Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Islamic Reformism and Christinaity. A Critical Reading of the Works of Muhammad Rashid Rida and his Associates (1898-1935)

Ryad, U.

Citation

Ryad, U. (2008, June 12). *Islamic Reformism and Christinaity. A Critical Reading of the Works of Muhammad Rashid Rida and his Associates (1898-1935)*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12958

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12958

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter Five
In Pursuit of a 'True' Gospel: Riḍā's Arabic Edition of the Gospel of Barnabas

Riḍā's Arabic edition of the Gospel of Barnabas should be seen as a continuation of an Islamic long-enduring search for a Biblical witness congruent with Islamic tenets of belief. Throughout history it has been a common phenomenon that Muslims maintained that the apostleship of Muḥammad had been foretold in Bible. On the basis of *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* of Ibn Ishāq and his citation from the Gospels (*Anājīl*), Alfred Guillaume tried to make a first reconstruction of the text of the Gospels, which was known in Medina in the early 8th century.[1] In a pioneering work, Tarif Khalidi collected the Arabic Islamic lore on the figure of Jesus.[2] Muslim polemicists sometimes used apocryphal books, which fitted well in their arguments on the main trends of the Islamic tradition regarding Christianity. O. Krarup and L. Cheikho published fragments of Islamicised Davidic Psalters.[3] In order to prove that not Jesus, but another man was crucified, the *Muʿtazilī* theologian and chief Judge ʿAbd al-Jabbār (935-1025), for example, quoted a few passages from an unknown apocryphal Gospel containing the story of the passion, alongside the canonical Gospels. Another unidentified apocryphal Gospel is quoted in the *Refutation of the Christians* by ʿAlī b. Rabbān al-Ṭabarī, a medieval Nestorian physician who converted to Islam.[4]

Much has been written on the controversial apocryphal Gospel attributed to Barnabas, whose Italian manuscript was discovered in the eighteenth century in Amsterdam. A number of these studies have argued that this anonymous Gospel was the work of Moriscos in Spain.[5] G.A. Wiegers has recently made a

---

[1] A. Guillaume, 'The version of the *Gospels* used in Medina circa A.D. 700', *Al-Andalus*, no. 15 (1950), pp. 289-296.

[2] Khalidi, *op. cit.*

[3] Ove Chr. Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1909; L. Cheiko, 'Quelques legendes islamiques apocryphes', *Melanges de la Faculté Orientale* (Beirut), vol. iv (1910), pp. 40-3. See, also, 'Some Moslem Apocryphal Legends', *The Moslem World*, vol. 2/1 (January 1912), pp. 47-59. See also, S. Zwemer, 'A Moslem Apocryphal Psalter', *The Moslem World*, vol. 5/4 (1915), pp. 399-403; Suleiman A. Mourad 'A twelfth-century Muslim biography of Jesus', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 7/1 (1996), pp. 39-45. Cf. I. Goldziher, *'Polemik'*, pp. 351-377.

[4] S.M. Stern, 'Quotations from Apocryphal Gospels in 'Abd al-Jabbār,' *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 18 (April 1967), pp. 34-57. Cf. D.S. Margoliouth, 'The use of the Apocrypha by Moslem writers', *Moslem Wo*rld, vol. 5/4 (1915), pp. 404-408; Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Brill, 1996. More about al-Ṭabarī's polemics, see, David Thomas, 'The Miracles of Jesus in Early Islamic Polemic', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, vol. 39/2 (1994) p.221-243.

[5] Luis F. Bernabé Pons, 'Zur Wahrheit und Echtheit des Barnabasevangeliums', in R. Kirste (ed.), *Wertewandel und Religiöse Umbrüche. Religionen im Gespräch*, Nachrodt, vol.4, 1996, pp.133-188; Mikel de Epalza, 'Le milieu hispano-moresque de l'évangile islamisant de Barnabé (XVIe-

link between the Gospel and the so-called *Lead Books* by arguing that it was an Islamically inspired work and a pseudo-epigraphic piece of anti-Christian polemics in the form of a gospel. He argued that the authorship of the Gospel would fit in the profile of a Morisco scholar and physician under the name of Alonso de Luna, who knew Latin, Arabic, Spanish and Italian, the languages used in the oldest manuscripts of the gospel.[6]

The Gospel of Barnabas reached the Muslim world for the first time through al-Qairanāwī's polemical work *Iẓhār al-Ḥaqq*.[7] He had derived his information from George Sale's Introduction to the Qur'ān (1734), who had known of a version of the Gospel in Spanish. But the Gospel gained much more diffusion among Muslims after Riḍā's publication of the Arabic text. As soon as he had received a complimentary copy of the Raggs' bilingual Italian-English edition from the Clarendon Press in Oxford, Riḍā spoke with Khalīl Saʿādeh, who immediately approached the editors for permission to translate their work into Arabic.[8]

In 1982, Ghulam Murtaza Azad, the director general of the Council of Islamic Ideology in Pakistan, tried to follow Riḍā's line by writing his own introduction to the Barnabas Gospel from an Islamic point of view.[9] Azad also cited Saʿādeh's introduction at length in Arabic, followed by an English translation of some of his conclusions. He disagreed with Saʿādeh on many points, and concluded: 'Christians should rest with peace of mind. This Gospel was not contrived by any Muslim, because according to the Holy Qur'ān Jesus predicted the advent of a messenger, Aḥmad. The Muslims, therefore are still in search of that Gospel wherein the name of their prophet is clearly mentioned as 'Aḥmad".[10]

Christine Schirrmacher is not precise when she remarked: 'Auf dem Deckblatt der arabischen Edition hat der Herausgeber zwei Seiten des italienischen Manuskripts in Faksimile reproduziert und die arabische Edition mit dem Titel 'al-ingil as-sahih' versehen, woraus Rashīd Riḍā's Anspruch,

---

XVIIe siècle)', *Islamochristiana*, vol. 8 (1982), pp. 159-183; G. A. Wiegers, 'Muḥammad as the Messiah: comparison of the polemical works of Juan Alonso with the Gospel of Barnabas in Spanish', *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, LII, no. 3-4 (1995), pp. 245-292. Cf. Longsdale Ragg, 'The Mohammedan' Gospel of Barnabas', *Journal of Theological Studies*, VI (1905), pp. 425-433; Luigi Cirillo & M. Fremaux, *Evangile de Barnabé, recherches sur la composition et l'origine: texte et tr.*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1977; J.N.J. Kritzinger, *The Gospel of Barnabas: Carefully Examined*, Pretoria, South Africa, 1975; P.S. van Koningsveld, 'The Islamic Image of Paul and the Origin of the Gospel of Barnabas', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam,* 20 (1997), pp.200-228.

[6] G.A. Wiegers, 'The Persistence of Mudejar Islam? Alonso de Luna (Muḥammad Abū' l-'Asī), the *Lead Books*, and the *Gospel of Barnabas', Medieval Encounters*, vol. 12/3 (November, 2006), pp. 498-518.

[7] R. al-Qairanāwī, *Iẓhār al-Haqq*, Constantinople, 1867, vol. 2, pp. 146-206.

[8] Rashīd Riḍā, (ed.), *Injīl Barnaba*, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Manār, 1325/1907. It actually appeared in 1908.The two included introductions, however, were dated on March/April 1908.

[9] Ghulam Murtaza Azad, 'An introduction to the *Gospel* of Barnabas', *Islamic Studies*, vol. 21/iv (1982), pp. 71-96.

[10] Ibid., p. 94.

hiermit das 'wahre Evangelium' vorzulegen, bereits deutlich wird'.[11] Although Riḍā's main interest in the Gospel emanated from the fact that it echoed the Qur'ānic image of Jesus and his servanthood to God, he did not mention the word '*ṣaḥīḥ*' on the cover of his Arabic edition. He presented it merely as a literal Arabic translation of the English (and original Italian) text as appearing on the cover: 'True Gospel of Jesus, called Christ, a new prophet sent by God to the world: according to the description of Barnabas his apostle'.[12]

The present chapter does not argue that Riḍā was convinced that the Gospel of Barnabas was a forgery. Neither does it claim that Riḍā was not in search for any newly discovered materials that would support his conviction of the corruption of the Scriptures, especially in his anti-missionary writings. It only tries to study what kind of change which might have occurred in Riḍā's thoughts by looking at his introduction and the later use by *al-Manār* of the Gospel. Firstly an attempt is made to study Riḍā's earlier initiative of using the Gospel of the Russian philosopher Tolstoy. Secondly, I will discuss Saʿādeh's participation in freemasonry, linking that to his translation of the Gospel. Then we shall move to study his perception of the Gospel as a historical piece of work through a critical reconsideration of his introduction. Finally and most relevant to the whole study is the revisiting of Riḍā's motivations as reflected in his introduction, and his later use of the Gospel in his journal and *Tafsīr* work.

