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**Muḥammad and the monk:  
the making of the Christian Baḥīra legend**

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## MUḤAMMAD AND THE MONK: THE MAKING OF THE CHRISTIAN BAḤĪRĀ LEGEND\*

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“M. was a humble boy, cheerful, good-natured, clever and eager to learn. He accepted Baḥīrā’s teaching (*‘ilm Baḥīrā*) and observed it, and he came to Baḥīrā day and night, until the Qur’ān was written. He continued to visit Baḥīrā frequently, sought his advice in his affairs and followed it...”<sup>1</sup>

This is the gist of the story of Islam, presented in a group of Syriac and Christian Arabic texts, best known as the Christian Baḥīrā legend. Islam is a human creation here; Baḥīrā, a Christian monk (called Sergius in the Syriac recensions), is its inventor; Muḥammad is no prophet, only a docile child, an obedient disciple of the monk. In addition to this counter-history of the rise of Islam, equally prominent are the legend’s apocalypses and polemical arguments. These components react to the challenge of Islam in three different ways: the first changes the Islamic past by rewriting its most crucial events, and thus deprives Islam of its claim to divine origin; the second provides Arab rule a safe place in the Christian vision of the course of history, thus neutralizing Islamic triumphalism; the third helps to deal with the doctrinal claims of Islam.

This masterful combination of polemical tactics must have made the legend one of the most influential texts in Christian polemic against Islam. Two Syriac recensions (a West-Syrian and an East-Syrian) and

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<sup>1</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 408 (A1, 16.16–17); this recension abbreviates the name “Muḥammad” as a *mīm* throughout the text.

two Arabic ones (a short and a long) are extant today.<sup>2</sup> The popularity of the legend among Christians living under Islamic rule is demonstrated by the relatively large number of known manuscripts, and by its impact on Christian polemic against Islam in the Middle East and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> The manuscript evidence also indicates that it circulated among all Christian communities of the Muslim realm,<sup>4</sup> and reached even a Jewish audience.<sup>5</sup>

But the lasting interest of the legend for Christians best shows in its continuing transformation; the copyist-redactors persisted in updating its apocalypses, expanding and modifying its counter-historical sections, and multiplying its polemical arguments. In the first part of this paper I will attempt to trace this metamorphosis from the earliest discernible phases of the legend's formation to the latest changes the copyist-redactors of the edited manuscripts made in the text. I will suggest when, where and by whom the various recensions were produced,

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<sup>2</sup>Three recensions (the two Syriac and the long Arabic) were edited by Richard Gottheil in his "Christian Bahira," between 1898 and 1903. The first report about the short Arabic version appeared in 1991 in Boisset, "Compléments." A critical edition of all four versions, Barbara Roggema's *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, has now been published. In this paper I refer to this edition, and use some of the abbreviations adopted there; see Appendix for the full list of abbreviations employed here. Quotations from the legend follow Roggema's translation, with modifications. Proper names are given according to their form in the language they are best known from; for example, always Baḥīrā, not Bḥīrā or Bḥīrō; Sergius, not Sargīs or Sarjis or Sarjiyūs; Ḥakīm, not Ḥakkīm.

<sup>3</sup>Thirty-one Christian manuscripts exist or are known to have existed. Only four of the 18 Syriac manuscripts (11 ES and 7 WS) were copied before the end of the nineteenth century, but most Christian Arabic ones are centuries older (3 A1, 8 A2, and 3 unknown recensions). On the manuscripts of the legend see Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 238–246. On the influence of this legend among the Armenians, see Thomson, "Baḥira legend;" in Byzantium, see Khoury, *Polémique byzantine*, pp. 76–87; among Andalusian Christians, see Burman, *Religious polemic*, pp. 122, 271; in European polemic against Islam, see Daniel, *Islam and the West*, index (Baḥīrā, Sergius), and Tolan, *Saracens*, index (Bahira, Sergius); in Ethiopia, see van Donzel, *Ēnbāqom: Anqaša Amin*, pp. 136–148.

<sup>4</sup>In addition to East- and West-Syrians, it circulated among Melkites, Copts and Maronites: A1 is a Melkite recension (cf. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 111–112), one of the manuscripts is dated according to the Coptic Era of the Martyrs (MS Paris ar. 215 of A2; cf. *ibid.*, p. 240), another was in the possession of a Coptic priest (an inaccessible Arabic manuscript; cf. p. 246), and still another bears the ownership mark of a Maronite physician (MS Gotha Orient. Ar. 2875 of A2; cf. p. 241).

<sup>5</sup>Two fragments of a Judaeo-Arabic manuscript of A2 survive in the Cairo Genizah (T-S Ar. 14.11 and Bodleian Heb. D 57). They are written in an Oriental semi-cursive Judaeo-Arabic script used from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, and the punctuation indicates that they probably belong to the first half of this period (see the description of the manuscript in Szilágyi, "Christian books," pp. 121, 141–142). These fragments are the earliest manuscript witnesses to the Christian Baḥīrā legend in any recension; Gottheil's dating of MS Gotha Orient. Ar. 2875 of A2 to the thirteenth century was baseless (cf. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 241).

and describe the shifting images of the monk, of Muḥammad and of the Arabs reflected in them. In the second part I will take a closer look at the most influential counter-historical episode, the story of Muḥammad's instruction by the monk, and re-examine its relationship to the Muslim Bahīrā legend.

### The metamorphosis of the legend

#### (1) *The common material of the synoptic versions*

Mār Yahb, the narrator monk in the East-Syrian recension (henceforth ES), relates that he found the monk Sergius among the Arabs during his wanderings in the desert. The old Sergius, having lived there for forty years without ever seeing a Christian, immediately realized that he was going to die soon, and told the story of his life to Mār Yahb. Sergius recounted his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, then to Mt. Sinai, and the vision he saw there about the imminent rule of the Arabs and the future course of events. After the vision, Sergius said, an angel sent him to Maurice (582–602) and Khusrau II (590–628), the Roman and Persian emperors of the day, to foretell them of the impending loss of their empires. The mission entrusted to him by the angel, it seems, did not satisfy the monk; from Persia he went to Bēt Armāyē to preach that “they should bow in worship to one cross, not to many.”<sup>6</sup> As a result of this teaching, he was persecuted there, and eventually came to settle, said Sergius, in “the desert of the Banū Ismā’īl. When they saw that I had come to them, I proclaimed to them a kingdom of ten weeks. They built a cell for me, and dug this well for me.”<sup>7</sup> Mār Yahb describes the end of Sergius' life: “When I, Mār Yahb, had stayed with him for seven days, Mār Sergius fell ill and died. I enshrouded him, and [...]. And they, because he had prophesied to them something they liked, and had written and handed down to them this book which they call Qur’ān, embalmed him and buried him with great pomp.”<sup>8</sup> Mār Yahb ends Sergius' story with a

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266 (ES, 5).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266 (ES, 6–6.8).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266 (ES, 7–7.4). 7.1 is a problematic passage; I omitted most of it in the translation. Its Syriac text is corrupt in all three manuscripts used for the edition of ES, and WS contains no parallel to it. The reference to Sergius' writing the Qur’ān appears in ES and WS, but is missing from A1 (WS, 7.3, p. 332, and A1, 7–7.1, p. 390). This omission from A1, however, seems to be part of its redactor's comprehensive attempt to make the text more coherent (see other examples of this below); therefore, the passage should be regarded as belonging to the common material (M).

miracle wrought by his bones.<sup>9</sup>

Following the death of Sergius, Kaʿb, the learned Jew, is briefly mentioned. He is described as somebody who corrupted Sergius' teaching, because he taught the Arabs that Muḥammad is the Paraclete.<sup>10</sup> "And lo, until our day they retain and pursue this tradition that Muḥammad is the Paraclete,"<sup>11</sup> the episode concludes.

Mār Yahb then tells the story of Sergius again, now as related to him by the monk's Arab disciple, Ḥakīm. Suffering from leprosy, Ḥakīm became an outcast, but Sergius healed him when they met in the desert, and also healed others who came to him after the news of his first miracle spread. Ḥakīm told Mār Yahb that people came to Sergius to water their cattle at his well, and "they asked him about everything, and they did everything he told them, because he taught them some of this doctrine which they chose to follow. He prophesied to them and said, 'God will raise up a great man for you from among you, and kings of the earth will come forth from his loins, and he<sup>12</sup> will become very numerous on the earth, and his name is Muḥammad.'" <sup>13</sup> Sergius later saw Muḥammad among a group of Arabs coming to his well and recognized him through a vision which appeared above his head; he then told the boy's companions about Muḥammad's grand future, and blessed him. The blessing was followed by a long conversation between Sergius and Muḥammad; the monk explained some fundamental Christian doctrines to him, obtained his word that he would spare the lives of Christians and show benevolence towards monks, and instructed him to attribute his teaching to the angel

<sup>9</sup>The entire section is *ibid.*, pp. 254–266 (ES, 1–8.1); it corresponds to pp. 316–332 (WS, 1–8.1) and pp. 376–390 (A1, 1–8.1).

<sup>10</sup>He is referred to as "a Jewish man known as *Kaʿb Sāprā*;" his name is translated as "Kaʿb the scribe" by Gottheil and Roggema. The original Syriac form of the name was doubtless *Kaʿb Sāprē*, equivalent of the Arabic Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (the form Kaʿb al-Ḥabr, which would agree with *Kaʿb Sāprā*, is also attested, but less often than Kaʿb al-Aḥbār; cf. M. Schmitz, "Kaʿb al-Aḥbār," *El*<sup>2</sup>, s.v.). The *syāmē* of *sāprē* would easily be lost in the transmission (they are not found in any of the Syriac manuscripts of the legend), because Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, as some copyists' wild variations of his name show (*k-ʿ-b*, *k-ʿ-p*, *Kelb Sāprā* ["dog of the scribe"] in the Syriac recensions, *Kutub al-Aḥbār* [or *al-Akhbār*(?): "books of reports"] in A1), was unknown to most Syriac- or Arabic-speaking Christians. But as the Syriac *sāprā* ("scriba, notarius... doctus, literatus;" cf. Payne-Smith, *Thesaurus*, vol. 2, pp. 2708–2709) is intended here as a translation of the Arabic *ḥabr* (or *ḥibr*), it seems to me best to translate *Kaʿb Sāprā* as "Kaʿb the learned Jew". I suppose this is how a Syriac-speaking Christian to some extent acquainted with Islamic culture would have understood the name, even though to most readers of the legend it probably meant nothing more than "X the scribe" (see the tenth-century *Lexicon* of Bar Bahlūl, vol. 2, p. 1376; he translates *sāprā* as *kātib*).

<sup>11</sup>This section is in Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 268 (ES, 9–9.6; the quotation is 9.6); it corresponds to pp. 332–334 (WS, 9–9.6) and p. 390 (A1, 9–9.7).

<sup>12</sup>Thus in Syriac.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 270 (ES, 11.2–6).

Gabriel before his future followers, to promise them carnal pleasures in Paradise, and to command them to fast for thirty days a year and to pray seven times a day. Sergius also promised to write for him a scripture that would be sent on the horn of a cow to Muḥammad's followers, as if from God. "Muḥammad liked the daily teaching of Mār Sergius, because he was a humble and simple boy. He [Sergius] wrote for them this book which they call Qur'ān with the help of Muḥammad, and they studied it every day of their lives until the death of Baḥīrā, the one who prophesied to them."<sup>14</sup> So ends the story of Ḥakīm.<sup>15</sup>

It is followed by another apocalypse of Sergius: "He said, 'All these things are going to happen in the days of the Banū Ismā'īl. . .'"<sup>16</sup> This prophecy concludes the material common to all the synoptic versions.<sup>17</sup>

All these episodes are found in the three synoptic versions; although names and minor details vary, substantial material is added only before or after them. As is apparent from the above summary, the common material (M) consists of four distinct units: (A) the life of Sergius as he told it to Mār Yahb and witnessed by the latter, including Sergius' vision on Mt. Sinai, his first apocalypse; (B) the corruption of Sergius' teaching by Ka'b, the learned Jew; (C) the deeds of Sergius as told by his disciple, Ḥakīm; (D) the second apocalypse of Sergius.

(A) could stand independently as the *vita* of a visionary monk, who supposedly lived in the early seventh-century Middle East. His story consists of two kinds of building blocks: hagiographical and other literary topoi, and episodes responding to Arab rule. The topoi include Sergius' forty years in the desert, his death seven days after the arrival of his visitor, his pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to Mt. Sinai, and the miracle wrought by his bones after his death. Sergius' wandering in the desert, the Arabs' benevolence towards him and his eagerness to teach them would also perfectly fit a normal saintly *vita*.<sup>18</sup> What makes his story distinct is the omnipresence of Islam in it. It is not uncommon for recluses to see visions, and there are biblical and hagiographical precedents for visions on mountains, certainly on Mt. Sinai,<sup>19</sup> but it is unusual

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284 (ES, 16.16). This passage is one of the few instances where the monk is called Baḥīrā in this recension.

<sup>15</sup> The entire section is *ibid.*, pp. 268–284 (ES, 10–16.16); it corresponds to pp. 336–354 (WS, 10–16.16) and pp. 390–408 (A1, 10–16.16).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284 (ES, 17).

<sup>17</sup> The entire apocalypse is *ibid.*, pp. 284–296 (ES, 17–17.122); it corresponds to pp. 354–372 (WS, 17–17.122) and pp. 408–414 (A1, 17–17.110).

<sup>18</sup> Arabs ("Saracens" or "Ishmaelites") often appear in pre-Islamic and later hagiography as raiders of monasteries, but they play other roles as well. For a collection of references to Arabs in pre-Islamic hagiography, see Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, pp. 148–166, 181–202, especially p. 200 (the Saracens bring food for St. Sabas).

