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WHAT DOES MECCA HAVE TO DO WITH URHŌY? SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY, ISLAMIC ORIGINS, AND THE QUR'ĀN

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I. PROLEGOMENA

For a long time, scholars have been aware of the importance of Syriac studies for the historical investigation of Islamic origins and for a deeper understanding of the language and text of the Qur'ān. There is even a report from early Islamic times that Muḥammad himself took an interest in the language. The report is preserved in a work by the ninth-century Muslim traditionist Da'ūd ibn al-Ash'ath as-Sijistānī (817-888 CE), quoting Muḥammad's well-known secretary, Zayd ibn Thābit (c.610-c.660). Zayd said the prophet asked him, "Do you know Syriac well? Some books have come to my attention. I said, 'No'." "He said, 'Learn it.' So I learned it in nineteen days."[1] The anecdote is just one among many surviving from early Islamic times that testify to the prophet Muḥammad's interest in the scriptures of other communities, and that mention the names of associates who could consult them on his behalf, in languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic/Syriac, and even Greek.[2] In later Islamic tradition, there is ample recognition of the currency of Syriac and other languages in the ambience of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān; even the Syriac background of certain words and phrases in the Islamic scripture was not unknown to Muslim commentators, from early on down to the time of Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyuṭī (d.1505), who made lists of the Qur'ān's 'foreign words', including Syriac.[3] But for all practical purposes, it was not until the twentieth century that Western scholars began to systematically investigate the relevance of Syriac for their study of the Qur'ān and Islamic origins.

[1] Da'ūd ibn al-Ash'ath as-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* (Cairo: al-Maṭba'ah ar-Raḥmāniyyah, 1355/1936), p. 6.

[2] See C. Gilliot, "Die Schreib- und/oder Lesekundigkeit in Mekka und Yathrib/Medina zur Zeit Mohammeds," in *Schlaglichter: Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*, ed. M. Groß and K.-H. Ohlig (Inārah, Schriften zur frühen Islamgeschichte und zum Koran; Band 3; Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2008), 293-319.

[3] See A. Rippin, "Foreign Vocabulary," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. J.D. McAuliffe (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006), vol. II, 226-37.

Alphonse Mingana, writing in 1927, estimated that seventy percent of what he called the "foreign influences on the style and terminology" of the Qur'ān could be traced to "Syriac (including Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac)."[4] And subsequently, taking note of Mingana's high estimate of Syriac etymologies for a significant portion of the Qur'ān's so-called 'foreign vocabulary,' Arthur Jeffery wrote in 1938 that "one fact seems certain, namely that such Christianity as was known among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times was largely of the Syrian type, whether Jacobite or Nestorian."[5] He further noted that numerous early Islamic texts mention Muḥammad's contacts with both Syrian and Arabian Christians, and this observation prompted Jeffery to conclude that these texts "at least show that there was an early recognition of the fact that Muḥammad was at one time in more or less close contact with Christians associated with the Syrian Church."[6]

Meanwhile, beyond just the study of vocabulary and the etymology of the 'foreign' words in the Qur'ān, the Swedish scholar Tor Andrae (1885-1947) pushed the investigation of Syriac influences into what he considered to be Muḥammad's and the Qur'ān's indebtedness to Christian eschatology in its Syriac expression.[7] In his seminal study, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, he specifically draws attention to the importance of Saint Ephraem's Syriac *madrāshê* 'On Paradise' and he spends some time unfolding the connecting themes between these Christian, liturgical compositions and passages in the Qur'ān. What Andrae perceived was not a direct literary connection between Syriac texts and the Qur'ān. Rather, he spoke of "one and the same homiletic scheme,"

[4] A. Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Kur'ān," *BJRL* 11 (1927): 77-98.

[5] A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 20-21.

[6] Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 22.

[7] Andrae first published the results of his research on this theme in a series of three long articles: T. Andrae, "Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum," *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 23 (1923): 149-206; 24 (1924): 213-292; 25 (1925): 45-112. Subsequently the articles were collected into the volume, T. Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentüm* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926). This volume was translated into French in T. Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam et le christianisme*, trans. J. Roche (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1955). In later studies of Islamic topics, Andrae continued to appeal to Syriac sources, most notably in T. Andrae, *Mohammed, sein Leben und sein Glaube* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932), English trans., *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. T. Menzel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936); T. Andrae, *I Myrtenträdgården: Studier I Tïdig Islamisk Mystik* (Lund: Albert Bonniers Forlag, 1947), English trans., *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism*, trans. B. Sharpe (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987).

and he offered it as his opinion that "whatever Muḥammad received from Christianity, he got from oral preaching and personal contacts."[8] More specifically in regard to the works of Ephraem, and taking his cue from a remark made by Hubert Grimme to the effect that in his descriptions of paradise Muḥammad "must have benefited much from recalling images used by Ephrem,"[9] Andrae averred that "in fact, on this point, there is a surprising relationship between Muḥammad and the Syrian preacher."[10] And in a later publication he speaks of Muḥammad as having been "inspired by the ideas of this Christian Syrian preacher."[11] As we look back from the vantage point of the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the studies and suggestions of Mingana, Jeffery, and Andrae seem merely exploratory by comparison to the role that Syriac and Syriac texts have now come to play in the academic study of early Islamic history, of the Qur'ān, and even of the biography of Muḥammad. Surprisingly, by now the suggestions of the influences of Syrian Christian thought and lore on nascent Islam have in the work of a number of recent researchers even surpassed earlier historians' claims for Jewish influences in the relentless search for the sources of early Islam in the Ḥijāz in the first third of the seventh century — an enterprise that, in the West, had its origins in the early nineteenth century in the famous work of Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen.*[12]

Here is not the place to rehearse this development in any detail. Suffice it just to mention the well-known names of the more recent 'revisionist historians' of early Islam,[13] such as John Wansbrough,[14] Patricia Crone,

[8] Andrae, "Der Ursprung," (1925), 45-46; *Les Origines*, 145-46.

[9] H. Grimme, *Mohammed* (2 vols.: Münster i.W.: Aschendorff, 1892-1895), vol. II, 160 n. 9.

[10] Andrae, "Der Ursprung," (1925), 52; *Les Origines*, 151.

[11] Andrae, *Mohammed, The Man and His Faith*, 87.

[12] See A. Geiger (1810-1874), *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (1st ed.; Bonn: F. Baaden, 1833).

[13] In many ways their work was anticipated by earlier scholars such as H. Lammens, *L'Arabie occidentale avant l'hégire* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1928); and even earlier by A. Sprenger. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad* (Berlin: Nicolai'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1861-1865); *idem*, "Foreign Words Occurring in the Qoran," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 21 (1852): 109-14.

