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Muḥammad, the Monk, and the Jews: Comparative Religion in Versions of the Baḥīrā Legend

David M. Freidenreich
Colby College, Waterville, Maine, USA

ABSTRACT Early Muslims told a tale about Baḥīrā, a Christian monk who identified the young Muḥammad as the long-awaited prophet and warned the boy's guardian to protect him from murderous Jews. This legend proved so popular that not only later Muslims but also Christians, Samaritans, and Jews themselves retold it in widely divergent ways. This study analyzes the foundational version of the Baḥīrā legend that appears in the Sīra of Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq (d. ca. 768 CE) alongside others whose genealogical relationship to it is demonstrable. Within these tales, comparison functions as a powerful rhetorical tool by means of which premodern authors denigrate their targets. Academic comparison of the Baḥīrā legend's many versions, in contrast, reveals the distinctive ways in which premodern authors from different communities understood the similarities and differences not only between their own community and its rivals but also among those rivals. This article demonstrates the utility of Oliver Freiberger's methodological framework for comparative religion and, more specifically, the analytical value of juxtaposing sources in order to generate insights that deepen understanding of each comparand in its own right.

KEYWORDS Anti-Judaism, Christian–Muslim relations, comparison, Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq, Samaritans, Sergius

Introduction

Early Muslims told a tale about Baḥīrā, a Christian monk who identified the young Muḥammad as the long-awaited prophet and warned the boy's guardian to protect him from murderous Jews. This legend proved so popular that not only later Muslims but also Christians, Samaritans, and Jews themselves retold it in widely divergent ways.[1] Storytellers seized the opportunity afforded by the legend's diverse cast of characters to depict similarities and differences among the groups these characters represent; in many cases, these storytellers also [1]

1 This legend has also been a popular topic for scholarly research. For bibliography, see Gil (2004); Roggema (2009); Boušek (2018); Firestone (forthcoming).

introduced or removed characters to support new claims regarding these relationships. Comparison of the Baḥīrā legend's many versions reveals the distinctive ways in which authors from different communities understood the similarities and differences not only between their own community and its rivals but also among those rivals.

This article self-consciously models Oliver Freiberger's methodological framework for comparative religion (Freiberger 2019, esp. 150–60), which comprises five operations: [2]

1. *Selection* of sources and of the point with regard to which one compares them (known in technical parlance as the *tertium comparationis*). [3]
2. *Description and analysis* of each source within its own context.
3. *Juxtaposition* of sources with attention to similarities and differences related to the point of comparison.
4. *Redescription* of the sources in light of the insights gained through comparison.
5. *Rectification* of the conceptual categories that implicitly underpin the comparison.

Freiberger emphasizes that these operations do not take place in a strictly linear fashion during the research process, but for modeling purposes I have chosen to structure this article by operation. I will, however, proceed through operations 2–4 repeatedly as I introduce new sources. I provide a summary redescription of these sources as part of the article's conclusion before addressing broader lessons regarding comparative religion as a conceptual category. [4]

This study begins with and revolves around the version of the Baḥīrā legend that appears in the *Sīra* of Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq (d. ca. 768 CE), which is not only the oldest surviving tale about Baḥīrā but also the most frequently repeated and most widely familiar Islamic account of the legend.[2] I compare this foundational tale with others whose genealogical relationship to Ibn Isḥāq's version is demonstrable, either through internal textual evidence or through a recognizable chain of narrative transmission. I have chosen to focus my comparison on the ways in which storytellers depict similarities and differences among characters who belong to different communities, as these characters and their relationships represent the storyteller's conception of the similarities and differences among their respective faith traditions. The specific versions I have selected for analysis are those that yield especially valuable insights in this regard. [5]

The Foundational Baḥīrā Legend

Abū Ṭālib, Muḥammad's uncle and guardian, joined a merchant caravan to Syria and, in response to his young nephew's pleading, brought Muḥammad along. The caravan, as always, passed near the cell of a solitary Christian monk named Baḥīrā, who "gained his knowledge from a book that was in the cell, so they allege, handed on from generation to generation" (Guillaume 1955, 79). The monk noticed that a cloud constantly shaded a certain member of the traveling group; when the caravan stopped to rest, a tree bent its branches to provide shade. Although Baḥīrā had ignored previous caravans, this time he prepared a meal for the entire group in order to discover the beneficiary of these miracles. The men of Quraysh left [6]

2 Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra* does not survive in its original version. The tale, however, is clearly original because it appears in the same form both in the extant version of the *Sīra*, preserved in the recension of ʿAbd al-Mālik ibn Hishām (1937, 1: 194–97; trans. Guillaume 1955, 79–81), and in Yūnus ibn Bukayr's recension of Ibn Isḥāq's *Kitāb al-Siyār waʾl-maghāzī* (Ibn Isḥāq 1978, 73–76); these editors were active in the early ninth century CE. For a survey of Islamic legends involving Baḥīrā or related figures, see Roggema (2009, 37–54).

Muḥammad with the luggage on account of his youth, but Baḥīrā recognized his absence and insisted that the boy join the meal. The monk found that Muḥammad's appearance and self-reported behaviors matched those of the prophet foretold in his sacred text, and he discovered the predicted "seal of prophethood" between Muḥammad's shoulders. Baḥīrā then asked Abū Ṭālib to describe his relationship to Muḥammad; when Muḥammad's uncle claimed to be the boy's father, Baḥīrā called out the lie because his own sacred sources indicated that the future prophet would be an orphan.

The key part of the story for our purposes follows: "Take your nephew back to his country," [7] Baḥīrā instructs Abū Ṭālib, "and guard him carefully against the Jews for by Allah! if they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil; a great future lies before this nephew of yours, so take him home quickly" (Guillaume 1955, 81). Sure enough, three People of the Book arrived seeking to kill Muḥammad, but Baḥīrā persuaded them that no one can thwart the figure foretold in divine scriptures.

Ibn Isḥāq's tale is filled with confirmatory redundancies. Muḥammad receives shade both [8] from a cloud and from a tree. Baḥīrā recognizes Muḥammad's prophethood not only from his physical appearance but also from his self-description as well as from the sign between his shoulders. Baḥīrā himself demonstrates his foreknowledge about Muḥammad both when he points out that the caravan members had excluded someone from the meal and when he rejects Abū Ṭālib's claim to be Muḥammad's father. These redundancies reinforce the veracity of Baḥīrā's words. The arrival of the Jewish assassins provides still more support: they too, independent of Baḥīrā, recognize in Muḥammad the scriptural signs of prophethood. Their presence, moreover, confirms Baḥīrā's warning that Jews will seek to harm the boy. These Jews—along with the similarities and differences between them and Baḥīrā—thus play significant roles in Ibn Isḥāq's narrative.

