Christsein in der islamischen Welt

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The Qur'ān's 'Nazarenes' and Other Late Antique Christians: Arabic-Speaking 'Gospel People'[1] in Qur'ānic Perspective[2]

The history of Christian/Muslim relations begins with the appearance of the Qur'ān in the first third of the seventh century CE, within the chronological and cultural horizon of Early Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism, and the final phase of the centuries long struggles between the rival empires of Rome and Sasanian Persia, a period historians now commonly call Late Antiquity.[3] While very few writers in any of the languages of the period, be they Christian or Jewish, took notice of the advent of the new Arabic scripture in the decades of its initial delivery and publication, the Qur'ān itself by contrast had much to say about both the Jews and the Christians within its purview. The purpose of the present essay is twofold: first to examine the Qur'ān's portrayal of Christians, with special reference to how it names them; and secondly to explore the Qur'ān's critique of Christian faith and practice in an effort to identify who were the Arabic-speaking Christians whose beliefs and practices the Qur'ān criticizes, thereby inaugurating the now centuries long Christian/Muslim confrontation in religious controversy. We begin with the Qur'ān's presentation of Jesus the Messiah, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God, articulated in the distinctive idiom of the Qur'ān's paradigm for characterizing God's Prophets and Messengers, what the Qur'ān itself calls, "the *Sunnah* of Our Messengers" (cf. XVII *al-Isrā'* 77).[4]

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1 V *al-Mā'idah* 47.

2 This essay revisits, revises, and recasts ideas the present writer discussed in an earlier article entitled, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān: A Hermeneutical Reflection", in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its Historical Context 2* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 301–322.

3 For discussion of the rise of Islam within the horizon of Late Antiquity, see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); *idem, Before and after Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and his People* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

4 For a discussion of the Qur'ān's distinctive prophetology, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: the Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 64–89. See also the present writer's forthcoming article, "The '*Sunnah*

According to the Qur'ān, the Messiah, the son of Mary, God's Messenger and Prophet, like Moses before him, was sent to his own people, the Israelites (LXI *aṣ-Ṣaff* 6). At the announcement of his birth, again according to the Qur'ān, the angel spoke as follows to Mary about God's commissioning of her son, Jesus:

> He will teach him the scripture, Wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel, and as a messenger to the Israelites, [he will announce,] 'I have come to you with a sign from your Lord'. From clay, I will create a bird-like form and then I will breathe into it so that it becomes a bird, by God's permission. I will cure the blind and the leprous and I will bring the dead to life by God's permission, and I will announce to you what you will eat and store in your houses. In this there is a sign for you if you are believers. And as one confirming what was before me of the Torah, I will permit to you some of what had been forbidden to you, and I will bring you a sign from your Lord, so fear God and obey me. God is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him, this is the straight path.
> (III *Āl ʿImrān* 48–51)

In another passage, the Qur'ān speaks of the Son of Mary as a man (*ʿabd*), "whom We graced and made an example (*mathalan*) to the Israelites" (XLIII *az-Zukhruf* 59). In fact, in the just previous verse but one, God is reported to have said to Muḥammad, "When the Son of Mary was proposed as an example, your (2ms) people turned away from him" (XLIII *az-Zukhruf* 57), suggesting that the Messenger had in his own preaching been commending Jesus to the Israelites among his local Arabian audience without much success. This notice prompts the question about the religious identities of those Arabic-speaking persons who heard Muḥammad's message both in Mecca and in Medina during the twenty-two years of his public ministry and particularly about the Christians among them. The Qur'ān provides several lists of the religious communities within its purview. While these lists are not exactly the same, in the ensemble they seem accurately to identify the principal groups present in Arabia in the first third of the seventh century CE, among whom the Qur'ān situates the Christians, whom it some fourteen times calls *an-Naṣārā*.

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of Our Messengers': The Qur'ān's Paradigm for Messengers and Prophets; a Reading of *Sūrah* XXVI *ash-Shuʿarā"*, soon to appear.

I. An-Naṣārā in the Qur'ān

Among those to whom Muḥammad proclaimed the message that he felt God had put on his heart to announce to his Arabic-speaking audience, the Qur'ān lists six different religious communities: those who believe (*alladhīna āmanū*), those who practice Judaism (*alladhīna hādū*), the *Ṣābi'īna*, the *Naṣārā*, the *Majūs*, and the local polytheists (*mushrikūn* or *alladhīna ashrakū*) (cf. XXII *al-Ḥajj* 17; II *al-Bakarah* 62; V *al-Mā'idah* 69). In the Qur'ān's parlance, 'those who believe' are those who were receptive to the message Muḥammad brought, i.e., the proto-Muslims.[5] 'Those who practice Judaism' are the contemporary Jews, whose ancestors in the Qur'ān's view were the Israelites, who were also in the Qur'ān's view, as we shall explain below, the ancestors of the *Naṣārā*, as the Qur'ān calls those who say, "The Messiah is the Son of God" (IX *at-Tawbah* 30), namely the 'Christians'. The *Ṣābi'īna* or Sabians are harder to identify; they seem associated with the Jews and the *Naṣārā* in the three places in the Qur'ān, cited just above, in which they are mentioned. Current scholarly opinion is inclined to associate them with non-Jewish and non-Christian monotheists in the Qur'ān's milieu, perhaps the Manichees.[6] All seem agreed that the *Majūs*, the Magians, are the community otherwise called the Zoroastrians of pre-Islamic Iran.[7] The *Mushrikūn*, those who associate partners with God, are the indigenous polytheists of pre-Islamic Arabia,[8] who in all likelihood made up in the ensemble by far the majority of the Arabic-speaking, religious communities in Muḥammad's audience. And finally, those whom the Qur'ān calls 'those who practice Judaism' and the *Naṣārā*, go together in the Qur'ān's parlance to make up the 'Scripture People' or the 'People of the Book', who had been

5 See Fred McGraw Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

6 See, e.g., François de Blois, "The 'Sabians' *(Ṣābi'ūn)* in Pre-Islamic Arabia", *Acta Orientalia* 56 (1995), pp. 39–61; *idem*, "Sabians", in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. IV, pp. 511–513.

7 See William R. Darrow, "Magians", in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. III, pp. 244–245.

8 See Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Patricia Crone, "How Did the Quranic Pagans Make A Living?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68 (2005), pp. 387–399; *eadem*, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities", *Arabica* 57 (2010), pp. 151–200; *eadem*, "Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God: The View of the Qur'ānic Pagans", in Philippa Townsend & Moulie Vidas (eds.), *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 315–336; *eadem*, "The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76 (2013), pp. 1–20.

making significant in-roads into the Arabic-speaking milieu during the preceding several centuries.[9]

Among the 'Scripture People', who are mentioned some fifty-four times in the Qur'ān,[10] those most often named specifically (some forty times) are called 'Israelites' (*banī Isrā'īl*), whose descendants in Muḥammad's day were reckoned to be both the contemporary Jews,[11] and the *Naṣārā*, mentioned fourteen times, who, according to the Qur'ān, were the ones who say, "The Messiah is the son of God" (IX *at-Tawbah* 30), in other words those whom others regularly call Christians, who in one place in the Qur'ān are also called 'People of the Gospel' (*ahl al-injīl*).[12] In every place in the Qur'ān in which the Christians / *Naṣārā* are explicitly named, so too are the Jews, indicating their close association in the Qur'ān's view as fellow Israelites. Along with them, another group mentioned in early Islamic tradition, who seem to have been pre-Islamic, Arabic-speaking monotheists inspired by the scriptures and beliefs of the Israelites, the Jews and Christians, but not of their number, are the so-called *Ḥunafā'* (sing. *Ḥanīf*), whom Islamic tradition recognizes as true believers.[13] The Qur'ān famously speaks of the biblical patriarch Abraham as being "neither a Jew (*yahūdī*) nor a *naṣrānī*; he was a *ḥanīf*, a *muslim*; he was not of the *mushrikīn* (polytheists)" (III *Āl 'Imrān* 67).[14] The Qur'ān's designation of Abraham as a *ḥanīf* seems to be an instance of the Arabic scripture's use of a religiously determined Arabic term current in its milieu, polemically and critically in accord with its own distinctive 'prophetology' to classify Abraham as a gentile and not as a Jew.[15] Another figure so designated in Islamic tradition is Waraqah ibn Nawfal, unknown in Christian tradition, who is said to have been among the first to recognize the infant Muḥammad's status as a prophet and who would later con-

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9 See M. Sharon, "People of the Book", in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. IV, pp. 35–43. Post-Qur'ānic, Muslim commentators and exegetes expanded membership of the category of the *ahl al-kitāb* to include others than Jews and Christians, especially the Sabians and Zoroastrians.