[14] See J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); *idem*, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). See now *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*, ed. C.A. Segovia and B. Lourié (Orientalia Judaica Christiana 3; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2012).

and Michael Cook,[15] and now Stephen Shoemaker,[16] who cast substantial doubt on the historical reliability of the traditional Arabic sources scholars have hitherto used in the search for Islamic origins. These sources, as the revisionists rightly say, come from a century and more after the events they describe, and were written within the framework of the encompassing horizon of the intellectual effort to compose an original Islamic religious discourse. The 'revisionist historians' turned their attention instead to earlier, non-Arabic and non-Muslim sources, more contemporary with the persons and events of the early movement that would become confessional Islam, to which these sources often allude seemingly just in passing.[17] Syriac texts, of course, assumed a prominent place among the sources now brought to the fore. The net effect of this new historiographical approach to the writing of early Islamic history was the suggestion to move the story of Islamic origins forward in time and place, from the Ḥijāz in the first third of the seventh century to Syria/Palestine/Mesopotamia in the late eighth to the early ninth centuries. According to this scenario, one should not think of the Qur'ān as an Arabic scripture, essentially complete by the mid-to-late seventh century, as the traditional view would have it,[18] but rather as a compilation of liturgical and scriptural texts edited from various sources and language traditions, and put together in Arabic in Damascus, Baṣrah, or even Baghdad sometime between the Umayyad and early Abbasid dynasties, when Islam itself was in the process of discovering its true self and coming into its traditional expression in Arabic.[19]

[15] P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[16] S.J. Shoemaker, *The Death of A Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[17] See now R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).

[18] Ernest Renan (1823-1892) famously expressed this position in his remark concerning what he called "la religion musulmane, celle-ci nait en pleine histoire." See E. Renan, "Mahomet et les origines de l'islamisme," *Revue des deux Mondes* 4 (1851): 1063-1101, 1065.

[19] For recent reviews and evaluations of these developments in the historiography of early Islam and the Qur'ān, see, e.g., A. Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History — a Disputed Relationship: Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," *JQS* 5 (2003): 1-18; J.D. McAuliffe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); A. Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2010); M.A. Amir-Moezzi, "Autour de l'histoire de la redaction du Coran," *Islamochristiana* 36 (2010): 139-57.

Following upon these developments, and in some measure dependent upon them, a number of scholars working in Syriac studies and in the field of the history of religions and comparative religion have gone so far as to advance the claim that Islam was in fact a Christian movement in its origins and the Qur'ān originally a Syriac text composed under Christian auspices in what one scholar calls a 'Syro-Aramaic' 'religiolect'[20] that only gradually became Qur'ānic Arabic. In this connection, one need only name Günter Lüling, Christoph Luxenberg, and the members of the self-proclaimed *Inārah* circle of scholars, writing mostly in German, to call the phenomenon to mind.[21] One scholar in particular from the *Inārah* circle, building on the Syro-Aramaic thesis of Luxenberg, speaks of a pre-Nicene, Syrian-Arabic Christianity that in his opinion originally gave shape to the Qur'ān and to Islam as we know it as late as the early eighth century, not in the Ḥijāz but in Syria/Mesopotamia.[22] The thesis reminds the historian who studies early Christian/Muslim relations of the claims made already in the early ninth century by the anonymous author of the originally Syriac 'Legend of Baḥîrâ' to the effect that Muḥammad was catechized by a renegade Christian monk.[23] More recently, scholars of

[20] On the useful neologism 'religiolect,' which is not used by any of the authors cited here, see B. Hary and M.J. Wein, "Religiolinguistics: On Jewish-, Christian-, and Muslim-Defined Languages," *International Journal of the Sociology of Languages*, to appear. See the term used in B. Hary, *Translating Religion: Linguistic Analysis of Judeo-Arabic Sacred Texts from Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2009)

[21] Especially representative of this 'circle' are: C. Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, 2nd rev. ed. (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2004), English trans., *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*, ed. T. Müke (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007); *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, ed. K.-H. Ohlig and G.R. Puin (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2005), English trans., *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into its Early History* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010); *Der frühe Islam: Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen*, ed. K.-H. Ohlig (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007); *Schlaglichter: Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*, ed. M. Groß and K.-H. Ohlig (Inârah, Schriften zur frühen Islamgeschichte und zum Koran, Band 3; Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2008). See also the useful summary in M. Galizia, "Il Corano e la tradizione Cristiana siriaca," in *La Letteratura Arabo-Cristiana e le Scienze nel Periodo Abbaside (750-1250 d.C)*, ed. D. Righi (Patrimonio Culturale Arabo Cristiano, 11, Atti del 2° Covegno di Studi Arabo-Cristiani, Roma 9-10 Marzo 2007; Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 2008), 79-122.

[22] See K.-H. Ohlig, "Das syrische und arabische Christentum und der Koran," in Ohlig, *Die dunklen Anfänge*, 366-404, English trans. K.-H. Ohlig, "Syrian and Arabian Christianity and the Qur'ān," in Ohlig and Puin, *The Hidden Origins of Islam*, 361-401. See also K.-H. Ohlig, "Vom *Muhammad* Jesus zum Propheten der Araber: Die Historisierung eines christologischen Prädikats," in Ohlig, *Der frühe Islam*, 327-76.

[23] See B. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Coptic and Syriac have been busily uncovering biblical, apocryphal, and even homiletic 'subtexts' in many passages in the Qur'ān,[24] noting the occurrence in many Syriac texts of themes, motifs and narrative tropes that also appear in the Arabic Qur'ān's recollection of the stories of the patriarchs and prophets of the Old and New Testaments.[25] The historiographical assumption in most instances seems to be that these Syriac 'subtexts' in some way lie behind the Qur'ān. But few of these writers suggest how the recognition of their pertinence to the background of the Islamic scripture might help the historian of Islamic origins to discern the identity of the Syriac-speaking Christians in the Qur'ān's milieu.

In the wake of these developments, the purpose of the present paper is to take advantage of the availability of the numerous recent studies and the insights to which their authors have come as providing an opportunity to propose a new approach for the investigation of the importance of Syriac to the study of Islamic origins and to the interpretation of the Qur'ān. It is an approach that follows the trail of Syrian Christianity into the Arabic-speaking tribal communities of Arabia and into the purview of the Arabic Qur'ān itself in its formative stages. A guiding assumption, which this study seeks to verify as it proceeds, is the hypothesis that the Qur'ān by itself, with its multiple reflections and reminiscences of Syrian expressions of Christianity, is the single most important document in reference to which the historian might track the progress of Christianity into the Arabic-speaking populations in the first third of the seventh century. This point of view then offers a perspective from which to observe the growth and development of burgeoning Islam, articulated in the language of the newly emerging Arabic scripture, with its distinctive prophetology and its idiom of response and critique, addressed especially to those whom it calls 'Scripture People,' and whom it admonishes: "Do not go beyond the bounds in your religious profession" (Q IV:171; V:77).

[24] The term 'subtext' in this connection appears in the work of G.S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London & New York: Routledge, 2010).

[25] For example, in English one thinks in this connection most recently of the work of C. Horn, "Mary between Bible and Qur'ān: Soundings into the Transmission and Reception History of the *Protoevangelium of James* on the Basis of Selected Literary Sources in Coptic and Copto-Arabic and of Art-Historical Evidence Pertaining to Egypt," *ICMR* 18 (2007): 509-38; *eadem*, "Lines of Transmission between Apocryphal Traditions in the Syriac-speaking World: Manichaeism and the Rise of Islam; the Case of the *Acts of John*," *PdO* 35 (2010): 337-55, and J.B. Witztum, *The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2011).