<sup>19</sup> On a Syriac hagiographical example of a monk who talks to an angel on Mt.

to come across visions which, like that of Sergius, incorporate so much from Muslim apocalyptic imagery: the Kingdoms of the Banū Ismāʿīl and the Banū Hāshim are followed by those of the Mahdī son of Fāṭima, the Banū Sufyān, the Banū Qaḥṭān, the Mahdī son of ʿĀʾisha and the Green King,<sup>20</sup> before the Kingdom of the Romans. The ensuing End of Days are described in the manner of traditional Christian apocalypses. Two other prominent episodes, both of which are probably reactions to Arab rule, are Sergius' mission to foretell the fall of the two great empires of his day and his upholding of the veneration of a single cross.<sup>21</sup> The episodes involving Islam in this part are idiosyncratic, but without them the life of Sergius would be composed of nothing but hagiographical topoi.

(B) is rather out of context at this point in the text. It is not clear how Muḥammad appears here; this is the first time he is mentioned at all. Furthermore, the episode presupposes that Mār Yahb stayed in "the desert of the Banū Ismāʿīl" for a long time, was in contact with the Arabs, and witnessed the appearance of Kaʿb and his corruption of Sergius' teaching. This generates tension with (A) where it seemed that Mār Yahb's visit lasted only several days and that he talked to Sergius alone. The two themes that make up (B) belong to the standard repertoire of Christian polemicists; both the reference to the Muslims' identification of Muḥammad with the Paraclete,<sup>22</sup> and the idea that a Jew (or Jews) corrupted the originally true doctrines of Islam following the death of Muḥammad's Christian master<sup>23</sup> are topoi of Christian anti-Islamic polemical literature.

(C) stands out as a distinct, but internally inconsistent unit. At the

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Sinai see Fiey, *Saints syriaques*, p. 17 (5). See also the vision of a monk on Mt. Sinai in the Arabic life of Timothy of Kākhustā in Lamoreaux and Cairala, "Timothy of Kākhustā," pp. 498–504 (26.2–9), pp. 574–578 (32.2–32.9).

<sup>20</sup>For the analysis of the apocalyptic figures of the legend in the context of Muslim apocalyptic tradition see Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 61–93. Not all of them are known with precisely these names in Muslim apocalypses, but all are recognizably derived from them. For other examples of apocalyptic imagery crossing religious boundaries see Michael Cook, "Apocalyptic chronicle," and David Cook, "Two Christian Arabic prophecies."

<sup>21</sup>For an interpretation of the monk's preaching about the cross as a reaction to Arab rule, see Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 95–104.

<sup>22</sup>See the apology of the Patriarch Timothy, Levond's version of the correspondence between Leo and ʿUmar, and the chronicle of Thomas Artsruni (cf. Putman, *L'Église et l'islam*, pp. 23–25 [Arabic section]; Jeffery, "Ghevond's text," pp. 277, 293–294; Thomson, "Muḥammad," p. 835).

<sup>23</sup>See *Risālat al-Kindī* and *Liber denudationis* (cf. Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien*, pp. 108–109; Burman, *Religious polemic*, pp. 270–273). Another example is quoted in Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 167. See also the Jewish versions of the same legend in Gil, "Jewish versions." I would like to thank Professor Sarah Stroumsa for supplying me with her copy of Georges Tartar's dissertation.

beginning of Ḥakīm's account Sergius is the teacher of all the Arabs, but after Muḥammad appears on the scene, he becomes his private instructor, or at least the reader at some point realizes that they must have kept their discussions secret, although this is never made explicit in the text. All synoptic versions end by noting how much Muḥammad liked the teachings of Sergius who "wrote for them this book which they call Qur'ān."<sup>24</sup> The sentence follows the legend of the cow which claims that the monk wrote a book for the Arabs, and "it is called *Sūrat al-baqara* until today."<sup>25</sup> The contradiction in the name of the book shows that (C) is the work of at least two redactors. In addition to some standard hagiographical motifs (primarily the healing miracles of the monk),<sup>26</sup> Ḥakīm's story, like (B), consists of polemical topoi. The legend of the cow and the legend of Muḥammad's instruction by the monk are familiar from other polemical accounts of the birth of Islam,<sup>27</sup> and, as Sidney Griffith has shown, many issues raised in the conversation between the monk and Muḥammad are also common apologetical and polemical arguments.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the mere description of the Muslim Paradise was scandalous in the eyes of Christians, and a favorite topic of Christian polemicists.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 284 (ES, 16.16).

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 284 (ES, 16.15).

<sup>26</sup>There are several examples of Arabs being cured by monks; e.g. an Arab is cured of paralysis (cf. Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, p. 151), an Ishmaelite queen is cured of barrenness (*ibid.*, p. 152), Arabs are freed from demonic possession (*ibid.*, pp. 201–202). Sergius cures a man possessed by a demon in ES, WS and A1, and a woman of barrenness in WS. All kinds of healing miracles are, of course, very common in hagiographical literature. Note also the Saracens coming to a monastery to water their camels (*ibid.*, p. 201), just as they come to the well of Sergius to water their animals in the story of Ḥakīm in the synoptic versions.

<sup>27</sup>The legend of the cow occurs in the Armenian chronicle of Mxit'ar of Ani, borrowed from an earlier, Iraqi source. Various versions of the legend are part of medieval European accounts of the rise of Islam which must have reached Europe through the Crusaders (cf. Thomson, "Muḥammad," pp. 852–853; Tolan, *Saracens*, pp. 135–147; Daniel, *Islam and the West*, pp. 31, 52–53, 60, 257, 261–262, 266; and Cambier, "L'épisode des taureaux"). On the Armenian versions of the legend of Muḥammad's instruction by the monk, see Thomson, "Bahīra legend;" on its Byzantine versions, Khoury, *Polémique byzantine*, pp. 76–87; on its medieval European versions, Tolan, *Saracens*, index (Bahīra, Sergius); and Daniel, *Islam and the West*, index (Baḥīrā, Sergius).

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Griffith, "The monk Baḥīrā," pp. 160–171.

<sup>29</sup>Theophilus of Edessa described the Muslim Paradise in his account of the beginning of Islam, and Those depending on his work, such as Theophanes Confessor, Agapius of Manbij, and the author of the *Chronicle to the year 1234*, based their depiction on his (cf. Mango and Scott, *The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, p. 465; Agapius, *Kitāb al-'unwān*, pp. 334–335; *Chronicle to the year 1234*, p. 229). Description or mockery of the Muslim Paradise is found in Levond's version of the correspondence between Leo and 'Umar, in the chronicle of Thomas Artsruni, in *Liber denudationis*, in *Anqaṣa Amin*, etc. (cf. Jeffery, "Ghevond's text," pp. 328–329;

(D), the second apocalypse of Sergius, follows the same sequence of events as the vision already told in (A), but in a much more elaborate form.<sup>30</sup>

(2) *The Syriac recensions*

Both Syriac recensions present incoherent and disjointed narratives which differ in minor details and in their additional material. As noted already by Richard Gottheil, the first editor of the legend, they seem to be patchworks made from the sections described above;<sup>31</sup> the framework created by the figure and the remarks of the narrator monk loosely joins the parts together. A comparison with the Arabic recensions makes the narrative of ES and WS (the West-Syrian recension) look schematic and lifeless, and their language sound dry.

Let us look first at ES. There, after the second apocalypse of Sergius, we read, "The account of Mār Sergius, called Baḥīrā, written by the monk Mār Yahb, is completed."<sup>32</sup> But after this remark Mār Yahb continues, and tells that he "undertook a careful investigation about him," which leads to some biographical data about Sergius, and to a detailed eyewitness explanation of his peculiar attitude towards the cross.<sup>33</sup> This section serves to enhance the credibility of the previous story, as well as to save Sergius' reputation from the suspicion of heresy. This is followed by three short accounts related to the birth of Islam: (a) a brief note that Ka'b corrupted the teaching of Sergius, and a description of Arab idol worship;<sup>34</sup> (b) the Arabs' identification of Muḥammad with the Paraclete, and their false expectation of Muḥammad's ascension to heaven three days after his death;<sup>35</sup> and (c) an account of the origins of the Qur'ān: first Ka'b, the learned Jew, added his appalling teaching to that of Sergius; then, by the time of al-Ḥajjāj (governor of Iraq 694–714), all the copies of the Qur'ān were full of error, so al-Ḥajjāj ordered them all to be burnt, and, choosing from the Old and New Testaments whatever he liked, wrote a new scripture which he called Qur'ān.<sup>36</sup>

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Thomson, "Muḥammad," pp. 835–836; Burman, *Religious polemic*, pp. 328–331; van Donzel, *ʿĒnāqom: Anqaṣa Amin*, pp. 256–259). For medieval European authors, see Daniel, *Islam and the West*, pp. 148–152; for Byzantine authors, see Khoury, *Polémique byzantine*, pp. 304–311. For a discussion of this topic in a wider context, see Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 121–128.

<sup>30</sup>On this see again *ibid.*, pp. 61–93.

<sup>31</sup>Gottheil, "Christian Bahira," pp. 190–191; see also Gero, "The monk Baḥīrā," pp. 52–54. Their delimitation of the sections is different both from each other and from mine (cf. *infra*, at n. 82).

<sup>32</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 298 (ES, 19).

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 298 (ES, 19).

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 298–300 (ES, 20).

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 302 (ES, 21).

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 302–308 (ES, 22).

The three episodes have separate headings: either *tūb kātḅīnnan* (“again, we write. . .”) or *tūb ʿeltā* (“again, the matter of. . .”). Both expressions are commonly used in Syriac to introduce a new work; WS actually begins with *tūb. . . kātḅīnnan*. Since the phrase that follows (D), the second apocalypse of Sergius, *shelmat tashʿitā. . .* (“the account. . . is completed”), usually signals the end of a work, at some stage of the legend’s literary history the text must have ended there. This ending is preserved today in WS only. The three short episodes of ES were appended, thanks to their relevance to the previous text, by copyists who probably did not want to waste the rest of the paper, but who were still aware that these were distinct from the legend. That the three accounts stem from the pen of at least two copyists is shown by the different lengths of (a): one manuscript contains only a brief list of pagan idols, while the other two continue with more details on idol worship.<sup>37</sup> The stories they chose formed part of the Christian polemical arsenal; nevertheless, the accounts of the Arabs’ idol-worship and the writing of the new Qurʾān by al-Ḥajjāj are unique variants.<sup>38</sup> The three appendices give more substance to the brief (B), explaining why Islam should be different from Christianity and in various ways similar to Judaism, if it had indeed been invented by a Christian monk. Thus subsequent copyists of ES could easily consider these accounts to be part of the legend, and continue to copy them together; the copyist of the latest East-Syrian manuscript (MS Mingana Syr. 604, dated 1933) even ended the entire text with the same phrase he had already used after the second

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 298–300 (ES, 20). It is impossible to determine with certainty whether the longer version is the result of later addition, or the shorter version of subsequent omission, but the former possibility seems more likely. Not only are the manuscripts containing the longer version later, but the second half of the text is also much more pertinent to the polemical character of the legend than the first; it adds polemical assertions about the Arabs’ continuing idol worship to the preceding laconic list of idols. It is possible, however, that an early copyist who knew that these assertions are untrue of the Arabs of his day omitted them. About the relationship between the known manuscripts of ES, see *ibid.*, pp. 225–227, 236; it leaves both possibilities open.

<sup>38</sup> On section (a), and the idol worship of the Arabs in Christian polemical literature in general, see Roggema, “Muslims as crypto-idolators.” Muḥammad’s resurrection or ascension to heaven was expected to happen three days after his death according to several polemical texts. See, for example, *Istoria de Mahomet, Risālat al-Kindī*, and the chapters on the beginning of Islam in the Armenian chronicle of Mxītʿar of Ani (cf. Wolf, “The earliest Latin lives,” p. 97; Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien*, pp. 92–93; Thomson, “Muḥammad,” p. 850). For medieval European examples, see Daniel, *Islam and the West*, pp. 104–105. Stories assigning various roles to al-Ḥajjāj in the writing or collection of the Qurʾān appear in several Christian polemical treatises, e.g. in Levond’s version of the correspondence between Leo and ʿUmar, *Risālat al-Kindī*, and the disputation of Abraham of Tiberias (cf. Jeffery, “Ghevond’s text,” pp. 297–298; Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien*, p. 117; Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d’Abraham de Tibériade*, pp. 331–333 [126–134]).

apocalypse, “The account of Sergius Bahīrā is completed.”<sup>39</sup>

Turning to WS, its first noticeable peculiarity is a lengthy initial summary of its contents which then continue with a short account of the conversion of al-Nu‘mān b. al-Mundhir, the last Lakhmid king of Ḥīra (580–602), to Christianity. This introduction is meant to explain why Sergius was welcomed by the Arabs, and, rather like the investigation section in ES, serves to enhance the historical verisimilitude of the ensuing story. It is more remarkable, however, to discover that some of the material found in the appendices of ES is here incorporated into the body of the text, although in a different form. Īsho‘yahb (the name of the narrator monk in WS) says, describing the lowly state of the Arabs, that “they worshipped the idol of Awkbar who is a demon.”<sup>40</sup> Awkbar appears in the list of demons in (a); he is, indeed, the most prominent of them. WS then has a somewhat more detailed account of the deeds of Ka‘b in (B) than ES, and tells about the Arabs’ expectation of Muḥammad’s resurrection, as well as about the death of Ka‘b.<sup>41</sup> ES relates the former as a separate episode in (b) without explicitly connecting it to Ka‘b, but juxtaposing it with a note about him. This change did not make WS more coherent than ES (on the contrary, it increased the chronological tension by having Mār Yahb now remain with the Arabs until the death of both Muḥammad and Ka‘b), but the copyist-redactor’s choice of material here was not accidental: placing the story of Muḥammad’s death immediately after that of Sergius creates a telling contrast between the miracle-working bones of the saintly monk and the rotten corpse of the impostor.