5.1. Championing Tolstoy's Gospel

According to *al-Manār* itself, Riḍā was apparently in search for a 'true gospel of Christ' that would confirm the message of Islam. As has been noted earlier, and before knowing of the Raggs' edition, Riḍā referred to the Gospel for the first time in 1903 in his reply to the *Glad Tidings* in the work of the *Shubuhāt*. There he wrote: 'The Christians themselves do not deny that there took place a dispute about the crucifixion; and that there were some Gospels excluded by the synods centuries after Jesus, which denied the crucifixion, *such as the Gospel of Barnabas, which still exists despite the attempts of Christians to 'obliterate' it, just as other Gospels they had already obliterated.*'[13] It is clear from this quoted passage that Riḍā at that moment knew about the existence of the Gospel of Barnabas (probably from al-Qairanāwī's *Iẓhār al-Haqq*). A few pages later in the same issue of *al-Manār*, Riḍā, in one of his *fatwās*, referred to a certain Gospel 'in the *Himyarī* script' which was said to be found at the Papal Library in the Vatican (discussed below).[14]

In the same year, Riḍā published parts of an Arabic text of the Gospels according to the Russian writer and philosopher Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910),

[11] Schirrmacher, *Waffen*, p. 300.
[12] Raggs, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
[13] *Al-Manār*, vol. 6/2, p. 64
[14] Ibid., p. 67

which had been published in 1879.[15] We have already said that Riḍā was aware of the excommunication of Tolstoy from the Russian Orthodox Church because of his religious ideas (see, chapter 4). One of Tolstoy's contributions was his composition of what he saw as a 'corrected' version of the four Gospels. In his collection, he unified them into one account, excluding the reports on Christ's birth and genealogy, his miracles (such as his walking on the lake, and the healing of the sick), his mother's flight with him to Egypt, and the references to prophecies fulfilled by his life. He also left out most of the material about the birth of John the Baptist, his imprisonment and death. For Tolstoy, 'to believe in Christ as God is to reject God'.[16] Many of Tolstoy's works were available in Arabic for readers in Egypt. ʿAbduh was fascinated by his ideas, believing that he 'cast a glance on religion which has dispelled the illusions of distorted traditions, and by this glance he has arrived at the fundamental truth of Divine Unity'.[17]

Following ʿAbduh's steps, Riḍā championed Tolstoy, and frequently praised his thoughts and writings in *al-Manār*.[18] In three successive articles, he published Tolstoy's own introduction to his Gospels in Arabic under the caption 'The True Gospel: Introduction of the Russian philosopher Tolstoy known as 'the Gospels'',[19] which was prepared for *al-Manār* in a translation from French. Riḍā praised this 'true Gospel' as the result of freedom in religious research, which the Protestant thinking revived in Europe. Riḍā reckoned Tolstoy as one of the Western scholars, who sifted out the teachings of the Bible, and whom he described as having liberated their thoughts from the dogmas prescribed by the Church. Typically of Riḍā's views was that the conclusions reached by those free-minded scholars in that regard came closer to the Qur'ānic perceptions regarding the corruption of the Gospels. Riḍā moreover deemed their views to be a substantial proof on the truth of Islam.[20]

---

[15] For more details, see, David Patterson (ed. and trans.), *The Gospel according to Tolstoy*, The University of Alabama: Tuscaloosa & London, 1992, p. xvii.; Comte Léon Tolstoï, *Les Évangiles*, translated from the Russian text by T. de Wyzewa and G. Art, Paris: Librairie Académique Didier, 1896. Richard F. Gustafon, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger – A Study in Fiction and Theology*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986; David Redston, 'Tolstoy and the Greek Gospel', *Journal of Russian Studies* 54 (1988), pp. 21-33. Cf. other works of Tolstoy on religions, *A Criticism of Dogmatic Theology* (1880-83), *What I Believe* (1883-84), and *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1893).

[16] As quoted in Patterson, *op. cit.*, p. xvii.

[17] Letter ʿAbduh to Tolstoy, 8 April 1904; as quoted in the English translation in the diaries of Abduh's friend Blunt, *op. cit.*, pp. 455-456.

[18] His works were translated by Salīm effendi Qabʿīn. These translations were also available for sale at Riḍā's bookshop. See, for example, *al-Manār*'s reviews of some of these works, vol. 5/24 (March 1903), p. 952; vol. 6/11(August 1903), p. 427; vol. 7/23 (February 1905), p. 915; vol. 9/12 (January 1907), p. 946; vol. 10/4 (June 1907), p. 292; vol. 13/2 (March 1910), p. 131, vol. 16/1 (January 1913), p. 66.

[19] *Al-Manār*, 'Al-Injīl al-Ṣahīh: Muqaddimat Kitāb al-Faylasūf al-Rūsī Tolstoy al-Ladhī Sammāhu al-Anājīl', vol. 6/4 (16 Ṣafar 1321/14 May 1903), pp. 131-137. See also other following parts in, vol. 6/6, pp. 226-232; vol. 6/7, pp. 259-265.

[20] Ibid., p. 131.

Riḍā agreed with Tolstoy in his distrust of the four canonical Gospels. He further argued that these Gospels clearly indicated that Jesus' followers in his age were *ʿAwāmm Jāhilūn* (ignorant laymen). After his death they became dispersed and persecuted by the Jews and Romans until Constantine had adopted Christianity. When the Christian religion had acquired its authority, there emerged synods to collect all religious remains. A multitude of Gospels was collected from which these four were authorized, which only contained some of Christ's historical records and transmitted sermons.[21] But Riḍā did not take all of Tolstoy's arguments for granted, as they contained many things contrary to the Islamic narratives on the life of Jesus, especially his denial of Jesus' miracles. However, he saw the work of Tolstoy as a very useful tool in contesting the missionary allegation that the Qur'ān bore testimony to the canonical Gospels as the real word of God, a point that he had also challenged in his *Shubuhāt* earlier.[22]

5.2. Announcing another 'True' Gospel?

In July 1907, *al-Manār* started to announce its publication of the Gospel of Barnabas by printing some Arabic samples of Saʿādeh's translation.[23] Riḍā also reminded his readers of his earlier publication of Tolstoy's Gospel, and once again quoted a lengthy passage from Tolstoy's introduction: 'The reader should remember that these Gospels in their present form do not entirely contain the testimonies of the disciples of Jesus directly […], and the oldest copy that has come down to us from the fourth century was written in continuous script without punctuation, so that even after the fourth and fifth centuries they have been subject to very diverse interpretations, and there are not less than fifty thousand such variations of the Gospels.'[24] In line with the Tolstoy Gospel, Riḍā started to announce the whole Arabic edition of the Gospel of Barnabas by his publishing house in 1908. On the cover of *al-Manār* issue in which he announced that, Riḍā plainly wrote: 'This Gospel is the narrative of Barnabas […] which he [himself] called the 'true Gospel', and whose privilege over other circulated Gospels is that it confirms monotheism, denies crucifixion, and gives elaborate prediction of our prophet Muḥammad'.[25] Riḍā's insistence on publishing the Gospel in Arabic was due to its conformity with the form and structure of famous canonical Gospels on the one hand, and its agreement with many Islamic conceptions on the other. A second objective was his intention to make this work available to Arab readers, just as the Westerners did in some of their languages.[26] As a promotion for his announcement, he quoted the

---

[21] Ibid., p. 131.
[22] Ibid.
[23] 'al-Injīl al-Ṣahīh aw Injīl Barnabā', a*l-Manār*, vol. 10/5, pp. 385-387, vol. 10/7, 8, 9 (September-November 1907), pp. 495-501 & pp. 621-625 & pp. 651-658.
[24] *Al-Manār*, vol. 10/5, p. 385.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 386

passages from the Gospel, which agree with Islamic concepts, among others that it was not Jesus who died on the Cross, but Judas instead.[27]

5.3. A Freemason

Saʿādeh's relation with Riḍā and his journal has been described above (see chapter 2). Based on Saʿādeh's testimony in his preface to the Arabic translation of the Gospel, it is obvious that he did not want to commit himself to the religious meaning of the text: 'I feel obliged to stress that I have been committed in my introduction to follow my research from a historical and scientific point of view only. […] My translation is just to serve history. Therefore, I have avoided any religious discussions, which I leave for those who are more competent than I'.[28]