10 Twice the Qur'ān speaks of the "Scripture People" as "People of Recollection" (*ahl-adh-dhikr*), referring to those who remember or recall scripture passages (XVI *an-Naḥl* 43 & XXI *al-Anbiyā'* 7). See Sidney H. Griffith, "When Did the Bible Become an Arabic Scripture", *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 1 (2013), pp. 7–23.

11 Ten times the Qur'ān speaks of the Jews as "those who practice Judaism" (*hādū*), using the term 'Jews' (*yahūd*) eight times, along with *hūd* three times.

12 V *al-Mā'idah* 47).

13 See Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīf", in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. II, pp. 402–403; De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*", pp. 16–25.

14 See Uri Rubin, "*Ḥanīfiyya* and Ka'ba: An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990), pp. 85–112.

15 See the discussion in Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, pp. 71–73.

firm the authenticity of the revelation sent down to him, affirming that it was on the order of what the angel Gabriel had brought to Moses before him.[16] The same Muslim sources speak of Waraqah's knowledge of the Torah and the Gospel and of his practice of writing them down alternatively in Hebrew and Arabic; they also mention that he ultimately became a Christian.[17] In modern times, some Arab Christian writers have elaborated on Waraqah's story as preserved in Islamic sources and imagined him to have been a Christian priest or a bishop serving in Mecca; some have even proposed that the Ka'bah was his church![18] But there is nothing to support these hypotheses beyond the ingeniously devised constructions their authors have put upon what little evidence there is and that largely from later Islamic sources.

In most of the passages in the Qur'ān in which *al-naṣārā* are mentioned by name, predominantly in the Medinan *suwar* II (*al-Baqarah*) and V (*al-Mā'idah*), it is a question of the Qur'ān's critique of the behavior of the Jews and *an-naṣārā*. The Qur'ān says of the 'Scripture People', "They say, 'None will enter the Garden save those who practice Judaism or are *naṣārā*'" (II *al-Baqarah* 111). A little further on the Qur'ān says, "The Jews say, '*al-naṣārā* are not onto anything' and *al-naṣārā* say, 'The Jews are not onto anything', while both recite the scripture" (II *al-Baqarah* 113). Further, "Neither the Jews nor *al-naṣārā* will be pleased with you until you follow their *millah*" (II *al-Baqarah* 120). And finally in this *sūrah*, there is the question, "Do you say Abraham, Ismā'īl, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes were Jews or *naṣārā*? Do you know best or does God?" (II *al-Baqarah* 140)

In at least one passage, the Qur'ān seems clearly to refer to the church-dividing, doctrinal controversies that roiled the Christian communities in its time: "With those who say, 'We are *naṣārā*', We made a covenant. But they forgot some of what had been mentioned to them. So We brought about enmity and hatred among them to the day of the resurrection. God will put them on notice about what they have been doing." (V *al-Mā'idah* 14) Just a few verses further along, the text says, "The Jews and *al-naṣārā* say, 'We are God's children and His beloved'. Say: 'Why then does He punish you for your sins'?" (V *al-Mā'idah* 18) And then further on the Qur'ān offers this advice, "You who believe, do not take the Jews

16 See C.F. Robinson, "Waraḳa b. Nawfal", EI, new. Ed., vol. XI, pp. 142–143.

17 See the sources cited in Sidney H. Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century", *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), pp. 126–167.

18 See, e.g., Joseph Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète: Aux sources du Coran* (trans. M.S. Garnier; Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001). See also Edouard M. Gallez, *Le Messie et son prophète: Aux origins de l'islam* (tome 1; De Qumran à Muḥammad, 2nd ed.; Paris: Éditions de Paris, 2005).

and *al-naṣārā* as allies;[19] they are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them, becomes one of them." (V *al-Mā'idah* 51) It is also in this *sūrah* that we find the following, much commented verses:

> You will surely find that the most hostile of men to the believers are the Jews and those who ascribe partners to God. And you will surely find that the nearest in amity towards the believers are those who say: 'We are *naṣārā*', and that is because among them are priests and monks,[20] and they do not grow proud. (82) When they listen to what has been revealed to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears from the truth they recognize. They say: 'Our Lord, we believe, so inscribe us among those who witness. (83) Why should we not believe in God and what has come down to us of the truth? We yearn for our Lord to lead us in among the righteous community.' (84) God shall reward them for their speech – gardens beneath which rivers flow, abiding there forever. This is the reward of the righteous. (85) But those who blaspheme and cry lies to Our revelations – those are the denizens of hell. (86)
> (V *al-Mā'idah* 82–86)[21]

Finally, there is the one statement about the most significant wrong belief and an indictment of the wrong behavior of those explicitly called *al-naṣārā*. The Qur'ān says:

> The Jews say, 'Ezra is the son of God', while *al-naṣārā* say, 'The Messiah is the son of God'. This is what they say, from their very mouths, thereby imitating the parlance of those who disbelieved of yore; may God fight them, how deceived they are. (30) They take their rabbis and monks as lords besides God, as

19 Traditionally, the Arabic term *awliyā'* has been translated 'friends'. Here, and in vs. 59, the connotations of the English term 'ally' seem more apt. This suggestion comes from Tarif Khalidi, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (New York: Viking, 2008), p. 90.

20 See now the unlikely suggestion of some recent scholars that the term *ruhbān* refers not to monks but to bishops or other clerical figures. Holger Michael Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 215–228; Emran El-Badawi, "From 'Clergy' to 'Celibacy': The Development of Rahbānīyyah between the Qur'ān, Hadīth and Church Canon", *Al-Bayān* 1 (2013), pp. 1–14.

21 The translation is from Khalidi, *The Qur'an*, pp. 93–94. For a review of selected Muslim commentaries on these verses, see McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians*, pp. 204–239.

well as the Messiah, son of Mary, although they are commanded to worship none but one God. There is no God but He; exalted He is above what they associate with Him. (31) (IX *at-Tawbah* 30 & 31)

It remains to say a word about the Qur'ānic scenarios in which most of the instances of the name *al-naṣārā* we have mentioned occur. Of the fourteen times it appears, seven of them occur in *surat al-Baqarah* (II), in a scenario that offers a glimpse into the early Islamic community's process of assuming its distinctive cultural and religious identity. Religiously speaking, attaining that identity involved dealing especially with the Jews and Christians, whose scriptural heritage the Muslims shared and with whom at the time of the *sūrah*'s revelation they were living in the same space, presumably in Yathrib/Medina.

While seven of the occurrences of the name *naṣārā* thus appear in *sūrat al-Baqarah* (II), five others occur in *sūrat al-Mā'idah* (V), once again reflecting a surrounding, Medinan context of religious critique of the beliefs and practices of the Jews and Christians. Here too we find two of the most pointed of the Qur'ān's critiques of Christian faith: "They have disbelieved who say that God is the Messiah, the son of Mary" (V *al-Mā'idah* 72) and, "They have disbelieved who say that God is *thālithu thalāthatin*" (V *al-Mā'idah* 73) two passages that will be discussed below.

Clearly, the Qur'ānic scenarios in which the preponderant number of times (12) the name *al-naṣārā* appears bespeak the sort of apologetic and polemical campaign characteristic of interreligious controversy and they feature the distinctive idiom of religious self-definition over against the challenges of others, specifically Jews and Christians.

