

## *Islam, Arabs and the Hijra*

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The traditional account of Muhammad's life tells us that in June of 622, upon getting wind of an assassination plot against him at Mecca, he escaped with some of his loyal followers and eventually made his way to Yathrib/Medina. The traditionally accepted reference for this event is in Surah 9: 100, which in the translation of Pickthall reads:

“And the first to lead the way, of the Muhajirūn and the Anṣār, and those who followed them in goodness—Allah is well pleased with them and they are well pleased with Him, and He hath made ready for them Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever. That is the supreme triumph.”

In Islam, this event is viewed as so significant a turning-point that the Islamic calendar commences with the “year of the exile” (*sanat* or *ʿam al-hijra*, not referred to in the Koran). We know the *Muhajirūn* (from a root *hajara* “to emigrate, go into exile”) as the “émigrés” who left with Muhammad. The *Anṣār* (from a root *naṣara* “to aid, to help”) are understood to be the “helpers” who welcomed the Prophet and his fellow exiles at Medina. Until now we have taken all this as a given.

But several problems arise from this narrative. First, the Koranic quotation is vague at best. Second, as the Koran is by all accounts the first book in Arabic, we lack internal comparative evidence for the meanings of key words. Reference to related Semitic languages might help a bit, but this is actually where more problems begin. Neither of the roots' definitions has support from other Semitic languages such as Akkadian, Aramaic, Ethiopian, or Hebrew. The first root (*hajara*) is only attested in South Semitic in the meaning of “city(-dweller)” and in Hebrew and Aramaic as the name of Abraham's concubine, Hagar. The second root (*naṣara*) is well-attested in Semitic languages, but not in the meaning “to help.” That these rather mundane bits of vocabulary appear to be unique to Arabic and that the meaning of the terms “émigrés” and “helpers” is not attested in other Semitic languages can only raise our suspicion about the traditional narrative.

We know about the Islamic dating system, which begins with the “year of the exile,” from contemporary evidence in Arabic, Syriac, Greek and even Chinese sources. The Syriac and Greek sources usually refer to a “year of the Arabs.” We further know that in Late Antique literatures, one of the many synonyms for Arabs is “Hagarite” (along with Ishmaelite and Saracen, for example), and that in Syriac we find a derivation *mhaggrāyā* (also borrowed into Greek as *magaroi*). An Greek inscription of the Caliph Mu`awiyah from Hammat Gader, dated in Classical fashion, includes the year of the colony, the indiction years for taxation (indicating that there still was some association with Constantinople, imagined or real) and the year of the local Metropolitan. In addition, it is dated “year 42 *katā ʿArabas*” which, based on the other dating systems, denotes the year 664. Arabic sources, such as an inscription of Mu`awiyah from Taif (modern Saudi Arabia), as well as Chinese sources, mention only the year, without reference to the dating system. Indeed, Mu`awiyah's inscriptions have no Islamic content whatsoever, posing additional serious questions about the traditional narrative. From the comparative evidence we have briefly touched upon here, it seems clear that the Muhajirūn are Arabs and not émigrés.

*Anṣār* poses similar problems. As we noted above, its semantics are unique to Arabic. Furthermore, the Semitic root *nṣr* (“to watch, regard, guard”) becomes *nṣr* in Arabic. What is

most interesting is that the root *nṣr* in Arabic (and other Semitic languages) is used as a basis for a specifically Christian vocabulary, such as *naṣrānīya* (Christianity) and *tanṣīr* (Christianization, baptism).

The root is the same as that of Nazareth (Arabic *an-nāṣira*), i.e., Jesus of Nazareth. Every student of the gospels knows that Jesus never had anything to do with Nazareth—he was a Galilean. The notice that Pilate had affixed to the cross, “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (John 19:19), can only mean “Jesus the Nazarene” in Greek. What a Nazarene means here has been a matter of contention, but the best answer would seem to lie in Isaiah 11:1, an Old Testament verse frequently read at Christmas: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch (*neṣer*) shall grow out of his roots”—a verse that in Jewish circles has a long tradition of Messianic interpretation. *Neṣer* here means “branch,” from which root the Davidic Messiah shall come forth (hence the infamous Branch Davidians of recent memory).

