

SYRIAN CHRISTIANS UNDER ISLAM

The First Thousand Years

EDITED BY

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BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON · KÖLN
2001

A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE QUR'AN:
THE LEGEND OF SERGIUS-BAḤĪRĀ AND ITS USE OF
QUR'AN AND SĪRA

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'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'

Although it may form an appropriate opening of an article dealing with Islam, when it comes to the subject of this paper, the Legend of Baḥīrā, the *basmala* occurs within a fiercely anti-Muslim context. For according to this Christian legend, these were the very first words that the Christian monk Baḥīrā wrote for the illiterate Muḥammad.¹ This was the beginning of the long process of writing the Qur'an.

The theme of the Christian monk Baḥīrā's encounter with Muḥammad is well-known in both Muslim and Christian tradition. It is found in sources from as early as the second/eighth century. Different versions of the *Sīra al-nabawīyya* all tell the story of the monk recognising Muḥammad, when still a boy, as the final Prophet.² The monk sees a miraculous vision above Muḥammad's head and finds the 'Seal of Prophethood' between his shoulders, exactly as it is described in his book. The story is meant to show that Christians acknowledged Muḥammad's prophethood, and to prove the Muslim claim that Muḥammad was predicted in the Bible.

Christians in the Middle East had their own version of the story of this encounter, which they retold according to their own views and needs. For them, the story meant that Muḥammad did not receive his message from God, but from a monk who tried to convert the Arabs to the worship of One God. It was a reply to the claim that Muḥammad was a prophet and that the Qur'an was revealed, and it was meant to explain away the apologetic argument of the Prophet's illiteracy. In addition to isolated references to the story in several Syriac and Christian-Arabic sources, a group of texts has come down to us which relates at length the encounters of the monk with Muḥammad and which

¹ In the title of this paper I have given the name of the monk as it is found in some versions of the legend, but since the paper concentrates on a version which calls him only 'Baḥīrā' I will use this name here.

² See, for example, the account in Ibn Hishām's redaction of the oldest biography of the Prophet by Ibn Ishāq: Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat sayyidīnā Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen, 1859, vol. I/1, pp. 115-17.

forms 'the legend of Bahīrā'. It probably originates in the third/ninth century, but it has undergone several redactions. The versions known are two Syriac ones and two Arabic ones, which have circulated in both Jacobite and Nestorian milieus.³ In this chapter we shall focus on the longer Arabic version, which distinguishes itself from the other three versions by, amongst other features, the large number of quotations from the Qur'an.⁴ In this text we find in total about 40 verses from the Qur'an,⁵ which Bahīrā confesses to have written for Muḥammad. Whereas the Bahīrā legend is an interesting and important chapter in the history of Christian polemic against Islam, it forms in itself a synopsis of this polemic, because many different Christian reactions to Islam culminate in it. In this paper we shall discuss the way in which the longer Arabic version deals with the Qur'an, how it quotes from its text and how it refers to parts of Muḥammad's life and polemicalizes against it.

We can distinguish several kinds of verses from the Qur'an in the legend. In the following we shall give a categorisation and discuss some examples to show which types of polemic are connected to them.

³ A hasty edition and translation of these versions was published by Gottheil in a series of articles: R. Gottheil, "A Christian Bahīrā Legend", *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archeologie* 13, 1898, pp. 189-242; 14, 1899, pp. 203-68; 15, 1900, pp. 56-102; 17, 1903, pp. 125-66. New editions and translations have been prepared by me, which will be published shortly. For a discussion of some aspects of the relation between these versions and the milieu of origin of the legend, see S. H. Griffith, "Muḥammad and the Monk Bahīrā: reflections on a Syriac and Arabic text from early Abbasid times", *Oriens Christianus* 79, 1995, pp. 146-74. Apart from these versions we have a Latin Apocalypse of Bahīrā (edition in the article by J. Bignami-Odier and G. Levi Della Vida, "Une version latine de l'Apocalypse syro-arabe de Serge-Bahīrā", *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 1950, pp. 125-48). All versions of the Legend of Bahīrā contain two long accounts of the apocalyptic vision about the rise of Islam and its downfall, which the monk Bahīrā supposedly received on Mount Sinai before meeting Muḥammad. For a discussion of this apocalyptic material, see A. Abel, "L'Apocalypse de Bahīrā et la notion islamique de Mahdī", in *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales* 3, 1935 (*Volume offert à Jean Capart*), pp. 1-12; and *idem*, "Changements politiques et littérature eschatologique dans le monde musulman", *Studia Islamica* 2, 1954, pp. 23-43.

⁴ In all other versions Bahīrā dies in the middle of the story and his meetings with Muḥammad are recounted by another monk. In the longer Arabic version there is no mention of Bahīrā's death. It is he himself who tells about the meeting with Muḥammad in the form of a long confession in which he relates how he wrote the Qur'an for him. Because of the defectiveness of the old edition, I will refer to the Paris manuscript, MS Paris Arabe 215, which is the *manuscrit de base* for the forthcoming edition.

⁵ A precise number cannot be given. Some 'verses' are a combination of several Qur'anic phrases and some are not Qur'anic at all. Like the rest of the legend, the verses are written in 'Middle Arabic'.

