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**By the Book:**

**Conversion and Religious Identity in Early Islamic Bilād al-Shām and al-Jazīra**

Jessica Sylvan Mutter

Abstract

This dissertation examines Arabic and Syriac writing on conversion among Muslims and Christians in early Islamic Greater Syria (Bilād al-Shām) and northern Iraq (al-Jazīra). It analyzes how conversion is written about and understood by scholars in these regions from 640-850 C.E., and the evolution of this understanding over the first two hundred years of Muslim rule. It does so using seventh-, eighth-, and early ninth-century Arabic and Syriac historical, legal and polemical texts that address conversion. I conclude that writing on conversion among Christian and Muslim scholars increased in sophistication and polemical focus as conversion to and from Islam increased, and religious leaders in turn constructed social and theological boundaries, bolstered by the development of law and ritual around conversion, delineating their respective religious communities. The term “conversion” is also examined in light of these changes. It is found to be largely inapplicable to Muslim and Christian writers’ understanding of religious change in the seventh-century Islamic context, and somewhat more applicable to such events in the eighth and early ninth centuries, though still not perfectly so. This research is the first comprehensive examination of conversion in early Islamic Syria and the Jazira, and expands Islamic historians’ limited understanding of conversion in early Islam. It lends insight into the poorly-understood phenomenon of Islamization of the eastern Mediterranean region during the

first few centuries after the Muslim conquests, and will also contribute to historical studies of conversion in the pre-modern era, which are skewed heavily toward the study of conversion to Christianity.



## **A Review of Relevant Literature on Religious Conversion: Toward a Theory of Conversion in Early Islam**

*“The phenomenon of conversion ... may be approached from many differing viewpoints: as history of missions, as a sociological process, as a personal journey from unbelief to faith, and as an aspect of political and territorial expansion which advanced the power of certain hegemonic cultures throughout the last two thousand years. This list is not exhaustive. Each of these perspectives may be illuminating, but the scholar may have some difficulties discerning the fundamental nature of ‘conversion’ amidst the methodological confusion.”<sup>1</sup>*

What does ‘conversion’ mean? In this chapter I address this question by examining several texts in the field of conversion studies, and in doing so attempt to identify changes in conceptualization, vocabulary, and ritual as demonstrated in textual and other evidence. The question this thesis raises, and hopes to answer, is this: how did the idea and formal act of becoming a Muslim develop during the early Islamic period, and how can such changes be traced? The foundation work, however, lies in defining one’s terms and placing them in historical context.

### Conversion and Conversion Studies: A Christian Phenomenon?

If one were to survey the major reference works in the Western academic study of Islam, conversion would not appear to be a relevant topic—or term. Indeed, the English word ‘conversion’ does not even have an entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. In the French *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*, a listing for ‘Conversion’ simply says, “Voir *Islām*.”<sup>2</sup> Conversion

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<sup>1</sup> Carole M. Cusack, “Towards a General Theory of Conversion,” in *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, ed. Lynette Olson (Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, 1996), 1.

<sup>2</sup> “Conversion,” in *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*. Consulted online on December 31, 2015. <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004206106\\_eifo\\_DUM\\_DCL207](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_DUM_DCL207)>

appears in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* in a 2,300-word entry by David Thomas, which concludes with the phrase, “See also *Islām*.” The entry begins with a brief definition:

Spiritual and moral transformation attended by a sincere change of belief. The concept of conversion is represented in the Qur'ān by a group of teachings which together stress the importance of admitting God's lordship, accepting the guidance he gives, following the way he has established and conforming to his will (see *Belief and Unbelief*; *Lord*; *Obedience*; *Islam*). It is essentially a matter of reverting to a norm perceptible to all and to which one is able to conform by one's own efforts. The initiative for the movement of restoration lies with God, though humankind has the ability to comply or not (see *Freedom and Predestination*).<sup>3</sup>

Successfully defining the term ‘conversion’ in the context of any religion (or non-religious cultural phenomenon—Talal Asad writes of conversion to modernity, for example<sup>4</sup>) has often eluded scholars. The introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* frames William James and Arthur Nock as founding scholars in conversion studies, though of course the work of defining and analyzing religious conversion began far prior to the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Most contemporary studies of religious conversion focus on Christianity, sometimes in late antiquity but most often in the modern era (particularly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a focus on modern European or American Protestantism). Of those that address late antiquity, several focus heavily or even exclusively on Christian figures such as Paul and Augustine.

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3 Thomas, David. “Conversion.” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill Online, 2015. Reference. University of Chicago. 31 December 2015 [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/conversion-EQSIM\\_00093](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/conversion-EQSIM_00093)

<sup>4</sup> Talal Asad, “Comments on Conversion,” in *Conversions to Modernities*, ed. Peter van der Veer (New York: Routledge, 1996), 263-73.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5. For further reading on conversion studies, see Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37-8 and Zeba Crook, *Reconceptualizing Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), *passim*.

Given that we have no studies of formative Islam that address conversion at length, we must look elsewhere for potential models. As a monotheistic tradition of the same heritage of both Islam and Judaism, Christianity is perhaps the most helpful paradigm through which to study religious change and transformation, but scholars must be careful. Islam, despite being of the same monotheistic tradition as Christianity, developed in its own ‘primordial ooze,’ which is to say its own milieu, and its own political, religious, social and geographical climates. Yet we may highlight some parallels between the traditions, and focus more intently on them for insights into how each religion developed its ideas of conversion and faith during its formative era.

The nineteenth-century psychologist William James is often considered the grandfather of modern conversion studies.<sup>6</sup> In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James defines conversion as follows:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.<sup>7</sup>

James argued that most conversions are sudden, life-changing events that totally affect one’s view of the world, citing the conversion of Paul as a prime example. James’s analysis is deeply psychological and focuses on the individual, as perhaps one would expect, relating conversion to self-surrender, to imagining positive outcomes, to happiness and unhappiness, and to morality. It is ultimately a modern, Western, Protestant Christian understanding of religious transformation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Zeba Crook, *Reconceptualizing Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 16, 22.

<sup>7</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982 reprint of 1902), 245.

<sup>8</sup> As James expressly conveys: “Those striking instantaneous instances of which Saint Paul’s is the most eminent, and in which, often amid tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses, a complete division is

Other nineteenth and early twentieth century studies of conversion also focused on the psychological profile of the convert, or the effects of conversion on the individual, with a specific focus on the psychological states of both Jesus and Paul.<sup>9</sup> As with James, conversion was usually conceptualized within a Protestant Christian paradigm.<sup>10</sup> Scholars such as J.B. Pratt, Edwin Starbuck, and James created oppositional dichotomies in which volitional conversion (as Alfred Underwood defines it, “[conversion] in which the steady effort of the person concerned is never relaxed until the new life is won,”) is diametrically opposed to one “in which feeling predominates,”<sup>11</sup> (Pratt), or one in which surrender of one’s struggle for self-improvement is given up (ostensibly to God, per Starbuck and James). “Unification of character,” as it is put by Pratt, comes only when the individual ceases all efforts and puts faith in God instead. Underwood argues that the distinction between sudden and gradual conversions was false indeed they were all gradual, if only subconsciously. These analyses remain rooted in the biblical

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*established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new. Conversion of this type is an important phase of religious experience, owing to the part which it has played in Protestant theology...*” Ibid, 280.

<sup>9</sup> Zeba Crook, *Reconceptualizing Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 17-22.

<sup>10</sup> In *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian*, Alfred Underwood identifies several conversions narrated in the Hebrew Bible: that of Jacob, when he wrestles with the angel and changes his name [Alfred Clair Underwood, *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1925, 17. Other major scholars of the era, who also promoted a sudden, Pauline conversion moment, include Edwin Starbuck (“A Study of Conversion,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 8 (January 1897), 268-308. Starbuck, James and Underwood were soon contested by a new school of conversion studies, led by James’s student Pratt, who advocated a gradual conversion, often supported by anthropological observation, see J.B. Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness: A Psychological Study*, 1924. See also Ralph W. Hood Jr. and Zhuo Chen, “Conversion and Deconversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: OUP, 2014), 538-9.]; Samuel’s adolescent conversion; Isaiah’s conversion in the temple; and the conversions of Amos, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in visions. In the New Testament, earthquakes and miracles prompt would-be conversions: proclamations of God’s wonder. According to Underwood, many scholars argue that such proclamations may be considered conversions only if they cause spiritual change, not just insight, but he disagrees, wondering if a spiritual ‘call’ qualifies as a conversion, as well. (*Conversion* 17-20 and 38-44.)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 143. See also Ryan Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 13-14.

tradition, with no real consideration of non-biblical sources, despite titles such as Underwood's *Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian* suggesting otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

In 1933 Arthur Nock published *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most influential modern text in conversion studies to this day, Nock defines conversion as a sort of turning: a “reorientation of the soul, a deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”<sup>14</sup> He distinguishes *conversion* from *adhesion*, in which one adheres to the rituals of a religion but does not undergo profound transformation, connecting conversion to Abrahamic monotheism and adhesion to polytheistic pagan cults. Of course, Nock failed to examine Islam, the third major (late) antique monotheism of the Abrahamic tradition; his study ended with Augustine some 200 years prior to the rise of Islam.<sup>15</sup> But beyond that, his theory, and those of James and others, strike one as insufficient or perhaps even inappropriate for the

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Non-Christian’ in Underwood’s mind refers specifically to Old Testament Jews, but it expands beyond the solely Christian scope of predecessors such as James and Starbuck.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 7. For a clearer definition see also Jan Bremmer, “Conversion in the oldest Apocryphal Acts,” in Birgitte Secher Bøgh, ed. *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 59-76. “Nock has rightly argued [!!] that conversion is not part of the polytheistic world of antiquity, but belongs to the rise of Judaism and Christianity, the only contemporary monotheistic religions; yet, he was still under the influence of William James’ mainly psychological approach which has to be seen against the background of contemporary American revivalism. This means that Nock’s famous definition of conversion, “the reorientation of the soul....that the old was wrong and the new was right” (7), neglects the social factor in conversion, and his emphasis on the personal experience obscures the fact that only the new Christians had become members of an exclusive, totalizing community.” Jan Bremmer, “Conversion in the oldest Apocryphal Acts,” in Birgitte Secher Bøgh, ed. *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 72.

<sup>15</sup> Further, of all Nock’s potential subjects, perhaps only Augustine could speak to the differences in converting to polytheism vs. monotheism. As Bøgh writes, “Since there is a vast difference between a Mithraic pater, a Metroac eunuch, a frenzied Bacchant, a Christian “believer”, and an Isiac devotee crying out her sins, a more nuanced picture of the ancient marketplace of religions can be gained by acknowledging different *types* of converts (with which modern conversion studies operate today) rather than using only two categories: Christian conversion and pagan adhesion.” Birgitte Secher Bøgh, “Introduction.” Birgitte Secher Bøgh, ed. *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 40-41.

study of large-scale conversion. Nock and his predecessors describe individual conversions, with fine distinctions in impetus related to the type and quality of the religion being converted to. Further, it is all but impossible to apply Nock's theory to a historical account—unless the account described some sort of spiritual transformation using language similar to Nock's, one would have to assume that all other conversions were mere initiations or adhesions. Yet these limitations have not hindered historians and other scholars in applying his theories to their subject matter.

Nock's distinction between conversion and adhesion has been examined by several scholars since its publication, including scholars of both Late Antiquity and of Islam. In his 1989 presentation at the Shelby Chisolm Davis Center, "Conversion and Christianization in Late Antiquity: The Case of Augustine," Peter Brown differentiated between Christianization, adhesion, and conversion in Late Antiquity—differences he argued mostly rested on governmental, societal and internal motivations.<sup>16</sup> H.A.R. Gibb attempted to apply Nock's theory to Arabian converts to early Islam, arguing that Islam was "received at three different levels" in Muḥammad's lifetime: that of total conversion, with internal acceptance of Islam by eventual leaders of the community, that of formal adhesion, by "later Meccan adherents," and enforced adherence, applied to Arabians who were under threat of military sanction.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Devin DeWeese argues that Nock's distinction between *adhesion* and *conversion* is utterly irrelevant in

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<sup>16</sup> Valerie J. Flint, "Conversion and Compromise in Thirteenth-Century England," (pp 1-29) in Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, eds, *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003, 4. Brown distinguished between "what might be called "Christianization" (a process of incorporation directed, often bullishly, by the state, and thus frequently resented); "adhesion," (a devotion to certain elements of religion as useful, but requiring no deep inner change, and so stopping short of conversion); and true conversion itself. True conversion, on this definition, demands a total and committed change of life on the part of the convert, and commands and sustains an energy quite lacking in the other states." Brown's lectures at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center in 1988-1989 were eventually published as his *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> H.A.R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, eds. S.J. Shaw and W.R. Polk (New York: Routledge, 1962), 5.

the context of Islam: “*Islamic tradition regards even purely formal and ‘external’ adoption of Islamic practices and patterns as religiously meaningful, since those patterns, even in their formal aspects, are conveyors of divine grace...*”<sup>18</sup>

Birgitte Bøgh has also questioned Nock’s understanding of conversion. Bøgh focuses heavily on Nock’s use of the terms *initiation* (conversion rites) and *adhesion*, noting that predecessors to Nock such as Franz Cumont and Richard Reitzenstein argued there was no significant difference in kind between conversion to pagan cults and conversion to Christianity or Judaism.<sup>19</sup> Nock, in opposition, found the differences significant enough to apply different terms to the act of accepting and practicing them.<sup>20</sup>

### Conversion in the Formative Era of Religions

In the case of this thesis, it is especially important to understand conversion in the context of a new or early religion, as early conversion narratives can signify how individuals perceived a developing faith tradition: its doctrines and rituals, to the extent those are clarified, but also the role and status of the new religion in a local society, as well as the role and status of a convert to that religion, both within and outside of the new religious community. These are not necessarily factual details, but perceptions of the individual author or ‘recorder’ of the conversion event and its aftereffects, as mitigated by social and literary norms of the context in which he or she is

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<sup>18</sup> Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 26. Ryan Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 179.

<sup>19</sup> Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1911), and Richard Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen: ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen* (1910).

<sup>20</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 7-14. Bøgh finds both perspectives to be outdated in both analysis and underlying research question. Birgitte Secher Bøgh, “Introduction.” Birgitte Secher Bøgh, ed. *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 9.

sharing the (often third-person) narrative with others, whether orally (and documented by others) or in his or her own writing. But it is also true that converted-to and converted-from religions are forced by converts to create clear borders. One of the best-researched examples of this phenomenon is early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. We will now examine a few cases from this era to better understand early Islam and late antique/early medieval Christianity in Syria.

Gordon Smith notes in *Transforming Conversion* that both the New and Old Testaments discuss conversion, citing Abraham's response to God's call in Gen. 12 as an example of conversion in the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup> Smith writes that the most important conversion event in the New Testament was the Pentecost (Acts 2:38-42). Six other conversions also occur, all in Acts: those of an unnamed Ethiopian (8:26-40), Paul (9:1-19, 22:6-16), Cornelius (10:34-45, 11: 17-8), Lydia (16:14-15) and her guard (16:30), and Crispus (18:1-8). Of course, what conversion signifies often changes as a religion matures. Only after Constantine's conversion in 312 C.E. was it considered ordinary or even possible to be a Christian and not also a convert, for example. As Christianity became widely practiced in Greater Syria and Mesopotamia, the idea of conversion was gradually relegated to the monastery: by the late antique era, to commit one's life to God was to become a monk.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 43, 124. Can we really say a 'call' is the same as a 'conversion'? Obviously James and others have already grappled with this, and Smith seems to think so: "The response of Abram to the call of God is essentially a conversion, a definite and radical move to live by faith in God (Gen. 12)." What is the difference between the two in the sources to which we refer? The Old Testament also cites Ruth and Rahab as outsider-converts (outside the Nation/God of Israel but converts to its faith anyway, Josh 2:1-12). Nineveh converts after hearing the Prophet Jonah, as mentioned in NT (Matt 12:41, Luke 11:32).

<sup>22</sup> In modern contexts, the term 'conversion' is as problematic as it is for historical contexts. In particular, the notions of exclusivity associated with century-old Western academic understandings of conversion oversimplify processes of religious change in both modern and pre-modern environments. Despite their modern focus, anthropological studies of conversion in Islam provide rich methodological frameworks for this project. Many anthropologists link the way societies incorporate new faiths into their way of life with other, non-religious changes happening in those societies. This may prove a useful paradigm for studying religious change in early Islam. Clifford Geertz discusses religious adaptation as means of preserving other social/cultural elements of a civilization that is undergoing major internal and external pressure to change. "Internal conversion," in this



Many early Christians were Jews who often maintained observance of Jewish ritual law—to the extent that some observances became Christian practice. So what was to be done with gentile converts—should they observe Jewish ritual law, as well? Some clearly did. The discrepancy motivated Paul, who saw such practices as representative of an incomplete or even literalist form of conversion, to write letters to gentile communities such as the Galatians and Romans, emphasizing the difference between literal and allegorical interpretations of Jesus’ message.<sup>23</sup>

David Nirenberg writes that “Paul drew sharp distinctions between Judaism and Christianity” in an active attempt to keep gentile Christian converts from adopting Jewish practices.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Islam actively sought out polytheists from its inception—those whose faith did not lie in a Jewish or Christian heritage. It also sought out Christians and Jews, but only belatedly created clear boundary lines that prevented new Muslims from converting to Christianity or Judaism (or Zoroastrianism?) once they had become monotheists, particularly monotheists who followed the Qur’ān’s teachings.

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context, is internal to a social group or a microcosm. Geertz, ““Internal Conversion” in Contemporary Bali” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* NY, 1973, passim. In direct contrast, Robin Horton argues that in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, Christianity and Islam served as catalysts for change or conversion from an old form of polytheistic cosmology to a new one of monotheism. Robin Horton, “African Conversion,” 100-107. The change was already ‘in the air’, so to speak, because the old religious ways did not satisfy changing social and cultural circumstances. Thus, an outside monotheistic form is adapted to a higher god among the polytheistic gods, and the others are disposed of (the impetus supposedly being the higher god is angry at the people for worshipping multiple gods). New rituals toward the one god are developed that more easily adapt to a changing world (or, as anthropologists like to say, modernity). Horton seems to have Islam in Nigeria in particular mind when he breaks down the hypothetical process by which this change occurs. Many people have taken him to task for this idea, especially Fisher, to whom he responds in “On the Rationality of Conversion” (I and II). See also Humprey J. Fisher, “The Juggernaut’s Apology: Conversion to Islam in Black Africa,” *Africa* 55 (1985), 153-73. “Fisher is replying in particular to Part II of Horton’s ‘Rationality’.” See also his “Conversion Reconsidered” in *Africa* 43 (1973), 27-40.

<sup>23</sup> David Nirenberg, “Politics and Poetics in an Age of Mass Conversion,” in Jan N. Bremmer, Wout J. van Bekkum and Arie L. Molendijk, eds. *Cultures of Conversions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

The formative period of Christianity is also when the idea of heresy emerged in both Christianity and Judaism. Daniel Boyarin points out that the definition of the term *Hairesis* transforms in the early Christian era: “a major transition took place within Judaism [and, he argues elsewhere, Christianity] from a sectarian structure to one of orthodoxy and heresy and this took place between the time of Acts and that of Justin.”<sup>25</sup>

Boyarin writes that the notion of heresy is not present in Jewish or early Christian texts until the end of the first century C.E.<sup>26</sup> The term *hairesis*, which eventually begat the term heresy, instead indicated something closer to ‘school of thought or philosophy.’<sup>27</sup> The Hebrew equivalent for heresy, *minut*, did not exist at the time, either, nor did any Hebrew word with an equivalent meaning. Boyarin argues that what was eventually presented as a dispute between Judaism and Christianity as entirely different religions actually began as a dispute amongst philosophical schools of Judaeo-Christian monotheism.<sup>28</sup> Rabbinic Judaism developed as a result of being forced to delineate boundaries with early Christianity, particularly second- and third-century Christianity, and early Christian doctrine emerged from the same process of distinguishing itself as separate from Judaism and Judaic practice.<sup>29</sup>

For example, in the first and second centuries C.E., several “Jewish Christians,” as Boyarin carefully refers to them, believed in a second God, who was referred to as Logos, Memra, Sophia, Metatron, or Yahoel. Simultaneously, many early Christians believed that distinguishing different elements of the same God (i.e., God from Jesus, and the developing concept of the Trinity) constituted ditheism. By the end of the fourth century, and probably much

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 41, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-6.

earlier, these beliefs were considered heretical within their respective religions. As Boyarin writes, “It is in this sense that heresiology is necessarily a part of the construction of Judaism and Christianity as two religions.”<sup>30</sup> In more active terminology, leading rabbis within the Jewish faith delineated the boundary with Christianity while Christian bishops were doing the same, in a sort of discursive theological feedback loop.<sup>31</sup> The end result is late antique ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ in what were then their most orthodox forms.<sup>32</sup> Though, as Boyarin notes, “the point is *not* that debate ceased with the canonization of Nicaea—quite the opposite seems to have been the case—but rather that on the ideological level, debate was no longer considered appropriate for the determination of Christian truth.”<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, by the fifth century C.E., a major new concern among Christian writers was that of “Judaizing heretics,” particularly the so-called Ebionites and Nazoreans, who appear in polemical writing of the era. A great deal of work was done on these two sects in the nineteenth century, though modern scholars now wonder if they ever existed at all. Boyarin argues that they “function much as the mythical “trickster” figures of many religions, in that precisely by transgressing borders that the culture establishes, they reify those boundaries.”<sup>34</sup>

While there is no direct comparison in the material examined in this thesis, in that there are no accounts of people who clearly follow a syncretic form of Christian Islam or Islamic Christianity, we do see the construction of boundaries between different religions, and converts (or potential converts) often represent fears of mixing religions, losing constituents, and

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 92-3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-8.

ultimately a loss of a religion itself.<sup>35</sup> Boyarin would argue that such figures and stories are necessary. In early Christianity, in a nod to Nock, he writes:

*“This [new creation of religious boundaries] helps explain why the Epiphanian narrative of conversion is so crucial in establishing the new sense of religio, for the possibility of conversion itself converts Christianity into an institution, rather than only a set of practices, an institution that we might name “the Church.” Now it becomes possible for Christianity to be a true religio, whereas Judaism and paganism are false religiones, another name for which is **superstitions** in its new sense.”*<sup>36</sup>

Howard Clark Kee, too, views early Christianity as a fundamentally Judaic movement, at least initially. Kee traces the development of the early church in his article, “From the Jesus Movement Toward Institutional Church.”<sup>37</sup> Kee argues that the early Christian movement’s driving impetus was “to define anew what it meant to regard oneself as a member of the covenant of the people of God, and to seek to discern how God was still at work to bring to fruition his purpose for his chosen people.” Thus, he argues, “We must examine both the subsequent development of Judaism and the rise of Christianity as a breakaway movement from Judaism in the light of the social and conceptual solutions that developed in response to this crisis of social identity.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Howard Clark Kee would no doubt agree: “Although the churches presumably continued to engage in evangelism [in the second century and beyond], their continued existence depended in considerable measure on the procreation of the members, whose offspring could then carry on and accept responsibilities within the institution.”<sup>35</sup> Howard Clark Kee, “From the Jesus Movement Toward Institutional Church,” in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 216. See also Robert W. Hefner, “Introduction: World Building and the Rationality of Conversion,” in *Conversion to Christianity*, Robert W. Hefner, ed., 31.

<sup>37</sup> Howard Clark Kee, “From the Jesus Movement Toward Institutional Church,” in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity*, 47-63.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

By the first and second centuries B.C.E., the concept of Jewishness centered around questions of identity.<sup>39</sup> As Kee phrases them: “What are the requirements for admission to the covenant people? And How is status to be maintained within this people? ... [H]ow were the boundaries of Jewish covenantal existence to be drawn?”<sup>40</sup> Further, the second-century BCE translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek attracted a sizeable number of gentiles to the tradition’s monotheism and ethical strictures. In the context of this identity crisis emerged the so-called ‘Jesus movement.’ The few early Christian sources we have contain edicts about social interactions, including marriage and divorce, wealth distribution, and communal spaces.<sup>41</sup> But because of the apocalyptic beliefs of the early Christians (see Mark 9:1, 1 Cor. 15:51, 1 Thes. 4:15), no edicts or plans for succession of leaders is made.<sup>42</sup> The community’s purpose is to spread its message as far as possible, as rapidly as possible. This is, of course, not dissimilar to some scholars’ views on the beliefs and succession dilemmas of early Muslims.

Kee also notes a shift in early Christian identity:

A basic shift in the self-definition of the community is also revealed in the different connotations of “faith.” In the writings of Paul faith is primarily trust, reliance, and confidence in God’s words and deeds. ... In the deuteron-Pauline materials, in contrast, faith means right belief or true doctrine. A direct and sharp attack on false doctrine and on heresy is promulgated within the church (1 Tm 6:11-16; Ti 2:1). This emphasis on faith as correct belief does not eliminate the need for members to trust God and his word, but it indicates a consolidation of the groups’ beliefs and a careful delineation of acceptable religious concepts and of those that could lead to expulsion. Socially, conceptually, and structurally, the churches in the Pauline tradition had become by the turn of the second century unmistakably institutional. ... But beyond doubt, the factors that led to this basic change in self-understanding of the covenant people include the spontaneous shift from charismatic origins to institutional structures, driven by the need

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the role of social, cultural, and theological boundaries in the construction of religious and ethnic communal identities, particularly in the context of Judaism, see Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 140-174, 263-73.

<sup>40</sup> Howard Clark Kee, “From the Jesus Movement Toward Institutional Church,” in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity*, 47-63.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-8.

to protect a movement launched with the expectation of a speedy end to the present age, and the necessity to adjust to a movement that had spread with such astonishing rapidity by the opening years of the second century. Although the tradition looks back to Jesus and his message in the Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic tradition, the patterns that it adopts and adapts are those of the wider Roman world.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 62-3.

The same shift, “from charismatic origins to institutional structures,” is directly comparable to the development of early Islam.

Gauri Viswanathan responded to Kee’s essay in his *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*. He writes that:

[Kee’s] essay is crucial to understanding the extent to which, from the standpoint of a fledgling community aspiring to consolidate itself by establishing certain norms, conversion from one sect to another is as much an expression of blasphemy as it is of heresy. It is perhaps for this reason that narrowly conceived doctrines like anti-Trinitarianism assumed such an exaggerated importance in delineating the outlines of Christianity, and accounts for the far greater persecution of Unitarians than of Jews or Catholics. ... But whether the doctrinal emphases that conflate blasphemy and heresy are present in Paul’s own writings or in those of his compositors, there is little doubt that dogmatism of religious opinion is a product of the post-Pauline creation of an institutional church carved out of a community of former Jews. Their sharpened doctrinal formulations paved the way for the sectarian divide of the fourth century on questions of Christ’s divinity, as well as the Trinity. The first great heresy to split the Church and challenge patristic orthodoxy—the Arian heresy—repudiated the doctrine of the Trinity and maintained the belief that Jesus was less than divine.<sup>44</sup>

### The Limits of Terminology

As if to support earlier texts’ apparent disinterest in the word ‘conversion,’ the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* argues that conversion is perhaps not the right term to use in an Islamic context.<sup>45</sup> It is not the first text to explicitly state as much. Karl Morrison’s two volumes on conversion, *Understanding Conversion* and *Conversion and Text*, provide a deep analysis of how poorly documentations of conversion reflect their realities. Morrison writes that:

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<sup>44</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 245. The Arian dispute affected both doctrine and praxis, including conversion rites. Karl Morrison writes that: “[t]he dispute over the reconciliation of the lapsed soon widened to include controversies over whether members of sects condemned as heretical (notably the Arians) could be admitted to communion and, if so, whether they were to be rebaptized. These long and bitter struggles had decisive effects on ideas about conversion in the Church. For believers confronted the experience of apostasy.” Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 14.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

... the experience of conversion is inaccessible through the screen of the text ... The result is not to dismiss the entire literature of conversion as without historical reliability. It is to establish the study of conversion as a venture in poetics, for texts witness to processes of composition and to habits of thought at work in them more than to the dramatic events that the texts portray. ... When one asks, "What is called 'conversion'?" interrogation of a text has already begun.<sup>46</sup>

Morrison's description of the limits of conversion narratives is undoubtedly relevant, as we have seen in the methodological problems with Nock, and is almost poetic in its own right,<sup>47</sup> which is why his understanding of anything outside of an English-language (or English-translated) Christian tradition grates so coarsely on scholars with knowledge of other faith traditions or even other languages. Take, for example, his discussion of medieval Islam:

Although Islam and Christianity were both religions of conversion, conversion was not institutionalized in Islam, which lacked both priesthood and hierarchy. Medieval Islam produced no missionaries, bishops, baptismal rites, or other indicators of conversion. ... Consequently, conversion is seldom mentioned by historical writers, much less developed as an impelling and dominant current in world history.<sup>48</sup>

Morrison claims there were no conversion rituals in medieval Islam, but even the slightest bit of research would have led him to the (medieval and modern) practice of reciting the *shahāda* as a formal conversion rite, to the early Islamic institution of convert clientage in the form of the *mawla* system, or the concept of *da'wa*, evangelism, or its agent, the *da'ī*, which directly translates to the English term missionary and which was well-developed by the medieval period, however one would bracket that era. Conversion is indeed mentioned by writers of the medieval Islamic period, though less so during its formative period, at least within the

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<sup>46</sup> Karl F. Morrison, *Conversion and Text* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 144.

<sup>47</sup> Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), xii-xiii.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 144. Channeling Nock, Morrison writes: "I am told, too, that lacking a word for "conscience" (see chap. 4, n. 1), Arabic has no equivalent for the mysterious inwardness of change connoted by "conversion." To adhere to Islam is "to follow the right way," meaning formal observance. Consequently, nuances of doctrinal understanding ... were for Muslims not indices of an unfolding apocalyptic conflict between good and evil." This is actually not true at all. Apocalyptic in the Qur'ān directly and repeatedly addresses what it sees as Christian doctrinal error, for example. Morrison displays a lack of knowledge of Islamic doctrine and Arabic, which leads one to wonder why he would include such statements in this text.



framework of ‘conversion’ as scholars often conceptualize it today. This has more to do with Islam’s own development and self-conception in its formative era than with conversion itself. By no means is conversion ‘less developed as an impelling and dominant current in world history’ than in the Christianity to which Morrison is drawing a comparison.

Morrison is on more solid footing when he discusses Christianity; indeed, scholars of Islam are better off drawing parallels from these discussions than from using anything he has to say about Islam itself. Of conversion in the early Christian community, Morrison writes:

As the circumstances of Christianity changed in the centuries that followed the composition of the New Testament, the nature of what was called conversion also changed. At first expected imminently, the apocalyptic coming of the Kingdom did not occur. Believers realized that loose, personal fellowships could not serve the demands of long anticipation.<sup>49</sup>

This passage may be directly compared to Fred Donner’s *Muhammad and the Believers*, which focuses on early Islam. Indeed, Donner spends more than ten pages on apocalypticism in Islam and its effects on early Muslims, whom he argues are more aptly referred to as ‘Believers’ (*mu’minūn*) during Islam’s formative period. But instead of failed apocalyptic expectations, Donner writes of an early religious community still expectant of an imminent apocalypse, or a community that believes it is already ushering in the End of Days. Donner references several Qur’ānic passages in support of this argument, including Q 33:63: “People ask you about the Hour. Say: Knowledge of it is only with God, but what will make you realize that the Hour is near?”<sup>50</sup> The apocalyptic nature of the movement helped spur the early Islamic conquests, particularly the conquest of Jerusalem, and may have been an effective belief in the context of the Believers’ movement as late as the 680s C.E.<sup>51</sup> By the early ‘Abbasid period, when

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<sup>49</sup> Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 10, 187-8.

<sup>50</sup> Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 97 and 125.

apocalypticism returned to the fore in Islamic popular belief, Islam was arguably in the final stages of establishing itself as a separate religion with its own set of doctrines, dogmas and internal disputes. Certainly a Believers movement with nebulous borders between itself and Christianity or Judaism would no longer define Islam. Conversion, too, became an increasingly clear and specific act—people knew what they were converting to, and from, and how to do so—and the consequences of changing one’s religious identity. As we shall see later in this chapter, if Donner’s Believers theory withstands critical assessment, and in the years since its publication much of it has, then conversion is not only the wrong term but perhaps also the wrong concept for understanding religious change in an early Islamic context.

Hence, terminology has long been at the center of the study of religious conversion, and defining one’s terms is how theories are often made and unmade. Some scholars, of course, recognize that modern academic understandings of the term ‘conversion’ have Christian roots and may not be universally applied within the same narrow definition.<sup>52</sup> Examining the terms used in the original languages of a religion for the concept of conversion can often yield more precise results. Ronald Witherup examines the words for conversion in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic to gain a better sense of their semantic fields as used in the Bible, for example.

In the Old Testament, Witherup identifies the Hebrew roots *n-h-m* (“to regret” or “be sorry”) and *sh-û-b* (“to turn, return, repent”) to most commonly express conversion.<sup>53</sup> In the

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<sup>52</sup> Kim Siebenhüner writes that “This case study deals with the notion of “conversion” and its use as a research concept. It argues that our notion of conversion has a Christian genealogy that needs to be reflected, to be historicized, and, ultimately, to be broadened in order to adequately describe and characterize the variety of global conversion phenomena in the early modern period. ... Since other religious cultures like Judaism and Islam, too, provide specific terms to name and describe changes of religion, its claim as a universally applicable category is highly questionable.” Kim Siebenhüner, “Glaubenswechsel jenseits des Eurozentrismus Überlegungen zum Konversionsbegriff und zur Differenzierung frühneuzeitlicher Konversionsphänomene,” in *Religiöse Grenzüberschreitungen: Studien zu Bekehrung, Konfessions- und Religionswechsel* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 269.

<sup>53</sup> Ronald Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 8.

verbal form, both may be transitive or intransitive, and both are used in the Old Testament to refer to individuals, groups, and even God. *Shûb*, which can mean both turning to and turning from, each in both physical and metaphorical terms, is used in the Old Testament to denote repentance or rejecting sin. Notably, then, the Septuagint does not translate *shûb* to *metanoëō*, the Greek word used for conversion in the New Testament, but instead uses *epistrephō*, signifying a physical (not metaphorical) turning.<sup>54</sup> Witherup uses a passage from Jeremiah to reflect the many ways *sh-û-b* is used in the Old Testament:

*“God speaks to Jeremiah:*

*Tell them: Thus says the LORD:  
 When someone falls, does he not rise again?  
 if he goes astray (yashûb) does he not turn back (yashûb)?  
 Why do these people rebel (shôb‘bah)  
 with obstinate resistance (meshubah)?  
 Why do they cling to deceptive idols,  
 refuse to turn back (lashûb)?  
 I listen closely:  
 they speak what is not true;  
 No one repents (niḥam) of his wickedness,  
 saying, “What have I done!”  
 Everyone keeps on running his own course,  
 like a steed dashing into battle.”<sup>55</sup>*

Witherup notes that the roots *sh-û-b* and *n-ḥ-m* can both signify conversion in the sense of returning to God.<sup>56</sup> *Sh-û-b*, however, can signify a wide variety of meanings, from repentance to resistance to turning away from truth.<sup>57</sup> It resembles several Arabic verb roots in this sense, not least the most common term for conversion to Islam in medieval and modern Arabic sources, *aslama*.

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<sup>54</sup> Ronald Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 8-9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-20.

## Terminology of Conversion in the Qur'ān

In his 1979 essay, “Conversion to Early Islam,” Muhammad Shaban discusses the way conversion is described in/by the Qur'ān.<sup>58</sup> Shaban writes that the clearest description of conversion in the Qur'ān occurs in Sura 110, *al-Naṣr*, as *dakhala fī dīn Allah*, “entering God’s religion.”<sup>59</sup> The other words used in the context of conversion, Shaban notes, are *amana* and *aslama*. *Amana* means ‘to believe,’ and it is used rather straightforwardly to mean this in the Qur'ān. It is also used far more frequently than *aslama*. In contrast, *aslama* implies submission, as well as, Shaban writes, “to abandon something, to give something up, to let something loose entirely, to leave or desert someone, to abstain from aiding someone and throw him into destruction, to leave someone in the power of another who desired to kill or wound him, to become resigned or submissive.”<sup>60</sup> Shaban argues that *aslama*’s semantic range affected its usage in the Qur'ān—because of what he describes as the negative connotations of *aslama*, the Qur'ān describes the faithful as *mu'minūn*, not *muslimūn*.<sup>61</sup> There are many possible reasons for use of *mu'minūn* over *muslimūn*, not least Fred Donner’s aforementioned Believers thesis, discussed further below. Shaban’s argument is not completely convincing on its own—it reads as tautological—but the connotations of *aslama* with submission instead of belief in the pre- and earliest Islamic periods, whether these connotations are negative or not, cannot be totally ignored. Furthermore, while early Islamic sources such as the Qur'ān and *sunna* view monotheism as a superior belief system, based on content and the use of terms such as *ḥanīf* (monotheist, with positive connotations) and *mushrik* (polytheist, with negative connotations), it

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<sup>58</sup> Muhammad Shaban, “Conversion to Early Islam,” in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion, (London: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 24-29.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. Shaban’s source here is Ibn Manẓūr’s *Lisan al-Arab*, which was compiled much later than the Qur'ān.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

appears that conversion to monotheism among the Quraysh is associated with the Sabeans—witness the conversion of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph, being described as such by Ibn Ishaq, who describes one colleague’s response to his public conversion: “‘Umar has become a Sabean!” *Saba’*, Shaban argues, implies one is positioning oneself as the enemy of the community from which he came.<sup>62</sup>

Fred Donner’s work on the distinction between the terms *mu’min* and *muslim* during the early Islamic era has led me to consider the definition of the term “Muslim” to be not just connotatively ambiguous but also theologically ambiguous, especially in terms of its relationship to Christianity, until the end of the seventh century. “Muslim,” and the related verbal noun “Islam,” are used in the Qur’ān to describe submission to God, both pre-Islamic (as in the case of Abraham, the *muslim ḥanīf*, 3:67) and early Islamic, which in the Qur’ān seems to include Christians and Jews (3:52, 3:83, 29:46).<sup>63</sup> But the term *muslim* is not used nearly as much as the term *mu’min*, which, along with its plural *mu’minūn*, is used nearly a thousand times in the Qur’ān, to *muslim*’s seventy-five or so.<sup>64</sup> Nor are the two synonymous, at least not always. Donner cites Qur’ān 49:14, which states, “The Bedouins say: ‘We believe (*aman-na*). Say: You do not believe, but rather say: ‘We submit (*aslam-na*), for belief has not yet entered your hearts.’”<sup>65</sup> By the end of the seventh century C.E., this distinction may no longer have been relevant. Donner argues that the meaning of the term *muslim* shrank; whereas before it essentially meant ‘monotheist,’ by the end of the seventh century it applied to those who followed the Qur’ān and no longer applied to Christians and Jews. This transformation of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 24, referencing the *Sirat Rasul Allah* of Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham.

<sup>63</sup> Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 71.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 57-8.

language and the meanings/affiliations behind certain terms has a major effect on our understanding of conversion during this period. If the term for conversion is *aslama*, then a convert is a *muslim*. But if Christians and Jews were already considered *muslims*, and if simultaneously *aslama* also connoted political submission as well as religious, then we must look elsewhere for signifiers of conversion. The most obvious next choice is the *shahāda*, but this, too, was not consistent in wording in the early period, nor perhaps a consistently applied conversion ritual. Furthermore, or perhaps saving us from this nebulous mass of inconsistent terminology and practice, is the fact that Muslim conversion narratives weren't documented until well into the eighth century C.E. By then, we may feel more substantiated in using terms like *aslama/muslim* and the *shahāda* to discuss conversion.

### Ontological Conversions

Modern English-speaking Muslims often describe conversion to Islam as 'reversion,' following the doctrine that while everyone is born Muslim, not everyone is raised in or comes to know the faith. Thus, according to this view, converts actually 'revert back' rather than 'convert' to Islam. This concept works particularly well in light of Nicholas Marshall's theory of "ontological conversion," in which a narrative presents conversion as an inevitable outcome. He writes:

In an ontological conversion, the worldview created by the community seems to leave the convert no choice but to convert, because the convert is asked to become who he or she really is, i.e., a divine being. This defines the religious group as a central agent in the conversion process.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Augustine presents his own conversion to Christianity this way in his *Confessions*, for example. Nicholas Marshall, "Ontological Conversion: a Description and Analysis of Two Case Studies from Tertullian's *De Baptismo* and Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*," in Birgitte Secher Bøgh, ed. *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 102-3.

Marshall argues that in presenting the idea that conversion allows one to become their natural or divine self, the community creates a kind of permeable barrier. This is done to make conversion an attractive proposition.<sup>67</sup>

In early Islamic conversion narratives, ontological circumstances are sometimes present, but not always. In instances where a would-be convert is spiritually moved by hearing or reading scripture, or is the recipient of a miraculous sign or message, ontological conversion is, as intended, the only next step. Rawh al-Qurashī's conversion in Chapter Two, for example, is an ontological conversion, as is Waraqa b. Nufayl's conversion in the *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzāq (also covered in Chapter Two). But other narratives do not contain such precursors to the conversion event itself—not the conversion of the Christian tribes of Arabia and southern Syria in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, and certainly not the 'accidental' conversion of Elijah, the drunk wedding attendee who removes his *zunnār*, or the polemical writings in fear of mass conversions penned by eighth- and ninth-century religious leaders. Ontological conversion is a useful prism, but not the only way conversion narratives are presented in early Islam.

Karin van Nieuwkerk's study of female converts to Islam reveals a varied use of terms to describe conversion, though the idea of 'ontological conversion' remains pertinent to the stories of the women she interviews. She notes that the women spoke of their conversions not as 'converting,' but rather "'becoming Muslim,' taking *shahāda*' or 'embracing Islam.'"<sup>68</sup> Many used the term 'reversion' instead of 'conversion.' Van Nieuwkerk concludes that the term

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<sup>67</sup> Nicholas Marshall, "Ontological Conversion: a Description and Analysis of Two Case Studies from Tertullian's *De Baptismo* and Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*," in Birgitte Secher Bøgh, ed. *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 117.

<sup>68</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk, "'Islam Is Your Birthright' – Conversion, Reversion and Alternation: The Case of New Muslimas in the West," in Jan N. Bremmer, Wout J. van Bekkum and Arie L. Molendijk, eds. *Cultures of Conversions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 151.

‘conversion’ is inherently “an outsider’s perspective.”<sup>69</sup> More appropriate English phrases such as ‘embracing Islam,’ ‘reverting,’ or ‘becoming Muslim,’ though they may seem interchangeable to an ‘outsider,’ have completely different meaning to someone inside the faith. Thus, van Nieuwkerk argues, ‘conversion’ is only effective as a shorthand term when discussing religion beyond a Muslim context. Furthermore, she argues:

‘Conversion’ narratives are created backwards, that is, they are written at the time of or after becoming Muslim. ... In the process of telling and retelling their conversion experiences, a common model is created. The written stories become a format for others to use as a model for their testimonies. ... [For example, m]any other new Muslimas mention that they have always had problems understanding the concept of the Trinity and the fact that Jesus was the son of God.<sup>70</sup>

Van Nieuwkerk is describing autobiographical accounts, but her statement is also true of third-person narratives of both individuals and groups. Early Islamic conversion narratives, and the debates about conversion that took place in early Islamic Syria, created a template on which converts and those concerned about conversion could build.

### Creative Methodologies for Studying Conversion

The major study of conversion in medieval Islam, which this project began as a response to, is that of Richard Bulliet. In *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Bulliet examined several hundred individuals attested in biobibliographic dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*) and gravestone inscriptions in Nishapur and Isfahan in Iran, identifying

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<sup>69</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk, “‘Islam Is Your Birthright’ – Conversion, Reversion and Alternation: The Case of New Muslimas in the West,” in Jan N. Bremmer, Wout J. van Bekkum and Arie L. Molendijk, eds. *Cultures of Conversions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 155.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 158, see also 160-161.



cases in which the entrant's name was traditionally Muslim (e.g. Muḥammad) and had a traditionally Persian patronym (e.g. “son of Rustam”). In this scenario, he argued, the father (Rustam) converted and raised his son (Muḥammad) to be Muslim. Based on this assumption, he examined individuals’ death dates, calculated an average generation to be thirty-four years, and formulated a rate of conversion for the local population and Iran in general. He then took these results and, using other local sources and adjusting slightly for different regions, developed similar estimates for Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Spain. In Syria, his graph demonstrated that nearly fifty percent of the population had converted by the end of the eighth century C.E.—though this was based on one text, the *Shadharat al-Dhahab* of Ibn al-‘Imād, and shows an immediate crash to zero at around 830 C.E.<sup>71</sup> Bulliet argued that Ibn al-‘Imād’s entries prior to the ninth century were almost certainly all Arabian immigrants, not native Syrians, which would explain the crash. Thus, early conversion in Syria, at least among elites, would be almost nonexistent.<sup>72</sup>

Bulliet acknowledged that his results were speculative, and indeed, scholars have identified several problems with his methodologies since the study’s publication in 1979. The study’s sample size was small (469 of the six thousand or so genealogies available were examined) and consists of the most elite members of the population. Further, naming one’s child a traditionally Muslim name such as Muḥammad did not necessarily imply that one practiced Islam (nor did naming one’s child Rustam imply that one did not). Perhaps because of these factors, scholars have not attempted a quantitative study of conversion since. However, the study continues to be cited in discussions of conversion, often because it provides the clearest picture of the conversion rate in the late antique and early medieval periods.

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 104.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

In 1990 Michael Morony reviewed Bulliet's methods and identified strong and weak elements in his work.<sup>73</sup> He argued that Bulliet's work demonstrated the existence of an 'age of conversions,' when a sizeable portion of a newly 'Islamicized' region converted over the course of several centuries. Morony revised the proposed 'age of conversions' to somewhat later than Bulliet's projections, based on tenth- and eleventh-century C.E. source materials describing large numbers of conversions during the lifetimes of their writers.<sup>74</sup> Mercedes García-Arenal adapts the idea of an 'age of conversions' to medieval Muslim Spain and the Ottoman Empire in her article "Conversion to Islam: from the 'age of conversions' to the *millet* system."<sup>75</sup> She argues that conversion processes remained both incomplete and inconsistent in their demands of new converts well after the so-called 'age of conversions' was over.<sup>76</sup>

Bulliet has since published work updating his perspectives on conversion processes. In his introduction to *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, he distinguished between process and status. To him, process describes "the manner in which members of one religious community leave that community and are received into another."<sup>77</sup> In contrast, status "refers to the perception each community has of the other in a particular time and place." These are fundamentally linked. In this passage, Bulliet focuses on Islam and Christianity, arguing that both began with similar

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<sup>73</sup> Michael G. Morony, "The Age of Conversions: A Reassessment," in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 135-50.

<sup>74</sup> These sources include Mahmud b. 'Uthman's *Kitāb Firdaws al-Murshidiyyah fī Asrār al-Ṣamadiyyah*, ed. FM Meier (Leipzig, 1948), *passim* and especially p 197, and C.E. Bosworth, "The Early Islamic History of Ghur," *Central Asiatic Journal* v. (1961), 116-33.

<sup>75</sup> Mercedes García-Arenal, "Conversion to Islam: from the 'age of conversions' to the *millet* system," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. 2*, ed. Maribel Fierro, 586.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 587.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Bulliet, "Introduction." In *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 4 and 6-7.

“characteristics,” as he called them, and mass conversion from Christianity to Islam had a significant effect on both religions. This was not a zero-sum movement, in which Islam expanded at the direct expense of Middle Eastern Christianity. Rather, each religion developed boundaries in response to developments of the other.

Finally, Bulliet’s distinction between process and status requires an understanding that these things, too, are related:

Status is particularly important for the study of the Christian communities in Islamic lands for two reasons: because it indirectly reflects, but is much more abundantly documentable than process; and because the persistence, usually in partial or distorted form, of earlier statuses enters into the perception of status at any given time. One Christian cleric might buttress the faith of a dwindling flock by explaining the disaster of Muslim rule as a trial of faith or punishment ordained by God, while another might seek to prevent conversions by classing Islam as a Christian heresy like others his flock had long been cautioned against.... Status and process, therefore, are closely linked.<sup>78</sup>

We will see in future chapters exactly how status and process affect writing on conversion in early Islamic Syria and the Jazīra.

In 2007, Bulliet published an essay titled “Conversion as a Social Process,” in which he distinguished his understanding of ‘social’ conversion from ‘formal’ conversion. This article developed his comments on social conversion in his original 1979 work.<sup>79</sup> He has also published comments on conversion in his 2009 monograph, *Cotton, Climate and Camels in Early Iran: A*

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Bulliet, “Introduction.” In *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 8.

<sup>79</sup> Richard Bulliet, “Conversion as a Social Process,” in *Defining Islam: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London: Equinox, 2007), 323-331.

*Moment in World History*, and returns the topic in “The Conversion Curve Revisited,” in a recent publication.<sup>80</sup>

Johannes J.G. Jansen’s “The History of Islam in the Light of the Rational Choice Theory” demonstrates how good quantitative methodologies can go bad.<sup>81</sup> Using documented conversion rates among early Christians and modern Mormons, Jansen calculates a growth rate of forty percent every ten years among adherents to new religions.<sup>82</sup> Applying this methodology to early Islam, Jansen calculates a starting figure of at least 7,000: the number of men in the army as of 640 C.E. (a figure for which he regrettably fails to cite any sources). From this he argues Islam should have remained a minority religion until around 1000 C.E., though the sources do not reflect this. Further, in his view, Islam should have expanded much faster than early Christianity did, given the circumstances of each’s rise.

Jansen also notes that Stephen Humphreys thought that increasing conversion was the reason for the Abbasid revolution’s success—new converts tended to be pro-Abbasid (because of both Umayyad Arab elitism and regional location of converts in Khorasan, etc.) and therefore the revolution had numbers on its side.<sup>83</sup>

This is a creative but fundamentally flawed attempt to apply quantitative analysis to the problem of conversion, and clearly demonstrates how the extrapolation of estimated figures can be quite dangerous in historical studies. It has led to compounded inaccuracies for Bulliet, Jansen and others. If reliable data were to exist, scholars would have more opportunities to use

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<sup>80</sup> Richard Bulliet, “The Conversion Curve Revisited,” *Islamisation: Perspectives from History*, edited by A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), *passim*.

<sup>81</sup> Johannes J.G. Jansen, “The History of Islam in the Light of the Rational Choice Theory,” in Birgitte Secher Bøgh, ed., *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2014), 139-149.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-47.

<sup>83</sup> See Stephen Humphreys’ *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, 104-127, especially 111.

quantitative analysis, but as it stands, such work is often impossible to do or do well. In the formative period of Islam, we have two problems: a lack of reliable data and a lack of clarity regarding what conversion meant (for at least a century or so after the emergence of Islam).

On a large-scale sociological level, Sébastien Tank-Storper argues in “Le converti comme figure paradoxale de la stabilité religieuse” that increased conversion rates signify the stable establishment of a religion in a given region. The increasing number of conversions forces a religion and its authorities to reconstruct tenets of the faith to better satisfy its new practitioners. Though focused on the modern era, his methods and conclusions would also apply to early Islamic Syria (and Iraq).

Tank-Storper identifies “un processus de recombinaison du religieux que d'un réel processus de décomposition, processus de recombinaison passant notamment par la multiplication des conversions.”<sup>84</sup> (*more a process of recombination of the religious than a real process of decomposition, a recombination process including an increasing number of conversions.*) The idea of reform and religious recombination as related to increased conversions is particularly relevant.<sup>85</sup> Tank-Storper writes that, instead of conceptualizing conversion as commitments to something on offer from authorities, we should view them as something closer to negotiations—converts express mobility, autonomy and subjectivity in their actions, and religions shift with every new convert’s perspective and questions. They stabilize, so

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<sup>84</sup> Sébastien Tank-Storper, “Le converti comme figure paradoxale de la stabilité religieuse,” in *Dynamiques de Conversion: Modèles et Résistances*, ed. Béatrice Bakhouche, Isabelle Fabre, Vincente Fortier (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012), 20.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

to speak, only after a sizeable number of conversions have occurred to create a collective understanding of the religion, its beliefs, and its practices.<sup>86</sup>

Richard Eaton, like Tank-Storper, sees conversion of a population as a ““creative adaptation” of the unfamiliar to what is already familiar, a process in which the former may change to suit the latter.”<sup>87</sup> This, he argues, opposes the common Western understanding of conversion, which occurs at the hand of a missionary and whose object is the convert, largely passive in adapting to a new and unfamiliar religion. Furthermore, a new understanding of conversion involving something of a negotiation between human beings and what Eaton, via Melford Spiro, refers to as ‘superhuman beings,’ would require both to change. Eaton argues that “changes in the naming patterns of both humans and superhumans, in addition to self-ascription as reflected in census data, would appear to be our most reliable indices of religious change.”<sup>88</sup> In the context of name changes for superhumans, there are a variety of superlatives ascribed to God/Allah, and while many (including *Allah*) appear to have pre-Islamic attestations from both monotheistic and polytheistic cultures, conversion to Islam *after* roughly 650 C.E. does not appear to have had an effect on the names used for God. (The greatest source of names or superlatives for God also seems to be the earliest: the Qur’ān.)

