THE JEWS AND CHRISTIANS OF PRE-ISLAMIC YEMEN (ḤIMYAR) AND THE ELUSIVE MATRIX OF THE QUR'ĀN'S CHRISTOLOGY

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Abstract. This paper suggests that 6th-century Yemenite Christianity should be taken into consideration as a relevant, if hitherto often neglected, factor that may help to explain both the emergence of Islam and its South-Arabian component. It also explores the extent to which the interactions between the Christians and the Jews of pre-Islamic Yemen may be said to be of especial relevance to understand the Christology of the Qur'ān. Lastly, it contends that this represents a better approach to deciphering the Jewish and Christian roots of emergent Islam than the hypothesis of a "Jewish-Christian" influence upon the latter.

Keywords. Abraha, Christology, Dyophysitism, Islamic Origins, Jewish-Christian Relations, Jewish Christianity, Muḥammad, Pre-Islamic Yemen, Qur'ān

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What exactly do we mean when we talk about Jewish Christianity and the origins of Islam? Certainly it seems to imply something more, and indeed something different, than talking about its Jewish and Christian components, no matter whether we trace them back to Muḥammad himself or to the various materials of Christian and (less clearly) Jewish provenance gradually integrated into the Qur'ān.[1]

[1] As I have stated elsewhere, the apparently pro-Jewish passages that one finds in the Qur'ān (e.g. Q 2:40-61, 63-73, 87a, 89a, 122; 5:44) often prove tricky, as they are usually placed within, or next to, more or less violent anti-Jewish pericopes that bear the marks of Christian rhetoric (e.g. Q 2:40-71, 64-66, 74, 75-82, 83-103, 118-21, 123; 5:41-43, 46) despite a few occasional anti-Christian interpolations (e.g. Q 2:62, 111-14, 115-17); see Carlos A. Segovia, "A Messianic Controversy behind the Making of Muḥammad as the Last Prophet?" (paper presented at the First Nangeroni Meeting of the Early Islamic Studies Seminar (EISS), Milan, Italy, June 15-19, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/3372907/A_Messianic_Controversy_Behind_the_Making_of_Muhammad_as_the_Last_Prophet_2015_Conference_Paper_-_Upcoming_Book_Chapter. Notice too that the Qur'ān explicitly reproves the Jews not only for having corrupted their scripture, but also for their hostile attitude vis-à-vis Jesus (e.g. 2:87; 4:155-59; 61:5-6).

The hypothesis of an specifically Jewish-Christian influence on emergent Islam has been diversely explored by several scholars (notably Schlatter, Schoeps, Roncaglia, Gnilka, de Blois, Gallez, and Zellentin) since Adolf von Harnack first suggested it more than a hundred years ago and represents an incisive counterpoint to that of a Christian influence on the making of Islam.[2]

But however attractive this hypothesis may prove due to a number of apparent parallels existing between the ideas expressed in the Qur'ān and those found in the literature attributed to the Jewish Christians and other similar groups (e.g. the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and the *Didaskalia*), it presents several problems.

As Guy Stroumsa aptly notes, "our documentation on Jewish Christian communities rarely goes beyond the fourth century."[3] Also, "the precise mechanisms through which ideas [were] transmitted [into Muhammad's milieu and/or the Qur'ān] are too little known"[4] to draw a clear-cut conclusion as to the direct influence of Jewish-Christian motifs upon formative Islam.

Yet there is another and even more fundamental problem with this hypothesis, as well. For the category "Jewish Christianity" is problematic itself, as Matt Jackson-McCabe and Daniel Boyarin have insightfully shown; in short, it is too theological and too anachronistic.[5]

I should like to add that it makes little sense, for instance, to distinguish between pagan- (i.e. Pauline) and Jewish (i.e. non-Pauline) Christians within the early Jesus's movement. We should rather talk of Christ-believing Jews as a subtype of Messianic- and/or Apocalyptic- and/or Enochic

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[2] See Guy G. Stroumsa, "Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert G. Hoyland (Leiden and Boston: Brill. 2015), 72-96. See also Édouard-Marie Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète. Aux origines de l'Islam*. (2 vols.; Versailles: Éditions de Paris. 2005), whose 2-vol. essay goes unmentioned in Stroumsa's otherwise excellent survey.

[3] Stroumsa, "Jewish Christianity," 76.

[4] Stroumsa, "Jewish Christianity," 90.