'Pro-Christian Verses'

One type of verse that we can distinguish are those which refer positively to Christians, Christianity or the Bible. Several of these are well known from other Christian polemical writings against Islam. Some of them are explained briefly. For example, when Bahīrā writes: 'If you are in doubt of that which we have sent down to thee, ask those to whom the book has been given before' (Q 10.94), he explains: 'By this I mean that the Holy Gospel is truer than all books, and cannot be impaired by those who want to discredit it, nor can it be changed or falsified.'⁶ Other positive verses are left to speak for themselves, for example the well-known verse in *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*: 'You will surely find those closest in friendship to those who believe those who say: We are Christians. That is because amongst them there are priests and monks and because they are not proud' (Q 5.82).⁷ This positive remark about Christians has not usually been interpreted by Muslim theologians as referring to Christians in general. It has been narrowed down to certain groups, mostly the Christians from Abyssinia who converted to Islam, some of the Christians from Najrān, or, ironically, Bahīrā himself.⁸ The verse is presumably mentioned for a number of reasons, the most obvious being that such a positive notion can only originate from a Christian, and left without specification the implication is that it was meant in a general manner. It can furthermore be a plea for respect for Christians. But it also has to be read in connection with what follows, for the first quotation from the Qur'an that comes after it is what is in reality the first half of the same verse: 'You will find that the strongest in enmity against those who believe are the Jews and the polytheists.' Bahīrā then comments: 'Then I saw that Muḥammad thought that the polytheists are the Christians but I explained that they are Quraysh.' The reason for quoting this verse thus appears to be that it occasions a Christian reaction to the Muslim interpretation of the word polytheist, *mushrik*. Because of their belief in the Trinity, Christians were commonly called *mushrikūn*. Here we see that the *mushrikūn* are a separate category: otherwise how could these two passages mention first positively the Christians and then negatively the *mushrikūn*? In order to remove all doubt about the meaning of the verse, Bahīrā adds some very negative verses about the polytheists.⁹ The same procedure

⁶ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 162r.

⁷ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 161v.

⁸ For an elaborate discussion of the exegesis of this verse, see J. Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: an analysis of classical and modern exegesis*, New York, 1991, pp. 204-39.

⁹ They echo Q 9.5 but are not true Qur'anic verses.

of demonstrating on the basis of Qur'an passages that Christians are not polytheists is found, more elaborately, in Elias of Nisibis in his third *Majlis* with the vizier 'Abd al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī al-Maghribī, held in 1026,¹⁰ and in the Letter of Paul of Antioch to his Muslim friends, which probably dates from the end of the sixth/twelfth century.¹¹

An intriguing passage deals with Q 43.81, a verse which I have not found in other anti-Muslim writings.¹² We read that Baḥīrā wrote: 'If the Merciful had a son, I would be the first of the worshippers', *in kāna li-al-Rahmān walad, fa-anā awwal al-'ābidīn*.¹³ He explains: 'And [Muḥammad] inferred that it meant "the first of the deniers".' And he adds: 'The worshippers are not the deniers and the deniers are not the worshippers.' On the basis of Muslim sources we can reconstruct what is being intended here. The verse presented a problem to Muslim exegetes, since it seemed a blasphemous suggestion; therefore some exegetes said that the word *in* must mean 'not' in this verse. Thus Abu 'Ubayda, for example, writes in his *Kitāb al-Majāz*: "'in" (if) is in place of "mā" (not), according to what some say: *mā kāna li-al-Rahmān walad fa-anā awwal al-'ābidīn*.' But he also gives the following interpretation: 'If, in your words, the Merciful had a son, I would be the first of the deniers (*'ābidīn*)', that is to say the ones who disbelieve and reject what you say. And this is taken from *'abida*.¹⁴ So the word *'ābidīn* would mean 'rejecters' if it is taken from the verb *'abida* instead of *'abada*. The latter exegesis is undoubtedly the one to which the Baḥīrā legend refers and reacts; anachronistically, Muḥammad is made to express a view which certain *mufassirūn* had already suggested so that Baḥīrā can contest this particular interpretation. This explains Baḥīrā's addition, 'the worshippers are not the deniers and the deniers are not the worshippers', a sentence which is not Qur'anic, but which may have been made to echo the language of *Sūra* 109.

¹⁰ Louis Cheikho, "Majālis Iliyya muṭrān Naṣībīn", *Al-Mashriq* 20, 1922, pp. 117–22. See also S. K. Samir, "L'unicité absolue de Dieu: regards sur la pensée chrétienne arabe", *Lumière et Vie* 163, 1983, [pp. 35–48] pp. 38–9 (repr. in *Idem, Foi et culture en Irak au XI^e siècle: Elie de Nisibe et l'Islam*, Aldershot, 1996); and *Idem*, "Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien: Elie de Nisibe (Iliyya al-Nasibi) (975–1046)", *Islamochristiana* 3, 1977, [pp. 259–86] pp. 261–2 (repr. in *Idem, Foi et culture*).

¹¹ P. Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche: évêque melkite de Sidon (XII^e s.). Introduction, édition critique, traduction*, Beirut, 1965, pp. 66–7 (transl. pp. 174–5). See also the chapter by D. Thomas in the present volume, pp. 203–21.

¹² I place it in this category, although one could argue that as such it is not necessarily 'pro-Christian'.

¹³ MS Par. Ar. 215, ff. 161v–162r (in the Qur'an the verse starts with 'Say', *qul*).

¹⁴ Abu 'Ubayda, *Majāz al-Qur'an*, ed. M. F. Sazkin, Beirut, 1981, vol. II, pp. 206–7.