Ibn Isḥāq does not state explicitly that the would-be assassins are Jews, although this iden- [9] tity is absolutely clear from context. He refers to them instead as *ahl al-kitāb*, "People of the Book." This term reinforces the tale's insistence that "the Book" speaks of Muḥammad: Baḥīrā is known for his ancient copy, this text apparently constitutes the source of knowledge about the future prophet for both the monk and the would-be assassins, and Baḥīrā refers explicitly to scripture when persuading these Jews to desist. Ibn Isḥāq posits a fundamental similarity between Christians and Jews in order to reinforce his primary message: that the scripture at the core of Judaism and Christianity truly and unambiguously foretells Muḥammad's prophethood.

At the same time, this tale sharply contrasts Baḥīrā's concern for Muḥammad's well-being [10] with the Jews' desire to harm him. This distinction reflects the Qurʾānic assertion that Jews are among "the most hostile of people toward those who believe" while Christians are "the nearest in affection," in part on account of their monks (Q. 5.82). Jewish hostility also confirms Muḥammad's prophetic status: the would-be assassins act as they do because, as the Qurʾān repeatedly asserts, Jews consistently persecute and seek to kill true prophets (Reynolds 2012). The monk and the Jews alike attest to Muḥammad's prophethood precisely because they respond to his presence in characteristically distinctive ways. Both the similarities and the differences between these non-Muslims reinforce a core Islamic truth claim.

Early Alternative Versions of the Baḥīrā Legend

The *Ṭabaqāt* of Muḥammad Ibn Saʿd (d. 845) recounts versions of the Baḥīrā legend that [11]

parallel Ibn Isḥāq's tale in all significant respects (Ibn Saʿd 1957, 1: 153–55). Elsewhere in the same work, however, Ibn Saʿd offers pared-down accounts with significant alterations. These accounts, which appear in the form of two adjacent traditions, make no reference to the Jewish/Christian scripture, either as the source of Baḥīrā's knowledge or as the cause of the Jews' animosity. Instead, the monk warns Abū Ṭālib that "the Jews are envious," perhaps because God sent a prophet to the Arabs rather than to the Jews themselves (Ibn Saʿd 1957, 1: 120–21).

[12] These alterations conform to broader dynamics that Alfons Teipen identified in his comparative analysis of Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra* and Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt* and, for that reason, likely postdate the *Sīra*. Ibn Isḥāq, Teipen demonstrates, narrates the rise of Islam in opposition to *jāhiliyya* (literally: "ignorance"), the Islamic term for the pre-Islamic polytheistic traditions of Arabia, and he recounts numerous instances in which Jews and Christians prepare Arabs to accept Muḥammad as their prophet. Ibn Isḥāq expresses both respect for the Jewish scripture that foretells Muḥammad's prophethood and disdain for the Jews who nevertheless reject him. Ibn Saʿd, in contrast, stresses the glorious Arab society in which Muḥammad emerged and downplays the links between Islam and earlier monotheistic religions (Teipen 2020). Ibn Saʿd's omission of the Book from which Baḥīrā and the Jews derive their knowledge about Muḥammad implies that one can recognize a true prophet without access to a prior scripture. Unlike Ibn Isḥāq, Ibn Saʿd expresses nothing but disdain for Jews—not necessarily because he viewed Jews more negatively but rather because, in his efforts to downplay the Bible's significance, he omits positive references to Jews such as their foreknowledge of Muḥammad.

[13] Another version of the Baḥīrā legend circulating during the early ninth century CE omits not only the Book but also the Jews: Once the motif of Jewish testimony disappears from the tale, the Jews themselves become dispensable. In a widely attested tradition attributed to Abū Mūsa al-Ashʿarī preserved, for example, in the *Muṣannaf* of Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 849), the monk warns Abū Ṭālib to protect his nephew not from Jews but rather from the Byzantine Romans; he then intervenes when Roman soldiers arrive to kill Muḥammad. This tradition emphasizes that "leading members of Quraysh," the Meccan tribe to which Muḥammad and his uncle belonged, were part of the caravan that encountered this unnamed monk, and that the monk identified Muḥammad as God's prophet in the presence of these leaders. Abū Bakr, Muḥammad's eventual successor, sends his servant back to Mecca with Abū Ṭālib to provide Muḥammad additional protection (Ibn Abī Shayba 1989, 7: 327, §36541).[3] Through these emendations, the Abū Mūsa version of the legend reframes the threat to Muḥammad and his community in political rather than theological terms: The danger comes from foreign soldiers, not zealous Jews, and the heroes include future leaders of the Muslim community. (Although prominent members of Quraysh were among Muḥammad's most powerful foes during the early years of his prophethood, they joined the Muslim community shortly before the Prophet's death; all of the caliphs who succeeded Muḥammad descend from this tribe.)

[14] Familiarity with these modified versions of the Baḥīrā legend enables us to more fully appreciate the foundational tale's emphasis on the similarities and differences between the monk and the Jews. Baḥīrā's possession of a scripture, pointedly omitted from the modified versions, is not an incidental element of the foundational tale, one confirmatory redundancy among several. Rather, this element is crucial to Ibn Isḥāq's message that Jews and Christians alike recognized Muḥammad's prophethood long before Arabs did; recall that the caravan's members dismissed the boy as insignificant. The monk and the Jews both confirm that Muḥammad's

3 For references to other works in which the Abū Mūsa tradition appears, see Rubin (1995, 50–51).

revelation is the ultimate scripture in a tradition that includes the Bible, albeit in dramatically different ways. Through this tale and others, Ibn Isḥāq legitimizes the Qurʾān by appeal to earlier traditions even as he condemns Jews themselves for their malicious hypocrisy.

Shīʿī Versions of the Baḥīrā Legend

Shīʿī accounts circulating in the tenth century CE offer a different spin on the Baḥīrā legend. [15]
According to al-Ḥusayn ibn Ḥamdān al-Khuṣaybī (d. 957 or 969), Baḥīrā instructs Abū Ṭālib to protect Muḥammad "especially from Quraysh and the Jews, for they bear the greatest enmity toward him among all peoples." When Abū Ṭālib asks the monk how he knows that Muḥammad will be a prophet, Baḥīrā explains that Jesus himself foretold this, "as is written in such-and-such book of the Gospels"; the monk then reiterates his warning that "Quraysh and the Jews" will seek to kill Muḥammad. The people of Quraysh, al-Khuṣaybī proceeds to report, rejected the testimony of Baḥīrā and a fellow Christian, Waraqā ibn Nawfal, that Muḥammad is the Messenger of God, while Abū Ṭālib's son ʿAlī became the first Muslim (al-Khuṣaybī 1991, 49–50). Shīʿīs revere ʿAlī and his descendants as the Imāms who by divine right ought to have led the Muslim community following Muḥammad's death instead of Abū Bakr and other members of Quraysh. By implication, ʿAlī represents his Shīʿī followers within this version of the Baḥīrā legend while Quraysh represents those who are hostile toward the Imāms and their followers.[4]

Al-Khuṣaybī's tale not only introduces and praises ʿAlī for his early acceptance of Muḥam- [16]
mad but also harshly condemns the people of Quraysh by linking them with the Jewish villains of the foundational tale. This inclusion of Quraysh alongside the Jews challenges the distinction between Arabs and Jews that earlier authors like Ibn Saʿd emphasized. It also pointedly undermines the political message of the Abū Mūsa version: The gravest danger to Muḥammad and his true followers is not in Syria or Byzantium but rather in Mecca itself, among those who claim the mantle of communal leadership.