[5] "Two critical if typically unspoken assumptions," writes Jackson-McCabe, "undergird this notion of a Jewish *Christianity*. The first is that, even if the name itself had not yet been coined, a religion that can usefully be distinguished from Judaism as Christianity was in fact in existence immediately in the wake of Jesus' death, if not already within his own lifetime. The second is that those ancient groups who seem from our perspective to sit on the borderline between Judaism and Christianity are nonetheless better understood as examples of the latter" (Matt Jackson-McCabe, "What's in a Name? The Problem of 'Jewish Christianity'," in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts*, ed. Matt Jackson-McCabe [Minneapolis: Fortress. 2007], 29). In turn, Boyarin highlights that "everything that has traditionally been identified as Christianity in particular existed in some non-Jesus movements of the first century and later as well," and that "there is no nontheological or non anachronistic way way at all to distinguish Christianity from Judaism until institutions are in place that make and enforce this distinction, and even then we know precious little about what the nonelite and nonchatering classes were thinking or doing" (Daniel Boyarin, "Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category [to which is Appended a Correction of my Border Lines]," *JQR* 99.1 (2009): 28); on the late partings of the ways between "Christianity" and "Judaism," see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (DRLAR; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Jews,[6] and consequently distinguish between (*a*) the Christ-believing Jews that accepted Paul's original message of integrating the gentiles *qua* gentiles into the people of God alongside Israel; (*b*) the Christ-believing Jews, be they originally born Jews or proselytes, that opposed Paul's message by claiming that the gentiles had to convert to Judaism; (*c*) the non-Jewish Christ-believers that sided with one or another of these options; and (*d*) the non-Jewish Christ-believers that refused to join Israel.[7] Labelling the Christ-believing Jews that opposed Paul's message as "Jewish Christians" implicitly deprives them of their Judaism and loses sight of the fact that Paul and those Jews who accepted his message were Christ-believing Jews as well.

As for the period elapsing between the first and the fourth century, why should we uncritically assume the view of the Christian heresiologists that the non-Pauline Christ-believing Jews and the gentiles who joined them need to be considered as Christians instead of Jews? Should we not equate Christianity with the somewhat artificial and political achievement of the aforementioned *d*-group alone, and thus exclusively label as Christians the people belonging to it whatever its eventual subdivisions?[8]

Given these problems, I would like to suggest here a different approach to the intertwining of Judaism, Christianity, and formative Islam. Instead of relying on a priori theological descriptions, I should like to focus on some intriguing events and late-antique South-Arabian inscriptions which are worth of being symptomatically re-examined.

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Before, though, I would like to underline that the view that the Qur'ān reflects *inter alia* anti-Christian- and/or non-mainstream intra-Christian polemical formulas needs to be nuanced.[9] To be sure, the Qur'ān endorses the view that God has no son and contains a number of anti-trinitarian claims (cf. Q 2:116; 3:59; 4:171-72; 5:72-75, 116-17; 6:101; 9:30; 10:68; 17:111; 18:4; 19:35, 88-94;

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[6] On the interconnectedness of these categories, see e.g. Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); idem, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, from Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Gabriele Boccaccini, ed., *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

[7] See further Carlos A. Segovia and Gabriele Boccaccini, eds., *Paul the Jew: Rethinking the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming in 2016).

[8] On the making of Christianity see Boyarin, *Border Lines*. On the subdivisions of "Jewish Christianity," Simon Claude Mimouni, *Le judéo-christianisme ancien. Essays historiques*, Préface par A. Caquot (Patrimoines; Paris: Cerf, 1998).

[9] A typological presentation and a tentative chronology of such formulas can be found in Segovia, "Messianic Controversy."

23:91; 39:4; 43:81; 72:3; 112). Strikingly, however, one also finds in it support for mainstream Christian beliefs – an issue which heretofore has not received due attention.[10]

Take, for instance, Q 15:28-31 and 38:71-74, where Adam seems to share not only God's spirit, but also God's likeness – since the wording of Q 15:29 and 38:72 (*fa-'iḏā . . . nafaḫtu fīhi min rrūḥī*) is reminiscent of both Genesis 2:7 *and* 1:26-7.[11] Now, the same wording is tacitly applied to Jesus (despite Mary being the character therein alluded to) in 66:12 (*fa-nafaḫnā fīhi* [sic!] *min rrūḥinā*) and probably too 21:91* (*fa-nafaḫnā fīhā* [**fīhi*?] *min rrūḥinā*).[12] One cannot but recall here Hebrews 1:6 and Philippians 2:10, which may be surmised to form, in addition to *Cave of Treasures* 2:12-13, 22-5 (Reynolds 2010: 50), the intertextual lens through which the author(s) of Q 15:28-31 and 38:71-4 had the two Genesis passages read; and suspect, therefore, that the Adam story in the Qur'ān conceals a still visible, if partly erased, Adamic Christology.[13]