Ultimately, it is impossible to discuss conversion movements without discussing how conversion affects the religion being converted *to*, and the one being converted *from*. Richard Eaton writes, “it would be wrong to view Islam as a monolithic essence that simply ‘expanded’

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<sup>86</sup> Sébastien Tank-Storper, “Le converti comme figure paradoxale de la stabilité religieuse,” in *Dynamiques de Conversion: Modèles et Résistances*, ed. Béatrice Bakhouché, Isabelle Fabre, Vincente Fortier (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012), 28-9.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Eaton, “Comparative History as World History: Religious Conversion in Modern India,” *Journal of World History* 8.2 (1997), 244.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-4.

across space, time, and social class, in the process assimilating great numbers of people into a single framework of piety.”<sup>89</sup>

As Eaton put it, “One may readily admit that societies continuously construct, reconstruct, and reconstitute themselves both socially and culturally, and that as a result no religion can be said to possess a fixed and unchanging essence.”<sup>90</sup> Further, he argues, “For the student of religious conversion movements, this proposition suggests that we can no longer conceptualize the phenomenon of conversion, as early generations did, in terms of the “spread” of an essentialized tradition from point A to point B—typically, from metropolis to periphery—as though it were a substance, like molasses or lava, flowing outward from some central point, engulfing and incorporating all that it passes over while itself remaining unchanged.”<sup>91</sup>

As we shall see, this rings true for early Islam as a religion and for early Islamic society and culture in Syria and the Jazīra. The understanding of what it meant to convert to Islam seems to have changed significantly, particularly during the first few centuries after the movement began, in regions where Islam first established a foothold: Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Mashriq (the east, here meaning areas of the caliphate roughly east of Egypt’s Fayyūm oasis). Major studies of conversion in the medieval period have been conducted on Iran,<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Richard Eaton, “Who Are the Bengal Muslims?” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 90-1. The problem conversion creates in kinship-based societies is also explored in Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke’s *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings*. Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke, eds. *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>90</sup> Richard Eaton, “Comparative History as World History: Religious Conversion in Modern India,” *Journal of World History* 8.2 (1997), 243-44.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), *passim*.

Egypt,<sup>93</sup> India,<sup>94</sup> central Asia,<sup>95</sup> and al-Andalus.<sup>96</sup> Yet scholars of early Islamic history are far from maintaining a consensus on the rate of conversion to Islam in Muslim-controlled lands, or how to study such a phenomenon. Even the basic question of how to define someone as Muslim remains an important topic of debate in the field.<sup>97</sup>

### Studies of Conversion and Related Phenomena in Early and Medieval Islam

There is no study singularly focused on conversion in early Islamic Syria to date, though very recently the topic has received some significant attention. In 2015, Michael Penn published *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians in the Early Muslim World*, which examined Syriac writing on early Islam in Syria. He also published a set of translations of some of the related works, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Source Book of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*.<sup>98</sup> Christian Sahner recently published “Swimming against the Current: Muslim Conversion to Christianity in the Early Islamic Period,” which examines early Muslim narratives of conversion to Christianity (this thesis also studies a few cases of Muslim conversion to Christianity).<sup>99</sup>

Thomas Carlson recently published “Contours of Conversion: The Geography of Islamization in

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<sup>93</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); Donald P. Little, “Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahrī Mamlūks, 692-755/1293-1354,” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39.3 (1976), 552-569; Maryann M. Shenoda, “Displacing Dhimmī, Maintaining Hope: Unthinkable Coptic Representations of Fatimid Egypt,” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007), 587-606; Maged Mikhail, *From Christian Egypt to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (London: IB Tauris, forthcoming).

<sup>94</sup> See previously mentioned works such as Richard Eaton, “Comparative History as World History: Religious Conversion in Modern India,” *Journal of World History* 8.2 (1997), 243-71.

<sup>95</sup> Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

<sup>96</sup> Janina Safran, *Defining Boundaries in al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Islamic Iberia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jessica Coope, *The Martyrs of Cordoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>97</sup> Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>98</sup> Michael Penn, *Envisioning Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>99</sup> Christian Sahner, “Swimming against the Current: Muslim Conversion to Christianity in the Early Islamic Period,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136.2 (2016), 265-284.



Syria, 600-1500.”<sup>100</sup> Islamization and conversion overlap significantly, of course, but the study of each often leads in very different directions. Carlson examines taxation and demographic information from medieval Syrian towns, combined with historical accounts and archaeological data up to and beyond the Crusader era. These recent publications suggest a renewed interest in the study of conversion in early Islamic Syria, and the materials one might use to do so. One hopes the interest will remain sustained.

But other than these texts, there are few studies of Islamization or conversion in early Islamic Syria. (There are, however, numerous studies of Christian and Jewish communities under Muslim rule.)<sup>101</sup> Outside of Syria, major studies on conversion to Islam exist, though they are few and far between. Notable examples include the work of Richard Bulliet on conversion in Iran; Tamer El-Leithy and Daniel Dennett on Egypt, and Janina Safran, Jessica Coope and several others on al-Andalus. Scholars have used a variety of literary sources, most of them in Arabic, of various genres—histories, biographical dictionaries, hagiographies, apocalypses, and polemical works, to name a few. Some scholars have examined non-literary written sources—inscriptions, legal documents such as fatwas and contracts, administrative and taxation manuals, and the like. Others have examined material evidence—including archaeological remains of monasteries, mosques, and the organization of early Muslim urban centers. Tamer El-Leithy’s 2005 Princeton PhD dissertation, “Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo,” examines conversion from Coptic Christianity to Islam in Egypt in the thirteenth through early sixteenth

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<sup>100</sup> Thomas Carlson, “Contours of Conversion: The Geography of Islamization in Syria, 600-1500,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135.4 (2015), 791-816.

<sup>101</sup> Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jack Tannous, “Making Incommensurables Speak” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011).

centuries, C.E. It ties conversion to Islamization, ritual, and tropes of suspicion, and provided a model for the present research on Syria and the Jazīra.

Maged Mikhail's *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* examines the rise of conversion to Islam among Egyptian Christians alongside a shift in spoken and literary use of Coptic and Greek to that of Arabic.<sup>102</sup> It also examines the effects of eighth-century legislation and tax revolts in Egypt on conversion of the population, and the use of polemical language to respond to social change. Mikhail's methodology is durable and he provides one of the clearest studies of conversion, and certainly the clearest on conversion in late antique and early medieval Egypt, in modern scholarship.

In Egypt as well as Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, Daniel Dennett examined the work of Muslim historians such as Baladhurī and Ṭabarī as well as non-Muslim scholars such as Theophanes and Michael the Syrian to determine the effect of the *jizya*, or poll tax, on local non-Muslim monotheistic (*dhimmī*) populations. He argues that taxation seems to have played a role, though an inconsistent one, in the conversion of early Muslims, whether wealthy or poor. In Syria he finds a number of different narratives on taxation, but concludes that there was an attempt to maintain the same or similar tax rates as the Byzantines. However, these conclusions are thrown into question by the fact that different historians he cites recorded different narrative accounts for the same location and event. Questions of regulation and taxation in relation to conversion will be addressed in Chapter Five. The most detailed early source we have for the Syria and Jazīra regions is the Chronicle of Zuqnān, which discusses both processes of

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<sup>102</sup> Maged Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming). Tamer el-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1294-1524 A.D." PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2005.

conversion and attitudes toward converts, and which will be examined in later chapters of this thesis.<sup>103</sup>

Other studies of medieval conversion to Islam have approached the issue with different methodologies and source materials. Some have identified connections between conversion and the loss of preexisting cultural signifiers such as language. In Egypt, for example, there seems to be a clear connection between the loss of constituents in the Coptic Church and rise in mosque attendees on one hand, and the loss of Coptic as a vernacular language, replaced with Arabic, on the other. Donald Little uses literary evidence in the form of apocalyptic texts by Coptic clergy, who lament these simultaneous phenomena,<sup>104</sup> alongside tax registers (Christians and Jews were required to pay more in taxes than Muslim residents). Similar apocalyptic texts exist in the Syriac tradition. Sidney Griffith has examined some of these texts and has identified a similar pattern: the loss of local languages to Arabic alongside a lament among clergy of lost (or potentially lost) Christian practitioners.<sup>105</sup> This information has not yet been examined in the context of increasing rates of conversion to Islam.

In studies of al-Andalus, Mayte Penelas and David Wasserstein both responded directly to Bulliet's thesis by examining onomastic evidence in light of an eleventh-century text by Ibn al-'Aṭṭār, *Kitāb al-wathā'iq wa-l-sijillāt*, which provides instructions on how to construct one's genealogy. In the case of an ancestor who was a convert, Al-'Aṭṭār writes that one should identify the convert as "al-Islāmī" and his father, if he had "one of the awkward names of the

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<sup>103</sup> Chronicle of Zuqnin, 173.

<sup>104</sup> Sāwīrus b. al-Muqaffa', *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (tr. B. Evetts), Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1904-1915, *passim*.

<sup>105</sup> Sidney Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic: The Languages of the Monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997): 27.

non-Arabs” should be listed as “‘Abd Allāh,” for, he says, we are all servants of God.<sup>106</sup> Both Penelas and Wasserstein concluded that Bulliet’s methodology faces even greater challenges in al-Andalus than in Iran. Other scholars of al-Andalus have studied conversion from a qualitative point of view: Janina Safran has examined polemical works and legal documents addressing conversion among Christians, Jews, and Muslims to analyze social differentiation and political boundary-making in her 2013 book, *Defining Boundaries in al-Andalus*, and Jessica Coope has examined conversion in relation to both interfaith marital contracts and polemical writings by both Christians and Muslims.<sup>107</sup>

Janina Safran has used legal texts to identify how Muslims and non-Muslims distinguished themselves from one another in medieval al-Andalus. She noted that intermarriage and conversion among Christians, Jews and Muslims yielded complicated interwoven relationships resulting in ambiguous legal circumstances, which, according to the evidence gathered, often required a jurist’s involvement to decipher.<sup>108</sup> Another approach on al-Andalus is that of Mikel de Epalza, who examined the decline of churches as influential social institutions after the Muslim conquest. Epalza argues, *contra* Bulliet, that most of the conversion of Muslim Spain to Islam occurred shortly after its conquest in 711 C.E., and was complete by 800 C.E.<sup>109</sup> Epalza also suggests that something of a hybrid of Muslim and Christian cultural and religious practices might have been followed by Spaniards for quite some time after the conquest,

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<sup>106</sup> Mayte Penelas, “Some Remarks on Conversion to Islam in al-Andalus,” *Al-Qantara* 23:1 (2002), 193-200; David Wasserstein, “Where Have All the Converts Gone? Difficulties in the Study of Conversion to Islam in al-Andalus,” *Al-Qantara* 33:2 (2012), 325-342.

<sup>107</sup> Janina Safran, *Defining Boundaries in al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Islamic Iberia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jessica Coope, *The Martyrs of Cordoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>108</sup> Janina Safran, “Identity and Differentiation in Ninth-Century al-Andalus,” *Speculum* 76 (2001): 78.

<sup>109</sup> Mikel de Epalza, “Mozarabs: An Emblematic Christian Minority in Islamic al-Andalus,” in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. S.K. Jayyusi (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 149-70.

particularly naming practices (both Latin and Arabic).

Robert Hoyland has examined non-Muslim sources to provide an aggregation and assessment of non-Muslim writings on early Islam called *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*. Hoyland examined major texts in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Persian as well as in less common languages such as Armenian, Georgian, and Chinese, that discuss early Islam. The text provides a view of how early Muslims in different regions appeared to the non-Muslims whose lands they had just conquered, and a comprehensive presentation of potential sources on conversion outside of the Muslim tradition. The five/six-volume *Muslim-Christian Relations* series, published by Brill, provides a comprehensive overview of sources on conversion in Syria and elsewhere, as well as many other topics. *Muslim-Christian Relations, 600-900 C.E. (Vol. 1)*, edited by Barbara Roggema and David Thomas, is incredibly useful for identifying primary sources that discuss conversion among Muslims and Christians in early Islamic Syria, in a number of different languages.

Jack Tannous's 2010 dissertation, *Syria from Byzantium to Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak*, also addresses conversion among Christians in Late Antique Syria. His discussion of conversion focuses on Arabic, Syriac and Greek literary sources, and is part of a larger study of cultural and intellectual continuity in the Eastern Mediterranean, centered on greater Syria under Byzantine and Islamic rule. His findings on Christian conversion to Islam in Syria demonstrate a remarkable amount of continuity from Late Antique Byzantine culture into the medieval Islamic era, particularly via written Syriac.

In "Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence: Ninth-Century Baghdad," Wadi Haddad argues that a lack of knowledge about the Christian faith in rural areas of the new

caliphate, as well as differences between sects, eased the idea and reality of transition from Christianity to Islam on the part of converts—especially if financial or social benefits were to be gained.<sup>110</sup> But persecution was not a factor, for the most part—with the exception of a few caliphs or local amīrs who sought to promote their piety by putting onerous restrictions or hardships on the population.<sup>111</sup>

Haddad argues that interactions between Muslim and Christian communities in Baghdad were common by the ninth century C.E., as were missionary efforts on the part of individual Muslims:

Contact between the Christian and Muslim communities by the ninth century appears to have become widespread and the Qur’anic injunction to spread the faith by inviting humanity to enter into Islam was taken seriously by Muslims in various walks of life. The attempt to convert people of the Book was not mitigated by what is usually described as Islam’s acceptance of Christians and Jews as fellow believers in the one God.<sup>112</sup>

We see similar patterns reflected in ninth-century texts on conversion coming from north and west of Baghdād, in the Jazīra and in Syria.

In *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, Michael Penn examines Syriac sources from the rise of Islam to the mid-ninth century C.E., identifying the ways in which Syriac sources view Muslims and themselves. Penn uses the phrase “supercessionist religion” to describe Islam in the view of Syriac Christians.<sup>113</sup> The last twenty or so pages of his monograph are devoted to conversion. Penn argues in support of the existence of “an ongoing debate between those who wanted to shore up confessional distinctions and those

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<sup>110</sup> Wadi Z. Haddad, “Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence: Ninth-Century Baghdad,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 34..

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>113</sup> Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 56.

less concerned with a clear divide between Christian church and Muslim *umma* (community),” one that lasted at least into the ninth century.<sup>114</sup> My review of the Syriac sources suggests the same—as do, quite often, the Arabic sources. If there is a distinction between the two camps Penn creates, then the purveyors of conversion narratives would in theory belong to the former—those concerned with confessional boundaries. This may be true of polemicists who associate mass conversions with the apocalypse. But writers who document individual narratives often do not fall easily into either camp. They often examine the confessional boundary closely, wherever it lies at that moment, but their interest in it lies in where the boundary exists at the moment of conversion, and not where it should be or once was. Those most interested in highlighting differences were often the religious authorities themselves. Political authorities and ordinary people were far more comfortable with cross-confessional ambiguities (while the religious authorities were perhaps more comfortable with ambiguities within the boundaries of the faith).

Penn argues that while most Syrian Christians eventually did convert, during the early Islamic period that process might have been all but imperceptible. Indeed, during the eighth and early ninth centuries C.E., the Syriac Church of the East was actually expanding rapidly, incorporating former Zoroastrians from Persia, as well as new converts and dioceses from India, China, Central Asia and Yemen. The Muslim conquest of Chalcedonian-dominated Byzantine territory may have encouraged intra-Christian conversion from Chalcedonian beliefs to those of the Church of the East. Islam and conversion to it might not have been noticed, or attended to, the way it would have been without these mitigating factors.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 143.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

Penn discusses Donner's "From Believers to Muslims" article and book (*Muhammad and the Believers*) as representing a paradigm shift in our understanding of the early Muslim community, especially vis-à-vis its confessional boundaries (or lack thereof).<sup>116</sup> He also references the Qur'ān, the Dome of the Rock, and various Syriac materials to "suggest that the prevalent image of early Christianity and early Islam as fairly separate religious entities is anachronistic not just for the early seventh century but also for long afterward."<sup>117</sup>

Based on the studies examined in this chapter, we may argue that conversion in a religion's formative era, and certainly in early Islam, was less a shift from Religion A to Religion B and more a negotiation involving the shaping of religion, individuals and communities around one another. This was certainly the case for early Christianity just as it was for early Islamic Syria. In subsequent chapters, we will see these negotiations manifest in various ways in the writings and materials left behind by Muslims and Christians in early Islamic Syria.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 180.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>118</sup> Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 313.



## Chapter Two:

### Historical Representations of Conversion in Early Islamic Syria and the Jazīra

*“Why, in the abundant medieval Arabic literature devoted to the religious community of Islam, is there so little information on conversion to that religion? How can one explain the peculiar types of information that do appear? Will it ever be possible to write a proper history of conversion to Islam in the medieval period?”<sup>119</sup>*

This chapter will address the shift in religious identities and boundaries that occurred in seventh-, eighth- and early ninth-century Syria and the Jazīra after the Muslim conquests. In order to do so, I will examine Syriac and Arabic historical sources that discuss conversion (whether directly or indirectly) written by Christian and Muslim scholars in Syria and the Jazīra from roughly 640-850 C.E. I will identify common terminology and tropes that emerge in discussions of conversion in these sources, and what the usage of such terms and tropes can tell scholars about conversion to and from Islam and Christianity in Syria and the Jazīra during this time period. I am particularly interested in how conversion was conceived of by these sources’ writers, how it was discussed, and (to the extent we can determine it) how significant conversion between Christianity and Islam was in greater Syria and the Jazīra during the first two centuries after the Muslim conquests.

If, as most studies of conversion suggest, Syrians and Jazīrans did not convert in large numbers during the first hijrī century, then the change in attitudes we see among Muslim leaders towards Christian Syrian and Jazīran populations during this same time period is noteworthy. As we shall see, several categories of evidence suggest that religious identities and boundaries

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<sup>119</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, “Conversion Stories in Early Islam,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 123.

among monotheists were quite fluid, and the distinction between Christians and Muslims was arguably the blurriest.

Among the materials on conversion in early Islamic Syria, one of the most interesting categories consists of conversion narratives, always written not by the convert him- or herself but by members of the community that either lost or gained a member. Different types of conversion narratives carry different forms of meaning. Individual, lengthy conversion narratives are often intended to provide an explanation for an individual's psychological condition at the time of his or her conversion, and possibly to offer a persuasive model for future converts. They portray the individual's pre-conversion lifestyle as immoral, his conversion as deeply spiritual or even miraculous, and his deeds and lifestyle after conversion as courageous, pious or both, often depicting him as confronting his previous faith's authorities.

Short, incidental references in historical texts to conversion of individuals or groups, on the other hand, may serve as indicators of the perceived inevitability of large-scale religious transformation. References to conversion or temptation to convert in order to secure material benefit such as tax relief are intended to portray non-religious motivations for conversion as worldly and sinful, and thus to dismiss converts in these situations as insincere religious subjects. These reports of conversion for material incentives reflect a perception that many of the faithful would be easily wooed to a competing faith by socioeconomic incentives.

The inclusion of conversion narratives in historical or other texts carries political motivations—either demonstrations of power and pride (for the converted-to group) or expressions of fear (for the converted-from group). Agendas in historical writing may be less obvious than those in polemical and apocalyptic tracts, but they certainly exist. Many of these writers were court historians, monks, or religious leaders, and all of them may be considered

intellectual and often religious elites. Their writings will reflect their societal positions, educations, and religious motivations.

Conversions to Islam are portrayed differently by Christian and Muslim writers, of course, but so are those written by scholars of different Christian sects. For Christian authors, the Christian sectarian divide seems to have mattered more than whether the imperial ruler was Christian, Muslim or Zoroastrian: calamities are just as often blamed on opposing sects as they are on Muslims, for instance. The East Syrian author John bar Penkāyē, writing in the 680s, who blames the misfortunes of his day on the dominance of Chalcedonian theology, writes:

As long as pagan kings ruled, all our ranks were properly conducted because, on account of persecutors, the lax and dissolute were not allowed to remain among us...But after there was relief and believing kings took control of the Roman government, then corruption and perplexity entered the churches. Creeds and councils multiplied because every year they made a new creed. Rest and peace brought them great loss.<sup>120</sup>

It is possible to identify trends in describing conversion (or accounts containing religious elements with implications for conversion) by Syrian and Jazīran historians writing between the 640s and 850s. As such, I have divided early Islamic Syrian and Jazīran historical writing on conversion into two different periods: that of the first, roughly spanning the Rashidūn, Umayyad and early ‘Abbasid periods, from 640-770 C.E.; and the second overlapping with what one might call the High ‘Abbasid period, from 770 to roughly 850 C.E. There is a significant gap in the literature in the first half of the eighth century, and indeed before roughly 770 C.E. there is no extant Muslim historical writing on conversion, and very little Christian writing on conversion in

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<sup>120</sup> Alphonse Mingana, *Sources Syriaques I. Mšiḥa-Zkha, Bar-Penkāyē (texte)* (Leipzig, 1908), 178. Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 92.

relation to Islam. Prior to roughly 700 C.E., there is hardly any Christian source that identifies Islam as a distinct religious movement.<sup>121</sup>

There are a small number of tropes we find among all categories of conversion narratives: Muslim and Christian, seventh century through ninth century. These include the idea of martyrdom for one's faith;<sup>122</sup> miraculous events associated with conversion (whether to or from the faith of the author/scribe or intended audience);<sup>123</sup> conversion in the 'wrong' direction from the perspective of the author/scribe or intended audience;<sup>124</sup> religious and political authority figures as antagonists in conversion narratives;<sup>125</sup> and perhaps most importantly, what read in the twenty-first century as blurred or inaccurate confessional boundaries between Christianity and Islam.<sup>126</sup>

This study uses Christian and Muslim sources from Syria and the Jazīra (northern Mesopotamia) nearly exclusively, as they would be the closest thing to direct witnesses of conversion in those regions, which constitute the area in which Syriac was a literary and cultural touchstone. It also focuses on histories that were written during the first and second hijrī centuries, an era that I believe reflects the formative—and thus, in my view, still somewhat confessionally fluid—era of the new Islamic religious movement. Thus, this documentation is as near to the events they describe as we are ever likely to have, and even writers who were not

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<sup>121</sup> Gerrit Reinink, "The Beginnings of Syriac Apocalyptic Literature in Response to Islam," *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993), 165-187.

<sup>122</sup> Found in the Chronicle of Zuqnīn, the Martyrdom of Anthony/Rawḥ al-Qurashī, and the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq, to name a few.

<sup>123</sup> These may be positive or negative signs. See the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, the Zuqnīn Chronicle, the Martyrdom of Anthony/Rawḥ al-Qurashī, the Life of Timothy, the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq, and Wāqidī's *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*.

<sup>124</sup> As found in Sebeos, the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, the Martyrdom of Anthony/Rawḥ, the Life of Timothy, and the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq.

<sup>125</sup> As found in Ishō'Yahb III's letters, the writings of John bar Penkāyē, the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, the Chronicle of Zuqnīn, Theophanes' Chronographia, the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq, and the maghazi texts of Wāqidī and 'Abd al-Razzāq.

<sup>126</sup> In Ishō'Yahb III's letters, the Maronite Chronicle, Sebeos, John bar Penkāyē, the Chronicle of Zuqnīn, Theophanes' Chronographia, Thomas of Margā, Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, and 'Abd al-Razzāq's *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*.

contemporary to the period which they write of could rely on the fact that only a short amount of time had passed since the events they described, and thus their material was less likely to have been altered or reinterpreted during the time lapse between occurrence and documentation. Though we are not looking for eye-witness accounts or direct proof of “what really happened,” historical documentation that comes from the same period as the events it covers can give us an indication of how those events were viewed when they were purported to have happened: thus, they give us a window into then-contemporary framing of historical and then-current events. For Muslim sources, an attempt to preserve original viewpoints from a particular moment in time is, of course, also the point of an *isnad*, but in the earliest Islamic period even the *isnad* was not an established documentary norm in Muslim sources—for awhile, at least, eyewitnesses were still alive to report their version of events directly.

Even when writing about events that occurred before their lifetimes, both Muslim and Christian Syrian and Jazīran scholars could draw on local collective memory, which, despite usually being of a verbal and anecdotal nature often preserves more detail and context surrounding historical events than did sources documented by outsiders. Accuracy is not guaranteed, as in any case of historical recollection, but certainly a local view of recent historical events is likely to preserve both more detail, a more accurate representation of events, and an interpretation that more closely reflects local culture, custom, ritual, and social landscape.

#### Historical Documentation of Conversion and Related Phenomena, 640-770 C.E.

In my examination of the first period, from 640-770 C.E., I have focused on the writings of three anonymous sources from roughly the 640s-670s, as well as those of the Patriarch Ishō‘Yahb III of Adiabene (d. 659), John bar Penkāyē (fl. 686-693), and, in an effort to provide a

more complete picture of the early period, the Armenian patriarch Sebeos (fl. 660s). One may note that this periodization declares its endpoint at 770, but all of the early sources are listed as written in the 600s. It is possible that sources such as the anonymous Maronite Chronicle were written as late as the 720s, though it seems more likely to have been written in the 660s or 670s. due to the level of detail it provides about the late 660s and the lack of commentary on the Maronites' split with the Byzantine church, which occurred in the 680s.<sup>127</sup> Thus there is a gap in the historical record on conversion in Syria and the Jazīra of as much as seventy-five years prior to the 770s, when a flourishing of writing on conversion began to occur (at least based on the source materials we have or know existed). The lack of source material for such a long period suggests that perhaps conversion was not an issue of popular or religious concern during this era. As it spans the latter half of the Umayyad caliphate and the first twenty years of 'Abbasid rule, perhaps Syrian Muslim scholars were indeed preoccupied with other faith-related matters, such as the development of Muslim theological doctrine and the negotiation of religious authority. Other factors could also matter—the oral nature of historical transmission in early Islamic society; the supposed 'Abbasid cleansing of Umayyad-era material from the historical record; even the use of Greek instead of Syriac, or the emigration of Syrian elites to Byzantine territory after the Muslim conquests, could have affected the transmission of the historical record on conversion (among other innumerable circumstances).

What little we have of historical writing from this era reflects the development of an understanding of the Muslim community in relation to the religious communities with which it interacted, comments on the frequency (or lack thereof) of conversion from one religion to another, and a sense of the implications of identifying oneself as a member of a particular faith

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<sup>127</sup> See Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 56.

and sect. It also demonstrates a development in trends of historical writing. These divisions are by no means hard and fast—historical writing does not cleave neatly into categories. But they may assist us in understanding trends, local and temporally-bound collective memory, and the socio-political concerns of the day.<sup>128</sup>

Many of our earliest non-Muslim sources are anonymous, and speak only briefly about the movement before returning to a focus on other subjects. Arabians had been known for centuries among Syrians as trading partners and, in recent decades, as vassals of either the Persians or the Byzantines in the wars that had been occurring, on and off, since the sixth century. Thus raids by groups from the south and southwest were not unheard of; why should these be any different? But many writers do note a religious impetus behind this migration, one that was emphatically monotheistic, Abrahamic, and evocative of both Judaism and Christianity in its narrative and ritual signifiers.

Generally, the 640s through much of the 700s demonstrate an attempt by non-Muslim historians to understand what the new religious movement from the Arabian Peninsula was, how to classify it and relate it to what they already knew, and how its leadership structure was organized. It is important to note that, during this period, we see essentially no Muslim historical writing. Documentation of *ḥadīth* transmission or *sīra* and *maghāzī* literature had only just begun in this period, though the source material we now have often focuses on this particular window of time.

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<sup>128</sup> The Byzantine-Sasanian wars loom in the background of any study of the seventh-century Near East. Heraclius's battles resonated with scholars for centuries and surely colored Syrian writers' views of the Arab raids. But what of Arabian religions? Could the well-known narrative of Christianity's arrival in Arabia and the deserts to its north relate to the association of the early Muslim conquests with a heretical sect of Christianity, as the Patriarch Ishō'Yahb III writes of it, or an odd form of Judaism, as the Armenian patriarch Sebeos or the Greek historian Theophanes write? We know that Arabian Christianity and Judaism were local history in the Hijaz; it is less clear whether Syrians also knew of them, or whether there was any shared understanding of Arab monotheism, or Arab religions, in seventh-century Syria.

The terminology used to describe the movement is distinctive. In Syriac the term ‘*ṭayyāyē*’ (meaning, originally, a member of the Ṭayy’ tribe, but by the seventh century referring more generally to groups from the Arabian Peninsula) is most often used, though some of the earliest sources are more specific. One of our earliest sources, from around 640 C.E., uses *ṭayyāyē d-Mḥmd*, and Ishō‘yahb III uses *ṭayyāyē mhaggrē*; eventually *mhaggrē* or *mhaggrāyē* became the common Syriac terminology applied to Muslims. *Ṭayyāyē*, *sarakenoi* (Saracen), *hagarēnoi/hagrāyē* (Hagarene), and *Bnai Ishma’l* descendents of Ismā‘l/Ishmā‘l) were used prior to Islam to describe Arabians from the peninsula and desert regions north of it. All but one of these terms (Saracen) clearly indicates a common Near Eastern understanding of Arabian genealogy as either tribal or biblical or both. The references to ‘Muḥammad’s Arabians’ (*ṭayyāyē*) and ‘Muhājir Arabians’ both use new descriptors to distinguish them from other Arabian populations.<sup>129</sup>

We may note a developing boundary between Syrian Christians and Muslims, from a nebulous unclear understanding of difference on both sides—though what, and to what degree, are unspecified. We may also identify minor apocalyptic elements incorporated into a chronicle format (apocalyptic in other formats will be discussed in Chapter 5). In this era taxes also seem to be a major factor in conversion rates. Some of this discussion could be polemical—John bar Penkāyē states that different tax rates present a major ‘temptation’ for Christians.<sup>130</sup> On the other

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<sup>129</sup> For lack of a more specific term I will replace *ṭayyāyē* with English ‘Arabians’ where necessary. The most common rendering into English is ‘Arabs,’ which will be noted in the use of other translations, and which seems fundamentally inaccurate after the publication of Peter Webb’s *Imagining the Arabs*, which argues that the term ‘Arab’ was not used in Arabic to denote people from the Arabian Peninsula and the deserts to the north of it until well after the Muslim conquests. See also Fergus Millar, *Religion, Language and Community in the Near East: Constantine to Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), for further discussion of Syriac terminology related to Arabian bedouins.

<sup>130</sup> Alphonse Mingana, *Sources Syriaques I. Mšīḥa-Zkha, Bar-Penkaye (texte)* (Leipzig, 1908), 179; Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 92.



hand, the *Chronicle of Zuqnān* discusses conversion motivated by taxes at length, and there seems to be no agenda in its treatment of the issue, other than to document the misery such a burden imposed. One of the earliest and most common complaints about Muslim rulers describes the census-taking efforts of several caliphs, and the resultant effect of heavy taxes on the population shortly afterward. Some works compare the way non-Muslims were taxed before and after the census, and express discontent with apparently arbitrary changes in tax policy for *dhimmīs*. The perceived relationship between conversion and taxation continued and indeed increased in the ‘Abbasid era.

Common tropes found during these documented early encounters include the following: conversion to or encounters with Islam as associated with calamity;<sup>131</sup> conversion associated with weakness on the part of the convert, and particularly conversion associated with tax benefits;<sup>132</sup> Mu‘āwiya;<sup>133</sup> preoccupation with faiths or social dangers other than Islam;<sup>134</sup> and most importantly, unspecific descriptions of Muslims or blurred or inaccurate descriptions of confessional boundaries between Christianity and Islam.<sup>135</sup>

### Thomas the Presbyter

Our earliest sources make no explicit mention of conversion—indeed, they merely document the first local encounters with the Arabian religious émigrés. The first indication we have of a specific group of Arabians is in two anonymous accounts, one from roughly 637 C.E.

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<sup>131</sup> See the anonymous chronicle of 637, the account sometimes attributed to Thomas the Presbyter, and the account of John bar Penkāyē.

<sup>132</sup> See the letters of Ishō‘Yahb III and the account of John bar Penkāyē.

<sup>133</sup> In the Maronite Chronicle and the account of John bar Penkāyē.

<sup>134</sup> In Ishō‘Yahb III’s letters and John bar Penkāyē.

<sup>135</sup> In the Maronite Chronicle, the letters of Ishō‘Yahb III, and the account of John bar Penkāyē.

and the other from around 640, the latter sometimes attributed to Thomas the Presbyter.<sup>136</sup> One of the most important elements of the earlier text is its use of the phrase “we saw,” a reference to direct witness of the Muslim conquest of the region; the record is a mere note written on a book of gospels.<sup>137</sup> The text also notes that the [lacuna]<sup>138</sup> of Muḥammad (*tayyāyē d-Mḥmd*) killed several people throughout Palestine and southern Syria and pitched camp beside Damascus.

Thomas the Presbyter writes of “a battle between the Romans and the Arabians of Muḥammad (*tayyāyē d-Mḥmd*) in Palestine twelve ‘miles’ east of Gaza.”<sup>139</sup> Several Romans fled, though the text says a patriarch named BRYRDN was killed, as were 4,000 Palestinian villagers. The *tayyāyē* invaded Syria and Persia; it notes specifically that they went to Mardīn and killed several monks in the monasteries.<sup>140</sup> The specification of the *tayyāyē* as “Muḥammad’s Arabians” in both texts is noteworthy, as is the comment about killing monks, but there is no discussion of the religion practiced by the *tayyāyē d-Mḥmd*.

### The Maronite Chronicle

The *Maronite Chronicle*, another anonymous source, was probably written in the 660s or 670s, and almost certainly prior to the 690s, the approximate time by which Muslim leaders broke permanently with the lingering belief that Christians and Jews would eventually accept

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<sup>136</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 118-120, and Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>137</sup> *Chronica Minora II*, ed. E.-W. Brooks (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1960), 75.

<sup>138</sup> Hoyland has suggested *tayyoye d-* (in his translation, ‘Arabs of’), *Seeing Islam*. Palmer notes that this phrase is not certain; the first word is missing and the second is not completely clear, though Brooks writes M[w]ḥmd without noting any uncertainty in the reading. 2.

<sup>139</sup> Chron. 724, in *Chronica Minora II*, ed. E.-W. Brooks (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1960), 135.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. The chronicler uses the terms “Ishmaelites,” “Hagarenes” and “Tayyaye,” and references the earthquake in June AG 940 (629 C.E.). One month later, in July, Heraclius and Shahrvaraz met and signed a peace treaty. Five years later, in AG 945 (so 634 C.E.), “On Friday, 4 February, at the ninth hour, there was a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of Muḥammad in Palestine twelve ‘miles’ east of Gaza.”

Islam as a reformed Abrahamic monotheism. It ends with the year 664 and may very well have been written shortly afterward. Like many chronicles from this era, the text covers events such as the first fitna in an extremely cursory way. It also notes major geological events, such as the severe earthquake in AG 970 (659 C.E.) in Palestine.<sup>141</sup>

The single extant manuscript of the seventh-century *Maronite Chronicle* is quite early—from the eighth or ninth century C.E.<sup>142</sup> It documents a theological debate among Christians, moderated by the caliph Mu‘āwiya:

“[In 659] on a Friday in June, at the second hour, there was a violent earthquake in Palestine, and many places collapsed. ... The bishops of the Jacobites, Theodore and Sabūkht came to Damascus and held an inquiry into the Faith with the Maronites in the presence of Mu‘awiya. When the Jacobites were defeated, Mu‘awiya ordered them to pay 20,000 denarii and commanded them to be silent. Thus there arose the custom that the Jacobite bishops should pay that sum of gold every year to Mu‘awiya, so that he would not withdraw his protection and let them be persecuted by the members of the (Orthodox) Church.”<sup>143</sup>

There is no discussion of conversion and no Muslim participant in this debate. It indicates, as do so many sources, that Mu‘āwiya was not interested in proselytization; rather, he would seem to almost consider himself Christian, or at the very least interested in promoting religious beliefs and practices favored by both Christians and early Muslims (based, in this case, mainly on Qur’ānic references to Christianity). Further descriptions of Mu‘āwiya corroborate this theory:

“In AG 971 [660 or 661], Constans’s 18<sup>th</sup> year, many Arabs gathered at Jerusalem and made Mu‘awiya king and he went up and sat down on Golgotha; he prayed there, and went to Gethsemane and went down to the tomb of the blessed Mary to pray in it... In

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<sup>141</sup> The Maronite Chronicle, in *Chronica Minora II*, ed. E.-W. Brooks (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1960), 69-70.

<sup>142</sup> David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol. 1: 600-900 C.E.*, 146; see also Elias El-Hāyek, “Struggle for Survival: The Maronites of the Middle Ages,” 407-21. The Maronites originated in plains of Orontes, and moved to Mt. Lebanon area in the seventh century C.E. (and were only formally recognized in 938), but came into existence as followers of Maron (d. 410 C.E.).

<sup>143</sup> The Maronite Chronicle, in *Chronica Minora II*, ed. E.-W. Brooks (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1960), 70; Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 30-31.

July of the same year the emirs and many Arabs gathered and proffered their right hand to Mu‘āwīya. Then an order went out that he should be proclaimed king in all the villages and cities of his dominion and that they should make acclamations and invocations to him. He also minted gold and silver, but it was not accepted, because it had no cross on it.”<sup>144</sup>

The details in this excerpt suggest that the population remained comfortably Christian throughout Mu‘āwīya’s reign, and that he exerted little or no pressure on them to convert. On the other hand, his minting of coins without crosses could indicate an intention to shift certain Christian viewpoints, such as the idea of Jesus dying on the cross (an erroneous belief according to the Qur’ān), to be more in line with early Muslim beliefs, which held that Jesus was a prophet and Mary, his mother, was therefore accorded an elevated position in Islam. More generally, Mu‘āwīya’s policies seem to reflect an early Umayyad conceptualization of Christianity (or certain forms of it) as a manifestation of true Abrahamic monotheism in need of a handful of specific theological reforms laid out in the Qur’ān—a belief Mu‘āwīya seemed to think would popularize among Christians if he promoted the similarities between local forms of Christianity and the monotheism laid out in the Qur’ān.

### Ishō‘Yahb III

The collected letters of Patriarch Ishō‘Yahb III of Adiabene (628-59 C.E., Syriac), found in Thomas of Margā’s *Ktābā d-rishane* and other later texts, are historical documents in that they narrate local events and Ishō‘Yahb’s thoughts on the conquests and the new religious movement

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<sup>144</sup> Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 31-32.

they brought with them.<sup>145</sup> In Letter 14, to Simeon of Revardashir, Ishō‘yahb denounces Christians who convert to the new religion (which he identifies as a distinct religion, unlike most other Syriac writers from the seventh century) financial benefit as ‘weak,’ and praises those who ‘praise our faith’ (which could mean Christianity in general or more specifically East Syrian Christianity). This is the earliest Syriac reference we have of conversion to the new religious movement. Yet Ishō‘Yahb does not denounce those who convert under pressure. As Herman Teule notes, Ishō‘yahb suggests the movement’s views on Christ would be more compatible with East Syrian Christology than with Miaphysite views.<sup>146</sup>

Muslims are first mentioned in the context of Ishō‘Yahb’s encouragement of his own followers to be more zealous in faith in light of Miaphysite attacks. He refers to them as *ṭayyāyē mhaggrē* and argues against the apparently widely-held belief that the Miaphysite attacks were occurring at the behest of these new rulers. If they are, he writes, East Syrians should persuade them otherwise.<sup>147</sup> This might be the earliest use of the Syriac *mhaggrē* to describe Muslims; the corresponding Greek term, *magaritai*, is first documented in a bilingual Greek-Arabic text dated 643 C.E./22 A.H., written by the Muslim leader of Egypt. The Greek and Syriac both seem to have been adapted from the Arabic *muhājir*. Note that the Syriac is not indicative of ‘Hagarene,’ which existed in both Greek and Syriac (*hagarēnoi/hagrāyē*).

References to the Arabians as descendants of Hagar or Ismā‘īl long predated Islam.

*Mhaggrē*, in contrast, emerged after the conquests from increased interaction with Muslims, who

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<sup>145</sup> *Ishō‘yahb Patriarchae III liber epistularum*, ed. R. Duval, 2 vols, Paris, 1904-5 (CSCO 11 247-55 and 12 71-4; E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of governors. The Historia monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga A.D. 840*, 2 vols, London, 1893, *i*, 69-80; *ii*, 123-79).

<sup>146</sup> Herman G.B. Teule, in *Muslim-Christian Relations Vol. 1*. Hoyland makes serious note of several rifts in the Eastern Syrian Church during the early- to mid-seventh century in and around Nisibis and major centers of Eastern Syriac scholarship (see 174-80), and how they affected Ishō‘yahb III throughout his life and leadership.

<sup>147</sup> Hoyland would seem to agree. His commentary on this letter: “It is clear that the Monophysites and Nestorians vied for privileges from their new masters much as they had done in Sasanian times.” *Seeing Islam*, 179.

self-identified as *Muḥājirūn*. In addition to borrowing this terminology from Arabic, it also might have borrowed an early understanding of these particular Arabians as migrants of sorts, in which *ṭayyāyē mhaggrē*, as with *Muḥājirūn*, would denote this particular group of Arabians as “migrating” or “emigrating Arabians.” The conceptualization of the Muslim movement as comprising “migrating Arabians,” as opposed to other Arabian groups (*ṭayyāyē*) or even “Muḥammad’s Arabians” (*ṭayyāyē d-Mḥmd*), is interesting because it could indicate large-scale population shifts within Syria and the Jazīra at this time (and in Egypt beginning in the 640s). Thus the *ṭayyāyē* first mentioned in seventh-century Syriac sources were not given the descriptor *mhaggrē* because they weren’t yet conceived of as émigrés—for the first several decades, they were simply Arabians, probably more specifically Bedouin Arabians, and sometimes Arabians led by a person named Muḥammad. Regardless of the implications of this first use of *mhaggrē*, it is an indication that Ishō‘yahb displays a clearer understanding of the movement than his predecessors, which would seem to provide evidence that he interacted with them more directly than the chroniclers previously mentioned. He also notes pressure from Muslims to convert, as well as relatively strong financial incentives for conversion that he apparently finds somewhat effective.

In another letter, Ishō‘yahb writes to Simeon of Rev Ardashir, exhorting him to remain within the East Syrian faith, under his command. He writes:

“As for the *ṭayyāyē*, to whom God has at this time given rule (*shūltānā*) over the world, you well know how they act towards us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries. Why then do your *M[z]wnayē*<sup>148</sup> reject their faith on a pretext

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<sup>148</sup> There is a great deal of discussion over this term, which, if read as ‘Maronites,’ seems to refer to Miaphysites; if the text instead reads *Mazonaye*, as Chabot has corrected it, it would refer to the Mazonites, who followed the Church of the East and had an episcopal seat in Oman. The *rasm* reads *resh*, indicating *Maronaye*, but a missing or faded diacritic could lead the reader to mistake it for *zayn*. There is no current consensus, though it seems far more likely that the Mazonites are referred to here, give their patronage/loyalty to the Church of the East and their proximity to Rev Ardashir in Fars. Additionally, as residents of the Arabian Peninsula, all of which, according to Muslim sources, converted very early, ‘Mazonites’ also more obviously fits the description here than ‘Maronites.’

of theirs? And this when the *M[z]wnayē* themselves admit that the Arabs have not compelled them to abandon their faith, but only asked them to give up half of their possessions in order to keep their faith. Yet they forsook their faith, which is forever, and retained the half of their wealth, which is for a short time.”<sup>149</sup>

Robert Hoyland argues that the good terms *Ishō‘Yahb* describes should be carefully placed within historical context. For example, to what extent was his view influenced by Christian sectarianism? Does the text’s glowing report represent a struggle over how the new Arabian rulers should be viewed by their Christian subjects of different sects? His overall support for Arabian rule cannot be dismissed as sectarian editorializing, yet he is clearly concerned about Simeon’s apparently significant loss of constituents.

### Sebeos

Writing at roughly the same time as *Ishō‘Yahb* was the Armenian bishop Sebeos.<sup>150</sup> Though Sebeos was writing in Armenia and Armenian, his history is early and rich, and thus too valuable to ignore, despite his distance from Syria proper. Sebeos writes quite favorably of the early Muslim movement, and his description of them matches the conception of an early ‘new Abrahamism’ of sorts—one that could incorporate Christians and Jews, if they reformed their views.

Sebeos introduces Muḥammad (Mahmet) as an Ishmaelite merchant, who “as if by God’s command appeared to them as a preacher, the path of truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learned and informed in the history of Moses.”<sup>151</sup>

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For further discussion of the matter see Moshe Gil, “The Creed of Abu ‘Amir,” *Israel Oriental Studies XII* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 17; and Michael Morony, “The Age of Conversions,” *passim*.

<sup>149</sup> E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of governors. The Historia monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga A.D. 840*, 2 vols, London, 1893, v.1, 155; Hoyland tr., *Seeing Islam*, 181.

<sup>150</sup> *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, tr. Thomson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999). It has been noted that the text may have been altered by a later editor, which could affect this reading.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Interestingly, Sebeos refers to Muḥammad’s knowledge of a Jewish prophet and therefore Judaism, not Christianity. He certainly places him within the Abrahamic tradition (using the term ‘God of Abraham’), and his portrayal of the figure of Muḥammad and his theology matches that of the Qur’ān and very early textual biographies. Sebeos continues:

“Now because the command was from on high, at a single order they all came together in unity of religion.<sup>152</sup> Abandoning their vain cults, they turned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham. ... He said: ‘With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him for ever.’ And he brought about as he promised during that time while he loved Israel. But now you are the sons of Abraham, and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham, and go and seize your land which God gave to your father Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in battle, because God is with you.”<sup>153</sup>

Sebeos then provides a description of a letter, assuredly false, from the ‘king of Ismael’ (Mu‘āwiya b. Abī Sufyān) to the Byzantine Emperor Constans II:

“If you wish, he said, to preserve your life in safety, abandon that vain cult which you learned from childhood. Deny that Jesus and turn to the great God whom I worship, the God of our father Abraham. Dismiss from your presence the multitude of your troops to their respective lands. And I shall make you a great prince in your regions and send prefects to your cities. ... But if you do not, that Jesus whom you call Christ, since he was unable to save himself from the Jews, how can he save you from my hands?”<sup>154</sup> Constans went to the house of God and said: “See, Lord, the insults which these Hagarenes have inflicted up on you. [and general insults]”<sup>155</sup> ... The host of troops, about 15,000, believed in Christ and were baptized.”<sup>156</sup>

Sebeos’ conception of the early Muslim *raison d’être* incorporates Christian conceptions of Arabian genealogy into its analysis of the conquests. His ‘letter’ reflects his understanding of early Muslim theology and its motivations for the conquests. It also reflects the power of the movement—though very young, its leader is corresponding with the Byzantine emperor from a

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<sup>152</sup> As noted by Thomson and others, this passage glosses over early Islamic struggles for authority in Arabia. Either Sebeos was not aware of these struggles or they became irrelevant to him once Muḥammad had acquired sufficient authority over Arabian populations.

<sup>153</sup> *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, tr. Thomson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999). 95-6.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-4.



position of strength. Sebeos' historical narrative reflects much of what is written during this period by Syrian, Iraqī and other seventh-century Near Eastern scholars.

*Ktābā d-rēsh mellē* (Book of the Main Points)

Another text from the seventh century, *Ktābā d-rēsh mellē* by John bar Penkāyē, was written just after the second fitna, in the late 680s in northern Mesopotamia.<sup>157</sup> John blames the early Islamic conquests on the rise of Chalcedonian theology after the fourth century. There are apocalyptic tones in his argument: in allowing the Arabians to conquer the region, God has essentially abandoned the world to its fate. His descriptions of the Arabians identify vague theological differences with Christianity, but not clear boundaries. John's analysis incorporates apocalyptic predictions and several insights on their attitudes toward Christians:

In the days of their kingdom of Khosrau, when the kingdom of the Persians came to an end, the kingdom of the Sons of Hagar immediately spread over more or less the entire world. For they seized the entire kingdom of the Persians, and they overthrew all their warriors, who had been exceedingly proud in the arts of war. Indeed, we should not consider their coming to be ordinary. For it was a divine deed. Prior to summoning them, [God] had previously prepared them to hold Christians in honor. Thus there also carefully came from God a certain commandment that they should hold our monastic order in honor.<sup>158</sup> ... Therefore, when he [[God]] observed that there was no reform [[of the church]], he summoned a barbaric kingdom against us, a people who knew no persuasion and had neither covenant nor pact, who accepted neither flattery nor supplication. This was their comfort—unnecessary blood. This was their pleasure—to rule over all. This was their desire—captivity and exile. This was their food—wrath and anger. They were not appeased by anything that was offered them. When they had flourished and did the will of him who had summoned them, they reigned and ruled over all the world's kingdoms. They enslaved all peoples to harsh slavery and led their sons and daughters into bitter servitude. They took vengeance on them for their insult of God the word and the innocently shed blood of Christ's martyrs. Then our Lord was appeased, consoled, and willing to have mercy upon his people. ... From [the westerners] a man named

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<sup>157</sup> John bar Penkāyē, *fl.* 686-693 C.E., also discusses early Muslim theology and its connection to conversion. Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations Vol. 1*, 176-81; Alphonse Mingana, *Sources Syriacques I. Mšiḥa-Zkha, Bar-Penkaye (texte)* (Leipzig, 1908), 1-202.

<sup>158</sup> Alphonse Mingana, *Sources Syriacques I. Mšiḥa-Zkha, Bar-Penkaye (texte)* (Leipzig, 1908), 174; Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 88-9.

Mu‘āwiya became king and took control of the kingdoms of both the Persians and of the Romans ... He allowed everyone to conduct himself as he wanted. For, as I said above, they upheld a certain commandment from him who was their guide concerning the Christian people and the monastic order. By this one’s guidance they also upheld the worship of one God, in accord with the customs of ancient law. And, at their beginning, they upheld the tradition of their instructor Muḥammad such that they would bring the death penalty upon whoever seemed to have dared [transgress] his laws. ... Every year their raiders went to far-off countries and islands and brought captives from every people under heaven. But from everyone they only demanded tribute. They allowed [each] to remain in whatever faith he wished, there being not a few Christians among them—some with the heretics [Chalcedonian] and some with us. But when Mu‘āwiya reigned, there was peace throughout the world whose like we had never heard or seen, nor had our fathers or our fathers’ fathers, as if our Lord had said, “I will tempt them with this.” As it is written: “By grace and truth, iniquity will be forgiven.”<sup>159</sup> Considering the present time advantageous, instead of evangelizing and baptizing the pagans in accord with ecclesiastical canons, the cursed heretics began a perverse conversion, converting almost all of the Roman churches to their wickedness. They revived and restored what had been overthrown. The majority of the westerners were constantly using this [heretical addition to the liturgy]: “The immortal who was crucified just for us.” All the churches became like barren land.<sup>160</sup>

These excerpts indicate a far greater concern with the notion of conversions of their practitioners to heretical Christian sects than to Islam. They also reveal a viewpoint demonstrated by a few Christian historians in the 660s-680s: Mu‘āwiya’s leadership in Syria was so favorable toward local Christians that it calls into question the idea of an established Islam itself: if Islam had indeed identified itself as a new religion, one clearly distinct from Christianity, as early as Muḥammad’s lifetime, then Mu‘āwiya’s behavior toward Christians and the incorporation of Christian ritual in his practice of Islam would have blurred this confessional boundary. There are epithets related to heresy and paganism thrown at Muslim leaders, but they do not differ from those used against leaders of other Christian sects. John bar Penkāyē, Ishō‘Yahb III, Sebeos and

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<sup>159</sup> Proverbs 16:6.

<sup>160</sup> Alphonse Mingana, *Sources Syriaques I. Mšīḥa-Zkha, Bar-Penkāyē (texte)* (Leipzig, 1908), 178-9; Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 91-3. See also Sebastian Brock, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam,” in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale: University of Southern Indiana Press, 1982), 9-21.

the Maronite Chronicle share a common understanding that Arabians were descendents from Abraham via Hagar and Ismā‘īl, that the ones led by Muḥammad were Abrahamic monotheists who respected Christianity, that Mu‘āwiya’s reign in particular brought peace and prosperity, and by one attractive force or another, large-scale conversion to the Arabians’ new religious movement was a danger to the Christian flocks over which each leader watched. The ‘emigrating Arabians’ brought with them a religion that was indeed no worse than that of the heretical sects each leader’s population rivaled, and which was sometimes better, in the eyes of these leaders, than what had come before.