'Anti-Christian Verses'

As well as the positive verses about Christians, Baḥīrā includes a small number of verses which are reproaches to Christians or go against Christian views, some of which are familiar in anti-Christian polemic by Muslims. Quoting these verses, their anti-Christian implications can be refuted on the spot. We find, for example, the verse about the crucifixion of Christ, 4.157: 'They have not killed him and they have not crucified him, but it only appeared so to them.' Baḥīrā claims to have written this, and he adds: 'I meant by this that Christ did not die in the substance of his divine nature.'¹⁵

We also find the famous *Sūra* 112 (*al-Ikhlāṣ*): 'Say, He is God, One, God, the everlasting, *al-ṣamad*, He begets not nor is he Begotten and not any one is equal to him'. Baḥīrā explains that he wrote this at the time when he had lost all hope, because Muḥammad's followers kept returning to their former idolatrous beliefs. He says: 'I likened God to the one they used to worship and I made him *ṣamad*, not hearing and not seeing; like a stone.'¹⁶ The word *ṣamad* should here be translated as 'massive', 'lifeless', which is the interpretation that Christians have traditionally given to this almost untranslatable word. It is one of the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God, and has many connotations. It refers to God's being impenetrable, indivisible, high in dignity, the one to whom one prays, the one who cannot be affected by those who want to harm him. This short *Sūra* was often used as an anti-trinitarian slogan, but the Baḥīrā legend diverts attention from its anti-Christian implication by interpreting it as God being 'massive', 'lifeless', linking the verse to idolatry. Particularly in Byzantine polemics against Islam, this interpretation was rife, and this aided the perpetuation of the image of Islam as a form of idolatry.¹⁷

'Neutral Verses'

In addition to these two types of verse which refer explicitly to Christianity, the Baḥīrā legend also contains verses which as such do not, or which were not used against Christians. As indicated above, the first words for Baḥīrā to write were the *basmala*. These are endowed

¹⁵ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 161r.

¹⁶ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 172v.

¹⁷ D. Sahas, "'Holosphyros?' A Byzantine Perception of 'The God of Muḥammad'", in Y. Yazbeck Haddad and W. Z. Haddad eds, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, Gainesville (etc.), 1995, pp. 109–25.

with a Christian meaning: *Allāh* refers to the Father, *al-Rahmān* to the Son and *al-Rahīm* to the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ The same happens with some other verses: the text attributes a Christian meaning to them, while in Muslim exegesis they are not interpreted as referring to Christians. An example which can also be found in other anti-Muslim writings is the beginning of *Sūrat al-Baqara*: 'ALM, that is the book in which there is no doubt' (Q 2.1f.).¹⁹ The words 'that is the book', *dhālika al-kitāb*, are interpreted as the Gospel. Some Muslim scholars recognised that the construction of this sentence necessarily meant that the reference is to another book than the Qur'an itself. For example, al-Ṭabarī, in his *tafsīr* of this verse, mentions that some exegetes believed that this referred to scriptures prior to the Qur'an.²⁰

Some of these verses do not come with any explanation by the monk, so it is not always immediately clear why they have been included. But by retracing the verses in other Muslim-Christian debates, the reason why they have been included can sometimes be reconstructed. Without any further comment Baḥīrā writes: 'God and the angels *yusallūna 'alā* the Prophet. O believers, bless him and greet him' (Q 33.56).²¹ The relevance of this verse in Muslim-Christian debate can be shown from a passage in the religious debate of Abraham of Tiberias with 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Hāshimī.²² One of the Muslim participants in the debate asks: 'O monk, tell me, did Christ pray or not? Because the Gospel bears witness that he prayed to God and addressed himself to Him. But a God does not pray.' The monk says: 'It is true that God does not pray, but Christ prayed in the substance of his human nature to his Father.' Then the monk takes his turn to ask: 'Tell me to whom do the believers pray?' The Muslim says: 'To the Unique God, Lord of mankind.' 'And to whom do the angels pray?' 'Also to God,' he answers. 'And God, to whom does he pray?', the monk continues. The Muslim expresses his horror at hearing this question and says: 'God never prays—the prayers of the angels and the people are

¹⁸ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 160v. The same interpretation is found with the Ethiopian apologist 'Enbaqom in his treatise *Anqaša Amin*; E. J. van Donzel, *Enbaqom, Anqaša Amin (La porte de la foi). Apologie Éthiopienne du Christianisme contre l'Islam à partir du Coran*, Introduction, texte critique, traduction, Leiden, 1969, pp. 222–5.

¹⁹ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 175r.

²⁰ This issue is discussed by H. Berg in his article "Ṭabarī's Exegesis of the Qur'anic Term *al-Kitāb*", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, 1995, pp. 761–74, esp. pp. 767–8; see also p. 210 below.

²¹ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 167r.

²² G. B. Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Hāshimī à Jérusalem vers 820. Étude, édition critique et traduction annotée d'un texte théologique chrétien de la littérature arabe (Textes et Études sur l'Orient Chrétien 3)*, Rome, 1986, pp. 470–83.

directed to him!' The monk then replies with this verse of *Sūra* 33. The Muslim protests that this is a different matter: the '*ṣalāt*' of God refers to his mercy and his forgiveness towards the prophets and apostles. The monk remarks that the Qur'anic verse is then strange, because no distinction is made between the prayer of God and the prayer of the angels. But he concedes this explanation and says: 'Like that are the prayers of Christ; they are his mercy to the ones who believe in him and follow him.' We see how the verse was used in a debate that was initiated by Muslims. Coming back to the Baḥīrā legend, it can be safely assumed that this verse is included as a reminder of this argument to the Christians.

