

*Islamic Origins: Anti-Theopaschism and Trisagion in the
Near East in the early 600s*

Peter von Sivers

The earliest note on the religious orientation of the conquering Arabs stems from Ishoyahb III, the patriarch of the Eastern Christians in Mesopotamia (in office 647-659). When he was still a bishop he wrote about the Arabs, who were in the process of taking Niniveh in 637-642, that they would not favor the Monophysites “who say that God, Lord over all, has suffered and died” over the Eastern Christians¹. Ishoyahb was referring to what in theological terms is called “theopaschism” and imputed it to the Monophysites who were competing for converts with his church in Mesopotamia. Informants presumably told him of the anti-theopaschism in what was to become the Qur’ān. Verses 4:157-158 state: “And for their [the Jews – PVS] saying, ‘We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God.’ In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did... Indeed, God raised him up toward Himself, and God is all-mighty, all-wise.” Ishoyahb was well aware that the Arabs were not Eastern Christians, but he astutely recognized that they were theologically opposed to the Monophysites who were in the majority in northern Mesopotamia and Greater Syria.

The following essay is the summary of conclusions drawn in one of the chapters in my book manuscript on Islamic Origins during ca. 500-700. It discusses the complex historical

¹*Īšo’yahb Patriarcha III Liber epistolarum*, ed. and tr. Rubens Duval, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Syri, Series Secunda* 64 (Paris: Carolus Poussielgue, and Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1904-1905), letter E-48, p. 96-97. The only contemporary author who has analyzed Ishoyahb’s letter is Frank Van der Velden, “Early Eastern-Syriac Perception of Islam in Ishoyahb III Letter Epistolarum (640-660): No Earlier Christian Sources for a Christian-Muslim Relationship?” in Nadia Maria El Cheikh and Shaun O’Sullivan, eds., *Byzantium in Early Islamic Syria* (Beirut and Balamand: American University of Beirut and University of Balamand: 2011), 43-57. Van der Velden, however, reads anti-theopaschism not into Q 4:157-158 but into the Qur’ān’s presentations of Trinity, the Adam-Christ typology, and the genealogy of the Virgin Mary.

context within late Antique Christianity where early Islam has to be situated. It is based only on pre-Islamic and non-Islamic sources and takes the Qur'ān as a scripture with a largely inscrutable internal chronology. The main thesis is that Islam originated within the polemics that raged among the three churches of the period (Chalcedonian, Eastern Christian, and Monophysite) – at a time when the destructive Perso-East Roman war of 602-628 aroused deep eschatological fears.

One of the most fiercely contested symbols of faith in both low and high Christology, that is, among the layfolk in the daily mass as well as the theologians in late Antiquity, was the so-called Trisagion. It was a hymn sung before the Epistle reading in the mass that consisted of the “thrice” repeated phrase “Holy Immortal.” Peter the Fuller (471-488) expanded the hymn to include a theopaschite reference to the crucifixion – “Holy Immortal, who was crucified for us” – and made it a battle cry, as it were, of the Monophysites. The latter had failed to receive full recognition by the Council of Chalcedon (451) even though the same Council anathemized the Eastern Christians for alleged heresy. As a result, the Monophysites began to build an independent church structure in the eastern provinces of the Eastern Roman empire while the Eastern Christians began to relocate to Sasanian Persian Mesopotamia. With the Eastern Christians out of the way, the Roman emperors sought to reincorporate the Monophysites into the Chalcedonian church through a policy of (intermittent) persecutions as well as conciliatory gestures. The official imposition of Peter the Fuller’s expanded Trisagion at the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (553) was one of these gestures.

After 553, the Eastern Christians outside the Eastern Roman empire were alone in their commitment to the original Trisagion. Accordingly, for Ishoyahb III the idea of a suffering eternal God implied a nullification of Jesus’ soteriological function: Only a human suffering on the cross, like that of Jesus, could bring about the redemption of humankind. By contrast, for the Monophysites, and a majority of Chalcedonians after 553, theopaschism with its concept of God on earth who suffered crucifixion by His own volition was perfectly logical. Since the Eastern Christians were no longer in the Eastern Roman empire, theopaschism could advance largely unimpeded.

Resistance against the expanded Trisagion inside the empire appeared in only one place, Jerusalem, and even here not until the end of the 500s, as reported by two Eastern Christians, the patriarch Ishoyahb I (585-596) and the monk Abraham Bar Lipeh (fl. first half of 600s).²

²Isho‘yabh I., “Trattato di Yeso‘yabh d’Arzon sul Trisagion,” ed. Giuseppe Furlani, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 7 (1916-18), 687-715, here 697 (f. 431d) and 714 (commentary). Latin tr. in Jean-Michel Hanssens, *Institutiones liturgicae de ritibus orientlibus* (Rome: Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, 1932), vol. III, 96-151, here 149. Abraham bar Lipeh (also known as Abraham Qatraya), *Interpretatio officiorum*, in George of Arbela, *Expositio officiorum ecclesiae II*, ed. R. Hugh Connolly, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 72, *Scriptores Syri* 29 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CSRC, 1960; reprint of 1913 edition), 168; Latin tr. R. Hugh

Actually, the two reports were a bit general. Most of the Holy City was Monophysite at the time and it was only in monasteries outside Jerusalem where the opposition to the expanded Trisagion was located. The most prominent figure among the anti-theopaschite monks was the later patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius (560-638), who eventually (in 634) even composed an epistle against theopaschism³. On the level of the low theology of everyday church service, it appeared as if Chalcedonianism and Monophysitism had become the same everywhere except among a few monks outside Jerusalem and the Eastern Christians outside the Eastern Roman Empire.

