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Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam  
8<sup>th</sup> Annual ASMEA Conference  
Washington, 29-31 October 2015

## Jewish Christianity, the Qur'ān, and Early Islam: some methodological caveats

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The question raised by this meeting seems straightforward: *Is there a Jewish-Christian influence at the core of the most primitive Islam*, as several former and recent scholars have argued (sometimes in very different ways)?<sup>1</sup> However, straightforward questions do not necessarily admit straightforward answers – for example because they can be quite ambiguous. Therefore, the path to a putative answer might be full of pitfalls and meanders – and I want to explore here some of them. They pertain to words and formulas included in the question itself, namely “Jewish-Christian,” “influence,” and “most primitive Islam.” I am afraid I will have more doubts or questions than answers, and I will also have to leave aside several relevant issues.

### *Jewish Christianity*

The first problem when we talk about the possible Jewish-Christian background of early Islam is to know what we mean exactly by “Jewish Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> Is there an accurate and

<sup>1</sup> See especially Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1949): 334-343, Martiniano Roncaglia, “Éléments ébionites et elkésaites dans le Coran : notes et hypothèses,” *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 21 (1971): 101-126, Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād, *Al-Qur'ān da'wā naṣrāniyya* (Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1969), id., “Coran, prédication nazaréenne,” *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 23 (1973): 148-155, id., *Al-Inḡīl fī-l-Qur'ān* (Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1982), Patricia Crone, “Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 59-95, Shlomo Pines, “Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984): 135-152, Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, *Qass wa-nabīy* (Beirut: n. p., 1990, French translation by S. Garnier: Joseph Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001)), François de Blois, “*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (ἕθνικός): studies in the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65-1 (2002): 1-30, Édouard-Marie Gallez, *Le Messie et son prophète* (Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2 vol., 2005), Joachim Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007), Holger M. Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), Francisco del Río Sánchez, “The Rejection of Muhammad's Message by Jews and Christians and its Effect in Islamic Theological Argumentation,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 6 (2015): 59-75. The most recent *status quaestionis* is Guy G. Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” in Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein and Robert G. Hoyland (ed.), *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honour of Patricia Crone* (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 72-96.

<sup>2</sup> Jewish Christianity (or, perhaps more accurately, Judaeo-Christianity) has been the topic of many recent books and papers. See, for the last quarter of century, in chronological order: Joan E. Taylor, “The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention?,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 44-4

useful definition? It seems – at first view – that there are basically three kinds of definition: the ethnic, the praxis-based, and the doctrinal.

*Ethnic definition:* Jewish Christians are ethnic Jews who became Christians.

*Praxis-based definition:* Jewish Christians are those (whatever their ethnic background) who accept Jesus as the messiah and continue practices associated with Judaism.

*Doctrinal definition:* Jewish Christians are Christians who retain Jewish thought and literary forms.

These definitions raise various problems: to sum up, they look anachronistic and highly dependent on ecclesiological and heresiological categories.<sup>3</sup> A detailed discussion is out of place here, but it is certainly relevant to add a few remarks about the ethnic and the praxis-based definitions (the doctrinal definition is not fashionable anymore, and rightly so).

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(1990): 313-334, id., *Christians and the Holy Places. The Myth of Jewish-Christians Origins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Simon Claude Mimouni, *Le judéo-christianisme ancien. Essais historiques* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998, English translation (to be used with caution): *Early Judaeo-Christianity. Historical Essays* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012)), Frédéric Manns, *Le judéo-christianisme : mémoire ou prophétie ?* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2000), Simon Claude Mimouni & F. Stanley Jones (ed.), *Le judéo-christianisme ancien dans tous ses états* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2001), Giovanni Filorami & Claudio Gianotto (ed.), *Verus Israel. Nuove prospettive sul giudeocristianesimo* (Brescia: Paideia, 2001), Daniel Boyarin (ed.), *Judaeo-Christianity Redivivus*, special issue of *The Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9-4 (2001): 417-509, Adam H. Becker & Annette Yoshiko Reed (ed.), *The Ways That Never Parted. Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), Peter J. Tomson & Doris Lambers-Petry (ed.), *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Oskar Skausane & Reidar Hvalvik (ed.), *Jewish Believers in Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), Matt Jackson-McCabe (ed.), *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), Daniel Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish-Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (2009): 7-36, James Carleton Paget, *Jews, Christians and Jewish Christians in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), Erwin K. Broadhead, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus. Redrawing the Religious Map of Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), Andreas Bedenbender (ed.), *Judäo-Christentum. Die gemeinsame Wurzel von rabbinischem Judentum und früher Kirche* (Paderborn: Bonifatius/Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), Petri Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects and Gospels* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), F. Stanley Jones, *Pseudoclementina Elchasaïticaque inter judaeochristiana: collected studies* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), id. (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Jewish Christianity. From Toland to Baur* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), Simon Claude Mimouni, “Le judaïsme chrétien ancien : quelques remarques et réflexions sur un problème débattu et rebattu,” *Judaïsme ancien – Ancient Judaism* 1 (2013): 263-279.

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this complex issue, see e.g. Jackson-McCabe, “What’s in a Name? The Problem of ‘Jewish Christianity’,” in Jackson-McCabe, *Rediscovering Jewish Christianity*, 7-38, Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish-Christianity,” and Broadhead, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus*, 28-58. The disagreement among scholars over the texts which should be counted as “Jewish-Christian” is sometimes striking – and this is a good sign that there might be something fishy with this category. For example, according to Stanley Jones, none of the New Testament writings should be counted as Jewish Christian as such (*Pseudoclementina*, 454), whereas Mimouni claims that almost all New Testament writings are of Judaeo-Christian origin, except Mark, Luke and Acts (*Early Judaeo-Christianity*, 160). Yet there are authors who read (to my mind, with good reasons) Luke and Acts as *Jewish texts* (see for example Isaac Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), and I see no reason not to do the same with Mark. So I am inclined to go further than Mimouni and say that *all* texts of the New Testament are simply Jewish (and written, of course, by Christ-believing Jews).