#### The Flourishing of Historical Writing on Conversion: 770-850 C.E.

Despite providing a variety of perspectives on early Islam, including some on conversion, our pre-Abbasid source materials are rather sparse when compared with those from the High ‘Abbasid period or later. Herman Teule claims that in the Jazīra, the most rapid phase of conversion happened between 775-800 C.E.<sup>161</sup> Teule provides no evidence for his claim, and whether such assessments can ever be confirmed remains uncertain, but his claim for this period generally corresponds with Richard Bulliet’s hypothetical periodization of mass conversion to Islam in Syria, which charts the first major rise in conversions in Syria between 767 and 810 C.E.<sup>162</sup> Bulliet bases these dates on entries in Ibn al-‘Imad’s *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, a Syrian *tabaqāt* work, linking them to a small number of early conversions under the Umayyads, local rebellions, fallout from the ‘Abbasid Revolution, and lastly, though mostly later than the period this study covers, the rise of semi-independent dynasties throughout the ‘Abbasid caliphate, including Syria and the Jazīra, beginning in the ninth century. As we have seen, Morony and

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<sup>161</sup> *Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol. 2, 1.*

<sup>162</sup> Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*, 104-9.

others have challenged Bulliet's periodization. In any case, in the late eighth and early ninth centuries C.E. we find several texts that convey conversion narratives and admonitions against conversion: biographies of converts (to and from Islam and Christianity), Christian martyrdom narratives, Christian and Muslim chronicles, and Muslim *sīra* and *maghāzī* literature, which often contain multiple conversion stories of different formats and lengths.

In this period we have more detailed accounts of conversions than those dating to the seventh century, though we must note that many of them are highly formulaic. Certain tropes appear frequently in the biographies of converts, for example, which suggests that many of them were fabricated or altered to fit a certain narrative arc, or to convey a moral lesson. One such trope consists of narratives of Muslims who convert to Christianity, or Christians who convert to Islam and back again, who must hide their religiosity for fear of retribution. Inevitably they are found out; sometimes they seek a Muslim authority figure intentionally to whom they proclaim their new Christian faith. Once this happens, they are usually sentenced to death for apostasy. Thus we may conclude that these narratives reflect very real fears of conversion, and are intended to warn others of the potential and permanent consequences of converting to Islam on a whim, while glorifying the choice to keep one's faith, even under penalty of death. Indeed, the development of what may be called "martyrdom literature" seems to have arisen around these fears. Martyrdom narratives will be examined in depth in Chapter Four, "Conversion in Apocalyptic and Polemical Writing," but it suffices here to say that tales such as that of the sixty martyrs of Jerusalem (and/or Gaza), or the widely-circulated narrative of the martyrs of Cordoba, demonstrate concern on the behalf of church leaders and scholars about the very serious consequences of conversion and apostasy.

Another common trope is the effect of heavy taxation on *dhimmi*s as a temptation to convert. Though taxes were an issue mentioned in the previous century as a conversion incentive, there is increased discussion of them after 770 C.E.; they seem to have become quite onerous at times. Specific individuals who convert for financial reasons are never mentioned; there are no conversion stories about the tax convert. The tax fugitive, who would rather live as an outlaw than pay onerous taxes or convert, is a prominent figure in some of these accounts, but he, too, is always anonymous.

Among late eighth- and early ninth-century Christian historical writing, common tropes include conversion associated with calamity or weakness among the people;<sup>163</sup> conversion associated with taxes;<sup>164</sup> and conversion associated with bad administrators.<sup>165</sup> We also see conversion associated with martyrdom;<sup>166</sup> with miracles;<sup>167</sup> and in one Christian source, with recitation of the *shahāda*.<sup>168</sup> Blurred or inaccurate confessional boundaries are also common,<sup>169</sup> as are preoccupation with faiths or dangers other than Islam,<sup>170</sup> and conversion in an unexpected direction, such as when a Muslim encourages conversion to Christianity.<sup>171</sup>

As part of a distinctive genre of early Muslim *Heilsgesichte*, or salvation history, *sīra* and *maghāzī* texts follow their own models of conversion narratives. For major figures in early Islam, such as ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb or Khadīja or even Abū Sufyān, the conversion narratives in *sīra* and *maghāzī* are often lengthy and sometimes complicated, with layers of belief acquisition,

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<sup>163</sup> See *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn* or Theophanes’ *Chronographia*.

<sup>164</sup> *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, and Theophanes’ *Chronographia*.

<sup>165</sup> See *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn* or Theophanes’ *Chronographia*.

<sup>166</sup> *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn* and *The Life of Anthony/Rawḥ al-Qurashī*.

<sup>167</sup> *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, *Life of Anthony/Rawḥ*, and *Life of Timothy*.

<sup>168</sup> *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn*.

<sup>169</sup> In *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, Theophanes’ *Chronographia*, and Thomas of Margā.

<sup>170</sup> *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*.

<sup>171</sup> See the *Vitae* of Anthony/Rawḥ and Timothy, and for the last example in particular, *The History of the Patriarchs*.

dialogue with the Prophet, and ultimately a testament of faith in the form of the convert reciting a variation of the *shahāda*. For lesser figures, or leaders of conquered tribes (or the tribes themselves), the record of conversion is often rather perfunctory. It is in these latter records—of conversions, capitulations, and documented tribute payments—that the *diwān* is reflected, perhaps even as a source for the *sīra* and *maghāzī* compilers. Nonetheless, as we shall see, they indicate that only a rather small minority of conquered groups and territories outside of Arabia chose to convert *en masse*—the vast majority of Syrians appear to have chosen tribute, even if the beliefs of their conquerors did seem fairly similar to their own belief systems. After all, Syrian Christians’ greatest rivals were other Christians with slightly different understandings of the Trinity, in which their conquerors did not believe. Furthermore, what was to stop the Persians or Byzantines from regaining control of their lands in a few years, as had only recently occurred several times, and forcing them to convert again, or punishing them for having done so at this time? Payment of tribute to keep the peace was much safer, if not exactly financially expedient.

### The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria

One of our earliest sources from the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods is *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*.<sup>172</sup> While the relevant sections of this source, originally written in the eighth century C.E. in Coptic, focus on early Muslim Egypt, the anxieties expressed in its conversion narratives are also reflected in later Syrian sources covering the same period. Some of these narratives are surprising in their variety: while the portrayal of an amir encouraging local populations to convert by enacting taxes is quite commonplace by this point,

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<sup>172</sup> John the Deacon, [Source of] *The History of Patriarchs of Alexandria and Life of Michael*. John the Deacon appears to have been the main source for the History of the Patriarchs, for those of Alexander II (43<sup>rd</sup> Patriarch, 705-730), Cosmas I (44<sup>th</sup> Patriarch, 730-731), Theodore (45<sup>th</sup> Patriarch, 731-743), and Michael I (46<sup>th</sup> Patriarch, 744-768).

the story of a Muslim boy defacing a cross and immediately falling in pain, only to be healed after a Muslim man tells him he must convert to Christianity to be cured, is a rarer formulation.<sup>173</sup> The defacement of idols and breaking of crosses by Jews, Muslims, and Christian iconoclasts in the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid periods was a controversial trend, one that was apparently not always supported by Muslim leaders, and perhaps this narrative was intended to discourage it. A narrative from the late Umayyad period about the loss of Christian believers to Islam as a result of reduced taxes for converts centers on a conversation between the Patriarch Michael and several church officials, who report a total of 24,000 conversions from Christianity to Islam as a result of the new policy enacted by the amir Ḥafs b. al-Walīd ibn Yūsuf al-Ḥaḍramī in the mid-eighth century C.E.<sup>174</sup> Another 3,000 are said to have converted under Marwān II, who, in an effort to drum up troops to fight the ‘Abbasids, swore to kill any Egyptians who refused to convert, and promised money and honor to those who would. At this 1,000 Egyptians reportedly converted, to whom he gave ten dinars each, after which another 2,000 converted.<sup>175</sup> The *History* also notes a severe increase in taxes under the early ‘Abbasids. The caliph ‘Abd Allāh (al-Saffāḥ, if we are to believe this was “in the third year of the rule of the Khorasanians”) decreed that anyone who converted would be exempt from the poll tax, and garnered so many converts that the Patriarch Michael complained to Abū Awn, the amir of Egypt, about the loss of his constituents.<sup>176</sup>

The *History of the Patriarchs* provides several conversion-related accounts of the type found in Christian sources throughout the late Umayyad and early ‘Abbasid caliphate (eighth- and ninth-century). Perhaps the two most common types of accounts are narratives of individuals

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<sup>173</sup> John the Deacon, [Source of] *The History of Patriarchs of Alexandria and Life of Michael*, 150.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, 116-17.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

converting from Islam to Christianity, often said to be related by those who are engaged in persecution of Christians, and reports of widespread conversion as a result of increasing tax burdens on non-Muslims or financial incentives for new converts. Indeed, a Syriac source written in northern Mesopotamia around the same time as the *History*, the *Chronicle of Zuqnān*, includes the same narrative tropes.

### The Chronicle of Zuqnān

*The Chronicle of Zuqnān* is possibly the earliest Syrian source we have after the ‘Abbasid Revolution. It was probably written between 767 and 775 C.E. by one of the monks of the monastery of Zuqnān; perhaps the steward, given its concerns with supplies and costs to the monastery.<sup>177</sup> Zuqnān was a West Syrian/Jacobite monastery near Amida/Diyarbakr, on the banks of the northern Tigris. The *Chronicle* provides perhaps the richest discussion of conversion we have yet encountered—earlier sources provide much less detail. Chronologically, it represents the beginning of an increase in historical narratives involving conversion—if not directly focused on the phenomenon, then at least indirectly noting it. There is also a general increase in detail about the early Muslims.

The *Chronicle* first mentions the *ṭayyāyē*, in 620-621 C.E.:

The [*ṭayyāyē*] conquered the land of Palestine and the land as far as the great river Euphrates. The Romans fled and crossed over to the east of the Euphrates, and the [*ṭayyāyē*] held sway over them. The first king was a man among them named Muḥammad, whom they also called Prophet because he turned them away from cults of all kinds and taught them that there was only one God, creator of the universe. He also instituted laws for them because they were much entangled in the worship of demons and cult of idols, mainly the cult of trees. Because Muḥammad showed them that God was one, because they vanquished the Romans in war through his direction, and because he

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<sup>177</sup> Some scholars attribute the text to Joshua the Stylite of Zuqnān (or perhaps pseudo-Joshua?). *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientale, s.p.r.l., 1965).



instituted laws for them according to their desire, they called him Prophet and ‘Messenger [*rasula*] of God.<sup>178</sup>

Again, this was written in the mid- to late eighth century. While not particularly positive or negative in its views of the early Muslims, even this text, written some 125 years after the conquest of this region, is still not entirely clear in its understanding of Muslim theology. It depicts Muḥammad’s monotheistic belief in God as shared in both Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as the development of laws that distinguish it from the various forms of Christianity this writer has encountered in his region.

691-692: The year one thousand and three: ‘Abd al-Malik made a census (*ta‘dīl*) among the Syrians. He issued a swift decree stating that every person must go to his country, village and paternal house to register his name and that of his father, as well as his vineyards, olive trees, cattle, children and all that he owned. From this time, the poll-tax began to be levied on the male heads, and all the calamities began to emerge against the Christian people. Previously, kings used to levy tribute on land, not on men. From this time onward the Sons of Hagar began to reduce the sons of Ārām to Egyptian slavery. But woe unto us! Because we sinned, the slaves ruled over us! This was the first census the [*ṭayyāyē*] had made.”<sup>179</sup> ... 708-709 The year one thousand and twenty: A census similar to the first one took place. The first one was confirmed, although it greatly added to the misfortunes.

This report parallels that in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. Unlike reports from the *History of the Patriarchs* about the Copts in Egypt, however, this excerpt makes no direct connection between what is described as punitive taxation and increased conversion rates. This passage also incorporates a significant amount of biblical imagery. The ‘sons of Hagar’ are likened to the pharaohs and Egyptians who enslaved the Israelites, while the ‘sons of Aram’ are the enslaved—a twist on the biblical narrative in which Hagar is the slave-girl of Abraham who

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<sup>178</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 149; Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnān, Parts III and IV* (Toronto 1999), 141-2.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-8.

gives rise, according to Late Antique understandings of biblical genealogy, to the Banu Isma'il—the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>180</sup>

Many of the identifying terms used in the *Chronicle* shift as the groups it refers to migrate elsewhere, convert to another faith, or are conquered or subsumed into other populations. In the context of the 'Abbasid revolution, the chronicle calls the 'Abbasids “Persians” (*parsāyē*) which, while an accurate description of their geographic base, is an interesting name to give them considering the very different religious identity of the Persians in previous centuries, to which the *Chronicle* ascribes the same term. It is not uncommon for the collective groups of people identified under a geographically-limited term to change, especially in pre-modern historical texts covering the *longue duree*, and that seems to have been the case in the *Chronicle*. It continues using the term *ṭayyāyē* as well, only now it refers specifically to Syrian *ṭayyāyē*, and is made synonymous with “Assyrian” via the prophecy of Isaiah:

“748-749 The year one thousand and sixty: The Persian people [*parsāyē*] invaded the land of Syria, subdued the [*ṭayyāyē*] and ruled over the land in their place. Isaiah too formerly prophesied about these ones, saying: *Ah the Assyrian is the rod of my anger, and the stick of my punishment in their hand, against an idolatrous nation I will send him, and against a wrathful people I will command him.* ... Indeed, the Persians were “the rod of anger and the stick of punishment in their hand,” as the prophet said. ...It was in this manner that they gathered and invaded the land.”

The *Chronicle* notes that in 766-767 the *ṭayyāyē* and *parsāyē* together attacked Anatolia, while local amirs attacked the Jazīra. Here again, *parsāyē* and *ṭayyāyē* identities have been reconfigured to denote, roughly, Muslims from east and west of the Tigris River. The army of the caliph was comprised of various sects, including Zoroastrians and pagans:

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<sup>180</sup> For more on this see Fergus Millar, “Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus and the Origins of Islam,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 44 (1993), 23-45.

Because this army was a mixture of all nations, it was called “the caliph’s clients.”<sup>181</sup> It included people from Sind and Allān, Khazars, Medes, Persians, people of ‘Āqūlā (=Kūfā), Arabs, people of Kho(ra)san and Turks. Therefore we have to say that it was made from all kinds of locusts! They also committed many sins of all kinds which could not be numbered, because of their impiety and impurity that was beyond measure.<sup>182</sup>

The *Chronicle* also notes that the Syrians on the Roman border were very poor due to heavy taxes and lack of work, the latter because all of their land had been sold to the *ṭayyāyē*. Yet there is no discussion of conversion in relation to higher taxes or the potential to defect to Byzantine territory, despite being on the border. The Syrians would resort to sneaking across the border to gather wild food in Byzantine territory to eat, but the frequencies of escape or conversion are not mentioned, though both must have occurred in large numbers. There is association of some enemies with the Assyrians (this might be who the text calls ‘Persians,’ i.e. the ‘Abbasids, though it is unclear who this could be).<sup>183</sup> Yet local Muslims, too, apparently suffered: “The [*ṭayyāyē*], with the usual poll-tax not paid to them, bought for themselves lands and yokes and became peasants themselves.”<sup>184</sup>

Another passage, carrying a warning about conversion away from the faith in the form of a premonition, is not about Muslims, but about bad bishops:

*“Truly, my Brothers, even if honourable George wanted to admit them, there was not one among them who deserved the bishopric rank, because they were haughty, boastful, troublesome, contentious, cunning, clever, and speakers of perverse things, who did not place before their eyes God’s judgment, and upon them the apostolic word was fulfilled: For I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in along with you, that will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise, speaking perverse things in order to turn away disciples so that they may follow them. Moreover, our Lord said*

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<sup>181</sup> The Syriac is *mawliya d-shultano*, corresponding to Arabic ‘*mawālī*’ and ‘*suḷṭān*’, respectively; *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 229.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 229; 206.

<sup>183</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 231; Harrak 208.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, 231; 208. See also Claude Cahen, *Les Peuple Musulmans dans l’Histoire Médiévale* (Damascus: Presses de L’Ifpo, 1977), and particularly his chapter “Fiscalité, propriété, antagonismes sociaux en Haute-Mésopotamie au temps des premiers ‘Abbāsides: D’après Denys de Tell-Mahré,” 405-422.

*about them when he cautioned his disciples: Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are rapacious wolves. You will recognize them by their fruit. He said: Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor could a bad tree bear good fruit. You will know them by their fruit. Indeed, these bishops were bad trees, who made the church and the people of God taste bitter fruit.*"<sup>185</sup>

Indeed, the strongest fear on the parts of both Muslim and Christian authorities of various sects and responsibilities, seemed to be of people who could pass as something else and thus undermine either the church or the caliphate's taxation system. A passage following this one focuses on a group of Persians<sup>186</sup> who acted as tax collectors by lying in ambush on the side of the road. Tax fugitives were apparently so common that locals would bribe them for money if they found them, as the risk of being found out by the authorities was far worse:

As for the people who married women, sired Syrian children, and mixed with the Syrians, and whom no one was able to distinguish from the Arameans, [Mūsā] quickly found out about them. He seized the leaders of the village in which they were living, beat their bodies with severe blows, until they produced securities whom they brought to him. When he had caught all of them in this way and made them ransom each other, he sold all their property and kept the proceeds. Thus he stripped all of them totally naked, expelled them and returned them to their own region where he imprisoned them.<sup>187</sup>

Upon first examination this passage would appear to refer to Muslim men who married Syrian women; indeed, this is what the editor of the text suggests. But the fact that this is addressed in the context of collection of poll taxes suggests that these men were not Muslims, though at times the terminology surrounding tax collection was not always consistent.<sup>188</sup> More

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 245; Harrak 218. (By this account, bad bishops were more likely to lead people astray than Muslims were!)

<sup>186</sup> *Parsaye*, meaning here, one must assume, 'Abbasid supporters. Whether they were official 'Abbasid tax collectors or simply opportunists is less clear. This passage makes several biblical references: The two lines about 'savage wolves' is Acts 20:29-30, and 'wolves in sheeps' clothing' and the several lines after it comprise Matthew 7:15-20.

<sup>187</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 256; Harrak, 226.

<sup>188</sup> Taxation of non-Muslims in the early Islamic era has been examined by Julius Wellhausen, Daniel Dennett, and Uriel Simonsohn, among others. In general it appears that taxes of both Muslims and non-Muslims were not applied consistently for perhaps the first century or so after the conquests, and almost certainly caused a number of people in

importantly, these men are described as hiding out. This would not be the reaction to, say, a veteran of the Muslim conquests who had merely received a land grant and settled down with a Syrian woman—that was an acceptable form of retirement and such an individual would have been listed in the diwan and possibly received a regular stipend. The tone of the above passage rather implies that perhaps members of the army, or perhaps non-Syrian Umayyad sympathizers (if any were still around), had defected, married Syrian women and pretended to be Syrian—thus probably going to church, taking on local customs, etc. These men may or may not have converted to Islam while in the army. They also may or may not have been originally Arabian, but they were certainly not considered Syrian by the standards of either the ‘Abbasid tax collectors or the Syriac Christian writer of the *Chronicle*. The greatest threat to those who walked the line, or a line, between Christianity and Islam, seems to have come from local officials. A passage from the *Chronicle* states:

He [al-Manṣūr] appointed over Mardīn a Persian man to bring back its fugitives and to exact the poll-tax. Because its people had fled in greater number than from anywhere else, the region had been occupied entirely by the [ṭayyāyē], before whom the Syrians [sōryāyē] had fled. The man’s name was Khalīl son of Zedīn. This man made the [ṭayyāyē] suffer so many ills that no one could rival him in animosity toward them, either before or after him. He sent to all the cities some of his chieftans, who removed each person from his house, village and country, even if he, his father or his grandfather was reported to have lived in Mardīn as much as forty or fifty years earlier. They were brought down to Mardīn. ... He gathered people in this region in such a way that no place or village or ruin was available which he did not fill and crowd with people. As for the [ṭayyāyē], he made them roam from one place to another, after he had confiscated all that they possessed, filled their fields and houses with [sōryāyē], and made them sow their wheat.<sup>189</sup> ... The Caliph also ordered that no one, be he [ṭayyāyē] or [sōryāyē], might harvest.<sup>190</sup> ... Thus the [ṭayyāyē] suffered more wrongs and hardships than the [sōryāyē].<sup>191</sup> As for the [sōryāyē], the collector of the poll-tax ordered that they must

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the new empire to flee the tax authorities. Taxation and its effects on and relationship to conversion will be examined further in Chapter Five.

<sup>189</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 269; Harrak, 237. ‘Ṭayyāyē’ here probably means non-Persian/Arab Muslims, and possibly Umayyad sympathizers.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 271; 238. He surveyed out the crops, registered them as being far larger than they were, and took taxes based on these figures, particularly for the ṭayyāyē.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 271; 239. (Note earlier comment about ṭayyāyē having all the property.)

gather. He then asked each village for securities and dismissed them to tread out (wheat).<sup>192</sup>

More apocalyptic references to Daniel and Isaiah follow, along with complaints about new and more terrible Persian tax collectors (with Arabic Muslim names), and further commentary on local tax fugitives.<sup>193</sup> A tax collector in the Jazīra forced everyone to go to the church and kept them there and beat them if they did not pay tribute. Churches and monasteries were looted by locals in order to pay.<sup>194</sup> Yet there is still no discussion of conversion—indeed, the focus remains on the financial burden placed on all Syrians, regardless of faith.

The Chronicle reports that Mūsā b. “Muṣāb” [Ka‘b] was elevated in position (to governor of Mosul) by Maṣūr, and the taxes became more onerous. There was an attempt to brand people—meaning Syrians—with their villages in order to identify tax fugitives; at this prospect the writer makes apocalyptic references to Daniel and John.<sup>195</sup> A separate tax collector was assigned to Muslims and was apparently equally terrible to them. The Muslims stated that they were against the census because none of the early caliphs had done one.<sup>196</sup> The text documents another tax-related detainment in a church (of both Syrians and *ṭayyāyē* in Edessa).<sup>197</sup>

If this persecution [torture] in which Christians, pagans, Jews, Samaritans, worshippers of fire and sun, Magians, as well as Muslims, Sabeans [lit. Harranians] and Manichaeans were subjected together, had not been general, would gods or goddesses not have been extolled in this bitter persecution? But the matter concerned neither religion nor worship East or West. Terms such as “worshipping toward the South” or “worshipping toward North” had become irrelevant. . . . Let him come now and see the countless thousands and myriads of [*ṭayyāyē*] and Syrians, guilty or not guilty, poor and wealthy, all mixed

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<sup>192</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 271-2; HARRAK, 239.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-4; 240-1.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 282; 247.

<sup>195</sup> E.g., “All the people received the mark of the beast,” Rev. 19:20, *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 292. HARRAK 255.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 298; 259-60.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 311-12; 270.

together!<sup>198</sup> ... Hardship pressed hard upon all of them alike, for all of them drank from the cup in the Lord's hand, and became dazed and troubled: Persians, because tax cancellation was not granted to them; [*tayyāyē*], along with Jews and Christians, because of extortions; Egyptians, Armenians, Sindhi and all other nations were oppressed by the heavy tribute.<sup>199</sup> ... Mūsā appointed agents for many affairs, including ones for the monetary alms tax of the *tayyāyē* from whom they extracted it manifoldly. They claimed cancelled debts, demanded thirty and sometimes forty *zūz* from everyone on whom they had imposed ten. ... And sometimes they determined contributions which they imposed on the notables of the country, [*mhaggrē*] as well as Christians.<sup>200</sup> Nevertheless, they did not wander around because they cared for Islam<sup>201</sup> but in order to satiate their greed through love of money.<sup>202</sup>

People attacked monks and ascetics due to the severity of the taxes. There is also an extended discussion of a plague and subsequent grave-robbing. Only then was a connection made between taxes and apostasy. Tax evasion is presented in the text as an alternative to conversion, which we do not see in other Syrian or Jazīran sources (though it was common in Egypt<sup>203</sup>):

After this impious and godless kingdom was set to rule and as it became powerful, great and countless evils caused by harsh, heavy and merciless extortions [befell] the whole country and the Christian people began to be pitilessly harassed.<sup>204</sup> ... During the [early] Arab rule, the tribute did not weigh so heavily upon the Christians that it went beyond their endurance, and so evils of harsh extortions suddenly broke out against them. As they had not yet learned to flee from one place to another, the door to paganism opened for them. All wanton and careless people slipped quickly into the pit and chasm of perdition [i.e., conversion], destroying their souls as well as their bodies—in other words, everything they possessed: their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; baptism; the holy seal of Myron; together with the living body and purifying blood (of Christ). Instead of these, they bought for themselves unextinguishable fire, undying worm, a quarrelsome thief, Satan instead of Christ, and darkness instead of Paradise.<sup>205</sup> ... If those who used to do

<sup>198</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 316; Harrak 273-4.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 338; 290.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 341; 292-3. Could *mhaggre* here refer specifically to the *muhajirun* meaning Meccans, and not all Muslims? It is interesting that *mhaggre* is used here to denote nobles, whereas *tayyaye* is used everywhere else throughout this passage.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 341; 293. *Muslimanūtho*; this is the only extant use of this term in the text (could have also been used where there is now a lacuna in the MS).

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 341; 293.

<sup>203</sup> See Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 381; 321.

<sup>205</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 381-2; Harrak 321-2.

such a deed had numbered one, or one hundred, or one thousand...I would have kept silent. But ... even without blows and tortures people slipped toward [apostasy with] great [eag]erness, in groups of twenty, thirty, one hundred, two hundred or three hundred [men], without any compulsion to it. They used to come down to Ḥarrān, to governors, and apostatize [original term?] to Islam.<sup>206</sup> ... Thus [Satan?] formed a great crowd from the regions of Edessa, Ḥarrān, Tella, Rēsh ‘Aynā, [...], Dara, Nisibis, Sinjār and Callinicum. Error and slander turned strong beyond measure in people coming from these regions, who were sometimes fifty or one hundred in a village, or half of it or one third of it. But they grew different from the faithful people in both person and name; in person, because their once happy personal appearance became repugnant, in such a way that they were recognized by the intelligent ones through their persons, odour, and the look of their eyes.<sup>207</sup> ... Along with their appearance, their name as Christians, and even as Muslims, was taken away from them. For they lost one name, that of Christ, but did not grab that of Muḥammad; rather, they found with their apostasy a name which they despised, for they were called Aydūlī, so that they might be distinguished, through \*their name\*, from both the gentiles and the faithful.<sup>208</sup> ... It happened, as we said to you, that numerous people converted to paganism and renounced Christ, baptism, the Eucharist and the Cross through which every human being was granted salvation. They renounced all of the things that are part of Christ’s programme of salvation, only confessing that Christ was the Word and the Spirit of God.<sup>209</sup> Nor did they admit to this very profession or understand what Moses had previously said: In the beginning God created... which was what the Son of Thunder (John the Apostle) interpreted, saying: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This One was in the beginning with God; everything came to exist through his hand, and without him not even one thing that was made came into existence.* [Gen. 1:1-3] They did not understand, nor did they comprehend these words, because they walked in darkness. As soon as someone asked them: “This ‘Word and Spirit of God in ‘Īsā’, what is it?” they blasphemed, saying: “He is like Moses, Elijah and Muḥammad;”—the prophet who was the founder of their faith. “He is simply a prophet, like other prophets, a man like you and me.” But then they professed that he was not born from a human seed, like anyone else, but they de[nied] him any divine substance. They only called him Word and Spirit of God, and Prophet, and one not born from the seed of man; instead, God ordered Mary and she conceived him, as the t[rees] are pollinated to pro[duce fru]it without the intervention of a male, since they are pollinated by the wind. Jeremiah the Prophet called a dubious faith like this

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<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 384-5; 324.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 385; 324.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 387; 325-6. No one has yet been able to parse this word. Harrak suggests a misinterpretation of Arabic هؤلاء, “these,” 330. A later reference to them and an explanation of the term do not clarify its meaning for modern readers: “Look, O believer, when you are in great fear, believe firmly in what is written, have faith at least in the prophets, and understand that a servant cannot serve two masters, that is the Holy Spirit and the impure spirit. It is not possible that king and a slave live in one house. Therefore, God does not live in the soul that renounces him and confesses Satan. I ought to talk about the reason why the apostates acquired the name of Aydūlī, and then leave off. They used to turn to apostasy in large and impressive groups, and their names used to be written in lists. Later, as they (=the Muslims) wanted to assist them, they would call: “Where is so-and-so, son of so-and so?” And they, because they lacked knowledge of the Arabic language, would answer, saying: “Behold, these are they!” Because of this, the apostates found a nickname for themselves that suited them and that distinguished them from all nations. The account about the apostates has ended.” (337-8/329-30)

<sup>209</sup> This is a rough translation of Sūrat al-Nisā’, 171, also echoing ‘Imrān 45.



one a leaky cistern.<sup>210</sup> This apostasy was practiced not only by the young, but also by adults, including many elderly people, and worst of all, by old priests and numerous deacons who cannot be numbered.<sup>211</sup>

This passage and previous ones suggest that large-scale conversion was viewed as a serious and credible problem in the mind of our chronicler. It is odd that only in the latter portion of the *Chronicle of Zuqnān* is a connection made between burdensome taxation and conversion. Similarly, Muslim differences with Christians over the Trinity and the divine nature of Jesus are not referenced at all in earlier sections of the chronicle, but here they are fully delineated. These factors, along with highly variable usage of terms to describe Muslims and Christians of various backgrounds, suggest that there was possibly more than one person writing Part IV of the chronicle, particularly the latter sections.

A narrative about a deacon in Edessa who converted to Islam provides a metaphor for this chronicler's perspective on the matter: the deacon wanted to convert, and the town begged him not to:

As for him, he went to seek refuge in a man, one of the [tāyyāyē] in that region, and asked that he might become a Muslim at his hands. This man did not pressure him; on the contrary, he asked him not to do so lest he should regret it one day and return to his faith, in which case great tortures would then be inflicted upon him. But he said: "If the idea of repenting will occur to me, I will not turn away from your faith, because God indicated that to me." The man said to him: "Do you renounce Christ?" He said: "Yes." Then he said to him: "Do you renounce Baptism?" He said: "I renounce it." Then he said to him: "Do you renounce the Cross, the Eucharist and everything which Christians profess?" He replied: "I renounce them." At this point, the son of the Devil added to these words insults not requested by the [tāyyāyē]. After he made him apostatize in this manner, he asked him: "Do you believe in Muḥammad as the messenger of God, and in the Book that descended upon him from Heaven?" He said: "I believe." Then he said: "Do you believe that 'Īsā is the Word and Spirit of God, that he is a Prophet, and that he is not God?" He replied, saying: "Yes." Thus he made him renounce everything in his free will. For no one among the people was forcibly driven by anyone else, unless by the Devil his father,

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<sup>210</sup> Jeremiah 2:13.

<sup>211</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 388-9; Harrak 326-7.

to renounce his faith, while many of them apostatized without any reason whatsoever. Then he ordered him: “Untie your belt and pray toward the South.”<sup>212</sup>

When the former deacon prayed in this manner, a white dove flew out of his mouth.

Another conversion narrative involving a converted priest describes him beginning to pray as a new Muslim and seeing two well-dressed men who appear to be removing white robes and ascending to heaven. The metaphor in both cases, according to our chronicler, is that the splendor of baptism is being removed from the souls of the two converts.

The martyrdom of Cyrus of Harran is a widely-circulated narrative of a failed attempt to convert someone by force. In this passage there are lacunae throughout the folia, but the text is mostly legible. It appears that Cyrus was registered to pay the lighter per-capita tax on Muslims, instead of the larger tax on *dhimmīs*, despite his Christian faith. When the error is discovered, he is entreated by tax officials to convert to Islam or pay the difference. Cyrus refuses both options and is ultimately martyred for it:

Now this holy Cyrus was a [...] and a fast moving man, physically strong and valiant [...]. During the time in which that battle [took place...] Muḥammad, ‘Abbās, and Sulaymān, son of Hishām [...] as was written above. [...Cyr]us happened to be in that battle. In that battle [...] from/by ‘Abbās [...] A Persian man reigned [and seized?] the reins of the caliphate, people [happened...] the Devil/Slanderer. They accused him of many things before Ḥumayd, [son of Qaḥṭab]a, who was at that time th am[īr] of the Jaz[īra]. When he heard about these things from the deceivers, he seized the man and asked him: “Are you Christian?” He said: “Yes.” The judge said: “Ho[w]...for a Christian man [... for the pol]l-tax?” Cyrus [told] him the reason without lie, and how he had been registered against his will. The judge said: “It is not possible that you be registered for the poll-tax [.after] you became Muslim. But come near and pray, for if not, a cruel death [...] you will suffer at my hands!” Cyrus said: “Or[der] me whatever yo[u wa]nt, but I will not do this! And if you ord[er] all tortures against me, you will not be able to turn me away from my faith!” The judge said: “[It is wrong(?)], O wretched one, that you hurl foolish words, [but come near] now, pray and confess that God is one, and has no [associate, and that Muḥammad is the serva]nt, messenger<sup>1</sup> and prophet of God, that he [...] [...] over his kin[gdo]m [...] he was owning [...] they are demanding from us many [...] now [...] he is. Either you profess or [...] and I will enhance your

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<sup>212</sup> Chabot 390-1, Harrak 328.

status and multiply gifts for you if you conver[t...and become Musl]im at my hand and pray.”<sup>213</sup>

Here the judge appears to be giving Cyrus a way out of his predicament. The reference to Cyrus’s service in the army (or at least his presence at a battle) during the ‘Abbasid Revolution is significant: it may be the reason he was exempted from the poll-tax in the first place.

Cyrus said: “Even if you give me [all that is in the wor]ld, I am now telling you, as I have previously told you, that I shall not renounce my faith, because if I destroy my soul [...gifts] will not profit me anything.” The judge said: “So everyone I ask [to apostatize] destroyed his soul on the basis of what you said: ‘If I will renounce, I destroy [my soul]?’ Hence, according to your statement, all the Christian people who became Muslim, have (in fact) destroyed their so[uls... ..] like you. For behold, many [...], including even old people, if they knew [...][...][...]because of me. You have saddened the exulting angels [...through] your flight. The church, your mother, used to rejoice in you, but now lo, she is saddened [...] you gladdened her. And now [...] is saddened by your departure. [...] [...]is waiting for you. The Devil [...] for it by your flight. All the martyrs were [...] for you. Even paganism and the city of Ḥarrān [...]to you, and [...] the darkness that surrounds is dissipating from it. “[...][...] Whence did you know me, my Lord? And what are the[se...],” he said. Lo, before my eyes the whole [...] testifies [...] you of the believers [...] because of the exactions of the poll-tax [...] not, and let us go immediately [...] without their knowledge [...] and do for me a lamentation [...] and do whatever you wish, [...for] our Lord said: Whoever denies me be[fore men, I will also deny him before my father who is] in heaven, and before God’s holy angels. [...Cy]rus said: “Yes.” Then all those who heard [...] some gross blasphemy. And he undertook sending after him [...] [...] while every day I was sending to bring him and in different ways [...] even great judges. Thus he never yielded to me [...].” And thus, after he spent a long time in prison [...] he ordered him to say: “I confess that Muḥammad is the messenger of God. [Nor] did he yield to him in this way. Then the judge became furious and ordered [...] that they return him [to prison] with abuse. Thus he [...] of everything, nor did he release him in this way. But when Satan grew strong [...:“] if this one becomes stronger than me, and his colleagues see him [they will say this is?] not a judge but a devil [...Now if you become Muslim? And] pray, you will take what belongs to you along with gifts and honours [...] [...]. Thus he left him in prison, saying “[...][...] when Ḥumayd will be dismissed from the Jazīra, and ‘A[bbās] will come to [...] [...]”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 396-7; Harrak 332-3.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 397-8; 333-4.

As we see here with Cyrus and the judge, many martyrdom narratives present initially gentle prodding toward conversion, with increasingly harsh persecution that escalates to the death penalty. The arc of the narrative develops around the faithful would-be convert's intransigence.

As for (Cyrus), he fled from Ḥarrān and entered [...where] he remained for a long time—about four y[ears]—[...by him]self. And he went [...] from it [...]. The blessed one said: “Not about this [...] all those who are persecuted, behold [...] [...] he will think [...], the church through [my?] sacrifice [...up]on me, in this hour which is leading us to this sacrifice [...] and calm, on behalf of my brothers and members of my faith [...up]on me. The blessed one said, “There is in Ḥarrān [...f]ind her (or:it), if you go round about the entire inhabited world.” “Behold, there [...] [...] holy men are looking for you. Wherever you go and they will see [...] the D]evil, as well as all those who submitted to his will.” After they [made many stat]ements, holy (Cyrus) stood up and quickly travelled to Ḥarrān, while many prayers [were offered]. When he arrived in Edessa and was seen there by many persons, his acquaintances, [they begged him] not to go to Ḥarrān. But he looked at them, and with a joyful countenance he said to th[em: “...] I came because I am ready for suffering.” And from there, he went like a lamb to the [slaughter], beholding Isaac, the daughter of Jephthah, and greater than all of them, [Christ, the Lord] of Isaac, carrying his cross and coming like (a lamb) to the slaughter. [...] while everyone adjured him not to enter Ḥarr[ān...] but he, like that one course [...]and be delivered from this wor]ld, so that I may be with Christ. And blessed am I [...]” [...] your hands to shackles and your feet to fetters and your [...] [...] [...].<sup>215</sup>

Cyrus's narrative ends with his apparent seeking of martyrdom. His account is often misinterpreted by editors who fail to notice that he was harassed because he had been incorrectly taxed as a Muslim, with a lighter tax, instead of as a *dhimmi*, despite his status as a Christian, or possibly a valid exemption (the mix-up may have been related to his service in the army during the 'Abbasid Revolution, noted at the beginning of the account). His conversion is demanded when he refuses to pay the poll-tax to which he is subject. Despite the various lacunae (here filled in with suggestions from Amir Harrak), the text is fairly clear. Cyrus's account is a perfect

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<sup>215</sup> *Incerti auctoris Chronicon anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum II*, ed. J.B. Chabot (Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste, s.p.r.l., 1965), 398-9; Harrak 334.

confluence of conversion narrative tropes: he argues with an official over taxes, refuses to recite the *shahāda* after it is demanded of him, goes to prison, seeks out his enemies, and ultimately dies a martyr, glorified by the author of the *Chronicle* as Christlike in his desire for holy suffering. The narrative marks the end of the entire (extant) Chronicle of Zuqnin, and perhaps represents to the author/complier the appropriate response to persecution of Christians by Muslim officials.

### The Martyrdom of Rawḥ

The Arabic *Martyrdom of Anthony* follows a similar arc. Rawḥ al-Qurashī was Muslim who was also a nephew of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd and (as his name indicates) a Qurashī.<sup>216</sup> Rawḥ, who had participated in raids into Byzantine territory, used to desecrate crosses and icons in the Church of St. Theodore in Damascus, which was near his home. One day he shot an arrow at a cross in the church, but the arrow turned around in the air and pierced his hand instead. He then began seeing Christian visions, which eventually compelled him to convert to Christianity:

" فعجب من ذلك روح جداً. وجعل يتفكر في نفسه ويقول: سبحان الله! إن دين النصرانية بحق إنه دين شريف!"<sup>217</sup>

And Rawḥ was amazed by this. And he thought to himself and said, "Glory to God! Verily, the Christian religion is truly a noble religion!"

This line represents the moment of conversion. Rawḥ then went to Jerusalem with a group of Christians to meet Patriarch Elias and to be baptized in the Jordan River; upon this occasion, he was renamed Anthony. He then returned to Damascus in monk's robes, where he was quite open about his conversion and thus repeatedly imprisoned. During his time in prison Rawḥ/Anthony

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<sup>216</sup> Rawḥ al-Qurashī, *La Storia di Rawḥ al-Qurashī*, ed. Emanuela Braidà and Chiara Pelisetti (tr. Italian); Ar. ed. Ernesto Dick. MS 10<sup>th</sup> c. This narrative also exists, with significant modification, in Ibn 'Asakir's *Ta'rīkh Dimashq* and several other places. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 346-7.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

saw Christian visions, which motivated him to remain Christian. He was beaten and offered various bribes to convert back to Islam. Eventually his royal uncle Harun sentenced him to death for apostasy and he was beheaded.

The martyrdom of Rawḥ follows several patterns common to Christian conversion narratives during this period.<sup>218</sup> Miracles and visions play an important role (common motifs, in this one and others, include seeing Christ as the lamb of God, hearing voices, and seeing a white dove). Conversion results in persecution by authorities, which is usually responded to by open displays of faith. As a member of the royal family, Rawḥ's interaction with authorities such as the caliph is both inevitable and high-profile, as he is the caliph's nephew. He is given many more opportunities to renounce his Christianity than the typical protagonist of these stories. As was ultimately the case with Rawḥ, the convert is usually imprisoned and finally martyred.

### Theophanes Confessor

Though written in Greek, Theophanes the Confessor's *Chronographia* contains a great deal of content from the Arabic and Syriac traditions, including material about conversion. He seems to have obtained much of his material from an earlier source, written in Syriac, alternately referred to as the "Syriac common source" or the "Chronicle of 750," at times attributed to

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<sup>218</sup> *The Martyrdom of Peter of Capitolias*, which only exists in Georgian, follows a similar trajectory in its seeking of martyrdom. Peter of Capitolias was an ascetic who fell ill and wished to be martyred for his faith, so he invited some Muslim leaders to dinner and denounced Islam. When he was restored to health, he was arrested and brought, eventually, to 'Umar b. al-Walīd, the son of the caliph (Walid was caliph when Peter died in 715 C.E.). Then he was sent to al-Walid and debated with him, upon which he was martyred. See *History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 1, 419-22.

Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785 C.E.), though this is contested.<sup>219</sup> When compared with other sources reliant upon this common ancestor, it appears Theophanes's *Chronographia* takes a more hostile tone toward Muslims than the original Syriac source, due in part to renewed interest in and undertaking of raids on Byzantium by early 'Abbasid caliphs.<sup>220</sup> Nonetheless, the *Chronographia* provides an extensive view of Muslim-Christian relations in early Islamic Syria, one that contains valuable information on conversion despite its apparent distortions.

Theophanes' description of Muḥammad's early movement is illuminating:

In this year<sup>221</sup> died Mouamed, the leader and false prophet of the Saracens,<sup>222</sup> after appointing his kinsman Aboubacharos <to his chieftanship> ... At the beginning of his advent the misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah who is awaited by them, so that some of their leaders joined him and accepted his religion while forsaking that of Moses, who saw God. Those who did so were ten in number, and they remained with him until his murder.<sup>223</sup> But when they saw him eating camel meat, they realized that he was not the one they thought him to be, and were at a loss what to do; being afraid to abjure his religion, those wretched men taught him illicit things directed against us, Christians, and remained with him.<sup>224</sup>

Theophanes dismisses the conversion of these early religious leaders as erroneous for a variety of reasons: their belief that Muḥammad was the Messiah; their identification of Muḥammad's

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<sup>219</sup> Robert Hoyland has attempted a partial reconstruction of this source based on the chronicles of Theophanes, Agapius of Manbij (fl. 940s C.E.), Michael the Syrian (d. 1199 C.E.), and an anonymous Syriac source often referred to as the *Chronicle of 1234*: Robert Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011). It is impossible to verify the validity of his results, so there is no way to assess the degree to which the final assemblage resembles the original work of Theophilus.

<sup>220</sup> For more on this topic see the works of Maria Conterno: La "descrizione dei tempi" all'alba dell'espansione islamica. Un'indagine sulla storiografia greca, siriana e araba fra VII e VIII secolo, de Gruyter, Berlin 2014; "Theophilus: "the more likely candidate"? Toward a reappraisal of the question of Theophanes' Oriental source(s)," in: F. Montinaro/M. Jankowiak, *The Chronicle of Theophanes: Sources, Composition and Transmission*, Paris 2014; "Processo ai testimoni: un' inchiesta storiografica sulle fonti per il VII secolo" (review of James Howard-Johnston's *Witnesses to a World Crisis*), *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 24.2 (2011), 897-912. Conterno questions whether the "common source" was Theophilus' work, and thus the validity of Hoyland's attempted reconstruction.

<sup>221</sup> "AM 6122 [AD 629/30] Year of the Divine Incarnation 622 / Herakleios, Emperor of the Romans (31 years), 21<sup>st</sup> year [463/4] Mouamed, leader of the Arabs (9 years), 9<sup>th</sup> year / Sergius, bishop of Constantinople (29 years), 22<sup>nd</sup> year / Zacharias, bishop of Jerusalem (22 years), 22<sup>nd</sup> year / George, bishop of Alexandria (14 years), 12<sup>th</sup> year."

<sup>222</sup> So-called 'polemical communities' (per Szpiech's term) fully established by this point.

<sup>223</sup> The word for 'murder' here is probably a misinterpretation, as Muḥammad was not murdered.

<sup>224</sup> Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 464 (tr. Mango).

dietary observance as invalid; their continued observance due to fear to convert back to Judaism; and (possibly) their Judaism itself (it is unclear who he refers to in this passage, though it could be any number of Arabian tribes). Yet Theophanes probably would not have included such a passage at all if conversion to Islam were not a known phenomenon by his day. Instead, he acknowledges conversion, while dismissing early converts as fearful, mistaken, small in number, and Jewish (thus obviously not Christians). He discusses conversion again in the Umayyad era, when he references ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s conversion of Christians and his correspondence with Emperor Leo III (r. 717-742 C.E.), in which he attempts to convert the emperor.<sup>225</sup> There is nothing else on conversion in the Umayyad period in this source.

Theophanes notes a brief and perhaps unofficial shift in administrative policy toward *dhimmi*s taking place in the early ‘Abbasid period:

[AM 6272, AD 779/80] ... [al-Mahdi] sent out Mouchesias surnamed the Zealot [Hasan b. Qahtaba?] and gave him authority to convert the slaves of Christians and to ruin the holy churches. This man came as far as Emesa and announced that he would not oblige anyone except former infidels to become Muslim, anticipating the Jews and Christians to make themselves known. Then straightaway he began torturing them in a godless manner, worse than Lysias and Agrikolaos of olden time, and many of them he destroyed. By the grace of Christ our God his fury was vanquished by some women who were, furthermore, newly baptized, namely the wives of the archdeacon of Emesa and of the son of Esaias. These endured many torments, but did not yield to impiety; for each of [624/5] them received a thousand lashes and was subjected to many other tortures and so obtained from Christ the crown of victory. The man in question went as far as Damascus and ruined many churches paying no heed to the promise that had been given to the Christians by the Arabs.<sup>226</sup>

The view presented here, in which tax collectors demand onerous poll-taxes or conversion, often obtaining one or the other through what amounts to torture, is reflected in other Syriac texts from this era (as we have seen). Theophanes references the protections granted to Christians by earlier

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<sup>225</sup> Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 549-50. I will cover the supposed exchange between Leo and ‘Umar in Chapter Four.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 624-5.



caliphs and highlights the apparent choice by many Christians of torture and martyrdom over conversion. The choice of martyrdom over conversion is a common one in conversion narratives about individuals or small groups of Christians, in Syriac, Arabic and several other languages,<sup>227</sup> but they rarely focus on women or on newly baptized Christians with connections to church officials—indeed, most such narratives are about ordinary (male) citizens.

The Syriac *Book of Governors*<sup>228</sup> by Thomas of Margā (fl. mid-9<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) provides a lengthy account of a Christian man passing himself off as an Arab Muslim camel herder, in the area probably outside of Damascus. He is discovered when a travelling bishop hears him singing the ‘Hymn of Resurrection’ while facing east, and calls out to him. The man responds to him in Arabic (*tayyoyaia*) and the bishop asks him why: “If thou art an Arab (‘*aoraba*) as thou sayest, why didst thou learn this hymn of the Resurrection of our Lord which very few men are found to have an ability to sing? And why were thy arms and face turned toward the east?”<sup>229</sup> The man replied that he had been Bishop of the Scattered in Egypt, but that he and his followers had migrated due to lack of rainfall. One night, a group of Arabic-speaking raiders surrounded his campsite, and everyone fled. Only he was taken captive. The men appointed him their camel herder, and though he sang a hymn every day, they did not force him to convert, so he had continued in such a manner for several years. The story implies that the men were Muslim, though it does not dwell on the issue. It also suggests the men who took him were nomads, not urban-dwellers, which indicates that Islam was entrenched in the region by this point.

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<sup>227</sup> There are several conversion narratives ultimately resolving in martyrdom in texts written in Greek, Armenian, Georgian, Latin and other languages; more will be covered in Chapter Four. Many of these sources reflect tropes similar to those discussed in this chapter; examples include the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, *The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, *The History of Lewond*, *The Martyrdom of Romanus the Younger*, *The Life of Mar Stephen* (Leontius of Damascus), and *The Martyrdom of Elias of Heliopolis/Damascus*.

<sup>228</sup> Thomas of Margā, ed. Budge, 130-135.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 131. The editor believes the camel-herding bishop was located somewhere outside of Damascus.

### Timothy of Kākhushṭā

Our final Christian source from the first half of the ninth century, an undated *vita* of Timothy of Kākhushṭā written sometime before 860 C.E.,<sup>230</sup> describes Timothy's role in the conversion of a Muslim man to Christianity. There are two extant narratives of this story with slight divergences, but in both, Timothy is sought out as something of a spiritual mentor for the Muslim man. In these narratives, however, unlike in others, the Muslim man is not martyred for his new beliefs.

Timothy was a monk who grew up in a small village between Antioch and Aleppo. He performed ascetic feats and small miracles in the countryside and became a famous recluse. One day a Muslim man came to see him, shouting—either to harass him (according to the Paris MS) or to ask him questions (according to the Syedna MS). The man was finally silenced after several hours at sunrise, when a bird entered the enclosure and he was rendered mute. After some time the bird flew away and the man's voice returned. He cried to Timothy for help, and Timothy responded. The man recounted what had just occurred. Timothy responded that the incident was the work of the Holy Spirit, and was intended to show the man his own hard heart. The man converted to Christianity: "He knew that Christ is God and the Son of God. After the saint prayed for him, he departed, confessing and acknowledging Christ and that there is no religion other than the religion of the Christians."<sup>231</sup>

Timothy's role here is that of a spiritual guide. In many ways he resembles the ascetics and hermits of previous centuries, who performed similar miracles and feats of human suffering,

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<sup>230</sup> *Life of Timothy of Kākhushṭā: Two Arabic Texts*. Ed/tr. John C. Lamoreaux and Cyril Cairala. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000.

<sup>231</sup> *Life of Timothy of Kākhushṭā: Two Arabic Texts*. Ed/tr. John C. Lamoreaux and Cyril Cairala. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000, 499.

and were sought out by Christians and would-be converts alike as mentors and symbols of piety. The main difference between accounts of those figures and that of Timothy presented here is that the follower is a Muslim man. While Christian ascetics and ‘holy men’ continued to practice seclusion and various feats of religious athleticism (there are references to stylites in Syria well after the Muslim conquest of the region), they are no longer afforded as much attention as they were in the fourth through seventh centuries. Timothy’s *vita* presents a very old Christian figure in a new light, as a reclusive, almost reluctant missionary for Muslim seekers instead of Christian or pagan ones.

#### Muslim Sources on Conversion: *Sīra* and *Maghāzī* in the Early Ninth Century C.E.

Our earliest documented chronological Muslim sources are *sīra* and *maghāzī* sources, and they emerge far later than historical writing on Islam from outside the tradition. Most of their material on conversion addresses conversion of individuals and groups in Arabia and the Syrian deserts. Furthermore, as our earliest historical source materials on the matter from within the Islamic tradition, *sīra* and *maghāzī* establish formulae for conversion narratives which are then used in later conversion accounts. These narratives may also provide basic historical information on conversions of individuals or tribes, though without corroboration of some sort from independent sources, these are difficult to verify. Nonetheless, *sīra* and *maghāzī* provide the best and earliest information we have on conversion from the Muslim tradition in this era.

Conversion narratives in early Muslim sources often appear in one of the following forms: A) an opponent of the movement overhears Muḥammad praying, or hears a recitation of the Qur’ān, and converts; B) an individual or a group converts seeking protection; C) a tribal leader converts and his tribe follows suit; D) a pre-Islamic monotheist of good faith seeks

counsel; he is sometimes led to Muḥammad through the guidance of an authority figure of his religion or by a miraculous sign. If he does not reach Muḥammad, he dies trying.

