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THE QUR'ĀN IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Edited by
Gabriel Said Reynolds

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2008
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Transferred to Digital Printing 2008

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd, Chennai, India

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN10: 0–415–42899–8 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0–203–93960–3 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978–0–415–42899–6 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978–0–203–93960–4 (ebk)

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CHRISTIAN LORE AND THE ARABIC QUR'ĀN

The "Companions of the Cave" in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian tradition

Sidney Griffith

Introduction

It is something of a truism among scholars of Syriac to say that the more deeply one is familiar with the works of the major writers of the classical period, especially the composers of liturgically significant, homiletic texts such as those written by Ephraem the Syrian (c. 306–73), Narsai of Edessa and Nisibis (c. 399–502), or Jacob of Serugh (c. 451–521), the more one hears echoes of many of their standard themes and characteristic turns of phrase at various points in the discourse of the Arabic Qur'ān. Conversely, Qur'ān scholars in search of the origins of what they sometimes present as the "foreign vocabulary" of the Qur'ān have not infrequently called attention to what they consider to be the high incidence of Syriac loan words and cognates in the Arabic idiom of the Islamic scripture. One difficulty which has attended the study of these matters has been that while most Qur'ān scholars are well trained in Islamic languages such as Arabic, Persian and Turkish, they have seldom had more than a philological grasp of Syriac and almost no first-hand acquaintance with the classical literature of the language. Similarly, most Syriac scholars are deeply immersed in the study of the classical texts of the fourth, fifth and even the sixth centuries, but their grasp of Arabic is largely grammatical and lexical and they are often not at all familiar with Qur'ānic or other early Islamic literature. Put another way, Qur'ān scholars have often been unwilling to consider pre-Qur'ānic, Syriac religious discourse as belonging in any way within the Qur'ān's hermeneutical circle. And Syriac scholars have seldom seen any reason to think that the Qur'ān belongs within the textual or discursive framework of "Late Antique" Early Christian or Patristic thought. The result has been that when scholars have posited Syriac connections for some locutions in the Arabic Qur'ān, be they grammatical, lexical or even

thematic, they have done so almost in a vacuum, without much to say about their methodological and hermeneutical presuppositions. There have been few if any efforts to set forth well articulated and historically plausible sets of principles or hypotheses in the light of which the stipulated coincidences between Syriac and Qur'ānic usages or modes of expression might find their most likely significance.

From the linguistic and philological point of view, already in the early years of the twentieth century scholars working in the west were assuming that there was a Syriac background for a significant portion of the Qur'ān's Arabic wording.[1] Alphonse Mingana, writing in 1927, estimated that 70 percent of the "foreign influences on the style and terminology" of the Qur'ān could be traced to "Syriac (including Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac)."[2] Noting Mingana's estimate of the high incidence of Syriac etymologies for a significant portion of the Qur'ān's "foreign vocabulary," Arthur Jeffery then wrote in 1938 that "one fact seems certain, namely that such Christianity as was known among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times was largely of the Syrian type, whether Jacobite or Nestorian."[3] He noted further that numerous early Islamic texts mention Muḥammad's contacts with both Syrian and Arabian Christians and this observation prompted Jeffery to conclude that these testimonies, coming from within the early Islamic community, "at least show that there was an early recognition of the fact that Muḥammad was at one time in more or less close contact with Christians associated with the Syrian Church."[4]

The effort to shed further light on the conundrums of the Arabic Qur'ān by reference to Syriac lexicography and grammatical usage found its most persistent advocate at the end of the twentieth century in the work of the author who employs the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg.[5] Alleging that both traditional Muslim *mufassirūn* and modern scholars alike have neglected what he calls the "Syro-Aramaic" roots of Qur'ānic Arabic in favor of an overly exclusive reliance on Bedouin Arabic idiom for data to explain the text's meanings, Luxenberg's method is to examine selected *cruces interpretum* in the text from what he calls the "Syro-Aramaic" perspective. He changes the vowels and diacritical points of selected lexemes as necessary, to explore the possibility that with the Syriac dictionary in hand a more intelligible reading of hitherto obscure passages may be attained, often then found to be congruent with earlier, Aramaic grammatical forms or syntactical usages. In the ensemble, the over-all suggestion is made that when it is read from Luxenberg's "Syro-Aramaic" perspective, the Qur'ān can be thought to have once been a very different scripture from the one it has become in the hands of its Muslim and western commentators from early Abbāsid times until now. Indeed Luxenberg's enterprise seems, under the guise of a philological quest, to be a modern-day analog of the efforts of some earlier Arabic-speaking, Christian apologists of the early Islamic period to argue that before it was "corrupted" by early Muslims, and Jewish converts to Islam, the Qur'ān was actually a book of virtual Christian meaning and sensibility.[6] While this is certainly not Luxenberg's avowed purpose, the net effect of his philological methods, to the degree that they would be deemed plausible in individual instances, is certainly to

cuum, without much to say about their positions. There have been few if any torically plausible sets of principles or ated coincidences between Syriac and ight find their most likely significance. nt of view, already in the early years of the west were assuming that there was tion of the Qur'ān's Arabic wording.[1] mated that 70 percent of the "foreign f the Qur'ān could be traced to "Syriac c)."[2] Noting Mingana's estimate of the a significant portion of the Qur'ān's ote in 1938 that "one fact seems certain, n among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times cobite or Nestorian."[3] He noted further ion Muḥammad's contacts with both servation prompted Jeffery to conclude hin the early Islamic community, "at ition of the fact that Muḥammad was t with Christians associated with the

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bring the Arabic Qur'ān's narratives much more within the hermeneutic range of Aramean Christianity in its Syriac expression than has hitherto been customary.

There is a particular hermeneutical danger in the purely linguistic and philological approach to the search for the influence of Syriac on the Arabic Qur'ān. For the ingenuity of the philologist can all too readily manipulate the linguistic materials into possible grammatical and lexical formulations solely on the basis of philological or orthographic considerations which leave out of account that degree of historical or cultural probability which is requisite for plausibility. In other words, from a responsible interpretive point of view, purely grammatical or etymological readings of words and phrases in the Arabic Qur'ān on the basis of a presumed underlying Syriac must be supported by reference to a thematic context which would make them not only possible and plausible, but in all likelihood the carriers of the authentic, originally intended meaning.

From a thematic point of view, as opposed to strictly philological or lexical concerns, Tor Andrae is undoubtedly the modern scholar who has so far the most systematically investigated what he considered to be Muḥammad's and the Qur'ān's indebtedness to the Syriac expressions of Christianity. In his well-known study of the *Origins of Islam and Christianity*,[7] Andrae speaks confidently of what he takes to be the influences and borrowings from Syriac sources which one familiar with the idiom and dominant themes of the major texts of the classical period of Syriac literature may perceive in the Qur'ān. His emphasis is on religious ideas and their characteristic formulae rather than on grammar or lexicography. Andrae first calls attention to the Christianity in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad, mentioning in particular its flourishing in a Syriac form in places such as Najrān and al-Ḥīra, and among large tribal confederations such as the Lakhmids and the Ghassānids. Then, having dismissed the pre-Islamic, Arabic poets and the so-called *Ḥunafā'* as sufficient sources for the Christian ideas and expressions he finds in the Qur'ān, Tor Andrae devoted most of his study to what he calls "the eschatological piety (*Frömmigkeit*) of Muḥammad." He meant the Muslim prophet's systematic thinking about the "last things," final judgment and the hereafter, resurrection, final reward and punishment. According to Andrae, this piety of Muḥammad's was "a coherent, well-defined conception (*Anschauung*) which provided the most important expression of his religious personality."[8]

According to Andrae, this eschatological conception articulated in finished formulae reflected a precise homiletic program (*prédication précise* < *bestimmten Verkündigung*) with which he thought Muḥammad must have been thoroughly familiar.[9] In the sequel, following his detailed analyses and comparisons of passages in the Qur'ān and in selected Syriac texts, Andrae argued that this "precise homiletic program" was that of the Syriac-speaking Christian community, which, in his view, served as the model for Muḥammad's own eschatological preaching.[10] According to Andrae, "Whatever Muḥammad received from Christianity he only learned it by way of oral preaching and personal contacts."[11] Presumably, although he does not say so explicitly, Tor Andrae supposed that Arabic was the language of the oral preaching and personal contacts. He does say

that he thinks that the "Church of the East," the so-called Nestorian church, was the source of the influences and borrowings from the Syrian Christians that went into the make-up of Muḥammad's "eschatological piety."[12] More specifically, Andrae proposed that the missionary preaching of the "Nestorians" came to Muḥammad's attention from Yemen, where a "Nestorian" mission had been established in the late sixth century.[13]

But Tor Andrae was also alive to what he called the "Monophysite" influence on Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. He found it in the Qur'ān's reflection of the Christology it rejected. According to Andrae, the Qur'ān's surprising idea that the Christian Trinity consists of God, Jesus and Mary,[14] its polemic against the presumed Christian allegation that God is the Messiah[15] and its reflection of an interest in the apocryphal narratives of Jesus' infancy, all suggest a polemical response to Christian "Monophysite" interlocutors. He supposed that they were to be found in the Abyssinian associations of the early Islamic community.[16]

But later western commentators would posit as close a connection between Muḥammad and the originally Syriac-speaking "Jacobites" as Tor Andrae had posited between Muḥammad and the "Nestorians." For example, John Bowman, pointing to the presence of the so-called Monophysites in Najrān and among Arab confederations such as the Ghassānids, argued that the Qur'ān's prophetology and its biblical awareness are best explained on the hypothesis that Muḥammad was in conversation with "Jacobite" Christians, among whom the Syriac *Diatessaron* circulated as the normal text of the Gospel. According to Bowman, Muḥammad must have gained even his knowledge of Old Testament *personae* from a milieu in which the harmonized Gospel circulated because the only Old Testament personages named in the Qur'ān are those whose names also appear in the *Diatessaron*. For Bowman, the weight of these observations strongly supports the view that the Christians with whom Muḥammad would have been familiar, and who would have been in the Qur'ān's audience, would have been "Jacobites," or "Monophysites," as he called them.[17]

