

THE QUEST FOR THE RELIGIOUS AND HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF A FORGERY: HENRY CORBIN AND THE *GOSPEL OF BARNABAS*¹

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Introduction

The present article deals with the publications which Henry Corbin (14 April 1903-7 October 1978) devoted to the *Gospel of Barnabas*. These publications occupy an interesting place in the ongoing research about this text, and therefore merit scholarly attention. I will first deal with the history of research, the extant manuscripts of the text and their relationship, then I will deal with Corbin's articles on the subject, and then put them in the perspective of trends in recent research into the *Gospel of Barnabas*.

The *Gospel of Barnabas* is an anonymous Islamic, pseudepigraphical and polemical text written in the form of a Gospel. It is widely used as polemical instrument by present-day Muslim apologists. In the prologue which precedes the gospel, "Barnabas," pictured as one of Jesus' closest apostles and eye-witness to his ministry, associates Paul with three innovations in the Christian religion: 1. calling Jesus the son of God, 2. the rejection of circumcision, and 3. allowing the faithful to eat and drink impure things². According to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15, Barnabas was a companion of Paul until they went separate ways after a difference of opinion. But unlike the mainstream Islamic tradition concerning Paul and his role in the history of Christianity (represented by Sayf ibn 'Umar al-Tamimi, al-Tabari and others), which pictures Paul as the main figure in the corruption of true message of Jesus, Paul is not pictured as a conscious deceiver, but rather someone who has been deceived³. And it is with much regret, therefore, that Barnabas feels obliged to tell us the Truth. This 'truth' is that according to the author of the said gospel, who has hitherto not been identified, Jesus' mission is limited to Israel only, is not the son of God, is not crucified, but replaced on the cross by Judas, who had all of a sudden miraculously adopted his appearance. Jesus is raised unto heaven; where he lives on with God, only returning at the end of time.

¹ Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Mr Jean Fathi (Riad) and Dr Jan Slomp (Leusden) for drawing my attention to some of the sources discussed here.

² The introduction to the Spanish text reads: "charisimos, el grande y poderoso Dios aquestos días pasados os a visitado por su profeta Jesu Christo, con grande misericordia de doctrina y milagros, por la qual cosa muchos engañados de Satanás, debaxo de pretexto de piedad, predicán iniqua dotrina, llamando a Jesús hijo de Dios, y repudiando la circuncision mandado de Dios in eternum, y conçediendo toda comida y bebida inmundá; entre los quales uno, Pablo, del qual hablo no sin grande dolor, porque es engañado; a cuyo respeto escrivo aquella verdad que yo he visto y oydo en la conversación que he tenido con Jesús, para que seáis salvos in eternum y no seáis engañados de Satanás y permanezcáis en el servicio de Dios" (f. 5).

³ On the image of Paul in the Islamic Tradition see Van Koningsveld, *The Islamic Image of Paul*.

In the *Gospel of Barnabas* Jesus is pictured as the precursor of the true Messiah, Muhammad, and as a manifestation of Elijah⁴. The figure of John the Baptist is entirely omitted in this text. Jesus himself, and the faithful in his environment, live as Muslims. Jesus performs the five daily prayers, fasts, gives away alms, etc. There is much stress on circumcision, even to the extent that Jesus in the *Gospel of Barnabas* states that the uncircumcised cannot enter paradise.

I. The history of the *Gospel of Barnabas*⁵

The earliest external references to the existence of a *Gospel of Barnabas* date from the pseudo-Gelasian decree, a forgery dating from the sixth century C.E. The apocryphal writing referred to there, however, has almost certainly nothing to do with the MSS in Italian and Spanish known to us today, for the earliest reference to the existence of *manuscripts* of the *Gospel of Barnabas* under discussion here dates from the beginning of the seventeenth century. In about 1634 a Morisco author, presumably Ibrahim Taybili, writing in North Africa and in all probability the Tunisian Morisco village of Testour, refers to a *Gospel of Barnabas* as a text "in which the light is to be found," and on account of which some people had converted to Islam. Taybili does not refer to the language in which this Gospel was written.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century a manuscript containing an *Italian* version turned up in Amsterdam. In that city it came into the possession of J.F. Cramer, counsellor to the King of Prussia, who presented it to Prince Eugène of Savoy. With the rest of the Prince's library the manuscript came into the possession of the Hofbibliothek at Vienna, where it has been preserved until the present day. At the beginning of the eighteenth century explicit reference was also made for the first time to a *Spanish* version by the Arabist George Sale (1697 (?)-1736), who said that "of this Gospel the Moriscos in Africa have a translation in Spanish."⁶ Thus the Gospel was connected with Moriscos in exile. In spite of the fact that there seemed to be evidence about the 'Sitz im Leben' of the Gospel at such an early stage, efforts to identify the author of the Gospel have hitherto been in vain.

The Spanish version was later lost. Fortunately, J. Fletcher discovered a manuscript transcribed from the manuscript in Sale's possession in the Nicholson collection of Fisher Library (Sydney) in 1976. The copyist of the Sydney manuscript, very likely John Nickols, whose signature of ownership, accompanied by the date, 1738, appears on the first page, had before him an incomplete *Vorlage*; as he notices "chapters 121 to 200 wanting." This means that about a third part of the text is lacking. Let us now for a moment turn to the manuscripts themselves.

The Italian manuscript

The Italian manuscript was edited firstly by Laura and Lonsdale Ragg. Their edition served as the basis for translations of the *Gospel of Barnabas* into Arabic,

Urdu, Indonesian and several other modern languages. A further critical study, French translation and paleographical study of the Italian manuscript was made by L. Cirillo and M. Frémaux⁷. The research of Cirillo drew the attention of Henry Corbin, who between 1975 and 1977, one year before his death on 7 October 1978, devoted three publications to this text. As will be set out in more detail below, Cirillo and Corbin concluded that the *Gospel of Barnabas* is ultimately based on an unidentified Judeo-Christian source. Corbin's quest was for the "ideal milieu" of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, which he associated with the idea of the Verus Propheta, a religious concept that according to Corbin had originated in early Christianity, viz. the Christian community of Jerusalem, was repressed later on by orthodox Christianity and had survived in Shiite Islam, whence it had found its way into the *Gospel of Barnabas*. All this will be explained in more detail below.

