

# *The Story of Monk Sargis-Baḥīrā*

## *Early Christian-Muslim Encounters*

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### *Introduction*

The Syriac communities have been orally circulating the story of the monk Sargis-Bahira since the eighth century. Although its oral tradition is widely spread, the written story is not well studied and publicized. Moreover, the oral story (or stories) has been embellished and/ or distorted and ends with varying conclusions. At a later period, the Christian version of Bahira was translated into Armenian and Latin where it gained more popularity, as a means of apology. Less known among lay Christian readers is an Islamic version of Bahira's story, in which Bahira testified to Muhammad having "the seal of prophecy" and "a great future." Equally, lay Muslim readers are less acquainted with Bahira in the Christian sources.

There are two versions of Bahira in the Christian sources, one Syriac and another Arabic. Both versions are filled with historical, ecclesiastical and doctrinal elements, which are traced back to the seventh century. Additionally, the story on its own right is an apocalyptic, hagiographic and apologetic literature. Thus, it would be insufficient to treat all these elements in one article, especially for the lay reader. A comprehensive study and critical edition of the story might be separately published soon. The purpose of this article, however, is to introduce the written story of both Christian and Muslim versions, then to treat the issue of date and authorship. As the article continues, the important historical events embedded in the story, and its religious motifs will be highlighted. Throughout the story, the reader will be guided to look at the text within its own historical and apologetic context. The focus will be on the Syriac text, the Arabic text will also be published, and a new translation based on the Syriac version will be added when there is a gap between the two versions. The Islamic version of Bahira is quoted from Ibn Hisham.

### *The Text*

As it is the case in the Islamic tradition of the story of Bahira, the essential outline of the story of Bahira in the Christian sources remains the same in all textual traditions although with many variations. There are shorter and longer recensions. Moreover, the Christian Bahira was preserved in both the Syriac and Arabic languages. Much evidence in the texts point to the Syriac version as the earliest. It is evident that throughout the centuries, copyists have changed and interpolated various elements to enhance their apologetic position at the time. While the story of Bahira in Islamic sources consists of one part, in the Christian sources, it consists of three parts. The three parts belong to different

periods, but are loosely tied together to form its own tradition after the ninth century. According to this written tradition, an itinerant monk, YeshuYahb, whose long journey led him to monk Bahira, tells the whole story. YeshuYahb encountered Bahira for eight days after which he died. Then Yeshu`Yahb relates the story as he had heard it from Bahira himself.

In the first part, Bahira speaks about his journey to Jerusalem and the holy Mount Sinai. On Mount Sinai, he was captured, in spirit not in body, into heaven to watch a vision which relates the religious and historical future of the region. In that vision, Bahira was commanded to warn both the Byzantine and Persian emperors that their kingdoms will be vanquished at the hands of “the Sons of Ishamel.” And “the Sons of Ishamel” will dominate and rule up to “twenty four kings,” and “within ten weeks.” Bahira obeyed the command of the angel, according to the vision, and informed both emperors, who caused him no harm. The harm, however, came from the hierarchy of the church, accusing him being “hatred of the cross.” “In fact, [this happened] because he said that only one cross should be placed in the church, and only one cross, should be worshipped since even Christ was crucified on one cross, not on many crosses.” Consequently, Bahira withdrew to the wilderness of Yathrib, where he encountered “the Sons of Ishamel,” and he prophesied to them about their future. “The Sons of Ishmael” liked and honored him, and they built a cell and dug a well for him, thus among them he dwelt in peace and tranquility. The sons of Ishmael used to visit him and were instructed by him. At the end, “Bahira wrote and delivered to them the book, which they called Quran.” This section ends with two notes. First, it relates that even after the death of Bahira, the sons of Ishmael were resorting to his grave, over which “a great miracle took place.” Second, after Bahira’s death, a Jewish scribe has falsified the teaching and the writing of Bahira, teaching them that “Muhammad is the Paraclete,” about which Jesus had promised to send.

The outline of the second part of the story corresponds to the Islamic version of BaÊirâ. It contains how Bahira first encountered Muhammand, recognizing him among the rest of the nomads, predicting that “he is the one in whom his prophecy will be fulfilled.” Afterwards, the story relates many encounters between Muhammad and Bahira, and a string of questions and answers between the two.

The third part departs from the dialectical style of the second part to follow, as in the first part, the apocalyptic genre. Here, the story relates several additional apocalyptic visions regarding the reign of the “ten weeks” of the dynasties of “the sons of Ishmael” and their final fall.

The Islamic version of Bahira, likewise, was related by various traditions. The most familiar of all is the version of Ibn Hisham. The story conveys that when Muhammad was twelve years old, he was accompanied by his uncle Abu Talib on a journey to Belad al-Sham. In Busra, they encountered monk Bahira, who “looked on his back and saw the seal of prophecy between his shoulders, in a very place described in his book.” Thus, Bahria warned his uncle to guard the child from the Jews, who wanted to harm him. Bahira also confirmed to his uncle that “a great future lies before this nephew of yours.”

### *The Polemical Context of Bahira*

It is not easy to determine which religious tradition first related the story of Bahira. The nuclear story of Bahira according to the Christian version was implicitly and/ or explicitly referred to by many Christian authors beginning from the early eighth century. John of Damascus (d. 749), writing in the early eighth century, pointed out that Muhammad was exposed to the Old and New Testament and was in dialogue with a certain Arian monk. In a more explicit way, the names Bahira and Muhammad were recorded in the tract of The Monk of Bet-Haleh along with the Emir of the (Mhagraye.) The Monk of Beth-Haleh relates to his Muslim interlocutor that “Muhammad received the doctrine of monotheism from Sargis-Bahira.”

In the ninth century, the story was even more widely spread and used as a means of apology and polemics by both Christians and Muslims. The polemical Letter (Risala) of al-Kindi in response to an alleged Muslim attacker, al-Hashimi, referred to Bahira as a heterodox monk, who left for Arabia and won Muhammad away from idolatry, thus making him his disciple. Corresponding to the version of Ibn Saad, who named the monk Nastur, al-Kindi incorporated this name, saying that the monk’s name was Sargis-Bahira, but he changed his name to Nastur because he followed Nastur’s teaching.” On the other side, the Mu`tazilite author, al-Jahiz (d. 869), reported to the tenth Abbasid Caliph, al-Muttawakel (d. 861) that “the Christian faith—may God have mercy on you—resembles Manichaeism and in some of its aspects is akin to atheism.” Al-Jahiz distinguished between his contemporary Christians and those mentioned in the Quran. He contended that the Christians concerning whom the Quran says “the nearest in loving friendship to those who believe” were not the present Christians, and that “God did not mean these Christians nor their like, i.e., the Melkites and the Jacobites. Rather God meant the likes of Bahira and the monks who were at the service of Salman.”

By mid-ninth century, the tension between Christian and Muslims in power intensified. It was in such an environment that certain Christian polemicist or polemicists recast the story of Sargis-Bahira from conventional hagiographic and apocalyptic story into an apologetic and polemical one.

### *The Religious Context*

It is common among many religions that the newest religion claims that the older religion testifies to the truth of the new. Eastern Christians, for instance, developed the episode of “Simon the Elder” mentioned in Luke 2:25-35, as a way of having a significant figure from the older religion (Judaism) miraculously testify to the new religion. In reaction to this and other Christian interpretations, the Jews composed polemical writings, among them a book known as *Toledoth Yeshu* (The History of Jesus) with the portrayal of a sharply anti-Christian version of the life of Jesus. Similar stories of testimonies were circulated concerning Buddha and Zoroaster, which lie outside of the scope of this article. In a similar way, later Muslim writers articulated many religious types already circulated among other religions and applied them on the early history of Muslims. The story of Bahira is no exception.

