another authentic revelation which did obligate them. Thus *naskh* leads directly to *iʿjāz*. Samuel ben Hofni, however, refused to deal with the subject of *iʿjāz* and gave two reasons for his refusal. First, he claimed rather disingenuously that he need not treat it because he was not asked about it, but then he mentioned what would seem to be the real reason: it was too dangerous to touch the topic.<sup>46</sup> We see here that despite the seeming openness of the humanistic intellectual life in Baghdad, Samuel ben Hofni felt the need to be cautious and did not press the boundaries of dialogue too far.

But where Samuel ben Hofni felt faint of heart, Yūsuf al-Baṣīr pushed boldly forward and tackled the issue of *iʿjāz al-qurʾān* directly, evidently taking the attitude that the best defense is a good offense.<sup>47</sup> His is not a large

45 For example, see ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Kitāb al-Mughnī*, ed. Amīn al-Khulī, Cairo, 1960, Vol. 16, p. 152, where he records that this was the position of Abū ʿAlī and Abū Hāshim. This position of the Muʿtazila is also mentioned by Samuel ben Hofni in his work *Ten Questions* (See Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni Gaon*, p. 256) and by al-Baṣīr in the work described below (ms. II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:3022, f. 2b). The Muʿtazilite reticence concerning Muḥammad's miracles actually may have only been for debating purposes, as ʿAbd al-Jabbār points out: "لأن شيوخنا أئيموا معجزة ودلالة لكتهم لم يجوزوا الاعتقاد في محالة الخالقين" (p. 152, ll. 16-17).

46 "זם צור אלבצירי בעד דהיא אלי אלכלאם פאן אלקיאן מעניז וליס בנתיאר אן הנכלם עליה פיה לוידין א' פיה Ezra reports that Samuel ben Hofni did deal with the issue of *iʿjāz* both in his *Nasakh al-Sharʿ* and in his *Kitāb Uṣūl al-Dīn* (of which no fragments have yet been identified). See Moses ibn Ezra, *Kitāb ad-Muḥādara wal-Mudhākara*, ed. A. S. Halkin, Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 36-38. In this context, he also mentions that Dāwūd al-Muqammas (in his *Ishrūn Maqāla*) and Saadya Gaon (in a number of his books) dealt with the topic. He, of course, may have had in mind discussions of *naskh* and quite naturally associated it with *iʿjāz al-qurʾān*.

47 Al-Qirḳisānī also addressed the issue of *iʿjāz al-qurʾān* in the section on Islam in his *Kitāb al-Anwār* (Nemoy ed., Vol. 2, pp. 298-300), this section presumably being a precis of his lost polemic against Islam. He has three types of arguments against the Qurʾān's inimitability being a proof for the truth of Muḥammad's prophecy. 1) In every field of endeavor there is always someone who is the most accomplished, and it is possible that Muḥammad was indeed the most eloquent of the Arabs. This, however, does not prove that his speech was miraculous. 2) If the Qurʾān was a revelation meant to obligate all of mankind, then its

book and al-Baṣīr refers to it as merely an outline or summary (*mukhtasar*) of the topic.<sup>48</sup> The beginning of the book, however, is still missing and we cannot give it a name. Even a direct attribution to Yūsuf al-Baṣīr is absent in the manuscripts of this work. There are some indications, however, which point to al-Baṣīr as the author. When discussing the issue of the veracity of Moses' miracles, the author says that he has already treated the topic in another book which he has dictated (*amlā nāhu*) in which he clarified his position that these miracles are known as intuitive knowledge (*ʿilm ḍarūrī*).<sup>49</sup> Al-Baṣīr is one of the few Jewish authors known to have dictated his works, presumably due to his blindness.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, this is quite likely a reference to al-Baṣīr's book, *Kitāb al-Istiʿāna*, in which this topic was discussed.<sup>51</sup>

Al-Baṣīr's authorship, though, can be demonstrated by means of another book, an anonymous Karaite polemic against the Samaritans.<sup>52</sup> This anonymous book contains what appear to be paraphrases from the work under discussion which are quite clearly attributed to al-Baṣīr.<sup>53</sup> In this polemic

proof cannot be based on the eloquence of its Arabic language which will be a meaningful proof only to Arabs. 3) He attacks the idea that the Arabs were not capable of producing an imitation of the Qurʾān in a fashion similar to that of al-Baṣīr as described below. Even though al-Baṣīr does not mention al-Qirḳisānī as a predecessor of his in polemics, the similarities between al-Baṣīr's book and the very short summary found in *Kitāb al-Anwār* suggest that they may have been drawing from a common pool of arguments.

Jewish reactions to the idea of the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān, mostly on a literary level, have been collected by J. Sadan, "Identity and Inimitability: Contexts of Inter-Religious Polemics and Solidarity in Medieval Spain in the Light of Two Passages by Moses ibn ʿEzra and Yaʿaqov Ben Elʿazar," *Israel Oriental Studies* 14 (1994), p. 328, n. 12.

48 As it is possible to reconstruct almost the entire book from two large manuscripts (II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:2980 and I:3022), one can estimate that a complete manuscript of the work filled 32-34 folios. The book is referred to as a *mukhtasar* at the end of the introduction (see the quote in n. 18 above) and on one other occasion.