Some 'neutral verses' are also to be found in the passages where it is described how Baḥīrā tries to establish a clear law to which the followers of Muḥammad can adhere. These deal with prayer, fasting and food laws, in which Baḥīrā identifies the Christian symbolism of his inventions. For example, the threefold aspects of prayer refer to the Trinity, and when he describes paradise to Muḥammad he explains that its four rivers refer to the four gospels.

The 'Counter-asbāb al-nuzūl'

Most of the different verses that are presented in the legend are listed without any context. However, with a subgroup of 'neutral verses' their writing has been placed in a specific setting, in which Muḥammad and Baḥīrā are debating about how to establish the religion, 'negotiating' about what to impose on the people. For example, when Baḥīrā proposes that Muḥammad should teach his people how to pray, Muḥammad says that his people will not be able to stand long and frequent prayers,²³ and Baḥīrā then reduces them. This could very well be a reference to the reduction of prayers that according to the Ḥadīth took place during Muḥammad's miraculous night journey, when he went up to the seventh heaven and met the former prophets on his way. When God commands Muḥammad to institutionalise fifty daily prayers, Moses warns Muḥammad that this is too heavy a duty for the believers and he advises him to ask God for a reduction in number, which is granted. Clearly, the legend attempts to create a kind of counter-context to this story. Baḥīrā takes God's place and the heavy load of fifty prayers is replaced by seven prayers per day, together with reading of the Psalms.²⁴

²³ MS Par. Ar. 215, ff. 163r, 164r.

²⁴ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 164r. I. Alon, "Bargaining with God", *Le Muséon* 110, 1997, [pp. 223–48] p. 240. has noted that in one Ḥadīth in al-Bayhaqī's collection Muḥammad's

In the course of time, Baḥīrā's suggestions regularly conflict with either Muḥammad's wishes or with the habits of his people. It is on those occasions that what we could call the 'counter-*asbāb al-nuzūl*' appear. In this type of passage the *asbāb al-nuzūl* are changed into trivial circumstances, which are, however, close enough to the Muslim version of the events to make it recognisably a parody. We will discuss three more examples of this.

The Direction of Prayer

Again with the issue of prayer, Baḥīrā explains at what time Muḥammad's followers have to pray, and Muḥammad then asks: 'To which place do I command them to turn their faces, considering that they are praying around the House to idols?' Baḥīrā replies: 'Make them pray to the East where the sun rises, because from there all light and brightness radiates and every star moves and proceeds from there. And below it is the garden of Eden, Paradise, from below which the rivers flow.'²⁵ Muḥammad later returns to Baḥīrā saying that he ordered the people to bow and pray to the East but they protested and said: 'We will not obey you and leave the *qibla* which we and our fathers have been used to, to pray to another one.' Baḥīrā gives in and lets Muḥammad 'change the rules' under the pretence of a new revelation.

The Qur'an indicates that there was a change of *qibla* in Q 2.142–50, which was traditionally believed to have taken place in the second year of the Hijra. The Qur'an refers to a change of direction to the 'Holy Mosque' (Q 2.144, 149), which is interpreted as Mecca's sanctuary. Although there is no indication of what the previous direction of prayer was, Jerusalem is believed to have been the previous *qibla*. There is no unanimity on the question of whether this was temporary or permanent.²⁶ The Baḥīrā legend tells us that the change was from an eastward direction, the direction of prayer of the Syrian Christians, to Mecca. Although the main point of this passage seems to be Muḥammad's having to give in to the wishes of his people, there is more latent criticism. First of all, the fact that there was a change in religious

direct speech to God is described (whereas in other traditions his speaking is only implicit). Muḥammad says: 'Oh Lord, I fear that my *Umma* will not be capable of this.' In similar wording Muḥammad expresses this fear to Baḥīrā: MS Par. Ar. 215, ff. 163r, 164r.

²⁵ MS Par. Ar. 215, ff. 164r–v.

²⁶ For the problems related to this, cf. *ET*² art. "Kibla"; and R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: a survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam* (*Studies in late antiquity and early Islam* 13), Princeton, 1997, pp. 560–74.

stipulations makes it unlikely that these instructions come from God.²⁷ Secondly, the change was from 'Christianity' to 'Arabism'—pointing 'backwards' to the Christian origin of Islam.

The issue of the direction of prayer is raised in the majority of Muslim-Christian debates, in which Christians often had to answer for their own direction of prayer. In one of the earliest Muslim-Christian debates, the *Dialogue of the Monk of Bēt Ḥālē with an Arab Notable*, the monk is asked to explain why Christians face the East during prayer.²⁸ He explains that paradise is in the East, that Christ prayed to the East and that all churches have been built in the direction of the East. He adds some proofs from the Old Testament that the East was important. Further, in the famous debate between the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the caliph al-Mahdī, the caliph is more critical and Timothy is more defensive when this issue appears in the context of the question of how Christ abrogated the Old Law. The caliph asks whether it was not to Jerusalem that Christ himself prayed. Timothy replies by explaining how Christ himself abrogated the old direction of prayer, but he also goes out of his way to show that the East was the very first direction to which Adam prayed before being driven out of paradise.²⁹ The criticism implied in the caliph's question concerns the divergence from the true form of worship—a type of critique that is particularly dominant in the fourth/tenth-century Mu'tazilite theologian 'Abd al-Jabbār's discussion of Christianity.³⁰ As the Patriarch defends himself by referring to Adam, he seeks recourse to a more Muslim than Christian style of arguing. He claims to know and follow the 'pristine religion' (and is perhaps trying to outdo the Muslims in their claim to Abrahamic religion). We see how what we could call the 'polemic

²⁷ It would imply *bad'*, a change of mind on the part of God.