Saʿādeh was a born Christian who held secularist beliefs. Previous studies on Saʿādeh's role in the Arabic edition of the Gospel of Barnabas did not pay attention to his participation in Masonic activities, which can be considered as a justifiable interpretation for his cooperation with Riḍā in the translation work. His affiliation with the freemasons dates back to 1885, when he was a member of the lodge of Sulymān al-Mulūki during his four-year service as a medical advisor, and director of the English Hospital in Jerusalem. In this period, he became the secretary of the lodge, and later its president. According to Saʿādeh, the meetings of the freemasons took place in a cave, which was discovered by the American consul in Jerusalem.[29] Later in 1915, Saʿādeh made a description of the discovery of the consul of this cave, and what he named their 'historic meeting' in it. While he was hunting rabbits, the consul discovered a small hole covered with trees. The cave (which they thought to be the Temple of Solomon) was very wide, and had big pillars and huge rocks. Saʿādeh wrote:

> In this dark cave our impressive meeting was held. It was attended by many British and American MP's. Police agents, who were freemasons as well, guarded the entrance. The number of attendants was not less than 200 people, most of whom were of high status. […] In that dark cave, where nothing would spoil the spreading calmness, except the sound of water moving in the canal nearby, we had heard fascinating speeches. Some of them were the most beautiful I had ever heard in my life. The attendants sent a telegram of loyalty to King Edward VII, Prince de Galles and the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England; and in whose name we shouted three times. […] We then went out, and took a picture in the front of the enterance of the cave

---

[27] *Al-Manār*, vol. 10/12, pp. 947-948. On the cover of the Arabic edition it is mentioned that the Gospel was available at Al-Manār Bookshop for the price of 15-20 piasters exclusive posting costs (2 piasters); and the introduction was to be sold for 10 piasters.

[28] Khalīl Saʿādeh's introduction to the Arabic translation, 'Muqaddimat al-Mutarjim (the Translator's introduction), p. 16.

[29] Hamie, *al-ʿAllāma*, p. 54.

> besides our freemasonry logo. In this particular meeting, I was thinking of building a freemason lodge in Jerusalem, which I wished to be the Grand Lodge of the whole freemason world.[30]

Unlike Afghāni and ʿAbduh, there is no proof so far that Riḍā took part in freemason activities in Egypt or elsewhere.[31] During his stay in Egypt, Saʿādeh must have been a member of its Grand Lodge. In 1905 he dedicated one of his translated novels to Idrīs Rāghib, the grand master of the lodge in Egypt.[32] After his migration to Brazil, he remained active, and became the president of the freemason lodge *Najmat Sūriyya* (the Star of Syria) in Sao Paulo.[33] Saʿādeh quitted in May 1926, when he became convinced that Masonic teachings about liberty and the elimination of tyranny and despotism had no tangible results, and that the teachings of its rites were futile.[34]

One might consider Saʿādeh's commitment to freemasonry as a clarification for his embarking on translating the Gospel, as part of his attitude towards the Holy Scriptures and religion in general. It would also suggest that he might have embraced the belief of the majority of freemasons that every scripture of faith of every religion is to be respected equally. The Baptist minister and Masonic author Joseph Fort Newton (1880-1950) put it clearly: 'Whether it be the Gospel of the Christian, the Book of Law of the Hebrew, the Koran of the Mussulman, or the Vedas of the Hindu, it everywhere Masonically symbolizes the Will of God revealed to man'.[35] In the same vein, one would venture to argue that Saʿādeh had no strong commitment to one religious scripture above another; and this would accordingly make sense that somebody like him would accept the task of making the translation of that Gospel.

---

[30] As quoted in ibid., p. 55.

[31] See, for instance, A. Albert Kudsi-Zadeh 'Afghānī and Freemasonry in Egypt', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 92/1 (Jan. - Mar., 1972), pp. 25-35; cf. Karim Wissa, 'Freemasonry in Egypt 1798-1921: A Study in Cultural and Political Encounters', *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 16/2 (1989), pp. 143-161; Jacob M. Landau, 'Muslim Opposition to Freemasonry', *Die Welt des Islams*, New Ser., vol. 36/2 (July 1996), pp. 186-203.

[32] It was his *Asrār al-Thawra al-Rūsiyya: Riwāya Tārīkhiyya ʿAsriyya*. See, Hamie, 'L'homme', p. 110 & p. 255

[33] Schumann, *op. cit.*, p. 606. The official language of al-Mulūkī lodge was English See also, Mishāl Sabʿ, 'al-Masūniya fī Sūrya', available at: http://www.syria-wide.com/Abass.htm, accessed on 23 July 2007.

[34] Hamie, 'L'homme', p. 261. His son Anṭūn became the secretary of the lodge. Three months later Anṭūn also resigned, see, Anṭūn Saʿādeh, *al-ʾAthār al-Kāmila: Marḥalat mā Qabla al-Taʾsīs 1921-1932*, vol. 1, Beirut, 1975, pp. 198-202.

[35] Joseph Fort Newton, *Religion of Masonry: An Interpretation*, Kessinger Publishing, 2003, p. 94. Cf. William Green Huie, *Bible Application of Freemasonry*, Kessinger Publishing, 1996, p. 72.

5.3.1. Critical Analysis of Saʿādeh's Preface

Saʿādeh was aware that scholars fundamentally differed around the historicity of the Gospel of Barnabas without reaching any satisfactory answer about its origin. Following the Raggs, he gave a detailed description of the Italian manuscript of the Gospel, which was firstly discovered in Amsterdam by J. F. Cramer, a Counselor of the King of Prussia. He also referred to the Spanish manuscript referred to by Sale that had been in the possession of Dr. Thomas Monkhouse of Oxford (d. 1793).[36]

Saʿādeh was convinced that the Italian manuscript had been stolen from the Papal Library by the monk Fra Marino, who had by accident come across the Gospel of Barnabas in the library of Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) among other scriptures, when the latter was asleep. The monk, who had managed to gain the Pope's confidence, discovered the manuscript and hid it in his sleeves.[37] Saʿādeh accepted the possibility that the existing Italian manuscript was the very manuscript found by Marino in the Pope's library, arguing that by examining its water-mark researchers had discovered that it was dated to the second half of the 16th century during Sixtus' Papal office. He also added that its water-mark proved that it had been written on paper of clear Italian character on which there appears a picture of a 'anchor in a circle.'[38] In this regard, Saʿādeh was selective, and did not elaborate on the point carefully. He actually accepted the description of M. Briquet, who had argued that its paper was 'distinctively Italian', which was also mentioned by the Raggs. But he left out other arguments referred to by other scholars, such as J. Toland, who described the paper as Turkish.[39] It should be added that L. Cirillo dated the water-mark of its paper to the second half of the sixteenth century. The binding of the manuscript was made of Turkish leather, decorated in the Ottoman style with a double gilt-edged frame and a central floral medallion on both covers. Although the main text was Italian, its lay-out showed that this manuscript was executed according to the Ottoman tradition.[40]

Saʿādeh criticised the eighteenth-century European scholars who dealt with the Italian manuscript for their speculations in answering the question about the originality of the text, and whether it was the copy found by Marino or a later copy. These scholars, in his view, had not paid attention to the Arabic sentences and phrases on the margin of the text, which could be the clue to answer the question. He also blamed the orientalist David Samuel Margoliouth (1858– 1940) for not having dealt with the question in more details. Margoliouth had maintained that 'the Arabic glosses […] cannot have been composed by anyone whose native language was a form of Arabic.'[41] He also

---

[36] Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3; cf. Schirrmacher, *Waffen*, pp. 260-261 & 301.
[37] Ibid., p. 3. Cf. Jomier, *Commentaire*, p. 138; as referred in Slomp (1978), *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.
[38] Ibid., p. 4.
[39] Raggs, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.
[40] Cirillo, *op. cit.*; as quoted by Van Koningsveld, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-218.
[41] Raggs, *op. cit.*, p. xlix.

pointed out that this fact had escaped the notice of Toland, as also of La Monnoye who had described the 'citations arabes' as 'fort bien écrites'. Denis, on the other hand, had not failed to observe its mistakes and archaic style.[42] In Saʿādeh's mind, although some of the Arabic expressions on the margin had correctly been composed and were well-structured, they apparently had been modified by the scribe of the manuscript. Some other phrases were difficult to understand, while others were very archaic. This would mean that the scribe tried to translate them literally and in the 'narrowest' and 'silliest' sense. For example, he incorrectly structured the genitive case by putting the muḍāf ʾilayh (the second noun) in the place of the muḍāf (construct state) by saying: 'there is no such an Arab [writer] who would make such a mistake under the sun.'[43]

Saʿādeh paraded some of these mistakes and reached the conclusion that 'these Arabic glosses had been written by more than one scribe. He concluded that the language of the original composer had been correct, but then a following copyist had tampered with it. His lack of command of Arabic had resulted in many changes, and he corrupted much of what the first scribe had already written down. The scribe added to them many 'silly expressions, archaic styles and foreign elements producing no meaning […] Therefore, the Italian copy found in […] Vienna is not the original one and is undoubtedly taken from another copy.'[44]

Regarding to the author of the Gospel, Saʿādeh literally quoted the Raggs' views that the copying process had taken place in 1575 possibly by Fra Marino. He translated their words as follow: 'Anyhow, we can surely say that the Italian book of Barnabas is original. It was done by somebody, whether a priest, secular, monk or layman, who had an amazing knowledge of the Latin Bible […] And like Dante, he was particularly familiar with the Psalter. It was the work of somebody whose knowledge of the Christian Scriptures was exceeding his familiarity with the Islamic religious Scriptures. It was more probable, therefore, that he was a convert from Christianity.'[45]

There were congruent features between the Gospel and the famous 'Divina Comedia' by Dante in his description of hell, purgatory and paradise. These coincidences and quasi-coincidences in both accounts regarding the infernal torment were a good reason for some historians to carry back the Gospel to the fourteenth century and to believe that its author was probably a contemporary to Dante. Saʿādeh, however, maintained that the descriptions of hell in the Gospel of Barnabas were reminiscent of those of Dante only in its

---

[42] Ibid. Cf. Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[43] Ibid., p. 5.