49 "ודוד א' אלבאר קד דירנא מא פיה פי כתאב אמלינא ובינא זוזא מא גדיב אליה מן תוצול אלעלם אליצירי... אמלי אבי יעקוב יוסף בן יעקב רצ"י אללה ענה עלי אסודלא מן אסודל מן אלמתכלמתי עלי בן אלקלון אות לפסול מן חית. אנה קוא דיאעי אלמכ'אלפיין אלי מצ'אזאה פיה באן קאל להם אעני אלשיר' רח' אללה מא אנכרתם אן תכזו אלנצוץ אלמתצמנה לדיך מידה פיה מן בעץ. אצאזאה למא לאן לים אות תצמדו עליה מו אלקלון חסב אלמשורד מן חאלום פי דילך מע אצאזאפום באן פסול מן ואלקלון מפוד בדי אנשי ואן עת'נאן ג'מע מן אידיהם וכאן מא לם יעוף מנה אנה מן קולה יתחא פיה אלי שני עדים או

50 The title pages of manuscripts of his works often include the phrase: בן יעקוב יוסף בן יעקב רצ"י אללה ענה עלי אסודלא מן אסודל מן אלמתכלמתי עלי בן אלקלון אות לפסול מן חית. אנה קוא דיאעי אלמכ'אלפיין אלי מצ'אזאה פיה באן קאל להם אעני אלשיר' רח' אללה מא אנכרתם אן תכזו אלנצוץ אלמתצמנה לדיך מידה פיה מן בעץ. אצאזאה למא לאן לים אות תצמדו עליה מו אלקלון חסב אלמשורד מן חאלום פי דילך מע אצאזאפום באן פסול מן ואלקלון מפוד בדי אנשי ואן עת'נאן ג'מע מן אידיהם וכאן מא לם יעוף מנה אנה מן קולה יתחא פיה אלי שני עדים או

51 On this work, see n. 56.

52 Two large fragments from the same manuscript of this work are found in II Firk. Yevr.-Arab. I:1681 and BL 1098 (Or. 2523). While the identity of the author is still far from clear, there are some indications that it may have been written by al-Baṣīr's student, Yeshu'ah ben Yehudah. I hope to treat this work in another forum.

53 "ואנאמא סאב אצאזאץ אלשיר' אבי יעקב רצ"י אללה ענה עלי אסודלא מן אסודל מן אלמתכלמתי עלי בן אלקלון אות לפסול מן חית. אנה קוא דיאעי אלמכ'אלפיין אלי מצ'אזאה פיה באן קאל להם אעני אלשיר' רח' אללה מא אנכרתם אן תכזו אלנצוץ אלמתצמנה לדיך מידה פיה מן בעץ. אצאזאה למא לאן לים אות תצמדו עליה מו אלקלון חסב אלמשורד מן חאלום פי דילך מע אצאזאפום באן פסול מן ואלקלון מפוד בדי אנשי ואן עת'נאן ג'מע מן אידיהם וכאן מא לם יעוף מנה אנה מן קולה יתחא פיה אלי שני עדים או



against the Samaritans, we also see another interesting example of the caution some Jews exercised when writing about Islam. When the author touches on something Islamic (as in the quote from al-Baṣīr concerning the Qur'ān), he uses a mixture of Hebrew and Arabic, a writing style which presumably would be opaque to Muslims. The possibility that Muslims might read his book evidently did not bother al-Baṣīr, perhaps because he knew that some of them had already heard his arguments in person. It can also be shown that his book was written in Arabic characters at some point in the manuscript transmission and perhaps it was originally written in this way.<sup>54</sup> It was not at all unusual for Karaites of the eleventh and twelfth centuries to copy books in Arabic characters, but in the instance of al-Baṣīr's book, doing so increased the possibility that it would be read by Muslims, perhaps bringing unwanted consequences.<sup>55</sup> In any case, the fragments found so far represent at least five

ישבע מי הוא בידו כי שמע אתו מפי פסל פמע אלתהוּא בהד"א סגא אלאסתכוא ללקוק באו כיון אלבעי' מן אצחאב פסל אסיהו נין אלתהוּת ונסבה אלי פסל וגשבע עלי לשקר והאמין ב המקבץ הקלון וגבון אתו בו פכאן גרין פאעל דילך גיעלה ללאה לפסל כי הוא אתו לו אר' לולא דילך למא צחח לאנה הו גויה לו

