AN UNPUBLISHED PALESTINIAN TRADITION ABOUT MUHAMMED

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In a remarkably short time after 622 A.D. Islam swept through extensive territories outside of Arabia, the land of its origin. Amongst these territories was Syria, which in early times included Palestine. When the Muslims conquered Syria and Palestine they found several religions being practised. In Palestine itself Judaism, Christianity and Samaritanism were the chief religions of the inhabitants. Islam meant for them, for the population at large, a considerable change from the harsh rule of the Byzantine Empire. There are recorded statements to the effect that in some lands the inhabitants truly welcomed the authority of their new Semitic overlords, regarding it as a relief, a deliverance from persecution and severe, indeed punitive, taxation.

Bernard Lewis\(^1\) mentions two traditions which show the attitude of a Jewish writer and a Syriac Christian historian.

A Jewish apocalyptic writing of the early Islamic period makes an angel say to a rabbinic seer: "Do not fear, Ben Yohāy; the Creator, blessed be He, has only brought the Kingdom of Ishmael in order to save you from this wickedness (i.e., Byzantium) . . . the Holy One, blessed be He, will raise up for them a Prophet according to His will, and conquer the land for them, and they will come and restore it. . . ."

The other tradition recorded by Bernard Lewis is as follows:

Therefore the God of vengeance delivered us out of the hand of the Romans by means of the Arabs. . . . It profited us not a little to be saved from the cruelty of the Romans and their bitter hatred towards us.

\(^1\) Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, London, 1950, p. 58. The relevant chapters in the larger histories may be consulted.
The Samaritan Chronicles, from which the translation below has been made, recount several occasions when the Samaritans actively assisted the Muslims in various ways. Bernard Lewis also records such assistance and says:

In Palestine the Samaritans gave such effective aid to the Arab invaders that they were for some time exempted from certain taxes, and there are many other reports in the early chronicles of local Jewish and Christian assistance.

It is well known that *ahl al-kitāb* (the People of the Book), on the authority of the Qur'an itself, were protected by Islam from the harsh, unfeeling treatment meted out to unbelievers. These *ahl al-kitāb* believed in the one God and in some prophets, except Muhammad, that the Muslims believed in. The peoples involved were the Jews, Samaritans and Christians. It will be seen at the end of the translation below that the Samaritan Chronicles generally adopted a favourable attitude to the advent of the Prophet of Islam.

The Samaritans, like the Jews and Christians, were treated as *dhimmis* and as such enjoyed the privilege of protection under the aegis of the local Arab governor. An example of a document of protection is provided in the Palestinian tradition translated herein. It is not known what reliance may be placed on this tradition and we do not know how early it existed among the inhabitants of Samaria in Central Palestine. It seems likely that the story as we have it now rests on some original and genuine agreement between the early Muslims and the Samaritans, but in the course of time acquired an accretion of legendary elements.

This tradition exists today in a number of manuscripts of Samaritan Chronicles. There are considerable differences in the details of the story as recorded in the various manuscripts, but as these manuscripts are no earlier than late medieval times, it

2. All the known chronicles are listed chronologically in my *The Theology of the Samaritans*, London, 1964, pp. 44 ff.
4. The Islamic term which describes Jews and Christians, since they believe too in revelation from God received in scripture form.
cannot be claimed that any one version is anterior to and better authenticated than the others. The only version actually published, a rather short (condensed?) one, was that of the Samaritan chronicler, Abu 'l-Fath, published by E. Vilmar as long ago as 1865.6 This version is in Arabic and based, as its author himself states in his Preface, on much older material, some of which was in Hebrew. The previously unpublished version translated in this article is a Hebrew one, found in the Samaritan Chronicle No. 117 and called Sepher ha-Yamin (which in Arabic would be Kitāb al-Ayyām). This Chronicle starts with the period of biblical Joshua and goes on, having been added to century by century and brought 'up to date', until well into late Islamic times. No one can say yet how reliable this Chronicle is. One thing that can be said is that there is surprising accuracy in the lists of dates it contains, especially for the period after Alexander the Great, and it may be that we can regard our source as having a foundation in fact, although the version now extant probably represents a folkloristic development of the original.

