Entangled Hagiographies of the Religious Other

Edited by

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

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

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1626-1
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1626-7

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CHAPTER II

SALVAGING THE SAINTLY SERGIUS: HAGIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE SYRIAC LEGEND OF SERGIUS BAḤĪRĀ[1]

BARBARA ROGGEMA

> Prof: 'You know, try to get some of those words straight in your mind—like *ambivalence*—'
> Student: 'Ambivalence?'
> Prof: 'Right.'
> Student: 'Is that a good thing?'
> Prof: 'Well, yes and no.'[2]

In their attempts to prove the superiority of their religions, Christians and Muslims throughout history not only resorted to critiquing each other's scriptures and refuting each other's apologetics by means of theological argumentation, but also to casting doubt on each other's historical foundations. One way they did this – and still do – was by writing alternative historical narratives that could lead readers to question the accepted 'sacred' history of the other. Retelling the history of 'the other' aimed at undercutting the signs of divine guidance in the circumstances surrounding the formation of the other faith. This type of writing is sometimes called 'counterhistory', which Amos Funkenstein described as 'brushing against the grain' of accepted history.[3] It can turn

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[1] My sincere thanks go to the European Research Council (ERC) for funding this research within the framework of the projects DEBIDEM (King's College London) and JEWSEAST (Ruhr University Bochum). I also thank Peter Hatlie and Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent for helping me with some aspects of Greek and Syriac hagiography.

[2] After: Garrison Keillor, *Guy Noir*, National Public Radio, episode April 5, 2003.

[3] Amos Funkenstein, "History, Counterhistory, and Narrative," in *Probing the limits of representation: Nazism and the 'final solution'*, ed. Saul Friedländer

the history of a rival community upside down. Sacred becomes profane, pure becomes polluted, miraculous becomes illusory, foreordained becomes contingent. The genre of counterhistory reminds us of the power and versatility of storytelling; of how narrations can persuade in ways that argumentation cannot.

Not all examples of counterhistory turn sacred history into the opposite extreme. This paper deals with an example of a group of texts, the Christian Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā, in which the counternarration of history is more subtle, even though one can say that the underlying idea is polemical, since this legend revolves around the idea that the Qur'an was not divinely revealed. In both the Middle East and Europe, the figure of Sergius Baḥīrā has always been intriguing to Christians wanting to understand how the religion of Islam came into being and how its claim to a divine origin could be refuted. Sergius Baḥīrā was believed to have been a monk who gave Muḥammad some form of religious instruction, which led to the composition of the Qur'an and the rise of Islam. The polemical stories which Christians narrated about this monk form the counterpart of the Islamic accounts about this monk's encounter with Muḥammad, as it is described in the *sīra* literature, i.e. the Islamic biographies of the Prophet. To Muslims the monk was the best-known among several revered figures who recognized the juvenile Muḥammad as the future prophet and leader of the Arabs and who publicly declared the great future that God had in store for him. In the early biographies of Muḥammad in Arabic, this key moment in Muḥammad's childhood is already described. Each of the Islamic biographers described the encounter between the monk and the prophet-to-be as very brief. Once the monk had recognized Muḥammad among a group of travellers, he told his chaperones to take him back home to Mecca immediately, because in Syria – the place of their encounter – the boy would not be safe, due to the evil intentions of the Jews and the Byzantines, who out of envy would want to prevent his prophetic mission from happening.[4]

Christians in the Middle East and Europe had a different idea about this alleged encounter: they claimed the two men established a long-lasting relationship, which explains how Muḥammad became acquainted with Biblical stories and Christian thought. In the many centuries in which

(Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press, 1992), 69. See also the discussion in Barbara Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā. Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2009), 11–35.

[4] For a survey of the Islamic stories about the encounter, see Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 37–60.

Christians have written about the Prophet Muḥammad, they have constantly elaborated on the theme of Muḥammad's meaningful encounter with a monk. A crucial aspect of the story which changed constantly was the actual intention of the monk. One can read how a monk went to Arabia to begin a new religion with great sexual liberties.[5] One can read how a monk went to Arabia to begin a new regime that would lower taxes.[6] One can read how a monk was complicit in covering up Muḥammad's embarrassing epilepsy by claiming he was a prophet.[7] One can read how the monk was thwarted in his ambition to rise in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and, as revenge, sought recourse in Arabia to lay the foundations for a religion that was diametrically opposed to Christianity.[8] Clearly, the figure of the mysterious Christian instigator of Muḥammad's claim to prophethood appealed to the imagination of medieval authors, whose fantasy and desire to discredit Islam were much stronger than their faithfulness to history. Many of these polemical stories have been analysed and compared and, although the variations are endless, the main strands can be distinguished, if one focuses on the key aspects of the *intention* and *responsibility* of the two main actors within these stories.[9] Often Muḥammad is an innocent youngster who was misled by a scheming monk, who was consciously deceiving Muḥammad and the world. In other accounts, the monk was a well-intentioned Christian teacher, whose teachings did not turn out as they were meant, due to Muḥammad's worldly ambition and greed.

In numerous 'explanations' of the rise of Islam, the core of the story is the monk's heretical form of Christianity which he passes on to the Arabs. Such stories entailed a simple explanation of where the 'low' Christology of the Qur'an comes from: from someone of the Arian or Nestorian 'heresy' of Christianity (or Sabellian, Jacobite, Cerinthian or Eutychian for that matter). Modern scholars often assume that the story-line of a

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[5] For example Embrico of Mainz (c. 1100); see Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 187.

[6] Bernardo Giustiniani, *De origine urbis Venetiarum rebusque ab ipsa gestis historia* (Venice: Bernardinus Benalius, 1492), Book VIII (ff. g4r–g6v).

[7] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 182.

[8] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 187–88.

[9] For surveys of the Christian stories about the monk, see Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 151–201; Alessandro D'Ancona, *La Leggenda di Maometto in Occidente*, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Salerno Editrice, 1994); Michelina Di Cesare, *The Pseudo-historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin Literature: A Repertory* (New York / Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2011).

'heretical monk' is the predominant one.[10] I believe this is not because this theme occurs more frequently than others, but because one of the oldest Christian refutations of Islam mentioned that Muḥammad 'supposedly encountered an Arian monk'.[11] These are the words of John of Damascus (d. before 754), whose refutation of Islam in 'On Heresies' (*De Haeresibus* Ch. 100) is one of the oldest surviving Christian writings on Islam. Although a name is not given, many modern readers of his work have wanted to see a reference here to the monk Baḥīrā, even though this cannot be confirmed.[12]

Besides the remarkable number of medieval writings that travelled all around the Mediterranean there is also a closely related group of Eastern Christian texts entirely devoted to this monk. Surviving in four recensions – two in Syriac and two in Arabic – these stories about how a monk received a divine vision announcing the rise of Islam and how he taught Muḥammad the basics of religion are conventionally referred to in scholarship as the 'Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā'. In this paper I want to look exclusively at the Syriac versions, which are undoubtedly the oldest, to see how its protagonist, the monk, is portrayed, not because this is necessarily interesting in and of itself, but because an analysis of his image helps us to understand what image of Islam the texts are trying to convey and how it tells Syriac Christians how they should view their own position in Islamic society.

The 'Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā' is a modern designation for the texts which in their original are labelled with equivalents of terms such as 'narration', 'account', 'history' and 'life'.[13] For the sake of convenience I

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[10] For the many variations to this theme, see: Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 166–82.

[11] Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. The 'heresy of the Ishmaelites'* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 131.

[12] See for example François Nau, "A propos d'un feuillet d'un manuscript arabe," *Le Muséon* 43 (1930): 85–116 and 221–62, 237; Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. The 'heresy of the Ishmaelites'*, 73; Adelbert Davids and Pim Valkenberg, "John of Damascus and the Heresy of the Ishmaelites," in *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Trialogue of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis and Pim Valkenberg (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2005), 71–90, 81.