The paraphrase of al-Baṣīr's (who is commonly referred to as יעקוב) argument based on the collection of the Qur'ān by 'Uthmān closely parallels the argument found in al-Baṣīr's text in ms. II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:3022 (this argument is discussed below, pp. 157): ...והו אן אצחאב אלאכבאר ואלחודית קד רון אן (זכב אלקראן פי הד"א אלמצחיק בעד וליאה עת מן ואן הד"א אלמצחיק יעוד בה וינסב אליה ויקאל הד"א מצחיק עת מן וגימע עת מן ואן אלתפסיה לה סתה אנפס פי ומאן פלסול) ורוו אן עת מן ראסל תפסיה אבנה עמד סלב מנחא אלצחפה אלתה כאן אלקראן פאפתהא אליה ענד גימעה ללקראן ואגמזע מע עלי ועבר אלהא בן מסעד ווד בן ת'אבת בן בילך עלי גימעה וגירי בינה כילאך ומשאורה חתי צירב עבר אלהא בן מסעד ואן כאן אלתחלמון יקולון אן אלכילאך בינה פי אלעיריתין וסודתי אלקות אן דילך מן אלקראן אם לא ומן אכבארה אנה למא גימע כאן יחטב מן ארדי אלנאס ואלחאמל לה יסחחקה אן דילך ממה סמעה מן פלסול) או יאחי בשאחודין... (101ב) ואנמא רוא אצחאב אלאכבאר אן צחיפה אכידת מן צחפה ענד גימע עת מנא ללקראן ולא נעלם מא פעל פי דילך ואנמא קדמת פי מא קבל אלתחאיה ען אצחאב אלתודית, כיק כאן תודין הד"ה אלקראן לא תקך ברילך אלי אלאעתהוּא פי גיעלהס איתא אלתודית טרישא אלי אלקע ברילך לא סימא אן אלשעיה והם פרקה עצומה מנחא קד אעקרו אנה קד כאן מן גימלתה מא אנול עליה אלנז עלי עלי ואן עת מנא חד"ה דילך ודא"א כאן דילך כדילך פלאן גיא חד"ה אמר קד סמעה מנה לא ימכין מן ארע דילך תהייתה ולא ימכין מן דפע דילך אן יתרוה עלי צחה קו' בל קד חצל אלשך פי דילך אר' לא פעל בין אלאמרי. וקד חתי ען אלשעיה איצ' תגויין אלוזיאה ויאיש מא אורדוא מן קולתה אן הד"ה אלאמחור הד"ה אלאיאת פי זמאן עת מנא ליכין דילך אשך תעשימ' ללקראן ויאיש מא אורדוא מן קולתה אן הד"ה אלאמחור אלי גיריה פיגיוז אן גרין עת מנא ואלמג'תמעות עלי גימעה תעשימ' פי אנפס אלנאס ליעתקך פיה אנה ליס מן בלאס אלבשר...

54 The clearest proof of the use of Arabic script is the Hebrew phrase which appears in ms. BL 5544B, f. 34a correctly, but which appears in ms. II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:3022, f. 1a as לורי הכל. This clearly comes from an unthinking scribe's mistaken reading of unpointed Arabic script *لوري* *al-Isībiyār* in which the first lifetime have survived. For example, BL Or. 2576.1-3 (*Kitāb al-Isībiyār*) in which the first fragment was copied in 1019 and the third was copied in 1028 (the text itself was written in 1019).

55 Karaites not only copied Arabic texts in both Hebrew and Arabic characters, but also transcribed the Hebrew text of the Bible into Arabic characters. The choice of script to be used for Arabic texts seems to have been up to the purchaser of the manuscript. Some

different manuscripts indicating that the Jews did find it to be a useful work.

In the beginning of his book, al-Baṣīr defines two major topics of dispute between the Muslims and the Jews. The first is that of traditions. The Jews see their traditions as being *tawātur* traditions which provide direct or intuitive knowledge (*ʿilm darūrī*), for example, of miracles performed for Moses. Muslims claim on the other hand that these things are known by traditions stemming from Muḥammad who himself performed miracles to substantiate his prophecy. However, since the Muʿtazilites considered the traditions concerning Muḥammad's miracles to be weak and did not themselves use them in debate, al-Baṣīr did not feel the need to deal with this topic. He did, however, have recourse to these issues in another response to Muslim polemics, a work entitled *Kitāb al-Istiʿāna*, which was a refutation of Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, presumably the famous ninth-century exegete and historian.<sup>56</sup> Among other things in this book, al-Baṣīr evidently reacted to al-Ṭabarī's criticism of the authenticity of the biblical traditions which relate the miracles performed for Moses and discussed the epistemological status of traditions. The second area of dispute is that of abrogation. And since the Muslims claim that the Qur'ān is the compelling proof for abrogation, al-Baṣīr made it his goal to disprove the proof for the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān. He proceeds to present in some detail the Muslim demonstration that the Qur'ān is inimitable which can be summarized as follows: Muḥammad challenged the pagan Arabs and invited them to attempt to imitate the Qur'ān. This challenge is found in certain verses of challenge, the *āyāt at-tahaddī*. However, even though to have produced an imitation (*muʿāraḍa*) would have released them from being subjugated to him and would have shown that he was no better than they were and would have certainly been easier than fighting against him, the Arab pagans chose to fight. This demonstrates that the Arab pagans who were the most talented of people in elegant speech could not produce a text of the quality of the Qur'ān, even though they had good incentives to do so. The style of the Qur'ān must therefore be beyond human capabilities and verifies the prophecy of Muḥammad.<sup>57</sup>

people evidently found Arabic script easier to read and some preferred Hebrew character manuscripts. On this phenomenon, see G. Khan, "On the Question of Script in Medieval Karaite Manuscripts: New Evidence from the Genizah," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 75 no. 3 (1993), pp. 133-141. Copying biblical manuscripts in Arabic script seems to have had some ideological background. See H. Ben-Shammai, "Hebrew in Arabic Script — Qirqisani's View," in S. R. Brunschwick, ed., *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica and Islamica Presented to L. Nemoy*, Ramat Gan, 1982, pp. 115-126; G. Khan, "The Medieval Karaite Transcription of Hebrew into Arabic Script," *Israel Oriental Studies* 12 (1992), pp. 157-176; and *ibid.*, *Karaite Bible Manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah*, Cambridge, 1990.