This approach to Islamic origins from the perspective of the historian following the trail of Syrian Christianity into the Arabic-speaking milieu in the first third of the seventh century goes in a direction opposite to that of the research of most Islamic historians. They customarily look back to the career of Muḥammad, the collection of the Qur'ān, and the first articulation of the new prophetic message from the vantage point of their knowledge of the Arabic sources that give accounts of the already fully developed religion of Islam. My opposite approach requires setting out from an earlier point of departure, namely from the time of the movement of Syriac-speaking Christians into the Arabic-speaking territories on the periphery of central Arabia, and even into the Ḥijāz, long before the rise of Islam, especially in the fifth and sixth centuries. And, in this connection, one must not forget the even earlier movement of Arabic-speaking peoples into the largely Aramaic/Syriac-speaking areas of Syria/Palestine and northern Mesopotamia, even as far back as the era of Syrian Edessa's flourishing as a kingdom in its own right in earliest Christian times and even before.[26] This long persistent intermingling of Arabs and Arameans in turn calls attention to the long-standing Aramaic and Arabic bilingualism in the Syro-Palestinian area,[27] the attestation of which circumstance helps to explain how Syriac could remain the prestige written language — even the scriptural and ecclesiastical language of choice among Arabic-speaking Christians as far south as Najrān and the shores of the Persian Gulf — right up to, and even following, the rise of Islam in the first third of the seventh century.

II. The Christians and Arabia

There is a wealth of information scattered in mainly Greek, Syriac, and Arabic texts about the Christian communities that found their way in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries into the Arabic-speaking heartland. In recent years, scholars have indefatigably gathered every shred of available evidence they have been able to glean from all of these sources and

[26] See R.G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001); J. Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2003).

[27] See E.A. Knauf, "Arabo-Aramaic and 'Arabiyya: From Ancient Arabic to Early Standard Arabic, 200 CE-600 CE," in *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 197-254.

more, thereby providing sufficient material for the composition of a more or less continuous narrative of Christian presence in Arabia and its environs from the fourth century to the time of Muḥammad.[28] And it seems clear from these sources that the major Christian communities who made headway among the Arabs in the several centuries just prior to the rise of Islam were associated with the communities or denominations that later Muslim writers would customarily identify as the 'Melkites,' 'Jacobites,' and 'Nestorians.'[29] Their principal ecclesiastical language was Syriac (or Christian Palestinian Aramaic among the 'Melkites'), albeit that their ecclesial identities were largely determined by the positions their communities adopted in the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries. These controversies in turn were largely concerned with texts translated from Greek into Syriac from the fifth century onward.[30] In South Arabia there was also a significant Ethiopian presence, and while

[28] See J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London & New York: Longman, 1979); T. Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam* (Eastern Christian Studies; Leuven: Peeters, 2007) with its rich and comprehensive bibliography. See also the monumental work of I. Shahid, *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 Oaks, 1989); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (vol. I, parts 1-2; Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (vol. II, part 1; Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century: Economic, Social, and Cultural History* (vol. II, part 2; Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009). The series is projected to conclude with volumes on the seventh century. See, too, F. Millar, "Christian Monasticism in Roman Arabia at the Birth of Mahomet," and R. Hoyland, "Late Roman Provincial Arabia, Monophysite Monks and Arab Tribes: A Problem of Centre and Periphery," in *Semitica et Classica* 2 (2009): 97-115, 117-39.

[29] One uses the names 'Melkite,' 'Jacobite,' and 'Nestorian' with some reluctance, realizing that they are anachronistic and polemical in origin, coined by the adversaries of the communities to which they are applied, viz. the Eastern/Greek Orthodox Church, the Syrian/Oriental Orthodox Churches, and the Assyrian Church of the East respectively. The problematic names were used for centuries by both Muslim and Christian writers and have become commonplace. See S. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *BJRL* 78 (1996): 23-35.

[30] See D.S.W. Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J. Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (The Christian Tradition, vol. 2; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); A.H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); S.J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); V.L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: University Press, 2008).

their Christological sympathies were with the 'Jacobites' and the Copts of Egypt, their ecclesiastical language was Ge'ez.[31] The historical record preserves no memory of any other significant Christian presence thriving among the Arabs or in their environs in the crucial period from the fifth century to the first third of the seventh century. In particular, as I will discuss, there is no indisputable documentary evidence for the presence of any notable 'Jewish Christian' group thriving as such in Arabia in this period. Modern scholars who have postulated their presence have done so, I will argue, on the basis of extrapolations from their theological interpretations of certain passages in the Arabic Qur'ān. But it nevertheless seems to have also been the case that the 'main-line' Christian communities (i.e., the 'Melkites,' Jacobites,' and 'Nestorians'), whose bishops, priests, and monks represented established Christianity in the Syriac and Arabic-speaking communities by the seventh century, still carried with them much of the lore and literature of earlier Christian groups — such as the Aramaic-speaking Ebionites, Elchasaites, and Nazarenes, along with the memory of the more or less contemporary 'Marcionites' (Marcion d. c. 160) and the followers of Bar Daysān of Edessa (154-222), to name only the most prominent of earlier Christian groups. But there was one important community from Christian antiquity that still flourished in the seventh century, even among the Arabs, and contemporary with the 'Melkites,' 'Jacobites,' and 'Nestorians' — namely, the followers of the Aramaic-speaking, third-century teacher and self-styled apostle and prophet Mani (c. 216-276), whose disciples also carried with them the memories and traditions of the earlier groups.[32] Indeed, the recollection of Marcion, Bar Daysān, and Mani still appears prominently centuries later in early Islamic heresiography.

Given the evidentiary presumption, then, that Christianity came among the Arabic-speaking peoples by way of their contacts with Aramaic, Syriac, or Ge'ez-speaking Christians on the periphery of Arabia proper, a question arises about the language of Christianity among the Arabs. It seems *a priori* unlikely that indigenous, Arabic-speaking Christians in the Arabian heartland, who would have learned their Christianity from

[31] For a brief historical sketch and bibliography, see W. Hage, *Das orientalische Christentum* (Die Religionen der Menschheit, vol. 29.2; Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2007), 202-6.

[32] See in particular M. Gil, "The Creed of Abū 'Āmir," *IOS* 12 (1992): 9-47; R. Simon, "Mānī and Muḥammad," *JSAI* 21 (1997): 118-41; F. de Blois, "Elchasai – Manes – Muḥammad: Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischen Vergleich," *Der Islam* 81 (2004): 31-48.

the communities on the Arabian periphery, would have adopted the Aramaic, Syriac, or Ge'ez languages along with their Christian faith. Rather, the historian's presumption must be that the Arabs on the periphery translated Christianity at least orally into their own Arabic language. This would not have been a surprising development in light of the likely bilingualism of the Arabs living on the periphery of Arabia proper, especially in Syria and Mesopotamia. In northern Mesopotamia there was an entire region between the city of Nisibis and the Tigris river called 'Bēt 'Arbāyê' in Syriac — 'the homeland of the Arabs.'[33] Here, in the sixth century, the Syrian Orthodox holy man and bishop Mār Aḥūdemeh (d. 575) had considerable success in evangelizing the Arab tribes, who would in due course come to have their own 'Bishop of the Arabs.'[34] Some of their number would become known in early Islamic times precisely for their bilingualism, speaking both Syriac and Arabic.[35] The situation must have been similar already in the fifth century in Palestine, where the monastic founder St. Euthymius (d. 473) evangelized Arab tribesmen and established an episcopal hierarchy among them.[36] In the areas controlled by the 'Jacobite' Ghassanids and the 'Nestorian' Lakhmids in the sixth century, Arabic may already have been the dominant language,[37] but their ties with the Syriac-speaking 'Jacobite' and 'Nestorian' churches were continuous. Presumably, the same may be said even of the Christian communities in southern Arabia, and particularly in Najrān, where ties with the Syriac-speaking mother-churches seem to have been continuous up to the rise of Islam.[38]

[33] See R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879-1901: reprint; Hildesheim & New York: Georg Olms, 1981), vol. II, col. 2983.

