Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula.

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Several papers delivered at this workshop contend that different suras in multiple "Qur'anic communities" were composed in Christian contexts.

Carlos Segovia argues for the existence of four attitudes to Christianity in the Qur'ān. He proposes that the "unclear dissemination of vague identity markers against a background of common ideas and practices" gradually gave way to more firm boundaries between religious communities. For him, this explains the composition of sections of the Qur'ān that identify with Christianity *from the inside*, even as other references pursue a kind of unitarian theology that denies the divinity of Jesus.[1]

Guillaume Dye also argues for the later adaptation of Christian material. He persuasively points to the alteration of the rhyme scheme of sura 19 and the insertion of anti-Christian material into a text that is "definitely not anti-Christian." He states that this material originated in the liturgy and popular Christian traditions. He goes on to suggest that the specific context for this "Arabic *soghitha*" can be found in the Kathisma church near Jerusalem. He situates the composer of the original text in a multi-lingual milieu, where Greek, Aramaic, and Arabic were all used, and underscores the text's broad Christology, which does not alienate any Christian group.[2]

Finally, Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann has highlighted the use of Christian honorific titles for Jesus (Q 4:171; 19:30; 19:34) and the close relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the Virgin, which is not seen for any other prophet. He proposes that this originated with an educated Christian who "converted" into the Qur'anic

[1] Segovia develops these ideas further in *The Quranic Jesus*. At p. 26 he notes the many ways in which the Qur'an describes Jesus, many of which are compatible with a Trinitarian theology if taken individually.
[2] Dye, "The Qur'anic Mary and the Chronology of the Qur'ān."

community.[3] Furthermore, he suggests that we should imagine that different parts of the Qur'ān were composed in different milieus, and that these parts were then combined in a single text. He also points to the multiple treatments of Iblīs (Q 2, Q 7, and Q 20) as a parallel to the various creation stories at the opening of Genesis.

All of these approaches aim to place the Qur'ān, "a profoundly ahistorical text," into history by attempting to reconstruct the kinds of communities that generated different suras.[4] They also attempt to undermine the idea that boundaries between religious communities and their ideas are "natural." Just as students of the Jesus cult emphasized that it must be seen as a movement within Judaism that incorporated Gentiles, so too we must stress that the Qur'ān was composed within the milieus of late antique monotheisms.[5]

The three approaches also share the idea that the Qur'ān is layered. Thus Dye identifies an original Christian background in Q 19, with subsequent interventions, while Segovia uses attitudes to Christian lore as the basis for his fourfold dating of the Qur'ān as a whole. Of course, there have been numerous attempts to divide the Qur'ān into different layers of composition,[6] and the shift in attitude toward the Jews has long been recognized, but Pohlmann, Dye, and Segovia identify the layers of composition that either originate *within* Christian communities or show a high level of familiarity with Christian texts. In this sense they share the approaches of Lüling and Luxenberg, though they do not share their normative aspirations for the 'reformation' of modern Islam.[7]

Dye and Segovia explain the layering effect by suggesting that parts of the Qur'ān were composed after the Arab conquests of Syria and the Levant.[8] But another possibility, which does not exclude the first,[9] is that the layered effect of the Qur'ān pre-

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[3] Pohlmann, "Conversion from Jewish and Christian Milieus to Islam"; Pohlmann, *Die Entstehung des Korans*.

[4] Quotation from Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, p. 80.

[5] Cf. Shoemaker (*The Death of a Prophet*), who focuses on the "hybridity" of (late antique) identities. In a sense, Donner (*Muhammad and the Believers*) attempts to deal with this hybridity by imagining Muḥammad as the leader of a highly ecumenical eschatological movement.

[6] Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans* (followed by Neuwirth, *Der Koran*); Chabbi, *Le seigneur des tribus*; Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qur'ān."

[7] Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*; Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*. Note the sympathetic summary of Lüling's career in Donner, "Günter Lüling".

[8] Dye, "The Qur'anic Mary". Cf. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu*, pp. 18–22; de Prémare, "Abd al-Malik bin Marwan and the process of the Qur'ān's composition"; Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 225.

[9] Dye, "The Qur'anic Mary," p. 19.

dates the Arab conquests and is the product of an act of compilation, as well as composition. Lüling, for instance, argues that Muḥammad compiled earlier Christian material, which he supplemented, after which post-Muḥammadan Islamic material was added as well.[10] This earlier material might have been composed simultaneously by different "proto-Qur'anic communities." Gilliot suggests that the accusations that Muḥammad relied on foreign informants imply a recent importation of Biblical lore into the Ḥijāz, and one could imagine that the proto-Qur'anic communities were the source of this novel material.[11]

This paper intends to examine the possibilities for the second of these reconstructions. If we seek to situate the emergence of Christian Qur'anic communities, or at least the transmission of "Christian lore," to what extent might this have been possible in sixth-century Arabia? In her polemical rejection of earlier economic explanations for the rise of Islam, Patricia Crone placed explanatory weight on what she termed a "nativist reaction," one in which the cultural systems of the Fertile Crescent were appropriated and re-used by the Arabs.[12] Though she subsequently re-instated the role of an economic driver in the "rise of Muḥammad,"[13] it is still worth considering exposure to the cultural systems of the Fertile Crescent and how this may have contributed to the sectarian milieu of Arabia itself.

I argue that three factors should increase the plausibility (though not provability) of greater Christian exposure to the Arabian Peninsula, namely the increased role of the Arab clients of the Romans and Persians; the missionary expansion of the Miaphysites in the borderlands between the empires, and the growth of Christian influence within Sasanian Mesopotamia. I begin by comparing the cultural production of the Jafnid and Naṣrid kings, the major Arab clients of the Romans and Persians, before examining the possible role their patronage may have had on the dissemination and prestige of the Arabic language and on the composition of the kinds of Christian-

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[10] Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*. Further comments in Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, p. 10.

[11] Gilliot, "On the Origin of the Informants of the Prophet." He comments on Q 16:103: "We know as well that people say a person is teaching him. The tongue is foreign but it is a pure Arabian tongue." Also note Gilliot, "Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qur'ān" and van Reeth, "Les prophéties oraculaires dans le Coran," esp. pp. 79 and 93–4. Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, pp. 312–14 discusses a related situation in the Qur'anic discussion of the terms al-Raḥmān and Allāh, which may reflect an attempt to unify different religious schema (one foreign and one indigenous) in Muḥammad's Medina.

[12] Crone, *The Meccan Trade*, p. 247. I find her comparisons to nineteenth-century Pacific examples compelling.

[13] Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army."

inclined material that have been posited by Dye, Segovia, and Pohlmann. I conclude by postulating that the different kinds of intra-Christian Qur'anic material that they identify may have developed in different Christian contexts.[14]

The Roman Frontier

The Roman empire had long used Christianity as a political tool. Conversion to Christianity seems to have been a requirement for many of its client kings, on all of its frontiers.[15] The *Life of Symeon the Stylite* famously reports that al-Nu'mān, the Naṣrid king of Ḥīra, prevented his Christian subjects from visiting the famous saint until he received an angelic vision.[16] We could read this story as an indication of the lure of Rome to Christians beyond the frontier, but we could also remark that the close connection between political allegiance and religion may have impeded the spread of the religion, especially in an environment like the Arabian Peninsula, which was contested by rival powers.