The Raggs and Cirillo dated the paper of the Italian manuscript to the end of the sixteenth century. In an article on the Islamic image of Paul and the origin of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, P.S. van Koningsveld draws attention to two hitherto neglected aspects of the Italian manuscript⁸. First of all, it seems that the binding, covers, the lay-out of the text, the numbers of the folios, the punctuation, the red dots in the text of the type one finds in Arabic and Turkish religious manuscripts, the frame in which the main text was written, all indicate that it was written in an Ottoman milieu. This hypothesis is further enhanced by the appearance of Arabic glosses, which made the Italian text more accessible for non-Italian readers. Secondly, the Italian text and the Arabic glosses were conceived as a unity, and copied out by the same person, presumably the author or someone involved in the forgery.

As Van Koningsveld points out, these glosses, which are sometimes real comments, can be divided into various categories. First of all, many simply translate or summarize passages in the text. Others give some comments. The author of these glosses shows a familiarity with Islamic and Christian traditions concerning Biblical writings and with Islamic teachings concerning Jews and Christians. Elsewhere the glossator gives an explanatory remark about some unusual expressions in the text. For example, when Jesus, before performing a miracle, addresses God with the name "Elohim Sebaoth," the glossator explains that this is a Hebrew name⁹. The glossator also shows that he is also familiar with the Latin language. Thus, when the future coming of a messenger from the south with power is predicted, he adds: "in the Latin tongue: *laudabilis*."¹⁰ And when Jesus says to the Jewish scribes: "Why did you suppress the Divine precepts, and replace them by your Traditions?", the glossator adds: "Jesus says to the Jewish scholars: 'Why do you falsify the rules of God and do you follow a heresy which you invent of your own accord?' (This is part [of the text])." The Arabic has: "Qāla 'Isā li-'ulamā' Banī Isrā'īl: li-mā tuḥarrifūna aḥkām Allāh wa-tattabi'ūnakum [sic] bid'a tuḥdithūnakum [sic] min 'indikum? Minhu."¹¹ The suffix *kum* in the two verbal forms quoted here,

⁷ Cirillo and Frémaux, *L'Évangile de Barnabé*.

⁸ In the next paragraphs I closely follow Van Koningsveld's argument.

⁹ "Allāhu Shabāwut Allāhu 'Aluhin: hādha ism lisān 'imrān[i]. Minhu" (f. 17v).

¹⁰ "fi lisān lātin lādābilis".

¹¹ This a remark often put in the margins of Islamic Arabic MSS following a gloss. It can be interpreted as a signal to a future copyist, warning him that he must not forget to copy the glosses as well: *minhu*; these glosses are part of the text.

⁴ Cirillo and Frémaux, *L'Évangile*, p. 179: "À la lumière de ces considérations, il devient évident que Jésus est présenté comme Elia-redivivus."

⁵ In the following paragraph I closely follow my "Muhammad as the Messiah."

⁶ Sale, *The Koran*, 1836: I, 88.

is, according to Van Koningsveld, a reflection of the origin of the glossator in the world of the Romance languages. On the other hand, Cirillo has adduced a whole series of linguistic properties of the Arabic notes which point to the influence of Turkish. Not only do we find an occasional Turkish word (such as *tanbal*, lazy), but grammatical and syntactical aspects of these notes reflect the Turkish milieu of the glossator¹². In conclusion, it seems likely that the glossator was not a native Arabic speaker and writer, but rather a Romance speaker who had learned Arabic later in life, presumably in a Turkish milieu.

Another important category of marginal notes in Arabic consists of a nearly complete series of Arabic chapter-titles (called *sūras*). The impression is thereby created of a gospel which really deserves to be seen as a worthy precursor of the Qur'ān. The original division of the Italian text has a total number of 222 frames for chapter-titles, but the glossator apparently intended to reduce this total number by adding the same Arabic title in the margins of several empty frames.

Cirillo argues, rightly in my view, that the whole manuscript was written in one hand¹³. Indeed, as Van Koningsveld points out, on f. 33r a marginal Arabic gloss is found, connected by a red line to the textual passage with which it is connected. This suggests that the glossator was probably identical with the copyist. Now the question arises whether the person who copied out the Italian manuscript was merely a scribe or whether he was the author of the Gospel himself. At this point we need to turn to the Spanish manuscript.

The Spanish manuscript

The Spanish manuscript (MS Nicholson 41 of the Sydney University Library) was edited by Bernabé Pons in 1998, who also made it the subject of a detailed study¹⁴. This MS is incomplete and lacks the Arabic glosses. It was copied out by a Western copyist, who was active in the 18th century. The first to mention the existence of a Spanish version was George Sale, who, as we have seen above, also stated that "of this Gospel the Moriscoes in Africa have a translation in Spanish." The Spanish MS has an introduction which is lacking in the Italian MS, though the latter leaves 34 blank folios at the beginning, which suggests that a similar introduction was intended for this version as well.

The introduction to the Spanish text gives an account of the discovery of the Gospel. A friar, who makes himself known as Fray Marin, though immediately adding that this is a wrong¹⁵ name, tells us that he discovered it in the library of Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590). He tells us:

Prologue to the reader. From him who is called with a wrong name Fray Marin, to the reader. With no small curiosity have I been racking my brain about the problem of how the Hebrew people were able to remain faithful to their beliefs on the basis of the book called the Bible only, for it is so very obscure, that it is impossible to understand, not only for the simple-minded, but even for the experts in the Scripture, who only with great difficulty were able to understand it. Therefore the thought

¹² Cirillo and Frémaux, *L'Évangile de Barnabé*, p. 48.

¹³ Cirillo and Frémaux, *L'Évangile de Barnabé*, p. 48.

