

The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century

I. *Apologetics and the First Abbasid Century*

With the success of the Abbasid revolution, and its espousal of the principle of the social equality of all Muslim believers, conversion to Islam became an attractive option to large numbers of upwardly mobile Christians in the conquered territories¹. Prior to that time many Jews, Christians and Muslims altogether seem to have thought of Islam as the religion of the conquering Arabs, which made no special appeal for conversion to the "scripture people" (*ahl al-kitāb*), who theoretically were to become "protected people" (*ahl adh-dhimmah*) in return for their payment of a special tax (*al-ġizyah*), and the maintenance of a low social profile (*at-Tawbah* (9):29)². It was Abbasid policy on the other hand, with roots stretching back to the programs of the Umayyad caliph 'Umar II (717-720), actively to summon the subject populations to Islam, and to promise full political and social participation to converted Jews, Christians and Magians³. Accordingly, it was in response to these inducements to convert to Islam, during the first Abbasid century, that the first Christian apologetic treatises in Syriac and Arabic appeared, having controversy with Muslims as their primary concern. Between the years 750 and 850 controversialists such as Theodore bar Kônî, Nonnus of Nisibis, Theodore Abū Qurrah, Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā'īṭah and 'Ammār al-Baṣrî produced the apologetic essays that set the agenda for years to come in the Christian/Muslim religious dialogue⁴. In large part

1 Cf. M.A. Shaban, *The Abbasid Revolution* (Cambridge, 1970), esp. p. 168.

2 Cf. Claude Cahen, "Note sur l'accueil des chrétiens d'orient à l'islam", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 166 (1964), pp. 51-58; Armand Abel, "La djizya: tribute ou rançon?" *Studia Islamica* 32 (1970), pp. 5-19.

3 Daniel C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950). Cf. H.A.R. Gibb, "The Fiscal Rescript of 'Umar II", *Arabica* 2 (1955), pp. 1-16.

4 Cf. Sidney H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muḥammad, His Scripture and His Message, According to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century", in *La vie du prophète Mahomet; un colloque, Université des Sciences Humaines de Strasbourg, 23-24 Octobre 1980* (Strasbourg, 1982), pp. 99-146.

their effort was simply to translate Christianity into Arabic, the *lingua franca* of the new body politic.

We have ample evidence that contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn* such as ʿAmmār b. ʿAmr, ʿĪsā b. Ṣubayḥ al-Murdār, and Abū l-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf, were deeply involved in the ensuing controversy. These three early Muʿtazilites all wrote refutations of Christianity, the latter two addressing their treatises by name against Abū Qurrah and ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī respectively⁵. So annoying did the campaign to explain Christianity in Arabic become to many Muslims that al-Ġāḥiẓ was led to complain in his *Refutation of Christians*:

This community has not been so tried at the hands of the Jews, the Maġūs, or the Sabaeans, as it has been tried at the hands of the Christians ... And due to the trial, every Muslim thinks that he is a *mutakallim*, and that there is no one more entitled to argue with these deviants⁶.

Perhaps it was in response to this Christian apologetic offensive in Arabic that, in some of the renditions of the "Covenant of Umar" dating from the first Abbasid century, we find among the conditions which the Christians should observe, the agreement that they would not use the language of the Muslims⁷. Under the caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861) this stipulation was at least theoretically strengthened to the point of prohibiting Christians even from teaching Arabic to their children⁸.

It is natural to suppose that the translation of the Gospels and the other Christian scriptures into Arabic would have been an important part of the first Christian apologetic campaign in that language. After all, it is the *Qurʾān*'s injunction that says, "Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has sent down it" (*al-Mā'idah* (5):47). Accordingly, the Christian apologists did make the Gospel the focal point of their attempts to demonstrate the credibility of the Christian doctrines in Arabic⁹. So it is not surprising to discover that the earliest unambiguous documentary evidence for the translation of the Gospel into Arabic dates from this era.

The scope of the present inquiry is to highlight the circumstances which fostered the translation of the Gospels into Arabic, with reference both

5 Cf. Bayard Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm* (2 vols.; New York, 1970), vol. I, pp. 386-389, 393-395, 415-417.

6 J. Finkel, *Three Essays of Abu ʿOthman ʿAmr ibn Baḥr al-Jaḥiẓ* (Cairo, 1926), pp. 19-20.

7 Cf. A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their Non-Muslim Subjects; a Critical Study of the Covenant of ʿUmar* (London, 1930), p. 7.

8 Cf. Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'islam* (Beyrouth, 1958),

9 Cf. Sidney H. Griffith, "Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians", *Proceedings of the PMR Conference 4* (1979), pp. 63-87.

to the liturgical and to the apologetical requirements of the Christian community. Within the Islamic context the inquiry necessarily involves the definition of the Gospel involved, as well as a discussion of the references to the Gospel in Christian and Muslim sources prior to the ninth century. Inevitably the question of the translation of the Gospel into Arabic prior to the rise of Islam presents itself. The hypothesis suggested by the results of the present inquiry is that prior to the ninth century, no texts of the Gospel in Arabic were available to either Muslims or Christians. They became available for the first time, for both liturgical and apologetical purposes, in the ninth century, in Palestine, under Melkite auspices. Any earlier versions which may have been made in Arabia prior to Islam have left only faint traces behind them, and were unknown to Christians in the conquered territories.

II. *The Gospel in Arabic*

A. What is the Gospel?

Following the usage of the *Qur'ān*, the ordinary Arabic word for 'Gospel' is *al-inḡīl*. In all likelihood it derives from the Greek τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, through the possible influence of the Ethiopic word *wangēl*¹⁰. As such the term occurs some dozen times in the *Qur'ān*, to designate what God has sent down to Jesus for the guidance of the "Gospel people" (*ahl al-inḡīl*). "We gave him the Gospel", God says, and "in it is guidance and light, and it is a confirmation of the Torah that was before it" (*al-Mā'idah* (5):46). As a matter of fact, according to the *Qur'ān*, the Torah, the Gospel, and the *Qur'ān* itself are on a par as God's announcements of His reliable promise (*at-Tawbah* (9):111). Jesus, to whom God gave the Gospel, is a messenger of God (*an-Nisā'* (4):171), the Messiah, who is not God (*al-Mā'idah* (5):17), who is as human and as creaturely as Adam (*Āl 'Imrān* (3):59), and whom the Jews did not crucify (*an-Nisā'* (4):157).

Such has never been a Christian view of the Gospel. In the course of his Arabic apology in favor of the Christian doctrine of human redemption through Jesus' passion and death on the cross, Theodore Abū Qurrah undertook to explain more clearly the Christian understanding of the Gospel. It is Jesus' summons (*ad-da'wah*), he explains in Islamic flavored Arabic.

10 Cf. Arthur Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda, 1938), pp. 71-72; Carra de Vaux & G.C. Anawati, "Indjil", *EI*², Vol. III, p. 1205.

"His summons is named a Gospel (*ingīl*), i.e., an announcement of good news (*shār'ah*), because it has announced to people Christ's salvation of them from what no one else could have saved them"¹¹. Accordingly, in the Christian view, the Gospel is an announcement of what God has accomplished for mankind in Christ, written down under divine inspiration by the four canonical evangelists. To some of the Muslim scholars of Abbasid times and later, however, such a view seemed to be a distortion of the original facts, as reported in the *Qur'ān*. And the *Qur'ān* itself, originally in connection with the Torah, and the Jews' observance of its prescriptions, suggested what had happened. "A group of them used to attend to God's word. Thereafter they distorted it (*naharrifūnahu*), after they had understood it. And they know it" (*al-Baqarah* (2):75).

The charge of *ar-tahrīf*, or 'distortion', that is brought against the scripture people already in the *Qur'ān*, has a long history of exegesis which it is not to the present purpose to rehearse here¹². However, one of the consequences of the charge has to do with the proper identification of the authentic Gospel. As is evident from what has already been said, for Muslims the Gospel is the divine revelation which God gave to Jesus, and for Christians it is the good news of what God has done for mankind, written in Greek by four inspired evangelists. Accordingly, Christians speak of the Gospel in four Gospels. For some Muslims, however, the four Gospels in Greek already represent a distortion. By the first Abbasid century someone must already have formulated what was to be clearly described later by the great Mu'tazilite scholar, 'Abd al-Ġabbār al-Hamdḥānī (d. 1025), viz., the conviction that God originally delivered the Gospel to Jesus in Hebrew, his presumed native language, since, as 'Abd al-Ġabbār points out, Jesus belonged to the Hebrew community. According to 'Abd al-Ġabbār's logical conclusion, therefore, Jesus' fractious later followers must have been responsible for the Greek versions of the Gospels. The evidence he offers for this contention is the manifest difference in detail, and even the contradictions that are evident in the four Greek narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John¹³. What makes one suspect that some earlier Muslim scholars

11 Constantin Bacha, *Les livres arabes de Théodore Aboucar* (Beyrouth, 1904), p. 90.

12 Cf. I. Goldziher, "Ueber mahammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl' al-Kitāb", *ZDMG* 32 (1878), pp. 341-387; I. Di Matteo, "Il *tahrīf* od alterazione della Bibbia secondo i musulmani", *Rivista* 38 (1922), pp. 64-111, 223-260; W. Montgomery Watt, "The Early Development of the Muslim Attitude to the Bible", *Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions* 36 (1955-1956), pp. 50-62; J.-M. Gaudeul & R. Caspar, "Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le *tahrīf* (falsification) des écritures", *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), pp. 61-104.

13 Cf. the English version of 'Abd al-Ġabbār's views in S. M. Stern, "'Abd al-Jabbār's Account of How Christ's Religion Was Falsified By the Adoption of Roman Customs", *JThS*

shared 'Abd al-Ġabbār's conviction about the status of the Greek Gospels is the fact that already in the first Abbasid century such a writer as 'Alī ibn Rabbān aṭ-Ṭabarī, from whom 'Abd al-Ġabbār quoted some of his information about Christians, as S. M. Stern has shown, was already busily pointing out some of the same inconsistencies in the four Gospels, and calling attention to the distorting influence of Paul, another theme that 'Abd al-Ġabbār himself was to follow up later¹⁴.

While it is not within the purview of the present article to discuss the complicated Islamic doctrines of *at-tahrif*, or even to trace the history of the Islamic teaching about the original Gospel which the *Qur'ān* says that God gave to Jesus, it is important at the outset to make clear the ambiguity that adheres to the very term 'Gospel' in Arabic. In reading Islamic texts one must always ask himself which sense of the word is to be understood, the Gospel as Christians have it in the four Gospels, or the Gospel as Jesus received it from God, according to the Islamic view? The purpose of the present article is to search for the first Arabic version of the canonical four Gospels of the Christian community. Muslims were certainly well aware of these Gospels, as will become abundantly clear below. As for the Gospel which Muslims believe that God gave to Jesus, and the conviction of 'Abd al-Ġabbār and others that its original language was Hebrew, one may conclude only that the *Qur'ān* is the sole witness for the existence of such a Gospel. The suggestion of some Muslim scholars that it was originally in Hebrew is an obvious conclusion for them to draw from the data contained in their own divine revelation. Furthermore, given this notion of the Gospel revealed in the *Qur'ān* it is not surprising that in commenting on Christianity in the *Qur'ān* Abū Ġa'far Muḥammad ibn Ġarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923) paid virtually no attention at all to what Christians would recognize as the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Rather, he was concerned only with the no longer available Gospel that the *Qur'ān* says God gave to Jesus¹⁵.

19 (1968), pp. 133-137. Cf. also S.M. Stern, "Quotations From Apocryphal Gospels in 'Abd al-Ġabbār", *JThS* 18 (1967), pp. 34-57. T. Baarda, "Het ontstaan van de vier Evangelien volgens 'Abd al-Djabbār", *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 28 (1974), pp. 215-238. For the original text, cf. 'Abd al-Ġabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Hamdḥānī, *Taḥḥit dalā'il an-nubuwwah* (2 vols.; Beirut, 1966). In a recent article Patricia Crone proposes that 'Abd al-Ġabbār here records the views of a group of Judeo-Christians. Cf. P. Crone, "Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980), pp. 59-95.

14 Cf. A. Khalifé et W. Kutsch, "Ar-Radd 'Ala-n-Nasārā de 'Alī aṭ-Ṭabarī", *MUSJ* 36 (1959), pp. 115-148. Another, later Islamic scholar, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), a younger contemporary of 'Abd al-Ġabbār, employed a similar line of argument. Cf. Gaudeu & Caspar, *art. cit.*, pp. 78-82.

15 Cf. A. Charfi, "Christianity in the *Qur'ān* Commentary of Tabarī", *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), pp. 107-109.

There was, of course, the "Gospel of the Hebrews", once current in Hebrew, i.e., Aramaic, as the scripture of a group of Jewish Christians sometimes known as Ναζωραῖοι, the Arabic form of whose name is probably *an-Naṣārā*, the *Qur'ān*'s name for Christians. There is a record of the presence of Ναζωραῖοι in Syria, and it is not impossible that they were known in Mecca, and ultimately to Muḥammad himself¹⁶. However, after the Islamic conquest the religious conflict of the Muslims was with the Christians of the patriarchal sees of Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem, whose Gospel was in Greek, or in Syriac derived from Greek, according to the Gospels of the four evangelists. While it is not inconceivable that the Ναζωραῖοι and their "Hebrew" Gospel somehow lie behind the *Qur'ān*'s view of the Gospel, it is unquestionable that the canonical Gospels were the focus of controversy in and after the first Abbasid century, and it is their first appearance in Arabic that is the subject of the present inquiry.

B. The Earliest Documentary Evidence

The ninth Christian century is the earliest time from which we have unambiguous, documentary evidence of Arabic versions of the four Gospels. The evidence is in the form of the actual manuscripts which contain these versions, which, as we shall see, have been transmitted in close association with anti-Muslim, Arabic apologies for Christianity; and reports, from both Christians and Muslims, dealing with the subject of Gospel translations into Arabic, or quoting passages from the Gospels in Arabic. We shall briefly survey both forms of this evidence.

