A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR WILLIAM M. BRINNER

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This volume of studies is offered to Professor William (Ze’ev) Brinner from students and colleagues as a tribute to his work as a scholar and his influence as a teacher. Examining the scholarly work of Ze’ev Brinner takes the reader on a journey that encompasses two civilizations, the Judaic and Islamic, and traverses many centuries. The wide scope of his scholarly activity ranges from fourteenth-century Mamlûk Syria to the contemporary state of Israel. Brinner has brought to light medieval Muslim entrepreneurs, Turkish warriors, Jewish philosophers, Arab chroniclers, and Karaite sectarians. These historical personalities do not stand in an isolated antiquarian past, but have been bought to life by Professor Brinner in order to illuminate the sociocultural and religious worldviews of Judaism and Islam. Many historians and scholars of religion may claim to be expert in matters both Jewish and Muslim, but few possess the combined skills and background of Ze’ev Brinner that together truly define mastery of these two enormous fields.

Ze’ev Brinner’s ability to interpret history and religion in both Jewish and Islamic contexts is evident from his publications. Trained as an Arabist by William Popper at the University of California at Berkeley, Brinner’s writing in the early part of his career focused on Mamlûk Syria and its Arabic literary sources. His philological background prepared him for understanding historical manuscript materials, and led to several monographs which helped open up the Mamlûk period to historical inquiry.

This phase of his work is marked by the important edition and translation of Muḥammad ibn Ṣaṣrā’s al-Durra al-Muḍi’a fi l-Dawla al-Ẓâhiriya,
published under the English title, *A Chronicle of Damascus* in two volumes. It is evident in the selection of this Arabic chronicle that Brinner was developing an approach to the general through the particular. Sources for this period usually emanated from the Mamlūk political center and Arab cultural hub of Egypt, and correspondingly gave the majority of attention to events and personalities there. But Ibn Șaṣrā recorded events from the peripheral perspective of “provincial” Damascus, providing an alternative view on the overthrow, reinstatement, and second reign of the Mamlūk Sultan Barqūq (d. 801/1399). The first volume of Ibn Șaṣrā is a magisterial example of the art of translation, embodying wide linguistic knowledge and particular familiarity with Arabic of the fourteenth century. More importantly, the translation demonstrated Brinner’s facility with many literary genres that were often embedded within medieval Arabic chronicles, including folktales, Muslim homily, geographical description, poetry, and the peculiar genre on the excellence of a locality (in this case, “Praise of Damascus”). In the selection of this important manuscript, the particular is found in the Syrian context of the narrative—Mamlūk hegemony over the Levant in the fourteenth century—while the general presents the turbulent era of the political fall and resurrection of one of the most important of the Mamlūk rulers.

*A Chronicle of Damascus* was accompanied by several journal articles that brought out important historical findings associated with the Mamlūk period, including “Some Ayyūbid and Mamlūk Documents from Non-Archival Sources” which analyzes the literary construction of examples of Mamlūk-Mongol correspondence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

While establishing his solid grounding in the medieval Arab-Muslim Middle East, Brinner also began to work on Jewish materials. His handlist of the Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic materials in the Sutro Collection of the California State Library in San Francisco brought a little-known collection of valuable manuscripts to the attention of scholars. Adolf Sutro, mayor of San Francisco, made his fortune in Nevada silver mining and had amassed what was perhaps the largest private library in the United States, including many Jewish books and manuscripts, most of which were lost in the great fire that

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2 *Israel Oriental Studies* II (1972), 117-143. See also items 2, 3, 6, 10, and 22 in the bibliography in this volume for other articles on Mamlūk history.
followed the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. Among the remaining items are several medieval and early modern manuscripts of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, as well as Bible commentaries, midrashim, and other works of Yemenite provenance. From this bibliographical project Brinner discovered a unique manuscript describing "A Nineteenth-Century Messiah from Azerbaijan."³

