

Rational Theology  
in Interfaith  
Communication  
*Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī's  
Mu'tazilī Theology  
among the Karaites  
in the Fāṭimid Age*

By Wilferd Madelung and  
Sabine Schmidtke

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# Rational Theology in Interfaith Communication

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## CONTENTS

Preface .....	vii
Introduction .....	1

### Text

1. Yūsuf al-Baṣīr's Refutation of Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣīr's Proof for the Existence of God .....	13
Translation .....	15
Arabic Text .....	37
2. Excerpt from Part Two of Sahl b. al-Faḍl al-Tustarī's Responsa to 'Alī b. Sulaymān al-Maḥdisī .....	61
Translation .....	63
Arabic Text .....	67
3. Excerpt from Sahl b. al-Faḍl al-Tustarī's Book of Intimation .....	75
Translation .....	77
Arabic Text .....	83
4. Excerpt from the Book of Revision of the Book of Aristotle on Metaphysics by Sahl b. Faḍl al-Tustarī .....	91
Translation .....	93
Arabic Text .....	100

### Facsimiles

Facsimile (RNL II Firk. Yevr.-Arab. I 3118) .....	111
Facsimile (RNL II Firk. Arab 119, fols. 1-6) .....	128
Facsimile (BL Or 2572, fols. 38a-41b) .....	134
Facsimile (BL Or 2572, fols. 47b-52b) .....	139



## PREFACE

Rational speculative theology (*kalām*) in early Islam was represented most distinctly by the theological school of the Muʿtazila. Founded in Basra in the early 8th century, the school soon became predominant in theological scholarship and discourse and remained so, in spite of the rise of rival, less rationalist schools, until the early 11th century. The Muʿtazila held that the basic truths of theology, such as the existence of God and the nature of His attributes and justice, are entirely subject to rational proof without the benefit of scriptural revelation. Only after these basic truths have been established can the veracity of scripture be proved by reason, and the primacy of reason must also be maintained in the interpretation of scripture.

Muʿtazilī theology naturally appealed to rationally inclined theologians of other scriptural religions and provided a suitable basis for inter-faith communication in the Islamic world. In Judaism Muʿtazilī thought was adopted to varying degrees from the 9th century on. In the 10th century the Basran school of the Muʿtazila gained ascendancy over the school of Baghdad and elaborated novel systematic thought based on the teaching first of Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī (d. 916) and then of his son Abū Hāshim al-Jubbāʾī (d. 933), who often deviated to some extent from the views of his father. The center of the school now moved to the ʿAbbāsid capital Baghdad where Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī (d. 980) attracted a large following. Muʿtazilī scholarship was favoured by the Būyid authorities ruling in Iraq and western Persia. The Būyid vizier al-Ṣāhib b. ʿAbbād in particular in his religious policy promoted Muʿtazilī and Shīʿī doctrine. When he appointed ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī, the most gifted of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī's pupils, chief judge (*qāḍī l-quḍāt*) in Rayy in 977, that city in western Persia became the flourishing center of Muʿtazilī scholarship.

Muʿtazilī influence on Jewish theologians also reached a peak during this century. Among the Rabbanite Jewish mainstream several heads of the ancient Academies (Yeshivot) in Iraq adopted Muʿtazilī thought. One of them, Samuel ben Hofni Gaon (d. 1013) had direct contacts with Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī in Baghdad. Even more evident was the impact of Muʿtazilī theological and legal thought among the Karaites, a sect that had arisen in the 8th century in Persia and was first marked



by strong ascetic tendencies, but now particularly inclined to rationalist religious thought. The Karaite Yūsuf al-Baṣīr (d. ca. 1040) brought the theological teaching of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār from Iraq to Jerusalem in Fatimid territory and adopted and defended it in his own writings, including his comprehensive summaries of theology *Kitāb al-Tamyīz* and *Kitāb al-Muhtawī*.

The Mu‘tazilī world view and rational theology was at this time facing increasing competition and criticism from philosophy of Greek origin, which claimed to provide the only scientific world view based on cogent logical demonstration independent of religious beliefs. Study of the philosophical sciences was mostly shunned in religious scholarship, but was an integral part of the education of the medical profession. Among Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s disciples in Rayy was for some time a young physician trained in the philosophical sciences, Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 1044), who challenged some of his teaching in his lectures and went on to compose a massive critical review of the arguments and proofs used in *kalām*. Most of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s students were scandalized by this criticism of their teacher and accused Abu l-Ḥusayn of seeking to undermine essential school doctrine and concealing heretical philosophical views. His theological works were generally ignored among the Mu‘tazila and handed down among students of medicine. Only a century later his teaching was revived and espoused by the Mu‘tazilī scholar Maḥmūd b. al-Malāḥimī in Khorezm in Central Asia and gained recognition as a school of Mu‘tazilī theology.

The present study presents evidence that Abu l-Ḥusayn’s theology was immediately registered and controversially debated in the Karaite community under the Fatimid caliphate. Yūsuf al-Baṣīr explicitly defended the views of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār and vigorously attacked Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī in a treatise, arguing that his views destroyed the rational proof for the existence of God. Abu l-Ḥusayn’s teaching was upheld and advocated from the middle of the 11th century, a half century before Ibn al-Malāḥimī, by the Karaite Sahl b. al-Faql (Yashar ben Hesed) al-Tustarī in Egypt. Sahl al-Tustarī not only criticized the conceptual principles of the school of ‘Abd al-Jabbār which had been upheld by Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, but also refuted philosophical doctrine on existence, as entailed by Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, on the basis of Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī’s teaching.

The study is based on source material preserved in Genizahs and now dispersed in libraries around the world. Our thanks are due first to David Sklare of the Ben Tzvi Institute and the Institute of Microfilmed

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