[44] Ibid., p. 6.

[45] Ibid., p. 7. Compare the Raggs: 'Thus much we may say with confidence. The Italian *Barnabas* is, to all intents and purposes, an original work. It is the work of one who, whether priest or layman, monk or secular, has remarkable knowledge of the Latin Bible – as remarkable, perhaps, as Dante's – and like Dante, a special familiarity with the Psalter. It is the work of one whose knowledge of the Christian Scriptures is considerably in advance of his familiarity with the Scriptures of Islam: presumably, therefore, of a renegade from Christianity.' Raggs, *op. cit.*, pp. xliii-xliv.

numbering of its seven circles. He argued that it was more plausible to believe that both authors did not live in the same age. It was just a matter of *Tawārud al-Khawāṭir* (telepathy). It was also possible that both of them, in different ages, had quoted from an earlier work depending on Greek mythology.[46] Saʿādeh's hypothesis did not depend on any further historical elaboration or linguistic analysis of both works. The Raggs were more systematic in their comparison between the Gospel of Barnabas and Dante. Although they pursued many examples of reminiscences and studied the 'common atmosphere' of both, they considered it a 'superficially attractive theory'.[47] All those who studied the similitude between the Gospel and Dante at this time did not pay attention to another probability that Dante himself might have depended on Islamic sources. It was until 1919 that the Spanish orientalist and Catholic priest Miguel Asín Palacios (1871-1944) compared the Muslim religious literature on the Prophet Muḥammad's *Mi'rāj* (ascension to Heaven) with Dante's story describing a spiritual journey among the various inhabitants of the afterlife.[48]

According to the Raggs, Western scholars in the eighteenth century were of the view that there 'lurked an Arabic original'.[49] They also argued that this suggestion was made by Dr. White in 1784, who wrote that 'the Arabic original still existed in the East'. His statement was based on Sale's statement that 'the Muhammedans have also a Gospel in Arabic, attributed to St. Barnabas, wherein the history of Jesus Christ is related in a manner very different from what we find in the true Gospels, and correspondent to those traditions which Mohammed has followed in the Qur'ān.'[50] Sale had not seen the Gospel, but had based his statement on the information of La Monnoye, who had never seen an Arabic original either.[51]

Saʿādeh's view in this respect is paradoxical. Having discussed the Arabic glosses, he in the beginning concluded that it would be quite unfeasible that the original text was Arabic for many reasons. First of all, it was not possible that a translator with such capabilities to translate the Gospel from Arabic would have committed linguistic mistakes. Most of the expressions used in the text would suggest that the original was Latin or Italian. It is more probable therefore that the scribe was from Venice, who had copied the manuscript from another

---

[46] Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

[47] Raggs, *op. cit.*, pp. xl-xli. See also, Lonsdale Ragg, 'Dante and the Gospel of Barnabas', *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 3/2 (January, 1908), pp. 157-165.

[48] See, for instance, Miguel Asín Palacios, *La Escatologia musulmana en la 'Divina Comedia'*, Madrid: Real Academia Española 1919. Western scholars started to elaborate on the point after Palacios had published his theory. See, for instance, Louis Massignon, 'Les recherches d'Asin Palacios sur Dante', *Revue du Monde Musulman*, vol. XXXVI (1919); Alfred Guillaume, 'Mohammedan Eschatology in the Divine Comedy', *Theology*, vol. 6 (1921; Paul A Cantor, 'The Uncanonical Dante: The Divine Comedy and Islamic Philosophy', *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 20/1 (April 1996), pp. 138-153; Theodore Silverstein, 'Dante and the Legend of the Miraj: The Problem of Islamic Influence on the Christian Literature of the Otherworld', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 11/2 (April, 1952), pp. 89-110.

[49] Raggs, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

[50] As quoted in ibid., pp. xv-xvi.

[51] Ibid.

Tuscan text, or from a Venetian text mingled with Tuscan expressions.[52] After having discussed the above-mentioned Western views on an Arabic original, Saʿādeh reached another conclusion:

> Nevertheless […] it should be declared that I am more inclined to believe in an Arabic original rather than any other [language]. [The fact] that it has never been found should not be taken as an argument that it has never existed. If not, it should be believed that the Italian was the original version because no other copy has been found except the aforementioned Spanish one, which was said to have beeen translated from an Italian version. The oriental reader would at first glance recognize that the writer of the Gospel of Barnabas had a wide knowledge of the Qur'ān to the degree that most of his phrases were almost literally or figuratively translated from Qur'ānic verses. I am saying this while being aware that I am opposing the majority of Western writers who immersed themselves in the matter.[53]

Saʿādeh did not agree with the Raggs that the writer of the Gospel had little knowledge of Islam. For him, many stories mentioned in the Gospel corresponded with the Qur'ānic narratives.[54] The Gospel of Barnabas also contained many statements, which could be traced in the ḥadīth-literature and 'scientific mythologies' which were only known to the Arabs. Saʿādeh digressed his main subject with the sweeping statement that 'although there are a large number of orientalists preoccupied by Arabic and the history of Islam, we do not find nowadays among Westerners those who are considered to be real scholars of ḥadīth.'[55]

Another proof for Saʿādeh's assumption of an Arabic original was the style of binding of the Italian manuscript, which was, in his opinion, undoubtedly Arab. He furthermore disagreed with the view that it was the work of the Parisian binders brought by Prince Eugene of Savoy, as merely a presupposition.[56] It was again the conclusion of the Raggs, who closely studied the manuscript: 'the binding is, to all appearance, oriental. If it be the work of the Prince's Parisian binders (as no doubt the outer case is), then it is an astonishingly faithful copy of an oriental model.'[57] They compared the style of binding of the manuscript of the Gospel to another document, of 1575, in the Archive of Venice; and also based their argument on that of Lady Mary Wortley-Montague's (1689-1762) remarks of 1717, that 'the books were

---

[52] Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.
[53] Ibid., p. 9.
[54] He mentioned examples, such as the story of Abraham and his father (The Gospel of Barnabas, pp. 55-63) that resembles the Qur'ānic narratives (al-Anbiyā 21: 48-73 & al-Saffāt 37: 83-101). Ibid., p. 9.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid., pp. 9-10.
[57] Raggs, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

profusely bound in Turkey leather, and two of the most famous bookbinders of Paris were expressly sent to do this work.'[58]

In Saʿādeh's mind, it was indifferent whether the writer of the Gospel was of Jewish or Christian origin. He was convinced in either case that he was a convert to Islam. Saʿādeh bemoaned the loss of the Spanish manuscript and the fact that the scholars who had witnessed it had not studied it meticulously.[59] He also stated that to speak of an Arabic original does not mean that the writer was of Arab origin. The most plausible argument, in his view, was that the writer of the Gospel was an Andalusian Jew who had converted to Islam, after he had been forced to adopt Christianity and had become very familiar with the Christian Scriptures. The writer's remarkable knowledge of the Bible was hardly to be found among the Christians of this time, except among a small group of specialists. Saʿādeh corroborated his premise with the fact that many Jews in Andalusia had an excellent command of Arabic to the extent that some had belonged to the class of poets and literati. The passage of the Gospel of Barnabas concerning the obligation of circumcision and the 'hurting' report that Jesus had said 'a dog is better than an uncircumcised man' (Chapter 22, p. 45) were, in Saʿādeh's eyes, another evidence that it had not been written by somebody of Christian origin. He again digressed his subject by arguing that the Arabs had never tried to persecute people of other religious denominations in the beginning of their conquest of Andalusia. The fact that the Jews of Andalusia had converted to Islam in droves, and had sustained Muslims in conquering Spain and their long-term establishment could also indicate, according to Saʿādeh, that the author of the Gospel was one of these converts.[60]

At another level, he wrote: 'This was one of the incentives, which spurred the people of Andalusia to yield to the Muslim authority […], except in one thing, namely circumcision. At a certain point in time, however, they [Muslims] compelled the people to do it and issued a decree obligating the Christians to follow the tradition of circumcision, like Muslims and Jews. This was therefore one of reasons which made the Christians 'pounce' on them'.[61]

Saʿādeh returned to confirm that the writer of the Gospel was an Arab. Another reason for that was his treatment of the philosophy of Aristotle, which was widespread in Europe in the early Middle Ages. As this philosophy had

---

[58] Ibid., p. xiii (footnote).