Common tropes in these narratives include the presence of Muḥammad; the recitation of the Qur’ān; a public recitation of the *shahāda*, and/or a public refutation of the convert’s previous associates; a reference to Muḥammad’s connection to pre-Islamic Abrahamic monotheism; and the seeking of protection (regardless of whether this was itself an impetus for the conversion event itself).

### Sayf b. ‘Umar

Sayf b. ‘Umar (d. ca. 786-809 C.E./170-193 A.H.) provides our earliest *maghāzī* source, *Kitāb al-ridḍa wa-l-futūḥ*.<sup>232</sup> Sayf’s discussion of monotheism is valuable for the study of conversion: he argues that Christianity, through the works and deeds of Paul and others, corrupted true monotheism. Thus, those who are monotheists of the Abrahamic faith but reject the form it has taken in Christianity have preserved the religion most sincerely. These are the ones who have upheld the teachings of Jesus, and who will readily convert to Islam because they recognize the same true monotheism in the teachings of Muḥammad. Sayf’s passage on Christianity is one of the earliest documentations of the idea that early Christians erred in their interpretation of Jesus’ message and his nature, one that would eventually become commonplace in Muslim writing on Christians.

### Al-Wāqidī

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<sup>232</sup> Sayf ibn ‘Umar, *Kitāb al-ridḍa wa-l-futūḥ* and *Kitāb al-jamal wa-masīr ‘Ā’isha wa-‘Alī*, ed. Q. al-Samarrai, 2 vols, Leiden, 1995, v.i, 132-35.

The *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* of al-Wāqidī (d. 822 C.E./207 A.H.) is another of our earliest maghāzī texts.<sup>233</sup> It narrates a number of individual conversions, including that of the leader of Ghatafan.<sup>234</sup> It also notes conversions of groups. There are, as is consistent with sources of this genre, no conversions from Islam—only those to it.

Most Muslim conversion narratives written prior to 850 C.E., whether from Christianity or non-Christian religions, describe conversions that supposedly occur during the Prophet's lifetime and involve direct contact with him. Al-Ḥakam b. Kaysan, a pagan prisoner of war, is nearly killed but instead brought to Muḥammad. He converts after asking 'What is Islam?' and receiving a response from Muḥammad.<sup>235</sup> Several boys from Quraysh convert but their fathers do not accept it; the boys ultimately remain within the faith.<sup>236</sup> A man who fought against the Muslims at Badr falls asleep in the mosque after negotiating prisoner releases. He wakes and hears the Prophet reciting a prayer at maghrib and "Islam entered into [his] heart."<sup>237</sup> During the raid of Ghatafan, the leader of the Bedouin, Du'thūr, loses a duel (Gabriel 'pushed him in the chest') and he converts, reciting the *shahāda*.<sup>238</sup> Hunayda, a man who converted after interacting with Abū Tamīm, seeks out Muḥammad to inform him that his people have accepted Islam. Mas'ūd notes that he, too, converted a man from 'Abd al-Qays.<sup>239</sup>

Among monotheistic or 'Abrahamic' converts, the narratives remain largely similar, but many also include references to pre-Islamic prophets or figures in the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition. In Wāqidī, however, this is not often the case. Banū Qurayza converted to Islam from

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<sup>233</sup> Al-Wāqidī, *The Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 610. It also includes the well-known Hudaibiyah 'Rahman' conversation with Suhayl, also found in Ma'mar b. Rashid (and discussed in that section).

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 195-6.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 409.

Judaism collectively and in doing so “secured themselves, their families and their wealth,” after initially refusing to abandon the Torah; shortly afterward they reneged on their agreement and were defeated.<sup>240</sup> A man from Dhū al-Qaṣṣa converts at the raid of Khaybar. ‘Abd al-Raḥman invites the people in Dūmat al-Jandal to Islam; after three days al-Asbagh b. ‘Amr al-Kalbī converts (“he was a Christian and their leader”).<sup>241</sup> One assumes, though it is not mentioned, that the rest of his tribe also converted. Ibn al-Ziba‘rā converts in a narrative very similar to ‘Umar’s, in which he secretly overhears the Prophet praying, has a moment of spiritual revelation, and seeks the Prophet out to convert publicly in front of him.<sup>242</sup> ‘Ikrima converts by reciting the *shahāda*; likewise Ṣafwān.<sup>243</sup> It is unlikely that the double *shahāda*, including the latter half, *Muḥammadun rasulu Allah*, was in existence and commonly recited at the moment of conversion when these two figures convert; indeed, it is possible that there was no standard conversion ritual of any sort yet.<sup>244</sup> Wāqidī’s work is considered unreliable by several foundational *muḥaddithūn* in generations after his, on grounds of fabrication, but his conversion references follow standard models of the *sīra* and *maghāzī* genre.<sup>245</sup>

### ‘Abd al-Razzāq

The *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 826 or 827 C.E./211 A.H.) was compiled and written at roughly the same time as Wāqidī’s work, in the 820s C.E.<sup>246</sup> Its attestations of conversion likewise incorporate similar tropes and narratives of major and minor

<sup>240</sup> Al-Wāqidī, *The Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 247

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 561.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 848.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 852.

<sup>244</sup> Fred Donner raised this point in his article, “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community,” *al-Abḥāth* 50-51 (2002-2003), 9-53.

<sup>245</sup> Among those who reportedly questioned Wāqidī’s scholarly trustworthiness were al-Shaf‘ī, Ahmad b. Hanbal, al-Bukharī, al-Nasa’ī, Abū Dawūd, and Ibn Abī Hatim al-Razī. (Not a list one would wish to be on the wrong side of!)

<sup>246</sup> The text is compiled and edited from the work of his teacher, Ma‘mar b. Rāshid (d. 770 C.E./153 A.H.).

figures. Its first mention of conversion is that of Waraqa b. Nawfal, Khadīja’s cousin, who converted to Christianity prior to the rise of Islam and, according to the text, knew how to write in Arabic and thus wrote down portions of the gospels in Arabic:

ثم انطلقت به خديجة حتى أنتت به ورقة ابن نوفل بن راشد بن عبد العزى بن قصي، وهو ابن عم خديجة، أخو أبيها. وكان تنصّر في الجاهليّة وكان يكتب الكتاب العربيّ. فكتب بالعربيّة من الإنجيل ما شاء الله أن يكتب.<sup>247</sup>

As other scholars have noted, this is legendary material; variations of this narrative say Waraqa instead knew Hebrew, and in any case there is no history of the gospels in Arabic prior to the rise of Islam.<sup>248</sup>

The text notes the conversion of major Companions, as is standard in *sīra* and *maghāzī* literature. The conversions of some Companions such as ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb are given lengthy treatment. One such narrative includes dialogue by Abu Sufyan in which he uses the phrase “dakhala ‘alā al-Islam” for conversion—an uncommon way of expressing conversion to or faith in Islam.<sup>249</sup> This sort of language, implying Islam’s status as fully formed, is relatively rare even in the *sīra* materials, which are themselves fairly later interpolations into early stories.<sup>250</sup> The recitation of the *shahāda* often marks the resolution of these narratives.<sup>251</sup>

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‘Abd al-Razzāq al-San’anī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, 14.

<sup>248</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzāq may have actually meant Aramaic. Ibid., *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, 15. Notes on variations of this account by the editor, 287. See also Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*.

<sup>249</sup> Abu Sufyan’s narrative, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-San’anī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, 47. Other uncommon usages include, for example, a reference to ‘Ali: “Ma‘mar said: Qatādah ibn Di‘āmah related to us on the authority of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and others, saying: *The first to believe in Muḥammad was ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who was fifteen or sixteen years old at the time* (18-19). ”علي أول من أسلم.

<sup>250</sup> Fred M. Donner’s forthcoming article “*Dīn, Islām, und Muslim im Koran*” addresses the evolution of the terms “islām” and “muslim” from their specific usages in the Qur’ān to more general, and often very different, meanings over the course of the seventh and eighth centuries. He concludes that the concept of “Islām” to denote a religion “im reifiziertem Sinne” (‘in a reified sense’) did not emerge until the eighth century, and that use of the term Islām (along with dīn and muslim) may just as easily be understood in other meanings commonly ascribed to them, such as ‘law,’ ‘judgment,’ ‘service,’ ‘one who submits,’ and in the case of islām, ‘submission.’ Donner builds upon the concept of ‘reified religions’ originating with Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion*, and directly refutes Smith’s argument, also based on Qur’ānic usage of dīn and islām, that only Islam began as a fully-formed or ‘reified’ religion.

<sup>251</sup> Donner argues that the recitation of the *shahāda* as the only consistent conversion rite in Islam—a very low-stakes requirement—may be indicative of the open or perhaps even ecumenical nature of the early Islamic

‘Umar’s conversion in ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s account involves several tropes seen in other conversions of major figures in early Islam. The account begins by describing ‘Umar’s persecution of other believers; in this case, his sister and her husband, who are reading a sura of the Qur’ān written on a shoulder blade. He then has someone read to him the portion of the Qur’ān his sister was reading, and experiences a moment of awe upon listening to it. He seeks out Muḥammad, who avoids him, assuming ‘Umar is there to harass him. Instead, he converts on the spot, reciting the *shahāda* and seeking authority figures to inform them of his conversion:

P 21: “ ‘Umar waited for the Messenger of God until he had finished the saying of “Peace!” at the end of the ritual prayer. The Messenger of God set off to see his followers, and ‘Umar walked after him hurriedly when he saw him go. Then ‘Umar said, “Wait for me, Muḥammad!” The Prophet said, “I seek refuge in God from you!” ‘Umar said, “Wait for me, Muḥammad! *O Messenger of God!*” The Messenger of God waited for him, and ‘Umar believed in him and acknowledged the truth of his message [*āmana bihi wa ṣaddaqaḥu*]. Once ‘Umar had become a Muslim [aslama],<sup>252</sup> he left to visit al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah. He said: “O Uncle! I bear witness that I believe in God and His Messenger, and I testify that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is His servant and Messenger! So go inform your people of this!”  
 أشهد أتي أو من بالله ورسوله وأشهد أن لا إله إلا الله وأن محمداً عبده ورسوله صلى الله عليه وسلم. فأخبر بذلك قوم!

But al-Walīd said, “My nephew! Remain firm in your stance toward Muḥammad. Your stature among people is well known. Will a man rise amid his people in the morning in one state and begin the evening in another?” [21/22-3] “By God,” retorted ‘Umar, “the matter has become clear to me, so inform your people [of my submission to God—*bi-Islāmi*]” “I will not be the first to tell them this about you,” said al-Walīd. ‘Umar then entered the elders’ assemblies, and once he ascertained that al-Walīd had not mentioned anything about him, he went to Jamīl ibn Ma‘mar al-Jumaḥī and said: “Spread the news: I testify that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is his servant and Messenger.”

أخبر أتي أشهد أن لا إله إلا الله وأن محمداً عبده ورسوله.

Jamīl ibn Ma‘mar stood up, hurriedly picking up his cloak, and the assemblies of Quraysh followed him. “‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb has abandoned his religion!” declared Jamīl [صبا عمر بن الخطاب] [footnote 45, p 288: “‘has abandoned his religion,: (Ar. *ṣaba’a*); lit. “‘Umar has become a Sabaen”<sup>253</sup>: but the Quraysh said nothing in reply, for ‘Umar was an esteemed leader of his tribe, and they were afraid to denounce him. When ‘Umar saw that they did not denounce him because of what he had done, he headed straightaway to their assemblies, which were as well attended as they had ever been. He then entered the walled enclosure of the Kaaba, pressed his back up against the Kaaba, and cried out, “O company of Quraysh! Do you not know that I testify that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is his servant and Messenger?” [أشهد أن لا إله إلا

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movement, or, as it is referred to in his article, the Believers’ movement. See Fred M. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Identity in the Early Islamic Community,” *al-Abhath* 50-1 (2002-2003), 49.

<sup>252</sup> The Arabic here is simply ‘aslama,’ so “has become a Muslim” is possibly an inaccurate translation.

<sup>253</sup> Sabaeans (Ar. *ṣābi’ūn*), although mentioned in the Qur’ān, remain somewhat mysterious beyond their belief in “God and the Last Day” (Q Baqarah 2:62, An’am 6:69). Later tradition often identifies them merely with those who abandon their ancestral religion. See de Blois, “The ‘Sabians’ (Ṣābi’ūn) in Pre-Islamic Arabia.”



والله وأنت محمدًا عبده ورسوله] Then they rose up in a fury, and some of their men attacked him fiercely. He spent most of that day fighting them off, and eventually they left him alone. Thus did he seek to announce his acceptance of Islam [*islāmihi*], walking to and fro in their midst and testifying that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is His servant and Messenger [يشهد أن لا إله إلا الله وأنت محمدًا عبده ورسوله]. Eventually they left him alone, for they had failed to harm him after being incited against him the first time. This greatly distressed the infidels of the Quraysh, so they began persecuting every man who embraced Islam, and even tortured a number of the Muslims.”

‘Umar’s conversion in this passage represents a variation of the widely circulated narrative about his conversion. Yet a number of interesting elements emerge here. The use of “Islam” to describe ‘Umar’s conversion is essentially synonymous with his submission to God and God’s laws and religion; this is the common understanding of the term to the present. His recitation of the *shahāda*, too, is symbolic of conversion to Islam, though in this narrative he does so three times—to Muḥammad, to his uncle al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra, and to a gathering of local elders. Thus, his conversion process moves gradually from private and most central to individual belief (an internal conversion, followed by one expressed to Muḥammad, followed by one to a non-believing relative, followed by a group of non-believers), to public and communal. It also moves from lesser to greater authority, in which ‘Umar first converts in front of Muḥammad, who is being persecuted, and finally in front of the most powerful individuals in his community.

In addition to ‘*aslama*’ and ‘*Islāmī*,’ ‘Umar’s conversion is described as *āmana bihi wa ṣaddaqahu* (referring to Muḥammad and his message) by the narrator, and as *ṣabā ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb* by a local elder, Jamīl b. Ma‘mar. It is unclear what is meant by ‘Sabean’ in this context—perhaps Jamīl simply meant that ‘Umar had converted away from polytheism to a religion (perhaps a monotheistic one?) that was somewhat familiar to others in the community.

While not directly addressing conversion, ‘Abd al-Razzāq includes an interesting narrative about the negotiation of Hudaibiyah and the language included in the treaty. In

response to ‘*bismillah al-Raḥman al-rahim*,’ the opposing leader, Suhayl, argues that he’s never heard of an al-Raḥman, and why not use ‘*bismika Allahumma*’ (“in your name, O Lord”) like Muḥammad’s people used to? This is a reference to Arabian Christian and Jewish use of ‘Raḥman’ as God,<sup>254</sup> and Suhayl’s view represents pagan unwillingness to be associated with monotheists.<sup>255</sup> He also objects to use of the title ‘Messenger of God’ in reference to Muḥammad, and has him write ‘Muḥammad b. Abd Allāh’ instead.

Thus, ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s reports provide documentation of conversion and an early Muslim perspective on other religions and how individuals and religious leaders responded and reacted to new events. Like his contemporaries, he portrays conversion as a submission to God made official by reciting the *shahāda*, preferably in the company of Muḥammad himself. Listening to Muḥammad or another individual recite a portion of the Qur’ān is itself the impetus for conversion, as the words often strike the convert as particularly beautiful or spiritual. Such an early emphasis on these elements underscores their importance in later understandings of conversion and underlying principles of Muslim belief: the Qur’ān is miraculous proof of Islam and the ultimate impetus for conversion to it, and the *shahāda* represents the act of conversion or submission.

### The *Shahāda*

The development of the *shahāda* in early Muslim sources is one that must be examined in the context of a developing religion. As the attestation one recites upon conversion or more

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<sup>254</sup> For epigraphic evidence of such usage among pre-Islamic South Arabian Christians and Jews see J. C. Greenfield, "From 'LH RḤMN To AL-RAḤMĀN: The Source Of A Divine Epithet" in B. H. Hary, J. L. Hayes & F. Astren (Eds.), *Judaism And Islam: Boundaries, Communication And Interaction - Essays In Honor Of William M. Brinner* (Brill: Leiden, 2000) 38; and G. Ryckmans, "Une Inscription Chrétienne Sabéenne Aux Muées D'Antiquités D'Istanbul," (*Le Muséon* 59, 1946), 165-168. Suleyman Dost also addresses Christian and Jewish understandings of *al-Raḥman/Rḥmnn* in his 2016 PhD dissertation from the University of Chicago.

<sup>255</sup> P 43-44; see also endnote 65 on page 290. Waqidi also includes this anecdote.

generally affirmation of faith, it is intrinsically linked to conversion today, and, according to our texts, no less so in the formative period of Islam. Yet the *shahāda* known and used so widely today did not always exist in its current formulation. The Qur’ān, arguably our earliest source material for Islamic history, contains only the first half of the *shahāda*, *la ilaha illa allah*, and not the second half.

The Qur’ān is the earliest source for the first half of the *shahāda* (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*).<sup>256</sup> It does not contain the second half, “*wa Muḥammadun rasūl Allāh*.”<sup>257</sup> However, a second half seems to be in use by early eighth century, based on its use in the coins mentioned previously, as well as a bilingual Greek-Arabic papyrus fragment dated to the reign of al-Walid (705-715 C.E.).<sup>258</sup> The second part of the *shahāda* is given in Greek first, then Arabic.

A longer version of the *shahāda* than the one most commonly used today appears in some early sources, as well. Sahih al-Bukhari, from the ninth century, records Sa’d b. Abi Waqqas as saying “I testify that there is no god but God, He is one, He has no partner, and I testify that Muḥammad is his servant and his messenger” (*Ashhadu an lā ilāha illā-llāh waḥdahū lā sharīka lahu, wa ashhadu anna Muḥammadan ‘abduhu wa rasūluhu*). A similar longer version was also found on an Anglo-Saxon gold coin minted by a King Offa, which was an imitation of an Abbasid-era dinar dated 157 A.H. (773-4 C.E.). One side reads *lā ilāh illā-llāh waḥdah lā sharīk lahu* while the other side reads *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* along with the Latin

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<sup>256</sup> The phrase “*lā ilāha illa huwa*” is found in verses 2:163, 2:255, 3:2, 3:6, 3:18, 4:87, 6:102, 6:106, 7:158, 9:31, 9:129, 10:90, 11:14, 13:30, 20:98, 23:116, 27:26, 28:70, 28:88, 35:3, 39:6, 40:3, 40:62, 40:65, 44:8, 59:22-23, 64:13, and 73:9.

<sup>257</sup> The Encyclopaedia of Islam (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) notes that the standard formula for the *shahāda* is sometimes referred to as the “*shahādatān*”—the two *shahādas*. Nonetheless, there is no documentation that the use of the term *shahāda* in the singular to signify the testament of faith ever denotes only the first half without the second. Gimaret, D. “*Shahāda*.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2015. Reference. University of Chicago. 18 October 2015 <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/shahada-SIM\\_6755](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/shahada-SIM_6755)>

<sup>258</sup> A. Grohmann, “A Bilingual Papyrus Of A Protocol - Egyptian National Library Inv. No. 61, 86-96 AH / 705-715 C.E.,” in *Arabic Papyri In The Egyptian Library, Volume I* (Cairo: Egyptian Library Press, 1934) 10-11.

inscription *OFFA REX*. This longer testimony is still used today in some contexts (it is one of the Six Kalimas in the Pakistani tradition), but its emphasis on *shirk*, juxtaposed with the time period in which it emerged, is interesting: it suggests an ongoing concern with polytheism, and perhaps also a fixation on the Christian Trinity as polytheistic. This implies that the longer *shahāda* was in use during the early Abbasid era and was later shortened to the modern version most commonly used today.

### Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām

Ibn Hishām's work (d.833) covers more conversions than the previous works, but of course in rather similar ways.<sup>259</sup> It includes several pre-Islamic conversions from polytheism to various forms of Abrahamic monotheism intended to foreshadow Islam's inevitable rise. It states, as do earlier *sīra*, that being Muslim<sup>260</sup> was possible before Islam, in the sense that perfect "Abrahamic" monotheism was Islam in the sense of submission to God; as it claims, "Dhū'l-Qarnayn before me was a Muslim..."<sup>261</sup> The text documents four men who became monotheists before Islam: Warāqa b. Naufal; 'Ubaydallah b. Jaḥsh; 'Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith; and Zayd b. 'Amr b. Nufayl:

"They were of the opinion that their people had corrupted the religion of their father Abraham and that the stone they went round was of no account; it could neither hear, nor see, nor hurt, nor help. 'Find for yourselves a religion,' they said; 'for by God you have none.' So they went their several ways in the lands, seeking the Ḥanīfiya, the religion of Abraham. Warāqa attached himself to Christianity and studied its scriptures until he had thoroughly mastered them. 'Ubaydallah went on searching until Islam came; then he migrated with the Muslims to Abyssinia taking with him his wife who was a Muslim, Umm Ḥabība, bt. Abū Sufyān. When he arrived there he adopted Christianity, parted from Islam, and died a Christian in Abyssinia. ... 'Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith went to the

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<sup>259</sup> Ibn Ishāq (d.767)/Ibn Hishām (d.833), *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Ed. Wüstenfeld (Gottingen, 1858-60).

<sup>260</sup> Perhaps the improper noun 'muslim' is more appropriate, as 'Muslim' did not yet indicate a practitioner of an established faith but rather a 'submitter' to the monotheistic religion of God. See Fred Donner, "*Dīn, Islām, und Muslim im Koran*," forthcoming.

<sup>261</sup> Ibn Hishām, 15; 18.

Byzantine emperor and became a Christian. He was given high office there. Zayd b. ‘Amr stayed as he was: he accepted neither Judaism nor Christianity. He abandoned the religion of his people and abstained from idols, animals that had died, blood, and things offered to idols. He forbade the killing of infant daughters, saying that he worshipped the God of Abraham, and he publicly rebuked his people for their practices.<sup>262</sup> ... Then he went forth seeking the religion of Abraham, questioning monks and Rabbis until he had traversed al-Mauṣil and the whole of Mesopotamia; then he went through the whole of Syria until he came to a monk in the high ground of Balqā. This man, it is alleged, was well instructed in Christianity. He asked him about the Ḥanīfiya, the religion of Abraham, and the monk replied, ‘You are seeking a religion to which no one today can guide you, but the time of a prophet who will come forth from your own country which you have just left has drawn near. He will be sent with the Ḥanīfiya, the religion of Abraham, so stick to it, for he is about to be sent now and this is his time.’ Now Zayd had sampled Judaism and Christianity and was not satisfied with either of them; so at these words he went away at once making for Mecca; but when he was well inside the country of Lakhm he was attacked and killed.”<sup>263</sup>

This account constructs the religious space Islam will encompass—actively rejecting Meccan polytheistic ritual, embracing Abrahamic monotheism (which it associates with the *Ḥanīfiya*) but ultimately dissatisfied with Christianity and Judaism, and reaching into Abyssinia, Syria, Iraq and the Jazīra. Ibn Hisham then provides several conversion narratives of major figures from early Islamic Arabia: those of wives and Companions of the Prophet, of course, but also of Abū Sufyān, the Quraysh, the leader of Banū Sa‘d b. Bakr, the Banū Tamīm, and others.<sup>264</sup> New converts are represented as future missionaries: when al-Ṭufayl converts, he narrates, “the apostle explained Islam to me and recited the Qur’ān to me...so I became a Muslim and bore true witness...[he then converted several others]...then I went to the apostle with my converts while he was in Khaybar.”<sup>265</sup> When Mecca was conquered and Abū Sufyān was taken, ‘Abbās “said to him, ‘Submit and testify that there is no God but Allah and that Muḥammad is the apostle of God before you lose your head,’ so he did so.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 99; 144.

<sup>263</sup> Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hisham, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Ed. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, 1858-60), 103; 148-9.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 155, 159, 162, 166, 185, 225-30, 259, 285-6, 933, 938, 944.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 253-55.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 814.

Among other Jewish and Christian converts in the *sīra*, Ibn Ishāq includes a variety of accounts. Abdallah b. Salām, a rabbi, converts in the presence of Muḥammad while confirming Muḥammad’s closeness to Moses. He asks Muḥammad to tell the Jews that he is with him, and refers to them as liars. When he finally confronts his former co-religionists, he proclaims the *shahāda* to them. Mukhayriq, another Jewish convert, leaves his faith after a dispute over assisting Muḥammad on the Sabbath.

Salman al-Fārisī, one of the better-known Christian converts to Islam, begins as a Zoroastrian, converts to various sects of Christianity, and is sent across much of the Near East looking for the next prophet. His last Christian mentor, in Syria, tells him to seek three signs in the next prophet. The moment of conversion for Salman, as Ibn Ishaq conveys it, is when the prophet reveals the third of these signs—the seal of prophethood on his back. Salman does not convert so much as recognize Muḥammad as the next prophet in the Abrahamic line, as foretold to him by his Christian mentor (who Muḥammad later identifies as Jesus son of Mary).<sup>267</sup>

Adīy b. Ḥātīm, a Christian, fled to Jaushiya in Syria when Muḥammad’s armies arrived, abandoning his half-sister. When she was later brought to him, she told him to join Muḥammad’s movement. Reluctantly, he went to meet Muḥammad, who chided him for taxing people beyond the legal tax limit in Christianity. As Muḥammad could not have known about this in advance, Adīy converted on the spot.<sup>268</sup> The Negus also converts, sort of, though more accurately he tells everyone what they want to hear.<sup>269</sup> Among other Christian converts, several Christians from Axum or Najrān (Ibn Ishāq is not sure which) travel to see Muḥammad and convert.<sup>270</sup> Various tribes associated with Byzantine Christianity in the pre-Islamic Near East convert, including the

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<sup>267</sup> Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hisham, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Ed. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, 1858-60), 95-8.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 637-9.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

Banū Tamīm,<sup>271</sup> the Banū al-Ḥārith in Najrān,<sup>272</sup> and Farwa b. ‘Amr al-Judhamī and the rest of Judham.<sup>273</sup> The Tamīm conversion report mentions the Romans, but none of these tribes is explicitly associated with Christianity in their conversion accounts here.

Ibn Hishām’s *sīra* is our most thorough Muslim work on conversion during this time period, but it adds little to our understanding of Muslim views on conversion that Sayf, Wāqidī or ‘Abd al-Razzāq did not already provide. Islam is both superior and inevitable, it is miraculous (as evidenced by the Qur’ān), and individuals convert as a result of hearing the Qur’ān read aloud. Their public conversion amounts to a recitation of the *shahāda* with a witness present, preferably Muḥammad himself (or, barring that, a Companion who reports back to Muḥammad). This, of course, speaks to a limitation of these narratives: though written down in the early ninth century, and transmitted by earlier scholars, they cover only the Prophet’s lifetime and the conquests that occurred immediately afterward. It is possibly—even likely—that any treatment of conversion from the ninth century that covers the early seventh century has already become thoroughly ossified into a series of tropes (or entirely fabricated from them). The commonalities among the lengthier conversion narratives in Wāqidī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Hishām reflect this; though there are discrepancies in accounts of major figures, they are minor, and most conversions contain the same basic elements. Some of those elements are reflected in Christian sources from the same time period or earlier—Christian writers recognize that the *shahāda* is as indicative of conversion and submission to Islam as baptism is to Christianity, for example. But otherwise, the early Muslim historical tradition does not interact with the Christian one in Syria and the Jazīra.

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 631.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 645-8.

<sup>273</sup> Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hisham, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Ed. Wüstenfeld (Gottingen, 1858-60), 644 and 648, respectively.

## Conclusions

The texts examined in this chapter demonstrate a rich variety of historical writing attempting to understand and explain religious developments in Syria and the Jazīra as they documented real or imagined conversions that occurred within their recent pasts. As conversion narratives proliferate, several tropes emerge, depending on the faith to which the convert or author belong. These include, for individual conversions to Christianity, visions or miracles often involving certain motifs (e.g. the cross, the lamb of God), a conversion followed by either an attempt to hide one's faith or, in marked contrast, ostentatious displays of it, along with experience in a monastery, interaction with a Muslim authority figure (often a caliph), and ultimately martyrdom. For individual conversions from Christianity to Islam (or 'passing' as a non-Christian) documented by a Christian author, tropes include some kind of vision upon conversion to Islam that represents the loss of spirituality conferred at baptism (e.g., saints removing holy robes or a dove flying from one's mouth upon recitation of the *shahāda*); for mass conversions, extreme taxation and resultant poverty providing temptation for the weak; and for all conversions to Islam documented by Christians, portrayal of Arab Muslims, and especially Muslim officials, as heretics, heathens, or simply cruel or barbaric rulers. Conversions to Islam documented by Muslim *sīra* and *maghāzī* authors usually include recitation of the *shahāda*, either in front of the Prophet or reported back to him, and in longer individual narratives, a situation in which the convert's change of heart occurs upon overhearing the Prophet pray or recite verses of the Qur'ān. Conversion to "Abrahamic" monotheism in *sīra* and *maghāzī*, it should be noted, frequently occurred before the rise of Islam itself, as these sources depict 'perfect' submission to God as monotheistic in the "Abrahamic" sense, though without the



beliefs and practices that eighth-century Muslims believed corrupted these traditions after the prophets in this tradition had passed away.

These sources are classified as historical in this project because they present themselves as chronological, somewhat objective, and largely concerned with past events. Nearly all of them, however, must be classified as salvation history, and thus considered within its conceptual framework. They tell us far more about local understandings of both religious developments in general and conversion specifically in seventh, eighth and ninth-century Syria and the Jazīra than about what actually occurred, as related to religious change and conversion, within this timeframe. These sources generally do not address theological issues in depth; rather, they seem to assume their audience shares their theological stances and would deem rival sects heretical. They are not blatantly polemical, or at least not written as such, though their intention is clearly somewhat polemical—no conversion narrative is ever a neutral account; each convert is fundamentally a win or a loss as far as our historians are concerned. They are usually not apocalyptic in nature, though some seventh-century historical texts contain apocalyptic elements. They also do not address legal issues beyond contextual consideration of tax status and the implications of apostasy (a potential death sentence). Polemical and apocalyptic material, along with legal considerations, will be addressed in the remaining chapters of this dissertation. Combined with this examination of early historical material on conversion, they will provide scholars with a richer understanding of conversion and its place in society in early Islamic Syria and the Jazīra: not necessarily an accurate report of a conversion event, but more generally how conversions were described, how they were perceived, their associated rituals and implications, and what conversions signified to the audiences of these narratives about the faith practices involved in the process of changing from one religious group to another.

### Chapter Three: Conversion in Early Islamic Syrian and Jazīran Apocalyptic Writing

*“Al-Walīd: I read, according to Daniel, the entirety of this community after its prophet Muḥammad until [the second coming of] Jesus will be 174 years.”<sup>274</sup>*

This chapter and the one following it comprise a set, examining a variety of overtly polemical material on conversion written from 640-850 C.E., tracing the way conversion is portrayed in the development of polemical writing. This chapter will cover apocalyptic material, and the next chapter will examine other genres of polemic. Apocalyptic writing is a particularly relevant subset of polemical writing for our purposes because during this period, mass conversion of a population to Islam or Christianity was often associated with the onset of the apocalypse.

Who was writing apocalyptic literature in Syriac or Arabic in seventh-, eighth-, and early ninth-century Syria and the Jazīra? Mostly, we do not know the identities of the authors, although we do know the communities from which they came. Many Christian sources are fully anonymous. In Muslim sources, we often know the compiler and the original transmitter, but tradition in the first two centuries after the conquests does not yet require a complete *isnad* going back to the original source of each report.

As a general rule, apocalyptic content follows social trends to extreme conclusions, and conversion is no exception. References to conversion in these apocalyptic texts never focus on individuals; converts are only represented in the aggregate. This implies that conversion in apocalyptic stories represents fear of the loss of an entire community, of numbers, of demographic strength. In the earliest Christian apocalyptic texts describing Muslims, as well as

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<sup>274</sup> *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 493.

Muslim material describing Christians (often represented by the Byzantines or “Romans”), the fear is often not of conversion per se, but that local men will join the army of the enemy. Based on our current understanding of the composition of the Muslim army after 640 C.E., such a move would often imply conversion, sometimes upon conscription and sometimes after years of fighting alongside Muslims. This was not always the case, however—large numbers of Christians joined the army of Yazīd I, for example, possibly out of tribal loyalty (his mother belonged to the Christian Kalb tribe).<sup>275</sup> Whether conversion was indeed implied by conscription or not, mass defection from the one side to the other represents a major loss of bodies in a community. Conversion away from one’s faith, to that of the enemy, is utilized in the writing of this era as a sign of the impending apocalypse because it signified a loss of social and ultimately political power on the part of one or another religious group, and constituted something of a demographic and existential reckoning for each community.

A variety of themes emerge in a chronological study of this material, many of them related to conquest. In early Syriac apocalypses, Muslims will soon be defeated as were the Persians and other enemies of the Byzantines. In later ones, only part of former Byzantine territory will be retaken; the Muslims will not be totally vanquished. In Muslim apocalypses, which cannot be plotted on a chronological graph so easily, the material refers to a variety of locations from which the Anti-Christ will emerge, including all four cardinal directions, but particularly Syria itself (and to a lesser extent Iraq). These directional references can often be linked to strife occurring with different groups coming from each of these directions relative to Syria: among other groups, Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī (d. 844 C.E.), the author of a major

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<sup>275</sup> A recently discovered Arabic inscription, found in present-day Jordan, reads “Yazīd the King,” and may be the earliest Christian Arabic inscription currently known. The authors argue that it likely refers to Yazīd I. Younis al-Shdaifat, Ahmad al-Jallad, Zeyad al-Salameen, and Rafe Harahsheh, “An early Christian Arabic graffito mentioning ‘Yazīd the king’,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 28.1 (November 2017), 315-324.

compilation of early apocalyptic traditions, describes ‘Alid supporters from the east, Berber rebels from the west, Turks, Daylamites and Bulgars from the north, and rebels from the south.<sup>276</sup>

Conversion is implicated in the end of the world, but not in the ways one might expect. In Muslim apocalyptic material, mass conversion (or submission to Islam) will bring about the end of days, which is initiated by the return to earth of Jesus, to earth to lead his followers. In Christian apocalypses, too, Jesus will return at the end of the world: that element is shared among faiths.

The references to heresy in these apocalypses are interesting: in Christian texts that describe Muslims, one does not see as much discussion of heretical sects as might be expected, given the contentious nature of Christian theological disputes in late antiquity. The few references to heretics that do occur blame Christians who have ‘strayed’ in various ways, whether by heresy, loose morals, arrogance, or otherwise. Yet individual heretical sects or groups are not named. On the other hand, references to heretical or marginal sects (or false prophets) is rather strong in Muslim apocalyptic material.

Biblical apocalyptic references are rife throughout all of the apocalyptic material, both Muslim and Christian. The book of Daniel is the text that is most commonly referenced, directly or indirectly, in many texts from this era: direct and indirect references can be found in the *Doctrina Jacobi*, the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād’s *Kitāb al-Fitan*, the Pseudo-Edessene apocalypse, and other texts. Of course, reinterpretations of Daniel had a long

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<sup>276</sup> Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 71.

tradition by the seventh century C.E.; the pre-Islamic Syrian Christian tradition drew heavily on it, as did several others (perhaps most famously John of Patmos, in the Book of Revelation).<sup>277</sup>

The symbolist school of thought argues that in the case of apocalypses, such scriptural re-imaginings have far more to do with the political events and scandals of the day, or within living memory, and particularly those recent or collective memories that had a strong effect on society's narrative for or of itself.<sup>278</sup> Apocalypses speak within the linguistic and thematic structures of scripture, no doubt, but we might propose that they speak more clearly, if indirectly, of politics, power struggles, prejudices, and even natural disasters—exaggerations of negative events that occurred within collective living memory, and which were then expressed through the concepts of heresy, collective fear of the foreign, and whatever a community thinks is most likely to cause its own downfall.

### Historical Context

Just as modern predictions of the future often look to the recent past, especially in war, so the same is true of late antiquity's variant: the apocalyptic vision. There are references to the True Cross in Jerusalem, to Bedouins overrunning the land, as they apparently did in the 610s, etc. But the earliest of these references does not mention Islam – Muḥammad, sure, but not a new

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<sup>277</sup> For an early-seventh century (pre-Islamic) Syriac interpretation of the Daniel narrative, see *The Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, ed. Matthias Henze (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), *passim*. For the Armenian tradition, see Lorenzo DiTommaso, "The Armenian Seventh Vision of Daniel and the Historical Apocalypsa of Late Antiquity," in Kevork Bardakjian and Sergio La Porta, eds., *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition: A Comparative Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 126-148. For the Late Antique Greek and Latin versions that later informed Arabic translations of Daniel in both the Christian and Muslim traditions, see Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel: A Comparative Study of Early MSS and Translation Techniques in MSS Sinai Ar. 1 and 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), xii-xvii and 9-22.

<sup>278</sup> See for example Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Vision, Prophecy and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), *passim*.

religion, just a familiar people, overrunning its territory and thus sparking increased strife—an apocalyptic sign.<sup>279</sup> Apocalyptic literature thus represents both political commentary and fear-mongering demagoguery. The fear-inducing events of the seventh and eighth centuries in Bilād al-Shām and al-Jazīra included earthquakes, plagues, and other cataclysmic events that were often interpreted as divine punishment; Muslims and heretical Christians; rebellious populations; false prophets; imperial pretenders. Astronomical events also portended the end of the world: comets, asteroids and other events could and did strike fear in populations who drew deep meaning from astrological predictions.

The last and arguably the worst of the Byzantine-Sasanian wars began in 602 C.E. and ended in 628—a mere six years before the area was gradually taken over by Muḥammad’s successors to the south.

The Sasanians occupied significant portions of Greater Syria (including Palestine) and Egypt for ten to twenty years during the war, beginning in 603. Major cities in Syria such as Emesa (Homs) and Damascus were captured rather quickly in 613. Though Constantinople was never taken, the Sasanians came close in 626. Antoine Borrut has argued that these raids are connected to Umayyad apocalyptic beliefs, in which the fall of Constantinople (or Rūm) would bring about the end of the world.<sup>280</sup> These beliefs, and particularly the importance of Constantinople in them, are also reflected in the collected traditions of Nu’aym b. Ḥammād’s

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<sup>279</sup> Jonathan Conant writes that “it was the Persian and Muslim wars that inspired the most apocalyptic visions on the part of seventh-century Byzantines living in Africa. The Roman or Byzantine empire was seen as the fourth kingdom in the vision of Daniel. Barbarian victories heralded not just the diminution of the empire but the end of time. ...[Further, t]he association of the Roman empire with the fourth kingdom had already been made by Augustine’s day.” Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 359. *Doctrina Jacobi* 3.8, 3.10, 3.12, 4.5, and 5.5, pp. 165-73, 181-3, and 191-3. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 20.23, 48:742.

<sup>280</sup> Antoine Borrut, *Entre Mémoire et Pouvoir: L’espace syrien sous les derniers omeyyades et les premiers abbassides (ca. 72-193/692-809)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 114-9; 207-16.

*Kitāb al-Fitan*, which will be discussed later in this chapter. More importantly for our purposes, Syria was under Sasanian occupation for an extended period of time within living memory of locals (indeed, it would have been a significant portion of many locals' lives).<sup>281</sup> When it was recovered by Heraclius, Syria became a line of defense against the Sasanians, with troops clustered in northern Syria and extending down as far south and west as Gaza.

In 614, Jerusalem was captured (technically recaptured) by the Sasanians after a siege lasting three weeks. The population was almost entirely Christian, as Jews had by and large not been permitted in the city (let alone live there), and in recent years local Byzantine administrators had carried out pogroms against the Jewish population of Greater Syria. When the city surrendered after the siege, much of the population was reportedly massacred. Due to the population being largely Christian, the massacre was also essentially entirely of Christian residents of Jerusalem, including some 4,500 prisoners. Sebeos put the total number dead at 17,000, though later sources would inflate it to five times that number or more. 35,000 or more residents were reportedly sent to Mesopotamia, including major religious leaders. Sources also report that the city was burnt to the ground.<sup>282</sup>

Jerusalem is one of the most excavated cities in the world, yet, as we know, there is nothing in the archaeological record that reflects mass burning. A number of churches underwent restoration in the years immediately following 614, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Golgotha, among others. Destruction of these churches cannot be confidently pinned to the dates of siege and surrender, but almost certainly within a few years of it. The massacre of Christians became an important fixture in local memory, especially in regard to both foreign

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<sup>281</sup> Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 99-101.

<sup>282</sup> For a nuanced take on this historical event see Gideon Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 C.E.) – An Archaeological Assessment," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 357 (Feb. 2010), 35-48.

invaders and interreligious strife. The alliance between the Sasanians and local Jewish populations was the source of much anti-Semitic polemic in the years to come, despite the fact that the Sasanians eventually developed even longer-standing partnerships with local Christian (often non-Chalcedonian) populations during the occupation, perhaps due to pressure from Sasanian Christian groups. Sebeos also notes that those deported to Mesopotamia were resettled according to their profession.

Several Christian relics were confiscated and brought to the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon after the capture of Jerusalem, the most famous being the True Cross. Byzantine Emperor Heraclius's gradual triumph over Sasanian forces in his territory, followed by his success in suing Sasanian Emperor Khusraw II for peace, culminated in his march to Jerusalem with the True Cross, beginning in Ctesiphon and concluding in Jerusalem in March 630. The return of the True Cross was deeply symbolic; its loss to the Sasanians represented God's disfavor toward Christians, as conveyed in many Christian eye-witness accounts of the wars. The return of the cross to Jerusalem is described in triumphant terms by essentially every scholar who covers it, and it is often portrayed as a restoration of order, the victory of peace over war, and the righteousness of Christianity, particularly the Chalcedonian variety. The conquest of the region by Arabian forces, declaring the superiority of a new religion, no less, began a mere four years later.

Christians in Iraq, of course, experienced the Byzantine-Sasanian wars differently from their co-religionists in Syria. Though they came from the same cultural heritage vis-à-vis religion, clerical language (Syriac) and other signifiers, including geographic regions (Syria and the Jazīra can arguably be viewed as a contiguous, if at times rather mountainous or remote, cultural zone), Iraqi (or more specifically Sasanian) Christians represented a variety of sects.



They were at times persecuted by those representing the Zoroastrianism, the official religion, as were non-Chalcedonian Christians under the Byzantines.

The events of the early seventh century were within the living memory of those who witnessed and wrote about the Muslim conquests.<sup>283</sup> Indeed, we can analyze many of our earliest texts more clearly with this in mind. For later texts, however, such as those written during the late eighth or early ninth century, this legacy may live on only in the tropes constructed (or often reconstructed from even earlier texts and events) in the seventh century to describe Muslims, their new faith, and the specter of conversion and non-Christian (or non-Byzantine) rule. Other historical events may have been as important, or perhaps more important, in the construction of a social, political and religious framework for an apocalyptic or polemical text. Such events include the first and second fitnas, which both involved Syria and Iraq as significant bases of opposition. For the sources that began to proliferate in the eighth century, important events within living memory also included the third civil war and ‘Abbasid revolution, whose Syrian-Iraqi political divide may as well have reconstructed the Byzantine-Sasanian border.<sup>284</sup> So too did the annual summer raid into Anatolia by the early ‘Abbasids mirror those of the Sasanians in the pre-Islamic era, both of which crossed from Baghdad/Ctesiphon into the Jazīra and northern Syria before raiding in Byzantine Anatolia, ever further towards Constantinople. One may also view the ‘Abbasid civil war as a potential source of strife writers could draw upon in the construction of apocalyptic treatises, though by this era the ‘Abbasid influences that emerge in such texts probably owe far more to the rise of local rebellions, local religious and political

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<sup>283</sup> Barbara Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood: The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image*, trans. Lee Preedy (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 139-148; Anatole Frolov, “The Veneration of the Relic of the True Cross at the End of the Sixth and the Beginning of the Seventh Centuries,” *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, NS 2.1 (1958), 13-30.

<sup>284</sup> Antoine Borrut, *Entre Mémoire et Pouvoir: L'espace syrien sous les derniers omeyyades et les premiers abbassides (ca. 72-193/692-809)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 160-83; 285-301.

pretenders, military defectors, and unabashedly corrupt officials, whether governors, generals, caliphs, or tax-collectors.<sup>285</sup> Paul J. Alexander says many texts fall under the “Last Roman Emperor” theme, which was common in late antiquity.<sup>286</sup> In this paradigm, among Christian writers, the Byzantine emperor will defeat the Arabs, take back Jerusalem, and establish Christendom around the world, bringing about the last days.

Avraham Grossman identified four major periods of activity in Jewish apocalyptic writing about Jerusalem from the seventh to the twelfth century C.E.:<sup>287</sup>

- 1) The first half of the seventh century, in which Jerusalem was taken and then controlled by Persia, returned to Byzantium, then conquered by Muslim armies;
- 2) The mid-eighth century, in which the Umayyad dynasty ends and the ‘Abbasid Revolution occurs;
- 3) The decline of ‘Abbasid power in the mid-tenth century; and
- 4) The Crusader era, especially the late twelfth century (which coincides with a shift in rulership from the Fatimids to the Ayyubids).

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<sup>285</sup> A revolt against the new ‘Abbasid leaders occurred in 132 AH/750 C.E., led by Abū al-Ward, a former Syrian governor and friend of Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik, who attacked the ‘Abbasid troops at Bālis on the Euphrates in Syria, where they were both stationed. He led the Qaysī faction, while the Yamanī faction was “led by the Umayyad noble Abū Muḥammad al-Sufyānī, a veteran of the Third Civil War who had spent the latter part of Marwān II’s reign imprisoned in Ḥarrān.” Paul Cobb, *White Banners: Contention in ‘Abbasid Syria, 750-880* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 47. Abū Muḥammad al-Sufyānī declared himself the next Umayyad caliph here, actively presenting himself as the Sufyānī, an already-formed apocalyptic figure by this time. There was also an Abū al-‘Umaytir al-Sufyānī, a “self-styled Umayyad messiah” who also presented himself as the Sufyānī (Cobb 56). Both were actual descendants of Mu‘āwiya b. Abī Sufyān, and therefore ‘real’ Sufyanis. See also Wilferd Madelung, “The Sufyani between Tradition and History,” *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986), 5-48.

<sup>286</sup> See Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985, and Andreas Kraft, “The Last Roman Emperor Topos in the Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition,” *Byzantion* 82 (2012), 213-257.

<sup>287</sup> Avraham Grossman, “Jerusalem in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” in *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period, 638-1099*, eds. Joshua Prawer and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1996), 296.

Of these, only the first two fall within our time period, and they are true of Christian and Muslim apocalyptic, as well. But both within and beyond Jerusalem, in Bilād al-Shām and al-Jazīra, two additional historical moments influenced apocalyptic writing during their era: the aftermath of the first and second fitnas, from 660 to the 690s, culminating in ‘Abd al-Malik’s construction of the Dome of the Rock,<sup>288</sup> and the fourth fitna, or ‘Abbasid civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn (813-817 C.E./197-202 A.H.), which was also the tail end of a period of messianic/apocalyptic expectation surrounding the year 200 A.H.<sup>289</sup> This is when Nu‘aym b. Hammad compiled his *Fitan*, for example.

Thus, the “political soup” of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, from which our apocalyptic material emerges, is complicated. Various overlapping legacies of rulers, wars, alliances, internecine spats, and cultural differences all factored into the way conversion was viewed by local populations in greater Syria and the Jazīra, by political leaders, by intellectuals, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, by the religious scholars who wrote the treatises and reports we now draw upon.

### *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizi*

One of our first apocalypses from the Muslim era is the *Doctrina Jacobi*, which was originally written in Greek but also preserved in Arabic and Slavonic, with fragmented evidence

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<sup>288</sup> Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 189-193.

<sup>289</sup> For more on the import given the year 200 AH, see David Cook, “The Apocalyptic Year 200/815-16 and the Events Surrounding It,” in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert I. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 41-68. See also Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 50-58.

of preservation in Syriac.<sup>290</sup> Set in Carthage, it was written in Palestine likely sometime between 634 and 650 C.E. The text is about a false conversion of a Jewish shopkeeper to Christianity, and contains a letter from Palestine referencing the forced conversion of the Jews under the Byzantine emperor Heraclius after the last Persian-Byzantine war ended in 628.<sup>291</sup> It references a prophet from the “Saracens” who excited Palestinian Jews with the prospect of the messiah and freedom from Byzantine oppression. The letter then says this prophet must be false because he is armed, though many Jews have joined the Saracens:

“It was said that the prophet had appeared, coming with the Saracens, and proclaiming the coming of the returning Christ. And when I arrived at Sykamina, I stopped at the house of an elder who was well versed in Scripture, and I said to him, What do you say to me about the prophet who appeared with the Saracens? And he answers me, bemoaning deeply: It is a false prophet: do the prophets come armed from hand to foot? Really, the events of recent times are works of disorder, and I fear that the first Christ who came, the one whom the Christians adore, is not God's envoy, while we are preparing to receive Hermolaos at the place. Isaiah said that the Jews would have a perverted and hardened heart until all the earth was devastated. But go, Abraham, and inquire about this prophet that has appeared. And I, Abraham, having pushed the investigation, I learned from those who met him that there is nothing authentic in this pretend prophet: it is only a question of massacres. He also says he holds the keys to heaven, which is incredible.”<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Vincent Déroche and Gilbert Dagron, “Juifs et Chrétiens dans l’Orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991), 50.

<sup>291</sup> See Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), *passim*. See also Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 75-77. Maximus Confessor had opposed the forced conversion of the Jews as well. R. Devréesse, ‘La Fin inédite d’un letter de Saint Maxime: un baptême forcé de Juifs et de Samaritains à Carthage en 632’, *Revue des sciences religieuses* 17 (1937), pp. 25-35; cf. Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 354. As with the author of the *Doctrina Jacobi*, Maximus also saw the Muslim conquests as a sign of the apocalypse. See Maximus Confessor’s letter to Peter Illustrios (Epistle 14, PG 91, cols 537-41), maybe 630s-640. Johannes Pahlitzsch writes: “In 632, Heraclius issued an edict that all Jews be baptized. This forced conversion was probably inspired at least in part by an apocalyptic vision of the events of the previous twenty years. But there are also indications that from an imperial point of view the political loyalty of the Jews to the empire was at stake. ‘Are you the servants of the most clement emperor?’, the Praetorian Prefect George (or Sergius) asked the Jews of Carthage. ‘Are you not his obedient subjects?’ Informing them of the emperor’s edict, the prefect continued, ‘The emperor desires that you be baptized....So you are not his faithful subjects, for you do not obey your master.’ In the seventh century, from a Byzantine point of view, a Christian must by definition love the emperor.” Entry by Johannes Pahlitzsch, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 117-9.

<sup>292</sup> Vincent Déroche and Gilbert Dagron, “Juifs et Chrétiens dans l’Orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991), 208-9.

In this narrative, Jacob was a Jewish merchant in Carthage who pretended to be a Christian. He seems to have succeeded until one night, walking home, he stumbled and shouted, ‘Adonai!’—a clear sign of Jewishness. Then, under suspicion, he was secretly followed to the public baths, where it was found he was circumcised. Upon this discovery, he was imprisoned and baptized against his will. After seeing a vision, he underwent a sincere conversion to Christianity, and began proselytizing among Levantine Jews.

This may be more about the legacy of the Persian-Byzantine wars, and especially the massacre of Christians in Jerusalem and responding forced conversion of its Jews to Christianity. The text is from Mar Saba, only a few miles from Jerusalem and no doubt the massacre would remain an important part of local historical memory at that point.<sup>293</sup> This narrative sets a precedent for later martyrdom stories about false conversions to Islam.<sup>294</sup>

### The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem

The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem, a memrā which was written sometime between 640 and 692 C.E., may be our earliest Syriac apocalyptic text about Muslims.<sup>295</sup> The apocalypse itself

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<sup>293</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 27-8 and 32-5; Francisco Javier Martínez, “La literatura apocalíptica y las primeras reacciones cristianas a la conquista islámica en oriente,” in *Europa y el Islam*, ed. G Anes y Álvarez de Caastrillón (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2003), 143-222. On Christian responses more generally, see John C. Lamoreaux, “Early Christian Responses to Islam,” in John Victor Tolan, ed., *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Press, 1996), 3-31; Alan M. Guenther, “The Christian Experience and Interpretation of the Early Muslim Conquest,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10.3 (1999), 363-78; Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), *passim*.

<sup>294</sup> See also Sean Anthony, “Muḥammad, the Keys to Paradise, and the Doctrina Iacobi: A Late Antique Puzzle,” *Der Islam* 91.2 (2014): 243-265, and his forthcoming book on the topic.