At one notable point, Tor Andrae singled out the works of St Ephraem the Syrian (c. 306–73), the early Syriac writer beloved by "Melkites," "Jacobites" and "Nestorians" alike, as texts in which he could the most readily find Syriac vocabulary, turns of phrase and religious conceptions cognate with those to be found in the Arabic Qur'ān.[18] One of his suggestions in particular stirred up a scholarly storm. Andrae proposed that the *houris* of Paradise as depicted in the Qur'ān (e.g. in *al-Dukhān* [44]:54; *al-Ṭūr* [52]:20; *al-Raḥmān* [55]:72; *al-Wāqi'a* [56]:22) could be found prefigured in one of St Ephraem's hymns *De Paradiso* (VII:18).[19] Tor Andrae wrote

> One may recognize a veiled reference to the virgins of Paradise in Afrem's saying: "Whoever has abstained from wine on earth, for him do the vines of Paradise yearn. Each one of them holds out to him a bunch of grapes. And if a man has lived in chastity, they (feminine) receive him into a pure bosom, because he as a

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> monk did not fall into the bosom and bed of earthly love."[20] . . . Popular piety certainly interpreted this daring imagery in a crass and literal sense, and under such circumstances one cannot blame a citizen of pagan Mecca for doing the same thing.
>
> (Andrae, Mohammed: *The Man and His Faith*, 88)

In 1948 Dom Edmund Beck, OSB, the modern editor of the critical editions of most of the Syriac works of Ephraem the Syrian, wrote a response to what he took to be Tor Andrae's claim about St Ephraem's meaning.[21] Beck took it that Andrae was proposing that St Ephraem's works suggested a heavenly reward for the celibate monk comparable to that provided by the *houris* of the Qur'ān for the faithfully departed Muslim. So he went to some trouble to show that such could not have been St Ephraem's meaning. Beck called attention to the faulty text of the *Editio Romana* of Ephraem's hymn that Andrae had used, and then he set about explaining the imagery and symbolism of the passage in its context, by a somewhat complicated word-study of several key terms. In sum, Beck argued that St Ephraem's imagery of the grape-vine, its stocks and shoots, evoked a vision of Paradise and a line of thinking which he thought definitively excluded any concept of the kind of delights provided by the *houris*. While Beck's exposition of St Ephraem's own thought is convincing, it seems that he did not in fact completely grasp Andrae's point. Tor Andrae did not actually say that Ephraem envisioned anything like *houris* in Paradise. Rather, he suggested that "popular piety," not to mention "a citizen of pagan Mecca," might have been inspired by such lines as Ephraem wrote to conjure up the *houris*. It was Andrae's major point, one should remember, that homiletic descriptions such as those by Ephraem, envisioning the blessings of Paradise in terms of a garden of delights, could reasonably be supposed somehow to lie behind the similar descriptions of Paradise in the Qur'ān, especially if one would be prepared to concede that Ephraem's descriptions could well have been reflected in the discourse of Arabic-speaking Christians who were in the audience of the Arabic Qur'ān.

In connection with a consideration of Tor Andrae's suggestion about a Syriac background for the Qur'ān's depiction of Paradise, illustrated for him by reference to a passage in the works of St Ephraem the Syrian, it is interesting to note in passing that Christoph Luxenberg, in what has become the most widely quoted part of his work, has on philological and lexical grounds reinterpreted the key phrase in Q *al-Dukhān* (44):54 and *al-Ṭūr* (52):20, *zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin 'īnin*, to mean not something on the order of, "We shall wed them to maidens with large, dark eyes," or "We pair them with beautiful-eyed maidens,"[22] but "We will make them comfortable under white, crystal(clear) (grape clusters),"[23] claiming that so understood the expression is more consistent with the Qur'ān's own eschatological scenario. Whatever one might think of the verisimilitude of this interpretation, it is clear that it is certainly closer to St Ephraem's image of the grape clusters which the Syrian writer says will welcome the chaste into their bosom than to the vision of the embraces of *houris* as conventionally imagined.

While here is not the place to discuss the merits of Luxenberg's reading, it may be just the place to point out that from a hermeneutical point of view, the case can be made that the difference in the readings is not a difference which philology or lexicography alone can plausibly reconcile. Rather, the difference here may well be the difference which Islam as a new narrative system itself makes in the presentation of traditional themes. One must point out that hermeneutically speaking, the meaning of the new Arabic Qur'ān cannot authentically be reduced to the parameters of its presumed conceptual background in the language of one of its predecessor narratives. It is in this connection that one requires the aforementioned, historically plausible set of principles and hypotheses in the light of which Syriac scholars in particular might evaluate the coincidences they observe between classical Syriac texts on the one hand and on the other hand the seemingly borrowed usages or modes of expression which they can sometimes find in the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān and Syriac

The historical and geographical setting in which the Arabic Qur'ān first appeared, both in its oral form, as it circulated among Arabic-speaking Muslims during the lifetime of Muḥammad, and as a written text following its collection and standardization in the decades following Muḥammad's death, favors the expectation that the Christian beliefs and practices it reflects, critiques and approves or rejects would in large part be those current in the Aramaic expressions of Christianity. The very script of North Arabic had Aramaic antecedents, be they Nabatean or Syriac. The Christianity finding its way among the Arabic-speaking populations beyond the frontiers of the Roman or Persian empires in the sixth and seventh centuries be it from Sinai, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia or southern Iraq, was Aramaic, and mostly Syriac, in its original homiletic and liturgical formulae. While there was also a significant presence of Abyssinian and even Coptic Christianity in Arabia in the sixth century, and traces of its characteristic idiom are not wanting even in the Qur'ān, the case could nevertheless hardly be otherwise: the Christianity reflected in the Qur'ān would for the most part betray its largely Aramaic and Syriac original formulation. The Arabic Qur'ān had perforce to address the Christian beliefs, practices and narratives actually current among its Arabic-speaking audience, reflecting the modes of expression in which they were customarily voiced among them. It is for this reason that it is not surprising that scholars working from a philological or lexical perspective, such as Alphonse Mingana or Christoph Luxenberg, should find so many traces of Syriac usage behind the diction of the Arabic Qur'ān,[24] or that scholars who examine the text with the methodologies of the disciplines of the "History of Religions" or "Comparative Religion," like Tor Andrae, should find in it echoes of a Syro-Aramaic religious discourse already present in its ambience. Given the historical and geographical circumstances of the people the Qur'ān addressed, it is only to be expected. How else could its message have been intelligible to them?

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Given the high historical probability that the Christianity to which the Qur'ān refers or the Christian diction which it reflects would have had its original expression in Aramaic and even Syriac, it is equally highly probable that among the Christians in the Qur'ān's audience its standard formulae and typical modes of expression, along with its narrative lore, originally Syriac, would all have normally been voiced among them in Arabic,[25] with the traces and echoes of its Syriac origins still discernible in the newly minted Arabic expression. In other words, the Christians in the Arabic Qur'ān's audience spoke Arabic, but their distinctive Christian vocabulary disclosed its Syriac origins. Sometimes these Syriac origins appear as "Syriacisms" when such Christian locutions were quoted in the Arabic Qur'ān. "Syriacisms" are words or phrases in the Arabic diction of the Qur'ān which betray an underlying Syriac locution. That is to say, they are calques, or "loan translations" from Syriac into Arabic; they are not simply Syriac words used in place of Arabic words and phrases. The recognition of them requires a familiarity with classical Syriac phraseology, along with an eye for what might otherwise appear as awkwardness in the Arabic diction. A case in point, which the present writer has developed elsewhere,[26] is the enigmatic phrase, *thālithu thalāthatin*, usually translated as "third of three" in *al-Mā'ida* (5):73. Once the phrase is recognized as a "Syriacism," reflecting the Syriac epithet for Christ, *tlîthāyâ*, "the treble one," the Qur'ān can be seen to be rejecting the Christian belief about Christ in the very language in which Arabic-speaking Christians in its audience affirmed the belief, using an epithet which was awkward, even *a'jamī*, in its Arabic version, but full of typological significance for those who understood it in its full Christian sense, originally expressed in Syriac.

An important hermeneutical ingredient in recognizing "Syriacisms" such as this one in the Arabic Qur'ān is the concomitant recognition that the Qur'ān repeats such locutions for its own rhetorical purposes, which may well be very different from the Christian purpose in coining or contriving the usually awkward Arabic words or phrases in the first place, or simply Arabicizing Syriac terms. For the Qur'ān's posture toward Christianity is primarily one of critique. Rhetorically, its critique is the more effective the more accurately it repeats actual Christian formulae in the context of the Qur'ānic revelation that would highlight the perceived Christian inadequacy or, on the Qur'ān's principles, its falsity. Similarly, beyond the range of "Syriacisms" properly so called, genuinely Christian, even biblical lore, no doubt re-told in Arabic from Syriac originals for the benefit of Arabic-speaking Christians, is sometimes deployed in the Qur'ān for the purpose of purchasing credibility for the Qur'ān's own teachings among the Arabic-speaking Christian members of its audience. Or more often, the Qur'ān does not repeat or quote Christian scriptures or traditional narratives so much as it alludes to them, with the presumption that their stories, their *dramatis personae* and their exploits are already known to its audience. Indeed the Qur'ān's large presumption of its audience's familiarity with the considerable amount of biblical and apocryphal scriptural material it contains, along with Jewish and Christian traditional lore, is itself the most convincing evidence of the circulation of

these narratives in the Arabic-speaking milieu of the audience the Qur'ān actually addresses.