### (3) *The Arabic recensions*

The literary quality of both Arabic recensions is higher than that of the Syriac ones. Their Arabic is variegated and lively, in sharp contrast to the rather plain language of both Syriac recensions. The scenes and conversations are more elaborate, thus the characters acquire some human touch. Both Arabic recensions betray their redactors’ conscious attempts to create a more integrated narrative and smooth out the incongruities of the Syriac texts at their disposal.<sup>42</sup> As Barbara Roggema

<sup>39</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 308 (ES, 22).

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 318 (WS, 1.5).

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 332–334 (WS, 9–9.6).

<sup>42</sup>At first sight A1 seems to have an absurd narrative structure, but this is only because both of its accessible manuscripts contain a version that integrated the end of A2, beginning after 17.68, the middle of the second apocalypse (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 212–215, 234–235), and thus the monk dies in (A) and again at the very end of the text. But the original A1 could not have been so incoherent; its skillful redactor would certainly not have made such a serious mistake. Probably a later copyist, working from an incomplete manuscript of A1, had access to a complete manuscript of A2,

has shown, the two translators worked independently of each other,<sup>43</sup> and accomplished their task in different ways (A1 follows the same outline as the Syriac recensions, while A2 effects a fundamental change in structure), but today it is difficult to say which of them was more successful; both Arabic recensions offer an enjoyable reading. Ironically, while the Syriac texts reveal their redactors' serious concern to increase the historical verisimilitude of the legend, either by making the narrator seek out people who knew Sergius personally or by providing some background information about Christianity among the Arabs, the redactors of the Arabic recensions came closer to achieving this goal by making the legend more coherent, unified and alive.

The redactor of A1, as mentioned above, did not change the original structure of the legend, but his small modifications throughout the text greatly improved the story. He added many minor details which make it more vivid. For instance, Sergius makes the sign of the cross before he tells his story to the narrator.<sup>44</sup> Later he mentions that he was sad to leave "Armenia,"<sup>45</sup> and that he has a little garden beside his cell in the desert, and, he says, "that is where I find solace."<sup>46</sup> The redactor also removed the most salient inconsistencies. A1 does not refer to the Qur'ān before telling the story of its writing; the Syriac recensions mentioned it once before that, rather out of context.<sup>47</sup> In A1 Sergius, a good Christian to all appearances, does not simply advise Muḥammad to teach outrageous things about Paradise and other matters, but takes pain to explain his reasons for this.<sup>48</sup> In the Syriac recensions, Sergius' disciple appears at the beginning of (C), but later he disappears without a trace. In A1 the disciple, anonymous here, is present in (A), (C) and (D), thus joining these, otherwise unconnected, parts of the legend. He first appears at the burial of the monk,<sup>49</sup> returns to him after having been healed, serves him and prays with him,<sup>50</sup> and participates in the trick of sending the Qur'ān to the Arabs on the horn of a cow.<sup>51</sup> While the Syriac recensions introduce the second apocalypse by ascribing it to

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and inadvertently complemented the text from A2 (cf. p. 214). Roggema has shown that the earlier of the two accessible manuscripts of A1 was the *Vorlage* of the later (cf. p. 229–230).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376 (A1, 2.6).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388 (A1, 5); Armenia is the translator's mistake for Bēt Armāyē (cf. p. 389, n. 17).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388 (A1, 6.8).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 266, 332 (7.3 in both ES and WS).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404 (A1, 16.7).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390 (A1, 7).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392 (A1, 10.7).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408 (A1, 16.14).

Sergius, in A1 Sergius' disciple hears it from his teacher, and transmits it to the narrator.<sup>52</sup>

Another inconsistency of the Syriac recensions is that Muḥammad seems to remain with Sergius immediately after the monk recognizes him; the narrator neglects the presence of Muḥammad's companions who are certainly not supposed to hear everything of their talk. In A1 Muḥammad returns to Sergius later, and additional remarks about keeping their conversations secret are also included.<sup>53</sup> The structure is still not seamless: for example, the narrator witnesses how Ka'b corrupts Sergius' teaching after the latter's death also in A1, and there is a veiled reference to Muḥammad in (B), but the story is much more coherent, and a great improvement on the Syriac recensions.

The redactor of A2 dealt much more freely with the Syriac material from which he worked: (B) is missing, Ka'b is not mentioned at all, no disciple of the monk (named Baḥīrā here) appears on the scene, it is the monk who tells the entire story to the narrator (here he is called the monk Marhab), he dies only at the end, and there is not a word about his burial or any miracle of his. In other words, the end of (A), the whole of (B) and the beginning of (C) are all omitted. By leaving out these episodes, the redactor fundamentally altered the structure of the text, and thus removed its chronological tensions. Despite the lost episodes, A2 is much longer than the synoptic recensions, because it is fleshed out with Baḥīrā's Christian interpretation of Qur'ānic passages and Islamic rituals which is absent from the synoptic recensions.<sup>54</sup> In this recension, the legend takes the form of a long deathbed confession, a powerful device that makes the story sound credible.

Somewhat similarly to ES, A2 continues after (D), (E): "Now I, the monk Marhab, stayed in the monastery with Baḥīrā for a long time, and he told and recounted this story to me. I saw and witnessed this entire account, and he explained to me its circumstances and its causes. I wrote it down in his presence, and verified it at his command."<sup>55</sup> The wording of these sentences and their location in the text suggest that these are concluding remarks. But the end is held off. In a long passage replete with self-reproach, Baḥīrā recounts a few more episodes from the writing of the Qur'ān, and says, "Whoever did what I described to you does not hope afterwards for the mercy of God and His Christ whom

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408 (A1, 17).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 394, 400, 404, 408 (A1, 13, 14.24, 16.2–3, 16.17).

<sup>54</sup> On this Christian exegesis of the Qur'ān, see Roggema, "A Christian reading of the Qur'ān."

<sup>55</sup> Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 506 (A2, 18–18.1); my translation follows MS Paris ar. 70, MS Paris ar. 71, and MS Gotha Orient. Ar. 2875; see *ibid.*, n. 56.

He sent for the salvation of the world. Blessed are those of His servants who persevere throughout the days of the kingdom of those people. . . .”<sup>56</sup> In this context, these words could again signal the ending, but Marhab promptly reassures Baḥīrā of God’s mercy, and continues, “These words made him feel better, and he said, ‘Write down what remains of the matter’.”<sup>57</sup> After this, several topics, recurrent in Christian polemical literature, are brought up, and finally the real concluding remarks of the narrator monk follow, almost the same as after (D): “Now I, Marhab, the sinner, stayed in the monastery with the monk Baḥīrā for a long time, and he told and described to me this story and this entire account in detail. I saw and witnessed it. . . .”<sup>58</sup>

The ruptures in (E) suggest that A2 went through a process of gradual growth; (E) seems to have been added by at least two different persons. The dissimilarity of the images of Baḥīrā<sup>59</sup> that emerge in A2 reinforces this impression. Throughout most of A2, Baḥīrā appears as a pious and benevolent Christian who acted in good faith; it was not his fault that Muḥammad and the Arabs did not convert to Christianity. In (E<sub>1</sub>),<sup>60</sup> however, the monk depicts his actions in darker colors: “Brother Marhab! I know that my sins brought upon me all this affair. . . . I studied all the books of the Torah and the books of the Prophets [. . .] and what the learned wrote about philosophy [*al-ḥikma*] and the descent of the stars on each other and the ascent of the Kingdom of the Banū Ismā‘īl. . . .”<sup>61</sup> Baḥīrā then distinguishes between what he did obeying divine command, and what he did without it, on his own account; his sin consists of advising Muḥammad to claim prophethood, and especially, including anti-Trinitarian verses in the Qur’ān.<sup>62</sup> In this part, the Muslims are depicted as fierce enemies of the Christians; they “will be struck by unbearable degradation;”<sup>63</sup> they are “rapacious wolves and vipers and ravenous predators,” and “refractory evil people” thrown “onto a faultless people.”<sup>64</sup> But the copyist who added some popular polemical arguments against Islam, and thus created (E<sub>2</sub>),<sup>65</sup> thought otherwise.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 514–516 (A2, 18.37–38).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 516 (A2, 18.40).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 526 (A2, 18.71).

<sup>59</sup> See Appendix for a chart comparing the images of the monk, Muḥammad and the Arabs in the various parts of the legend.

<sup>60</sup> Part (E<sub>1</sub>): *ibid.*, pp. 506–516 (A2, 18–18.38).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508 (A2, 18.7, 11). My translation follows MS Paris ar. 70, MS Paris ar. 71, and MS Sbath 1004 (see *ibid.*, nn. 32, 33, 37); the words I left out (“and what the prophets wrote”) are the result of dittography (*wa-kutub al-anbiyā’* [*wa-mā waṣafathu al-anbiyā’*] *wa-mā waṣafathu al-ḥukamā’*).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 508, 514, 510 (A2, 18.12, 18.34, 18.13–18).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508 (A2, 18.10).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 514 (A2, 18.35).

<sup>65</sup> Part (E<sub>2</sub>): *ibid.*, pp. 516–526 (A2, 18.39–75).

Although the Christians “will have enemies from among them,” and Christian converts to Islam are warned that “they will have no mercy,”<sup>66</sup> here Baḥīrā is confident that there was no other way for him to act: “Do not reproach me, neither you nor the one who reads it, for what I have done and committed, because I knew what I knew, I understood and discerned that he would rule, and that it was inevitable that he would rise, and reach his aim and achieve his goal. . . . So I wrote to the believers about his intention, and obtained from him a treaty and promises of his care for them all the days of his rule.”<sup>67</sup> After this, Marhab asks for God’s blessing on Baḥīrā, thanks the monk, describes how he was honored and loved by the Arabs. So the story ends.

The first image of the monk, as a devout Christian, is similar to his figure in the synoptic recensions. His only potentially heretical tendencies were his deviant views on the veneration of the cross, but they are always played down; the only function of the episode is to explain why he settled among the Arabs. In (E<sub>1</sub>) the monk’s image is quite the opposite. Baḥīrā confesses that he knowingly disobeyed God, and his sin, including anti-Trinitarian verses in the Qur’ān, is too grave to forgive. It is noteworthy that his sins are connected to his study of astrology; the motif of astrology does not appear in the synoptic recensions, but in various other Christian, Jewish and Samaritan legends on the birth of Islam we find an astrologer as an instructor or helper of Muḥammad.<sup>68</sup>

The third image of the monk, found in (E<sub>2</sub>) is similar to the first one; yet the image of Islam is different from what we find in the previous part. Muslims here are not all sworn enemies of the Christians; some of them are transformed from rapacious wolves and ravenous predators to dependable authorities bound by a treaty to care for the Christians. The image of Islam in (E<sub>2</sub>) could well be the same as in (M); there the image is implied,<sup>69</sup> here it is spelled out clearly. The two copyist-redactors of (E<sub>1</sub>) and (E<sub>2</sub>) are not only familiar with two different images

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 524 (A2, 18.70).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 526 (A2, 18.72–73).

<sup>68</sup> For a list of these legends see Gero, “The monk Baḥīrā,” pp. 54–55, n. 46. The astrologer image of the monk is first attested in the eleventh-century *Genizah* fragments of Jewish versions of the Baḥīrā legend (the legend of the ten Jewish teachers of Muḥammad), on which see Gil, “Jewish versions.” An additional Jewish example is the astrologer Buḥayrān in the sixteenth-century chronicle of Yosef Sambarī (cf. *Sefer Divrei Yosef*, p. 90). For Samaritan sources, see also Levy-Rubin, *Continuatio*, pp. 46–50. The figure of the astrologer advisor of Muḥammad might have resulted from the conflation of the legend of Muḥammad’s instruction by the Christian monk with the legend that Heraclius had been warned by astrologers that he would be defeated by a circumcised people. For a collection of references to these latter astrologers, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 218, n. 12.

<sup>69</sup> See Muḥammad’s promises to Baḥīrā that the Christians would be treated justly in Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 454–456 (A2, 15–15.5).

of the monk, but also illustrate how diametrically opposed an attitude Christians of the Islamic world could adopt towards Islam.

The polemical contents of (E<sub>1</sub>) and (E<sub>2</sub>) are also different from each other. As mentioned above, the heart of (E<sub>1</sub>) is two anti-Trinitarian verses of the Qur'ān which in no circumstances could be interpreted to correspond to Christian doctrines; the monk's sin is more the inclusion of those verses than the founding of Islam itself.<sup>70</sup> As could be expected, *Sūrat al-ikhlāṣ* (Sūra 112) is quoted here in its entirety, followed by an interpretation similar to that of Byzantine polemicists who understood *ṣamad* as *holosphuros*, implying that God is a material object. Added to it is another anti-Trinitarian verse.<sup>71</sup> Making the monk teach heresy is another way to account for the current doctrines of Islam; the copyist perhaps added this part, because A2, instead of recounting the activities of Ka'b, contains only an allusion to those who come after Baḥīrā and corrupt his Qur'ān.<sup>72</sup>

(E<sub>2</sub>) does not seem to have a similarly precise polemical agenda. Its copyist-redactor added to the text five polemical topoi which he might have considered impossible to leave out of a comprehensive explanation of the origins of Islam. Muḥammad first comes to Baḥīrā and tells him that his people are too lascivious, implying that they would be unable to conform to Christian morals. The monk therefore includes a passage in the Qur'ān that allows unrestricted polygamy.<sup>73</sup> Indignant references to polygamy in Islam abound in Christian polemical literature.<sup>74</sup> Later Muḥammad complains to Baḥīrā about his passion for Zaynab, the wife of his adopted son. As a response, the monk writes a Qur'ānic passage that allows Muḥammad to marry her.<sup>75</sup> This story, with various details, is told time and again in Christian polemical literature against Islam; to medieval Christians the Muslim story in itself, without further comment, was a definitive proof that Muḥammad was a false prophet.<sup>76</sup> Some

<sup>70</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, p. 510 (A2, 18.13–18); the passages in A1b put it more clearly (p. 416).