¹⁴ Bernabé Pons, *El Evangelio*.

¹⁵ Maybe he is referring to it in this way, because it is his alleged Christian name.

occurred to me that in the same manner as the People of Israel draw conclusions from their Law, they would have had glossators, who wrote diversely about every canon, for [is it not true that] in the same vein the philosophers have written explanations of [the works of] their predecessors, and that the Unbelievers nowadays have glosses not only about the Bible, but also about the decrees of their Popes, and the compendia of their confessors and ceremonies? In my opinion, therefore, the Hebrew people must have had glosses on the entire scripture [as well]. And the more I became convinced of this, the more I realized that these glosses have been abandoned by the Prophets and the Doctors. Reflecting on this line of thought, I concluded that either these glosses were burnt during the many calamities from which the Hebrew people suffered, or that human wickedness had concealed them¹⁶.

The latter appeared to be the case. As an official involved in papal decisions and the Inquisition it so happened that Fray Marin received a visit from a member of the "Ursina" family, involved in the Inquisition as well, who brought him four very ancient books, written in Latin. They contained texts written by the old Prophets which, because they contradicted the Christian religion, were considered heretical and useless. For this reason Fray Marin was given the books and was allowed to do what he liked with them. They turned out to be glosses on Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Joel. But they also turned out to be very different from the scriptures available to Fray Marin! They made the author wonder about the New Testament apocrypha, and he then remembered what Jerome had said about Gospels other than the four canonical ones. Shortly afterwards he received some more books, this time from the library of a deceased male member of the "Colona" family. These included a book written by Irenaeus, disciple of Ignatius, who had argued against Paul, basing himself on the *Gospel of Barnabas*. Then God brought the author into contact with Pope Sixtus V Montalto. It so happened that when the Pope dozed off, Fray Marin took a book, intending merely to read it to pass the time, but discovered that it was the Gospel of the Apostle Barnabas. When the Pope woke up, Fray Marin left, hiding the heavenly treasure in his sleeve. After a study of two years he reached the conclusion that it was the true Scripture, clearly and unequivocally announcing the coming of the Sacred Messenger, and he converted to the Faith.

The Spanish manuscript also mentions the name of the person who translated it from the Italian: Mostafa de Aranda, a Muslim from Ambel, a place in Aragon known for its dense Morisco population. After the introduction to the text of the

¹⁶ "Prólogo al lector. Del que por mal nombre se llamó Fray Marin, al lector. Con no pequeño cuydado ha estado mi pensamiento vacilando continuamente de que cómo el pueblo Hebreo se aya conservado tanto tiempo con sólo el libro llamado la Biblia en la fee, aviendo estado tan a oscuras su entendimiento que es imposible entenderla; no tan solamente los ignorantes, sino también los muy peritos en la Escritura han entendido con grave dificultad. Por lo qual me ha pasado por el pensamiento que, así como el pueblo de Israel infieren su Ley, tienen glossadores que sobre cada canon han escrito distinctamente, así mismos los filósofos han declarado de sus antecesores, y los infieles oy día tienen glossas no sólo sobre la Biblia, sino también de los decretos de sus Papas, y summas de sus confesores y ceremonias. Así está en mi opinión que el pueblo Hebreo avía tenido glossa sobre toda la escritura. Y tanto más me he afirmado en esta opinión quanto más he considerado que siempre han sido abandonados de los Profetas y Doctores. Con el qual pensamiento discurriendo, me resumí en creer que tales glossas han sido quemada en tantas calamidades como ha padecido el Pueblo Hebreo, o que la malicia humana los avía occultado," Bernabé Pons, *El texto morisco*, pp. 55-56.

Gospel itself, we read: "Translated from Italian into Castilian by the honourable Muslim Mostafa de Aranda, inhabitant of Ambel in Aragon, and at present resident in Istanbul."¹⁷

The word here used for resident, *estante*, would seem to imply that Mostafa was not permanently settled there, for in that case one would have expected the term *vecino*. Furthermore, we note that although Mostafa apparently was a Spaniard, he is not unambiguously called a "Morisco," but merely "Muslim," and may therefore have been a recent convert to Islam. This small and not entirely conclusive piece of evidence seems to be the only indication of a 'Sitz im Leben' of the Gospel: the milieu of the Moriscos and converted Muslims in the Diaspora. The prologue itself is a remarkable example of a literary forgery, though historical reality is not far away. The families referred to, 'Ursina' and 'Colona,' to be read as Orsini and Colonna, were two ancient and noble Roman families, which produced many important people, men of letters, cardinals, even popes. From the papacy of Julius II (1503-1513) onwards they were representing the Roman nobility as the Papal 'throne-attendants,' a religious office for laymen. At the end of the sixteenth century Fulvio (1529-1600), one of the Orsini, made his name as a philologist, numismatist, historian, and collector of antiquities, including valuable manuscripts. Marcantonio (d. 1597), a member of the Colonna family, had an official position in the Vatican library. Fray Marin's reference to ancient manuscripts in the possession of these two families can therefore not be a coincidence. Bernabé Pons draws attention to the fact that the same perhaps holds true for Fray Marin too, who may well be the orientalist and Arabist Fra Marco Marini (1542-1594), a scholar involved in the study and edition of the *Targum of Jonathan*¹⁸. The same could be said of the figure of Sixtus V, to whom we will return below.

Relationship

Many modern students of the Gospel start with the assumption that the Gospel was originally written in Italian and then translated into Spanish, maybe by the same author. This seems indeed likely on the basis of the evidence discussed above, which points to Istanbul as the place of origin of the *Gospel of Barnabas*. Nevertheless, there are some problems to be solved here. First of all, why is the translator's remark to be found only at the beginning of the Gospel itself, i.e. after the prologue, which is also written in Spanish, *as if the Prologue had not been translated from Italian into Spanish, but only the Gospel itself*? Did the author perhaps conceive an Italian text first, then the Spanish prologue, and, finally, the Spanish translation of the Gospel? Or was only a Spanish text conceived which included the prologue, allegedly translated from Italian which (unlike Spanish) the Popes themselves were used to reading? And did the alleged original come into being later?

