

# Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arabic Sources

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By the late sixth and early seventh centuries, trade had opened up the worlds of Meccans and Medinans, bringing them into contact with many people from nearby lands. As the scope and intensity of trade relations increased, so did the Arabs' contact with foreigners, including Christians from South Arabia, Abyssinia, Egypt, and Syria. By the late sixth century, Christianity had stopped being only a religion of foreigners, as it began to take hold in the Meccan and Medinan populations themselves.

The subject of Christians in Mecca and Medina is one that has occupied the minds of many. Yet no work has been dedicated to specifically studying the group itself; rather, the subject has been dealt with in passing generalities. By far the most detailed work about Christians in Mecca is Henri Lammens's now outdated chapter "Les Chrétiens à la Mecque à la Veille de l'Hégire" (1928).<sup>1</sup> The next two relevant articles we find are Muḥammad Hamidullah's 1958 "Two Christians of Pre-Islamic Mecca" that looks at 'Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith and Warāqa b. Nawfal, and his 1959 "The Christian Monk Abū 'Āmir of Medina."<sup>2</sup>

One of the most extensive and relatively recent writings on the subject of Meccan Christianity is Gunter Lüling's 80-page *Der Christliche Kult an der Vorislamischen Kaaba als Problem der Islamwissenschaft und Christlichen Theologie*. But Lüling's concern is on Christian influences on Muhammad, and the Prophet's motivation for his actions.<sup>3</sup> Lüling's much lengthier 1981 work *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad: Eine Kritik am "christlichen" Abendland* expands on these themes, but still does not mention any Christian individuals.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we find a general gap in the

discussion of Meccan and Medinan Christianity in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times. This article is an attempt to fill some aspects of this gap. While the usual concerns of authenticity and polemics surround this subject like any other in this time period, we can also glean important information from the Muslim sources, giving us a glimpse into the existence of Christians in Mecca and Medina during the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

In pre-Islamic Mecca and Medina, conversion to Christianity occurred individually, with each convert undergoing his own independent religious quest. In examining the stories of converts to Christianity, we find two major themes. The first is a journey to another land, where the convert-to-be first encounters Christianity. The second is an interaction with a monk — often living in a solitary cell — that leads to the traveler's conversion and adoption of an ascetic lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> There are also accounts where men travel to a Christian land, convert to Christianity there, and remain in that land, but these are outside the scope of this article, which will focus on Christianity among the Arabs of Mecca and Medina.<sup>6</sup>

In his discussion of Christianity in the Arabian peninsula as a whole, J. S. Trimingham observes that the

impetuosity of the Arab temperament is what impelled many individuals of varied walks of life to suddenly throw off the shackles of ordinary life to embrace the path of self-abnegation. Records of these have been transmitted only when the man was of noble rank or subsequently became famous as a thaumaturgist or a monastery-founder. The idea of the monkish life as the 'holy' life, a particular vocation and way to personal salvation, accounts for the fact that the personal aspects of the Christian Way find no echo in the consciousness of Christian Arab poets.<sup>7</sup>

The changing framework of Arab society and the move from a purely tribal society to one in which economic trade connections were central inspired individuals to adopt a lifestyle that was quite different from the societal norm.<sup>8</sup> As a result, several prominent Meccans and Medinans embraced this new asceticism. And as Trimingham points out, it is the most prominent — those “of noble rank” or those that “subsequently became famous” through their religious practices — that we tend to hear about, suggesting that there were less notable individuals that also followed this path, but whose less consequential lives were never recorded.

## **The Meccans**

To confirm Trimingham's point, we hear that in Mecca “[o]f the Arabs who had become Christian were a few of Quraysh of B. Asad b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzza; among them were ‘Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith b. Asad b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzza, and

Waraqā b. Nawfal b. Asad.”<sup>9</sup> While we have very little or no information about the few other Christians, the more noble ‘Uthmān and the stringent worshipper Waraqā were the two most mentioned in our sources.

Shortly before the birth of the Prophet in around 570 C.E., four men had made a pact to renounce the prevalent idolatry of Mecca, and had set out to seek “the true religion.” This pact, which some claim took place in Mecca,<sup>10</sup> others in Syria,<sup>11</sup> was made within the decade before the advent of Islam. This conclusion is based on the statement that Zayd b. ‘Amr, the only one of the four not to become a Christian, was killed on his religious quest, at the time “when Quraysh was building the Ka‘ba . . . five years before the mission.”<sup>12</sup> After the pact the four “left to roam the earth . . . Waraqā became a Christian and read the books, amassing a great deal of knowledge. As for ‘Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith, he went to Caesar and became a Christian, and raised his status with him.”<sup>13</sup> By the end of their lives, three of the four had become Christian, but each had reached his Christianity independently.<sup>14</sup>

This theme of individualism is clearly demonstrated in the case of ‘Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith. Seeking power and an alternate religion, ‘Uthmān journeyed to Byzantium. There, “Caesar” (probably not the Byzantine emperor but rather a regional governor) lifted him “on a mule with a golden bridle” and “made him king,” thereby earning him the nickname *al-Bitriq* (leader of an army, or one skilled in war and its affairs).<sup>15</sup>