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 512 (A2, 18.24–26). On *Sūrat al-ikhlāṣ*, see Roggema, "A Christian reading of the Qur'ān," p. 61; Meyendorff, "Byzantine views of Islam," p. 122; and Sahas, "Holosphuros." The other anti-Trinitarian verse is Qur'ān 5: 116.

<sup>72</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 488 (A2, 16.26).

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 518 (A2, 18.44).

<sup>74</sup>For example, John of Damascus mentions it in *De Haeresibus*; it appears in *Liber denudationis*, and in Levond's version of the correspondence between Leo and 'Umar (cf. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, pp. 136–139; Burman, *Religious polemic*, pp. 288–291; Jeffery, "Ghevond's text," pp. 324–326). For Byzantine authors, see Khoury, *Polémique byzantine*, pp. 260–269; for medieval European approaches, Daniel, *Islam and the West*, pp. 135–148.

<sup>75</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, pp. 520–522 (A2, 18.58–60). For the Muslim tradition about Zaynab, see C.E. Bosworth, "Zaynab bt. Djaḥsh," *EI<sup>2</sup>*, s.v.

<sup>76</sup>We find it, for example, in *De Haeresibus*, *Istoria de Mahomet*, *Liber denudationis*, Levond's version of the correspondence between Leo and 'Umar, and *Risālat*

less obvious examples include the story about the camel of Thamūd which, says Bahīrā, he inserted into the Qurʾān to satisfy the demands of Muḥammad's followers for miracles.<sup>77</sup> This story was mocked already by John of Damascus.<sup>78</sup> Although it is not spelled out why the story of the *isrāʾ* and the *miʾrāj* appear here, they must also have been introduced into the text in order to provide Muḥammad with miracles. Since the monk made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and saw heaven in his vision on Mt. Sinai, he was qualified to help Muḥammad feign knowledge of these.<sup>79</sup> Finally the incomprehensibility of the mysterious letters of the Qurʾān (*al-fawātih*) is attacked.<sup>80</sup>

After these two main expansions of A2, some further small additions were made, but these did not affect the overall structure of the legend.<sup>81</sup>

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*al-Kindī* (cf. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, pp. 138–139; Wolf, “The earliest Latin lives,” pp. 97–99; Burman, *Religious polemic*, pp. 288–291; Jeffery, “Ghevond’s text,” p. 324; Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien*, p. 74). Daniel calls it “[p]robably the most favourite mediaeval story of Muḥammad” (speaking about medieval European writings on Islam); cf. *Islam and the West*, pp. 97–99 (quotation on p. 97). For Byzantine authors, see Khoury, *Polémique byzantine*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>77</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 516 (A2, 18.42–43).

<sup>78</sup>Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, pp. 138–141. It is also mentioned briefly in *Risālat al-Kindī*, although not as a miracle; see also its polemic against the miracles attributed to Muḥammad by his followers (cf. Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien*, p. 84, and pp. 85–92). On the story in Byzantine polemic, see Khoury, *Polémique byzantine*, pp. 155–156. On European polemic concerning Muḥammad’s miracles, see Daniel, *Islam and the West*, pp. 93–98.

<sup>79</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, pp. 518–520 (A2, 18.46–57). The *isrāʾ* and the *miʾrāj* are mocked in *Liber denudationis* (cf. Burman, *Religious polemic*, pp. 252–253, 266–269, 374–383); on these in European polemic, see Daniel, *Islam and the West*, index (*miʾrāj*); Tolan, *Saracens*, index (*miʾrāj*).

<sup>80</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, pp. 522–524 (A2, 18.63–67). Various explanations are given of these letters in anti-Islamic polemical literature; see Gil, “Jewish versions,” pp. 193–210; van Donzel, *ʿĒnbāqom: Anqaşa Amin*, pp. 172–179, 210–211.

<sup>81</sup>There are some passages in (E) of A1b which do not fit well their context, and are without parallel in A2. For example, 18.8 of A1b (cf. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 416) is such a passage. It should read: “. . . and I know them (i.e., my sins), and I am certain that this book will inevitably fall [into the hands of many Christians], and it will be proof for them, like a cutting sword, against their enemies and against all those hostile to them, and they will defend (read *wa-yaqū* for *w-t-q-w-*) the laws (*nawāmīs*) of their book with it.” A comparison with 18.8 in A2 (p. 508) helps to add some missing words (see the translation on p. 417), and shows that what follows them is the result of a reinterpretation of the passage; it is out of context in (E<sub>1</sub>) where Bahīrā blames himself for helping the enemies of the Christians. The addition in A1b, however, confidently claims the opposite: when “this book” falls into the hands of the Christians, they will be able to defend their religion with it. Three of the five manuscripts of A2 that were accessible to the editor (MS Paris ar. 70, MS Paris ar. 71 and MS Gotha Orient. Ar. 2875) are similarly optimistic; they would use “this book” against those who leave the faith (*ʿalā aʿdāʾihim al-khārījīn* ‘*an/min al-nāmūs*). Without these passages “this book” seems to be the Qurʾān (as later in 18.13 and 18.21, p. 510), but with them it is more likely to refer to the

(4) *The making of the legend*

Richard Gottheil already pointed out the existence of various layers in the texts; so did Stephen Gero, the only other scholar who was interested in the development of the Christian Baḥīrā legend.<sup>82</sup> Although the over-arching polemical message provides the Syriac recensions too with some thematic unity, (M), the common material of the synoptic versions has been shown above to be laden with inconsistencies, even contradictions, so conspicuous that it cannot stem from the pen of one author nor can it be a written version of one orally transmitted story. Instead, three of the four parts of (M) may be considered as separate literary units, two substantial enough to have circulated independently.

The process of the development of (M) from its building blocks was probably gradual<sup>83</sup> and occurred under the influence of the oral culture of eastern Christianity. That it was gradual is supported by the structure of (M), and by the various ways the copyist-redactors formed (M) into the recensions extant today, as examined above. My suggestion that it occurred under the influence of oral culture is based on our knowledge of how non-Muslims reacted to the Arab conquests and to the challenge of Islam. Counter-histories of Islam are as old as Islam itself; accounts alternative to the Muslim narrative of the origins of Islam are known already from their rejection in the Qurʾān, and later from the literatures of the non-Muslim communities of the Islamic world. Some of these stories gained popularity, developed into numerous versions, and were recorded in many surviving writings. Others, less successful, survive only in the work of a single author. Some orally transmitted versions of counter-historical legends have been reported even recently.<sup>84</sup> Christian texts reacting to Arab rule began to be written soon after the conquests; the earliest of such popular genres was the apocalypse. It is usually known as a written genre, but one can imagine that it could also have been part of oral culture.<sup>85</sup> Later, the growing religious challenge of Islam prompted

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book written by the narrator about the deeds of Baḥīrā (as in 18.12, p. 508), except probably in the case of A1b. Three more passages of A1b (18.22, parts of 18.33, and 18.68, pp. 414, 420, 428) are without even partial parallel in any manuscript of A2: one again does not fit into its larger context (18.22), another is a gloss on the previous sentence (18.33), and all are concerned with monks. These probably stem from the same monk copyist of the legend.

<sup>82</sup>Their respective identifications of the layers vary slightly. Gottheil distinguished between (A), (C), and (D) as separate parts, but did not mention (B) (cf. his "Christian Bahira," pp. 190–191); Gero identified four sections, but considered the miracles wrought by the monk's bones part of (B) (cf. "The monk Baḥīrā," pp. 52–54).

<sup>83</sup>This is also the opinion of Gero; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 55, 57.

<sup>84</sup>See Salinger, "A Christian Muḥammad legend," p. 319; Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 195; and Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 31.

<sup>85</sup>Cf. the figure of Pierce Gwyn Mawr in Antal Szerb's novel, *The Pendragon legend*. The character might stem from the author's own experience. Relevant medieval

Christians to provide a reasoned defense of their own doctrines and a critique of Muslim ones. This need was answered in apologetical writings, very often presented as accounts of religious debates, produced in increasing numbers from the eighth-century onwards. Most arguments known to us today only from texts must have proved useful in oral debates with Muslims, public or private,<sup>86</sup> and were recorded to help other Christians defend their religion.<sup>87</sup> It has been shown above that many building blocks of (M) appear in other writings as well. Since most of them were certainly part of the oral culture of Christians living under Islamic rule, in most cases it would be futile to look for their textual origins.

For written transmission prior to (M) we have some indirect evidence only in the case of (A) and (D), the life of the visionary monk, and the second apocalypse of Sergius. Two Latin manuscripts containing the narrative of (A) survive, but the apocalypse is a hybrid of the visions in (A) and (D).<sup>88</sup> The Latin text is likely to have originated in the separate (A) and (D), put together by a redactor in Syriac or by the Latin translator.<sup>89</sup> This is more plausible than to suppose that a redactor extracted it from the full Christian Baḥīrā legend, and omitted precisely the story of Muhammad's instruction by the monk, a most popular legend about the rise of Islam.

Gottheil suggested that (A), the life of Sergius, was the earliest part of the legend.<sup>90</sup> The vision of the monk on Mt. Sinai is datable to the reign of al-Ma'mūn, probably to the time of the wars in the 810s, on the basis of its last historically identifiable symbol, the seven horns of the black beast which stands for the first seven 'Abbāsī caliphs.<sup>91</sup> This

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examples, if such exist, might be found in hagiography.

<sup>86</sup>It is well-known that many Christian apologetic texts are based, in various degrees, on public debates in the *majālis* of caliphs or emirs (cf. Griffith, "The monk in the emir's *majlis*"). Even if exaggerated, the complaints of al-Jāḥiẓ about the Christians pestering uneducated Muslims with their critique of the Qur'ān is a useful reminder how deeply interreligious debate could pervade daily life (cf. his *al-Radd 'alā 'l-naṣārā*, p. 320).

<sup>87</sup>The best example I know is the remark of the Jewish Yūsuf al-Baṣīr who tells that he wrote his polemical treatise against Islam in order to help his co-religionists in such disputations (cf. Sklare, "Responses," p. 142, n. 18; see also pp. 140–142). It is likely that this was a function of similar Christian texts as well.

<sup>88</sup>See Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 215–217, 234. The later Latin manuscript has been edited in Bignami-Odier and Levi Della Vida, "Une version latine."

<sup>89</sup>The Latin text was probably translated from Syriac (cf. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 217–218; and *eadem*, "The legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā," p. 121).

<sup>90</sup>Gottheil, "Christian Bahira," p. 190; so did Gero, "The monk Baḥīrā," pp. 55, 57.

<sup>91</sup>The dating of the apocalypse to the reign of al-Ma'mūn was suggested by Armand Abel (cf. his "L'Apocalypse de Bahīra," pp. 8–9) on the basis of A2. His dating is

dating is reinforced by the notorious eschatological disposition of the period,<sup>92</sup> and by the expectation of the Kingdom of the Maḥdī, the son of Fāṭīma, after the last king of the Banū Hāshim; this expectation was possibly inspired by the appointment of ‘Alī al-Riḍā as heir apparent. Unlike (M) as a whole, (A) is a carefully composed work; under its brusqueness a balanced structure lies. God’s plan is communicated to the Christians in detail through the vision of the monk, then the major actors in the events, the Byzantine and the Persian emperors and the Arabs, are briefly told what concerns them. The prime goal of (A) is to make up for the unsettling lack of prophecy about the victory of the Arabs; there is no explicit religious debate, but the otherwise compelling Muslim scenario, that in idolatrous Arabia only God could have been the source of the Islamic doctrines and practices, is undermined by making a Christian monk live among the Arabs. Because of the tight unity of (A) and its general focus on the monk’s vision, the 810s is likely to be the date of the entire part of (A) too.

(D), the second apocalypse of Sergius, serves a function similar to (A). It is a greatly expanded version of the vision in (A) and it uses the same apocalyptic imagery in the same sequence. This text probably also originates from the 810s or shortly thereafter.<sup>93</sup> All recensions contain, at crucial points, passages that may be understood to delay the fulfillment of the prophecy indeterminately. In the vision of (A), the last king of the Banū Hāshim is simply followed by the Maḥdī, the son

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accurate, although his analysis is mostly untenable today. The seven horns of the black beast were identified as the first seven ‘Abbāsī caliphs in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 271–274.

<sup>92</sup>Cf. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 63–64; Cooperson, *al-Ma’mūn*, pp. 62–64.

<sup>93</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 286, 290, 360, 410, 502 (ES, 17.9 and 17.57 eight kings; WS, 17.57 seven kings; A1, 17.7 twelve kings if it refers to Banū Hāshim at all; A2, 17.57 seven kings). The kings of the Banū Hāshim are described in detail in ES, WS and A2 (the corresponding passages are missing from A1). In WS and A2 Baḥīrā prophesies that one of these kings will have two names, two one name, two will be from the Torah, one with “three signs,” and another with seven. In ES he foretells eight kings, the eighth with “five signs” (and accidentally omits the one with two names; an early copyist’s mistake). The overall solution of the riddle is undoubtedly the first seven and eight ‘Abbāsī caliphs; the question is how the specifics of the prophecy should be paired off with them. The two from the Torah must indeed be Mūsā al-Hādī and Hārūn al-Rashīd, as suggested in Hoyland’s partial explanation of these passages (see his *Seeing Islam*, p. 274). I was unable to fully solve the puzzle. It should be noted, however, that we are not looking for caliphs with three, five and seven “signs,” but for names of caliphs written with three, five and seven letters. It seems that all modern commentators of the text have been misled by the medieval Arabic translator’s ‘*alāmāt*’; he understood the Syriac *ātawātā* as the plural of *ātā* (‘sign’), although *ātawātā* can also be the plural of *ātūtā* (‘character, letter of the alphabet’). The latter meaning is also suggested by the wording of the passage in WS and A2; both connect *ātawātā* to the names of the kings.

of Fāṭima, but here the Kingdom of the Banū Hāshim is characterized by a range of tyrannical acts, economic hardships, and natural catastrophes that hardly ever occur at the same time: "... There will be severe famine and plague in place after place because of them, and slaughter and bloodshed... The people will become food for the birds and the beasts of the earth... The kings of the earth will come to Babel, bound in fetters and their honored ones in iron chains... There will be signs in the sky, and wonders on the earth, the sun will become dark, and the moon will not show its light... The land of Babel will tremble and quake twice a day... When all these things have been fulfilled, know that the Kingdom of the Banū Hāshim has come to an end..."<sup>94</sup> (A) and (D) probably circulated separately from each other; they are able to stand independently, and render one another superfluous.