Our immediate concern in this essay is with the Arabic-speaking Christians who were within Muḥammad's and the Qur'ān's purview, whom the Qur'ān sometimes calls *an-Naṣārā*, and about whom modern scholars have proposed a number of theories regarding their identity and their provenance.[22] The hypothesis espoused here is that these Christians are best thought of as associated in one way or another with the main denominational Christian communities whose presence in Arabia and on the Arabian periphery in the first third of the seventh century is historically well documented. They were the Late Antique Christians in the ensemble, whom the Arabophone writers of later times, both Muslim and Christian, regularly called by their principal denominational titles, the 'Melkites', the 'Jacobites'

22 See the discussion of the most important of these proposals in Griffith, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān".

and the 'Nestorians' albeit that other churches and interest groups were also intermingled with them. For its own purposes and in virtue of its own distinctive 'prophetology'[23] the Qur'ān, as we argue, when not using a broader category such as 'Scripture People' (*ahl al-kitāb*) to include Christians, Jews, and perhaps others, distinctively calls all the Christians within its immediate purview *an-Naṣārā*, deeming the contemporaries among them to be the recidivist descendants of those Israelite *Naṣārā* whom the Qur'ān recognizes as having originally been the disciples of God's messenger and prophet to the Israelites, Jesus the Messiah, whom Muḥammad and the Qur'ān are now calling back to the new dispensation's portrayal of their original beliefs and practices.

II. The Qur'ān and the Nazarenes of Late Antiquity

Given the Qur'ānic designation of Christians as *an-Naṣārā*, a name that also had a currency in Late Antiquity long before the first third of the seventh century CE as we shall see, the question naturally arises about how the term was used prior to and outside of the immediate concerns of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān and why for its own purposes the Qur'ān chose this particular name for the Christians within its purview rather than the more common name 'Christians', which those so designated overwhelmingly used for themselves, but which never occurs at all in the Qur'ān in its readily available Arabic form, *al-Masīḥiyyūn*.[24] We begin the story with an account of the views of the early Muslim commentators.

Already in early Islamic tradition there is considerable discussion of the basic meaning, the etymology and the grammatical typology of the term *an-Naṣārā*, the

23 See the discussion of the Qur'ān's distinctive prophetology in Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, pp. 62–89 and in Griffith, "The '*Sunnah* of Our Messengers'".

24 Some have questioned the currency of the Arabic form of the name in the seventh century. In this writer's opinion, given the attested currency of the Syriac term *mshīḥayyê* already in the fourth century, it is unlikely that it was lacking in Arabic in the seventh century. In this connection it is interesting to read in a now anonymous Arabic text written by a 'Melkite' sometime prior to the 17th century, "Once the Muslims came, our believing community was dubbed 'Nazoreans' (*naṣārā*), while before that we had only been called 'Christians' (*masīḥiyyīn*). ... 'Nazoreans' means 'obedient ones', for they have been obedient to the commandments of the Gospel. It also alludes to 'help', for they have helped the Truth with solid proofs, and have been helped by [the Truth] in return, and so they are both 'helpers' and 'those who are helped' (*nāṣirīn wa-manṣūrīn*). Additionally, this term is derived from [one of] the names of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the 'Nazarene' (*al-nāṣirī*)." Alexander Treiger, "Unpublished Texts from the Arab Orthodox Tradition (1). On the Origin of the Term 'Melkite' and on the Destruction of the Maryamiyya Cathedral in Damascus", *Chronos: Revue d'Histoire de l'Université de Balamand* 29 (2014), pp. 12 (Arabic) & 18 (English).

most commonly attested, plural form of the word, and its singular *an-Naṣrānī*.[25] Earlier commentators, such as Abū Ja'far aṭ-Ṭabarī (839–923), were inclined to consider it to be a geographical term referring to the village of *Nāṣirah*, where, they said Jesus, son of Mary, and his mother had lived.[26] However, as time went on, it became more common in the Islamic commentary tradition to derive the term from the Arabic root *n-ṣ-r*, in the form of the participle *nāṣir* (pl. *anṣār*) in the sense of 'helper/s' or 'supporter/s', and to assign a scriptural meaning to the term by referring to the passage in the Qur'ān that speaks of Jesus' disciples (*al-ḥawāriyyūn*) as declaring themselves to be "God's helpers" (*anṣār Allāh*): "Jesus said, 'Who will be my helpers (*anṣāriya*) toward God?' The disciples said, 'We are God's helpers'." (III *Āl 'Imrān* 52)[27] So one might on this basis assume that the *Naṣārā* of the Qur'ān are thought to be the now misguided, spiritual descendants of Jesus' first disciples. This interpretation is widespread in the Islamic community, with some commentators saying that it excludes those who both yesterday and today call themselves *al-Masīḥiyyūn*. For example, in one notable instance, the famous *littérateur*, Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāḥiẓ (781–868/9 CE) wrote in reference to the *naṣārā* whom the Qur'ān said were "the closest in amity to the believers" (V *al-Mā'idah* 82), that God "did not mean these *naṣārā* [of today] and their like, the 'Melkites' and 'Jacobites'. He meant only the like of Baḥīrā and the monks whom Salmān served".[28]

Muslim commentators have all approached the term *naṣrānī/naṣārā* with the assumption that it functions as an Arabic word, and that its grammatical and lexical states are to be, and can be adequately explained in reference to the principles of classical Arabic grammar and lexicography. Contrariwise, non-Muslim, mostly western scholars have considered the term to be part of the "foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān", to borrow a phrase from Arthur Jeffery. Specifically, the common, scholarly opinion is that the Arabic term is a reprise of the Greek adjective, Ναζωραῖος/οι, perhaps by way of the Syriac equivalent *Nāṣrāyâ/Nāṣrāyê*,[29] and

25 See the discussion of selected classical and modern, Muslim exegetes of the Qur'ān on the subject in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. pp. 93–128.

26 See Abū Ja'far aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayyān fī tafsīr al-qur'ān* (30 vols. in 14; Cairo: al-Maṭba'ah al-Mīnīyyah, 1321/1903), vol. I, p. 242.

27 See, e.g., the commentary of Zamakhshārī (1075–1144) in W. Nassau Lees, *The Qoran; with the Commentary of the Imam Aboo al-Qasim Mahmood bin 'Omar al-Zamakhshari, Entitled "The Kashshaf 'an Haqaiq al-Tanzil"* (2 vols.; Calcutta: W. Nassau Lees, 1856), vol. I, p. 80.

28 Al-Jāḥiẓ, "Refutation of Christians", in 'Abd as-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (ed, *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ* (4 parts in 2 vols.; Cairo: Maktabah al-Khābakhī, 1399/1979), vol. II, part 3, pp. 310–311.

29 See H.H. Schaeder, "Ναζαρηνός, Ναζωραῖος", in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of*

that in the Qur'ān and elsewhere its literal meaning is 'Nazarene/s'.[30] This adjective is used in the singular in the New Testament to describe Jesus as the man from Nazareth (Mt. 2:23; John 19:19). In the Acts of the Apostles, Tertullus, the attorney for the Jewish accusers of Paul before the Roman governor, Felix, describes Paul as "the ring leader of the sect of the Nazoreans" (Acts 24:5), presumably meaning the followers of the man from Nazareth. In this sense, the non-Muslim scholars of the Qur'ān and the early Muslim commentators, albeit from different perspectives, are agreed that the literal meaning of the term *naṣrānī/naṣārā* is Nazarene/s and that it refers to the followers of Jesus, the Messiah. The somewhat later Islamic, scriptural exegesis that connects *naṣārā* with the phrase *anṣār Allāh* on the basis of consonantal harmony, as explained above, does not however negate the term's basic geographical meaning; it rather enhances it by indicating that in the exegetes' opinion those called *an-naṣārā* or 'Nazarenes' were in fact identical with Jesus' original disciples (*al-ḥawāriyyūn*), both God's and the prophet-messenger Jesus' 'helpers' (*anṣār*).[31] Support for this view may be seen in the following verse:

> O you who believe, be God's helpers (*anṣār Allāh*), as when Jesus, Mary's son, said to the disciples, 'Who will be my helpers unto God?' And the disciples said, 'We are God's helpers.' (III:52) So a party of the Israelites believed and a party disbelieved. (LXI *aṣ-Ṣaff* 14)

It is notable that in the early Islamic period, Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims alike, regularly used the Qur'ān's term *naṣārā* as the functional equivalent of the name 'Christians' (Χριστιανοί, *masīḥiyyūn*) for the several ecclesial communities of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 11:26), who lived in the

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the New Testament (trans & ed., G.W. Bromiley, 10 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964–1976), vol. IV (1967), pp. 874–879; Stephen Goranson, "Nazarenes", in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. IV, pp. 1049–1050.