The ethnic definition does not seem adequate enough: should an “ethnic Jew” who becomes Christian but wholly gives up Torah practices be called a Jewish Christian? Most people would certainly answer no. Hence it seems necessary to add praxis-based elements, as do several scholars, like Mimouni or Broadhead. According to Mimouni’s most recent definition, “ancient Jewish Christianity is a modern term designating those Jews and their pagan sympathizers who recognized Jesus as messiah, who recognized or did not recognize the divinity of Christ, but who, all of them, continued to observe, in totality or in part, the Torah.”<sup>4</sup> According to Broadhead’s definition, Jewish Christians are “followers of Jesus who maintain a significant degree of Jewishness – they present themselves as faithful Jews standing in continuity, in both thought and deed, with God’s covenant with Israel.”<sup>5</sup> This presupposes, of course, that we already know precisely who the Jews are and what is Jewishness – and maybe this is less easy than it seems. Incidentally, it might probably be better to speak of *Judaeans*.<sup>6</sup>

The praxis-based elements also raise difficulties (note that the praxis-based definition *alone* is unable to pick out Jewish Christians from Judaizers – that such a distinction should be preserved is another topic). For example: which proportion of Jewish practices should be kept for allowing us to speak of *Jewish Christianity*? What is the level of the “significant degree of Jewishness,” or the observance of the Torah, required? And *who* is legitimate in deciding where the limit has to be drawn, and which practices are essential and which are not?<sup>7</sup> Should we focus on circumcision and shabbat? Yet these criteria are not so clear. For example, circumcision was sometimes not practiced inside Judaism,<sup>8</sup> and sometimes practiced outside. When we learn from Sozomen (Ecc. Hist. VI.38.11) that there were Arabs who practiced circumcision, should we suppose, as Sozomen apparently claims, a Jewish influence? Or is it simply the way Sozomen makes sense of some Arab customs? Circumcision was not confined to “Jews,” and did the Arabs commemorate the Abrahamic covenant this way? Please note, moreover, that according to these criteria (circumcision,

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<sup>4</sup> Mimouni, “Le judaïsme chrétien ancien,” 273.

<sup>5</sup> Broadhead, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus*, 57. Broadhead adds the following caveat (seemingly designed, at least in part, to exclude Judaizers from Jewish Christianity): “excluded from this definition of Jewish Christianity would be [1] all conceptions of an Israel replaced by or superseded by Christianity, [2] all systems that abrogate or replace the Law, [3] all allegorizing or spiritualizing interpretations of the Law, and [4] all christological paradigms that call into question the basic integrity of monotheism. *These represent a disruption rather than a continuation of Israel’s heritage*. Also excluded would be [5] individuals and movements who embrace aspects of Jewish belief and practice, but whose basic identity is Gentile and Christian” (numbers and emphasis are mine). This caveat is interesting, in part welcome, and in part questionable. [1] is certainly a very significant criterion; [2] is simply redundant with the usual criterion of a partial or complete continuation of Torah practice; [3] is too restrictive; [4] is *ad hoc*, and is aimed at excluding “high Christologies” – but should it exclude “orthodox” Jewish Christians, like the so-called Nazarenes, whose existence Broadhead does not doubt? Moreover, where is Broadhead speaking from when he refers to “the disruption and continuation of Israel’s heritage”? This looks like a theologian’s value judgment, not an historian’s analysis. About [5], see next paragraph in the main text.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 457-512.

<sup>7</sup> About such “checklists,” see Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels. The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 7-22.

<sup>8</sup> José Costa, “Le marqueur identitaire de la circoncision chez les rabbins de l’Antiquité,” in Simon Claude Mimouni & Bernard Pouderon (ed.), *La croisée des chemins revisitée* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2012): 161-194.

shabbat), and regardless of ethnicity, Ethiopian Christianity looks definitely Jewish Christian.

Some scholars, like Daniel Boyarin, have therefore argued that the category of “Jewish Christianity” is too confused to be of any use. Others, while aware of these problems, are not ready to jettison it and award it, at least, some heuristic virtues.<sup>9</sup> I have nothing against giving up the label, but if people still want to use it, why not – provided it is reminded that this is a modern and elusive category, which does not refer to clearly identifiable groups<sup>10</sup> (contrary to what it is supposed to do), and which brackets together multifarious subcultures and religious sensitivities.

Much depends, of course, on our own reasons for using this term. If it is “to disturb (...) any unquestioned assumptions that we might harbor about the essential incompatibility and inevitable “parting” of Judaism and Christianity,”<sup>11</sup> or if it is to remind of the importance of Jewish believers in the making of Christianity, there should be no quibble – except that I am unsure this is the best way to achieve such a goal. For example, when we are dealing with the period before the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it would be far more accurate to rely on Carlos Segovia’s typology (in his own paper in this meeting), and therefore speak of:

(a) the Christ-believing Jews who accepted Paul’s original message of integrating the gentiles *qua* gentiles into the people of God alongside Israel;<sup>12</sup>

(b) the Christ-believing Jews, be they originally born Jews or proselytes, who opposed Paul’s message by claiming that the gentiles had to adopt all or almost all Jewish practices (I prefer avoiding the term “conversion” here);

(c) the non-Jewish Christ-believers who sided with (a) or (b);

(d) the non-Jewish Christ-believers who refused to join Israel.

Note that it is only group (d) which gives rise to supersessionism; and it is only a part of group (d) which will become mainstream Christianity – Marcionism, which also belongs to (d), will not.

