

A. Mingana

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defence of Islam

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REMARKS ON TABARI'S SEMI-OFFICIAL DEFENCE OF ISLAM

BY

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NOTE BY THE EDITOR OF THE "BULLETIN OF THE
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In July last an open letter of sixteen printed pages was addressed to "Monsieur le Directeur de la John Rylands Library," by le Père Maurice Bouyges, S.J., of the Université S. Joseph, Beyrouth, in which the writer raises the question of the authenticity of Tabari's "Apology or Defence of Islam," the Arabic text, and an English translation of which, under the title: "The Book of Religion and Empire: a semi-official defence and exposition of Islam written by order at the Court and with the assistance of the Caliph Muta wakkil (A.D. 847-861)" was published by Dr. A. Mingana, under the auspices of the John Rylands Library, from the manuscript which is in its possession.

In response to the demand of Father Bouyges, that I should cause the manuscript to be more minutely examined by Dr. Mingana, and, in case of need by other scholars, it is only necessary for me to say that already the manuscript has been submitted to all the tests recognised by exact scholarship, and that there remains not a shadow of doubt as to its authenticity in the minds of any of those who have been responsible for its publication.

Furthermore, the manuscript has been seen and examined by the following scholars: Professor D. S. Margoliouth of Oxford, Professor A. Nicholson of Cambridge, Dr. Rendel Harris, and Mr. F. Krenkow. By a deputation of six Indian Muslim Journalists; by a research student from Azhar University of Cairo, and by two other Egyptian scholars. By the Shaikh 'Abd al-Karim-Murād of Fez, who spent two days in Manchester for the special purpose of examining the manuscript; and by other Christians and Muslims, all of whom are perfectly satisfied as to its authenticity.

The manuscript may be seen in the library by any scholar wishing to examine it, under the necessary safeguards, and we venture to suggest to Father Bouyges that he would have been better advised, to have examined the manuscript for himself, or to have requested some member of the Society of Jesus in or near Manchester to make the examination for him, before venturing to question the authenticity of a text, which has been accepted as undeniably authentic both from external and internal evidence.

In the following pages Dr. Mingana, makes further appeal to the internal evidence of the text in proof of its authenticity.



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REMARKS ON ṬABARĪ'S SEMI-OFFICIAL DEFENCE OF ISLAM.

BY A. MINGANA, D.D.

DR. WENSINCK of Leiden has in the introduction to his translation of Barhebraeus' *Book of the Dove* and elsewhere drawn our attention to the bold plagiarism practised by the Eastern writers of the Lower Middle Ages, and illustrated his point by the sad spectacle of the great and prolific Jacobite writer himself swelling the rank of plagiarists. The epidemic seems to have affected Christians and Muslims alike. The case of the latter may be illustrated by a striking example.

In 1922-1923 I edited 'Ali b. Rabban aṭ-Ṭabari's *Book of Religion and Empire*, a kind of a semi-official Defence of Islam written by order, at the Court, and with the assistance of the 'Abbasid Caliph Mutawakkil (A.D. 847-861). If one peruses the articles of the late Professor Goldziher and others: *über Muhammed. Polemik gegen ahl al-Kitāb*,¹ one cannot fail to notice that the Muslim writers cited on pages 374-379 are using the Biblical texts collected and translated by 'Ali Ṭabari centuries earlier, apparently without so much as mentioning the latter's name—at least in the passages quoted by Goldziher, which are my only authority.—The question arises whether these Muslim writers are plagiarising Ṭabari, or *vice versâ*. That the first alternative is the only possible one is borne out by many external and internal evidences, the chief among which are :

1°. Both Shihāb ad-Din as-Ṣanhāji and Ibn Ḳayyim al-Jawzīyah referred to by Goldziher were not even born at the time when the

¹ In Z D M G, vol. xxxii., 1878, pp. 341-395, I referred to this article on p. 131 of my edition, but I had not then the intention of pushing the matter further.



MS. containing the Defence of 'Ali Ṭabari (which we have edited and translated) was written. Ṣanhāji died in A.H. 684, Ibn Ḳayim in A.H. 751, and the MS. containing the Defence is dated A.H. 616.¹

2°. The Biblical quotations found in the two writings are certainly a translation from the Syriac Peshitta, and often contain a play on the Syriac root *Shabah*, rendered into the Arabic root *Ḥamad*, from which the name "Muḥammad" is derived. Now neither Ṣanhāji nor Ibn Ḳayim nor, in this respect, any other late Muslim knew any Syriac at all; the Biblical work, therefore, that they contain is without doubt that of 'Ali Ṭabari, the ex-Nestorian Doctor, and the official controversialist of the Court of the Caliph.