Hungry for power, ‘Uthmān convinced Caesar to annex Mecca to his realm, and make him its ruler. ‘Uthmān then returned to the Meccans and tried to persuade them to relinquish their independence and submit to Caesar. By this time, ‘Uthmān had become a Christian, which implies that he had converted at Caesar’s court.<sup>16</sup> Here is the first motif that we come across with regard to Arab conversion to Christianity: a journey to another land. Interactions with Caesar were not uncommon; the Meccans seemed to have known enough about him for ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb to have exclaimed emotionally to the Prophet one day, “You are the Prophet of God [yet you sit on straw,] and it is Chosroes and Caesar that are sitting on gold thrones.”<sup>17</sup>

Our second motif, a strong ascetic inclination, shows up indirectly in the historical accounts. Sources tell us that ‘Uthmān never had any children, a surprising fact. Surely a man that was granted so many favors by “Caesar” would have been given a wife or a slave girl as a gift? Yet we are not informed of this, and are more specifically told that he had no offspring.

The two motifs show up again in the accounts about Waraqā b. Nawfal b. Asad b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzza b. Quṣayy, the paternal cousin of Muḥammad’s wife Khadija, and a distant cousin of Muḥammad himself. A great deal of the information we have on Waraqā serves a polemical purpose. From before the Prophet was even conceived, Waraqā’s sister is said to have offered herself to

his father ‘Abd Allah, because of a light that shone between his eyes, due to the sperm within him that would create Muḥammad.<sup>18</sup> Forty years later, Warāqa appears as a supporter of Muḥammad’s Prophethood, a learned Christian who upon hearing about Muḥammad’s first revelation, links him to the chain of Old Testament prophets and thus legitimates him. But as Sidney H. Griffith points out, “there is no reason to doubt the basic veracity of the reports that Warāqah b. Nawfal was a Christian, and that he was familiar with both the Torah and the Gospel, as Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Hishām have said, even given the evidently apologetical character of the *Sīra*, and its requirement to present Muhammad as affirmed by the scripture people.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, having acknowledged this polemical trend, we can still uncover kernels of information about Warāqa’s Christianity.

According to our sources, as soon as Khadija heard about Muḥammad’s first revelation, she turned to Warāqa. Upon hearing the news, Warāqa exclaimed, “Holy, Holy! By Him in whose hand is the soul of Warāqa, if what you say is true, Khadija, there has come to him the greatest Nāmūs — meaning by Nāmūs, Gabriel — he who came to Moses. He is the Prophet of this people, so tell him to stand firm.”<sup>20</sup> Despite Zuhri’s quote in *Maqdisī* that Warāqa died before the revelation, most writers, including *Maqdisī* himself, report some version of this previous account.<sup>21</sup> Wahidi relates that Warāqa said to the Prophet, “If you hear the call then remain steadfast, so that you hear what it says to you.”<sup>22</sup>

We are told by many of our authors of Warāqa’s travels to Syria, suggesting that he had encountered Christianity there.<sup>23</sup> He is referred to as the priest, such as in a tradition where the Prophet reports having a vision of “the priest with a green garment trailing in paradise.”<sup>24</sup> This title is particularly relevant in light of Trimmingham’s mention of the priest-monk as a usual figure of the time.<sup>25</sup> We know that Warāqa had no offspring;<sup>26</sup> furthermore, Ibn Sa’d informs us that he was supposed to have married Khadija, but did not.<sup>27</sup> This does not seem to be due to ill relations between the two, who appear to be on good terms in the accounts. The lack of the nuptials and progeny rather indicate Warāqa’s adoption of a vow of celibacy as a priest-monk.

Details about Warāqa’s death are in general murky. Balādhūrī for example presents one account wherein Warāqa became a devout Christian and died in Syria, and another that he was killed in Lakhmi territory.<sup>28</sup> Other accounts vouch that he died in Mecca, either before, immediately after, or quite awhile after the beginning of the mission. According to one story, Warāqa lived long enough to even witness the unbelievers’ torture of the slave Bilal, who continued to cry out, “One! One!” as he was being tortured. Warāqa supported his monotheism by affirming, “Yes. One.”<sup>29</sup> Wāqidī in Ḥalabī even talks of Warāqa’s mother’s survival until the Battle of Badr,<sup>30</sup> a practically impossible

occurrence in light of Waraqa's supposedly advanced age at the beginning of Muḥammad's mission.

The fates of the other two of the four *ḥanīfs* involved in the pact, although different from those of 'Uthman and Waraqa, still reflect some of our motifs. Also in the tale of Zayd b. 'Amr b. Nufayl we find the two motifs: Zayd came upon a monk in his cell in Syria (Ibn Ḥabīb locates him in Balqā'), and told him "of my distance from my people, and my hatred of idol worship, as well as for Christianity and Judaism." We are told that the monk identified him as a *ḥanīf* and urged him to return to Mecca, to witness the beginning of the mission.<sup>31</sup> Although Zayd was killed in the land of Judham on his return journey,<sup>32</sup> thus leaving us to merely conjecture as to whether he would have adopted asceticism, his interaction in Syria was with a monk. In a tradition that is reminiscent of the dream about the priest-monk Waraqa, the Prophet sees Zayd also wearing flowing garments in paradise.<sup>33</sup>

After migrating to Abyssinia as a Muslim, the fourth of the group, 'Ubayd Allah b. Jaḥsh, "looked into religion," converted to Islam, then "found no religion better than Christianity."<sup>34</sup> Ḥalabī even informs us that he was initially a Christian before becoming a Muslim.<sup>35</sup> We do not know the exact circumstances under which 'Ubayd Allah converted, but here again we find our first motif.