[34] See Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam*, 106-10. See, too, J. Tannous, "Between Christology and Kalām? The Life and Letters of George, Bishop of the Arab Tribes," in *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, ed. G.A. Kiraz(Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008), 671-716.

[35] See the report of Michael the Syrian in *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche, 1166-1199*, ed. and trans. J.-B. Chabot (4 vols.; Paris: Leroux, 1899-1924), vol. II, 422 (Syriac) & vol. IV, 432.

[36] See Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam*, 41-42.

[37] See the discussion of Louis Cheikho's claims for pre-Islamic, Arabic literature in C. Hechaïmé, *Louis Cheikho et son livre: Le Christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'islam; etude critique* (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1967. See now I. Shahid, *The Arabs in Late Antiquity: Their Role, Achievement, and Legacy* (The Margaret Weyerhaeuser Jewett Chair of Arabic, Occasional Papers; Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 2008); Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. II, part 2, 297-302; 321-37. See also E.K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[38] See R. Tardy, *Najrân: Chrétiens d'Arabie avant l'Islam* (Recherches 8; Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1999).

In the fifth and sixth centuries the south Arabian tribal group called *Kinda* gained ascendancy among the Arab tribes even of central and northern Arabia, and there were notable Christian and Jewish converts among them. And while it may well have been the case that the Christians among them played a major role in the spread of the knowledge of Christianity among the Arabic-speaking peoples, their major exploits seem to have been mostly political in nature, and to have transpired normally on the Arabian periphery, among the Romans in Palestine or the Persians in Mesopotamia.[39]

There is scant, but nonetheless explicit, evidence in the Greek, Syriac, and even Arabic historical sources for a presence of Christians among the Arabic-speaking peoples of central Arabia and the Ḥijāz in the sixth and seventh centuries,[40] where presumably only Arabic was commonly spoken. And the contents of the Arabic Qur'ān that has its origins in just this Arabic-speaking milieu testifies to the fact that by the first third of the seventh century knowledge of Christianity and its scriptures, lore, doctrines, and practices must have been widespread in the Arabic-speaking heartland. For, as I will explain, the Qur'ān presumes a fairly detailed knowledge of these matters on the part of its audience. So the question is, how was this knowledge acquired? The answer seems to be that, by the time of the Qur'ān, fairly detailed knowledge of the Christian Bible, creed, and liturgy had already spread orally among the Arabs, presumably transmitted originally from those Arameans and Arabs living on the Arabian periphery, who were in more immediate contact both with those Syriac-speaking Christians whose faith and practice the Qur'ān largely echoes, and with the Ge'ez-speaking Christians of Ethiopia and South Arabia, who were themselves influenced by Syriac Christianity.[41] While very few traces of Christian texts in Arabic prior to the rise of Islam have so far come to light, the Arabic Qur'ān itself, given the high quotient of its Christian awareness, emerges as the most important document in evidence of the presence of Christians in its Arabian milieu.

[39] See I. Shahid, "Kinda," in *EI*, rev. ed., vol. V, 118-120; G. Olinder, *The Kings of Kinda of the Family of Ākil al-Murār* (Lund: H. Ohlsson, 1927). See also I. Shahid, "Byzantium and Kinda," *BZ* 53 (1960): 57-73; *idem*, "Procopius and Kinda," *BZ* 53 (1960): 74-78.

[40] See Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam*, 137-42; G. Osman, "Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arabic Sources," *The Muslim World* 95 (2005): 67-80.

[41] See A.M. Butts, "Ethiopic Christianity, Syriac Contacts with," in *GEDSH*, 148-53.

III. The Arabic Qur'ān and its Prophetology

Before considering the Qur'ān as the repository of evidence for the spread of the knowledge of Syriac Christianity among the Arabs in the first third of the seventh century, one must take account of the current state of Qur'ān scholarship. This is a particularly important step in view of the fact that much recent research raises significant historiographical questions about the traditional view of Muḥammad, the Qur'ān, and the rise of Islam. Much of the revisionist scholarship already mentioned questions the identity of the Arab prophet, including the time and place of his career, and suggests that the Qur'ān did not come into the form in which we presently have it in seventh century Arabia (according to the conventional view) but rather in the early eighth century at the earliest — and not in Arabia but Syria or Mesopotamia. Some scholars have even questioned the Arabicity of the Qur'ān in its origins, postulating a so-called 'Syro-Aramaic' underpinning for the text that would later be forced into the dress of a burgeoning classical Arabic.[42] Needless to say, this revisionist account of the Qur'ān would undermine its value as a source of historical information about the spread of Christianity in central Arabia and the Ḥijāz in the early seventh century. So for this reason I must, even if very briefly, state my case for maintaining the Arabian origin of Muḥammad, the Qur'ān, and Islam.

Here is not the place to engage in a review of the multiple historiographical problems surrounding the reports of the collection of the Qur'ān into its canonical form. Suffice it to say for the present purpose that the basic premise on which I rely has been well put by Patricia Crone, one of the most prominent historians of Islamic origins and who has heretofore been one of those vigorously questioning the reliability of the traditional sources. She now says:

> "The evidence that a prophet was active among the Arabs in the early decades of the 7th century, on the eve of the Arab conquest of the Middle East, must be said to be exceptionally good. ... Most importantly, we can be reasonably sure that the Qur'ān is a collection of utterances that he made in the belief that they had been revealed to him by God. The book may not preserve all the messages he claimed to have received, and he is not responsible for the arrangement in which we have them. They were collected after his death — how long is controversial. But that he uttered all or most of them is difficult to doubt."[43]

[42] See in particular Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*, and in general the studies of the *Inārah* circle of scholars listed above.

[43] P. Crone, "What Do We Actually Know about Mohammed?" *OpenDemocracy*, 10 June 2008: http://www.opendemocracy.net.

But before I can, on the basis of this historical premise, examine the passages of the Qur'ān that address Christians, recall biblical narratives, and reflect Christian idiom — in the effort to catch a glimpse of the confessional identity of the Christians within its purview — I must first take account of the character of the Qur'ān as a scripture vis-à-vis the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian Bible, as well as of its distinctive prophetology. Again, here is not the place to investigate these matters in detail. Suffice it for the present purpose to very briefly set forth the view that I have elaborated in detail in another study.[44]

Briefly put, the prophetology of the Tanakh has historically been seen in the Jewish communities as one characterized by the divine promise of land, progeny, and election, and the prophetology of the Bible has been interpreted by Christians as a 'salvation history,' featuring both God's address to Israel and the promise of a Messiah, fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The prophetology of the Qur'ān distinguishes itself from these perspectives in that it envisions a series of prophets and messengers sent by God over time to every nation in their own language, with the same message of monotheism and judgment, in a prophetic series concluding with Muḥammad and the Qur'ān itself. This distinctive view is set forth in a virtual typology of Qur'ānic prophecy in *sūrat ash-Shu'arā'* (XXVI).[45] Here prophecy is characterized as: catholic (God's messengers have come to both biblical and non-biblical people); recurrent (the pattern of prophetic experience recurs in the sequence of messengers and prophets); dialogical (the messengers and prophets interact in dialogue with their people); singular in its message (the one God, who rewards good and punishes evil on the day of Judgment; no divinization of creatures); and triumphant (God vindicates His messengers and prophets in their struggles with their adversaries). Concomitant with this view of prophecy and messengership, the Qur'ān, among other concerns, polemicizes against and corrects the biblical and doctrinal views of the Jews and Christians in its milieu. And it is important to observe that the Qur'ān does not mean to retell the biblical stories and narratives it evokes, but rather to recall them within the corrective framework of its own discourse. For this reason the Qur'ān does not quote the Bible (save for a verse from Ps. 37:29

[44] See in this connection S.H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the 'People of the Book' in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[45] See especially the very important article by M. Zwettler, "A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of 'The Poets' and the Qur'ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. J.L. Kugel (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75-119, 205-31.

in XXI *al-Anbiyā'* 105); the Qur'ān re-presents the stories of many of the Bible's major figures within the parameters of its own distinctive prophetology, which is characterized by an apologetic typology in support of Muḥammad's mission and a polemical corrective of the biblical interpretations of others.