<sup>295</sup> Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones I* (CSCO 130; Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1970), 62-71. It is unclear to which sect of Christianity this author belonged. The text contains criticism of the Byzantine authorities, whose oppressive actions caused the poor to pray for justice, resulting in the Muslim

was written before the Muslim conquest, but a section was added later about Muslims, in which Muslim oppression exists in the form of excessive tax collection.<sup>296</sup> While the text contains a line referring to open apostasy, it occurs well before any reference to Muslims (here the ‘sons of Hagar’ who emerge from the desert). Thus, whether this refers to conversion to Islam depends upon how the text is read – the line about apostasy seems to come toward the end of an eighteen-line introductory section: “Men will publically apostatize | and the left side profit; The sons of righteousness will be oppressed | by the sons of the side of sin; Thus, my beloved, | the last age will arrive.” It is here that the introduction seems to end. The next couplet reads, “Behold, we will see signs | as Christ declared to us:”<sup>297</sup> What follows is several pages of events that are to be interpreted as signs of the apocalypse. Conversion is not mentioned among them, though the arrival of the “sons of Hagar” from the desert is, as are their actions of plunder, enslavement and enactment of ‘humbling’ tribute.<sup>298</sup> Yet between the initial reference to apostasy and this discussion of Muslims come references to “nations attacking nations,” specifically the Roman Empire, and the rule of the “Assyrians,” who will become extremely wealthy while ruling the Roman Empire. Indeed, the “sons of Hagar” come only after the poor make entreaties to heaven about the wickedness occurring on earth. The initial reference to apostasy, coupled with mentions of profit and the oppression of righteous people by “the sons of the side of sin,” could

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conquests. While oppression by Muslim rulers is then referenced, the author seems unlikely to have been Chalcedonian, given its affiliation with the Byzantine Empire. The perspective of non-Chalcedonian Christians viewing Muslim rule as something of a reprieve from Byzantine persecution is a common one in seventh- and eighth-century texts in particular, at times followed by disappointment when these sects experienced new hardships (often in the form of taxation), as represented here.

<sup>296</sup> Gerrit Reinink suggests that the entire text was reworked when the Muslim section was added, though this remains unconfirmed. Gerrit J. Reinink, “Following the Doctrine of the Demons: Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam,” in *Cultures of Conversions*, eds. Jan Bremmer, Arie L. Molendijk, and WJ Van Bekkum (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 138. Entry on Ps.-Ephrem, Harald Suermann, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 160-2.

<sup>297</sup> Tr. Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 40.

<sup>298</sup> Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen en Ephraem des Syrsers Sermones I* (CSCO 130; Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1970), 62-3.

be about events prior to the Muslim conquests – Byzantine acceptance and promotion of Chalcedonian Christianity, for example. However, given that the language of oppression, particularly financial oppression, is a trope that is also used to describe Muslim rule, the reference to apostasy could denote conversion to Islam, and indeed seems more likely to do so. If it does, then references to ‘public apostasy’ resulting in sin and profit for one group of people and oppression for another implies that conversion to Islam was linked, at least in this text, to financial gain, while remaining Christian was linked to financial oppression, possibly in the form of onerous taxes. If so, this is one of the earliest texts linking conversion, taxation, and the apocalypse, and should be dated toward the end of the proposed window in which it was written (640-692 C.E.), as the early 690s coincides with census-taking and major tax reforms under the Umayyads, and a minor flurry of writing by Christians protesting the onerousness of the new taxes.

### The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius

The author of the Syriac apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius was writing in the late seventh century in northern Syria., likely around 691-2 C.E.<sup>299</sup> He provided one of the earliest discussions of conversion to Islam and the fear it evoked among Christians in the Syriac-speaking regions of the Levant and upper Mesopotamia.<sup>300</sup> The Arabians are known as “Children

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<sup>299</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 34. From what we can discern, the author was Syrian, maybe from an area east of Mosul, somewhere near the Persian border. *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 163-71, entry by Lutz Greisiger. Multiple MS used: V (Vatican); M (Mardin); G (Greek); L (Latin).

<sup>300</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 34. It is unclear to which sect of Christianity he belonged—Chalcedonian, Jacobite, or Melkite.

of Ishmael, son of Hagar,” as is common in Syriac texts during this period, and are noted to be from Yathrib.

Pseudo-Methodius begins with historical context, which for him represents the last fifty years or so. These actions are interpreted as retribution for Christian sins. For the study of conversion in the early Islamic era, Pseudo-Methodius’s writings are quite telling in details and theme: these Arabians represent destruction, and therefore fear of a worst-case conquest scenario—mass conversion—is presented here. Much work has been done on Pseudo-Methodius’s apocalypse. This section will focus on his treatment of conversion.

Only Chapter 7 of the apocalypse is focused on Christian apostasy, though the topic lies at the heart of the text’s motivations.<sup>301</sup> Reinink argues that the text’s tone, and its author’s fear of mass conversion, were predicated on the changes in Umayyad rule in the 690s, particularly the development of state-sanctioned proselytization and the projection of Islamic authority as distinct from Christian or Jewish authority. This was reflected in material remains such as the Dome of the Rock, inscriptions on coins, etc. during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik, and texts and scholars such as al-Zuhrī, who interpreted these developments as the superseding of Christianity by Islam, particularly regarding their main points of difference: that Jesus was not the son of God, and that the Trinity was not true monotheism. But, as Reinink points out, conversion to Islam did not begin in the 690s; Christian converts to Islam are noted in Muslim and Christian sources beginning in the Prophet’s lifetime (perhaps the 620s or earlier). The difference, he

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<sup>301</sup> Gerrit Reinink writes, “The fierce tone with which Ps.-Methodius polemicises against the defection of his co-religionists shows that he really feared an imminent mass conversion to Islam.” While this may be true, it is impossible to tell – conversion is a common trope in apocalyptic writing, and as we have noted before, represents a feared final outcome, and often but not necessarily an imminent one. Gerrit J. Reinink, “Following the Doctrine of the Demons: Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam,” in *Cultures of Conversions*, eds. Jan Bremmer, Arie L. Molendijk, and WJ Van Bekkum (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 127.



argues, is that those conversions were not solicited or encouraged by Muslim political authorities. Furthermore, as has been discussed in previous chapters, it is not clear until the 690s, to followers of the new faith or anyone else, that it was indeed something fully distinct from Christianity in particular.

“After the kingdom of the Hebrews [alt MS: the Persians] had been extirpated,<sup>302</sup> in its place the Children of Ishmael, son of Hagar, waged war on the Romans. These are the people whom Daniel calls ‘the arm/seed (V) of the South.’”<sup>303</sup> This reference to Daniel 11, combined with his use of the term “children of Ishmael,” reinterprets the Southern kingdom, understood in Daniel to refer to the Seleucid Empire (specifically the Seleucid king Antioches IV Epiphanes), as the Arab Muslim armies.<sup>304</sup> Whether this refers to the initial conquests or the Umayyad caliphate, Pseudo-Methodius’s references to Daniel here underscore how terrifying he finds the new conquerors: they will cause the fall of Jerusalem and usher in the tribulations before the Rapture. He notes that the war will happen seven (or ten) weeks of an indefinite number of years.<sup>305</sup> As is common in Christian apocalyptic texts from this era, he blames not the conquerors, or non-believers, but specifically Christian wickedness on their downfall, which he identifies as prostitution, homosexuality, the sharing of prostitutes by relatives, public drunkenness, cross-dressing, and other acts.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> The line about Hebrew extirpation likely refers to forced Jewish conversions.

<sup>303</sup> Sebastian Brock, “Extract from the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*,” in Andrew Palmer, ed., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 230.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>305</sup> This may be a reference to the regular ‘Abbasid summer raids into Anatolia in the late eighth and early ninth centuries C.E., as well as Daniel 9.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-2.

Pseudo-Methodius names several regions in the Byzantine Empire: Armenia, Cilicia, Cappadocia, and others. He also names regions of the former Byzantine Empire, now under Muslim rule, with Syria and Egypt under particularly heavy taxation.<sup>307</sup>

Pseudo-Methodius's biblical references are frequent. He cites Daniel, the most common biblical reference in our survey of texts, but also Ezekiel, Genesis, and a variety of other books. The Roman leader he describes represents hope in the form of justice, and on last day he will reconquer lands taken by Arabs. He also discusses a biblical figure called "the Devastator." In Pseudo-Methodius, the Devastator clearly represents a particular caliph—whether this is Mu'āwiya or 'Abd al-Malik, as have commonly been suggested, or a conquest-era caliph such as 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, is unclear. What is clear is that taxation is noted to be a heavy burden as early as Pseudo-Methodius's era, which is well before this trope usually appears in texts about conversion. In our survey of historical texts, for example, they normally appear in the latter half of the eighth century, often in reference to early 'Abbasid administrators. This suggests that, at least in Syriac sources, taxes and conversion to Islam have always represented twin evils; their afflictions cannot be extricated from one another.<sup>308</sup>

Pseudo-Methodius's concerns about taxation are many. Taxation is taken by the Devastator, who is no doubt an Umayyad official: "He will take a capitation tax from orphans, from widows, and from holy men. 15. They will have no mercy on the poor, nor will they give judgment to the afflicted ..."<sup>309</sup> He then turns to conversion:

"Many people who were members of the Church will deny the true faith of the Christians and the holy Cross and the glorious Sacraments. And without [being subjected to]

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<sup>307</sup> "Sebastian Brock, "Extract from the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*," in Andrew Palmer, ed., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 232-4.

<sup>308</sup> A perusal of Arabic texts might lead one to conclude that higher taxes do not lead to conversion, but Syriac sources consistently link the two.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

compulsion, torments and blows they will deny Christ and take part with the unbelievers. For this reason the Apostle, too, proclaimed beforehand concerning them: [1 Tim. 4:1] ‘In the latter times people will desert the faith and follow the unclean spirits and the doctrine of the demons’.”

By quoting this portion of Timothy, Pseudo-Methodius suggests that mass conversion to Islam will usher in the apocalypse—and that this conversion will not be done by force. Also related to this conversion is the degradation of the authority of the church:

“XIII: 1. People will undergo [or: during the] chastisement by the Ishmaelites; they will enter into various afflictions to the point of despairing of their lives. Honour will be taken away from priests, the Divine Office and the Living Sacrifice will come to an end in the Church; priests will be like the people at that time.”

So, too, is plague and famine, both of which had afflicted the region in previous decades:

“2. In the seventh [or tenth] week, during which their victory will be completed, affliction will increase, a double chastisement affecting people, cattle and wild animals: there will be a great famine, and many will die; their corpses will be thrown, like mud, into the streets, for want of anyone to bury them. On one of those days plagues of wrath will be sent upon humanity, two or three in a single day. 3. A person will sleep in the evening and rise up in the morning to find outside his door two or three men who use force as they demand tribute and money. ... At that time people will sell their bronze, their iron, and their burial clothes ...”<sup>310</sup>

As such, Pseudo-Methodius is invoking a fearful recent memory – that of the simultaneous plague and famines that occurred in Syria in the mid-680s, and another famine in 693-4, which is approximately a year after the earliest possible date at which Pseudo-Methodius could have been writing.<sup>311</sup> The memory of these events is one which his audience of Syriac-speaking Christians would have remembered as perhaps apocalyptic-seeming in its own right. Perhaps as relief from such bleak predictions, Pseudo-Methodius then writes of an imagined victory over Muslims, with harsher punishments for them than are currently being inflicted by

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<sup>310</sup> Sebastian Brock, “Extract from the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*,” in Andrew Palmer, ed., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 236.

<sup>311</sup> John bar Penkaye, (Book XV), Theophanes, Elias of Nisibis and Michael the Syrian all note these unfortunate events. Dionysios Ch. Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 331-4.

them. In this rendering, Syria is spared the worst aftereffects, and Pseudo-Methodius lists by name major Syrian regions to which people will return:

“Then ... the king of the Greeks shall go out against them in great wrath ... he will go forth against them from the sea of the Kushites [this is the Red Sea], and will cast desolation and destruction on the wilderness of Yathrib, and in the midst of their forefathers’ dwelling place. And the sons of the kings of the Greeks will descend upon them from the countries of the west and finish off with the sword the remnant left over from them in the Promised Land. 12. Fear shall fall upon them from all who are round about them. They, their wives, their children, their leaders, all their encampments, all the land of the wilderness which belonged to their forefathers shall be delivered into the hand of the kings of the Greeks; they shall be given over to the sword and devastation, to captivity and slaughter. 13. The yoke of their servitude shall be seven times more oppressive than their own yoke, and they shall be in harsh affliction, from hunger and from exhaustion; they shall be slaves, together with their wives and children, and they shall serve in slavery those who were (previously) serving them. ... 14. Then the land which had been devastated of its inhabitants shall be at peace, and the remnant left over shall return, each to his land and to the inheritance of his forefathers – Cappadocians, Armenians, Cilicians, Isaurians, Africans, Greeks, Sicilians – all the remnant left over from captivity; and everyone who was in captive servitude shall return to his region, to his ancestral home. [Pseudo-Methodius also identifies different outcomes for different regions [indent and quote]:] 15. People shall multiply like locusts in the land which had been devastated. While Egypt shall be devastated and Arabia shall be burnt, and the land of Hebron shall be laid waste; but the tongue of the sea shall be at peace. And all the fury of the wrath of the king of the Greeks shall be completed upon those who have denied Christ. There shall be peace in the land ... 16. There shall be joy in the land ... churches will be renovated, towns rebuilt, priests will be freed from tax.”<sup>312</sup>

The earliest conversions may have required little more than verbally accepting belief in Muḥammad as prophet and the Qur’ān as the word of God, without recitation of a standardized *shahāda*, as is the case now, or verbal rejection of Christological arguments such as the Trinity or Jesus’ status as the Son of God, as was sometimes required of converts from Christianity in the eighth and ninth centuries (and possibly later). But outside of the Arabian conquests, they yielded little benefit: converts would lose their old religious and likely also their social communities, while being relegated to sometimes second-class (client) and always somewhat

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<sup>312</sup> Sebastian Brock, “Extract from the *Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius*,” in Andrew Palmer, ed., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 238-9.

suspect status in their new one. Reinink and others believe for this reason that most converts prior to the 690s were likely prisoners of war seeking manumission (though conversion did not legally require manumission, freeing slaves was seen as a beneficent act, particularly Muslim slaves), or other persons of low social status who could only benefit from a change of community.

What changed was the attitude of the state, particularly that of ‘Abd al-Malik, and especially after the second *fitna*. It is unclear why ‘Abd al-Malik began such propagation at this point, or why the Umayyad state did not do so earlier, but perhaps the second *fitna* clarified for Umayyad leadership the importance of followers to bolster the caliphate’s legitimacy,<sup>313</sup> especially as some Christian groups thought the strife would likely lead to the empire’s demise. It could also simply be that the differences between Islam and its religious predecessors were not entirely clear, or consistent, prior to this point in time.<sup>314</sup>

Regardless of intent, the actual effect of such movements on ‘Abd al-Malik’s part was significant. An early proliferation of polemical and apocalyptic literature by Christian scholars is well-documented during this period, beginning with the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius.<sup>315</sup>

Michael Morony has declared the Umayyad era the “Age of Conversions.”<sup>316</sup> Reinink argues that this is clearly not true in terms of the actual number of conversions, but it may well

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<sup>313</sup> Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 263.

<sup>314</sup> Gerrit J. Reinink, “Following the Doctrine of the Demons: Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam,” in *Cultures of Conversions*, eds. Jan Bremmer, Arie L. Molendijk, and WJ Van Bekkum (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 130-1. See also Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 196-224.

<sup>315</sup> Gerrit J. Reinink, “Following the Doctrine of the Demons: Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam,” in *Cultures of Conversions*, eds. Jan Bremmer, Arie L. Molendijk, and WJ Van Bekkum (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 131-3.

<sup>316</sup> Michael Morony, “The Age of Conversions: A Reassessment,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 135-50.

be true in terms of Christian fears of conversion to Islam—as reflected in polemical and apocalyptic writing of the era, which begins with the conquests but mentions conversion regularly beginning in the Umayyad period. This suggests that the phenomenon, while still relatively rare, was decidedly frequent enough to be of concern, especially after the second Civil War and the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik, whose major empire-building projects pointedly emphasized the differences between Christianity and Islam. In this period and well into the ‘Abbasid era, writing began to focus on polemical debate, and laid out precisely how Christianity or Islam could each win the war against the other for souls and followers.<sup>317</sup>

Lutz Greisiger writes that: “This rhetoric was obviously meant to inspire perseverance in the audience to withstand the temptation to convert to Islam.”<sup>318</sup> Greisiger also connects taxes, which were “greatly increased as a result of the caliph’s fiscal reform of 691-92 in Mesopotamia.”<sup>319</sup> He also argues that: “The crushing of the rebellion of al-Mukhtār (685-7) dashed the hopes Syrian Christians had cherished of the imminent downfall of Muslim rule.”<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Gerrit J. Reinink, “Following the Doctrine of the Demons: Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam,” in *Cultures of Conversions*, eds. Jan Bremmer, Arie L. Molendijk, and WJ Van Bekkum (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 138. For a summary of polemic written in Syriac, see Sidney Griffith, ‘Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)’, in B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner, eds, *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter (Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien 4)*, Wiesbaden, 1992, 251-73.

<sup>318</sup> *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 165-6.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-6. See also Sebastian Brock, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam,” in G.H.A. Juynboll, ed., *Studies in the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1982), 1-21.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-6.

## The Edessene Apocalypse

The Syriac Edessene Fragment or Apocalypse, called such because it focuses on Edessa, was almost certainly written during the 690s by a Miaphysite author.<sup>321</sup> It assumes its reader has knowledge of Ps.-Methodius. The text describes fear of taxation, but not conversion. There is absolutely no conversion in the extant fragment of this text. Based on similar texts, we may hypothesize what came before the fragment we have, which begins, "... as a result of the oppression and evils (brought about) by the Children of Hagar":

"... as a result of the oppression and evils (brought about) by the Children of Hagar. The Orient will be laid waste by the sword and by many wars, for nation will stand against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. Their own sword will fall among them. Armenia will be laid waste, and part of the territory of the Byzantines will be laid waste, (including) many cities.

When of the said (number of) years a week and a half, that is, ten and a half years, are left to the Children of Hagar, their oppression will increase: they will take everything made of gold, silver, bronze and iron, and their clothes, and all their habitation from the ...[missing] of the dead, until the living will pass by the dead and exclaim, 'Happy are you who have not remained alive at this time.' ..... as it is written in the good news of the Gospel: 'A man will flee from his wife and his children, and a wife from her husband' as a result of oppression, distress and famine. The rains will be withheld, spring water will fail, the fruits of the trees and all the bounty of the land will be scarce at that time, as a result of the unbelief of the Children of Ishmael."<sup>322</sup>

In this fragment, war, taxation and famine are discussed, but changing faiths is not mentioned. We may conclude that conversion to Islam isn't a concern—possession of territory and wrong belief take precedence. This is not a given; conversion may have been referenced in

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<sup>321</sup> Most scholars are in agreement about this, though an alternative dating in the late thirteenth century has been suggested by Robert Hoyland. Sebastian Brock, "*The Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment*," in Andrew Palmer, ed., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 244-5 and Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 130-8.

<sup>322</sup> Sebastian Brock, "*The Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment*," in Andrew Palmer, ed., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 244-5. This is not the entire fragment, but comprises the section in which Muslims, referred to as both 'children of Hagar' and 'children of Ishmael,' are referenced.

previous sections - indeed, in other texts it is associated with the themes that are present at the beginning of this fragment - but it is impossible to be sure without the rest of the text itself.

### The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: The Apocalypse of John the Little

The Apocalypse of John the Little, one of several short narratives in the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, is attributed to the apostle John, but was clearly written sometime after 692 C.E., which we know because it mentions ‘Abd al-Malik’s defeat of Ibn al-Zubayr in that year. Lutz Greisiger considers this Miaphysite text an update to Pseudo-Methodius, the Edessene Apocalypse, and John bar Penkāyē. As in those texts, in this one, Muslim rule will usher in the apocalypse.<sup>323</sup> Additionally, as with those and other texts from this period, the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles adapts Daniel to Muslim rule, connecting Daniel’s four empires with Rome, Persia, Media and Arabia. Written shortly after Pseudo-Methodius’s apocalypse, it differs from other apocalypses from this era in that Rome is not the final empire standing, but Arabia.<sup>324</sup>

Conversion plays a role in the text; oppression will increase and send ‘hypocrites and the godless men’ into the empire of the Arabs to better themselves, suggesting at least false conversion to Islam. A Byzantine emperor, represented as the ‘king from the north’ in the apocalypse of James, will emerge and defeat both of the warring Arab factions. There is also a line about oppressed peoples “acting like brides and bridegrooms.”<sup>325</sup> The Syriac verb used here is ‘-th-p-k, which can mean “to act” or “to convert.”<sup>326</sup> While “converting like brides and

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<sup>323</sup> *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 222-5, entry by Lutz Greisiger; Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 146-55.

<sup>324</sup> Between 692-705 C.E., according to Greisiger.

<sup>325</sup> Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 153.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.



bridegrooms” is a slightly odd phrase, it is still possible. Furthermore, the line comes after a discussion of both slavery and oppressive taxes, and in the same section as a condemnation of hypocrites, all topics which we have seen discussed with conversion in other apocalyptic texts from this period.

### Anastasius of Sinai

The *Narrationes* of Anastasius was likely written sometime during the 690s, based on narratives the author collected in Damascus and Jerusalem as well as Cyprus and Egypt.<sup>327</sup> The text was originally written in Greek but preserved in Arabic. Noble and Treiger note that “In his *Narrationes*, Anastasius even goes so far as to call Muslims “associates of the demons” and responds to the Muslim confession of faith, the *shahāda*, with the proclamation “there is no God but the God of the Christians.””<sup>328</sup>

Shaun O’Sullivan has argued that another text from this period, the apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius, was also written by Anastasius of Sinai.<sup>329</sup> The text, preserved in Arabic and Coptic and likely written during the early eighth century C.E. (O’Sullivan proposes a period between 725-755, and Martinez suggests 690-744). The Arabic edition contains a great deal of content from the much earlier Coptic *Apocalypse of Paul*, and, in its final section, significant influence of the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. This final section discusses the Muslim

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<sup>327</sup> Francisco Javier Martinez, “Eastern Christian Apocalypticism in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius.” PhD Dissertation, Catholic University of America (Washington, DC, 1985), 263.

<sup>328</sup> Noble and Treiger, *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World: An Anthology of Sources*, 15. See also *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 198, entry by A. Binggeli.

<sup>329</sup> Shaun O’Sullivan, “Anti-Jewish Polemic and Early Islam,” in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 49.

conquests and the effects of early Muslim rule on local Christians. The Arabs are represented as the fourth beast from Daniel.<sup>330</sup> The author writes that local people will sell all of their possessions to pay the *jizya*, and priests and monks will “turn away” (*yaḥīdū*) at that time.<sup>331</sup> It is unclear whether this refers to conversion or simply abandonment of religious leadership. Shortly later, the text states that many Christians, barbarians, and Byzantine Christians (the Arabic manuscript reads “Greeks” (*yūnāniyyīn*) and the Coptic reads “Basanians and Syrians”), and people from all tribes, will join the Muslims in their faith in order to free themselves from oppression, while at the same time noting that the Muslims will “multiply like the sand of the sea.”<sup>332</sup> Later it notes that the people will not repent of their sins, including conversion, instead compounding them until the Last Day.

### Sergius Bahira

Barbara Roggema writes: “The legend of Bahira gives an insight into how Near Eastern Christians tried to come to terms with the fact that they were dominated by a community whose religion was at odds with their own. It tries to make sense of the religion of Islam by suggesting that it is a simplified version of Christianity suitable for pagan Arabs, and it explains the political rise of Islam as a divinely ordained but limited phase in history”<sup>333</sup> (as does anything that references Daniel). Syriac-speaking Christians clearly knew the Qur’ān and Islamic doctrine.

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<sup>330</sup> Francisco Javier Martinez, “Eastern Christian Apocalypticism in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius.” PhD Dissertation, Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1985.

<sup>331</sup> Francisco Javier Martinez, “Eastern Christian Apocalypticism in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius” (PhD Dissertation, Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1985), 366.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 370-1; 528.

<sup>333</sup> Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 255-7. *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 600-3. Entry by Barbara Roggema.

This text seems to have been rather popular; many recensions exist. Much of the text is a polemical “history” of early Islam before the author’s apocalyptic predictions are presented. In this text, Daniel is used in both retellings of the past and apocalyptic predictions of the future.<sup>334</sup>

Sergius describes his attempts to proselytize in Persia and Syria: “Then I left Bēt Parsāyē and went to Bēt Aramāyē, preaching to them that they should bow in worship to one cross and not to many.”<sup>335</sup> These ultimately failed, so he went to the desert of the sons of Ishmael, and prophesied to them, and they built him a cell and a well.<sup>336</sup> It is during this period that Sergius was to have given them the Qur’ān, which was then corrupted by “Ka‘b the Scribe” (combining two common polemical tropes: blaming Jews for Muḥammad’s rise, and referencing Ka ‘b b. Aḥbār in doing so).<sup>337</sup> Muḥammad’s lengthy encounter with Bahira, where he supposedly received counsel on the faith and how to respond to future questioning, is described in detail.<sup>338</sup>

Apocalyptic passages resume at this point, predicting earthquakes, slaughter, famine, plague, and bloodshed. The ‘Abbasid Revolution is alluded to; after that, according to God’s prophecy, there will be twelve more kings of the Ishmaelites (a reference to Gen 17:20). Prophecies also reference Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Revelations, Matthew, and Luke, at times in reference to the Shī‘ī version of the Mahdī (as descended from Fatima).<sup>339</sup> There is a repeat of earlier themes, including references to people dressed in blood, who harm the sons of Ishmael on the mountain of Yathrib, and a lion who represents the Mahdī. This figure will destroy Christian places of worship and will cause death by famine and violence. As a result, “Many of the sons of

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<sup>334</sup> Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 259-261.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-285.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 291. This section also suggests a reference to the split between Banī Hāshim and Banī Umayya.

the church will stray from the truth and they will follow him in order to worship demons and bring sacrifices to them. And those who repent are one in ten.”<sup>340</sup>

Thus, there will be many converts to Islam, and only one in ten will return to Christianity. This is notable: it suggests that in the early ninth century, there was a question of “getting back” converts to Islam—or an understanding that this was possible. Such a concept is not referenced in earlier texts. Also, one in ten reverts is a fairly high number, given that the punishment for such an action was death (which this writer surely knew). Then again, Muslim authorities often appear reluctant to kill apostates in conversion and martyrdom narratives, particularly if they are well-known. It was entirely possible that a wavering, uncertain convert would be of even less use—at least a non-Muslim would pay the poll-tax. Of course, the number itself does not represent a real figure of how many people reverted back to Christianity after converting to Islam; one in ten is a rounded figure meant to signify very few.

After this, the text notes, “they do not resemble Christians, when they deny God and forswear Christ, without being forced.”<sup>341</sup> This also refers to the subtle ways Christians tried to downplay their faith differences in front of Muslims, especially officials. We have seen this in some martyrdom narratives. In Sergius, this prevarication is the stated reason God sent the Bani Ismail to Syria in the first place. They will rule for a set period of time, until eventually Christian rule will be restored to the world, and Christian places and symbols of worship with it. Yet that is not the end: Turks and Daylamites appear after a period of Roman (Byzantine) rule, and only

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<sup>340</sup> Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 293.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 295; see also the apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius.

after that do the signs of the apocalypse emerge.<sup>342</sup> These non-Christian figures all represent societal threats from the perspective of eighth- and ninth-century Syrian Christians.

### The Greek Apocalypse of Daniel

An anonymous Greek “Apocalypse of Daniel” from the early ninth century C.E. discusses Muslim raids into Anatolia in 717-718 C.E.<sup>343</sup> They represent the start of a series of apocalyptic events only stopped by a new Byzantine emperor. The text predicts that conversion by some will occur after great violence. Eventually the struggle will be won by Byzantium, which will then be given to Rome (this has been interpreted to mean Charlemagne, crowned on Christmas Day, 800 C.E.). The Anti-Christ then arrives, but by then no Muslims or Arabs remain in the story. There are references to Christian women giving birth to unbelievers, reflecting the demographic fears represented in Syriac apocalyptic texts from this period: “Churches will be destroyed. The faith has been dissolved. Women conceive the babies of misbelievers... And your high walls will fall.”<sup>344</sup> This final section suggests that, while the Byzantines may win a fight against Muslims, the demographic battle for souls has been lost by Byzantine Christians, and essentially equates to the loss of the empire.

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<sup>342</sup> Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 297. The Turks and Daylamites were seen as the worst enemies of the ‘Abbasid empire in northern Iraq and Iran due to intermittent raiding, until they began holding administrative power in the late ninth/early tenth century C.E.

<sup>343</sup> G.T. Zervos, ‘Apocalypse of Daniel,’ in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha v.i* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 755-70. *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 414-8. Entry by Pablo Ubierna.

<sup>344</sup> G.T. Zervos, ‘Apocalypse of Daniel,’ in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha v.i* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 763-4.

## Apocalypticism in the Qur'ān and Its Interpretation

The Qur'ān's apocalyptic material is extensive. Indeed, based on the content of the Qur'ān, Fred Donner and others have identified the early *mu'min* community as an apocalyptic (messianic?) one.<sup>345</sup> The role of conversion, if it exists in the Qur'ān, is presented as submission to the newest and truest form of Abrahamian-heritage monotheism, is fundamental: only if one submits can one be saved on the Last Day. Exhortations to submit are near-constant, and examples of the negative consequences of prior individuals and groups who did not do so are presented as warnings for the Qur'ān's collective audience.<sup>346</sup> *Aslama*, “submission,” was later interpreted to denote conversion, but in the Qur'ān this is not so clear—indeed, it distinguishes submission from the acquisition of belief. Thus, the way conversion is understood in the modern context (which we explored in Chapter One) is not synonymous with Qur'ānic usage of *aslama*.

Early Muslim exegetes interpreted these verses to mean submitting to Islam in advance of the apocalypse, and abiding by its laws. Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767 C.E.) nearly always

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<sup>345</sup> Stephen Shoemaker, ““The Reign of God Has Come”: Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam,” *Arabica* 61 (2014), *passim*, and works cited on 516: C. Snouck Hurgronje, “Une nouvelle biographie de Mohammed,” *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 15/30 (1984), 48-70, 149-178, 161-2; and Paul Casanova, *Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l'Islam primitif*, Paris, P. Gauthier, 1911-1924. See also Stephen Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), *passim*; David Cook, “The Beginnings of Islam as an Apocalyptic Movement,” *Journal of Millennial Studies* 1 (2001); *passim*; and Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 78-82.

<sup>346</sup> Muhammad Abdel Haleem, “Quranic Paradise: How to Get to Paradise and What to Expect There,” in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam Vol. 1*, eds. Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 50-1. According to my own review, apocalyptic exhortations to Islam may be found in the following: 2:6288-91, 285; 3:56-7, 106, 113-116; 4:47, 56-7, 69, 115, 135-8, 159, 170-2\*\*; all of 5; 6:21-165 (mostly); all of 7, especially 7:32; all of 10; most of 11; 12:57, 105-111; all of 13, 14 and 15; 16:35-55, 101, 125-8; all of 17, especially 110-111; 18:4-7 (maybe), 102-110; 19:34-40; 58-98; all of 21, 22 and 23 (which is called “al-Mu'minūn” - “the Believers”); 24:51; most of 25 and all of 26; 27:59-93; parts of 28, especially 28:88; all of 29 and 30 (“al-Rum,” which discusses the conquests); parts of 31; essentially all of 32, 33 and 34; parts of 35, 36 and 37; all of 38 and 39, especially 39:4; all of 40 and 41; all of 43, especially 43:63-7; all of 44 and 45; some of 47; all of 50, 51 and 52; some of 53; all of 54; some of 55; all of 56 and 57; much of 61 and 64; all of 67, 69, 70, 77, 83, 87, 98, and 112. In addition to the Qur'ān itself, see Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 37.

mentions *islām* as a replacement for *shirk*, and *tawhīd* is often referenced, as is *dīn*.<sup>347</sup> Smith argues that Muqātil’s use of the verbal noun *al-islām* implies simultaneous joining of a community and an act of submission—a meaning that is deemphasized in later tafāsīr.<sup>348</sup>

Notably, Muqātil is perhaps the only mufassir (at least from what we can discern from extant texts) who includes reports on the apocalypse in his exegesis.<sup>349</sup> But other apocalyptic reports referencing the Qur’ān may be found in early hadith collections (meaning those compiled around or earlier than 850 C.E.). Ibn Abī Shayba’s *Muṣannaḥ* contains a great deal of Iraqi apocalyptic material.<sup>350</sup> The hadith collections of Bukhārī, Muslim and Ibn Māja all contain chapters on *fitan*. Tirmidhī and Abū Dawūd report that the final battle (*malḥama*) will take place either near Damascus or Basra, or perhaps closer to Arabia. Ibn Ḥanbal reports that it will occur shortly after the caliphate takes power in the Holy Land.<sup>351</sup> His *Musnad* and Muslim’s *Saḥīḥ* both note that most people at that time will be Byzantines (“Rūm”).<sup>352</sup> Muslim, Tirmidhī, Ibn Ḥanbal, Abū Dawūd and Malik report that the Byzantines will take back Constantinople as the apocalypse approaches. Bukhārī, Muslim, Tirmidhī, Malik, and Ibn Ḥanbal all report that faith will vanish. Tirmidhī reports that those who hold to religion will be rare.<sup>353</sup> A variety of reports declare that Jesus will return as an *imām* or *ḥakam* and destroy the cross or kill pigs.<sup>354</sup> Other

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<sup>347</sup> Jane I. Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term ‘Islām’ as Seen in a Sequence of Qur’ān Commentaries* (Missoula: Scholars Press for Harvard Theological Review, 1975), 53-6.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>349</sup> David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 29; he later refers to Muqātil as a “frustrated apocalypticist” (*ibid.*, 284).

<sup>350</sup> Cook lists Ibn Abī Shayba’s apocalyptic Qur’ānic citations in his *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*: 2:191, 5:105, 6:65, 6:158, 9:12, 17:79, 18:100, 21:96-7, 23:107-8, 31:34, 35:9, 37:24, 55:35, and 74:38-48. David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 24-45 and 393-408.

<sup>351</sup> Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad* Vol. 5 (Cairo, 1313 AH, 6 vols.), 288.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 230. *Saḥīḥ* Muslim, “Bāb al-Fitan,” 35 and 36.

<sup>353</sup> A.J. Weinsinck, *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1927), 101.

<sup>354</sup> Early Syriac chronicles (e.g. John bar Penkāyē) ascribe the killing of pigs and the breaking of crosses to orders from the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), raising the possibility that these reports, too, are from his era. If so, it is possible that they were attempts to portray ‘Abd al-Malik as something of a messianic ruler.

reports predict that he will return in Syria and kill the Dajjāl.<sup>355</sup> There are allusions to conversion in these apocalyptic reports, particularly those that represent Jesus as a Muslim messianic leader, but no direct references to conversion of individuals or groups.

### Kitāb al-Fitan

Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī (d. 844 C.E.) probably wrote his *Kitāb al-Fitan* in the early ninth century, perhaps around 820.<sup>356</sup> Outside of the Qur’ān and the few reports mentioned above, Nu‘aym is the main source for early Islamic apocalyptic reports, and the only scholar to compile a text comprised solely of apocalyptic material. There is a rich symbolic history behind all of these reports, but this assessment will look only at the presentation and role of conversion in them.

Collective memory informs apocalyptic content, but certain traditions can maintain some memories, fears, and issues well past the normal turnover rate of collective living memory. For Nu‘aym, it is the nascent hadith system that maintains old fears and issues informing apocalyptic belief: the downfall of the late Umayyads, the rise of the revolutionary ‘Abbasids, the emergence of false prophets in various contexts of civil war, and, only to a lesser extent, the ‘Abbasid civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn, which would have been fresh in the memory of someone writing around 820, as David Cook has suggested.

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<sup>355</sup> E.g. Muqāṭil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqāṭil b. Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Cairo: Mu‘assasat al-Ḥalabi, 1969), Bāb al-Fitan, 308.

<sup>356</sup> This is David Cook’s estimate; the last dated tradition is from AH 204—819-20. Some traditions were likely collected earlier (e.g. several from al-Walid b. Muslim, d. 790). Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, tr. David Cook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), *xii*.



In an earlier section of this chapter, the concept of hadith transmission was explored in the context of preserving apocalyptic material. In effect, these reports also preserve the political and social concerns of the era from which they originate. Thus, in a text compiled during or after the fourth *fitna* (the ‘Abbasid civil war), one will see material reflecting the strife of that era, as well as the three *fitan* before it, and other incidents of social and political turmoil from the late seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries C.E. Nu‘aym’s collection has content about the ‘Abbasid Revolution, for example, which occurred some seventy years prior to the *Fitan*’s publication: several reports discuss rebellions from the east with black banners—a clear reference to the ‘Abbasids—or yellow banners from the west, a reference to Berbers and the frequent Berber rebellions that occurred during the late Umayyad and early ‘Abbasid eras. These concerns remained a part of collective or living memory long after their eyewitnesses passed away because of the nature of hadith transmission: every student who memorized the reports learned of the events they described, at least to some degree, in the sense that they experienced the obtaining of such knowledge of them. Intentionally or unintentionally, the social, political, religious and moral lessons each report contained was potentially learned or relearned by every generation of scholars who encountered them anew.

The focus of the text is on Syria, and the transmission of reports within the Syrian tradition (which is to say, largely local, and largely sympathetic to the Umayyads). Nu‘aym transmits several reports that address conversion, specifically between Islam and Christianity. Major themes include 1) taxes; 2) the army (in which defectors are formerly Christian tribes and Byzantine vassals, whereas converts and *mawālī* embrace their military duties—converts and *mawālī* sometimes meaning the same thing, and sometimes not); 3) demographic fears (some

related to conversion and some related to sheer population numbers); 4) the return of Jesus<sup>357</sup> (always in Syria; often fighting the Dajjāl; sometimes being the Mahdī, sometimes fighting him, sometimes joining him, sometimes succeeding him; sometimes converting people, and occasionally engaging in anti-Christian behavior); 5) fighting the Byzantines; 6) the caliph Mu‘āwiya; 7) biblical references; 8) conversion causing strife, and sometimes the emergence of the Dajjāl, the Mahdī and/or Jesus; and 9) the continued (timeless) existence of Syrian Christian locals, who sometimes outsmart the Muslim armies.

The Mahdī is a complicated figure in Nu‘aym’s collection. One report says, “He is only called *mahdī* because he guides to a hidden matter, so he will bring out the Torah and the Gospel from a land called Antioch.”<sup>358</sup> Another says that Jesus will convert Christian people to Islam at his arrival. There are many reports of Jesus coming at the end of the world, but few mention him converting people to Islam:

“Al-Walīd said: I heard a man narrating to the people: “There are three Mahdīs: The good Mahdī, who is ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Azīz; the Mahdī of blood, who is the one who will calm the bloodshed; and the Mahdī of religion, who is Jesus son of Mary; his community will convert to Islam [*tuslima ummatuhu*] during his time.” Al-Walīd said: It reached me from Ka‘b that he said: “The good Mahdī will emerge after the Sufyānī.””<sup>359</sup>

Elsewhere we find reports that the Mahdī is a descendant of the Prophet through Fāṭima and ‘Alī; implying an association with the ‘Alids and thus early (or ‘proto-’) Shī‘ism. As in the

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<sup>357</sup> David Cook argues his frequent appearance in early Muslim apocalyptic is because of polemical disputes with Christianity, not despite them. David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 323.

<sup>358</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 220. Cook argues that this is the original meaning of the term *Mahdī*. David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 138, 204.

<sup>359</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 222. Zakkār notes that a second (unnamed) reading says “every umma” (kul umma) instead of “his umma,” suggesting differences in focus on conversion of all people versus conversion of Christians in particular. Based on this and other reports, it seems to be somewhat clear that the Mahdī here is an intentionally ambiguous figure; he seems to represent both the Mahdī figure and al-Mahdī, the Abbasid caliph. In any case, the Mahdī will pass rule to Jesus. The ‘Abbasids will thrive until their kingdom collapses, and then will have trouble until the Mahdī comes.

report above, other times he seems to be conflated with the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī. In terms of the Mahdī’s relationship to Jesus, sometimes he is presented independently of Jesus; sometimes he appears before Jesus to clear a path for him; sometimes he works with Jesus to defeat the Dajjāl, and sometimes he seems to be Jesus.<sup>360</sup>

As with the roles of Jesus, Mahdī, Sufyānī, and other terms such as *mawālī*, Nu‘aym sometimes uses interchangeable terms to describe Syrians in this collection of reports. His most common term, *al-Rūm* or *Rūmī*, usually identifies people associated with the Byzantines, or is even synonymous with “Byzantine.” On the other hand, it can merely mean “Christian,” with no imperial connection, which is also the case when he uses *nabaṭī* (one of a few terms denoting “Christian”). In a Muslim context, he usually uses *ahl al-Shām* to refer to Syrians. This can refer to Muslim armies or caliphal authorities from Syria, as when it denotes “Umayyad” (usually in distinction from “Abbasid” or, to a lesser extent, “Berber,” though he also uses “*Banī Umayya*”). But it is not always synonymous with “Umayyad.” *Ahl al-Shām*, along with *Rūm* and *nabaṭī*, can also denote its most obvious meaning: a person from the population from or living in what was then considered Syria (*Bilād al-Shām*)—regardless of religious or imperial affiliation.

The term “Byzantine” is a bit easier. Suliman Bashear writes that early Muslim apocalyptic is deeply connected to war with the Byzantines, and that is true.<sup>361</sup> He writes: “It should be noted at this stage that although Byzantium figures as the main enemy of Islam, our apocalyptic material leaves no doubt that the struggle over Syria would be an all-out one with the

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<sup>360</sup>Cook argues that Jesus was the first messianic figure in Islam. David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 139.

<sup>361</sup> Suliman Bashear, “Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars: A Review of Arabic Sources,” in *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*, ed. Michael Bonner (Burlington, VT: Ashgate-Varorium, 2004), 181-215.

whole Christian world.”<sup>362</sup> Thus, in our Muslim sources, “Byzantine” may be, and often is, all but synonymous with “Christian.” Bashear also writes that “Muslim belief throughout the first century that the eventual conquest of Constantinople would be the last major eschatological event before the end of the world seems indeed to have been so strong that almost every tradition which spoke about the Byzantine *malḥama* (final battle) ended with the prophesy that the city would be conquered. Besides, there are numerous traditions which state that such conquest would be the sign of “the hour” or even gave detailed descriptions of its circumstances.”<sup>363</sup> Indeed, we find several references to Constantinople in reports about conversion, but that is because there are references to Constantinople throughout Nu‘aym’s collection.

Reports addressing conversion also include several other topical clusters. In several reports Jesus is mentioned, often in reference to his return at the end of the world:

“‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr said: “The most preferable people to God are the strangers.” Someone said: “Who are the strangers?” He said: “Those who flee with their religion, flocking to Jesus son of Mary.””<sup>364</sup>

“Ka‘b said: There will always be a caliph who unifies the umma and guides the emirate and receives the zakat and jizya until Jesus son of Mary returns, then he will gather them and break the emirate.”<sup>365</sup>

This implies the abolishment of the ‘Abbasid caliphate. Nu‘aym’s collection often contains reports that appear to contradict one another, and elsewhere the ‘Abbasids are promoted as good rulers. They are consistently seen as the final (or sometimes penultimate) ruling empire before the return of the Mahdī, Jesus, and/or other apocalyptic figures or leaders.

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 189-190.

<sup>363</sup> Suliman Bashear, “Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars: A Review of Arabic Sources,” in *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*, ed. Michael Bonner (Burlington, VT: Ashgate-Varorium, 2004), 198.

<sup>364</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 41.

<sup>365</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 55. (Perhaps this is Mu‘āwiya?)

Jesus is clearly to emerge in Syria only:

“The Prophet said: A group from my community will raid India, so God will conquer it for them such that when they bring back the kings of India fettered in chains, God will forgive them for their sins. They will return to Syria, and find Jesus son of Mary in Syria.”<sup>366</sup>

The Prophet speaks of the return of Jesus:

“Baqiyya said: I saw the Messenger of God in a dream having tucked up his clothes. I said: “O Messenger of God, why do I see that you have tucked up your clothes?” He said: “Prepare for the return of Jesus son of Mary.””<sup>367</sup>

Jesus emerges after the Dajjāl appears, and prays behind the imam in Jerusalem. Jesus kills the Dajjāl. Jesus will crush the cross, kill the pigs, and impose jizya but not zakat. Everyone converts to Islam because of him:

“Abū Umāma al-Bāhilī said: The Messenger of God mentioned the Dajjāl, so Umm Sharīk said: “Where will the Muslims be on that day, O Messenger of God?” He said: “In Jerusalem (*bayt al-maqdis*), he will emerge to besiege them. The imam of the people on that day will be a righteous man.” It is said: “He will pray the morning prayer. When he will say *allāhu akbar!*, and begin it [the prayer], Jesus son of Mary will descend. When that man sees him he will know him, and retreat, walking backwards. But Jesus will come forward and place his hand between his shoulders then say: ‘Pray, [for] I am appointing you.’ So Jesus will pray behind him. ... [A passage follows in which the Dajjal emerges with 70,000 Jews and is defeated by Jesus.] Jesus will be a fair judge among my community, and a just imam, crushing the cross, killing the swine and imposing the head-tax, but leaving aside the charity-tax. One will not busy oneself with lust, grudges and mutual hatreds will be lifted, and the animal nature of mounts will be removed, such that a boy will be able to put his hand on a serpent, and it will not harm him, and a girl will be able to meet a lion, and it will not harm her, and it will be among the camels as if it were their guard dog. The wolf will be among the flocks as if it were their guard dog. The world will be filled with Islam, and the unbelievers will be deprived of their dominion. There will be no dominion other than Islam.”<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Nu‘aym b. Hammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 246-7; Nu‘aym b. Hammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, tr. David Cook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 231.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 256. Tucking up one’s clothes implies preparation for a battle—here a final battle, the *malhama*.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

In this context, Jesus is seen as a propagator of Islam. This is the ultimate rebuke to Christianity: the return of a Jesus who supports Muslim doctrine, not Christian, and accordingly kills pigs, breaks crosses, and imposes the *jizya* on non-believing scripturalists. There are also reports that ‘Abd al-Malik did these things, too, thus equating the two figures as apocalyptic or near-apocalyptic, or perhaps borrowing reports from one portrayal to the other in order to present them in the role of a Muslim redeemer figure.<sup>369</sup> The next report, too, portrays Jesus in this way. Jesus will emerge at the eastern gate of Damascus, go to Muslims in Damascus and announce he killed the Dajjāl in battle, then the rest of the Christians will convert to Islam:

“Ka‘b said: Jesus son of Mary will descend at the tower (*manāra*) that is near the eastern gate of Damascus. He will be a ruddy youth, with him will be two angels; he will be leaning on their shoulders. Every unbeliever that his breath and spirit finds will die. This will be because his breath will reach the distance of his vision, so his breath will find the Dajjāl, so he will melt like a candle melts, and die. The son of Mary will go to the Muslims in Jerusalem (*bayt al-maqdis*), and inform them of his killing, and then pray one prayer behind their commander. Then the son of Mary will pray for them, which is the apocalyptic battle [*malhama*], and the remainder of the Christians will convert to Islam [*yuslimu*], and Jesus will stay and give them good tidings of their levels in paradise.”<sup>370</sup>

Similarly, Jesus breaks the cross and converts people to Islam:

“The Messenger of God said: The prophets are brothers to different wives, their religion is one, but their mothers are different. The one most worthy of me among them is Jesus son of Mary as there was no messenger between myself and him, and he will descend among you, so you should know him. He is a round man, tending towards whitish-red, who will kill the swine, break the cross, put aside the head-tax, and not accept anything but Islam.”<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> See for example the history of Dionysius of Tell Mahre, 204.

<sup>370</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 349; Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, tr. David Cook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 355. A surprising number of these reports originate with Ka‘b, the famous Jewish convert to Islam. That is not the case with other apocalyptic material in Nu‘aym’s collection (that doesn’t address Christianity or conversion); in cases where Christians are mentioned, Ka‘b is overrepresented as a source.

<sup>371</sup> Q 47:4. Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 491; Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, tr. David Cook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 358. See also the report on page 129 of this chapter: “I heard a man narrating to the people: “There are three Mahdīs: The good

“Abū Qubayl said: None of the family of the Mahdī after him will be just to people, but their injustice will be lengthy for the people after the Mahdī, so that the people will pray over the ‘Abbasids, and say: “Would that they were in their place!” The people will continue like this until they raid Constantinople together with their leader. He will be a righteous man, who will pass the rule over to Jesus son of Mary. The people will continue in ease as long as the dominion of the ‘Abbasids does not fall apart, but when their dominion falls apart they will be in tribulation until the Mahdī arises.”<sup>372</sup>

There is no mention of Jesus in this report, but there is mention of non-Muslims joining or obeying the Mahdī:

“When the Sufyānī sends an army to the Mahdī, and they are swallowed up by the earth in the wasteland, and that [news] reaches the Syrians [*ahl al-Shām*], they will say to their caliph: “The Mahdī has emerged, so swear to him, and enter into his obedience—otherwise we will kill you!” So he will send his oath to him, and the Mahdī will go until he settles in Jerusalem, and the storehouses will be conveyed to him.<sup>373</sup> The Arabs, the non-Arab Persians, the people of war, the Byzantines and other will enter into his service (obedience) without fighting, such that mosques will be built in Constantinople and other places.<sup>374</sup> A man from his family will depart from before him leading the easterners, carrying his sword on his shoulders. Eight months he will kill and mutilate, and then turn towards Jerusalem, but not reach it before he dies.”<sup>375</sup>

This report serves as a comment on corruption of the ‘real’ or ‘true’ Christian gospels and the various Christian sects that emerged as a result. This and the next report reference the Ark of the Covenant:

“Ka‘b said: The Mahdī will send to fight the Byzantines, having been given the insight (*fiqh*) of ten, and to remove the Ark of the Covenant (*tābūt al-sakīna*) from a cave at Antioch. In it there will be the Torah, which God revealed to Moses, the Gospel which

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Mahdī, who is ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Azīz; the Mahdī of blood, who is the one who will calm the bloodshed; and the Mahdī of religion, who is Jesus son of Mary, who will convert his community to Islam during his time.” Al-Walid said: It reached me from Ka‘b that he said: “The good Mahdī will emerge after the Sufyānī.”” Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 220.

<sup>372</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 239.

<sup>373</sup> Here again possibly a reference to tax collection, as taxes were often collected in kind.

<sup>374</sup> Nu‘aym’s preoccupation with victory over the Byzantines, which he essentially equates with Christianity, is on display here.

<sup>375</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 216/199.

God revealed to Jesus, and he will judge among the people of the Torah by their Torah and the people of the Gospel by their Gospel.”<sup>376</sup>

“Sulaymān b. ‘Īsā: It has reached me that at the hands of the Mahdī the Ark of the Covenant (*tābūt al-sakīna*) will appear from the Sea of Galilee, so that it will be carried, and placed before him in Jerusalem (*bayt al-maqdis*). When the Jews look upon it, all but a few of them will convert to Islam (*aslamat*), then the Mahdī will die.”<sup>377</sup>

Here the Mahdī is represented as having a human lifespan, though the idea that he will die might be a reference to Jesus, who Muslims believe was raised to heaven by God instead of dying on the cross. Perhaps the Mahdī here is Jesus, being given the natural human death he apparently missed during his first life—or perhaps this is a pointed note that he is indeed *not* Jesus. Our final Mahdī – conversion reference maintains an anti-Trinitarian perspective, arguing that people will see the light at the end of the world and the emergence of the Mahdī:

“‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said: I said: O Messenger of God, will the Mahdī be from us, the imams of guidance or from someone other than us? He said: “From us, of course—by us the religion will be sealed just as by us it was opened, and through us they should seek salvation from the error of *fitna* [dissension], just as through us they sought salvation from the error of *shirk* [polytheism]. Through us God will unite their hearts in the religion after the enmity of *fitna* just as God united between their hearts and their religion after the enmity of *shirk*.””<sup>378</sup>

It is unclear who “us” and “they” are in this report. “They” sought salvation from *shirk*, implying either polytheistic pagans or Christians (or both) who converted to Islam. But “they” also dissented after converting, which is more opaque. Either “they” are proto-Sunnis or proto-Shi’is or Kharijites, or some combination thereof, and will be healed of their dissent in the apocalypse. “Us” is even more complicated. “By us the religion will be sealed just as by us it was opened” suggests an attempt to underscore Islam’s descent from Judaism and

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<sup>376</sup> So the cave is Syrian! See also the following, which was discussed previously: “He is only called *Mahdī* because he guides to a hidden matter, so he will bring out the Torah and the Gospel from a land called Antioch.” Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 220.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>378</sup> This was narrated on ‘Alī b. Abi Talib. Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 229.