The earliest part of the Christian story comprises an apocalyptic vision as an attempt to interpret the historical events of the Arab conquests and their domination in a biblical genre. This part has totally different outlines from that of Bahira in the Muslim

tradition. Interpreting history in an apocalyptic way is deeply rooted in the Syriac tradition as far back as the writings of Aphrahaat (d. 364) and Ephrem (d. 373) and even before. During the Islamic era, many Syriac writers related the history of the Arab conquests and their domination in correlation with the prophecy of Daniel in apocalyptic imagery. John Penkaye, for example, a contemporary of the Arab conquests and its repercussion, clearly stated the purpose of his writings as: “not to entangle ourselves with complicated narratives, the result of which may trouble our selves and forget our purpose—in our book which we entitled “The Principles of Words,” (Resh Melle). This is our purpose: to demonstrate what God has done for us in His goodness, and what we have dared to do in opposition to Him in our wickedness.” Thus, Bar Penkaye related the events of the Arab/ Muslim conquests as part of a divine plan, prophesied by Daniel. Likewise, elements in the first part of Bahira in the Syriac sources were mostly employed and circulated in various forms as reflections on the events: apocalypse, hagiography, homily and reflection on history. Thus, the story of Bahira fits the literary context as an apocalyptic and hagiographic story of monk Sargis proper, who will later become Sargis-Bahira and Sarigis-Bahira-Nestur.

### *The Date and the authorship of the Story*

The written text of the story of Bahira in both Christian sources and Muslim sources appeared in the ninth century although its oral tradition preceded the text. It is certain that its oral tradition was well distributed among and well received by all Christian communities owing to the fact that it is referenced by various Christian groups and is focused in various editions. As a result, many versions of the story have traces of the peculiarity of each Christian denomination. Additionally, it is evident that the story was developed and augmented to accommodate its apologetic purpose. What applies to the story of Bahira in Christian sources also applies to the same story in Islamic sources.

While the written text is evident in the ninth century for both traditions, the question still arises as to which tradition precedes which, the Christian tradition or the Muslim? Christian sources demonstrate several references of the Story which precede any reference in Muslim sources. As a matter of fact, Muslim sources are silent on this story before the ninth century. The silence in the Muslim sources, however, does not eliminate the possibility of its oral circulation among Muslim communities prior to the ninth century. It should be expected, at least, that a certain reaction from the Muslims would arise as they hear the story from their Christian subjects. Whatever the case, there is no reference either in Muslim sources nor in Christian that Muslims relate their own version of story prior to the ninth century. Thus, as far as the documentation is concerned, the oral tradition of Sargis-Bahira in the Christian tradition precedes the Muslim oral tradition, but only the first part of Bahira in its earliest form.

Up to the ninth century, the story of Bahira in the Christian tradition, which comprised only the first part, was totally independent of that in the Islamic tradition. It was only during the ninth century and in response to the Islamic version of Bahira that the story of monk Bahira (former Sargis) was developed. Thus, the second part of the story of Bahira in the Christian tradition corresponds line for line to Bahira in the Islamic tradition, but with emphasis on Sargis-Bahira’s role of instruction. To provide a cohesive conclusion, the third part continued the style of the first part, on which, along with the second one, we will continue our study.

*Translation of the Syriac Text*

Again, relying on the power of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, my hope, we write the story of our Rabban Sargis, who is called in the Saracenian language Bahira, and in the Syriac [as well.] He is also called the heater of the cross. He is the Solitary who dwelt in the mount Sinai, and how did he discipline Muhammad. Amen.

[1] My beloved, this same Rabban Sargis had narrated to me—I, Yesu`Yhab, the monk, concerning his illness, his travels to the holy mount Sinai, and concerning the kingdom of the Ishamelites, one thing after another until the end--for it [the kingdom] appeared to Sargis in the likeness of twelve beasts, which are different from each other--especially about the religion of the sons of Hagar, and about the conversation which Sargis had with Muhammad, the prophet of the Saracens, and about the questions and answers, which Muhammad had with Sargis, and about the entrance of Rabban Sargis to the wilderness of Yathrib among the sons of Ishmael, and how he was persecuted by his contemporary bishops, and how they claimed that because he hated of the cross, he was persecuted by the church. In fact, because he said that only one cross should be placed in the church, and to only one cross, we should worship because even Christ was crucified on one cross, not on many crosses. Additionally, he said that we should not worship to a cross made of stone, nor of silver, nor of gold, nor of copper, nor of such kind, but only of wood, so that such kind may not be resembled the idols which the idolatrous people do, the worshipers of idols. After he had been persecuted by the bishops and the elders because of these words, Rabban Sargis-Bahira left for the wilderness of Yathrib, towards the Ishmaelites. There, he lived in peace and calmness.