[13] It was probably Carra de Vaux who first labelled the story a 'Syriac Legend', in his "La légende de Bahira ou un moine chrétien auteur du Coran," *Revue de l'orient chrétien* 2 (1897): 20–30. David Taylor correctly refers to it as *The History of Sergius Baḥīrā* in his "The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē: Syriac Text and Annotated English Translation," in *Christsein in der islamischen Welt. Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Sidney

will continue to refer to them as the Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā (in short: the Legend; for the Syriac recensions collectively: the Syriac Legend). The original labels do not point us into the direction of a specific genre, beyond the basic indication that the author(s) purported to document things that had really happened. Modern scholars have pointed out how these texts were formed by a combination of two frequently encountered genres among the early Syriac and Christian Arabic writings that were written in response to the rise of Islam: apologetic dialogue and apocalypses. The larger part of the Syriac Legend consists of prophecies about the succession of Muslim rulers and the eventual downfall of the Caliphate. There are two apocalyptic sections. The first is told by the monk himself to another itinerant monk in the desert, who is also the narrator: Mar Yahb or Isho'yahb, who identifies himself as a 'wanderer'. From his self-labelling as 'solitary monk' it becomes clear that he is depicted as belonging in the tradition of itinerant monks, who were well-known in the Syriac Christian world of Late Antiquity.[14] His itinerary is a familiar one for a Syriac itinerant monk in the late sixth century. He visits holy men on mountains and in caves and gorges and travels to Sinai and deep into Egypt.[15] From there he crosses into Arabia where he meets the monk Sergius Baḥīrā. Sergius tells him how he received an apocalyptic vision on top of Mount Sinai, long before encountering Muḥammad. It presents the rise of Islam as the fulfilment of the Biblical prophecy about the future might of Ismael's descendants (Gen 17.20).[16] The other apocalypse in the Syriac

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H. Griffith and Sven Grebenstein (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 187–242, 202.

[14] Daniel Caner, *Wandering, begging monks, social order and the promotion of monasticism in the Roman East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 360–451.

[15] Florence Jullien and Scott Johnson have drawn attention to the importance of pilgrimage to the oldest monastic centres of Egypt for Syriac monks in the sixth and early seventh century, for example Abraham of Kashkar and Mar Gani. Since the Syriac Legend mentions 'the desert of Yathrib' after Egypt, presumably the idea was that the narrator crossed the Red Sea to find the shortest way home to Iraq. Whether this is based on an actual pilgrimage route I do not know; Florence Jullien "Types et topiques de l'Égypte: Réinterpréter les modèles aux VIe–VIIe siècles," in *Monachismes d'Orient. Images, échanges, influences: Hommage à Antoine Guillaumont*, ed. Florence Jullien and Marie-Josèphe Pierre-Beylot (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 151–64; Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *Literary Territories: Cartographical Thinking in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 115–32.

[16] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, section {3}, commentary on 66–69.

Legend comes after the encounter of the monk with Muḥammad. It is much longer and goes into graphic detail about the distress Christians will suffer under the early Abbasids, followed by the end of times and the exclusive salvation of Christians.[17]

In between these apocalypses, we find the narration of the monk's encounter with the young Muḥammad. This section is inspired by the 'recognition scene', as found in Islamic biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad.[18] The monk informs Muḥammad of his visionary experience which confirmed that Muḥammad would be the first of the future kings of the Arabs – a prophecy which alludes to a downfall in the early ninth century, during early Abbasid caliphate. This arouses Muḥammad's curiosity and that is how the two begin to converse. The exchange between the monk and Muḥammad is cast in the style of Late Antique didactic eratopokriseis.[19] Sergius is the master and Muḥammad fulfills the role of student. Muḥammad has a lot to learn: before anything else, he is unaware of the existence of the creator. Sergius tells him about 'God's Word and His Spirit', the Virgin birth, Christ's crucifixion and his resurrection and the general resurrection of humankind. At the end Muḥammad is more-or-less acknowledging the truth of Christianity. He is so impressed that he tells the monk he will grant all his wishes. The monk then asks him for fair treatment of Christians during his rule.[20] Eager to spread the good message in his community, Muḥammad asks for the monk's help and strategic advice. Sergius gives him some simple tenets and commandments to pass on to the people. He includes a promise of food and drink, as well as virgins, in the afterlife. He also prescribes fasting and praying. When Muḥammad anticipates the reluctance of his people to accept his preaching, the monk says he will teach him secretly at night and write a Scripture for him, which he eventually will put on the horn of a cow, who will then miraculously present the new Scripture to the people. With this witty allusion to the second chapter of the Qur'an, the 'Chapter of the Cow', the conversation ends, and the reader is told: 'Because he was a humble, simple boy, Muḥammad liked the daily teaching of Mar Sergius.

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[17] Ibidem, section {17}, commentary on 69–86.

[18] Ibidem, sections {12} to {16}, commentary on 95–149.

[19] For the forms and purposes of the genre, see: Ioannis Papadogiannakis, "Instruction by Question-and-Answer: the Case of Late Antique and Byzantine Erotapokriseis," in *Greek literature in Late Antiquity. Dynamism, Didacticism, Classicism*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Aldershot / Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 91–105.

[20] For the importance of Muḥammad's promise to Sergius Baḥīrā in the light of the Pact of ʿUmar, see: Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 113–21.

And he wrote for them this book which they call 'Qur'an', at the hands of Muḥammad.'[21]

At the end of this section, the message is clear: the Qur'an is in essence a Christian document, with some adaptations, and Muḥammad was impressed with Sergius' teaching, hence his willingness to do anything for the Christians that Sergius may desire. The monk's request to protect Christians and Muḥammad's avowal to do so are a way to put the dhimmi status of Christians under Islam in positive light. The 'protection' of Christians under Islam is portrayed as a corollary of Sergius' catechism of Muḥammad – not as a form of subjugation. The conversation between the two men contains several points of overlap between Christianity and Islam: belief in the One God who is the Creator, God's possession of a Word and a Spirit, the Virgin birth and the resurrection. In other words, the strategy of the Syriac Legend seems to be to emphasize the agreements between Christianity and Islam rather than the differences. Insofar as Islam is divergent from Christianity, an additional passage serves as an explanation. After the death of Sergius a Jew appeared, Ka`b al-Aḥbār, who inserted many new ideas into the core of Islamic teachings and rituals, such as circumcision and the belief that Muḥammad was the Paraclete.[22]

Does this mean that there is no trace of the heretical monk of the polemical stories that emphasize difference rather than closeness between the two religions? It speaks for itself that in order to establish this as a fact, we need to take a close look at what the monk supposedly taught. In my analysis of the 'christological' passages in the two recensions of the Syriac Legend, I was struck by the fact that in both recensions the monk teaches a Christology that is in agreement with the teaching of the community in which the recension originated.[23] In the West-Syrian recension the monk says that Christ was born from the Virgin, according to the flesh, 'being God in hypostasis and nature'. In the East-Syrian recension, on the other hand, the monk says that Word clothed itself with a body from Mary and 'came to be in a human being'. These explanations of the Incarnation are

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[21] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 285 ({16.16} in East-Syrian recension).

[22] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 298-309 ({20}-{22} of the East-Syrian recension).