On the other hand, after the so-called “parting of the ways,” we face a very different problem. Indeed, our evidence on the so-called “Jewish Christians” is very shaky: most of our extant data (first-hand<sup>13</sup> and second-hand) come from the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE – in fact mainly from the 4<sup>th</sup> (that we have such data at this time is also related to the eye of the beholders, namely, the heresiologists).<sup>14</sup> We have almost no evidence beyond the 5<sup>th</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Annette Yoshiko Reed, “‘Jewish Christianity’ after the ‘Parting of the Ways,’” in Becker & Reed (ed.), *The Ways That Never Parted*, 190-191, Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” 74.

<sup>10</sup> Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” 74.

<sup>11</sup> Reed, “‘Jewish Christianity’ after the ‘Parting of the Ways,’” 191, n. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Paul is often considered as the main target of Jewish Christians – but, strictly speaking, he was no less “Jewish Christian” than his Ebionite critics!

<sup>13</sup> See especially the Pseudo-Clementines and the testimonies gathered in Albert F. J. Klijn and Gerrit J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) and Albert F. J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> “It is not epiphenomenal that so often heresy is designated as “Judaism” and “Judaizing” in Christian discourse of this time, nor that a certain obsession with varieties of “Jewish Christianity” (Nazoreans, Ebionites) became so prominent in some quarters precisely at the moment when Nicene orthodoxy was consolidating” (Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 14).

century (“almost no evidence” does not mean “no evidence at all,” but it means that there is no evidence strong enough to support the existence and influence of a specific sectarian Jewish Christian community behind the rise of Islam).

And here a remark is in order – about the *connotation* of “Jewish Christian.” Almost every work on this topic will focus on apparently marginal groups (most often the Nazarenes/Nazoreans, whose existence is in fact highly doubtful,<sup>15</sup> the Ebionites, the Elkesaites, and sometimes also the Cerinthians and the Symmachians), even when the goal is to show that these groups were not so marginal, at least at a certain time. On the other hand, Ethiopian Christianity will *not* be examined, nor other kinds of Eastern Christianity, for example the Armenians, who were accused by Jacob of Edessa to follow Jewish ideas and observances about impurity, because they had been taught by a Jew,<sup>16</sup> nor Manichaeism, even if it is the surgeon of a Jewish Christian group. Sometimes (though it is less fashionable now), the question will be about the relations between the Jewish Christian groups and the earliest “Christian” communities (like the Jerusalem community). Behind this state of affairs looms the genetic search for their origin in previous (more or less sectarian) movements – a search which is highly dependent on a heresiological worldview.

In other words, speaking of Jewish Christianity leads (not necessarily consciously) to highlight the limited regional scope of Jewish Christian movements, who became more and more marginal with the development and consolidation of Imperial Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: “To be sure, late antique Jewish Christian communities must have been small, marginal groups, often living in a protecting isolation.”<sup>17</sup> But if these groups were small and marginal, how did they play a role in the emergence of Islam? It seems that there are only two strategies to overcome this problem: either posit the existence of otherwise unknown Jewish Christian groups in the vicinity of Muḥammad’s movement, or claim that Jewish Christian ideas were more widespread than Jewish Christian communities: monks, dissidents, missionaries, merchants, soldiers, refugees, would have facilitated the circulation of religious ideas in Arabia – and particularly, on its margins, some of them could have facilitated the circulation of “Jewish Christian” ideas, unattractive for bishops and rabbis, but welcome for the group(s) behind the rise of Islam.<sup>18</sup>

In other words: either we use “Jewish Christian” in a strict sense, and following its usual definitions, we look for *specific communities or groups* (since these definitions are normally tailored to pick out real groups or people), or we use it in a looser sense.

*First strategy:* if we use the label “Jewish Christian” in a strict sense, evidence is simply lacking. We have no evidence of Jewish Christian groups in Arabia in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, and no evidence either that other putative Jewish Christian groups elsewhere in the Near

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<sup>15</sup> Petri Luomanen, “Nazarenes,” in Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (ed.), *A Companion to Second-Century Christian ‘Heretics’* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 279-314.

<sup>16</sup> See Karl Kayser, *Die Canones Jacob’s von Edessa* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1886), 3-4 (Syriac text). Of course, Ethiopians and Armenians are not supposed to be ethnically Jewish, and they are not “sympathizers” of Jewish people – therefore, there seems to be good reasons not to mention them. But, on the other hand, their practices and beliefs are perfectly consonant with what Jewish Christianity is supposed to look like.

<sup>17</sup> Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” 75.

<sup>18</sup> Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” 79, 90.

East played a role in the emergence of early Islam. Of course, scholars often refer to *indirect* evidence, which is of two kinds. The first concerns striking parallels and similarities between, on the one hand, the Qur'ān and early Islam, and on the other hand, what we can find in what is, rightly or wrongly, called Jewish Christian texts and movements. I do not deny all these parallels (however, some are more apparent than real),<sup>19</sup> but I would explain them in a different way.

The second kind of indirect evidence pertains to elements which would attest the Jewish Christianity of people among the informants (or the opponents) of Muḥammad. In particular, relying on some narratives in the Muslim tradition, it has been argued that Waraqa b. Nawfal was a Jewish Christian. One can find similar hypotheses about Zayd b. Ṭābit, or about the Jews of Medina, who are then supposed to be, not Jews, but Jewish Christians. The trouble is that there is simply no way to substantiate or disprove such suppositions, which are speculative and/or circular – the putative evidence is too shaky and meagre indeed to allow any conclusion.<sup>20</sup> If we are not ready to imagine Arabia as a kind of Jurassic Park for ancient “heresies,”<sup>21</sup> then we should find another explanation of the affinities between Jewish Christianity and early Islam.

Hence the *second strategy*: using the label “Jewish Christian” in a looser sense. But which sense? Does it refer to groups *inside* the “great Church”? In this case, what is the difference between Jewish Christians and Judaizers? Or does it refer to *texts*, or *ideas*? But then, what makes a text Jewish Christian or not? More precisely, what does it mean, or entail, to describe a text or an idea as Jewish Christian when it is used, or widespread, in a non-Jewish Christian community? Let’s agree, for example, that it makes sense to say that the *Didascalia Apostolorum* was written by a Jewish Christian, and therefore that it could be called, originally, a Jewish Christian text. But is it still warranted to speak of a Jewish Christian, or Judaeo-Christian text, when it is used, and has become, the “textual good” (*Textgut*) of (non-Jewish) Christian communities – as is the case indeed with the *Didascalia*? A positive answer would entail radical consequences, since the same could arguably be said of any book of the New Testament.