Hermeneutically speaking, one should approach the Qur'ān as an integral discourse in its own right; it proclaims, judges, praises, blames from its own narrative center. It addresses an audience which is already familiar with oral versions in Arabic of earlier scriptures and folklores. The Qur'ān does not borrow from, or often even quote from these earlier texts. Rather, it alludes to and evokes their stories, even sometimes their wording, for its own rhetorical purposes. The Arabic Qur'ān, from a literary perspective, is something new. It uses the idiom, and sometimes the forms and structures, of earlier narratives in the composition of its own distinctive discourse. It cannot be reduced to any presumed sources. Earlier discourses appear in it not only in a new setting, but shaped, trimmed and re-formulated for an essentially new narrative. Syriac in the Arabic Qur'ān is no longer Syriac; it may be a "Syriacism" in Qur'ānic Arabic, or a narrative originally told in Syriac, which in an oral Arabic version has become a point of reference for the Qur'ān's own discourse. Allusions to, even quotations from, or structural similarities with earlier Syriac narratives do not control the Qur'ān's discourse. Rather, the Qur'ān, framing the new hermeneutical horizon, casts any originally Syriac elements in its Arabic diction into the framework of meaning constructed by its own diction.

In this context, the study of the Syriac *prolegomena* for any given passage in the Qur'ān's narrative is the study of a Syriac text which presumably, in all historical likelihood, lies behind the oral, Arabic version of a recital to which the Qur'ān alludes or refers, with an assumption of its familiarity to the Qur'ān's own audience. One may think of it as a heightened form of oral "intertextuality" which envelops two closely related language communities, close to one another in time, space and scriptural consciousness. In important ways, historically speaking, due to commerce, transhumance and other cultural phenomena, the populations of the two language communities, the Arameans and the Arabs, had already been intermingled for centuries. It was only a matter of time and the accidents of history, or the providence of God, before an Arabic master-narrative arose to subsume the terms and themes of earlier Aramean narratives into a distinctively new pattern of meaning in a new text, which its community would consider divinely inspired."

The Companions of the Cave

The legend of the "Companions of the Cave" or the "Sleepers of the Cave" is a good example of Christian lore current in the Syriac homiletic and liturgical tradition prior to the rise of Islam, to which the Qur'ān alludes and portions of which the Qur'ān includes in its own narrative for its own purposes, addressing its own Arabic-speaking audience who are presumed to be familiar with the details of the legend. For the present purpose it seems best first of all to recall the setting of the references to the legend of the "Companions of the Cave" in

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the Qur'ān, then to discuss the forms in which it circulated among Christians in Syriac in pre-Islamic times, and presumably also in Christian Arabic folklore, and then to examine the recollection of the details of the legend as it survives in the earliest extant Syriac homiletic text which includes it. Against this background, one might then be in a position to make some useful observations about what there is to be learned by reading the Qur'ānic passage in *sūrat al-Kahf* (9–26) against the background of the legend's currency in the earlier, Syriac homiletic and liturgical tradition.

The Companions of the Cave in the Qur'ān

In the Islamic scholarly tradition, as well as in western Qur'ānic scholarship, there has been an abundant commentary on the narrative of the "Companions of the Cave."[27] Almost always, the commentators have looked back to the text of the Qur'ān from a post Qur'ānic standpoint, looking for the meaning of the narrative within the context of a developing or developed Islamic point of view; some westerners have looked for the origins of the legend in earlier Christian material, taking a more or less critical view of the Qur'ān's fidelity to this material or highlighting the coincidences.[28] Be this as it may, in the present inquiry, the point of view is reversed. One approaches the narrative of the "Companions of the Cave" in the Arabic Qur'ān from a pre-textual perspective, with a deep and primary familiarity not with the post Qur'ānic Islamic commentary tradition but with the traditional literature of the Syriac-speaking Christians, among whose texts modern scholars have found the earliest, still extant accounts of the legend of the "Companions of the Cave." The approach assumes, for reasons broadly stated earlier, that these texts furnish the form of the legend nearest to that in which it would in all likelihood have been familiar to the Arabic-speaking Christians in the Qur'ān's audience as Muḥammad gave voice to the discourse sent down to him from God.

The Qur'ān's evocation of the legend of the "Companions of the Cave" comes close to the beginning of *sūrat al-Kahf* (18:9–26), where Allāh addresses Muḥammad with the following question: "Do you reckon that the companions of the cave (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*) and of the inscription[29] are wondrously among Our signs?" (18:9). It is pertinent to notice at the outset that Allāh poses this question in the context of recalling for Muḥammad the purpose of the revelation of the Scripture (*al-kitāb* = the Qur'ān) to His servant in the first place, which among other things was "so that it might give a warning to those who say, 'God has gotten a child'" (18:4). Similarly, at the end of the pericope of the "Companions of the Cave" Allāh tells Muḥammad that the youths had no protector other than God, "and He takes no one as an associate in His governance" (18:26). The next verse exhorts Muḥammad to recite from the Lord's scripture, "whose words no one will change," and it ends with the assurance that "You will not find any recourse apart from Him" (18:27).

Clearly it is in the context of commending trust in the revelation of the Qur'ān that Allāh reminds Muḥammad of the story of "the youths who sought shelter in

the cave" (18:10); He suggests that analogously with the verses of the Qur'ān, this story is itself to be considered among "Our signs." Alternatively, perhaps the message is also that just as this story is among "Our signs," so are the verses of the Qur'ān. In any event, it is notable that a purpose of the scripture is to warn "those who say God has gotten a child" (18:4) when in the next breath the text offers an extended evocation of a martyrdom and miracle story which had hitherto circulated only among Christians. And, at the end of the passage, the text intimates that an important meaning of the story is that God "takes no one as an associate in His governance" (18:26) nor is there "any recourse apart from Him" (18:27). It is hard to avoid the thought that not only is the Qur'ān here using a familiar Christian narrative to enhance the understanding of the sense of the expression "God's signs," but that it is also proposing in the sequel that the true meaning of the Christian story corrects what the Qur'ān considers to be one of the major errors of the Christian understanding. Namely, the doctrine that God has a son and that he is Jesus, the Messiah.

This reading of the setting in context of the Qur'ān's evocation of the Christian legend of the "Sleepers" is not without its difficulties. To begin with, it is the received wisdom among both Muslim commentators and western scholars that the sūra in which the legend is evoked is, with the exception of just a few verses, "Meccan."[30] Furthermore, it is generally assumed that Muḥammad's adversaries in Mecca were given to the polytheist view that angels and lesser goddesses could be taken to be Allāh's children. Accordingly, on this view the warning against "those who say God has gotten a child" (18:4) was not in the first place addressed to Christians but to Meccan polytheists.[31] It is also the generally received opinion that Muḥammad encountered opposition from Jews and Christians only in the Medinan period of his prophetic career, whereas in Mecca the attitude was more positive.[32] However this may be, the fact remains that it is in this largely Meccan sūra that the Qur'ān evokes the memory of the Christian legend of the "Sleepers" with the clear expectation that it is already known to Muḥammad and presumably also to other members of the Qur'ān's audience, a number of whom may well have been Arabic-speaking Christians. How else would one explain the currency of such a detailed reminiscence of a Christian legend, together with so many other elements of Christian scripture, doctrine and ecclesiastical lore that are to be found broadcast throughout the Qur'ān?[33] Not only are they present in the Qur'ān, but often the text evokes them in such a way that there is evidently a presumption that the audience too is thoroughly familiar with them.

At the outset it is clear that in the Qur'ān's evocation of the legend of the "Sleepers" Allāh comments on the story and in the process poses rhetorical questions to Muḥammad about its proper interpretation: "Do you reckon that the companions of the cave and the inscription are wondrously among Our signs?" (18:9). As the catechesis of Muḥammad on this matter unfolds in the subsequent sixteen verses, one may distinguish two phases in the discourse: 18:10–20 and 21–6. In the first phase (vv. 10–20), directly addressing Muḥammad in the second person, Allāh recalls central elements of the legend and by interweaving stock phrases

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from other parts of the Qur'ān He discloses the proper, Qur'ānic understanding of the story's central message. In the second phase (vv. 21–6), Allāh addresses several points about which controversy had arisen in connection with the details of the story of the "Companions of the Cave" and issues Muḥammad instructions in the imperative mood about how they are to be dealt with.

The first phase of the Qur'ān's evocation of the legend of the "Companions of the Cave" itself involves two narrative stages: Allāh's statement of the central elements of the story (vv. 10–12) and Allāh's interpretive rehearsal (*qaṣṣ*) of the authentic narrative (*naba'*) of the companions' experience (vv. 13–20).[34] The central elements as Allāh states them are several: the youths sought refuge in the cave (v. 10); they prayed for their Lord's mercy and right guidance (v. 10); Allāh shut their ears for a number of years (v. 11); Allāh roused them to know which of two parties had rightly computed the extent of their stay (v. 12).

Allāh's interpretive rehearsal of the authentic narrative of the companions' experience presents the story of the youths according to the familiar Qur'ānic pattern of righteous individuals who believed in their Lord (v. 13), who called on none other as God (v. 14), whose people had taken on other gods without any show of power (v. 15). So too the youths, Allāh says, after their refusal to worship any other than Allāh, exhorted one another in the second person to take refuge in the cave where their Lord's mercy would unfold for them and He would provide a way out of their predicament (v. 16, cf. similar wording in v. 10). Allāh discloses to Muḥammad the miracle of the sun's movements, shifting a bit to the south of the cave's opening at its rising and a bit to the north at its setting, while the youths were within. The text specifies that this too was one of "God's signs" (v. 17, cf. also v. 9). Allāh tells Muḥammad, "You would think they were awake, but they were asleep (*ruqūd*); We would turn them over," while their dog stretched out his paws on the threshold. Allāh assures Muḥammad that had he come upon this scene he would have fled in dismay (v. 18). Allāh says He roused the youths precisely so that they would ask questions among themselves; to the question about how long they had been there some said a day or so, some said the Lord knows best. Allāh then recalls for Muḥammad some of the further dialogue among the youths, "Send one of you into the city with money to search out and bring back to you the cleanest food, but let him act very courteously and not tell anyone about you (v. 19). If they were to get the better of you they would stone you or make you go back to their religion (*milla*) and then you would never thrive" (v. 20).