[23] Barbara Roggema, "The Syriac Legend of Sergius-Bahīrā. Some remarks on its origin in the East and its traces in the West," in *East and West in the Crusader States. Context – Contacts – Confrontations. II. Acta of the congress held at Hernen Castle in May 1997,* ed. Krijnie Ciggaar and Herman Teule (Leuven, 1999), 107–23, 116–17, and id, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 104–08.

in line with the Christological doctrines of the respective communities, so there is no attempt to portray the monk as teaching heresy. The purpose of this part of the Syriac Legend is quite different. What we are made to believe is that the Qur'an's belief in the existence of a Word of God and a Spirit of God (cf. Q 4:171) equals belief in the Incarnation. There is no intra-Christian polemic here. What we have is Christian apologetic vis-à-vis Islam, suggesting that what 'they' (Muslims) believe about Christ is the same as what 'we' (Christians) believe. The impulse behind this type of apologetic is the desire to ward off Islamic polemic against Christian 'polytheism' – a desire to stress similarity for practical purposes.[24]

Even though there is no question here of a christological heresy allegedly feeding into Islam, Sidney Griffith nevertheless uses the term 'renegade' to refer to the monk.[25] He argues that the monk was portrayed as 'renegade monk' in the Syriac Legend, because he is described as having ended up in the desert of Arabia after having been persecuted. The ground given for his clash with ecclesiastical authorities was his attitude to the cult of the cross. However, this episode needs to be read in context. The monk's motivation is given as 'because Christ was crucified on one cross' in the West-Syrian recension, while the East-Syrian recension adds: 'not because he hated crosses – he honored crosses more than all people'.[26] The latter is one of several instances where the Syriac Legend points readers to an unambiguous interpretation by means of specific extradiegetical cues. For this reason the label 'renegade' seems inappropriate. Such a reading, to my mind, has probably been infected by the negative image of the monk in other texts, especially European ones. There is no concrete reason to think that the redactor of the Syriac Legend was aware of this negative image, since the Syriac Legend came into being earlier and in a different community and geographical area. The only other Syriac text to mention the monk Sergius Baḥīrā is the eighth-century East-Syrian *Disputation between a monk of Bēt Ḥālē and an Arab notable*, which attributes a positive role to the monk.[27]

Having said this, one can argue that some of the actions of the monk do not fit with the image of a saintly evangelizing desert solitary. After all,

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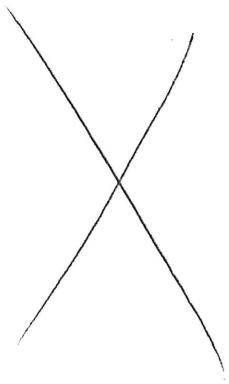
[24] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 108–13.

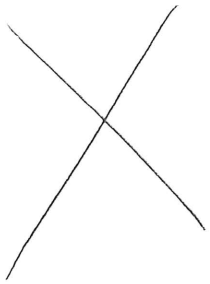
[25] Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 38, and idem, "Muhammad and the Monk Bahîrâ: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times," *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995): 146–74, 157–58.

[26] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 331({5} (in West-Syrian recension) and 299 ({19} in East-Syrian recension).

[27] Taylor, "The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē".

it was he who advised Muḥammad to claim prophethood. Moreover, he devised the hoax of presenting the Qur'an on the horns of a cow, while pretending it came from God.[28] How this should be interpreted in the context of the Syriac Legend as a whole brings me to an aspect of the Legend that has never been sufficiently highlighted. This is again a question of genre. Many passages in the Syriac Legend read as hagiography. The hagiographical aspects of the narrative may provide us with a key to understanding the Syriac Legend as a whole. Before





Hagiographical Themes in the Syriac Legend

The vision at Mount Sinai which the monk receives is authenticated by the ultrabright light coming from the skies, the appearance of a cross of light and myriads of angels. One of the angels draws close to the monk and tells him not to fear. This forms the beginning of the first apocalyptic vision. After the apocalyptic vision about the rise of the Sons of Ishmael has been shown, the angel is still there with the monk. He proceeds to fulfill a task which is paralleled in many saints' lives: the angel commands the monk to go on a mission. He sends him to the Byzantine emperor. Angels who appear to saints with this type of command to undertake a specific mission can be frequently found in hagiographical texts. In the East-Syrian Life of Mar Qardagh, an angel tells the hermit `Abdisho` to go and look for Qardagh who is enjoying his life in elite Zoroastrian circles. After converting him to Christianity, the angel approaches `Abdisho` once again to tell him to go and accept Qardagh as a disciple.[29] Angels also typically appear to urge aspiring ascetics to depart from their homes and take up an itinerant lifestyle, thus bestowing their seemingly irrational decision to abandon their more comfortable life for a life in the desert with

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[29] Paul Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, vol 2, 446–47, 462; Joel Walker, *The Syriac Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 24–25, 37; See also Walker's commentary on 41, n. 109.

divine approval.[30] One can already find this topos of 'Berufing zur Wanderschaft' in the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, where we can read how an angel addressed the ascetical hermit, John, who was literally steadfast, not moving from underneath a rock for three years. The angel not only healed him but also spurred him on to move, thus justifying the ascetic's ensuing life of desert wandering.[31] The great East-Syrian monastic leader Abraham of Kashkar (d. 588) was spurred on by an angel who wanted him to travel to al-Ḥīra to teach there and to convert the pagans.[32] In the Syriac Legend too, the angel urges to monk to go on a mission.

After his vision on Mount Sinai has been completed, Sergius Baḥīrā is told to go and inform the Byzantine and the Sasanian Emperors about the impending losses of their empires to the Arabs. It seems to be a matter of course that some unknown itinerant monk could get access to the Emperor – apparently no ink needed to be spilt to explain how and why a monk would be received by emperors. The reason why Sergius Baḥīrā's role as prophetic messenger could sound convincing in the Syriac Legend is because the emperors were known to have regarded ascetical monks as authority figures, not only in spiritual matters but precisely also in political affairs. We notice how the figure of Sergius Baḥīrā plays the perfect role of the holy man of God who can converse with those in power, as we

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[30] This hagiographical motif, as well as most other ones in the Syriac Legend, are listed in Thomas Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos. Griechische Heiligenviten in mittelbyzantinischer Zeit* (Berlin : De Gruyter, 2005), 113–15. Although Pratsch only deals with Greek hagiography of the middle-Byzantine period, the topoi he lists are all familiar in Syriac hagiography too. For the close relations between Greek and Syriac hagiography, see: Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Hagiography," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography,* ed. Stephanos Efthymiades, vol 1: *Periods and Places* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 259–83, 266–69 and André Binggeli, "Introduction," in *L'hagiographie syriaque*, ed. id. (Paris: Geuthner, 2012), 3–7. These topoi also lived on in the hagiographical production of Arabic-speaking Christians, for example in the late eighth or ninth-century 'Life of Timothy Kākhushtā' (John C. Lamoreaux and Cyril Cairala, "The Life of Timothy of Kākhushtā," *Patrologia Orientalis* 48 (2000): 431–629). For an introduction to Arabic saint lives, see: Mark N. Swanson, "Arabic Hagiography," in *The Ashgate Companion to Byzantine Hagiography,* ed. Stephanos Efthymiades, 345–67.

[31] Daniel Caner, *Wandering, begging monks, social order and the promotion of monasticism in the Roman East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 30–31.

[32] François Nau, "Histoires d'Abraham de Kaskar et de Babaï de Nisibe," *Revue de l'orient chrétien* 21 (1918–1919): 161–72, 162.

know it in its idealized form but also as a historical reality of Late Antiquity. Stories abound about how famous monks were sought after by the emperors, who were eager to hear their prophecies, be healed by them, witness their miracles and seek their counsel.[33] Vice versa, the spiritual authority of monks was enhanced by their access to emperors, whom they are described as visiting for important affairs, such as the defence of correct doctrine or the communication of prophecies relating to impending change of power and burning issues in current affairs. There are plenty of historical examples of monks visiting the emperors to bring them important messages, often messages that went against the interest of the emperors or could be regarded as critique of their policies; in the case of Sergius Baḥīrā this is of course the message that the emperor's realm will soon fall to the 'Ishmaelites'. The monks' depicted audacity to proclaim their views and their news to those in power enriches their profile as those who could see the truth in a pure form, untainted by economic and social ties. John bar Aphtonia (d.c. 538), the founder of the Syrian-Orthodox monastery of Qenneshre, went to the Emperor to testify against heresies[34], and Symeon the Stylite (d. 459) famously rebuked the Emperor Theodosius II for favouring Jews over Christians. Symeon's threats of heavenly punishment successfully changed the Emperor's attitude and policies towards the Christians. Such examples are at the background of the Syriac Legend's depiction of Sergius Baḥīrā's encounters with the emperors and they help to give its portrayal of events credibility.