Thus, albeit the Qur'ān contains a number of passages in which God is declared to be one and unique, there are several interrelated quranic passages in which Christ – notice that I am not speaking of the earthly Jesus – is implicitly understood as the true Adam and depicted in heavenly terms. But maybe this should not be deemed strange in a document whose anonymous prophet, or one of whose anonymous prophets,[14] encourages his followers to behave like Jesus's disciples, repeatedly defends Jesus against the "Jews," declares him to be the messiah and the Word of God (two titles that are never applied to other prophets like Noah, Abraham, and Moses), makes syste-

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[10] See once more Segovia, "Messianic Controversy."

[11] Cf. Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (RSQ; London and New York: Routledge. 2010), 51, who remarks that "the idea of humans as *imago Dei* is rejected by Islamic theology. Yet the Qur'ān itself hardly rejects it." He rightly points to Gen 2:7 as standing at the backstage of the quranic Adam narratives, but fails to observe their simultaneous connection to Gen 1:26-27.

[12] Hereinafter * stands for the hypothetical original wording of a given quranic passage; ** for its original content. In his brilliant analysis of the quranic Adam narratives, Reynolds, too, notices these parallels (see Reynolds, *Biblical Subtext*, 53), but does not mention the odd wording in Q 66:12, which in my view needs to be taken into account, as otherwise the implicit reference to Jesus in Q 21:91 remains somewhat tangential. Cf. moreover the possible downplaying of this tacit connection in 2:30-34 (where Adam in simply taught by God the names of his creatures) and 4:171 (where Jesus is merely declared to be a spirit from God). I am grateful to Guillaume Dye (private communication of February 12, 2015) for drawing my attention to the contrast existing between Q 2:30-34; 15:28-31; and 38:71-4.

[13] In other words, I take Heb 1:6 and Phil 2:10 to be the core thematic subtext of the Adam narratives in Q 15:28-31 and 38:71-4, Gen 1:26-7 and 2:7 to be their additional intertexts, and *Cave of Treasures* 2:12-13, 22-5 to be their immediate source. On the complexities inherent in quranic intertextuality, whose study implies going beyond the identification of the Qur'ān's eventual subtexts, see once more Reynolds 2010; see now also Carlos A. Segovia, *The Quranic Noah and the Making of the Islamic Prophet: A Study of Intertextuality and Religious Identity Making in Late Antiquity* (JCIT 4; Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2015); idem, "'Those on the Right' and 'Those on the Left': Rereading Qur'ān 56:1-56 (and the Founding Myth of Islam) in Light of Apocalypse of Abraham 21-2," *Oriens Christianus*, forthcoming n 2016; Guillaume Dye, "The Qur'ān and Its Hypertextuality in Light of Redaction Criticism," paper presented at the First Nangeroni Meeting of the Early Islamic Studies Seminar (EISS), Milan, June 15-19, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/12358270/The_Quran_and_its_Hypertextuality_in_Light_of_Redaction_Criticism.

[14] See further Segovia, *The Quranic* Noah,16-17.

matic use of a number of crucial Christian rhetorical moves, and quotes more or less verbatim the New Testament Apocrypha and the writings of several late-antique Christian authors.

Hence it is legitimate to ask whether these Christian- and/or pro-Christian notions may have entered the quranic corpus, or its *Grundschriften*, at a late stage of their textual development like, for instance, Q 19:1-63**, or else go back to Muḥammad himself.[15] If the former, an scenario northwards from the Ḥiğāz would be most likely.[16] If the latter, then we would arguably need to look either into the Ḥiğāz itself (of whose pre- and paleo-Islamic religious milieu, unfortunately, we do not know much) or else southwards from it.[17]

In the next section I will contend that mid-to-late-sixth-century South Arabia may provide us a generally overlooked clue as to the roots, in particular, of what I propose to call the elusive matrix of the Qur'ān's Christology, according to which Jesus is the messiah of God but not his son. I use here the adjective "elusive" to denote the non-straightforward conceptual premises and political implications of such formulation – which originally may have meant something different from which it came to mean after the Arab conquest of Syria-Palestine and Iraq – *versus* its habitual interpretation as an overtly anti-Christian argument.[18]

My main reason for bracketing the latter interpretation is that the denial of Jesus's divine sonship and the statement that God is childless belong in the Qur'ān to two different series of texts.[19] In my view, this typological distinction may be seen to reflect, *ex hypothesis*, an early two-fold religious-political background in which Dyophysite- and/or Dyophysite-oriented Christians for whom the earthly Jesus was God's messiah merged with a (Jewish-influenced?) monotheist community whose members claimed that God has no equal and were responsible, therefore, for the aut-

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[15] On Q 19:1-63** see Guillaume Dye, "Lieux saints communs, partagés ou confiqués: aux sources de quelques pericopes coraniques (Q 10:1-63)," in *Partage du sacré: transferts, dévotions mixtes, rivalités interconfessionnelles*, ed. Isabelle Dépret and Guillaume Dye (Brussels-Fernelmont: EME, 2012), 55-121; idem, "Hypertextuality."