In the second phase of the Qur'ān's evocation of the legend of the "Companions of the Cave," Allāh addresses points of controversy which had arisen about some details of the story and instructs Muḥammand about how to deal with them. In the first place, God himself takes responsibility for the fact that the legend was well known among members of the Qur'ān's audience, including the information that somewhere there was a shrine or *martyrion* in their memory and that opinion was divided about how many companions there were. Allāh says about the companions, "We alerted [people] to them so that they would know that

God's promise is true; there is no doubt about the hour, albeit that [people] dispute among themselves about their (i.e. the companions') experience" (v. 21). The Qur'ān then recalls that some people wanted to put up a building over them; those who prevailed opted for a place of worship (*masjid*) (v. 21). Regarding the differing estimates about the number of companions, Allāh tells Muḥammad, "Say, 'My Lord knows best,' 'Do not engage in dispute about them,' 'Do not ask anyone's considered opinion about them'" (v. 22). In the next two verses Allāh reminds Muḥammad not ever to say about something on his own recognizance, "I will do that tomorrow" (v. 23). "Remember" and "Say, 'Perhaps my Lord will guide me'" (v. 24). Then, depending on how one understands the Arabic text, either Allāh makes the declarative statement about the "Companions of the Cave": "They stayed in their cave three hundred years; nine are added," or the Qur'ān is reporting that this is an estimate commonly given (v. 25). At the end, Allāh tells Muḥammad, "Say, God knows best how long they stayed. They had no protector apart from Him and He takes no one as an associate in His governance" (v. 26).

The Companions of the Cave in pre-Islamic Syriac texts

Although their story circulated in all the languages of early and medieval Christianity,[35] modern scholars are not sure of the original language of the legend of the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus," as the "Companions of the Cave" are generally known among western Christians. The currently prominent opinion is that a record of their miraculous survival after more than three hundred years of entombment was first composed in Greek by Bishop Stephen of Ephesus between the years 448 and 450, albeit that the earliest extant texts are in Syriac and date from the sixth century. The thought is that the original "memoranda" (*hypomnēmata*), later translated into Syriac, were first composed by Bishop Stephen in testimony to the veracity of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which had been denied by Bishop Theodore of Aegeae and his followers late in the fourth century.[36] Nevertheless, the alternative opinion of a Syriac original, strongly seconded by Theodor Nöldeke in 1886, and bolstered by the remark of St Gregory of Tours (d. 594) that he owed his account of the "Seven Sleepers" to a Latin translation from a Syriac original, still survives. The thought among those who support this opinion is that the legend arose in the Syriac-speaking churches in connection with the "Origenist" controversies of the sixth century, in which differing opinions about the doctrine of the resurrection of the body were an issue.[37]

Whichever may have been the original language of the legend, the earliest extant texts in which it actually survives are in Syriac.[38] The earliest Syriac texts which feature the story of the "Youths (*ṭlāyê*) of Ephesus," as the "Companions of the Cave" or "Seven Sleepers" are always called in Syriac, are two recensions of a liturgical homily (*mêmrâ*) attributed to Jacob of Serugh (c. 451–521),[39] who spent most of his life as a monk composing homilies on biblical and other liturgical themes. Indeed the hundreds of homilies attributed to him are in the ensemble

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a virtual compendium of Aramean Christian thought and tradition, written in the classical Syriac idiom of Edessa and its environs in the crucial decades spanning the turn of the sixth century.[40] At that time in the Syriac-speaking world the two parties who would in due course become two separate ecclesial communities were in the process of disengaging from one another over issues of biblical interpretation and Christology.[41] Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrê* circulated widely among those who would later be called "Jacobites," the "Syrian Orthodox Church," whose faith would be championed among the Arab Ghassānids and eventually the Christians of Najrān.[42] Toward the end of his life, Jacob himself wrote a letter of consolation at a time of persecution addressed to his brother Christians and confessors among the Ḥimyarites of southern Arabia.[43] The other confessional community among the Syriac-speakers, the so-called Nestorians,[44] the "Church of the East," whose faith had spread among the Arab Lakhmids and along the coast of southern Arabia, cherished the *mêmrê* of Narsai of Edessa and Nisibis (399–503), a rival of Jacob of Serugh at the time of the break-up of the School of Edessa in the course of the controversies precipitated by the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451).[45] So far no trace of the legend of the "Youths of Ephesus" has been found among the *mêmrê* attributed to Narsai, or in any other "Nestorian" Syriac text which dates from the pre-Islamic period.

In addition to the two recensions of the *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh, two further Syriac accounts of the legend of the "Youths of Ephesus" are included in two "Jacobite" histories from pre-Islamic times. The first of them is in the Syriac epitome of the originally Greek *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mytilene (c. 465–536), often called Zacharias Rhetor or Scholastikos. The surviving Syriac epitome of the *History*, which originally provided an account of the religious controversies of the years 450–91 from a "Jacobite" perspective, was included in a much longer Syriac chronicle compiled by an anonymous monk at Amida in the year 569.[46] The second account is in a portion of the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus (c. 507–86)[47] which has been preserved in the later *Chronicle* of Dionysius of Tell Maḥrē (d. 845), which in turn was preserved in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (1126–99) and the *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* of Gregory Abū l-Faraj, commonly known as Bar Hebraeus (1226–86).[48]

It is notable that in Syriac in pre-Islamic times the legend of the "Youths of Ephesus," as far as we can ascertain, circulated solely in "Jacobite" communities. This fact may well be significant for the study of the origins of the legend in the context of the theological controversies of the fifth century, but that inquiry is beyond the range of concerns in the present study.[49] In connection with the inquiry into the Syriac background of the evocation of the legend of the "Companions of the Cave" in the Arabic Qur'ān, the recognition of the fact that it circulated only among the "Jacobites" prompts one to draw the conclusion that in the Qur'ān's milieu, the narrative circulated first among Arabic-speaking, "Jacobite" Christians in the Ghassānid confederation in the Syro-Jordanian steppe land as well as in the environs of Najrān in southern Arabia. From these centers it would have circulated among Arabic-speaking Christians throughout Arabia.

Furthermore, given the likely, oral form of the legend's circulation in this milieu it is reasonable to suppose that the liturgy and its wider ecclesial ambience was the primary setting in which the legend circulated among Arabic-speaking, "Jacobite" Christians. This being the case, it is also reasonable to suppose that the recollection of the details of the legend in the liturgically inspired *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh is, textually speaking, the most likely, still extant, single narrative ancestor in Syriac in the background of the Arabic Qur'ān's evocation of the legend.[50] Nevertheless, the fact remains that no single Syriac text includes every aspect of the legend as it circulated orally or as the Qur'ān evokes it. A situation of intertextuality obtains, according to which one expects to find details of the narrative scattered among the several textual witnesses, with no one of them containing all the narrative features in a single record.

The "The Youths of Ephesus" in the mêmrâ *attributed to Jacob of Serugh*

The two recensions of the *mêmrâ* attributed to Jacob of Serugh on "The Youths of Ephesus" are transmitted in several different Syriac manuscripts, of different provenance and different dating.[51] The first recension, and seemingly the earlier of the two, is known in two manuscripts, one of which, Vatican Syriac MS 115, paleographically dated to the seventh or eighth century, is among the oldest, extant collections of Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrê*.[52] The other manuscript containing the first recension, of uncertain date, is Codex Syriacus Nitriensis 13.[53] The second recension is so far known in only a single manuscript of an uncertain later date, Vatican Syriac MS 217.[54]

Many of the 763 *mêmrê* which both Jacob of Edessa (c. 640–708) and Bar Hebraeus say Jacob of Serugh composed[55] have been transmitted in several recensions. Because of their constant use in the homiletic and catechetical enterprises of the "Jacobite" communities many of these *mêmrê* effectively became the property of the churchmen who used them and they seem often to have altered them the better to suit their immediate purposes. Most of the alterations, as in the second recension of the *mêmrâ* here under discussion, are not of major significance; they are for the most part cosmetic, improving the grammar or diction, occasionally correcting a narrative detail. The story recalled in both recensions of the *mêmrâ* on the "Youths of Ephesus" remains a faithful recollection of the legend as we also have it in the somewhat later sixth century historical texts of Zacharias of Mitylene and John of Ephesus.

At the beginning of his *mêmrâ* on the "Youths of Ephesus," Jacob of Serugh evokes the liturgical setting of the composition; first he addresses himself in prayer to the Son of God and then he says, "About the children, the sons of the princes of Ephesus, I have a homily (*mêmrâ*) to declaim before the hearers. Pay attention to me, laborers; sing praise, sons of the bridal chamber."[56] It was probably the feast day of the youths, who were considered to be martyrs; Jacob clearly expects his congregation, perhaps monks, to be familiar with the story.

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Nevertheless, he will recall the narrative outline for them, to refresh their memories, as if to summon the very presence of the youthful saints and martyrs into the minds of the congregation. Jacob first of all reminds his audience (the "hearers") that the trials of the youths began in the time of Emperor Decius (r. 249–51), who came to Ephesus and decreed a festival for the gods, Zeus, Apollo, and Artemis,[57] requiring that everyone should place incense on their altars. When several handsome noble youths refused, they were summoned to the emperor's presence, who demanded to know why they would not comply with his order. The text says

> The son of the prefect and his seven companions (*ḥabrawhy*) spoke up,
> "We are not going to bow down to dumb idols, the work of human hands.
> Ours is the Lord (*māryâ*) of the heavens; He will help us.
> To Him we will bow down, and to Him offer the purity of our heart.
> You have as king, Zeus and Apollo, along with Artemis.
> We have as king, the Father and the Son, along with the Holy Spirit."
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 19, ## 31–9)

The emperor deferred dealing with the youths until he would return from a journey to other parts of his domain. In the meantime, having escaped custody, the youths determined to take refuge in a "cave of stone"[58] on a nearby mountain top. After they established themselves there and having prayed that the Good Shepherd would protect his sheep, Jacob says

> The Lord saw the faith of the beloved lambs,
> and He came to give a good wage for their recompense.
> He took their spirits and brought them up to heaven,
> and He left a watcher (*'îrâ*) to be the guardian of their limbs.
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*,
> 1, 19–20, ## 58–62)

When the emperor returned and learned where the youths had hidden, he planned to kill them there and he gave orders for the cave's entrance to be walled up. Jacob says that at this moment