There are puzzling passages in the tradition and several names whose significance escapes us at the present. The translation is of Sepher ha-Yamin version, with notes giving variant readings from a manuscript in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, numbered 1168 in the Gaster Collection of Samaritan manuscripts. Notes presenting the chief variants in the Abu 'l-Fath Arabic version are also provided. The same story is told in all three accounts and the variants only affect details of names and some descriptions. The Sepher ha-Yamin account is the fullest and it is this that now appears for the first time.

Now in those days,8 when Muhammad the Prophet of the Ishmaelites9 appeared, there were three men who were diviners, well skilled in their art. The first was a Samaritan man whose

7. For the list and names of the Samaritan chronicles see The Theology of the Samaritans, pp. 44 ff.
8. Referring to the rule of the High Priest Nathanel (his 12th year of office), giving the date 643 A.D. This date indicates not Muhammad's birth, but the advent of his followers in Palestine.
9. The usual name given by the Samaritans to the Arabs. The Samaritans call themselves Israelites, i.e., sons of Jacob Israel, brother of Ishmael.
name was Zohar,\textsuperscript{10} but they nicknamed him Zarmaza.\textsuperscript{11} The reason for his name was the shooting-star\textsuperscript{12} which occurred during his lifetime. He was also given the name Qabza\textsuperscript{13} and he lived in the town of Askor.

The second was a Jewish man named Eqev ha-Kohanim\textsuperscript{14} and the third was a Christian man\textsuperscript{15} whose name was Elishama.\textsuperscript{16}

These three men perceived by their divination\textsuperscript{17} that the reign of Edom\textsuperscript{18} was finished and that the reign of Ishmael had begun. They knew that this would be brought about by one of the sons of Ishmael son of Abraham, upon whom be peace. Now this man was of the sons of Hashim\textsuperscript{19} and they knew what he looked like, what his status was and where he lived\textsuperscript{20}—by means of divination.

\textsuperscript{10} This Hebrew word means ‘brightness’.
\textsuperscript{11} Or Zar Maza more properly. The origin of the name is in doubt. It is not translated by Abu ‘I-Fath, but merely transliterated Sār masah. MS 1168 of the John Rylands Library states that he got his nickname because of the evil afflictions he suffered in his lifetime. This is a far cry from the explanation in our basic text. My colleague, B. S. J. Isserlin, on hearing the names of the three characters in the story, immediately thought of them as \textit{noms de guerre}, especially the second of the three names (see n. 14 below). See further the remarks following the translation. Zarmaza, then, may mean ‘he has encountered affliction’.
\textsuperscript{12} Or ‘comet’. This nickname explains Zohar (brightness), but not Zarmaza. MS 1168 has \textit{zq} which may be the same as \textit{zyq} in the Jewish Targumic Aramaic, i.e., a shooting-star or comet.
\textsuperscript{13} Qabza, probably meaning ‘gathering’ or if vocalized Qabbaza ‘gatherer’, has no precise significance that we can find. Perhaps it was a by-name for one who ‘has gathered troubles’, if the MS 1168 explanation of Zarmaza is to be taken as typical.
\textsuperscript{14} This nickname means ‘last of the priests’, referring presumably to the decline and demise of the Jewish priesthood. MS 1168 has Kaf ha-Pasim, which could have reference to tax-gathering, but the meaning is obscure. Abu ‘I-Fath merely translates \textit{kabd al-ahbar} ‘heel of the learned doctors’ (Arabic term for Rabbis). It seems more than likely that this is a \textit{noms de guerre} (see n. 11 above).
\textsuperscript{15} Abu ‘I-Fath: ‘a Christian monk’.
\textsuperscript{16} Elishama, a Hebrew name, means ‘My God has heard’. MS 1168 on the other hand states that the third character was an uncircumcised (gentile) man named Eved ha-Shalom (Abu ‘I-Fath: \textit{cabd al-salam}). The version of the basic text could certainly be a \textit{noms de guerre} coined by a Samaritan of a Christian with his claims of divine revelation, just as the Jewish member of the trio was rather ironically given the derogatory title of ‘last of the priests’, i.e., a priest, but just and no more!
\textsuperscript{17} Abu ‘I-Fath: ‘astrology’.
\textsuperscript{18} A Samaritan synonym for Byzantium/Rome (Abu ‘I-Fath has \textit{al-rum}).
\textsuperscript{19} I.e., Muhammad’s third ancestor.
\textsuperscript{20} MS. 1168: ‘the place of his birth’.
They knew too that he had on the back of his shoulder a bright white spot.