Here is not the place to discuss the analogues of this Qur'ānic prophetology in late antiquity; suffice it to say for now that the prophetology evident in surviving Manichaean texts most immediately comes to mind as a point of comparison, albeit that it systematically excludes most of the biblical prophets whose stories the Qur'ān recalls.[46] Hermeneutically speaking, the important point to make at this juncture for the interpretation of biblical and other Jewish and Christian subtexts in the Qur'ān — and for the recognition of the scriptures and doctrines of Syriac Christianity mirrored in the Islamic scripture — is the acknowledgment of the determining role that the Islamic scripture's distinctive prophetology plays in the rhetoric of its evocation of Bible history and Christian doctrines. It is a rhetoric of critique, of apology and polemics, of an appeal to its audience for the right way to go religiously, the way of those unerring Believers on whom, according to the Qur'ān, God has bestowed blessings, not being angry with them (*cf.* I *al-Fātiḥah* 9-10).

It is against this background of the Qur'ān's prophetic framework for the estimation of the Jews and Christians, their scriptures, their doctrines, and their practices, that one might most usefully take account of what one might learn of the Syrian Christianity that was within the Islamic scripture's purview. It is important to notice that this approach is one taken by a historian of late antique Christianity in its Syriac expression, following the trail of this Christianity into the Arabic-speaking milieu of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān in the first third of the seventh Christian century. It is in contrast with the approach of most students of Islamic origins, who have typically approached the subject from the opposite point of view: they look back from the Qur'ān and early Islamic history into late antiquity, looking for what might plausibly be thought to be the Christianity to which the Qur'ān seems to obliquely refer. I hope to show that this divergence of approach yields unexpected results.

[46] See the discussion already in T. Andrae, *Mohammed, Sein Leben und Sein Glaube* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932), English trans. *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. T. Menzel (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 98-108.

IV. Christians and Christianity in the Qur'ān

While much recent research has disclosed echoes of Syriac/Aramaic Christian language and lore in many parts of the Qur'ān, especially in passages that recall the stories of biblical patriarchs and prophets,[47] it is particularly in those *sūrahs* customarily called 'Medinan' that one finds the Islamic scripture's more explicit critique of Christian doctrines and practices. Consequently, most modern non-Muslim scholars who have sought the identity of the Christians in the Qur'ān's purview have examined precisely these 'Medinan' passages of doctrinal critique in the course of their efforts to discern who in all likelihood the Arabian Christians were. The most widely published recent views are that the Qur'ān's Christians were 'Jewish Christians' of some sort,[48] usually now more specifically identified as 'Nazoreans,'[49] or that they were a group espousing an early form of 'Angel Christology.'[50] Alternatively, they would have been a community of Arabic-speaking Christians who, influenced by a so-called pre-Nicene Syrian theology, refused to accept the Nicene creed and eventually, in Umayyad times, morphed into what we recognize as early Islam, complete with their now Arabized, originally so-called 'Syro-Aramaic' Christian lectionary, which they call *al-Qur'ān*.[51]

In contrast with these prevailing opinions, I have advanced the hypothesis that the Christians within the Qur'ān's immediate purview were, to use the later Muslim names for them, the very 'Melkites,' 'Jacobites,' and 'Nestorians' whose common liturgical and confessional idiom was Aramaic/Syriac (in dialogue with earlier Greek theologies), and who in the first third of the seventh century were present everywhere in large numbers on the Arabian periphery, also commonly found in increasing

[47] See the discussions, with bibliography, in G.S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London/New York: Routledge, 2010).

[48] See, e.g., S. Zinner, *The Abrahamic Archetype: Conceptual and Historical Relationships between Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge: Archetype, 2011).

[49] See most importantly F. de Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραιος) and *ḥanīf* (εθνικος): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *BSOAS* 65 (2002): 1-30.

[50] See, e.g., G. Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974); *idem, Der christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba als Problem der Islamwissenschaft und christlichen Theologie* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1977). See also, J.M.F. Van Reeth, "La typologie du prophète selon le Coran: Le cas de Jésus," in *Figures bibliques en Islam*, ed. G. Dye and F. Nobilio (Fernelmong: Éditions Modulaires Européennes, 2011), 81-105.

[51] See, e.g., the studies cited in nn. 21 & 22 above.

numbers among the Arabic-speaking tribesmen of the Arabian interior.[52] The principal argument in favor of this hypothesis is that it takes better account of the Qur'ānic evidence, both in recognition of the critique of Christian doctrines in the light of the Qur'ān's distinctive prophetology and particularly in recognizing and taking seriously the Islamic scripture's polemical rhetoric in the service of commending its prophetic message. What is more, on the positive side, the hypothesis also takes full account of the aforementioned multiple echoes of the Syriac background and the biblical and other subtexts that scholarship is increasingly disclosing in all parts of the Qur'ān, not just in the 'Medinan' *sūrahs*, thus revealing a horizon within which the full range of canonical and non-canonical liturgical and hagiographical Christian narratives and traditions were circulating, in an oral, Arabic expression that often reveals its Syriac origins.[53] The echoes of Christian lore to be found in the Qur'ān argues against the currency in its milieu of just the limited scriptures of any 'Jewish-Christian,' Gnostic, or other early so-called 'heretical' group. Negatively, the hypothesis avoids postulating the existence — in Arabia in the first third of the seventh century — of groups of 'heretical' Christians, Jewish-Christian or otherwise, for whose presence in the Arabian milieu there is no historical evidence at all other than the constructions modern scholars have put on Qur'ān passages that criticize Christian doctrine, ignoring both the Qur'ān's own rhetoric of doctrinal critique and the underlying echoes of Syriac Christological diction to be found in some of the passages. What is more, the mainline Syriac-speaking churches, along with the equally Syriac-speaking Manichees in the Arabian milieu, were readily available conduits for whatever may have survived of the popular Christian culture of earlier times, including heresiographies, legends, martyrologies, non-biblical Acts of the apostles, and even memories and reminiscences of long-assimilated Jewish Christian groups.

In what follows, I offer several brief soundings into the Qur'ān's text in witness to the clarifying hermeneutical potential that the hypothesis defended here provides in connection with several passages that scholars have long already studied. They all reveal Syriac underpinnings and bespeak a Christian presence in the Qur'ān's audience, whose confessional profile is more notably that of the mainline Christian communities of the seventh

[52] See S.H. Griffith, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān: A Hermeneutical Reflection," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qurān in its Historical Context 2*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London/New York, 2011), 301-22.