30 See Arthur Jefferey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), pp. 280–281; Arne A. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004), p. 311. See now, François De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002), pp. 1–30; Joachim Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran: Eine Spurensuche* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007). See also François de Blois, "Elchasai – Manes – Muḥammad: Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischen Vergleich", *Der Islam* 81 (2004), pp. 31–48, esp. pp. 41 ff.

31 For a somewhat different but compatible view, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Quran and the Apostles of Jesus", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76 (2013), pp. 209–227.

world of Islam.[32] So, while the common name 'Christian' had quickly prevailed in general parlance in the Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Latin-speaking milieux of Late Antiquity and early Islam, as the general designation for the several communities of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the term 'Nazarene/s' / 'Nazorean/s' nevertheless also persisted both in Christian and Jewish usage.[33] In his *Onomasticon*, the church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340) remarked in connection with his entry on the name of the village of Nazareth that "From it, Christ was called a 'Nazorean', and we too early on [were called] 'Nazarenes', who are now Christians."[34] In his Latin translation of this passage, St. Jerome (c. 342–420), added the note that "we were called Nazarenes *quasi pro obprobrio*",[35] signifying the contemptuous sense the term 'Nazarene' was understood to have by his time.

Among the Christians, it seems that it was in the Syriac-speaking communities that, along with the much more popular terms *mshîḥāyâ/ê* and the transliterated Greek term *krîsẖyānâ/ê*, one could also find the term *nāṣrāyâ/ê* applied generally to followers of Jesus of Nazareth, especially in texts written by Christians, but reporting the usage of non-Christians, and particularly that of Persian authorities, well into the fifth century.[36] Similarly, one also finds the term used in Manichaean texts to refer to Christians. For example, in *The Kephalia of the Teacher* one finds Mani in conversation with a presumably Christian questioner whom the text calls a 'Nazarene' (Ναζωραῖος).[37]

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32 See J.M. Fiey, "Naṣārā", in *EI*, new ed., vol. VII, pp. 970–973; S.H. Griffith, "Christians and Christianity", in McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. I, pp. 307–316; Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "Christians and Christianity in the Qur'ān", in David Thomas & Barbara Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (vol. I [600–900]; Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 21–30.

33 See, e.g., the entry under *Noṣrî* in Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (2 vols. in 1; London: Luzac, 1903), vol. II, pp. 889–890.

34 The passage is cited here from its quotation in De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος)", p. 2, n. 6.

35 Quoted from De Blois' citation, *ibidem*.

36 See Sebastian P. Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning", in Nina Garsoïan *et al.* (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, 1980; Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), pp. 91–95; *idem*, "Christians in the Sasanid Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties", in Stuart Mews (ed.), *Religion and National Identity* (Studies in Church History, XVIII; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 1–19. It is interesting to note in passing that Joachim Gnilka, who does not seem to know the studies of Sebastian Brock or François De Blois, envisions a more general use of the term. He says, "Der Name Nāzrājā ist aber im Orient längst zur Bezeichnung aller 'Christen' geworden, nicht mehr nur bezeichnet er eine jüdischen Religionsparteien wie in Jerusalem/Palästina vor dem Jahr 70. Aus dem Syrischen übernimmt das Arabische und der Koran den Namen in dem umfassenden Sinn." Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran*, p. 35.

37 [H.J. Polotsky (ed.)], *Kephalaia* (Band I, Manichäische Handschriften der Staatlichen Museen

There is one more piece of lexical information to consider and this time it comes from an Arabic text, composed well after the rise of Islam. In his work on the *History of the Councils*, the Coptic writer, Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, who flourished in Egypt in the second half of the tenth century, wrote of the traditional reports available to him of the conversion of the emperor Constantine I (d. 337) to Christianity in the fourth century. Sāwīrus reports of Constantine:

> One night as he was standing by, he saw a cross in the heavens, and angels were hovering about it. He became wary and alarmed. His attendants and companions asked him about the vision. They told him, 'These are the marvels of the cross, according to the history and present state of the people of Syria who are called *naṣārā*.' He then, intending to go out to a certain battle, made a promise to God that when he would gain the victory over his enemy, he would give thanks for it by adopting the practice of *an-naṣrāniyyah* and the public practice of the Christian religion (*al-diyānah al-masīḥiyyah*).[38]

In this remarkable passage, Sāwīrus quotes his sources to the effect that before his conversion, Emperor Constantine I was informed that there were people in Syria who were called 'Nazoreans', at least some of whom were presumably Syriac-speakers. Sāwīrus then explains that *naṣrāniyyah* is actually another name for Christianity. One may take it that in this Christian Arabic text Sāwīrus is reporting an instance of the usage in pre-Islamic Syria, according to which non-Christians are reported by Christians to have habitually called 'Christians' 'Nazoreans'. One may speculate that he intended herewith also to explain how it came about that the Qurʾān and the Muslims call the Christians 'Nazoreans'; it had already been the practice in the Syriac-speaking milieu for non-Christians to call Christians by this name. So, one may conclude that the name still had currency among Syriac and Arabic-speakers well into the seventh century and was therefore readily available to Muḥammad and the Qurʾān, who seem clearly to have excluded the Christians whom they called *an-naṣārā* from the Qurʾān's Community of Believers,[39] using for that purpose the very name for them that other non-Christians had used, and perhaps like them intending the very soupçon of opprobrium of which Jerome had once spoken.

Berlin; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1940), p. 221.

38 L. Leroy (ed. & trans.), *Sévère ibn al-Moqaffaʿ, évèque d'Aschmounaïn: Histoire des Conciles (second livre)* (Patrologia Orientalis, 6, fasc. IV; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1911), p. 484 [20].

39 *Pace* Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers*.

III. The Qur'ān's Admonishment of Christians

While in instances of Qur'ānic admonition the name *an-naṣārā* is used some fourteen times in the Qur'ān as a community designation, like the name Jews, with which it always occurs, it is not the only designation for Christians in admonitory or polemical passages. Perhaps even more frequently the Qur'ān simply criticizes Christian doctrine or practice by addressing them as 'Scripture People' (*ahl al-kitāb*), or some more general, accusatory phrase, such as, "They have disbelieved who say ..." (e.g., V *al-Mā'idah* 72, 73), and then specifying a particular Christian saying as the disbelief in question. For the Qur'ān's posture toward the Christians within its purview is predominantly one of polemical critique of their doctrines and practices and it employs literary and discursive strategies consonant with this purpose.[40] This reproving intent is evident in the tenor of the language employed already in the passages in which the name *an-naṣārā* appears, which we have already reviewed. In other passages, which obviously reprove Christian beliefs or practices albeit that Christians are not explicitly named, e.g., IV *an-Nisā'* 171 and V *al-Mā'idah* 77, one finds such anti-Christian, polemical admonitions as: "O Scripture People, do not exceed the bounds in your religion, nor say about God aught but the truth; the Messiah, Jesus, Mary's son, is but God's Messenger." (V *an-Nisā'* 171) Or, "Say, O Scripture People, do not exceed the bounds in your religion untruthfully, and do not follow the fancies of a people who went astray in the past and led others astray and strayed from the even path." (V *al-Mā'idah* 77) Even more obviously anti-Christian are the passages that declare "They have disbelieved who say God is the Messiah, son of Mary" (V *al-Mā'idah* 72), and "They have disbelieved who say God is *thālith thalāthatin*" (V *al-Mā'idah* 73), about which more below.

Hermeneutically speaking, an important corollary of the reader's recognition of the Qur'ān's intention polemically to criticize Christian belief and practice is the further recognition that in the service of this purpose the Qur'ān rhetorically does not simply report or repeat verbatim what the Christians within its purview actually say. Rather, it reprovingly alludes to what they say, corrects it, or even caricatures it for polemically rhetorical purposes. For example, there is no record that Christians in the Qur'ān's time ever said that "God is the Messiah, son of Mary" (V *al-Mā'idah* 72). They did often affirm that the Messiah, son of Mary, is the son of God, the basic article of faith of the Nicene Christians of the seventh century. The

40 See Kate Zebiri, "Polemic and Polemical Language", in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. IV, pp. 114–125.