1. Arabic Gospel Manuscripts

The oldest known, dated manuscripts containing Arabic translations of the New Testament are in the collections of St. Catherine's monastery at Mt. Sinai. Sinai Arabic MS 151 contains an Arabic version of the Epistles of Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Catholic Epistles. It is the oldest of the dated New Testament manuscripts. The colophon of this

16 Regarding the Ναζωραῖοι, cf. the sources cited in G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961), p. 897. For the Greek name and its Syriac connections, cf. H.H. Schaefer, "Ναζαρηνός, Ναζωραῖος", in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Trans. G.W. Bromiley, vol. IV; Grand Rapids, Mich., 1967), pp. 874-879. For "The Gospel of the Nazoraeans", cf. Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* (W. Schneemelcher, ed., R. McL. Wilson, trans.; Philadelphia, 1963), vol. I, pp. 139-153. For the connection of the Arabic word *an-naṣārā* with οἱ Ναζωραῖοι, via the Syriac *naṣrāyē*, cf. A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda, 1938), pp. 280-281. A recent writer has proposed a connection between Islam and the Ναζωραῖοι, viz., J. Dorra-Haddad, "Coran, prédication nazaréenne", *POC* 23 (1973), pp. 148-151. Cf. also M.P. Roncaglia, "Éléments Ébionites et Elkasaites dans le Coran", *POC* 21 (1971), pp. 101-126.

MS informs us that one Bišr ibn as-Sirrī made the translation from Syriac in Damascus during Ramaḍān of the Hiḡrah year 253, i.e., 867 A.D.¹⁷ The oldest, dated manuscript containing the Gospels in Arabic is Sinai Arabic MS 72. Here the text of the four canonical Gospels is marked off according to the lessons of the temporal cycle of the Greek liturgical calendar of the Jerusalem church. A colophon informs us that the MS was written by Stephen of Ramleh in the year 284 of the Arabs, i.e., in 897 A.D.¹⁸ Although this MS remains unpublished, we know that its text belongs to a distinct family of some half dozen Arabic Gospel manuscripts which contain a version of the Gospel rendered from the original Greek¹⁹. A recent study of the text of the Gospel according to Mark in these MSS shows that Sinai Arabic MS 72 is in all likelihood the latest of them all, textwise, featuring numerous improvements and corrections of earlier readings²⁰.

Vatican Arabic 13, which originally contained an Arabic version of the Psalms, the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and all of the Epistles, now has only Paul's Epistles and portions of the Gospels in what remains of the manuscript. It comes originally from the monastery of Mar Sabas in Judea. Modern scholars consider it to be one of the oldest surviving Arabic New Testament manuscripts. It carries no date, but is now generally reckoned to have been written in the ninth century²¹.

There are, of course, many other manuscripts of the Gospels rendered into Arabic. We have mentioned here only the most notable early ones²².

17 The Pauline epistles have been edited and translated into English. Cf. Harvey Staal, *Mt. Sinai Arabic Codex 151; I, Pauline Epistles* (CSCO, 452, 453; Lovanii, 1983). On Bišr ibn as-Sirrī, cf. J. Nasrallah, "Deux versions melchites partielles de la Bible du ix^e et du x^e siècles", *OrChr* 64 (1980), pp. 203-206.

18 Cf. the published photograph of this colophon in Constance E. Padwick, "Al-Ghazali and the Arabic Versions of the Gospels", *Moslem World* (1939), pp. 134ff.

19 For a description of these MSS cf. Graf, vol. I, pp. 142-147.

20 Cf. Amy Galli Garland, "An Arabic Translation of the Gospel According to Mark", (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, The Catholic University of America; Washington 1979).

M. Samir Arbache has a doctoral dissertation in preparation at Louvain on the Sinai Gospel MSS. Cf. *Bulletin d'arabe chrétien* 1 (1977), p. 82.

21 Cf. Graf, vol. I, pp. 115 & 138.

22 Cf. the list of Bible versions in Arabic in J. Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic* (CSCO, vols. 267, 276, 279; Louvain, 1966-1967), vol. 267, pp. 29-34. For a general overview of the Arabic versions of the Gospels, cf. Ignazio Guidi, "Le traduzioni degli Evangelii in arabo e in etiopico", in *Reale Accademia dei Lincei* 285 (1888), pp. 5-37; Graf, vol. I, pp. 138-170; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament; their Origin, Transmission and Limitations* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 257-268. André Ferré, of the Pontifical Institute of Arabic Studies in Rome, is at work on a new survey of Arabic Gospel versions. Cf. *Bulletin d'arabe chrétien* 1 (1977), p. 84.

An interesting fact about the Sinai Gospel manuscripts in this group is that they were written by the same people who have transmitted some of the earliest Christian Arabic controversial treatises to us, and it is to them that we shall now turn our attention.

Stephen of Ramleh, the scribe who wrote Sinai Arabic MS 72, included two short treatises at the end of his Gospel text. One is an inspirational homily, attributed to Mar Basil. The other is a short apologetic treatise composed by Theodore Abū Qurrah. It is a dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim, about the alleged Jewish responsibility for Christ's crucifixion²³. This same Stephen of Ramleh also wrote a major portion of the British Museum MS Or. 4950. This important manuscript, written in the year 877/8, contains two long Christian Arabic apologetic treatises. One is a still largely unpublished treatise in 25 chapters that discusses and defends the major Christian doctrines about God and Christ. The other is Theodore Abū Qurrah's defense of the Christian practice of venerating images, against the objections to this practice generally voiced by Muslims and Jews²⁴.

Sinai Arabic MS 154 is another New Testament manuscript written in the ninth century that also contains the text of an apologetic treatise. In addition to Arabic versions of the Acts of the Apostles and the Catholic Epistles, the scribe has included an anonymous treatise in defense of the doctrine of the Trinity. A remarkable feature of this treatise is the large number of quotations from the *Qur'an* which the author employs, in addition to his citation of the standard biblical testimonies that one usually finds cited in support of the doctrine²⁵.

From the little evidence we have presented here it is already clear that the earliest datable copies of the Gospel in Arabic are from Syria/Palestine,

23 Cf. Sidney H. Griffith, "Some Unpublished Arabic Sayings Attributed to Theodore Abū Qurrah", *Le Muséon* 92 (1979), pp. 29-35.

24 A page of MS 4950 is published in Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *Forty-One Facsimiles of Dated Christian Arabic Manuscripts* (Studia Sinaitica, XII; Cambridge, 1907), pp. 2-4. A portion of the first apologetic treatise was published in Louis Ma'luf, "The Oldest Christian Arabic Manuscript". (Arabic) *al-Machriq* 6 (1903), pp. 1011-1023. Cf. Graf, vol. II, pp. 16-19. For Abū Qurrah's treatise, cf. Ioannes Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Kurra de cultu imaginum libellus e codice arabico nunc primum editus latine versus illustratus* (Bonn, 1897); German translation: Georg Graf, *Die arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abū Qurra* (Paderborn, 1910), pp. 278-333. The present writer has prepared a new edition and English translation of Abū Qurrah's treatise, to appear soon, and is at work on Georg Graf's unfinished edition of the first apologetic treatise in BM Arabic MS 4950, the *Summa Theologiae* in 25 chapters.

25 Cf. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles From an Eighth or Ninth Century MS in the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai* (Studia Sinaitica, VII; Cambridge, 1899). Cf. also Graf, vol. I, pp. 172-173; vol. II, pp. 27-28.

largely from St. Catherine's and Mar Sabas' monasteries, in the ninth century. Furthermore, there is a clear relationship in the manuscript traditions between these earliest discoverable Arabic versions of the Gospel, along with the other New Testament writings, and the earliest Christian, apologetic treatises in Arabic — notably those of Theodore Abū Qurrah, himself a monk of Mar Sabas. These and other sources of information which we shall consider below support the conclusion that it was in the ninth century, or late eighth century, that a full edition of the Gospel appeared in Arabic, when this language became the common language for public affairs, even among the subject, non-Muslim populations in the Fertile Crescent whose original languages were Syriac, Greek or Coptic.

Here is the place to note in passing that the earliest extant manuscripts of the Old Testament in Arabic also date from Abbasid times. Perhaps the earliest surviving, integral manuscript is the Arabic version of the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, contained in Sinai Arabic MS 155, which may date from the ninth century, and which is itself the product of re-copying²⁶. But even more interesting than this Sinai MS, for reasons that will appear below, is the dual language MS fragment from Damascus which contains a large portion of Psalm 78 (LXX,77), vv. 20-31, 51-61, in the Greek of the LXX, accompanied by an Arabic version that is written in Greek script²⁷. The fragment was discovered by Bruno Violet in Damascus, in the Umayyad mosque. Greek paleographical considerations show that the text was written in Syria at the end of the eighth century, or in the early ninth century²⁸.

Anton Baumstark, who was a notable proponent of the theory that the Gospel was translated into Arabic in pre-Islamic times, at one time also suggested that the Psalter was translated then too, even as far back as the fifth century, perhaps when Euthymius (377-473), the Palestinian monk, began his missionary work among the Arabs²⁹. Baumstark based his proposal on what he took to be the archaic form of the Arabic text of a Psalter preserved as Zurich Or. MS 94. However, now one is in a position to recognize that this ninth or tenth century manuscript, which has been little studied beyond the small portion of it which Baumstark published (viz.

26 Cf. Richard M. Frank, *The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (Sinai ar. 155. ixth/xth cent.)* (CSCO, vols. 357 & 358; Louvain, 1974).

27 Cf. B. Violet, "Ein zweisprachiges Psalmfragment aus Damaskus", *Berichtiger Sonderabzug aus der Orientalistischen Literatur-Zeitung, 1901* (Berlin, 1902). The text of the Psalm is also available in P. Kahle, *Die arabischen Bibelübersetzungen. Texte mit Glossar und Literaturübersicht* (Leipzig, 1904), pp. 32-35.

28 Cf. Violet, *art. cit.*, and Graf, vol. I, pp. 114-115; Blau, *op. cit.*, vol. 267, p. 31.

29 A. Baumstark, "Der älteste erhaltene griechisch-arabische Text von Psalm 110 (109)", *OrChr* 31 (1934), p. 62.

Ps. 110, LXX 109), actually seems to exhibit an Arabic text that is comparable to that which was written in southern Palestine in the ninth and tenth centuries³⁰.

Not only are the earliest dated biblical Arabic manuscripts from the ninth century, but even a cursory glance through Graf's or Blau's lists of manuscripts shows that this century witnessed a fairly prodigious amount of other non-biblical Christian writing in Arabic, especially in Palestine. However, one should not immediately conclude that the ninth century is the earliest time when Christians wrote in Arabic. Some works doubtless date back to the eighth century. Many of the ninth century manuscripts seem to be copies of works written earlier. As noted above, Sinai Arabic MS 72, the earliest dated manuscript of the Gospel in Arabic, is clearly an improvement on the text of the Gospel in the other manuscripts in its family. This fact argues that the text in the other manuscripts had an earlier origin³¹. The earliest date so far attested in a documentary source for Christian writing in Arabic is the report in British Museum MS or. 5019, written in the tenth or eleventh century, that the martyrology contained in the text was translated into Arabic in the year 772³².

2. References to the Arabic Gospel

a. Christian References

The earliest occasion which later Christian writers remembered as concerned with a project to translate the Gospel into Arabic was originally described in an early 8th century Syriac chronicle, which reports an encounter between a Muslim official named 'Amr, and the Jacobite Patriarch John I (d. 648), in the course of which the Muslim is said to have made inquiries about the contents of the Gospel³³. According to Michael the Syrian, a twelfth century Jacobite chronicler, it was as a consequence of his meeting with 'Amr³⁴ that the Patriarch John made arrangements for the first translation of the Gospel from Syriac into Arabic, with the con-

30 Cf. Graf, vol. I, p. 115. Cf. also the fragmentary, triglot Psalter, in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic published by N. Pigulevskaya, "Greco - Siro - Arabiskaia Rukopis IXv", *Palestinskii Sbornik* 1 (63) (1954), pp. 59-90.

31 Cf. n. 20 above. Even one of the earliest dated Christian manuscripts in Arabic, viz., British Museum Or. MS. 4950, copied in 877, testifies that its text of Theodore Abū Qurrah's treatise on images was copied from an earlier manuscript.

32 Cf. Joshua Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 5-6.

33 Cf. M.J. Nau, "Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716", *Journal Asiatique* 11th Series, 5 (1915), pp. 225-279.

34 Probably 'Amr ibn Ša'd ibn Abi Waqqās, cf. J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London & New York, 1979), p. 225.

sultation of men from those Christian, Arab tribes of Mesopotamia who knew both Syriac and Arabic. Following Michael's account, the Muslem official gave the patriarch clear orders to this effect.

Thereupon he commanded him, "Translate your Gospel for me into the Saracen language, i.e., Arabic³⁵; but do not mention Christ's name, that he is God, or baptism, or the cross." Fortified by the Lord, his Beatitude said, "Far be it that I should subtract a single *yod* or stroke from the Gospel³⁶, even if all the arrows and lances in your camp should transfix me." When he saw that he would not be convinced, he gave the order, "Go, write what you want". So, he assembled the bishops, and he brought help from the Tanūkāyê, the 'Aqûlāyê, and the Tu'āyê, who were knowledgeable in both the Arabic and in the Syriac language, and he commanded them to translate the Gospel into the Arabic language³⁷.