[53] See Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 7-53.

century than they are indicative of any other group. The brief survey breaks no new ground; it merely calls attention to several themes already investigated and the relevant bibliography.

A. *Re-interpreted Christian Lore in Sūrat al-Kahf*

Students of the Qur'ān have long recognized the Syriac background of at least three of the five narratives included in the remarkable *Sūrat al-Kahf* (XVIII): the reminiscence of the legend of the Sleepers of Ephesus (Q 18:9-26); the evocation of the story of Satan's refusal to bow down before Adam at God's command (Q 18:50); and a comment on the Syriac Alexander Legend (Q 18:83-98). In each instance, the Syriac sub-text can clearly be shown. And in each instance one can perceive the Qur'ān's corrective purpose to offer its audience an alternative interpretation of what must have been narratives well known to them.

In the instance of the Companions of the Cave, the Qur'ān emphasizes the one God's will and power; He guides and protects whom He will. The Qur'ān's recollection of the story effectively removes any hint of the Christian doctrine proclaimed in the Syriac account of the Sleepers, namely that God has a Son and that He is Jesus, the Messiah, whose resurrection from the dead anticipates that of mortal men.[54] Similarly, in the evocation of the story of the refusal of Iblis to bow down before Adam at his creation, as God had commanded the angels to do, the Qur'ān puts the emphasis on the folly of those who would take any others than God as protectors. This is not the case in the Syriac Christian tradition, reflected, for example, in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, which contains interpretations of Bible-related lore that would very likely have been well-known to Arabic-speaking Christians in the Qur'ān's audience. There, God's command to the angels to bow down before Adam was given in virtue of the latter's creation in the image and likeness of God, and of his role as a type of Christ, the Son of God who was to come.[55] Additionally, in the Qur'ān's recollection of the doings and sayings of Alexander the Great, *Dhū l-Qarnayn*, one once again recognizes motifs and themes current among Syriac-speaking Christians in their Christianized legends

[54] See S.H. Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The 'Companions of the Cave' in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London/New York: Routledge, 2008), 109-37.

[55] See G.S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 39-54.

of Alexander. In the Qur'ān, Alexander appears as a servant of God, comparable to the righteous sages and prophets (Moses and al-Khiḍr) of the past,[56] thereby bringing the well-known story within the Qur'ān's frame of reference and removing it from its Christian apocalyptic context.

B. *Christian Doctrines Critiqued in the Qur'ān*

There can be no doubt about it: the Qur'ān's principal critique of the Christian creed focuses on the Christian confession that Jesus, the Messiah, Mary's son, is the son of God. This Christian article of faith runs counter to the Qur'ān's repeated affirmation that the one God has neither partner nor associate and that God has neither son nor offspring. The single most straightforward expression of this basic Qur'ānic premise is: "Say, 'He is God, one, God the eternal; He neither begat, nor is He begotten; no one is an equal to Him'." (CXII *al-Ikhlāṣ*) More pointedly in regard to the Christian confession is the statement: "The Christians say, 'The Messiah is the Son of God. That is what they confess with their mouths, imitating what those who disbelieved in the past have said';" (IX *at-Tawbah* 31) or "They say God has taken a son. Glory be to Him! Rather, His is what is in the heavens and the earth; all are obedient to Him" (II *al-Baqarah* 116). And in its most comprehensive passage in critique of Christian doctrine, recognizing that what Christians believe about Jesus, the Messiah, is what leads them to speak of three in respect of God, the Qur'ān says by way of critique and correction:

> O People of the Book, do not exceed the bounds of your religion, nor say anything about God except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only God's messenger and His word, which He imparted to Mary, and he is a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not say 'three'. Stop it; it is better for you. God is one God. How, glory be to Him, could He have a child? His is what is in the heavens and on the earth. God suffices as one to be trusted (IV *an-Nisā'* 171).

On the face of it, from the Qur'ān's point of view, this verse corrects what the Arabic-speaking Christians of the early seventh century would readily have said and believed about Jesus, the Messiah, namely that he is the Son of God, although their bishops and theologians would have been

[56] See K. van Bladel, "The *Alexander Legend* in the Qur'ān; 18:83-102," in Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, 175-203. See also J. Renard, "Khaḍir / Khiḍr," in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. III, 81-84.

in controversy with one another about the exact Christological formulae they should employ to accurately express their belief that the Messiah is God's Son. The Qur'ān here bids them, rather, to speak of Jesus, the Messiah, as 'son of Mary,' an epithet that none of the Christians would have found wanting in itself, save as it would bespeak an unwillingness to confess that Jesus is also truly Son of God. The Qur'ān rejects that very affirmation and commends the view that Jesus is in fact "only God's messenger." But the Qur'ān also says he is God's word and a spirit from Him, as the text goes on to make clear. Once again, the Qur'ān's language corrects normal Christian parlance. Arabic-speaking Christians of the seventh century would customarily have spoken of Jesus, the Son of God, indeed the Word of God, and of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Qur'ān avers that it is really Jesus who is meant by expressions like 'word of God' and 'spirit of God,' both understood as titles of the fully human, creaturely Jesus, 'God's messenger.' This understanding is consistent with the Qur'ān's usage elsewhere, as in the passage: "O Mary, God sends you the good news of a word from Him whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary" (III *Āl 'Imrān* 45), or in the passage in which God says of Mary, "We breathed into her of Our spirit and made her and her son a sign unto the world" (XXI *al-Anbiyā'* 91).[57] So according to the Qur'ān's teaching, contrary to Christian teaching, the scriptural expressions 'word of God' and 'spirit of God,' in the Gospels and in other biblical books, do not justify the Christian practice of saying 'three' when speaking of the one God; "God is truly One God" (IV *an-Nisā'* 171). These expressions are rather to be understood as epithets proper to Jesus, the Messiah, Mary's son, and they cannot, therefore, in the Qur'ān's view be truthfully taken as scriptural warrants for the doctrine of the Trinity.

Similarly, other passages in the Qur'ān that critique what Christians say about Jesus, the Messiah, also refute the doctrine of the Trinity. The most important of them are the following:

> They have disbelieved who say, "God is the Messiah, Mary's son." The Messiah said, "O Sons of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever would assign God an associate, God will have forbidden the Garden to him; his abode is to be the Fire. There are no helpers for the wrongdoers." (72) They have disbelieved who say, "God is 'third of three'." There is but a single God. If they do not stop what they are saying, a sore punishment will

[57] See S.H. Griffith, "Holy Spirit," in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. II, 442-44.

> afflict those of them who have disbelieved. (73)[58] Will they not turn back to God and ask His forgiveness; God is forgiving,
> merciful. (74) The Messiah, Mary's son, is only a messenger, messengers have gone before him, and his mother is a saint. The two of them eat food. Consider how we clarify the signs for them (i.e., the disbelievers), then consider how they are made liars. (75) (V *al-Mā'idah* 72-75).