In addition to Uthmān and Waraqa, we also hear of another prominent Meccan convert. Al-Rabbāb b. al-Barā', the son of 'Amr b. al-Ju'ayd, one of the B. 'Amir b. al-Dayl b. Shann b. Afsa b. 'Abd al-Qays, had been a soothsayer (*kāhin*), who decided to leave the pre-Islamic people and follow the religion of Jesus.<sup>36</sup> His position was a significant one due to the lack of permanent stable leadership in Mecca, making him "the spiritual and intellectual guide of the tribe." The *kāhin* was an independent holy man, a diviner, and holder of "a priestly role in places where social conditions allowed it, such as at Mecca and al-Ta'if."<sup>37</sup> Such a conversion of a religious figure to Christianity is very interesting, especially in light of the frequent traditions that group "Christian monks and Arab soothsayers."<sup>38</sup> An influential figure such as al-Rabbab must have been a very late convert, who did not have time to really spread his new religion to those around him.

## The Medinans

The two motifs of travel and ascetic conversion continue into our examination of Christians in Medina. The Christian we know about the most there is Abū 'Āmir, nicknamed al-Rāhib.<sup>39</sup> Ibn Ḥibbān relates that his full name was Abū 'Āmir al-Rāhib 'Abd 'Amr b. Sayfi b. Zayd b. Umayya b. Duba'i b. Zayd Ghāsil al-Malā'ika.<sup>40</sup> Mas'ūdī and Ibn Sa'd say that he was of the Aws, while Ibn Kathir reports that he had a high place among the Khazraj;<sup>41</sup> it is not

clear whether this last statement actually means that Abu ‘Amir was of the Khazraj, or just that he was respected among them, despite being from the warring Aws. Ibn al-Jawzī in Ḥalabī wrote that he was of the Aws, and was called Abū Sayfi.<sup>42</sup>

Referred to as a worshipper (*ḥibī ‘ibāda*), Abū ‘Āmir used to talk about the religion of the *ḥanīfs*, and had read the knowledge of the People of the Book.<sup>43</sup> Balādhūrī tells us that he was named the monk because he used to debate with the People of the Book and be inclined towards Christianity, following the monks, becoming familiar with them, and often traveling to Syria.<sup>44</sup> Most transmitters present him as actually having become a Christian, however: Mas‘ūdī, for example, explicitly states that Abū ‘Āmir was of the same religion as Heraclius, “among those that had converted among the Arabs.”<sup>45</sup> Ibn Ḥajar recounts from Mujāhid that he went to the land of the Byzantines and became a Christian.<sup>46</sup> Ibn Sa‘d and Wāḥidī inform us that he was a devoted Christian nobleman in pre-Islamic times, who wore sack cloth (*labisa al-masūḥ*), stayed away from women on their periods, and became a monk.<sup>47</sup>

Thus we find our two motifs in the conversion of Abū ‘Āmir. But what can be noted immediately is that for Abū ‘Āmir, becoming a monk did not mean shunning women in general, but only those on their periods. The *sabab* for verse 60:10 relates how a woman “under him” named Sa‘ida later came to the Muslims in Medina during the time of the truce of Hudaibiyya, and had to be returned to Mecca upon the polytheists’ demand.<sup>48</sup> Of further interest is that despite mention of Abū ‘Āmir’s monkhood, we hear about several of his children: al-Shamūs b. Abī ‘Āmir al-Rāhib, married to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb,<sup>49</sup> and Ḥantala b. Abī ‘Āmir al-Rāhib, who died 32 months after the migration;<sup>50</sup> his son (Abū ‘Āmir’s grandson) was the *tābī‘i* ‘Abd Allah b. Ḥantala b. al-Rāhib mentioned in the biographies.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Abū ‘Āmir took on a more limited vow of celibacy, staying away from menstruating women in particular. This may seem surprising until we remember the Nestorian viewpoint, particularly that expressed in the synod of Babai and the Council of Bat Lapat in the late fifth century, which affirmed clerical marriage and sparked an anti-ascetic movement.<sup>52</sup> Medina, with its connection to Hira, which may have collected its taxes,<sup>53</sup> and thus the rest of the Sasanian Empire, would have been more exposed to Nestorianism, as opposed to the Meccans’ interaction with the Monophysite Abyssinian, Egyptian, and Syrian elements.