56 This book was also known as *an-Naqd ʿalā Abi Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī*. On this work, see Sklare, "Yusuf al-Baṣīr," p. 257-258.



Al-Baṣīr stresses that this is the proof as he heard it orally and not as he found it in books and that he has presented it at length lest anyone claim that he has left something out.<sup>58</sup> There are, however, some elements commonly found in Muslim discussions of *iʿjāz* which are missing from al-Baṣīr's description and which by their nature would not be strong arguments in a polemical setting. This lack helps confirm that this is indeed how the demonstration of the inimitability of the Qurʾān was presented in a polemical *majlis*. In internal Muslim discussions of *iʿjāz*, the concept of *ṣarfa* ("turning away") is often included.<sup>59</sup> This is the idea that the true miracle of the Qurʾān was that even though the pagan Arabs may have been capable of producing a *muʿārada*, God prevented them from doing so. The idea of *ṣarfa*, perhaps first suggested by al-Nazzām (d. 846), was introduced because of the weaknesses of an argument based solely on the lack of imitation.<sup>60</sup> Clearly, however, the claim that God prevented the pagan Arabs from imitating the Qurʾān was not going to carry much weight in a polemic with Christians or Jews. On the other hand, al-Baṣīr's Muslim contemporaries, al-Bāqillānī and ʿAbd al-Jabbār rejected the idea of *ṣarfa* as a proof of the Qurʾān's inimitability.<sup>61</sup> Muslim disputants influenced by them might have left it out of their repertory of arguments. In general, it should be pointed out that the vocabulary, style of argumentation and content of the debate in al-Baṣīr's book are very similar to those in al-Bāqillānī's *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* and the sixteenth volume of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Kitāb al-Mughnī* which is devoted to *iʿjāz*. This similarity demonstrates that they all came from the same intellectual and polemical environment.

In the tenth century, the central argument for *Iʿjāz* found in Muslim works

57 II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:3022, ff. 4a-5b.

58 אעלם אנא דק ברנא וגו' דלא לתתם ובסמא אלק' פי דילך לאנא אורדנא דילך על סביל אלהאיה ענבם גיר מנקיל מן כהנא להם (6a) בל מא יחצל לי סמאעא פאחתגנא אן נבסס דילך לילא יסין אן קד חדיפנא מן כלאהם שרא וקד דכר קאצ' אלקצא' פי אלמוזיס באלתכלין] בין הוא קוה ודאעזים אלי מצאציה אן נחו כוננם תמאיה ואיבה ונאפה לם יעמאר אלצבר על אלסי'ם ולא אחרמאל אוללה. ונבנא כונה מכלפא להם arguments which he had heard, he then supplements his description with points taken from ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Kitāb al-Mughnī bit-Taklīf*.

59 G. E. von Grunebaum, "Iʿdījāz" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 1019a; Abdul Aleem, "Ijazu' l-qu' an," *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), pp. 222-223.

60 Historically, there were attempts to produce an imitation, perhaps the most famous of which was by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 757). (On this, see J. van Ess, "Some Fragments of the *Muʿāradat al-Qurʾān* Attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ," in W. al-Qāḍī, ed., *Studia Arabica et Islamica: Festschrift for Ihsān ʿAbbās on His Sixtieth Birthday*, Beirut, 1981, pp. 151-163.) Further, an argument based on the incomparable style of the Qurʾān is obviously subjective, and, as al-Baṣīr points out, it can only be truly judged by native Arabic speakers who are not the people the Muslim polemicists are trying to convince that the Qurʾān is an authentic revelation.

was that the literary style of the Qurʾān was aesthetically incomparable.<sup>62</sup> For example, al-Bāqillānī and ʿAbd al-Jabbār devoted much of their discussion of *iʿjāz* to a treatment of the Qurʾān's literary qualities. Scholars analyzed the Qurʾān's stylistic tropes and compared its language with epitomes of Arabic poetry. This type of investigation strongly affected the development of Arabic literary theory. In the polemical setting, however, this type of argument was also not particularly useful. Christians and Jews could easily point out that this is a rather subjective argument and is actually rather particular to the Arabs.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, only learned scholars of Arabic language can truly appreciate the excellence of Qurʾānic language and non-Arabic speakers would not be aware of its transcendental nature at all. So while the issue of the Qurʾān's miraculous style is central to the Muslim argument as presented by al-Baṣīr, analysis of its literary style is missing both from the Muslim argument and from al-Baṣīr's critique. Indeed, he states that he is not an Arabic stylist and is not competent to judge such matters. He was even strongly criticized in a *majlis* for his lack of eloquence.<sup>64</sup>

Al-Baṣīr's goal was not to refute the Qurʾān's inimitability entirely, but simply to weaken the cogency of the Muslim argument so that it would not be convincing. If he could raise sufficient doubts about the main elements of the Muslim's proof, his purpose would be accomplished. His response is structured as follows: He points out that there are three points at which the argument for *iʿjāz* can be attacked. First there is the question as to whether the challenge to the pagan Arabs actually took place or not. Related to this is the issue of when the challenge was issued, before or after Muḥammad had defeated his opponents militarily. Even if they could do so, defeated adversaries might not be so quick to anger their new ruler by imitating his revelation.

