CROSSPOLLINATIONS—PHILOSOPHICALLY FRUITFUL EXCHANGES BETWEEN JEWISH AND ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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To the Muslim conquerors of the Middle East, as Richard Walzer was fond of pointing out, philosophy and its allied sciences appeared at first to be a treasure house of truth. The image has almost a literal verisimilitude. For the intellectual wealth of ancient Greece and Persia and of the Syriac and Hebraic cultures that were folded into the new society of the Islamic empire was treasured up in the libraries of the Muslim princes, warehoused like any other booty. We can still feel Avicenna’s excitement on entering the Samanid royal library, where books lay piled in cases with a room for every subject and the philosopher found works he had never seen before, and some that in his checkered and too short life he would surely never see again. Muslim princes and savants sought manuscripts from Byzantium, and scholars were engaged to translate what was acquired—works on medicine, astrology, statecraft, arithmetic, logic, music, engineering, history, philosophy, and poetics. But the value in these arts was in their use, and the heirs learned rapidly that the sciences, like the newly-won lands, would lie waste and barren if untended, but yielded fruit if cultivated.

We may suppress a smile when we speak of the treasure house of truth, as though we knew, and our predecessors did not, that learning is not a store of facts but a way of life, and philosophy not a body of ideas but a mode of inquiry. A fashionable scepticism encourages us to discourage students who come seeking wisdom from philosophy, and we too readily forget that even know-how is information, that culture depends on cumulative ideas, and that the Socratic quest is empty if it has no goal. There is a kind of nihilism in urging self-knowledge and bandying about the slogan that the unexamined life is not worth living, while almost in the same breath announcing that the object of examining our lives is the examination itself and insisting that no one has any inkling of what thing it is that self-knowledge knows. The straightforward pragmatism and realism of the ancient quest for truth and understanding are in a way far more wholesome, and surely far more honest, than such a bait and switch. Philosophy, Aristotle said, begins in wonder. But he also insisted that it
does not end in wonder but in understanding. Medieval thinkers knew that truth was what they wanted, and they had some sound markers by which truth could be identified—tests of logic and conformance to experience, but also of coherence and consilience with tradition, the power of an idea to answer questions and settle issues, to reconcile values seemingly in conflict, to resolve apparent paradoxes.

For this reason, wisdom remained a category in the Middle East long after the capital in the treasure house of truth had been put out at interest and brought home rich returns that doubled and redoubled its worth. Since traditions were cumulative, the latter day thinkers, as they called themselves, *mūta'akhirūn*, saw it as part of their task not only to explicate but to rescue the insights of their predecessors, to synthesize, rationalize and reconcile what they found, if it was the work of exponents of the truth, *mubaqiqūn*. The filiation of Islam to Biblical Judaism helped in this regard. For not only did Islam see itself as carrying on what Judaism and Christianity had begun, but the old fictions that laid claim to Greek wisdom as discipleship of the ancient Jewish prophets¹ could be used to naturalize Greek insights as an ancient heritage reclaimed, and the *hadith* seemed to pose no limit to what could be brought into the house of Islam under the broad cloak of the Prophet.

The problematics guiding the uses of Greek, Persian or Aramaic thought ensured that what was taken up would chime with the great issues of Hebraic thought as well. Not that it would agree in conclusions or even in underlying assumptions. There was no restriction to "one's own paradigm." But clearly all that was conned over, translated and studied was germane. So when the tradition came full circle and Jewish thinkers fell heir to the works of Muslim thinkers, not by right of conquest but by an intellectual eminent domain, taking up into a newly-formed Jewish philosophy the ideas of the philosophers—and indeed the pietists, mystics, jurists, and grammarians—of Islam, what they found was nothing foreign at all, but theories genuinely useful in addressing the problematics of Jewish thinking, ideas that were in fact rooted in Biblical categories and theses, but now sharpened by Greek conceptual analysis, rendered vivid by Greek poetic imagery, and, in the case of philosophy, carried to a high pitch of rigor by the dialectic and love of synthesis and dogged hatred for