When the three men had thus perceived by this divining, they said to one another, "Come now, let us go and see who is this man, that we may exchange a word with him." The three of them went together, completely in agreement, and they reached the city in which he lived. When they arrived at the city, they said to one another, "Who is to meet the man first?" Eqev ha-Kohanim answered craftily, "I shall go to him first." So he went to him first and met him. He called out the greeting to him and Muhammad said, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am a Jewish man, one of the leaders of the Jewish community. I have found in the book of the holy law that there is to rise up a king from the Ishmaelites who will reign over the world and before whom none shall be able to stand."

Elishama approached him next. Meeting him, he called out the greeting to him and he said, "Who are you?" Elishama replied, "I am a Christian, one of the leaders of the Christian community. I have found in the Gospel that you are to reign over all the inhabitants of the world."

These two men did not really know anything like this on the basis of law or gospel. They knew solely by their divining.

Next Zarmaza went up to him, but he did not actually meet him. He addressed Muhammad, "Know that you shall reign over all the world with extensive power, and I have the proof that you have on the back of your shoulder a bright white mark."

Muhammad took off his garment and, lo and behold! there was a large bright mark on the back of his shoulder. Muhammad rejoiced over this. Elishama and Eqev ha-Kohanim became Muslim, and Muhammad brought them food and they ate their

21. Abu 'l-Fath states that another tradition has 'yellow'.
22. MS 1168: 'When they had discovered his existence after their research and calculations and computations, they waited a long time—an obvious later addition to a short text. Abu 'l-Fath: 'When they heard of his appearance'.
23. Abu 'l-Fath adds: 'returned the greeting and'.
24. But see notes 15-16 above.
25. MS 1168: 'He approached him from the outside (sc. of his house) and so addressed him at a distance'.
26. Abu 'l-Fath: 'at what the three men had said'.
27. Or 'submitted themselves to him'.
meal together. He perceived that these men had verified the prophecy about him, and he rejoiced with great joy because of them.

He placed them on his right side and he said to Zarmaza, "What is it you want that you do not do as these two do and eat a meal with us?" But Zarmaza was unable to touch the food, to share his fare, for he was obliged to adhere to his religious law; he answered and said, "I am under obligation in this regard." Muhammad answered him, "Why do you refuse my invitation?" Zarmaza replied to him, "My laws and statutes prevent me from doing so, and I must conform to them." Muhammad became angry with him and said to him, "What is the matter with you, Samaritan?" Zarmaza answered, "I came to you seeking a covenant and a sworn deed on which I and all my people and community can rely. I request that you write out a covenant for me that you will protect our lives and those of our descendants, our valuables and cattle and houses of prayer."

Muhammad gave orders for a document to be brought and for a covenant to be written out for him, just as the Samaritan had requested, for he did not wish to deny him his request. When the document was brought to him, he ordered the bearer to write out the covenant as follows:

I, Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah ibn 'Obd al-Mutallib, hereby command the writing of a binding covenant for the community of the Samaritans, for the protection of their lives and the lives of their children and their cattle and their places of worship and sanctuaries and every field belonging to them. Through this covenant they shall be among the inhabitants of Palestine as bona fide people.