The way in which the monk communicates the impending loss of power and territory to the emperors is theatrical. He breaks his staff in two before their eyes. Undoubtedly the monk's staff was not only written into the story as an emblem of the wandering hermit per se, but also because the staff evoked the memory of Moses' miracles. Numerous simple but powerful anecdotes about monks' staffs were narrated to show how despite their humble appearance the wandering monks could demonstrate the truth of their God-given mission. For example, the East-Syrian saint Abraham of Nethpar was instructed by an angel to evangelize among the

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[33] Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople ca 350–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 206–07 and notes 88–91, and Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos,* 178–80.

[34] François Nau, "Histoire de Jean bar Aphtonia," *Revue de l'orient chrétien* 7 (1902): 97–135. See also: John Watt, "A portrait of John bar Aphtonia, founder of the monastery of Qenneshre," in *Portraits of Spiritual Authority. Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium & the Christian Orient*, ed. Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 1999), 155–69.

pagan idolaters (Zoroastrians?) in the mountains around Adiabene. He is described as making his staff the center point of his evangelization, when he claims and proves that it will not burn when thrown into the holy fire of the pagans. Thus he convinced the onlookers to have themselves baptized.[35] The East-Syrian monk and disciple of Babai the Great, John of Nhel, used his staff to hit the river near his monastery in order to divert it to the grounds of his monastery, where the water then surged forth.[36]

The soundness of Sergius Baḥīrā's prophecies to the Emperors is symbolized by the lack of resistance of each of them to this news. Both the Byzantine and the Persian emperors seem to resign themselves to their fate when they tell the monk to go where he wants to go in peace.[37]

The story goes further than mere prophesying *ex eventu.* Whereas the fulfilment of the main prophecy about the rise of the Ishmaelites took place years much later (in real historical terms), the West-Syrian recension describes how Sergius' prophecy had an immediate impact.[38] It is described how the prophecy was overheard by the Byzantine military leader Phocas who used it as inspiration to kill Emperor Maurice and usurp the throne: 'And when one of the officers heard that I was sent by God, he set up a revolt against him and [killed him], and it was fulfilled'.[39]

The passage refers to the tumultuous historical events in the heart of the Byzantine Empire in 602 AD, when an officer of unknown origin called Phocas led a revolt of the Byzantine army in the Balkans in protest against poor wages, murdered Maurice with all his children and took the throne. Paradoxically, it was probably the unexpectedness of this coup d'état which led to the invention of many accounts about how the death of Maurice had been predicted and how Phocas, despite being hated all around, had been made to rule by God. The Byzantine historian Theophanes described in his *Chronographia* how an ascetical monk ran to the imperial palace in Constantinople with an unsheathed sword proclaiming the imminent murder to Maurice.[40] He also mentions a certain Herodian who

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[35] Addai Scher, "Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)," *Patrologia Orientalis* 7 (1911): 95–203, 173.

[36] Sebastian P. Brock, "John of Nhel: An Episode in Early Seventh-Century Monastic History," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 9 (1978): 95–119, 105–07 and 114–15.

[37] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, {4}, 264–67, 328–31.

[38] See the chronological chart above.

[39] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 329.

[40] Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 408.

had predicted the same.[41] The emperor responded by publicly repenting his deeds. The Greek saint Theodore of Sykeon, who was believed to have predicted the rise of Maurice to the throne and informed him of this when the latter stopped by him to pray, had also received a revelation with the details of the Emperor's gruesome death at the hands of Phocas.[42] Not only in Greek but also in Syriac stories were transmitted about prophecies surrounding Maurice's death, undoubtedly because the vicissitudes of the Byzantine-Persian wars had made the inhabitants of Mesopotamia particularly sensitized to the tensions between the two empires.[43] The abrupt end to a peaceful period due to Phocas' rebellion in the late sixth century, following a truce between Maurice and Khusrau II, was explained afterwards as foreordained. The passage in the Syriac Legend is clearly inspired by such prophecies about Maurice's death. The reason why Sergius Baḥīrā's prophecy about the Arabs conquests is tied to the coup d'état of Phocas is probably because the coup could be seen as an immediate confirmation of the inevitability of the imperial losses, while the fulfillment of the monk's prophecy about the Arabs was still three decades away.[44]

The saintly profile of the monk is underscored by a further series of hagiographical motives that feature in the part that takes place in the desert of Arabia. When Sergius Baḥīrā is found by the itinerant monk who functions as the narrator, the monk foresees his imminent death. It is the coincidental encounter with a fellow Christian after many years that triggers the monk's realization that his life is ending: 'He sighed and wept bitterly and said to me: 'I have been here for forty years and I have not seen a single Christian here, except you. Now I know that the end of my life is at hand.'[45] The fact that the prediction of his impending death turned out to be correct reinforces the idea that Sergius Baḥīrā belongs to the special category of holy men whose spirituality gave them a heightened semiotic awareness and the gift of prophecy, which included a capacity to sense their impending death. As Pratsch has shown in his survey of

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[41] Mango and Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813*, 408.

[42] André-Jean Festugière, *Vie de Théodore de Sykéôn*, 2 vols (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1970), vol.1, ed., 95–96, vol. 2, transl, 99–100.

[43] François Nau and Lucien Leroy, "Les légendes syriaques d'Aaron de Saroug, de Maxime et Domèce, d'Abraham, maître de Barsôma, et de l'empereur Maurice; Les miracles de Saint Ptolémée," *Patrologia Orientalis* 5 (1910): 773–78.

[44] The prophecy takes place more than thirty years before the Arab conquest, cf. the chronological chart above.

[45] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, {2.5}, 256–57, 318–19.

hagiographical topoi of the Middle-Byzantine period, the saint's prediction of the time of his own death is a well-known motif.[46] It functions as proof of the men's special capacity to understand God's invisible workings in the world. The same special sensitivity plays a role when the monk sees Muḥammad for the first time. Just as in the Islamic version of the story, the monk recognizes Muḥammad from a distance among his companions because he has a little cloud above his head. The Syriac Legend considers this recognition an important aspect of the story, for the narrator adds a comment that compels readers to pay attention to the monk's spiritual gift: 'And when he [i.e. Muḥammad] came in, Sergius stood up and sat down again. He told them [i.e. his companions] about the vision that was above his head. *They, however, were not aware of the vision.*'[47] In other words: only the monk perceived Muḥammad's aura, by which he could identify him as the chosen one.

Prior to their encounter the monk is described as having become a counselor to the locals. The idea that the monk would fulfill that role is not surprising. We are reminded of one of the primary roles of ascetical monks, as described by Peter Brown in his monumental article 'The rise and function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity'. He recalls Symeon the Stylite, who not only addressed large crowds of visitors from remote places but also lived in a sort of 'symbiosis' with the local population. Brown also reminds us of how 'the Bedouin were among the first clients of many Syrian and Palestinian holy men'.[48] In the Syriac Legend the Arabs are described as coming in contact with the monk prior to the latter's encounter with Muḥammad. As they were coming to draw water at the monk's residence, they conversed with him, consulted him about all sorts of matters and followed his advice.[49] The author felt the need to add an explanation as to why the people would seek counsel from the monk,

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[46] Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos*, 320–22.

[47] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, {12.6}–{12.7}, 270–71, 338–39.

[48] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101, 82–83; and see now: Elisabeth Key Fowden, "Rural converters among the Arabs," in *Conversion in late antiquity: Christianity, Islam and beyond*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn and Daniel Schwartz (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 175–94.

[49] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, {11}–{11.3}. According to the East-Syrian recension, the water sprouting next to his habitation was God-given. God-given water is another hagiographical topos; see for example how Simeon the Stylite's prayer for water was answered on the spot when God made a source gush forth for his thirsty friend: Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum,* vol. 4, 514, Lent, "The Life of St. Simeon Stylites," 115.

whose wisdom they may not necessarily have recognized. The explanation is brief but intriguing: 'they would do everything he told them, because he taught them this belief a little, to which they adhere'.[50] The suggestion seems to be that the Arabs had learnt something about the Christian faith from the monk and consequently endowed him with spiritual authority, which, in turn, led to the monk's authority in worldly matters.