Instead, it was *within* the Roman empire, rather than through far-flung missions, that Arabs likely came into contact with Christian institutions and symbols. Great power warfare in the sixth century stimulated the employment or subsidy of Arabs: we get a sense of the greater prominence of the Jafnids in the Greco-Roman sources of the sixth century.[17] Indeed, the availability of these subsidies, and the prestige and booty available from the wars between Rome and Persia, may have stimulated the northward migration of tribes from the south of the peninsula that is reported in Muslim sources.[18]

Comparative studies emphasize that nomadic peoples rely on contact with settled populations to sell their goods (whether booty or animal products) and buy the agricultural products and arms of the settled world.[19] Patricia Crone has emphasized how great power conflict stimulated a trade in leather goods that might feasibly have brought Arabs into Roman administrative centers and army bases such as Boṣrā.[20] The

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[14] Classic treatments of Christianity among the Arabs include Nau, *Les Arabes chrétiens*; Charles, *Le Christianisme des Arabes nomades*; Andrae, *Les Origins de l'islam et le christianisme*; Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*; Shahid, B*yzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*; Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam*; and now Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity."

[15] Heather, "The Crossing of the Danube and the Gothic Conversion"; Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, pp. 464–65; Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 40-45.

[16] Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," pp. 299-300.

[17] Fisher, *Between Empires*; Fisher, "Mavia to al-Mundhir".

[18] Hoyland, "Arab Kings, Arab Tribes," pp. 387–90; Fisher, *Between Empires*, p. 7.

[19] Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*.

[20] Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army."

archaeologist Bert de Vries has suggested that the wealth of a site like Umm al-Jimāl (which had neither rich agriculture nor administrative prominence) might be explained in part by a trade in mounts, possibly used for travel and war.[21]

The contact between Arabs and the "fixed points" of the Roman frontier resulted in the exposure of visitors to churches and pilgrimage sites.[22] This would have certainly been the case at Boṣrā, which hosted a large church dedicated to the rider saint Sergius, who enjoyed popularity among the Arabs.[23] Similarly, Umm al-Jimāl's wealth was expressed in some fifteen churches. This was surely more than was required by the resident population, thus these monuments may have been intended for display to outside visitors.

Outside the cities, the role of the Jafnid kings as sponsors of churches has rightly been emphasized.[24] And though their role as monastic founders is less certain, they do seem to have been respected leaders within the Miaphysite movement, and this allowed them to arbitrate between rival factions (the Paulites and the Jacobites) in the 570s.[25] The famous pilgrimage site of Ruṣāfa was also patronized by the Jafnid king al-Mundhir, through the construction of a small church (c. 580).[26]

The Jafnids acted as patrons in the mold of Roman Christian aristocrats and received high honors from Miaphysite writers such as John of Ephesus.[27] Their models of patronage of Christian sites were adopted by other lesser Arab leaders too.[28] Church-building was part of the Roman elite display that might have been readily exported to "barbarian" elites, who acquired a means of constructing "fixed points" for nomadic

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[21] De Vries, "Umm el-Jimal I," pp. 238–39 and Sartre, *Bostra,* pp. 129–32. De Vries in particular notes the large number of corrals in the town, which implies a trade in horses and camels as mounts. Also see www.ummeljimal.org/en/library.html.

[22] Cf. Fowden, "Rural Converters among the Arabs," pp. 178–82, building on Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain.*

[23] Sartre, *Bostra*; Foss, "Syria in Transition, AD 550–750." We find clear examples of the link between Sergius and the Arabs at the site of Tell al-'Umayrī (Fisher, *Arabs and Empires Before Islam*, p. 333); Zabad (Fisher, *Arabs and Empires Before Islam*, p. 348) and Ruṣāfa (Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain*).

[24] Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," p. 320 for foundations at Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi and "the church of Mundhir." Inscriptions call the Jafnids by their Roman honorifics and use their reigns as dating formulae.

[25] Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," pp. 323–25, esp. John of Ephesus HE III. 4. 36–40.

[26] Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," pp. 331–32; Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain*.

[27] Wood, "Christianity and the Arabs in the Sixth Century," p. 363 and idem, *We Have No King but Christ*, ch. 7. Book IV of John's history presents al-Mundhir in terms normally reserved for a Roman emperor, as an orthodox unifier of the churches.

[28] Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," p. 350 suggest that Sharaḥīl's Harran inscription (568) could be an example of direct imitation of Jafnid precedent.

followers and a form of public giving that did not require the redistribution of wealth to followers.[29] Furthermore, this meant that church infrastructure could be built well beyond urban centers; this was true of Ahudemmeh's missions in the Jazīra that established a "bishopric of the Arab tribes."[30]

But the Jafnid example primarily serves to illustrate that Christianity became an important part of the self-fashioning of the Arab elite in the Levant and the Jazira: it does not follow that the institutions they sponsored or models of elite behavior they generated found fertile ground in the Ḥijāz. John of Ephesus does refer to al-Ḥārithʾs involvement in the appointment of two Miaphysite bishops, Jacob Baradeus and Theodore. The latter is described as bishop of "Hirta de Tayyaye" (the camp of the Saracens).[31] He is said to have exercised authority in the "southern and [eastern] countries and in the whole of the desert and in Arabia and Palestine."[32] But we do not hear much of Theodore's endeavors from John, and, given John's interest in missionary work, I would emphasize the fact that he does not credit Theodore with work beyond the southern frontier. It is likely, therefore, that "Arabia" referred to the hinterland of Boṣrā, that is the Roman province of Arabia.[33]

The Persian Frontier

Roman Syria is relatively well-known. It has been subjected to intensive archeological investigation and is illuminated by sources in Greek and Syriac. Sasanian Iraq, by contrast, is relatively poorly served: much of the information on the Naṣrid capital of Ḥīra comes from West Syrian observers or from the later (Christian and Muslim) Arabic tradition.[34] Nevertheless, if we read such material against the grain, there are indications that Ḥīra was a much more significant missionary center for Arabia than any site in Roman Syria.

Firstly, and most importantly, the synodical record shows that Ḥīra was an important center for the Church of the East. It was a see from at least 410, and a synod

[29] Wood, "Christianity and the Arabs in the Sixth Century," p. 366, commenting on the *Life of Ahudemmeh*. Also see Fowden, "Rural Converters among the Arabs."

[30] Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," p. 355 with further references.

[31] PO 19, 154. PO 19: 238 describes Theodore as bishop in Bostra, but Honigmann, *Evêques*, pp. 163-64 argues that this was only a titular see and identifies Ḥirtā as the Jafnid "capital" of Jābiya.

[32] PO 19. Brooks corrects "western" to "eastern" as a slip of the pen.

[33] PO 19: 238. For the ecclesiastical province see Hoyland "Late Roman Provincia Arabia" and Millar, "Christian Monasticism in Roman Arabia," who discusses Nöldeke's original hypothesis.

