MU'TAZILISM IN ISLAM AND JUDAISM

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(1) Project Coordinators:

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(2) Background:

The Mu'tazila was a rationalist school of Islamic theology and one of the important streams of Islamic thought. Its beginnings were in the eighth century and its “classic” period of development was from the latter part of the ninth century until the middle of the eleventh. During these four centuries, the theological movement of the Mu'tazila played a major role in the Islamic intellectual scene. Over time it fell out of favor in Sunni Islam and had largely disappeared by the fourteenth century. It is mainly due to the reception of Mu'tazili thought by the Imamis and the Zaydis within Shi‘ism, as well as by Rabbanite and particularly Karaite Jews, that we are relatively well informed today about Mu'tazili doctrines and even have access to a significant quantity of authentic textual materials. The literary activities of the Zaydis and the Karaites were particularly important for the preservation of primary textual materials of the Mu'tazilis. Not only did they adopt Mu'tazili doctrines to a large extent in their own respective theological thinking; they also copied significant amounts of original Sunni Muslim Mu'tazili texts.

Mu'tazili manuscripts have survived largely in two sources: in Yemenite public and private manuscript collections housing manuscripts of Zaydi provenance, and in the Abraham Firkovitch collection in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg which came mostly from the manuscript storeroom of the Karaite synagogue in Cairo.

In the early 1950’s a number of manuscripts were discovered in Yemen which contained works of various representatives of the Mu'tazili school of Abu Hashim al-Jubba’i (d. 933), the Bahshamiyya. These included most of the twenty-volume Kitab al-Mughni fi abwab al-tawhid wa-l-'adl of ‘Abd al-Jabbar al-Hamadhani (d. 1025) which was subsequently edited in Egypt between 1960 and 1969. It was also in Yemen that important writings were discovered of Rukn al-Din Mahmud b. al-Malahimi al-Khwarazmi (d. 1141), a follower of the teachings of Abu l-Husayn al-Basri (d. 1044), the founder of the last innovative school within the Mu'tazila. Ibn al-Malahimi’s Kitab al-Mu'tamad fi usul al-din was published in 1991 and the shorter Kitab al-Fa’iq fi usul al-din is about to be published (both edited by W. Madelung and M.D. McDermott). All these
manuscripts are housed at the Library of the Great Mosque in Sanaa. By contrast, the holdings of the numerous private and smaller public libraries of Yemen remain unexploited until today. Thirteen of the Mu‘tazili manuscripts found in the Firkovitch collection were described in detail in 1935 by Y.A. Borisov (in Bibliografiya Vostoka 8-9 (1935), pp. 69-95). On the basis of Borisov’s descriptions of the Firkovitch Mu‘tazili manuscripts comparing them with fragments from the British Library, Haggai Ben-Shammai was able to draw further conclusions regarding the identity of some of the Mu‘tazili materials preserved by the Karaites, showing in particular that the Karaites had preserved the original version of ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s Kitab al-Muhit which we now possess only in the shortened version by Ibn Mattawayh. (Haggai Ben-Shammai, “A note on some Karaite copies of Mu‘tazilite writings,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 37 (1974), pp. 295-304.). Until the early 1990s the Russian materials were basically inaccessible to Western scholars.

Much of the material which has survived has not yet been utilized or published. In 2003, the applicants founded the Mu‘tazilite Manuscripts Project, an international group of fifteen scholars (so far), setting out to collect, record and prepare critical editions of all unpublished material of Mu‘tazili provenance. Initial funding for the project was provided by grants from the Thyssen Foundation (Germany) and the Ben-Tzvi Institute (Israel) for a period of two years (10/2004-10/2006). The Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany) provided a grant for the organization of an international workshop on the Mu‘tazila held in Istanbul (July 2005) that was hosted by the German Orient-Institut, and a second international workshop, again held in Istanbul (May 2006), was funded by Yad ha-Nadiv. During the current academic year (2005-2006), the Institute for Advanced Studies at The Hebrew University (Jerusalem) is hosting a research group (“Mu‘tazilism in Islam and Judaism”) enabling a number of the members of the Mu‘tazilite Manuscripts Project to work together on Mu‘tazilite texts. In addition to work on the texts themselves, a Handbook of Mu‘tazilite Works and Manuscripts is being prepared which has been accepted for publication by Brill, Leiden.

(3) Political Significance of the Project:
Apart from being an interdisciplinary project in which scholars from the fields of Islamic and Jewish studies closely cooperate on an international level, the project has a wider political dimension in two respects. First, it sheds light on an important aspect of Jewish-Muslim intellectual interaction that stretched over a period of some three centuries and occurred in the center of the Islamic world (Baghdad, Basra, Cairo). As such “the story of the Mu‘tazila” is as important, if not more so, as the well-known intellectual symbiosis of the two religions in Islamic Spain. A thorough scholarly investigation of Mu‘tazilism in Islam and Judaism and the publication of its results – not only in the West but also in the Islamic world – can therefore constitute a contribution conducive to a more peaceful future. This is particularly so given the significance “the heritage” has for contemporary Muslims and given the re-evaluation of Mu‘tazili thought in 20th century Sunni Islam (so-called “Neo-Mu‘tazila”). Moreover, among the fifteen members of the Mu‘tazilite Manuscripts Project are scholars not only from the West (Europe and the US), but also from Israel and the Islamic world (Iran, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia). Against all odds we have been successful so far in collaborating closely, publishing the results of our work in the West, in Israel, in Lebanon, and in Iran; in meeting for two very productive conferences in Istanbul in July 2005 and in May 2006.

(4) Achievements and publications since the formation of the Mu‘tazilite Manuscripts Project:

(i) Catalogues and Handbooks:


(ii) Editions:


(iii) Studies:


