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# MUḤAMMAD

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# THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN WRITINGS ON MUHAMMAD: AN APPRAISAL<sup>1</sup>

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## I. INTRODUCTION

When Blaise Pascal (1623-62) wrote that since Muḥammad "worked no miracles and was not foretold" he could not be a true prophet, he was simply echoing the judgment of John of Damascus (wr. ca. 730) passed more-than 900 years earlier.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the explanation of Muḥammad's revelation as the result of epileptic fits, found in numerous thirteenth-century and later texts, was already given by the Byzantine monk and chronicler Theophanes the Confessor (d. 818).<sup>3</sup> The same is true for various other attributes, deeds and doctrines of Muḥammad, which recur for centuries in European polemical tracts and all of which have their roots in the very earliest Eastern Christian writings about the Prophet. That makes these earliest accounts of interest, since, as well as revealing to us what were the initial reactions of the inhabitants of the Near East to Islam and its founder, they can in addition help to elucidate the provenance of medieval and even contemporary Western (mis)conceptions.

But is this the limit of their worth? Can such writings not tell us anything about what the Muslims themselves said and did, rather than just how such sayings and actions were regarded? In his "Note

<sup>1</sup> All the Christian sources used in this article were first used in a systematic way for Islamic history by P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge, 1977. All receive full discussion in my *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13, Princeton, 1997, from which I draw in this article.

<sup>2</sup> John of Damascus, *De haeresibus*, in PG, XCIV, 765C, 768A, and in a "Refutation against the Saracens" transmitted *dia phōnēs Iōannou Damaskēnou* by Theodore Abū Qurra (d. ca. 825), PG, XCIV, 1596-97; B. Pascal, *Oeuvres*, ed. L. Brunschvig, Paris, 1921, XIV, 37-38. John of Damascus was particularly important as a source for Byzantine and Western Christian views of Muḥammad, being the first to speak of Muḥammad's revelation and legislation, portrayal of Christ, carnal vision of Paradise, his many wives and his instruction by a monk.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West. The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh, 1966, 27-28, citing, amongst others, Vincent of Beauvais, Alexandre du Pont and Ricoldo da Monte Cruce, all of the second half of the thirteenth century; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 334.

sur l'accueil des chrétiens d'Orient à l'islam", written three decades ago, Claude Cahen posed the question whether "la première réaction proprement religieuse des chrétiens", evoked before conversion to Islam had put the Church on the defensive and before Byzantium had begun to use words as well as weapons in its war against the Muslims, might not differ from "la littérature polémique ultérieure". Might it not be free of "le besoin de mettre en place une argumentation antimusulmane" and so be able to inform us about Islam in its formative phase?<sup>4</sup> Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in their book *Hagarism* took up this point and used only sources external to the Muslim tradition to sketch an alternative account of early Islam.<sup>5</sup> Their methodology and conclusions attracted much criticism, but little was said about the material they had gone to such great trouble to unearth. This article will reexamine a small body of this material, namely, the earliest Christian portrayals of Muḥammad, those dating from the first two centuries of Islam (1-200/622-815), and then try to assess their value for the historian.

## II. THE TEXTS

### *Muḥammad the Initiator of the Conquests*

The earliest clear Christian reference to the Prophet is to be found in the Syriac chronicle of Thomas the Presbyter, a resident of northern Mesopotamia.<sup>6</sup> Since he states that his brother Simon was killed in 636 during an Arab raid upon Ṭūr 'Abdīn and does not mention the death of the emperor Heraclius (610-41), we may assume that Thomas was writing ca. 640. In his chronicle he relates that:

<sup>4</sup> Claude Cahen, "Note sur l'accueil des chrétiens d'Orient à l'islam", in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 166 (1964), 51-52, 56-58.

<sup>5</sup> Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, esp. 3-34.

<sup>6</sup> There are two possibly earlier references. A Greek anti-Jewish tract entitled *Doctrina Jacobi*, purportedly composed in Africa in July 634, mentions a "prophet who has appeared with the Saracens" and who condones "the shedding of men's blood", but he is not named (see Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 3-4, and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 55-61, for references and discussion). A few lines about the Arab conquests which appear on the front fly-leaf of a sixth-century Syriac Gospel manuscript are stated by E.W. Brooks to contain a mention of Muḥammad, but Sebastian Brock finds the reading "very uncertain" (in Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Translated Texts for Historians 15, Liverpool, 1993, 2, note 70).

In the year 945, indiction 7, on Friday 4 February (634) at the ninth hour, there was a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of Muḥammad (*ṭayyāyē d-Mḥmt*).<sup>7</sup>

The implication here is that Muḥammad was a military leader of some kind. This is also intimated by another Syriac chronicler, most likely writing in Khūzistān ca. 660, who conveys the following information amid his account of the reign of Yazdigird III (632-52):

Then God brought the Ishmaelites against them like sand on the sea shore; their leader (*mdabbrānā*) was Muḥammad (*Mḥmd*), and neither walls nor gates, armor or shield, withstood them: they gained control over the entire land of the Persians.<sup>8</sup>

An anonymous history of Armenia, which concludes with the victory of Mu'āwiya in the first Arab civil war (656-61) and is usually attributed to a bishop Sebeos, has Muḥammad preach to the Arabs, saying:

You are the sons of Abraham, and God will realize in you the promise made to Abraham and his posterity. Only love the God of Abraham, and go and take possession of your country which God gave to your father Abraham, and none will be able to resist you in battle, for God is with you.<sup>9</sup>

Four later texts are more explicit. The first is by a certain George, "the archdeacon and companion of the father and patriarch Abba Simon, patriarch of Alexandria (692-700)", who "informed us what occurred in the time of the arch-unbeliever Marcian and what troubles came upon our fathers and what came after them up to the time of Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik, king of the Muslims (715-17)".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Chronica minora II*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> *Chronica minora I*, 30. The Khūzistān provenance is suggested by the chronicler's preoccupation with that region as regards the latest events; the date of composition follows from the fact that the title declares the finishing point to be "the end of the Persian kingdom" and from the lack of a clear reference to an event later than 652. The chronicle is also known as the *Anonymous Guidi* after the name of its first editor.