The picture that emerges here is strikingly similar to the picture that historians of Late Antiquity have sketched of superficially Christianized Bedouins who sought blessings, baptism and practical directives from, as Peter Brown called them, the local 'charismatic Ombudsmen', without ever becoming full members of the Church.[51] To the modern reader the story of Sergius Baḥīrā may seem farfetched because of the distance that the monk would have had to travel to central Arabia before chancing upon Muḥammad. To Syriac readers, however, the verisimilitude of the story was enhanced precisely by these kinds of elements, which, on the basis of the readers' familiarity with hermits on the Syrian desert frontier, gave the story historical plausibility. In this respect yet one more narrative element needs to be highlighted as a standard feature – perhaps the most important one – of charismatic monks: Sergius Baḥīrā was also a healer of the sick. Part of the Syriac Legend is narrated by a young man who was healed by him as a child. The boy's parents had supposedly chased him away into the desert. Here again the story is less fantastic than it may seem, since expulsion and abandonment was a well-known way to deal with lepers to prevent contagion, while healing was commonly attributed to desert hermits.[52] The monk healed the boy and immediately built a reputation for himself in this way, which meant that many more sick people came to him to get cured. Again, we see a glimpse of the life and work of monks as depicted in the pious literature of Syriac Christianity. Their capacity for healing both physical and mental illnesses was one of the monks' most valued roles in society. Belief in their special spiritual gifts and skills in medicine exceeded the monks' lifespan. Even more impressive than their care for the sick during their lifetime was their *posthumous* miracle work, since their bones consistently proved effective in combatting illnesses. In Syriac hagiography, one can read how the bones of martyrs and other saints were sought after, traded and crushed up to produce *ḥnana*, the much-desired mixture that could cure the sick and even paralyze the

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[50] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, {11.3}, 270–71, 338–39.
[51] Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", 91.
[52] Timothy S. Miller and John W. Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses. Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 16 and 47.

mightiest lion.[53] In other words, the saint's relics were more than a mere object of veneration, exhibited to keep the memory of the saint alive. They were a powerful physical and spiritual medicine, with saintliness as its active ingredient, providing healing and protection.[54] The Syriac Legend leaves no doubt as to whether the Sergius Baḥīrā's bones possessed the same kind of powers as those of the well-known saints, for his bones did precisely what a saintly monk's bones were supposed to do: they worked miracles. One can read how they functioned as a lie detector: 'Next to his bones God performed a great miracle, as one man murdered his brother and the murderer said: 'The slave of the victim killed my brother'. And by means of the bones of Mar Sergius the killer became known before the eyes of all the people, for right at that moment his hand withered'.[55]

There is little doubt that posthumous miracles were regarded as even more important than miracles during a saint's lifetime in Late Antique Christianity. The posthumous miracle was the seal to a saint's impeccable reputation and removed potential doubt about the veracity of his earlier miracles, his orthodoxy and piety. Hence it provided the ultimate divine sanction of his saintly status. The importance of posthumous miracles may be the primary reason why the monk was made to die early on in the Syriac Legend. His status as divinely supported agent was cemented before we read about his actual encounter with Muḥammad. Readers and listeners would therefore have approached the topic of Muḥammad's acquaintance with Christianity through the lens of someone who could not be suspected of deception or of having desired to teach Muḥammad unacceptable ideas.

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[53] Symeon the Stylite was described as providing *ḥnana* in order to paralyze a lion, heal the sick, restore damaged crop, punish vandals and prevent a shipwreck: Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum,* vol. 4, 565–72, 603–05; Lent, "The Life of St. Simeon Stylites", 148–51, 172–73.

[54] Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent, "Bones in Bags: Relics in Syriac Hagiography," in *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, Duke University, 26–29 June 2011*, ed. Maria E. Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano and Kyle Richard Smith (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 439–54.

[55] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, {10}–{10.8}, 268–71, 336–37. A saint resolving a murder mystery is also found in the Life of Babai of Nisibis who resurrected a physician to ask him who had killed him: Nau, "Histoires d'Abraham de Kaskar et de Babai de Nisibe", 167.

Sergius Baḥīrā and the Conversion of King Al-Nuʿmān of Al-Ḥīra

In the context of the hagiographical aspects of the Syriac Legend, one element in the text deserves to be discussed, which has been overlooked in previous research. Besides a few footnotes, no attention has been paid to the connection the Syriac Legend makes between Sergius Baḥīrā and the Christianisation of the Iraqi city of al-Ḥīra. This city was located on the edge of the desert west of the Middle Euphrates, close to the later city of al-Kūfa. Lying at the frontiers of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires and the Arabian desert, it had an intriguing history in the centuries before Islam, which, despite a scarcity of sources, has recently been reconstructed with great care by Isabel Toral-Niehoff, Greg Fischer and Philip Wood.[56] The dynasty that ruled there for several centuries, (from the late third to the early seventh) held on to power as allies of the Sasanians. Its rulers in Late Antiquity were Arabs who were assimilated to Persian culture and under the influence of Syro-Aramaic culture as well. They managed to withstand the competing forces around them, until their demise just before the rise of Islam. Several Syriac and Arabic writings give us some insight in the gradual Christianization of al-Ḥīra, mostly but not exclusively through the efforts of the Church of the East. Although the sedentary elite of al-Ḥīra had already converted to Christianity long before (the so-called ʿIbād) and the surrounding Arab population had been partially Christianized, the last King of al-Ḥīra (r. ca. 583–602/4), the Nasrid Nuʿman was baptized only in the early 590s.[57] The accounts of his conversion differ somewhat, but each of them stress al-Nuʿmān's prior attachment to the cult of al-ʿUzzā (Zohra), the exorcism of his demons that led to his acceptance of the Christian faith and the collective baptism of him and his close family members. The triumphant stories about his healing and conversion seem to have been partially modelled on the stories

[56] Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīrā. Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2014); idem, "Late Antique Iran and the Arabs: the Case of al-Hira," *Journal of Persianate Studies* (2013): 115–26; Philip Wood (with Geoffrey Greatrex), "The Naṣrids and Christianity in al-Ḥīrā," in *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 357–63; Greg Fischer and Philip Wood, "Writing the History of the "Persian Arabs". The Pre-Islamic Perspective on the "Naṣrids" of al-Ḥīrah," *Iranian Studies* 49 (2016): 247–90.

[57] Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīrā*, 206–07.

about the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine.[58] The monks copying his story in the early Islamic period, did not seem to mind the fact that al-Nu`man had in due time been removed by the Sassanian Emperor Khusrau II, that al-Ḥīra lost its status as foederatus of the Sasanians and that the rise of Islam made al-Ḥīra irrelevant, except as a source of nostalgia. What was deemed important was the achievement of bringing a pagan king into the fold at the hands of an East-Syrian monk, as one of the great achievements during the sixth century East-Syrian monastic and missionary revival. The main character in the conversion stories is the great East-Syrian ascetical monk, missionary and later Catholicos Sabrisho`I (d. 604). Whereas the East-Syrian recension only refers briefly to Sergius' stay in the 'Monastery of the Ḥireans'[59], the West-Syrian recension of the Legend includes a brief version of the conversion story in a prelude to the Legend proper. It is explained that when Sergius Baḥīrā was exiled for his militant campaign against excessive displays of crucifixes, he proceeded to live peacefully in Arabia through Mar Sabrisho`'s mediation. The text then continues with the description of Mar Sabrisho`'s accomplishments with regard to the conversion of Nu`man and other people in al-Ḥīra:

"Rabban Sergius Baḥīrā left and went to the desert of Yathrib, to the Ishmaelites. He stayed with them in peace and quiet, and he enjoyed affection and familiarity with them, by the help of Father Mar Sabrishoʿ, the monk who worked many great miracles and for whom Nuʿmān the King, ruler of the Arabs, sent, because of a certain illness of which Nuʿmān suffered. He was tormented by an evil demoniacal spirit, like Saul in the days of the Prophet David. This King Nuʿmān lived in the old city of the Ishmaelites, which is called 'Arabia', which was theirs in the days of Chosroes, King of the Persians. And through the guidance of the true pastors of the rational flock of Christ, Mar Sabrishoʿ, Catholicos of the East and Mar Ishoʿzekhayā [sic] the monk, Nuʿmān was cured of the evil demoniacal spirit that had been vexing and tormenting him severely. Because the monks were few at the time and only present in some places

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[58] Isabel Toral-Niehoff, "Constantine's Baptism Syriac Legend: A 'Wandering' Story between Byzantium, Rome, the Syriac and the Arab World," in *Negotiating Co-Existence: Communities, Cultures and Convivencia in Byzantine Society*, ed. Barbara Crostini and Sergio La Porta (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013), 129–42, 139; idem, "Die Tauflegende des Laḫmidenkönigs Nuʿmān: Ein Beispiel für syrisch-arabische Intertextualit?," in *Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie der syrischen Kirchen. Göttinger Orientforschungen: Syriaca*, ed. Dorothea Weltecke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 63–78.

[59] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 256–57, and n. 8.

and regions, Nuʿmān and the entire city of Arabia received the sign of baptism at the hands of Mar Sabrishoʿ Catholicos of the East, since before they were baptized they worshipped the star al-ʿUzzā, who is Aphrodite Venus, about whom even these days they say the following, when they swear 'No, |By| the Father of al-ʿUzzā!'. I said to them: 'Who is it by whom you swear?' and they told me: 'That is God the Mighty', while still adhering to this old tradition."[60]

Sergius Baḥīrā is not said to have been involved with the healing and conversion of King al-Nuʿmān, which would not have tenable on chronological grounds.[61] Rather, the passage suggests that Sabrishoʿ played a role as a protector of Sergius Baḥīrā when the latter settled among the Arabs. This gives a sense of legitimacy to Sergius Baḥīrā's undertakings, as he was supposedly operating under the auspices of a great missionary hero, his contemporary Sabrishoʿ.[62] One might say, the West-Syrian recension inserted the spiritual-genealogy topos here, which is common in Syriac hagiography. The histories of holy men often contained references to their masters as indicators of their spiritual pedigree and as minimal historical anchors in texts with otherwise few historical references.[63] Sabrishoʿ had been a key figure in the contacts between the Byzantine and Sassanian empire and this role of his may also have been a reason why Sergius Baḥīrā – himself an ambassador to the emperors as we have seen – is brought into association with him.

A second historical figure mentioned in this introductory section in conjunction with Sabrishoʿ is the ascetical monk Ishoʿzekha, who indeed is known to have been instrumental in the healing and conversion of the king. He was a close companion of Sabrishoʿ and founder of several

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[60] Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 314–317.

[61] The conversion took place around 590, before the monk Sergius Baḥīrā had allegedly gone to the Byzantine and Persian emperors and had gone campaigning against excessive display of crosses. The monk's prediction about the death of Maurice was supposed to have materialized soon afterwards, i.e. 602.

[62] Martin Tamcke, *Der Katholikos-Patriarch Sabrišoʿ I. (596–604) und das Mönchtum*, Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe XXIII, Theologie 302 (Frankfurt am Main / Bern / New York: Peter Lang, 1988); Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 188–99.

[63] Muriél Debié, "Writing History as 'Histoires': The Biographical Dimension of East Syriac Historiography," in *Writing 'True Stories': Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Muriel Debié, Hugh Kennedy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 43–75.

monasteries.[64] Here too the text claims to provide a glimpse of historical context: the time when the Church of the East was actively missionizing in pagan areas by means of ascetical charismatic figures. The various versions of Nu`man's miraculous healing and conversion have recently received attention from scholars interested in the history of al-Ḥīra.[65] The *Chronicle of Seert* gives one account where Sabrisho` and Isho`zekha were together with the bishop of al-Ḥīra, Simeon b. Jābir, when they exorcized the demons from the King together.[66] Somewhat differently *the Life of Sabrisho`*, written by Petros and transmitted in the *Chronicle of Seert* as well, gives a more prominent role to Sabrisho` and Isho`zekha.[67] The King has an angelic dream about converting and with Khusrau's permission Simeon baptizes him. Soon, however, he was lured away by heretics – undoubtedly the miaphysites with whom the East-Syrians were in open competition, not only doctrinally but especially in their efforts to widen their monastic and missionary presence.[68] His demon kept on tormenting him and he acknowledged that he could only be healed properly by Sabrisho` with his ascetical companion Isho`zekha. In the Syriac Legend the bishop does not feature at all. It is a much shorter and simpler vignette, meant to remind the readers of the missionary efforts of the East-Syrians, with which the Legend seems to want to associate the monk Sergius Baḥīrā. In a similar loose way the Life of Abraham of Kashkar (d. 588 CE), the great reformer of East-Syrian monasticism, brings up the conversion of al-Ḥīra from the cult of al-`Uzzā to Christianity. Abraham taught in al-Ḥīra in his early years for a short time but in the 560s he had begun to build his great monastery at Mount Izla near Nisibis and he

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[64] Tamcke, *Der Katholikos-Patriarch Sabrišo` I.*, 53; Florence Jullien, *Le monachisme en Perse. La réforme d'Abraham le Grand, père des moines de l'Orient* (Louvain: Peeters, 2008), 223.

[65] Philip Wood, 'Christianity and the Arabs in the sixth century', in *Inside and Out: Interactions Between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. Greg Fisher and Jitse Dijkstra (Louvain: Peeters, 2014), 353–68, 366–77; id, "The Naṣrids and Christianity in al-Ḥīrā," 358–60; and see above no. 59 (?).

[66] Addai Scher, "Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)," *Patrologia Orientalis* 13 (1919): 433–639, 468–69; see also Fisher and Woods, "Writing the History of the "Persian Arabs"," 272–73.

[67] Scher, "Histoire Nestorienne Inédite," 478–81 and see Fisher and Woods, "Writing the History of the "Persian Arabs", 273–74.

[68] See Jullien, *Le monachisme en Perse. La réforme d'Abraham le Grand,* and idem, "Les controverses entre chrétiens en milieu sassanide : un enjeu identitaire," in *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque*, ed. Flavia Ruani (Paris: Geuthner, 2016), 209–38.

certainly was no longer alive when al-Nu`man converted.[69] Yet the triumph of a pagan king converting to Christianity was an achievement for which Abraham received some credit retroactively. In his Life, in a late abridged version, his preaching there is regarded as having been conducive to the conversion of a large part of the population from this astral cult to the Christian faith, which was then brought in relation with the royal conversion decades later: '[Abraham of Kashkar] taught and made many of the people of al-Ḥīra Christian and they rejected al-`Uzza the star they used to worship and they worshiped the Living God whom the Holy Mar Abraham preached to them, and in the time of Nu`man b. al-Mundhir they all became Christians'.[70]

There is little doubt that the primary function of this anecdote about King Nu`man in the Syriac Legend was to remind readers that missions to the Arabs were common at the time and that they were to some extent successful. It seems that just like the author of the Life of Abraham of Kashkar did, the redactor of the West-Syrian version of the Legend wanted to associate Sergius Baḥīrā indirectly with this success, through his connection with his protector Sabrisho`. As for the people of al-Ḥīra, they accepted Christianity, but at the same time continued to swear by the goddess whom they worshiped previously, according to this West-Syrian version of the Legend.[71] This fits in the Syriac Legend's schematic representation of the rise of Islam as the result of sincere evangelization

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[69] As noted also in Chialà, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità* (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2005), 187, n. 15. See Jullien, *Le monachisme en Perse. La réforme d'Abraham le Grand*, for his life and monastic reform.

[70] Nau, "Histoires d'Abraham de Kaskar et de Babai de Nisibe," 162–163.