Michael the Syrian's list of the three Christian Arab tribes, whose members understood both Arabic and Syriac, calls one's attention to the fact that there were many Arab Christians prior to the rise of Islam, including not only these three groups in Mesopotamia, but also the many Christians among the Arabic speaking populations in Arabia proper, in the Sinai, and in Syria/Palestine, from at least as early as the fifth century³⁸. However, Michael the Syrian's statement that the three groups in Mesopotamia were bilingual reminds the modern reader that every one of these Arabic speaking Christian communities, who were tribally organized and at least semi-noma-

35 Michael's Syriac expression is *lešânâ sarqāyâ awkêt ṭayyāyâ*. *Sarqāyâ* is simply an adjective derived from the transliteration of the enigmatic Greek word Σαρακηνοί, which originally designated nomadic Arabs, and in later Byzantine writers meant 'Muslims'. Cf. V. Christides, "The Names APABEZ, ΣΑΡΑΚΗΝΟΙ etc., and their False Byzantine Etymologies", *ByZ* 65 (1972), pp. 329-333. It is curious that Christides does not seem to know of John Damascene's ideas about the etymology of Σαρακηνοί. Cf. Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam; the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden, 1972), p. 71. Cf. also Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 312-313; and Louis Cheikho, "Al-'arab aw as-sarhiyyūn", *Al-Machriq* 7 (1904), pp. 340-343, where the author suggests that the term might ultimately come from the name of the Yemenite province *as-Sarḥah*, whose inhabitants the sea-faring Greeks may have encountered, and whose name they may eventually have applied to all Arabians, and all Arab nomads. The Syriac adjective *ṭayyāyâ* comes from the name of the Arab tribe, *at-Ṭayy*, and it was widely used in Syriac texts of Byzantine times to designate Arabic speaking, bedouin nomads. Cf. Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-312.

36 Cf. Mt. 5:18.

37 J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien; patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166-1199)* (4 vols.; Paris, 1899-1910), vol. II, p. 432, vol. IV, p. 422.

38 Cf. the extensive bibliography in Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, and particularly the work of Professor Irfan Shahid (Kawar). Of special interest for the present inquiry are his recent works: *The Martyrs of Najrān: New Documents* (Subsidia Hagiographica, 49; Bruxelles, 1971); "The Martyrs of Najrān: Miscellaneous Reflexions", *Le Muséon* 93 (1980), pp. 149-161; "Byzantium in South Arabia", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979), pp. 25-94. Of decisive importance for the whole field of inquiry into Christianity among the pre-Islamic Arabs, will be Prof. Shahid's forth-coming three volumes, *Byzantium and the Arabs Before the Rise of Islam: from Constantine to Heraclius*.

dic, lived in association with a larger, ecclesiastically more dominant group, whose church language was either Greek, Syriac, or, in one known instance where a vernacular was employed in the liturgy, Palestinian Aramaic. The official Christian scriptures of the Arab tribes most likely remained in these ecclesiastical languages of the completely settled communities. If among the tribes any Arabic versions of the Gospel ever were made prior to the rise of Islam, an accomplishment that is not to be considered *a priori* impossible or even unlikely, all mention and all unambiguous evidence of them disappeared later.

As for what became of Patriarch John's Arabic version of the Gospel, no other mention of it seems to have survived. Presumably the patriarch used it in his discussions with Muslims. As for the Christian community, it was not yet that they had Gospel, liturgy and theology in Arabic.

b. Muslim References

i. Ibn Ishāq

The earliest known extended quotation from the Gospel in an Islamic Arabic text, apart from some earlier allusions to Gospel stories which we shall mention below, is undoubtedly the passage from John 15:23 - 16:1 which Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d.c. 767) included in his biography of the prophet Muḥammad, and which has been preserved in the later biography by Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hišām (d. 834). It is worth quoting Ibn Ishāq's passage at some length, in order to appreciate the significance of his reference to St. John's Gospel³⁹.

Ibn Ishāq said, "Here is what has come down to me about the description of God's messenger, God's prayer and peace be upon him, in what Jesus, son of Mary, set down in the Gospel, for the people of the Gospel, which came to him from God, as Yuḥannis the apostle established it for them when he copied the Gospel for them at the commission of Jesus, son of Mary, peace be upon him; he said: (15:23) "Whoever has hated me, has hated the Lord. (15:24) Had I not performed in their presence such works as no one has performed before me, they would have no sin. But now they have become proud and they think that they will find fault with me and even with the Lord"⁴⁰. (15:25) However, it is inevitable that the saying concerning *an-Nāmūs* will be fulfilled, "They have hated me for nothing, i.e., in vain". (15:26) Had *al-Munahḥ*⁴¹ *mā-nā*, he whom God will send, already come to you from the Lord, and the spirit of truth⁴¹, he who comes from God, he would have been a witness for me, and you too,

39 Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hišām. *Sirat an-nabi* (ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī d-Din 'Abd al-Ḥamid, 4 vols.: Cairo, 1356), vol. I, p. 251; F. Wüstenfeld (ed.), *Das Leben Muhammeds nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk* (Göttingen, 1858), pp. 149-150.

40 For this rendition of the enigmatic *y-z-w-n-n-y*, cf. below.

41 Reading *wa rūḥi l-qisṭ* with Wüstenfeld, cf. the explanation below.

because you have been with me from the beginning. (16:1) I have said this to you so that you may not be in doubt.”

Al-Munahh' mānā in Syriac is Muḥammad, and in Greek it is *al-baraqitūs*, God's prayer and peace be upon him.

The first thing that must strike the reader of this passage is the fact that Ibn Ishāq is citing St. John's Gospel as a scriptural testimony to the future divine mission of Muḥammad. Indeed, in context in the *Sirah* the passage occurs at the end of the first part of the book, just prior to the accounts of the first revelations to Muḥammad, in company with a number of other testimonies from Jews and Christians to Muḥammad's prophethood, culminating in the story of Waraqaḥ ibn Nawfal, to which we shall return below. Secondly, it is easily recognizable that Ibn Ishāq's idea of the Gospel is the Islamic, in fact the Qur'anic view that the Gospel is something which God gave to Jesus. Ibn Ishāq says that the apostle John had merely copied it down on Jesus' commission. Furthermore, with reference to any known Christian version of the Gospel according to John, it becomes clear from what Ibn Ishāq offers us here that he must also have been convinced that John's text as Christians have it has been altered⁴². For, in his quotation of John 15:23 - 16:1 there are a number of telling variants. The three occurrences of the phrase "my Father" in the passage as it appears in Christian texts, have here all become "the Lord," in accordance with the *Qur'ān's* insistence that God has no son (*al-Ihlās* (112)), and that Jesus, son of Mary, is only God's messenger (*an-Nisā'*(4): 171), whom, as the Messiah, the Christians have said to be God's son, "imitating the doctrine of those who disbelieved earlier. ... They have taken their own scholars and their own monks as lords, in spite of God, or the Messiah, the son of Mary" (*at-Tawbah* (9):30-31). Clearly then, Ibn Ishāq must have felt that he had ample divine authority in the *Qur'ān* to set matters aright in his quotation from the Gospel of John.

Both A. Baumstark and A. Guillaume, the two modern scholars who have most assiduously studied Ibn Ishāq's quotation, have shown that the Christian text that underlies the quotation as we have it here in undoubtedly the version preserved now in the so called Palestinian Syriac Lectionary⁴³. Their evidence for this conclusion is principally the un-

42 It is noteworthy that in Ibn Ishāq's account of the conversion of the Persian Salmān, which just precedes the quotation of the John passage, Salmān was informed by his first respected Christian master that "men have died and have either altered (*haddalū*) or abandoned most of their true religion". Cf. 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hišām, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 236.

43 Cf. A. Baumstark, "Eine altarabische Evangelienübersetzung aus dem Christlich-Palastinensischen", *ZSem* 8 (1932), pp. 201-209; A. Guillaume, "The Version of the Gospels Used in Medina c. A.D. 700", *Al-Andalus* 15 (1950), pp. 289-296. For the Palestinian text of the

mistakable appearance of the singular term *al-munahh^hmānā*, the Comforter, in Ibn Ishāq's quotation, as a rendering of the original ὁ Παράκλητος. The term is unique to the Palestinian Syriac version. Then there is the phrase, "the spirit of truth", in vs. 26, the original Arabic version of which in Ibn Ishāq's quotation betrays its debt to the same Palestinian Syriac text⁴⁴. Both scholars also mention a number of other, smaller pointers to the Palestinian version which it is not necessary to repeat here. Rather, what is important now is to call attention to those places in the text where Baumstark and Guillaume detected further deliberate Islamic alterations, or corrections to the Christian text, or where mistakes or textual corruptions seem to them to have crept into the quotation.

15:24b, "But now they have become proud and they think that they will find fault with me, and even with the Lord."

Both Baumstark and Guillaume argue that the Arabic text of Ibn Ishāq is corrupt in this verse. They correct the rare word *baṭirū*, "they have become proud," to *naẓarū*, "they have seen", to agree with both the Greek and the Palestinian Syriac readings, and they mention the easy mistake it would have been to confuse the consonants of these two words in the Arabic script⁴⁵. Further, Baumstark proposed a fairly complicated double textual corruption in Syriac to account for the last part of the verse, involving the introduction into the original text of a form of the Syriac root *h-w-b*, "to be guilty", which he then supposed was subsequently misread to be a form of the root *h-s-n*, "to be strong, to overcome", yielding the final reading, "they think that they will overcome me ..."⁴⁶, which, on Baumstark's view, Ibn Ishāq would have found before him. Both Baumstark and Guillaume, therefore, understood Ibn Ishāq's verb, *y-ʿ-z-w-n-n-y*, to be a form of the root *ʿ-z-z*, and Baumstark offered what seemed to him to be a plausible explanation of how a misunderstanding of the underlying Syriac could issue in such an errant Arabic version of John 15:24b.

The readings of Guillaume and Baumstark make sense of Ibn Ishāq's quotation of vs. 15:24b by measuring it against the Palestinian Syriac *Vorlage*, and ultimately against the Greek original. This approach assumes that Ibn Ishāq's intention was accurately to reproduce an Arabic version

passage under discussion, cf. A. Smith Lewis & M. Dunlop Gibson, *The Palestinian Syriac Lectionary of the Gospels* (London, 1899), pp. 24 & 187.

44 Wüstenfeld, following a better MS, preserves the original *wa rūḥi l-qisṭ*. Cf. Baumstark, *art. cit.*, p. 201; ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Hišām, on the other hand, follows the later 'correction' of the phrase to *rūḥi l-quḍus*, *op. cit.*, p. 251. Cf. Guillaume, *art. cit.*, p. 293.

45 Baumstark, *art. cit.*, p. 205; Guillaume, *art. cit.*, p. 294.

46 Baumstark, *art. cit.*, pp. 205-206.

of the Palestinian Syriac text. However, on the evidence of his alteration of 'father' to 'Lord' throughout the passage, we have already seen that Ibn Ishāq must rather have intended accurately to quote from John's copy of the Gospel as it would have been originally, when God gave it to Jesus, according to the *Qur'ān*'s teaching, and not to reflect what in his view would have to be instances of textual alterations introduced later by the Christian community in support of their unique doctrines about God and Jesus. Religious accuracy, and hence scriptural accuracy, for Ibn Ishāq, would have been measured by the *Qur'ān*'s teachings, and not by Christian manuscripts in Greek, Syriac or Arabic.

Accordingly, in John 15:24b one should look for the religious accuracy which Ibn Ishāq meant to reflect. In this connection one's attention is drawn immediately to the fact that the root *b-t-r*, in the sense of "to be proud, vain," appears twice in the *Qur'ān*, in *al-Anfāl* (8):47 and *al-Qaṣaṣ* (28):58, and in both places it describes the state of mind of those who have in the past turned aside from God's way, or who have rejected His messenger. Clearly, this sense fits an Islamic understanding of the context of John 15:24. Furthermore, if the reader understands Ibn Ishāq's verb, *y-'z-w-n-ny*, to be a form of the root '-z-w', it may be understood to mean "to charge, to incriminate, to blame", in the first form, and "to comfort, to console" in the second and fourth forms. The first alternative fits well with an Islamic understanding of the present verse, and the second meaning, of course, is perfect for the Christian Palestinian understanding of the important term, *al-munaḥḥ^emānā* in 15:26. In fact, the ninth century Christian Arabic translator of St. John's Gospel chose precisely the root '-z-w' to render the term in question, as we shall see below.

15:25, "The saying concerning *an-Nāmūs* will be fulfilled."

The translation of this phrase reflects the Islamic understanding of the term *an-Nāmūs* as referring not to the Torah, or to a law of Moses (*nāmūsā d^e Mōšē* in Syriac, e.g., in Luke 2:22), but to Gabriel, who brought it to Moses. As aṭ-Ṭabarī said, "By *an-Nāmūs* one means Ġibrīl, who used to come to Moses"⁴⁷. The evidence that such was also Ibn Ishāq's understanding of *an-Nāmūs* is to be seen in his omission of the participle 'written' and the third person plural pronominal suffix from his Arabic rendering of the Palestinian Syriac reading, "The saying written in their law(s)"⁴⁸. While Baumstark did not think that the omission of the pronoun or the participle was significant enough to warrant one's understanding Ibn Ishāq to mean *an-Nāmūs* in the Islamic sense here, his cavil seems actually

47 M.J. De Goeje (ed.), *Annales quos Scripsit Abu Džafar Mohammed ibn Džurir at-Tabarī* (Leiden, 1882-1885), 1st series, vol. III, p. 1151.

48 Lewis and Gibson, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, l. 22 and 287, l. 12.

to stem from his method of measuring Ibn Ishāq's version of this passage of John's Gospel against Christian texts, rather than against Ibn Ishāq's own Islamic understanding of what the Gospel should say. Baumstark confined his discussion to the missing pronoun and simply ignored the missing participle⁴⁹. Guillaume, on the other hand, clearly recognized that "one cannot escape the conclusion that the alteration is deliberate"⁵⁰.

15:26, "*Al-Munaḥḥemānā*, he whom God will send to you."

The Palestinian Syriac version of John 15:26, following the original Greek, speaks of "*al-munaḥḥemānā*, whom I shall send to you". There are two subjects for discussion in this verse, the identity of *al-munaḥḥemānā* himself, and the identity of the sender. In both instances Ibn Ishāq's Islamic construction of the Gospel text is evident.