<sup>9</sup> Sebeos, XXX (trans. Macler, 95-96). Various indications in the text suggest that Sebeos was contemporary with the events he relates (see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 125). I use the name Sebeos here simply as a shorthand for the text of the anonymous history and for its original compiler.

<sup>10</sup> *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs*, in *PO*, V, 90-91. This text comprises the biographies of the leaders of the Coptic church beginning with St. Mark; George was responsible for *Lives*, 27-42, covering the period from Chalcedon to the early eighth century. The first attempt to compile all the material and translate it into Arabic was made by Mawhūb b. Maṣṣūr b. Mufarrij (d. ca. 1100). That the comments of earlier authors often survive suggests that the editing was not heavy-handed, but the

About Muḥammad George says that "he took possession of Damascus and Syria, crossed the Jordan and..."<sup>11</sup> The second text is by a mid-eighth-century Spanish writer, who preserves in Latin translation a chronicle ultimately of Syrian provenance and who notes:

When a most numerous multitude of Saracens had gathered together, they invaded the provinces of Syria, Arabia and Mesopotamia. Above them, holding the leadership, was one Muḥammad (*Mahmet*) by name.<sup>12</sup>

The next two are again Syriac chronicles, both of which are anonymous and halt at the year 775. The one known as the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, because it was composed by a resident of the monastery of that name in Mesopotamia, simply says that "they (the Arabs) had conquered the Romans in battle under his (Muḥammad's) direction".<sup>13</sup> The other, entitled "an account of how the generations and races and years were from Adam until today", makes the declaration that:

In 930 of Alexander (618-19), Heraclius and the Romans entered Constantinople, and Muḥammad (*Mḥmt*) and the Arabs went forth from the south and entered the land and subdued it.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that Muḥammad initiated the Arab conquests comes through very clearly in these sources. And this idea is further spelled out in the account of Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785), astrologer to the

corruption evident in parts of the notice on Muḥammad (see next note) shows that translation from Coptic and subsequent copying took its toll.

<sup>11</sup> *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs*, in *PO*, I, 492. The last word is *sādamahu* ("damned its waters"?); cf. *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs (Hamburg)*, 99: "This Muḥammad and his companions took possession of Damascus and Syria, crossed the Jordan and...(*šbādāmyh?*)".

<sup>12</sup> *Continuatio Byzantia Arabica*, §13 (so-called because it is a continuation of John of Biclar's chronicle with an obvious Arab focus). The Syrian provenance of this text is evident from the fact that the Umayyad caliphs are each described in a relatively positive vein, all reference to 'Alī is omitted, Mu'āwiya II is presented as a legitimate and uncontested ruler, and the rebel Yazīd b. al-Muhallab is labeled "a font of wickedness".

<sup>13</sup> *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 149. This chronicle is also known as the "pseudo-Dionysius", since it was once thought to be by the patriarch Dionysius of Tellmahre. Note that the author explicitly states when he is writing: "...the present year, which is the year 1086 of Alexander and the year 158 (775) of the Muslims" (*ibid.*, 145).

<sup>14</sup> *Chronica minora III*, 348. The date should perhaps be read 940 (628-29), though this reference to AG 930 is not isolated; for example, Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) has Muḥammad travel to Syria three years before "the beginning of the kingdom of the Arabs" (in AG 933), so again in AG 930 (*Chronica minora III*, 326), and an inscription on the wall of a church at Ehnes in northern Syria notes that "in the year 930 the Arabs came to the land" (Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, 71).

caliph al-Mahdī, which survives to a greater or lesser degree in the chronicle, begun before 805,<sup>15</sup> of the Jacobite patriarch Dionysius of Tellmahre (818-45):<sup>16</sup>

This Muḥammad, while in the age and stature of youth, began to go up and down from his town of Yathrib to Palestine for the business of buying and selling. While so engaged in the country, he saw the belief in one God and it was pleasing to his eyes.<sup>17</sup> When he went back down to his tribesmen, he set this belief before them, and he convinced a few and they became his followers. In addition, he would extol the bountifulness of this land of Palestine, saying: "Because of the belief in one God, the like of this good and fertile land was given to them." And he would add: "If you listen to me, God will give to you, too, a land flowing with milk and honey." To corroborate his word, he led a band of them who were obedient to him and began to go up to the land of Palestine, plundering, enslaving and pillaging. He returned laden [with booty] and unharmed, and thus he had not fallen short of his promise to them.

Since love of possessions impels an act towards a habit, they began going back and forth on raids. When those who had not as yet joined him saw those who had submitted to him acquiring great riches, they were drawn without compulsion into his service. And when, after these [expeditions], his followers had become many men and a great force, he would allow them to raid while he sat in honor at his seat in Yathrib, his city.<sup>18</sup> Once dispatched, it was not enough for them to frequent Palestine alone, but they ranged far and wide, killing openly, enslaving, ravaging and plundering. Even this was not enough for them, but they

<sup>15</sup> When describing an event of the Sixth Ecumenical Council of 680-81, Dionysius says: "And is it not still so today, 125 years after this wicked synod?" (preserved in Michael the Syrian, *Chronique*, IV, 435/II, 453).

<sup>16</sup> Itself preserved in Michael the Syrian, *Chronique*, IV, 405-07/II, 403-05, and the *Chronicle of 1234*, 227-29. The wording of the account is identical or very similar in these works, but Michael makes a few emendations of a polemical nature, more likely added than omitted, so I translate from the *Chronicle of 1234*. For the dependence of the *Chronicle of 1234* and of Michael upon Dionysius and of Dionysius upon Theophilus, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 400-09, 416-19.