Soon, he acquired love and intimacy through the reputation of SaberYesu`, the Solitary father, who performed great, many miracles. [It was at the time when] King No`man, the ruler of the Tayyaye [Arabs] brought him because of a sickness, No`man himself was sick. He was tortured by a bad demon of the devil, just as Saul in the days of the prophet David. This No`man used to reside at the first city of the Ishmaelites, its name was Arabia. It was theirs at the days of Chosrau, the king of Persians. And through the guidance of Mar SaberYesu`, the Catholicus of the East and the Mar Yesu`Zcha, the Solitary, to their true flocks of the rational sheep of Christ, No`man was relieved from the spirit of the bad devil, which was bitterly torturing and tormenting him. Since at that time, the monks were few, and were not found but in few locations and separate places, No`man with his entire city, Arabia, received the seal of baptism on the hands of Mar SaberYesu`, the Catholicus of the East. For earlier, they used to worship the Star `Uzzi, which is Aphrodite Zahra. Even now, when they swear, they say: "No, by al-`Uzzi. And I said to them, who is this by whom you swear? They answered me that God is strong. But they are still holding to that first tradition.

After, I, Yesu`Yahb, the monk, had traveled among mountains, plans and caverns, where the solitaries lived, I went up to the holy mountain of Sinai, and entered Egypt and the wilderness of Scete. I reached even the inner wilderness, and went up Thebais. From there I went in to the wilderness of Yathrib and to the wilderness of the people of Hagar, the Egyptian one. The Ishmaelites were simple, common and ignorant. They were like the wild asses of the wilderness, without order or law. [They were] wild like untamed horses, and they were worshipping an stature of Aukbar, who is devil.

There, I saw this Rabban Sargis among them. He was from the Holy Land, from a village called Tshrn. In his [hierarchical] rank, he was an elder. He was intelligent and trained in the reading of the Scriptures. And he called by [the people of] Hagar Bahira and a prophet because he had prophesied to them about their kingdom and about the twenty two kings, who will rule over their posterity. And Rabban Sargis had advanced in age.

[2] I, Yesu`Yhab, the solitary, and nominally a monk, went to Rabban Sargis, into his cell. I greeted him and was blessed by him. As soon as Rabban Sargis saw me, he sighed and bitterly wept, saying: "I have been in this wilderness for forty years, but I have never seen a single Christian, except you alone this day. But now, I realized that the end of my life has approached." I, Yesu`Yhab, begin to speak to him and asked him, how was it his coming to the wilderness and for what reason? He responded to him and said: when I was in the monastery of the solitaries, where I had lived for a long time, it dawned on me to go to Jerusalem to pray and be blessed by its holy sites. Thus, I left the monastery to fulfill my intention. I went to and was blessed by the holy sepulchre, by Golgatha and the rest of the holy sites. After all these, I went up to the mount Sinai, to the site where the prophet Moses had received the holy revelation. At that same site, there was a monastery inhabited by many monks and brothers serving it. I stayed there for many days. I heard from some of the brothers, who live there, saying that every one who lodges or sleep over night on the top of this mount Sinai, he may be worthy of a certain revelation from heaven. He who is from the East may be sent to the West, and he who is from the West may be sent to the East. Then, when the monks finished the Psalms of David and the evening prayer, they came down from the upper altar to the monastery. Afterwards, the guards surrounded the upper alter in order to guard it so that no one may go and abide there on the top of the mountain. For they do not permit anybody to go up and sleep there. But I greeted them and ate food with them, I, Sargis, secretly rose and went on the top of the mountain of Sinai. There, I prayed and was blessed by it; thus, a certain glorious vision was reveled to me from God.

[3] I saw an indescribable light, and thousands, but unnumbered angles. And I saw one great cross that lights up the whole earth, seven times the light of the sun. I drew near to one of the angels, greeted him, bowing down to him. He said to me: take heart, Sargis! do not be afraid. I looked and saw the four winds in the heavens struggling with each other. I saw a white beast coming upon the South wind. It went to the East, the West, the North and the South and rested in the West. On the head of the beast, there were twelve horns. I said to the angel, what is this, Lord? He responded and said to me: this is the kingdom of the people of Ishmael.