[16] That is to say, Q 15:28-31 and 38:71-74 may be seen as the product of the redactional work carried out by Christian scribes eventually hired by the *mu'minūn/muhāğirūn* in the time of the Arab conquest of the Near East in order to achieve some kind of compromise between them and the Christian inhabitants of of Syria-Palestine and/or Iraq – a product that was thought of as inherently dangerous, and hence emended, by the later quranic editors.

[17] The term "Paleo-Islam" has been recently coined by Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). I do not share his views on the emergence of Islam in late antiquity; nonetheless, I find useful the term itself.

[18] See for a different use of the concept of "elusiveness" within the study of early Islamic rhetoric and identity formation, Carlos A. Segovia, "Identity Politics and Scholarship in the Study of Islamic Origins: The Inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock as a Test Case," in *Identity, Politics, and Scholarship: The Study of Islam and the Study of Religions*, ed. Matt Sheedy (Sheffield, UK, and Bristol, CT: Equinox, forthcoming in 2016).

[19] Cf. Q 2:87, 253; 3:45; 4:57, 159, 171-72; 5:17, 46, 72, 78, 110, 112, 114, 116; 7:58; 9:30-31; 17:57, 104; 18:102; 19:34; 21:26, 91, 101; 23:50; 25:17; 33:7; 39:45; 43:57, 61; 57:27; 61:6, 14; 66:12 (on which see Section 3 below) and Q 2:116; 3:59; 4:171-72; 5:72-75, 116-17; 6:101; 9:30; 10:68; 17:111; 18:4; 19:35, 88-94; 23:91; 39:4; 43:81; 72:3; 112 (which I have already mentioned at the beginning of the present section), respectively. In my view these passages reflect two different trends of thought – the only overlapping of which is Q 4:171-72; 5:72, 116; and 9:30.

horship of such texts as Q 112.[20] Also, I will try to show that such an alliance echoed in turn that seemingly reached – again *ex hypothesis* – between the Dyophysite- and/or Dyophysite-oriented Christians and the Jews of pre-Islamic Yemen (Ḥimyar) during Abraha's reign (535-570s).

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Let me start by summarising the events that took place in Ḥimyar between 525/531 and the 540s.[21]

After 525 or 531 Aksumite authority and Christianity were imposed in Ḥimyar after a *longue durée* of Himyarite political independence and Jewish religious supremacy.[22] However, the king of Aksūm did not annexed Ḥimyar. Instead, he maintained the Himyarite throne and placed on it a Himyarite prince called Sumyafa' Ašwa' (Greek Esimiphaios), who very likely was of Jewish origin but had opportunely converted to Christianity.[23]

Esimiphaios's inscriptions bear witness to the new official religion of Ḥimyar and must be regarded as the first inscriptions of this kind in pre-Islamic Yemen.[24] They contain various trinitarian and binitarian thanksgiving formulas on which the Ethiopian influence is perceptible.[25] This would change, however, within just a few years.

Around 535, Esimiphaios's army commander Abraha deposed him and assumed the throne of Ḥimyar. Apparently, Abraha brought stability to Ḥimyar[26] and extended his rule to several neighbouring regions of the Arabian peninsula including not only Saba', ḏū Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt, Ṭawd

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[20] On Q 112 and its alleged antiquity, see Manfred Kropp, "Tripartite, but Anti-Trinitarian Formulas in the Qur'ānic Corpus, Possibly Pre-Qur'ānic," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (RSQ; London and New York: Routledge. 2011), 247-64.

[21] A more detailed presentation of the argument developed in this section can be found in Carlos A. Segovia, "Abraha's Christological Formula *Rḥmnn w-Ms[1]ḥ-hw* and Its Relevance for the Study of Islam's Origins," *Oriens Christianus*, forthcoming.

[22] The exact date when this happened is unclear. See Christian Julien Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia", in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 283-84.