<sup>17</sup> Michael has: "While engaged with the Jews, he learnt from them the belief in one God, and seeing that his tribesmen worshipped stones and wood and every created thing, he adhered to the belief of the Jews, which pleased him."

<sup>18</sup> The *Chronicle of 1234* has "did not allow", but cf. Michael: "When many had submitted to him, he no longer went up in person as leader of those going up to raid, rather he would send others at the head of his forces while he would sit in honor at his city." This is repeated by the tenth-century Nestorian *Chronicle of Siirt* (in *PO*, XIII, 601), evidently ultimately reliant upon the same source: "When Islam became strong, he refrained from going out in person to war and began to dispatch his companions." Michael adds: "Whoever did not accept the teaching of his doctrine, no longer by persuasion but by the sword did he subject them; those who refused, he killed."

would make them pay tribute and enslave them. Thus, gradually, they grew strong and spread abroad. And they grew so powerful that they subjected almost all the land of the Romans and also the kingdom of the Persians under their sway.<sup>19</sup>

### *Muḥammad the Trader*

The first comment that the Armenian chronicler Sebeos (wr. 660s) makes about Muḥammad is that he was a "merchant" (*t'ankangar*).<sup>20</sup> This fact is also known to the scholar Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), who announces in his chronicle that "Muḥammad went down for trade to the lands of Palestine, Arabia and Syrian Phoenicia".<sup>21</sup> Possibly it is Jacob's notice which underlies the explanation given by Theophilus of Edessa of how Muḥammad came to acquire knowledge about monotheism:

This Muḥammad, while in the age and stature of youth, began to go up and down from his town of Yathrib to Palestine for the business of buying and selling. While so engaged in the country, he saw the belief in one God and it was pleasing to his eyes...<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This last sentence is not in Michael. Besides Dionysius, two other chroniclers make heavy use of Theophilus for early Islamic history, namely, Theophanes the Confessor (d. 818) and Agapius, bishop of Manbij (d. ca. 950). For their notices on Muḥammad, however, they diverge considerably from Theophilus. As regards Muḥammad's role in the conquests, Theophanes just says his "heresy prevailed in the region of Ethribos, in the last resort by war: at first secretly for ten years, and by war another ten, and openly nine"; and Agapius, 457: "He waged war against whomsoever refused and resisted him, and he killed chiefs among the Arabs, from his own tribe and others, and he conquered many towns of neighbouring peoples."

<sup>20</sup> Sebeos, XXX (trans. Macler, 95). G. Abgaryan, in his edition (Erevan, 1979), corrects the manuscripts to *t'angar* on the basis of Thomas of Artsruni's account. In either case this is a usual term to have used; it derives from the Syriac *taggārā* and perhaps reflects that Sebeos has his information on Muḥammad and the Arab conquests from fugitives "who had been eyewitnesses thereof", as he himself states.

<sup>21</sup> *Chronica minora* III, 326.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in full above from Dionysius of Tellmahre. The chronicler Theophanes (d. 818), who in general also makes heavy use of Theophilus' chronicle, simply says: "Whenever he came to Palestine, he consorted with Christians and Jews and sought from them certain scriptural matters" (Theophanes, 334). Though this is too brief to be sure that it is from the same source as that used by Dionysius, one might note that they both make the same polemical point, that Muḥammad had his knowledge of monotheism from Christians and Jews.

*Muhammad the King*

A Maronite chronicle, which contains firsthand information relevant to the 650s, makes the comment that Mu'āwiya "placed his throne in Damascus and refused to go to Muhammad's throne".<sup>23</sup> The implication is that Muhammad was a ruler like Mu'āwiya, and indeed this is how he is most often described in Christian sources. In his chronicle, which halts in 692, Jacob of Edessa refers to "Muhammad, the first king (*malkā*) of the Arabs", and this is echoed by the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* ("the first king was a man from among them by the name of Muhammad").<sup>24</sup> Moreover, numerous texts speak about the "reign" of Muhammad: a Syriac "report giving information about the kingdom of the Arabs and how many kings they produced" concluding with the accession of Walīd I "in AG 1017 (705), at the beginning of October" ("he reigned for seven years"),<sup>25</sup> the mid-eighth-century Spanish chronicler ("he fulfilled ten years of his rule"),<sup>26</sup> an anonymous Greek chronographical compilation of 818 ("In the year 6131 of the world and the thirteenth year of Heraclius there began the rule of the Saracens: Mouameth, 9 years; ..."),<sup>27</sup> and so on. This manner of description also crops up in disputation texts, as, for example, that recording the dialogue between the monk Abraham of Tiberias and an Arab emir, allegedly held in Jerusalem ca. 820, where the former maintains that Muhammad is "a king approved by God, in whom and by whom God has fulfilled His promise to Abraham regarding Ishmael".<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Chronica minora II*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> *Chronica minora III*, 326; *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Translated by Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Continuatio Byzantia Arabica*, §17.

<sup>27</sup> Edited in A. Schoene, *Eusebii chronicorum libri duo*, Berlin, 1875, vol. I, Appendix IV, 97. The text contains a number of chronological lists, one of Arab rulers, which ends: "Aarōn...(Hārūn al-Rashīd), 20 years; anarchy, and war among the latter's sons for 7 years until the present 11th indiction. Presently God will curtail the years of their rule and will raise the horn of the Christian empire against them." Hārūn died in 809 and so seven years of civil war would take us to 816; the nearest 11th indiction to this is 818.

<sup>28</sup> Abraham of Tiberias, *Dialogue*, §110; a reference to Genesis 17:20; 21:13.