Our Muslim sources focus on Abū ‘Āmir because of his animosity to the Prophet, which led him to fight with Quraysh at Badr.<sup>54</sup> This connection demonstrates Abū ‘Āmir’s involvement as a regular member in Meccan and Medinan society. Unlike the apolitical Warāqa and the pro-Byzantine ‘Uthmān, Abū ‘Āmir was eager to uphold the Medinan status quo that had allowed him

to practice his Christianity freely. This interest in maintaining existing circumstances was also fueled by his support of his nephew ‘Abd Allah b. Ubayy, who sources inform us would have been crowned king had it not been for the Prophet’s advent to Medina. Abū ‘Āmir eventually left Medina in A.H. 3, after once more joining Quraysh against the Muslims, this time at the Battle of Uḥud.<sup>55</sup>

There are two views as to Abū ‘Āmir’s exact fate after Uḥud. Balādhūrī narrates that upon the conquest of Mecca, Abū ‘Āmir moved to Ṭā’if until its conquest, then to Syria.<sup>56</sup> The majority relate that after Uḥud he went to Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, asking for his support against the Prophet. Heraclius reportedly received Abū ‘Āmir kindly and generously, but it is not clear whether he actually pledged his support. Abū ‘Āmir wrote to a group of his supporters among the Anṣār, promising them that he would come with an army to fight the Prophet and defeat him, and advised them to build an opposing mosque (*maṣjid al-Ḍirār*) in the meantime. When they had finished building it and came to the Prophet to ask him to pray there, he refused.<sup>57</sup> Wāḥidī relates that he was in fact in Syria at the time.<sup>58</sup> Abū ‘Āmir died in A.H. 9 or 10 at the court of Heraclius.<sup>59</sup>

Another man that had become a Christian monk in pre-Islamic Medina (*labisa al-musūḥ*), left the idols, also shunned women on their periods, and purified himself from impurity, was Abū Qays. Mas‘ūdī gives his full name as Abū Qays Sirma b. Abī Anas of the Anṣār of B. al-Najjār,<sup>60</sup> while Ibn Hishām calls him Sirma b. Abī Qays b. Sirma b. Mālik b. ‘Adī b. ‘Āmir b. Ghānim b. ‘Adī b. al-Najjār.<sup>61</sup> This description of Abū Qays’s monasticism is very similar to that of Abū ‘Āmir. As opposed to Abū ‘Āmir, however, Abū Qays converted to Islam when the Prophet came to Medina. He was a distinguished old man who was reported to recite fine poetry about monotheism.<sup>62</sup>

Another two Medinan converts to Christianity were the sons of the Ansari Abū al-Ḥusayn, who was possibly of the B. Salīm b. ‘Awf.<sup>63</sup> In either pre-Islamic or early Islamic times — according to the different sources — some oil merchants came from Syria to Yathrib/Medina. After they sold their oil and were about to turn back, the two sons of al-Ḥusayn came to them, and they invited them to Christianity. The sons converted and returned to Syria with the merchants. Their father came to the Prophet and said, “My two sons have become Christians and left. Should I get them back?” This occurrence is presented as one possible occasion for the revelation of verse 2:256 (*lā ikrāha fī al-dīn/* there is no compulsion in matters of faith).<sup>64</sup>

As opposed to a voyage to a Christian land, here we have the voyage of Christians to Medina. The role of these merchants as missionaries is an interesting one, especially in light of the observations of the Byzantine

historian Gregory Every. Every notes that in the Christian East of late antiquity, “some traders were certainly presbyters, and some bishops.” This was a practice that continued until at least the end of the sixth century, when St. Gregory the Great (540–604 C.E., bishop of Rome 590–604 C.E.) became “troubled by the activities of a bishop who was more interested in his ships than in his clergy.”<sup>65</sup> In our Arabic sources, we come across the figure of the clergyman-merchant in the Christian deacon or liturgical cantor (*shammās*) Saymūna, also known as Sayma al-Balqāwī (from Balqā’), who used to trade wheat from his hometown for Medinan dates.<sup>66</sup> Every also informs us that monks were often chosen as bishops, as was the case with St. Gregory himself, indicating that it could have been monks acting as bishop merchants that introduced Christianity to the two sons of Abū al-Ḥusayn.<sup>67</sup> Trade had expanded to such an extent that now conversion was occurring in Mecca and Medina themselves.

There are other brief accounts in general of Christians in Medina. Tabarsī tells us that Abū ‘Āmir converted to Christianity in Byzantine territory, along with Abū Hanēhala Ghāsil al-Malā’ika, who nobody else names as a Christian.<sup>68</sup> Ḥalabī quotes from Ibn al-Jawzī that a Christian of the Aws b. Ḥāritha was Sayfi b. al-Aṣlat, a respected leading poet. He had *labisa al-musūḥ*, and gone into a sanctuary that was forbidden to the menstruating and the impure. He worshipped the One God until the advent of Muḥammad to Medina.<sup>69</sup>

Ibn Ḥajar mentioned that the Prophet sent Jud‘a b. Hāni’ al-Haeramī to a Christian man in Medina to call him to Islam.<sup>70</sup> According to Ibn al-Athīr, the Prophet sent ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb to a Christian man in Medina to carry out the same task.<sup>71</sup> Our first motif resurfaces in the case of a man of B. ‘Amr b. ‘Awf, who went to the land of the Byzantines and became a Christian. He then wrote to his people asking for repentance for his actions, and returned home.<sup>72</sup> Another Christian we are told about is Wazr b. Sudus b. Jābir, also called Wazr b. Jābir b. Sudus, who became a Christian and died as one.<sup>73</sup>