Christianity, and Muḥammad’s role in Islam as the “seal of the prophets” (the final prophet in this lineage). “Us” is also distinct from “the imāms of guidance” (which might be early Shī‘ī imams or even the Rashidun caliphs, depending on the interpretation of “imāms”). Given that this text is from Syria, which was a bastion of Umayyad support, it seems most likely that “us” is associated with early Sunnism and “they” with early Shī‘ism, at times collapsed with converts either from paganism, Christianity or both. Thus, here the Mahdī is also Sunnī. Yet the narrator of this report is purportedly ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. This was likely to have been fabricated, an attempt to depict ‘Alī saying something that belies a Sunnī perspective, just as Jesus is depicted converting all Christians to Islam in earlier reports.

### Other Biblical References

These reports do not directly reference conversion, but their themes are often clustered with conversion references in other reports and texts from this period:

“Abū al-‘Āliyya said: When Tustar was conquered, we found a book [codex] on a couch in the treasury of Hormuzān, near the head of a dead man. He said it was Daniel, by our reckoning, and he said: “So we took it to ‘Umar [b. Khaṭṭāb], and so I was the first Arab to read it. Then he sent for Ka‘b, who copied it into Arabic, and in it was what will be, meaning tribulations.”<sup>379</sup>

“Al-Walīd said: I read, according to Daniel, the totality of this community after its prophet Muḥammad until [the second coming of] Jesus will be 174 years. The Umayyads will have a period of eighty years. The rulers—they will be twelve, and have 100 years, then the tyrants [meaning the ‘Abbasids] will reign forty years, then the people will remain without a ruler for seven years, then the Dajjāl will emerge for seven years, then Jesus son of Mary will emerge, and he will have forty years.”<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 18-9.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

“Ka‘b said: God Most High gave to Ishmael twelve righteous leaders from his loins,”<sup>381</sup> (the report then names Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, “the king of Syria and his son” [Mu‘āwiya and Yazīd], al-Saffāh, and al-Mansūr).

This positive reference to early ‘Abbasid caliphs along with a selection of Rashidūn and Umayyad caliphs contradicts reports we’ve previously examined, in which the ‘Abbasids are “tyrants.” Its omission of ‘Alī, however, belies an anti-‘Alid perspective also seen elsewhere in the *Fitan*. This is almost certainly also a Syrian perspective (as we’ve mentioned, most of Nu‘aym’s reports seem to come from Syria).<sup>382</sup> It also aligns with an Umayyad perspective, in which ‘Alī’s legitimacy as caliph is in question. It is quite likely that seventh-, eighth-, and even early ninth-century Syrian views about who was and was not a legitimate Muslim ruler, both in the Muslim tradition and outside of it, were 1) basically synonymous with Umayyad views on the caliphate; 2) were essentially uniform within Syria, no matter the religious community espousing them; 3) were unique to Syria (these views, and certainly their ubiquity within Syria, are not as common or as ubiquitous outside Syria); and 4) were held for at least several decades after the ‘Abbasid Revolution (Nu‘aym’s reports date as late as the early ninth century, some seventy years after the ‘Abbasids came to power).

#### Portrayals of Syrian Christians in Nu‘aym’s *Kitāb al-Fitan*

As noted earlier, the terms used for Syrian Christians change depending on the report’s context. Such attitudes can reflect the social dynamic in which conversion was, or was not,

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<sup>381</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 64.

<sup>382</sup> Three eighth-century Syriac texts contain lists of Muslim rulers from Muhammad to the date of writing; neither lists ‘Alī (one, dated sometime after 705 C.E., says “they were without a leader during the war of Siffin for five and a half years; a second, dated between 724-743 C.E., refers to dissention after ‘Uthman and before Mu‘āwiya, while the last, dated 775 C.E., lists “No king” between the two). See Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, 43, 49-51.

happening in early Islamic Syria and the Jazīra. Christians remain separate but act as advisory figures in one account, where ‘Umar b. Khaṭṭāb sends for and speaks with a bishop, who predicts strife after him.<sup>383</sup> Another discusses a monastery by the Euphrates where several battles were fought during the first *fitna*.<sup>384</sup> As in other genres of literature from this period, Mu‘āwiya is a theme in the conversion of Syrian Christians:

“‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Abī ‘Awf al-Jurashī said: The Messenger of God mentioned Syria, so a man said, “How is it possible for us to get Syria, Prophet, when the Byzantines [*al-Rūm*], possessors of horns, are in it?” So the Messenger of God said: “Perhaps a youth (*ghulām*) from Quraysh will suffice for it,” and the Messenger of God stretched with his stick towards the shoulders of Mu‘āwiya.”<sup>385</sup>

Mu‘āwiya was seen as a peacemaker in Syria, especially among Christians, and this is reflected in the account. The acquisition of Syria here refers to conquest, but it also refers to local support, and with Mu‘āwiya’s role it also implies at least partial conversion of Syria to Islam.

In the next several reports, Syrians appear to be wiser strategists than the Muslims, who are often outsmarted by them. In one report, Marwān besieged Ḥoms for four months until the people were ostensibly lacking in food and water. Then he tried to dig tunnels to them, but a Syriac-speaking Christian (*nabaṭī*) inside ordered tunnels built from inside to meet and block them. Marwān tried to bribe the man and failed. Then the man flooded their camp, so they left (the Syrian thus outsmarted them).<sup>386</sup> In this report and the following one, Syrians are presented as wiser than their Muslim counterparts, but more importantly, more permanent, while the Muslims are presented as foolish, voracious and ultimately temporary inhabitants:

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<sup>383</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 68.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>386</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 114.

“Sa ‘īd b. Marthad Abī al-‘Āliyya said: I was sitting with Shuraḥbīl b. Dhī Ḥimāya at the palace of Ibn Athāl<sup>387</sup> when a distinguished elder from the Christians passed by, whose eyebrows had fallen over his eyes, leaning on a stick, so he said: “Hey, you, elder.” So he sat with him, and said: “How far back do you remember?” He said: “Persians, I saw them in this city, sitting circle after circle, talking among themselves, saying: “The Muslims will be victorious over this earth, so God will open (conquer) the storehouses for them, both on land and sea. They will be known by the length of their hair, and their spears, and their wearing a wrapping around the waist. Their last king they will kill violently. Wealth and many foodstuffs will be poured on their table, but they will not be satisfied.”<sup>388</sup>

“Abd al-Raḥmān b. Jubayr b. Nufayr said: Heraclius, the Emperor of Byzantium, said: The Arabs and us are like a man who had a house, and he gave it to some people to live, then, said: ‘Dwell in it as long as you are righteous, but watch out if you are corrupt, for I will expel you from it.’ So they inhabited it for a time, then he looked carefully at them, and suddenly he realized that they were becoming corrupt, so he expelled them from it and brought in others, settled them in it, and made their settlement conditional, just as he had made it conditional on the ones before. The house is Syria, the Lord of it is God Most High, who caused the Israelites to dwell in it, so they were its people for a time. Then they changed and corrupted, and so He looked carefully at them, then expelled them from it, and caused us to dwell in it, O Arabs, so if you are righteous, you will be its people, but if you change and corrupt, He will expel you from it just like He expelled those who were before you.”<sup>389</sup>

These reports contradict the one prior to them: Syria is presented as Christian, regardless of ruler, in the first (as embodied in the figure of the elder). It is seen as the house of different religions according to the will of God in the second. In both reports, proselytization and conversion of local Syrians at the hands of non-Syrians is presented as an impossibility. It is unclear what such reports signify. Perhaps the recalcitrance of local Christians to convert to Islam was proving harder to address than was expected, or the rate of conversion was slower or more difficult than conversion of populations in other regions. In early historical reports about Syria, the Umayyads (and especially Mu‘āwiya) are portrayed showing at least visual reverence toward Christianity, as when Mu‘āwiya prayed in the grotto at Gethsemane in Jerusalem. This

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<sup>387</sup> Cook notes that this location was in Ḥīra, former capital of the Lakhmids, and Ibn Athāl was a Christian and a companion of Mu‘āwiya.

<sup>388</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 121; Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, tr. David Cook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 108.

<sup>389</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 136.

may speak to the local power held by Syrian Christians, whether social, economic, cultural or otherwise. It likely also relates to the symbolic power of Jerusalem, which had been viewed and maintained as a Christian city (to the extreme detriment of Palestinian Jews) for centuries. In any event, these reports reflect a deep respect for and understanding of Syria as a traditionally Christian region (despite Christianity having only been in the region for a few centuries).

### Muslim-Christian Relations: Demographic Tensions

Many of the reports in the *Fitān* contain a strong sense of demographic tension, or even dread, between Christian and Muslim populations, and this is reflected in concerns about conversion to and from each religion. The first two describe scenarios in which conversion leads to tribulations:

“Kurz b. ‘Alqama al-Khuzā‘ī said: A man said to the Messenger of God: “Does Islam have an end?” He said: “Yes. Any family from the Arabs or the ‘*ajam* to which God wishes well, He will cause to enter Islam.” He said, “Then what?” He said: “Then there will be tribulations like they were clouds.””<sup>390</sup>

“Abū Zāhiriyya said: Among your protected peoples, you will find none harsher towards you during these trials than the easterners, the possessors of salt and perfume. One of their women would poke with her finger at the belly of a Muslim woman, and she would say: “Pay us the head-tax (*jizya*)!” gloating over her, saying: “Give the head-tax.””<sup>391</sup>

Some reports examine the temptation of marriage as means of conversion to Islam:

“Ibn al-Mus‘ib said: I said: “If I went out and married with your people...” Then he said: “God forbid that I should leave 125 prayers for five prayers!” Then Sa‘īd said: I heard

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<sup>390</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitān*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 31/2.

<sup>391</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitān*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 141. Cook notes the ambiguity in this text as written, and says the comment must be coming from the Muslim woman. It seems, rather, that the comment is coming from a Christian woman, one of the ‘harsh’ easterners, who is simply harassing a Muslim pregnant woman: Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitān*, tr. David Cook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 129.

Ka‘b al-Aḥbār saying: “Would that this milk turned to tar!” So it was said: “Why is that?” He said: “Quraysh has followed the tails of camels on the mountain paths. Satan is with the single one, but he is further away from the couple.”<sup>392</sup>

This report addresses conversion to Islam from Christianity: “125 prayers [i.e., a lot of prayers] for five prayers” refers to Christianity and Islam, respectively. Thus, the narrator is contemplating marriage to a Muslim, which would require him to convert to Islam to be able to legally marry a Muslim woman. Ka‘b’s comment here seems to be encouragement of such a move: “Satan is with the single one, but he is further away from two” is a metaphor (where camels represent people) suggesting marriage protects one from Satan—here, specifically marriage into Islam. The narrator is a “single one,” thus Ka‘b would rather such tainted milk (the narrator’s comment about not leaving 125 prayers for five) turn to tar. It should also be noted that Ka‘b is famously a convert to Islam from Judaism, so his role in the report is itself symbolic.

This report demonstrates the ties between Muḥammad and Jesus, hinting at pushback, but no conversion:

“Abū Ja‘far said: A herald will call from the heavens: “Is not the truth with the Family of Muḥammad?” And a herald will call from the earth: “Is not the truth with the Family of Jesus?” Or he said: “al-‘Abbās,” I am doubtful about it. The lesser voice is from Satan to deceive the people. Abū ‘Abd Allāh, Nu‘aym, was doubtful.”<sup>393</sup>

Here we see the struggle for power between Islam and Christianity (sometimes conveyed through fighting for territory and people between the caliphate and the Byzantine empire). Then again, Nu‘aym’s uncertainty, and willingness to replace “Jesus” with “al-‘Abbās” suggests the conflict between the ‘Abbasids and the ‘Alids/early Shī‘ites.

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<sup>392</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 141.

<sup>393</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 208.

The following report discusses the hierarchical treatment of Muslims (especially *mawālī* and converts, which it distinguishes as two separate groups), and denounces it, arguing that it is a sign of the apocalypse. Hierarchical ill-treatment of converts, of course, would discourage conversion:

“Ka‘b said: When you see the Arabs despise the order of Quraysh, then you see the *mawālī* despise the order of the Arabs, then you see the converts to Islam (*maslamāt al-arḍīn*) despise the order of the *mawālī*, then the portents of the Hour are overshadowing you.” Kurayb said: I said to him: “O Abū Ishāq, Hudayfa narrated to us a tradition (*ḥadīth*) concerning the two red ones.”<sup>394</sup> He said: “That is when pens and cushions are forbidden.” Abū ‘Abdallāh said: “The cushions are the governors, while the pens are the secretaries.”<sup>395</sup>

### Converts and the Army

The army plays a major role in reports on conversion. Defection – or possible defection – of *mawālī* and/or converts seems to have been a major preoccupation in these early reports, and a possible sign of the apocalypse. Another report discusses slave soldiers who want to defect, for example.<sup>396</sup> This worry is often turned on its head, however—in many cases the converts or *mawālī* are seen as possible defectors, but they do not choose to do so. Similarly, David Cook argues that Jewish converts are seen as perhaps more likely to defect from the army after conversion to Islam than before.<sup>397</sup> *Mawālī*, here represented simply as non-Arabs (possibly meaning more specifically Persians or Syrians), may be subject to the same phenomenon:

“Ḥudhayfa said: ... When this issue [of prisoner exchange] will reach the ruler of the Muslims on that day, he will say to them: “Whoever of the non-Arabs [*al-‘ajam*] who

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<sup>394</sup> ‘Red ones’ here probably means ‘Byzantines.’ In general, *aḥmar/ḥamrā*’ can mean former or current Byzantines, converts, and/or jizya-payers.

<sup>395</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 246. See also the discussion by Ahmed El Shamsy on these hierarchical interactions in *The Canonization of Islamic Law: A Social and Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 100.

<sup>396</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 42.

<sup>397</sup> David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 75.

wants to go to the Byzantines from among us, let them do so.” So a speaker from the *mawālī* will rise and say: “God forbid—we desire Islam as a religion and as a substitute,”<sup>398</sup> then they will swear to the death as the Muslims had done previously. Then they will go together as a group, so when the enemies of God see them, they will desire [to fight], be angry, and energized. The Muslims will draw their swords, and break their sheaths—and the tyrant will be enraged at his enemies.”<sup>399</sup>

Demographic fears are represented in the army, as they were earlier, in more general social terms: both non-Arab foreigners and Muslim offspring of Christian women are demanded by the Byzantines in prisoner exchanges and other contexts. These groups are not necessarily converts, but they are always considered ‘unsecure’ believers, and therefore suspect. Thus, many reports reflect fears that *mawālī* in the army will defect to Byzantines, or that ‘untrue Muslims’ will defect to the Byzantines by whole tribe and return to the Christian faith:

“Ka‘b said: [details predicting a battle between the Byzantines and Muslims.] ... Then they [the Muslims and Byzantines] will go to a valley [in Syria] where there is room for fighting ... Whoever flees that day will not breathe the breath of paradise. The Byzantines will say to the Muslims: “Give us our land, and return to us every non-Arab foreigner (*aḥmar*) and half-breed (*hajin*) of yours, and the sons of the concubines.”

The Muslims will say: “Whoever wants to join you can; whoever wants to defend his religion and himself can,” so the half-breeds, the [sons of] concubines and the non-Arab foreigners (*ḥamrā’*) will be enraged.

They will assign a banner to a man of the non-Arab foreigners (*ḥamrā’*)—he is the sultan Abraham and Isaac promised would come at the end of time—and they will swear allegiance to him. Then they will fight one by one with the Byzantines and be victorious over the Byzantines. The emigration of the Arabs will turn toward the Byzantines [then], and their hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*), when they see the victory of the *mawālī* over the Byzantines. Tribes in their totality, most of them Quḍā‘a and the non-Arab foreigners (*ḥamrā’*), will flee until they place their banners among them [the Byzantines]. Then companions will cry back and forth to distinguish [between them]—those who joined what they joined will cry: “The Cross is victorious.”<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> See Q 3:85.

<sup>399</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 263.

<sup>400</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 289.



The next report references formerly Christian tribes reverting back to old faith and vassal status before they converted to Islam:

“Abū Muḥammad al-Janubī said: I heard ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr saying: Arab tribes in their totality will join with the Byzantines.” I said: “In their totality?” He said: “With their shepherds and dogs.” Sulaym b. ‘Umayr said to him: “If God wills, O Abū Muḥammad,” but he got up angrily, saying: “God has already willed and written it.””<sup>401</sup>

This report is essentially the opposite of the previous one, and the fear of reversion is not met:

“‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ said: ... The Byzantines will say: “We will continue to fight you until you bring out to us everyone among you who is foreign.” Then the non-Arabs (‘*ajam*) will emerge and say: “God forbid that we go back into unbelief after Islam!” At that God, mighty and majestic, will be enraged and strike with His sword and pierce with His spear ...” [etc. about Muslim armies conquering Byzantine cities].<sup>402</sup>

Lastly, this report represents a fundamental battle of Islam vs. Christianity, in which reserves of true believers will be called on both sides. No conversions are mentioned, but a numbers game of sorts is in play, in which related fears of demographic loss are demonstrated:

“Ka‘b said: The Messenger of God mentioned the *malḥama* (apocalyptic battle)—and it is named *malḥama* because of the number of people [involved in it]—so I will interpret for you: Twelve kings will be present at it, the Byzantine king the least of them, with the smallest number of fighters, but they will be the ones who call for it [to happen], as they will have called upon the nations to aid them. It will be forbidden for anyone who considers Islam to be true to not help Islam on that day. So on that day aid for the Muslims will come from the army-province of Ṣana‘ā’ (Yemen). And it will be forbidden to anyone who considers Christianity to be true to not help it on that day, so al-Jazīra will aid them with 30,000 Christians. A man will abandon his plot of land (*faddān*), saying: “I will go to help Christianity,” so iron will be set against each other...”<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>402</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 290-1.

<sup>403</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 293.

In this account, we see a commentary about timing, in which Christian dwellers of Constantinople knew the conquest was inevitable, but did not know it would be so soon – a miscalculation represented in their Scripture. This is simultaneously a comment on Byzantium, public Christian practice, and the concept of *tahrīf* (corruption of the Gospels and Torah):

“Some of the elders of [al-Faraj b. Yaḥmad’s] people: We were with Sufyān b. ‘Awf al-Ghāmidī until we came to the Gate of Constantinople, the golden gate, with 3000 horsemen from the sea side until we had passed the river or the gulf. He said: So they were terrified and beat their clappers (*nawāqīs*), then they said: “What is with you, O Arabs?” We said: “We have come to ‘this town of evildoers’ so that God would destroy it at our hands.” They said: “By God, we do not know whether the Book has lied or whether the calculation is a mistake, but you have come too fast. By God, we know that it will be conquered one day, but we do not think that this is the time.”<sup>404</sup>

This account combines a number of tropes about *mawālī*, Syrians, and the army:

“Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik, while he was besieging Constantinople: suddenly a young man with beautiful garb and a swift mount came to him, then said to him: “I am Tiberius,” so he honored him, brought him to his council, and kept him close. Then he sent for Abū Muslim al-Rūmī, who was from the *mawālī* of the Marwanids, a captive from the Byzantines, who had converted to Islam, improved his *fiqh* and his Islam, and his primary loyalty was to Islam. He [Maslama] said: “O Abū Muslim, this one claims that he is Tiberius.” So he said: “He is lying, may God make the commander righteous. I of all people know Tiberius well, so if he were among 10,000 I would be able to pick him out. Tiberius is a ruddy man with a broad forehead, bad teeth, who will appear when he is sixty years old—known by blood, drinking water. He will say: ‘How long will we allow the camel-eaters to stay in our country and our land? Take us to the camel-eaters so we can do whatever we like to them.’” So they will come to him in a gathering the like of which has not been seen previously, such that they will settle in the valleys. The Muslims will learn of his coming and his settling [in the valleys], so they will ask for aid, such that from the furthest Yemen they will come, helping Islam. The Christians of al-Jazīra and Syria will aid those Christians [the Byzantines], so the Muslims will go towards them. Victory will be lifted from them, but endurance will descend upon them, and the iron of each of them will be set against the other. It will not harm a man to have a sword that would not cut off a nose, to not have al-Ṣamṣāma<sup>405</sup> in its place—everything he touches [with his sword] will be cleft. A group of the Muslims will desert them, then go to a land overflowing with sand—they will never see Paradise or their families ever! A group will be killed, and then God will send down His help upon a group, who will be the best people on earth that day. A martyr from among them will receive the reward of seventy

<sup>404</sup> Nu‘aym b. Hammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 305.

<sup>405</sup> Al- Ṣamṣāma was the famously powerful sword of the poet and warrior ‘Amr b. Ma‘dīqarib al-Zubaydī.

martyrs from previous [battles], while the remaining will get a double portion of reward. When they meet [in battle] a man will take the banner, and be killed, then another...”<sup>406</sup>

In this report the apocalyptic prediction hinges on an account from a convert, Abū Muslim al-Rūmī. It is unclear if this figure actually existed, but in any case, his name represents the ideal convert: father of Muslim, from Rome (Byzantium). Abū Muslim describes Tiberius, an apparently mythical figure, who will insult the Muslims, catalyze the amassing of troops and ultimately a battle between Muslims and Christians, centering on the Christians of al-Jazīra and al-Shām, who will help the Byzantines and will therefore be defeated. Here converts and conversion are closely associated with the army and with demographic strength, as centered on the figure of Abū Muslim al-Rūmī and the Syrian and Jazīran Christians who ally with the Byzantines instead of the Muslim caliphate.

The following account contains a variety of demographic fears played out. It equates a refusal to “share” the offspring of Muslims with a refusal to lose numbers, thus reflecting concerns about the offspring of religiously-mixed marriages. It also discusses conversion itself, as well as the defection of formerly Christian tribes from the army, and military “reserves” in the form of estimated population figures from Yemen, Arabia, Persia, and former Byzantine vassal states. Ultimately, it predicts that the Byzantines will take back Syria and destroy Jerusalem:

“The Prophet said: There will be a truce between the Muslims and the Byzantines such that they will fight with them an enemy, and divide between them their spoils. Then the Byzantines will raid Persia (*Fārs*) with the Muslims, and kill their fighters and take their offspring captive. The Byzantines will say: “Divide the spoils with us, just as we divided with you,” so they will divide the wealth and the polytheists’ offspring, but the Byzantines will say: “Divide your offspring who you have taken,” but they will say: “We will never divide the offspring of Muslims with you!” So they will say: “You have betrayed us,” and the Byzantines will return to their lord in Constantinople, then say: “The Arabs betrayed us, but we are more numerous than they, better prepared, and

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<sup>406</sup> Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 257-8.

stronger, so aid us that we can fight them.” He will say: “I do not like to betray them, for they have been victorious over us through the ages (*fī tūl al-dahr*).” So they will go [to] the ruler of Rome and inform him of this, whereupon he will send eighty banners—under each banner there will be 12,000 [troops]—in the sea. Their lord will say to them: “When you have anchored on the coastlands of Syria, burn your boats so that you will fight for yourselves.” So they will do that, and take the land of Syria, all of it, land and sea, other than Damascus and Mt. Mu‘naq, and they will destroy Jerusalem.

...Ibn Mas‘ūd: “How many Muslims can Damascus contain?” The Prophet said: “By the One who holds my soul in His hand, it will contain as many Muslims as come to it, just as the womb contains a child.” I said: “What is al-Mu‘naq, O Prophet of God?” He said: “A mountain in the land of Syria, close to Ḥomṣ, on a river called the Orontes. The offspring of the Muslims will be on the highest part of al-Mu‘naq, while the Muslims are on the River Orontes and the polytheists are behind the River Orontes, fighting them day and night. So when the lord of Constantinople perceives this, he will send by land to Qinnasrīn 600,000 [troops]. Then Yemenite support will come to [the Muslims], a total of 70,000, whose hearts God has united in belief, together with 40,000 from Ḥimyar, such that they will come to Jerusalem (*bay[t] al-maqdis*), fight the Byzantines, defeat them, and expel them from army-province to army-province, until they come to Qinnasrīn, and the *mawālī*’s provisions will come to them.”<sup>407</sup>

I said: “What are the *mawālī*’s provisions, O Messenger of God?” He said: “They are your freedmen, and they are a part of you—a group coming from the direction of Persia. They will say: ‘You have acted in a chauvinistic/tribal manner, O Arabs, so we will not be with either of the two factions until you unite in your words (*kalimatakum*)<sup>408</sup>—so they will fight Nizār one day, Yemen one day, and the *mawālī* one day. Then the Byzantines will emerge in the valleys, and the Muslims will descend upon a river called so-and-so, bearing up patiently, while the polytheists are at a river called al-Ruqayya, which is the Black River, so they will fight them [the Byzantines], while God Most High lifts His victory from both armies, and causes endurance (*ṣabr*) to descend on them, until a third of the Muslims are killed, a third flee and a third are left.

As to the third that are killed, they are martyrs like ten of the martyrs of Badr, as one of the martyrs of Badr will intercede for seventy, while the martyr of the apocalyptic battles will intercede for seven hundred. As to the third that flee, they will divide into three groups: one third will join the Byzantines, saying: ‘If God had any need of this religion [Islam], He would have aided it.’ These are the Arabs’ defector tribes (*musallimāt al-‘arab*): Bahrā’, Tanūkh, Ṭayyī’ and Salīh.<sup>409</sup> One third will say: ‘The dwellings of our

<sup>407</sup> Here the *mawālī* are Persians?

<sup>408</sup> If taken literally, this suggests the *mawālī* desire for different factions to “unite in their words” = come to an agreement, ostensibly to work together. On the other hand, “kalima” sometimes refers to the testimony of faith, which suggests something more serious (yet applicable in this case): unite in one belief and thus one *shahāda* (presumably with or without language regarding ‘Alī).

<sup>409</sup> Bashear discusses this in his article, which examines several Muslim sources from later centuries (Tabari, Baladhuri, and Mas‘udi) that discuss the defection of Iyād in northern Mesopotamia to the Byzantines, and the report that all of Taghlib threatened to defect during Umar I’s reign (Bashear 207). Ibn Mas‘ūd identifies a pervasive fear of formerly (maybe still partially?) Christian tribes reverting back to their old faith and status. These fears are seldom represented, but they must have existed (the same is also true for the next two, of course).

fathers, and grandfathers are better—they will never reach us there, and we will pass into the desert'; these are the Bedouin. One third will say: 'Everything is like its name, and the land of Syria (*sha'm*) is like its name, ill-omened (*shu'm*), so let us go to Iraq, the Yemen, and the Hijaz, where we will not fear the Byzantines.'

As to the third that will remain [on the battlefield], each one will go to the other, and will say: 'O God, God—put aside the petty tribal chauvinism (*'usaybiyya*) and unite your word (*kalimatukum* = your belief? Your testimony of faith?) to fight your enemy, since you will never be victorious as long as you act in a tribal manner.' So they will gather together, and will swear allegiance that they will fight until they have joined with their brothers who were killed. When the Byzantines will see those who joined them and [the number of] those killed, and the small number of the Muslims, a Byzantine will stand up between the two rows [of fighters], who will have with him a flag with a cross at the top of it, and cry out: 'The Cross is victorious, the Cross is victorious!' Then a Muslim who will have a flag will stand up between the two rows and cry out: 'Nay, God's Helpers (*ansār Allāh*) and His friends (*awliyā'*) are victorious!'

God Most High will be angered because of those who blasphemed by saying that the cross is victorious, then say: 'O Gabriel, support My servants!' so Gabriel will descend at the head of 100,000 angels, then He will say: 'O Michael, support My servants!' so Michael will go down at the head of 200,000 angels, and He will say: 'O Isrāfīl, support My servants!' so Isrāfīl will go down at the head of 300,000 believers, and His wrath will be upon the unbelievers, so they will be killed and defeated.

The Muslims will go through the land of the Byzantines until they reach Amorium, while there will be a great number of people on its walls, saying: 'We have never seen a more populous nation than the Byzantines—how many we have killed and defeated, and yet how many more there are in this city and on its walls!' But they will say: 'Give us safe conduct on the condition that we pay the head-tax (*jizya*) to you,' so they will accord the safe conduct to them and to all of the Byzantines on the condition they pay the head-tax.

Their outer regions will gather, then say: 'O Arabs, the Dajjāl is behind you, in your homes!' But the report will be false—so whoever of you will be among them, let him not throw away what he has, for it will be necessary for what remains. They will depart, but find the report to be false.

The Byzantines will rise up against those Arabs remaining in their lands, and kill them—not even leaving a single male or female Arab or child alive in the land of the Byzantines. This will reach the Muslims, so they will return with the wrath of God, mighty and majestic, kill their fighters, and take their offspring captive. They will gather wealth, and every single city or fortress to which they lay siege will be conquered for them in three days. Then they will descend upon the Bay, and the Bay will overflow, so the people of Constantinople will begin to say: 'The Cross has aided our sea for us, and the Messiah is our Helper!' But then they will wake to the Bay being dry, so that tents will be pitched on it, and the sea will withdraw from Constantinople. The Muslims will surround the city of unbelief on Friday night with praising God, saying *allāhu akbar*, and *lā ilaha illā allāhu* until the morning—there will not be a single sleeper or sitter among them. When the dawn rises, the Muslims will let out one *allāhu akbar!* and that which is between the two towers will fall down.

The Byzantines will say: ‘Before we were merely fighting the Arabs, but now we are fighting our Lord, as He has devastated our city, and destroyed it for them.’ So they will stay [be controlled] under their [the Muslims’] hands, and [the Muslims will] weigh out the gold in shields—dividing up the offspring until the portion of each man will be 300 virgins, taking pleasure with them as long as God wishes. Then the Dajjāl will emerge truly. God will conquer Constantinople at the hands of people who are the friends (*awliyā*) of God, and God will lift death, sickness, and disease from them, until Jesus son of Mary descends upon them, and they will fight the Dajjāl together with him.’”<sup>410</sup>

This report is deeply rooted in fears of demographic loss, which are closely tied to conversion to and from Islam (or non-conversion to Islam, in some cases). It first deals with the division of spoils after battle, including prisoners of war and their offspring (in an imagined battle of the Byzantines and Muslims against the Persians). The caliphal army’s refusal to divide Muslim offspring between them and the Byzantines induces total war. In the leadup to this war, both the Byzantines and Muslims gather troops, and their numbers are compared. The Persian Muslims refuse to join the fight until the Muslims put aside petty tribal differences (possibly a Yaman/Qays reference, or a nod to Persian dissatisfaction with Umayyad-era notions of Arab superiority). The Byzantines then insult Islam, noting all of the Arabian tribes who have apparently deserted Islam (these are all well-known Christian Arab tribes, some of whose members converted to Islam but not all). Syria is cursed; petty tribalism is again bemoaned and disparaged. The Byzantines declare the cross victorious, which angers God. He then sends Gabriel, Michael, and Isrāfīl to assist the Muslims. The Muslims reach Amorium and are astounded at the sheer size of the Byzantine population, and are all killed. Then Muslims within the caliphate prepare for war and march to Constantinople, where the sea ebbs and flows, assisting with their efforts. They will be victorious and will take the offspring of the Byzantines.

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<sup>410</sup> After the Muslims take Constantinople and the Byzantines believe the Lord has forsaken them, the Dajjal will come and Jesus will emerge to fight him. Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Mecca: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya, 1991), 259-61.

Then the Dajjāl will emerge and fight the Muslims, who will conquer Constantinople with the help of Jesus, son of Mary. Converts, as represented in the aggregate, play a major role here: they represent the ultimate loss or victory for one side or the other.

### Conclusion

This chapter has examined a variety of seventh-, eighth-, and early ninth-century Syriac and Arabic apocalyptic textual evidence that directly or indirectly deals with conversion between Christianity and Islam. In these accounts, conversion is a harbinger of the end of the world. Whether a false prophet gathers followers, or a rival sect converts a community away from their faith, or a major religion gathers converts to join the army, the effect is that the enemy has gained in number and therefore power, and will soon take over the world and bring about its destruction. This is, of course, a metaphor for what each writer sees implicated for his own faith: a loss of constituents or the rise of a rival faith system could signify the end of a particular community, belief system and way of life.

## Chapter Four: Conversion in Polemical Writing

The preceding chapter examined apocalyptic material on conversion written from 640-850 C.E. This one builds on it, examining other forms of polemical material on conversion from the same era and region. My tentative conclusion is that polemical writing develops in sophistication rather quickly over this period but reaches an early peak in hostile tone around the time of the ‘Abbasid Revolution and for some decades afterward (roughly 750-820 C.E.), when political tensions and apocalyptic fervor were at their height in Syria and Iraq. This was fed in part by a near-obsession of the early ‘Abbasids with conquering Byzantine territory in Anatolia; when this fervor died down in the early ninth century, the energy that fueled polemical scholarship was rekindled by the patronage of the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn and his successors al-Mu‘taṣim and al-Mutawakkil. Still, the ire directed toward other faiths during this period was yet not as strong as that directed to ‘heretical’ sects of one’s own faith, in both Christian and Muslim writing.

Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger argue that a surge in conversions, resulting from the abolishment of the *mawla* system by the ‘Abbasids, led to the ubiquity of Christian-Muslim polemic by the ninth century C.E. But based on the few sources we have on actual converts, we do not see a rise in conversion so much as a rise in scholarship about conversion—the latter does not necessarily indicate the former. The increase likely has far more to do with an improved understanding of these faiths on both sides, an entrenchment of enmity between the Byzantine Empire and the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, and the flourishing of theological and other forms of scholarship in Arabic and Syriac more generally, particularly within the genre of heresiology.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> David Bertaina, *Christian and Muslim Dialogues: The Religious Uses of a Literary Form in the Early Islamic Middle East* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 9.



Doctrinal disputes existed in Muslim-Christian interactions but also within each faith, of course: over the roughly two hundred years this research covers, four major periods of strife (*fitan*) occur in the Muslim world, the last two in particular (the ‘Abbasid revolution of 750 and the ‘Abbasid civil war of the 810s) having a notable influence on what was written during this period. We saw these events reflected in apocalyptic materials in the previous chapter. In this one, their presence is a bit less obvious. Many of the Muslim scholars who wrote refutations and dialectic against the Christians also wrote refutations of the Mu‘tāzilites, or the *ahl al-sunna wa-al-jamā‘a*, or the proto-Shī‘ites. Jāhiz, for example, whose oddly admiring refutation of the Christians we discuss in this chapter, had little mercy for any group he thought worthy of mockery, faith adherence notwithstanding.

In seventh- and eighth-century Christian milieux, Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian polemic was pervasive and increasingly hostile toward other sects. Nearly every Christian writer who addressed Islam in the seventh or eighth century classified it as a Christian heresy.<sup>412</sup> The idea that Late Antique Christian writers initially identified Islam as a Christian heresy is all but universally accepted by historians and is supported by many textual sources from the seventh and eighth centuries; indeed, it seems to have taken decades, if not centuries, for Christian scholarship to correct this early assessment.<sup>413</sup> We can make the claim, as do many other scholars, that this is because of shared similarities between the two faiths, but it is likely just as much because Christian scholars were so intent on identifying, classifying and rejecting fine points of difference in Christological views as indicative of heresy that it made sense to classify

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<sup>412</sup> Daniel J. Sahas, “The Art and Non-Art of Byzantine Polemics: Patterns of Refutation in Byzantine Anti-Islamic Literature,” (55-73), 57-64.

<sup>413</sup> Gerrit Reinink, “The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam,” *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993) 165-87.

new monotheistic faiths as heresies, as well.<sup>414</sup> Early Muslim belief contained many elements Christians identified as common to their faith, and as we have discussed in previous chapters (and as has been argued in other texts), early Muslims, if indeed we can even call them that, do not appear to be entirely clear on their faith boundaries with Christians, either (if seventh- and eighth-century Muslim sources are to be believed). Thus, Christological disputes (and, to a lesser extent, writings on Jews, Zoroastrians, and other faiths) provided the framework for texts on Muslims. In both worlds, sectarian strife within faith communities loomed larger, and took up more of the attention and page counts of most of our scholars, than did disputes with other faiths.

Just prior to the Muslim conquests, Heraclius attempted to solve major Christological disputes within the church by promoting something of a compromise, first in monoenergism (the idea that Christ had one energy), then in monotheletism (that Christ had one will). Palestinian dyophysites were not pleased with the efforts, and when Sophronius rose to patriarch of Jerusalem in 634, he issued a formal letter, stating the orthodox position and outlining various heretical beliefs, and listing “the first five ecumenical councils in canonical order.” This letter directly refuted Heraclius’s attempts to square the Christological circle (or triangle, as it were). From the perspective of Christian doctrine, the *Letter* was representative of its time: Cameron and Hoyland argue that it “demonstrates the increasing formalization of doctrinal argument and the role of bishops and patriarchs in promoting it.”<sup>415</sup> This, too, affected the way Islam was viewed and written about.

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<sup>414</sup> Robert Hoyland suggests that local Christian scholars may not have taken much initial notice of Muslim belief and practice because there was no expectation that the occupation would last. Averil Cameron and Robert Hoyland, eds. *Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300-1500* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate-Variorum, 2011), xxx-xxxi. See also Pinggéra, Karl. “Konfessionelle Rivalitäten in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Islam. Beispiele aus der ostsyrischen Literatur”, *Der Islam* 88:1 (2012), 51-72; and others.

<sup>415</sup> Cameron, Averil, and Robert Hoyland, eds. *Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300-1500* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate-Variorum, 2011), xxiii.

The Christian-Muslim polemical tradition is deeply discursive: even when laying out points of contention, the structure of a dialogue—or the stated intention of the author that the text be used for debates—is often used, and even when it is not, the form’s influence is always present. Of course, there is little chance of confirming debates as recorded speech; that is not the point of this work, nor was it the point of these texts. They were meant to reflect common fears and concerns of faith groups, and provide examples of how ordinary believers could respond to attacks on their faith. As conversion became an increasingly widespread phenomenon, fears of loss of constituents became increasingly powerful motivations for scholars to write apologetic, polemical, and apocalyptic works. Such works amounted to a form of identity construction, in which one’s self was denoted by faith group, and divisions between faith groups were dependent upon what each in-group was not, and did or did not believe. Beliefs and identities outside of the in-group’s core theologies were considered heretical. Conversion is often mentioned in these accounts, either to narrate the consequences of apostasy, or with a mere line or two in the context of a polemical argument. Either way, one may be sure that a fear of loss of constituents is always in the background. While this chapter focuses only on texts with explicit references to conversion, many polemical texts that do not reference it are clearly motivated by its possibility. Ultimately, in theory, these texts were a way to win converts—or stem the potential tide of converts going in the wrong direction.

In polemical debate scenarios, each religious opponent had to know the doctrines, scriptures, and sources of authority of the other’s faith as well as their own.<sup>416</sup> To read the Qur’ān and early Muslim scholarship is to know that Islam’s main issues with Christianity were

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<sup>416</sup> Wadi Haddad 1985, Mark Beaumont 2005, David Thomas, 1992/2002. Griffith, Sidney. “Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians.” in *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conference* (Villanova, PA, 1979). See also K. Corrigan, *Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Psalters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xl-liv.

largely contained in the concept of the Trinity. Qur’ān 5:76, 112:1-3 and others denounce it. Yet Umayyad and ‘Abbasid rulers maintained close ties to Christian scholars and leaders. ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz died while visiting the monastery of St. Simeon near Aleppo. John of Damascus worked for the Umayyad caliph al-Hishām, yet wrote a treatise called “The Heresy of the Ishmaelites.”<sup>417</sup> They also needed finely-honed debate skills: what Hoyland refers to as “dialectical reasoning based on categorial definitions” (training in Greek dialectic). Scholars on both sides marshalled Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theology as well as Greek philosophy, salvation history (and other kinds of history) and other intellectual tools to win audiences over to their cause. Increasingly, the debates took place in Arabic (Hoyland notes that until the thirteenth century, only eight writers (in 600 years!) engaged in anti-Muslim polemic written in Syriac).<sup>418</sup> Major tropes in these works include legitimate vs. illegitimate reasons to convert; legitimacy vs. illegitimacy of the Trinity (corollary of the previous trope); other faiths as heresies; hypocrites and/or equivocators (on both sides of the faith divide); the presence of a caliph or a relative of the caliph (most often al-Ma’mūn); bullying to force conversions among the lower classes; attempted conversions of rulers.

### Equivocation

It is worth examining instances of equivocation together to underscore their prevalence. Equivocation on theological points can be found in a significant number of polemical texts that address conversion. The sources express concern, or at times outright alarm, over faith members minimizing differences between faiths in interactions with those outside their community, and

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<sup>417</sup> Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), *passim*.

<sup>418</sup> Cameron, Averil, and Robert Hoyland, eds. *Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300-1500* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate-Variorum, 2011), *xxiv*.

even stretching dogma or doctrine to fit that of the other faith. Anna Chrysostomides writes about conversion/equivocation as a form of ‘code-switching.’<sup>419</sup> This is the case when Christians argue that “there is no god but God,” neglecting the latter half of the *shahāda*.<sup>420</sup> The eighth century Christian tract *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid* frequently uses language that echoes that of the Qur’ān (an opening invocation of God uses “*al-rahman, al-rahīm*”),<sup>421</sup> blurring the boundaries of liturgical vocabulary between the two faiths. Abū Rā’īta discusses Christian disciples as “rightly-guided People of Truth,” echoing the Muslim use of “Rashidūn” to describe the first four caliphs.<sup>422</sup> The fictional figure al-Kindī declared Christian dissemblers all but omnipresent, citing al-Ma’mūn’s reception of a rumor that the converts at court are all false.<sup>423</sup> Many scholars wrote about this sort of code-switching or “faith stretching” as the first step in apostasy, as it is done to placate a member of another faith in order to remove oneself from duress, or to gain favor with someone with more political, economic or social power. Whether these sorts of interactions between Muslims and Christians were commonplace during the first few centuries of Muslim rule is unclear, but the concerns over them, from both sides, are rather high, and are not found in earlier Christian models of heresiology. This suggests that the concern over false or insincere conversions, or the presence of confessional ambiguity, was a new phenomenon in the region, or at least one that was not fresh in collective memory. We saw in Chapter One that concerns about

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<sup>419</sup> Anna Chrysostomides, “‘There is no god but God’: Islamisation and Religious Code-Switching, Eighth to Tenth Centuries,” in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 118-133.

<sup>420</sup> The *Summa* complains about Christians who do this frequently, knowing full well they mean something very different from what their Muslim counterparts mean. Chystostomides, “‘There is no god but God’: Islamisation and Religious Code-Switching, Eighth to Tenth Centuries,” in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 119, and Griffith, *Summa*, 20.

<sup>421</sup> Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and Seven Catholic Epistles from an Eighth or Ninth Century MS. In the Convent of St. Katherine on Mount Sinai* (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1899), 40.

<sup>422</sup> Sandra Toenis Keating, *Defending the “People of Truth” in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rā’ītah* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 84-5.

<sup>423</sup> Al-Kindī/Al-Hāshimī author also bemoans these fake Christian-Muslim hybrids, via the mouth of Al-Ma’mūn when he hears the converts in his court are false, Sahas 27.

confessional ambiguity between Judaism and early Christianity were of concern to Jewish and Christian religious scholars, as were the potential adoption of Christian practices by Jewish laypersons and the residual practice or maintenance of Jewish laws and customs by Christian laypersons that had since been rejected by the formal Church. But these concerns appear to have faded somewhat in the Syriac literature, while issues of heresy within Christian groups arose. The issue of false conversion, especially for social benefit, was not a concern to either religious group: it couldn't have been one in any real way until the fourth century C.E., when Christianity gained widespread social and imperial acceptance, and by then boundaries between Christians and Jews had been quite clearly established. After the fourth century, issues of heresy became much more of a concern to Christian scholars, an issue where false "conversions" to one sect or another, if they may even be called that, were not a significant phenomenon or problem. Thus the issue of false or insincere conversion in the context of a formative religion was entirely new to both Christian and Muslim scholars, and their writings reflect great concern over it.

Christianity increasingly emphasized its monotheism in response to the Muslim concept of *tawḥīd*.<sup>424</sup> The author of the *Summa Theologiae* references debates in which Arabic-speaking Christians promote only the aspects of their faith that do not contradict Muslim doctrine, deflecting when Trinitarianism or other doctrines could be raised. Further, the author argues, in co-opting the language of the Qur'ān to support Christian doctrine (e.g. *rabb al- 'ālamīn*),<sup>425</sup> these debaters misrepresented their faith and put forth erroneous statements.

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<sup>424</sup> Hoyland cites the *Book of the Tower*, a religious encyclopedia, which begins its section on Christianity with 'The acme of faith is the oneness of God'—for more information see Bo Holmberg, "Christian Scribes in the Arabic Empire," in *The Middle East – Unity and Diversity*, eds. Heikki Palva and Knut S. Vikør (Lund: NIAS Press, 1993), 103-122.

<sup>425</sup> *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990). Sidney H. Griffith, "The First Christian *Summa Theologiae* in Arabic: Christian *Kalām* in Ninth-Century Palestine," 20.

Roman rulers in the past had already constructed short, concise creeds attesting Christian doctrine, the *Summa* argued, so why should these debaters neglect to use them? But seventh- and eighth-century interfaith issues did not necessarily hinge on the outcomes of these older disputes. Additionally, the old formulae, whose language was cloaked in Christological nuance, proved less useful in debates in which the Muslim *shahāda* and the language of the Qur’ān were far more clear and direct than earlier Christian theological writings (even creeds and scriptures). The ordinary faithful understood Muslim religious language formulations more easily, according to the author of the *Summa*.

What does this imply about conversion? Our author seems to be presenting something of a warning to his audience: ordinary people will be swayed by the comparative clarity of the Muslim creed, while Christian creeds and scriptures are less direct and easy to understand.<sup>426</sup> While lack of clarity in doctrine was likely not the main factor, during this period we see many examples of “heretical” Christian practices, described in texts as a result of their practitioners being remote from centers of power, away from educational institutions, lacking local clerical authorities, and often illiterate: all ways in which groups could slip past the attention of a church’s normalizing authority.

### The Qur’ān

There are several polemical texts that explicitly discuss conversion between Islam and Christianity, the first being the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān was likely the first Arabic text to contain

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<sup>426</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, “The First Christian *Summa Theologiae* in Arabic: Christian *Kalām* in Ninth-Century Palestine,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 20.

anti-Christian polemic, and it was often used in dialectic with Christians, verse by verse.<sup>427</sup> The Qur'ān argues that the Bible has been corrupted by faith leaders; that the real doctrine of monotheism is legitimate (as opposed to the Trinity, which it deems polytheistic); and that Christians are legitimate unless or until they promote false or corrupted beliefs. Verses including 4:171, 5:72-73, 5:161, and 112:1-4 equate Trinitarianism with polytheism or mention other Christian practices it defines as erroneous or insufficiently monotheistic. These verses of the Qur'ān are yet not always incorporated in early polemic and apocalyptic; the Bible is quoted far more frequently, and sometimes other Qur'ānic verses are used instead (49:14, for example, which distinguishes *aslama*, submission, from *amana*, belief).<sup>428</sup> By the 'Abbasid era, however, anti-Christian verses are referenced more frequently in polemical texts by both Muslims and Christians, almost in tandem with the increasing use of Arabic for such texts by Christians.<sup>429</sup>

*A Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and an Arab Notable*

The Syriac text of the *Drāshā da-hwā l-ḥad men Ṭayyāyē 'am iḥidāyā ḥad b-'umrā d-Bēt Hālē* (*A Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and an Arab Notable*), written in the 720s, is generally considered to not reflect an actual debate that occurred so much as propaganda.<sup>430</sup> The Arab notable, purportedly from the court of Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik, begins by stating that his

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<sup>427</sup> For a detailed study, see David Bertina, *Christian and Muslim Dialogues: The Religious Uses of a Literary Form in the Early Islamic Middle East* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 45-71.

<sup>428</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu describes Islam (*aslantu*) as the formal declaration of faith in *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2002), 70; 184-202. He also discusses *amana* and *aslama* in the context of verses 49:14-15.

<sup>429</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, "The First Christian *Summa Theologiae* in Arabic: Christian *Kalām* in Ninth-Century Palestine," in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 15-31.

<sup>430</sup> Gerrit J. Reinink, "Following the Doctrines of the Demons: Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam," in Jan N. Bremmer, Wout J. van Bekkum and Arie L. Molendijk, eds., *Cultures of Conversions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 136-7.



faith is the superior one, and why should the monk disagree? He is then refuted by the monk, point by point. The Arab then presents both himself and the Prophet Muḥammad as would-be Christians, if only the Arabs had been ready for the Trinity during Muḥammad’s lifetime—an unusual argument not found in other polemical texts from this period. The unnamed Muslim is easily convinced by the monk’s argument, to a degree that belies the credibility of the account. Easily-convinced Muslim opponents are commonly found in Christian debate accounts from this era, though not universally. In many cases, they are convinced only at the very end of the debate, or the debate is “won” by the Christian figure but the Muslim opponent is not brought over in the account (sometimes conceding one point or another, sometimes not), or the debate ends with another party being converted but not the Muslim, or sometimes there appears to have been a stalemate.

### The Triunity of the One God

The *Risālat Dafa‘iyya fīl ‘aqā’id al-masīḥiyya* is an anonymous text written in either 755 or 788 C.E.<sup>431</sup> Commonly known as *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid*, it was found in St. Catherine’s monastery in Sinai and translated by Margaret Dunlop Gibson in 1899. It may be the earliest Arabic Christian apology, and in that context has a surprising level of knowledge about Islam: it quotes the Qur’ān (and Torah) at length in its arguments in favor of Christianity.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> The numbers on the manuscript are not clear.

<sup>432</sup> Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and Seven Catholic Epistles from an Eighth or Ninth Century MS. In the Convent of St. Katherine on Mount Sinai* (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1899), 40-1. The MS is from 750-800 C.E., and the text likely is, as well. See also David Bertaina, “The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam,” in Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 163. It is one of the earliest Christian Arabic apologetic texts, possibly the earliest of the eighth century. See also Samir K. Samir’s article, “The earliest Arab apology for Christianity,” *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 57-114.

The method of apology is standard. The text promotes baptism and talks at length about Jesus, mentioning that Muslims will find all of it in the Qur’ān, and disputes the Muslim claim that Christians believe in two Gods or two Lords. It also uses more Qur’ānic verses—seven of them (70:39, 54:11, 18:48, 3:55, 19:5, 3:49, 3:39) at times alongside biblical verses, and frequently uses language that echoes that of the Qur’ān (an opening invocation of God uses “*al-rahman, al-rahīm*”).<sup>433</sup> Thus, it equivocates on Christianity somewhat, or at minimum uses phrasing influenced by Islam (as we know, this is common).

### The Letter from Patriarch John to an Amīr of the Mhaggrāyē

The *Egartā d-Mār(y) Yoḥannan paṭriyarkā meṭṭul mamllā d-mallel ‘am amirā da-Mhaggrāyē*, of unknown authorship but sometimes attributed to John Sedra (d. 648 C.E.), Miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, is presented in debate format.<sup>434</sup> It discusses Christ’s nature. The Patriarch John debates an amīr; notably, they look up evidence in “scriptures,” apparently on hand as reference tools, to confirm their arguments throughout the debate.<sup>435</sup> The audience was also notable: “many things were discussed regarding this subject—while there were gathered there [many] people, not only nobles of the Hagarenes but also chiefs and leaders of cities and of believing and Christ-loving people: the Tanukāyē and Tu‘āyē and the ‘Aqlāyē. And the glorious

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<sup>433</sup> David Bertaina, *Christian and Muslim Dialogues: The Religious Uses of a Literary Form in the Early Islamic Middle East* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 46: “You will find it in the Qur’ān: “*We created humanity in affliction,*” [90:4] and “*We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down.*” [54:11] And it said: “They shall come to *Us* individually, as *We* created them at first.” [6:94] And it said: “Believe in God and His Word,” [4:171] and also, with regard to the Holy Spirit, “But the Holy Spirit shall reveal from your Lord as mercy and guidance.” [16:102] See also David Bertaina, “The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam,” in Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 166.

<sup>434</sup> The MS is dated 874; Michael Penn thinks it was originally written in the early eighth century. Michael Pihip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 200. Abd al-Masih Saadi, “Letter of John of Sedreh,” *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 11 (1997), 68-84. Reininck and Griffith think it responds to conversion fears.