Another example: it has been argued that the similarities between *sūra Maryam* and the *Protoevangelium of James* pointed to Jewish Christianity, supposedly the elected ground of traditions about Jesus’ childhood.<sup>22</sup> Even if we grant that the *Protoevangelium of James* comes from a Jewish Christian milieu (the matter is disputed), or that traditions on Jesus’ childhood originate in Jewish Christian circles (I would urge caution here), such similarities do not prove anything, since the *Protoevangelium* was very popular in Late

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<sup>19</sup> I am even ready to do mine Schoeps’ famous sentence: “we have a paradox of world-historical proportions, viz., the fact that Jewish Christianity indeed disappeared within the Christian church, but was preserved in Islam and thereby extended some of its basic ideas even to our own day” (*Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*, Tübingen, 342), provided we *only* mean by “Jewish Christianity” a certain kind of religious sensitivity.

<sup>20</sup> The traditions on Waraqa look rather as retrojections and “crystallizations” – on figures related to Muḥammad – of much more complex phenomena (that is, the later scribal role of Jewish and Christian converts in the making of the Qur’ān).

<sup>21</sup> I borrow this nice formula from Jack Tannous’ excellent dissertation, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak* (PhD, Princeton University, 2010), 396.

<sup>22</sup> Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran*, 103.

Antiquity, as were many traditions on Jesus' childhood. If we want to explain the origins of the traditions involved in *sūra Maryam*, and the way they are mixed there, we have to adopt a geographical approach, since these traditions are all deeply related to Palestine, and especially the popular, liturgical and homiletic traditions of Kathisma church, and more generally the Jerusalem Marian liturgy.<sup>23</sup>

These questions on method and lexicon are not purely formal, because the way we use and understand the tools we rely on when we interpret a phenomenon is deeply related to the way we frame the questions, and to the kind of answers we are looking for.

### “Influence”

The second problem when we talk about the possible Jewish-Christian background of early Islam is to find real parallels. Sometimes an apparent similarity is noticed, and conclusions are drawn. We need to be careful on such cases (and the issue of real or apparent similarities is only half of the job, since we should also account for the differences). Here are three examples.

The first one pertains to onomastics:<sup>24</sup>

“[A] The Qur’anic names of the Old Testament patriarchs and of the protagonists of the gospels (Jesus, Mary, John, Zachariah, etc.) all derive from Semitic (Hebrew or Aramaic, though occasionally restructured) forms. By contrast, [B] the Qur’anic names of the post-Mosaic prophets (e.g. Yūnus/Jonah) derive from the Greek forms found in the Septuagint. This suggests that [C] Muhammad’s awareness of these figures derives not from the Nazoraeans but from Melchite Christians.”<sup>25</sup>

I am not sure it is understated here that Muḥammad got his information on Old Testament patriarchs and of the protagonists of the gospels from Nazoreans (if yes, this is a *non sequitur*, since Aramaic-speaking Christians could do the job too). Anyway, if there is nothing to object concerning [A], [B] and [C] are much more questionable.

<sup>23</sup> In other words, the sources of Q 19 are to be found in popular and local traditions, related to a Chalcedonian church. See Stephen Shoemaker, “Christmas in the Qur’ān: The Qur’ānic Account of Jesus’ Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003), 11-39, Guillaume Dye, “Lieux saints communs, partagés ou confisqués : aux sources de quelques péripécies coraniques (Q 19 : 16-33),” in Isabelle Depret & Guillaume Dye (ed.), *Partage du sacré : transferts, dévotions mixtes, rivalités interconfessionnelles* (Bruxelles-Fernelmont: EME, 2012), 55-121, id., “The Qur’ān and its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism,” paper presented at the First Nangeroni Meeting of the Early Islamic Studies Seminar (Milan, 2015), forthcoming in G. Dye (ed.), *Early Islam: The Sectarian Milieu of Late Antiquity?*, ([https://www.academia.edu/12358270/The\\_Quran\\_and\\_its\\_Hypertextuality\\_in\\_Light\\_of\\_Redaction\\_Criticism](https://www.academia.edu/12358270/The_Quran_and_its_Hypertextuality_in_Light_of_Redaction_Criticism)).

<sup>24</sup> See Guillaume Dye & Manfred Kropp, “Le nom de Jésus (‘Īsā) dans le Coran, et quelques autres noms bibliques : remarques sur l’onomastique coranique”, in Guillaume Dye & Fabien Nobilio (ed.), *Figures bibliques en islam* (Bruxelles-Fernelmont: EME, 2011): 174-176.

<sup>25</sup> François de Blois, “Islam in its Arabian Context,” in Angelika Neuwirth, Michael Marx and Nicolai Sinai (ed.), *The Qur’ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 622, n. 16 (letters are mine).

I will focus only on [B]. Do the names of post-Mosaic prophets in the Qur'ān come from Greek? De Blois refers to Jonas, whose name in the Qur'ān is Yūnus (with some variants: Yūnas and Yūnis) and considers it comes from Greek Ἰωνᾶς. Yet from a strictly linguistic viewpoint, it could derive from Geez Yonas or Christian-Palestinian Aramaic Yūnas (a Christian source, in any case). Same thing with Elijah (ʿĪlyās): Greek Ἠλίας or Ἠλείας provides the final -s, but Geez ʿElyas and Syriac ʿElyās (less common, however, than ʿElyā), provide it too. Another example: it seems straightforward to derive the Qur'ānic name of Job (ʿAyyūb) from Syriac ʿAyūb (ʿAyyūb seems indeed to be a calque from Syriac) – no need to refer to Greek Ἰώβ (strictly speaking, a borrowing of Arabic ʿAyyūb from Greek Ἰώβ is not excluded, but there is not the slightest reason to think that it should come from Greek rather than Syriac).