[23] See Iwona Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l'époque monothéiste. L'histoire de l'Arabie du Sud ancienne de la fin du IV[e] siècle de l'ère chrétienne jusqu'a l'avènement de l'Islam* (MAIBL 40; Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2009), 115.

[24] Esimiphaios's inscriptions Istanbul 7608 bis and Wellcome A 103664 can be accessed here: http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2410 and http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2459, respectively. As Iwona Gajda puts it, "pour la première fois dans l'histoire de l'Arabie du Sud, des formules religieuses chrétiennes apparaissent dans un texte officiel" (Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 115).

[25] See Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 115; Manfred Kropp, "»Im Namen Gottes, (d. i.) des gnädigen (und) B/(b)armherzigen«. Die muslimische Basmala: Neue Ansätze zu ihrer Erklärung," *Oriens Christianus* 97 (2013-14): 195.

[26] See Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," 284-88.

and Tihāma, but also Yamāma – as Manfred Kropp perspicaciously pointed to me in a private communication of July 24, 2015[27] – and Yaṯrib (i.e. the future Medina) in the Ḥiǧāz.[28] Nevertheless, he refused to act as a vassal king of Aksūm, as can be safely deduced from the rhetoric of his inscriptions, which date to the 540s and 550s.[29]

Like Esimiphaios before him Abraha had several monumental inscriptions set up.[30] Yet they denote Syrian, rather than Ethiopian, influence and hence evince to a curious shift in Abraha's linguistic and cultural policy aiming perhaps at affirming his political independence from Aksūm.[31] The most striking thing in Abraha's inscriptions, however, is the wording relative to Jesus and Jesus's relation to God – for they repeatedly refer to Jesus as "God's messiah" instead of God's son.[32]

Why did Abraha use the term *Ms¹ḥ* ("Messiah"), which is unattested elsewhere in the whole corpus of ancient South-Arabian (ASA) inscriptions, to refer to Jesus instead of using the more common *Bn* ("Son"), which is the term commonly used in both Esimiphaios's inscriptions and the Ethiopic trinitarian *basmala*-s?[33] Should one acknowledge relevance to this unprecedented choice?

Several explanations have been provided so far. Alfred Beeston suggests that Abraha might have inclined towards Dyophysitism rather than Miaphysitism to stress his independence from Aksūm.[34] In turn, Irfan Shahid contends that Abraha probably converted to the Chalcedonian faith in

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[27] For how else could *y(b)mn* and *ymnt* in CIH 541 l. 7; DAI GDN 2002-20 l. 10; and Ry 506 l. 2 be read?, he observed.

[28] Cf. Robin "Abraha et la reconquête de l'Arabie déserte: un réexamen de l'inscription Ryckmans 506 = Murayghan 1," *JSAI* 39 (2012): 1-93; idem, "Arabia and Ethiopia," 284-88; idem, "Note d'information. Soixante-dix ans avant l'islam: L'Arabie toute entière dominée par un roi chrétien," *CRAI* 2012.1 (2012): 525-53; idem, "À propos de Ymnt et Ymn : « nord » et « sud », « droite » et « gauche », dans les inscriptions de l'Arabie antique," in *Entre Carthage et l'Arabie heureuse. Mélanges offerts à François Bron*, ed. François Briquel-Chatonnet, Catherine Fauveaud, and Iwona Gajda (OM 12; Paris: De Boccard, 2013), 119-40.

[29] See Manfred Kropp, "Abrəha's Names and Titles: CIH 541,4-9 Reconsidered," *PSAS* 21 (1991): 135-45; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 119; Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," 285.

[30] In particular I would like to refer in this paper to CIH 541, AI GDN 2002-20, and Ry 506, which can be accessed here: http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=389874095&recId=2382; http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2391; http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_epi&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=800877863&recId=2447, respectively.

[31] See Alfred F. L. Beeston, "Foreign Loanwords in Sabaic," in *Arabia Felix. Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien. Festschrift Walter M. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Norbert Nebes (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. 1994), 42; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 121; Robin, "Soixante-dix ans avant l'islam," 540.

[32] Cf. CIH 541 ll. 1-3: *Rḥmnn w-Ms¹ ḥ-hw*; DAI GDN 2002-20 ll. 1-4: *Rḥmnn mr'ṣ¹myn w-Ms¹ḥ-h[w]*; Ry 506 l. 2: *Rḥmnn w-Ms¹ḥ-hw*. See also Robin, "Soixante-dix ans avant l'islam," 539-40.

[33] See Robin, "Soixante-dix ans avant l'islam," 540; Kropp, "Die muslimische Basmala," 195.