²⁸ MS Diyarbakir Syriac 95, ff. 14–15. The early dating of this debate is based on the assumption that a certain Maslama, mentioned in the text, is to be identified with Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik, governor of Iraq in the 720s. See S. H. Griffith, "Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)", *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter, proceedings of the 25th Wolfenbütteler Symposium* (June 1989), ed. B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner, Wiesbaden, 1992, [pp. 251–73] pp. 259–60.

²⁹ A. Mingana ed., "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi", *Woodbrooke Studies* 2, Cambridge, 1928, [pp. 1–162] p. 104, trans. pp. 29–30.

³⁰ 'Abd al-Jabbār saw Christianity as a bundle of inventions from the time after Christ. He accused Christians of having left Christ's *qibla* for a Roman *qibla*; see 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān, Beirut, 1966, partial translation and discussion in S. M. Stern, "'Abd al-Jabbār's Account of How Christ's Religion Was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs", *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 19, 1968, pp. 28–86; and S. Pines, "The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source", *Proceedings of the Israeli Academy of Science and Humanities* 2, 1966, pp. 237–310.

of *bid'a* took over a debate that arose in early times because of an easily recognisable difference between the two religions. Reading in the Bahīrā legend how Muḥammad changed his *qibla* shows that this type of polemic worked both ways.

Miracles

Another passage which aims to show that the contents of Muslim scripture were determined by circumstances during the life of the Prophet is the one about miracles. Muḥammad comes to Bahīrā and is at loss because his people say they will not believe that he is a prophet if he does not show them a miracle (an issue that is expressed clearly in Q 17.90 ff.: 'We will not believe in you till you make a spring gush forth from the earth for us', etc.). Bahīrā promises to solve this problem and he writes: 'Nothing prevented us from sending the signs but that the ancients cried lies to them' (Q 17.59).³¹ Here we have to do with one of the sharpest points of criticism, launched by Christians against the Prophet of Islam time and again. Thaumaturgy was considered a prerequisite for prophethood, and Christian polemicists claimed that it can be known from the Qur'an that Muḥammad did not work miracles. Not only does the Qur'an not record any miracles as such, it was said, but it also states that Muḥammad did not work miracles and did not consider himself a miracle-worker. The Patriarch Timothy, in his debate with the Caliph al-Mahdī, raised this very issue, saying that all the words of God have been confirmed by signs and that abrogation can only occur by means of miraculous signs. He claims that if God had wished to abrogate the Gospel and introduce another Scripture in its place he would have done this by means of miracles.³² The Qur'anic verse in question is adduced in the *Kitāb al-Burhān* of the Nestorian apologist 'Ammār al-Baṣrī and in the *Apology of al-Kindī*, in which Muḥammad's miracles are ridiculed and explained away as apocryphal stories.³³ The thirteenth-century Jewish philosopher Ibn Kammūna gives a whole list of Qur'an verses which indicate that Muḥammad considered himself 'just a warner'.³⁴ Here in the Bahīrā legend we must

³¹ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 173v.

³² Mingana, *Timothy's Apology*, p. 110, trans. pp. 36-7.

³³ 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-burhān*, in M. Hayek ed., *'Ammār al-Baṣrī, Apologie et controverses*, Beyrouth, 1977, pp. 31-2; *Risala 'Abd Allāh b. Ismā'il al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīh b. Ishāq al-Kindī yad'ūhu bihā ilā al-Islām wa risālat 'Abd al-Masīh ilā al-Hāshimī yaruddu bihā 'alayhi wa yad'ūhu ilā al-Naṣrāniyya*, ed. A. Tien, London, 1880, p. 58, trans. G. Tartar, *Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien sous le calife al-Ma'mun (813-834), les épîtres d'Al-Hāshimī et d'Al-Kindī*, Paris, 1985, p. 159.

³⁴ Ibn Kammūna, *Sa'd b. Manṣūr b. Kammūna's Examination of the Inquiries into the Three*

assume that this verse was put in this context to indicate clearly that it indeed arose as nothing more than an excuse.

Muḥammad's Night Journey

An interesting rewriting of Muslim tradition underlies the passage about Muḥammad's night journey and ascension. Bahīrā says:

I taught Muḥammad that he had been carried up to heaven and I informed him of all that I saw at the time when the angel took me up to heaven and I described everything to him, not leaving out a single thing, and I made him say to them: 'I have ridden al-Burāq to Bayt al-Maqdis.' And when Muḥammad told this to his companions they gave him the lie and said to him: 'We do not want you to describe heaven to us. Give us a description of Bayt al-Maqdis and what is in it!' And he said to them: 'Please let me ask my Lord.' And they allowed him. So he came to me filled with sadness and said: 'I have informed them about it but they did not accept a word of what I said. They have demanded a complete description of Bayt al-Maqdis.' And I said to him: 'Say to them: "I have asked my Lord and he has promised me that he will send it to me on the wing of Gabriel so that I can describe all of it for you."' And he did what I told him. And as a confirmation of what he had said I wrote for him the verse: 'Glory be to Him who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque, the precincts of which we have blessed' (Q 17.1). And I wrote for him: 'He was two bow's-lengths away or nearer.' (Q 53.9)³⁵