[34] Cf. general comments in Hunter, "The Christian Matrix of al-Ḥīra."

was probably held near Ḥīra in 424.[35] It was also the site of a Christian school, built on the model of the famous schools of Edessa and Nisibis.[36] At several points in the late sixth century it was even a burial place for the catholicoi of the Church of the East, in competition with Nisibis and Ctesiphon.[37] There are probably too many claims to the relics of the catholicoi to be credible to modern historians, but these claims are still noteworthy, since they show that Ḥīra was able to make its impact felt in the historical record of the Church of the East as a whole. And this in turn implies the existence of a population of scholars and clerics who could write in Syriac on its behalf.

Syriac was only one of three different literate traditions that were pursued in the city.[38] At the same time, some Ḥīrans were also involved in the administrative structures of the Sasanian empire. The poet ʻAdī b. Zayd is said to have written in Middle Persian and used his contacts in Ctesiphon to arrange the election of al-Nuʻmān III as king of Ḥīra.[39]

Finally, Ḥīra has a significant reputation as a center for Arabic poetry, including the so-called "hanging poems" (*muʻallaqāt*) that were said to have been composed in Arabic before Islam.[40] They do not simply eulogize the Ḥīran kings, the poets often deride them for their reliance upon members of other tribes (or upon the Persians) to coerce their vassals into obedience. One poet even boasts of seducing al-Nuʻmān's daughter.[41] Nevertheless, the jealousies expressed here place Ḥīra at the center of pre-Islamic Arabic culture, at least as it was preserved by later Muslims.

I have argued elsewhere that later Muslim and Christian Arabic material on Ḥīra suggests that the reign of al-Nuʻmān III also saw the production of a Naṣrid history that celebrated Naṣrid rule as a permanent and natural feature of the political landscape.[42] The ability of so many later authors to reproduce a very similar list of Ḥīran kings, and several shared anecdotes of the Ḥīran kings, suggests that this material was widely disseminated and that it was likely in Arabic.[43] The histories of Ḥīra were the only

[35] Chabot, ed. and trans., *Synodicon Orientale*, pp. 35, 43.
[36] Becker, *The Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom.*
[37] Fiey, *Pour un oriens christianus novus,* s.v. Ḥīra.
[38] Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*.
[39] Eadem, "Late Antique Iran and the Arabs," pp. 120–21.
[40] Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 155–56.
[41] Munt, "Arabic and Persian Sources for Pre-Islamic Arabia," pp. 481–82; Miller, "Tribal Poetics", pp. 78 and 82-3.
[42] Wood, "Ḥīra and her Histories."
[43] Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*, appendix 2.

Arabian histories said to have been recited at Mecca during the *jāhilīya* period, alongside those of the Persians and Romans.[44]

However, the reports that state that Hishām b. al-Kalbī was able to research his books on Ḥīra in the city's churches and monasteries suggest that Christian institutions had an important role in preserving and nurturing Arabic cultural production, as well as Syriac.[45] Such institutions were not only sponsored by the kings themselves, but also by different groups among the ʿIbād, who may have sought to ensure that their own claims to prominence as early converts to Christianity were recognized through their sponsorship of history.[46]

Thus Ḥīra was a meeting point for Syriac, Persian, and Arabic. It also hosted a fragile monarchy that needed to persuade Persian shahs, local (Christian) elites, and the tribes of the interior of its right and ability to rule, over and above other potential candidates. I suggest that this friction produced "heat" in the form of cultural production, namely the sponsorship of history and poetry. After his conversion to Christianity, the last Naṣrid king, al-Nuʿmān III, used this sponsorship to emphasize a firm and ancient connection between the Naṣrids and the Sasanians and to invent the conversion of earlier Naṣrids such as al-Nuʿmān I.[47] At the same time, the sponsorship of poetry at Ḥīra may have been intended for a different audience: the Naṣrids sought to emphasize their "Arabness" by appealing to shared values of courage, and the protection of the needy.[48] Nathaniel Miller has recently observed that this poetry was intended to showcase the Nasrids' possession of prestige objects gained through their service to the Persian kings, through poems that celebrated wine-drinking, women, weaponry, fast horses and the generosity of the Nasrids to their own Arab clients. Their goal was not to identify with foreign customs, but to 'skillfully mediate between Arabian nomadic values and foreign sedentary customs'.[49] Certainly, this sponsorship

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[44] Omidsalar, *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic,* p. 42.

[45] Horovitz, "'Adi ibn Zeyd."

[46] Wood, "Ḥīra and her Histories" discusses a possible example from the *Haddad Chronicle*.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Hoyland, "Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity," p. 237; Knauf, "Arabo-Aramaic and 'Arabiyya.'"

[49] Miller, "Warrior elites on the verge of Islam", esp. pp. 153-4. Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, has dismissed the role of the Jafnids and Nasrids to generating any pre-Islamic 'Arab' identity. While I think he is correct that the Marwanid and Abbasid period both saw substantial reshaping of what it meant to be an Arab, I think that some of the raw material for an eighth century Arab identity had already been formed in the sixth century as I argued in my review of Webb's monograph. Also note R. Hoyland's response to Webb in "Reflections on the Identities of the Arabian Conquerors".

of poetry seems to underlie the later significance of the kings of Ḥīra in the Muslim Arabic memory of the past.[50]

The Client Kings and the Emergence of Arabic

The Qur'ān repeatedly states that it is "an Arabic Qur'ān" and that it is inimitable.[51] These concepts rest on the comprehensibility of Arabic across a wide area and based on shared aesthetic norms. Though the Qur'ān plays an enormous role in shaping Arab identity, we must also recognize that it develops earlier manifestations of "Arabness", among them an Arabic script and a register of Arabic that was widely comprehensible, in an environment where multiple North Arabian languages had once been spoken.[52]

Recent work by Leila Nehmé at Madā'in Ṣāliḥ (Ḥegrā) (in the northern Ḥijāz at the edge of Roman control) confirms the emergence of Arabic script from the Nabatean script.[53] This script had long been used in the Nabatean kingdom to record legal matters for communities that spoke Arabic. Michael MacDonald further notes that the cursive character of this script implies that it was used in administrative contexts, thus we need not necessarily imagine the existence of written literary Arabic to explain this development in the script.[54]

Robert Hoyland has further observed that the zones on the periphery of the Roman world where third-century Nabatean inscriptions were found correspond to the same areas where the earliest sixth-century Arabic inscriptions have been discovered: that is the Ḥawrān, the Negev, and the region between Petra and Madā' in Ṣāliḥ.[55] He notes that these areas were also controlled by the Jafnid kings, who may have encouraged the use of Arabic as part of their promotion of a shared Arab identity on the

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[50] Athamina, "The Tribal Kings in Pre-Islamic Arabia."

[51] Though note the skeptical position of Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, p.115 and pp. 118-20 who argues against the idea that *'arabi* is the name of a specific language or people in the seventh century.