If we were to accept, however, that there was challenge, the second point to be questioned is the claim that a *muʿārada* was not produced. Al-Baṣīr breaks this issue down into two sub-topics. The first is that there were imitations of the sort produced by counter-prophets such as Musaylama, Tulayḥa and al-Aswad or by Nadr ibn al-Hārith who opposed Muḥammad and sought to challenge him by the quality of his stories. The second sub-topic to be questioned is the Muslim claim that if a *muʿārada* had been

61 Al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, Cairo, 1930, pp. 33-34; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Kitāb al-Mughnī*, Vol. 16, p. 322.

62 G. E. von Grunebaum, *A Tenth-Century Document of Arabic Literary Theory and Criticism*, Chicago, 1950, p. xvii; A. Aleem, op. cit., p. 223-224.

63 As did Qirqisānī, see *Kitāb al-Anwār*, Vol. 2, p. 298.

64 For example, in one place he says: *Kitāb al-Anwār*, Vol. 2, p. 298. 1:2980, f. 17b). His own eloquence was criticized as follows: *Il Firk. Yevr.-Ar.* לא תערך אלמרחן בין קול אלגאריאח צבנא ואלמוזינא פירמא ויין קול אלעאניאח עניא ומחבריאח (I)



produced, it would have been transmitted as the Qur'ān was transmitted. The lack of such transmission indicates that it never existed. If we were to accept, however, that no imitation was produced, the third point to be attacked is the Muslim argument that no *mu'arada* was produced because it was beyond human capabilities to do so. Perhaps there were other reasons why there was no imitation, such as fear.

From this short description, it is clear that the book does not contain al-Basīr's personal opinions concerning the Qur'ān and Islam.<sup>65</sup> It does not contain any attacks on Islam or criticism of the Qur'ān per se. In fact, in one place he has a rather positive description of Muhammad as the person who brought monotheistic faith to the Arabs. But, as pointed out above, the book is an attempt to call into question the logical consistency of the proof that the Qur'ān is superhumanly incomparable. His general approach is to examine traditions and to apply a historical analysis. This may be illustrated by a few examples.

The Muslims initially claimed that the challenge to produce an imitation of the Qur'ān is known in an direct or intuitive fashion (*ilm darūrī*) by way of a *mutawātir* tradition in the same way that we know that Muhammad appeared in Mecca claiming to be a prophet. Al-Basīr points out that by claiming intuitive knowledge of this, the Muslims thus preclude any discussion of the matter for it is then not a matter of proof. However, he continues, it is possible to separate between the existence of Muhammad and the reality of the challenge. The only real source for the challenge actually would be the few verses of the Qur'ān such as Sura 2:23-24 or 17:90 which indicate that a challenge to imitate the Qur'ān was indeed made. Here we find one of the several remnants of the actual face-to-face debate to be found in his book. Al-Basīr reports a discussion in which he said to his adversary that even if he had his opponent's great faith in the Qur'ān, he probably would not know the existence of the challenge from the few verses which mention it. His opponent was baffled by this and was at a loss for a reply.<sup>66</sup>

כחרא נ'יא: כ'אבואה כ'בוא) פקלה לה לא אערף אכתיך מן אבך באכ'י צבוא לכרא תעטימה פי אלנפוס פשגו חכרא נ'יא: כ'אבואה כ'בוא) פקלה לה לא אערף אכתיך מן אבך באכ'י צבוא לכרא תעטימה פי אלנפוס פשגו... עליי וקאל מן אראך מאוונתי... (I:2980, f. 17b).

65 The attitudes of early Karaites towards Islam have been discussed by H. Ben-Shammai, "The Attitudes of Some Early Karaites Towards Islam," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. I. Twersky, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, pp. 3-40.

66 ולק נאצ'רת בעצמה פארעו פי ד'לק אעני אלתהו תצול אלעלם אלצ'ירורי פקלה לה אתעלם ד'לק פי שכך פי מא ורא פי אלקראן מן איאח אלתהי מן נהו קולה פארעו בצורה מן מת'לה ואדעו שדוואכס מן דון אלהאן און כנתם פארק'ן מוריה פי אלקראן אכנת תעלם מא כדרתה מן אלתהי פתחתי פי אלג'יבא (96) ואנפא כ'רבת ד'לק לה לאן פיהם מן יעול עלי ד'היה אלאחא פי את'באת אלתהי פכשי פי אוק'לה לא מן אנכתיך און ד'היה אלאחא מוריה פי אלקראן עלי מא סאכין וג'ה אלוש פי ד'לק פארעי אלעלם אלצ'ירורי פקלה ד'היה לאנך אענקת' כון [מ'ור'ה] (ז) אלאחא אעני פתחי מ'ור'ה מן מת'לה ומא ג'ירי מ'ג'ד'ראח מסמועה מנה פאנא א'רא שככנא פי ד'היה אלאחא ג'רונא און יכ'ון ל'ם יק'ולא פ'מן א'ין אנה ת'היה פ'לם יד מע ת'חיה ועלמה מן קד שככתה פי ט'ריק אלתהי (כופת און י'סס עלי ת'קיעה עלי אויעתיה אלעלם אלצ'ירורי פקלה אני לא אעלם ד'לק והאתנא יק'י

Al-Basīr raises the possibility that these verses were not said at all by Muhammad. His opponent responded to this suggestion by saying that we know that the Qur'ān originated with Muhammad in the same way that we know that an author's book is his, giving as examples, interestingly enough, Abū Hāshim's *al-Jāmi' al-Kabīr* and Saadya Gaon's *Kirāb al-Amānāt*.<sup>67</sup> But al-Basīr continues and points out that the Qur'ān and authored books are not comparable in this way. An author's book is organized by him from the beginning with chapters and any addition or detraction would be noticeable. This was not true of the Qur'ān.