In Muslim tradition we find elaborate accounts of how Muḥammad went in one night from Mecca to Jerusalem on the steed al-Burāq and how he went up to heaven where he met the former prophets. The Qur'an gives little information about Muḥammad's night journey as such. The well-known verse, which is a starting point for the accounts that we find in *Sīra* and Ḥadīth literature, is 17.1. Other Qur'an passages which have been connected to this event are 53.1-18, 81.19-25, 17.60 and 94.1. These scant verses were woven into an elaborate story, but not all traditionists did this in the same manner.³⁶ Originally the

Faiths: a thirteenth-century essay in comparative religion, ed. M. Perlmann, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, pp. 135-6, trans. M. Perlmann, *Ibn Kammūna's Examination of the Three Faiths: a thirteenth-century essay in the comparative study of religion*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, pp. 92-3.

³⁵ MS Par. Ar. 215, ff. 174r-v.

³⁶ Important studies which reconstruct the growth of the night journey traditions are: B. Schrieke, "Die Himmelsreise Muḥammads", *Der Islam* 6, 1916, pp. 1-30; A. A. Bevan, "Mohammad's Ascension to Heaven", in K. Marti ed., *Studien zur Semitischen Philologie und Religionsgeschichte Julius Wellhausen zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 27)*, Giessen, 1914, pp. 51-61; H. Busse, "Jerusalem

story of the *Mirāj* was regarded as a journey to Heaven where the 'Further Mosque', the Masjid al-Aqṣā, was to be found. It was Muḥammad's rite of initiation, part of which was the opening of his breast and the washing of his heart (cf. Q 94.1). This is how we find it in the History of al-Ṭabarī, who places it at the beginning of Muḥammad's prophetic career.³⁷

Then there was the interpretation that the Masjid al-Aqṣā was Jerusalem, the idea being that Muḥammad travelled there and back in one night. On arriving in Jerusalem he led a prayer and the other prophets prayed behind him. This journey was known as the *Isrā'*.

These events were combined: the ascension to heaven takes place from Jerusalem during the night journey from Mecca and all this was placed at a later date when Muḥammad had already received revelations. During that ascension he travels through the seven heavens, accompanied by Gabriel, he meets the former prophets there and he receives the command to institute the five daily prayers.

At the same time there were traditions which presupposed that it was all a vision—a journey of the spirit, not of the body. This is based on Q 17.60 where a vision is mentioned. A tradition on the authority of 'Ā'isha made clear that Muḥammad's body remained where it was during the events.³⁸

The differing opinions of those who believed in an actual journey and those who believed in a vision were combined in, for example, the account by Ibn Ṣa'd.³⁹ What he gives is: a journey to heaven (starting from the Meccan sanctuary at a place 'between the Maqām and Zamzam') and a separate account of the night journey to Jerusalem, which is followed by disbelief among the people. After this Muḥammad receives a vision of Jerusalem, which allows him to answer the questions of the people about it and to give a detailed description of it.

In the legend it is, of course, Baḥīrā who gives him these details. What makes the story a particularly easy target for a polemical retelling is first of all the fact that the story records the disbelief of the Muslims.

in the Story of Muḥammad's Night Journey", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14, 1991, pp. 1–40.

³⁷ *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., Leiden, 1879–1901, vol. I, pp. 1157–9.

³⁸ See Ibn Hishām, *Strat sayyidīnā*, vol. I/1, p. 265. Al-Ṭabarī gives numerous Ḥadīths in which it is claimed that this was only a journey of the spirit: al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, Cairo, 1905–12, part 15, pp. 2–14 *passim*.

³⁹ Ibn Ṣa'd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, Beirut, 1960–8, vol. I, pp. 213–6. Schrieke, who drew attention to this procedure, remarked: 'Im arabischen Text ist die Naht der Zusammenflickung noch ganz gut wahrzunehmen' (Schrieke, "Die Himmelsreise", p. 19). This remark is equally valid for the account of Ibn Hishām.