In fact, other prophecies in the text also show signs of having been updated. WS adds one gold, one silver, and one copper horn to the seven iron horns of the black beast,<sup>95</sup> and A1 adds an unspecified number of small horns to its seven big horns in (A).<sup>96</sup> These additional horns successfully update the entire first vision. Two other changes perhaps attempt at the same thing: A1 states in the introduction that Sergius prophesied that forty kings were to reign from among the Banū Ismā'īl,<sup>97</sup> and ES changes the Lybians fighting the Turks into Daylamites in (D).<sup>98</sup> The latter modifications did not affect the overall structure of the apocalypses; in fact, in ES the Daylamites fight the Turks after the Romans had triumphed again.

But it was connecting (A) and (D) to legends concerning the rise of Islam that proved to be the most successful means of securing the continuous relevance of the text. After the monk Sergius somehow became identified with the protagonist of the Muslim Bahīrā legend, a copyist-redactor wrote down the story as he imagined it on the basis of these legends and other standard hagiographical, polemical and apologetical material, thus creating (C).<sup>99</sup>

(C) is the only major part of the legend that probably did not circulate independently. It presupposes (A); the two parts are loosely connected through the figure of Sergius' disciple, and the inconsistency of (C) has been pointed out above. In (C) the main focus shifts from the

<sup>94</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, pp. 286–290 (ES, 17.20, 24, 31–32, 52, 58). In WS these passages closely correspond to ES, in A2 they are similar, but in A1, which strongly abbreviated the second apocalypse, many of them are missing.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 322 (WS, 3.13).

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 380 (A1, 3.13).

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 376 (A1, 2.1).

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 294 (ES, 17.104–105).

<sup>99</sup>On these developments see the second part of the paper.

victorious presence of the Arabs to their religion: (A) implicitly questions the Muslim narrative concerning the origin of Islam, (C) does the same explicitly by telling a different, but no less compelling story, about the monk's instruction of Muḥammad. Through their conversation we learn about lax Christian teachings for the Arabs; the doctrines appear to be the same as Christian doctrines, but the required religious practice is much more lenient. The Syriac versions do not explain why the monk deemed it necessary to instruct Muḥammad in this way, but they allude to the widespread image of the Arabs as a pleasure-seeking and lustful people.<sup>100</sup> A1 explicitly refers to the dilemma of the monk who wanted to transmit the truth, yet could not induce the Arabs to follow it,<sup>101</sup> but those passages are characteristic of that recension's lively style, and do not belong to (M). Interestingly, Muḥammad and the monk are represented in a rather positive light in (C) and none of them is blamed for failing to convert the Arabs to Christianity.<sup>102</sup>

Although (C) provides some explanation for the ways of the Muslims in all three synoptic versions, an alternative reason is supplied by stories about Jewish involvement in the foundation of Islam which had been circulating among Christians already since the rise of Islam. As time passed, these influences acquired names and personalities, and eventually Ka'b al-Aḥbār became the main figure responsible for the Jewish impact on Islam.<sup>103</sup> Since this legend was very well known, it inevitably came to be inserted into the Christian Baḥīrā legend, and generated (B).

It remains to consider which community produced the legend, where and when.<sup>104</sup> It has been mentioned above that (A), the life of the vi-

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 280, 350 (ES and WS, 16.7–8).

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 404 (A1, 16.5–7).

<sup>102</sup>This is true only in the synoptic versions. In (C) of A2 Muḥammad is represented as being as pleasure-seeking as his people, and it is due partly to his lack of understanding that the Arabs did not convert to Christianity: he was capable of understanding only Arian Christology. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 480 (A2, 16.24).

<sup>103</sup>In some West-Syrian writings, Muḥammad learns from Jews while trading in Palestine. This story is found in late chronicles, like that of Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle to the year 1234*, but probably goes back to Theophilus of Edessa through Dionysius of Tell Maḥrē (cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 403). Theophanes Confessor gives a story about ten Jews who joined Muḥammad and influenced him; the story is known in Jewish versions as well (cf. Mango and Scott, *The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, p. 465; Gil, "Jewish versions"). The earliest story in which the foundation of Islam involved Jews is known from the seventh-century chronicle of Sebeos (cf. Thomson, "Muḥammad," pp. 830–831). The function of Ka'b in Christian polemic against Islam is similar to that of Ezra and Paul in Muslim polemics against Judaism and Christianity (on the latter two see Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined worlds*, pp. 19–74; Koningsveld, "The Islamic image of Paul," pp. 200–216; Reynolds, *A Muslim theologian*, pp. 163–170).

<sup>104</sup>See Appendix for a chart comparing these data for the various recensions of the legend.

sionary monk, can be securely dated to the 810s. It clearly originated in Iraq. While the monk's origins differ in each recension,<sup>105</sup> all of them present him as leaving for Iraq to spread his teaching about the one cross.<sup>106</sup> The white beast symbolizing the Umayyads settles in the West in all recensions; this makes sense only if the author lived east of Syria.<sup>107</sup> The legend circulated in all Christian communities of the Islamic world. Three of the four recensions betray their origins: there is an East-Syrian, a West-Syrian and a Melkite recension (A1).<sup>108</sup> Griffith suggests that the legend originated among West-Syrians.<sup>109</sup> Roggema, however, has shown that his criterion - the use of the Seleucid Era in the second apocalypse - does not exclude an East-Syrian provenance;<sup>110</sup> she concludes that it cannot be established which community produced the legend.<sup>111</sup> But it seems to me that there is something else in the text that indicates that (A) was composed by a West-Syrian, and not an East-Syrian, author. Near the end of the monk's vision a beautifully ornamented chariot appears: "This is the Kingdom of the Romans which will rule at the end all the kingdoms of the world," as the angel explains to Sergius in all recensions.<sup>112</sup> Roman rule before the End of Days features as part of the sequence of events in apocalypses of West-Syrian,<sup>113</sup> but not of East-Syrian origin.<sup>114</sup>

(A), therefore, was probably written by a West-Syrian author in Iraq in the 810s. It is also plausible that (M) was put together in the same

<sup>105</sup>The monk hails "from a village called Shūshān" in Bēt Garmay in ES, but in WS he departs from the "monastery of the Ḥīreans," his origins being "from a village called *T-sh-n*" in Bēt Qūdshāyē. In A2 he comes from Antioch; cf. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 298, 256, 318, 434 (ES, 19, 2.6; WS, 2.1; A2, 2.5). A1 does not specify the monk's origins.

<sup>106</sup>ES has Bēt Armāyē identified with Shinar (*Sen'ār*), WS has Bēt Rōmāyē (a corruption of Bēt Armāyē, see *ibid.*, p. 331, n. 34) also identified with Shinar, A1 has Armenia (*Armīniya*, the Arabic translator's misunderstanding of Bēt Armāyē, see *ibid.*, p. 389, n. 17), and A2 probably originally had Shinar (see *ibid.*, p. 445, n. 16; *bīlād al-Aytār* or *balad al-Ansār* in the manuscripts); cf. *ibid.*, pp. 266, 330, 388, 444 (ES, 5-6; WS, 5-6; A1, 5; A2, 5).

<sup>107</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 258, 322, 380, 436 (3.12 in all recensions). There are some exceptions: the white beast settles in the desert (*b-madbrā*) instead of the West (*b-ma'rbā*) in two of the three East-Syrian manuscripts used for the edition.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 104-113.

<sup>109</sup>Griffith, "The monk Baḥīrā," pp. 156-159.

<sup>110</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 66-67, n. 18. These are the only options: the original language of the legend was Syriac (cf. p. 237) which excludes Melkite authors as late as the ninth century.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 260 (ES, 3.19).

<sup>113</sup>Cf. Reinink, "John bar Penkaye," p. 89, n. 73.

<sup>114</sup>See the End of Days described in *Ktābā d-rēš mellē* and in the *Revelations and Testimonies about Our Lord's Dispensation* (cf. Reinink, "John bar Penkaye," and Debié, "Unedited Syriac text").

community and in the same region, because otherwise it would not be so similar in all extant recensions. The special concern for monks in (C)<sup>115</sup> points to an origin in a monastic milieu. Furthermore, since the changes occur consistently in all the manuscripts used for the edition, the extant versions of the three synoptic recensions might tentatively be dated with the help of the copyists' attempts to update their apocalypses. WS probably reached its current form after the reign of al-Ma'mūn (813–833), and, at the latest, during the reign of al-Mutawakkil (847–861);<sup>116</sup> A1 during the first half of the tenth century, conceivably as a reaction to the first military successes of the Byzantines against the Arabs for a long time,<sup>117</sup> and ES perhaps in the mid-tenth century.<sup>118</sup> The modifications of some passages in the second apocalypse suggest that A2 originated in Syria in the twelfth century (also a probable date of its earliest manuscript), thanks to hopes aroused by the arrival of the Crusaders.<sup>119</sup> But none of

<sup>115</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥūrā*, pp. 278, 346–348, 402 (ES, 15–15.3; WS, 15–15.4; A1, 15–15.4). A similar passage appears also in A2 (pp. 454–456, 15–15.5).

<sup>116</sup>The three small horns after the seven iron horns (*ibid.*, p. 322, WS, 3.13) indicate that the redactor was active after the reign of the seventh 'Abbāsī caliph, al-Ma'mūn (813–833), and during the reign of one of the next three caliphs, al-Mu'taṣim (833–842), al-Wāthiq (842–847) or al-Mutawakkil (847–861).

<sup>117</sup>Sergius' prophecy of the forty kings of the Ishmaelites (*ibid.*, p. 376, A1, 2.1) reveals the expected total number of the kings of the Arabs, and the many small horns added to the seven horns of the Banū Hāshim in the first apocalypse (p. 380, A1, 3.13) an indeterminate number of additional, albeit weaker, 'Abbāsī caliphs after the first seven. The fortieth caliph was al-Mustakfi (944–946), but as forty is a symbolic number, the updating could equally have taken place decades earlier. Another detail pointing to the first half of the tenth century is 15.4 (p. 402) which reads: "They [*mulūk al-Rūm*] will be your equal in wars and power;" the corresponding passage in WS and ES mentions only the victory of the Romans in the future (also in A1), and is entirely missing from A2 (cf. pp. 278, 348, 456). It is unlikely that the Byzantines were depicted as the equals of the Arabs in military matters before the tenth century.

<sup>118</sup>Whether an attempt at updating the apocalypse or the mistake of a copyist who was not familiar with the Lybians, the change from Lybians to Daylamites (*ibid.*, p. 294, ES, 17.105) must have taken place after the Daylamites appeared on the political scene in the Caliphate. This dating is the least certain of the three; as the change from Lybians to Daylamites does not really update the apocalypse, it might easily be an accidental copyist's mistake in the ancestor of all extant manuscripts.

<sup>119</sup>While 17.56 of A2 (*ibid.*, p. 502) refers to the imminent end of Arab rule in Syria, the parallel passages of ES and WS speak about the end of Arab rule in general (pp. 290, 358–360, 17.56 in ES and WS; see also p. 503, n. 119). The passage is left out of A1. Syria is mentioned also in 17.73 in A1b and A2 (pp. 412, 504), but not in the Syriac recensions (17.73 in ES and WS, pp. 292, 362). 17.73 in A2 and A1b foretells people coming from the West who "enter the Promised Land and reach the land of Syria;" this description best matches the Crusaders. Other references to people coming from the West are found in two more places in A2 (17.62, p. 502, and 3.16, p. 438; the latter refers to them as reaching Jerusalem); the corresponding passages in the other recensions contain nothing similar. A further detail that may point to the Syrian provenance of A2 is Sergius' Antiochene origins (p. 434, 2.5). Roggema, Griffith and Gero dated the Syriac recensions to the time of al-Ma'mūn, and A2 to a

these considerations should apply to all small sections of the recensions; (a) of ES is a useful reminder how late a part of a text might be: (a) is about twice as long in the two modern manuscripts (dated 1889 and 1933) as in the old one (which is undated; estimates vary between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century).<sup>120</sup> While this does not mean that the additional material of (a) is necessarily later than the fourteenth or seventeenth century,<sup>121</sup> it is first attested only as late as the end of the nineteenth century. In other cases it might be accidental that none of the extant manuscripts differ more from each other. This is especially the case with A1 of which only two manuscripts are accessible, the earlier of which is the *Vorlage* of the later one.<sup>122</sup>

### Did the monk Sergius instruct Muḥammad?

*Nomen est omen.* Since Richard Gottheil gave his edition the title “A Christian Bahira Legend” in 1898, scholars discussing the texts often introduced and interpreted them as the Christian transformation of the Muslim Baḥīrā legend for polemical purposes. “This tale of how a monk bore witness to the prophethood of Muḥammad was taken up by Christian authors and fashioned into an account of how a monk instructed Muḥammad in monotheism and wrote for him a scripture,” as one scholar has put it.<sup>123</sup>

The foregoing analysis has made it clear that the Muslim Baḥīrā legend could not have served as the “basis” for its Christian namesake.<sup>124</sup> The Christian legend consists of several independent parts, each comprising a number of polemical and other topoi; the encounter episode, the only section of the narrative similar to the Muslim story, is just one

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later period (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 205–206; Griffith, “The monk Baḥīrā,” p. 157; and Gero, “The monk Baḥīrā,” pp. 54–55). See Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 87, n. 102 for earlier, untenable attempts to date the legend.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 298–300 (ES, 20); on the dating of the manuscripts see p. 238. Another, now lost, nineteenth-century manuscript also had the shorter version of (a); about this manuscript, cf. *ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>121</sup>See the discussion about the relationship between the manuscripts *ibid.*, pp. 225–236.