*Muhammad the Monotheist Revivalist*

The Armenian chronicler Sebeos, writing ca. 660, seems to envisage Muhammad as having turned the Arabs away from idolatry and having led them to take up once more their ancestral religion, the core of which was Abrahamic monotheism:

At this time there was an Ishmaelite called Mahmet, a merchant; he presented himself to them as though at God's command, as a preacher, as the way of truth, and taught them to know the God of Abraham, for he was very well informed and very well acquainted with the story of Moses. Since the command came from on high, they all came together, at a single order, in unity of religion, and, abandoning vain cults, returned to the living God who had revealed himself to their father Abraham.<sup>29</sup>

The chronicler of Khūzistān, also writing ca. 660, likewise remarks upon this ancestral Abrahamic connection:

Regarding the dome of Abraham, we have been unable to discover what it is except that, because the blessed Abraham grew rich in property and wanted to get away from the envy of the Canaanites, he chose to live in the distant and spacious parts of the desert. Since he lived in tents, he built that place for the worship of God and for the offering of sacrifices. It took its present name from what it had been,<sup>30</sup> since the memory of the place was preserved with the generations of their race. Indeed it was no new thing for the Arabs to worship there, but goes back to antiquity, to their early days, in that they show honor to the father of the head of their people.<sup>31</sup>

And, in general, it is very common for Muhammad to be portrayed as having brought his people back into line with the dictates of monotheism: "As a result of this man's guidance they held to the worship of the one God in accordance with the customs of ancient law" (John bar Penkaye); "he returned the worshippers of idols to the knowledge of the one God" (*History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs*); "he had turned them away from cults of all kinds and taught them that there was one God, Maker of Creation" (*Chronicle of Zuqnin*); "he enjoined them to belief in the one God, Who has no companion, and to reject idolatry"

<sup>29</sup> Sebeos, XXX (trans. Macler, 94-95).

<sup>30</sup> One wonders whether the chronicler had heard of the term Ka'ba—note that Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), *Letters*, fol. 124a, writes it *K'btā*—and thought that it derived from the dome (*Qūbtā*) of Abraham.

<sup>31</sup> *Chronica minora I*, 38.

(Agapius); "he summoned the Arabs to the worship of God Almighty" (*Chronicle of Siirt*).

*Muhammad the Lawgiver*

John bar Penkaye, a monk of northern Mesopotamia who states that he is writing "in the year 67 of the rule of the Arabs" (686-87), calls Muhammad a "guide" (*mhaddyānā*) and "instructor" (*tarʿā*), and observes of the Arabs that:

They kept to the tradition of Muhammad...to such an extent that they inflicted the death penalty on anyone who was seen to act brazenly against his laws (*nāmōsawh*).<sup>32</sup>

This image of Muhammad as a lawgiver is very common. The archdeacon George, responsible for the portion of the *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs* relating to the seventh century, mentions that Muhammad gave to the Arabs a "covenant" (*ahd*) "which they call the law" (*al-nāmūs*).<sup>33</sup> A plausibly late Umayyad Christian-Muslim disputation between a monk of Beth Hale monastery and an Arab notable has the Christian interlocutor defend veneration of the cross, though it is not stipulated in the Gospel, by saying:

I think that for you, too, not all your laws and commandments are in the Qurʾān which Muhammad taught you; rather there are some which he taught you from the Qurʾān, and some are in Sūrat al-Baqara and in the Gospel and in the Torah.<sup>34</sup>

And the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* asserts that "he laid down laws for them (the Arabs)" and refers to him as "their guide and legislator" (*mhaddy-ānhōn w-sāʿem nāmōsayhōn*).<sup>35</sup> Other Christian authors are even able to

<sup>32</sup> John bar Penkaye, 146-47/175. The Arab "kingdom" (*malkūtā*) is dealt with in the last book of John's "Book of Salient Points" (*Ktābā d-rīsh mellē*), which is characterized in the heading as "a chronicle of the world" extending from Creation to "the severe chastisement of today", treating "the salient points" of history "in a brief fashion".

<sup>33</sup> *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs*, in *PO*, I, 494.

<sup>34</sup> Ms. Diyarbakir 95, fol. 6a. The text begins: "With God's help we shall write down the debate that took place between a man of the Arabs and a certain monk of the monastery of Beth Hale." Nothing is known about its transmission before its appearance in two manuscripts, one from Diyarbakir of the early eighteenth century, the other at Mardin copied in 1890. The text continues by saying that "this Arab man...was one of the chief men before the emir Maslama", whose mention, if we identify him with Maslama ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, gives a *terminus post quem* of 710, when he was appointed governor of Mesopotamia. See Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 163, note 23; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 465-72.

<sup>35</sup> *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 149, 299.

give examples of some of the laws which Muhammad enacted for his followers. Thus Sebeos tells us:

He legislated (*awrinadre*) for them not to eat carrion, not to drink wine, not to speak falsely and not to commit fornication.<sup>36</sup>

And John of Damascus (wr. ca. 730), last of the fathers of the Greek Orthodox church, remarks, in a rather polemical vein:

He prescribed that they be circumcised, women as well, and he commanded neither to observe the Sabbath nor to be baptized, to eat those things forbidden in the Law and to abstain from others. Drinking of wine he forbade absolutely.<sup>37</sup>

*Muhammad the Prophet/False Prophet*

In its entry upon the rise of Islam the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* makes the following statement:

Since he (Muhammad) had shown them the one God, and they had conquered the Romans in battle under his direction, and he had appointed laws for them according to their desire, they called him prophet (*nbīyā*) and messenger (*rasūlā*) of God.<sup>38</sup>

This fact, that the Muslims regarded Muhammad as a prophet and messenger of God, was known to Christians from at least the late seventh century. In his section of the *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs* the archdeacon George (wr. ca. 720) records that during the time of the patriarch Isaac of Rakoti (689-92) the governor ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Marwān "wrote a number of notices and placed them on the doors of the churches in Miṣr and the Delta, saying in them: Muhammad is the great messenger (*al-rasūl al-kabīr*) who is God's".<sup>39</sup> A Syriac king list, which concludes with the death of Yazīd II (105/724), begins: "A notice of the life of Muhammad the messenger (*rasūlā*) of God."<sup>40</sup> And the mid-eighth-century Spanish chronicler recounts:

It is he whom they (the Saracens) to this day hold in such great honor and reverence that they affirm him to be the apostle and prophet of God in all their oaths and writings.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Sebeos, XXX (trans. Macler, 95).