[59] Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, p. 11. An eighteenth-century copy of the Spanish manuscript was discovered in the 1970s in the Fisher Library of the University of Sydney among the books of Sir Charles Nicholson, which was marked in English as 'Transcribed from ms. in possession of the Rev. Mr. Edm. Callamy who bought it at the decease of Mr. George Sale and now gave me at the decease of Mr. John Nickolls, 1745'. See, J.E. Fletcher, 'The Spanish Gospel of Barnabas', *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 18/4 (October, 1976), pp. 314-320. The manuscript has been published in L.F. Bernabe Pons, *El Evangelio de San Bernabe; Un evangelio islamico espanol*, Universidad de Alicante, 1995.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., p. 10.

reached Europe through the Arabs in Spain, it would be definitely confirmed that its writer was an Arab, but not a Westerner.[62]

Saʿādeh did not accept the view that the milieu of the Gospel of Barnabas was Italian. This was the historical conclusion made by the Raggs that the style of the book and the atmosphere it breathed were Occidental, more specifically medieval Italian. They mentioned many suggestive parallels between passages in the Gospel and the manners and customs of people in Italy. For example, its picturesque eulogy of the 'bellezza' of the summer season of fruits voiced an experience that was almost worldwide; and had familiar parallels in the Old Testament.[63] The Raggs were of the view that *vendemmia* (Vintage in Tuscany) in the Gospel would give a 'realistic description' of the historical background in which the Gospel had been written. Its reference to the expert stone-quarriers[64] and the solid stone buildings[65] were also 'more suggestive of a nation of born *muraturi* than of tent-loving Arabs.'[66] Saʿādeh saw these examples as merely an indication of an oriental rather than an occidental environment. These manners and customs during the harvest time and stone-quarrying had also been known in the remote past among the peoples of Palestine and Syria.[67]

The Raggs corroborated their abovementioned theory on the relation between Dante and the Gospel of Barnabas by the incidental reference to the Jubilee as giving a definite date for the origin of the Gospel. The Jubilee year was a Jewish celebration occurring every fifty years (Leviticus 25:10-11). The first recorded Jubilee was that of Pope Boniface VIII in 1300. The Pope issued a decree that the Jubilee should be observed once every hundred years.[68] After his death, however, Pope Clemens VI decreed in 1343 that the jubilee year should be held once every fifty years as the Jews had observed it. Pope Urban VI later proposed the celebration of a Jubilee every thirty-three years as representing the period of the sojourn of Christ upon earth, while Pope Paul II had decreed that the Jubilee should be celebrated every twenty-five years. In the Gospel it was mentioned: 'the year of jubilee, which now cometh every hundred years, shall by the Messiah be reduced to every year in every place.'

---

[62] Ibid., p. 15.

[63] Raggs, *op. cit.*, chapter 185, pp. 391-400. 'Behold, then, how beautiful is the world in summer-time, when all things bear fruit! The very peasant, intoxicated with gladness by reason of the harvest that is come, makes the valleys and mountains resound with his singing, for that he loves his labours supremely. Now lift up even so your heart to paradise, where all things are fruitful with fruits proportionate to him who has cultivated it.'

[64] Ibid., chapter 116, p. 251. 'But tell me, have you seen them that work quarried stones, how by their constant practice they have so learned to strike that they speak with others and all the time are striking the iron tool that works the stone without looking at the iron, and yet they do not strike their hands? Now do you likewise.'

[65] Chapter 153, p. 327. 'Have you seen them that build [and] how they lay every stone with the foundation in view, measuring if it is straight [so] that the wall will not fall down? O wretched man! for the building of his life will fall with great ruin because he does not look to the foundation of death!'

[66] Ibid., p. xxxviii.

[67] Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[68] Raggs, *op. cit.*, pp. xli-xlii.

(chap. 82, p. 193). This was a convincing reason for some historians to conclude that the author of the Gospel knew of the decree of Boniface. It would be reasonable therefore to suggest that it had not been written earlier than the second half of the fourteenth century.[69] Saʿādeh argued that it was difficult to understand how somebody, who had such a wide knowledge of the Bible, would make such a naïve error which he excused as a spelling mistake made by the copyist. He gave the far-fetched argument that the writing of the word 'fifty' in Italian is almost identical to the word 'one hundred'. [70]

In one sub-section, the Raggs dealt with the Gospel of Barnabas as part of the question of the lost Gnostic Gospels, and whether the Italian Barnabas enshrined within its covers the lost Gnostic Gospel which bore that name. The so-called 'Gelasian Decree' mentioned an *Evangelium Barnabe* as a heretical book. The decree was an apocryphal text, which was generally to be dated in the century after Pope Gelasius; and this was a reason for some people to suggest that such an apocryphal Gospel survived during the time of the prophet Muḥammad. The Raggs further argued:

> It is quite conceivable, then, that some of the apocryphal stories of the Qur'ān may be indirectly borrowed from this Gospel. If this be so, then a Christian student of the Qur'ān would at once be attracted by the Gnostic Gospel of Barnabas if it chanced to fall into his hands. Assuming, then, for the sake of argument, that an original Gnostic Barnabas, or a Latin version of the same, fell into the hands of a Christian renegade of the fourteenth or fifteenth century – just as the Spanish translation(?) fell into Fra Marino's hands in the last quarter of the sixteenth century – it would give him at once a title for his great missionary pamphlet, and a vast amount of material to work upon.[71]

On the basis of their arguments, Saʿādeh concluded that to say that the Gospel of Barnabas was entirely invented by a medieval writer was still debatable. The half or third of it would correspond with other sources than the Bible and the Qur'ān. If the Gelasian Decree was true, Saʿādeh added, it would be possible that the Gospel of Barnabas was existent long before the Prophet of Islam, albeit this would mean that it was different from its present form. The Gelasian Decree would also imply that it was well-known among the elite of scholars in this age, let alone the laymen. 'Therefore', Saʿādeh wrote, 'it was probable that any information about it must have reached the prophet of Islam (even by hearing), including the repeated and lucid statements and explicit chapters in which his name was clearly mentioned.'[72]

---

[69] Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, pp 12-13.
[70] The word 50 in Italian is 'cinquanta', while 100 is 'cento'. The two words are not almost identical as Saʿādeh argued.
[71] Raggs, *op. cit.*, pp. xlv-xivi.
[72] Saʿādeh, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Saʿādeh did not understand the Raggs' standpoint entirely. He mistakenly interpreted their sub-section on the Gospel of Barnabas as one of the Gnostic Gospels by thinking that there existed a Gospel under the name of the '*Gnostic Gospel*', which was completely lost. He totally misapprehended the argument of the Raggs, who only intended to put the Gospel of Barnabas in the context of other apocryphal Gospels and its deviance from the canonical ones, especially in its account of the 'valedictory denunciation of St. Paul' and the 'painless birth of Jesus'.[73] Saʿādeh was erroneous in his argument that 'this *Gnostic Gospel* was probably a father of the Gospel of Barnabas'.[74] By the end, he left aside the earlier-mentioned argument about an Arabic original copy of the Gospel. He reformulated the Raggs' views that a Jewish or Christian convert to Islam might have found a Latin or Greek version of this Gospel in the fourteenth or fifteenth century and made it up in its form, and therefore its origin had disappeared.[75]

5.4. Riḍā's Introduction

Following Saʿādeh's introduction Riḍā wrote a few pages in which he described his personal attitude towards the Gospel and its significance as an apocryphal book. In the start, he reiterated Tolstoy's statement that Christian historians were unanimous that there had been a great number of Gospels in the early centuries after the coming of Jesus, but clergymen had selected four only. But he did not attribute the statement to Tolstoy this time. In his conviction, the Christian *muqallidūn* (imitators) followed the selection of their clergymen without any further investigation, while those who valued science and avoided *taqlīd* (imitation) were eager to study the origin and history of Christianity even by means of such rejected Gospels. He also maintained that the reason for the existence of multiple versions of Gospels was the interest of each follower of Jesus to write a *sīrah* (biography) and name it a 'gospel', which contained his sermons and history. Therefore, apocryphal books could be useful after comparing them with the other canonical books. Riḍā argued that their significance would lie in their giving information about other religious conceptions, which had not been officially stipulated by clergymen: 'Had these gospels survived, they would have been in their content the most affluent historical sources […] You would have also watched the scholars of this age judging and deducing from them [conclusions] through the methods of modern sciences, as they have become safeguarded by the 'fence' of freedom and independence of thought and will: a thing which clergymen had never produced when they selected these four gospels only'.[76]

---

[73] Ibid., p. 13; See Raggs, *op. cit.*, p. xlvi.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Riḍā's 'Muqaddimat al-Nāshir (the publisher's introduction), p 17, see also, 'Injīl Barnabā, Muqaddimatuna lahū', *al-Manār*, vol. 11/2 (Ṣafar 1326/April 1908), p. 114 (Cited below as, 'muqaddimatuna').