[34] Alfred F. L. Beeston, "Abraha," in vol. 1 of *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Hamilton A. R. Gibb *et al*. (Leiden: Brill, and Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1960, 2nd ed.), 105.

order to obtain support from Byzantium.[35] Iwona Gajda discusses Beeston's (and implicitly Shahid's) view(s) and proposes that Abraha's peculiar wording may simply reflect a local usage.[36] Conversely, Christian Robin highlights the apparent Jewish-Christian nature of Abraha's formula.[37]

I take Shahid's interpretation to be too far-reaching, as there is no evidence to support it – despite the fact that emphasising Jesus's humanity might have proved effective in attempting to establish friendly relations with Byzantium, one may question how the term *Ms¹ḥ* could bear witness to Abraha's eventual conversion from Miaphysitism to Chalcedonianism.[38] Gajda's "local-usage" hypothesis has no evidence to support it, either – for, as I have underlined, Abraha's formula is unattested elsewhere in the ASA corpus. In turn, Robin's interpretation overlooks the various problems alluded to in the first section of this paper. As for Beeston's suggestion, I will now offer an additional argument that may give it some support.

Invocations of Jesus in late-antique Christianity normally mention "God (the Father) and his Son Christ." Yet Dyophysites, who held that Christ was God's Son (like the Miaphysites and the Chalcedonians), are known to have emphasised (against the Miaphysites and even more than the Chalcedonians themselves) Jesus's human nature. Thus the well-known Dyophysite description of Mary as *Christotókos* (i.e. "Mother of the Messiah") rather than *Theotókos* ("Mother of God"). Let me be clear: the formula "God and his Messiah" has no scriptural basis[39] and is not attested in the corpus of late-antique Dyophysite literature; but it implicitly fits within the Dyophysite mindset.[40]

Now, we know that Dyophysite Christians lived in Ḥimyar albeit Ḥimyar was confessionally linked to Ethiopian Miaphysitism after 525/531.[41] Hence in my view it is reasonable to ask – as Beeston does – whether Abraha tried to distance himself from Aksūm by endorsing a Dyophysite-oriented Christology.

But it could also be that Abraha – who obviously was and presented himself as a Christian king – tried to avoid any sharp provocation against the Jews of Ḥimyar, a land that for several cen-

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[35] Irfan Shahid, "Byzantium in South Arabia," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979): 31.

[36] Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 122.

[37] Robin, "Soixante-dix ans avant l'islam," 540.

[38] See. C. Jonn Block, *The Qur'ān in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations* (RSQ; London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

[39] I am grateful to Antonio Piñero (private communication of July 19, 2015) for checking the whole New Testament corpus so as to determine if there is a single scriptural passage that may be adduced against this view – the result being negative.

[40] Cf. too Arius's salutation to Eusebius of Nicomedia "on account of God and his Messiah," which shows that Arians (and possibly Anomoeans later on, whose presence in fourth-century South Arabia is documented in the work of Philostorgius) shared a similar caution against the assimilation of God and Jesus, notwithstanding the Christological differences between Arianism/Anomoeanism and Dyophysitism.

[41] See Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," 282-83.

turies had witnessed to an ongoing religious conflict (indirectly promoted by Byzantium and Persia) between Christians and Jews and that he attempted to rule in his own way.[42] Had Abraha intended not to offend his Jewish subjects, he could have done so by evoking God alone (instead of God plus his Messiah = Jesus); indeed, *Raḥmānān* was (also) the south-Arabian Jewish name for God. Anyway, referring to Jesus as the Messiah would be less provoking for them than describing him as God's divine Son.

In fact, these two hypotheses need not contradict themselves, as in antiquity Dyophysites and Jews did not collide as often as Miaphysites and Jews did. A survey of the anti-Jewish literature of late-antique Christianity further shows that not even a single extant anti-Jewish text can be attributed to the Dyophysites.[43]

Whatever Abraha's agenda, his Christological formula evinces that South-Arabian Christians in the sixth century (even mainstream Christians!) were not totally unfamiliar with the representation of Jesus as the Messiah instead of God's son – a feature that we also find in the Qur'ān from the viewpoint of the Jesus himself, who is repeatedly called there "the Messiah, son of Mary" instead of "son of God".[44] And it is at least curious in this respect to notice the positive references to the religion of the Arab conquerors in several Dyophysite writings of the seventh century, including

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[42] This hypothesis was suggested to me by Guillaume Dye in a private communication of July 13, 2015. On Ḥimyar, Ethiopia, Byzantium, and Persia between the fourth and the 7seventh centuries, see Glen W. Bowersock, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press and Historical Society of Israel, 2012); idem, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[43] See further Adam H. Becker, "Beyond the Spatial and Temporal *Limes*: Questioning the 'Parting of the Ways' Outside the Roman Empire," in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam H. Becker (TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 387.