At this point he does something quite interesting. He retells the story of the canonical collection of the Qur'ān made by the third caliph, 'Uthmān; how he sent to 'Umar's daughter, Hafsa, for the leaves which had been collected by 'Umar and how the material was authenticated by a group of experts.<sup>68</sup> (His version is somewhat different from the tradition usually cited. He has only three experts involved: 'Alī, 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd who is usually not listed and Zayd ibn Thābit.) He tells this story to emphasize that the Qur'ān as it is in our hands today is not exactly the text as pronounced by Muhammad, but rather to a certain extent the creation of 'Uthmān. "We really don't know," he says, "what 'Uthmān did with the material he collected." Furthermore, the Shī'ites maintain that there was Qur'ānic material relating to 'Alī which 'Uthmān removed. They even assert that additions were possibly made to the Qur'ān.<sup>69</sup> It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the challenge verses (*āyāt at-tahaddī*) were added by 'Uthmān in order to increase the eminence and glory of the Qur'ān, although not to provide a proof for its authenticity as that was already well-rooted in the souls of the Muslims. In concluding

אלכלאם ביננא וביננא לאננה ליסו משהל'ון פנאשהל'ם בצעה ד'לק' און נע'ת'ר'ת'ם באע'ת'ר'א'ין י'ל'ומ'ם אלג'י'ב'א פ'אד'רא ק'לנא להם מא אלד'י ד'ל עלי און ד'ה'יה אלאחא קד ספעת מנה ק'אלו און ד'ה'יה אלאחא מת'יבתה פי 67

אלקראן ועלם באלכ'יכ' און ד'ה'יה אלקראן צ'אד'ר מן ג'יה'תה כמא נעלם פי כתב אלמצנפ'ין אנה מן ג'יה'תה ראס כעלמנא פי אלג'י'ב'א מע אלכ'ב'ר אנה צ'ד'ר ען אבי ה'אש'ם וכעלמנא פי כתאב אלמאנאט אנה מן ג'יה'תה ראס אלת'י'ב'ה אלפ'י'ומ'י, ואעלם און ב'ין אלמ'ורי'ן פ'ל ד'לק' און אלמצנפ'ין י'צ'נפ'ו'ת'ם וד'יע'ר'ו'ן אבו'ב'א'א וחכ'רג' אלי לנאס אלת'י'רה עלי חד י'תע'ד'ר א'לי'א'ה'ה ואלנ'ק'צ'א ח'תי לו ז'יד פי בע'ני' אלנ'ס'י' ל'ס'יה'ר ד'לק' וכד'ר'לו לן נ'ק'ן ול'יס כ'ד'יל'ך (טוב) סב'ילי אלקראן לאן צ'אח'בה ל'ם י'ד'ו'בה'ה ו'ז' על ל'ם י'צ'ע'ל פי ז'מאנה מן ד'יל'ך אלנ'ס'י'ה 68 Part of this argument can be found in the second quotation in n. 53 above. An analysis of the various traditions of this story may be found in J. Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān*, pp. 138-159.

69 Such claims were evidently not widespread among Shī'ites of the tenth century, but they were commonly attributed to the Shī'ites by Mu'azilite authors. On this, see H. Modarressi, "Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur'ān," *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993), pp. 5-39. Note also E. Kohlberg, "Some Notes on the Imāmite Attitude to the Qur'ān," in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented by His Friends and Pupils to Richard Walzer on His Seventieth Birthday*, S.M. Stern, A. Hourani and V. Brown, eds., Oxford, 1972, pp. 209-224 and Meir Bar-Asher, "VARIANT READINGS AND ADDITIONS OF THE IMĀMĪ ŠIFĀ TO THE



issued with the reasonable expectation that those hearing it would have attempted an imitation.