<sup>435</sup> David Bertaina, “The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam,” in Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 171-2.



possibly a Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox) church leader, but it is unclear: the main source of evidence toward this claim is that he is sometimes referred to as *Malpōnō*. He had a list of unacceptable reasons to convert to a religion in “Proof of the Christian Religion and Proof of the Holy Trinity” (*Ithbāt dīn al-Nasrāniyya wa ithbāt al-thālūth al-muqaddis*), which tacitly renounces Islam without directly mentioning it.<sup>439</sup> The text begins by explaining how people were called to convert (“called to accept” / دعت الى قبول) Christianity. He then enumerates seven reasons to convert to a religion: 1) worldly advantage; 2) desire for the afterlife; 3) fear; 4) permission for what is forbidden; 5) worldly prominence; 6) tribal affiliation or collusion for power or wealth; 7) for the Lord. He argues that only the last group includes the “rightly-guided people of truth” (*ahl al-ḥaqq al-murshidīn*), for Christians only accept the final reason as valid. Abū Rā’iṭa then provides more details about each reason to convert. If it was not already clear that he was discussing conversion to Islam, it is made known in this section (though he still does not explicitly say as much). Abū Rā’iṭa contrasts conversion for acquisition of wealth and power with the Christian obligation to live humbly. He then describes Heaven as it is described in the Qur’ān (with fine food, drink, clothing and company), and argues that in the Christian conception of heaven, people will be like angels and therefore will not need any of those things. As for fear motivating conversion, he notes that the early missionaries were powerless and often feared for their lives, yet did not carry weapons and did not allow new converts to do so, either. This is an indirect rejection of both the Muslim conquests and continuing involvement of Christians (or converts from Christianity) in the army. He then discusses conversion to access permissibility of what is forbidden, referencing divorce specifically (this refers to Islam’s allowance of divorce). Finery is next, which is rejected on the grounds that the Gospel does not

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<sup>439</sup> Sandra Toenis Keating, *Defending the “People of Truth” in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rā’iṭah* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 2-10; 83-95.

permit it. Lastly, tribal affinity and collusion must refer to the advancement of some tribes over others relating to when they converted and how they assisted the early Muslims. Abū Rā'īṭa then argues that Christians accepted their faith for genuine reasons. He does not ever mention Muslim converts, but it is clear who he is contrasting. He concludes by stating that on one was able to reject the miracles performed by early Christian missionaries, which is why they were able to gain converts even without beautiful rhetoric—an indirect reference to the Quran.

'On the Demonstration of the Credibility of Christianity Which Was Received from the Preaching of the Evangelists in the Holy Scriptures'

Abū Rā'īṭa also wrote an epistolary response to Yumāmah the Mu'tazilī (probably actually Zūmāma b. al-Ashras al-Baṣrī, d. 828 C.E., an advisor to al-Ma'mūn), also on the topic of conversion.<sup>440</sup> It reflects some of the same themes as his "Proof" text: valid as opposed to invalid reasons to convert to a religion, hints about coercion, the dangers of worldly gains, and the inherent superiority of Christianity. We do not have the original letter from Zūmāmah, though it is interesting that Abū Rā'īṭa's poem maintains the style of Greek dialectic. It is, in its entirety, below:

*"The response of Abū Rā'īṭa al-Takrītī, Bishop of Nisibis, to Yumāmah, the Mu'tazilī, Concerning His Question about the Proof of the Authenticity of Christianity.*

He said: It must be the case that Christianity is either true or false  
And those who have accepted it are either wise or ignorant.

Those who are wise will not accept what has not been demonstrated to be true by a  
logical proof, except by compulsion,

And the ignorant are not restrained from abandoning [themselves] to worldly things,  
except by compulsion.

There are two kinds of compulsion: either it is compulsion by the sword or compulsion  
by signs from God.

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<sup>440</sup> Sandra Toenis Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth" in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rā'īṭah* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 336-7 and 342-5.

We do not see that there are among the wise who have accepted the religion of Christianity those who have been compelled by the sword to accept something that is not been demonstrated to be true by a logic proof.

And the ignorant are not compelled by the sword to refrain from abandoning [themselves] to worldly things.

The wise have accepted [Christianity], although it has not been demonstrated to be true by a logical proof.

And the ignorant have accepted it, although it discourages [one] from worldly things.

All of them have been compelled by signs, not by the sword.

Signs are the surest proof that the religion in which they appear is the true religion, according to God, the Powerful and Mighty.

And the Christian law is consistent with these presuppositions.”

### The Disputation of the Monk Abraham

The *Mujādalat al-rāhib Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī ma‘a al-amīr ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Ṣāliḥ al-Hāshimī* was written by an unknown source likely between 815-840 C.E. or so, possibly during the reign of al-Ma’mūn (one analysis puts it between 815-840; al-Ma’mūn ruled from 817-833).<sup>441</sup> The story begins in Jerusalem with the amīr ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī (a real person alive during this era) wondering how Christians could not be swayed by Islam, despite their erudition. To answer the question, he calls on several people to discuss the matter, including a random monk off the street. The monk, who is named Abraham, then engages in three grueling days of interfaith debate and ultimately wins.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>441</sup>). Giacinto Bulus Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d’Abraham de Tibériade avec Abd al-Raḥman al-Hašimi à Jérusalem vers 820. Étude, édition critique et traduction annotée d’un texte théologique chrétien de la littérature arabe* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, 1986), *passim*. Krisztina Szilágyi, “*Mujādalat al-rāhib Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī*,” in *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700-1700*, ed. Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger (DeKalb: NIU Press, 2014), 90-1.

<sup>442</sup> Marcuzzo argues that the author must have been Chalcedonian. Second, he argues, the author was probably writing in Palestine. The reference to “killing seven caliphs” suggests the ‘Abbasid civil war between Amin and Ma’mun was probably in living memory.<sup>442</sup> Marcuzzo writes that the seventh killed caliph was probably al-Amin. Even if the text was written after the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E., it is clear that the Abbasid civil war was within living memory and may still have been a cultural touchpoint.

We must assume the debate's text was fictional, even if its characters and outcomes were plausibly true.<sup>443</sup> In any case, it seems to have been widely circulated among Arabic-speaking Christians, and several manuscripts survive of it.<sup>444</sup>

The narrative is initially focused on the amīr 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī, who marveled at the Christians' simultaneous number, scholarship, and stupidity in faith. He assembles a debate of Muslims, Christians, and Jews.<sup>445</sup> He called on five converts: two from Christianity to Islam and three from Judaism to Islam, and his doctor. He peppered them with questions about the Trinity, but they all equivocated. So he pulled a monk off the street. This was Abraham of Tiberias.

The amīr asked the monk to explain his religion, to which Abraham demurred, citing ignorance, then citing the fact that the amīr would likely kill him if he told the truth.<sup>446</sup> 98: The amīr told the monk he could convert, or die, or stay and defend Christianity, and specifically "your doctrine of the hypostases and Christ" in response to the amīr's questions. The monk acceded, then asked to leave again. The amīr refused. Abraham then asked if he could bring the amīr a booklet, so the amīr adjourned the meeting, to resume the next day.

The next day Abraham presented the booklet to the amīr. It addressed the family of the prophet and argued that it was basically destroyed from within and the people who did so were wicked, yet those same people were held up as leaders of the faith and missionaries. "less than two hundred years have elapsed ... and you have already murdered seven caliphs, none of them an enemy or adversary of Islam." The booklet also said the phrase 'There is no God but He' had

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<sup>443</sup> Krisztina Szilágyi, "Mujādalat al-rāhib Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī," in *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700-1700*, ed. Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger (DeKalb: NIU Press, 2014), 91-2.

<sup>444</sup> Giacinto Bulus Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec Abd al-Raḥman al-Ḥašimī à Jérusalem vers 820. Étude, édition critique et traduction annotée d'un texte théologique chrétien de la littérature arabe* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, 1986), 181.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

already been used by Moses. This angered the amīr, who threatened the monk's life.<sup>447</sup> As the amīr and the monk had already agreed that the monk would not be harmed for his beliefs, the threats were not carried out.

Several other events occurred: Abraham drank poison and survived after praying; a criminal was given the same drink and died. The monk healed the amīr's slave girl, who had been possessed by a jinni. The monk turned hot coals over with his bare hands. The amīr's servants who had converted from Christianity to Islam saw this, as did two Jews, and bowed before the monk and professed belief in Christianity and asked to be baptized. The monk replied that he couldn't, but that the patriarch and bishops in the audience could. The amīr asks the audience what to do. The audience argued that the Jews who convert should still pay the poll-tax, but the Christian-Muslim-Christian boys should be beheaded. The decisions were carried out. The monk was imprisoned, but the amīr freed him in the middle of the night, which ends the narrative.<sup>448</sup>

### Theodore Abū Qurra

Theodore Abū Qurra was born ca. 725-755 C.E. and was a prolific writer in Arabic, Greek and Syriac. Originally from Edessa, he may have been a Melkite bishop of Ḥarrān while he lived there. It has been suggested that he spent his early days at Mar Saba monastery in Palestine, but John C. Lamoreaux believes this is false. Theodore wrote several treatises about Islam, but only a few relate to conversion in a direct manner.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Giacinto Bulus Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec Abd al-Raḥman al-Ḥaṣīmi à Jérusalem vers 820. Étude, édition critique et traduction annotée d'un texte théologique chrétien de la littérature arabe* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, 1986), 194.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-3.

<sup>449</sup> Sandra Toenis Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth" in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rā'īṭah* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 347-57.



*Maymar fī wujūd al-Khāliq wa al-dīn al-qawīm*

*Treatise on the existence of the Creator and the true religion*

Theodore's first essay in this text, sometimes referred to as the *Theologus Autodidactus*, is a philosophical thought experiment centered around conversion, of a sort, based on rational thought. The text purports to be a guide to choosing the ideal religion: the choice inherent in conversion (if in a vacuum). Its narrator and protagonist grew up without human contact and thus also without religion. When he joined civilization, he encountered all the religions available to him in the world, and analyzed them individually. He is invited to join the *hanifs*, a sect with clearly-defined beliefs in the text, and several other religious groups of the man's time and region: Magians/Zoroastrians, Samaritans, Jews, Christians, Manichaeans ("Zindiqs"), Marcionites, Bardasian, and finally Muslims. With the exception of the Christians, each was subject to a negative judgment; Muslims were monotheistic and concerned with pleasures in the afterlife, for example. He then decides they shared three commonalities and three differences: they shared a claim to God, things allowed and not allowed, and concepts of reward and punishment. The differences lay in the manifestation of these shared, agreed-upon things.

"That Christianity is from God"<sup>450</sup>

As we saw with Abū Rā'īṭa's treatise, the following essay by Abū Qurra (the third in his *Maymar*) examines legitimate and illegitimate reasons to convert. Conversion and fear are strong elements of the text. It is clear that Abū Qurra has Islam in mind in his discussion of illegitimate reasons to convert. Yet note that here he uses the Arabic term "submit" (*aslama*) throughout.

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<sup>450</sup> Ignace Dick, *Théodore Abuqurra. Traité de l'existence du Créateur et de la vraie religion/Maymar fī wujūd al-Khāliq wa-l-dīn al-qawīm li-Thāwudhūrus Abī Qurra* (Jounieh, 1982), 51; John C. Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 41-7.

Knowing that he has elsewhere referred to Qur'ān 49:14-15, which distinguishes between submission and faith (*islām* and *imān*), it is possible his choice of terminology was deliberate. In his reference to Christianity in this passage, he writes, "...the Gentiles submitted to the disciplines of Christ and accepted this religion from them, something which took place through the power of God and had nothing to do with the power of human beings..." Even here, he is making a distinction between submission to a religion's practice and acceptance of it through God. Yet he almost always uses "submit" in his subsequent discussion of Islam. The one exception is when he writes, "Sometimes they submit to an intellectually agreeable doctrine of God, accepting it because everyone finds it agreeable." In this case, the distinction lies in what motivates the person who submits to and accepts a religion. Otherwise, the terms used for conversion are exclusively "submit" (used nine times throughout the passage) and "compel," used twice in the context of rulers who compel their subjects to a religion. Abū Qurra's list of reasons for why people convert is similar to Abū Rā'iṭa's, if perhaps more strongly focused on power relations:

"We assert, too, that there is yet another way for our minds to infer that the Christian religion is from God. This has to do with why the Gentiles submitted to the disciplines of Christ and accepted this religion from them, something which took place through the power of God and had nothing to do with the power of human beings and their ability to compel others, their use of tricks, or their appeals to ambition. Such things are characteristic of the other religions, the adherents of which came to submit to their leaders either through human compulsion or through ambition or through tricks. ... Sometimes people submit to a noble person on account of that person's nobility and to a rich person on account of what that person can give. Or consider a ruler. To him people are willing to submit for a variety of reasons: some because the ruler compels them, others because they are afraid of the harm he can do, others because they hope to obtain things through serving him, yet others because they can become powerful through him. Sometimes people submit to a wise person because of that person's wisdom. Sometimes people submit to someone who panders to their appetites and caters to their desires and to their predilection for what gives pleasure to their nature. Sometimes they submit to an intellectually agreeable doctrine of God, accepting it because everyone finds it agreeable. –How Other Religions Were Propagated- Imagine someone who goes and summons people to God in the aforementioned ways, especially if this person is a noble, a king who

compels others with the sword, one who offers them worldly gifts, might, and nobility, one who panders to their appetites for the world and its pleasures, one who brings them an account of God that is simple and agreeable to the minds of the common folk (perhaps an account that someone had already proposed, one with which the common folk were already familiar). If someone did this, would it be any wonder if people submitted to this person and came to follow his religion? If this person wanted to establish that his religion was from God, the fact that people were following it for the aforementioned reasons would hardly be an acceptable argument. ... Accordingly, is it any wonder that people submit to one who goes and summons to a religion if at the same time he strikes with the sword those who do not follow it and exalts those who do, pandering to them with the comforts of this world, its glory and its wealth, providing generously for their appetites for it and its delights and pleasures? This is especially true if before this they were in a wretched state and had never seen or even heard of good things and if this person taught them an account of God that vulgar minds find agreeable, an account that was to be found in earlier religions and through which the world had already been worshipping God for many ages.”

Abū Qurra concludes this passage with a note titled, “How Christianity was Propagated.”

It reads: “A religion is established to be from God if the one who summons to God does so in a manner contrary to the aforementioned ways. An example would be the disciples of Christ...”<sup>451</sup>

This, of course, is intended to underscore the legitimacy of conversion to Christianity, in contrast to conversion to Islam.

*Maymar fī taḥqīq al-Injīl wa-anna kullamā lā yuḥaqqiquhu al-Injīl fa-huwa bāṭil / Treatise on the confirmation of the Gospel and that everything the Gospel does not confirm is false*

Abū Qurra returns to this theme of reasons for conversion (he uses the phrase “accept religion”) in “On the Confirmation of the Gospel.” He writes that there are four (illegitimate) reasons people convert, and if someone does not convert for those reasons, it may be said that their original faith is the true faith. The four reasons, he writes, are “permissiveness, might, tribal zeal, and the persuasion of vulgar minds.” This list takes up Abū Qurra’s earlier points, giving

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<sup>451</sup> Ignace Dick, *Théodore Abuqurra. Traité de l’existence du Créateur et de la vraie religion/Maymar fī wujūd al-Khāliq wa-l-dīn al-qawīm li-Thāwudhūrus Abī Qurra* (Jounieh, 1982), 51; John C. Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 41-3.

equal attention to each of them this time. It strongly resembles Abū Rai'ta's earlier treatise, enumerating many of the same points (rejecting Abū Rā'iṭa's discussion of Muslim heaven and folding several categories into "the persuasion of vulgar minds"). Abū Qurra then discusses "religion...entered by persons from a nation other than that which originally adopted it because of tribal zeal or because of the might that was obtained through it." He makes a blanket exception for Christianity, arguing that people from other faiths converted when they were taken captive in war, or faced extraordinary hardship, or due to previously mentioned factors. None of these were factors in the acceptance of Christianity, however, he argues, and indeed accepting it often brought hardship on converts.<sup>452</sup>

Abū Qurra conveniently ignores Christian history after the fourth century C.E., when Byzantine Emperor Constantine first converted to Christianity, then decreed it the official religion of the empire—after this point, would-be Christians could expect advantages to accrue to them instead of hardship (where the opposite would have indeed been true prior to 313 C.E.). Abū Qurra's careful description of Jesus as "this man who was in outward appearance a Jew" is also notable for the fine line it walks, admitting Jesus' Jewish heritage while never actually referring to him as a Jew. But such finessing of one's message is common in interfaith dialectic scenarios, as we have seen.<sup>453</sup>

"Muḥammad Is Not from God"

Theodore's final conversion-related treatise, titled "Muḥammad Is Not from God," is contained in his Greek *Refutation of the Saracens* (*Eletōn pros tous Sarakēnous antirrhēseōn tou episkopou Theodōrou Charran, to epiklen Aboukora, dia phones Ioannou Diakonou*). It begins

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<sup>452</sup> Constantin Bacha, *Mayāmir Thāwudūrus Abī Qurra usquf Ḥarrān* (Beirut: Maṭba'at al-Fawā'id, 1984), 71.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

by stating: “It is customary for the Saracen hypocrites,<sup>454</sup> if they meet a Christian, not to offer a greeting, but immediately to say, “Christian, testify that God is one and without companions and that Muḥammad is his servant and messenger.”” He then notes that a Muslim came up behind him and said the same to him at one point. The way that he describes the experience is threatening: it suggests that the Muslim will cause him physical harm if he does not comply. It is unclear whether such semi-forced conversions, essentially conversion by bully, were common, or if they occurred at all. We have seen a few mentions of such behavior elsewhere, but they are often associated with Muslims who are not elite members of society. If pressure to convert was exerted on Christians in this manner often, it would make sense that few such conversions actually showed up in any records. As the bullies were essentially anonymous low-lives, their extracted conversions likely would not have been recorded in any sort of official capacity, and a Christian could likely easily give a false statement in order to free him or herself from the predicament. If such a thing happened often, it would also explain why equivocators were seen as such pervasive threats. In any case, Abū Qurra uses this situation to demonstrate his rhetorical skills. He quickly traps the Muslim bully in a logical fallacy, and the encounter ends peacefully.<sup>455</sup>

*Mujādalat Abī Qurra ma‘a al-mutakallimīn al-muslimīn fī majlis al-khalīfa al-Ma‘mūn*

*Debate of Abū Qurra with Muslim Scholars*<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> It is interesting that Abu Qurra uses the term “hypocrites” to describe Muslims, when the term is also used during this period to refer to Christians, and to equivocators from both Muslim and Christian communities. In this usage, it likely denotes specifically Muslims who attempt to force conversions from ordinary Christians who abide by the law, paying the jizya and adhering to other restrictions in lieu of conversion to Islam. The Muslim bullies are hypocrites because they have reneged on the arrangement.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 214-5.

<sup>456</sup> Wafiq Naṣrī, *Abū Qurra wa-al-Ma‘mūn: Al-Mujādalāh* (Beirut: Markaz al-Turāth al-‘Arabī al-Masīhī, 2010), *passim*; Wafik Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop* (Beirut: Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Arabes Chrétiennes, 2008), 93.

Abū Qurra’s debate at the Caliph al-Ma’mūn’s court was reportedly held in 214 A.H./829 C.E.<sup>457</sup> The debate was supposedly recorded by John of Damascus, though the text itself is unauthored.<sup>458</sup> The event, recorded in Arabic, was almost certainly not based on real events: in the narrative, al-Ma’mūn seemed to support Abū Qurra’s Christian position more than he does Islam. Other names mentioned in the text are demonstrably false,<sup>459</sup> especially the two figures named “al-Hāshimī.”<sup>460</sup> The text parallels an earlier debate, likely also false, between al-Mahdi and Timothy I. Nasry argues that al-Ma’mūn may have been so facilitating because he intended to convert Abū Qurra to Islam<sup>461</sup> (though perhaps indirectly: in one section where the caliph praises him, a caliphal scribe simultaneously invites him to Islam.<sup>462</sup>

In this narrative, as in his own writings, Abū Qurra knows a great deal about Islam, even using verse 49:14 again (“The bedouins say, “We believe.” Say you believe not, but rather say, “We submit,” for faith has not yet entered your hearts...””) In this context, Abū Qurra suggests this verse implies disingenuous beliefs are inherent in Islam—“the religion of God is faith. You are the Muslims and we, the Nazarenes, are the believers.”<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> David Bertaina, “The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam,” in Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 168; Wafiq Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop* (Beirut: Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Arabes Chrétiennes, 2008), 93.

<sup>458</sup> Wafiq Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop* (Beirut: Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Arabes Chrétiennes, 2008), 121.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-5.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-6.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>463</sup> Wafiq Naṣrī, *Abū Qurra wa-al-Ma’mūn: Al-Mujādalah* (Beirut: Markaz al-Turāth al-‘Arabī al-Masīhī, 2010), 124. He invokes this verse again later on, Wafiq Naṣrī, *Abū Qurra wa-al-Ma’mūn: Al-Mujādalah* (Beirut: Markaz al-Turāth al-‘Arabī al-Masīhī, 2010), 211.

‘Ammār al-Baṣrī

‘Ammār al-Baṣrī wrote *Kitāb al-masā’il wa-l-ajwiba* (*The Book of Questions and Answers*) and *Kitāb al-burhān* (*The Book of Proof*) in response to allegations by Muslims of Christians spreading a corrupted message, arguing that Christianity could not have spread by Roman emperor or his newly-converted subjects if it were false, or if Christian leaders corrupted it.<sup>464</sup> Beaumont notes that arguments of impossibility of corruption are normal, but ‘Ammār’s use of history and psychology—especially from the view of the convert—were unique.<sup>465</sup>

‘Ammār’s Muslim debater wonders if Christian entreaties to love one’s enemies, do good to those who harm you, etc., were sayings Christians attributed to Christ to attract converts despite lacking a revelation or command from God.<sup>466</sup> The Christian opponent then explains God’s revelation/command through Christ. He then details six indicators of false religious texts, all indirectly referencing Islam: “1. “They permit what God has forbidden; 2. They are forced on people by the sword; 3. They are promoted by financial inducements; 4. They are believed out of ethnic loyalty; 5. They are believed in as a result of magic arts; 6. They are pronounced by rulers and so accepted.”<sup>467</sup> These reasons are by this point well-known: they parallel those of Abū Rā’iṭa and Abū Qurra, with slight variation (“magic” is a new one). As with Abū Rā’iṭa’s and Abū Qurra’s treatises, Islam is never mentioned directly, only implied. One wonders if this was done to appease their patrons, who were often ‘Abbasid rulers. Regardless, what ‘Ammār was referring to would have been clear to any reader.

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<sup>464</sup> “As the message was accepted by means of the force of the signs, no corruption would have been accepted after the message became deeply rooted in people’s hearts.” Both titles found in M. Hayek, ed., *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī: Apologie et Controverses*, Beirut 1977, 21-266.

Mark Beaumont, “‘Ammār al-Baṣrī on Alleged Corruption of the Gospels,” in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*. ‘Ammār, *Kitāb al-burhān*, 42/Beaumont 246.

<sup>465</sup> Beaumont 249.

<sup>466</sup> ‘Ammār 130/Beaumont 250.

<sup>467</sup> Beaumont 251-3; ‘Ammār 139-44.

## Al-Jāhiz

As we have discussed, al-Jāhiz was prolific, and spared no one his withering attention, including Christians. His *Kitāb al-Radd ‘alā l-Naṣārā* (wr. before 847) attacks the Christians precisely because they are thriving under Muslim rule.<sup>468</sup> In his *Radd*, Jāhiz appears to be impressed by the Christians, particularly the elites among them, who he feels have gotten away with more than their fair due in nearly every respect—economically, socially, and even dialectically. Newman writes that the text seems to be geared toward Nestorians, as they were closest to Muslims in both doctrine and physical location. Jāhiz calls upon Muslim leaders to crack down on Christians who are disobeying or ignoring the regulations supposedly placed on them:

“Indeed no other people has furnished so many hypocrites and waverers as the Christians. This results, naturally, when weak minds attempt to fathom deep problems. Is it not a fact that the majority of those who were executed for parading as Muslims, while hypocrites at heart, were men whose fathers and mothers were Christians? Even the people who are under suspicion today have come mostly from their ranks. . . . They call themselves Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, ‘Abbās, Fadl and ‘Alī and employ also their forenames. There remains but that they call themselves Muḥammad and employ the forename Abū l-Qāsim. For this very fact they were liked by the Muslims! Moreover, many of the Christians failed to wear their belts, while others hid their girdles beneath their outer garments. Many of their nobles refrained, out of sheer pride, from paying tribute. Why indeed should the Christians not do so and even more, when our judges, or, at least the majority of them, consider the blood of a patriarch or bishop as equivalent to the blood of Jā‘far, ‘Alī, ‘Abbās and Hamza?”<sup>469</sup> “Another cause for the growth and expansion of Christianity is the fact that the Christians draw converts from other religions and give none in return (while the reverse should be true), for it is the younger religion that is expected to profit from conversion.”<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Joshua Finkel, ed., *Thalāth rasā‘il li-Abī ‘Uthmān ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhiz* (Cairo: Salafiyya Press, 1926), 10-38; Finkel, “A Risala of al-Jāhiz,” in Newman, ed., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 685-717.

<sup>469</sup> Finkel, 27 and 704-5.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 and 708.



The reference to execution of Christians parading as Muslims is not found in other texts. Equivocation and accusations of hypocrisy are common, of course. So too are narratives of converts to Christianity from Islam who are executed upon publicly proclaiming their faith. But execution of “hypocrites” as they are understood in this passage—as religious minorities who try to hide their status by using Muslim signifiers such as language—is not something we have encountered in any other early source.

### ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī

‘Alī b. Rabbān al-Ṭabarī famously converted to Islam at the age of 70, then wrote *al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā* and *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*,<sup>471</sup> both treatises refuting Christianity and promoting Islam, prior to his death around 855 C.E. David Thomas outlines his biography: a physician, ‘Alī probably converted during al-Mutawakkil’s reign, and definitely wrote a polemical treatise during his reign, called *Radd ‘ala al- Naṣārā* (Refutation of the Christians), probably in the early 850s according to Thomas, and later a treatise that argued for Muḥammad’s prophethood using Biblical references (*Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*).<sup>472</sup> Abū Zakkār Yaḥyā b. Nu‘mān, the Christian paternal uncle of al- Ṭabarī (likely also Nestorian), wrote the non-extant *Al-radd ‘alā ahl al-adyān*.<sup>473</sup> “‘Alī al-Ṭabarī mentions in his *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*<sup>474</sup> that Abū Zakkār’s work included the point that no one who converted to Islam did so as a result of witnessing a miracle. He also refers to ‘an uncle of mine who was one of the learned and eloquent men among Christians,’<sup>475</sup> surely the same person, arguing with respect to the claim

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<sup>471</sup> ‘Alī l-Ṭabarī, *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*.

<sup>472</sup> . David Thomas, “Conversion out of Personal Principle: ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Tabari (d. c. 860) and ‘Abdallah al-Tarjuman (d. c. 1430), Two Converts from Christianity to Islam.” In *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 59.

<sup>473</sup> This text is not extant, although there are studies by Mingana and Sachau.

<sup>474</sup> Alī l-Ṭabarī, *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*. Ed. Mingana, 124.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-5.

that the Qur’ān’s literary qualities proved Muḥammad’s prophethood that rhetoric was not a sign of prophetic status because it was common to all nations.”<sup>476</sup> ‘Alī’s *Radd ‘ala al- Naṣārā* compares biblical passages (especially the gospels) to the Nicene Creed and other doctrinal works to highlight their differences. He provides seven arguments he calls “the silencers” because he thinks no Christian has a good response to any of them.<sup>477</sup> Wadi Haddad writes that “Al-Ṭabarī’s method was to utilize Christian concepts to appeal to Christians. Thus he compares Muḥammad to [Jesus] and endows both with the same characteristics of pure monotheism. He enumerates ten qualities of the Prophet which he believes are found in no one else except [Jesus].”<sup>478</sup> Haddad argues that the most convincing part of the *Radd* is its concluding remarks to Christians.<sup>479</sup>

‘Alī’s *al-Dīn wa-l Dawla* was probably written around 855, just after the *Radd*. He mentions the caliph al-Mutawakkil several times in *al- Dīn wa Dawla*, unlike the *Radd*, which David Thomas argues implies that the caliph encouraged him to write it, and further, based on

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<sup>476</sup> David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, eds., *Christian-Muslim Relations Vol 1 600-900* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 566.

<sup>477</sup> Haddad, 59. The text is broken down into nine chapters, the first of which provides a brief praise section on Islam; the second of which focuses on seven questions intended for refutation: 1) which is a better monotheism, that of truth or that of error? He then provides two ways to win the argument based on an answer of either ‘the truth’ or ‘this isn’t a fair question’, with Torah and bible references for both (p. 4-6); 2) on Jesus’ relationship with his disciples, 3) on the unchanging nature of God; 4) on the Christian creed of confession; 5) on Christology; 6) on the life of Christ; 7) who wrote the bible? Third chapter: major points of argumentation on the nature of the divine, Christian dogma, Satan, Jesus, God, and possible responses from the Christians, sometimes broken down into “Jacobites” or “one group of Christians” (Tabari 29-30). Fourth chapter: critique of the ‘Credo’ or Nicene Creed, which is reprinted in total here (Tabari 33). Discusses internal contradictions. Fifth chapter: critique of Christianity: the word, the false interpretation of Christian theology, the absurdity of Christian dogma. Sixth chapter: four proofs in the Bible: 1) the annunciation to Mary by Gabriel; 2) the voice coming from the sky (to John the Baptist, found in Matthew 2); 3) John’s forewarning/preaching; 4) the response of John when he visited Jesus. Seventh chapter: contradictions in the texts: what is the Spirit; Joseph as prophet; were the Magis prophets? The reaction of John the Baptist; etc. Eighth chapter: why deify Jesus? (and refutations) The conception of Jesus; the miracles of Jesus; the predictions of Jesus; the sentencing of Jesus; the agony of Jesus; the announcement of Simon-Peter of his rising; the announcement of his disciples; the Ascension; the use of the term ‘God’ in the Bible. Ninth chapter: critique of the dogma of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit—refutations of the concept).

<sup>478</sup> Wadi Z. Haddad, “Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence: Ninth-Century Baghdad,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 47.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

what he writes about him, that the caliph played an active part in his conversion.<sup>480</sup> The text represents a full break from Christianity and even intentionally distorts Christian texts and doctrine.

Thomas argues that the strength of ‘Alī’s new beliefs, as shown in his writings, completely belies the assessment of Hunayn b. Iṣḥāq (to be treated below), along with many others, of why Christians convert to Islam insincerely. Thomas argues that each reason can be dismissed readily, though his dismissal of the fourth reason, in which one person tricks another into believing, is not entirely convincing: motivations such as fame and wealth, Thomas argues, can be dismissed because ‘Alī was already famous and probably wealthy, and at age 70 such things would not have mattered. I disagree: ‘Alī was already famous, but improved his standing significantly with the new caliph’s reign, and may have gained increased financial security as a result of his conversion and subsequent writings. Nor does great age preclude one from the desire for wealth and social standing. Further, even Thomas notes that al-Mutawakkil was fairly hardline in his Sunni beliefs and rather intolerant of unorthodox ones, which may have influenced ‘Alī (at minimum, it suggests that conversion would have a positive effect on his relationship with the caliph). Thomas believes the religious conviction evident in ‘Alī’s writing negates any of these questions. This does not seem to me to be sufficient evidence. In *al-Dīn wa al-Dawla* ‘Alī mentions that he used to believe his theologian uncle’s arguments about the weaknesses of Islam, so perhaps he is just particularly susceptible to the influence of authority

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<sup>480</sup> Thomas notes his treatment of Psalm 50, where he translates “perfect in beauty” to “greatly praised,” which in Arabic is *maḥmūd*, which can be used to argue for a prediction of Muhammad’s coming. In another passage, he takes Isaiah 40, in which one cries in the wilderness to “Prepare the way of the Lord,” and suggests it is about the Muslim conquests (this passage is usually associated with John the Baptist). Thus, Thomas argues, in this text ‘Alī has totally dissociated from Christianity. David Thomas, “Conversion out of Personal Principle: ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Tabari (d. c. 860) and ‘Abdallah al-Tarjuman (d. c. 1430), Two Converts from Christianity to Islam.” In *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 61-3.

figures. In any case, Thomas argues that there must have been at least some conviction on ‘Alī’s part, in contrast to Hunayn’s assessment of why people convert. Evidence to that effect, as represented in ‘Alī’s writing, is probably incontrovertible.

#### ‘Alī b. Yahyā b. al-Munajjim

‘Alī b. Yahyā b. al-Munajjim’s *al-Burhān*, written before 873, was a call to Islam in the form of an epistle providing proof of Muḥammad’s prophesy.<sup>481</sup> The writer, who may or may not have gone by this name, sent it to Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 873 C.E.) and to Quṣṭā b. Lūqā (d. 912 C.E.). The letter focused on the inimitability of the Qur’ān and the argument that Muḥammad must have known its value, or he would not have dared others to produce anything like it. This epistle reflects arguments made in Muḥammad b. Layth’s letter to Constantine on behalf of Hārūn al-Rashīd, so he may have known about it or been exposed to it.

#### Hunayn b. Ishāq

Hunayn responds to Ibn Munajjim’s letter by discussing the nature of truth and falsehood in the context of conversion. He argues that there are six reasons one might accept something false: 1) coercion; 2) to ease great distress; 3) for glory, honor and power instead of their opposites, “and will move from one religion to another for these”;<sup>482</sup> 4) due to lying and unfairness; 5) when surrounded by only ignorant people, to accept false beliefs to deal with it; 6) to maintain ties when a family member follows a different faith.<sup>483</sup> These are all about

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<sup>481</sup> David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, eds., *Christian-Muslim Relations Vol 1 600-900* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 672-7.

<sup>482</sup> David Thomas, “Conversion out of Personal Principle: ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Tabari (d. c. 860) and ‘Abdallah al-Tarjuman (d. c. 1430), Two Converts from Christianity to Islam.” In *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 57.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

conversion to Islam, of course, and echo the work of Abū Rā'īṭa, Abū Qurra, and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī.

He writes that there are four reasons one would accept the truth: 1) if one witnesses a miracle and accepts belief on account of it; 2) one can encounter evidence of a truth even if that truth is itself not present; 3) conclusive evidence of a truth; 4) “the end of the matter agrees with its beginning, leaving no space for continuing doubt.”<sup>484</sup>

David Thomas suggests Hunayn might have had 'Alī al-Ṭabarī's conversion from Christianity to Islam at age 70 in mind—an event that probably scandalized the Nestorian community at the time (Hunayn and 'Alī were both Nestorian). 'Alī's writings likely poured fuel on the already fiery debates about the superiority of Islam or Christianity happening at both elite and common levels, if our sources are to be believed. They certainly provided a good sense of what a convert to Islam might have been thinking when he left Christianity. Thomas argues that Hunayn was attempting to dismiss 'Alī, using common arguments about conversion to Islam from Christianity for social, economic, political and perhaps even life-preserving reasons.<sup>485</sup>

### *Al-Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*

The ““Summary of the Ways of Faith,” as *al-Jāmi'* is often translated, is a long, now anonymous composition of some twenty-five chapters, written in Arabic in the ninth century by one or more Christian *mutakallimūn* from the Melkite community. ... This manuscript was copied, or perhaps compiled, by Stephen of al-Ramlah at the monastery of Mar Charitōn in

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<sup>484</sup> David Thomas, “Conversion out of Personal Principle: 'Alī b. Rabban al-Tabari (d. c. 860) and 'Abdallah al-Tarjuman (d. c. 1430), Two Converts from Christianity to Islam.” In *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 57.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Palestine in the year A.D. 877. The full title reads *Al-Jāmi‘ wujūh al-īmān bi-tathlīth waḥdaniyyat Allāh al-kalima min al-ṭāhira al-‘adhrā’ Maryam/The compilation of the ways of faith in the Trinity of the unity of God, and the incarnation of God the Word from the pure virgin Mary.*

Sidney Griffith writes that the content of the text suggests that its audience is already somewhat ensconced in Muslim culture: they speak Arabic, they are familiar with the Qur’ān, etc. He notes that the treatise reproaches those who do not testify the doctrine of the Trinity (the term “*tashahhud*” is used here<sup>486</sup>) because they are rebuked by “strangers,” which is to say that a large number of people they encounter will be Muslim.<sup>487</sup> The author thinks these people have no faith, or that “the distinctiveness of their faith is eclipsed.”<sup>488</sup> The term “hypocrites”/“*munāfiqūn*” is also used throughout the Qur’ān, something this author no doubt knew; thus this text itself evokes both Islamic language and a long dialectic precedent of identifying religious “hypocrites.”

Further, the author argues that the vernacular use of Arabic itself will cause the church to lose followers, as it renders the other languages of the church (Syriac, Greek, etc.) obsolete and elevates the language of Islam and the Qur’ān.<sup>489</sup> To remedy this, he argues, the church should construct a Christian counterpart to the Muslim *shahāda*, one that emphasizes the Trinity and the incarnation of God via the Virgin Mary, even if this causes Christians to be publicly shamed.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, “The First Christian *Summa Theologiae* in Arabic: Christian *Kalām* in Ninth-Century Palestine,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 20.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-5.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Modern scholars often identify the era of the text as the first mass conversion event: Bulliet declares it the era when the “early majority” converted.<sup>491</sup> While we can say that, per Haddad, “[c]ontact between the Christian and Muslim communities by the ninth century appears to have become widespread,” at least among some groups in society, it is another thing to review a single genre of work by itself (polemical literature, *ṭabaqāt*) and declare that conversion was also widespread.<sup>492</sup> There very likely was pressure on Christians to convert to Islam, and perhaps even (if far more subtle) pressure on Muslims to convert to Christianity at times. There may have indeed been Muslims who essentially bullied Christians to convert. But to review a subgenre of literature, particularly polemical literature, and declare that conversion was widespread is not justified by this body of literature, nor by others from this region and era. Historical works, for example, mention conversion, but not the pressure to convert, or at least not in such all-encompassing terms.

### The Apology of al-Kindī

The debate that is detailed in this text likely never happened, as neither of its figures are known.<sup>493</sup> The first passage of the actual text refers to ‘al-Kindī’ and ‘al-Hāshimī’ as pseudonyms used to protect their identities, but whether the debate in question actually happened is essentially unconfirmable. They are also noted to be friends.<sup>494</sup> Their identities appear to be intentionally formulaic: the Hashemite, aka the elite Muslim, debating the Kindī, a Christian man of Kinda, by this point in time likely to have been born in Iraq. Al-Hāshimī’s other

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<sup>491</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, “The First Christian *Summa Theologiae* in Arabic: Christian *Kalām* in Ninth-Century Palestine,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 26-7.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-6.

<sup>493</sup> Muir, *The Apology of al Kindy* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1882).

<sup>494</sup> Newman, 382.

nomenclature, “‘Abd Allāh” (Servant of God) and “Ibn Isma‘īl” (descendant of Isma‘īl, or from the Banu Isma‘īl) could also be read as formulaic. The al-Kindī figure (‘Abd al-Masīh Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī) was represented as a friend to the caliph al-Ma’mūn, and wrote at his court.<sup>495</sup> His nomenclature, too, is formulaic: “‘Abd al-Masīh,” servant of the Messiah, being the counterpart to Hāshimī’s “‘Abd Allāh,” and “Ibn Ishaq,” son of Isaac or of the Banī Ishāq, denoting a different lineage from Abraham than al-Hāshimī’s Banu Ismail. Mingana was inclined to accept these figures as real people, but that appears to be a minority view among modern scholars. Mingana argues that al-Kindī is a Nestorian, where he cites a Nestorian hymn that al-Kindī quotes, and identifies Nestorian exegesis in the text.<sup>496</sup>

The text takes the form of an epistolary exchange between al-Kindī and al-Hāshimī (Abdullah ibn Ismail al-Hāshimī), in which al-Hāshimī calls al-Kindī to Islam, breaking down its elements of belief and praxis and citing the Qur’ān throughout; al-Kindī responds to Hāshimī’s points, one by one. Al-Hāshimī’s letter is twenty-two pages, al-Kindī’s response is 142.<sup>497</sup> Muir notes a strong proto-Shi’i influence in al-Kindī’s letters (al-Kindī is the Christian, al-Hāshimī is the Muslim. Al-Hāshimī is of course related to the caliph and of ‘Abbasid/Hashemite lineage). This text is also preserved in an Arabic text written in Syriac letters, by one Yā‘qub Kindī.<sup>498</sup> He is noted in yet another MS as “a Jacobite.”<sup>499</sup> Muir argues that a text so pro-Christian could only have been written under the aegis of the likes of al-Ma’mūn, known for his openness to scholarship and rigorous religious debate. Muir notes al-Kindī’s point about false converts.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Muir, *The Apology of al Kindy* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1882), ii.

<sup>496</sup> Newman, 166 and 171.

<sup>497</sup> Muir, *The Apology of al Kindy* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1882), iii.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.



Muir notes “al-Hāshimī” might be made up.<sup>501</sup> He points out that regardless of authorship, the fact that this was written under Muslim rule was amazing, and the fact that it was apparently in wide circulation a century later (al-Birūnī cited it) is even more extraordinary.<sup>502</sup> False conversions (the *ridḍa* phenomenon) under Abū Bakr are mentioned.<sup>503</sup>

### Attempts to Convert Rulers

Suleiman Mourad discusses the trope of Christian leaders (Heraclius, the bishop of Najrān, etc.) acknowledging the truth of Islam while also not being able to profess this publicly for one reason or another. Such attempts are evident in several early accounts. These accounts were intended for Christian audiences, who ostensibly desired to live under Christian rule.<sup>504</sup>

### Ibn al-Layth, *Risālat ibn al-Layth*

Abū al-Rabī‘ ibn al-Layth, a Barmakid elite in Hārūn al-Rashīd’s court, wrote a letter to the Byzantine emperor Constantine VI (r. 780-797) in 796 C.E., in which he tried to convert him to Islam.<sup>505</sup> While Ibn al-Layth was clearly Muslim, his biblical references had a Christian perspective, particularly one coming from the Syriac tradition.<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>501</sup> Muir, *xiv*.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, *xvi*.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>504</sup> Suleiman Mourad, “Christians and Christianity in the Sīra of Muḥammad,” in *Muslim-Christian Relations, Vol 1 600-900* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 59.

<sup>505</sup> Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 21.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

## ‘Umar II and Leo III Correspondence

There are a number of surviving early manuscripts that purport to be correspondence between the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Azīz (r. 717-720 C.E.) and Byzantine emperor Leo III. If authentic, these letters would date to the early eighth century C.E. Jeffery argues that ‘Umar’s letter, as represented in Ghevond/Lewond, is fake, as is Leo’s purported response.<sup>507</sup> Final conclusions about the letters’ authenticity may still be out. The letters constitute an interfaith debate, but here the intention to convert one’s opponent, while never stated explicitly, seems more present than it does in debates between lesser authorities. It contains several standard points of discussion (corruption of the gospels, whether the coming of Muḥammad was predicted, how God could have a son, etc.), but the polite correspondence presents as fully sincere, on both sides, in its intention to bring the opposing party to its side.<sup>508</sup>

## Timothy I<sup>509</sup>

The debate between Timothy, Patriarch of the Church of the East (r. 780-823) and the caliph al-Mahdī reportedly occurred in 781 C.E. in Baghdād.<sup>510</sup> Our text survives as a letter Timothy wrote to a monk named Sergius, describing the event. The debate took place in Arabic, and materials recording it survive in Arabic and Syriac. “While the debate with the Caliph al-Mahdī occurred in Arabic, Timothy composed his text as a letter to the monk Sergius, recording

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<sup>507</sup> Jeffery in Newman, 47-135, 48.

<sup>508</sup> Gaudel, ‘The Correspondence between Leo and Umar’ *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984). See also *Ḥadīth Wāṣil al-Dimashqī* and Griffith, “Bashir/Beser: *Boon Companion* of the *Byzantine Emperor III*; the Islamic Recension of his Story in Leiden Oriental MS 951(2).” *Le Muséon* 103 (1990): 293-327.

<sup>509</sup> Mingana, Alphonse 1933-9. ‘Catalogue of the Mingana collection of manuscripts’, Vols. 1-3, W. Heffer & Sons Ltd, Cambridge.

<sup>510</sup> David Bertaina, “The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam,” in David Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 155.

the event in Syriac. In addition to the Syriac recension, there are two later Arabic recensions of the text.”<sup>511</sup>

Mingana notes in his introduction to the text that the rise of the ‘Abbasids and the move of the caliphal capital to Baghdād began a tradition of debate between leaders from the Church of the East (Nestorians) and the ‘Abbasids themselves. When the ‘Umayyads were based in Damascus, he argues, Christians were more often represented by Melkites (Chalcedonian) and Jacobites (West Syrians/West Syriac speakers).<sup>512</sup> This may well have changed the nature of the content being debated – or perhaps it helped facilitate frequent debates in the first place. While individual ‘Abbasid caliphs are often given credit for hosting these debates, it may be that authorities from the Church of the East were more amenable to them than Melkite leaders, who at least nominally looked to the Byzantine Empire for theological issues of importance.

“Timothy’s *Apology* highlights the active spirit of dialogue between Christianity and Islam during the second/eighth century. ... the Caliph al-Mahdī dictated many of the topics and sources that would be used for the conversation.”<sup>513</sup> The Qur’ān formed the basis of debate for both sides (Timothy quotes 19:34, 3:55, and others), and Timothy covered a standard list of topics common to such debates in this period, including the Trinity, the Old Testament, Muḥammad’s non-existence in the bible, etc.<sup>514</sup>

While the record of this debate (however representative of any debate that may have actually occurred between Timothy I and al-Mahdī) is incredibly important as a source of eighth-

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<sup>511</sup> David Bertaina, “The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam,” in David Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 155. Samir K. Samir has addressed the issue of manuscript preservation in multiple languages and what that suggests about the text in S.K. Samir, “The Prophet Muhammad as seen by Timothy I and other Arab Christian authors,” in D. Thomas, ed., *Syrian Christians under Islam*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, 75-106.

<sup>512</sup> Mingana, Editor’s Preface: The Dialogue of Patriarch Timothy I with Caliph Mahdi, in Newman, 163.

<sup>513</sup> David Bertaina, “The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam,” in David Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 157.

<sup>514</sup> Bertaina provides a full list, 157-160.

century interfaith argumentation, it contains very little about conversion itself. One may say that, as with all Muslim-Christian interactions during this period, the intent to convert one's opponent is arguably always in the background). About midway through the content of the first day's record, al-Mahdi states, "as the Jews behaved towards Jesus, whom they did not accept, so the Christians behaved towards Muḥammad, whom they did not accept."<sup>515</sup> Timothy responds that the Old Testament contained many predictions about the coming of Christ, and that this was not the case for Muḥammad in any Jewish or Christian scripture. The discussion then turns to the issue of corruption of the Bible.

During this debate, in response to an accusation of corruption of the "books," Timothy also says:

"Where have you found that the Gospel is corrupted?' The Caliph gives no reply but Timothy confidently affirms: 'If I saw one prophesy in the Gospel about the coming of Muḥammad then I would leave the Gospel and follow the Qur'ān ... as I have left the Torah and the Prophets for the Gospel.'"<sup>516</sup>

Later in the text:

"And our king said to me: 'You should, therefore, accept the words of the Prophet.' And I replied to his gracious Majesty: 'Which words of his our notorious king believes that I must accept?' And our king said to me: 'That God is one and that there is no other one besides Him.' And I replied: 'This belief in one God, O my Sovereign, I have learned from the Torah, from the Prophets and from the Gospel. I shall stand by it and shall die in it.'"<sup>517</sup>

### Life of St. Theodore of Edessa

In this Greek text from the 840s, a monk named Theodore heals a caliph called "Mavi," who converts to Christianity, is baptized, takes the name John, and when he openly admits his

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<sup>515</sup> Newman 193.

<sup>516</sup> Tiezsen 54. (Beaumont 242, Mark Beaumont, "'Ammar al-Basri on the Alleged corruption of the Gospels...'" Cites 'Dialogue between the Caliph al-Mahdī and the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I', in H. Putnam, *L'église et l'Islam sous Timothée I (780-823)*, Beirut, 1975, appendix p. 21.)

<sup>517</sup> Tiezsen, 56.

new faith to Muslims, is martyred.<sup>518</sup> This account is clearly legendary and like other accounts of leaders converting or nearly converting to an opposing faith, is intended to demonstrate the superiority of Christian doctrine and Christianity itself, as validated by the leader of the Muslim community.

### The Life of John of Edessa

This narrative is set in the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd.<sup>519</sup> The story is about a Jewish man, Phineas, who hates Christians. He fell into favor with the caliph and caused him to also hate Christians. John, who was about to become clergy in Ruhā (Edessa), obviously did not like this. In his prayers to God he noted that the Muslims had power over Christians due to Christian sinning. (Then there is a missing section.) Then Hārūn al-Rashīd, Phineas, and John are debating. Phineas puts John through a series of tests, accompanied by theological questions. John heals a man beset by demons. John drinks poison and is unaffected. Phineas' hands dry up while attached to scissors; after waiting for three days, John heals his hands. Hārūn encourages John in these acts. Hārūn then seeks to have his recently-deceased daughter brought back from the dead. John brings her back from the dead, where she discusses angels and her observation of John bringing her back. After this Hārūn orders that military expeditions into Byzantium cease "and that the customs and festivals of Christianity be practiced openly. He also lifted oppression from the people in general. Indeed, if it had not been that his co-religionists would have hated to hear it, he would have entered the Christian faith. He also ordered that churches be built throughout

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<sup>518</sup> Vasiliev, A.A. "The Life of St. Theodore of Edessa," *Byzantion* 16.1 (1942), 165-225.

<sup>519</sup> John Lamoreaux and H. Khairallah, "The Arabic Version of the Life of John of Edessa." *Le Muséon* 113 (2000), 439-60.

his dominion and that Abba John be given everything he wanted.”<sup>520</sup> Abba John then baptizes Phineas and his extended family (eighty-two people, “the whole house of Phineas”).

This narrative contains several elements commonly found in debate texts, such as the presence of the caliph (here Hārūn al-Rashīd), the performance of several miracles to “prove” the validity of a religion, and the admittance by the ruler that his opponent’s arguments are legitimate, or that he would convert to the opponent’s faith but for one issue or another (in this case, concern for his co-religionists). It also contains a conversion by another party to the debate; here Phineas, the Jewish man, and his extended family are all baptized. The text represents multiple victories for Christianity: not only the actual victory of the debate itself, but also an admission of the validity of Christianity by a Muslim ruler, and the conversion of a large number of apparently elite Jews to Christianity, as well.

### Martyrologies

There is something of a local tradition of Syrian martyrs, or Syrian converts, as represented by local Arab Christian saints. These accounts are highly formulaic, both within the regional and historical parameters of this research and beyond it. Many of the individual martyrdoms contain identical narrative structures (antagonistic behavior toward a religion or its practitioners, followed by a miraculous event, conversion, religious immersion, intentional exposure of conversion, persecution, refusal to renege, and ultimately martyrdom). The mass conversions, too, contain similar elements and seem to have served as formulae that were used in later martyrdom narratives: the sixty martyrs of Jerusalem and Gaza narratives are highly similar,

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<sup>520</sup> John Lamoreaux and H. Khairallah, “The Arabic Version of the Life of John of Edessa.” *Le Muséon* 113 (2000), 460.

and seem to have influenced both the martyrs of Amorium and the martyrs of Cordoba narratives.

### The Martyrdom of Elias of Heliopolis/Damascus

This anonymous Greek narrative is about a young Syrian Christian boy who apparently accidentally converted by taking off his *zunnār* (the belt Christians were at times required to wear) at a wedding.<sup>521</sup> Born a Christian, the young Elias worked for a Muslim man who converted from Christianity to Islam after Elias began working for him. The man's family tried to convert Elias to Islam when he was twelve. The removal of Elias's *zunnār* by drunken revelers at a party (where he is also drunk) causes others to declare that he has converted to Islam, and Elias is beaten, imprisoned and eventually martyred for apostatizing from Islam when he returns to his Christianity. His Christian affiliation is unclear, but he was probably Miaphysite. Naturally, miracles occur after his martyrdom. Elias's story is well-known and appears to have been widely circulated in the eighth century. It appears to demonstrate to Christians the ease with which one could convert to Islam—even accidentally—and the severe consequences possibly faced if one tried to convert back to Christianity.

### Life of Theodūtē

This Syriac narrative describes the late seventh-century martyrdom of the monk Theodūtē (d. 698 in Dārā). Theodūtē spent a lot of time on the Byzantine-Arab frontier (*thugūr*), apparently because he “had redeemed many souls, both from the Arabs and from the Romans” there, and was trusted by leaders on both sides: “The fear of the holy man [Theodūtē] took hold

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<sup>521</sup> “Elias of Heliopolis [Baalbek]: The Life of an Eighth-Century Syrian Saint,” Stamatina McGrath, in *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations*, ed. John W. Nesbitt (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 85-107.

of the Muslims/converts to Islam and the heretics and the Orthodox and they accepted with joy everything that he commanded.”<sup>522</sup> Inasmuch, they gave him money to pay ransom to the Romans for prisoners of war. Palmer notes that this means there would have been both Arab (Muslim) and Christian captives. It also gives us insight into religious interactions on the border between the caliphate and the Byzantine Empire: in this case, Theodūtē was savvy enough to be trusted by Muslims and Christians, despite his dealings with both sides and his apparent missionary efforts.