Ibn Isḥāq emphasizes that Jews and Christians alike possess the scripture that foretells [17]
Muḥammad's prophethood, but al-Khuṣaybī ascribes that prediction to the Gospels alone. Doing so enables the storyteller to draw a sharp distinction between Christians and Jews and, by extension, between Shīʿīs and their rivals. Al-Khuṣaybī may also wish to subtly remind his Shīʿī audience that, just as Jews sought to kill Jesus, members of Quraysh killed the Imāms.

Muḥammad Ibn Bābawayh (d. 991/2), another Shīʿī scholar, associates Jews not with rival [18]
Muslims but rather with Christians. In his version of the legend, Baḥīrā warns Abū Ṭālib to ensure that neither "a Jew nor a Christian nor an adherent of the Book" sees Muḥammad, because "if they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil, especially those Jews" (Ibn Bābawayh 1970, 181). Portions of this passage match the language in Ibn Isḥāq's foundational tale, but Ibn Bābawayh pointedly and awkwardly associates Christians and People of the Book with the Jews, notwithstanding the fact that Baḥīrā himself is a Christian and, as such, an adherent of the Book.[5] (Like Ibn Saʿd and al-Khuṣaybī, Ibn Bābawayh makes no reference to this Book as a source of the monk's knowledge.)

Not only does Ibn Bābawayh erase the distinction between Christians and Jews implicit [19]

4 I do not refer to these rivals as "Sunnīs" because Shīʿīs themselves employed multiple gradations to distinguish non-Shīʿī Muslims on the basis of their attitudes toward ʿAlī and the Imāms; see Kohlberg (1985).

5 Roggema (2021, 111), observes that ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), another Shīʿī, identified Baḥīrā as a "believer in the religion of Christ" rather than as a "Christian" so as to distinguish his monotheism and receptivity to Muḥammad from contemporary Trinitarian Christians.

in earlier versions of the legend, namely that Jews bear hostility toward Muḥammad while Christians do not, he also challenges the broader distinction between People of the Book and other non-Muslims that the foundational tale reinforces. To explain how and why Ibn Bābawayh does so, I need to redescribe Ibn Isḥāq's version once more. Its emphasis on the scriptural knowledge that the monk and the Jews alike possess regarding Muḥammad reflects a hierarchical conception of Islam and non-Muslim religions often expressed within the Qurʾān and other early Islamic sources. These works, of course, portray Islam as the supreme religion, but they also portray Judaism and Christianity alike as similar to Islam—and, as such, superior to other religions—on account of their scripture. Expression of this hierarchy appears, for example, in the Qurʾān's permission of "the food of those who were given the Book" and "chaste women among those who were given the Book" (both Q. 5.5); Muslims may not, in contrast, eat meat prepared by idolaters nor marry idolatrous women (Q. 6.121 and 2.221, Freidenreich 2011b, 131–43). Sunnī authorities enshrine this hierarchy into law (Freidenreich 2009). The amount of blood-money that survivors of a homicide victim receive illustrates this hierarchy: some authorities pegged the amount for Jewish and Christian victims at half or one-third of the amount required for Muslim victims, while they awarded the survivors of Zoroastrian victims only one-fifteenth of that amount (Friedmann 2003, 47–50). Ibn Isḥāq has no interest in this level of precision, but his tale presupposes and even emphasizes the relatively elevated status of Jews and Christians that results from their reverence of authentic divine revelations.

[20] Ibn Bābawayh and fellow Shīʿīs, however, insisted that all non-Muslims are legally and theologically equivalent; for that reason, they pointedly eliminated the distinctions between Jews and Christians on the one hand and Zoroastrians on the other with regard to such matters as food, marriage, and blood-money (Freidenreich 2011a, 2011b, 157–75). As I demonstrate elsewhere, this black-and-white hierarchy supports the Shīʿī assertion that true knowledge of God is accessible exclusively through the Qurʾān and the teachings of the Imāms (Freidenreich 2011c). Because Jewish and Christian scriptures contain nothing of value, it should come as no surprise that Ibn Bābawayh's version of the Baḥīrā legend omits reference to them. His retelling of the legend reflects the notion that the distinction between Jews and Christians and, for that matter, between People of the Book and other non-Muslims, is irrelevant.

[21] Despite their difference of opinion regarding the value of the Book and the status of its adherents relative to Muslims, Ibn Isḥāq and Ibn Bābawayh alike believe that Jews and Christians bear identical legal status. Both storytellers, however, nevertheless portray Jews as worse than Christians, the former by alleging specifically that Jews seek to harm Muḥammad and the latter by declaring that Jews are "especially" prone to do so. This rhetoric reflects not merely the Qurʾān's assessment of the difference between these religious communities but also and more fundamentally the influence of anti-Judaism, a discourse that brands specific negative characteristics as "Jewish" in order to cultivate the opposite characteristics. David Nirenberg demonstrates that anti-Judaism, although especially prominent within Christian thought, plays important roles in early and classical Islamic literature as well as in a wide range of pre-Christian and post-Christian sources (Nirenberg 2013, esp. 135–82). Polemicists often employ the discourse of anti-Judaism in order to critique non-Jews who allegedly bear so-called Jewish traits.

[22] Ibn Isḥāq's negative depictions of Jews and, likewise, those of Ibn Saʿd serve not only to condemn Jews for their rejection of Muḥammad's prophethood but also to promote within their own Muslim audiences the wholehearted acceptance of his authority. Al-Khuṣaybī takes this

anti-Jewish rhetoric a step further in his allegation that the people of Quraysh—and, by extension, all Muslims who actively reject the Imāms—are equivalent to Jews because they display the purportedly Jewish characteristic of spurning true prophets. Merely self-identifying as a Muslim is insufficient, al-Khuṣaybī maintains: To truly cultivate the traits that set one apart from the Jews, one must revere ʿAlī and his successors. Anti-Jewish rhetoric persists in Ibn Bābawayh's version of the Baḥīrā legend not because it advances the storyteller's agenda but rather because this discourse had already become deeply embedded within Islamic culture.