[52] Wood, *We Have No King But Christ*, p. 243. Note, however, that subsequent editing may have reduced the dialectal variation within the extant corpus of pre-Islamic poetry: Van Putten, "Status quaestionis". Miller, "Tribal poetics", pp. 307 and 402 notes the existence of regional variations within the pre-Islamic poetry.

[53] Nehmé, "A Glimpse of the Development of the Nabatean Script into Arabic" and Nehmé, "Between Nabatean and Arabic: 'Transitional Nabatean-Arabic Texts,'" pp. 417–21. Stein, "Literacy in Pre-Islamic Arabia," p. 258, distinguishes Hegra from the "Arabian cultural area" but I think this is unnecessary and unhelpful.

[54] MacDonald, "Decline of the 'Epigraphic Habit,'" pp. 19–22. Cf. MacDonald, "Reflections on the Linguistic Map of Arabia," pp. 59–60.

[55] Hoyland, "Mt Nebo, Jabal Ramm, and the Status of Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Old Arabic in Late Roman Palestine and Arabia," p. 35; idem, "Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity."

part of the members of their confederation. This is plausible given that the Jafnids had a familiarity with written administration (we see them acting as arbitrators in property disputes at Petra, for instance),[56] and because the spread of Christianity among tribes entering Roman service may have been accompanied by the spread of literacy. There is no attested pre-Islamic Arabic Gospel or liturgy, and the post-Islamic translations do not seem to rely on earlier precedent. Indeed, when translations do appear they employ Qur'anic language.[57] But we can still envisage a situation in which Christian texts were read in Syriac and then translated aloud; this might have made the idea of a written lectionary more widely known, and made writing itself seem more prestigious.

Though the Old Arabic inscriptions and the papyri from Petra dominate our impression of the writing of Arabic in the sixth century, I also note that Muslim Arabic sources stress Ḥīra as a site of the genesis of Arabic writing.[58] The Ḥīran kings had been established longer than their equivalents in the Roman world, and Ḥīra was a center of cultural production (in Syriac and in Arabic) and institutional foundations in a way that does not have known parallels in "Jafnid" southern Syria. We do not have take the Muslim Arabic accounts to be literally true, but I would still underscore Ḥīra's importance as a prime site of "intercultural transmission" and as a foundation of scholarly institutions.[59]

In the light of the hypotheses of Dye, Segovia, and Pohlmann, there is a further significance to the overlap of Syriac and Arabic, namely that these are possible locations for the creation of intra-Christian sections of the Qur'ān. Two major contributions to the Qur'ān from Syriac are highlighted in the literature, namely the use of Syriac loanwords (which far exceed those from other languages)[60] and the use of Syriac punctuation to mark line endings in the earliest Qur'ān manuscripts.[61] And numerous scholars have noted religious ideas and imagery that are shared by West and East Syrian Christianity and the Qur'ān.[62] It follows that the same zone of bicultural interaction that innovated

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[56] E.g., Kaimio, "Petra inv. 83: A Settlement of Dispute."

[57] Volandt, *Arabic Versions of the Pentateuch*, p. 42.

[58] al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān*, pp. 471–73; Ṭab, I, 2061. In general Van Reeth, "Les prophéties oraculaires," pp. 100–03; Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script*, pp. 4–5.

[59] Cf. Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra.*

[60] Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*; Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*.

[61] Neukirchen, "Eschatology, responsories and rubrics."

[62] E.g., Dye, "Réflexions méthodologiques sur la "rhétorique coranique,'" p. 160 for the affinities between the *Testamentum Domini* and Q 23:1–11; Andrae, *Les Origines de l'Islam et le christianisme*, pp. 67–161 for Christian monastic sources to Qur'anic eschatology and images of paradise (esp. Ephraem) and 196–97 on the idea of sleepless prayer; Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an," p. 115 for the use of an

use of Arabic in prestige contexts or disseminated Arabic poetry may have also produced proto-Qur'anic material from within a Christian milieu, or a milieu exposed to Christian narratives and ideas.

In the following sections, I attempt to summarize some of the most salient evidence for Christian missionary activity in the peninsula. In particular, I highlight the possible political and social contexts in which Christian proto-Qur'anic material might have been produced.

Jacobite Missions into Arabia

Contemporary written evidence of Christian activity in the Arabian Peninsula is mainly in Syriac and written from a Jacobite (Miaphysite) perspective. John of Ephesus devoted one chapter of his hagiographic collection, the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (c. 568), to the Persian missionary Simeon beth Arsham.[63] Simeon had been active beyond the eastern frontier of the Roman empire in the previous generation, and he was famous for his involvement in debates against the Dyophysites of the Church of the East at the court of the Persian shah, Khusrō Anushirwān: "he even caused the Magians to laugh at them [the Dyophysites], since he would set up the Magians themselves as judges."[64] The narrative imagines the East as a haven for ancient heresies, such as Marcionism, Manichaeism, and Bardaisanism. This is certainly an attempt to blacken the Church of the East by geographical association, but it may also reflect an environment that was genuinely less "policed" in terms of religious orthodoxy than the Roman empire, and this impression may be true for the whole of Simeon's missionary zone.

Though the text is focused on his deeds in Ctesiphon, Simeon was also active in Ḥīra, and used it as a base to enter Sasanian Iraq.[65]

> He used to go among the [different] lands even up to Hirta of the Saracens of the

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Arabic calque on the Syriac terms for the Trinity and p. 121 for the harmonization of various West Syrian stories on the seven sleepers in Q 18:9–26; Grypeou, "A Table from Heaven" for the relationship between Q 5:111–115 and the West Syrian *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*; Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context,* p. 10 for the term Qurʾān itself as a derivation of *qeryānā* (liturgical reading). Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity,* p. 492 notes the direct influence of two Biblical passages, Revelations (Q 57:3) and Psalm 37 (Q 21:105).

[63] On his life in greater detail, see Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories.*

[64] PO 17:144.

[65] Simeon is assumed to be "in Saracen lands," and therefore unable to engage in debates at one point in the narrative. PO 17:146.

> house of Nuʿmān, which he visited frequently so that he won over many of the Saracens who dwelt there. He got the magnates whom [he] had persuaded to become his disciples to build a Christian church in it.[66]

The account of Simeon writing down the creed for the people he converted should also be noted:

> to be certain that writing should remain without danger of alteration, he took linen cloths and medicated them so that they might take writing…and he would write the belief of every people in their own language from their archbishop, and above that he would place the seal of the king of that people and of the bishops and their chief men in lead upon the cloth.[67]

This last narrative is especially significant for the discussion of the stimulation of Arabic writing. It is a clear example of the role of missionaries in stimulating the use of written documents. In this case, we also see the export of the Sasanian custom of sealing to give a document authority and the innovation of writing materials in a zone where parchment was scarce. Simeon's concern over the creed probably reflects the use of the Trisagion[68] in the Miaphysite liturgy, and it may be that he emphasized writing because Dyophysite missionaries were also operating in the same area. Furthermore, his involvement with recently converted chiefs and local bishops also may have helped to embed local elites into wider networks. Documents would have been useful as symbols of the wider recognition of the authority of local elites, which also would have preserved the creedal statements made on the document.