Cirillo argued on the basis of his comparison of the Spanish fragments known to him with the Italian version that the one does not depend upon the other, that both are derived from a "common source." But this conclusion loses its force if we

¹⁷ "Traduça de italiano en Castellana por el Honrrado Muzlim Mostafa de Aranda, natural de Ambel, en Aragón, estante en Estambor."

¹⁸ Bernabé Pons, *El Evangelio*, p. 65..

assume that the author had a hand in both versions or that the Spanish is based on an improved version of the Italian text¹⁹.

At this point we need to take another look at the Arabic glosses in the Italian MS, for if the Spanish version is based on the Italian we might expect that some of the Arabic glosses in some way or another influenced the Spanish translation. This is indeed the case.

A remarkable difference between the Spanish and Italian texts are the names of the archangels. In the Spanish version, two archangels are called Azrael and Azrafiel. For example, one of the places where they are mentioned reads as follows:

And Jesus told his mother: "these are the ministers of God: Gabriel, who knows about His secrets and brings messages, Michael, who fighteth against His enemies, Azafril, who will call every one to the Judgement, and Azrael, who receiveth the souls."²⁰

The Italian MS, however, reads Rafael instead of Azrael, and Uriel instead of Azrafiel. Now both Azreal (Izār'il) and Azrafiel (Isrāfīl) are names of two of the four archangels (next to Jibrīl and Mīkhā'il), characteristic of the Islamic tradition. Izrā'il is the name of the angel of death who receives the souls of the deceased, while Isrāfīl blows the trumpet at the last judgement²¹. The use of Uriel and Michael is of course far more convincing for a Christian readership as a sign of authenticity than Azrael and Azrafiel, which are meant for a Muslim readership. In the Italian text itself these Islamic names are never used. However, they are to be found in the long gloss on f. 150r²² commenting on a sentence in the Italian text which reads as follows:

After those years shall the angel Gabriel come into hell, and shall hear them say: "O Muḥammad, where are thy promises made to us, saying that those who have thy faith shall not abide in hell evermore?"

The gloss reads:

Jesus said: "After the sinning believers have entered Jahannam, Gabriel comes into Jahannam and is faced by the believers, and they say: O Muḥammad! Where is your promise to those who accept your religion that they will not remain forever in the fire? And if Gabriel informs Muḥammad of what he has heard from the sinning believers, then Muḥammad will call his Lord saying, O Lord, thy promise is true and thou art the best of judges; then God will send Gabriel and Michael and *Asrafiel and Azrael* [my italics] and they will take them out of the fire and place them in paradise." This is part [of the text].

The use of the Islamic names of both angels in the gloss proves the unity of the Italian text, the Arabic glosses and the Spanish translation. The logical conclusion would be that the Italian text was meant to reflect the Christian tradition, the glosses an 'Islamic' readership (the use of the brackets will be explained below), while the Spanish text was entirely meant for an Islamic readership. The general

¹⁹ Cirillo and Frémaux, *Évangile de Barnabé*, p. 75.

²⁰ "Y Jesús dixo a su madre: 'Estos son los ministros de Dios: Gabriel sabe de sus secretos y lleva las ambaxadas; Michael combate con sus enemigos; Azrafiel llamará todos al Juizio; y Azrael recibe las almas'." GBS chapter 221, Bernabé Pons 1992: 595-6; GBV, chapter 220, f. 229r.

²¹ Cirillo and Frémaux, *Évangile de Barnabé*, p. 70.

²² Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, p. 319.

object of the writer of the Italian MS, including its Arabic glosses, can be clarified even better when the following gloss is examined. After a certain "prayer of mid-night" Jesus says in the main text:

This night shall be in the time of the Messiah, messenger of God, the jubilee every year -that now cometh every year.

The gloss reads:

The *ṣalāt al- barā'a* in old times was performed at the beginning of every hundred years once, but in the time of the messenger *it will be* (takuna) every year. This is part [of the text].

Though, as far as I know, there exists in Islamic religious life no such prayer, the term *barā'a* itself is well-known. It is mainly used in two contexts. One is the context of the conquest of Mecca, when *sūrat al- barā'a* (*sūra* 9) was revealed. The other, and that is probably the context referred to here, is the celebration of *laylat al-niṣf min sha'bān*, the night of the middle of the month Sha'bān. This night is celebrated in many parts of the Islamic world, and is often called *laylat al- barā'a*, indicating the belief that in this night God decides about the life and death of people in the coming year. The glossator here draws the attention of his Islamic readership to the fact that already in Jesus' time such a night was celebrated with prayer. The imperfect with future significance used here indicates that the gloss was designed to suggest a 'believing' readership *before* the time of the Prophet. In other words: the gloss was designed to create the impression that the *Gospel of Barnabas* was read *between the assumption of Jesus and the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad*. This may very well be the goal of all glosses. In any case this hypothesis explains the entire structure of the glosses and some other aspects of the Italian manuscript. First of all, the use of red dots: these were meant as an equivalent of a well-known feature of manuscripts of the Qur'ān, the so-called *fawāṣil al-āyāt*, the dots separating the verses. This also applies to the effort of the glossator to add chapter-titles which are strongly reminiscent of the Qur'anic *sūras*, and the terminology of the glosses, which is clearly Islamic. To the examples given in the preceding section many more could be added. Where the main text speaks about the true Pharisees, for example, the glosses speak about *darwīs* [sic]. Indeed, the chapter which in particular deals with them is called *Sūrat darwīs* [sic]. The word Pharisee itself is also explained: "Derwish signifies in the Hebrew language Pharisee. This is part [of the text]."²³ Thus the glossator makes it clear that these true Pharisees are to be understood as Islamic mystics.