There are even more decisive examples. The final ʿayn in the Qur'ānic name of Elisha, Alyasaʿ, cannot come from Greek Ἐλίσα, Ἐλισάιη or Ἐλισάιος, whereas it is present in the Semitic forms, like Syriac Elyšaʿ, Geez ʿEləsaʿ or Hebrew ʿElišaʿ; moreover, Solomon's name (Sulaymān) can be easily explained from Syriac Šlīmūn, whereas it is very hard to derive it from Greek Σαλώμων. In other words, there is no Biblical proper name in the Qur'ān where a borrowing from Greek is the only or the best explanation. Therefore, I do not see how we could draw any conclusion about the confessional origins of the Qur'ānic names of the prophets.

The second example concerns a famous religious formula – the first part of the *šahāda*. According to Stroumsa:

“One of the most striking parallels between the pseudo-Clementine writings and the Qur'ān is probably Peter's claim, in the Homilies, that ‘God is one, and there is no God beside Him’.”<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, Greek *heis estin ho theos, kai plēn autou ouk estin theos* (Hom. 16.7.9) is the equivalent of Arabic *lā ilāha illā huwa* and *lā ilāha illā Allāh*. The second formula appears only twice in the Qur'ān (35:37; 47:19), even if it will become later the first part of the “official” *šahāda*, whereas the first one is extremely widespread ((3:18; 4:87; 6:102, 106; 7:158; 9:31, 129; 11:14; 13:30; 20:8; 23:116; 27:26; 28:70, 88; 35:3; 39:6; 40:3, 62, 65; 44:8; 64:13; 73:9). There are some variants with personal pronouns (*lā ʿilāha ʿillā ʿana* (16:2; 21:25), *lā ʿilāha ʿillā ʿanta* (21:87)), and sometimes divine epithets are added (*lā ʿilāha ʿillā huwa r-raḥmānu r-raḥīm* (2:163), *lā ʿilāha ʿillā huwa l-ḥayyu l-qayyūmu* (2:255; 3:2), *lā ʿilāha ʿillā huwa l-ʿazīzu l-ḥakīmu* (3:6, 18)).

Pines notices that the formula *lā ilāha illā huwa* sometimes occurs in relation to the rebuttal of the belief that Allah has a son or a companion (6:102). For sure, the Pseudo-Clementine writings and the Qur'ān both display a Unitarian theology – but they are certainly the only ones to do this. Are we allowed to suppose a kind of literary dependence between both texts, which would support the idea of a Jewish Christian background of the Qur'ān?

<sup>26</sup> Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” 86.



The problem in claiming such a dependency is that the parallel is less significant than Pines and Stroumsa believe. The idea of God's uniqueness is quite widespread and there are not infinite ways to express it, especially when the aim is to *contrast* the belief in one God and "polytheism." Moreover, we find this formula elsewhere, especially in the Syriac *Acts of the Martyrs* (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c.), as noticed by Philippe Gignoux:<sup>27</sup>

*w'lh 'hryn lbr mnh lyt ln*: "and there is for us no other God beside Him."<sup>28</sup>

*dhd hw 'lh' wlyt 'hryn lbr mnh*: "that God is one and there is no other beside Him."<sup>29</sup>

*wtd' dhwyw wlyt 'hryn lbr mnh*: "and you know that He exists and that there is no other beside Him."<sup>30</sup>

*wlyt 'lh lbr mnh*: "and there is no God beside Him."<sup>31</sup>

*wlyt 'lh 'hryn lbr mnk*: "and there is no God beside You."<sup>32</sup>

*'nt 'nt 'lh šryr wlyt 'hryn lbr mnk*: "You are the true God and there is no other beside You."<sup>33</sup>

*wlyt 'lh 'hryn lbr mnh*: "and there is no other God beside Him."<sup>34</sup>

Gignoux affirms that "one cannot evade the conclusion which imposes itself, that is to say that the *šahāda* has its origin in the Judaeo-Christian circles, but it was also very well-known among the Nestorian community on the middle and at the end of the Sassanian period."<sup>35</sup> Anyway, if one is really looking for origins, a Nestorian origin appears much more plausible than a Jewish Christian one, which seems at best indirect. Moreover, as Pines and Gignoux remark,<sup>36</sup> a similar formula can already be found in Isaiah 44:6 (see also Isaiah 44:8, 45:21):

"I am the first and I am the last, apart from me there is no God" (in Syriac: *wlyt 'lh lbar mny*).

We should also add the Syriac (Peshitta) translation of Psalm 18:31-32 (=2 Samuel 22:32, same translation in the Targum), where we have

*lyt 'lh lbr mn māryā*: "there is no God beside the Lord."

Translated into Arabic, it becomes *lā 'ilāha 'illā r-rabb*, and not much aesthetic taste is needed to substitute, for phonetic reasons, *Allāh* to *al-rabb*, and get *lā 'ilāha 'illā Allāh*. Such formulas, often used in cultic or liturgical contexts, can travel easily. Therefore,

<sup>27</sup> Philippe Gignoux, "Les antécédents nestoriens de la Chahada," *Acta Iranica* 28 (1988): 403-406, English translation: "The Nestorians Antecedents of the Šahāda," in Ibn Warraq (ed.), *Christmas in the Koran* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2014): 683-687.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Bedjan (ed.), *Acta martyrum et sanctorum* (Paris, Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 7 vol., 1890-97): vol. II, 346-347.

<sup>29</sup> Id., II, 375.

<sup>30</sup> Id., II, 384.

<sup>31</sup> Id., II, 406, 410.