There are a number of telling features in this quotation. First of all it is important to notice at the outset the Qur'ān's wording in verses 72 and 73 (and also in V *al-Mā'idah* 17): "They have disbelieved who say God is the Messiah" (V *al-Mā'idah* 17 & 72) or "God is 'third of three'" (V *al-Mā'idah* 73). While it is clear that the reference is to Christians, one recognizes the inversion of the Christian formula in the Qur'ān's telling accusatory phrase, 'God is the Messiah/Christ.' The Christian confessional affirmation is rather 'Jesus, the Messiah/Christ, is God.' One readily discerns the polemical intent in the Qur'ān's inverted phrasing here, which effectively expresses its critique of Christian doctrine, bespeaking as it does a subordination of God to the Messiah that Christians themselves would not accept.

Furthermore, it is important to notice that the phrase 'third of three' in V *al-Mā'idah* 73, which is parallel to the phrase 'the Messiah, son of Mary' in V *al-Mā'idah* 17 & 72, and which is normally interpreted to mean 'one of three,'[59] is actually an Arabic rendering of the customary Syriac title for Jesus, the Christ, *tlîthāyâ*, the 'treble one,' or 'one of three,' common in the works of St. Ephraem the Syrian and in the *mêmrê* of popular Syriac homiletic writers such as Jacob of Serūg.[60] So in effect Jesus, the son of Mary, is evoked by title also in V *al-Mā'dah* 73. The recognition of this Syriacism in the Qur'ān's Arabic diction then allows one to correct a faulty construction sometimes put upon another Qur'ānic

[58] The introductory formulae of vss. 72 & 73 recall an earlier verse in the same *sūrah* with an apposite message: "They have disbelieved who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son.' Say, 'Who other than God has dominion over anything, should He will to destroy the Messiah, Mary's son, and his mother too, and all who are on the earth? To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them. He creates what He wants. God is powerful over everything" (V *al-Mā'idah* 17).

[59] See the phrase *thānī thnayni* in IX *at-Tawbah* 40, a parallel expression to the phrase *thālith thalāthatin* in V *al-Mā'idah* 73, which the context clearly interprets as meaning 'one of two': "He being one of two, when both of them were in the cave." My thanks to Prof. Manfred Kropp and Dr. Joseph Witztum, both of whom called my attention to this passage.

[60] See S.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 *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān, presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. M.M. Bar-Asher, *et al.*(Jerusalem: The Ben Zvi Institute, 2007), 83-110.

verse that has been interpreted to mean that in the Islamic scripture the Christian Trinity is portrayed as: God, the father, Mary, the mother, and Jesus, the son. The verse in question is:

> [Remember] when God said, 'O Jesus, Mary's son, did you say to people, 'Take me and my mother, two gods instead of God?' He said, 'Praise be to You, it is not for me to say what is not fit for me in truth. If I had said it, You would know it; You know what is within me, but I do not know what is in You. You are the knower of hidden things" (V *al-Mā'idah* 116)

Commentators ancient and modern, Muslim and non-Muslim, have over the centuries taken this verse in conjunction with the phrase 'third of three' / 'one of three' in V *al-Mā'idah* 73, and have drawn the conclusion that in the Qur'ān's view Jesus occupies the third place in the Trinity, and Mary the second. The recognition that the phrase in question is actually a reflection of a common Syriac title for Jesus removes it as evidence for this allegation.[61] Furthermore, reading V *al-Mā'idah* 116 within its own context reveals that the verse occurs in a scenario in which the Qur'ān envisions the "day when God shall assemble the messengers" (V *al-Mā'idah* 109), querying Jesus in connection with his ministry and recording Jesus' responses (V *al-Mā'idah* 110-120). Within the dialogue on this occasion, and immediately following Jesus' disavowal of commending to people the divinization of either himself or his mother, there is an allusion on Jesus' part to the doctrines his followers devised when he was no longer with them. Jesus says, "I said to them only what You commanded me, that they worship God, my Lord and your Lord. I was a witness to them while I was among them. When You took me to Yourself, You became the watcher over them; You are witness to everything" (V *al-Mā'idah* 117). In other words, the Qur'ān exempts Jesus himself from any responsibility for the beliefs about him on the part of his followers, beliefs that the Qur'ān itself critiques in other passages, and which people are presumed to have devised when Jesus the Messiah was no longer among them.

In other passages of the Qur'ān, the text similarly critiques and corrects Christian doctrines or Christian understandings of events recorded in the scriptures. All of them can be seen to refer to teachings or scriptural interpretations current among Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christians of the first third of the seventh century of the common era, namely the very communities that later Muslim writers would regularly refer to as

[61] See Griffith, "Syriacisms in the Arabic Qur'ān," *idem*, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān."

the 'Melkites,' 'Jacobites,' and 'Nestorians.' Not all can be reviewed here, but cases in point would be the Qur'ān's recollection of the Gospel's Annunciation narratives,[62] or the Qur'ān's admonition regarding the crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah.[63] The fact that the Qur'ān's positions in regard to these matters can be seen to be more or less in accord with views espoused by various groups of Jewish Christians of an earlier era, e.g. Ebionites, Elchasaites, or Nazarenes, does not constitute evidence of their surviving, communal presence in the Arabic-speaking milieu of the seventh century. Rather, it happens that the Qur'ān's Christology, along with its critiques and corrections of the doctrines of the Christians actually in its environs, have reminded modern scholars of positions held by one or the other of these earlier communities. But the Qur'ān's own positions cannot in the ensemble be forced onto the Procrustean bed of earlier Jewish Christianities. For the points of convergence occur within the Qur'ān's very distinctive frame of reference that construes them in accord with its own distinctively original message.

C. *Eschatology*

Speaking of the Believers — the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians — the Qur'ān says: "Whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is good, shall receive their reward from their Lord" (II *al-Baqarah* 62). So it is no surprise to notice that the Islamic scripture speaks often of the Last Day, of the Judgment, and of the Garden and the Fire, eschatological themes that in the Qur'ān's descriptions of them are strongly reminiscent of the language in which Syriac-speaking writers long before the seventh century had addressed these same themes. One supposes that Arabic-speaking Christians at the time of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān would have long been familiar with the Syrian eschatological imagination and would have incorporated early on its images and modes of expression into their own religious discourse, which in turn may well have rather quickly permeated the popular Arab lore of the afterlife in late antiquity.

[62] See F. van der Velden, "Konvergenztexte syrischer und arabischer Christologie: Stufen der Textentwicklung von Sure 3, 33-64," *OC* 91 (2007): 164-203; *idem*, "Kotexte im Konvergenzstrang - die Bedeutung textkritischer Varianten und christlicher Bezugstexte für die Redaktion von Sure 61 und Sure 5, 110-119," *OC* 92 (2008): 130-73.

[63] See T. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2009); G.S. Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *BSOAS* 72 (2009): 237-58.