<sup>37</sup> John of Damascus, *De haeresibus*, in *PG*, XCIV, 773A.

<sup>38</sup> *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 149.

<sup>39</sup> *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs*, in *PO*, V, 25.

<sup>40</sup> *Chronica minora II*, 155.

<sup>41</sup> *Continuatio Byzantia Arabica*, § 17.

However, just because the Christians knew Muḥammad was deemed a prophet by his own people does not mean that they themselves accepted him as such. In general, of course, they did not. Christians living in Muslim-ruled lands were at least content to say that Muḥammad "walked in the way of the prophets" in that he brought his people to knowledge of the one true God and recognition of virtue,<sup>42</sup> but Byzantine authors designated him rather as "the forerunner of the Antichrist" (*prodromos tou antichristou*) and "a false prophet" (*pseudo-prophētēs*).<sup>43</sup>

### III. CHRISTIAN POLEMIC AGAINST MUḤAMMAD

In their provision of a response to the situation facing them, namely, that a new religio-political entity had unexpectedly arisen, achieved dazzling military successes and promoted itself as favored by God and in possession of His latest dispensation, only very rarely did the conquered peoples evince an interest in the motives and actions of the Muslims themselves. Their chief concern was rather to minimize the damage done to their own former status and self-image, to play down the gains won by their new masters and to extend some hope that they would themselves rise to the fore once again.

Thus, for example, much of the reason for the presentation by Christian writers of Muḥammad as a reviver of an original or Abrahamic religion was to emphasize that his religion was nothing new, indeed that it was primitive, not having benefited from any of Jesus' modernizations. The Arabs are seen as having ascended to the first rung of the monotheist ladder, but as being still a long way off from the more lofty heights of Christianity. And Muḥammad is depicted as a revivalist who reacquainted the Arabs with the one God, from whose service they had lapsed. Muḥammad himself had, we are told, knowledge of Christian doctrines, but it was not possible for him to teach them to the Arabs since their minds were as yet too immature. This is carefully explained by a monk of Beth Hale monastery to

<sup>42</sup> As is, for example, stated by the catholicos Timothy I (780-823) to the caliph al-Mahdī (Timothy I, *Apology*, §§159-62).

<sup>43</sup> The earliest recorded application of these terms to Muḥammad is by John of Damascus in his *De haeresibus* (PG, XCIV, 764A, 764B), and thereafter they are commonly used by Byzantine writers (e.g. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 333).

his Muslim antagonist in the plausibly late Umayyad disputation text mentioned above:

Arab: "Tell me the truth, how is Muḥammad our prophet considered in your eyes?"

Monk: "As a wise and God-fearing man who freed you from idolatry and brought you to know the one true God."

Arab: "Why, if he was wise, did he not teach us from the beginning about the mystery of the Trinity as you profess [it]?"

Monk: "You know, of course, that a child, when it is born, because it does not possess the full faculties for receiving solid food, is nourished with milk for two years, and [only] then do they feed it with meat. Thus also Muḥammad, because he saw your simpleness and the deficiency of your understanding, he first taught you of the one true God..., for you were children in terms of your understanding."<sup>44</sup>

This same tack is pursued in the story of the monk Baḥīra, where Muḥammad is given a simplified version of Christianity to take to the Arabs. Even then he has often to remind his instructor, Baḥīra, that "my comrades are uncouth desert Arabs who are not accustomed to fasting and prayer, nor to anything which causes them trouble or bother". And in the end he has to request something more in accord with their capacities: "I taught what you described to me and they did not understand it, so give them something succinct enough that their minds can accept it."<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, the discussion of Muḥammad's prophethood by Christians was conducted chiefly with the aim of discrediting his credentials. Two trump cards were played by the Christians. The most common, that Muḥammad was not announced in the scriptures and had worked no miracles, was first put forward by John of Damascus, and remained in play for centuries thereafter,<sup>46</sup> even though the Muslims came up with numerous examples of biblical prophecies about Muḥammad and of signs worked by him.<sup>47</sup> The second, that Muḥammad

<sup>44</sup> Ms. Diyarbakir, fol. 5a; cf. 1 Corinthians 3:2: "I have fed you with milk and not with meat, for hitherto you were not able to bear it, nor yet now are you able."

<sup>45</sup> R. Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend", in *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 15 (1900), 64, 73. This story of how the monk Baḥīra fashioned for Muḥammad and his people a book and a new religion that was a simplified version of Christianity seems already to have circulated by the late eighth century, but to have been added to for centuries thereafter and to have passed from its original Syriac to Christian Arabic, Armenian, Hebrew and Latin (see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 476-79).

<sup>46</sup> See the first sentence of this paper and the note thereto.