<sup>32</sup> Id., II, 425.

<sup>33</sup> Id. II, 447.

<sup>34</sup> Id., II, 458.

<sup>35</sup> Gignoux, "The Nestorians Antecedents of the Šahāda," 685.

<sup>36</sup> Gignoux, "The Nestorians Antecedents of the Šahāda," 684.

giving a too big weight to the parallelism with the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies does not seem warranted.

Here is a third example, related to the interpretation of a famous Qur'anic verse (Q 5:116):

“(Remember) when God said, ‘Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to the people, “Take me and my mother as two gods instead of God (alone)”?’”

The context seems to imply that, according to the Qur'ān, the Christians took Mary as the third person of the Trinity. This looks strange, and various explanations have been proposed. It has been supposed that this verse refers to a specific Christian sect, the Collyridians. This does not look very convincing, for many reasons – for example, because there is no evidence that the Collyridians (if they really existed) ever considered Mary as a part of the Trinity. Others have argued that Muḥammad could have mistaken Mary for the Holy Spirit, by ignorance, or because the word for “spirit” (*rūḥ*) is feminine in Arabic. It does not seem very plausible either. Some scholars, like de Blois and Gallez, have argued that the Nazoreans are targeted here.<sup>37</sup> Both refer to Origen and Jerome:

“But in the gospel written according to the Hebrews which the Nazoreans read, the Lord [Jesus] says: ‘Just now, my mother, the holy spirit, lifted me up.’ (Jerome, *in Esaiam* 40:9)

“Just now my mother, the holy spirit, lifted me up by one of my hairs and brought me to the great mountain Thabor.” (Origen, *in Johannem* 2:12)

In a nutshell: since we have evidence that a Jewish Christian (Nazorean) text calls the holy spirit “Jesus’ mother,” then Q 5:116 is a polemic against a Nazorean doctrine.

This is certainly ingenious, but hardly convincing, and not only because of the problem of the ambiguous evidence about Nazoreans (in general, and in relation to Muḥammad’s movement). In fact, the content of the verse itself goes against such a reading. First of all, the text says “Jesus, son of Mary!”; and *immediately after*, it refers to Jesus’ mother. Of course, “Jesus son of Mary” might be considered as a stereotyped formula, but the obvious reading is to identify “my mother” (Jesus’ mother) and Mary. Moreover, it is clear that the text does not aim at simply describing Christian beliefs and practices; it is, on the contrary, a polemical text, which draws to absurd consequences the Theotokos formula and the idea of Jesus’ divine sonship: if you make Jesus God and the son of God, and if you say that Mary is not only the mother of Jesus, but also the mother of God (Theotokos), then the only logical conclusion (to be rejected, of course) is that Mary should be divine too.<sup>38</sup>

### “Early Islam”

<sup>37</sup> De Blois, 14-15, Gallez, vol. 2, 74-83.

<sup>38</sup> See Michel Cuypers, *Le festin. Une lecture de la sourate al-Mâ'ida* (Paris: Lethielleux, 2007), 351-352, and Frank van der Velden, “Kotexte im Konvergenzstrang – die Bedeutung textkritischer Varianten und christlicher Bezugstexte für die Redaktion von Sure 61 und Sure 5, 110-119,” *Oriens Christianus* 92 (2008), 164-171.

A third problem when we talk about the possible Jewish-Christian background of early Islam is that “early Islam” might not be very homogeneous – in fact, we need to be clear about what we mean by “most primitive Islam.” First of all, the Qur’ān cannot simply be considered as Muḥammad’s words, since there are good reasons to acknowledge an important compositional and editorial activity on the Qur’ān *after* Muḥammad’s death or *independently* of Muḥammad.<sup>39</sup> It entails that the sources or the informants of Muḥammad are not necessarily the sources of the (authors of) various Qur’anic pericopes or suras: looking for the sources of the Qur’ān, therefore, does not unescapably mean looking for Muḥammad’s putative informants. Second – and it is the problem I have in mind here –, the content of the Qur’ān itself is sometimes quite heterogeneous. Therefore, when we speak about the “most primitive Islam,” are we talking about Muḥammad’s community, or are we talking about the Qur’ān, and if we are referring to the Qur’ān, about which strata are we talking? Most of the time, all is done as if these were the same things, whereas I think we should be more cautious.

But let us go back to the Qur’ān and consider the figures of the prophets, and especially the place of Jesus. There is no need to remind here about the importance of Jesus in the Qur’ān, but *sometimes* he seems to be only one character among others (4:163 – whereas 4:164 highlights Moses; 6:85). In Q 37, we have a long list of prophetic figures, but no mention of Jesus. Such lists do not agree with mainstream Christianity, but they do not agree with “Jewish Christianity” either: Jesus’ role is not central enough.

On the other hand, as noticed by Francisco del Río Sánchez,<sup>40</sup> there are lists of Qur’anic prophets which seems to exclude all prophets between Moses and Jesus. For example:

“(Remember) when We made a covenant with the prophets – and from you, and from Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus, son of Mary – We made a firm covenant with them.” (Q 33:7)

This list is very significant – but is it specifically Jewish Christian, and does it reveal specific Jewish Christian tenets? Some cautiousness, once again, is allowed. Take, for example, the following text by Jacob of Edessa (c. 633-708):<sup>41</sup>

“For what is Christianity except the covenant of God with humans? Now the covenant of God with humans, is from the time when God created the first man in His image and placed him in Paradise, whatever this is, and set down for him a law and a commandment which was from Him and gave him freedom of the will and admonished him to keep it.