As all commentators on the Palestinian Syriac lectionary have observed, and as Baumstark and Guillaume have both rehearsed it, the term *al-munaḥḥemānā*, which Ibn Ishāq simply transliterated into Arabic characters, is a unique rendering of the original Greek term in John 15:26, ὁ Παράκλητος, in a sense unique in Syriac to the Palestinian Syriac deployment of the root *n-h-m*, to mean "the comforter"⁵¹. For Christians, the Paraclete, the Comforter, is the Holy Spirit, or as St. John calls him, "the Spirit of truth", whom Jesus promises to send after his return to the Father.

For Ibn Ishāq and the Muslims this idea is an instance of the distortion (*at-tahrif*) which Christians have introduced into the Gospel text, particularly at places where the coming of Muḥammad was foretold. According to the report of a Christian controversialist of the first Abbasid century, his Muslim interlocutor explicitly made this charge against John and his disciples after Christ's ascension. The Muslim said to the Christian :

49 A. Baumstark, "Eine altarabische Evangelienübersetzung ..., *art. cit.*, p. 206. In an earlier article Baumstark admits the Islamic understanding of *an-Nāmūs*, in connection with the story of Waraqa ibn Nawfal, as found in the *Sirah* of Ibn Ishāq Ibn Hišām, and in support of it he cites some passages from the eastern liturgy in which the Greek ὁ νόμος seems to have an almost anthropomorphic, or angelomorphic sense. Cf. A. Baumstark, "Das Problem eines vorislamischen christlich-kirchlichen Schrifttums in arabischer Sprache", *Islamica* 4 (1929-1931), pp. 565-566.

50 Guillaume, *art. cit.*, p. 294.

51 As all the commentators have mentioned, the Palestinian Syriac use of the root *n-h-m* to mean 'to give comfort' is comparable to the Jewish Aramaic deployment of the root. Cf., e.g., Guillaume, *art. cit.*, p. 293. However, the meaning 'comforter' for Παράκλητος, instead of the more likely 'advocate', poses yet another lexical problem, which need not detain us here. Cf. J. Behm, "Παράκλητος", in G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (eds.), G.W. Bromiley (trans. & ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964-1976), vol. V, pp. 800-814.

What you have said, you report only from your Gospel and your new books. But we have the original, genuine Gospel. We have gotten it from our prophet, and it stands in opposition to what is in your possession; for John and his associates, after Christ's ascension to heaven, revised the Gospel and set down what is in your possession, as they wished. So has our prophet handed it down to us⁵².

Ibn Ishāq knew very well, on the authority of the *Qur'ān* itself, that Jesus said, "O Sons of Israel I am a messenger of God to you, confirming what was before me of the Torah, and announcing a messenger who will come after me, whose name is *aḥmad*" (*aṣ-Ṣaff* (61):5). Consequently, what John originally wrote down of the Gospel at Jesus' commission could only have been in accordance with what the *Qur'ān* says. So Ibn Ishāq presented John 15:26 in an Islamically correct fashion which makes the Paraclete, the Comforter, a designation for Muḥammad, as he says explicitly at the end of the long passage translated above. Nor is he troubled by any necessity to explain the relationship between *aḥmad* and ὁ Παράκλητος/*al-munaḥḥ^emānā*⁵³. The unquestionable assumption for Ibn Ishāq was that Jesus predicted the coming of Muḥammad. John 15:26 says that Jesus said that the Paraclete will come. Therefore, the Paraclete designates Muḥammad. As for who will send the Paraclete/Muḥammad, it is clear that God is the one who sends His own messengers (cf., e.g., *Ghāfir* (40):78: *arsalnā rusulan*). Therefore, the undistorted Gospel must have described *al-Munaḥḥ^emānā* as "He whom God will send", and so Ibn Ishāq reports it. Baumstark's proposal that Ibn Ishāq's report in this instance was based on a corruption of the Syriac phrase for "Whom I shall send"⁵⁴ once again, and not without ingenuity, measures Ibn Ishāq's quotation against Christian texts, rather than against his own Islamic understanding of the matter in hand.

16:1, "So that you may not be in doubt."

The Palestinian Syriac lectionary, along with the original Greek, says "So that you might not be tripped up", that is to say, "scandalized", as the expression has universally been interpreted in Christian circles. Ibn Ishāq has simply supplied an easily understood Islamic phrase here, the recognition of which removes the necessity to follow Guillaume in his search for dialectical understandings of the root *š-k-k* to mean 'to limp', or 'to fall'⁵⁵.

52 K. Vollers, "Das Religionsgespräch von Jerusalem", *ZKG* 29 (1908), p. 62.

53 Western scholars have long attempted to interpret *aḥmad* as a reflection of παράκλητος, misread as περικλυτός. Cf. Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans* (vol. I, 2nd ed., F. Schwally; Leipzig, 1909), p. 9, n. 1. In all probability the *Qur'ān* passage has no reference to any particular Gospel passage. As for the relationship between *al-m^enaḥḥ^emānā* and Muḥammad/Aḥmad, one scholar has proposed that "this identification is based only on the assonance between the Aramaic word and the name Muḥammad, and seems to have been suggested by Christian converts to Islam". J. Schacht, "Aḥmad", *EI*², vol. I, p. 267.

54 Baumstark, "Eine altarabische Evangelienübersetzung...", *art. cit.*, pp. 206-207.

55 Guillaume, *art. cit.*, p. 295.

In the *Qur'ān*, the people to whom prophets have been sent, who have spoken against their prophets, are often said to be “*fī šakkīn ... murībīn*”, i.e., “in suspicious doubt”, as were the people to whom Šāliḥ was sent (*Hūd* (11):62), the people to whom Moses was sent (*Hūd* (11):110), and even the people to whom Muḥammad was sent (*Sabā'* (34):54). Indeed, at one place in the *Qur'ān* there is this specific advice: “If you are in doubt about what we have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you. The truth has come to you from your Lord, so do not be among the doubters” (*Yūnus* (10):94). Ibn Ishāq's Islamic understanding of John 16:1 is, therefore, easily intelligible, as are the apologetical reasons for which he searched out this whole passage from the Gospel according to John⁵⁶.

Quite clearly Ibn Ishāq's Arabic version of John 15:23 - 16:1 is dependent upon the version of the Gospel preserved in the Palestinian Syriac lectionary. There is every reason to believe that he found it in Syriac, and that he alone, or with the help of an Arabic speaking Christian, put it into an Arabic idiom that would be both comprehensible and doctrinally reinforcing to Muslim readers. There is no reason to believe that Ibn Ishāq's quotation is dependent upon a pre-existent, Christian, Arabic version of the Gospel. He himself twice refers to his Syriac source, once to explain that Syriac *mağğānan* means *bāṭilan*, and once to claim that *al-Munahḥimānā* is Syriac for Muḥammad.

There is certainly no reason to propose a connection between Ibn Ishāq's quotation from John, and the Palestinian Arabic Gospel text that is represented in the family of Arabic manuscripts mentioned above, which originate from the first Abbasid century⁵⁷. A comparison between Ibn Ishāq's quotation and the text of John 15:23 - 16:1 in Sinai Arabic MSS 72 and 74 makes this conclusion crystal clear. The one connection between the two versions of the passage from John is that both of them depend upon a Gospel text of the type that now remains only in the Palestinian Syriac lectionary. The translator of the texts in the Sinai MSS understood the Paraclete to be ‘the Comforter’, and he rendered this understanding into Arabic with a form of the root ‘-z-w, viz., *al-mu'azzī*⁵⁸. Below we shall discuss further the relationship between the Palestinian Arabic Gospel text and the Palestinian Syriac lectionary.

56 Cf. John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford, 1978).

57 Cf. nn. 19 & 20 above.

58 Sinai Arabic MS 72, f. 110r, l. 18, and Sinai Arabic MS 74, f. 238, l. 5.

ii. Waraḳah ibn Nawfal

The story of Waraḳah ibn Nawfal includes not so much a claim to the existence of an early Arabic version of the Gospel, as it does a testimony to the religious association and linguistic knowledge of Waraḳah himself.

Waraḳah ibn Nawfal was a cousin of Ḥadiġah, the wife of Muḥammad. Waraḳah was a Christian, according to tradition, one of the handful of Meccans in the prophet's time who became monotheists prior to the preaching of Islam. He is remembered in Islamic tradition for his knowledge of the scriptures, both the Torah and the Gospel. It is in connection with him that we find in Islamic historical sources the only mention of the Gospel in Arabic in any form in pre-Islamic times.

In the several renditions in which it has come down to us, the constant features in Waraḳah's story are that he had become a Christian in the *Ġāhiliyyah*, that he was learned in the scriptures, and that when the prophet had his inaugural revelation (*bad' al-wahy*) and described the experience to Waraḳah at Ḥadiġah's instigation, Waraḳah recognized immediately Muḥammad's prophetic vocation.

The details are not exactly the same in any two of the ten or so accounts of Muḥammad's meeting with Waraḳah that are preserved in early Islamic sources. The most common form of the story, found in three places, may be quoted here from al-Buḥārī's collection of traditions. The scene is set as just following Muḥammad's disclosure of his first visionary experience to Ḥadiġah.

Ḥadiġah hurried off with him until she brought him to Waraḳah ibn Nawfal. He was the son of Ḥadiġah's uncle, her father's brother. He was a man who had professed Christianity in the time of ignorance. He used to write *al-kitāb al-'arabi*, and he would write down from the Gospel *bi l-'arabiyyah* whatever God wanted him to write. He was a very old man, now gone blind. Ḥadiġah said, "Uncle, listen to your brother's son". Waraḳah said, "O son of my brother, what is it you see?" So the prophet, God's prayer and peace be on him, gave him the report of what he had seen. Waraḳah said, "This is an-Nāmūs that was sent down to Moses"⁵⁹.

Two points in this account attract our attention, viz., that Waraḳah copied passages from the Gospel, and that he told Muḥammad that an-Nāmūs had come to him. We shall discuss each of them in turn, citing the significant variations that occur in the other reports of this incident.

All of the sources insist that Waraḳah was knowledgeable about the scriptures. In the form of the story about him that we have quoted above, it is his ability to write in Arabic that is emphasized. A slightly different

59 Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il al-Buḥārī, *Kitāb al-ġāmi' aṣ-ṣaḥiḥ* (M. Ludolf Krehl, ed., 4 vols.: Leiden, 1862), vol. III, pp. 380-381. Cf. also vol. IV, pp. 347-348, and Muslim b. al-Ḥaġġāġ, *Ṣaḥiḥ Muslim* (8 vols.: Cairo, 1334), vol. I, pp. 97-98.

wording of this story says simply, "He used to read the Gospel *bi l-'arabiyyah*"⁶⁰. Ibn Hišām, on the other hand, is content to say in his edition of Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah* of the prophet, "Waraqah had professed Christianity, and he read the scriptures, and heard from the people of the Torah and the Gospel"⁶¹. The striking variant in the telling of the story, however, is what we find in another place in al-Buḥārī's collection of traditions, as well as in the *Kitāb al-aghānī*. It says of Waraqah, "He used to write *al-kitāb al-'ibrānī*, and he would write down from the Gospel *bi l-'ibrāniyyah*"⁶².

Already in the last century A. Sprenger noticed this discrepancy concerning the language in which Waraqah is said to have read and copied from the Gospel. Sprenger proposed that the "Hebrew" in question was actually the Aramaic script employed by Jews, and that in this story it means that Waraqah was writing Arabic in the Aramaic script. So in his view there is no real conflict between the two versions of the story. Nor is there, in his judgment, any unlikelihood that someone would write Arabic in non-Arabic characters. Historically there is not only the example of Arabic speaking Jews writing Arabic in "Hebrew" characters. Syriac speakers also employed their own alphabet to write Arabic, a writing called *Garšūnī* in Syriac⁶³. But Waraqah, a Meccan and a native Arabic speaker, and not a Jew but an alleged Christian, would hardly have had any need to borrow the "Hebrew" script. By his time the north Arabic script, albeit with an obvious debt to the Syriac script in its origins, would certainly have been available to Waraqah⁶⁴.

There is nothing *a priori* unlikely about the arrival of Christianity in the environs of Mecca in the time of Waraqah ibn Nawfal. Indeed, in the sixth century the Ḥiǧāz was virtually surrounded by Christian areas in Sinai, Syria/Palestine, the Syriac and Arabic speaking areas of Mesopotamia and Iraq, al-Ḥirā, Naǧrān to the south of the Ḥiǧāz, and across the sea in

60 Al-Buḥārī, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 352.

61 Ibn Hišām, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 256.

62 Al-Buḥārī, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 5; Abū Faraǧ al-Isbahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī* (20 vols.; Cairo, 1285), vol. III, p. 14.

63 A. Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad nach bisher grösstentheils unbenutzten Quellen* (3 vols.; Berlin, 1861-1865), vol. I, pp. 124-134.

64 Cf. Nabia Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and its Kur'ānic Development, With a Full Description of the Kur'ān Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 5-11; J. Starcky, "Petra et la Nabatene", *Dictionnaire de la bible. Supplement*, vol. VII, cols. 932-934; Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Les origines de l'écriture arabe, à propos d'une hypothèse récente", *Revue des Études Islamiques* 34 (1966), pp. 151-157; *idem.*, "Khatt", *EP*, vol. IV, pp. 113-1122. Regarding the hypothesis that Christian literary use of Arabic was widespread before the rise of Islam, usually associated with the name of Louis Cheikho, cf. Camille Héchaïme, *Louis Cheikho et son livre "le christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'islam"*, étude critique (Beyrouth, 1967).

Ethiopia⁶⁵. Furthermore, the merchants of Mecca travelled in all of these areas and had commercial relations with them. Early Islamic tradition as well as Christian sources testify to the presence of Christians in the area, even among the nomadic tribes. So there is no reason to doubt the basic veracity of the reports that Waraqaḥ ibn Nawfal was a Christian, and that he was familiar with both the Torah and the Gospel, as Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hišām have said, even given the evidently apologetical character of the *Sīrah*, and its requirement to present Muḥammad as affirmed by the scripture people⁶⁶.