An account from Suddī through Wāḥidī tells the tale of a Christian of Medina who, when he would hear the prayer caller saying, “I bear witness that Muḥammad is the Prophet of God” would curse, “Burn the liar!” One night his servant came in with a fire while he and his family were asleep. A spark flew off and burned the house, the man, and his family.<sup>74</sup>

This is a more difficult case to untangle. The point of the story seems to be of a “what goes around comes around” variety. But it could also be a later insertion to justify any hostility against Christians, by demonstrating their evil intentions. Yet again, Suddī (d. 745) and his transmitters were quite willing to believe that there was such a Christian man in Medina, confirming the possibility of their existence.



## Was there a Christian Community in Mecca and Medina?

We have established that there were a number of Meccan and Medinan Christians in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Was there any community, or at least a sense of community, among these Christians? The fact that the four *ḥanīfs* began their spiritual journey together seems to support this theory. Furthermore, the bond between the four *ḥanīfs* did in some way continue after their conversion. Waraqa used to recite poetry to the *ḥanīf* Zayd b. ‘Amr. Waraqa’s poetry also mourned ‘Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith b. Asad b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzza, who was poisoned by ‘Amr b. Jafna the Ghassanid in Syria.<sup>75</sup> Ibn al-Athīr reports through a chain of transmitters going back to ‘Īsa b. Zayd that Abū Bakr was sitting at the Ka‘ba and saw the Thaqaḥī Christian poet Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt greeting Zayd b. ‘Amr b. Nufayl with the words, “*kayfa ḥāluka, yā bāghī al-kbayr?*” (“How are you, oh searcher of good?”)<sup>76</sup>

Thus we find a hint of the beginnings of some communication and sympathy among the Arab Christians of Mecca and Medina. In general, however, a significant Christian community did not have time to form in Mecca and Medina for three main reasons. First of all, on the eve of Islam, Christianity was a very new religion in the cities: all the Christians about whom we hear are first generation converts. Thus, they had not gathered the momentum to create a church that would bring their coreligionists together. Furthermore, our two motifs meant that Christians remained by nature isolated from each other, even after their conversion. Many, such as ‘Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith and Abū ‘Āmir al-Rāhib, settled in Byzantine territory. Others who stayed in Mecca and Medina, such as Waraqa b. Nawfal, led isolated ascetic lives that did not bring them into much contact with others, including other Christians.

We also do not know about the creed of these converts. Meccans and Medinans may have been influenced by several of the religious persuasions of their neighboring Near East Christians. In general, the Arabs proved particularly susceptible to both Nestorianism, coming from Mesopotamia, and Monophysitism, coming from Egypt and Abyssinia.<sup>77</sup> If Meccans and Medinans were inspired by monks in Syria, these were probably Monophysites, but they could also have been Nestorians, or even Chalcedonians. We have tentative evidence of differences in doctrine between the Meccans and the Medinans, as seen in the details of the practice of asceticism. Converts could thus belong to different Christian factions that were in conflict with each other.

Even the four *ḥanīfs*, who began their spiritual journey together, reached their Christianity in very separate ways, and in diverse locations. Despite accounts of the poetry they recited to and for each other, nowhere are we given any indication that their conversion to Christianity was remotely

communal. It was, rather, the individualism of the time that propelled each of them to renounce idolatry, pursue the search for monotheism, and finally convert to Christianity.

Through “oral teaching and exchanges of everyday life” trade opened a whole new world for the Meccans and Medinans, one with diverse languages, religious pluralism, and an expanding reorganization of society, leading to an unprecedented individualism.<sup>78</sup> As this sense of individualism both broadened and deepened, the thirst for exploration led men such as the four *ḥanīfs* to abandon the practice of their forefathers and go out in the explicit cause of seeking a new religion. In time, merchants such as the two Syrian oil carriers were able to convince Medinans like the two sons of Abū al-Ḥusayn to convert to Christianity and to return to Syria with them. Would Christianity have remained within its confines, or would it have continued to spread in the Meccan and Medinan societies? The answer to this question will forever remain a mystery, since just as Christianity was beginning to slowly infiltrate Meccan and Medinan society, Islam came bursting forth, completely dismantling the status quo, and leading to one of the most far-reaching revolutions in history.