[44] See Q 2:87, 253; 3:45; 4:57, 159, 171-72; 5:17, 46, 72, 78, 110, 112, 114, 116; 7:58; 9:30-31; 17:57, 104; 18:102; 19:34; 21:26, 91, 101; 23:50; 25:17; 33:7; 39:45; 43:57, 61; 57:27; 61:6, 14; 66:12. The fact that Abraha's formula ("*Raḥmānān* and his Messiah") is paralleled in the quranic corpus has not escaped Robin's attention (see Robin, "Soixante-dix ans avant l'islam," 540). See also Irfan Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD," in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, and David Thomas (Leiden and Boston: Brill. 2006), 20-21, who, albeit he adduces no evidence thereof, interprets the quranic phrase "Jesus son of Mary" as a Dyophysite expression circulating in Mecca in Muḥammad's lifetime.

Išō'yahb III's letters (48B.97; 14C.251), the Khuzistan Chronicle (34), and John bar Penkāyē's *Book of Main Points* (141).[45]

Thus unless we represent Muḥammad himself as a non-Christian monotheist – but why should we? – it is fair to ask whether his religious views were somehow influenced by Abraha's, and thereby to what extent emergent Islam must be studied against the background of sixth-century South-Arabian Christianity.[46]

To put it in more forceful terms: Did Muḥammad, in his ambition to conquer the Arabian peninsula after the disappearance of the Himyarite, Jafnid, Nasrid, and Hujrid Arab kingdoms (Segovia 2016c), try – like Abraha had tried earlier with the Jews – to reach an agreement with either

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[45] See Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland, CA: California University Press, 2015), 33, 36, 50, 88-89. If compared to Dyophysite Christology, the Qur'ān's Christology operates on a different level, for it does not address the question of the relationship between Christ's divinity and his humanity, i.e. between Christ's divine and human hypostases, as Guillaume Dye insightfully pointed to me in a private communication of August 12, 2015. Nonetheless, it reflects its premises in so far as it takes the earthly Jesus to be a man and labels him the Messiah, son of Mary, instead of son of God. It must also be mentioned that the Dyophysites developed a "theology of the indwelling Logos. Colossians 2:9 [REB: 'For it is in Christ that the Godhead in all its fullness dwells embodied'] was paraphrased to mean: 'In him the Logos dwells perfectly.' The man whom the Logos had assumed as his temple and dwelling was the Second Adam, made sinless by the grace of God. It was this assumed man, and not the indwelling Logos, who had been crucified" (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 600-17*, vol. 2 of idem, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 41); cf. the reference to Jesus's death in Q 4:153-59, which may be read in this way *contra* its traditional interpretation in Islam (cf. Neal Robinson, "Jesus," in vol. 3 of *Encycopledia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Damen McAuliffe [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003], 17-20; Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *BSOAS* 72.2 (2009): 237-58). Also, in contrast to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, the Dyophysites saw Jesus more as a teacher and example, so that Christ-believers could effectively imitate the pattern that the man assumed by the Logos had set (Pelikan, *Eastern Christendom*, 46); otherwise, they argued, humanity would be deprived of the hope of salvation. Yet, normally, the Dyophysites gave the name Christ to the person of the union of both hypostases, the human and the divine, rather than to Jesus the human teacher alone; this, in turn, raised among their opponents the objection that they endorsed the view of a double sonship, one divine and the other human (Pelikan, *Eastern Christendom*, 48). It was only with Babai the Great (c. 551-628) that an effort was made on the part of the Dyophysites both to solve this and other related ambiguities (Pelikan, *Eastern Christendom*, 42-43) and to counter the threat of a growing Miaphysite influence in Nisibis between 571 and 610, which must in turn be seen as one of the reasons that led Ḫusraw II to temporarily suppress the catholicate in 609 (see Gerrit J. Reinink "Tradition and the Formation of the 'Nestorian' Identity in Sixth- to Seventh-Century Iraq," in *Religious Origins of Nations? The Christian Communities of the Middle East*, ed. Bas ter Haar Romeny [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010], 217-50; Geoffrey Greatrex, "Khusro II and the Christians of His Empire," *JCSSS* 3 [2003]: 78-88). Thus it is fair to ask what knowledge of such problems and conflicts might certain peripheral groups more or less inclined towards Diophysitism have had around that time, and if any of such groups might have eventually striven to upheld an even more radical distinction between Christ's divinity and humanity by stressing Jesus's exclusively human condition. The possibility that the Qur'ān reflects their hypothetical views cannot be excluded, either. On the eventual connections between Dyophysites and Unitarian Christians (i.e. Christians who refused to see Jesus as anything else than a man and thus reserved the title "God" for the Father alone) in the late-6th- to mid-7th century Arabian peninsula and Iraq, see further Philip Wood, "Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula," paper presented at the First Nangeroni Meeting of the Early Islamic Studies Seminar (EISS), Milan, June 15-19, 2015, whose references to the *Acta Arethae*, Išō'yahb I, and Thomas of Marga are particularly helpful in this respect. I am also grateful to Peter von Sivers for drawing my attention to the relevance of the early 600s in the making of a Dyophysite orthodoxy).