Riḍā stressed that Barnabas accompanied Paul for a long time. After his conversion to Christianity, Paul had been introduced on his return to Jerusalem by Barnabas to the apostles (Acts 9:27). Before making any attempt to review the arguments of Saʿādeh, Riḍā stated that because the belief of Paul became more dominant and became the pillar of Christianity, it was no wonder that the Church considered the Gospel of Barnabas as non-canonical or incorrect. But he was pleased that the Gospel had not been discovered in Europe during its medieval times: 'Had anybody found it in the medieval centuries – the centuries of the darkness of fanaticism and ignorance – it would never have appeared […]. Its copy, however, appeared in the vivid light of freedom in these [Western] countries'.[77] In Riḍā's evaluation, the views of Western scholars concerning the paper of its manuscript, binding and language had been a result of painstaking and scholarly research, but their conclusions about its earliest writer and the time of its composition were merely reached by way of conjecture. Like any researcher basing his propositions on incorrect assumptions, while considering it as a valid postulate, those who studied the Gospel had assumed that the author was a Muslim, but became puzzled later and did not manage to define his origin.[78]

After this statement, and without further elaboration, Riḍā started to rephrase some of Saʿādeh's findings that its author was an Andalusian Jew, who had converted to Islam. He also mentioned an argument by an anonymous 'priest in a religious magazine', who had argued that most of the chapters of this Gospel were not known to any Muslim before. Riḍā was probably referring to Temple Gairdner, who had alluded to the 'strange' fact that none of the earlier Muslim writers had ever referred to this Arabic 'Gospel of Barnabas.[79] Riḍā was initially persuaded that its reference to the year of Jubilee was the 'strongest' assertion that its composer had been a medieval writer, but Saʿādeh's argument and his illustration on the 'weakness' of this theory made him change his view. Saʿādeh's examination was, for Riḍā, meticulous enough, and there was no other evidence to depend on in this regard. The same held true for Saʿādeh's argument concerning Dante.[80] In line with Saʿādeh, Riḍā supported the viewpoint that Fra Marino probably was the writer of the Arabic glosses on the Gospel. He argued that conversion to Islam must have stimulated him to learn Arabic, but he had not been able to write in correct phrases. As he learnt a language in his old age, it was normal that he had made several mistakes. Most of his correct expressions, however, were literally quoted from the Qur'ān or other Arabic sources, which he might have read.[81] According to Riḍā, there was another possibility that a clergyman had found the Gospel, and started learning

---

[77] Ibid., p. 115.
[78] Ibid., p. 116.
[79] Selim 'Abdul-Ahad and W. T. Gairdner, *The Gospel of Barnabas: An Essay and Inquiry*, (foreword by Jan Slomp) Hyderabad: Henry Martin Institute of Islamic Studies, 1975, p. 15 (first published in Cairo, 1907), cited below as Ahad and Gairdner.
[80] 'Muqaddimatuna', p. 116.
[81] Ibid., p. 117.

Arabic in order to determine any Arabic reference to which he might ascribe this Gospel. Neither native nor non-native (*a'jamī*) would say in Arabic, for example, '*Allah Subḥān*' instead of '*Subḥān Allah*'.[82]

Researchers rejected the Gospel's affirmation of the coming of Muḥammad by name. One of their arguments was that it was not logical that it had been written before Islam, as foretelling should come usually in a metonymical way. Riḍā maintained that it was probable that the translator of the Gospel into Italian had rendered the name Muḥammad from the word 'Paraclete'. However, deeply-religious people, in his opinion, would not see such things as contradictory with the Divine revelation. He quoted the Tunisian Muslim reformist Muḥammad Bayram al-Khāmis (1840-1889) who reported on the authority of 'an English traveler that he had seen in the Papal Library in the Vatican a copy of a Gospel written in the *Ḥimyarī* script, which was dated before the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad. Bayram al-Khāmis did not define the Gospel by name, but this 'reliable' Gospel, according to him, literally corresponded with the Qur'ānic verse: 'And giving the good tidings of an Apostle who will come after me, his name being Aḥmad' (61: 6). Riḍā gave no reference for his information, but tracing Bayram's *Ṣafwat al-Iʿtibār* I have found that the author did not describe the Englishman as 'traveler'. Bayram also did not hear this report personally from him. It was an account which Bayram mentioned in the context of his description of the Vatican and its library, which he portrayed as containing thousands of books, including this Gospel in 'Arabic *Ḥimyarī* script, which had been written two hundred years before the [Islamic] message'.[83]

Riḍā, however, admitted that it was never reported that any Muslim had seen a Gospel with such an evident prediction of the coming of Muḥammad. In his view, it seemed that the remains of such Gospels were still existent in the Papal Library in the Vatican with other banned books, which might have been dated to the early centuries of Christianity. The appearance of such works, he believed, would remove all assertions around the Gospel of Barnabas and other gospels.[84] By the end, Riḍā urged his Muslim readers not to think that Western scholars and Eastern Christian writers (such as Saʿādeh and the above-mentioned founders of *al-Muqṭaṭaf* and *al-Hilāl*) doubted the authenticity of this Gospel out of their fanaticism as Christians: 'the age when fanaticism used to incite people to obliterate historical facts has elapsed […] Aside from its historical advantage and its judgment in our [Muslims] favour in the three issues of dispute; namely monotheism, non-crucifixion and the prophethood of

---

[82] Ibid., p. 118.

[83] Muḥammad Bayram al-Khāmis, *Ṣafwat al-Iʿtibār bi Mustawdaʿ al-Amṣār wā al-Aqṭār*, edited by Maʾmūn Ibn Muḥī al-Dīn al-Jannān, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmyya (2 vols.), 1997, vol. 2, p. 14.

[84] 'Muqaddimatuna', p. 119 In 1903, Riḍā mentioned the same argument about this Gospel in his answer to a *fatwā* by one of his readers in Cairo on the prediction of the Prophet Muḥammad in other scriptures. *Al-Manār*, vol. 6/2, pp. 67.

Muḥammad, it suffices us to publish it because of its sermons, wisdom, ethics and best teachings.'[85]

5.4.1. Later use by *al-Manār*

Riḍā scarcely mentioned the Gospel of Barnabas in his religious arguments against Christian missions. Four years later *al-Manār* for the first time mentioned the Gospel in its comment on an article published in the Russian journal *Shūrā,* which compared Ibn Taymiyya and Luther in sciences related to Christianity. (see, chapter 2).[86] In 1929, *al-Manār* published a critique written by a certain al-Yazīdī from Rabat on Emile Dermenghem's biography of the prophet Muḥammad.[87] Al-Yazīdī, among others, attacked the Church for having not well established the Divine revelation, and for the fact that its clergymen had not only corrupted their religion, but rejected the message of Muḥammad. As a comment on this article, Riḍā rebuked Dermenghem and requested him to call the Christians to convert to Islam, as this religion was the *muslih* (reformer) of Christianity. In a footnote, he confirmed that the Christians had lost the real Gospel. As Islam, in his view, came to abrogate all preceding laws, Christianity should return back to it, and not vice versa. Riḍā was now more outspoken: 'The Gospel of Barnabas is the truest in our point of view above all these canonical Gospels, as it utterly speaks of monotheism and its proofs, and the prophethood of Muḥammad.' [88]

Riḍā cited the Gospel of Barnabas again in the context of his exegesis of the verse: 'Those who follow the Messenger; the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own (Scriptures) – in their Torah and the Gospel' (Al-ʾAʿrāf, 7: 157). In his discussion on the *Bishāra* (foretelling or glad tiding) of previous Judeo-Christian Scriptures of the coming of the prophet Muḥammad, Riḍā quoted lengthy passages (about 60 pages) of *ʾIẓhār al-Haqq.*[89] After discussing what he deduced as *bishārāt* from the authorized Biblical books, al-Qairanāwī preferred to avoid quoting other prophecies mentioned in non-Canonical books, except the Gospel of Barnabas. Al-Qairanāwī pointed out that despite its exclusion by clergymen this Gospel included 'the greatest *Bishāra* on the Prophet of Islam.[90] He also believed that it was one of the most ancient Gospels, and even existed before the coming of Islam. Concerning the historicity of this Gospel, al-Qairanāwī noted that it had been mentioned in books dated back to the second and third centuries A.D.