<sup>47</sup> See Sarah Stroumsa, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature", in *Harvard Theological*

had won adherents with physical incentives rather than spiritual riches, first appears in a disputation that allegedly took place between the caliph 'Abd al-Malik and a monk of Mar Sabas named Michael.<sup>48</sup> The former opens with the question: "Did not Muḥammad convert the Persians and the Arabs and smash their idols to pieces?", to which Michael replies that Muḥammad had relied on physical inducements and force of arms whereas Paul came in peace:

Paul possessed neither swords nor treasures. He was toiling with his hands and he was being provided for by means of that, and he was conducting himself in accordance with all [the laws]; he was commanding fasting and holiness, not abominable fornication. Nor was he making promises of eternal eating or marriage, but rather of [an eternal] kingdom.<sup>49</sup>

This idea became further developed by later apologetes as a way of testing the veracity of a religion. If it could be shown that its success derived from mundane circumstances (*asbāb al-dunyā*, *asbāb al-arḍ*), then that religion was evidently not from God, but a religion of men. The Jacobite theologian Abū Rā'īṭa (d. 830s) proposed six categories of unworthy motives for adoption of a religion: worldly desire, ambition, fear, license, personal whim and partisanship, and these are found with only minor variations in a host of other polemical works.<sup>50</sup> Inevitably Islam was found guilty on all counts, and so discounted as a divinely inspired religion and labeled "a religion established by the sword and not a faith confirmed by miracles".<sup>51</sup>

*Review*, 78 (1985), 16-42.

<sup>48</sup> Even if not explicitly articulated, the same argument does, of course, appear in other genres; compare, for example, the words of Dionysius of Tellmahre cited above: "(Muḥammad) would add: 'If you listen to me, God will give to you, too, a land flowing with milk and honey.' To corroborate his word, he led a band of them... to go up to the land of Palestine plundering, enslaving and pillaging..."

<sup>49</sup> Translated by Monica J. Blanchard, "The Georgian Version of the Martyrdom of Saint Michael, Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery", in *Aram*, 6 (1994), §8. The text was most likely composed in the late eighth or early ninth century.

<sup>50</sup> Abū Rā'īṭa, *Rasā'il VIII (Fī ihbāt al-dīn al-naṣrāniyya)*, 131-32. Other examples and further discussion are given by Sidney H. Griffith, "Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians", in *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conference, Villanova, Pennsylvania*, 4 (1979), 63-86.

<sup>51</sup> As the catholicos Hnanisho' (686-93) declared to 'Abd al-Malik (Bar Hebraeus, *Chron. eccles.*, II, 136). Much of the purpose of this polemic by Christians and Jews was to discourage conversion to Islam amongst their own people.

#### IV. CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE OF MUḤAMMAD?

In the various reviews of Crone and Cook's *Hagarism* one criticism that recurs again and again is: how could external observers know better than initiates? To use the words of Josef van Ess:

We cannot demand that an observer from outside, who could even less evaluate the radical novelty of the event, should have had a clearer concept of what was really happening. We should rather expect that he tried to describe the phenomenon with his own categories.<sup>52</sup>

This is hardly to be denied. Of course, Christians presented their information about Islam and its adherents on their own terms, which inevitably entailed a greater or lesser degree of distortion, but the point to note is that this information either had its basis in personal observation or else ultimately derived from the Muslims themselves. When the Gallic bishop Arculf, on pilgrimage in the Near East ca. 670, says that in Damascus "a kind of church" (*quaedam ecclesia*) has been built for "the unbelieving Saracens",<sup>53</sup> he is, of course, using Christian vocabulary, and with a dose of polemic, but surely we can still infer from this that there was some sort of Muslim place of worship in the city. And when Anastasius of Sinai says that during his stay in Jerusalem ca. 660 he was woken up in the morning by Egyptian laborers clearing the Temple Mount, one might doubt his accompanying comment that demons collaborated in this task, but surely not the undertaking of the work itself.<sup>54</sup>

The excursus of the aforementioned chronicler of Khūzistān (wr.

<sup>52</sup> J. van Ess, "The Making of Islam" (review art.), in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Sept. 8 (1978), 998. Cf. Norman Daniel in *JSS*, 24 (1979), 298: "It is easier to believe that Muslims are better witnesses to Islam than Christian or Jewish writers who may more naturally be supposed to have known very little about it"; R.B. Serjeant in *JRAS*, 1978, 78: "Why should the Syriac sources,...with their hostility to Islam, be considered more trustworthy than the Arabic histories?"; J. Wansbrough in *BSOAS*, 41 (1978), 156: "My reservations...turn upon what I take to be the authors' methodological assumptions, of which the principal must be that a vocabulary of motives can be freely extrapolated from a discrete collection of literary stereotypes composed by alien and mostly hostile observers..."

<sup>53</sup> Adomnan, *De locis sanctis*, II, XXVIII, 220 (Arculf dictated his experiences to Adomnan, abbot of Iona, on his return). Note that the church of St. John the Baptist is mentioned separately from the Muslim "church".

<sup>54</sup> Anastasius of Sinai, *Narrationes*, C3. The incident occurred, says Anastasius, "before these thirty years", and he relates it "because of those who think and say that it is the Temple of God (*naos theoi*) being built now in Jerusalem", a reference to the Dome of the Rock completed in 691.



ca. 660) upon the Arabs' "dome of Abraham" is a concoction of elements from the Book of Genesis,<sup>55</sup> but the impetus to blend them at all must have come from outside. The chronicler can only be using biblical antecedents to make sense of the report, albeit rather vague, that has reached him regarding the Muslim sanctuary.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, the presentation of Muḥammad as the instigator of the Arab conquests, detailed above, may be confused in its chronology<sup>57</sup> and may be embellished to emphasize his un-prophetlike behavior, but the essence of it is already encountered in the very foundation document of the Muslim community, the so-called *Constitution of Medina*, which unites believers under the "protection of God" to fight on his behalf and to "help one another against whomsoever fights the signatories of this document".<sup>58</sup> The narrative of Theophilus of Edessa, quoted above, seems more directly to rely upon Muslim tradition, where, too, Muḥammad initially heads most raids, but as time goes by increasingly stays behind at Medina and appoints commanders in his stead.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Compare with the chronicler's account cited above: Genesis 12:9, 20:1 (Abraham makes frequent wanderings southwards); 12:6, 13:7 (he displays a certain apprehensiveness regarding the Canaanites); 13:2 (he is "very rich in cattle, in silver and in gold"); 12:8 ("he pitches his tent...and there built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord"); 12:2, 17:20 (God promises both to Abraham and to Ishmael to make of them "a great nation").