> Two sophists, sons of princes, were present there,
> and they thought that the Lord was going to raise them up.
> They made tablets of lead[59] and placed them beside them;
> they wrote the names of the sons of light on them,
> and the reason why the youngsters went to hide in the cave,
> and in what time period they had fled from Decius the king.
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 20, ## 69–73)

The time came when "the Lord willed to awaken the sons of light."[60] Long after their entombment, a wealthy man came to build a sheepfold on the mountain top

and he took the well carved stones walling up the entrance to the cave to use in the new structure. When the stones were removed, "the light came in and awakened the sons of light."[61] From this point Jacob somewhat elaborately recalls how the youths took counsel with one another and sent one of their number, Yamlîkâ by name,[62] to go into the city to learn the news and to bring back food. Jacob lingers over the adventures of Yamlîkâ in an Ephesus now only barely familiar to him, with signs of the cross prominently displayed. When he attempts to pay for food with coins the youths had taken into the cave with them people are convinced that he had found a buried treasure and they are determined to force him to lead them to it. Eventually, Yamlîkâ is brought to the church, where a sophist recognizes the coin as coming from the reign of the emperor Decius, as the youth himself had claimed. The sophist, who says, "I see you are about twelve years old," goes on to say

> The one of whom you speak was a very long time ago.
> According to the numbering and the reckoning of the Greeks,
> he was the king three hundred and seventy-two years ago.[63]
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 22,
> ## 152 and 154–5)

Eventually, Yamlîkâ leads the people of Ephesus to his companions in their cave. Jacob says the bishop sends a message to Emperor Theodosius II (408–50), who came to see the great prodigy for himself. Jacob also says that the emperor "took up the tablet of lead and he began to read why it was the youngsters had entered and hidden in the cave."[64] Theodosius tried to persuade the youths to return to city of Ephesus, where "he would build a temple (*hayklâ*) over their bodies."[65] But they refused, saying they would remain where they were, and they told the emperor

> For your sake . . . our Lord, the Messiah, awakened us,
> so you could see and affirm that there is truly a resurrection.
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*,
> 1, 23, # 184)

The Qur'ān's relationship to the Syriac narrative

When one reads the evocation of the story of the "Companions of the Cave" in the Arabic Qur'ān against the background of the accounts of the legend which are available in the pre-Islamic, Syriac sources, and in particular in the *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh on the "Youths of Ephesus," a number of interesting coincidences present themselves. But in the very first place it should be mentioned that viewed from the perspective of the Syriac tradition, it seems clear that the Qur'ān does not present its own, full recension of the story. Rather, for its own rhetorical purposes and within the context of its own concerns, the Qur'ān evokes the memory of the story, which it presumes is common knowledge among

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its audience or at the very least that the legend was known in some detail to Muḥammad, with whom Allāh actually speaks about it. Allāh recalls the gist of the story and asks questions about its proper interpretation. And a striking feature about the text is that when the Arabic Qur'ān's evocation is read against the background of the Syriac tradition of the "Youths of Ephesus" as it is preserved in the several Syriac textual sources, a remarkable coincidence of word, phrase or narrative detail is sometimes observable. One may best observe this phenomenon by following the Qur'ān's text verse by verse, according to the outline presented earlier.

The narrative setting (18:9)

The Qur'ān provides the immediate setting for its evocation of the legend of the "Companions of the Cave" with Allāh's question to Muḥammad, "Do you reckon that the companions (*aṣḥāb*) of the cave and of the inscription (*al-raqīm*) are wondrously among our signs?" (18:9). Reading from the perspective of the Syriac texts, two terms are of immediate interest in this verse. The first of them is the term "companions" to refer to the youths whose story is in the offing. It is a term which frequently appears in the Christian texts in its Syriac equivalent (*ḥabrê*) to refer to the youths hidden in the cave, and for which the Qur'ān's Arabic term (*aṣḥāb*) may be considered an apt translation. Of more interest however is the often disputed Arabic term *al-raqīm*, which is traditionally, very often translated "inscription," but about which there has been much speculation regarding its actual meaning both among Muslim commentators and western scholars of the Qur'ān.[66]

The difficulty commentators have had with *al-raqīm* springs both from the rarity of the word in Arabic lexicography, its grammatical form in this verse, and from the perceived awkwardness of its possible meaning in the present context. Consequently, scholars have offered a broad array of alternative meanings for the troublesome word.[67] Recently, James A. Bellamy, noting the possibilities for misreading the consonants in the Qur'ān's orthography, has argued that in its present form the text is corrupt and he has proposed reading *al-ruqūd* ("sleeping," "sleepers") for *al-raqīm*, a term which actually occurs in 18:18 in reference to the companions. Bellamy then takes the restored phrase to say, "The sleeping companions of the cave."[68] Alternatively, Christoph Luxenberg has argued that on the basis of their failure to recognize a common, underlying, Syro-Aramaic orthography,[69] the transmitters of the Arabic Qur'ān's text changed a misunderstood, original *al-ruqād* ("sleep," "slumber") into the puzzling *al-raqīm*, which has yielded the well known array of suggestions regarding its possible significance in the works of the later Muslim commentators. Luxenberg then takes the restored text to be saying, "Die Leute der Höhle und des Schlafes."[70]

Reading the verse in question from the perspective of the several, pre-Islamic Syriac accounts of the "Youths of Ephesus," with the traditional association in Arabic of the root consonants *r-q-m* with "writing," and the understanding that

al-raqīm could just possibly mean "inscription" or "tablet,"[71] one recalls the importance in the narrative of the "lead tablet(s)" which record the names of the youths and give an account of their entombment in the cave. There are two important moments in the narrative in which the "tablet(s)" are mentioned: the moment of the entombment and the moment when the Christian emperor arrives at the cave/tomb to verify the miracle of the resurrection of the youths.[72] According to Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrâ*, at the moment of the entombment

> Two sophists, sons of princes, were present there,
> and they thought that the Lord was going to resurrect them.
> They made tablets of lead and they set them beside them;
> they wrote on them the names of the sons of light,
> and the reason why the youths went into the cave to hide,
> and at what era they had fled from Decius the king.[73]
>
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*,
> 1, 20, ## 68–73)

When Emperor Theodosius II (408–50) arrived at the cave to verify the miracle of the resurrection of the youths, according to Jacob of Serugh

> He took up the tablet of lead and he began to read
> why the children had entered into the cave to hide.
>
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*,
> 1, 22, ## 176–7)

With this background in mind, Allāh's question to Muḥammad, "Do you reckon that the companions of the cave and of the inscription are wondrously among our signs?" (18:9) makes complete narrative sense. In the Syriac texts, the "Companions" really are portrayed as "Companions of the Cave" and of the "inscription," they belong in both of them. Furthermore, even if one were to read the passage in a way that separates the youths and the "inscription" (i.e. "the Companions of the Cave and the inscription"), in the Qur'ānic understanding, the "writing" (*raqm // kitāb*) on an inscription would just as readily be among God's "signs" (*āyāt*) as would be the miracle of the youths' resurrection. What is more, it seems that this reading of the verse yields more consistent intelligibility, on the hypothesis that the Syriac narrative of the legend is in the background, than does either of the suggested textual emendations or any understanding of the meaning of the term *al-raqīm* other than one which bespeaks "writing." There remains only the perceived awkwardness of the grammatical form of the word in Arabic. In this connection one wonders why an awareness of the Syro-Aramaic background of the Arabic diction in such a context should not suggest that the form could be understood to be a "Syriacism." That is to say, the likely scenario would be that the form of the Syriac passive participle (*f'îl*),[74] used as a substantive adjective (*fa'îl*),[75] has been imported into Arabic diction to produce the

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anomalous *al-raqīm*,[76] presumably originally by an Arabic-speaking Christian with a Syriac-speaking background, who was concerned with translating the legend of the "Youths of Ephesus" into Arabic. The Qur'ān simply "quoted" this usage, presumably current among Arabic-speaking Christians, along with its evocation of the rest of the legend. In this interpretation, one might plausibly claim that a philological possibility gains probability from a consideration of the historical and cultural background of the narrative.

The first narrative phase (18:10–20)

Stage one (18:10–12)

The details which the Qur'ān recalls in these verses have parallels in the Syriac tradition. Here we may note them most readily in the *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh. The youths (*al-fityа // ṭlāyê*) took shelter (*awā // bātw*) in the cave (v. 10);[77] they prayed for their Lord's mercy and right guidance (v. 10);[78] Allāh shut their ears for a number of years (v. 11);[79] and finally Allāh roused them (v. 12).[80] The Qur'ān goes on to say that God roused them "to know which of the two parties rightly calculated how long they had stayed" (v. 12). As we shall see later, there is a concern in the Syriac texts to calculate the length of the youths' stay in the cave, but there is no mention of "two parties" being involved in the reckoning.

Stage two (18:13–20)

Allāh retells (*qaṣṣ*) the narrative (*naba'*) of the "youths who believed in their Lord" (v. 13) recalling familiar Qur'ānic themes in familiar Qur'ānic language. In these verses the Qur'ān makes the legend of the "Youths of Ephesus" its own; one might see in them the "Islamicization" of the current Christian narrative. The historical, geographical and overtly Christian frame of reference, so much a part of the Syriac tradition, is left behind in favor of highlighting the Islamic themes of the refusal of the youths to adopt the pagan practices of their people (vv. 13–15), the miraculous signs of God's providence in their behalf (vv. 16–17), God's personal care for the seemingly sleeping youths (v. 18), God's raising the youths and their dispatch of a messenger into the city (v. 19) out of the fear that if they were discovered they might be forced to return to the religion (*milla*) of their people (v. 20). The Qur'ān's own rhetorical purposes for evoking the legend of the "Companions of the Cave" are shaped in these verses.