In conclusion we can say in the first place that there seems to be a close correspondence between the Italian text and the Arabic glosses. Each fulfils its role in making an archaising impression on the reader both in content and form, creating the impression that he has before him a copy of an authentic Gospel, which had been studied before the time of the Prophet by the small group of 'believers' predicted by Jesus in the *Gospel of Barnabas* itself²⁴. The glossator represents, as

²³ f. 158r: 'darwīs liṣān 'Imrān Fārishā'u. Minhu'.

²⁴ See, for example, the reference to a *mu'min* in chapter 17, headed by the following words: "In this chapter is clearly perceived the unbelief of Christians, and the true faith of the believing man (Italian text: mumin)." A small group of believers is also mentioned by Al-Qaysī, who derived this idea in his turn from Sayf ibn 'Umar, as Van Koningsveld and the present author have set out elsewhere, see: Van Koningsveld and Wiegers, "The Polemical Works of Muhammad al-Qaysī," pp. 168-174.

it were, the small group of believers, already foretold by the Gospel, who have remained faithful to Jesus' authentic teachings, and are awaiting their saviour, Muḥammad, the Messiah. In the second place there appears to exist a hitherto unnoticed correspondence between the Italian text and the glosses on the one hand, and the Spanish text on the other. This may confirm the hypothesis that the same person had a hand in the Italian text, the Arabic glosses and the Spanish translation, or rather adaptation, of the Italian text, which preceding the extant Spanish version.

II. Corbin's contributions

Let us now turn to Corbin's publications about Barnabas and deal with them in order of publication. But before we do, we have to remind ourselves that Corbin wrote these articles at the time Fletcher's re-discovered the Spanish manuscript of the *Gospel of Barnabas*. It appears that he did not know about its rediscovery²⁵.

As far as I know, Corbin published three articles about the subject, all of them written between 1975 and 1977. On 26 April 1975 L. Cirillo had given a lecture about his research into the *Gospel of Barnabas* to the Ernest Renan society, the French society for the History and Science of Religions. A few months later, on 4 July 1975, Cirillo would defend his thesis at the Sorbonne. On 20 May 1976, about a year later, Corbin gave a lecture for the same society, which would be published in *Studia Iranica* 5 (1976) under the title "Theologoumena Iranica."

The article, which is an adaptation of the paper he had presented to the society Ernest Renan, has as goal an analysis of a number of Iranian Twelver Shiite theological writings which Corbin considers to be the heirs of the Judeo-Christian prophetology, in particular the concept of the *Verus Propheta* that had allegedly originated in the pristine Christian community in Jerusalem. This article is clearly about research in progress. It consists of a number of observations on a number of alleged parallel theological concepts apparently inspired by Cirillo's research into the *Gospel of Barnabas*.

Point of departure is Cirillo's paper about the *Gospel of Barnabas*, presented to the Ernest Renan Society a year earlier. After briefly mentioning Cirillo's "monumental" thesis as well, he deals with a Persian translation of the *Gospel of Barnabas* that had appeared in 1968. This appears to be a translation by Mortaḍā Karīm Kirmānī of the Arabic version by Khalīl Sa'āda, under the guidance of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1908). Kirmānī's edition included a preface in which an Iranian author states that he had allegedly seen a Syriac version of the Gospel of Barnabas in the possession of a friend, a Nestorian priest. Even though Corbin considers this story as a sort of literary fiction, it is according to him not devoid of religious and cultural value. Such stories demonstrate that the Shiite imamology and the early Christian notions of the Paraclete have something in common: they elaborate upon the notion of the *Verus Propheta*, while they do not conceive of Jesus as God's son either. Moreover, they also allegedly shared anti-Pauline views. Then he deals with his ongoing researches into the writings of Sayyid Aḥmad 'Alawī Ispahānī (17th century). He draws particular attention to a refutation by this reli-

²⁵ See Corbin, "L'Évangile de Barnabé," p. 171: "Le seul texte dont nous disposons est une version en dialecte vénitien...."

gious author of a Christian missionary treatise dated 1032/1622 about the interpretation of the passages in the Gospel of John about the Paraclete. For the Twelver-Shiite texts the *paraclete* is the twelfth imam, the *imam-mahdī*, who is expected to return from the occultation (*ghayba*) in an unknown future. Corbin surveys a number of Iranian texts that take up the notion of the paraclete from the Christian Tradition. The most important observation with regard to the *Gospel of Barnabas* we find in this article is that in its massive composition, whoever might be the author and the date (15th century or later) it is a monument that takes up the so-called Clementine literature to the point at which it had remained with the Ebionites, in order to take it up on its own terms, fully aware that Islam was the heir to the christo-prophetology which was finally refused by Christianity²⁶. All this demonstrates according to Corbin that the theme of the Paraclete is one of the Iranian theologoumena *par excellence* (p. 235). He ends this article with the remark that a profound comparison would allow us to grasp what the 'Religions of the Book' have in common with regard to "a Pentecost that is still to come."²⁷

In 1977 Corbin published two other studies in which the Gospel occupied a central place. The first of these is called "L'Évangile de Barnabé et la prophétologie islamique." It was published in the *Cahiers de l'Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*. The title of the journal refers to the 'University' of St John that was founded by Corbin himself and located in Paris. Corbin describes his own private college²⁸ as a "centre for comparative spiritual research" in the tradition of the hermetic philosophy²⁹. The said article, also described by Corbin as a piece of "comparative spiritual research"³⁰ was probably originally a paper given to the participants in one of the meetings, and finished in May 1976³¹. In his first article, discussed above, he refers to the second one as already being in print³².

In it, he continues his discussions about the Gospel, but the tone is more engaged, even militant. The *Gospel of Barnabas*, he admits, is a late text, that has no relation at all with such texts as Gnostic Gospels found in Nag Hammadi, or the Dead Sea Scrolls. Nevertheless, it stands in the same tradition. It represents the idea of the successive manifestations of the *Verus Propheta*, the true Prophet, an idea that Islam has taken over from this tradition. The *Gospel of Barnabas*, an Islamic gospel, reminds us, People of the Book, the *ahl al-kitāb*, that we are brothers in Abraham, the "imam of the pure believers" in our Abrahamic œcumenism, of which Jerusalem is the spiritual centre³³.