By this point in his career, Brinner was fully engaged in developing integrative and comparative studies embracing Judaism and Islam. His translation of R. Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shāhīn's *Kitāb al-faraj ba'd al-shiddah* was published as *An Elegant Composition concerning Relief after Adversity*.⁴ This eleventh-century composition was well-known in its Hebrew version, *Ḥibbur yafeh me-ha-Yeshu'ah*, first published in Constantinople in 1519, but whose standard edition is derived from the imprint of Ferrara, 1557. R. Nissim’s standing in Jewish tradition is as a talmudist, whose writings mostly obscure the particulars of contemporary history, a characteristic of rabbinic method that eschews narrative description in favor of legal formulation. In contrast, this legendary narrative work opens a window on Jewish society in Kairouan (located in contemporary Tunisia) during a period when native North African Jewish cultural florescence was being eclipsed by Spanish Jewry. Furthermore, the encroachment of bedouin Arab and Berber tribes upon towns and villages led to destruction and emigration. R. Nissim himself relocated to Sūsah (Sousse) and it is known that he was ill there. Given the cultural adaptation of Jews to Islamic society that marked many regions and periods of the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that the classical Arabic theme of "relief after adversity" was co-opted by an individual sufferer to become the basis of a Jewish literary genre which addressed the beleaguered Jews of its region and time. In his introduction, Brinner quotes R. Nissim: "Although these stories concern individuals, nonetheless I shall not fail to mention also events that have happened to the whole nation [of Israel], and the [resulting] distress in which they found themselves, but were granted relief therefrom."⁵

Although genre and style were borrowed from the Arabic, the *Elegant Composition* uses primarily rabbinic textual sources to recount tales of moral

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³ "A Nineteenth-Century 'Messiah' from Azerbaijan" in *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, II, Jerusalem, 1972, 6-12.
⁵ Introduction, xxvii.
and theological import. The resulting cross-cultural blend became the first work in a Jewish literary genre that came to be known as ma‘aseh literature, a genre which combines legendary and folk materials with talmudic and other rabbinic stories. The popularity of this particular work is evidenced in fifteen subsequent printed editions and the inclusion of many of its stories in other collections of ma‘asiyyot in Hebrew and even Yiddish. However, the distinctiveness of this work is found in R. Nissim’s creative use of Judeo-Arabic, characterized by its utilization of the Hebrew alphabet to record the living spoken Arabic language of North African Jews without the limitation of Quranic grammatical and stylistic models that imbued and dominated the written expression of contemporary high Muslim literary culture. Thus, this version provides a window on the living colloquial language of eleventh-century Jews in North Africa unobscured by high Arab culture.

With this translation, Brinner provided scholars and interested laypersons alike with a view of the particular (North African Jewry) which is illuminated by the general (Arabic language, literature, and culture). In doing so, he marshaled a wide range of expertise in both Judaica and Islamica to provide an elegant example of the fine art of translation.

Brinner’s next major work took up a more subtle engagement of the Judaic with the Islamic, considering Muslim strategies for constructing the pre-Islamic past. Identifying the era preceding the divine revelations to Muḥammad as the jāhiliyyah, or “Age of Ignorance,” Muslims developed an ambivalent relationship to the religious and cultural predecessors of Islamic hegemony in the Middle East. Unlike the borrowing of genre that characterizes R. Nissim’s Jewish work, Muslims created a new genre by constructing parallel versions of narrative derived from and echoing Jewish and Persian narratives of the past—“filling in” that which was missing from the Qur’ān and Muslim tradition. Known as qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyā’ (“Tales of the Prophets”) or Isrā’īliyāt (“Israelitica”) these stories became popular as a literary genre and oral storytelling form, especially in the early centuries before the religious and cultural dominance of Muslim tradition and Shari‘a.

In the early tenth century, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī solved the problem of representing the pre-Islamic past in the first part of his massive universal history by using these tales of the distant past. Most appropriately, William Brinner was selected as the translator for the second and third
volumes of what would become a thirty-nine volume collection. His well-known linguistic abilities and scholarly familiarity with the terrain of medieval Middle Eastern cross-cultural interpenetration led to a masterful translation in English of this literary exemplar of the Islamic engagement with antiquity.

Al-Ṭabari is perhaps the most significant historian of the early centuries of Islam, gathering and identifying many literary sources and presenting them with little editorial reformulation or bias. As Brinner notes in one of his introductions: “al-Ṭabari shows again and again his striving for historical accuracy, despite the heavy odds against him. Lacking the requisite linguistic knowledge and the ‘primary sources’ that are the sine qua non of modern scholarship, al-Ṭabari trained his critical and quite skeptical eye on the tales transmitted by various traditionists, accepting some, questioning or rejecting others.”