## Endnotes

1. Henri Lammens, “Les Chrétiens à la Mecque à la Veille de l’Hégire” in *L’Arabie Occidentale avant l’Hégire* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1928).
2. Muḥammad Hamidullah, “Two Christians of Pre-Islamic Mecca,” *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 6 (1958), 97–103, *Ibid.*, “The Christian Monk Abū ‘Amir al-Rāhib,” *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 7 (1959), 231–40. Although readers must be cautious in their acceptance of the accounts that Hamidullah uncritically places in front of them with the disclaimer that “as to Arab historians, their number is so great and the sources of their information so varied that to accuse them of fabrication is simply out of the question,” Hamidullah’s articles serve to whet the appetite for a topic that needs to be developed further.
3. Gunter Lüling, *Der Christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba als Problem der Islamwissenschaft und Christlichen Theologie* (Erlangen: Lüling, 1977), 43–59, 37–38.
4. *Ibid.*, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad: Eine Kritik am “christlichen” Abendland* (Erlangen: Lüling, 1981).
5. See J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London & Beirut: Longman Group Ltd. & Librairie du Liban, 1979), 101–3, for more on monks’ solitary living.
6. For example, see the case of al-Burd b. Mawshir al-Ṭā’ī in Muḥammad b. Ḥibbān, *Tārikh al-Ṣaḥāba allādhīna Ruwiya ‘anhum al-Akbbār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1988), 471.
7. Trimingham, *Origins*, 223.
8. For more on this, see W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad in Mecca*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).
9. Aḥmad b. Ya‘qūb (aka al-Ya‘qubi), *Kitāb al-Buldān* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1860), 1:257.

10. See for example Ibn ‘Abbās in Abū al-Fidā’ al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1987), 3:38.

11. See for example Husayn b. ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dbabab* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus Press, 1965), 3:59.

12. Ibn Sa‘d from Waqidi in Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl Aḥmad b. ‘Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Ibn Ḥajar’s Biographical Dictionary* (Osnabrück: Bibliotheca Indica Collection of Oriental Works. Biblio Verlag, 1980), 3:60.

13. See *inter alia* Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Yasār, *Sīrat Ibn Ishāq: Al Musāmmab bi-Kitāb al-Mubtada’ wa al-Mab’ath wā al-Maghāzī* (Rabat, Morocco: Ma’had al-Dirāsāt wa al-Abḥāth li al-Ta’rīb, 1976), 95–100; Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Hishām al-Ma‘āfirī, *Al-Sīra al-Nabawīyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1996), 1:191–8; Al-Kharā’iṭī in Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 3:38.

14. Only Mas‘ūdī presents the conversion as an *en masse* occurrence, writing that, “in pre-Islamic times, Warāqa, Zayd, ‘Uthmān and ‘Ubayd Allah all traveled to Syria and became Christians, because they found this to be the closest religion to the truth; the only exception was Zayd who found that the religion had been corrupted (Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, 3:59).

15. Al-Zubayr b. Bakkār, *Jambarat Nasab Quraysb wā Akhbārība* (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-‘Urūba, 1962), 426; Edward Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge, U.K.: Islamic Texts Society, 1984), s.v. *Bitriq*.

16. Ibn Bakkār, *Jambara*, 1:425–6, 430.

17. Muḥammad b. Sa‘d, *Al-Tabaqāt al-Kubra* (Beirut: Beirut Publishing House, 1978), 1:466.

18. Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:95 and Ibn Ishāq in Abū Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Muḥammad in Mecca*, translated and edited by W. M. Watt & M. V. MacDonald, volume 6 of *Tarikh al-Tabari: SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies*, ed. Ehsan Yarshatar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 6:6 identify this woman as the sister of Warāqa b. Nawfal, whose name is given as Umm Qattal, Umm Qital, Qutayla, or Ruqayya. Suhayli in Shihab al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Wahāb al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyāt al-Arab fi Funūn al-Adab* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfa wa al-Irshād al-Qawmī, no date), suggests her name was Ruqayya but that she was nicknamed Umm Qital (16:58). Abu Ja‘ar Muḥammad b. Habīb b. Umiyah b. ‘Umar al-Hāshimī al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar* (Haydarabad al-Dikan: Matba‘at Jam‘iyat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Uthmaniyya, 1942), 77, simply identifies her as a woman of the B. Asad. The other popular opinion about the identity of this woman is that given by — among others — Tabari: that she was Fatima bt. Murr, a Khath‘ami *kābina* of Tabala (see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Edited by H. A. R. Gibb *et al.*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1960–, henceforth referred to as *EI*<sup>2</sup>), 4:1106.

19. Sidney H. Griffith, “The Gospel in Arabic,” *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), 146. See also Ibn Hisham, *Sīra*, 1:167; Ibn Habīb in *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar*, 172; Ibn Bakkār, *Jambara*, 408; Ibn Hibban, *Tarikh*, 1:47; ‘Izz al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fi al-Tārikh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1997), 1:648; Ibn Ishāq in Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 2:300.

20. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 112–13; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 2:202; Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Riyādh: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyya li al-Nashr, 1998), 22, shorter version in Bukhari, *Saḥīḥ*, 650; Ibn Ishāq in Tabarī, *Tārikh*, 6:72; a similar account in Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 1:648; Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Tabarsī, *Jam‘ al-Bayān fi Tafsiṛ al-Qur‘ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), 10:317; other accounts such as Aḥmad b. Yahya al-Baladhūrī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf* (Damascus: Dār al-Yaqza, 1997), 1:121, 127; Ibn ‘Asākir in Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 3:66 mention further details that are not particularly relevant for our purposes. ‘Alī b. Burhān al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī, *Insān al-‘Uyūn fi Sīrat al-Amīn al-Ma‘mūn* (Cairo: Matba‘at Mustafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1964), believes Warāqa to have been a Jew before converting to Christianity, which could be one explanation for his focus on Moses (1:222).