²⁶ "Theologoumena Iranica," p. 228: "... dans sa compilation massive, quels qu'en fussent l'auteur et l'époque (xv^e siècle ou plus tard) comme le monument qui reprend la littérature dite 'clémentine' au point où elle en était restée chez les Ébionites, pour l'achever et la mener à son terme en pleine conscience du fait que la christo-prophétologie refusée en définitive par le christianisme, l'Islam en fut l'héritier."

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235: "L'approfondissement comparatif nous permettrait de saisir ce qu'ont en commun les 'religions du Livre' dans leur attente d'une Pentecôte encore à venir" - compare Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, p. 175.

²⁸ Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, p. 324, note 18.

²⁹ Corbin, "L'Évangile de Barnabé," p. 170; Basset, *Henry Corbin*, p. 21; Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, p. 8.

³⁰ Corbin, "L'Évangile de Barnabé," p. 198.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

³² It is mentioned in note 28 of his article.

³³ H. Corbin, "L'Évangile de Barnabé," p. 170.

Thus, the *Gospel of Barnabas* brings us in contact with the ideas of St James, brother of Jesus and of the Ebionites in Jerusalem, opposed to the Theology of the Cross. This is not historical Christianity, however, but a world in which the sacred and the biblical faith had not yet been dislocated, i.e. before the catastrophic developments in Christian theology which have been the cause of "a metaphysical laicization, the eviction of theology by sociology, which is in fact the phenomenon of the divine incarnation degenerating into a social incarnation, with all its consequences..."³⁴ According to him, the Gospel and other texts invite us to "nous rendre présente la conscience des chrétiens qui furent nos ancêtres, mais qui cependant n'ont jamais professé cette idée d'une consubstantialité humano-divine qui a été l'antécédent théologique nécessaire à la socialisation opérée de nos jours. Leurs christologie fut et resta une prophétologie".

We are thus not looking for a historical phenomenon, but a state of mind, or perhaps a spiritual experience, in any case a sacred history of the successive manifestations (theophanies) of the heavenly Anthropos, the eternal Adam-Christ, who is the True Prophet. Gnosis and Theophany lead to the same: the True Prophet or Doctor of the Truth. *To recognize him, is to put oneself in a state of Truth* (my italics, GW)³⁵. This religious view was found in the Early Church in the doctrine of James and the so-called pseudo-Clementine literature. It was opposed to the Theology of the Cross which put the doctrine of the original sin and atonement by Jesus, essentially Pauline doctrine, in a central place.

The *Gospel of Barnabas* is a late witness to this anti-Pauline view: "Et c'est toute la doctrine du Vrai Prophète que formera l'axe de la prophétologie islamique, nommément sous la forme shi'ite"³⁶.

In what follows a main argument centers again around the concepts of the paraclete/mahdī. As I have explained, in the *Gospel of Barnabas* Jesus denies being God's son, and that he is the Messiah. Not he, but Muḥammad will be the Messiah. Corbin states about this: I do not know any text in which Muḥammad is called al-Masīḥ, al-Mahdī. However, if a faithful Shiite would read the words Muḥammad al-Mahdī, he would not doubt for a single moment that it would be the 12th imam³⁷. Pauline Christianity refused these Ebionite ideas which are in agreement with the Islamic views about the religious ideas of monotheists, Hanafites, who lived in the Arabian peninsula before the advent of Islam. The title messiah used for Muḥammad should be interpreted in the context of chapters 52, 53, 54, 55 and 56 of the *Gospel of Barnabas* as follows. Chapters 53 and 54 describe the eschatological events, chapter 55 the last Judgment and the General Resurrection of the Dead. Chapter 56 then describes the judgment of Satan and the rejected³⁸, and the exaltation of Muḥammad whom Jesus describes in the *Gospel of Barnabas* (chapter 43) as: "God's messenger, whom you call Masīḥ (messiah)³⁹, who was made before me,

³⁴ "Une laïcisation métaphysique: l'éviction de la théologie par la sociologie, qui n'est qu'un aspect du phénomène de l'Incarnation divine dégénérant en Incarnation sociale, avec toutes ses conséquences."

³⁵ "Gnose et Vrai Prophète ne font qu'un", «Le Vrai Prophète est le Docteur de la Vérité. Le connaître c'est se mettre soi-même en état de Vérité», Corbin, "L'Évangile de Barnabé," p. 174.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184-186.

³⁹ Corbin adds: "Christos."

and will come after me" (chapter 42)⁴⁰. This transfer of qualities of being Masīh, which is also expressed in the term *mahdī*, can be explained only by reference to the islamo-shiite prophetology: "En effet, le rôle du prophète Mohammad comme 'Sceau de la prophétie', n'est pas un rôle eschatologique. Le héros eschatologique, c'est le XII^e Imām, Mohammed al-Mahdi, achevant le plérôme de la *Haqiqat [sic] mohammadiya*." In other words, the expression in the *Gospel of Barnabas* that Muḥammad is the messiah is not a sunnite concept. The reason for this is that sunnism, by adhering to the doctrine of Muḥammad as the last of the Prophets, could not recognize a continuing prophecy. Hence the *Gospel of Barnabas* fits into an Imami Shiite conceptual framework.