Then Muhammad ordered that the covenant be given to Zarmaza and that he should take it and leave his presence. Just as he was leaving Omar and 'Abdallah met him. The covenant was in his hand and they took it from him to examine it. They

28. The right hand signifying good fortune.
29. But MS 1168: 'I cannot transgress my faith. My laws forbid me to eat'—another typical later addition.
30. Abu 'l-Fath adds 'to the scribe'—a later addition?
31. i.e., as disimmis. The Samaritan stress on obedience to their law in the story is obviously intended to draw Muhammad's attention to their status as ahl al-kitab.
32. These names are wrongly given as Omar ibn Rabicah and 'Abdallah ibn Jahsh in MS 1168.
read through it, acquainting themselves with its contents. They spoke with Zarmaza and then gave orders that the deed of covenant should be written on the authority of Ali ibn Abi Talib. So Zarmaza returned and presented himself some distance from the Prophet of the Ishmaelites and said, "My lord, I have come to you from a far distant land, from an ailing community whom foreigners have destroyed and into whose land idol worshippers have entered. My people wait upon the Lord for a covenant and they look for deliverance at your hand. Now I wait upon you, requesting that this covenant be re-written in the writing of Ali ibn Abi Talib." Ali gave orders and wrote for him a covenant as follows:

I have given this covenant to the community of the Samaritans as a guarantee to them of their lives and the lives of their children, their sanctuaries and their places of worship in every city which they inhabit, in every place and in their property. It is valid among all peoples and they are bona fide subjects.

This covenant was written on kidskin. They gave it to Zarmaza and he bowed to the ground and kissed it as he departed.

Ali called to him and said, "Go, Samaritan, with your life. During your lifetime you can say that you did not touch (us) and that you have a promise that will not be broken. See, we shall honour your God who is your protector, to whom you bow down."

After this Zarmaza returned to the land of Palestine and told his people the Samaritans all that the Lord had been pleased to do for them, by prospering his way, and they commemorated this man Muhammad for all his kindly dealings with them.

Muhammad was kind towards the Samaritans, for he wanted to have friendly dealings with them. He neither reviled the

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33. Known to Islam as Ahl al-shirk (polytheists). Polytheism, in Islamic eyes, is the supreme crime against God, comparable in heinousness to the Christian condemnation of 'the sin against the Holy Spirit'.
34. At that time, it is known, there were large Samaritan communities in such centres as Damascus, Alexandria and Cairo, as well as in Palestine.
35. Abu 'l-Fath adds 'at a distance'.
36. According to Abu 'l-Fath it was Muhammad.
37. This may be a later reflection of the actual assistance accorded to the Arabs by the Samaritans, as referred to above.
Samaritans, nor did them harm. They in their turn did not revile him. Likewise, he hated evil and despised men who transgressed his law. If a man is well-disposed, he comes to him; if a man is not well-disposed, he does not keep his friendship.

Having read through this translation, one may well regard the story as containing two basic parts; the first deals with the acknowledgement of 'one who is expected', the second with a contract or treaty. This second part may itself comprise two original elements or versions of the treaty making.

There are several elements in the first part which bring to mind the Christian story of the Advent. One notes the words of Elishama: 'I have found in the Gospel that you are to reign...'. Indeed we may well adjudge part 1 of the tale to have Gospel origins. There is the Advent of one whose coming is foretold in the stars. It is of particular interest that the word 'Prophet' is used of Muhammad, since the Samaritans strictly exclude the existence of any prophet but Moses, denying the validity of the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible. The usage may be put down to tact and diplomacy, for the Samaritans had to live under Islam and obtain what good conditions they could. It may be that our tale is of secular origin. We could not imagine a priestly source using the term 'Prophet' of Muhammad, tact or no tact, diplomacy or no diplomacy. The Samaritan literature at large reveals an absolute hardening against the idea of anyone but Moses being so called.