<sup>56</sup> From Qur'ān 2:125-28 one can infer that Abraham, the fount of the Arab people, built a sanctuary which is still used as such by his ancestors. And in the conflict that occurred during the second Arab civil war (683-92) over the layout of the Meccan sanctuary, the point of contention was the status of the *ḥijr*, a place generally associated in some way with Ishmael; Ibn al-Zubayr sought to include it within the sanctuary, wishing to reinstate "the foundation of Abraham" (see Gerald R. Hawting, "The Origins of the Muslim Sanctuary at Mecca", in G.H.A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1982, 33-34, 42-43).

<sup>57</sup> Though Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 4 and 24, argue that it is the Muslim sources which are misleading: "The Prophet was disengaged from the original Palestinian venture by a chronological revision whereby he died two years before the invasion began."

<sup>58</sup> R.B. Serjeant, "The *Sunnah Jāmi'ah*: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called 'Constitution of Medina'", in *BSOAS*, 41 (1978), esp. 17, 19, 33. Its authenticity has been accepted by most scholars, most recently by Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, Cambridge, 1980, 7.

<sup>59</sup> In the "Lists of Expeditions and Dates" given in W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford 1956, 339-43, Muḥammad is cited as the leader of nineteen raids in the first five years of the Hijra, but of only eight in the second five years (excluding two pilgrimages and the division of the spoil of Hawāzin at Jī'rāna), none of which occurred in the last two years of his life. Note that our extant sources usually distinguish between *ghazawāt*, raids led by the Prophet, and *ṣarāyā*, raids led by his commanders; of the former there are usually said to have been about twenty-seven, in nine of which the Prophet actually fought, and of the latter as few as eighteen or as

What then, one may ask, is the value of Christian sources if all they do is give a distorted version of Muslim accounts? The answer is two-fold. In the first place, they are often precisely dateable, which for the first two centuries of Islam cannot normally be said to be true of Muslim writings. Since the Muslim perception of Muḥammad underwent major change during this period, this means that Christian sources can sometimes provide evidence for this change where Muslim sources are silent. It is instructive, for instance, to compare the comment of John bar Penkaye (wr. 687), cited above, that the Arabs "kept to the tradition (*mashlmānūtā*) of Muḥammad...to such an extent that they inflicted the death penalty on anyone who was seen to act brazenly against his laws" with the following remark of the chronicler of Zuqnin (wr. 775), writing in the same region but nearly a century later:

They are a very covetous and carnal people, and any law, whether prescribed by Muḥammad or another God-fearing person, that is not set in accord with their desire, they neglect and abandon. But what is in accord with their will and complements their desires, though it be instituted by one contemptible among them, they hold to it saying: "This was appointed by the Prophet and Messenger of God, and moreover it was charged to him thus by God."<sup>60</sup>

The expression "the tradition of Muḥammad" used by John bar Penkaye suggests something handed down, but one doubts that a defined corpus of rulings is meant. Most likely John is simply passing on the message given out by the Muslims themselves, that they adhere to and enforce the example of their Prophet. Since he writes at a time when there still survived a few Companions of the Prophet, this example would most likely have been living and only orally conveyed rather than fixed and written down. The situation was evidently very different by the time of the chronicler of Zuqnin. Despite the highly polemical tone of his notice, it is patent that this author is writing at a time when Prophetic *ḥadīth* had already gained currency, when a practice might receive sanction by saying: "This was appointed by the Prophet..."

In the second place, Christian sources often preserve information which the Muslims passed over, whether because it was no longer

many as sixty. Though Muḥammad himself never transgresses the confines of Arabia, his commanders get as far as central Jordan and southern Palestine.

<sup>60</sup> *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 149-50.

congruent with their received view of things or just for lack of interest.<sup>61</sup> For example, Christian authors reveal to us how numerous were the prisoners-of-war taken by the Muslims and how extensively this affected non-Muslim society, both physically and mentally. They illustrate how preoccupied the Muslims were with matters of security and how suspicious they were that Christians might be conspiring with the Byzantines against them. They record a number of caliphal decrees that are not found in Muslim sources, such as that 'Abd al-Malik ordered a slaughter of pigs in Syria and Mesopotamia, that al-Walid required magicians to be tried by ordeal, that 'Umar II forbade consumption of wine and the testimony of a Christian against a Muslim, that Yazid II banned the display of images, and that al-Mahdi prescribed the death penalty for converts to Islam who subsequently apostatized. They also bear witness to Muslim hostility to the cross at a very early stage and to a number of cultic practices performed by Muslims.<sup>62</sup> With regard to Muḥammad, Christian writings divulge nothing much new about his biography,<sup>63</sup> but they can tell us something about how and when his people first set about demonstrating the truth of his prophethood. There are no extant treatises by Muslims on this subject before the mid-ninth century;<sup>64</sup> Christian apologetic texts can help to fill this gap, in particular showing the extent to which Muslim theologians, from a very early date, ransacked the Bible for allusions to their Prophet.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> In general, Muslim writings exhibit little interest in the Late Antique civilization which Islam slowly replaced or in the inhabitants whom the Muslims conquered and employed to run their empire. This means that Christian sources are essential for helping us to understand the setting and gain the right perspective for various events and developments that took place in Muslim-ruled lands.

<sup>62</sup> References to these instances and further discussion are given in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 591-98.

<sup>63</sup> There do exist a few unusual reports as, for example, that Muḥammad appointed sacrifices for the Arabs: "He made the first sacrifice and had the Arabs eat them against their custom" (*Chronicle of 819*, prefixed to *Chronicle of 1234*, 11); "The misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah...and they remained with him until his [first] sacrifice" (Theophanes, 333).