Eastern Christian Legends of Sergius Baḥīrā

Anti-Jewish rhetoric animates most Islamic versions of the Baḥīrā legend, but it takes on especially important roles in Christian versions. Christians, after all, routinely employed Judaism as a negative foil when defining and reinforcing what it means to be a good Christian, including in their polemics against non-Jews who allegedly display Jewish characteristics (Nirenberg 2013). Premodern Christians fully understood that Muslims are not Jews, but they nevertheless found it useful in a wide variety of contexts to allege that Muslims are "Jew-ish" (Freidenreich, forthcoming). The Baḥīrā legend, with its Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cast of characters, provides an ideal framework for Christian storytellers to articulate the nature of Islam's purported Jewishness and to explain how this came to be. [23]

An especially popular set of Eastern Christian retellings of this tale, known today as the Sergius Baḥīrā legend, first took written form in the ninth century and survives in multiple Syriac and Arabic versions (Roggema 2009).[6] Its hero is a monk named Sergius, whom Arabs respectfully called *bḥīrā*, an honorific term for monks that means "the eminent one" in Syriac. Sergius, who had received an apocalyptic revelation predicting the rise of successive Muslim empires, recognizes the young Muḥammad as the one who will bring this about. Sergius teaches Muḥammad the fundamentals of Christianity and secures a promise that Muḥammad's followers will treat all Christians kindly. This Christian legend clearly draws on its Islamic predecessor, most obviously by ascribing the title "Baḥīrā" to Sergius the monk; one version even includes the monk's warning that Muḥammad's companions should protect him from the Jews (Roggema 2009, 394–95). The Christian counter-narrative, however, emphatically denies Muḥammad's prophethood by ascribing the Qurʾān not to God but rather to Sergius, who creates a watered-down version of Christianity suitable for the primitive Arabs. [24]

The Sergius Baḥīrā legend, however, also needs to account for passages in the Qurʾān that directly contradict Christian doctrine. Most versions blame a Jew, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, for inserting this content after the monk's death. Kaʿb, according to Islamic sources, was a scribe or rabbi who converted to Islam several years after Muḥammad's death. Some traditions report that Kaʿb sought to introduce into Islam certain false teachings from Judaism, but that the caliphs firmly repudiated those teachings (Wolfensohn 1933; Halperin and Newby 1982). These Islamic tales reassure Muslims that their leaders effectively safeguarded Islam from corruption. Christian storytellers agree with their Muslim counterparts regarding the danger that Jews [25]

6 Christian tales from the seventh and eighth centuries preserved in the *History of Sebeos* and the *Chronicle of Theophanes* depict Jews interacting with Muḥammad; Theophanes also recounts an eighth-century tale involving a monk who falsely affirms Muḥammad's claim to prophethood (Freidenreich, forthcoming, chaps. 2, 6). The Sergius Baḥīrā legend, however, is the oldest surviving Christian tale to include Muḥammad, a monk, and a Jew in a single, integrated narrative. Barbara Roggema demonstrates that the Christian version of this legend is secondary to the Islamic one (Roggema 2009, 52–60).

pose to the true faith, but in their counter-narratives the Jews succeed and corrupt the Qurʾān itself.

[26] The *Apology of al-Kindī*, a ninth-century Arabic text that adapts the Sergius Baḥīrā legend for its own polemical purposes, alleges that Kaʿb and an accomplice, ʿAbdallah ibn Salām, were angered by Sergius' success at teaching Christian doctrines to Muḥammad and his followers. Upon the monk's death, these two Jews deceitfully joined Muḥammad's community in order to corrupt the Qurʾānic text that Sergius had written. "They introduced passages from their own Torah and some of the laws and stories in their possession. In this way, they corrupted the whole, taking from it and adding to it as they chose, insinuating their own blasphemies into it."[7] This account does not specify the content that Jews introduced into the Qurʾān, but other versions of the Sergius Baḥīrā legend do.

[27] In the words of the short Arabic version, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār "began to teach the Sons of Ishmael and to invalidate the word of Sergius. He said to them, 'The one who will appear from amongst you [Muḥammad], he is the Paraclete whom Christ mentioned as coming after him,' and he taught them many things from the Torah and the Prophets and also some of the stories of theirs" (Roggema 2009, 391). Christians traditionally understand Jesus' teaching that God the Father will send the Paraclete (literally, "helper") after his Son's death (John 14.16–16.7) as a reference to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Qurʾān, however, reports that Jesus spoke of "a Messenger to come after me whose name is Aḥmad" (Q. 61.6), and Muslim interpreters such as Ibn Isḥāq understood this verse to speak of Muḥammad (Anthony 2016). This representation of Jesus' prophecy as referring to a flesh-and-blood person, which from a Christian perspective reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of God's true nature, exemplifies the false teachings that Kaʿb the Jew purportedly inserted into the Qurʾān. According to Syriac versions of the Sergius legend, Kaʿb even declared that Muḥammad, as Jesus' successor, would rise from the dead after three days; when his followers returned to check, however, they discovered a rotting corpse. Nonetheless, these texts emphasize, Muslims continue to believe that Muḥammad is the Paraclete and irrationally adhere to Kaʿb's other teachings notwithstanding his evident lack of credibility (Roggema 2009, 303, 335).

[28] The East Syrian version explains that Kaʿb introduced into Sergius' Qurʾān "confusion, corruption, superstitions, ridiculous and arbitrary things, circumcision, ablution, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' and 'a killing for a killing.'" In sum, it declares, "Sergius gave them the New [Testament] and Kaʿb the Old" (Roggema 2009, 303–5). Christians understand Old Testament references to circumcision, ritual cleansing, and retributive justice spiritually, but Kaʿb misreads these biblical norms in a literal and carnal—that is, a "Jewish"—manner. Given their excessive focus on the flesh, it is no wonder that Kaʿb the Jew and the Muslims he misled are incapable of recognizing that the Paraclete is the Holy Spirit and that Jesus Christ is no mere human being. Muslims instead mistakenly place their trust in Muḥammad, even after they discover his rotting corpse. The fundamental errors of the Muslims, which the Sergius Baḥīrā legend labels as Jewish errors, are that they fail to distinguish body from spirit and that they fail to understand the Trinity. Christians should do the opposite, keeping their distance from Islam no less than from Judaism because the two are so closely related.