Qur'ān's seeming misstatement, rhetorically speaking, should therefore not be thought actually to be a mistake, or a report of some otherwise unknown Christian group's unlikely affirmation. Rather, rhetorically the statement is a polemically inspired *reductio ad absurdum* from the Qur'ān's point of view, the purpose of which is clearly to highlight in alternative, polemical terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness from the Qur'ān's perspective of the Christian belief that Jesus is actually the Son of God.[41] A constant theme in the Qur'ān is that God has no offspring, most forcefully stated in CXII *al-Ikhlāṣ* 3–4, "He has not begotten, nor has He been begotten; there is none beside Him".

A further important hermeneutic step for the reader to take is to affirm the historiographical presumption that Muḥammad and the Qur'ān actually knew how the presumably mostly Arabic-speaking (and Aramaic/Syriac-speaking) Christians in its milieu phrased the confessional formulae to which the Qur'ān objects when it alludes to them and distorts rephrases them for polemical purposes. What is more, the Islamic scripture actually provides its own evidence of its familiarity not only with the scriptural narratives of the Scripture People, i.e., Jews and Christians in particular, a familiarity often documented by scholars, but also of much of their non-scriptural religious lore. The Qur'ān typically does not simply repeat these narratives; it comments on them, alludes to them, adds different readings and interpretations, and even corrects them from its own point of view.[42] In this manner

41 This feature of the Qur'ān's rhetoric was already highlighted by Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāḥiẓ in his "Refutation of Christians". Noting that in reference to certain Qur'ānic passages, Jews and Christians in his day often disavowed the Qur'ān's reports of what they allegedly say, al-Jāḥiẓ responded that in these instances those who question the Qur'ān's accuracy miss the point. He says that there is no error in the Qur'ān's language. Rather the adversaries have misinterpreted it. He says, "If God wanted to give a report of the infidelity of certain people with whom He is displeased, they have no right to require Him to give an explanation of their religion and their faults along with the best way to evade [the charge] and to disclose [the faults] in the best words. Why so, since He wants to provide a deterrent from what they say and to render them detestable to anyone who hears of it." (P. 346) Al-Jāḥiẓ says to his Jewish and Christian adversaries, "You want only to question us about our scripture and about what it is possible to say in our language and in our speech, but you do not ask us about what it is possible to say in your language and in your speech." (P. 347) As for the Christians in particular, who object to the Qur'ān's saying that in addition to being God's word, the Messiah is also 'a spirit from Him' (IV *an-Nisā'* 171), thereby negating the Christian view of the Holy Spirit's individuality, al-Jāḥiẓ says that his adversaries want us to say about Jesus what they say about him and he goes on to say, "You know that that is not part of our religion, nor is it in any way possible for us. Why would we make a statement to people of what we do not say, or [propose] a religion we do not approve of?" (P. 348) Al-Jāḥiẓ, "Refutation of Christians", vol. II, part 3, pp. 343–349. My thanks go to Nathan Gibson for calling my attention to this passage.

42 The present writer has attempted to display this aspect of the Qur'ān's approach to earlier

the Qur'ān regularly appropriates, reinterprets according to the parameters of its own 'prophetology', and re-contextualizes themes and formulae readily found in the religious discourse of other communities. Many studies have high-lighted this phenomenon, as they have examined how the Qur'ān echoes and evokes the recognition of earlier Jewish or Christian modes of speech. But, often ignoring the Qur'ān's own polemically-inspired, commentarial, critical and corrective posture toward the earlier narratives it recollects, many of the scholars who have studied these thematic or linguistic coincidences and their transformations in the Qur'ān have often in the past come to the unwarranted conclusion that the Qur'ān had misunderstood, misconstrued or otherwise mistook the Jewish or Christian accounts. They have often overlooked the Qur'ān's judgmental posture toward the Jewish or Christian lore it recollects and the rhetorical strategies it employs in expressing its objection to it and as a consequence they have then often looked for earlier 'sources' for the language they actually find in the Qur'ān, a process which sometimes then leads them to the postulation of the presence in the Qur'ān's milieu of some otherwise historically unattested Jewish or Christian text or community known to feature something like the belief, the turn of phrase, or the practice found or alluded to in the Qur'ān.

Hermeneutically speaking, in the search for the Christianity known to Muḥammad and the Qur'ān it is important to take into account the full range of the Qur'ān's evocation of Christian belief and practice and not to draw conclusions from too narrow a point of reference. For example, in the past some researchers, as we shall see in more detail below, have taken their cue almost solely from what they have thought to be the Qur'ān's Christology, or from its halachic prescriptions, as a basis for postulating the presence in Arabia in the early seventh century CE of yet earlier, otherwise historically unattested, independent creedal communities whose views they take to be sources for the Qur'ān. But in fact the profile of Christianity available in the Qur'ān is much fuller than what these restricted views

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Christian lore in two instances in particular: Sidney H. Griffith, "Syriacisms in the Arabic-Qur'ān: Who were 'those who said 'Allāh is third of three' according to *al-Mā'idah* 73?" in Meir M. Bar-Asher *et al.* (eds.), *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān; presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai* (Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007, pp. 83–110, now re-printed in Ibn Warraq [ed.], *Christmas in the Koran: Luxenberg, Syriac, and the Near Eastern and Judeo-Christian Background of Islam* [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014, pp. 119–144]); and Sidney H. Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: the 'Companions of the Cave' in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition", in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London & New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 109–138.

present. For example, the range of biblical reminiscence, especially from the apocryphal, Second Temple, and non-canonical New Testament scriptures far outstrips what would have been available to the communities normally identified by these suggestions. What is more, the Qur'ān also recollects elements of Christian lore that circulated in the churches much closer to its own time, for example the accounts of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, the Alexander Legend, references to the Christological controversies, and some features of Julianist Christology, not to mention monasticism and the religious authority that priests and monks exercised in contemporary Christian communities.

As many researchers have pointed out, much if not most of the Qur'ān's evocation of the Christianity within its frame of reference betrays an originally Syriac formulation, which accords well with what is known of Christian history on the Arabian periphery and within Arabia proper in the early seventh century.[43] This is the Christianity that stands most immediately both geographically and chronologically within the Qur'ān's purview. Occasionally with great ingenuity, and usually with reference to some form of Jewish or Judeo-Christianity, some recent scholars have striven to avoid or by-pass Syriac Christianity in their efforts to situate the Qur'ān's Christians in time, place, and creed.[44] So far in the present writer's opinion, these efforts have not been convincing largely because of their failure to take the full range of the Qur'ān's Christian view into account or they are too heavily dependent on extrapolations from too meager a textual base or too narrow a theological projection.

Finally, given the Qur'ān's critical posture towards the beliefs and practices of the Christians, its polemical strategies, and the presumption of its accurate knowledge of the beliefs, the creedal formulae, and even the ecclesiastical lore it criticizes or rhetorically caricatures, one must on the basis of this evidence assume the presence of contemporary, Arabic-speaking communities of 'Scripture People' in the Qur'ān's immediate milieu, within its purview, and even in its audience. As a

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43 See Sidney H. Griffith, "What Does Mecca Have to Do with Urhoy? Syriac Christianity, Islamic Origins and the Qur'ān", in Maria Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano & Kyle Smith (eds.), *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium; Duke University, 26–29 June 2011* (Eastern Christian Studies, 20; Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2014), in press.

44 See, e.g., Patricia Crone & Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977); John Jandora, *The Latent Trace of Islamic Origins: Midian's Legacy in Mecca's Moral Awakening* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012). See also many of the studies included in Carlos A. Segovia & Basil Lourié (eds.), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam and Various Other Topics in Memory of John Wansbrough* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012).

matter of fact, given the paucity of other evidence of Christian communities in the Ḥijāz, the Qur'ān itself emerges as the single, most important source of historical documentation for the presence of Arabic-speaking Christianity in the Arabian heartland in the seventh century.