It is not Muḥammad's opponents who distrust Muḥammad's claim of having travelled to Jerusalem and heaven in one night, but the believers. Abū Bakr believed it and was consequently called al-Ṣiddīq but it is stated explicitly that many apostatised at the time.⁴⁰ The fact that Muḥammad proved his claim afterwards by describing Jerusalem is also a key point: the proof of his claim supposedly comes from a much less miraculous version of the story, in which Muḥammad does not himself move. Although it is possible that this is the only form in which the redactor of the legend knew the story, it is more likely that this composite version was chosen specifically to make that point. As a reminder of the fact that all of this goes back to the tradition and not to the Qur'an, Baḥīrā only writes two very vague verses. Apart from 17.1 he also quotes verse 53.9: 'He was two bow's-lengths away or nearer.' Then Baḥīrā adds: 'And I made it such that nobody who would come after him from his community could understand this passage, because in fact he neither went up nor did he come down.' This writing of the verse Q 53.9 is another finger on the sore spot of the continuous discussions about the visions of Muḥammad. This verse, or rather verses 1–18 of *Sūra* 59, are overloaded with debate among the *mufasssīrūn*. The question is: Who forms the subject of verses 5–11? It was God, says the early tradition. But this was a problem for most of the theologians because it implies a corporeal God, and so the view that it had been Gabriel, became dominant.⁴¹ (The Qur'anic verses 81.19 and 23 may, in fact, be a rectification of the suggestion that it was God.) However, verse 53.9 was at the same time incorporated in the Night Journey traditions, where it meant that Muḥammad was at that distance from God. In *The Book of Muḥammad's Ladder* the phrase occurs twice and implies in both instances the distance between God and Muḥammad.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibn Ṣa'd describes the disbelief of the people who heard the Prophet relate the events. Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī explicitly mention that many Muslims apostatised: Ibn Ṣa'd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, vol. I, pp. 215–6; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, part 15, p. 5; Ibn Hishām, *Strat sayyidīnā*, vol. I/1, p. 264. The Latin translation of a Mozarabic polemical work against Islam, the *Liber Denudationis siue ostensionis aut patefaciens* (better known under the name *Contrarietas alfolica*), contains a chapter on the night journey (called 'the counterfeiting of the most improbable vision') which is very similar in wording to the passage in the legend. There it is said that after Muḥammad had related his vision 'sixty thousand men abandoned his religion'; T. E. Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050–1200*, Leiden, 1994, pp. 374–85.

⁴¹ Both interpretations are found in the large number of different traditions recorded by al-Ṭabarī in his *Tafsīr*; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, part 27, pp. 24–9. For an analysis of this passage, see R. Bell, "Muḥammad's Visions", *The Moslem World* 24, 1924, pp. 145–54.

⁴² See, for example, in the Latin version: *Le Livre de l'Échelle de Mahomet: Liber Scale*

There are several explanations for the inclusion of verse 53.9 in the legend. One is simply that the redactor only knew it in relation to the night-journey association of the verse and wanted to show that there are no more than two vague verses in the Qur'an referring to the events. Also, the verse may have been picked on because it refers to a very important event but in a doubtful manner, the distance not being exactly specified. It is also possible that the redactor knew about the divergence in opinion about the subject of this sentence, and that he wanted to draw attention to it. That is perhaps the most likely explanation given the last remark: 'And I made it such that nobody who would come after him from his community could understand this passage.'

Discussion

The examples chosen in this chapter are meant to give a representative picture of the different 'readings of the Qur'an' within the longer Arabic version of the Baḥīrā legend. The cross section presented reveals a combination of polemical strategies. 'The Qur'an confirms Christian beliefs' is a clearly distinguishable tendency in the legend. The aim is firstly to make clear that the Qur'an can be shown to have originated in Christian circles instead of being revealed, and secondly that Christians should not be attacked by Muslims for their beliefs. This tendency forms a thread within Christian apologetic writings in Syriac and Arabic. It is already found in the *Dialogue of the Monk of Bēt Hālē with an Arab Notable*, in which the monk exhorts the Arab either to confess Christ as Son of God or to distance himself from the Qur'anic phrase 'Word of God and His Spirit'.⁴³

The legend highlights 'pro-Christian' verses, but at the same time tries to explain away verses which seem to contest that 'Christian origin'. Verses from the Qur'an which do not agree with Christian views are shown to be interpreted in the wrong way by Muḥammad and his people (read: Muslim theologians). In other polemical writings of Christians against Islam, including the other versions of the Baḥīrā legend, the verses which go against Christian views are explained as the influence of other men on Muḥammad after Baḥīrā's death, for example the Jew Ka'b al-Aḥbar, or as the result of the falsification of the

Machometi, ed. G. Besson/M. Brossard-Dandré, s.l., 1991, pp. 154-5, 236-7. See also R. Hyatte, *The Prophet of Islam in Old French: the Romance of Muhammad (1258) and the Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)* (*Brill's Studies in Intellectual History* 75), English translations, with an introduction, Leiden, 1997, pp. 126, 157.

⁴³ MS Diyarbakir Syriac 95, ff. 8-9.

Qur'an after Muḥammad's death. The Byzantine writer Bartholomew of Edessa, for example, writes: 'I have found that your Qur'an says the truth and tells lies. The truth stems from Baḥīrā's teaching to Muḥammad, the lies from the writing of 'Uthmān. From this we can deduce that your Scripture did not come from heaven, because at times it tells the truth and at times it tells lies.'⁴⁴ This notion is absent from our text: the legend divests the 'anti-Christian verses' of their standard explanation, Christianising the exegesis (although the monk does predict at the end of his confession that a lot of his teaching will be changed at a later date).⁴⁵

Apart from this, the legend tries to lay bare the contingency of the Islamic message by means of what I have called the 'counter-*asbāb al-nuzūl*'. The notion of Islam being a universal religion with divinely sanctioned laws is attacked by means of the tales of problems and changes at the earliest time of the religion coming into being. The genesis of Islam is described wholly in terms of 'down to earth' circumstances and compromises.