[4] Again, I saw a black beast coming upon the North wind. It came and went to the East and the West, the North and the South and rested in the land of Babylon. Upon its head, there were seven horns of iron, one of gold, two of silver and copper. And I said to the Angel, what is this, Lord? He said to me: this is like that of the people of Hisham, the son of Muhammad.

[5] Again, I saw a bull coming calmly and with great humbleness, and through the South wind. Upon his head there were five horns of gold, two of silver and one of iron. He went to the four directions and resided in Assyria. Thus, I said to the angel, what is this bull? He answered me, it is the kingdom of Mahdi, the son of Fatmeh. And just as the

bull is calm, humble and peaceful, so it is his kingdom calm and peaceful more so that all the Tayyaye [Arab] kingdoms.

[6] Again, I saw a lamb wearing wolf's cloth coming through the West wind. I said to the angel, what is this, lord? He said, this is the kingdom of the sons of Sorfin, which will crush all the kingdoms of the sons of Ishmael by sword, and it will pursue them unto the mountain of Yathrib.

[7] Again, I saw a goat coming from the West. I said to the angel, what is this, lord? He answered me, this is the seed of Yoqtan, who are the Qatranaye.

[8] Again, I saw a lion coming from the South, destroying everything, eating everything and treading down everything with great force. And there were nothing that could resist him. I said to the angel, what is this, lord? He said, his name is Great Might the one brought by Mahdi, the son of Aisha. In whose days, there will be an unprecedented, great crisis, since the time Nebuchadnezzar and Beltshasar his son.

[9] Again, I saw a man wearing a yellow cloth coming from the East. I said to the angel, what is this, lord? He answered, this is the last kingdom of the sons of Hagar and Ishmael, with which their end and destruction will occur.

[10] Again, I saw a chariot, decorated with every beauty. I said to the angel, what is this, lord? He said to me, this is the kingdom of the Romans, who will rule at the end of the all of the kingdoms of the earth.

[11] Again, I saw a great serpent, creeping and swallowing everything before it without pity. I said to the angel, what is this, lord? He said, this is the son of perdition, the false Christ, who will come at the end of the world. And I saw the Satan falling as a flash of lightening from heaven, filled with envy and hatred toward the whole race of the human beings.

[12] Again, I saw a man coming through the East wind wearing splendid honor and glory. I said to the angel, who is this, lord? This is Elijah, the prophet who will come at the end of the world, who is the messenger before Christ.

[13] Again, I saw three angels wearing white and clothed the flame. I said to the angel, who are these, lord? He said, these are Gabriel, Michael and Sarafael. One of the angels approached me, saying, follow me. I followed him with great delight and fear. I ascended with him into heaven-- by spirit not by body. And I saw the heaven and the heavens of the heavens, which demonstrates a great unspeakable light, and the ranks of the angels of nine degrees. I saw the Spirit of God descending and hovering down from heaven, and the ancient of days who is celebrated, he is Christ, God, the savior of the world, the Son of God. I saw the world dissolved and disappeared, and the heaven rolled up as a scroll and disappearing. I saw everything disappearing and vanishing, even the earth dissolving and becoming tough and bough (disparate and chaotic). Everything became as if there were nothing. I saw the Judge sitting and awarding everybody according to his/ her deeds. I saw the righteous people entering the Paradise. I saw Adam and Eve, Enoch and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Aaron the priest, the group of prophets, the company of apostles, the twelve seats of the apostles, the host of martyrs and confessors. I saw David singing and saying, Hallelujah. I saw the tree of

life and the tree of good and evil, the spring that flows in the midst of Paradise, becoming four rivers—Tigris, Euphrates, Pishon and Gihon, which give life to all creation. Then Seraph said to me, look and examine carefully the deep, which is Gehenna. I saw an unquenchable fire, an immortal worm, eternal punishment. Moreover, I saw numerous people sighing and gnashing their teeth, howling, lamenting and groaning, but no one listened to them, nor who can care and comfort them from the everlasting punishment. At that moment, I sighed and said, what would benefit a person if he gained the whole world, but he lost his soul.