[29] This similarity notwithstanding, the Sergius Baḥīrā legend portrays Islam as superior to Judaism and even emphasizes the ways in which Islam resembles Christianity thanks to Sergius'

7 Tien (1993, 454; revised in light of *Risālat al-Kindī ilá al-Hāshimī* 2005, 85); see further Freidenreich (forthcoming, chap. 6). Similar claims about the roles that Sergius, Kaʿb, and ʿAbdallah played in the formation of Islam appear in the *Apocalypse of Peter—Book of Rolls* (see Roggema 2009, 166–68). On ʿAbdallah ibn Salām, a Jewish figure who features prominently in Islamic tales, see Stafford (2019).

instruction. Its relatively positive portrayal of Islam may reflect the storytellers' awareness that members of their Christian audience already regard the dominant elite and their beliefs favorably. Evidence that Christians respected their Muslim overlords, even if only as a matter of prudence, appears in various seventh- and eighth-century works (Freidenreich, forthcoming, chap. 5; Penn 2015). Rather than challenge that perception by utterly condemning Islam, Eastern Christian versions of the legend co-opt it by portraying Christianity itself as the purest manifestation of all that is praiseworthy about Islam. The same motivation may underpin the relatively positive portrayal of Christianity and even Judaism in the foundational Baḥīrā tale: Ibn Isḥāq may employ the Jewish/Christian Book to legitimate Muḥammad's prophethood because he believes that his audience holds this scripture in high esteem. His rhetoric, after all, seems designed to build upon rather than challenge his audience's preconceptions regarding the Book and its adherents. The omission of this Book from several later Islamic versions of the legend, in turn, could reflect a shift not only in how the storytellers perceived non-Muslim sacred texts but also in the perceptions of ninth- and tenth-century Muslim audiences.[8]

European Christian Legends of Sergius Baḥīrā

Petrus Alfonsi, drawing upon the *Apology of al-Kindī*, introduced European Christians to his [30]
own version of the Baḥīrā legend. Alfonsi's *Dialogue against the Jews* (c. 1109) seeks to persuade fellow Christian intellectuals that logical reasoning and divine scripture alike support the truth claims of the Church of Rome alone. In the course of demonstrating that Islam is neither rational nor divine, Alfonsi reworks the legend's triangular relationship between Muḥammad, the monk, and the Jews. Alfonsi alleges that Muḥammad sought to become king of the Arabs by falsely claiming to be a prophet. To do so, Muḥammad solicited assistance from a Christian—portrayed for the first time as a heretic and unnamed in most manuscripts—and also from a pair of Jewish heretics: Kaʿb al-Aḥbār and ʿAbdallah ibn Salām. "These three mixed together the law of Muḥammad, each one according to his own heresy" (Alfonsi 2006, 152). Peter of Cluny, writing in the mid-twelfth century, takes Alfonsi's argument a step further by ascribing diabolical origins to the collaboration between the pagan Muḥammad, Sergius the heretical Christian monk, and unnamed Jews, figures who collectively represent the full spectrum of false beliefs. These tales deprive the Qurʾān of any legitimacy (Freidenreich, forthcoming, chap. 6).

Recall that Eastern Christian legends, like their Islamic counterparts, portray Baḥīrā as a [31]
heroic figure hostile toward Jews and Judaism; in Eastern Christian versions of the tale, Kaʿb can only corrupt Sergius' text after the monk's death. One reason these storytellers preserve key elements of the foundational tale, including its contrast between the monk and the Jews, is that they presume their audiences have already heard this tale in some form. As Barbara Roggema observes, the Sergius Baḥīrā legend is a work of "parasitical historiography," one whose rhetorical force rests in part on the audience's ability to recognize the relationship between the new account and the traditions it recasts (Roggema 2009, 30–31). The satisfaction that comes from hearing about the heroic Christian monk, for instance, stems in no small

8 Alfons Teipen (2020, 563–66) makes a similar argument but focuses on the self-confidence of the authors in their own religion rather than on the authors' or audiences' attitudes toward other religions. Teipen also proposes that authors such as Ibn Saʿd vehemently condemned Jews in an effort to combat Christian associations of Islam with Judaism in works such as the roughly contemporaneous Sergius Baḥīrā legend. I see little evidence, however, that ninth-century Muslims would have been familiar with this Christian rhetoric.

measure from knowledge that Muslims themselves acknowledge such a figure; the claim that Kaʿb corrupted the Qurʾān stings precisely because audiences recognized both this figure and the broader Islamic allegation that Jews corrupted the Bible (Nickel 2011). Petrus Alfonsi and Peter of Cluny, in contrast, transform the Sergius Baḥīrā legend to the point that it is nearly unrecognizable: They invent an entirely new plot in which the original hero becomes a villain. These storytellers need not adhere to the existing framework of the legend because their audiences lack prior familiarity with it. Instead, these authors cast Islam in a negative light by drawing on their audiences' pre-existing antipathy toward heresy and Judaism.

[32] A later European retelling of the Baḥīrā legend completely collapses the distinctions between Muḥammad, the monk, and the Jews; in the process, it removes all traces of Christianity from Islam's origins. Jaime Bleda, in his early-seventeenth-century *Chronicle of the Moors of Spain*, alleges that Muḥammad himself was a Jew by maternal ancestry and that his tutor, "Baeyra," was a Jewish astrologer and magician. Bleda even jokingly suggests that Muḥammad could be "a four-quarters Jew" (that is, someone whose biological grandparents are all Jewish) conceived through the incestuous adultery of his mother and Baeyra, her brother. Bleda warns that it would be a grave sin to lodge a similarly baseless accusation about the parents of an honorable Spaniard but, he says, Muḥammad is so dishonorable that calling him a Jew or even Antichrist cannot further damage his reputation (Bleda [1618] 2001, 3 and 5; see further Freidenreich, forthcoming, chap. 7).

[33] No Eastern Christian polemicist ever alleged that Muḥammad himself was Jewish, as such a claim would be patently ridiculous to audiences familiar with basic information about Islam's prophet. In order to be persuasive, after all, polemical allegations need to be plausible. By the early seventeenth century, literate Europeans like Bleda had access to books that contained reasonably accurate information about Muḥammad, but they also inherited several centuries of scholarly and fanciful accounts regarding Muḥammad's birth and education (Freidenreich, forthcoming, chap. 7; Tolan 2019, 44–100). Bleda, although a well-read and meticulous historian, regarded the sources that portray Muḥammad as a Jew to be more plausible than those that in fact were more accurate because this allegation confirms his negative preconceptions about Islam and Judaism alike. Bleda also presumed, with good reason, that his Spanish audience would be receptive to his scurrilous depiction of Muḥammad and, more specifically, to his conception of Jewishness as profoundly genealogical in nature. This, after all, is precisely how Spanish Christians defined their own identity in an era shaped by the ideology of "blood purity" (Nirenberg 2013, 212–45).

[34] The plausibility of allegations regarding Muḥammad varied over space and time. Allegations regarding the Jews, however, remain remarkably stable across versions of the Baḥīrā legend. Muslim and Christian audiences from diverse regions and time periods evidently accepted the notion that Jews would try to assassinate a prophet or conspire to create a deliberately false alternative to Christianity. The plausibility of this allegation stems not from the activity of actual contemporaneous Jews—who were, after all, no more likely to commit murder or create new religions than anyone else—but rather from the pervasiveness of anti-Jewish rhetoric within both Christian and Muslim communities. Jaime Bleda may put his finger on the underlying issue when contrasting his own allegation about Muḥammad with an equivalent claim about an honorable Spaniard: neither Christians nor Muslims regarded Jews as honorable, and for that reason they felt free to lodge scandalous allegations against them.