¹ We may here state that the MS. 631 of the Crawford collection of the John Rylands Library, containing Ibn Rabban's Defence of Islam, is absolutely genuine and authentic in every respect. This authenticity is beyond the shadow of a doubt, and we consider it to be so unquestionable that we venture the deliberate opinion that it will never be successfully assailed, nor reasonably impugned. This assertion for which we take full responsibility, should allay the unfounded fears of anyone, who, by reason of long distance, finds himself unable to examine the MS. We are unfortunately in no position to ascertain how and when the MS. was acquired by the late Lord Crawford, but from the number of MSS. acquired after it, we may suggest that it came into his possession in about A.D. 1840, and from the word "Egypt" found on the first leaf one is tempted to believe that its last Eastern owner lived in the country of the Nile.

A distinctive mark of the work itself is that it is an unmistakable reflection of the personality of its author, and a true mirror of the complex and pregnant events of the period in which he lived: an ex-Nestorian Doctor from Ṭabaristan trying to justify before the eyes of his old and new co-religionists his change of religious allegiance and the confidence placed upon him by the greatest Sunni Caliph, who had urged him to vindicate the religion of Islam by methods which would carry conviction with the Christian scholars of his day, and to prove, mainly from the Books of his old faith the sacred language of which he understood perfectly, the apostleship and the prophetship of Muḥammad. The connection between the mirror and the personality of the author is so intimate that if we endeavour to break the former we run the great risk of destroying the latter. The work is thus one of the most authentic that the Arab and Syrian world has ever seen; and any attempts to throw doubt on its genuineness will *certainly* be based on inexactitudes and will *certainly* also be foredoomed to failure. The Apology, like any other book, may have difficulties (and possibly also slight inexactitudes) which we should try to understand and explain, but not in connection with the question of its authenticity, which is absolutely incontestable.

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We will now give a few examples from both texts :

Goldziher.

(1)

Isa. xlix. 5.

وصرت محمدا عند الرب وباللهي حولي وقوتي
(p. 377)

(2)

Isa. xxxv. 2.

فانها تعطى باحمد محاسن لبنان
(p. 378)

(3)

Isa. lxiii. 14-15.

اني جعلت اسمك محمدا يا محمد يا قدوس الرب
اسمك موجود من الابد
(p. 378)

(4)

Isa. xli. 16

وانت تبتهج وترتاح وتصور محمدا
(p. 378)

(5)

Ps. xlviii. 2.

ان ربنا عظيم محمود وفي قرية الهنا قدوس
(p. 377)

(6)

Genes. xxi. 13.

اني جاعل [ابنك اسمعيل] لامة عظيمة لانه من زرعك
(p. 376)

Tabari.

(1)

Isa. xlix. 5.

وصرت محمدا عند الرب وباللهي حولي وقوتي
(p. 90)

(2)

Isa. xxxv. 2.

لانها ستعطى باحمد محاسن لبنان
(p. 85)

(3)

Isa. lxiii. 14-15.

اني جعلت اسمك محمدا ... يا محمد يا قدوس
... اسمك موجود منذ الابد
(p. 100)

(4)

Isa. xli. 16.

وتبتهج انت [حينئذ] وترتاح [بالرب] وتكون محمدا
(p. 89)

(5)

Ps. xlviii. 2.

ان ربنا عظيم محمود [جدا] وفي قرية الهنا ...
قدوس
(p. 75)

(6)

Genes. xxi. 13.

اني جاعل ... لامة عظيمة لانه من زرعك
(p. 68)

The examples could be multiplied, but we will here be satisfied with two more : both works call Hagar's progeniture ولد المشغولة and ولد الفارغة pp. 377 and 91 respectively), and both harp on the argu-

ment taken from *Meshabbha* (*Muṣabbah*—wrongly written in Goldziher: *Mushaffah* and equivalent to “Muḥammad” = the glorified, the praised one) and *Shubha* (wrongly written in Goldziher: *Shufha*) *l’alāha* equivalent to “praise be to God” (pp. 375 and 112 respectively), which could have emanated only from Ṭabari.