These first sections of the History of Messengers and Kings (Tarīkh al-rasul wa’l-mulāk) embody deep psychological and cultural structures of the medieval Middle East that illuminate interreligious relations of the period. In the section on Abraham (Ibrāhim) al-Ṭabari is acutely aware of the content and limits of Muslim tradition. The majority of that section is devoted to the religiously-charged and communally-valued question of which son Abraham took to be sacrificed. Without taking sides as to whether it was Isḥāq (Isaac) or Ismā’il (Ishmael), al-Ṭabari lists the sources and repeats their words concerning the two positions. Both sides of the issue are purely Muslim, emanating from the world of Qur’ān commentary, yet the subtext yields either a “Jewish” (biblical) or “anti-Jewish” reading. This is not the intertextuality of supercessionist Christianity working out a way to share yet not share a scripture with another monotheism, but it is the sharing while not sharing of monotheism and its master figures by opposed traditions. With this translation Brinner brought his background in biblical and later Judaic materials to the presentation of a primary example of a Muslim literary and historical genre.

Brinner became even more involved with Isrā’īliyāt materials, and published several articles on them. In recent years he has completed a long-term project, translating Abū Isḥāq ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Tha‘labi’s

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7 Ibid., xi.

8 See items 19, 57, 80, 90, and 93 in the bibliography in this volume, as well as entries in the Oxford Companion to Arabic Literature (item 94).
‘Arā‘is al-majālis, qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā ("Brides of the Sessions: Tales of the Prophets"). Al-Tha’labi (d. 1036) was quite taken by these tales, and glories in them at a time when such legendary views of the pre-Islamic past were being condemned. The increasingly powerful ‘ulāmā’, whose socio-legal views were typified by Shari‘a and Qur’ān commentary, preferred an agglutinative and segmentary world-view that was typical of their literature and that excluded narrative genres such as the Isrā‘iḥiyāt. Al-Tha’labi himself is a perplexing figure, since in addition to compiling tales of the prophets, he was a traditional Qur’ān commentator as well as associated with mystically-oriented circles whose spiritual heritage went back to the tenth-century Baghdādi mystic al-Junayd. Personally situated in these seemingly contradictory cultural arenas, al-Tha’labi compiled one of the last great works of qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā in the Middle Ages. The cultural dilemma that is framed in a work such as his is manifest in the contradiction inherent in passing sentence on the part of increasingly dominant Muslim tradition upon a genre of literature whose early proponents were writers of great authority in Islam. al-Tha’labi attempts to bridge the gap between these opposing positions by providing justifications (in the form of “wisdoms”) for the compilation and reading of Isrā‘iḥiyāt. Each of his justifications directs the reader toward normative proofs of the prophecy of Muḥammad, his moral example, and the supremacy of the community of Islam, thereby bridging the narrative and necessarily multi-ethnic world of pre-Islamic legend with the singular Shari‘a-oriented textual community of the ascendant Islamic civilization of the eleventh century.

Al-Tha’labi is more than a compiler, for he demonstrates knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. For example, he knows the content of Isaiah and Jeremiah, often quoting them closely or correctly. On the other hand, he also makes mistakes, such as confusing Ezra and Ezekiel or Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar. He also knows Christian narrative, including a long version of the story of St. George, which is contextualized, in part, as an anti-pagan polemic. Importantly, he not only spans the breach between pre-Islamic and Islamic worldviews by means of the framing of his narrative, but also between pre-Islamic and Islamic history by including such stories as the persecution of Christians in 523 by the Himyarite Jewish ruler, Dhū Nuwās, and a recounting of the Battle of the Elephant fought between the Ethiopians and the Arabs in 570 or 571. Both of these events have reference in the

9 At the time of this festschrift’s publication the translation of al-Tha’labi is complete and will soon be ready for publication.
Qur’ān.\textsuperscript{10} Brinner’s translation will present this important work and its peculiar sociocultural setting to scholars of Islam and Judaism.