For our purposes, we might speculate that the practice of translating the creed into local languages might have given them a prestige that they had hitherto lacked. We should probably assume that these local languages were written in Syriac script: John would likely tell us if Simeon had actually created a new script. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that, given Simeon's regular involvement with the Arabs, some of these languages were different dialects of "Old Arabic" in Ḥīra and its hinterland.

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[66] PO 17:140.

[67] PO 17:156.

[68] R. Taft, "Trisagion," *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*; Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Churches*, pp. 166–73.

Dyophysite Missions into Arabia

The *Chronicle of Seert*, a major Christian Arabic history of the tenth or eleventh centuries, preserves three notices on Ḥīra that seem to derive from earlier Syriac material. These notices provide other kinds of information about the links between Ḥīran Christians and the rest of Arabia, though the late date of the source means that we need to be especially careful in how we handle these excerpts. The first of these was from approximately 400 and describes how one 'Abdisho' of Arphelouna trained at the school of 'Abdā in southern Iraq, then fled ordination as a bishop to convert "an island in [the region of] Yamāma and Baḥrayn." Following this he founded a monastery in Ḥīra, and returned to Maishān. His connection with Ḥīra is the most prominent part of his legend, and the section dedicated to him is titled "'Abdisho' of Arphelouna, who founded a monastery at Ḥīra."[69]

This hagiography is attached to a cycle of stories surrounding the saint 'Abda and his disciples.[70] The existence of a mission near Ḥīra long predates the other hagiographies that describe Dyophysite proselytism in the region, and date to the early seventh century.[71] But even if the details that interest us are later inventions, they would still suggest the kinds of things that a later hagiographer would seek to invent, namely an earlier connection between Ḥīra and Ctesiphon, as this would give contemporary monasteries greater antiquity, and the link between Ḥīra and the eastern Arabian coast.[72]

A number of the monasteries on the Persian Gulf have been excavated, and Robert Carter dates them from the seventh to ninth centuries.[73] He suggests that contradictions in the textual evidence of earlier monastic foundations may show that they were built in perishable materials and not tied to trade networks.[74] Alternatively much of the textual evidence may simply be Islamic-period invention of an early Christian heritage for a region that had been relatively recently colonized.[75] Richard

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[69] PO 5:310–312. The island may be "Ramath," which lay "eighteen parsangs from Obelah," which is identified later in the text. Bernard, et al., "L'église d'al-Qousour Failaka," p. 145 identify this as al-Quṣūr in Kuwait; Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, p. 245 n. 275 as Abū ʿAlī, north of Jubayl.

[70] Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, pp. 75–8.

[71] Wood, "Ḥīra and Her Saints."

[72] Van Reeth, "Les prophéties oraculaires," p. 88 rightly observes the architectural connections between southern Mesopotamia, Ḥīra, and the Gulf.

[73] Earlier dating of these settlements is probably influenced by the belief that Christians were expelled from the peninsula. These traditions are discussed in Munt, "No Two Religions."

[74] Carter, "Christianity in the Gulf during the First Centuries of Islam."

[75] Cf. Payne, "Monks, Dinars and Date Palms."

Payne emphasizes that the excavated monasteries were dependent on maritime links to Iraq, but this composition may envisage a land route to 'Abdisho''s offshore island (though the abbreviated nature of the text makes it very hard to establish).[76]

Synodical records indicate that in in 410 there were bishops for Meshmahig (probably the island of Baḥrayn and the nearby coast) and Dayrin on the island of Tarut and in 576 there were bishops for Beth Qatraye and Mazun, which probably refer to the east Arabian coast and Oman respectively, and for Hajar, modern-day Hufuf in Saudi Arabia.[77] I would regard these as the earliest firm indications of a Christian presence, which might confirm the stories for a very early mission to Baḥrayn.[78]

The second narrative about Ḥīra embedded in the *Chronicle of Seert* describes the arrival of Miaphysite refugees from the Roman world after the persecutions of Justin I. It describes the Miaphysites being sponsored by one al-Ḥajjāj, the son of Qays of Ḥīra and al-Mundhir b. al- Nu'mān, a famous Naṣrid king, known for raids on the Roman empire. The Miaphysites were invited to leave, acknowledge Dyophysitism, or submit to a religious debate. They agreed to the debate, which was adjudicated by al-Mundhir and undertaken against the catholicos Shila. Al-Mundhir found against them and, after diplomatic pressure from Justin, al-Mundhir expelled them and they moved to Najrān while others remained hidden in Ḥīra. Those in Najrān were said to adopt Julianism, which was also followed in the oasis of Payram, near Ḥīra, until a Dyophysite mission under 'Abdā b. Ḥanīf in the early seventh century.[79]

This passage gives substantially more local detail. In particular, the appearance of otherwise unattested local figures who threaten to undermine the dominance of the Naṣrid kings or the Church of the East inspires confidence in the text. The narrative appears to have been composed in the seventh century, prompting the reflection on Payram. The figures of Shila and Justin may have been added to embed a local crisis into the international affairs of the time, but the complexity of the text suggests that it did not undergo heavy editing. The detail on Julianism in South Arabia in this narrative was also confirmed by John of Ephesus: "they [the Julianists] went east and west, to the capital, to Alexandria, to the whole of Syria, they even crossed to Hirta d-Beth Nu'mān

[76] Payne, "Monks, Dinars and Date Palms."
[77] Briquel-Chattonet, "L'expansion du christianisme en Arabie", pp. 181-2. Also discussion in Potts, *Arabian Gulf*, 2: pp.150, 253 and 256–257.
[78] Langfeldt, "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in Northeastern Arabia," highlights the likely destruction of Christian sites in eastern Saudi Arabia.
[79] PO 7:143–44. Further discussion of the Ḥīran hagiography set in the seventh century in Wood, "Ḥīra and Her Saints."

and Persia. One of them, named Sergius even rushed off to the land of the Himyarites…and consecrated another, named Moses, to be bishop in his stead."[80]

We should highlight the role played by a (still pagan) Naṣrid king in convening religious debates, and the opportunities that the existence of multiple Christian confessions gave to more minor political figures such as al-Ḥajjāj. The author also tacitly acknowledges the inability of the church to completely expel the Miaphysites from Ḥīra, and the text suggests that the converts made by Simeon beth Arsham were well-supported.[81] The Muslim Arabic description of Ḥīra's Christian elite (the ʿIbād) as 'Nestorian' may owe more to developments during the Islamic period.[82] Instead, we should probably imagine a situation in which Christian elites in Ḥīra belonged to both confessions, and may have transferred their allegiances between them. The involvement of al-Mundhir in the disputation shows that it was possible for Naṣrid kings to involve themselves in intra-Christian politics even when they remained pagan (later Arabic sources also present the wives and mothers of the Ḥīran kings as monastic founders, which was another method of involvement).[83] Finally, the references to Najrān imply that Ḥīra was a gateway to the far south of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as to the east coast.