A Samaritan Tale Inspired by the Baḥīrā Legend

The *Kitāb al-Tārīkh*, written in 1355 by the Samaritan chronicler Abū al-Fatḥ ibn Abī al-Ḥasan, recounts a tale of three astrologers who recognized that an Arab with a special birthmark between his shoulders was about to establish a powerful Ishmaelite kingdom. The group, which set off to see Muḥammad and his birthmark, comprised a Samaritan named Ṣarmāṣa, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār the Jew, and a Christian monk named ʿAbd al-Salām or ʿAbdallah. (The latter character was evidently inspired by the *Apology of al-Kindī*'s portrayal of ʿAbdallah ibn Salām, but in this tale he takes the place of Baḥīrā, who is otherwise absent.) The Jew and the Christian falsely claim to have found reference to Muḥammad in their scriptures, although in fact they learned of his arrival through astrology, and they both convert to Islam upon seeing the birthmark. The Samaritan alone remains true to his faith and secures from Muḥammad a covenant of peace and security for his people. Kaʿb, who becomes Muḥammad's scribe and advisor, inserts into the Qurʾān a curse against this Samaritan (Q. 20.97); in context, this verse refers to the figure who allegedly caused the Israelites to worship the Golden Calf. As Abū al-Fatḥ explains, "every affliction that comes upon us is due to the Jews" (Boušek 2018, esp. 106–7, 114–15). [35]

Abū al-Fatḥ closely associates his tale's Jewish and Christian characters with one another while, like Shīʿī Muslims and European Christians, denying any connection between the Bible and Muḥammad. Jews and Christians alike possess an authentic scripture, namely the Torah, but they are prone to misrepresent it and to abandon ancient truths in favor of novelty (such as the rest of the Bible, whose authority Samaritans reject). This allegation against Jews and Christians serves to increase the distance between the narrator's religious community and its proximate rivals. [36]

The Samaritan tale parallels the Eastern Christian Sergius Baḥīrā legend in several respects. Not only does it include Kaʿb al-Aḥbār and ʿAbdallah ibn Salām in its cast of characters, it also reiterates the allegation that Kaʿb tampered with the language of the Qurʾān to insert passages that the storyteller regards as especially problematic. This particular attribution neutralizes a verse that Muslims employed in their anti-Samaritan polemics and, as we saw in Christian tales, the allegation itself undermines Islamic claims regarding the Qurʾān's perfection and divine origins. [37]

Most significantly, Abū al-Fatḥ ascribes to Muḥammad a covenant of protection for his own beleaguered community just as Eastern Christian authors insist that Muḥammad promised Sergius to treat Christians kindly. Whereas the monk secures a vague promise, however, the Samaritan tale spells out the precise terms of this covenant repeatedly as Ṣarmāṣa requests them, Muḥammad grants them, and ʿAlī confirms them. These terms include protections for Samaritan "property and houses of worship and religious endowments"; Daniel Boušek suggests that the storyteller objects to recent expropriations of such properties by Muslim authorities (2018, 121). [38]

The Samaritan tale foregrounds an element of the Baḥīrā legend that also animates many other versions: concern about persecution by the governing authorities. The tales that Samaritans and Eastern Christians tell about Muḥammad's promises to Ṣarmāṣa and Sergius reinforce, if only within their respective communities, the conviction that such persecution is unjust and unwarranted. Al-Khuṣaybī implicitly explains the persecution that Shīʿīs periodically suffered as a legacy of Quraysh's longstanding refusal to accept authentic teachings about Muḥammad and his successors. Versions of the legend told by those in positions of power, mean- [39]

while, justify their authority and even encourage persecution. The Abū Mūsa version, which portrays Abū Bakr as a hero and Byzantine Romans as Muḥammad's principal enemies, implicitly valorizes the caliphs who defeated Byzantine forces during the Muslim conquests and who continue to hold them at bay; Uri Rubin observes that this tale also counters Shīʿī claims on behalf of ʿAlī (Rubin 1995, 50–51). Jaime Bleda, who alleged that Muḥammad himself was Jewish, was a tireless and, ultimately, successful advocate for expelling all former Muslims from Spain just as Jews had previously been expelled (Freidenreich, forthcoming, chap. 8).

Bleda used the discourse of anti-Judaism to brand former Muslims as unassimilable and thus [40]
as fitting targets for persecution and expulsion. Al-Khuṣaybī drew upon the same discourse to account for why Shīʿīs experience persecution at the hands of fellow Muslims: the people of Quraysh are no different from the Jews in their enmity toward Muḥammad's true followers. Abū al-Fatḥ also employed anti-Jewish rhetoric when he blamed Jews like Kaʿb al-Aḥbār for the afflictions that Samaritans suffer. The appearance of anti-Judaism in this Samaritan tale is, in one respect, unsurprising: we have seen that such rhetoric is a stock feature of the Baḥīrā legend. In another respect, however, its presence is telling. Anti-Jewish rhetoric features prominently in both the New Testament and the Qurʾān, but it is absent from the Samaritan Bible (a version of the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish and Christian Bible). Abū al-Fatḥ's use of this discourse demonstrates that anti-Judaism draws its strength from widespread antipathy toward Jews, regardless of whether polemicists employ sacred scripture to fan such attitudes.

A Jewish Baḥīrā Legend

Anti-Judaism constitutes a red thread that weaves through nearly all Islamic, Christian, and [41]
Samaritan versions of the Baḥīrā legend. Jewish versions of this legend embrace and even double down on the allegations leveled against Jewish characters while transforming these deeds into the heroic acts of trickster figures. For example, Jews told tales in which Kaʿb al-Aḥbār is one of ten Jewish elders who infiltrated Muḥammad's community and wrote the Qurʾān for him.[9] In some versions of the tale, these elders include not only Kaʿb and ʿAbdallah ibn Salām but also such prominent figures as ʿAlī and Abū Bakr, the latter identified as the son of Babylonian Jewry's political leader. Unbeknownst to Muḥammad, these Jewish undercover agents inserted within the Qurʾān hidden messages identifying themselves by name as the human authors of a text that falsely claims divine origin. The Qurʾān's Jewish authors also purportedly embedded within its text an acrostic message: "Thus do the Sages of Israel counsel the mute, wicked man." The Hebrew term "mute," *ʾillēm*, vocalizes the enigmatic opening letters of the Qurʾān's second chapter (*alif, lam, mīm*), and the ascription of this term to Muḥammad associates him with a biblical verse that depicts false prophets as "mute dogs that cannot bark" (Is. 56.10; see Firestone 2019, 7–12). According to this Jewish tale, the Book whose significance Ibn Isḥāq emphasizes indeed speaks of Muḥammad, but it denies rather than confirms his prophethood!