It is not only the phraseology of the texts in both works that is identical, but also their selection and choice. There are a few more quotations in Goldziher’s text which are not found in our Defence, but I feel confident that they were taken by these late Muslim writers from the other two controversial books (now lost) of Ṭabari to which he himself refers in his Defence on pages 100-101 and 107 of our translation. Cf. also page xiv of our Introduction.

The Biblical texts collected with so much care by Ṭabari were also known and referred to by writers much more ancient than those mentioned by Goldziher. Nisābūri quotes in his *Gharāib al-Kur’ān* (i., 270 edit. Cairo), Genesis xvi., 8-13, in connection with Qur. ii., 38. More than two-thirds of the quotation are in an abbreviated form, the keywords of which are certainly those employed in our Apology;¹ but the end of the quotation is given in full and is word for word identical with Ibn Rabban’s Arabic translation from Syriac, and is undoubtedly taken from it:² *watakūnu yaduhu fauḳa al-jamī’i, wa yadu al-jamī’i mabsutatan ilaihi.*

This borrowing from the Apology does not extend only to phraseology but also to the number of the chapter of Genesis which is counted by Ṭabari as the ninth. Nisābūri could not have got this peculiar number except from Ibn Rabban’s work. Further, the conclusions that Nisābūri draws from this quotation for the benefit of Islam and the Arab race are in the letter and in the spirit absolutely identical with those drawn by the Apology,³ and are in addition introduced by him by *Kīla*, “it has been said.” In vol. ii., page 335, Nisābūri is also giving an almost full abstract of the Apology as a proof of the divine mission of the Prophet.

Ṣanhājī’s and Nisābūri’s quotations should be considered as decisive in favour of the point at issue.

¹ Page 67 of our edition.

² *Aiban* in the text of the Cairo edition of Nisābūri (*ibid.*) is certainly a mistake for *Airan*.

³ Page 70.

The other point to which we wish to call attention is the phrase which deals with the extension of the spoken Persian language (p. 105 of the text and p. 122 of the translation) : ولا تجاوزت الفارسية مدينة ايران شهر
 "Nor did the Persian language go beyond *the city of Iran Shahr.*" The word *madīnat*, "the city of," is really written by a later hand between the lines of the text, and is not a part of the copyist's exemplar. This later hand is possibly that of a reader, or possibly also that of Mūsa al-Maulawi mentioned in our introduction (p. xvii).

At the time of the publication of the work I was puzzled a great deal as to what was to be done with this word *madīnat*. On the one hand I was aware of the fact that "Irān Shahr" alone meant either the city of Irān Shahr (generally called Naysābūr) in Khurāsān, or more probably "the country of Persia" (as Persia is sometimes called by Oriental writers ;¹ on the other hand the Maulawi having proved useful to me in a few necessary words which he (or possibly another reader) had supplied apparently from another MS.,² I decided to follow him here also, and I did not mention the fact in a footnote, in order not to multiply footnotes without great necessity. But now I realise that it would have been better not to have inserted in the text the word *madīnat*, which is probably an unwarranted addition or an erroneous gloss by an owner. The right interpretation of the above sentence is therefore : "Nor did the Persian language go beyond Irān Shahr," i.e. "the country of the Persians," understood generally to extend from Jāihūn to Qādīsīyah (Yaḳūt as quoted in our note in *loc. cit.*).

Finally on pages 147-148, and 152 of the translation the author mentions by name his uncle Yaḥya b. Nu'mān. Exception has been taken to this name in some quarters on the ground that the man was otherwise unknown. In reply to this we may state that such a man is mentioned by Bīrūni (*Āthār*, pages 191 of the translation and 208 of the text edit. Sachau), whose statement is as follows : "According to Yaḥya ibn al-Nu'mān the Christian, in his book on the Magians, Māni was called by the Christians *Corbicious the son of Patecius.*" There can hardly be any reasonable doubt that this Yaḥya was the uncle of our Ṭabari ; this is also the independent opinion of my friend Professor Margoliouth of Oxford.

¹ Cf. Marquart's *Eranshahr*, which I quoted as early as 1908 in the first volume of my *Sources Syriaques*, p. 107.

² Cf. the margin of the first page of the MS.

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TABERNACLE

The tabernacle was the dwelling place of the Lord in the wilderness. It was a portable sanctuary, built according to the plans given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The tabernacle was made of gold, silver, and brass, and was covered with precious stones and spices. It was a symbol of God's presence among His people.

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