[46] On Muḥammad's plausible Christian background see Segovia, "Messianic Controversy," as well as the cross-references to Muḥammad's and Musaylima's Qur'ān-s, the Old Syriac version of the Gospels, and the New Testament parable of the mustard seed provided in Segovia, "Abraha's Christological Formula," *in fine*. See also Jan M. F. van Reeth, "Ville céleste, ville sainte, ville idéal dans la tradition musulmane," *Acta Orientalia Belgica* 24 (2011): 121-31.

the Jews or a group of (Jewish-influenced?) monotheists (the Q 112 community),[47] or with both, or with the Jews first and then with that monotheist group, or with such group first and foremost and then occasionally with some Jews until the Jews themselves were excluded from his- or his followers' movement? – note that the recurrent Christian- or Christian-influenced anti-Jewish passages of the Qur'ān may either imply this latter possibility or the fact that the Jews were, together with the pagans, Muḥammad's opponents right from the start.[48] Be that as it may, in my view these questions can no longer be avoided.

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To sum up: I am not affirming that sixth-century South-Arabian Christianity is is *the* key to deciphering the origins of Islam. I am simply suggesting that it should be taken into consideration as a relevant, if hitherto often neglected, factor that may help to explain both the emergence of Islam and its South-Arabian component.[49] And that, if Abraha's Christological formula is susceptible of being interpreted as a *Konvergenztext* attempting to unify the Christians and the Jews of pre-Islamic Yemen under the label of an inclusive, Dyophysite-oriented political theology, and Muḥammad's mission, in turn, as an adaptation under different circumstances of Abraha's political agenda, then the interactions between the Jews and the Christians of Ḥimyar may be said to be of especial, if indirect, importance to understand the elusive Christology of the Qur'ān.[50]

In short, we do not need to fancy a "Jewish-Christian" influence on emergent Islam to explain its plausible Jewish–Christian roots. Yet denying such influence is not the same as to say that Jewish and Christian components were attached to formative Islam merely because Muḥammad and his community, or their followers, lived within a religious milieu full of Jews and Christians to whose cultural influence they were exposed. If, as almost everyone would agree today, some kind of *Realpolitik* towards the Jews and the Christians was often fostered by the Arab conquerors of al-

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[47] See section 2 above.

[48] See further Segovia, "Messianic Controversy." Overall this hypothesis – which lacking further information must remain tentative – contrasts with Fred Donner's recent description of the early Muhammadan community as an inclusive monotheistic confederacy (see Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010]) in the sense that, if a confederacy leaded by Muḥammad did exist, in my view it must have been pragmatical- rather than ecumenical-oriented (cf. Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Les fondations de l'islam. Entre écriture et histoire* [Paris: Seuil, 2002], 85-105), and Muḥammad either a Jewish-influenced monotheist or, perhaps more likely, a Christian himself, as I have elsewhere suggested (Segovia, "Messianic Controversy").

[49] See further Jan Retsö, "The Contradictory Revelation: A Reading of Sura 27:16-44 and 34:15-21," in *Micro-Level Analyses of the Qur'an*, ed. Hakan Rydving (AUUHR 34; Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2014), 95-103.

[50] I take the notion of *Konvergenztext* from Frank van der Velden "Die Felsendominschrift als Ende einer christologischen Konvergenztextökumene im Koran," *Oriens Christianus* 95 (2011): 213-46, who employs it in a different context (namely, the study of the Dome of the Rock inscriptions).

Šām, albeit due to diverging motivations and with uneven results each time, some kind of *Realpolitik* involving Christians, Jews, and perhaps other groups as well might have also been at stake in Muḥammad's lifetime – and it might have had Himyarite precedents.

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