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<sup>39</sup> In other words, the idea that the Qur’ān is the gathering of Muḥammad’s *ipsissima verba* should certainly be given up. See e.g. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Die Entstehung des Korans. Neue Erkenntnisse aus Sicht der historisch-kritischen Bibelwissenschaft* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2015<sup>3</sup>), Guillaume Dye, “Pourquoi et comment se fait un texte canonique ? Quelques réflexions sur l’histoire du Coran,” in Christian Brouwer, Guillaume Dye & Anja van Rompaey (ed.), *Hérésies : une construction d’identités religieuses* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles (Problèmes d’Histoire des Religions), 2015): 55-104, id., “The Qur’ān and its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism.” It should be noted also that the Qur’ān, in all probability, and whatever its shape then, did not play a central role in the life of the first generations of “Believers.” See Dye, “Pourquoi et comment se fait un texte canonique ?”, 77-104.

<sup>40</sup> Del Río Sánchez, “The Rejection of Muhammad’s Message,” 66-68.

<sup>41</sup> This text comes from a book on canon law which is now lost, but some excerpts of Book XII are preserved in two different manuscripts of the British Library (BL 12, 154, fol. 164-165; BL 17, 193, fol. 58). I quote from Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 216-217.

(...) We see that the covenant of God therefore was set down and entrusted to humans once, then it was set down and given to humans [*i. e.* several times afterwards]. And at a second time [it was given] to Adam and to his children, which is now this law which is natural and unwritten. And a third time with Noah and with his children. And a fourth time, with Abraham and Isaac. And a fifth time, with the people of the children of Israel by means of Moses and in written form.”

Jacob then explains that the sixth time there has been a covenant, it was with the person of Christ – a very special covenant, then. The last (seventh) covenant will be at the end of the world.

Of course, Jacob of Edessa lived after Muḥammad, but there is no reason to think that he is dependent here on the Qur’ān or on Muḥammad’s preaching. It seems more plausible to see his text as the expression of a quite widespread conception of sacred history in the Christian Near East – Jacob’s worldview, in fact, is quite similar to the *Cave of Treasures*.

Jacob’s text has much in common with the Qur’ān. For Jacob, Christianity is more ancient than all the other “religions.” It is old as creation or humankind. In fact, Christianity is the covenant of God with humans – no idea here of a developmental history of revelation, but the tenet of the same covenant renewed several times between God and humanity, and a continuous insistence on the importance of *law*. Instead of “Christianity,” substitute what the Qur’ān refers to when it speaks of God’s judgment or promise, and you have a Qur’anic or Islamic doctrine. Moreover, the first covenant reminds of the Qur’anic “pre-eternal pact” (Q 7:172). It is also particularly significant that Jacob of Edessa refers to “Adam *and his children*,” “Noah *and his children*,” “Abraham *and Isaac*.” The question of prophets’ offspring and descendance is highlighted here – and this is a very prominent topic in the Qur’ān too.

The Qur’ān provides also another remarkable list of prophets:

“Surely God has chosen Adam and Noah, and the house of Abraham and the house of ‘Imrān over the worlds, some of them descendants of others.” (Q 3:33-34)

The *crux interpretatum* concerns the expression “house of ‘Imrān” (*‘āl ‘imrān*). In light of its Qur’anic context, it refers to Jesus’ family (Mary is called “sister of Aaron” (Q 19:28), “daughter of ‘Imrān” (*bint ‘imrān*) (66:12), and she is the biological daughter of “the wife of ‘Imrān” (*imra’at ‘imrān*) (3:35-36)), but in a way which links Jesus and Mary to Moses’ family, with his father ‘Amran, his brother Aaron and his sister Miryam. I have argued elsewhere that there is neither a confusion between Mary and Miryam, nor a simple metaphor about Mary’s ancestry, but a typological identification: when the Qur’ān states that Mary is Aaron’s sister and ‘Imrān’s daughter, it does not state that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is Aaron’s biological sister and ‘Imrān’s biological daughter, but it claims that she is prefigured, one way or another, by the “family of ‘Imrān,” especially Aaron and Miryam. Yet this typology is perfectly Christian – but it is *not widespread*, since it can be found, in this precise sense, *only* in the Jerusalem Marian traditions of the early 7<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Dye, “Lieux saints communs,” *id.*, “The Qur’ān and its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism.” This typology is made possible, in the Christian context, by the use of Jewish traditions about Aaron’s and Miryam’s dormitions.

In other words: sometimes we have a list of prophets which is not enough Christian to be counted as “Christian” or “Jewish Christian,” and sometimes we have perfectly Christian lists where, however, the ontological status of Jesus has been downplayed, in comparison to mainstream Christianity – as if we had several *strata* in the Qur’ān. Should we explain this by a Jewish Christian background influenced by Christianity, or as a kind of reaction to, or (re)interpretation of, Christian discourse, or in another way? Let us leave the question open, even if I would favour the second alternative.

### *Conclusion*

Even if I warned that fancying Jewish Christian *groups* behind the rise of Islam was certainly too speculative (and unnecessary), I agree that there is something that might be called a “Jewish Christian sensitivity” in the Qur’ān. It includes, among other things: a low Christology (but higher than the Ebionite Christology), where Jesus is a servant and a prophet but neither a divine being nor the son of God (even if the virginal birth is asserted), an insistence on law, and a certain conception of prophecy, which is, however, not specifically Jewish Christian.<sup>43</sup> Yet we also have elements which undeniably point towards Eastern Christianity as the most plausible context of the Qur’ān (I do not imply it is also the context of Muḥammad’s preaching – let us leave also this question open here!): a Qur’anic Mariology deeply related to Christian Palestinian traditions, a typology between Adam and Jesus, a similar anti-Jewish rhetoric, many common points with Syriac cosmology, piety and eschatology,<sup>44</sup> and the fact that the closer parallels to the Qur’anic Biblical and para-biblical stories are to be found, most of the time, in Eastern Christianity...