There is one detail in particular, mentioned in the context of God's care for the youths, which has given a distinctive mark to the Islamic rendition of the legend. The Qur'ān says that while God would turn the "sleeping" youths over to the right and the left, "their dog was stretching its paws on the threshold" (v. 18). There is no mention of the dog in the pre-Islamic, Syriac tradition of the "Youths of Ephesus." But there is mention in Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrâ* of a guardian for their "sleeping" members. The text of recension I says that having taken their spirits to

heaven, the Lord "left a watcher (*'îrâ*) to be the guardian of their limbs."[81] Normally in the milieu of Aramaic one would think of such a "watcher" as an angel,[82] an understanding which is made explicit in recension II of the *mêmrâ* where the text says the Lord "dispatched a 'watcher' to go down to guard their limbs."[83] It may not be too far a leap to suppose that it was this "watcher" of the Syriac tradition which became the watch-dog of the Arabic Qur'ān,[84] albeit that such an interpretation, with at least one notable exception,[85] is never to be found in the Islamic commentary tradition.[86] Neither watch-dogs nor guard-dogs seem to have had a place in the entry under "dog" (*kalb*) in the Arabic lexicon of the Bedouin Arabs; the nomads prized hunting dogs.[87] But watch-dogs do appear in the Syriac lexicon of the Arameans, among whom both shepherds and shepherding imagery have a high literary profile.[88] In fact, in Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrâ* on the "Youths of Ephesus," the mention of the "watcher" who served as their guard occurs in just such a context, featuring shepherd imagery, in the youths' prayer to their Lord. The text says

> They went up the mountain; they entered the cave and stayed there.
> They called out to the Lord in a doleful voice and spoke thus,
> "We beseech you, Good Shepherd, who has chosen His servants,
> guard your flock from this wolf who thirsts for blood."
> The Lord saw the faith of the blessed lambs,
> and He came to give a good wage for their recompense.
> He took their spirits and brought them up to heaven,
> and He left a watcher to be the guardian of their limbs.
>
> (Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 19–20, ## 55–61[89])

In spite of its allure, it is probably a temptation to be avoided to suppose that the watch-dog in the Arabic Qur'ān is a conceptual "Syriacism." The step down from guardian angel to watch-dog is no doubt too steep a step to imagine the Arabic-speaking Christians in the Qur'ān's audience readily to have taken in translating the legend. As for the Qur'ān's own imagery, in spite of the later Islamic interpretive tradition, which obviously struggles with the appearance of the dog in the narrative, the watch dog with its paws spread on the cave's threshold remains right on the mark from the perspective of the pastoral metaphors evoked in the Syriac tradition.

The second narrative phase (18:21–6)

Allāh tells Muḥammad that while the purpose of the narrative of the "Companions of the Cave" was to make known to people that "God's promise is true and there is no doubt about the hour" (v. 21) people have nevertheless been caught up in disagreements about them. The disagreements began already at the

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time of the discovery of the risen youths, who were soon to sleep again. According to the Qur'ān some said, "Build a building over them," but "those who prevailed said 'we shall build a place of prayer (*masjid*) over them' " (v. 21). The Syriac tradition too preserves a recollection of differing opinions about what to do with the bodies of the companions once they went to sleep for good after the discovery of their momentary reawakening. At first the emperor Theodosius proposed to bring them back into Ephesus, where he would build a "sanctuary" (*hayklā*) over them. But the youths requested to be left in their cave and the emperor acceded to their request.[90] It is notable that in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mitylene the narrative says of the emperor's action, "He left them there to this very day; meanwhile a great sanctuary has been built over the cave for honor's sake, and for a house of prayer (*bayt ṣlūtâ*), and for liturgy (*teshmeshtâ*) over their bodies."[91] One notes in passing the specification of the sanctuary as "a house of prayer," a detail that may be echoed in the Qur'ān's mention of the *masjid* which "those who prevailed" would build over the bodies of the companions.

Allāh has specific instructions for Muḥammad about other aspects of the disagreements surrounding the story of the "Companions of the Cave." He tells the prophet not to get into arguments with people about the number of the companions (v. 22). In the Syriac tradition there is in fact some disagreement about the number. According to the *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh and the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus, the number is consistently eight, the youths' leader and spokesman/emissary (Yamlîkâ) and his "seven companions," while the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mitylene speaks of "their leader Akleides and his six companions."[92] In other early Christian language traditions the youths are usually called the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus."

Noting a concern about the number of years the companions stayed in the cave, "three hundred years, nine to be added" (v. 25), Allāh tells Muḥammad to say, "Allāh knows best how long they stayed" (v. 26). In the pre-Islamic Syriac texts there is in fact disagreement about the number of years the youths stayed asleep in the cave. For the most part the differences seem to come from the methods of computing the number of years which elapsed between the reigns of the emperors Decius (249–51) and Theodosius II (408–50). Recension I of Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrâ* says of Decius, "According to the numbering and the reckoning of the Greeks, he was the king three hundred and seventy-two years ago,"[93] but recension II says, "According to the numbers and the reckoning of the Greeks, Decius passed on three hundred and fifty years ago."[94] The *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus says that the coinage of Decius in the youths' possession was current three hundred and seventy years ago;[95] in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mitylene, the bishop of Ephesus tells the youth Dionysius that Decius reigned "two hundred years ago, more or less."[96] With this reckoning, the bishop would seem to be "more or less" correct; the number of years which elapsed between the end of the reign of Decius (d. 251) and the last year of the reign of Theodosius (d. 450), when the youths were discovered, is roughly 199.

So the Qur'ān's advice about quarrelling over the number of years the youths spent in the cave seems to be well taken.

Conclusion

Reading the Qur'ān's evocation of the legend of the "Companions of the Cave" against the background of the fuller narrative as we have it in the extant, pre-Islamic, Syriac tradition, and particularly in the *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh, enables the scholar of Syriac to recognize the fidelity of the Qur'ān's reprise of a piece of Christian lore as it must have circulated orally among the Arabic-speaking, "Jacobite" Christians of Muḥammad's day in Arabia. One notices not only the Qur'ān's familiarity with details of the story and the different understandings of them, but also the way in which the Qur'ān on the one hand removes the Christian frame of reference and on the other hand provides an Islamic, Qur'ānic horizon within which the legend takes on a whole new hermeneutical significance.

While it is beyond the range of this study to pursue the matter, the review of the Syriac texts discussed here, together with a rapid survey of the Islamic exegetical tradition, provides abundant evidence that early Muslim commentators on the Qur'ān were also much indebted to these same Syriac sources for many of the details they included in their commentaries on the story of the "Companions of the Cave." The debt is already evident in what may be one of the earliest of them, the *Kitāb al-mubtada'* of Muḥammad Ibn Isḥāq (d. c. 767).[97] The story line of the "Companions of the Cave" as it appears in this prologue to the biography of Muḥammad as it has been recovered from the works of later writers, largely from al-Ṭabarī's *History* and *Commentary*,[98] owes an obvious debt to the Syriac account of the "Youths of Ephesus" as it appears in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mitylene. This recognition highlights the need for serious studies in the future on the role of Syriac sources in early Islamic scholarship, how they came to the attention of the Arabic-speaking Muslims, and how Syriac themes, duly Islamicized, came to furnish important ingredients in classical Islamic literary culture.

In the "Sectarian Milieu" in which the early Islamic accounts of "salvation history" were composed,[99] contemporary Christian writers in Arabic were also alive to the need to include important moments in Islamic religious history in their own apologetically inspired accounts of events. This was especially the case when Islamic history offered an "Islamicized" version of an earlier Christian narrative. The story of the "Youths of Ephesus" who became the "Companions of the Cave" is a case in point. Already in the earliest recension of Eutychius of Alexandria's (877–940) *Annals*,[100] the author is concerned to replace the narrative into its Christian context; he distributes the relevant portions of the legend between his accounts of the reigns of the emperors Decius and Theodosius II. And then at the end, as if to correct the prevailing Islamic reckoning, that is, the Qur'ān's mention of 309 years, he writes, "From the time when the youths fled

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from King Decius and went to sleep in the cave, to the time in which they appeared again and died, one hundred and forty-nine years elapsed."[101]

It would seem that much Christian lore in Syriac lies behind the Qur'ān's evocation of the Christian scriptures, the beliefs and practices of the churches, and their homiletic traditions, as they must have circulated among many Arabic-speaking Christians in the Qur'ān's original audience in the time of Muḥammad. This study is meant to suggest and to illustrate, in a particular instance, some hermeneutical assumptions, grounded in a plausible historical and cultural scenario, which may usefully be applied to the discernment of "Syriacisms," both lexical and thematic, in the Qur'ān's discourse. The Syro-Aramaic tradition is not the only source of Christian discourse present in the milieu of the Arabic Qur'ān, but it is arguably the most important and most pervasive one. It is hoped that the hermeneutical assumptions applied in this one study might suggest ways to avoid some of the extremes of both the philological and the thematic methods of past inquiries into the presumed foreign influences on the Qur'ān. One result of the application of these hermeneutical considerations to the study of the narrative of the "Companions of the Cave" which is striking is that it leaves the canonical Qur'ān's Arabic diction intact at the same time as it suggests ways to explain how certain grammatical or lexical anomalies in the text may have come about. What is more, this approach offers no threat to the Islamic exegesis of the Qur'ān. Rather, it enhances our knowledge of the social, cultural and religious complexity of the Arabic-speaking audience addressed by the Arabic Qur'ān and in the process it discloses the Qur'ān's own detailed awareness of the folklore of that audience's Christian members, whose patristic and liturgical heritage was distinctly Syriac.

Notes

1 See the review, in a broader context, in M.R. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, esp. 51–63.
2 A. Mingana, "Syriac influence on the style of the Ḳur'ān," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library Manchester* 11, 1927, 77–98.
3 *FV*, 20–1.
4 Ibid., 22.
5 See C. Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000; 2nd rev. edn; Berlin: Schiler, 2004.
6 See S.H. Griffith, "The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Texts: The Development of an Apologetical Argument; Abū Qurrah in the *Maǧlis* of al-Ma'mūn," *Parole de l'Orient* 24, 1999, 203–33.
7 Andrae first published the results of his researches in a series of three long articles: T. Andrae, "Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum," *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 23, 1923, 149–206; 24, 1924, 213–92; 25, 1925, 45–112. Subsequently the articles were collected into the volume, Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1926, which was then translated into French as T. Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam et le christianisme*, trans. J. Roche, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1955. In later works Andrae continued to appeal to Syriac

sources, most notably in T. Andrae, *Mohammed, sein Leben und sein Glaube*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1932; English trans.: *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. T. Menzel, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936 and *I Myrtenträdgården: Studier I Tidig Islamisk Mystik*, Lund: Albert Bonniers Forlag, 1947; English trans.: *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987.