[14] These I saw in the spirit not in the body. Then the angel said to me, go to Maurice, king of the Romans, and break your rod before him and tell him: for thus your kingdom will be broken, and not as you think that you will give as inheritance to your sons after you. I went and did just as the angel commanded me. The King was not angry with me, nor did he respond to me in any evil way; but he just said, let God's will be done. When one of the chiefs of the army, called Phoka, the wicked, heard that I was sent by God, he raised a rebellion against the King and killed him. Thus, it [the prophecy] was fulfilled in him by this very act. Then I went to the land of the Persians, to Chosrau, king of Persians. Before him, I broke half of my rod, and I said to him, thus your kingdom will be broken by the sons of Ishmael. Likewise, Chosrau was not angered with me, nor wrathful. Chosrau asked me, saying, how did you enter before Maurice, the king of the Romans? What did you say to him? What is this revelation and from where did you receive it? I responded and said to him, I saw wild asses coming up against you, and they took the crown off your head, threw it to the ground and trod it under their foot. When Chosrau heard this, he did not answer me any bad word, but he said, go in peace wherever you want.

[15] I left the land of the Persians and came to the land of the Romans, preaching that people should worship only one cross and not many because Christ was crucified upon one cross, and thus only one cross should be placed in the church. When the bishops and the governors of church of the Romans heard, they persecuted me and trapped me in order to kill me. When I heard this, I left Senaar and came to this wilderness of the sons of Ishmael, where no one hurts me.

[16] All these, Rabban Sargis-Bahira narrated to Yeshu`Yhab: concerning the coming of the Sargis toward the sons of Ishmael, to the wilderness of Yathrib. When I entered here, among the sons of Ishmael, they were curds and simples, living a bad life, nourishing themselves meagerly and poorly. They worshipped idols, stones and stars of heaven; and everyone worshipped the thing that he loved. They were behaving like animals, without understanding or knowledge. Thus, when I realized that they are in such situation, stiff-necked, I foretold to them about all the issues that concern them, and I instructed them. I announced it to them, saying that you will rule over the whole earth for ten weeks of years. Now, when they heard this from me, they all rose together and built me a cell in their midst, and they dug for me a well of water. Thus, I dwelt with them in peace and rest – far from persecutors. In this way, I, Yeshu`Yhab, I stayed with Bahira for seven days, and I learned from him everything. Finally, Sargis-Bahira fell sick and died.

[17] Bahira had disciplined the sons of Ishmael, becoming their chief because he had prophesied to them that they loved. Moreover, he wrote and delivered to them this book which they called Quran. When this Rabban Sargis died, they embalmed him in myrrh



and aloe in addition to many other fragrances. They placed his body in a vault and buried him. Over his grave, and by means of his bones, a great miracle took place.

A man had killed his brother, and the murderer said, the servant of the victim had killed him. He took refuge at the bones of Sargis. By the effectiveness of God, and through the intercession of Sargis, it became known who had killed him. For after little while, the right hand of the murderer withered, thus, he himself confessed publicly.

After the death of Sargis, another man, called Kalb the scribe, rose up. He was from the descendent of Abraham, born in adultery among the Jews, and lived there. And he was a scribe. This scribe, Kalb, became their instructor after Sargis. He became a false prophet and taught lies and proclaimed falsehoods. He changed that which Sargis had written and taught, saying to them that what Issa [Jesus], the son of Mary, had said, “behold, I go and I will send you the Paraclete,” is in fact, Muhammad. There will be a sign for you, when Muhammad will die, he will ascend unto heaven just like Issa [Jesus], the son of Mary, and he will rise again after three days. But when Muhammad died, his people gathered together, and they embalmed him and buried him. They placed him in a certain house with great honor, sealing the door after him, so that they may see what would happen to him. But no one was able to enter that house because of the odor emanates from Muhammad’s corpse. It is not necessary for anyone to investigate what happened to it. And when Kalb the scribe died, he was buried like an ass because his prophecy was not fulfilled, and because he was revealed as a lyer and deceiver. But the people, intentionally, abandoned the words of Rabban Sargis-Bahira, which were the truth, and they embraced this tradition, which Kaleb the scribe handed to them. And up to this day, they say that the Paraclete is Muhammad.