How should we explain the presence of this “Jewish Christian sensitivity”? Maybe a brief glance at the concrete religious situation of the Late Antique Middle East will bring some insights.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, confessional loyalties in the Late Antique Middle East were much more in flux than we generally believe. People could move back and forth from different church groups, not only in rural areas, but also close to the centres of theological power,<sup>46</sup> or inside the same family, from one generation to another.<sup>47</sup> There could be various reasons for this behaviour, even lucrative ones – in other words, “religious identity was being used instrumentally.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> A topic I sadly cannot discuss here. See Jan M. F. van Reeth, “Melchisédech le Prophète éternel selon Jean d’Apamée et le monarchianisme musulman,” *Oriens Christianus* 96 (2012): 8-46, id., “*Qui es-tu ? Es-tu Élie ? Est-tu le Prophète ?* (Jean 1 : 19-21) Transposition intertextuelle d’une prophétologie, de la Bible au Coran,” in Philippe Cassuto & Pierre Larcher (ed.), *Oralité et écriture dans la Bible et le Coran* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014):145-162.

<sup>44</sup> The classical study of the Syrian background of Qur’anic eschatology and piety is Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l’islam et le christianisme*, traduit de l’allemand par Jules Roches (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1955). See, however, José Costa, “‘*Olam ha-ze/’olam ha-ba, al-dunyā/al-aḥīra* : étude compare de deux couples de termes dans la littérature talmudique et le Coran,” *Arabica* 62 (2015): 234-259.

<sup>45</sup> I owe much here to Tannous’ insightful discussion in *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, which provides many examples and contains some excellent formulas.

<sup>46</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 230.

<sup>47</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 227.

<sup>48</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 233.

This is true, not only between different Christian movements, but also between Christian and non-Christian religious groups.<sup>49</sup> Of course, it does not entail that relations between groups were necessarily peaceful.

On the other hand, the theological elites were involved in building barriers and frontiers, and also in trying to get the adherence of ordinary Christians, as well as extirpating what they considered to be idolatrous beliefs or practices (beliefs and practices which were certainly very widespread, and even more widespread than the so-called “orthodox” beliefs and practices). Most of the ordinary Christians had certainly other interests than border policy (which was as much boundary maintenance as boundary drawing),<sup>50</sup> even if frictions between Christians of opposed ideas were not uncommon either. Many disagreements of this kind are lost to us now, but we should be aware that the content of the tenets involved in such disagreements was very multifarious – without implying a group or community which necessarily followed such and such tenet.

This idea could be made clearer with the following experiment: suppose you make today a street survey and ask Christians about their Christological and more generally religious ideas. You might get many answers, sometimes in line with the official doctrine – but press these people a bit with a few malicious questions and you will realize that most of them are certainly “heretics,” even if, probably, they do not realize it.<sup>51</sup> And you might find “Arians,” “Jewish Christians,” “Docetists,” and so on, among them. However, it does not mean that Arian, Jewish Christian, or Docetist communities are alive today and managed to survive, almost hidden, during centuries.

In fact, the 7<sup>th</sup> century is a time of “confessional kaleidoscope,”<sup>52</sup> not only on the level of popular religion (and of course with people Christianized only recently or lightly), but *also* on the level of many monks and clerics – not all, for sure, and clearly not on the level of the religious entrepreneurs of the theological elite who were involved in border policy. The range of beliefs available to Christians was large: we know, for example, that there were Christians in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century who believed that polygamy was compatible with Christianity,<sup>53</sup> and they had some good reasons to think so, since the Bible allows polygamy – and highly blessed figures like Abraham, Jacob, or David are said to have been polygamous. So, might they think – if they were polygamous, why not us?

Therefore, most probably, what I have called a “Jewish Christian sensitivity” was floating around – and we have no need to suppose a relation with earlier Jewish Christian communities. In fact, the “Jewish Christian sensitivity” is a widespread sensitivity for people belonging to a Biblical or para-biblical culture, since it is based, for its Christology and its prophetology as well, on a Monarchianist theology, *i.e.* a kind of piety which highlights God’s uniqueness. Such theologies can be found outside Jewish Christianity (Paul of Samosata, Theodote of Byzantium...). And the idea of Jesus as a prophet or servant of God is scripturally warranted.

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<sup>49</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 272.

<sup>50</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 272.

<sup>51</sup> See Dr Knock’s famous motto, “Tout homme bien portant est un malade qui s’ignore”; here we could say that “every believer is a heretic who does not know himself.”

<sup>52</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 255.

<sup>53</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 258.

And this brings us to the next topic: how to generate “heresy.”<sup>54</sup> I use the term “heresy” here only for the sake of convenience. To generate “heresy,” what is needed is not a relation with a “heretic” movement, or with a “heretic” teacher – we should not posit unnecessary entities. What is simply needed is to read Scripture (which admits many possible readings!) in a way which is not consonant with the “orthodox” reading. Any reading of Scripture supposes taking some passages as fundamental and others as secondary, ignoring others, taking some passages literally, and others metaphorically, and so on. The various “heretics” and the “orthodox” all do this; they only differ in their choices about the passages they rely on, or not, and the ways they read them. If, moreover, there is no agreement on what should count as Scripture, the range of available interpretations expand even more.

In other words, Scripture (taken in a large sense, and not only as the Jewish or Christian canon), is a literary, thematic, symbolic and formulaic repertoire which is the tank where so-called “heretics” and orthodox take their stuff, in different and even sometimes opposed ways. I suggest that this is the kind of phenomenon we should refer to when we want to explain the presence of “Jewish Christian” ideas of the Qur’ān.

This approach seems to me less speculative, and more economical and more realistic. My point is not that we should take into account only “mainstream” religious ideas or movements – far from that. Islam was born indeed in a highly sectarian milieu, but not the kind of sectarian milieu sometimes referred to, *i.e.* I do not see early Islam as the surgeon of a marginal and almost hidden Jewish Christian movement. The sectarian milieu I have in mind is rather the one described in the previous paragraphs – a very diverse religious landscape with many rival but porous confessional groups, escaping, most of the time, the control of the “orthodox” boundary makers.

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<sup>54</sup> Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, 397-98.