8 Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam*, 68.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 145, 160, 203.

11 Ibid., 146.

12 Ibid., 192, 199, 202.

13 Ibid., 206, with a reference back to p. 24.

14 Presumably a reference to *al-Mā'idah* (5):116.

15 Presumably a reference to the Qur'ān's dictum, "They have disbelieved who say God is the Messiah, son of Mary," *al-Mā'idah* (5):72.

16 See Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam*, 209–10. See also Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, 91.

17 See J. Bowman, "The debt of Islam to monophysite Syrian Christianity," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 19, 1964/65, 177–201; also published in E.C.B. Mac Laurin, *Essays in Honour of Griffithes Wheeler Thatcher (1863–1950)*, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967, 191–216.

18 See Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam*, esp. 145–61. Andrae used the old, uncritical *Editio Romana* of the works of Ephraem. See J.S. Assemani (ed.), *Sancti Patris Nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine*, 6 vols; Romae, 1732–46. He was apparently unaware of the problems of authenticity between the works of the so-called Ephraem Syrus and Ephraem Graecus; he referred to them indiscriminately.

19 Ibid., 151–4, where, on p. 151, n. 4, Andrae attributes the original insight to Hubert Grimme, *Muhammad*, 3 vols: Münster im W.: Aschendorff, 1892–5, 2, 160, n. 9.

20 This is Andrae's version of a strophe from St Ephraem's Syriac *Hymni de Paradiso*, 7:18, based on the text in the *Editio Romana* of his works, Assemani, *Opera Omnia*, 2, 563ff.

21 See E. Beck, "Eine christliche Parallele zu den Paradiesesjungfrauen des Korans?" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 14, 1948, 398–405. Beck returned to the issue with some further observations in a later article, Edmund Beck, "Les Houris du Coran et Ephrem le Syrien," *MIDEO* 6, 1959–61, 405–8. For Beck's own understanding of Ephraem's hymn, see Edmund Beck, *Ephraems Hymnen über das Paradies*, *Studia Anselmiana*, 26; Rome: Herder, 1951, 63–76, and E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*, *CSCO* 174 and 175; Louvain: Peeters, 1957. Beck's version of the stanza quoted by Andrae is as follows: "Wer des Weines * in Klugheit sich enthielt, – dem eilen freudiger * die Weinstöcke des Paradieses entgegen – und jeder wird seine Trauben * ihm darreichen. – Lebter er auch noch jungfräulich, * dann führen sie ihn ein – in ihren reinen Schoss, * weil er als Asket – nicht gefallen ist in den Schoss * und in das Bett der Ehe." Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso*, 175, 7:18, 28.

22 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 322–3, 345.

23 Luxenberg, *Die Syroaramäische Lesart*, 226: "Wir werden es ihnen unter weissen, kristall(klaren) (Weintrauben) behaglich machen."

24 The Qur'ān itself alludes to the "foreign" (*a'jamī*) speech of one whom some of Muḥammad's adversaries claim was his teacher (*al-Naḥl* [16]:103) and it also defends the idiom of revelation be it "foreign" or Arabic (*Fuṣṣilat* [41]:44).

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32; English trans.: *Mohammed: The Man*
ork: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936 and
sk Mystik, Lund: Albert Bonniers Forlag,
rtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism,
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ulianum, *CSCO* 174 and 175; Louvain:
a quoted by Andrae is as follows: "Wer
lem eilen freudiger * die Weinstöcke des
e Trauben * ihm darreichen. – Lebter er
ihn ein – in ihren reinen Schoss, * weil
choss * und in das Bett der Ehe." Beck,
de Paradiso, 175, 7:18, 28.
v Translation, Oxford: Oxford University

26: "Wir werden es ihnen unter weissen,
achen."
(*a'jamī*) speech of one whom some of
cher (*al-Naḥl* [16]:103) and it also defends
rabic (*Fuṣṣilat* [41]:44).

25 It is unlikely that this pre-Qur'ānic, Christian Arabic would have been available in writing, although it is not impossible that a few literate individuals may have had notes or some other rudimentary texts for personal use. See Gregor Schoeler, *Écrire et transmettre dans les débuts de l'islam*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002, esp. 26–9.

26 See S.H. Griffith, "'Syriacisms' in the Arabic Qur'ān: Who were 'Those who said that Allāh is third of three, according to *al-Mā'idah* 73?'" in Meir M. Bar-Asher, Simon Hopkins, Sarah Stroumsa and Bruno Chiesa (eds.), *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an;Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai* Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007, 83ff.

27 See especially L. Massignon, "Les 'sept dormants'; apocalypse de l'islam," *Analecta Bollandiana* 68, 1950, 245–60; idem, "Les sept dormants d'Ephèse (*ahl al-kahf*) en islam et chrétienté," *Revue des Études Islamiques* 12, 1954, 61–110; *idem, Le culte liturgique et populaire des VII dormants, martyrs d'Ephèse* (ahl al-kahf)*: trait d'union orient-occident entre l'islam et la chrétienté*, *Studia Missionalia*, Rome: The Gregorian University, 1961, 62. The first and third of these items are republished in Louis Massignon, *Opera Minora*, ed. Y. Moubarac, 3 vols; Beirut: Dar al-Maaref, 1963, 3, 104–18 and 119–80. See also H. Kandler, *Die Bedeutung der Siebenschläfer (Ashab al-kahf) im Islam: Untersuchungen zu Legenden und Kult in Schriftum, Religion und Voksglauben unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Siebenschläfer-Wallfahrt*, Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr N. Brockmeyer, 1994.

28 See F. Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants: Une rencontre entre chrétiens et musulmans*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001.

29 Regarding the translation of the term *al-raqīm* as "inscription" see the discussion later.

30 See Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *GdQ1*, 140–3, where sūra 18 is assigned to the second Meccan period.

31 See, for example, Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 183, n. a.

32 See, for example, N. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, London: SCM, 1996, 54.

33 See, for example, J. Henninger, "Spuren christlichen Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft / Nouvelle Revue de Science Missionaire* 1, 1945, 135–40, 304–14; 2, 1946, 56–65, 109–22, 289–304; 3, 1947, 128–40, 290–301; 4, 1948, 129–41, 284–93; 5, 1949, 127–40, 290–300; 6, 1950, 207–17, 284–97. See also C.H. Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, trans. H.J. Chaytor, New York and London: Harper, 1909; R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University, 1925*, London: Macmillan, 1926.

34 Some modern commentators have spoken of two versions of the story in these verses. See, for example, R. Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur'ān*, ed. C.E. Bosworth and M.E.J. Richardson, Manchester: University of Manchester, 1991, 1, 483; R. Blachère, *Le Coran; traduction nouvelle*, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1947–50, 2, 328.

35 See the masterful survey of M. Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschläfern: Eine literargeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1910. See also Massignon, "Les Sept Dormants... en islam et en chrétienté," and "Le culte liturgique et populaire des VII Dormants." It is interesting to note that because of its Christian/Muslim, cross-cultural potential, the legend also found an important place in Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan*; see David Bell, "Goethe's 'Siebenschläfer' and the Heroes of the *West-östlicher Divan*," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 84, 2002, 67–84.

36 See esp. E. Honigmann, "Stephen of Ephesus (April 15, 448-October 29, 451) and the legend of the Seven Sleepers," in E. Honigmann, *Patristic Studies*, Studi e Testi, 173; Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1953, 17, 125–68. See also Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants*, 40–50.

37 See I. Guidi, "Seven Sleepers," in J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 11, 1921, 428–30; Arthur Allgeier, "Der Ursprung des griechischen Siebenschläferlegende," *Byzantinische-neugriechische Jahrbücher* 3, 1922, 311–31; "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus," in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (eds), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 1489–90. The account of the legend in the Syriac version/epitome of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mytilene mentions as an occasion of the miracle, controversies over the fate of the human body after death sparked by works of Origen. See E.W. Brooks (ed.), *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo Adscripta II*, *CSCO* 84, Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1921, 114–15. See n. 47 later.

38 See A. Allgeier, "Untersuchungen zur syrischen Überlieferung der Siebenschläferlegende," *OC* 4, 1915, 279–97; 5, 1915, 10–59; idem, *Die westsyrische Überlieferung der Siebenschläferlegende*, Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1915; idem, "Die älteste Gestalt der Siebenschläferlegende," *OC* 6, 1916, 1–43; 7–8, 1918, 33–87.

39 The texts are published in I. Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti sopra I Sette Dormienti di Efeso*, Reale Accademia dei Lincei, 282, 1884–5; Roma: Tipografia della R. Accademia dei Lincei, 1885, 18–29. One of the recensions is also published in H. Gismondi, *Linguae Syriacae Grammatica et Chrestomathia cum Glossario*, 4th edn; Rome: C. De Luigi, 1913, 45–53.

40 See T. Kollamparampil (intro. and trans.), *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies*, Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies/Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997; idem, *Salvation in Christ according to Jacob of Serugh: An Exegetico-theological Study on the Homilies of Jacob of Serugh (451–521 AD) on the Feasts of Our Lord*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2001; Tanios Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug*, Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 16 and 40; Kaslik, Lebanon: L'Université Saint-Esprit, 1993 and 2000.

41 See D.S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

42 See J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London and New York: Longman, 1979; I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najrân: New Documents. Subsidia Hagiographica* 49. Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1971; idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995–2002; R. Tardy, *Najrân: Chrétiens d'Arabie avant l'islam*, Beyrouth: Dar al-Mashriq, 1999. See also E.K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, esp. 25–6, where a *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh is quoted in celebration of St Sergius' role in bringing the faith to the Arabs at Rusafa.

43 R. Schröter, "Trostsschreiben Jacob von Saruj an die Himyaritischen Christen," *ZDMG* 31, 1877, 360–405.

44 See S.P. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78, 1996, 23–35.

45 See A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*, Mosul: Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905.

