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From my Notebooks

Masīḥ bin Ḥakam, a Jewish-Christian (?) Physician of the Early Ninth Century

Masīḥ bin Ḥakam al-Dimašqī was a physician and intellectual active at the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809). The recent publication of his medical text, *al-Risāla al-hārūniyya*, by Suzanne Gigandet, offers us an opportunity to take stock of the references to this figure in Jewish writings.[1] Moreover, I have come across an additional biographical notice, unknown to Gigandet, which affiliates Masīḥ with the Isawiyya, an important Jewish-Christian sect.[2] If this information is correct—and, as we shall see, there is good circumstantial evidence for believing that it is—then Masīḥ's treatise is the first Isawiyyan writing to come to light and potentially of major significance. First, however, I shall discuss the references to Masīḥ in Jewish writings. There are only two of these, but each is interesting in its own way.

1 *Masih b. Hakam al-Dimasqi, médecin damascain du IIIe h./IXe siècle*, *al-Risala al-haruniyya*, text established, translated [into French], and annotated by Suzanne Gigandet (Damascus, 2002). I have adopted Gigandet's spelling of the patronymic although some of my sources, like some of those studied by her, spell it Hakim.

2 The latest discussion of the Isawiyya is Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton, 1995), 71–89. Wasserstrom distances himself from Shlomo Pines' characterization of the Isawiyya as Jewish-Christians; however, our source (to be cited and discussed below) supports Pines' view.

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The first is a collection of chemical and alchemical recipes attributed to "Masīḥ ibn Ḥakīm." They are part of a larger collection of alchemical texts, Arabic in Hebrew characters, found in a manuscript belonging to Dr. Margoliot (Tel Aviv), which I described in an earlier publication.[3] Pages 2–5 of the Margoliot manuscript correspond, with few and insignificant variants, to pp. 441–451 of Gigandet's edition. It is noteworthy that these recipes were extracted from a medical text and transferred to an alchemical codex. As I suggested in my earlier notice, Masīḥ, like Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, Ibn Masawayh, and, perhaps, the semi-legendary Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, worked in an era of productive inter-disciplinary exuberance; cross-fertilization between medicine and alchemy was one expression of this. Later, however, the two fields diverged sharply. Selected writings of al-Rāzī and selected passages from the treatise of Masīḥ were transmitted separately, as part of a specifically alchemical tradition.

In the Margoliot manuscript, Masīḥ's recipes of are exhibited *en bloc* and with the author's name clearly displayed. Another Judeo-Arabic alchemical *majmūᶜa* from Yemen, filmed only recently by the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, contains a recipe for "divine water" identical to that given here by Masīḥ.[4] However, it is not attributed to anyone; it is part of a series of recipes, each of which is a "chapter" (*bāb*) in itself.

The second reference is more problematic. It is, however, of interest for the early stages of both kabbalah and philosophy. The passage, found in a Hebrew tract entitled *Šaᶜar ha-yiḥud*, reads as follows in the printed version (my translation):

> We also see that the man who is called *ᵓadam qadmon* resembles both the higher and lower entities. He resembles the higher entities with regard to life and speech [*or* cogitation]. For he lives as they do, and he speaks [*or* cogitates] with the faculty of the rational soul (*ha-nefeš ha-medabberet*). He resembles it

> (!) as Mašiaḥ ben al-Ḥakim the Physician explained in the book that he wrote on this subject; but this is not the place to go into the subject in detail.[5]

Before assessing the passage we must say something about its source, *Šaᶜar ha-yiḥud*. This is one of several unusual and, at the time, otherwise unknown treatises published by a certain Rabbi J. Gad from his own collection of manuscripts. On the title page, Rabbi Gad described himself as "born in Kovna (Lithuania), now in Johannesburg (South Africa)." According to a newspaper notice published in 1954, late in his life Rabbi Gad was "being forced to sell most of his manuscripts and coins."[6] Their purchaser(s) and present whereabouts are unknown. Rabbi Gad identified the author of *Šaᶜar ha-yiḥud* as Judah Ibn Tibbon, solely on the grounds—so it appears—that Judah did in fact translate the first section of Baḥya ibn Paquda's *Ḥovot ha-levavot*, which also carries the title (in the Hebrew translation) *Šaᶜar ha-yiḥud*. Fortunately, however, I have recently identified this same treatise in a manuscript at the Vatican, ebr. 270, ff. 192a–198b. That manuscript (like the text by Rabbi Gad) gives no indication as to the name of the author. As we shall see, however late twelfth-century Provence is very plausible as the time and place where the text was produced.