<sup>122</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>123</sup>Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 477. Similar claims have often been made (see for example, Gottheil, “Christian Bahira,” p. 189; Griffith, “The monk Baḥīrā,” pp. 148, 153; Boisset, “Compléments,” p. 123; Roggema, “The legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā,” p. 107; *eadem*, “A Christian reading of the Qurʾān,” p. 57; and Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 88), but the only serious attempt to substantiate it is found in Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 37–60, especially pp. 56–60.

<sup>124</sup>Gottheil used this word in his “Christian Bahira,” p. 189.

of these building blocks. (A), the oldest part of the legend, does not contain any motif from the Muslim Baḥīrā legend, and although the encounter episode is of central importance for (C), it seems to have been introduced at a later phase of the development of the legend in a rather careless manner. I shall now try to trace when and why it was connected to the life of Sergius.

According to the story in (C), the monk taught the Arabs and healed their sick. The Arabs often came to water their cattle at his well. The monk also prophesied to them, "God will raise up a great man from among you, and... his name will be Muḥammad."<sup>125</sup> This prophecy is followed by the encounter episode:

One day, when they were coming to the well, Baḥīrā was standing outside his cell. He looked and saw them from far away, as they were coming, Muḥammad with them. When he saw him, he knew that something great was to become of the boy, because he saw a certain vision above him, and knew that in him his prophecy would be fulfilled. When they arrived at the well, they went to him inside the cell, as they were accustomed. The boy Muḥammad was sitting outside at the well, saying to himself, "When my brothers come out and leave, I will enter too."

Then Mār Sargīs Baḥīrā said to them, "There is someone with you who is to become great."

They said to him, "A simple-minded foolish boy is with us."

Father Sargīs said to them, "Call him, so that I can see him."

When he came in, Sargīs rose, then sat down. He told them about the vision that was above his head. They, however, were not aware of the vision. He then blessed him...

The episode ends with the monk prophesying the future greatness of Muḥammad, and the kingdom of his descendants.<sup>126</sup> This is the story as given in ES; the two other synoptic recensions add more details. WS explains that the vision above Muḥammad's head was similar to a cloud, and has Muḥammad's companions inform the monk that Muḥammad is

<sup>125</sup>This section is in Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 268–270 (ES, 10.7–11.6); it corresponds to pp. 336–338 and p. 392 (WS, 10.7–11.5; A1, 10.7–11.7) in the other synoptic recensions. The quotation is at the end of this section. In A2 (pp. 444–448, 11–11.3, 6.5, 11.5–11.6) the monk is no healer or teacher of the Arabs, only prophesies to them; as he dies at the very end of the text, the end of (A), (B) and the beginning of (C) are left out. In a similar prophecy passage of (A), there is no mention of Muḥammad (pp. 266, 330–332, 388; 6.5 in all synoptic recensions).

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 270–272 (ES, 12–13.1).

an orphan.<sup>127</sup> A1 emphasizes that Muḥammad was still “a small boy.” At the beginning of the episode, the monk simply recognizes Muḥammad, and later, when he talks to his companions, he tells them about “what he noticed above his head,” and shows them “the sign that was on him.” The monk says to his disciple, among other things, that Muḥammad “will call himself a prophet.” Unlike in the other two synoptic recensions, here Muḥammad stays outside with another boy, and when the monk calls them in, he chooses Muḥammad from the two, and praises him. This version of the episode also contains a warning of the monk to Muḥammad’s companions, “Protect and guard him against the Jews.”<sup>128</sup>

The encounter episode as given in ES contains at least two details that evoke the Muslim Baḥīrā legend:<sup>129</sup> the motif of the vision above Muḥammad’s head and the Davidic motif (i.e., Muḥammad, the small boy, stays outside while the others enter, and the monk has to ask his companions to call him in).<sup>130</sup> Both of these motifs are found in all synoptic versions. Therefore, they probably belong to the early ninth-century (M). However, A2 lacks any motif recalling the Muslim legends: the monk recognizes that it is Muḥammad in whom his prophecy will be fulfilled on the basis of Muḥammad’s abilities, and talks immediately to Muḥammad who is a young man rather than a boy.<sup>131</sup> In other cases when A2 deviates from (M), it simply omits or adds material; this is the only section of (M) that A2 presents in a rewritten form. Alternatively, could perhaps the encounter episode of A2 have been part of the original (M) instead of the one in the synoptic recensions?

First, it might be useful to identify from which version of the Muslim

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338–340 (WS, 12–13.1).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 392–394 (A1, 12–13.1).

<sup>129</sup> By ‘Muslim Baḥīrā legend’ I mean the Muslim legends about the recognition of Muḥammad’s prophethood by a Christian monk (or, in one version, by a learned Jew, *ḥabr*), whether he is anonymous or called Baḥīrā or some other name. These belong to a wider category of recognition legends in which Muḥammad’s future prophethood is attested by Jews, Christians, pagans, even *jinn*s. The stories about the meeting of the Christian monk and Muḥammad are, however, clearly distinguishable by a common plot: (I) during a trade trip to Syria, (II) Muḥammad is recognized as special by a monk (III) who finds out that Muḥammad is an orphan and (IV) warns him against enemies seeking to destroy him. Motif (I) is a unique feature of the Muslim legends, but motifs (II), (III) and (IV) are commonly found in lives of heroes in the cultures of the Mediterranean and beyond. While motifs (III) and (IV) are occasionally missing from versions of the Muslim Baḥīrā legend, motif (II) is often greatly expanded, and becomes a vehicle for a variety of prophethood signs, sometimes known also from other Muslim legends about Muḥammad. They include the cloud which follows Muḥammad; the tree which bends its branches to give him shade, or, having been dry, sprouts leaves, and the *khātām al-nubuwwa*, a bodily sign of prophethood on his back.

<sup>130</sup> See 1 Samuel 16: 11–12.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 448–452 (A2, 12–13.1).

legend the motifs of the synoptic recensions could have been borrowed, in order to establish whether it was accessible when and where (M) was composed. In the majority of the thirteen versions of the Muslim legend I found in mostly ninth- and tenth-century Muslim writings<sup>132</sup>, Muḥammad is a small child when he meets the monk,<sup>133</sup> but the latter is called Bahīrā in only six versions.<sup>134</sup> The cloud motif (a cloud or two angels that provide Muḥammad with shade in the heat), evoked in the vision above Muḥammad's head in the Christian legend, is missing only in four cases.<sup>135</sup> Muḥammad is an orphan, as in WS, in eight versions.<sup>136</sup> The two motifs evoked in A1, the mark of prophethood that the monk discovers on Muḥammad's back, and the monk's warning to Muḥammad's companions about the Jews (or the Byzantines, or the Jews and the Christians, or the people of Syria), occur six and ten times, respectively.<sup>137</sup> The Davidic motif, echoed in all the synoptic recensions of the Christian legend, is found in five versions; in the Muslim legend Muḥammad, the youngest in the caravan, stays outside to guard the baggage while his companions enter the cell of the monk for a meal, the monk has to call him in, and the ensuing conversation resembles the one in the Christian legend.<sup>138</sup> I did not find the modification of the Davidic motif given in A1 (Muḥammad stays outside together with another boy, making the motif more closely resemble its biblical model)

<sup>132</sup>(1) Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, p. 74; (2) 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 5, p. 318; (3) Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, pp. 98–99; (4.1.1) Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 1, pp. 119–120; Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 1/3, pp. 1127–1129 (the last two have the same structure, but there are slight variations in wording); (4.1.2) Ibn Bukayr, *Maghāzī*, pp. 81–82; Dūlābī, *Dhurriyya*, pp. 47–48; and Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il*, vol. 2, pp. 66–67 (the structure is identical in these last three, but there are occasional differences in wording); (4.2) Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, p. 83; (5.1) Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl al-dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 187–188; (5.2) Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 1/3, pp. 1123–1125; (5.3) Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 1, pp. 115–117; Ibn Bukayr, *Maghāzī*, pp. 73–76; and Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il*, vol. 2, pp. 26–29 (again, the structure is the same in these last three, but there are differences in wording); (5.4) Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, pp. 99–101; (5.5) Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl al-dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 182–186; (6.1) Ibn 'Asākir, *Dimashq*, vol. 71, pp. 339–340; (6.2) Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 7, p. 327 (this version occurs in a few other ninth- or tenth-century writings as well, and all agree almost word for word with the one given by Ibn Abī Shayba); (7) Wāḥidī, *Asbāb*, p. 284. (6.1) and (7) are attested only in writings later than the tenth century. I did not count (4.1.1) and (4.1.2) as different versions, because they vary only slightly, but have different *isnāds*. There are additional versions as well, especially in works from the tenth century or later, but lacking *isnāds*; these are unhelpful for my present purposes.

<sup>133</sup>In all except for (4.1), (4.2) and (7).

<sup>134</sup>In (5.1), (5.2), (5.3), (5.4), (5.5) and (7).

<sup>135</sup>In (1), (2), (3) and (7).

<sup>136</sup>In (1), (2), (3), (5.1), (5.2), (5.3), (5.4) and (5.5).

<sup>137</sup>The mark of prophethood occurs in (5.2), (5.3), (5.4), (5.5), (6.1) and (6.2); the warning is missing in (4.1), (4.2) and (7).

<sup>138</sup>In (5.1), (5.3), (5.4), (6.1) and (6.2).

in any version of the Muslim legend. Unless an instance of this variant escaped my attention, it might stem from a lost oral or written version, or it might be an innovation introduced by the redactor of A1. According to this comparison, three versions of the Muslim Bahīrā legend, (5.1), (5.3), and (5.4), have all the motifs of (M), and two of the three, (5.3) and (5.4), have the additional motifs of A1.<sup>139</sup>

These three versions are known today from the works of (5.1) Ibn Bābawayh (d. 991), (5.3) Ibn Hishām (d. 833 or 828), Ibn Bukayr (d. 815), al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066), and (5.4) Ibn Sa‘d (d. 845) — that is, from authors who were active either around the time of or later than the writing of (M).<sup>140</sup> The life of a legend, however, does not begin or end with its being written down; the recorded versions we read today are only accidental samples from a rich variety narrated for centuries before and after these authors lived. Thanks to the *isnāds* usually placed before the Muslim legends, we are able to catch a glimpse of when and where they circulated before being recorded.<sup>141</sup> An examination of the biographies of the transmitters mentioned in the *isnāds* point to an Iraqi, probably Kūfan, provenance in the case of the versions that influenced the encounter episode of (M),<sup>142</sup> agreeing with the Iraqi origin of (M). These transmitters were active from the second half of the eighth to the late ninth century CE.<sup>143</sup> This matches the period when (M) was presumably

<sup>139</sup>(5.1), (5.3) and (5.4) contain all the motifs found in both WS and ES, and the mark of prophethood motif of A1 is missing from (5.1).

<sup>140</sup>On these authors, see the relevant entries in *EI*<sup>2</sup>; Ibn Bukayr is mentioned in W. Raven, “Sīra,” *EI*<sup>2</sup>, s.v.

<sup>141</sup>It seems that most of the fourteen *isnāds* are genuine. Two versions of the legend are attributed to eyewitnesses of the events, two to near-contemporaries, but the first transmitters of the remaining ten all died ca. 100–150 AH (ca. 718–767 CE). Since the authors did not attempt to make these ten *isnāds* look reliable, at least they are likely to be authentic from the start.

<sup>142</sup>(5.1) Abān b. ‘Uthmān b. Yahyā al-Lu‘lu‘ī al-Bajaī al-Aḥmar, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Kūfī, and Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim b. al-Khalīl, Abū Ishāq al-Qummī, originally from Kūfa; (5.3) Yūnus b. Bukayr al-Shaybānī, Abū Bakr al-Kūfī, Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Tamīmī al-‘Uṭāridī, Abū ‘Umar al-Kūfī, and the first recorded transmitter, Muḥammad b. Ishāq, born in Medina, moved to Baghdad and died there; (5.4) Ibn Sa‘d, the author, was born in Baṣra and died in Baghdad; his informant was al-Wāqidī who was of Medinan origin and later settled in Baghdad. The biographical details of most of the above are found in the relevant entries in Mizzi, *Tahdhīb*; for Abān b. ‘Uthmān, see Ibn Ḥajar, *Lisān*, vol. 1, p. 118; for Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 219, and for Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Sa‘d and al-Wāqidī, see also the relevant entries in *EI*<sup>2</sup>. Most of those other versions that have Kūfan transmitters usually contain all but one of the four motifs of the encounter episode of (M) (in addition to the cloud motif and the Davidic motif, the monk is called Baḥīrā, and Muḥammad is a child), and even the additional motifs of WS and A1, whereas those which have no Kūfan transmitters contain only one.