Many Jewish tales about Muḥammad also feature Baḥīrā. One medieval version of the [42]
tale about the ten Jewish elders seeks to undermine Christian legends by emphasizing that

9 On these tales, see Firestone (2019, forthcoming). The *Chronicle of Theophanes*, which preserves tales that circulated in the eighth century, also reports that ten Jewish leaders, who go unnamed in this account, joined Muḥammad's community and taught him "illicit things"; see Mango and Scott (1997, 464), and the discussion in Freidenreich (forthcoming, chap. 6).

Baḥīrā's name is nowhere to be found in the Qurʾān and thus that the monk played no role in the composition of that work (Leveen 1926, 402–4). Joseph Sambarī, a seventeenth-century chronicler from Cairo, preserves the most elaborate Jewish tale about Baḥīrā in his *Sefer divrei Yosef*.[10] "[T]he great astrologer Buḥayrān, the uncircumcised in heart and flesh"—that is, the wicked Christian—predicted Muḥammad's greatness to the boy's father before Muḥammad was born and ultimately rose to become chief among Muḥammad's advisors.[11] Like Haman in the biblical Book of Esther, Buḥayrān counseled Muḥammad to slaughter all the Jews who had not joined his community. To thwart this plan, Abū Bakr and ʿAlī (here, once again, portrayed as undercover Jews) conspired to kill the Christian. Their opportunity arose when Buḥayrān invited Muḥammad and his counselors to a drinking party: after everyone fell asleep in a drunken stupor, Abū Bakr used Muḥammad's own sword to behead Buḥayrān. Muḥammad, distraught at the thought that he killed his own advisor, forbade his followers from consuming alcohol.[12] In what is by now a familiar element of the legend, Jewish sages then established a covenant with Muḥammad, who established terms of toleration that came to be known as the Pact of ʿUmar.

Christian and Samaritan versions of the Baḥīrā legend blame Jews for the suffering they [43]
experience at Muslim hands. Sambarī, perhaps perceiving the Christian origins of much anti-Jewish rhetoric, turns the tables and points instead to Buḥayrān's pernicious influence over Muḥammad. Note, however, that this influence is political rather than religious: Sambarī does not suggest that Islam itself is related to Christianity in the way that Christian tales allege that Islam is Jewish. The Jewish storyteller attributes the similarities between Islamic and Jewish rituals not to Muḥammad's Jewish advisors but rather to Muḥammad's own desire to adapt and improve upon Jewish traditions. The tale's Jewish heroes, in short, do not use their relationship with Muḥammad to shape Islam but rather to ensure that fellow Jews neither embrace Islam themselves nor suffer too much for their refusal to do so.

To appreciate the significance of this element within the Jewish account, I need to re- [44]
describe Islamic and Christian versions once again. Ibn Isḥāq's foundational tale depicts Jews and Christians as similar to Muslims in their reverence for an authentic scripture and their recognition of Muḥammad's prophethood while stressing that Jews are different from Muslims on account of their hostility toward this prophet. Later Islamic versions downplay the similarity between Muslims and non-Muslims—or, in the case of al-Khuṣaybī, allege that some Muslims are as bad as Jews—but still conceive of the Jewish and Christian characters as like or unlike Muslims to varying degrees. To use a numerical analogy inspired by the example of blood-money amounts, Muslim authors place Jews and Christians at varying points between 0 and 1 (for example, one-third or one-fifteenth) on a scale in which 1 represents Muslims. The Eastern Christian Sergius Baḥīrā legend also addresses the ways in which Muslims are

10 Firestone (forthcoming) provides the text of this tale with a translation and analysis; the translation that follows, however, is original. I note below parallels between Sambarī's tale and those told by Christians in Spain and North Africa, but there is insufficient evidence to determine the nature of the relationship among them.

11 Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, archbishop of Toledo, recounts in his *History of the Arabs* (1245) that a nameless Jewish magician who was the friend of Muḥammad's father predicted the newborn boy's glorious future by means of astrology and later became Muḥammad's tutor. On this passage, see Pick (2004, 73–79). Jaime Bleda, discussed above, identifies this figure as Baeyra; I am unaware of any earlier Christian author who makes this association.

12 William of Tripoli, a thirteenth-century Dominican monk, recounts a similar tale in which Muḥammad's companions (whom William does not identify as Jews) kill Baḥīrā in order to eliminate the monk's civilizing influence (see Tolan 2002, 204–5). The notion that a genocidal villain meets his doom at a drinking party, however, calls to mind Haman's downfall in the Book of Esther.

both like and unlike Christians: similar because of the lessons imparted by the monk, and different because of the corruptions introduced by Jews, the ultimate anti-Christians. European storytellers portrayed Muslims more negatively by increasingly associating Muḥammad with those Jews. In the Christian version of the numerical scale, Jews fall at -1 on a scale in which 1 represents Christians, while the status of Muslims depends in part on the degree to which polemicists define them as Jewish. (On these scales, see Freidenreich 2011b, 182–83.)

[45] Jewish tales, in contrast, do not address similarities or differences among their characters, and they deny any real relationship between Islam and Judaism: Muḥammad's Jewish associates teach him nothing and the Bible itself testifies that Muḥammad is a false prophet. Sambarī also devotes no attention to Christianity, although he implies that Christians are especially hostile toward Jews. Jewish tales suggest that Jews sometimes need to act deviously for the sake of collective self-defense, but they need not concern themselves with the substance of either Christianity or Islam, let alone the relationship between these religions, as both are clearly false. Whereas Muslims address the degree to which others are like or unlike Muslims while Christians define Jews as anti-Christian, these and other Jewish sources present a binary division of the world into Jews and non-Jews: 1 and 0, respectively.

[46] Comparisons of characters who represent distinct religious communities feature prominently in many versions of the Baḥīrā legend, so why are they absent from the Jewish version? One possibility is that Jews generally avoid such comparisons as a matter of principle: if the distinction between Jews and non-Jews is absolute, then there are no meaningful similarities to address and the differences among non-Jews are irrelevant (see Freidenreich 2011b). The present study suggests an additional, complementary possibility. The prominence of comparison in other versions of the legend may stem from the important role in those versions of the inherently comparative rhetoric of anti-Judaism, which alleges that its target is similar to Jews. The elimination of anti-Jewish rhetoric, not only in the Jewish tale but also in the Abū Mūsa tradition that focuses on the threat posed by Byzantine soldiers, correlates with the absence of comparison. Perhaps one factor that contributes to the general lack of attention within premodern Jewish sources to similarities and differences among non-Jewish traditions is the absence of a Jewish comparative discourse analogous to that of anti-Judaism.