The passage in question in the manuscript differs considerably from

3 Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Transcriptions of Arabic Treatises into the Hebrew Alphabet: An Underappreciated Mode of Transmission," in F. Jamil Ragep and Sally Ragep, *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation* (Leiden, 1996), 247–260, section III.

4 MS Nahariya-Ya'aqov 283 (IMHM F 73348). The recipe is found on f. 8a (= Gigandet, *Masih b. Hakam,* 447). I thank my friend Efraim Ya'aqov for his cooperation in this study; I hope to describe the Ya'aqov manuscript more fully on another occasion.

5 J. Gad, *Sefer ḥamišah meᵓorot ha-gedolim* (Johannesburg, 1952/3), 161.

6 My sincere thanks to Prof. R. Musiker for sending me a photocopy of the notice, which appeared in the *Cape Argus* on January 16, 1954.

the version printed by Gad; in particular, the term ʾ*adam qadmon* is absent:

> And so we see that the ancients (*ha-qadmonim*) call him a microcosm (*ʿolam qaṭan*), because he is built according to the structure of the macrocosm (*ʿolam gadol*). Everything that is found [added in the margin: in the cosmos is found] in man, one corresponding to the other. He is like the higher entities [...][7]; like the higher entities with regard to life and speech, because he is alive and able to speak[8] by means of the rational soul (*ha-nefeš ha-medabberet*). He is like the lower entities, insofar as he possesses bodies and corporealities (*geramim we-gufaniyyim*) similar to the bodies and corporealities that are found in the cosmos, each of which is like him, as the scholar Masīḥ bin al-Ḥakīm explained in the book that he wrote. However, this is not the place to go into the matter in detail, because the discussion would be lengthy.[9]

This passage clearly refers to our Masīḥ bin Ḥakam. *Al-Risāla al-hārūniyya* contains a long section on analogies and correspondences between humans and other components of the cosmos; indeed, the first items mentioned are two great faculties common to humans and angels—life and speech (*al-ḥayā wa-l-nuṣq*). Moreover, Masīḥ employs both *jism* and *jirm* to describe the corporeal components of the cosmos; he tells us that God "made part of creation a dense body (*jism*), and that is what is called body (*jirm*)."[10] The cumbersome Hebrew phrase, *geramim we-gufaniyyim*, aims to reproduce this terminology. These are exactly the qualities noted in the manuscript version of *Šaʿar ha-yiḥud*. Clearly, then, that text is to be preferred to Gad's, and the author of *Šaʿar ha-yiḥud* had *al-Risāla al-hārūniyya* in mind.

We must, however, still reckon with the printed version. In particular, we observe that there is nothing in Masīḥ's known writings that corresponds to the term ʾ*adam qadmon*. As far as I have been able to determine—and I certainly claim no expertise in the matter—the Arabic equivalent is found only in Ibn al-Nadīm's extensive discussion (one of our most important sources) of Manichean theology.[11] ʾ*Adam qadmon*, which eventually became an important concept (or symbol) in the kabbalah, first entered Jewish letters in the writings of the so-called ʿIyyun circle.[12] Indeed, it is one of a number of notions qualified by the adjective *qadmon* (pre-eternal or primordial) that figure prominently in the writings associated with that group of thinkers.[13] The most plau-

[7] The word here is unclear.

[8] The manuscript has *u-devarim* (?); this is most likely a corruption of *medabber*.

[9] MS Vatican ebr. 270, f. 194 [196]a–b.

[10] Gigandet, *Masih b. Hakam,* 51.

[11] Bayard Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm* (New York and London, 1970), 2: 779ff.; Georges Vajda, "Le témoignage d'al-Māturidī sur la doctrine des Manichéens, des Daysanites et les Marcionites," *Arabica* 13 (1966): 1–38, on p. 16 (Fihrist), and 113–128, on p. 119 (al-Warrāq). Bernard Lewis, "An Isma'ili Interpretation of the Fall of Adam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 9 (1937–9): 691–704, on p. 697 n. 8., parenthetically cites *insān qadīm* as an equivalent of ʾ*adam qadmon*, but provides no source reference. On "primal man" in Manicheanism, see, e.g., Manfred Heuser and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Studies in Manichean Literature and Art* (Leiden, 1998), 28–42, 201.

[12] Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 10 (Jerusalem, 1972), column 566; reprinted in idem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), p. 100. The definitive study to date of the ʿ*Iyyun circle* is Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation* (Albany, 1992); I find there only one oblique reference (p. 209 n. 54), but no discussion at all, of ʾ*adam qadmon*.

[13] ʾ*Awir qadmon* and ʾ*or qadmon* are perhaps the most important of these; see the index of Verman's book, s.vv. "ether:primal" and "light:primal." See also Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Cosmology and Cosmogony in *Doresh Reshumot*, a Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Torah," *Harvard Theological Review* 97:2 (2004): 199–227.

