REMARKS ON ΤΑΒΑΡΙ’S SEMI-OFFICIAL DEFENCE OF ISLAM.

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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 at-Tabari’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, one cannot fail to notice that the Muslim writers cited on pages 374-379 are using the Biblical texts collected and translated by 'Ali Tabari 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 Tabari, or vice versa. 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-Dīn as-Ṣanḥājī and Ibn Ḫayīm al-Jawziyah referred to by Goldziher were not even born at the time when the

1 In ZDMG, 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 Tabari (which we have edited and translated) was written. Sanhājī died in A.H. 684, Ibn Kayīm 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 Peshīṭa, and often contain a play on the Syriac root šabāḥ, rendered into the Arabic root ḥamad, from which the name “Muhammad” is derived. Now neither Sanhājī nor Ibn Kayīm 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 Tabari, 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 Tabaristan 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 Muhammad. 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.
We will now give a few examples from both texts:

**Goldziher.**

1. Isa. xlix. 5. وصرت محمدًا عند الرب وبالغة حولي وفوتى (p. 377)
2. Isa. xxxv. 2. (p. 378)
3. Isa. liii. 14-15. اي جعلت اسمك محمدًا يا محمد يا قدوس الرب اسمك موجود منذ الأبد (p. 378)
4. Isa. xli. 16. وانت تبههم ورحاش ونصير محمدًا (p. 378)
5. Ps. xlvi. 2. ان ربا عظيم محمد وفي قرية الهنا قدوس (p. 377)

**Tabari.**

1. Isa. xlix. 5. وصرت محمدًا عند الرب وبالغة حولي وفوتى (p. 90)
2. Isa. xxxv. 2. (p. 85)
3. Isa. liii. 14-15. اي جعلت اسمك محمدًا يا محمد يا قدوس الرب اسمك موجود منذ الأبد (p. 100)
5. Ps. xlvi. 2. ان ربا عظيم محمد [جد] وفي قرية الهنا قدوس (p. 75)
6. Genes. xxi. 13. اني جاعل ... لامة عظيمة لأمه 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 المشغلة and ولد الفارغة pp. 377 and 91 respectively), and both harp on the argu-
ment taken from Meshabbha (Muṣabbāḥ—wrongly written in Goldziher: Mushaffah and equivalent to “Muḥammad” = the glorified, the praised one) and Shubha (wrongly written in Goldziher: Shufha) lālāha 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.e., 270 edit. Cairo), Genesis xvi., 8-13, in connection with Kur. 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 fauṣa al-jamī’, wa yadu al-jamī’i mabsūṭan 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.

Ṣanhaijī’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 ‘Aīran.
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):

"Nor did the Persian language go beyond the city of Irān 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 Khūrāsān, or more probably "the country of Persia" (as Persia is sometimes called by Oriental writers; 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., 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 Jaihūn to Kādisīyah (Yakūt 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 Yahya 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 Birūnī (Āikhār, pages 191 of the translation and 208 of the text edit. Sachau), whose statement is as follows: "According to Yahya ibn al-Nu'mān the Christian, in his book on the Magians, Mānī was called by the Christians Corbicious the son of Patecius."

There can hardly be any reasonable doubt that this Yahya was the uncle of our Ţabari; 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 Syriaces, p. 107.

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