The question before us concerns the language in which the Gospel arrived in Mecca, and the language in which Waraqaḥ would have been likely to "write down from the Gospel ... whatever God wanted him to write". Two questions are actually involved here.

The straightforward answer to the first question is that in all likelihood the bearers of Christianity in the Ḥiḡāz had their Gospel in Syriac, not because it would have been impossible for them to have had it in Arabic (or even in Greek), but because there is no evidence to support the conclusion that they did have it in Arabic, and what evidence there is points to Syriac. The answer to the second question is that in all likelihood Waraqaḥ ibn Nawfal copied from the Gospel (and the Torah) in his own native, Arabic language, this accomplishment being among his notable achievements remembered in Islamic tradition. The answers to both questions require further elucidation.

The evidence that Syriac was the scripture language of the Christian Arabs in Muḥammad's lifetime is first of all the large number of expressions with a Syriac origin, having to do with Biblical and Christian religious concepts that are to be found in the *Qur`ān*, beginning with this very word itself, and extending to many other distinctive locutions⁶⁷. Secondly, in

65 Cf. the studies and bibliographies in Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, n. 34 above, and the works of I. Shahid, n. 38 above.

66 On the apologetic character of the *sīrah*, cf. J. Wansbrough, *op. cit.*, n. 56 above.

67 For the relationship between *qur`ān* and *qeryānā*, cf. Arthur Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur`ān* (Baroda, 1938), p. 234; R. Blachère, *Le Coran* ("Que sais-je?" no. 1245; Paris, 1966), pp. 15-16. For an extended lexical discussion of Quranic terms, cf. K. Ahrens, "Christliches im Quran", *ZDMG* 84 (1930), pp. 15-68, 148-190. For historical considerations and analyses of Quranic passages in relationship to Christian diction in Syriac, cf., esp., Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam et le christianisme* (Trans. J. Roche; Paris, 1955). Andrae originally wrote this study in German in 1923-1925, and published it in the journal, *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift*, which is not available to me. Regarding the Syriac origins of the *Qur`ān*'s name for Jesus, i.e., *ʿIsā al-Masīḥ*, cf. M. Hayek, "L'origine des termes ʿIsā-al-Masīḥ (Jésus-Christ) dans le Coran", *OrSyr* 7 (1962), pp. 227-254, 365-382. Cf. also John Bowman, "The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity", in E.C.B. Mac Laurin (ed.), *Essays in Honour of Griffithes Wheeler Thatcher 1863-1950* (Sydney, 1967), pp. 191-216, and in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 19 (1964/5), pp. 177-201. For some relation-

Muḥammad's time Syriac speaking Christians seem to have exerted the strongest formative influence on the established Christian community nearest to the Ḥiḡāz to the south, viz., Naḡrān, with its ties to the church at al-Ḥirā; while to the north and east the Arabic speaking tribes which included Christians customarily moved freely in and out of the Syriac speaking areas, or had contacts with the churches of Syria/Palestine⁶⁸. As we shall see below, the language of the vernacular scriptures in much of Syria Palestine prior to the rise of Islam was the Aramaic dialect known as Palestinian Syriac.

The *Qur`ān* itself insists some dozen times that it is an Arabic *Qur`ān* (e.g., in *Yūsuf* (12); 2), as opposed to the lessons of the Jews and the Christians, which are in other languages. In his commentary on this verse, aṭ-Ṭabarī explains that it is as if God said about Muḥammad's Ḥiḡāzī audience, "because their tongue and their speech is Arabic, we sent down this scripture in their own tongue so that they could understand it and gain knowledge from it"⁶⁹. Presumably, among others, Christian preachers were about in the Mecca/Medina area whose scriptures were not in Arabic. Indeed, there is evidence of their presence in the *Qur`ān* itself, when it records the reaction of those members of Muḥammad's audience who doubted that it was really God's message that the prophet was preaching, but rather the teaching of someone else. They referred to the presence of some un-named person whose speech the *Qur`ān* says was not Arabic. Of the doubters *an-Naḥl* (16): 103 says, "We know very well what they say, 'Only a mortal is teaching him'. The speech of him at whom they hint is barbarous; and this is speech Arabic, manifest" (Arberry). In his commentary on this verse, aṭ-Ṭabarī explains that Christians were the people at whom the suspicious Arabs were hinting. He records traditions that identify their barbarous speech as Byzantine Greek⁷⁰. However, this identification may simply reflect the later Islamic awareness that the original Gospel as the Christians have it is Greek. In the Ḥiḡāz, in the late sixth and the early seventh centuries, the barbarous, or non-Arabic (*a'ḡamī*) speech of Christian monks and preachers was most likely Syriac.

What was remarkable about Waraqah ibn Nawfal's acquaintance with the scriptures was the fact that he copied from them in Arabic. The language in which he was able to write the scriptures is thus a focal point of the story

ships between passages from the *Qur`ān* and the Syriac liturgy, cf. Erwin Graf, "Zu den christlichen Einflüssen im Koran", in *Al-Bāḥiḥ, Festschrift Joseph Henninger zum 70. Geburtstag am 12. Mai 1976* (Studia Instituti Anthropos, vol. 28; Bonn, 1976), pp. 111-144.

68 For Naḡrān cf. the studies of Prof. Irfan Shahid, cited in n. 38 above; for the rest, cf. Tringhamam, *op. cit.*, with a complete bibliography of earlier works.

69 Abū Ġa far Muḥammad ibn Ḡarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur`ān* (30 vols. in 13; Cairo, 1321), vol., 12, p. 84.

70 *Ibid.*, vol. 14, pp. 109-111.

that is preserved about him. The fact that this language, or writing, is said to be "Hebrew" in some tellings of Waraqah's story underlines this point. As for the "Hebrew" itself, it is most easily explained as a later correction of the narrative, contributed by someone who thought he knew not only that the language of the Torah was Hebrew, but that Jesus' native language, and hence the language of the original, undistorted Gospel must also have been Hebrew⁷¹. For, it would have been a necessity for Islamic apologetic purposes, given Waraqah's role in recognizing Muḥammad's prophethood, that he have his testimony from the original, undistorted Gospel.

As for Waraqah's statement about the source of Muḥammad's revelations, viz., "This is *an-Nāmūs* that was sent down to Moses", one must recognize in this report the classical Islamic understanding of *an-Nāmūs* as a designation for the angel Gabriel, as discussed above⁷². Indeed this understanding of *an-Nāmūs* is clear in one version of Waraqah's story as preserved by al-Buḥārī, where an additional phrase explains that *an-Nāmūs* is "the master of the mystery, who would inform him (i.e., Moses) of what he would conceal from anyone else"⁷³.

It is understandable how Gabriel was thought of in association with the moment of revelation. There are Jewish traditions which record instances of Gabriel visiting Moses⁷⁴. The *Qur`ān* too mentions Gabriel's role in the revelation to Muḥammad, "He is the one who brought it down to your heart, by God's permission, confirming what was prior to it, as guidance and good news for the believers (*al-Baqarah* (2):97). What is mysterious is how *an-Nāmūs* came to designate Gabriel. While it is not to the present purpose to pursue this question at any length, one cannot help but to observe the obvious similarity of the Arabic word to the Syriac *nāmōsā*, the ordinary word for "law, ordinance, usage", as in a law of Moses (*nāmōsā d' Mōšē*, e.g., in Luke 2:22 *Peš*). Anton Baumstark, as we have seen, wondered if the identification of *an-Nāmūs* with Gabriel could have been due to an almost anthropomorphic, or angelomorphic, sense of the Greek word *ὁ νόμος* in the eastern liturgy⁷⁵. While it is unlikely that a Greek liturgical phrase *per se* would have influenced the Islamic interpretation of *an-Nāmūs*, it is notable that in Syriac texts one finds a similar 'personalization' of *nāmōsā*. In his *Sermon on Our Lord*, for example, Ephraem set a scene of punishment among the women in the Exodus who had given their jewelry

71 Cf. n. 13 above, and the attendant discussion in the text.

72 Cf. n. 47 above, and the attendant discussion in the text.

73 Al-Buḥārī, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 352.

74 Cf. the instances cited in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia, 1913-1938), vol. VII, pp. 173-174.

75 Cf., 49 above; M. Plessner, "Nāmūs", *ET*¹, vol. III, pp. 902-904.

for the manufacture of the golden calf (Ex. 32:15-29). According to the story, Moses crushed the calf, mixed its remains with water and forced them to drink it. Later he commanded the Levites to slay the men in the camp (vs. 27). Ephraem called these Levites 'avengers', and he pictured them as slaying the people who had given their jewelry for the calf. He said, "He made it (i.e., the community) drink the water of the trial so that the sign of the adulteresses might appear. Thereupon this *nāmōsā* assailed the women who had drunk the testing water"⁷⁶. Perhaps it is not farfetched to think that Syrian preachers among the Arabs would have followed Ephraem's lead in speaking of *nāmōsā* as virtually an avenging angel, and someone identified him as Gabriel.

There remains one more Christian, and probably Syriac element in Waraqah's story. In the version of his encounter with Muḥammad that we find in the *Sīrah*, Waraqah begins his testimony to Muḥammad's prophetic vocation with the exclamation, *quddūs quddūs*⁷⁷. The expression puts one in mind of the triple *qadīšā* one finds in the Syriac *Trishagion*. The form of the word, i.e., *quddūs*, comes from the *Qur'ān* (e.g., *al-Ḥaṣr* (59):23), but the exclamatory usage of it here recalls the Christian liturgy, a point already made by Baumstark⁷⁸.

iii. Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 732)

Among the Muslim scholars of the first century of the *Hiğrah* there were those, notably Wahb ibn Munabbih, who were renowned for their knowledge of the traditions and scriptures of the ancients, including the Jews and Christians. Wahb himself, in his accounts of the earlier prophets, alluded to the Torah, the Psalms, and once or twice to the Gospel, including a long paraphrase of Jesus' sermon on the mount, following along the lines of Matthew 5-7⁷⁹. R.G. Khoury has most recently studied these citations and allusions in the works of Wahb and others, and has signalled the two issues which they raise, viz., the obvious Islamicization of the accounts, and the question of their sources.

As a result of our previous study of Ibn Ishāq's quotation from John 15:23 - 16:1, and the story of Waraqah ibn Nawfal, it comes as no surprise to learn that Wahb ibn Munabbih's accounts of the narratives in Torah

76 E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro* (CSCO, vol. 270; Louvain, 1966), p. 6.

77 Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hišām, *Sīrat an-Nabī* (4 vols.; Cairo, 1356), vol. I, p. 256.

78 Cf. Baumstark, "Das Problem ...", *art. cit.*, p. 565.

79 Cf. the reference in R.G. Khoury, "Quelques réflexions sur les citations de la Bible dans les premières générations islamiques du premier et du deuxième siècles de l'hégire". *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 29 (1977), p. 272, n. 13.

and Gospel are presented in a manner which accords with what the *Qur`ān* teaches about their message.

As for Wabb's sources, Khoury points particularly to early converts to Islam from Judaism for the Torah and Psalms, such as Ka`b al-Aḥbar and `Abd Allāh b. Salām⁸⁰. There is also the report from Mālik ibn Dīnār (d. 748) that he took a book that interested him from a Christian monastery. In reference to this report Khoury says, "If one can believe such texts, and basically what could be more natural than to think of such encounters all across the centuries, he could have come upon an Arabic version of the Old and of the New Testaments, or at least of a part"⁸¹.

In the absence of any positive evidence to the contrary, however, the most likely construction to put upon the reports that have come down to us about scriptures in Christian monasteries, or in the possession of monks, even in pre-Islamic Arabia⁸², is that they were in languages other than Arabic, most probably Syriac, and possibly some Greek. The people who read them in these languages would have transmitted their contents to inquiring early Muslims, possibly in writing; or Muslims with a scholarly inclination could have learned to read them for themselves, and to make their own notes. They certainly presented their references to Torah and Gospel, as we have seen, dressed in an Islamic guise. What is still lacking, with the dubious exception of Waraqah's story, is any explicit reference to Torah or Gospel in Arabic, even in the form of scholarly notes, prior to the first Abbasid century. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that early Muslim writers learned of the contents of Torah or Gospel from Jews or Christians *viva voce*, without reference to an Arabic text, against which to measure the accuracy of their reference to them. Accuracy would have been measured, as we have seen, against the requirements of Islamic dogmatic ideas⁸³.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 272.

81 *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

82 Pre-Islamic poets refer to monks and their scriptures. Cf. the references in Tor Andrae, *Les origines*, *op. cit.*, pp. 42ff.

83 There is support for the idea that Muslims in the early eighth century learned about the Gospel from Christians *viva voce*, in a story about al-Aṣḥabḥ, the son of `Abd al-`Azīz ibn Marwān, the governor of Egypt. In his *History of the Patriarchs*, Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' described the anti-Christian behavior of al-Aṣḥabḥ, and said of him: "At that time a deacon, named Benjamin, became attached to him and grew intimate with him; and al-Aṣḥabḥ loved him more than all his companions. And he treacherously revealed to al-Aṣḥabḥ the secrets of the Christians, and even expounded the Gospel to him in Arabic as well as the books of alchemy. For al-Aṣḥabḥ sought out books that they might be read to him, and so for instance he read the Festal Epistles, in order that he might see whether the Muslims were insulted therein or not". B. Evetts, "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria (III, Agathon to Michael I (766))", *PO* 5 (1910), p. (305), 51.

iv. The First Abbasid Century

From the first Abbasid century onward there is evidence of the existence of Arabic versions of the Gospels with which Muslims were familiar. In the first place there is the earliest explicit mention of a translation of them in the *Fihrist* of Ibn an-Nadīm (d. 995/8), concerning the work of Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Salām, a scholar of the time of Harūn ar-Rašīd (786-809). According to Ibn an-Nadīm, Salām said, "I have translated ... the Torah, the Gospels, and the books of the prophets and disciples from Hebrew, Greek and Sabian, which are the languages of the people of each book, into Arabic, letter for letter"⁸⁴. Whether or not one is prepared to credit the extent of this claim, what is important for the present inquiry is the clear reference to a translation project for the scriptures in the late eighth century.