<sup>143</sup>(5.1) I was not able to determine when Abān b. ‘Uthmān and Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim died. The former was the disciple of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq who died in 148 AH (765 CE), and

compiled. Therefore, the redactor of (M) could well have had access to the relevant versions of the Muslim Baḥīrā legend during the first half of the ninth century in Iraq.<sup>144</sup>

Second, one notices the variation of the monk's name in the synoptic recensions. In (M) of the Syriac recensions he is usually called Sergius, occasionally Sergius Baḥīrā. In ES he is named Baḥīrā once, at the beginning of the encounter episode, then he becomes Sergius Baḥīrā, then again Sergius. The monk is never called Baḥīrā or Sergius Baḥīrā outside (C), and only twice outside the encounter episode.<sup>145</sup> In WS the monk is once Baḥīrā, and five times Sergius Baḥīrā.<sup>146</sup> None of these occurrences of the name correspond to those of ES. In (A) and (B) of A1 the monk is usually called Sergius, and so is he at the beginning of (C). He is not named at all in the encounter episode, but during his subsequent instruction of Muḥammad he suddenly becomes Baḥīrā, and remains Baḥīrā until the end of the legend.<sup>147</sup> Again, none of the instances when the monk is called Baḥīrā correspond to any of those in ES or WS;<sup>148</sup> thus he is not named Baḥīrā by the narrator in (M) at

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Ibn Abī 'Umayr (Muḥammad b. Ziyād b. 'Īsā, Abū Aḥmad al-Azdī), who transmitted the legend from Abān b. 'Uthmān, died in 217 AH (832–833 CE). The latter was the father of 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qummī who died ca. 285 (898–899 CE). This leads to ca. 183 AH (799–800 CE) in the case of Abān b. 'Uthmān, and to ca. 251 AH (865–866 CE) in the case of Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim. (5.3) Ibn Ishāq died in ca. 150 AH (767 CE), Yūnus b. Bukayr in 199 AH (814–815 CE), and Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār in 270–272 AH (883–886 CE). (5.4) Al-Wāqidī died in 207 AH (822 CE), and Ibn Sa'd in 230 AH (845 CE). For most of these biographical data, see the references in the previous footnote; for Ibn Abī 'Umayr, see Najāshī, *Rijāl*, vol. 2, pp. 204–208; for 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm, see Bābānī, *Hadiyya*, vol. 1, p. 678; for Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Sa'd and al-Wāqidī, see the relevant entries in *ET*<sup>2</sup>. All but one of the Kūfan transmitters of the other versions died around the middle of the second century AH (the third quarter of the eighth-century CE).

<sup>144</sup>If the dating of A1 to the first half of the tenth century is correct, versions (5.3) and (5.4), recorded by Ibn Hishām and others, should indeed be the closest to its encounter episode. By that time this version of the Muslim legend had become dominant: the monk Baḥīrā had grown into a symbolic figure, the protagonists of versions in which the monk is anonymous were identified with him, and in later Muslim literature we find much more elaborate variants of these versions than of any other. About the monk Baḥīrā as a symbolic figure see Jāḥiẓ, *al-Radd 'alā 'l-naṣārā*, vol. 3, p. 311. About the identification of *al-rāhib* in (6.1) as Baḥīrā see, for example, Kharā'īṭī, *Hawāṭif*, p. 88; and *Ta'riḫh Baghdād*, vol. 10, pp. 252–253. More elaborate versions of (5) are in Diyārbakrī, *Ta'riḫh*, vol. 1, pp. 257–258; Wāqidī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, vol. 1, p. 29; Abū Nu'aym, *Dalā'il*, pp. 124–129; Kharkūshī, *Sharaf*, vol. 1, pp. 403–405 (136).

<sup>145</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 270, 272, 284 (ES, 12, 12.5, 12.6, 14.2, 16.16).

<sup>146</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 330, 332, 336, 338, 340 (WS, 6.1, 7, 10, 11.5, 14.2).

<sup>147</sup>The monk is called Baḥīrā *ibid.*, pp. 376, 394–430 (A1, 2.3, and from 14.1 until the end of the legend).

<sup>148</sup>On the basis of the numbering of the passages referred to in the previous footnotes

all. In a passage at the beginning of (M), however, the narrator says in all the synoptic versions that the Arabs called the monk Baḥīrā: “I found this Rabban Sergius there with them. . . He was called Baḥīrā and prophet by the Sons of Hagar, because he prophesied to them about their kingdom. . .”<sup>149</sup> This appears to indicate that Sergius was identified with the monk Baḥīrā of the Muslim legends already at the stage of the writing of (M), thus making it more plausible that the encounter episode was part of the Christian legend at this stage, and that the redactor of A2 rewrote it.

But however similar the encounter episode of (M) is to certain versions of the Muslim Baḥīrā legend, their only common motif is missing: in the Muslim legend Muḥammad always stops at the cell of the monk on his way to Syria for trade, not in order to water the cattle at the well of the monk as in (M). Indeed, the versions of the Muslim legend known to me do not associate a well with the monk at all. The encounter takes place in Buṣrā or on the way to Syria in the Muslim legend, while in (M) the monk lives close to Muḥammad. The scene of the meeting and the role of the well indicate that the encounter episode was fashioned to fit (A), and not the other way around; the monk relates in (A) that he settled in the desert among the Arabs, and they dug a well for him. If the redactor of (M) had used the Muslim Baḥīrā legend as his starting point, nothing would have prevented him from placing Muḥammad’s encounter with and instruction by the monk in Buṣrā or elsewhere in Syria; in fact, some Christian legends would easily have allowed such a transformation.<sup>150</sup> Otherwise, the redactor could have made the monk settle among the Arabs in Mecca, not in Yathrib as he does in (M);<sup>151</sup> it is hard to believe that a redactor basing himself on the Muslim legend

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it might seem as if the occurrences of the name Baḥīrā in 14.2 would go back to (M). This is not so, because the double name Sergius Baḥīrā appears in different parts of the passage in ES and WS, and the monk is called only Baḥīrā in A1.

<sup>149</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 318 (WS, 2, 2.2); the corresponding passage is p. 376 in A1 (2.1). The parallel passage in ES (p. 256, 2.2) has “chosen one” (*gabyā*) instead of “prophet,” and so does a similar passage in ES, p. 268 (10.2). The explanation following these words shows that (M) had “prophet” (*nbīyā*) here. It must have been changed to “chosen one” due to the resemblance of the two words in Syriac (they differ only in their first letter), under the influence of the previous *bḥīrā* which has a meaning similar to *gabyā*. Bar Bahlūl translates the latter into Arabic as *mukhtār* which is one of the five meanings he gives for *bḥīrā* (cf. his *Lexicon*, vol. 1, pp. 379, 446).

<sup>150</sup>Cf. the stories about the travels of Muḥammad to Palestine, mentioned above, n. 103. Their gist is probably not legendary, as already Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) mentions Muḥammad’s travels to “Palestine, Arabia and Syrian Phoenicia” (cf. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p. 165).

<sup>151</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 254–256, 316, 377 (ES, 1.4; WS, 1.4; A1, 1.4); A2 speaks only about a desert, p. 434 (A2, 1). The monk of the similar story in *Risālat al-Kindī* indeed settles around Mecca (cf. Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien*, p. 107).

would have missed that Muḥammad departs from Mecca and returns there. Moreover, it is not just the scene of the meeting and the role of the well that make no sense if we assume that the Muslim legend served as the basis of (M), but also the inconsistent relationship of the monk with the Arabs. In (C) it first seems an extension of that in (A): in addition to prophesying their grand future to them, he is their healer and teacher, and his previous prophecy is just made more precise by the inclusion of Muḥammad. When the monk identifies Muḥammad, he proclaims to the Arabs that he is the awaited leader, but then his instruction of Muḥammad turns into a private affair. Reading (C) after (A), one cannot decide whether the monk was the teacher of all the Arabs or only of Muḥammad, whether Muḥammad became a good Christian or a religious fraud, and whether the Arabs respected and followed the monk or were only tricked into accepting his doctrine. The encounter episode and the entire legend of Muḥammad's instruction by the monk thus appear loosely connected to the life of the visionary Sergius.

To sum up, since the encounter episode appears to be a later addition to the legend, with its rough edges still visible, it must have been borrowed from a version of the Muslim Baḥīrā story circulating in the early ninth century, and introduced to combine the legend of Muḥammad's instruction by the monk with the life of the visionary Sergius and his second apocalypse. But as the legend was not fashioned around the encounter episode, and as nothing else from their content on the tens of pages each recension covers in print can be attributed to the impact of the Muslim Baḥīrā legend, the Christian story can hardly be the derivative of the latter; instead, the two originated and for a time circulated independently from each other. Had Gottheil mentioned the name Sergius in the title of his edition instead of Baḥīrā, it would not have occurred to anyone to view these Syriac and Arabic texts as transformations of the Muslim Baḥīrā legend.<sup>152</sup>

<sup>152</sup>It seems to me that the imperfect integration of the encounter episode into (M) is the best argument for its origin in Muslim lore. The other imaginable scenario, that the section was borrowed from similar Christian stories about a Christian meeting and instructing Muḥammad that circulated among Syrian Christians prior to this period (cf. *infra*), is less likely; it is improbable that these Syrian stories (which survive only in short references; see *infra*) included precisely those motifs of the Muslim Baḥīrā legend that are attested more in Iraq than anywhere else. The arguments of Roggema (*The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 56–58) for the dependence of the Christian legend on the Muslim one actually prove no more than the dependence of the encounter episode on the Muslim legend. Furthermore, on p. 58 she argues that “[w]hen Christians adopted the Muslim stories they were confronted with a name that to them was not a name at all... Hence, the monk was baptized ‘Sergius.’” Had the Christian narrative grown out of the Muslim Baḥīrā story, this might have been the case, but the use of this name is understandable if the life of Sergius predated its connection to the Muslim Baḥīrā legend.

What led to the identification of the monk Sergius of the Christian story with the monk Bahīrā of the Muslim legends? After all, their stories have hardly anything in common. One possibility is that the monk Sergius had been identified with the heretical Christian teacher of Muḥammad, known from two Christian writings of the eighth and the early ninth century. In an oft-quoted passage, John of Damascus (d. 749 or 753/754) mentions an Arian monk who “supposedly encountered” Muḥammad;<sup>153</sup> Theodore Abū Qurra (d. between 820 and 825) similarly refers to an Arian.<sup>154</sup> Unfortunately, the laconic references to this Arian do not allow a detailed comparison with possibly related legends, but it is sufficiently clear that this heretic figure is distinct from the pious monk Sergius. It is also noteworthy that this Arian appears in the Greek writings of two Melkite authors who were active in Syria, thus pointing to the circulation of his story in communities different from that of the redactor of (M), an Iraqi West-Syrian.<sup>155</sup> This Arian teacher of

<sup>153</sup>In *De Haeresibus*; cf. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, p. 133.

<sup>154</sup>In *Opusculum 25*; cf. Gleis and Khoury, *Johannes Damaskenos und Theodor Abū Qurra*, p. 118.

<sup>155</sup>A reference might be expected here to the unedited Syriac *Disputation of the monk of Bēt Ḥālē*, presumably composed in the 720s, which refers to Sergius Bahīrā as the teacher of Muḥammad (see the quotation of the passage in Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 158). But it is by no means certain that the reference to Sergius Bahīrā was part of the eighth-century text. Only two late manuscripts of the *Disputation* survive, one from the eighteenth century, the other from 1890. During such a long transmission copyists had ample opportunity to modify the text; one of them could have complemented the *Disputation's* original story of Muḥammad on the basis of the Christian Bahīrā legend known to him from elsewhere. Indeed, based on the older manuscript (MS Diyarbakir syr. 95), it seems to me likely that some passages were inserted centuries after the original *Disputation* was written. The following could have been one of them:

You rightly say that you are kings and that the whole world is subject to you. [...] In the North, twenty-two kings reign. In the West, in the land of the Abyssinians (*kūshāyē*) and Nubians (*hendwāyē*), there are many kings; and four kings reign in the territories of the Romans (*Bēt Rōmāyē*). In the South there are many kings. In Merv, in China (*Šm*), in Ceylon (*Sīrandīb*), in Ray, in Hamdan, in Goran, in Gilan [and] over the islands many kings reign. But you, sons of Ishmael, you hold a small part of the earth, and the whole creation is not subject to your authority. (f. 2r–v; my translation is modified from Reinink, “Political power and right religion,” pp. 162–163)

It is questionable whether this passage was in its entirety part of the eighth-century Iraqi original. The opening and concluding sentences contradict each other; Ethiopia lies to the south of Iraq; the whole of Asia Minor was under Byzantine, and all the places but China and Ceylon listed in the penultimate sentence were under Arab rule in the eighth-century. The passage, however, makes good sense both geographically and historically if we understand the second half (beginning with “In the North...”) as a gloss written in northeast Iran or western Central Asia in the twelfth or thirteenth century. On the manuscripts of the *Disputation*, see Reinink, “Political power and

Muḥammad could not have been the model for the monk Sergius, but might have been identified with him in the early ninth century; the monk Sergius who lived among the Arabs and taught them could have taught Muḥammad as well. Thus the identification of Sergius and Baḥīrā, the two monks known in their respective communities primarily because of their relationship with Muḥammad, became easier.

A second and perhaps better possibility is provided by the passage quoted above: "I found this Rabban Sergius there with them... He was called Baḥīrā and prophet (*w-metqre hwā... bḥīrā wa-nbīyā*) by the Sons of Hagar, because he prophesied to them about their kingdom..."<sup>156</sup> Being familiar with the Muslim Baḥīrā legend, one automatically understands *bḥīrā* as a proper name, but without that implied context, *bḥīrā* is only a common noun like the following word, *nbīyā*, and we can just as well translate the sentence, "He was called elect and prophet by the Sons of Hagar..." In fact, using the passage as proof for the identification of the monk Sergius with the monk Baḥīrā is somewhat problematic; although the protagonist of the Muslim legends is called Baḥīrā in many versions, he is certainly not a prophet in any of them. The new translation then reveals another image of Sergius, so far obscured by Muḥammad's presence: he is Sergius, prophet of the Arabs. Indeed, (M) contains passages that seem to give substance to this image. In (A) we are told that Sergius wrote the Qur'ān for the Arabs, without mentioning Muḥammad,<sup>157</sup> and according to (C) the Arabs "came to him, and asked him about everything, and they did everything he told them, because he taught them a little this doctrine which they chose to follow."<sup>158</sup> These passages, all belonging to (M), seem to refer to another legend that credited Sergius with the foundation of Islam not as the teacher of Muḥammad, but instead of Muḥammad.