Semitic Christians used derivations of this root as a term for their religion. We know about them from the writings of Church Fathers, such as Eusebius, Jerome and particularly Epiphanius, who in his collection of heresies and heretics, the *Panarion*, notes that the Nazarenes and a sub-group, the Ebionites, were, in Greek Christian eyes, essentially Jews who believed in Christ. The Ebionites also went so far as to believe in the virgin birth, as does Islam. Both, as does Islam, held to a semblance of the Jewish law, which is what made them heretics in the eyes of the Greeks. While Pauline Christianity was the norm in Greek Christianity, Semitic Christians largely rejected his teaching and considered him a heretic. In return, the adherence to Jewish rites made the Nazarenes and Ebionites heretics for Greco-Pauline Christians (cf. Galatians 5: 3-4: “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace”).

We have, then, a group of Judaeo-Semitic Christians, the Nazarenes (and their Ebionite sub-sect, the exact distinction is hazy) who, to some extent, adhered to Jewish Law and believed in the virgin birth. At the same time, they professed psilanthropism, the claim that Jesus was a “mere man,” a teaching rejected by the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. The Council explicitly condemned the notion that Jesus was not fully divine, and as a clear statement of the doctrine of his divinity formulated the Nicene Creed. That in Islam an ancient pre-Nicene Semitic Christology has been preserved is not a new observation. Indeed, today we easily forget that “Christianity” began with multifarious views on whether Jesus was human, divine or a combination of these. Doctrinal diversity abounded before and even after the formulation of Chalcedonian Christianity (to which Catholics and Protestants belong) in 451. Even today the Council of Chalcedon (which made official the dogma of the Trinity) is still rejected by the Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, and Ethiopian churches, collectively known as Oriental Orthodoxy. In light of this, it is no surprise that in the homeland of Christianity most people have rejected Hellenistic Christianity. They either cling to a non-Chalcedonian branch or have converted to Islam.

An interesting point about the Nazarene/Ebionite “heresy” is that the Church Fathers note that their New Testament consisted of only a Semitic (probably Aramaic) Gospel similar to that of Matthew (probably a collection of Matthean logia). This would seem to correspond with the Koranic practice (e.g. 9: 111) of referring to this previous revelation only in terms of a single Gospel (*injīl*; ultimately from the Greek *evangélion*). That it refers to the Christian Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as the Torah (*tawrat*) is not surprising. The five books attributed to Moses are often used *pars pro toto*. “Gospel,” however, is never used to denote the New Testament in such a fashion (and Arabic has a plural of this word, *ānājīl*).

So, to summarize: we know that the root *nṣr* is well attested in Arabic for denoting things Christian. And we know that there is no support for the meaning “to aid,” and that the *Anṣār* are a

well-known group of early Semitic Christians, the Nazarenes (and Ebionites). And, finally, we know that these groups had only one Gospel (*injīl*). That they, along with the Arabs (*muhajirūn*) were supposedly “the first to lead the way,” severely undermines the traditional Islamic narrative.

So if, as comparative evidence indicates, the *Muhajirūn* are Arabs and the *Anṣār* are Semitic Christians who kept some form of Jewish law and rejected the divinity of Jesus while accepting his parthenogenesis, what are the origins of the Islamic year (*hijra*)? For one answer, we know that Easter 622 was when the Romano-Byzantine Emperor Heraclius initiated a “Holy War.” Led by an icon of Christ said to have come into existence miraculously (*acheiropoieteta*), that is, as if led by Christ himself, Heraclius’ goal was to re-conquer lost Syro-Palestinian possessions and then ultimately destroy the Sassanid Empire. These are the events that led to the formation of the Umayyad Caliphate, a Byzantine shadow empire in which the Arabs and not the Romans were to rule the region. They marked the birth of an Arab dynasty—not an Islamic one—that would rule much of the former Roman and Sassanid Empires.

This is what was meant by “the year of the Arabs.” The *hijra* from Mecca to Medina described in Islamic sources has no historical underpinnings.