More important than this notice of Ibn Salām's translation project, however, are a number of Muslim writers from the late eighth and the ninth centuries, who quote from the Torah and the Gospel with a fidelity which shows that they must have had Arabic versions of these scriptures before them, to which they referred for their quotations, and from which they learned at first hand how the Christian account of the Gospel message differs from the Islamic one. As we have mentioned, this is the same period of time to which the available documentary evidence allows one to date the Christian program to translate the Gospel into Arabic.

The earliest Muslim scholar whose quotations from the Bible suggest that he had an Arabic version before him is Abū ar-Rabī' Muḥammad ibn al-Layth. He wrote a *risālah*, a letter-treatise, in the name of Harūn ar-Rašīd (786-809), addressed to the Byzantine emperor, Constantine VI (780-797), arguing in favor of the truth claims of Islam⁸⁵. He quoted from the Old Testament and the New Testament, and it is particularly in his quotations from the former that it is clear that he was working with a version. Unfortunately, his quotations from the Gospels of Matthew and John are too few, too allusive, and too fragmentary to allow the conclusion that he had an Arabic version of the Gospel before him⁸⁶. But it is notable that these few references show no trace of the Islamicization one finds in the earlier Muslim references to the Gospel.

Other Muslim apologists and polemicists against Christianity in the ninth century quoted freely from the Gospels in Arabic. ʿAlī Rabbān aṭ-Ṭabarī,

84 Cf. Dodge, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 42.

85 Cf. D.M. Dunlop, "A Letter of Harūn ar-Rašīd to the Emperor Constantine VI", in Matthew Black & Georg Fohrer (eds.), *In Memoriam Paul Kahle* (Beiheft zur ZAW, no. 103; Berlin, 1968), pp. 106-115.

86 *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

who converted to Islam at an advanced age, was already well acquainted with the Gospels during his life as a Christian. He quoted extensively from them in his apologies for Islam⁸⁷. But there were other Muslim apologists of the period who had no known Christian background, who made an equally copious use of Gospel quotations in their treatises. We may mention in this connection an anonymous early ninth century Muslim refutation of Christians, and the polemical treatise of the Zaydī scholar, al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm⁸⁸.

By the end of the ninth century there were well known Muslim scholarly writers, such as Ibn Qutaybah (d. 889), and the historian al-Ya'qūbī, who were well acquainted with the Gospels and quoted from them in their works⁸⁹. It is clear that they had versions before them, and did not have to rely solely on Islamic doctrines about the contents of the original Gospel before, in the Islamic view, it was distorted at the hands of the Christian evangelists⁹⁰.

By the tenth century, Muslim scholars were taking note of Arabic versions of the scriptures done by Christians. Ibn an-Nadīm, for example, reports that a priest named Yūnus informed him of the Christian writings available in Arabic, listing the books of the Old and New Testaments, along with collections of canons and the *synodicon*⁹¹. And al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956), in his *Kitāb at-tanbīh wa l-iṣrāf*, recorded it as his opinion that of the versions of the Torah in Arabic, the one by Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq (d. 873) was the best according

87 Cf. Max Meyerhof, "Alī ibn Rabbān at-Ṭabarī, ein persischer Arzt des 9. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.", *ZDMG* 85 (1931), pp. 38-68; A. Khalifé et W. Kutsch, "Ar-Radd 'Alā-n-Naṣārā de 'Alī at-Ṭabarī", *MUSJ* 36 (1959), pp. 115-148. Scripture quotations and their interpretation are the essence of the author's *Book of Religion and Empire*. Cf. A. Mingana (ed.), *Kitāb ad-Dīn wa d-Dawlah* (Cairo, 1923), Eng. trans. (Manchester, 1922). But the authenticity of this work has been questioned. Cf. Maurice Bouyges, "Nos informations sur 'Alīy ... at-Ṭabariy", *MUSJ* 28 (1949-1950), pp. 67-114.

88 Cf. Dominique Sourdel, "Un pamphlet musulman anonyme d'époque 'Abbaside contre les chrétiens", *Revue des Études Islamiques* 34 (1966), pp. 1-34; Ignazio Di Matteo, "Confutazione contro i Cristiani dello Zaydita al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm", *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 9 (1921-1923), pp. 301-364.

89 Cf. G. Lecomte, "Les citations de l'ancien et du nouveau testament dans l'œuvre d'Ibn Qutayba", *Arabica* 5 (1958), pp. 34-46. For Ibn Qutayba and the Old Testament, cf. also G. Vajda, "Judaeo-Arabica: observations sur quelques citations bibliques chez Ibn Qutayba", *Revue des Études Juives* 99 (1935), pp. 68-80. For al-Ya'qūbī cf. Dwight M. Donaldson, "Al-Ya'qūbī's Chapter About Jesus Christ", in *The Macdonald Presentation Volume* (Princeton, 1933), pp. 89-105; André Ferré, "L'historien al-Ya'qūbī et les évangiles", *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977), pp. 65-83.

90 Arthur Vööbus proposed that the Old Syriac version of the New Testament text lay behind the Arabic translations found in the works of these Muslim authors, as well as in those of some early Christian Arabic writers. Cf. A. Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament; Manuscript Studies* (Stockholm, 1954), pp. 276-287.

91 Dodge, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 45-46.

to most people⁹². Clearly by this time Christianity had found its tongue in Arabic, to the point that even the Muslims were noticing the fact.

One should not think that the scholarship displayed in the ninth century by Ibn Qutaybah or al-Ya'qūbī in regard to the text of the Christian Gospels brought an end to the Islamic dogmatic approach to the message of the Gospel, or the life and teaching of Jesus. Indeed, the textual approach of these two scholars to the subject was the exception. Such major figures as Abū Ġa'far aṭ-Ṭabari and al-Mas'ūdī still wrote fairly extensively of Jesus and Christianity without any reference at all to the Gospels of the Christians, or any evidence that they had consulted them⁹³. The point to be made here is simply that by the ninth century it is clear for the first time from Muslim sources that Arabic versions of the Christian scriptures were available.

III. *The Gospel in Arabia Prior to Islam*

A number of prominent scholars have argued that it is likely that pre-Islamic, Christian Arabs would have been anxious to render the Gospels and other liturgical compositions from Greek and Syriac into their native Arabic. Given what can be discovered about the status of Arabic as a literary language prior to Islam, these scholars argue that it is probable that such a Gospel translation was in fact produced. There are two headings in particular under which to review these arguments. The one is the Palestinian Arabic Gospel text discussed earlier, which some scholars have considered to be pre-Islamic in its origins. The other is the history of Christianity in Arabia, in search of which at least one modern scholar considers that some clues for the existence of a pre-Islamic Gospel in Arabic can be found, particularly in Nağrān.

A. The Palestinian Arabic Gospel Text

Anton Baumstark was the first scholar to put forward the claim that the Palestinian Gospel text preserves an old, pre-Islamic version of the Gospel in Arabic. His hypothesis was that the translation was made in one of the Syrian centers of Christian Arab life, either in Ghassanid Sergiopolis, or in al-Ḥirā to the east, and that this version was subsequently borrowed by the monks of Mar Sabas and St. Catherine's monasteries for use in the liturgy of the Word among the Palestinian Christian Arabs. After the rise of Islam, according to Baumstark's hypothesis, most of the Arabs on the

92 Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb at-tanbih wa'l-ischrāf* (M. J. De Goeje (ed.), *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicum*, 8; Lugduni-Batavorum, 1894), p. 112.

93 Cf. Ferré, *art. cit.*, pp. 81-82.

borders of Palestine became Muslims and so the Arabic Gospel lectionaries became literary curiosities preserved by the monks, who were themselves Greek speaking⁹⁴.

The motivating factor in Baumstark's argument seems to have been his conviction that once the church was established in Arabic speaking areas, it would have been inconceivable that at least the lessons to be read at the divine liturgy would not have been translated into the Arabic language. Accordingly, at the beginning of his article on this subject he cited the practice of Christian missionaries in other areas, whereby the translation of the scriptures into the native language was the first order of business. For the rest, Baumstark's evidence consists of the following observations. He points to the report in Islamic traditions that the Meccan Waraqah ibn Nawfal, just prior to Muḥammad's call to prophecy, had become a Christian and was conversant with the scriptures. Secondly, he points to some phrases in the *Qur`ān* which seemed to him to be remarkably faithful renderings of some passages in the Psalms. Finally, and most importantly, he refers to the Arabic versions of the Gospels, marked with rubrics that indicate when they are to be read in the liturgy, which came originally from Palestine, but which were available to Baumstark in two different manuscripts, viz., Vatican Borgia Arabic MS 95, and Berlin Or. Oct. MS 1108, along with a few leaves from another, otherwise unknown manuscript. It was the rubrics in these manuscripts that interested Baumstark. He pointed out that they reflect the liturgical usage of the Jerusalem church prior to the rise of Islam, and not the Byzantine usage which became common after the Arab conquest. Therefore, Baumstark argued, it is probable that the Arabic Gospel text in these manuscripts itself comes from the same time as the rubrics — i.e., from before the time of Islam. More specifically, he argued that this Arabic version of the Gospels was probably made in the environs of the Arab city of al-Ḥirā in the sixth century⁹⁵.

Since Baumstark wrote his articles about the Palestine Gospel text it has become evident that his two manuscripts are members of the family of manuscripts from Palestine which contains basically the same Arabic version of the Gospels, made from a Greek *Vorlage*. Other members of the family, as mentioned earlier, are Sinai Arabic MSS 72 and 74. Sinai MS 72, as we have seen above, is the earliest dated Gospel MS known. It was written in 897. The other dated MS in the family is Berlin 1108. It was copied in 1046/47. Serious textual study of these MSS began in 1938, when the texts of Matthew

94 Anton Baumstark, "Das Problem eines vorislamischen christlich-kirchlichen Schrifttums in arabischer Sprache", *Islamica* 4 (1929-1931), pp. 562-575.

95 Anton Baumstark, "Die sonntägliche Evangelienlesung im vor-byzantinischen Jerusalem", *ByZ* 30 (1929/1930), pp. 350-359.

and Mark from Vatican Borgia 95 and Berlin 1108 were published and compared⁹⁶. The Sinai MSS have not yet been published, but the researches of a number of scholars are sufficient to inform us of the general relationship of the manuscripts in the family.

What is immediately clear upon an examination of these texts is the care of the original translators and the subsequent copyists constantly to remain faithful to the original Greek, with a literalness that often makes the Arabic baffling. The practice of improving the Arabic text persists from copyist to copyist in such a way that it allows one to propose a relative chronology for the manuscripts. The texts of Vatican Borgia MS 95, Sinai MS 74, and Berlin MS 1108 most often agree with one another. While Sinai MS 72, which carries the earliest date of any known Arabic Gospel MS, shows most evidence of improvement in terms of Arabic expression, and corrections in many of the readings. Some marginal glosses that occur in Sinai MS 74 have even found their way into the text of Sinai MS 72. Therefore, one concludes that in terms of the relative age of the Gospel version in Arabic it offers, the earliest dated MS actually contains a later recension of the version in its manuscript family. And the latest dated MS and its allies contain an earlier exemplar of this particular translation tradition⁹⁷. As if to underline the fact that this family of manuscripts played a definite role in a concerted attempt to render the Gospel into an intelligible Arabic, suitable to the sensitivities of the Arabic speakers within the *dar al-islām*, it appears that the considerably improved and corrected Arabic version of the Gospels in Sinai Arabic 75 is what Georg Graf called an *Ableger* from the text found in the family of manuscripts we have been discussing⁹⁸. Sinai Arabic MS 75 thus represents the culmination of the attempt on the part of a group of Palestinian Christians to achieve an Arabic version of the Gospel in the early Islamic period which could pass for literary Arabic.

The milieu of these Gospel manuscripts is decidedly Palestinian. They reflect the Greek of the Caesarean Gospel text one should expect there. There is even an occasional reading reflecting expressions unique to the so-called Palestinian Syriac version of the Gospels, which also rests on a Greek *Vorlage*⁹⁹. Consider, for example, the addition to Mt. 6:34, found only in our family of Arabic Gospel manuscripts and the Palestinian Syriac version: "Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day, and the hour's

96 Bernhard Levin, *Die griechisch-arabische Evangelien-Übersetzung; Vat. Borg. ar. 95 und Ber. orient. oct. 1108* (Uppsala, 1938).

97 Cf. Joshua Blau, "Über einige einschlägig-arabische Manuskripte aus dem 9 und 10. Jahrhundert", *I. Misc.* 75 (1962), pp. 140-58. Cf. also the study by Amy Galli Garland, cited in n. 20 above.

98 Graf, vol. I, p. 146.

99 Metzger, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-82.

difficulties for the hour". The last phrase is an *agraphon*, found in no Greek manuscript of the Gospel¹⁰⁰.

More to the point for the purpose of the present inquiry is the fact that the Arabic of these Gospel manuscripts, along with the Arabic of the many theological treatises coming from Palestinian monasteries in the same period, to which we alluded above, from the point of view of grammar, syntax, and even lexicography, is what Joshua Blau designates as a form of Middle Arabic. It represents a popular pattern of Christian Arabic speech which was at home in southern Palestine beginning in the eighth century. It is significant that the earliest date Blau can assign to any of the texts written in this veritable dialect, both biblical and non-biblical, as mentioned earlier, is the year 772¹⁰¹. So the conclusion must be that the early Palestinian Arabic Gospels are indigenous to Palestine, and a product of the Palestinian Christians' adjustment to the arrival of Arabic as a *lingua franca* within *dar al-islām*, probably beginning in their area with the reforms of 'Abd al-Malik (685-705), as we shall argue below. The evidence of the language itself thus precludes a pre-Islamic date for the origin of the Palestinian Arabic Gospel text¹⁰².