The third narrative concerns the final conversion of the Naṣrid king al-Nuʿmān III to Christianity. It describes how the king converted to Christianity at the hands of Simeon b. Jābir, the 'Ibadi bishop of Ḥīra for the Church of the East, only to turn to the Miaphysites soon afterwards. The catholicos Isho'yahb I and the shah Khusrō II arranged for the intervention of the holy man Sabrisho', and the king returned to Dyophysitism.[84] The text may indicate that the initial conversion represented a loss of face for al-Nuʿmān, as the man responsible for his conversion was a fellow Ḥīran, albeit with a better Christian pedigree. His brief conversion to Miaphysitism might be interpreted as a bartering strategy that triggered the involvement of highly placed figures in the Church of the East and brought about a clear royal approval for his actions, and this also freed him from his local bonds to the 'Ibād.

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[80] Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, Chronicle Part III,* p. 111.

[81] Miaphysite bishops are attested for Ḥīra in the late sixth and early seventh century. Andrae, *Les Origins de l'Islam et le christianisme*, p. 31; Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times,* pp. 193–194.

[82] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 2:328.

[83] Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times,* pp. 192 and 196.

[84] PO 13:478–81. Cf. PO 13:468–69. A longer analysis is given in Fisher and Wood, "Writing the History of the Persian Arabs."

Heterodox Christianities in Arabia

Many of these sources are hagiographic, and we should be wary of placing too much weight on individual details. But some general patterns do emerge. Firstly, both the Jacobite and the Church of the East accounts underscore the significance of Ḥīra, this time as a gateway for cultural influences from the Near East into the peninsula. The official "paganism" of the Naṣrid kings was no impediment to their involvement in Christian politics or to the presence of Christianity at Ḥīra. But the lack of a Christian political authority did contribute to the "unpoliced" character of Arabian Christianity. We gather the impression of institutional foundations by both groups, sponsored by the city's Christian elite, and further expansion to the south, whether in the form of contact with individual tribes, who were sent bishops, or the establishment of a string of monasteries along the east Arabian coast. Both environments saw the encounter of Arabic speakers with the use of written and liturgical Syriac; these might be seen as areas where Christian proto-Qur'anic material was disseminated. However, I do not find anything in the sixth-century literary sources to suggest that Christianity was significant in the Ḥijāz.

Secondly, Arabia (like Iran or Iraq) was an environment where no single Christian orthodoxy was enforced and multiple Christian groups co-existed.[85] That said, none of the sources examined here indicate that communities of "Judeo-Christians," Montanists, Marcionites or Arians were (still) present in the Arabian peninsula, and the existence of older "heretical" groups should not be used to explain features of the Qur'anic milieu.[86] Tannous has called this the "Jurassic Park" illusion, in which historians identify the expression of beliefs in their texts and then use heresiologists (often written several centuries before) to diagnose the presence of groups who spread those beliefs.[87] The authors I examine here were not afraid to identify heretical groups when they found them, or to highlight the sharing of false ideas between heretics. John

[85] Compare Wood, *We Have No King but Christ*, ch. 4 on northern Iraq. I also draw on Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, who stresses the importance of "marginal" environments for religious innovation.

[86] E.g. Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*; Van Reeth, "Les prophéties oraculaires"; Von Sivers, "Christology and Prophetology"; Stroumsa, "Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins."

[87] Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam*, p. 396. Al-Azmeh, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity*, pp. 271–73 criticizes the "scouring of heresiologies and scriptures to identify textual coincidences" and the use of these as a basis for arguing for the continuous histories of obscure groups.

of Ephesus devotes excursus to Melchizikeans, Montanists, Tritheists, and Arians,[88] and the *Chronicle of Seert* discusses Manichaeans, Marcionites, and Origenists,[89] so I would emphasize the fact that they do not identify such groups in Arabia when they record the Julianist presence at Najrān. I do not think modern analysts should conjure up groups where they do not exist.

But none of this is to deny that Christian theology is complex and that Christians on the edges of the properly catechized might not answer all questions in an orthodox manner.[90] Christian *identity* (and religious identity in general) often has much more to do with shared symbolism and narratives than technical theology.[91] For instance, it has often been observed that there is little evidence of Christian (or for that matter Jewish) theology in the Christian and Jewish pre-Islamic poets.[92] I think we should imagine that individuals who saw themselves as Christians (including priests) might easily give idiosyncratic ad hoc answers in response to questions of technical theology, especially in areas when Jewish ideas were in circulation.

One aspect of the relatively unpoliced nature of Christianity in Arabia may be the kind of sympathetic unitarianism that we find in parts of the Qur'ān.[93] Similar ideas can be found in the mouths of Christian aristocrats of northern Iraq and expressed in the hagiography of Thomas of Marga (writing in the mid ninth century, but describing the seventh).[94] Thomas is, of course, incredulous of the claims that these aristocrats might be "real" Christians, but this may be another example of the tension between symbolic and theological definitions of Christianity. Rather the statement that Jesus was

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[88] Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, Chronicle Part III,* pp. 101–02, 112 (On the Melchizidekans and their later involvement with the Julianists); John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History Part Three* I. 30–1 (on the Tritheites) and V. 15 and 21 (on the Arians and other heretics).

[89] PO 5: 324–25 (on Marcionites and Manichees).

[90] Cf. Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity," pp. 306–08 and Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization,* p. 171.

[91] Tannous, *Syria between Byzantium and Islam,* pp. 433–34.

[92] Conrad, "Mawali and Early Arabic Historiography," 412–13. Cf. Hoyland, "Jews of the Hijaz in the Qur ' ān and their Inscriptions," p. 111 on the weakness of the links between Jews in Arabia and those beyond, as attested in the epigraphy.

[93] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers,* p. 70 observes the possible role of non-Trinitarian Christians in the "believers' movement."

[94] Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, III.iii (p. 151/310). Note a similar example of the opposition to Christian anti-Trinitarianism in a ninth-century Arabic *Summa Theologica* in Griffith, "The First Christian Summa Theologica," pp. 21–3.

a (perfect) man rather than God, though perhaps still messiah or God's word,[95] may be a symptom of open theological borders in which it was not necessary to join every dot or follow through on the theological implications of every statement. The presence of such ideas may reflect shifts brought about by the Arab conquest of Iraq and the political importance of Muslims in this environment. But the anecdote in Thomas should also alert us to the possibilities of skeptical reflection on a religious tradition without abandoning communal religious labels.