Another example of his style of argumentation is how he treats the Muslim claim that no *mu'arafa* was actually produced. He expresses amazement at their claim that they have immediate knowledge (*ilm darūrī*) that there was no such imitation. They say that this like the widespread knowledge that between here and Baghdad, there is no city larger than Baghdad. (This by the way might show that the book was not written in Baghdad.) What follows is a rather convoluted discussion of the possibility of knowing positively the lack of something. Al-Basīr's conclusion is that there can be no simple immediate or intuitive negative knowledge of something which does not exist, but only knowledge of the absence of something based on positive knowledge. For example, we know that there are not six prayers because we know that Muḥammad only made it obligatory to have five prayers. Or we know that there is no city greater than Baghdad between here and Baghdad because witnesses have reported to us about the cities and towns in between. We cannot know, however, that no imitation of the Qur'ān was produced. Many more examples could be given, but I think that those presented here are sufficient to impart some sense of what al-Basīr sought to accomplish, the nature of his argumentation and the quality of the discourse which took place in the *majālis* he attended.<sup>72</sup>

Such a text raises the question of the extent of al-Basīr's knowledge of Islam and the Qur'ān.<sup>73</sup> In this book, he actually quotes only a few Qur'ānic verses. In addition to the *āyāt at-tahaddī*, he also quotes verse 17:88 and Sura 109, *al-Kāfirūn*. The nature of debate, however, did not demand extensive use of the Qur'ān and it is difficult to judge the extent of his Qur'ānic knowledge from this book alone. In addition, he was apparently familiar with the *Sūra* (presumably in the version of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq) and al-Wāqidi's *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*.<sup>74</sup> From the description of his *Kitāb al-Istī'āna* as a

... יסודו אלטרר במה גירי ואלקבל ולו קיל להם אעיינ שי ממה סמעתם לתעד עליהם דילן...  
Yevr.-Ar. I:3022, ff. 15a-16a with corrections from I:2980.

72 It is of interest to note that some of al-Basīr's arguments against the Qur'ān are similar to those put forth by the Muslim free-thinker Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq who was active in the first part of the ninth century. Al-Basīr may have been familiar with al-Warrāq's works which still circulated in the tenth century or these arguments may have been part of the general pool of debating points used in the polemical *majālis*. On al-Warrāq's refutations of the Qur'ān, see David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 28.

73 Jewish knowledge of the Qur'ān has been summarized by H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, Appendix, pp. 143-160. One can add to the sources brought there the author of the anonymous work published by J. Mann, "An Early Theologico-Polemical Work," *HUCA* 12-13 (1937-1938), pp. 411-459.

74 Al-Wāqidi's book is mentioned in H. Firk, *Yevr.-Ar. I:3022*, p. 13a. Al-Basīr's utilization of

this line of reasoning, al-Basīr points out again that he does not have to prove that these verses were actually added by 'Uthmān. All he has to do is to raise reasonable doubts about their authenticity. This argument is quite similar to the Muslim polemical claim that the Jews had altered the text of the Torah, adding and removing verses from Moses' original revelation (*tahrīf*).<sup>70</sup> It is tempting to speculate that al-Basīr particularly enjoyed giving back to the Muslims what they had dished out.

He further raises doubts about the challenge to imitate the Qur'ān by pointing out that we don't know the circumstances of when it was made. If it was made after Muḥammad's military successes, then it is understandable that no one answered the challenge, cowed as they probably were by the force of arms. The Muslims answered that it is possible to know which suras were revealed in Mecca and which in Medina and to show that the *āyāt at-tahaddī* were revealed in Mecca, before Muḥammad had defeated his enemies. Al-Basīr responded that is unreasonable to expect that the proof for the authenticity of the Qur'ān should be dependent on such arcane knowledge held only by experts of *hadīth*, particularly when you are trying to convince Jews who cannot be expected to know such things.

Furthermore, he says we don't know if the challenge was issued to the lowly types who surrounded Muḥammad in Medina who could not be expected to produce any sort literary elegance or to men of stature such as the Quraysh. The suggestion that the people who were attracted to hear Muḥammad were only a common rabble must have touched a sensitive spot as al-Basīr reports here that this argument really made his opponent in the *majālis* angry.<sup>71</sup> He then proceeds with a historical reconstruction of Muḥammad's career in order to show that there was really no instance when a challenge could have been

Quran," *Israel Oriental Studies* XIII (1993), pp. 39-74. I thank Prof. A. Udovitch and Prof. H. Lazarus-Yafeh for bringing these studies to my attention.

70 A good recent treatment of the topic of *tahrīf* can be found in H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, pp. 19-28.

71 פנענא אלי דהיא אלשך ותסדקא בתצולא אלי אן לא גיוז אן נקטע עלי אן אלתחדי תאצל במכל לדיכין קד תכילצנא מן קולחם אנה תחזיהם וכאנו אשך אלנאס עדואה לה פעעלו ען מעוציניה אלי מואר בתה פנאז אד"א קלנא אן איאז (15) אלתחדי סמעת מנה מן בעז אלפתח בתצויה עמאה אסתג'אבו לה עלי מא בית מן אנהם למא אעתקדו צדקה פי גימעי מא אכ'ב' לם יבחה' ען צדקה פקילך אנהם כאנו מן אשך אלנאס עדואה תחזיהם פלם יעארצו גיר מסלם וגהתא' אן נתבין אנה תחאה מן כאן יעארצו עלי מא בית עליה דליך ולא סביל לך אלי באן דילך ואלדי עוציני בה עלי דהיא אלכלנא יומא הו אן קיל אן אעזארה קרש חוזאליה וקריב מנה במכה והו פי אלמדינה ולהם אן יעארצו ביחוד אלמדינה לאנהם כאנו בה ובאעזאבה אשך אכתי'לט מע מכי'אלפתחם איאז פיקד כאן יסמעתו אלתחדי וקריש תסמע אלתחדי' פליס אללמר כמא דכרת מן אן אלתחדי סמעה עמא כאנו מסתג'אבו לה אעתקדו צדקה צרפהם דהיא אלאתעקא ען מעוציניה וקד כנת ארתכת אלקיל באני לא אעלם אן קריש אן אעלם (16) בלגה אלתחדי פנתהם מן כאן נבאסדי מן דהיא אלאתכחב ולא ג'בה ג'רשה מן דילך וישאן אן קריש כאנו במכה והו פי אלמדינה ג'תמע עליה ליסמעתו קצצה וישאן לא יסמעתו ג'תמע ולא ג'רשה מן דילך וישאן אן קריש כאנו במכה והו פי אלמדינה ג'תמע עליה ליסמעתו קצצה