<sup>64</sup> The earliest Muslim apologetes are 'Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. 855), Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. ca. 860), Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq (d. 861) and Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāhiz (d. 869). There is also an alleged letter of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (786-809) to the Byzantine emperor Constantine VI (780-97), calling him to Islam and pointing out to him its advantages, but this is likely to be attributed (edition, translation and commentary by Hadi Eid, *Lettre du calife Hārūn al-Rašīd à l'empereur Constantin VI*, Paris, 1992).

<sup>65</sup> Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, Leiden, 1996, 141-43.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize the danger of interpreting historical patterns and events in the early medieval Near East in terms of simplistic dichotomies, in this case Christian/Muslim. To quote a colleague:

It is of course true that groups and categories with some meaningful identity may quite legitimately be identified and viewed in relation to other groups and categories, but when the labels thus generated are taken beyond their descriptive function, assigned determinative values of their own, and juxtaposed to one another as vehicles for interpretation, the risk of oversimplification quickly becomes acute.<sup>66</sup>

Christians living in the Byzantine realm were to a large degree insulated from contact with Muslims, but for those living under the latter's rule it was a different story. The claim of the Mesopotamian monk John bar Penkaye that "there was no distinction between pagan and Christian, the believer was not known from a Jew" may be exaggerated,<sup>67</sup> but is nevertheless instructive. The initial indifference of the Muslims to divisions among the peoples whom they conquered, when compounded with the flight and enslavement of an appreciable proportion of the population and with the elimination of internal borders across a huge area extending from northwest Africa to India, meant that there was considerable human interaction across social, ethnic and religious lines.<sup>68</sup> This was especially true for those who sought employment in the bustling cosmopolitan garrison cities of the new rulers, where one was exposed to contact with men of very diverse origin, creed and status. In addition, there were the widespread phenomena of conversion and apostasy, of inter-confessional marriage and festival attendance, of commercial contacts and public debate, all of which served to break down confessional barriers.

An excellent illustration of this point is provided by the life, sadly little studied, of the aforementioned Theophilus bar Thomas of Edessa.<sup>69</sup> If we can believe an anecdote that relates how he died within a

<sup>66</sup> Lawrence I. Conrad, "Muḥammad and the Faith of Islam in Eastern Christian Historiography under the Early Abbasids", Paper given at the Seventh International Colloquium: From Jahiliyya to Islam, July-August 1996, 4-5.

<sup>67</sup> John bar Penkaye, 151/179.

<sup>68</sup> Compare again John bar Penkaye, 147/175: "Their robber bands went annually to distant parts and to the islands, bringing back captives from all the peoples under the heavens." Anastasius of Sinai, *Narrationes*, C5, gives us an example of Jewish and Christian prisoners-of-war performing forced labor together at Clysmā in Sinai.

<sup>69</sup> The following information on Theophilus is drawn from my *Seeing Islam*, 400-09.

few days of the caliph al-Mahdī (775-85) at the age of ninety, then he was born in 695 and, as his name suggests, at the city of Edessa in northern Syria. We first hear of him in the late 750s when he was accompanying al-Mahdī on a campaign in the east, presumably acting as the future caliph's astrological adviser.<sup>70</sup> Thereafter he remained in the service of al-Mahdī, becoming chief astrologer during his reign and taking up residence in Baghdad. Very popular among his scientific writings was his *Peri katarchōn polemikōn* (On Military Forecasts), which was cited by later Muslim astrologers and chapters of which made their way to Byzantium to become incorporated in a mid-ninth century collection of astrological writings. In addition, Theophilus translated into Syriac Galen's *On the Method of Maintaining Good Health*, Homer's *Iliad*, and possibly Aristotle's *Sophistici*.<sup>71</sup> Finally, he penned a "fine work of history", which seems to have been an attempt at continuing the genre of secular classicizing history and which describes at length the reign of Marwān II, the last Umayyad caliph, and the 'Abbāsīd revolution. Theophilus cannot, therefore, be viewed as simply a Christian who writes under Muslim rule; he is evidently a highly educated man, still influenced by the traditions of Antiquity as well as cognizant with the culture of his employers.

None of this is to say that religious affiliation did not count for a great deal; it obviously did so. But it did not exert, in some predictable fashion, an all-encompassing power to direct patterns of social relations in such a way as to prevent external influence or positive response to that influence. Religious leaders of the various confessions in the Near East might well have wished that that were the case, but

<sup>70</sup> CCAG, V, 1, 234; Theophilus addresses his son Deukalion: "I was urged, as you know, by those holding power to undertake these things (i.e., write a treatise on military forecasts) at the time when we made the expedition with them to the east in the province of *Margianēs*" (i.e., Margiana, the Merw oasis). A second edition of this work contains a chapter *De stellis fixis* which gives a planetary conjunction correct for 768 (CCAG V, 1, 212). The campaign must, therefore, be before 768 and very likely refers to al-Mahdī's activities in 141/758-59 in Khurāsān, quelling the revolt of its governor 'Abd al-Jabbār with the help of Khāzīm b. Khuzayma, and in *Tabāristān* (Tabarī, III, 134-37).

<sup>71</sup> In his *Fihrist* Ibn al-Nadīm says that Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (d. 974) translated the version of Theophilus [of Aristotle's *Sophistici*] into Arabic. F.E. Peters, *Aristoteles arabus*, Leiden, 1968, 25, takes this to refer to Theophilus of Edessa, saying that "his translation of the *Sophistici elenchi* is frequently cited in the notes to 'Isā b. Zur'ah's version". These notes, however, only ever refer to *Thāwufilā*; as with Ibn al-Nadīm's remark, the reference could well be to Theophilus of Edessa, but not necessarily so.

the region was and remained too diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity, history, language and so on for that ever to happen.

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