Similar stories, in which a Christian monk or cleric establishes Islam, circulated in medieval Europe.<sup>159</sup> These European legends surprise no one; those who recounted them lived far away from the Islamic world, and one would almost expect medieval Europeans to believe in such phantasmagoria about Islam. It seems, however, less likely that anyone

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right religion," pp. 157–158 and nn. 20–22; on the date of writing, see *ibid.*, pp. 158–160; see also his interpretation of the passage *ibid.*, pp. 162–164. I am indebted to Professor Michael Cook for placing his copy of the manuscript at my disposal.

<sup>156</sup>Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 318 (WS, 2, 2.2); the corresponding passage is p. 376 in A1 (2.1). As mentioned above, the parallel passage in ES (p. 256, 2.2) has "chosen one."

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 266, 332 (ES, 7.3; WS, 7.3). The passage is missing from A1.

<sup>158</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 270 (ES, 11.2–3); see also the parallel passages in the other synoptic recensions, pp. 338, 392 (WS, 11.2–3; A1, 11–11.3).

<sup>159</sup>See, for example, Wolf, "The earliest Latin lives," pp. 95–96, 99–100; and Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 105.

would have deemed such a legend a satisfactory explanation for the rise of Islam in early ninth-century Iraq, and that such a legend would have been invented, handed down, and preserved in the central lands of the Caliphate, after two hundred years of Islamic rule. Yet it is not as improbable as it may appear. In the early ninth century most Christians still lived in towns and villages in which the majority of the population was Christian. They had different levels of education that only in the rarest instances included acquaintance with Islam, let alone a systematic knowledge of Islamic doctrines or Muslim traditions concerning Islamic history. Christian knowledge of Islam must have been haphazard, just as the acquaintance of the redactor of (M) with Islam seems to be. On the one hand, (M) shows a deep embeddedness in Islamic culture, as seen in the Muslim apocalyptic figures inserted into the Christian apocalypse; on the other hand, it claims that *Sūrat al-baqara* reached the Arabs tied to the horn of a cow, and that the Muslims pray seven times a day.<sup>160</sup> A Christian who hardly ever met a Muslim in his life could well have been satisfied with a Christian monk once settled in the distant desert of Arabia as the prophet of the Arabs, the author of their scripture, and the teacher of their quasi-Christian beliefs.

It seems, then, that the identification of Sergius with Baḥīrā was not part of the original (M), but was introduced as the result of a philological error; a copyist-redactor of the legend must have mistaken the Syriac common noun *bḥīrā* for the name of the monk Baḥīrā. Although the passage quoted above is the only instance of (M) using the word *bḥīrā* for the monk Sergius, it is near the beginning of the text, easily catching the reader's eye. If someone familiar with the Muslim legends, and perhaps having Arabic as his mother tongue, copied (M), he could have easily understood *bḥīrā* as a proper noun, and identified the otherwise dissimilar characters of the monk Sergius with the monk Baḥīrā. He might then have inserted the encounter episode and Muḥammad's instruction by the monk. If my reconstruction of this earlier image of Sergius is correct, some material corresponding to it in (C) was part of (M) before the bilingual copyist introduced his fateful additions, overwriting and obscuring the archaic story. As (A) can be dated to the 810s, (M) probably to several years later, and WS, the earliest of the synoptic recensions, to the period between 833 and 861, the bilingual copyist must have been at work between the 810s and 861. The Christian Baḥīrā legend in this form soon became rather well-known, because al-Mas'ūdī, a Muslim historian, mentions in the 940s that "the name of Baḥīrā is Sergius in the books of the Christians."<sup>161</sup>

<sup>160</sup>There can be no doubt that this passage was part of (M), because it occurs in all four recensions; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 282, 352, 406, 474 (16.12 in all recensions).

<sup>161</sup>Cf. Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, vol. 1, p. 146. Al-Mas'ūdī wrote the *Murūj* in 943,

## Conclusions

Polemical literature is repetitive. This is especially true of popular polemical literature where the same simple or simplified theological arguments, based always on the same proof-texts from the Bible and the Qurʾān, are encountered time and again. At first sight, the Christian Baḥīrā legend seems to be different, because it contains mostly apocalypses and stories, not a collection of arguments; upon closer reading, however, it also reveals itself as having been largely fashioned from existing material. It is this repetitive character of the polemical writings which makes it possible to unravel the various layers of the legend, to reconstruct its gradual formation, and to show how it was transformed by various redactors and copyists from the early ninth to the twentieth century.

This continuing metamorphosis was certainly encouraged by the anonymity of the texts and the presence of much related material in oral tradition.<sup>162</sup> The orally transmitted and constantly changing legends and the religious debate culture of the Islamic world gave the copyist-redactors both motive and new material to update, modify and expand the legend. Other apologetical and polemical texts containing many polemical topoi similarly exist in more than one recension,<sup>163</sup> and probably yet more such writings were transformed in this manner through the ages, but the process cannot be reconstructed because they survive in only one recension. This phenomenon should make one careful when dating the polemical material of a work. If the text exists in only one recension, and especially if it exists only in late manuscripts, we can hardly be convinced that all the material included in it was indeed in circulation at the time to which the first recension can be ascribed.<sup>164</sup>

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and revised it twice, in 947 and in 956. Of these, only the revision of 947 survives. On the *Murūj*, see Ch. Pellat "al-Masʿūdī," *EI*<sup>2</sup>, s.v.

<sup>162</sup>That polemical literature is closely related to oral culture was first suggested in connection with the Judaeo-Arabic *Qiṣṣat mujādalat al-usquf*, a ninth-century Jewish polemical treatise against Christianity (cf. Lasker and Stroumsa, *The polemics of Nestor the Priest*, pp. 23–24).

<sup>163</sup>For example, several Syriac and Arabic recensions of the apology of Patriarch Timothy exist (cf. Caspar, "Les versions arabes," pp. 107–113; on a fragment of another Arabic version see Szilágyi, "Christian books," pp. 122, 138–141). The correspondence of Leo and ʿUmar is known in five versions; four are listed in Gaudeul, "Correspondence," p. 110, and an unedited Christian Arabic text that might be a fifth version is mentioned in Hoyland, "Correspondence," pp. 167–168, n. 11. The disputation of Abraham of Tiberias is also preserved in two distinct recensions; cf. Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade*, pp. 197–208.

<sup>164</sup>The case of the disputation of the monk of Bēt Ḥālē has been mentioned above.

Thanks to the constant transformation of the Christian Baḥīrā legend, many different ideas about Islam, its origins, its doctrines and its religious practices were incorporated into the text, thus reflecting the diversity of attitudes towards Islam among the Christians of the Islamic world. These ideas were no more uniform than the community that created them. For the Christian peasant of northern Mesopotamia, Islamic rule meant the arrival of the tax collector once a year, and he perhaps never met a Muslim who had more than a rudimentary knowledge of his own religion. The Christian physician of Baghdad treated wealthy Muslim patients, wrote learned medical treatises at the request of his Muslim patrons, and debated science and religion with the most refined Muslim minds of the age. The Christian merchant of Damascus often had business dealings with Muslims, and shared their fear of the depredations of the Bedouin in times of instability. The monk of the Monastery of Mār Mārī was highly respected by the villagers of the region on account of his ascetic life, but he spoke only Syriac, and his entire knowledge of Islam was from hearsay. The Melkite bishop of Ascalon knew Arabic better than Greek, and had ambivalent feelings about the Byzantine reconquest of northern Syria; he hoped for the return of Christian rule, but dreaded the looting and destruction of churches that such military successes brought in their wake. The approaches of these Christians to Islam were as varied as their contacts with Muslims.

The different images of Islam interwoven in the Christian Baḥīrā legend, from the optimistic reminder of the contract that protects the Christians to the bleak comparison of the Muslims to ravenous beasts, stem from this mixed background. For one Christian, the founder of Islam was the Christian monk who gained the Arabs' respect and loyalty by healing their sick and prophesying for them a glorious future; for another, it was Muḥammad, the simple-minded child converted to Christianity by a monk, and later misled by Jews; for still another, it was Muḥammad, the talented young man, perfectly fit to lead his people, but unable to understand the intricacies of Christian theology. Although these images were appealing enough to literate monks to induce them to preserve the stories in writing, they reflect primarily the ideas of the uneducated; one can easily picture illiterate peasants telling stories like those included in the legend. These were certainly not the proclaimed opinions of those most dependent on the goodwill of the Muslims; like Patriarch Timothy (d. 823), who characterized Muḥammad as walking "in the path of the prophets" in front of the caliph al-Mahdī (775–785).<sup>165</sup> Other members

Another example is the debate of the Patriarch John with the Muslim *amīr*, presumably held in 644, but its only surviving manuscript was copied in 874; cf. Reinink, "Syriac apologetic literature," p. 171.

<sup>165</sup>Samir, "The Prophet Muḥammad," pp. 93–94.

of the Christian elite must also have made compromises in order to protect the precarious coexistence of their community with the Muslims or to maintain their own lucrative positions.

In all its transformations, the Christian Baḥīrā legend fulfilled its most important function: it presented the birth of Islam in a way that helped Christians to maintain their religious identity in the Islamic world. The coming of Islam presented Christian identity with enormous challenges. Not only did the Arabs successfully conquer a substantial part of Byzantium in spite of the common belief that the Christian Roman Empire would last until the End of the Days, but they also increasingly promoted their new religion which, as they claimed, replaced Christianity. No imperial propaganda was available now to dissuade the Christians from abandoning their religion; popular legends like that concerning the origin of Islam, taken up by monks, must have nevertheless been of assistance in discouraging Christians from conversion. By providing a credible alternative story about the beginning of Islam, by denigrating the prophet much revered by his followers, by mocking their scripture, such legends made abandoning Christianity in favor of Islam look not only morally deplorable, but also unbecoming, disagreeable, absurd, even ridiculous. Theological expositions about the falsity of the new religion could perhaps impress themselves upon the minds of those few who were able to understand them, but colorful stories, besides being more widely accessible, appealed to emotions which influence one no less than reason. In addition, the Christian Baḥīrā legend, by making the doctrines of Islam originate from the distorted teachings of a Christian monk, by having this monk write the Qur'ān, the scripture allegedly revealed by God, transformed Islam into a Christian heresy, thus perfectly matching a well-known concept of Christian theology. The familiar category to which Islam was assigned neutralized the impact of its dramatic novelty, and gave hope that the perfidious doctrine of the Ishmaelites would prevail no longer than that of Arius.<sup>166</sup> The Christians of the Islamic world were told by the Muslims that Islam was divinely revealed, and they knew that unless they want to convert they need to account for Islam in some other way.

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<sup>166</sup>Muḥammad's Christological understanding is associated with Arianism in A2; cf. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 480 (A2, 16.24). That Islam is a Christian heresy is only implied by the Christian Baḥīrā legend and other texts written by the Christians of the Islamic world, but never stated explicitly. Although John of Damascus included Islam in his *De Haeresibus*, it does not mean that he thought of it as a Christian heresy: Islam appears there not only in the company of Marcionism, Donatism and Monotheletism, but also of Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Judaism, and Samaritanism. *Haeresis* in this context refers to any doctrinal system that deviates from Christian orthodoxy.

## Appendix

(1) *Abbreviations used*

- ES East-Syrian recension
- WS West-Syrian recension
- A1 short Arabic recension
- A2 long Arabic recension
- A1b the end of A2 integrated into the accessible manuscripts of A1
- (M) the common material of the three synoptic recensions (ES, WS, A1)
- (A) the life of the monk as he told it to the narrator, including his vision on Mt. Sinai
- (B) the corruption of the monk's teaching by Ka'b
- (C) the deeds of the monk among the Arabs as told by his disciple, including the encounter episode and his instruction of Muḥammad
- (D) the second apocalypse of the monk
- (E) an additional section in A2 after (D), consisting of (E<sub>1</sub>) and (E<sub>2</sub>)
- (E<sub>1</sub>) the first part of (E) (only in A2)
- (E<sub>2</sub>) the second part of (E) (only in A2)
- (a) note on the corruption of Sergius' teaching by Ka'b and the Arabs' idol worship
- (b) note on the teaching of Ka'b and the Arabs' expectation of Muḥammad's ascension to heaven
- (c) note on the origins of the Qur'ān (only in ES)
- (p) epilogue (only in ES)
- (i) introduction (only in WS)

(2) Summary of the various recensions

	(M)	ES	WS	A1	A2
Structure	(A)(B)(C)(D)	(A)(B)(C)(D) (p) (a)(b)(c)	(i)(A)(B)(b) (C)(D)	(A)(B)(C)(D) [A1b=(D) (E <sub>1</sub> )(E <sub>2</sub> )]	(A)(C)(D) (E <sub>1</sub> )(E <sub>2</sub> )
Author/ redactor	West-Syrian monk	East-Syrian	West-Syrian	Melkite	?
Date	(A) in 810s, (M) soon af- terwards	mid-tenth century?	between 833 and 861	first half of tenth century	twelfth cen- tury
Location	Iraq	?	?	?	Syria

(3) Images of the monk, Muḥammad and the Arabs/Muslims

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E <sub>1</sub> )	(E <sub>2</sub> )
The monk	positive; visionary, saintly, post- mortem miracles	positive; teaches right doctrines	positive, although teaches a lax version of Chris- tianity, healer	positive; visionary	negative; sinful, de- liberately teaches falsehood	positive; seeks pro- tection for the Christians
Muḥam- mad	absent	neutral	positive; obedient disciple of the monk	absent	neutral	negative; fraud- ulent, immoral
Arabs/ Muslims	positive; respectful towards the monk, follow his teachings	gullible	negative; pleasure- seeking, need a lax religion	powerful rulers, bringing calamities	negative; idol- worshippers, enemies of the Chris- tians	mixed; lascivious, but not uniformly hostile

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