[71] Although the claim about swearing is not known from elsewhere, the basic idea that the Arabs were superficially adopting Christian beliefs and practices agrees with modern interpretations of al-Ḥīra's history, for which see Toral-Niehoff, "Late Antique Iran and the Arabs: the Case of al-Hira," There is also an extensive story about the history of the Christianization of al-Ḥīra in a twelfth-century Islamic source, the *Manāqib al-Mazyadiyya fī akhbār mulūk al-Asadiyya* by the Shī'ī author Abū l-Baqā' Hibat Allāh al-Ḥillī, who was presumably from al-Ḥilla, not far from al-Ḥīra, and may have recorded local oral traditions. After narrating the conversion story in a lively way, he adds: 'After Nu'mān had left idolatry, he returned to quite the same. The listener is amazed by this and by this example of hypocrisy' (transl. Toral-Niehoff, 'Al-Ḥīra and the Baptism of al-Nu'mān', 490 (additions in brackets omitted)); see also Toral-Niehoff, "Die Tauflegende des Laḫmidenkönigs Nu'mān," 76–77.

and failed enculturation at the receiving end, as I will discuss further below.[72]

Muḥammad's Catechism with Sergius Baḥīrā and the Formation of Islam

In the discussion above I have tried to demonstrate that the two Syriac recensions of the Syriac Legend are saturated with hagiographical motifs and follow many conventions of the hagiographical genre. Sergius Baḥīrā is endowed with the profile of a saint. His miraculous deeds, his charisma, his reception of a divine vision, the acceptance of his message by the emperors, his prophetic reputation with the Arabs are all aspects which construct his image. Even his epithet *bḥīrā* is reminiscent of ascetical holy men, just as his title 'Mar' which is reserved for saints.[73] It may be safely assumed that the mosaic of hagiographical topoi impacted Syriac readers more profoundly than a modern reader. The text builds up an image and uses genre-specific elements which Syriac readers would never associate with non-saints. It stands to reason that once the monk's bones have performed miracles there is little that can shake the reader's faith in this man. Since these are the terms in which the life of a Syriac saint is imagined and expressed, using them for a dubious figure as a kind of pastiche would be unimaginable. Visions on Mount Sinai, prophecy, healing power and thaumaturgy are not the gifts of ordinary men– let alone of heretics and charlatans.

Yet the more we become aware of the solidity of Sergius Baḥīrā's saintly status, the more tension may be felt with the idea that the saintly monk fabricated some claims and doctrines for Muḥammad.[74] A number

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[72] It may or may not be a coincidence that modern scholars also see certain links between Ḥīra and the genesis of Islam, because al-Ḥīra may have played a role in the development of the Arabic script, because Christians may have transmitted their texts and ideas into Arabic there and because the idea of a transtribal Arab community may have originated there. See the tentative comments in Toral-Niehoff, "The 'Ibād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq," in *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2010), 323–47, 344.

[73] Cf. Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 56–57, for an explanation of the term *bḥīrā*. The term 'Mar' is only used in the East-Syrian recension. The West-Syrian recension calls the monk 'Rabban', which is used for teachers.

[74] For some time a search for the coherence of the monk's actions seemed unnecessary. Stephen Gero and Robert Hoyland, and others, suggested that the first

of modern commentators who recognized Sergius Baḥīrā's aura of saintliness, have put forth interpretations of the monk's teachings to Muḥammad within the larger context. Bénédicte Landron, in her study of approaches to Islam in the Church of the East, describes Sergius Baḥīrā as an exalted figure with prophetic abilities and she stresses the positive light in which Muḥammad is presented. The monk's inventions were simplifications for the ignorant Muḥammad and facilitations for his people.[75] Kenneth Wolf similarly speaks of a 'consistently sympathetic depiction of the monk and his protégé', whose goal of converting the

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half of the Syriac Legend, where the monk is prophet and visionary, was originally a separate text from the encounter story: Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it. A survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 271; Stephen Gero, 'The Syriac Legend of the monk Baḥīrā, the cult of the cross, and iconoclasm," in *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam, VII^e–VIII^e siècles. Actes du Colloque international, Lyon-Maison de l'Orient Méditerranéen, Paris-Institut du Monde Arabe, 11–15 Septembre 1990*, ed. Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais, Publications de l'Institut français de Damas 137 (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1992), 7–58, 57, and see Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 216 for other scholars claiming this. Their evidence for this claim seemed quite concrete at the time: in two Medieval Latin manuscripts we find only the story of Sergius Baḥīrā's wanderings and his visions. Yet, as I have clearly shown the Latin texts is the result of cutting and pasting from the two apocalyptic sections. See Roggema, *The Syriac Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, 215–217. Szilágyi's claim that the Latin text was composed on the basis of two separate parts rather than as an extraction of the whole Syriac Legend, because any medieval redactor would be interested in Muhammad's Christian instruction and therefore would not have left that part out, is unconvincing since (a) it would be too much of a coincidence that the Latin or (before the time of translation into Latin) Middle Eastern redactor would find exactly the two independent texts which also happen to be part of the Syriac Legend and (b) the accompanying texts in the Latin manuscripts show that the text was transmitted by people interested in apocalyptic prophecies; there is no reason to presume a priori that Muhammad would be of interest to them. See: Krisztina Szilágyi, "Muḥammad and the Monk: The Making of the Christian Baḥīrā Syriac Legend," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008): 169–214, 186. Most problematic is the fact that in the Latin text the monk is called Sergius Barre, the latter surely being a corrupted form of Baḥīrā. According to Szilágyi's reconstruction of the redaction process, the monk did not have this double name yet in this part, which she believes to be independent (Szilágyi, "Muḥammad and the Monk," 186–88, 197–98).

[75] Bénédicte Landron, *Chrétiens et musulmans en Irak: attitudes nestoriennes vis-à-vis de l'Islam* (Paris: Cariscript, 1994), 251.

Ishmaelites seems to justify the monk's occasional overstepping of the 'bounds of propriety'.[76]

Jacob Lassner, who in blooming yet precise prose described the main thrust of the Syriac Legend, reflected on one of its major paradoxes: the tension between the monk's genuine divinely revealed vision of Islam's future might and Muḥammad's positive response to his 'catechism', on the one hand, and the subsequent inferior status of Christians under Muslim rule, on the other. How could it be convincing that there was such an intimate relationship between a Christian and Muḥammad early on? Lassner is careful to note that even though Sergius had to reformulate some of the injunctions that Muḥammad passed on to his kinsmen, nevertheless the monk's teachings on Christ remained correct and sincere. He certainly did not teach heresy.[77] He merely gave in to religious backsliding and used the 'hoax' of the scripture on the cow's horns, but this was with the good intention of what he calls 'jump-starting' the faith.[78] Just like Landron and myself, Lassner goes on to stress that the Syriac Legend ascribes the negative turn in Islam, in the sense of developing a harsher attitude to Christianity, to the Jew Kaʿb, i.e. Kaʿb al-Aḥbār.[79] Rather than seeing this Jewish influence, that proved detrimental to the original core of Islam, as an afterthought of the author(s), Lassner reads this section as an integral part of the Syriac Legend's explanatory model for the rise of Islam: 'So it came to pass that the Islam of Baḥīrā/Muḥammad, originally intended to be a reaffirmation of Christianity, became, through the agency of an unscrupulous Jewish convert or converts, a debased form of monotheistic belief'.[80] This is how the West-Syrian recension summarizes that development: '[Kaʿb al-Aḥbār] was also found to be a liar and an impostor. However, because of their irrationality, they abandoned the words of Rabban Sergius Baḥīrā, which were true, and accepted and adhered to this tradition which Kalb the Scribe had given them.'[81]

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[76] Kenneth B. Wolf, "Falsifying the Prophet. Muhammad at the Hands of the Earliest Christian biographers in the West," in *Character assassination throughout the ages*, ed. Martijn Icks and Eric Shiraev (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105–19, 111.

[77] Jacob Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered. Forged Identities, Competing Narratives, Contested Spaces* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 373.