#### *The Story of Bahira According to Ibn Hisham*

Abu Talib had planned to go in a merchant caravan to Syria, and when all preparations had been made for the journey. The apostle of God, so they allege, attached himself closely to him so that he took pity on him and said that he would take him with him, and that the two of them should never part; or words to that effect. When the caravan reached Busra in Syria, there was a monk there in his cell by the name of Bahira, who was well versed in the knowledge of Christians. A monk had always occupied that cell. There he gained his knowledge from a book that was in the cell, so they allege, handed on from generation to generation. They had often passed by him in the past and he never spoke to them or took any notice of them until this year, and when they stopped near his cell he made a great feast for them. It is alleged that that was because of something he saw while in his cell.

They allege that while he was in his cell he saw the apostle of God in the caravan when they approached, with a cloud overshadowing him among the people. Then they came and stopped in the shadow of a tree near the monk. He looked at the cloud when it overshadowed the tree and its branches were bending and drooping over the apostle of God until he was in the shadow beneath it. When Bahira saw that, he came out of his cell and sent word to them, “I have prepared food for you, O men of Quraysh, and I would like you all to come both great and small, bound and free.” One of them said to him, “By God, Bahira! Something extraordinary has happened today, you used not to treat us so, and we have often passed by you. What has befallen you today?” He answered, “you are right in what you say, but you are guests and I wish to honor you and give you food so

that you may eat.” So they gathered together with him, leaving the apostle of God behind with the baggage under the tree, on account of his extreme youth. When Bahira looked at the people he did not see the mark, which he knew and found in his books, so he said, “do not let one of you remain behind and not come to my feast.” They told him that no one who ought to come had remained behind except a boy who was the youngest of them and had stayed with their baggage. Thereupon he told them to invite him to come to the meal with them. One of the men of Quraysh said, “by al-Lat and al-`Uzza, we are to blame for leaving behind the son of `Abdullah ibn `Abdul-Muttalib.”

Then he got up and embraced him and made him sit with the people. When Bahira saw him he stared at him closely, looking at his body and finding traces of his description. When the people had finished eating and gone away, Bahira got up and said to him, “boy, I ask by al-Lat and al-`Uzza to answer my question.” Now Bahria said this only because he had heard his people swearing by these gods. They allege that the apostle of God said to him, “do not ask me by al-Lat and al-`Uzza, for by Allah nothing is more hateful to me than these two.” Bahira answered, “then by Allah, tell me what I ask.” He replied, “ask me what you like.” Then he began to ask him about what happened in him in his waking and in his sleep, and his habits, and his affairs generally, and what the apostle of God told him coincided with what Bahira knew of his description. Then he looked at his back and saw the seal of prophethood between his shoulders in the very place described in his book.

When he had finished he went to his uncle Abu Talib and asked him what relation this boy was to him, and when he told him he was his son, he said that he was not, for it could not be that the father of this boy was alive. “He is my nephew,” he said, and when he asked what had become of his father he told him that he had died before that child was born. “You have told the truth,” said Bahria. “Take your nephew back to his county and guard him carefully against the Jews, for by Allah! If they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil; a great future lies before this nephew of yours, so take him home quickly.

So his uncle took him off quickly and brought him back to Mecca when he had finished his trading in Syria. People allege that Zurayr and Tamman and Daris, who were people of the scriptures, had noticed in the apostle of God what Bahira had seen during that journey which he took with his uncle, and they tried to get at him. But Bahira kept them away and reminded them of God and the mention of the description of him, which they would find in the sacred books, and that if they tried to get at him they would not succeed. He gave them no peace until they recognized the truth of what he said and left him and went away. The apostle of God grew up, God protecting him and keeping him from the vileness of heathenism because he wished to honor him with apostleship, until he grew up to be the finest of his people in manliness, the best in character, most noble in lineage, the best neighbor, the most kind, truthful, reliable, the furthest removed from filthiness and corrupt morals, through loftiness and nobility, so that he was known among his people as “the trustworthy” because of the good qualities which God had implanted in him.