At the end of the article Corbin asks two questions: which place do the texts discussed by him, including the *Gospel of Barnabas*, have in the process of catastrophic process of desacralisation mentioned above? And second: which is the community that the *Gospel of Barnabas* addresses⁴¹? The answer to the second question is that the text is directed to a small group of readers dispersed and hidden among the three Abrahamic communities, heirs to a long tradition. It can be called the order of Elijah, and can be traced in the EBV itself. They appear as the true Pharisees, discussed above (located on mount Carmel, chapter 148,⁴² see p. 199). This order goes back to Elijah himself, and lives on in small groups among the three "Abrahamic" religions, forming an Abrahamic harmony. This is the spiritual milieu to which the message of the *Gospel of Barnabas* was directed. The way in which Corbin analyses the *Gospel of Barnabas* here, as he himself admits, is not to be judged as a historical critical analysis (as we will see below, Corbin was highly critical on the historical critical method). This text should be studied under the aspect of the *Formgeschichte*, "de la forme rédactionnelle choisie pour transmettre un enseignement visant un niveau qui transcende les données empiriques [my italics, GW]. Or précisément l'enseignement visé ici constitue un thème archétype, celui d'une communauté idéale de saints et d'élus."⁴³ There is no clear answer to the first question, except that at the end Corbin asks himself whether it is the separation between Prophetic and mystical religion that led to the dislocation of the sacred. I assume that he means that the declaration of the end of Prophecy lead to a separation between rational and personal inspiration. The remedy he apparently envisions is the eternal continuation and presence of Divine Guidance. We will return to this aspect below.

The concept Harmonia Abrahamica also serves as the title for the third study which Corbin devotes to the subject, the introduction to the edition of the Italian manuscript by Cirillo and Frémaux, published in 1977⁴⁴. The preface is dated at the end to June 1977⁴⁵.

As for Corbin's preface, it includes of course some friendly words for Luigi Cirillo, whose research Corbin has followed from close-by. He and Cirillo had shared the same scholarly interests, which had made them into "compagnons de

⁴⁰ Corbin, "L'Évangile de Barnabé," p. 185.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴² See *ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ This article was certainly written after the article in *Studia Iranica*. It is mentioned in note 9.

⁴⁵ In the second edition published in 1999, and revised by Michel Frémaux, the original preface of Corbin has been reduced to a few quotations, only, to be found in the preface by Frémaux.

recherche." The remainder of the introduction is nearly the same as the second article, expect that the references to the catastrophes of secularization, and the metaphysical backgrounds of that development are omitted. Here, Corbin follows more closely a line of argument that almost seems historical critical.

III. Discussion

In his fascinating study *Religion after Religion* Steven Wasserstrom demonstrated the close personal and scholarly relationship between Corbin, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and Gershom Scholem (1898-1982). Of different backgrounds, they all became world famous historians of religions. Members of the Eranos group that yearly met near to the Swiss city Ascona and published the Eranos Yearbooks, they also had a lot in common with regard to their life histories, their philosophies of life and their views with regard to methodological issues in the study of religions.

All three were strongly influenced by the anti-reductionist phenomenological approach, even though they would not reckon themselves among the phenomenologists of religion. The Sacred and the Numinous can, according to them, not be reduced to non-religious, i.e. social, political and psychological factors. Religion, the sacred, is a phenomenon *sui generis*, i.e. autonomous, a view that they ultimately derived from the influential philosopher of religion, Rudolph Otto (1869-1937). Corbin and Eliade strongly rejected the contribution of the social sciences to the study of religions⁴⁶. Behind all this is their metaphysical conviction that the sacred and the mystic are ontologically real, whereas the objective forms of history in the final analysis are not⁴⁷. In early times, man, according to Eliade, lived in a world that was dominated by the sacred. Only later, the world began to de-sacralize. This process in which the modern world, dominated by a separation between the sacred and the profane and the marginalization of the sacred (i.e. secularization) came about, was judged as negative, catastrophic even. The task the three historians of religions set themselves was to bring back to harmonious state of affairs that had characterized archaic man. Their means to achieve this was to write books, through which modern readers might discover this state of affairs, and initiated by reading these books, find a way to realize the Sacred. Related to his strong anti-reductionist point of view Corbin maintained that the only way to understand the religious is in a religious way. A religious symbol system is *tautegorical*, i.e. can only be understood by reference to itself⁴⁸. Most anthropologists and scholars of religions would rather posit the reverse: that religious symbols cannot be properly interpreted *without* referring to their social, cultural and historical context. Corbin's approach was esoteric, oriented on the thought of Pasqually, Saint Martin and Martinisme. Corbin was very much opposed to legalistic aspects of religion, and an enthusiast supporter of its esoteric and spiritual aspects⁴⁹.

Wasserstrom also briefly devotes attention to Corbin's views regarding the *Gospel of Barnabas*. According to him, he was at the end of his life he wrote "more

⁴⁶ Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, p. 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

explicitly, *if not feverishly* (my italics) on what he called *Harmonia Abrahamica* (Abrahamic Harmony) in which he made clear that his Christology was indistinguishable from Shi'ite and Sufi Christology.⁵⁰ The words used here suggest a sort of existential urgency, for which I have no further evidence. Basset interprets his efforts for this Abrahamic harmony as a personal commitment with existentialist elements⁵¹. It falls outside the scope of the present contribution to go into the details of Corbin's work. With regard to his contributions to the study of the *Gospel of Barnabas* the following can be said.

There has been a lot of progress in research into the *Gospel of Barnabas* since Corbin published his contributions. Two trends can be distinguished here. On the one hand major advances have been made after the discovery of the Spanish manuscript in Sydney in 1976 which opened up new possibilities. A number of studies have since then shed new light on the Morisco environment of the Gospel. I am referring here to studies by M. de Epalza, L. Cardaillac, L.F. Bernabé Pons⁵², García-Arenal, and Van Koningsveld and myself. On the other hand, the line of research into the background of the Italian manuscript has been pursued. Here, studies by Pulcini⁵³, Joosten⁵⁴ and Kuchinski should be mentioned. Joosten studied the relationship between the *Gospel of Barnabas* and the Venetian Diatessaron, a medieval Italian adaptation of Tatian's Gospel harmony. In a number of recent articles and discussion papers, published on the internet Y. Kuchinsky argues that the *Gospel of Barnabas* incorporates early Jewish-Christian materials, viz. "a pre-Muslim harmonistic gospel, although later that was considerably expanded, possibly more than once by a number of hands." According to him, the *Gospel of Barnabas* is closer to a version of Tatian's gospel harmony extant in the so-called Magdalene Gospel, than to the Venetian Diatessaron, as Joosten argues. The authors of these researches into the 'Italian' version of the Gospel do not deny that the extant Italian manuscript is a Muslim forgery, but they contradict the hypothesis of the Spanish Morisco origins of the Gospel. If the hypothesis is correct that the Italian version was made by an author who lived in Italy much earlier than the seventeenth century, the origins of the *Gospel of Barnabas* cannot be found among the Moriscos.