[78] Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, 372.

[79] Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, 375–76.

[80] Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, 376.

[81] Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, {9.5}, 334–35.

Michael Penn's reading is similar, but he uses stronger language to refer to the monk's strategies towards the Arabs. He speaks of deception, of the shrillness of the Baḥīrā Syriac Legend's assault of Islam's foundations and of parodying the Muslim Baḥīrā tradition.[82]

In other words, Sergius Baḥīrā's actions in Arabia remain an ambiguous part of the Syriac Legend that causes a cognitive dissonance in readers who clearly see his saintly profile. My reason for closely comparing the Syriac Legend to Syriac hagiography is that I think the monk's saintly status is meant as the guiding principle behind the story as a whole. The monk's elevated status and visions draw the reader to his side and convince the reader that the rise of Islam, its doctrines and its power, can and should be viewed from the authoritative perspective of the protagonist from one's own community, therewith undercutting the authority of Muslims to speak in opposite terms about the origins of their faith and community. What the saintly man saw in his visions was that the rise of Arab power was inevitable and that therefore educating the Arabs was a priority – to use Lassner's term: their faith and basic rituals had to be 'jump-started'. The resulting ambiguity is intentional and not – it seems to me – a by-product of ongoing redaction processes.[83] This ambiguity provides the community with a dynamic response to the challenges of Islamic propaganda, calls to conversion, and soul-searching about God's apparent political support for Islam. The Legend provides answers for all seasons: in times of oppression or hostility, the Legend can be used to show that (a) Islam is not targeting (read: should not) Christians specifically (the Prophet had promised protection), and (b) that Islamic rule is in any case temporary. In peaceful times, the potential for loosening of the boundaries between Christians and Muslims and conversion of Christians to Islam, the Legend can remind Christians that Muslims are very similar to Christians but nevertheless on a step down from Christianity. In addition, the Legend can be used to show that Islam was the result of a project that had targeted the pagan Arabs. The result was a form of near-Christianity suitable for Arabs. The alleged Jewish elements in it were meant as a cue to the Syriac Christians that Islam was not for them.

Such a dynamic set of answers to Islam was also given by the famous East-Syrian Patriarch Timothy I (d. 785). He talked about the Prophet Muḥammad as someone who 'walked on the way of the Prophets and went on the path of those who love God' and he stressed the presence of

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[82] Michael P. Penn, *Envisioning Islam. Syriac Christians and the early Muslim world* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 88–89.
[83] See above, n. 74.

Christian notions in the Qur'an in his dialogue with the Caliph al-Mahdī.[84] In other writings, the Patriarch calls the Muslims 'new Jews'.[85] Rather than labelling this as contradictory, Philip Wood uses the apt term *availability*: 'Both views were available to the catholicos, for whom the Muslims might be depicted as Judaizers or as fellow monotheists'.[86] Here too, we get the impression that to give a fitting answer to Islam was specific to the circumstances.[87]

This versatility is presumably one of the main success factors of the Syriac Legend, which was read by Syriac Christians for many centuries, even until today.

Hagiography of the Religious Other

The man on the picture on the next page is Farhaan, a watchman of St Catherine's monastery who belongs to the local Bedouins of the Jabaliya tribe. The picture was made by a German tourist in Sinai in 1988. Farhaan noticed something strange on it and when he showed it to the monks, they noticed the cross that had appeared on Farhaan's garment. Everyone agreed that the unmistakable appearance of the cross, whose style they regarded as distinctly Byzantine, is a miracle. It confirmed to the monks that the Jabaliya, with whom they have an intriguing symbiotic relationship, are Christians at heart, even though they profess Islam. In the recent decades the relationship between the monks and the Bedouins has become more distant, but the monks are 'comforted by their belief that the Bedouins are at heart Christians loyal to the monastery'.[88]

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[84] Martin Heimgartner, *Disputation mit dem Kalifen Al-Mahdi*, Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptores Syri ; t. 244-45, 2 vols (Louvain: Peeters), vol. 1, 99, ed., vol. 2, 96, transl.

[85] Thomas R. Hurst, "Letter 40 of the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (727-823). An Edition and Translation" (MA Thesis, The Catholic University of America, 1981), 48.

[86] Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 254.

[87] See also my comments in "Pour une lecture des dialogues islamo-chrétiens en syriaque à la lumière des controversies internes à l'Islam," in *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque*, ed. Flavia Ruani (Paris: Geuthner, 2016), 261–94, 280.

[88] Joseph J. Hobbs, *Mount Sinai* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 163; the picture is printed on the next page.

Farhaan's distant glance underscores his unawareness of the miracle. It was at the level of his knee. In the case of the juvenile Muhammad, the miraculous appearance discerned by the monk was 'over his head'. He too was unaware.

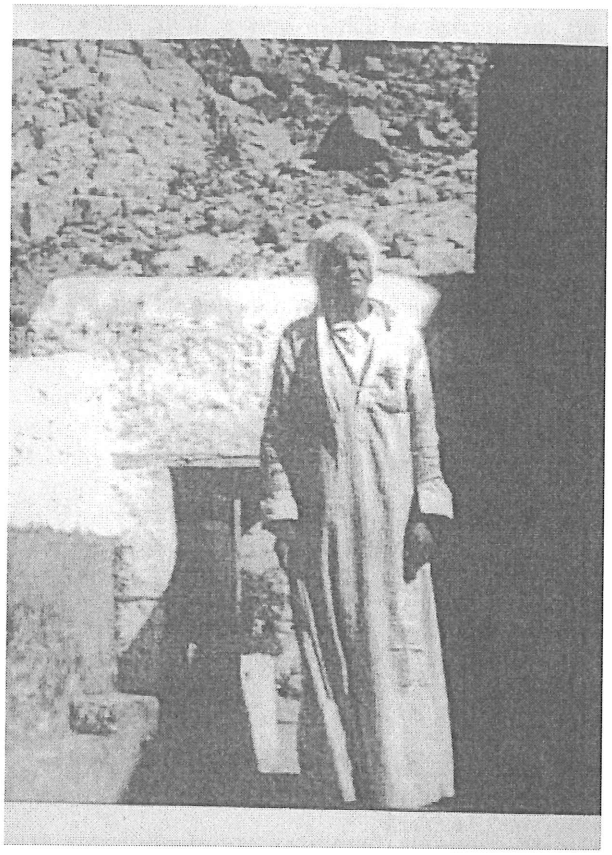

Fig. 1 Courtesy of the Monastery of St Catherine at Sinai

The picture at Sinai, in my interpretation, captures the essence of the Syriac Legend. The Legend also originates in a time when interaction between Christians and Muslims often took place around monasteries

and when Muslims appreciated monastic culture.[89] It likewise turns the subject into an object. And it is also about an 'other' who was unknowingly hallowed. Objectification of 'the other' is ever so often a means of creating distance and of rejection. In the case of the 'miracle of the robe' and the Syriac Legend, the strategy is 'to deny Muslims their alterity'.[90] It removes the need to self-examine the causes of difference.

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[89] See: Elisabeth Key Fowden, "The Lamp and the Wine Flask: Early Muslim Interest in Christian Monasticism," in *Islamic Crosspollinations. Interactions in the medieval Middle East*, ed. Anna Akasoy, James E. Montgomery and Peter E. Pormann (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007), 1–28; Elizabeth Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine: Muslim-Christian Encounters at Monasteries in the Early Islamic Middle East" (PhD Diss., University of Washington, 2009); Hilary Kilpatrick, "Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: the *Diyārāt* Books," in *Christians at the heart of Islamic Rule: Church life and scholarship in `Abbasid Iraq*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2003), 19–37. For the Qur'an's ambivalent attitude towards monasticism, see: Sara Sviri, "*Wa-rahbānīyatan ibtada'ūhā*. An analysis of traditions concerning the origin and evolution of Christian monasticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 195–208.

[90] Penn, *Envisioning Islam. Syriac Christians and the early Muslim world*, 100.