IV. Who Were the Qur'ān's Nazoreans / Nazarenes?

Heretofore researchers have identified a number of different, Christian communities as being the likely Christians, whose views they claim to have found reflected in the Qur'ān. For the most part, the methodology has been first to articulate what is taken to be the Qur'ān's own Christology, and consequent Theology, and then to match it with the creedal formulae and reports of the beliefs of some historically attested earlier Christian community, usually much earlier than the seventh century and usually not otherwise historically attested to have been in the Arabic-speaking milieu of the Qur'ān's own day. The problem has then been to advance a rationale for how the chosen community could have been present to the nascent Islamic community, whose scripture, on the usual hypothesis, then adopted the chosen Christian community's Christological and theological position. Currently, the two most frequently proposed groups are the Jewish-Christians, represented by the Nazarenes, as they are described in Epiphanius of Salamis' *Panarion*,[45] and a more recently postulated group of Arabized, Syriac-speaking upholders of a supposed, Pre-Nicene, Syrian theology.[46]

From the historical point of view, a significant problem for the suggestion that the Qur'ān's Christology derives from a group of Jewish Christians, and specifically the Nazarenes in its milieu is, as Rémi Brague has pointed out most succinctly,

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45 See the studies cited in n. 30 above, particularly and most seriously, the studies by François de Blois and Joachim Gnilka. The idea of a Jewish Christian, even Nazarene presence in Muḥammad's milieu had been adumbrated already by Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin: Reimer, 1897), p. 232. It was explicitly put forward by Hans Hoachim Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949), pp. 334–342, and widely popularized by Hans Küng, most recently in his, *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft* (München & Zürich: Piper, 2004, esp. pp. 75–78, 595–599. Joseph Azzi went so far as to propose the idea that Waraqa ibn Nawfal was a priest in a Nazarene, Ebionite, Christian group in Mecca. See J. Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète: Aux sources du Coran* (trans. M.S. Gamier; Paris: Maisonneuve te Larose, 2001). See most recently in a similar vein, Edouard M. Gallez, *Le Messie et son prophète: Aux origines de l'islam* (tome 1; De Qumran à Muḥammad; 2nd ed.; Paris: Éditions de Paris, 2005).

46 See Karl-Heinz Ohlig, "Das syrische und arabische Christentum und der Koran", in Karl-Heinz Ohlig & Gerd-R. Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam* (3rd ed.; Berlin: Schiler, 2007), pp. 366–404.

"Nous n'avons pas de traces d'un lien direct entre le groupe judéo-chrétien expulsé de Jérusalem vers 66 et les événements situés six siècles plus tard".[47] It is a problem that caused François De Blois to be somewhat circumspect in phrasing his conclusion that "There was a community of Nazorean Christians in central Arabia, in the seventh century, unnoticed by the outside world".[48] As for Joachim Gnilka's hypothesis that Jewish Christianity more broadly speaking was the point of contact between Christianity and the Qur'ān, the well marshaled evidence he puts forward to support the hypothesis consists mainly of the "interesting parallels between the Koran and Jewish Christianity",[49] which parallels he finds in texts, many of which he says, "are of Jewish Christian origin".[50] But the problem here is that many if not most of these texts, and especially the Diatessaron, along with motifs otherwise found in apocryphal Gospels, had a long life in the Syriac literature of the decidedly non-Jewish Christian churches, mostly 'Jacobite' and 'Nestorian', actually known to have been actively present in the Arabic-speaking milieu in the seventh century. There is a similar problem with the *Inarah* school's suggestion that there was some sort of Pre-Nicene, Syrian theology current among some Arabized, Syriac-speaking communities in the Qur'ān's immediate milieu. As we shall see, all the actual traces of Syriac-speaking Christianity among the Arabic-speaking peoples reflect language and lore otherwise found only in texts by resolutely Nicene Syriac writers, such as Ephraem the Syrian (d. 373), Narsai (d. c.503), or Jacob of Serug (d. 520/1).

In addition to the inability to find immediate historical evidence for stipulating the presence of Jewish Christians, Nazarenes or Pre-Nicene, Syriac-speaking Christians, be it in Arabia or elsewhere in the seventh or eighth centuries, a further problem with these hypotheses, articulated solely on the basis of an uncritical search for presumed sources, is that their proponents often ignore the Qur'ān's rhetorical strategy for debating purposes to engage in a polemical characterization or caricature of the positions of its religious adversaries. Here one argues that taking the controversial intent and the polemical cast of the Qur'ān's language into account supports the hypothesis that the Christians, their doctrines and practices that are within the Islamic scripture's purview, and which the Qur'ān criticizes are none other than those to be found among the wide range of traditions transmitted within the largely Aramaic and Syriac-speaking communities of the seventh and

47 Rémi Brague, "Le Coran: sortir du cercle?" *Critique* (no. 671; Avril, 2003), p. 251.
48 See DeBlois' conclusion cited in full at n. 13 above.
49 Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran*, p. 110
50 Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran*, p. 97.

eighth centuries, who in later Islamic times would customarily be called in the ensemble 'Melkites', 'Jacobites', and 'Nestorians'. Their presence and their language and lore can actually be shown to have been present on the Arabian periphery and in the greater Syro-Palestinian-Mesopotamian milieu from at least the sixth century onward, well into early Islamic times. And the Qur'ān itself supplies the best evidence for their presence among the Arabic-speaking populations of central Arabia in the first third of the seventh century.

On chronological and geographical grounds, these large communities are most likely to have been the umbrella groups among whom were the Arabic-speaking Christians, whom for its own reasons the Qur'ān calls *an-Naṣārā*, and who, according to the Qur'ān, would say, "The Messiah is the son of God", a statement, the text goes on to say, in which "they emulate the language of the unbelievers of yore" (IX *at-Tawbah* 30). This Qur'ānic critique is in fact at variance with what is reported of either the *Panrion's* Nazarenes or most other Jewish Christian groups,[51] none of whom according to current scholarly opinions explicitly confessed that the Messiah is the Son of God in the sense critiqued by the Qur'ān.[52] Contrariwise, that Jesus, the Messiah, is the Son of God, and therefore God in person, is a basic creedal affirmation of each of the Nicene Christian communities actually contemporary with the Qur'ān, albeit that their differing Christologies prevented their ecclesial communion with one another. The Qur'ān not only does not affirm what the Qur'ānic *an-Naṣārā* affirm; it explicitly rejects their common creed and engages in polemical attacks against it!

Whatever plausible reason one finds for the Qur'ān's use of the name *an-Naṣārā* for the Christians, or for the Arabic-speaking Christians of Arabia to use it for themselves, it seems historically highly unlikely that the usage was due to the presence in the peninsula in the seventh century of a long forgotten group of Nazorean Jewish Christians as a number of modern scholars have alleged. On the one hand, the only evidence so far adduced for their presence there is based on an interpretation of certain Qur'ānic passages, for which the interpreters were in the present writer's opinion misguidedly looking for sources rather than meanings in

51 Ray Pritz actually argued, on the basis of passages quoted from the works of Jerome and Augustine, that while Epiphanius neglected to mention it in the *Panarion*, the Nazarenes were in point of fact willing to confess that Jesus, the Messiah, is the Son of God. See Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, pp. 35 & n. 8, 54–55, 78, 90.

52 One notices the ingenious but tortuous line of reasoning De Blois employs to show that the Judeo-Christian groups might actually have espoused the Qur'ān's Christology. See De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*", esp. pp. 14–15. So, according to him, the Christology of the Qur'ān is supposed to be congruent with that of *al-naṣārā* whose views the Qur'ān critiques.

context. On the other hand, rhetorically speaking, and taking the Qur'ān on its own terms, these same passages, which after all reject the truth claims of what in its view the *Naṣārā* wrongly say or believe can just as well be understood as rejecting the teachings and critiquing the behavior of those who in the ensemble are customarily called 'Melkite', 'Jacobite', and 'Nestorian' Christians, whose presence in Arabia and on its periphery in the requisite timeframe is amply documented.