One text we have not looked at so far is the *Acta Arethae*, a mid-sixth-century Greek source that describes the martyrdoms that occurred under the Jewish king Dhū Nuwās at Najrān in 523. One passage in this text describes a theological debate at Ḥīra, which is reminiscent of the scene we have seen in the *Chronicle of Seert*.[96] It is striking for what it tells us about the role of anti-Trinitarian ideas in Arabia. It describes how Dhū Nuwās' envoy comes to al-Mundhir seeking the death of the Christians. At this point an envoy from the Nestorian catholicos Shila also arrives, and he urges the "orthodox" at the court of Ḥīra to accept the position that Jesus was a perfect man and not a God: "We are Persians and we know that the king of the Romans and his priests know that the Jews crucified a man and not a God." He does this, we are told, in order to please the Jews and pagans.[97]

I do not want to discuss here the interpolation of the reply of the "orthodox" to emphasize Roman orthodoxy and the "heresy of Nestorius", which are later developments in the text.[98] Suffice it to say that the original text imagined a confrontation between Miaphysites and members of the Church of the East. But I would like to highlight the fact that such ideas as the Jews' crucifixion of a man are similar to those expressed in the Qur'ān. And it is possible that they are included here as an accusation against Shila because there were Christians who did indeed make such claims. Again, we need not believe that the Church of the East as an institution preached such beliefs, only that there were individual members of that church who made such statements.

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[95] For Jesus as God's word in the Qur'an, see Q 3: 45 and 4: 171. For Jesus as Messiah, Q 5: 72 and 9: 30. Segovia, *The Qur'anic Jesus*, p. 26 gives a useful survey of the many ways in which the Qur'an describes Jesus.

[96] Another version of the same disputation is also found in Ps. Zachariah of Mytilene VIII.3.

[97] *Acta Arethae*, § 26.

[98] Van Rompay "The Martyrs of Najran"; Detoraki, *Le martyre de saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons*, pp. 89–92.

The Qur'ān and Christian Imagined Communities: The Case of Najrān

The hagiographies associated with Najrān deserve further comment, particularly in relation to links between Romans, Persians, and Ḥīrans in south Arabia and the reception of Christian narratives by Muslims.

Ḥīra appears to have enjoyed important ties with Najrān, where Miaphysite exiles fled in the 520s and came to embrace Julianism. It was here that Christians were engaged in a protracted struggle against a much more firmly established Jewish community;[99] this struggle became active persecution at several points in the late fifth century and culminated in a major pogrom in the 520s.[100] These events were rapidly disseminated around the Syriac-speaking world[101] and were discussed at length in several important dossiers of related Syriac texts that probably date to the mid-to-late sixth century.[102]

The Christian community that was massacred at Najrān was probably Miaphysite. A Church of the East community was present there in the Islamic period, possibly from as early as the late sixth century.[103] And authors from the Church of the East in the tenth century claimed the Najrān martyrs as examples of non-confessional Christian martyrdom.[104] But these claims should probably be taken as examples of Najrān's importance in Muslim and Christian self-fashioning, as an archetypal example of the prestige of Christians in the Muslim narrative universe, rather than as statements of fact. Indeed, as John of Ephesus observes, the Miaphysites of Najrān were (or became) Julianists not long after the massacres, and Christian Arabic authors used "Najranite" as a synonym for Julianist.[105] Even the dossiers of material that developed around the martyrs in the late sixth century skirt over many details of the confessional allegiance of Christians in southern Arabia: what they represented for Christians

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[99] Gajda, "Quel monothéisme en Arabie du sud ancienne ?"

[100] Beaucamp, Briquel-Chatonnet, and Robin, "La persécution des chrétiens de Nagrān et la chronologie himyarite"; Robin, "Nagrān vers l'époque du massacre."

[101] Detoraki, *Le martyre de saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons*, pp. 84–5.

[102] Taylor, "A Stylistic Comparison of the Syriac Ḥimyarite Martyr Texts Attributed to Simeon of Beth Arsham." Though Q 85 is widely believed to refer to the martyrs of Najrān, this is unlikely: Kropp, "Comment se fait un texte et son histoire."

[103] Fiacciadori, "Gregentius in the Land of the Homerites," p. 53. For the mission to Najrān under Timothy I (d. 832) see Fiey, *Pour un oriens christianus novus*, s.v. "Nagran"; and Fiacciadori, "Gregentius in the Land of the Homerites," pp. 78–9.

[104] Briquel-Chatonnet, "Recherche sur la tradition textuelle"; Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, pp. 249–56.

[105] Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, Chronicle Part III*, p. 102; Jugie, "Gaianite," *Dictionnaire de l'histoire et géographie ecclésiastique*; Anastasius of Sinai, Patrologia Graeca 89: p. 296.

elsewhere was much more important.

The dossier of Syriac material comprises three texts that all deal with the martyrdoms. They include the *Book of the Himyarites* (a fragmentary hagiographic collection) and two letters that (spuriously) claim to derive from eyewitness accounts of the events, one of which is ascribed to Simeon beth Arsham. The *Acta Arethae* are a Greek account of the same events and also derive from a Syriac original.

I have discussed these texts elsewhere, so here I only highlight certain key features.[106] First, they all emphasize the opposition between Christians and Jews (and pagans). True Christians are identified as those willing to be martyred, and are differentiated from false Christians, such as one "Bar Mauhaba" from "Hirta d-Nu'mān" who acts as an emissary for the Jewish king.[107] At points, the texts stress the international corollaries of this struggle, against the "pagan" Naṣrids. Second, several texts identify Najrān as a new Jerusalem, whether because it was made holy by the martyrs, or because of its conquest by the Ethiopian king Caleb, "the new Joshua."[108] Third, it is likely that all of these materials were intended for dissemination outside Arabia, probably in Mesopotamia and/or Palestine.[109]

We should also note certain key features that differentiate the texts from one another, most notable being the terms of their geopolitical (or geoconfessional) orientation.[110] The *Acta Arethae* embeds the events in Najrān in contemporary Roman ambitions in the Red Sea: in Najrān, Caleb would seem to be acting at the invitation of the Roman emperor Justin I, and with his military support.[111] In this imagining, the Miaphysite perspective of the *Acta*'s original Syriac source has been overlaid during its

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[106] Wood, *We Have No King but Christ*, ch. 7. However, my dating of these texts was often too early, and should be revised in the light of Taylor, "A Stylistic Comparison of the Syriac Ḥimyarite Martyr Texts Attributed to Simeon of Beth Arsham." This is significant because the imagination of a Miaphysite commonwealth, while stimulated by events in the 520s, was primarily a feature of the second half of the sixth century, much closer in time to the writings of John of Ephesus. I also failed to note the earlier Miaphysite layer of the *Acta Arethae*, for which see Van Rompay "The Martyrs of Najran"; Detoraki, *Le martyre de saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons*.

[107] Moberg, trans. *Book of the Himyarites* § 7 (p. 7); *Shahid's Letter*, §44.

[108] *Acta Arethae* § 24 (p. 248); *Book of the Himyarites* §§ 43–47 (pp. 46–54).

[109] Detoraki, *Le martyre de saint Aréthas et de ses compagnons*, p. 96, discussing the *Acta Arethae*. Also see *Shahid's Letter* § 63, requesting that the account of the martyrs be sent to Peter of Apamea and Thomas of Germanicia.

[110] After Blaudeau, *Alexandrie et Constantinople: De l'histoire à la géo-ecclésiologie*.