While Corbin clearly belongs to the second category, his researches stand out because they do not fit into the largely historical critical approach of the other studies. In many respect Corbin's studies belong to the philosophy of religion, with some ideological elements as well⁵⁵. Though the metaphysical assumptions are hard to criticize from the point of view of historical criticism, we can critically evaluate Corbin's use of historical critical research. The following points can be raised.

1. With regard to Corbin's interpretation of use of the concept of the paraclete in the Islamic tradition, he seems to neglect the fact that this nearly always serves strongly anti-Christian polemical goals, as is demonstrated by many polemical

writings from both Sunnite and Shiite circles in which we find the theme. For example, the famous Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) in his anti-Christian writings makes ample use of it⁵⁶. The *Gospel of Barnabas* is a heir to that tradition.

2. The same holds true with perhaps the most distinguishing elements in Corbin's articles, viz. his interpretations of the notion of Muḥammad as messiah and the religious and historical origins of the text. As we have seen, according to Corbin, the messiahship of Muhammad should be interpreted as an indication of its Shiite (Twelver) background. This interpretation differs striking from other researches in the field. In his important contributions to the study of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, J. Jomier has called the thesis of Muḥammad is the messiah "an enormity," and a clear sign that the text is a forgery⁵⁷. Other recent researchers, such as Bernabé Pons⁵⁸, and Epalza⁵⁹, do not consider the use of the title messiah (Spanish: *Mesías*, Italian: *messia*) for Muḥammad to be extraordinary. According to Epalza it just refers to Muḥammad being *khātim al-nabiyyīn*, i.e. seal of the Prophets, but with salvational connotations⁶⁰. While I do not completely disagree with Epalza, I believe that precisely this last aspect is extraordinary, since the dogma of Muḥammad being seal of the prophets has, as Corbin points out, few, if any eschatological connotations. Eschatological connotations were attached to the figure of the mahdī, who was expected to come after Muḥammad had died, at the end of time.

While disagreeing with Corbin about the Shiite background, I believe that he has a better understanding with regard to the eschatological aspects of the message of the Gospel of Barnabas than Epalza. It is, in the terminology of the science of religions, the figure of a *messiah/mahdī* that is evoked⁶¹. However, I disagree with Corbin that this is evidence for a historical current in Christianity that saw Jesus as a Prophet instead of a Divine figure nor referred to the appearance of the *imam-mahdī* after the death of Muḥammad. The text does so because its author wishes to bring about the conversion of non-Muslim, predominantly Christian readers to convert to Islam. In order to achieve this, he invents an early text that had to be in agreement with Islamic doctrine, a process in fact hinted at in the preface to the Spanish manuscript. He writes the text from the point of view of a "Muslim" follower of Jesus/ʿIsā living after the latter but *before the birth of Muḥammad*. That "imaginary" believer had to await Muḥammad as the messiah. The analysis of the Spanish and Italian manuscripts, including their paleographic and codicological aspects, with which I began this article, strongly suggests that such a "pre-Islamic tradition" was the fruit of the creative imagination of the author of the Italian *Gospel of Barnabas*, not the result of an adaptation of early texts. By trying to find an early *Vorlage*, we do are doing exactly what the preface of the Spanish manuscripts suggests us to do and what many Muslim authors who believe in its authenticity stress when they claim to have heard about ancient manuscripts of the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵¹ Basset, *Henry Corbin*, p. 30-31.

⁵² See for a recent overview of his researches: Bernabé Pons, "Los mecanismos."

⁵³ Pulcini, "In the Shadow of Mount Carmel."

⁵⁴ "Jésus et l'aveugle né"; *Idem*, "The Gospel of Barnabas and the Diatessaron."

⁵⁵ See on the ideological aspects of the work of Corbin, Algar, "The Study of Islam"; Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin"; Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, p. 176.

⁵⁶ See for example Ljamai, *Ibn Hazm*, pp. 115-121; for Morisco writings see, for example, my "Muhammad as the Messiah."

⁵⁷ Jomier, "L'Évangile selon Barnabé," p.199.

⁵⁸ Bernabé Pons: "Zur Wahrheit und Echtheit," pp. 147-153.

⁵⁹ Epalza, *Jesús entre judíos, cristianos y musulmanes hispanos*, p. 206-208.

⁶⁰ On the historical background of the dogma, see Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous*.

⁶¹ See for example Cirillo-Frémaux, *L'Évangile*, f. 101b: the true messiah will restore Jesus' original teaching, his name will be Ahmad, he will break the power of Satan and the idols.

Gospel in Syriac or Aramaic, exactly as Corbin's Persian source does⁶². I showed that even though Corbin does not deny that the *Gospel of Barnabas* is a Muslim text, he assumes that it goes back to a text that ultimately can be traced back to pristine Christianity. The same, probably not a coincidence, holds true for the view of Cirillo, even though the latter does not share Corbin's views about the conceptual framework described above. There is no contradiction between what I am arguing here and the use of a Gospel Harmony by our Muslim author. It is evident that the author used older texts, including Gospel texts, and researches into these older texts will help to resolve the problem of the identity of the author.

3. The same sort of criticism may be applied to Corbin's interpretations of Ebionite Christianity, and the pseudo-Clementine corpus, which is the subject of another contribution in the present publication, and which has already been criticized by others, and will be left out of consideration here⁶³.

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⁶² We find the same sort of mystifications in the Dutch translation of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, see Geels (ed), *Het Evangelie van Barnabas*, p. 9.

⁶³ See the article of S.Mimouni in this volume and also Slomp, "The Gospel in Dispute", p. 89, 104; Van Koningsveld, *The Islamic Image*, p. 201 and *passim*.

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