Even though most of the words of Baḥīrā are left to speak for themselves, below the surface the legend reflects knowledge of discord among the Muslim theologians on certain issues. The fact that the sensitive issues that are touched upon are not always explained may mean that the background of the debate about these verses was known among the Christians who were involved in debate with Muslims. It is likely that much of the knowledge of the Qur'an and its exegesis was the result of actual discussions with Muslims. Some verses of the Qur'an probably came up in Muslim-Christian debates regularly, and Christian debaters may have discovered that Muslim scholars did not always understand these verses in the same way. Their interpretation perhaps even changed through debates with Christians. For example, the opening passage of *Sūra* 53 was used by Abraham of Tiberias in his debate with 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī. One of the Muslims in the debate asks: What would have happened with the world if Christ had died in Mary's womb? Abraham replies by asking the question: What would have happened to the world if God had fallen when 'He was at the highest horizon and came down'? (Q 53.7-8). The Muslim does not contest that the Qur'anic passage under discussion refers to God, and Abraham claims that therefore the Muslim cannot attack Christians

⁴⁴ Bartholomaios von Edessa, *Confutatio Agareni*, kommentierte griechisch-deutsche Textausgabe von K.-P. Todt (*Corpus Islamo-Christianum, Series Graeca* 2), Würzburg/Altenberge, 1988, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁵ MS Par. Ar. 215, f. 175r.

for having a conception of God as being limited and susceptible to accidents.⁴⁶ But once Christians had discovered this passage as a 'weapon' for debates with Muslims, they may have found out that other Muslims insisted this referred to Gabriel. This divergence in opinion then became a new 'weapon' which is used here. On the other hand, it is possible that works of *tafsīr* were read to discover discord about certain verses. For this it was not necessary to peruse and compare shelves full of Qur'an commentaries; for example with this passage of *Sūra* 53 al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* would have been sufficient for a Christian theologian to discover the problems related to it.

We cannot reconstruct the exact way in which Christians became acquainted with Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an. But what, nevertheless, seems clear is that verses quoted in the legend had become 'tags' of debate, in the sense that, by simply mentioning the verses the legend was able to evoke among the Christian audience discussions linked to them. Logically, they would have come with more elaborate explanations had the backgrounds of these verses not been common knowledge. In this respect they resemble the chapters of Dionysius bar Ṣalībī against the Muslims, which are found at the end of his larger work against heresies.⁴⁷ The last six *memre* of the thirty in this work consist of quotations from the Qur'an in Syriac (and they have a remarkable number in common with the Baḥīrā legend) without any comment at all. Again, the fact that the long list of quotations from the Qur'an in this work comes without any explanation, suggests that Christians had these verses handy as ready-made replies to challenges to their faith. Some of the verses were apparently picked because they were problematic for Muslims, in the sense that they had no straightforward exegesis for them (e.g. the mysterious letters, excerpts of Q 53 and Q 5.64). A Christian could supply this in debate with a Muslim.

This brings us to what may be considered the overall tendency of the Baḥīrā legend. What connects the different detectable strands of polemic is the point that a Christian, here in the person of Baḥīrā, can be shown to have a true background knowledge of the rise of

⁴⁶ Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade*, pp. 462-9.

⁴⁷ An edition of these chapters is being prepared by Prof. J. Amar. For an introduction to the manuscripts and contents of this work see S. H. Griffith, "Dionysius bar Ṣalībī on the Muslims", *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984, Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (Groningen—Oosterhesselen 10-12 September)* (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 229), ed. H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, S. J. Molenberg, and G. J. Reinink, Rome, 1987, and *idem*, "Disputes with Muslims", pp. 268-9. For a facsimile of the relevant chapters in MS Mingana Syriac 89 and a survey of all Qur'an verses in them, see A. Mingana, "An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Qur'an Exhibiting New Verses and Variants", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9, 1925, pp. 188-235.

Islam, to the extent that he can explain what Muslims cannot.⁴⁸ Baḥīrā, as writer of the Qur'an and witness to and confessor of Muḥammad, is *mufasssīr* par excellence, and therefore he can, anachronistically, give the final verdict on the exegetical debate. His 'existence' was attested by Muslim sources, but we could say that his existence, and with that his authority, is also established within the legend itself. The text gradually 'proves' Baḥīrā's existence by showing the Christian essence of part of the Qur'an. Baḥīrā's authoritativeness also grows, and this in its turn can be used to interpret whatever does not seem to fit the Christian mind at first sight. The authoritativeness created within the legend has its function outside: it works as a justification for Christians to interpret the Qur'an in the first place.

That the exegesis of this Christian monk necessarily supersedes all Muslim exegesis is the clue to the legend. This is made clear once again at the very end of the monk's confession. In order to take away all doubt about who has the right and capacity to interpret the Qur'an, Baḥīrā says that he did not make a *tafsīr* with his book, and that nobody knows how to explain it except 'God and the well-versed in knowledge'. This is an echo of Q 3.7, in which it is said that the meaning of the ambiguous verses in the Qur'an, *āyāt mutashābihāt*, can only be known to God and those well-versed in knowledge, *al-rāsikhūn fī al-ʿilm*. There is no need to explain who is regarded here as *rāsikh fī al-ʿilm* and who is not.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ As said, some verses are invented by Baḥīrā to make a clear 'law' for Muḥammad's people. He gives the people food laws and tells them about good behaviour, and he instructs them in detail how to pray. The passages about prayer make up a very tedious part of the legend in which all the 'threefold' aspects of the Muslim prayer are pointed out. It seems very farfetched to relate the movements in the *ṣalāt* to the Trinity, but perhaps we should not think that this is meant to convince anybody that the Muslim prayers are essentially Christian. The point seems to be that a Christian can indicate why Muslims do what they do, whereas a Muslim could not (as opposed to Christians who justify their acts of worship by explaining their symbolism).

⁴⁹ I would like to thank Fred Leemhuis for his comments on this paper.