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sible explanation (assuming that Rabbi Gad's transcription is accurate) is that the copyist responsible for his manuscript misread *ha-qadmonim* as *qadmon*, supplied the term *ʾadam*, and omitted other text as well.

An exhaustive discussion of all the possibilities should find its place in an edition and study of *Šaʿar ha-yiḥud*, which is in many other ways an interesting document. Two observations will suffice here. First, the printed version displays a coherent text. Since it is not incomprehensibly corrupt, we can conclude that the copyist understood *ʾadam qadmon* to mean "everyman" or perhaps an archetype that finds expression in all individuals; it is not some sort of metaphysical, macrocosmic, or quasi-divine entity. Second, should it turn out that the printed version displays the correct text—and I stress that this is very unlikely—then the identification of Masīḥ as the earliest source of the concept of *ʾadam qadmon* (which would have to be found in some other, still unknown writing of his) would be of great importance.

Should Rabbi Gad's version prove to be accurate, we would be able to make a plausible claim that *ʾadam qadmon* was a concept known in a series of traditions, most of which were "underground" in cultures dominated by Islam or Christianity: Manicheans, Isawiyyans, and the nascent kabbalah. Moreover, the sense in which the term is employed in Rabbi Gad's text—as a prototypical human rather than as a mythical being—is strikingly similar to the only occurrence of the parallel Greek term, *ho aïdios anthropos*, in Damascius' commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*.[14]

This leads us to the question of Masīḥ's religious identity. According to Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, Masīḥ, like his father and grandfather before him, was a Christian.[15] However, as indicated earlier, a source not noticed by Gigandet preserves some important additional information: the opening remarks in the entry on Masīḥ in Ibn Faḍlallah al-ʿUmarī's (d. 1349) *Masālik al-abṣār* (the great bulk of his entry is simply copied from Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa):

> Among them [the physicians] there was ʿIsa bin Ḥakam al-Dimašqī, known as al-Masīḥ. He was called this because some Christian, Isawiyyan traditions came to light through his agency (*li-mā ẓaharat al-athār al-masīḥiyya ʿalā yadayhi al-ʿisawiyya*), and the non-prophetic wonders (*ʿajāʾib*) were transmitted. He was one of the most excellent physicians and outstanding bearers of information (*[min] nubalāʾ dhawī al-anbāʾ*).[16]

From this report I infer that Masīḥ was outwardly a Christian, but actually belonged to the Isawiyya, a Jewish-Christian sect. The "non-prophetic wonders" may refer to alchemical traditions or to miracles supposedly wrought by the founder of the Isawiyya.

The Isawiyyan sect took its name from its founder, Abū ʿIsa al-Isfahānī. Abū ʿIsa and his followers recognized both Jesus and Mo-

[14] Damascius' text is cited by Polymnia Athanassiadi, "The Chaldean Oracles: Theology and Theurgy," in Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999), p. 175. Damascius appears to be speaking of something akin to the Platonic idea of man; nonetheless, the fact that Damascius spent some time at the Sassanian court, where he engaged in philosophical discussions, that is to say, in a time and place when Manicheism flourished, may be relevant. I thank Michael Chase and other participants in the Internet discussion group on neoplatonism (moderated then by Cosmin Andron, now by Edward Moore) for useful feedback and criticism. The archives are public; the relevant postings (Nos. 402–405, 411–415) can be accessed at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/neoplatonism>.

[15] Aḥmad ibn al-Qāsim Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿ*a, ʿUyun al-anbāʾ fī tabaqat al-atibbāʾ, vol. 2 (Beirut, 1987), pp. 28–32.*

[16] Ibn Faḍlallah al-ʿUmarī, *Routes Towards Insight into the Capital Empires* (*Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*), a facsimile edition prepared by Fuat Sezgin, in collaboration with A. Jokhosa and E. Neubauer, reproduced from MS Ayasofia 3422, vol. 9 (Frankfurt, 1988), p. 174.

hammad as true prophets. Therefore, it seems plausible that one of his followers could be taken to be a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim, even though as a group the Isawiyya were recognized by contemporaries as a distinct religious grouping. Although some information is available concerning their teachings, none of their writings have been identified. Indeed, aside from the original leaders of the sect, only one member, Iṣḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Bahsun (tenth century) is known by name.[17]

Nonetheless, circumstantial evidence seems to support al-ᶜUmarī's report. Perhaps the most important such item is Masīḥ's native city, Damascus. Al-Qirqisānī, our richest source for the sect, notes that in his day (the 930s) there were still about twenty Isawiyyans living in Damascus.[18] Their community in that city may have been much larger a century before. So too his names—he was called both ᶜIsa and Masīḥ — may support this religious affiliation. It is also relevant that in the chapter on the creation of man, Masīḥ cites traditions (including a reference to the Torah) in the name of Wahb bin Munabbih, well-known for his connections with *Isrāʾīliyyāt*, that is, Muslim traditions relating to the early history of the Jews.[19]