21. Ibn Ishāq from Zuhri in Abū Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, *Kitāb al-Bad' wa al-Tārikh* (Paris: Erneste Laroux, 1899), 4:142–3.
22. Abū al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb Nuzūl al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Jadīd, 1969), 17.
23. Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 983; Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Hajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1995), 1:127; Abū Muḥammad 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. Sa'īd ibn Ḥazm, *Jambarat Ansāb al-'Arab* (Cairo: Dār al-Mā'arif, 1962), 411; Ya'qūb b. 'Abd Allah b. 'Abd al-Barr, *Al-Durar fi Ikhtisār al-Maghāzī wa al-Siyar* (Cairo: Dār al-Taḥrīr, 1966), 34; Ibn Ishāq in 'Imād al-Dīn b. Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus li al-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 1966), 7:326.
24. Baladhūrī, *Ansāb*, 1:122. The Prophet also validates Warāqa in another dream, where Warāqa is wearing white. In explicating the dream the Prophet comments, "I think if he were of the people of hell I would not have seen white on him" (Ibn Bakkar, *Jambara*, 410).
25. Trimmingham, *Christianity*, 221.
26. Ibn Bakkar, *Jambara*, 408.
27. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:14.
28. Baladhūrī, *Ansāb*, 1:122.
29. Ibn Bakkar, *Jambara*, 412; Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil*, 1:663.
30. Ḥalabī, *Insān*, 2:275.
31. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:162; Ibn Ḥabīb, *Muḥabbar*, 172.
32. Ibn Ḥabīb, *Muḥabbar*, 172, 175. It is interesting that Zayd b. 'Amr has been mentioned in some traditions to be among the 10 that were promised paradise (Hisham b. Muhammad al-Kalbi, *Book of Idols, Being a Translation from the Arabic of the Kitāb al-Anam*, translated, introduced & annotated by Nabih Amin Faris, vol. 14 of *Princeton Oriental Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 19). Zayd b. 'Amr is also mentioned in Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 3821; Ibn Sa'd in Ṭabarī, *Tārikh*, 6:64; Mas'ūdi, *Muruḥ*, 1:57; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Durayd, *Al-Isḥtiqāq* (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1991), 134; 'Izz al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-Athir, *Uṣd al-Ghāba fī Ma'rīfat al-Ṣaḥāba* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1997), 3:206–8; Ibn Hajar, *Dictionary*, 3:60.
33. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:161–2.
34. Al-Zubayr b. Bakkar, *Al-Muntakhab min Kitāb Azwāj al-Nabiyy* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1983), 50–1. See also *inter alia* Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 3:339; Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:207–8, 4:104; Ibn Ḥibban, *Tārikh*, 1:59; Ibn al-Kalbī in Abū Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The Last Years of the Prophet*, translated and annotated by Ismail K. Poonawala, volume 9 of *Tārikh al-Ṭabarī: SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies*, ed. Ehsan Yarshatar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 9:133; Zuhri in Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 4:144; Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī and Abū al-Yaqzān in Ibn Hajar, *Dictionary*, 1:9–10.
35. Ḥalabī, *Insān*, 2:27. According to Ṭabarī, he was not the only Muslim to convert to Christianity in Abyssinia: al-Sakran b. 'Amr b. 'Abd Shams, the previous husband of the Prophet's wife Sawda, also converted from Islam to Christianity there (Ṭabarī, *Tārikh*, 9:128).
36. Abū al-Yaqzān in Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1957), 16:260; Ibn Hajar, *Dictionary*, 6:743. In Abū Ja'far Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakbmid, and Yemen*, translated by C. E. Bosworth, volume 5 of *Tārikh al-Ṭabarī: SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 279, Bosworth translates the word *kābin* here to mean both soothsayer and medicine man.
37. *EI*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. *kābin*, 4:421–2.
38. See for example Ibn Hisham, *Sīra*, 1:177; Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:166, 169.
39. Note that the word al-Rāhib is not always an indication of a person's adoption of Christianity. Abū Bakr, the son of the Medinan *tābi'i* 'Abd al-Rahman b. al-Harith who was

born during 'Umar's caliphate, used to be referred to as "Rāhib Quraysh," due to his copious prayer and generosity (Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5:6, 208; Ibn 'Abbās Shams al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Muhammad b. Abi Bakr b. Khallikan, *Wafayat al-A'ẓyān wa Anbā' Abnā' al-Zamān* (Beirut: Dār Sadir, 1978), 1:282). In the case of Abū 'Amir, however, we specifically read about his Christianity. Ibn Hajar (*Dictionary*, 2:773) presents chains of transmission that include Rahib al-Maghafiri and Rahib b. 'Abd Allah, but we know nothing further about them.

40. Ibn Hibban, *Tārikh*, 3:274.

41. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:382; Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, 1:60; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 3:451.

42. Halabī, *Insān*, 2:524.

43. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 3:451; Ibn Hajar, *Dictionary*, 2:741.

44. Baladhūri, *Ansāb*, 1:328.

45. Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, 5:24.