refutation of Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, it would seem that he would have had a familiarity with the works of this scholar, perhaps both his *tafsīr* and his history. On the other hand, he may merely have responded to sections of al-Ṭabarī's works which were brought to his attention. In general, there is the question of whether someone like al-Baṣīr actually sat down and read Muslim literature or whether he depended upon the information gleaned from attendance in the *majālis al-kalām*. Al-Qirīsānī tells us that some of his knowledge of the sayings of the scholars came from books and some was gained from what he heard in *majālis* or was reported to him by others who had been in attendance.<sup>75</sup> It is quite likely that these polemical debates served not only as a jousting arena, but also as a means for Jews to learn something about Islam and *vice versa*.

Were the arguments found in the books of Samuel ben Hofni and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr ever actually used in a *majlis* debate? The question arises particularly in relationship to the work of al-Baṣīr in which he attempts to undermine the foundations of a major element of Muslim belief. For example, it is a bit difficult for us to imagine that Muslims sat and listened with equanimity while al-Baṣīr suggested that not all of the verses of the Qurʾān were pronounced by Muḥammad. On the other hand, both of these books preserve traces of live encounters between the authors and Muslim interlocutors. While it is true that works of this period are frequently written in a dialogue style ("He maintained . . . and I would then respond . . .") which could sometimes be mistaken for a re-written and edited record of a live debate, the bits of dialogue found in these books go beyond the barebone give-and-take normally found. Al-Baṣīr reports, for example, that his opponent was baffled and confused by a particular argument or became angry at another and Samuel ben Hofni says that Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī asked him a specific question.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, al-Baṣīr says quite clearly in his introduction that he himself was overcome by doubts by the Muslims' proofs, but that he garnered his strength and realized how to respond, presumably using the arguments which he presents in his book. It would seem, therefore, that the cultural climate in Baghdad, at least among certain groups of intellectuals, was indeed tolerant

the *Sīra* of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq is suggested by his use of information or stories which at his time were found most easily there. A good example would be the story of Nadr ibn al-Ḥārith's opposition to Muḥammad found in the *Sīra* (ed. Wüstenfeld, Leipzig, 1858-60, Vol. 1, pp. 191-2) and retold by al-Baṣīr (II Firk. Yevr.-Ar. I:2980, f. 18b). The history books of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq and al-Wāqidi are also mentioned by Samuel ben Hofni in his book *Ten Questions* (see Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni Gaon*, p. 256). These may possibly have been part of a Jewish intellectual's normal reading.

<sup>75</sup> *Kitāb al-Anwār*, Vol. 1, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> See the quotes in notes 39, 64, 66, and 71 above. These works also do not have the style of the fictional debates of the sort discussed by Sidney Griffith in his contribution to this

enough to allow the sort of exchange indicated by the books discussed here. It may also be presumed that other Jews made use of these books to prepare themselves for polemical encounters, either in formal debates or in casual discussions. We have also seen above that the elegant logic of the Muslims' arguments in these disputations with Muslims deeply affected many Jews, some to the extent that they converted to Islam. Jews who found themselves confused and their faith weakened surely found these works useful in their struggle with Muslim claims and in restoring their confidence in their own tradition. Books of the type discussed here thus had a dual function, being directed both outward and inward.

A final point to be noted is the similarity between the Jewish-Islamic polemic as seen in these two books by Samuel ben Hofni Gaon and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr and the Karaite-Rabbanite polemic of the same period, a debate which to a significant extent was conducted by these same individuals.<sup>77</sup> The underlying question for both polemics was how do we know about revelation, Scripture and traditions and what is their epistemological value? For both, Muʿtazilite *Kalām* or *Kalām*-influenced legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) provided the conceptual framework for the discussion and the technical vocabulary.

In summary, we have seen how the polemical *majlis* created the need for Jews to compose books responding to and refuting Islamic claims. On the one hand, the absorption of *Kalām* theology and discourse by some Jewish intellectuals made them more susceptible to the elegant sophistry of the Muslim *mutakallimūn*. On the other hand, however, it provided them with the tools and techniques to respond. Samuel ben Hofni and Yūsuf al-Baṣīr rose to the challenge of the *majlis* and by their reports, succeeded in disputing with the Muslims. It is reasonable to believe that our knowledge of the dynamics of the interchange between Jews and Muslims in this cultural context will deepen as we further explore the manuscript resources.

volume. Our works are more or less systematic presentations of their topics into which intrude residues of their origins in actual disputations.

<sup>77</sup> The Karaite-Rabbanite polemics of the period still need to be reconstructed and described in detail. For now, see Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni Gaon*.