Given this historical setting and recalling that Christological controversy was the primary factor in the disunion of the Christians in the seventh century in the Levant and the principal topic in their mutual recriminations, it is not surprising that Christology is also without a doubt at the heart of the Qur'ān's doctrinal objection to Christianity, dictated by the Qur'ān's own determinative 'prophetology', 'the *sunnah* of Our Messengers'. It was precisely the Christians' affirmation that Jesus, the Messiah, Mary's son is the Son of God that elicited the Qur'ān's stark imperative, "Believe in God and His messengers and do not say, 'three'. Stop it; it is better for you. God is but a single God. Glory be to Him, that He should have as a son anything in the heavens or on the earth." (IV *an-Nisā'* 171)[53] This passage, in fact, is the only one in the Qur'ān that seems directly and explicitly to refer to the Christian affirmation of a doctrine of the Trinity as a consequence of their confessing that Jesus the Messiah is God's son, unless, following the suggestions of some commentators, one would think that the affirmation, "He did not beget and is not begotten, and none is His equal" (CXII *al-Ikhlāṣ* 3–4), is also to be so interpreted.[54] As for the enigmatic phrase in the Qur'ān's dictum, "They have disbelieved who say, 'God is *thālith thalāthatin*'" (V *al-Māidah* 73), in its context it is, as has been said, most reasonably understood as primarily an epithet of Jesus, the Messiah, well-known among Syriac-speaking Christians, which evokes a scriptural typology that in turn also evokes the doctrine of the Trinity. In other words, the Qur'ān puts its finger on what Christians confess about Jesus the Messiah as being what leads them to speak of the one God as being somehow also three.

The Qur'ānic phrase, "They have disbelieved who say that God is ..." – used three times in the same *sūrah* (V *al-Mā'idah* 17, 72, 73), and twice directly reproving those who say, "God is the Messiah" (vss. 17, 72), – obviously intends rhetorically,

53 Interestingly, Arabic-speaking Christian apologists in Islamic times, beginning with the earliest of their texts, regularly cited the Qur'ān's verse IV *an-Nisā'* 171 in their defenses of the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity, arguing that in fact in this verse the Qur'ān itself posits the three divine persons, God, His Word, and His Spirit.

54 See Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010), pp. 161–165.

and polemically, to emphasize the incompatibility of the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God with the main premise of Qur'ānic monotheism. In the first instance, the text says, "They have disbelieved who say, 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary'. Say, 'Who could prevent God, if He wished, from destroying the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother too, together with all those on the face of the earth'?" (vs. 17) In the next instance, the Qur'ān says, "They have disbelieved who say, 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary.' The Messiah said, 'O Children of Israel worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Surely, he who associates other gods with God, God forbids him access to the Garden and his dwelling is the fire. Evildoers have no supporters'." (vs. 72) The polemical intent here is obvious. The conundrum is in the third utterance of the formula, where the text reproves those who say, "God is *thālith thalāthatin*", "They have disbelieved who say, 'God is *thālith thalāthatin*.' For there is no god except one God; if they do not stop saying what they say, those who have disbelieved will be severely punished." (v. 73)

In another place, and briefly above, the present writer has argued at some length that the Arabic phrase, *thālith thalāthatin* in *sūrah* V *al-Mā'idah* 73 can most reasonably be construed as an Arabic rendering of the common Syriac epithet for Christ, *tlîthāyâ*,[55] thereby positing a symmetry in the opening phrases of verses 72 and 73. In connection with the present discussion of the Qur'ān's polemics against the doctrines of those it calls *an-Naṣārā*, i.e., Nazoreans, the recognition of this sense of the enigmatic phrase, *thālith thalāthatin*, removes the reason many commentators, ancient and modern, Muslim and non-Muslim, have used in reference to another passage in the same *sūrah*, V *al-Mā'idah* 116, to claim that the Qur'ān's conception of the Christian Trinity is that it consists of three persons, God, Mary, and Jesus. This misconception then sent those researchers exclusively looking for sources off on a search for early Christian groups that espoused such a trinity; François De Blois, for example, very ingeniously found them among the same Judeo-Christians, Mandaeans and others, whom he had associated with the early Christian heretical sect, the 'Nazarenes'. He adopted the position that in the

55 See Griffith, "Syriacisms in the 'Arabic Qur'ān'". In this article, I failed to call attention to the phrase *thāniya 'thnayni* in *al-Tawbah* (9) 40, which is grammatically parallel to *thālith thalātin* in *al-Mā'idah* (5) 116, 'one of two' // 'one of three'. I am grateful to Prof. Manfred Kropp and to Dr. Joseph Witztum for bringing it to my attention. But this parallel sense of the phrase *thālith thalāthatin* to mean 'one of three' does not, in my opinion, preclude its selection to reflect the Syriac epithet for Jesus, *tlîthāyâ*, for in both Syriac and Arabic, the ordinal number evokes a triad, and the Syriac epithet is used to describe Jesus as one of the three 'persons' / 'hypostases' (*qnômê* in Syriac, *aqānīm* in Arabic) of the Trinity.

Qur'ān's view, the Christian Trinity is God, as Father, Mary, as Spirit and Mother, and Jesus, Mary's son, as their Son, and so the 'third of three'.[56]

With the recognition that the phrase *thālith thalāthatin* is best explained as an Arabic rendition of a Syriac epithet for Jesus, the mystery of its meaning is resolved. The Qur'ān is reflecting a genuine usage of the Christians in its audience in its polemic against their belief that Jesus, the Messiah, the son of Mary, and 'the three-fold one', is the Son of God. Similarly, the Qur'ān's polemical rhetoric is also evident in its suggestion in *sūrah* V *al-Mā'idah* 116 that in its view the absurd logic of the Christians should lead to the manifestly unacceptable conclusion that if Jesus is the Son of God and God, so too should his mother Mary be God – two Gods, apart from God.

The Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation that the Qur'ān polemically rejects are most reasonably seen as the doctrines espoused among the main-line Christian communities known to be in its milieu; there is no need to postulate the presence of other communities, for which there is no historical evidence at all of their presence, save in what the present writer takes to be a scholarly mis-reading of the Qur'ān itself. The mis-reading consists in the failure to recognize that in the pertinent passages, the Qur'ān is not reporting the views of those it calls *an-Naṣārā*, 'Nazoreans'; it is knowledgeably and rhetorically suggesting the absurdity of their doctrines from its own confessional point of view and polemically rejecting them as wrong. The fact that the Qur'ān's own Christology can then be seen as a theological match with an earlier Jewish Christian Christology in its substance is not a convincing argument for the Qur'ān's dependence on the doctrines of the Jewish Christians, nor is it evidence for an otherwise unattested Jewish Christian presence in its milieu.

It is similarly the case with some modern scholarly opinions given in explanation of the passage in the Qur'ān that has often been taken by both Muslims and non-Muslims to deny the reality of the crucifixion of Jesus, IV *an-Nisā'* 157–159.[57] In the immediate context of the passage, the Jews are the 'Scripture People' whose reported boasts the Qur'ān rejects in this matter.[58] But some modern scholars have perceived seemingly docetist or phantasiast Christian views reflected in the enig-

56 See De Blois, "*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*", pp. 13–15.

57 See Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'ān: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: One World, 2009). See also Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72 (2009), pp. 237–258.

58 There seems to be some Rabbinic evidence for this boast. See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 73–74.

matic phrase *shubbiha lahum*, "it seemed so to them" (vs. 157), and they have taken the phrase to reflect an early Gnostic view, according to which someone other than Jesus was crucified in his stead and so they have on this basis posited the contemporary presence of such a Gnostic or docetist Christian community in the Qur'ān's immediate milieu, who espoused the substitution doctrine.[59] But even in this instance there is no need to go beyond the contemporary 'Melkites', 'Jacobites' and 'Nestorians' to account for the Qur'ān's purported awareness of this line of thinking current among some Christians. The so-called 'Julianists', the followers of Julian of Halicarnassus (d. after 518), were in fact associates of the wider 'Jacobite' community, and they were a constant target for the theologians of that wider community, who called them 'Aphthartodocetists' and 'Phantasiasts', accusing them of detracting from the concrete reality of Jesus' death on the cross because of their teachings about the incorruptibility of Christ's body, albeit that he did seem to suffer and die on the cross.[60] These polemics can be found alluded to in a very general way even in Syriac texts that address the historical circumstances of Christians in Arabia in the century before the time of Muḥammad, e.g., in Jacob of Sarug's so-called 'Letter to the Himyarites',[61] and in Simeon of Beth Arsham's (d. before 548) 'Letter on the Himyarite Martyrs'.[62] There are even reports of 'Julianists' in Najrān, with whose Christians, according to Islamic tradition, Muḥammad himself is alleged to have been in dialogue.[63] But surely the passage in IV *an-Nisā* 157–159 on the face of it means primarily to deny the truth of what the Qur'ān takes to be the boast of the Jews to have been responsible for Jesus' crucifixion and death. It surely cannot be taken as evidence for the presence in Arabia in the seventh century of an otherwise forgotten group of ancient 'Gnostics'. The local 'docetists', as we have seen, were very much among the local 'Jacobites'.