The wide range of possibilities that an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural point of view affords, led Brinner to investigate the important subject of the Karaite Jews. They are a non-rabbinc sect with roots in the ‘Abbāsid caliphate, who flourished in pre-Seljuk Palestine, only to wither into modernity in the Byzantine, Ottoman, Lithuanian-Polish, and Russian empires. Although Middle Eastern Karaites unquestionably identified and were seen as Jews, their approaches to scripturalism and halakhah could echo exegetical and jurisprudential strategies adopted by Muslims. These Jewish sectarianists are studied by only a few scholars, whose work tends to be tightly focused on discovering and understanding Karaite texts. Transcending such a context, Brinner adopted a global perspective articulating the important differences in recent centuries between Middle Eastern and Eastern European Karaites. While the former identified themselves with their rabbinic coreligionists as Jews, and in the twentieth century as Zionists, the latter became increasingly dejudaized and adopted a theology of accommodation to Orthodox Christianity and Islam, as well as strong opposition to modern Jewish nationalism. One can account for this great divergence between two great regional Karaite communities partly through the influence of the host cultures and their attitudes toward Jews in general.\textsuperscript{11} In this case, the sectarian particular yields deeper understanding of general contexts represented by Christian and Muslim host cultures.

As an area specialist of the Middle East who is not limited to a single time period, Brinner has offered an important contribution to modernity in the region with his translation of a portion of volume II of al-Jabarti’s History of Egypt.\textsuperscript{12} The setting of this historical chronicle of the Middle East defies the simple paradigm for periodizing history used in the West, which divides human experience into antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modernity. Al-Jabarti chronicles the end of a very long “medieval” period, by the end of which Islamicate Middle Eastern civilization remained largely self-contained and

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\item Sura 85:4 and 105:1-3, respectively.
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remote from the technological and intellectual developments of Europe. He witnessed the imposition of European modernity on Egypt during Napoleon’s invasion of 1798 and the French occupation, starkly juxtaposing the clash of culture and the shock of seeing the Other from Muslim Arab eyes. Long before post-colonial studies generated categories and concepts for thinking about this great encounter, al-Jabarti represented the contradictions of Muslim cultural confidence and Turkish-Egyptian military defeat; of Muslim moral superiority and superior French technique and technology; and of Egyptian naïveté and European arrogance.

Before describing the French invasion, al-Jabarti testifies to an Egypt unaffected by foreign culture, but dangerously unstable as a result of internal corruption and weak political structures. Commenting on typical internal strife created by fighting among factions of Mamlûk and Turkish amîrs in Jumâdâ II, 1202 (March 9-April 6, 1788), he notes, “At that time the affairs came to a standstill and there was a scarcity of the means of subsistence. There were highway robbery, insecurity, beduin disturbances, blocking of the roads, paralysis of commerce, and difficult travel conditions by land as well as by sea.”13 In contrast, the pasha of Egypt plays in a global arena, entertaining an ambassador from Russia who is concerned about Ottoman encroachment upon Egypt.14 Brinner’s translation portrays the Egyptians standing on the cusps of historical epochs. In this work, Brinner facilitates understanding of the late eighteenth-century cross-cultural engagement, making “old Egypt” alive for scholars and the general English reader alike. For Brinner himself, this translation represents a return to the Mamlûks who were the objects of interest earlier in his career. He observes the Mamlûk elite at the end of their long dominance in Egypt. By contemporary eighteenth-century standards, they were corrupt and inefficient rulers, yet they remained formidable as individual mounted warriors.

To the satisfaction of colleagues and more distant readers of his work, Professor Brinner remains active as a scholar. A glance at the bibliography in this volume demonstrates William Brinner’s sustained activity in most areas in which he has conducted research and published. We look forward to his continued work, both in the forms of translation and historical and cultural analysis. We are also deeply appreciative for years of active participation in

13 Ibid., 259.
14 Ibid., 269. Note that al-Jabarti refers to the “king of Moscow,” not knowing or not divulging the female identity of Russia’s ruler.
scholarly and community organizations. As a scholar who garners respect from his peers, he has acted as editor and reviewer of many publications. As teacher and advisor, he has guided dissertations and helped launch the academic careers that transformed students into colleagues. And as friend, he has nurtured students, helped to shape the careers of junior colleagues, and supported the scholarship of senior colleagues. With the deepest gratitude and highest sense of honor this volume is offered in recognition and as a gift to William (Ze'ev) Brinner from his colleagues, students, and friends.