---

[85] Ibid. Unlike Saʿādeh, Riḍā praised people such as Margoliouth for his independent findings on the Gospel.
[86] *Al-Manār*, vol. 15/7, pp. 542-544.
[87] *Al-Manār*, Vol. 30/6 (Jumādā al-ʾĀkhira 1348/December 1929, p. 445 He was probably Muḥammad al-Yazīdī, a member of the Moroccan secret society al-Zāwiya. His name has been mentioned on the list of the society, Muhammed Azūz Hakīm, *al-Hāj ʿAbd al-Salām Bannūna*, Rabat: al-Hilāl Press, vol. 2, p. 14. Émile Dermenghem, *La vie de Mahomet*, Paris : Plon, 1929.
[88] Ibid., p. 445.
[89] Al-Qairanāwī, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-206.
[90] Ibid., p. 206

This would mean that it had been written 'two centuries before Islam'. Al-Qairanāwī did not accept the argument that it was a Muslim who had corrupted this Gospel either, since it had nowhere been reported that Muslims had ever attempted to make any change in the widely accepted scriptures, let alone the Gospel of Barnabas.[91]

In Riḍā's view, there was 'a clear mistake' made by al-Qairanāwī in calculating the years, since the Prophet had received his message in the beginning of the seventh century. This meant that Barnabas had written his Gospel five centuries before Islam, and not two. Riḍā, however, supposed that Jesus had given Barnabas the order to write it down in the first century, although there was no earlier mention of it. The oldest version discovered in Europe, nevertheless, was dated to the 15th or the 16th century.[92] Riḍā in details quoted the *bishārāt* from the Gospel of Barnabas annexing to them some passages of his above-mentioned introduction.[93] He added another *Bishāra* from the book of Haggai (2:7-8): 'For thus saith the Lord of hosts: Yet one little while, and I will move the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land. And I will move all nations: and *the desired of all nations* shall come and I will fill this house with glory: saith the Lord of hosts.' Riḍā stated that the 'desired of all nations' was in its original Hebrew '*ḥemdat* (חֶמְדַּת)', which directly means 'praised', and would consequently refer to the Arabic 'Muḥammad'.[94]

By the end, Riḍā restated: 'We believe that the Gospel of Barnabas is superior to these four Gospels in its Divine knowledge, glorification of the Creator, and knowledge of ethics, manners and values.'[95] He agreed with Saʿādeh that some of its ethical and cognitive notions had been derived from the philosophy of Aristotle. Riḍā argued that similar arguments had also been raised by 'independent' Western scholars concerning the Mosaic laws as derived from Hammurabi (which he had endorsed earlier), and concerning the ethics of the Gospels as emanated from Greek and Roman philosophy. Riḍā was straightforward in declaring his pragmatic approach in polemics by saying: 'We might have agreed with the People of the Book and have accepted these *shubuhāt* (allegations) as well, but we establish proofs against them by exploiting them in [defending Islam] in this situation [of polemics].'[96]

5.5. Short-lived Like an Apricot: A Missionary Response

The appearance of the Gospel must have been a shock to many Christian believers.[97] Strangely, Riḍā never alluded to any Christian response to his

---

[91] Ibid., p. 206.
[92] *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, vol. 9, p. 245.
[93] Ibid., pp. 249-250.
[94] Ibid., p. 250; italics mine.
[95] Ibid., p. 251.
[96] Ibid., p. 251.
[97] Some available studies have examined a few evaluations made by Muslims and Christians afterwards, as well as some recent debates on the Gospel and their impact on Muslim-Christian

undertaking. He only told us one anecdote that happened a few months after its publication, when he was visiting his village in Lebanon. In one of his meetings with Muslims and Christians, one of the Muslim attendants shouted: 'Without you [Riḍā] the status of Islam would never be elevated!' A Christian fellow replied: 'Not only yours, he also published the Gospel for us' – meaning the Gospel of Barnabas. Riḍā and other people laughed. He ironically wrote: '*Ḥabbadhā hadhihī al-Sadhājah maʿa hadhā al-ʾItifāq bayna al-Muslimīn wā al-Naṣārā* (how wonderful this naïveté is, as accompanied by harmony among Christians and Muslims)'.[98] ʿAbd al-Masiḥ al-Antākī (1874-1922), the Greek Orthodox proprietor of *al-ʿOmrān* journal in Cairo and a friend of Riḍā, expressed his interest in the Gospel.[99]

Then working in Cairo, Temple Gairdner and his Egyptian fellow-worker Selim ʿAbdul-Wāhid wrote a refutation of the Gospel. The authors did not make a straight reference to Riḍā, but their treatise should be seen as a contemporary Christian description of the whole debate. In their own words, they contended:

> The name (though not the contents) of this strange book had long been known in India, and was not unknown in Egypt. Though it was only by name, it has been freely cited in these countries by inserted parties, who cited a book they had never seen or read, and almost certainly never would have heard of, except for a chance mention of it in Sale's Introduction of the Qur'ān […]. Moreover it has been triumphantly cited by the opponents of the Christian religion as the book which most of all confuted the New Testament and demonstrated all that our Muslim friends have alleged against the Christian Book and against Christianity in general. It would seem that such men, therefore, have been guilty of using as one of their valued weapons a book about which they knew nothing other than the name.[100]

As an active member in missionary circles in Egypt, the Muslim convert to Christianity ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Bajūri sharply reacted to Riḍā's publication of the Gospel in a hitherto unnoticed polemical piece of work under the title *Khūdhat al-Khalāṣ* (see, introduction). According to Bājūrī himself, he was taught Christian theology by Gairdner, and became keeper at the English missionary Library in Giza. His polemical treatise against the Gospel of Barnabas was

---

relations later. See, Leirvik, 'Barnabas'; Goddard (1994); Jan Slomp, 'The Gospel in dispute. A critical evaluation of the first French translation with the Italian text and introduction of the so-called Gospel of Barnabas', *Islamochristiana*, vol. 4 (1978), pp. 67-111; id., 'The pseudo-Gospel of Barnabas, Muslim and Christian Evaluations,' *Bulletin Secretariatus pro non christianis*, vol. 9 (1976), pp. 69-76.

[98] *Al-Manār*, vol. 11/11, (Dhū al-Qiʿdah 1326/December 1908), p. 879.

[99] Letter from Antākī to Riḍā, 8 May 1908. More about Antākī, see Sāmī al-Kayyālī, *al-Adab al-Muʿāsir fī Sūriyā*, Cairo, 1959, p. 81.

[100] Ahad and Gairdner, p. 1.

primarily a collection of articles, some of which he earlier published in the Egyptian Christian journals *al-Haqq* ('The Truth') and *Bashā'ir al-Salām* (see, chapter 4). After the publication of the Gospel in Arabic, he immediately approached a certain Maʿzūz Effendi Jād Mikhā'īl, a notable Copt from the town Dīr Muwās (the province of Minia, southern Egypt), who showed his enthusiasm to finance the printing of a treatise against the Arabic edition of Riḍā on the condition that the profit should be used to publish another Christian rejoinder to Muslim attacks.

Throughout his whole treatise, Bājūrī did not refer to Riḍā directly by name, except at the end of his work.[101] Like many other Christian Egyptians, Bajūrī often called him the 'intruder Sheikh', whose objective was to enflame the animosity between Islam and Christianity. Besides his attack on the Gospel, he reported many interesting stories about his conversion and the conversion of other contemporary Muslims in Egypt. He maintained that he abandoned Islam after a long-term investigation of the Bible. As he committed himself to the 'service of Jesus', his treatise was a message to the Muslim umma. His intention was to give those 'arrogant' people a lesson if they dared to assault his new religion. In his view, Muslims turned their efforts to attack the essence of Christianity in their magazines instead of reacting to Cromer's writings on Islam.[102]

Bājūrī incorrectly thought that the publisher and translator of the Gospel in English was George Sale. As he had no anxiety that the Gospel would have impact on the English people, the translator published this 'mythical' work in order to teach his Christian fellow-citizens the superiority of their Gospel over such 'invented and futile' books. Unlike the English people, he went on, Muslims of Egypt believed that the authority of religion was above everything, including the freedom of individuals. They became excited when they saw the Gospel in Arabic; and it was, Bājūrī believed, part of the anti-Christian propaganda in the country. He scornfully attacked the 'intruder' by saying that his claim of publishing the Gospel because of its historical significance was only to escape the 'arrows of blameworthiness', as he did that due to the 'hidden fanatic hostility […] boiling in his head' against Christianity and Paul.[103]

Bājūrī considered it his task to defend the Scriptures, like a 'solider' in the Kingdom of Christ,[104] just like the Egyptian soldier who had sacrificed himself and saved the Khedive from an assassination attempt in Alexandria. In his view, four reasons must have been behind the 'horrifying evil' which Riḍā made by publishing the Gospel: 1) his conviction that Egyptian Muslims had a tendency to purchase whatever anti-Christian literature; he therefore wanted to gain money without paying attention to the problems which this '*Juhanammī* (devilish)' work was to cause, 2) as reaction to his feeling of exclusion by Al-Azhar scholars, so he attempted to gain their affection by having published the

[101] Ibid., p. 122.
[102] Ibid., pp. 1-24.
[103] Ibid., p. 25.
[104] Ibid., p. 121.