Baumstark's choice of al-Ḥirā as a likely place for the translation of the Gospels into Arabic, even prior to Islam, was not a completely groundless surmise on his part. Christianity was certainly well established there by the end of the sixth century¹⁰³. By that time in al-Ḥirā written Arabic had achieved a sufficiently high degree of development to be capable to serve as a vehicle for the translation of the Gospels. Christian Arabs themselves probably used this written Arabic language at this early time¹⁰⁴. The problem is that if they ever thought of translating the Gospels into Arabic, and we have no documentary evidence to support the surmise that they ever entertained such a thought, they almost certainly would have translated them from Syriac, which was the ecclesiastical language of the Nestorian and Jacobite Christian communities of the area. The early Palestinian Arabic Gospels on the other hand are definitely translated from Greek. The persons and monasteries with which they are associated are Melkite. The likelihood of an

100 The addition appears in Sinai Arabic MSS 72 and 74. Vatican Borgia Arabic MS 95, and Berlin Orient. Oct. 1108. It is absent in Sinai Arabic MS 75. Cf. Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *The Palestinian Syriac Lectionary of the Gospels* (London, 1899), p. 71. Cf. Metzger, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

101 Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic*, *op. cit.*, vol. 267, pp. 19-38, esp. p. 20, n. 7.

102 Cf. J. Blau, "Sind uns Reste arabischer Bibelübersetzungen aus vorislamischer Zeit erhalten geblieben?" *Le Muséon* 86 (1973), pp. 67-72.

103 Cf. J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London, 1979), pp. 188-202, including references to earlier bibliography.

104 Cf. the studies cited in n. 64 above.

Arabic Gospel text originating in al-Hirā and finding its way to widespread acceptance in the monasteries of Palestine prior to the rise of Islam is highly improbable. Not only is the earliest dated manuscript which contains the early Palestinian Gospel text from the late 9th century; but all of the manuscripts in the family of them which carries the same Gospel text tradition are examples of the Christian Arabic dialect of the eighth and ninth centuries that was a stage in the rise of middle Arabic.

As for the evidence of the rubrics contained in the Palestinian manuscripts, which reflect the liturgical usage of the pre-Islamic Jerusalem church, and which were Baumstark's only plausible reason for assigning the Palestinian Gospel versions to pre-Islamic times, they need not be considered an obstacle to the later date of the Gospel text. As Georg Graf pointed out, the persistence of these rubrics, even after the time when the liturgical practices were supposed to have changed in Palestine, may only testify to the tenacity of earlier liturgical practices in Palestinian monasteries, as they affected the Arabic speaking, non-monastic population¹⁰⁵. Furthermore, there is now evidence to suggest that Palestine, along with the other Oriental patriarchates, was virtually sealed off from effective direct communication with Constantinople from about 750 until the tenth century¹⁰⁶. So the liturgical changes in question probably did not occur in Palestine until long after they were mandated in Byzantium.

B. Nağrān

Himyarite Nağrān is a likely place to look for a pre-Islamic, Arabic version of the Gospels. Christianity flourished there, due in no small part to the efforts of Simeon of Bêt Aršām who was active as a missionary during the first half of the sixth century¹⁰⁷. It was Simeon in any case who furnished the evidence that may be construed as supportive of the surmise that there was in Nağrān a pre-Islamic, Arabic version of the Gospels. Simeon wrote a letter in Syriac in 518/19 in which he tells the story of the Christian martyrs of Nağrān who had been killed by the Jewish king of Himyar, Dhu Nuwās, around the year 517. The letter speaks of reports of the massacre which circulated in documents written in the Nağrānite language. Professor Irfan Shahid, who has edited, translated and extensively studied Simeon's letter and related documents, argues that this Nağrānite language (*seprā*

105 Cf. Graf, vol. I, pp. 143-146; Vööbus, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

106 Cf. Sidney H. Griffith, "Eutychius of Alexandria on the Emperor Theophilus and Iconoclasm in Byzantium: a Tenth Century Moment in Christian Apologetics in Arabic", *Byzantion* 52 (1982), pp. 154-190.

107 Cf. Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 169, 195, 289, 294-307.

nigrānāyā) was Arabic¹⁰⁸. The significance of this fact in regard to the present topic may be stated in Professor Shahid's words.

The fact that these letters dispatched from Najrān were written in Arabic illuminates the obscurity which shrouds the problem of an Arabic liturgical language and Bible translation in pre-Islamic times. These letters are perhaps the single most important evidence that can be adduced in favor of an affirmative answer to this question¹⁰⁹.

Others may argue that Syriac was the ecclesiastical language of the Christians in Arabia. Professor Shahid does not deny its official presence there. But, on the basis of the geographical distance of Naḡrān from the Syriac speaking areas, he presses his point, "For the devotional purposes of the Najrānites, Arabic must have been their principal language"¹¹⁰. No small part of his readiness to reach this conclusion is his conviction that "the feeling of the Arabs for their language and the spoken word was such as to make it completely incomprehensible that they would not have desired to express their religious sentiments through their own language, which had been so highly developed and refined by the great poets of pre-Islamic Arabia"¹¹¹. When it comes to the specific point which most interests us here, Professor Shahid says, "The case for a pre-Islamic Arabic translation of the Bible or part of it is as strong as the case for the use of Arabic in church service and rests upon the same arguments that have been adduced above"¹¹².

What confirms the argument for Professor Shahid is aṭ-Ṭabarī's mention of the story that one of the Christians of Naḡrān escaped the massacre of his people by Dhu Nuwās, and came with the report of it to the king of Abyssinia, bringing along with him a partly burned Gospel book¹¹³. "What is important in the reference", says Professor Shahid, "is its reflection of the fact that there was a Gospel in South Arabia around 520. Whether the whole of the Bible or only a part of it was translated is not clear; it is safe to assume that of the books of the Bible, the Gospels and the Psalms, and possibly the Pentateuch, were the first to be translated"¹¹⁴.

108 Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najrān, New Documents* (Subsidia Hagiographica, 49; Bruxelles, 1971), pp. 242-250. Prof. Shahid has defended his argument that Arabic was the language of Naḡrān, against the attack of G. Garbini in his review of *The Martyrs of Najrān* in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 52 (1978), pp. 111-112. Cf. Shahid, "The Martyrs of Najran: Miscellaneous Reflections", *Le Muséon* 93 (1980), pp. 154-157.

109 Shahid, *Martyrs, op. cit.*, p. 247.

110 *Ibid.*

111 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

113 Cf. Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden aus der arabischen Chronik des Ṭabarī* (Leyden, 1879), p. 188.

114 Shahid, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-250.

C. The Argument for a Pre-Islamic Gospel in Arabic

Professor Shahid and Anton Baumstark share the conviction that it is inconceivable that Arab Christians prior to the rise of Islam should not have had an Arabic version of the Gospels, if for no other purpose, for use in the liturgy of the divine word. The arguments rest not so much on documentary evidence for the existence of any such Arabic versions, although some bits of evidence have been put forward, but on the above mentioned inconceivability, and on the fact that the Arabic language of the sixth century was certainly sufficiently well developed, in more than one place, to serve such a purpose. Furthermore, in his forthcoming *Byzantium and the Arabs before the Rise of Islam : from Constantine to Heraclius*, Professor Shahid will unfold a panorama of Arab Christian history which dates from the fourth century¹¹⁵. Naturally, he will argue that Arabic was the language of this Christianity.

Opposing the views of Professor Shahid are those of Professor J. Spencer Trimingham. Noting the lack of documentary evidence for the existence of a pre-Islamic, Arabic version of the Gospels and other scriptures, Professor Trimingham reaches the following conclusion :

The fact that Aramaic was so widely understood hindered the translation of Christian writings into Arabic ... The Arab Church had no focus that could provide that sense of Christian-Arab unity that the Syriac Church had in its Syriac Bible and liturgy. The many translations of Christian writings from Syriac into Arabic that exist are all subsequent to the Muslim Arab conquest¹¹⁶.

It becomes clear in his review of Professor Trimingham's book, that Professor Shahid will argue that documentary evidence for Christianity in Arabia will in large part come from the hints and clues of it which remain in the works of the pre-Islamic, Christian Arabic poets¹¹⁷. One can only await the publication of Professor Shahid's projected three volume study before any more can be said on the subject.

As for the thesis of the present study, it is that in the first Abbasid century an abundant Christian literature, including versions of the Gospels, began to appear in Arabic, without reference to any previous Arabic ecclesiastical archive. Rather, as mentioned above, the determining factor for this development was the arrival of Arabic as a *lingua franca* within *dar al-islām*. When the language of the *Qur`ān* became the language of empire, the Gospels were translated into Arabic. The project was first inaugurated in the monastic communities of Palestine.

115 Cf. Shahid, "... : Miscellaneous Reflections", *art. cit.*, p. 160.

116 Trimingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-226.

117 Irfan Shahid, review of J. Spencer Trimingham, *op. cit.*, *JSS* 26 (1981), pp. 150-153.

IV. Palestine and the Gospel in Arabic

At the beginning of the present inquiry it was noted that the impetus to assimilate the subject peoples into the Islamic community was a feature of the Abbasid revolution, with roots in the policies of the Umayyad caliph, 'Umar II (717-720). Even earlier, the impetus to Arabicize the administration of affairs in all the domains of the caliph began in the reign of 'Abd al-Malik (685-705)¹¹⁸. The Arabicization involved not only a change of the language in which records were kept among the subject populations. An important feature of this administrative reformation was the public and official proclamation in Arabic of the basic tenets of Islam. No where is this more evident than in 'Abd al-Malik's monetary reform. The iconographical formulae of his coinage went through a process of development whereby all notations in languages other than Arabic disappeared, along with their associated religious or imperial designs. No trace of Greek, or of Christian crosses and figural representations remained once the development found its conclusion. The new coinage carried only epigraphic designs, proclaiming the truths of Islam, and claiming the authority of the caliph¹¹⁹. The same is to be said even for road signs; from the time of the reign of 'Abd al-Malik one finds them in Arabic, announcing the *šahādah*¹²⁰. As if to put the point clearly, in a Greek papyrus document from the time of 'Abd al-Malik one finds the *basmallah* and the *šahādah* in Arabic, followed by a Greek translation¹²¹. And, of course, 'Abd al-Malik's truly monumental statement of the truths of Islam in Arabic, in the public forum, is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, with its emphatically Islamic inscriptions composed of phrases from the *Qur`ān*¹²².

118 On this caliph and his reign, cf. 'Abd al-Ameer 'Abd Dixon, *The Umayyad Caliphate 65-86/684-705; a Political Study* (London, 1971).

119 Cf. Philip Grierson, "The Monetary Reforms of 'Abd al-Malik, their Metrological Basis and their Financial Repercussions", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3 (1960), pp. 241-264. Grierson's study is metrological and not iconographical, but he provides a full bibliography along with some important comments on iconography. For the latter concern cf. J. Walker, *A Catalogue of the Arab-Byzantine and Post-Reform Umayyad Coins* (London, 1956); G.C. Miles, "The Iconography of Umayyad Coinage", *Ars Orientalis* 3 (1959), pp. 207-213; A. Grabar, *l'iconoclasme byzantin: dossier archéologique* (Paris, 1957), pp. 67-74.

120 Cf. Moshe Sharon, "An Arabic Inscription from the Time of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29 (1966), pp. 367-372.

121 Cf. L. Mitteis & U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyrskunde* (2 vols. in 4; Leipzig-Berlin, 1912), vol. I, pt. 1, p. 135.

122 Cf. Oleg Grabar, "The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem", *Ars Orientalis* 3 (1959), pp. 33-59, reprinted in the author's *Studies in Medieval Islamic Art* (London, 1976); K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture: Umayyads A.D. 622-750* (2nd ed. in two parts, vol. I, part II; Oxford, 1969); E. C. Dodd, "The Image of the Word", *Berytus* 18 (1969), pp. 35-79;

The message was clear and unmistakable. The official deployment of Arabic in the conquered territories stated the religious and imperial claims of Islam. As if to leave no doubt about the effect of this policy on the Christian community, 'Abd al-Malik, in what may be taken as a gesture symbolic of the new resolution publicly to promote Islam, attempted to expropriate the church of St. John in Damascus, to incorporate it into the mosque beside it¹²³. In the spirit of these same affairs one must understand the caliph Yazid's (720-724) reaction against the public declarations of Christian faith in the open display of crosses and icons¹²⁴. It is no wonder that later Christian historians dated the beginnings of anti-Christian policies in Islamic government to the reign of 'Abd al-Malik¹²⁵, in spite of this caliph's well documented benevolence to many individual Christians in his entourage, as well as in his administration¹²⁶.

The Arabicization of the Islamic government was not without its effects within the conquered Christian populations outside of Arabia. The policy effectively required the caliph's subjects to learn Arabic for the sake of their own civic protection, as well as in pursuit of upward social mobility. Eventually, within a century of the institution of 'Abd al-Malik's policies, Christians were producing their own literature in Arabic.

It is not surprising that the earliest exemplars of Christianity in Arabic appeared in the Palestinian area. Here the ecclesiastical language had been Greek, with the exception of the local Syro-Palestinian dialect of Aramaic, often called Palestinian Syriac, which appears to have been used in church principally for the liturgy, but also for the more popular genres of religious writing, such as homilies and saints' lives¹²⁷. After the Islamic conquest, and during the initial period of military occupation in Syro-Palestine, church life in the area doubtless continued as before, having adjusted itself to the new facts of civic life. With 'Abd al-Malik's reforms and innovations, however,

C. Kessler, "'Abd al-Malik's Inscription in the Dome of the Rock: a Reconsideration", *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1970), pp. 2-14.

123 Dixon, *op. cit.*, p. 23. Cf. the references to this and to a similar affair involving columns from the Basilica of Gethsemane, which 'Abd al-Malik wanted to incorporate into the mosque at Mecca, in J. Nasrallah, *Saint Jean de Damas, son époque, sa vie, son œuvre* (Harissa, 1950), pp. 54-55.