Monophysites had propagated theopaschism during the 500s with brazen polemics. One of the propagators was John of Tella (483-538), Monophysite bishop of Tella in southeastern Turkey. He promoted theopaschism by attributing docetism (crucifixion of a mere human in the place of the human-divine Jesus) to Nestorius (386-451), the patriarch of Constantinople whose condemnation as a heretic in 431 had set into motion the subsequent disintegration of the Chalcedonian church into three competing branches: “The Jews will not boast that they crucified Him as God. For they crucified a simple man (Syr. *d-barnāshāhū shḥīmā*, Gr. *psilos anthropos*).”⁴ The charge is, of course, malicious since Nestorius was as a firm believer in Jesus’ human-divine nature.

On the other hand, John of Tella’s charge seems to reverberate in Q 4:157-158, if read docetically, as it is by many scholars. A careful reading, however, makes clear that by forbidding any kind of speculation concerning the crucifixion the Qur’ān explicitly denies the “simple man” interpretation. Instead, the verses can be seen as a compressed reading of the passion complex from crucifixion to ascension, very similar to examples one can find in The Acts and Epistles of the New Testament.⁵ Such compressed-passion renderings were standard in sermons throughout Antiquity. In the sixth century they are found, for example, in the sermons of a Monophysite theologian, Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem (fl. 550), and are significant because they have attracted the attention of Islamic Origin scholars as documents attesting to the existence of Jewish-Christian communities at that time. These communities, which professed Jesus as the Messiah but continued to adhere to Jewish law, existed until about 400 but disappeared once Christianity was fully defined doctrinally.

Conolly, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (SSRC) 76, Scriptorum Syri 32* (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste 1953; reprint of 1915 edition), 154.

³Pauline Allen, *Sophronius of Jerusalem and Seventh-Century Heresy: The Synodical Letter and Other Documents—Introduction, Texts, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29.

⁴John of Tella, *Profession of Faith: The Legacy of a Sixth-Century Syrian Orthodox Bishop*, *Texts from Christian Late Antiquity* 25, ed. and tr. Volker Menze and Kutlu Akalin (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2009), ed. 89, tr. 88.

⁵E.g.: Acts 2:31-33, 5:30-31, Rom. 8:34, Eph. 1:20, Col. 3:1, Hebr. 10:12, 12:2, and 1 Pet. 3:21-22.

In one of his sermons, Pseudo-Cyril polemicizes against a certain “Ebionite” who held that “after [the Jews] had raised [Jesus] up on the Cross the Father took Him up into heaven unto Himself.”⁶ Ebion was the apocryphal founder of a Jewish-Christian heresy in the second century, which adhered to the doctrine of Jesus as a human prophet only. Pseudo-Cyril refutes the Ebionite in the sermon but, importantly, not for his version of the crucifixion but rather for another professed belief of his, that is, in the descent of the Virgin Mary’s from a “power” (*dynamis*) in heaven.⁷ The uncontested rendering of the crucifixion by the Ebionite can be considered, therefore, as nothing more than another version of the orthodox compressed-passion complex. Pseudo-Cyril fails as a persuasive witness for either the survival of a Jewish-Christian community or even the inspiration for a presumed docetism in the Qur’ān.⁸

The tentative conclusion in this essay would then be that the Qur’ān originated not merely in a late Antique polemical context but furthermore adopted a carefully redacted version of the passion of Jesus in opposition to Monophysitic and Chalcedonian Christianity. It emerged in an era when Christology was embroiled in implacable polemics, anti-theopaschism was rampant in Jerusalem, and the legitimacy of theopaschite Chalcedonianism was compromised by the eschatological Perso-Roman war.

⁶Pseudo-Cyril, “On the Virgin,” in E.A. Wallis Budge, *Coptic Texts*, Vol. V: *Miscellaneous Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1915), ed. 49-73, tr. 626-651, here ed. 60, tr. 637. The text has also been edited and translated into German by Stefan Bombeck, “In Mariam virginem, Text und Übersetzung von Pierpont Morgan M 597fols. 46-74,” *Orientalia*, 70 (2001), 40-88, here 28.

⁷Budge, “Virgin,” ed. 51, tr. 628; Bombeck, 7.

⁸Patricia Crone is the principal author advocating the theory of a Jewish-Christianity community existing in Palestine during the 500s and early 600s. See Crone, “Jewish Christianity and the Qur’ān (Part One and Two)” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 (2015), 225-253, and 75 (2016), 1-21; Doubts about the tenability of this theory are voiced by Guillaume Dye and Stephen Shoemaker in Francisco del Río Sanchez, ed., *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 11-29 and 105-116.