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59 See e.g., the account of them given in Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 598.

60 See René Draguet, *Julien d'Halicarnasse et sa controverse avec Sévère d'Antioche sur l'incorruptibilité du corps du Christ: Étude d'histoire littéraire et doctrinale suivie des fragments dogmatiques de Julien* (Louvain: Smeesters, 1924); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590–604)* (vol. II, part 2, 'The Church of Constantinople in the Sixth Century', trans. P. Allen & J. Cawte; London & Louisville, KY: Mowbray & Westminster-John Knox, 1995), pp. 79–111 See also Theresia Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam: Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit; eine Hinführung* (Eastern Christian Studies, 7; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 105–106, 133–134.

61 See G. Olinder, *Iacobi Sarugensis Epistulae Quotquot Supersunt* (CSCO, vol. 110; Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1937), pp. 87–102.

62 See I. Guidi, "La lettera di Simeone vescovo di Bêth-Aršâm sopra I Martiri Omeriti", *RAL* 278 (1880–1881), pp. 3–32.

63 See Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber*, pp. 133–134.

V. The Naṣārā and Jewish Christianity

The historical record amply demonstrates that main-line Christian communities had been pressing into Arabia from all sides from at least the beginnings of the sixth century and even earlier.[64] Recognition of this historical situation taken together with the absence of any textual or other evidence of the actual presence in Arabia in the seventh century of groups such as the ancient Nazarenes, the Ebionites, the Elkasaites or other Jewish Christians, raises a question about how then and why may scholars nevertheless still discern perceptible strains of Jewish Christian thought and practice in the Qur'ān. In fact there are echoes and reminiscences of views otherwise found expressed in acknowledged Jewish-Christian works such as the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies and Recognitions* and certain apocryphal scriptural texts.[65] And recently Holger Zellentin has been able to identify a substantial overlap in the legal culture, the sum of what he calls the *nomos* and the narrative regarding ritual purity, between the Qur'ān and the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, especially in this document's description of Jewish-Christian practices with which its author takes issue. This discovery then prompts him to speak of the Qur'ān's dialogue with and reaction to Jewish, Jewish-Christian, and Christian sources, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* prominent among them.[66] Similarly, other current scholars have been speaking of the Qur'ān's biblical and other sub-texts and even of its dialogues and conversations with earlier scriptures, many of which were considered non-canonical or in some instances even heretical by the main-line churches of the seventh century.[67] But this does not add up to evidence for postulating the continuing presence in the Arabic-speaking milieu of groups that all but disappeared elsewhere by the seventh century.

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64 See Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber, passim.* See also the numerous studies of Irfan Shahid, and in particular his *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oakes, 1989); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (vol. I, parts 1 & 2.; Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oakes, 1995 & 2002).

65 See in this connection the interesting work of Samuel Zinner, *The Abrahamic Archetype: Conceptual and Historical Relationships between Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Bartlow, Cambridge, UK: Archetype, 2011). Zinner's approach is a theological and historical undertaking to reconstruct what he elsewhere calls the *praeparatio islamica.*

66 See Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture.*

67 See, e.g., Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London & New York: Routledge, 2010); Emran Iqbaql El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014).

It is hermeneutically important to take cognizance of the fact that the texts which transmit Jewish Christian legal and doctrinal material, almost all of them in Greek or Syriac, were transmitted, translated, copied, and read throughout the centuries by now largely unknown parties who by the seventh century were for the most part in some way integrated into the main-line communities. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* is a case in point; issues addressed in it were being discussed in the 'Jacobite' community in early Islamic times.[68] It is important to keep in mind the fact that by the seventh century 'orthodoxy' was for the most part a matter of Christology in the several, official ecclesial communities. To judge by the continuing currency of many earlier texts, orthodoxies were not threatened by, nor did the authorities often proscribe interest in a wide variety of philosophical and religious ideas and practices, hagiographies and pious legends, at the same time as they were insistent on the general adherence to the Christological confessional formulae approved in each church.[69] From the early sixth century onward, the major disciplinary concern of the churches of Syria and Mesopotamia, flowing from their several Christological allegiances, had to do with matters of intercommunion and sacramental boundaries.[70] The wide range of Christian lore cultivated orally and in writing continued unabated in multiple schools or circles of thought, unhindered in all the churches.

Given the oral origins of the Qur'ān, and the oral circulation of the Bible and other narratives of the Jews, Christians, Manichees and others in the Arabic-speaking milieu prior to the appearance of the Qur'ān, it is no wonder that scholars can readily find in the Qur'ān's language, motifs and expressions familiar to them from their acquaintance with earlier Jewish, Jewish-Christian, and Christian texts. But this discovery does not authorize putting the Qur'ān textually in conversation with earlier texts in other languages in which one finds the same themes. In fact, one regularly finds that the Qur'ān very seldom quotes from other narratives. Rather, the Arabic Qur'ān assumes its audience's familiarity with the contents of

68 See the discussion in Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture*, pp. 5–17.

69 To mention just some well-known instances, in addition to works like the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies and Recognitions* in Greek, Origen's *De Principiis* in Latin, Evagrius of Pontus' *Kephalia Gnostica* in Syriac, or Tertullian's multiple compositions, not to mention numerous apocryphal scriptures, hagiographical legends, ascetical works and even Gnostic and Neo-Platonic philosophical texts.

70 See Volker-Lorenz Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Philip Wood, *We Have No King but Christ: Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c. 400–580)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

earlier scriptures and other texts and it recollects their themes and turns of phrase within the parameters of its own distinctive message, often correcting, criticizing, or even polemicizing against other communities' beliefs and practices, while at the same time acknowledging broad areas of agreement.

In the instance of the Qur'ān's recollection of material otherwise found in texts associated with Jewish-Christianity, it would seem to be an hermeneutical error to assume that it warrants the assumption that there was a distinct Jewish-Christian community present in the Qur'ān's immediate ambience from whom the material was borrowed. For by the first third of the seventh century these very texts deemed to be Jewish-Christian were either preserved or being actively copied and transmitted within the conventional Christian communities, especially in the Aramaic and Syriac-speaking realm and their contents seem already to have become common knowledge in the milieu in which the texts were read and used. Like all the other scriptural and ecclesiastical or rabbinical lore, these so-called Jewish-Christian traditions would have originally come orally into the Qur'ān's Arabophone domain through the intermediacy of Arabic-speaking Jews or Christians, whose rabbis, clergy and monks would have had access to them in their originally Greek, Aramaic or Syriac texts or oral transmissions.

The hypothesis proposed in this essay is that the Arabic Qur'ān came into being in the Arabian Ḥijāz in the first third of the seventh century of the Common Era in a milieu in which the current traditions of the Jews, Christians, Manichees, and others were circulating freely, abundantly and orally in Arabic. Within this context, the Qur'ān incorporated much of the well-known Jewish and Christian lore, recollected within the horizon of its own telling and put into a new interpretive framework designed to commend the message of its own distinctive 'prophetology', which is differently construed from the previous 'prophetologies' of the Jews, Jewish-Christians, and Christians alike, whose models it eclipsed, with a typology all its own, thereby providing a new horizon of meaning for the common material it includes. One might think of it as a paradigm shift in Late Antique prophetology. After all, the Arabic Qur'ān could only address its seventh century audience in religious terms and narratives already familiar, but a new interpretive paradigm for the familiar material was required for the sake of communicating the new, corrective vision that was to become Islam. And it was within this framework that Christian/Muslim dialogue began its long journey into the twenty-first century.