Summary Redescriptions

[47] Comparison is a valuable analytical tool because it calls attention to potentially significant similarities and differences. This tool is essential when using specific cases from multiple contexts to study general conceptual categories such as *scripture* or *anti-Judaism*. The present article, however, does not employ comparison in this "taxonomic mode," to use Oliver Freiberger's terminology, but rather in an "illuminative mode": it juxtaposes versions of the Baḥīrā legend for the purpose of generating insights that enable us to better understand each version in its own right (Freiberger 2019, 126–27; see further Freidenreich 2004, 91–94). Thus far, I have presented these insights in the context of the specific juxtapositions that highlight their significance. The redescriptions that follow restate these observations in consolidated fashion.

[48] Ibn Isḥāq's foundational tale conveys two key messages: that the scripture revered by Jews and Christians alike unambiguously identifies Muḥammad as a prophet, and that the Jews seek to harm Muḥammad for this very reason. The first of these messages reinforces the established notion that "People of the Book" resemble Muslims on account of that Book, while the second draws upon the longstanding polemical discourse of anti-Judaism, whose objec-

tive is to persuade audiences to differentiate themselves from Jews. Both Ibn Isḥāq's positive portrayal of the Bible and his negative portrayal of the Jews may reflect not only his own opinions but also those of his audience, which his rhetoric reinforces.

[49] Ninth- and tenth-century Islamic versions of the Baḥīrā legend downplay the similarity between Islam and earlier scriptural traditions by omitting reference to the Book. Ibn Saʿd focuses on the envious enmity of the Jews alone, while Ibn Bābawayh pointedly associates Christians with Jews as part of a broader effort to challenge the elevated status that other Muslims grant to People of the Book. The tradition ascribed to Abū Mūsa, meanwhile, valorizes those who would become the political leaders of the Muslim community after Muḥammad's death by inserting leaders of Quraysh into the Baḥīrā legend while replacing Jewish enemies with Byzantine soldiers. Al-Khuṣaybī, in contrast, links Quraysh with the Jews who sought to kill Muḥammad in order to explain these leaders' persecution of Shīʿīs and to condemn those who reject the authority of ʿAlī and the Imāms. The discourse of anti-Judaism continues to play important roles in these versions, as Jews consistently serve as the negative reference point in claims of similarity and difference; this suggests widespread and persistent prejudice against Jews among Muslim storytellers and audiences alike.

[50] Eastern Christian versions of the Sergius Baḥīrā legend ascribe aspects of Islam that resemble Christianity to the teachings of the monk and those that depart sharply from Christianity to the corrupting influence of a Jew. Eastern Christian storytellers leverage their audience's prior knowledge regarding Islamic tales and presuppose that these audiences hold Muslims in relatively high esteem but despise Judaism. Whereas Eastern Christian versions emphasize the similarities between Islam and Christianity as well as the differences, European storytellers presented Islam as entirely unrelated to Roman Catholicism. They did so both by redefining Sergius as a heretic and by intensifying the degree to which Jews shaped Islam. Petrus Alfonsi and Peter of Cluny allege that Muḥammad, the monk, and the Jews collaborated to concoct a diabolical religion, while Jaime Bleda asserts that Muḥammad and Baḥīrā are Jews themselves. The plausibility of these claims stems from the ways in which they reinforce negative preconceptions about Muḥammad, Muslims, and Judaism.

[51] The Samaritan chronicler Abū al-Fatḥ presents Ṣarmāṣa, the hero, as committed to his faith, while his Jewish and Christian companions misrepresent their own scriptures and convert to Islam. This tale, like its Christian and Jewish counterparts, emphasizes Muḥammad's grant of protection to the Samaritan community as well as the Jew's corruption of the Qurʾānic text. Abū al-Fatḥ also employs the discourse of anti-Judaism found in Christian and Islamic versions of the Baḥīrā legend, notwithstanding the fact that this discourse has no basis in the Samaritan Bible.

[52] Jewish storytellers transform the anti-Jewish allegations that animate Islamic, Christian, and Samaritan versions of the Baḥīrā legend into heroic trickster tales. Jews, they gleefully report, really did shape the contents of the Qurʾān and assassinate their enemy, all for the purpose of protecting fellow Jews and ensuring that Jews remain steadfast in their faith. Unlike their Christian and Islamic counterparts, however, these Jewish storytellers do not see any reason to address similarities and differences among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Rhetoric of Comparative Religion

[53] Comparison constitutes not only a valuable analytical tool but also a powerful rhetorical tool. By drawing attention to real or alleged similarities and differences, storytellers shape their

audiences' perception of the subject matter. For example: by highlighting the differences between Arabs and Jews notwithstanding the well-known fact that some Arabs were Jews, Ibn Saʿd bolsters his claim that real Arabs (specifically, members of his audience) ought to revere Muḥammad as their prophet lest they become Jew-ish themselves. Al-Khuṣaybī uses the rhetoric of comparison in more pointed fashion to allege that some who claim to revere Muḥammad in fact resemble the Jews on account of their hostility toward ʿAlī and the Imāms. This allegation stings precisely because it compares the people of Quraysh, commonly regarded as honorable, with the dishonorable Jews. As Christina Brauner observes, comparisons like this "obtain their polemical edge by explicitly violating usual categories and standards of comparability. They point out similarities in items conventionally understood to be different or compare things commonly deemed incomparable" (Brauner 2020, 2).

[54] Ibn Saʿd, al-Khuṣaybī, and most of the other storytellers we have considered stress the difference between their own community and the Jews. Several, including al-Khuṣaybī and European Christian authors, also highlight similarities between Jews and those whom the storytellers wish to portray negatively, such as the leaders of Quraysh or Muḥammad himself. Comparisons that emphasize both similarities and differences among religious communities are much less frequent: In the present case study, the only examples appear in Ibn Isḥāq's foundational tale and the Eastern Christian Sergius Baḥīrā legend. The acknowledgement of similarities between one's own community and a rival requires a level of respect for that rival often absent in premodern times (and, one might add, in present times as well). Attention to differences among other religious communities, at least in the cases we have examined in this article, presupposes that these communities are more or less similar to one's own, so comparisons of this nature also require a certain level of respect. Those, like Jaime Bleda, who do not regard their rivals as honorable opt for polemical rather than nuanced comparisons.

[55] Twenty-first-century polemicists continue to employ comparison as a powerful rhetorical tool to denigrate their targets, not only by emphasizing the differences between Us and Them but also by highlighting purported similarities between these targets and members of other despised groups. Scholars critical of the academic field of comparative religion often emphasize that academic comparativists also employ comparisons selectively, focusing on either similarities or differences depending on their agenda. The present study demonstrates once again the importance of analyzing both similarities and differences, but it also highlights a lesson that previous works on comparative religion overlook, perhaps because they take it for granted: The analytical value of academic comparisons rests upon the equal respect that the scholar accords to each comparand.

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