Masīḥ's writings were well known in the western Mediterranean. Despite his relative obscurity, he receives an entry in Ṣāᶜid al-Andalusī's history. Moreover, the earliest manuscripts of his *risāla* are Maghrebian.[20] *Šaᶜar ha-yiḥud,* on the face of it, was written in Spain or the Provence. Here too, circumstantial evidence certainly does not contradict the identification of Masīḥ as an Isawiyy. The eleventh-century Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm, another important source for the history of the sect, reports that he personally met many Jews who followed the teachings of the Isawiyya.[21] Hence the presence of members of the sect in the Iberian peninsula is well attested.

In sum, then, it is extremely plausible that *al-Risāla al-hārūniyya* is the work of a member of the Isawiyya, indeed, the only such writing identified so far. It may have been brought to the west by adherents who moved to Spain from the sect's centers in Iran or Damascus. Although we know a little about the Isawiyya's praxis and teachings on prophecy, we have no information about any particular trend in natural science or cosmology that they may have followed.

To round out the portrait of this interesting figure, let us call attention to several idiosyncratic teachings that may be connected to Isawiyyan traditions he is reported to have revealed. Masīḥ, as we have seen, was both an alchemist and a physician; his medical writing ranges over topics in natural philosophy that have metaphysical and religious implications. In the introduction to *al-Risāla al-hārūniyya*, he tells us that he relies upon three authorities: Hippocrates, Galen, and "Falaṭīs the Indian." We should never forget the importance of the input of Indian wisdom in the cultural efflorescence of the Abbasid period.[22]

As a rule, Masīḥ introduces each section with a statement of his source. Some unusual materials, however, are not attributed to anyone. Here are some examples. Masīḥ tells us that God has given the angels certain powers in order to frighten other creatures: the capacity to give impressions (*takhyīl*, that is, to cause people to imagine things), to represent themselves or to take on various forms (*taṣawwur*), and to change colors (*tabdīl al-alwān*).[23] The appellation for Venus, *anāhīd*, is

17 Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew,* 87.

18 Ibid., 86–87.

19 Gigandet, *Masih b. Hakam,* 62 and n. 16.

20 The passage from Ṣāᶜid is cited in ibid., p. 11; at the bottom of the following page Gigandet notes that the Maghrebian manuscripts, dating roughly to the fourteenth century, are probably the earliest copies that she has seen. See also ibid., p. 10, for some conjectures on the reason for the tract's success in the Maghreb.

21 Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew,* 87.

22 Gigandet, *Masih b. Hakam,* p. 40; see also pp. 17–18 on Indian sources, including a possible Indian source for the correspondences between the human body and the celestial bodies.

23 Ibid., 50–51; for some reason Gigandet translates *alwān* into French as "apparences."

quite unusual, and may trace back to the Persian heartland of the Isawiyya.[24] Of the twelve signs of the zodiac, six are always apparent (i.e., above the horizon) and six are hidden. These correspond to the six external senses and six internal senses with which humans are endowed. The six external senses are the five standard ones plus *šahwa*, lust—that is, sexual lust.[25]

Finally, let me conclude with an instructive episode about the place of astrology in medieval culture. *Al-Risāla al-hārūniyya* includes a section on astral indications for or against medical intervention. Among the rules given is one forbidding phlebotomy or cupping (and, presumably, any other purgation) when the moon is aspected by (*yanẓur ilayhi*) Saturn.[26] Ibn Abī Uṣaybiᶜa recounts an interesting anecdote that illustrates that, in practice, Masīḥ paid no attention to these rules. Three physicians, one of them Masīḥ, were summoned to the caliph's court to treat some women for colic (*qawlanj*). Masīḥ diagnosed the case as severe and recommended that an emetic be administered immediately. One of the other physicians demanded that the treatment be delayed until the astrological conditions were more favorable, precisely because the moon was "with" Saturn (presumably, with it in aspect). Masīḥ objected, stating more or less bluntly that, were treatment delayed, there would no longer be a living patient to treat. He was promptly thrown out of the room. His advice was rejected, but his prediction came true.[27]

24 Ibid., 52–53 and n. 10. The name given to Jupiter, *birjīs*, is also not commonly employed in medieval texts.

25 Ibid., 53.

26 Ibid., 199.

27 Ibn Abī Uṣaybiᶜa, *ᶜUyun al-anbāʾ, 2: 31.*