Gospel, and in order to persuade them that he was serving Islam, 3) his pretence that he was an honest servant of Islam so that the sultan would allow him to return back to his homeland, 4) or his desire to support anti-Christian nationalist papers in Egypt (such as *al-Liwāʾ* of Muṣṭafā Kāmīl), and to enhance them in their fanaticism and agitation.[105] Bājūrī mockingly described Riḍā as 'the hero of [propagating] discord among the two Egyptian races, Christians and Muslims', and his *Manār* was 'the theater of offenses against Christianity'.[106]

Bājūrī's first chapter firstly appeared in the fifth issue of *al-Haqq* (7 December 1907), which he signed as *Ḥāmīl ʿĀr al-Masīḥ wā Ṣalībuh* (or the bearer of Christ's Disgrace and Cross). He believed that his treatise was an 'amputating sword and protective shield' for Christians against the Gospel of Barnabas. Under the title, 'Nazareth and Jesus', Bājūrī mentioned that he had many discussions with some 'dissident [Muslims]' in Giza, who were enthusiastic about the appearance of the Gospel. In his dispute, he used the arguments developed by Gairdner's magazine *al-Sharq wā al-Gharb* that its writer must have been a Westerner, since he was entirely ignorant of the geographical site of Syria and Palestine. The Gospel's notion of Nazareth was, for example, incorrect. In the Gospel, it had been stated that 'Jesus went to the Sea of Galilee, and having embarked in a ship sailed to his city of Nazareth (chapter 20). This picture would represent the city as a harbour on the lake of Galilee, whereas it was a town miles away from the Lake, surrounded by mountains.[107] A Muslim once disputed Bājūrī and rejected such arguments, and accepted the portrayal of Barnabas, since the 'cursed Christians had changed the name of Nazareth and labeled it on this town surrounded by the mountains in order to contend the Gospel of Barnabas'.[108]

A few months later, Bājūrī published another article (his second chapter) in the above mentioned *Bashāʾir al-Salām*. For him, due to its 'fallacies', the publication of the Gospel would harmfully affect Islam, and its circulation could be a reason behind the conversion of many Muslims to Christianity. He praised Saʿādeh for his scientific introduction, especially his doubts about the Gospel and its foretelling of Muḥammad by name. As for Riḍā's introduction, he found it 'immature' in 'philosophical' terms, and contained nothing but all kinds of provocation against Christianity. Interestingly, Bājūrī charged Riḍā of seeing no understanding for the significance of *Taqālīd* (customs) in Christianity, just as his resistance against the Islamic concepts, such as *Ijmāʿ* (consensus), *Taqlīd* and *Tawātur*. It was no surprise therefore that he, in a similar sense, would rejoice the 'baseless' Gospel attributed to Barnabas, while

---

[105] Ibid., pp. 29-31.
[106] Ibid., p. 124.
[107] Ibid., pp. 35-36. Bājūrī headed his chapter with the verse, 'And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong' (Luke 4:29). This was a direct message that Luke should be considered more reliable as it represents the city surrounded by a hill, not a sea.
[108] Ibid., pp. 44-45.

'closing his eyes' away from the fact that the Bible had been transmitted from one generation to another. Bājūrī consequently compared Riḍā's denial of the Bible to the rejection of the *tawātur* in ḥadīth, the Qur'ān, and prophets. He moreover described Riḍā's introduction as religiously 'fanatic', and based on the illusions of a lunatic Indian who superficially knew […] the Holy Book […], and whose fatal poison was the cause of discord among Christians and Muslims'.[109]

In Bājūrī's opinion, the Gospel of Barnabas contained many contradictions with the Bible and Qur'ān. In the last part of his treatise, Bājūrī traced a hundred chapters (out of 222) from the Gospel and criticised them in the light of his own understanding of Christian and Islamic notions.[110] He complained that his constant shortage of financial resources was the reason why he was not able to publish the remaining chapters in his small book. He therefore requested zealous rich Christians to contact him for the funding of another treatise, if they were interested in seeing his criticisms of the rest.[111]

Bājūrī concluded that Riḍā was not aware of his 'childish' act and the grief it caused. According to him, the Gospel became an incentive for many Muslim teachers of Arabic, who spent most of their lessons in mocking at Coptic children in state schools.[112] He saw the publication of the Gospel was an integral part of what he considered as anti-Coptic sentiments in Egypt. In his view, by reviewing the Coptic mouthpiece *al-Waṭan* for the last three years (1905-1908) one would count more than 3000 incidents offending the Copts. Bājūrī warned Egyptian Muslims not to continue their assault on the Christians, as he believed that the British would persist to occupy Egypt and protect its Coptic minority against any aggression. He also expressed his unwillingness to offer any concession by pleading for independence, and leave more space for these nationalist voices to play with the Copts after the British departure.[113] He was therefore seeking for any kind of European protection by writing: 'we the Copts are in need of the English or any other European state more than during the *Fitna* (strife) of ʿUrābī'.[114]

Bājūrī argued that the writer of the Gospel had inserted the idea that the 'uncircumcised is worse than dogs' after his conversion to Islam in order to satisfy Muslims: 'why the disciples would be disappointed when hearing that [from Jesus], while they were circumcised Jews, and Jesus himself was circumcised!'[115] Another example was the story of Adam according to Barnabas: 'as the food was going down, he remembered the words of God, and, wishing to stop the food, he put his hand into his throat' (chapter 40). Bājūrī maintained that such a story had its Islamic origin. He had heard the

[109] Ibid., p. 71.
[110] Ibid., pp. 74-109.
[111] Ibid., pp. 109-110.
[112] Ibid., pp. 115-116.
[113] Ibid., p. 120.
[114] Ibid., p. 119.
[115] Ibid., p. 89.

same account from his teacher of the Qur'ān, when he was still a young Muslim, twenty-nine years before the publication of the Gospel in Arabic. This was for him enough evidence that the author of the Gospel was 'hunting' for any common Islamic notions.[116] Bājūrī also compared verses from the Gospel of Barnabas with their Qur'ānic equivalents. Here Bājūrī was trying to find these equivalents by using Saʿādeh's Arabic text. For example, he compared the verse of the Gospel of Barnabas which stated that 'the flesh […] alone desireth sin' (chapter, 23), with a Qur'ānic passage maintaining that 'certainly the soul is indeed prone to evil' (Yūsuf, 55).[117]

Bājūrī concluded his treatise by making an interesting parallel that 'each lie [embodied] in the Gospel of Barnabas was a weapon against the simple-minded Christians, but we thank God that it was published out of agitation in the month of May: [… a month] in which flies are very short-lived; and the age of this Gospel will be shorter than flies. Also in May apricot grows up, which is the most short-lived fruit, and this 'deceitful' Gospel will be likewise!'[118]

5.6. Conclusion

The Gospel of Barnabas has been examined as part of a continuing Islamic literary tradition in looking for an 'Islamic Gospel' that supported the principal tenets of the Islamic faith. Four stages have been detected in *al-Manār*'s search for this gospel: 1) Riḍā's explicit reference to the existence of the Gospel of Barnabas (May 1903), 2) his simultaneous allusion to a copy of a Gospel confirming the coming of the prophet Muḥammad, which had been written in the *Ḥimyarī* script to be found in the Papal Library in the Vatican, 3) his declaration in the same month of the Gospel of Tolstoy as the true one, 4) finally his publication of the Arabic edition of the Gospel of Barnabas, after he had received the translation by the Raggs.

It remains an interesting aspect of the Arabic version of the Barnabas Gospel that it was the product of cooperation between a Christian (albeit with a secular spirit) and a Muslim scholar. We have seen that Saʿādeh probably did not study any relevant materials related to the historicity of the Gospel, except the conclusions of the Raggs, whose views were deeper and historically more detailed. Riḍā rephrased Saʿādeh's ideas most of the time without giving any elaborate explanation.

[116] Ibid., p. 94.
[117] Ibid., p. 90.
[118] Ibid., p. 117.