124 A. A. Vasiliev, "The Iconoclastic Edict of the Caliph Yazid II, A.D. 721", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 9 & 10 (1956), pp. 25-47.

125 J. B. Chabot, *Devis de Tell Mahré: Chronique* (Paris, 1895), vol. II, pp. 474-475.

126 Cf. Nasrallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-55.

127 Cf. the brief survey, with bibliography, in B. M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 75-82. Cf. also the comments and bibliography of M. Goshen-Gottstein, *The Bible in the Syro-Palestinian Version: Part I. Pentateuch and Prophets* (Jerusalem, 1973), pp. viii-xv.

the seeds were sown for an eventual ecclesiastical adaptation to the new linguistic, and the novel religious milieu in Arabic.

A fact that would have hurried the pace of adaptation in Syria/Palestine was that Greek had been the language of participation in the life of Byzantium. It had suited Melkite church life in the area, helped by the indigenous Aramaic dialect, as long as Palestine had been a province of the Byzantine empire, with strong ties to Constantinople. Afterwards, however, Syro-Palestinians, largely Melkite in religious confession, like their brothers in Alexandria, were left without the comforts of a full church life in an indigenous language, i.e., in Coptic or Syriac, as enjoyed by the largely Monophysite communities in Egypt and Syro-Mesopotamia, the Maronites in Syria, or the Nestorians and others in the Persian territories. This fact must have aided the Arabicization of Christianity in Palestine.

It was as an eventual consequence of the policies inaugurated by ʿAbd al-Malik that John Damascene, Palestine's greatest ecclesiastical writer in Greek, retired to the monastery of Mar Sabas, probably between 718 and 720, during the caliphate of ʿUmar II¹²⁸. His scholarly achievement is still recognized as a major exponent of Byzantine Christianity. But a symbol of what was really happening in Palestine is to be seen in the fact that after 750, in the next generation of scholarship at Mar Sabas, John Damascene's disciple, Theodore Abū Qurrah, was writing in Arabic. One cannot be sure that Abū Qurrah ever wrote in Greek. Among the forty-three Greek *opuscula* preserved under his name, one of the longer ones was translated from Arabic¹²⁹, and one now has evidence that one of the shorter ones also circulated originally in Arabic¹³⁰.

Greek, of course, did not simply disappear from the Melkite church of Palestine. It was a language of liturgy and high church-manship. But not even all the monks of Mar Sabas could understand it by the end of the eighth century¹³¹. The time was ripe for the full appearance of Christianity in Arabic, obviously, by now, the daily language of many Christians in Palestine. The liturgy, and the pastoral effort to produce effective apologetical information in the new vernacular were the two areas in which Arabic first appears in the manuscript tradition.

128 Cf. Nasrallah, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

129 Abū Qurrah originally wrote his epistle-treatise against the "heretics" of Armenia in Arabic, at the behest of Patriarch Thomas of Jerusalem. The patriarch's *synkellos*, Michael, translated it into Greek, and it is preserved as Abū Qurrah's Greek *opusculum* IV. Cf. *PG*, vol. 97, col. 1504D.

130 Cf. Sidney H. Griffith, "Some Unpublished Arabic Sayings Attributed to Theodore Abū Qurrah", *Le Muséon* 92 (1979), pp. 29-35.

131 Cf. S. Vailhé, "Le monastère de saint Sabas", *Échos d'Orient* 3 (1899-1900), p. 22. On the swift Arabicization of life in Palestine beginning in the eighth century, cf. R.P. Blake, "La littérature grecque en Palestine au viii^e siècle", *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), pp. 376-378.

A. The Liturgy

From as early as the fourth century there is evidence that in Palestine there was a need for the translation of the scripture lessons of the divine liturgy from Greek into the Aramaic vernacular. Both Eusebius and the western pilgrim, Etheria, provide the documentation for the employment of Aramaic translators in the liturgy, even in Jerusalem, at this early date¹³². This practice was presumably the situation which eventually gave birth to the Palestinian Syriac Version of the scriptures, a version which is preserved in notably liturgical manuscripts. While the date of the origin of this version is uncertain, with likely estimates ranging from the fourth century to the sixth¹³³, it is clear that the Melkite community of Palestine was its original home. Melkite groups in Egypt and Syria, perhaps refugees from Palestine, were still employing it as late as the twelfth century. Two of the most important manuscripts of the Gospel lectionary in this version were written in this century by Palestinian scribes, in a place called "Antioch of the Arabs"¹³⁴. But the manuscripts themselves were found in the monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai¹³⁵. The most plausible hypothesis is that this version of the Gospels grew out of the liturgical need for translations of the lessons in the vernacular, reaching back into the circumstances described by Eusebius and Egeria¹³⁶.

As it happens, the Arabic Gospel text of the family of manuscripts which includes Sinai Arabic MSS 72 and 74, along with Vatican Borgia MS 95 and Berlin Orient. Oct. MS 1108, as mentioned earlier, has marked affinities with the text of the Syro-Palestinian lectionary¹³⁷. Here is not the place to pursue this relationship further, a task which must await the full scholarly edition of these important Arabic manuscripts. However, it is important to recall that these manuscripts present the four Gospels in a continuous text, and not in a lectionary format. Nevertheless, the text is marked off with liturgical rubrics, assigning pericopes to the appropriate days in the temporal cycle of the liturgy. These circumstances argue that the origin of this text of the Gospel in Arabic, *mutatis mutandis*, answered the same need as did the earlier Syro-Palestinian version, and that in a certain sense it can be considered its successor.

132 Cf. the relevant passages noted and quoted in Vööbus, *Early Versions, op. cit.*, p. 126, nn. 2 & 3.

133 *Ibid.*, pp. 123-128.

134 Cf. Metzger, *op. cit.*, p. 79, and n. 1.

135 Cf. Agnes Smith Lewis & Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *The Palestinian Syriac Lectionary of the Gospels* (London, 1899).

136 Cf. M.-J. Lagrange, "L'origine de la version syro-palestinienne des évangiles", *Revue Biblique* 34 (1925), pp. 481-504.

137 Cf. n. 100 above, and B. Levin, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

It is striking that all of the early Arabic versions of the Bible from the ninth century which are actually extant, including the fragment of Psalm 78 in Greek characters from Damascus, come from the Syro-Palestinian area, and were seemingly all accomplished under Melkite auspices. The most likely hypothesis is that the reforms instituted by ʿAbd al-Malik eventually produced the circumstances which made necessary the first Arabic versions of the scriptures. The Melkites in Syria/Palestine, who had earlier experience with the necessity of providing for liturgical lessons in a vernacular language, met this new necessity in a similar spirit, and thus became the first Christian community to publish an Arabic Bible. A western pilgrim to Jerusalem, who around 808 A.D. wrote a *Memorandum on the Houses of God and Monasteries in the Holy City*, listed among the clergy of the church of St. Mary at Mt. Olivet, one “qui Sarracenicā lingua psallit”¹³⁸.

B. Apologetics

At the beginning of the present article attention was called to the fact that the earliest Arabic manuscripts which contain Gospel texts often also contain apologetic tracts. The connection is not accidental. The Gospel in Arabic was a necessity in the first Abbasid century not only for liturgical purposes, but also for the purpose of defending Christian doctrines and practices against challenges to them coming from Muslims.

Since it was the conviction of the Islamic community that “the people of the Gospel should pass judgment according to what God has sent down in it” (*al-Māʿidah* (5):47), one is not surprised that the first Christian apologists to write in Arabic were concerned to set out in their treatises a careful explanation of how the Gospel provides testimonies to the truth of the standard Christian doctrines. In the first place the effort required a clear statement of what the Gospel is, in Christian eyes. As we have seen, the *Qurʾān* has it simply that God gave Jesus the Gospel, “confirming what was in the Torah before it” (*al-Māʿidah* (5):46). Secondly, the apologists had to explain their principles of exegesis, especially in regard to the relationship between the Torah and the Gospel. And finally, they had to argue that the Gospel alone, of all the sacred books, is the only one that warrants human faith, and that it sustains the religious doctrines propounded by Christians.

Here is not the place to examine these arguments. The central position which the Gospel holds in the apologetical treatises of the time may be

138 T. Tobler & A. Molinier, *Itinera Hierosolymitana et Descriptiones Terrae Sanctae* (Genevae, 1879), p. 302.

shown by two quotations from the works of Theodore Abū Qurrah, some of whose writings were transmitted by the same scribes who wrote the Biblical manuscripts described earlier¹³⁹. The first quotation includes a neat description of a Bible in hand, with the Gospel in the central position. He says, "Christianity is simply faith in the Gospel and its appendices, and the Law of Moses and the books of the prophets in between"¹⁴⁰. The Gospel's appendices are the books of the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and Revelation — the books that make up the remainder of the New Testament. The books of the prophets "in between" are all the Old Testament books from Joshua to Malachi.

In his stylistically more popular tract "On the Existence of the Creator, and the True Religion", Abū Qurrah leaves no doubt about the Gospel's central position. He says,

Were it not for the Gospel, we would not have acknowledged Moses to be from God. Rather, on reflection, we would have vigorously opposed him. Likewise, we have acknowledged the prophets to be from God because of the Gospel. It is not on the basis of reason, since we have acknowledged them because Christ has informed us that they are prophets. Also, because we have knowledge of Christ's whole economy, and having read their books and discovered that they had previously described his whole economy just as he accomplished it, we have acknowledged that they are prophets. At this point in time we do not acknowledge Christ and his affairs because of the books of the prophets. Rather, we acknowledge them because of Christ's saying that they are prophets and because of our own recognition that his economy is written in their books¹⁴¹.

Earlier in this article Abū Qurrah was quoted as saying that the Gospel is Jesus' summons (*ad-da'wah*)¹⁴² to people to accept the good news of the salvation he won for them. In this connection it is pertinent to recall that both Abu Qurrah and other Christian apologists who wrote in Arabic were accustomed to argue that one of the motives for accepting the credibility of Christianity is that, alone among the messengers of the world's religions, Christian evangelists saw to it that the good news about Christ was proclaimed to each people in their own language¹⁴³.

139 Cf. nn. 22 & 23 above. See Sidney H. Griffith, "Stephen of Ramleh and the Christian Kerygma in Arabic, in Ninth Century Palestine", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), pp. 23-45.

140 Constantin Bacha, *Les œuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara, évêque de Ḥarān* (Beyrouth, 1904), p. 27.

141 Louis Cheikho, "Mīmar li Tādurus Abī Qurrah fī wuḡūd al-ḥālīq wa d-dīn al-qawīm", *al-Machriq* 15 (1912), p. 837.

142 Cf. n. 11 above.

143 Cf. Theodore Abū Qurrah's deployment of this argument in I. Dick, "Deux écrits inédits de Théodore Abuqurra", *Le Muséon* 72 (1959), p. 64; 'Ammār al-Baṣrī in M. Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī, apologie et controverses* (Beyrouth, 1977), pp. 128 & 131.

V. Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from our inquiry into the appearance of the Gospel in Arabic in the first Abbasid century is that it was in this century, in Syria/Palestine, as a pastoral project under Melkite auspices, that the first translation was made for general use in the church. Michael the Syrian's report of an earlier Arabic version of the Gospel made at the command of the Jacobite patriarch, John I, if it is reliable, concerns only a translation made in the seventh century for the consultation of a Muslim official. It had no discernible influence in the life of the church.

As for quotations from the Gospels in Islamic sources, it is clear from the foregoing inquiry that prior to the first Abbasid century Muslim writers spoke of the Gospel and its message, primarily from the point of view of Islamic ideas about its contents, and they worded their quotations accordingly. Only from the ninth century does one find evidence that allows the conclusion to be drawn that some Muslim writers had Arabic translations of the Gospels at their service, which they could use to document their references. Even then, as we have seen, only a few writers made use of the new resources. Earlier scholars, even someone of the stature of Ibn Ishāq, apparently were dependent upon Christian informants about the Christian Gospels, or themselves learned enough of the requisite languages to find the places in the Christian scriptures which interested them. There is no evidence in their works of an existent Arabic version in the hands of Christians. Rather, the quotations in Arabic are all such as to betray the work of an Islamic interpreter, who most likely rendered only certain passages into Arabic, and then on an *ad hoc* basis, and in accordance with Islamic ideas about what is religiously correct. Such a procedure does not suggest that these writers were working with an Arabic version of the Bible. Rather, it suggests that there was no such version yet available.

All one can say about the possibility of a pre-Islamic, Christian version of the Gospel in Arabic is that no sure sign of its actual existence has yet emerged. Furthermore, even if some unambiguous evidence of it should turn up as a result of more recent investigations, it is clear that after the Islamic conquest of the territories of the oriental patriarchates, and once Arabic had become the official and *de facto* public language of the caliphate, the church faced a much different pastoral problem than was the case with the earlier missions among the pre-Islamic Arabs.

The new pastoral problem asserted itself first in Syria/Palestine because it was here, in the Melkite community, that by the ninth century Arabic had become the only common language among Christians. In Mesopotamia

and Iraq, on the other hand, the translation of the Bible into Arabic, at the hands of savants such as Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, appears to have been essentially a scholarly and apologetical activity. The Christian liturgy remained in Syriac, even as the apologists were beginning to write in Arabic. In Syria/Palestine, however, there was a pressing liturgical, as well as an apologetical need for the Gospel in Arabic. The dozen or so earliest manuscripts of the Christian scriptures translated into Arabic from Syriac and Greek all appeared in this milieu, as we have sketched it above. A symbol of the circumstances which evoked these first versions may be seen in the old bilingual fragment of Mt. 13:46-52 found at Sinai¹⁴⁴. The text is in both Greek and Arabic, in eloquent testimony to the need which in Palestine prompted the first appearance of the Gospel in Arabic in the first Abbasid century. It was not until sometime later, even in the twelfth century, that a similar need was felt in other, linguistically more homogenous churches within *dār al-islām*.

144 Cf. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Catalogue of the Syriac MSS in the Convent of S. Catherine on Mount Sinai* (Studia Sinaitica, no. 1; London, 1894), pp. 105-106.