For this reason, the Qur'ān could readily assume its audience's familiarity with these scenes and themes and freely recollect them with the confidence that they would be recognized. It was Tor Andrae who, already in the 1920s, traced the Syriac background for much of the Qur'ān's eschatological narrative, comparing it with passages in the works of St. Ephraem the Syrian and other Syriac writers of the classical period. In a later work, speaking of St. Ephraem's influence, he wrote that it "seems to me to be the irrefutable fact that the Koran's descriptions of Paradise were inspired by the ideas of this Christian Syrian preacher."[64]

One of Tor Andrae's suggestions in this connection became something of a *cause célèbre* among scholars of Syriac. Speaking of a passage in Ephraem's *Hymns on Paradise* VII:18,[65] Andrae wrote, "One can even point out in his words a hidden allusion to Paradise's virgins."[66] Dom Edmund Beck reacted strenuously to this suggestion and pointed out that it rested on a misreading of the text due to the faulty Roman edition Andrae had used,[67] a problem Beck remedied in his own critical edition of the *Hymns on Paradise*.[68] But the matter did not end there. Appealing to Beck's remarks on the subject, and arguing that the original 'Syro-Aramaic' Qur'ān would no more have introduced such 'virgins' into the Garden than St. Ephraem would have done, Christoph Luxenberg has construed the Qur'ānic phrases that most Muslim and non-Muslim interpreters take to refer to "dark-eyed maidens" (*ḥūrīs*) to mean, instead, "white, crystal(-clear) (grapes)."[69] Here is not the place to discuss Luxenberg's startling interpretation, but it is pertinent to the present concern with the Syriac background to the Qur'ān's eschatological imagery to point out that, in addition to the lush, horticultural imagery with which he depicts

[64] T. Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and his Faith*, trans. T. Menzel (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 87.

[65] Andrae was referring to the passage as published in P. Mobarak and S.E. Assemani, *Sancti Patris Nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine* (6 vols.; Romae: Ex Typographia Vaticana apud Jo. Mariae, Henrici Salvioni. 1732-1746), vol. III, p. 584.

[66] Andrae, "Der Ursprung," 25 (1925): 53; *Les origines*, 153.

[67] See E. Beck, "Eine christliche Parallele zu den Paradiesesjungfrauen des Korans?" *OCP* 14 (1948): 398-405; a précis of the article appeared in a French translation in Beck, "Les Houris du Coran et Ephrem le Syrien," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire* 6 (1959-1961): 405-8.

[68] E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und contra Julianum*. CSCO, vols. 174 & 175 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1957).

[69] See the long discussion in C. Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*, ed. and trans. T. Müke (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007), 247-83.

the Garden of Paradise, St. Ephraem does also speak of what he calls the bridal-chambers (*gnānê*) of the blessed, bridal chambers of glory, of light, and even of joys.[70] In Paradise, Ephraem says, one sees the disciples "on high in their bridal chambers,"[71] where God also gave Adam "a chaste bridal chamber."[72] While Dom Edmund Beck was clearly right in his correction of Tor Andrae's reading of the passage in the *Hymns on Paradise* mentioned above, other passages such as the ones just mentioned make it evident that there is more to be discussed on the subject of marital imagery in the descriptions of the joys of Paradise, both in Syriac literature and in the Qur'ān, than has yet been undertaken.[73] But perhaps enough has already been said here to highlight the importance of the Syriac background to the study of the Arabic Qur'ān in the milieu of its origins, in which Christian ideas and modes of expression with a distinctly Syriac flavor seem, on the evidence of the Qur'ān itself, to have been widespread.

V. Syriac, the Qur'ān, and the Arabic-Speaking Christians

Hermeneutically speaking, one should approach the Qur'ān as an integral discourse in its own right; it proclaims, judges, praises, blames from its own narrative center. It addresses an audience which is already familiar with oral versions in Arabic of earlier scriptures and folklores. The Qur'ān does not borrow from, or often even quote from, these earlier texts. Rather, it alludes to and evokes their stories, even sometimes their wording, for its own rhetorical purposes. The Arabic Qur'ān, from a literary and even a scriptural perspective, is something new. It uses the idiom, and sometimes the forms and structures, of earlier narratives in the composition of its own distinctive discourse. It cannot be reduced to any presumed sources. Earlier discourses appear in it not only in a new setting, but shaped, trimmed, and re-formulated for an essentially new presentation. Syriac in the Arabic Qur'ān is no longer Syriac; its influence may appear in the form of a 'Syriacism' in Qur'ānic Arabic, or a narrative originally told

[70] See Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso* XIII:10; VII:15 and 24.
[71] Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso* I:6.
[72] Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso* XIII:3.
[73] See in this connection S.H. Griffith, "St. Ephraem the Syrian, the Qur'ān, and the Grapevines of Paradise: An Essay in Comparative Eschatology," to appear in the forthcoming volume *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, ed. S. Günther *et al.*

in Syriac, which in an oral Arabic version has become a point of reference for the Qur'ān's own discourse. Allusions to, even quotations from, or structural similarities with earlier Syriac narratives do not control the Qur'ān's discourse. Rather, the Qur'ān, framing the new hermeneutical horizon, casts any originally Syriac elements in its Arabic diction into the framework of meaning constructed by its own diction, in service to its own distinctive prophetology.[74]

One may think of the instances of Syriac in the Qur'ān as Syriacisms and define them as words or phrases in the Arabic diction of the Qur'ān that betray an underlying Syriac locution. That is to say, they are calques or 'loan translations' from Syriac into Arabic; they are not simply Syriac words used in place of Arabic words and phrases. Syriacisms may be thematic, lexical, or even grammatical. The recognition of Syriacisms implies prior recognition of the integrity of the Arabic syntax and vocabulary of the Qur'ān. The recognition of Syriacisms in the Qur'ān's Arabic diction, and indeed in whole narrative passages, would help one to identify more exactly the Christian motif addressed in a given passage, as well as to gauge more correctly the Qur'ān's response to it. In short, the identification of Syriacisms allows one to pinpoint with greater confidence Arab Christian locutions with which the Qur'ān itself would already have been familiar.

The discernment of Syriacisms in the Qur'ān requires the reader to make a certain attitudinal adjustment in approaching the text. On the one hand, the admission of Syriacisms implies the presence of actual Christian dialogue partners in the Qur'ān's own world of discourse; on the other hand, the fact that the Syriacisms are part of the Qur'ān's Arabic discourse means that they should find their interpretation primarily within the parameters of meaning of Qur'āic Arabic, and not solely in reference to Syriac or any other non-Arabic lexicography. While the consultation of Syriac lexica in the process of reading the Arabic Qur'ān may significantly enhance one's understanding of the Syriacisms, the Qur'ān's Arabic should not be read as if it were simply Syriac in a different script, which seems to have been the problem besetting those proposing '*die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran.*'

Historically, as far as the Syriacisms are concerned, the Qur'ān's dialogue partners in its own milieu would have been Arabic-speaking Christians who

[74] See in this connection the forthcoming study, in which I discuss my ideas on this important topic, S.H. Griffith, "The Qur'ān's Paradigm for Messengers and Prophets: A Reading of Sūrah XXVI *ash-Shu'arā*."

learned their Christianity directly or indirectly from its earlier, Syriac expression. The assumption defended here is that these Arabic-speaking Christians were in association with their contemporary, Syriac-speaking, seventh century 'Melkites,' 'Jacobites,' 'Nestorians,' and their fellow travelers, the only Christian communities historically known to have actually been in the ambience of the Qur'ān.

So in the end one can say that in the first third of the seventh century of the Common Era, Mecca had much to do with the heritage of Syriac-speaking Urhōy in terms of the currents of contemporary Christian thought and religious lore that circulated in Arabic at the time. The evidence for this survives in the Syriacisms in the Qur'ān and in the critiques and correctives of Christian doctrine and practice one finds in the Islamic scripture, expressed in language that reflects the fact that Arabic-speaking Christians learned their Christianity largely from their Syriac-speaking co-religionists living on the periphery of Arabia and not infrequently making their way into the Arabian heartland.

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