46 The account of the "Youths of Ephesus" from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias is published in *CSCO* 84, Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 106–22 and in J. P. N. Land, *Anecdota Syriaca*, 3, *Zachariae Episcopi Mitylenes aliorumque Scripta Historica Graece plerumque Deperdita*; Leiden: Brill, 1870, 87–99.

47 See J.J. van Ginkel, *John of Ephesus: A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium*, PhD dissertation; Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1995.

48 See W. Witakowski, *The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Ma ḥrē: A Study in the History of Historiography*, *Studia Semitica Upsaliensia* 9, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1987. The account of the "Youths of Ephesus" from the

Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus is printed in Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 35–44 and in P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum Syriace I*, Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1890, 301–25.

49 In this connection, see n. 38 earlier.

50 In this connection one recalls the remarks of Ignazio Guidi about the Qur'ān's account of the "Companions of the Cave": "Its source is undoubtedly oral tradition; it goes back probably to Christian monks, and from them directly or indirectly the story reached Muḥammad.... A certain resemblance to the homily of James of Serugh, which must have been very well known and often repeated among the Syrian monks, confirms this supposition." I. Guidi, "Seven Sleepers," 429.

51 See Jourdan, *La tradition des sept dormants*, 57. In addition to the MSS indicated by Jourdan, there is at least one other MS which includes a *mêmrâ* on the "Seven Sleepers" attributed to Jacob of Serugh; it is MS Mardin Orth. 139; which recension it represents remains unknown. See A. Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēmrē-Dichtung des Ja'qōb von Serūg*, *CSCO* 344 and 345, 421 and 422, Louvain: Secrétariat du *CSCO* 1973 and 1980, 344, 71–2. There is also an anonymous *mêmrâ* (n. 203) on the "Seven Sleepers" in MS 156 at the monastery of St Mark in Jerusalem. See Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēmrē-Dichtung des Ja'qōb von Serūg*, 344, 149 and n. 19.

52 See Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēmrē-Dichtung des Ja'qōb von Serūg*, 344, 51–2.

53 See the rather full description of Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrâ* on the "Youths of Ephesus" as contained in this MS in J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana I*; Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719, no. 221, 335–8.

54 See A. Mai, *Scriptorum Veterum Nova Collectio e Vaticanis Codicibus Edita*, vol. 4; Romae: Typis Vaticanis, 1831, 410–11; S.E. Assemanus and J.S. Assemanus (eds), *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Codicum Manuscriptorum Catalogus in Tres Partes Distributus*, 3; Paris: Maisonneuve Frères, 1926, no. 10, 503–5.

55 See Kollamparampil, *Salvation in Christ*, 33.

56 Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 2, 18; different wording in 2, 23.

57 Artemis was the patron deity of Ephesus, whose festival is the setting in which St Paul found himself on his visit to the city as described in Acts 19:28–35. The memory of this passage was doubtless in Jacob of Serugh's mind.

58 Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 19, # 45.

59 Elsewhere in recension I and in recension II the text speaks in the singular of "a lead tablet (*lū ḥâ d'abārâ*);" only here is the plural used.

60 Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 20, # 75.

61 Ibid., 1, 20, # 80.

62 Ibid., 1, 20, # 85. This is the only one of the companions whose name Jacob mentions. At a later point in the narrative, Yamlîkâ speaks of "I and my seven companions." 2, 22, # 158.

63 In recension II the sophist estimates Yamlîkâ to be about fifteen years old and he says, "Decius passed away three hundred and fifty years ago." 2, 28, ## 175 and 179.

64 Ibid., 2, 22–3, ## 175–6. According to recension II, the bishop was the first one to take up the lead tablet and to read the names and exploits of the youths; Theodosius then follows suit. 2, 28, ## 195–6, 205.

65 Ibid., 2, 23, # 179. According to recension II, Theodosius "took the mantle in which he was clothed and covered them; he left them and they lay down to sleep, the sleep of [eternal] rest." 2, 29, ##, 105–6.

66 See R. Tottoli, "Raqīm," in J.D. McAuliffe, *EQ*, 4, 351–2.

67 See the brief but comprehensive review of understandings in Tottoli, "Raqīm," and in James A. Bellamy, "*Al-Raqīm* or *al-Ruqūd*? A note on Sūrah 18:9," *JAOS* 111, 1991, 115–17.

68 Bellam y, "*Al-Raqīm* or *al-Ruqūd*?" 116.
69 See Luxenberg, *Die syroaramäische Lesart*, 66–7, where it is explained that in addition to mistaking *dāl* for *mīm*, as Bellamy had argued, a copyist must also have failed to understand the Syro-Aramaic orthographic possibility for *yā'* to indicate *ā*, a recognition which for Luxenberg removes the difficulty of alleging two mistaken characters in the same word, as Bellamy's suggestion involved.
70 Ibid., 67.
71 See E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2 vols; Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984, 1, 1138–40.
72 Both moments involving the lead tablet(s) appear in all three pre-Islamic, Syriac texts of the legend. In the *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh the text of recension I speaks of "tablets" only in regard to the first moment; in the second it speaks of a single "tablet"; the text of recension II speaks of a single tablet in both instances. In the histories of Zacharias of Mitylene and John of Ephesus the texts speak of "tablets" encased in caskets of brass, in both instances.
73 In recension II (p. 25, ## 80–1) there is only one lead tablet, as in the other passage to be quoted from recension I.
74 See T. Nöldeke, *Compendious Syriac Grammar*, trans. J. A. Crichton; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraun's, 2001, 218, # 278.
75 Ibid., 70, # 110.
76 It is interesting to note the collocation of *al-raqīm* with *marqūm* in Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1, 1139.
77 Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 19, # 54.
78 Ibid., 1, 19, ## 55–6.
79 Ibid., 1, 19, # 60, "[God] took their spirits and brought them up to heaven."
80 Ibid., 1, 20, # 75, "The Lord willed to awaken the sons of light."
81 Ibid., 1, 19–20, # 61.
82 This understanding is already evident in the Aramaic portions of the Bible; see, for example, Daniel 4:13, 17:23. As for Syriac, see W. Cramer, *Die Engelvorstellung bei Ephräm dem Syrer*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 173, Rome: 1965; R. Murray, "The origin of Aramaic *'ir*, angel," *Orientalia* 53, 1984, 303–17; *idem*, "Some themes and problems of early Syriac angelology," *V Symposium Syriacum 1988: Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, 29–31 août 1988*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 236, Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990, 143–53.
83 Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 2, 25, # 68.
84 The suggestion was made already in Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschläfern: Eine literargeschichtliche Untersuchung*, 240–2.
85 The Muslim historian, al-Ya'qūbī (d. 292/897), who recorded the story of the "Companions of the Cave" in his *History*, says that they were accompanied by a shepherd and the shepherd's dog, whose name he gives as *Qaṭmīr*. See *Ibn Wādhih Qui Dicitur al-Ja'qubī Historiae*, ed. M.Th. Houtsma, Leiden: Brill, 1969, 1, 173.
86 It is interesting to note in passing the range of interpretations for the dog in the story of the "Companions of the Cave" in Islamic tradition. See B. Fudge, "Dog," in McAuliffe, *EQ*, 1, 545–6. See also Kandler, *Die Bedeutung der Siebenschläfer (Ashab al-kahf) im Islam*, Exkurs II: Der Hund, 56–8.
87 See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2, 2624–7.
88 See R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879–1901; reproduced in Hildesheim: Olms, 1981, 1, cols. 1741–4.
89 See also 2, 25, ## 60–7.
90 Ibid., 1, 23 ## 180–1. According to *mêmrâ* 2, Theodosius, "took the cloak that covered him and he covered them; he left them and they lay down to sleep the sleep of [eternal] rest" (p. 29, ## 210–1). In addition to the royal cloak, Zacharias of Mitylene and John of Ephesus both speak of "sheets/planks of gold" (*qūpsê d-dahbâ*)

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2 vols; Cambridge: The Islamic Texts

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990, 143–53.

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f "sheets/planks of gold" (*qūpsê d-dahbâ*)

which the emperor ordered to be put underneath the bodies; there is no mention of writing on them. See Brooks, *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo Adscripta II*, 121; Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum Syriace I*, 1, 324.

91 Brooks, *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo Adscripta II*, 121–2.

92 Ibid., 110. While Akleides, the son of the prefect of Ephesus, is the youths' leader (*rîshâ*), their chosen *chargé d'affaires* (*sā'ūrâ*), according to this source, was "the wise and swift youth" Dionysius (p. 111). Jacob of Serugh names only Yamlîkâ; both Zacharias of Mitylene and John of Ephesus name all of the companions, but the names are different on the two lists.

93 Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti*, 1, 22, ## 154–5. The "reckoning of the Greeks" refers to the practice among the "Jacobite" Syrian Orthodox to compute dates from the beginning of the Seleucid era in Syrian history, that is, from the beginning of the reign in Antioch of Seleucus I Nicator (312–281 BC).

94 Ibid., 2, 28, ## 179–80.

95 Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum Syriace I*, 1, 320.

96 Brooks, *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo Adscripta II*, *CSCO* 84, 120.

97 The earlier remarks of Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. c. 110/728) show no traces of an awareness of the Syriac tradition. See Kandler, *Die Bedeutung der Siebenschläfer (Ashab al-kahf) im Islam*, 62.

98 See G.D. Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989, 212–23.

99 See J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, *London Oriental Series, 34*; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

100 See S.H. Griffith, "Apologetics and Historiography in the *Annals* of Eutychios of Alexandria: Christian Self-Definition in the World of Islam," in R. Ebied and H. Teule (eds), *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage in Honour of Father Prof. Dr. Samir Khalil Samir, S.I. at the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, *Eastern Christian Studies* 5, Leuven: Peeters, 2004, 65–89.

101 M. Breydy, *Das Annalenwerk des Eutychios von Alexandrien: ausgewählte Geschichten und Legenden kompiliert von Sa'īd ibn Baṭrīq um 935 AD*, *CSCO* 471, Louvain: Peeters, 1985, 88. In fact, the number of years was roughly 199. See n. 102 earlier.