[111] In particular note the text's imagination of a "chain of command" from Justin to the patriarch of Alexandria to Caleb (§ 27, with Detoraki, *Le martyre de saint Aréthas*, p. 258) and the gathering of the Red Sea fleet (§ 28).

transmission into Greek and the Chalcedonian emperor becomes an unproblematic defender of all Christians.[112]

The geoconfessional orientation of the first of the two Syriac letters (Guidi's Letter) is rather different.[113] It opens with the reception of the envoys of Dhū Nuwās by the Naṣrid king al-Mundhir at Ramla. The king mocks the "orthodox" and announces that "the king whom the Cushites set up in the land is dead." Al-Mundhir tells the Christians: "Now forsake the religion of Christ. You have already heard what happened to those who do not deny Christ, how the king of the Himyarites killed and destroyed them and burnt their church…Your Christ has been rejected by Himyarites and Persians and Romans, do you not now reject Him?" The king's mockery is countered by an Arab Christian noble: "It was not in your time that we became Christians, but in the time of our fathers' fathers."[114] In this description, four states (Ḥīra, Persia, Rome, and Himyar) have all rejected (Miaphysite) Christianity. The "orthodox" protest the antiquity of their belief and confess their faith in public, just like the martyrs who refused the inducements of wealth to convert to Judaism.

The letter imagines Simeon writing to a network of Christian cities to oppose the Jews, who receive the help of the rabbis of Tiberias. Simeon writes to Caleb (by way of the patriarch of Alexandria), and to the "faithful" of Egypt, Antioch, Tarsus, and Caesarea: he hopes to prevent the persecutions by threatening the synagogues of the Roman world. In other words, the text imagines an international competition between the Jews and the Christians, but in this imagined geography there is no place for the Roman emperor. Instead Justin is removed and a Miaphysite commonwealth that has no link to any state is left in his place.[115]

Finally, the first letter's anti-Jewish feeling draws on a specific vein of West Syrian writing that accuses Christians of being Jews in order to denigrate them.[116] Thus

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[112] Detoraki, *Le martyre de saint Aréthas*, pp. 89, 94; Vasiliev, *Justin the First*, pp. 283–302.

[113] Shorter (and earlier) versions of this letter are found in John of Ephesus and Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene. See the useful stem diagram in Taylor, "A Stylistic Comparison of the Syriac Ḥimyarite Martyr Texts Attributed to Simeon of Beth Arsham."

[114] *Guidi's Letter*, p.508 (Jeffery, "Christianity in Southern Arabia," p. 210).

[115] Ibid., p. 518 (Jeffery, "Christianity in Southern Arabia," p. 215). A further variant on the same idea can be detected at the end of the second letter, where a Roman, a Najranite, a Persian, a Ḥīran, and a Cushite are listed among the martyred clergy: *Shahid's Letter* §63–64 (30–2).

[116] E.g. Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, Chronicle Part III,* pp. 20–7 (for the Chalcedonian patriarch Paul "the Jew"); Wood, *We Have No King but Christ*, ch. 5; De Halleux, "Die Genealogie des Nestorianismus"; De Halleux, "Un fragment philoxénien inédit de polémique anti-chalcédonienne." Also

statements such as "a king who behaves treacherously is no king,"[117] while addressed by a martyr to Dhū Nawas, may also be intended as a comment on Justin I and Justinian's persecutions of Miaphysites, and as a way of setting up a parallel between the Chalcedonian emperors and the Jews. Christian priests in the Roman world are even accused of selling their churches to the Jews.[118]

The construction of Jews and Christians and the way in which they are placed in a wider geoconfessional context is worthy of some emphasis. The martyrdoms at Najrān were not only a popular subject for literary compositions in the Near East, but they also acted as a symbol for Jewish and Christian rivalry. Moreover, the fact that these took place far beyond the Roman frontier allowed Miaphysite writers to present them as a part of a wider Miaphysite commonwealth in which the surrounding states are agents of persecution, and allies of the Jews.

I certainly do not argue that any of these texts exerted a direct "genetic" influence on the Qur'ān. But I do think that they allow us to imagine a proto-Qur'anic milieu in which Christianity could be separated from Roman identity and take on a highly egalitarian and pan-ethnic self-identity, in which the commemoration of martyrdom played a key role in communal solidarity. The hagiographies also illustrate how events in Arabia might be seen to have a significance far beyond its borders and how Arabia might be seen as a promised land or as a site of persecution for a chosen people. Finally, these narratives also allows us to think of how anti-Jewish rhetoric (such as that found in the Qur'ān) might have originally marked intra-Christian, as well as extra-Christian boundaries.[119]

Conclusions

I have set out evidence here for the presence of Miaphysite and Dyophysite Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula and ascribed a major role to Ḥīra as a gateway for missions to the south. I have suggested the possibility that the contact zone between Syriac and Arabic was an area where Arabic script might have been used and developed, and where proto-Qur'anic Christian material might have emerged and been disseminated.

Taylor "A Stylistic Comparison of the Syriac Ḥimyarite Martyr Texts Attributed to Simeon of Beth Arsham," pp. 168–69.

[117] *Guidi's Letter*, p. 509 (Jeffery, "Christianity in Southern Arabia," p. 211).

[118] *Guidi's Letter*, p.518 (Jeffery, "Christianity in Southern Arabia," p. 215).

[119] Compare Kropp, "Tripartite but anti-Trinitarian Formulas," who sees anti-adoptionist slogans used for intra-Christian polemic at the root of Q 72:3 and Q 112.

This might allow for the imagination of a religious community without reference to the great empires of the day, a community that emphasized true religion as a force that bound members of different ethnic groups together. It might have also provided a powerful anti-Jewish rhetoric, which would prove attractive in an environment where some Arabian groups identified with Judaism, such as in the Ḥijāz.[120] On the other hand, the Christianities of the world beyond the Roman frontier were not highly policed, and the emergence of anti-Trinitarian ideas in Christian contexts in Arabia is possible, especially for groups in contact with Jewish ideas.

I do not mean to imply that all Christian lore present in the Qur'ān was generated in proto-Qur'anic communities at the edges of the Arabian Peninsula. It is also possible to imagine later points of transmission to a community of believers/Muslims that had already acquired a relatively distinct identity. The transmission of the Syriac Alexander legend might be an example of this, one in which a narrative modeled on the conquests of Heraclius in Iran was adapted to strip it of any specifically Christian resonance.[121] And Guillaume Dye plausibly argues for a context in post-conquest Palestine for the incorporation of substantial parts of Sura 19.[122] That said, we can still endorse Sidney Griffith's statement that "The Syro-Aramaic tradition is not the only source of Christian discourse present in the milieu of the Arabic Qur'ān, but it is arguably the most important and pervasive one."[123]

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[120] Accusations of the falsification of Scripture may also originate in Christian anti-Jewish polemic. Andrae, *Les Origins de l'Islam et le christianisme*, p. 203.

[121] Van Bladel, "The Syriac Sources for the Early Alexander Narrative in Arabic"; Van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in Qur'ān 18:83–102."

[122] Dye, "The Qur'anic Mary."

[123] Griffith, "Christian lore and the Arabic Qur'ān," p. 131.

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