Next we see that there are three 'magi' or diviners, just as in the Gospel story (although the number is not specified in the Gospels themselves, only in tradition and hymnal liturgy). These three, like the Magi of the Gospels, know by astrology that the Advent of the inaugurator of a new age is near. They know 'his status', i.e., the significance of his presence in the world, and they know where he is—just as the Magi knew (after enquiry in Jerusalem, Islam's second sacred city) where Jesus was to be born.

The Jew in the story says, "I know... there is to rise up a king... who will reign." The Christian says, "I have found... that you are to reign." The Samaritan says, "Know that you will reign..." The Magi (Matthew ii.2) called Jesus 'king'. The Magi 'rejoiced exceedingly' when they saw the star; the three in our story, by proving Muhammad's foretold status, cause him to 'rejoice over this'. This last point may be coincidental of course.
Also coincidental may be the fact that our story speaks of the new reign being brought about 'by one of the sons of Ishmael son of Abraham', while Matthew (i.1) immediately traces Jesus' ancestry to 'David, son of Abraham'. One difference between the story here and the Gospel is in the 'mark' or 'bright spot' on Muhammad's shoulder. The notion that the hero in an epic has some special mark is well known in myth, legend and folklore. Whether the Samaritan tale reflects a non-Gospel source at this point or whether there has been a deliberate alteration of the Gospel-type story of Jesus we cannot say. Perhaps deliberate alteration has in fact taken place because of the already existing belief that the advent of Moses was signalled in the heavens by a star (in various versions of the Samaritan Birth of Moses story).

A remarkable and more exact equation of the basic story with Luke's version of the Infancy is to be found in the words of our three characters to each other: "Come now, let us go and see..." The shepherds in the Gospel (Luke ii.15) say: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see..."

It seems more than probable, therefore, that the Christian Advent story has been 'borrowed' to provide a preface or background to the second part of the story, which deals with the covenant. It is probable, one may judge, that some kind of covenant or treaty was made between the Muslims and the Samaritans, hence the willingness of the Samaritans from time to time to give assistance to the Muslims. The theme of the treaty, from Zarmaza's viewpoint, is the security of Samaritan lives and property. He asks, in effect, that the Samaritans be treated as 'protected people', as 'people of the book' (see note 31), or as the Muslims call such people dhimmis. This seems to be a reasonable request.

Have we in part 2 the story of two different treaties? This looks likely from the wording. If we regard the passage "Just as he was leaving, Omar... spoke with Zarmaza" as a bridge passage between the two versions or two treaty accounts, we see that the second contains the elements of an independent tale, especially in the words "My lord, I have come... from a distant land...", as if Zarmaza had not already encountered and received a treaty from Muhammad.

Finally, we may note that the treaty making did not take place in Palestine. This is a point in favour of the genuineness underlying the account, since it is certain that the Samaritans would not wait until the Muslims were attacking their land before approaching the leaders (not Muhammad) in the hope of obtaining
favourable terms. Therefore, the Samaritan spokesman or delegate went—where? If the first version (which refers the treaty making to Muhammad himself) is correct, he went to Arabia; if the second, he went to some place not far from Palestine where the Muslim generals were available for the submission of a request. This could not have been far away. We may suggest Aleppo or Damascus, or somewhere nearby, as the most likely venue.

So our story basically concerns the original treaty with the Muslims; two versions may be discerned. Prefixed to the story, possibly for politic reasons, is a welcoming of the advent of the Prophet of Islam in terms borrowed from New Testament imagery. The three gifts of the Christian tradition here become, however, three men with conflicting claims to receipt of divine authority. The story is Samaritan; therefore the Samaritan member of the trio gives the best account of his beliefs and wins Muhammad’s favour for his people. Unhappily, there is no ending ‘and they all lived happily ever after’, for the Samaritans encountered much hostility and open persecution from their latest overlords according to their version of their own unhappy history.