46. See Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl Aḥmad b. 'Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Al-'Ujab fi Bayān al-Asbāb* (Jedda & Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Jawziyya, 1997), 2:711–12 for a list of the names of the others; see also Ibn Hajar, *Ujab*, 2:707; about the verse 3:86, Medinan *Sura* 3, as well as Waḥidī, *Asbāb*, 259 about the verse 9:101; Medinan *Sura* 27; revealed in A.H. 10.

47. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:540–1; Waḥidī, *Asbāb*, 259. It should be noted that this phrase, *labisa al-masūb*, is not used specifically for Christianity; the people of the Prophet Jonah are also described using these words (Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kishaf 'an Ḥaqq'iq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fi Wujūb al-Ta'wīl* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Mustāfa al-Bābī, 1972), 3:124). It can also be used simply as a reference to a type of cloth: for example, the Ka'ba in pre-Islamic times was said to have been covered in this (Halabī, *Insān*, 1:280–1).

48. 'Abd Allah b. Rawaha in Jalāl al-Dīn b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Shuyūṭī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Cairo: no publisher, 1962), 4:16–8; about 60:10; Medinan *Sura* 5; revealed A.H. 7–8.

49. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:345; Abū 'Abd Allah al-Mus'ab b. 'Abd Allah al-Mus'ab al-Zubayrī, *Kitāb Nasab Quraysb* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'arif, 1953), 349.

50. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5:66, 8:382; Ibn Ḥajar, *Dictionary*, 2:742.

51. Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5:66.

52. Stephen Gero, *Barsauma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity* (Lourain & Washington: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium des Universités Catholiques, 1981), 46, 95.

53. C. E. Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs Before Islam," *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, volume 3 of *Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshatar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 600–1, from the ninth century geographer Ibn Khurdadbih.

54. *Ibid.*, 3:540–1.

55. Ibn Hishām, *Sira*, 7:117; Ibn Ishāq in Tabarī, *Tārikh*, 7:117.

56. Baladhūri, *Ansāb*, 1:329–30.

57. Mujāhid b. Jabr, *Tafsīr* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Ḥadīth, 1989), 374; Muqatil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Āmma li al-Kitāb, 1983), 2:195–6; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 3:452; see also Al-Mathnī, Ibn Sa'd, Ibn 'Abbās, Wāqidī and others in Abū Ja'far Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (Cairo: Mustāfa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1954–68), 14:470–4; Zamakhsharī, *Tanzīl*, 2:213, 3:97.

58. Wāhidī, *Asbāb*, 260–1; about verses 9:107–8.

59. Ibn Hibban, *Tārikh*, 2:123; Ibn Ishāq in Tabarī, *Tārikh*, 9:98; Ibn Ishāq in Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 2:67; Baladhūri in Ibn Ḥajar, *Dictionary*, 2:741; 4:1197–8.

60. Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, 1:60; Maqdisī, *Bad'*, 5:121 also briefly mentions "Abū Qays Sirma b. Abī Anas or Uways."

61. Ibn Hishām, *Sira*, 2:119.
62. Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3:200; Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 5:277–8. Ibn Ḥajar (*Dictionary*, 7:303) too mentions a *hanīf* also named Abū Qays, but he is Abū Qays b. ʿĀmir b. Jashm b. Waʿil b. Zayd b. Qays b. ʿĀmir b. Murra b. Mālik b. al-Aws. In a manner similar to that of Zayd b. ʿAmr, this Abū Qays also went to Syria, to Jafna, and spoke to the learned people and the monks, who invited him to their religion, then advised him about the impending advent of a Prophet. Since only the name “Mālik” is common between this Abū Qays and the one described as a Christian, we may assume that these are two different individuals.
63. Wāḥidī in Ibn Ḥajar, *Dictionary*, 2:700.
64. Ibn Iṣḥāq and Suddī in Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 5:409–10; see also Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, 1:329, 409; Tabarsī, *Bayān*, 2:126; Abū Dāwūd in Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 5:172; Abū Dawūd, Ṭabarī and Ismāʿil ibn Iṣḥāq, all from Suddī in Ibn Ḥajar, *Dictionary*, 2:699–700; Wāḥidī, *Asbab*, 77–8; Suyutī, *Asbab*, 1:34; Ibn Hajar, *ʿUjab*, 1:613.
65. George Every, *Understanding Eastern Christianity* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1978), 13; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. in chief Mircea Eliade (New York & London: MacMillan, 1987), 6:118–9, s.v. Gregory the Great.
66. Ṭabarānī, Ibn Qanīʿ and Ibn Manda in Ibn Ḥajar, *Dictionary*, 3:317.
67. Every, *Christianity*, 13; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6:118–9, s.v. Gregory the Great.
68. Tabarsī, *Insan*, 5:92.
69. Ibn al-Jawzī in Ḥalabī, *Insān*, 2:172.
70. Ibn Manda in Ibn Ḥajar, *Dictionary*, 1:482.
71. Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 1:285.
72. Mujāhid in Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, 6:574.
73. Ibn Ḥajar, *Dictionary*, 6:1332.
74. Wāḥidī, *Asbab*, 193.
75. Ibn Bakkar, *Jambara*, 419.
76. Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 3:206. See also Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1998), 6:903; Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 1:53 for further indications.
77. *EI*<sup>2</sup>, 2:548.
78. *Ibid.*, 3:1206, s.v. Indjil.

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