Gregory Dekapolites, *Historical Sermon*

“St. George and a Muslim”<sup>523</sup>

The town of Lydda, near Ramla, had a shrine dedicated to George the Martyr. A Syrian amīr sent his nephew to manage Ramla, and the nephew happened upon the church on his way, and ordered his entourage to bring the saddlebags and luggage inside. He went to the upper galleries (where the liturgy was held) and ordered his ten camels to be brought inside there so he could observe them eating. The priests asked him not to, but he did so and threatened them not to stop him. The camels all died upon entering the shrine, which scared the Muslim, who ordered the camels dragged back out. The priest made the offering, which the Muslim witnessed as the dismemberment and consumption of a small child. The priest then continued with the liturgy. When it was over, he brought some of the leftover loaves to the Muslim as a gift, which he still saw as chopped body parts. The Muslim got angry and asked why he would cut up a small child

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<sup>522</sup> *Mahēgroye*, per Palmer’s nuanced assessment. Andrew Palmer, “Āmīd in the Seventh-Century Syriac Life of Theodūtē,” in David Thomas, ed., *Encounter with Eastern Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 121, 126. A Chalcedonian church in the region, just on the wrong side of the border, is either shared by Muslims and Christians or slowly taken over by Muslims and converted into a mosque (it is unclear).

<sup>523</sup> Noble and Treiger, *Siyar al-Qadīsīn*. John C. Lamoreaux. 112-35 (128); Daniel J. Sahas, “What an Infidel Saw that a Faithful Did Not: Gregory Dekapolites (d. 842) and Islam,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31 (1986), 47-67.



like that, at which the priest bowed and expressed amazement at what he said. The Muslim said, “What I’ve seen isn’t the reality of the ritual, is it?” The priest confirmed that it was, but only in the form of bread and wine, which was really the body and blood of Christ. As this man had been chosen to witness it, the priest was convinced he would be great. The Muslim was frightened, so he prayed, and when he was finished, he asked to be baptized. The priest refused, noting his important lineage, and sent him to the Patriarch of Jerusalem to be baptized there instead. The Muslim put on a hair shirt and snuck away in the middle of the night to Jerusalem. He bowed before the Patriarch and was baptized. After eight days, he asked how to save his soul. The Patriarch sent him to Mt. Sinai to become a monk. He went there and spent six years as a monk, after which he asked the abbot to be sent back to the church of St. George. He was sent there, and found the priest, who didn’t recognize him. Once he did, the priest was overjoyed and asked him if there was anything he wanted. The convert asked to see Jesus. The priest told him to go to his uncle, the “king” of Syria, and confess his belief in Christ, which would grant him his desire.

The monk went to his uncle. He climbed the minaret at night and began shouting, whereupon locals found him and asked him why he was shouting. He inquired about what reward would be given for finding the amīr’s nephew, and asked to be taken to the amīr. They did this, and informed him that the monk knew where his nephew was. The amīr asked if this was true, and the nephew replied that it was he. He then confessed his belief in Christianity. The amīr was shocked and told him to return to Islam so he could be properly clothed again. When he refused, the amīr ordered him taken outside the city and chased away. His advisers told him the death penalty was warranted, so he told them they could do whatever they wanted. The men took him outside the city and stoned him to death while he loudly proclaimed Christ. Eventually the

amīr ordered local Christians to take the man out and bury him. His body was intact and smelled of perfume. They buried him and glorified him.<sup>524</sup>

This narrative follows a standard pattern seen in Syriac and Arabic martyrologies about conversion during this era. Its protagonist is a relative of the caliph. His conversion comes about after seeing miraculous visions while in a church—which he entered with ill intent. He travels to a prominent patriarch and/or monastery and becomes a monk, rising through the ranks. After several years, he seeks martyrdom by publicly proclaiming his faith to the ruler. After imprisonment and attempts by elites to bring him back to his old faith, he is martyred. This text is standard polemical fare, and was circulated to model ideal responses for Christians to pressures to convert, and demonstrates the possible, very permanent consequences of converting to Islam.

#### Qays b. Rabīh ‘Abd al-Massīh al-Ghassānī

Born in Najrān a Christian, Qays b. Rabīh ‘Abd al-Massīh al-Ghassānī (d. 857), was found to be a good fighter as a youth and was recruited into the Muslim army, where he fought the Byzantines. The text never directly addresses his conversion to Islam, but it becomes clear that he is Muslim when he goes to a church in Baalbek, overhears the priest reading the Gospel (probably in Syriac or Greek), and asked him to translate for him.<sup>525</sup> He is moved to tears, converts to Christianity, sells his horse and sword, gives away the profit, and takes communion. Then he goes to Jerusalem, finds the patriarch (Abba John IV, 839-43), and tells him his story. John prays for him and sends him to the abbot of the Lavra of Sabas (Mar Saba), to make him a monk. Al-Ghassānī then becomes a monk and stays for five years, then went to monasteries near

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<sup>524</sup> Noble and Treiger, Lamoreaux, 128-134.

<sup>525</sup> Ḥ. Zayyāt, “Shuhadā’ al-Naṣrāniyya fī l-Islām,” *Al-Mashriq* 36 (1938), 463-5.

Jerusalem and Mt. Sinai. He sometimes went to Ayla to pay a local village's *kharāj* tax (several villages).<sup>526</sup> Local monks appoint him *oikonomos* (treasurer for the monastery) for five years. Then he wanted to make his story public, so he went to Ramla, where a letter declaring his conversion to Christianity, and threw it into Ramla's Friday mosque.<sup>527</sup> Then he went with two monks and waited at a local church. Some Muslims came looking for him and couldn't see him, even though he was right in front of their eyes. After three days, he left Ramla, went to Edessa, then Mt. Sinai. The old abbot had died and the monks made him the new abbot. He did this for seven years, until Palestinian administrators started extracting harsher *kharāj*-taxes from Mt. Sinai. So he went to Ramla with an entourage and encountered pilgrims returning from *hajj*. One of them recognized Ghassānī from their raiding days. He is positively identified by a scar. He is bound and brought to Ramla, and the old raiding buddy takes him to the governor. "The governor summoned the witnesses against him, and a crowd of people testified as to matters of which they knew nothing."<sup>528</sup> After three days, he was given the chance to repent. When he refused, the governor became angry and ordered him beheaded—so he was. His remains were kept guarded from the Christians, thrown in a well. Several monks came from Mt. Sinai nine months later and secretly retrieved his bones from the well.<sup>529</sup>

As with the previous entry, this is a fairly standard narrative. Involvement in the Muslim army is a surprisingly common theme in conversion narratives (in this case, ones that end in martyrdom), and the fact that al-Ghassānī was invited to join the army as a Christian after his fighting skills became known is notable. So, too, is al-Ghassānī's encounter with the priest in Baalbek. Neither figure's Christian sect is mentioned, though one may guess that a Najrānī

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<sup>526</sup> Noble and Treiger, 125.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Christian might belong to the Church of the East, while a priest in Baalbek might be Maronite. Also of note is the fact that al-Ghassānī asked the priest to translate the biblical passage for him, and that the priest complied. Al-Ghassānī likely would have only known Arabic, while the priest would have been speaking in Syriac (or Greek). Yet even in Baalbek, a strongly Christian area, Arabic was so commonly spoken at this point that al-Ghassānī’s request was unremarkable.

### Peter of Maiouma

Theophanes’s *Chronicle* is notoriously polemical, and his rendering of martyrdom narratives is no exception. In the below excerpt, he relays a narrative about Peter of Maiouma, an apparently ordinary bureaucrat who fell ill and wished to die a martyr’s death. To that end, he invited several Muslim friends over for dinner, whereupon he testified his faith and invited his colleagues to Christianity. Assuming his illness had rendered him out of his mind, his friends dismissed his testimony. When he recovered, however, he continued to testify his faith loudly and frequently, and denounced Islam. He was subsequently martyred (Theophanes spares us the details). What is notable here is that Peter did not apostasize, nor did he insult Islam in the presence of the caliph—he merely did so in public, according to Theophanes’ rendering:

“AM 6234, AD 741/2

Oualid ordered that Peter, the most holy metropolitan of Damascus, should have his tongue cut off because he was publicly reproving the impiety of the Arabs and the Manichees, and exiled him to Arabia Felix, where he died a martyr on behalf of Christ after reciting the holy liturgy. Those who have told the story affirm to have heard it with their own ears. This man’s homonym and imitator, Peter of Maiouma, proved at the same time a voluntary martyr on behalf of Christ. Having fallen ill, he invited the prominent Arabs who were his friends (for he served as chartulary of the public taxes) and said to them: ‘May you receive from God the recompense for visiting me, even if you happen to be infidel friends. I wish you, however, to witness this my will: “Anyone who does not believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the consubstantial and life-giving Trinity within a unity, is spiritually blind and deserving of eternal punishment. Such a one was Mouamed, your false prophet and precursor of the Antichrist. If you believe me as I testify to you today by heaven and earth (for I am your friend), abandon his fables that

you may not be punished along with him.”” When they had heard him utter these and many other words about God, they were seized by astonishment and fury, but decided to be patient, thinking he was out of his mind on account of his illness. After he had recovered from his illness, however, he started to cry out even louder, ‘Anathema on Mouamed and his fables and on everyone who believes in them!’ Thereupon he was chastised with the sword and so became a martyr.”<sup>530</sup>

### *The Martyrdom of Peter of Capitoliās*

The *Martyrdom of Peter of Capitoliās* reads in a similar fashion to that of Peter Maioumas, with some key differences. As the text survives only in a sixteenth-century Georgian translation (the original may have been Greek), this could well be the same narrative, perhaps altered or merged with others over the course of several centuries of transmission and translated into at least one other language.

Peter of Capitoliās (d. 715) was a man who decided to become an ascetic in middle adulthood. After several years, he fell ill and, suspecting he would die soon, expressed his wish to be martyred. Upon a fellow ascetic’s advice, he invited some Muslim leaders to dinner and denounced Islam in front of them. When he recovered from his illness, he was arrested and brought, eventually, to ‘Umar b. al-Walid, the son of then-caliph al-Walid. Then he was sent to al-Walid and debated with him. He then openly proclaimed his faith to the caliph and was martyred.<sup>531</sup>

It is unclear whether this narrative has any basis in reality. As we have noted, it is full of hagiographical formulae. It is also likely far too early to be a real account (especially given how late its source is); it comes from an early eighth-century Syrian milieu that circulated a number

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<sup>530</sup> Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 577-8.

<sup>531</sup> *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 419-22, entry by Stephanos Efthymiadis. No date, original may be Greek. The text survives in a 16<sup>th</sup>-c. Georgian translation.

of such stories. “Original” narratives of forced conversions, or attempts to convert would-be Christian martyrs, became far less frequent by the ninth century.

#### Abraham/Artavazd, *Martyrdom of Vahan*

This story is an Armenian martyrdom with significant similarities to the Syrian ones of Peter Maioumas and Peter of Capitolias, as well as others examined elsewhere in this research.<sup>532</sup> The conquest of Armenia occurred when ‘Abd al-Malik was governor of Armenia. Shortly afterward, a man named Vahan sought martyrdom by proclaiming Christ in front of the caliph. As with similar narratives of martyrdom, he took a while to decide to do so, and was discouraged from it by others. He eventually rode to Syria to pronounce his faith before the caliph al-Hisham. In response to his testimony, the caliph encouraged him not to martyr himself, and to instead better his life. Vahan refused and was executed, and despite efforts to prevent Christians from accessing his remains, his tomb became sacred.

#### *The Life of Bacchus the Younger*

This important ninth-century text, detailing a conversion from Christianity to Islam and back again, only exists in a Greek MS or a seventeenth-century Greek edition.<sup>533</sup> Bacchus, a man living in Maiouma,<sup>534</sup> in Gaza, in the eighth century C.E., converts to Islam as a child when his Christian father converts to Islam. His three sons also convert to Islam, while his wife remains Christian. As an adult, one son, named Ḍaḥḥāk, decides to convert back to Christianity. Once his father dies, he travels to Jerusalem and encounters a monk who takes him to a monastery in Mar

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<sup>532</sup> *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 281-3 (d. 744 C.E., Armenian from Greek/Arabic?) Entry by Robert W. Thomson.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 597-9. Entry by Stephanos Efthymiadis.

<sup>534</sup> A surprising number of our martyrologies come from Gaza, and at least two specifically from Maiouma.

Saba. There he is baptized, takes the name Bacchus, and becomes a monk. Fearing his apostasy will be discovered, he travels frequently to different monasteries. In Jerusalem he meets his mother in a church and reveals his conversion. She returns to Maouima and informs her other sons, who are both married to Muslim women. One brother converts to Christianity and the other does not, but the family flees. One of the Muslim wives' families puts out a search for Bacchus and finds him praying in a church in Jerusalem. He is then imprisoned and questioned in Arabic, only responding "Alleluia, glory to God" in Greek, refusing to respond in Arabic. He is then executed and quickly buried so 'the Hagarenes who dwelt in the desert' could not desecrate the body. This narrative suggests that conversion was seen as a potential source of religious strife within families.

### *The Martyrdom of Abo of Tbilisi*

This text was written in the late 780s by John of Saban, a Georgian writer who observed Abo, Arab governor of Georgia, being put to death on Jan 6, 786.<sup>535</sup> In name and lineage, "Abo" seems to represent a "pure" Arab Muslim.<sup>536</sup> As of 772 the "ruling prince of Georgia" was Nerses, son of Adarnerse, the Byzantine representative of Georgia. He was summoned to the "great city of Baghdād" by the "Saracen Caliph Abdulla" (al-Manşūr) and was imprisoned.<sup>537</sup> Al- Manşūr was succeeded by his son al-Mahdī (r. 775-85) in 775, who freed Narses. The figure Abo seems to have befriended Narses while he was in Baghdād.

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<sup>535</sup> "The Martyrdom of Abo, the Perfumer from Baghdad" in *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, tr. David Marshall Lang (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956), 115-133.

<sup>536</sup> Abo "was born of the line of Abraham, of the sons of Ishmael and the race of the Saracens. He had no foreign blood in him, nor was he born of a slave-woman, but of pure Arab stock on both his father's and his mother's side of the family." *Ibid.*, 117; his family was from Baghdad.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

Abo went to Tbilisi with Narses on his return and lived with him for some time.<sup>538</sup> He then began to read the Bible and attend church services, and started questioning Narses and other Christian figures. He then became a Christian and was secretly baptized.<sup>539</sup> In 779-780 Narses was forced to flee the Muslim authorities again, and he and Abo went to Byzantine territory in Khazaria and Abkhazia. They returned to Georgia in 782 C.E. In Tiflis, Abo began openly practicing Christianity, and was alternately persecuted and assisted by his friends, some of whom tried to encourage him to convert back to Islam.<sup>540</sup> After three years, he was imprisoned for apostasy but then freed; some local Muslims called for his death if he did not renounce Christianity. Abo was eventually brought before the amīr and professed his Christianity. The amīr offered him money to convert, but he refused and remained in prison. On the day of his execution, he was allowed to attend church and take the Eucharist. After making the sign of the cross and praying to the Trinity, he was beheaded. His body was burned so it could not be divided into relics, but his bones would not burn, so they were put in a bag and thrown in the river. Christians who visited the burning site were healed, and a pillar of light shone where the bag was thrown in the river.<sup>541</sup>

The overall structure of this martyrology is familiar: conversion, secret practice followed by open admission of conversion, persecution and pressure to renege, and ultimately, martyrdom. What is unfamiliar in this narrative is Narses, a Christian and a royal figure from Georgia (normally the royal figure in these narratives is a relative of the caliph who converts to Christianity, not a Christian royal figure) and an apparent outlaw. Narses' role as a mentor to the

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<sup>538</sup> "The Martyrdom of Abo, the Perfumer from Baghdad" in *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, tr. David Marshall Lang (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956), 117.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-8.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.



Muslim Abo is the most unusual element of the story, and is not addressed at length. We may infer that such relationships, in which a Christian mentored a Muslim, was not inherently frowned upon: we have many examples of non-Muslim scholars tutoring the children of the caliphs, but not beyond the confines of the royal palace. However, in this narrative, Narses flees the Muslim authorities more than once for reasons that are unclear, so his mentorship of a Muslim, to the point of living with him, may have indeed been a problem, even if Abo's conversion to Christianity had not yet happened or was not yet publicly known.

### Mass Martyrdom Narratives

There are several mass martyrdom narratives that, while plausible or confirmed, strongly resemble one another. Many of these are from Palestine (Jerusalem, Mar Saba, Gaza), though some are not (Amorium, etc.). Nearly all of them have to do with Byzantine rivalry and suspicion. All of them are preserved in Greek, though some apparently were written in Syriac.

### The Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba

This account, by Stephen Mansur/Stephen of Damascus (and nephew of John of Damascus, narrates the sack of the Mar Saba monastery in 797 C.E. by bedouin raiders. Prior to the raid, the text makes reference to how much the monastery and its inhabitants irritate local populations. There is one reference to a Persian at the monastery who converted to Christianity and was living at the monastery; he was executed for apostasy by the caliph.<sup>542</sup>

### Stephen Mansūr, *The Martyrdom of Romanus the Neomartyr/the Younger*

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<sup>542</sup>*Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 393-6. Entry by David Vila.

This text from the 780s, probably originally written in Arabic but only surviving in Georgian, also covers the raid of the monastery of Mar Saba, though with a different perspective. In the account, the Muslims (raiders) treat nuns and monks well, until the Caliph al-Mahdi forces one man, Romanus, to convert to Islam. When Romanus refuses, he is taken to Baghdād and imprisoned. Ultimately al-Mahdī has him executed.<sup>543</sup> The Romanus figure is not altogether different from the Persian in the previous version, though one commits apostasy and the other is merely unwilling to convert.

### *Life of Mar Stephen*

This is a vita, not a martyrology, but it covers the Mar Saba raid mentioned in the previous two entries. The text, by Leontius of Damascus, is from around 800-807 C.E.; it was originally written in Greek, but is now only extant in its entirety in Arabic. The content that covers the raid of the Mar Saba monastery is similar to the twenty martyrs of Mar Saba account. The text also notes one Muslim convert to Christianity, after he witnesses a miracle performed by Mar Stephen.<sup>544</sup> The text gives a vivid picture of Christian life in Palestine, and especially monastic life and that of hermits and ascetics. There are mentions of local bedouin as evil or fearsome (they are hunters or abductors, and are ultimately the ones who raid the monastery). Otherwise the monks seem perfectly unhindered in their faith practice. Mar Stephen is noted as being merciful and compassionate to Christians as well as Muslims, and feeding both groups. In the Arabic, Muslims and Christians are denoted as *muslimūn* and *naṣārā*, respectively. It is unclear what original Greek term was translated into ‘*muslimūn*.’<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>544</sup> *The Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas*, ed. John C. Lamoreaux. CSCO Scriptorum Arabici v.50-51 (Louvain: Aedibus Peeters, 1999), 88-89.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid., 145.

### The Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion

We have three Greek versions of the forty-two martyrs of Amorion. The first was written ca. 845-846 C.E. by Michael Synkellos. In it, Callistus, a Christian governor and army leader is captured in battle with the Arabs. He is transferred to Tarsus, where he shares a prison space with several Byzantine leaders who were taken at Amorium. The prisoners are all pressured to convert, offering riches and honor. The prisoners refuse and are marched to Baghdād. They are called to convert on the banks of the Tigris, one by one. Callistus makes a speech encouraging steadfastness. They are all beheaded and their bodies are thrown in the Tigris.

The second text is undated and anonymous, though very similar to that of Michael Synkellos. The officers are held for six years (other texts say seven), then executed on the banks of the Tigris. The protagonist in this narrative is named Theodorus Craterus (or Carterus), instead of Callistus. The third account was authored by Sophronius, Archbishop of Cyprus. It, too, follows the same narrative, though it names two protagonists: Theodorus Craterus (or Carterus) and a man named Bassoos. These are all variations of the same narrative.<sup>546</sup>

### The Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza

This undated text, which many scholars date (questionably) to the mid-seventh century C.E., describes an incident that occurs in the aftermath of the conquest of Gaza.<sup>547</sup> Prisoners are taken. “Ambrus” (probably ‘Amr b. al-‘As) asks for the prisoners to be brought to him, and he

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<sup>546</sup> Athina Kolia-Dermizaki, “The Execution of the Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion: Proposing an Interpretation,” *Al-Masaq* 14 (2002), 141-62.

<sup>547</sup> David Woods, “The sixty Martyrs of Gaza and the Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem,” *Aram* 15 (2003), 129-50; George Huxley, “The sixty martyrs of Jerusalem,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 18 (1977), 369-74. The earliest MS is from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, in Latin, with indications that it was translated from Greek.

demands they convert to Islam. After refusing, they are sent back to prison for a month, then are asked again by ‘Ambrus’ to convert. They are sent back to jail for two months. Then they are sent to Eleutheropolis for two more months, then asked again. Then they are sent to Theropolis. After three months, Ambrus sends them to prison in Jerusalem. Then Sophronius visited them and begged them not to convert, as did one of their leaders in prison, Callinicus. This name, of course, was also the name of one of the leaders in the Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion narrative.

After 10 months ‘Ambrus’ goes to the prison to ask them to convert again. If they do so, they will be freed with honor; if not, Callinicus will be beheaded along with nine others in front of them. Then “Ammiras” came to them to read Ambrus’s order. The ten are martyred outside the city gates. The rest are sent back to prison. After 30 days Ambrus orders Ammiras to send the rest of them back to him in irons. Then he brings their wives and children to them and tells them to convert. When they refuse, he sends a mob of Saracens to them, who kill the men (the names of these martyrs are listed in the text).<sup>548</sup>

This narrative shares elements of the previous accounts of the martyrs of Amorion, though it far precedes them. Thus, we may infer that they are constructed out of various conflated accounts, likely based on some real events, while many of the shared elements of the narratives are probably legendary. These similarities call into question our understanding of mass martyrdom accounts such as those of Amorion or Cordoba (and indeed purportedly earlier ones like this one). It also suggests that this narrative of the martyrs of Gaza is later than its commonly cited seventh-century date. A more likely guess is that it comes from the same time period as the next text, the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem, which is similar—and which is from the late eighth century C.E.

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<sup>548</sup> David Woods, “The sixty Martyrs of Gaza and the Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem,” *Aram* 15 (2003), 129-48.

### The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem

This text, written before 787, is in essence the same story as the earlier Sixty Martyrs of Gaza narrative.<sup>549</sup> The extant Greek manuscript, from eleventh-century Palestine, states that it was translated from an earlier Syriac text. It narrates a battle between the caliph Suleyman b. ‘Abd al-Malik and Byzantine emperor Leo III for land in “Romania” (the timing must have been, per Suleyman’s reign and ‘Umayyad raids into Anatolia, in the middle of 717 C.E.). A seven-year truce was forged, with the stipulation that Byzantine Christians could safely travel to Jerusalem on religious pilgrimage. Near the end of the truce period, seventy Roman officials traveled to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. After reaching Jerusalem, giving alms, and visiting monasteries, they headed toward Byzantine territory. Three miles outside of Jerusalem, they were attacked, not knowing that the truce period had ended. They were imprisoned in Jerusalem, on notice that if they converted to Islam, they would lose only their horses and weapons, but that if they did not, they would die. Three of the men died on the way to Caesarea. Seven converted to Islam and immediately died of dysentery. The remainder chose to die rather than convert. They were buried in a church outside of Jerusalem and their bones were used as relics to heal people. Huxley notes that this is related to Symeon’s sixty-three martyrs narrative, and provides a chart that traces back to the original tale.<sup>550</sup> Huxley also shows that the truce is fiction—it is not recorded anywhere, variations of this story lack that detail, and if the truce were legitimate, the officers would not be carrying weapons.

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<sup>549</sup> “The 60 Martyrs of Jerusalem,” *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 327-9.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

## Conclusion

It may be argued that all polemical material relating to Muslim-Christian interactions during this period was ultimately fueled by fear of conversion. That may well be true, though other factors such as fear of foreigners or socio-economic rivalries may also come into play (one imagines Jāhiz's refutation was fueled by resentment of Christian elites, for example). The early polemical texts we have examined all address conversion in direct and substantial ways. We may say that polemical material of all kinds—refutations, apologia, debate narratives, and martyrologies—does not seem to emerge until the eighth century, perhaps once the stakes of conversion in either direction became abundantly clear to both Muslim and Christian writers. But how well did this polemical writing address its underlying concern: conversion away from one's own faith to that of the competition, or successful conversion of someone of that faith into one's own? Daniel Sahas tries to assess the effectiveness of polemic; he does not come to any conclusions, most likely because a lack of demographic information does not allow one to come to any definitive conclusions. Thus, the only assessment left to be made is textual: do our documents demonstrate a political or societal response to polemic?<sup>551</sup> The data from the next and final chapter, on early legal developments addressing conversion, may yet provide an answer.

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<sup>551</sup> Daniel J. Sahas, "What an Infidel Saw that a Faithful Did Not: Gregory Dekapolites (d. 842) and Islam," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31 (1986), 68-9.

## Chapter Five: Laws and Rituals Surrounding Conversion between Christianity and Islam

لا إكراه في الدين - “There is no compulsion in religion...” (Q 2:256)

As religious boundaries formed and conversion narrative tropes and rituals formed around them, a legal apparatus was needed to distinguish the status and rights of original followers, converts, non-practitioners, and other groups. In the context of Islam, the apparatus of clientage (the *mawla* system) was adopted relatively early for converts, for economic and socio-cultural reasons, but was not consistently applied. Only with the development of the Sunni legal schools (*madhāhib*) do we find a documented legal apparatus dealing with conversions in various contexts, though that is not to say that one did not exist before we see it represented in written form. Many of the regulations surrounding conversion come from the Qur’ān and hadiths, and questions of how to deal with converts (in social, economic and religious terms) arise in individual cases found in narratives of Muḥammad’s life, the conquests, and every time period afterward. Though many of our sources were written down after the conquest era, and therefore may not accurately represent the events they describe, it is all but certain that conversion was something that administrators had to address on a legal level at least occasionally from the very beginning of the conquests (and before), and regulations were likely put in place quickly in order to manage the effects of conversion on things like taxation, inheritance, and the *diwān*. Christian leaders also responded very quickly to legal issues of conversion to and from Islam, issuing formal edicts regulating its process. This seems to have been, at least in part, because conversion to and from other religions and sects had been addressed regularly in the recent past, including one set of regulations on rites of return to the church issued in 622 C.E.

## Conversion in Islamic Law

Standard books of law include sections on apostasy, inheritance, marriage and divorce, and manumission; these topics are addressed in a legal context in the Qur'ān. Conversion to and from Islam was a potential factor in each, and was thus addressed from a very early period in their contexts. Apostasy in particular is synonymous with conversion from Islam, and is a major subsection in many standard legal treatises, often under a section of Qur'ānic edicts or *ḥadd* laws.

Sunnī *madhāhib* do not seem to emerge until around the early to mid-eighth century C.E., though signs of this process emerged as early as the late seventh century. Of the major *madhāhib* and their regional influence during the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., Syria may have been mostly influenced by al-Shāfi'ī, while Iraq was largely influenced by Ḥanafī scholars (though Stephen Judd has argued that other scholars such as al-Awzā'ī and Sufyān al-Thawrī may have been at least as influential in Syria and Iraq, respectively).<sup>552</sup> Thus, ways of dealing with converts from a legal perspective were likely not associated with particular *madhāhib* until the latter half of the era we examine here. Additionally, David Cook notes that many early hadith collections (what he calls “pre-canonical,” i.e. prior to the compilation of collections from Bukhārī, Muslim and other scholars starting in the ninth-century) are focused on legal concerns, and do not often reference Christians or Christianity directly, if at all. He cites Shaybānī, Ibn Wahb al-Qurashī, and Abū Dawūd al-Ṭayalīsī as examples (all d. 805-820).<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> Stephen C. Judd, “Al-Awza’ī and Sufyan al-Thawri: An Umayyad Madhhab?” in *The Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution and Progress*, ed. Peri Berman, Rudolph Peters, and Frank E. Vogel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 10-25.

<sup>553</sup> David Cook, “Christians and Christianity in *ḥadīth* works before 900,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History Vol. 1 (600-900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 74.



This research focuses on a chronological window (640-850 C.E.) that ends at approximately the same time as the “pre-canonical” era; the canonical hadith collections emerge beginning in the mid-ninth century (though much of their content is likely at least somewhat earlier). Thus, all discussions of a particular legal school’s stance, or Islamic law’s general perspective on particular issues relating to conversion, either come from the Qur’ān or from individual works of pre-canonical scholars (or very early in the “canonical” era). The effect, therefore, is that early stances on particular issues may not be consistent, and that in this analysis, individual scholars’ views on conversion count for as much as those of the early *madhāhib*.

### The *Shahāda* and Other Rituals of Conversion

We have discussed the development of the *shahāda* in Chapters One and Two, but it seems to have been the earliest signifier of conversion in Islam. The first half of the *shahāda* is found in the Qur’ān (47 (Sūra Muḥammad):19: “So know that there is no god but God”), while the second half appears in late eighth and early ninth century sources such as Ibn Ishāq’s *Sīra*, but its utterance out loud by any person in those sources is consistently associated with an acceptance of the Qur’ān’s message and Muḥammad as the conveyor of that message.

As it was (literally) legal testimony, witness to the utterance of the *shahāda* was necessary to convert to Islam. Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt* demonstrates that conversion to Islam did not require much more than sworn allegiance to the Prophet in particular, or simply stating that one

desired to become Muslim.<sup>554</sup> Education came after the act of conversion instead of before.<sup>555</sup> Bulliet also notes the lack of a catechism in advance of conversion, or even prior exposure to the Qur'ān.<sup>556</sup> This may have been in part circumstantial: converts to Islam were surrounded by Islamic culture and practice in the public sphere and were likely already somewhat familiar with them. Additionally, the education of a convert in Islamic belief and practice was not a regulated process in the seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries because formal education in Islamic belief and practice was itself not yet a regulated process at the time. As noted above, even the major Sunni legal schools were somewhat nascent phenomena.

### Taxes on Converts

Taxation was an important factor in the administration's attitude toward converts. Non-Muslim *dhimmīs* paid more taxes than Muslims, and liability for the *jizya* after before or after one's conversion was an issue that was addressed fairly early on in our sources. Thus, taxation may be considered indicative of how converts were treated, as well as possibly how much revenue could be expected.

Abū Yūsuf's *Kitāb al-Kharāj* notes that the *jizya* was incumbent on all Christians (and other non-Muslims) except the Banū Taghlib, a legacy of their power in the pre-Islamic and

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<sup>554</sup> Zorgati, Ragnhild Johnsrud. *Pluralism in the Middle Ages: Hybrid Identities, Conversion, and Mixed Marriages in Medieval Iberia* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 35; Giovanna Calasso, "Récits de conversion, zèle dévotionnel et instruction religieuse dans les biographies des << gens de Basra >> du Kitāb al-Tabaqāt d'Ibn Sa'd, Réflexions autour de la notion de conversion selon l'Islam," in Mercedes García Arenal, ed., *Islamic Conversions: Religious Identities in Mediterranean Islam*, Maisonneuve et Larose, European Science Foundation, Paris, 2001, 34. See also Bulliet 1990: "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," in *Conversion and Continuity*, 123-33.

<sup>555</sup> Zorgati 35; Calasso 35-6.

<sup>556</sup> Zorgati 35; Bulliet 1990, 129.

conquest eras.<sup>557</sup> It is not to be collected from a Muslim by definition, with one exception: if a Muslim has converted from another faith after the end of the calendar (probably fiscal) year, he owes the *jizya*, as he was a *dhimmī* for the full year. If he converts to Islam before the end of the year, on the other hand, even just before it, he does not owe it.<sup>558</sup> If a person who converts after the end of the year dies before the *jizya* is collected, it may not be taken out of his inheritance—it is not taken as partially unpaid, just as it is not when a person converts before the end of the year.<sup>559</sup>

Ibn Sallām’s *Kitāb al-Amwāl* supports the concept that converts to Islam do not pay *jizya* if done so by the end of the year, citing multiple hadiths.<sup>560</sup> This interpretation is accepted by Abū Ḥanīfa, Malik, Ibn Ḥanbal and the Shī‘ites, according to Antoine Fattal.<sup>561</sup> According to Abū Yūsuf and Shāfi‘ī, Fattal writes, the convert will still be liable for the *jizya* the year he or she converts. (276) We do not have systematic evidence of which interpretation was used in collecting the *jizya* in early Islamic Syria and the Jazīra. Ibn Sallām cites a hadith saying: “Ḥajjāj related to us from Ḥammād b. Salama from Ḥumayd, who said: “‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz wrote: ‘He who stands witness with us, turns to our *qibla* and undergoes circumcision is not to pay the

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<sup>557</sup> See *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, 27. The Banu Taghlib were granted concessions other Arab tribes were not because they were powerful and wanted to remain Christian, and threatened to join the Byzantines. There was much contention over this agreement, including the fact that some people felt the tribe violated the agreement when they baptized their children. ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, who created the arrangement, also ordered a different ‘*ushr* tax from them: they were to pay a tenth, while other Christians were to pay half a tenth (so, 5%). This is mentioned frequently throughout the text (see also p 489, 495-7, etc). Based on multiple reports, the agreement was that the tribe would not change to another religion, nor baptize their children, and they must pay double ‘*ushr* and extra *ṣadaqa* (but no *jizya*), and for this they could keep their Christianity but would not defect to the Byzantines. Another hadith on page 496 contests the idea that they pay *ṣadaqa* (that is only for Muslims), but that they pay double the *kharāj*, which is to equal or exceed the *ṣadaqa*. Further ones argue that it was indeed *ṣadaqa*, but went into the same track/money pot as the *jizya*. In another exception, Christian Kalbi participation in Yazid b. Mu‘āwiya’s army was also a holdover of the pre-Islamic era in which tribal affiliation/’*asabiyya* was an extremely powerful social force—this dynamic is well-known to have continued into the Umayyad era, despite the Qur’an’s prioritization of religious affiliation over tribal. See also Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb (d. 798), *Kitāb al-Kharāj*.

<sup>558</sup> *Kitāb al-Kharāj* 159-60.

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>560</sup> Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, 44.

<sup>561</sup> Antoine Fattal, *Le Statut Légal des non-Musulmans en Pays d’Islam* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1958), 275.

*jizya*.<sup>562</sup> This was apparently not universally accepted, and some administrators continued to levy it on converts, arguing that it was comparable to a slave accepting Islam (he did not lose liability for his taxes in doing so). They argued that some people converted to get out of paying the *jizya*, so they did not waive it. Ibn Sallām argues that this response from local tax collectors is the reason so many reports came out during the Umayyad period that state that conversion frees one from liability for the *jizya*.<sup>563</sup>

What we do know about collection of the *jizya* is that local administrators were usually in charge of collecting it; that it was usually charged only upon heads of households; that in small towns and rural areas it was often levied collectively; and that in this era there is evidence of significant tax evasion through migration (though the strongest evidence for this is in Egypt). Daniel Dennett makes the case that the *jizya* increased by 400% in urban areas of the Jazīra in the 690s, when ‘Abd al-Malik tasked a local administrator, Ḍaḥḥāk b. ‘Abd al-Raḥman, with reassessing tax collection in the region.<sup>564</sup> Ḍaḥḥāk conducted a survey of land and people, decided the proper assessment of the *jizya* was four dinars (instead of the one dinar that had been levied before), and began collecting it in coin in the countryside, rather than in kind (wheat and oil) as it had been previously collected. Dennett also writes that taxation in Syria can only be understood in the context of pre-existing Byzantine structures.<sup>565</sup> Indeed, tax structures differentiating taxes on individual versus landowners, and those of different status in the Byzantine Empire, may be traced back to Diocletian’s tax reforms and the end of the third century C.E. Iraq, particularly its *Sawād*, was famously taxed according to Persian structures, per

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<sup>562</sup> Ibn Sallām, *Kitab al-Amwal*, 44. Note the list of requirements for conversion outlined here: testimony of faith, turning toward the qibla in prayer (instead of toward the east or toward Jerusalem), and circumcision.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>564</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 46.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

the decision of ‘Umar b. Khaṭṭāb.<sup>566</sup> Given all of the other factors at play in the collection of the *jizya*, whether or not a convert paid it for the year in which he converted was likely nearly immaterial from the administration’s perspective. From the convert’s perspective, however, it would have been much more significant.

According to Ibn Sallām, *dhimmi* landowners who converted to Islam ceased paying *jizya* and began paying ‘*ushr* according to Muslim percentages, while they continued paying *kharāj* as before.<sup>567</sup> *Kharāj* land is land Muslims conquered and allowed conquered peoples who owned it to stay on it so long as they paid this tax. This was relevant whether or not the owners converted to Islam. The difference between ‘*ushr* and *kharāj*, he writes, is where the revenue is allocated: army salaries and allowances are paid from *kharāj*, while *ṣadaqa* is paid for the ‘eight categories [of people]’ as listed in the Qur’ān (9:60).<sup>568</sup> The *kharāj* is paid on the land value, while the ‘*ushr* is paid on the amount produced. There were arguments that Muslims who hold *kharāj* lands should pay *jizya* on it up to a point, then the rest of what they owe is considered *zakāt*—one man said he had experienced this.<sup>569</sup> Others contested the idea that the same person should pay *jizya* and *ṣadaqa*. All of this was purportedly decided during the conquest era, though of course Ibn Sallām lived from 774-837 C.E. and was writing in the early ninth century, well after the ‘Abbasid Revolution. The chronological lapse suggests that any major discrepancies that existed in tax policy and/or tax collection were probably addressed by the time Ibn Sallām was writing, and thus these taxation rules were guidelines to collection and were standardized and presented *ex post facto*.

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<sup>566</sup> Yahya b. Adam (d. 818 C.E.), *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, ed/tr. Ben Shemesh (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 26-7.

<sup>567</sup> Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb al-Amwal*, 84-5.

<sup>568</sup> Alms, etc. *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

## The Army and the Diwān

Duri cites Ya‘qūbī, Ṭabarī, Balādhurī, and Maqrīzī in his discussion of the army *diwān* implemented by ‘Umar, in which those who converted after the battles of Yarmūk and Qādisiyya are given 1,000 dirhams. Figures decrease from there: Yemen-affiliated tribes get 400 dirhams, while Muḍar-affiliated ones get 300. Ya‘qūbī notes that the tribe of Rabī‘a is given 200 dirhams (this is the lowest figure mentioned in this context).<sup>570</sup>

Humphreys writes that “Moreover, even during the conquest period, and more systematically under the Marwānids, there was clearly a great deal of pressure on the Syrian Arab tribesmen who had joined in the conquests (Tanūkh, Taghlib, Quḍā‘a-Kalb, Judhām) to come over to Islam. On what other basis could they possibly be registered on the payroll of a professedly Islamic regime—or not be relegated to the mass of tax and tribute-paying subjects?”<sup>571</sup>

*Mawālī* often fought in the Muslim army, including the conquests.<sup>572</sup> Duri writes that ‘Umar made the *mawālī* and Arabs equal in terms of ‘*aṭā*’, and likewise with the *mawālī* of anyone who fought at Badr.<sup>573</sup> Another account reports that ‘Umar wrote to the commanders, decreeing that whomever was a Byzantine prisoner of war who was then freed, and who then

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<sup>570</sup> ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Duri, *Early Islamic Institutions: Administration and Taxation from the Caliphate to the Umayyads and Abbasids* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 166.

<sup>571</sup> Stephen Humphreys, “Christian Communities in Early Islamic Syria and Northern Jazira: The Dynamics of Adaptation,” in *Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria*, edited by John Haldon (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 50. As we have seen elsewhere in this study, one could join the army without converting during the conquest period, though this becomes a rarity after the seventh century. Among the other reasons for this which have already been examined, perhaps it was assumed that by fighting in the army others would eventually come to accept Islam, based on social exposure or otherwise.

<sup>572</sup> Waqidi, p78-9, 168, etc.

<sup>573</sup> Abd al-‘Aziz Duri, *Early Islamic Institutions: Administration and Taxation from the Caliphate to the Umayyads and Abbasids* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), (per Abu ‘Ubayd narration), 167. By “Arabs” here Duri refers to Arabian tribes. See also Fred Donner, “Talking about Islam’s Origins,” BSOAS 81.1, 1-23.

converted to Islam, should be granted the same rights and duties as the *mawālī*. On the other hand, another narration says a group of people came to ‘Umar seeking assistance and was not granted it, as he gave to the Arabs but not the *mawālī*.<sup>574</sup> The earliest sources we have on the *diwān*<sup>575</sup> date its imposition to 20 A.H. (though this date is contested somewhat on either side).<sup>576</sup> Duri argues that the *diwāns* expanded under the Umayyads and reached full form under the Abbasids, but that it is nearly impossible to tell exactly when that happened, or how the expansion of the *diwān(s)* occurred.<sup>577</sup> According to later Muslim historians such as Balādhurī and Ibn ‘Asākir, these *diwāns* were originally maintained in local administrative languages (Greek, Persian, etc.) until the reigns of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd, in the early eighth century C.E., upon which they were switched to Arabic. However, papyrus evidence from Egypt suggests the transition to Arabic was slower than is represented by medieval historians, and bilingual documents were in use for several centuries. Syria’s administrative apparatus purportedly switched from Greek to Arabic under ‘Abd al-Malik, though our evidence for how this process occurred is lacking.<sup>578</sup>

Duri cites Ibn ‘Asākir, who reports that the patriarchs in Syria fled after the conquests, and the plantations they owned then became Muslim state land (*ṣawāfī*). Thus, Syrian land was easy to conquer, and much of it was then also available to distribute for cultivation. Evacuated homes were given to soldiers at nearby garrisons; several monks also left. Some of the land was divided up and given to major Companions; at that point only *‘ushr* was paid on it. The rest of it

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<sup>574</sup> Abd al-‘Aziz Duri, *Early Islamic Institutions: Administration and Taxation from the Caliphate to the Umayyads and Abbasids* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 167.

<sup>575</sup> Ibn Sa’d, Waqidi, etc.

<sup>576</sup> Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, *Der Diwan von ‘Umar ibn al-Hattab: ein Beitrag zur frühislamischen Verwaltungsgeschichte* (Druck: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1970), 5.

<sup>577</sup> Abd al-‘Aziz Duri, *Early Islamic Institutions: Administration and Taxation from the Caliphate to the Umayyads and Abbasids* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 168.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

was divided up and given out under temporary sharecropping agreements (*muzāra‘a*), and its produce was accepted as tax payment in kind.<sup>579</sup> As property formerly owned by Byzantine elites, some of this land was in prime locations in or near Damascus, al-Balqā’, and Ḥomṣ.<sup>580</sup>

“On Aslam, freedman of ‘Umar: ‘Umar wrote to the tax collectors instructing them to levy poll-tax only on those who were adult [males], and he fixed it at four dīnārs on those who possessed gold. He also assessed on them a subsistence tax by which each Moslem in Syria and Mesopotamia would receive two modii of wheat, and three kists of oil, and the right to be entertained as a guest for three days.”<sup>581</sup>

“Abū Hafṣ ash-Shāmi from Makhūl: Every piece of “tithe-land” in Syria is one whose people had evacuated it, and which had been given as fief to the Moslems, who, by the permission of the governors, cultivated it after it had lain as waste land claimed by no one.”<sup>582</sup>

Of course, these accounts reflect later political biases and almost certainly a narratological “smoothing” process: it is unlikely that huge tracts of desirable land in or near Syrian population centers were abandoned long enough (by their owners or tenants, or even by opportunistic locals who noticed good land was not being used and decided to move in) to allocate to soldiers in such a systematic manner. It is more likely that these accounts were intended to demonstrate an early systematization of the taxation process that did not entirely reflect actual events, and perhaps also a justification of later tax practices.

The Rabī‘a tribe was considered to be the most rural and the least desirable tribal confederation in the Umayyad army. Their payment in the *diwān* was the smallest of all the soldiers, and they were considered weak (though brave) soldiers. They were also scattered throughout the region and lacked a strong base where they could muster support, and had no base at all in Syria proper. They were often viewed as contemptible,<sup>583</sup> and thus sometimes rebelled

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<sup>579</sup> Abd al-‘Aziz Duri, *Early Islamic Institutions: Administration and Taxation from the Caliphate to the Umayyads and Abbasids* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 98.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>581</sup> Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1866), 152.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, 152. (Other standard capitulation agreements in Syria are found on pages 108-144.)

<sup>583</sup> Ṭabarī 2:1662, where Hisham says they are unfit for important governorships, etc.



against their low status. From this group purportedly came many of the eastern *khawārij*. The ranks of the *khawārij* were also made up of other tribes (like the Tamīm, purported rivals to Rabī‘a), and were portrayed as being comprised of a variety of tribal groups (not unlike the early ‘Abbasids and proto-Shī‘a), but during the late Umayyad period the Rabī‘a dominated the Kharijite ranks.

Blankinship argues that part of their continued status as weak and rebellious was likely related to the Rabī‘a’s unwillingness to convert. Taghlib made up a sizeable part of Rabī‘a, as did Bakr (both in the Syrian-Iraqi border regions). As we have seen, Taghlib in particular had a special agreement that allowed them to continue paying extra taxes and not convert. As it was, their fighting style seems to have tended toward the guerilla style of small raiding parties, which was also reflected in the attacks of the *khawārij*. It is hard to identify when Rabī‘a converted, if they did so in large numbers at any given time. By the 740s, there were a sizeable number of Muslims from the tribe.<sup>584</sup>

None of these accounts should be taken at face value. Rather, they should be read as later attempts to enshrine later legal and administrative developments in early Islamic history, and thus to standardize the early Islamic historical narrative. We have few ways of confirming the relative social power of given tribes in relation to when they converted, for example, or even of confirming when they converted at all. In this research we examine only scholars who were writing before the 850s to discern what legal (and historical, polemical, etc.) perspectives emerged before the 850s, but beyond date of authorship as the end of the window in which a particular view emerged, we cannot definitively assess the origins of any of these perspectives.

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<sup>584</sup> Khalid Blankinship, *The End of the Jihad State* (Syracuse: SUNY Press, 1994), 55-56. (For more on Akhtal’s Christianity, see Isbahani, *kitab al-aghani*, v8, pp3036, 3052, 3056, 3063.)

## Apostasy

Apostasy (*ridda* or *irtidād*) is the most comprehensively covered topic relating to conversion; it is synonymous with conversion from Islam. The convert-apostate, the *murtadd*, is subject to the death penalty, though with different stipulations depending on the context. It is clear that differences in how to treat different apostates emerged very early in the legal literature. The Encyclopaedia of Islam's entry for *murtadd* covers many of these differences.

As noted previously, apostasy is addressed in the Qur'ān (16:108-9, 3:82-5, 4:136, 5:59, 9:67, 2:214); for example, 16:108 notes that the apostate will receive the wrath of God in the next life. Exceptions are made if one converts under compulsion and maintains correct belief in secret (false conversion, specifically false and coerced conversion), or if one repents of apostasy. Sura 2:214 is the source for al-Shāfi'ī's assessment that apostasy commands the death penalty.<sup>585</sup> There are also a number of hadiths that support this assessment. Ibn Maja's *Hudūd* contains a section focused on apostasy, including hadiths on the death penalty, as do Ibn Ḥanbal, Malik, Bukhārī, Tirmidhī, and Abū Dawūd.<sup>586</sup>

There are differing opinions on whether apostates may be given time to retract their conversions, and which apostates may do so. Some hadiths suggest this should not be permitted at all, while others suggest Muḥammad forgave apostates and thus it is permitted.<sup>587</sup> Others

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<sup>585</sup> EI2, *Murtadd*.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., citing (Ibn Mādja, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 2; Ibn Ḥanbal, i, 409, 430, 464-5; v, 4, 5). (Ibn Mādja, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 2; al-Nasā'ī, *Taḥrīm al-dam*, *bāb* 14; al-Ṭayālīsī, no. 2689; Mālik, *Aḥḍiyā*, tr. 15; cf. also al-Bukhārī, *Istīṭābat al-murtaddīn*, *bāb* 2; al-Tirmidhī, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 25; Abū Dāwūd, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 1; Ibn Ḥanbal, i, 217, 282, 322). (al-Bukhārī, *Diyāt*, *bāb* 6; Muslim, *Ḳasāma*, tr. 25, 26; al-Nasā'ī, *Taḥrīm al-dam*, *bāb* 5, 14; *Ḳasāma*, *bāb* 6; Ibn Mādja, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 1; Abū Dāwūd, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 1; al-Tirmidhī, *Diyāt*, *bāb* 10; *Fitan*, *bāb* 1; Ibn Ḥanbal, i, 382, 444). (al-Bukhārī, *Istīṭābat al-murtaddīn*, *bāb* 2; al-Tirmidhī, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 25; Abū Dāwūd, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 1; Ibn Ḥanbal, i, 217; al-Nasā'ī, *Taḥrīm al-dam*, *bāb* 14; Ibn Ḥanbal, i, 282, 322). (al-Nasā'ī, *Taḥrīm al-dam*, *bāb* 11; *Ḳasāma*, *bāb* 13; Abū Dāwūd, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 1).

<sup>587</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Maghāzī*, *bāb* 60; *Istīṭābat al-murtaddīn*, *bāb* 2; *Aḥkām*, *bāb* 12; Muslim, *Imāra*, tr. 15; Abū Dāwūd, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 1; Ibn Ḥanbal, v, 231. Ibn Ḥanbal, v, 2. al-Nasā'ī, *Taḥrīm al-dam*, *bābs* 14, 15; Abū Dāwūd, *Hudūd*, *bāb* 1; Ibn Ḥanbal, i, 247; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, iii, 223.

suggest waiting three nights for an apostate to retract his or her conversion, or three attempts to convert him or her back to Islam;<sup>588</sup> Malik’s *Muwatta’* includes a hadith in which the caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb questions the value of executing those convicted of apostasy without first giving them a three-day waiting period to reconsider.<sup>589</sup> Uriel Simonsohn notes that Ibn Ḥanbal also encouraged delays in execution once an apostate had been sentenced.<sup>590</sup> Al-Khallāl notes that Ibn Ḥanbal’s *responsae* were filled with Muslims with Christian mothers, neighbors, slaves, lovers, business partners, and, perhaps most surprisingly, fellow soldiers in raids against the Byzantines.<sup>591</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal seems particularly concerned about cases of travel with non-Muslims in which that individual dies—what should one do with the body? He concludes that one can bury the body, but not wash it or recite prayers over it.<sup>592</sup>

Capital punishment for apostasy is limited to adult males of sound mind who did not convert under duress or compulsion. According to Ḥanafī (particularly Abū Yūsuf’s) and early Shī‘ī writings, female apostates should be imprisoned until they retract their conversions, whereas Awzā‘ī and Ibn Ḥanbal, along with the Malikīs and Shāfi‘īs, argue that she is also liable for the death penalty.<sup>593</sup> We see in the prohibition of marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men an implicit understanding in Islam of men (specifically husbands and fathers) as the keepers of religion within the household. Yet this is also not assumed to be a given: hence

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<sup>588</sup> Malik b. Anas, *al-Muwatta’*, ed. M.F. ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo, 1951).

<sup>589</sup> Malik b. Anas, *al-Muwatta’*, ed. M.F. ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo, 1951), v.2, 459., cf. Uriel Simonsohn, “Conversion, Apostasy and Penance: The Shifting Identities of Muslim Converts in the Early Islamic Period.” In *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn, and Daniel L. Schwartz (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 207.

<sup>590</sup> Uriel Simonsohn, “Conversion, Apostasy and Penance: The Shifting Identities of Muslim Converts in the Early Islamic Period.” In *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn, and Daniel L. Schwartz (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 208.

<sup>591</sup> Thomas Szigorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2009), 259; al-Khallāl, *Ahl al-Milal*, ed. al-Sultān, 291 (#602-5).

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 260, Khallāl 297.

<sup>593</sup> Al-Tirmidhī. *Hudūd, bāb 25*; Shafi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, v.1, 231.

the stipulation that if a Muslim man marries a non-Muslim woman, the offspring are to be raised Muslim. In this view, apostasy by a man is a much more serious event than apostasy by a woman—in demographic terms, a man’s apostasy signifies the loss of an entire household, whereas that of a woman signifies herself. Another possibility, also related to demographic concerns (which is to say population numbers) is conscription: by the late eighth/early ninth century, only Muslim men were in the caliphal army, and so the loss of a Muslim man also represented the loss of a potential soldier. Some early scholars differentiated between apostates who were born into the faith and those who had converted to Islam and were now converting ‘away’ (EI2 cites ‘Aṭā’ (d. 115/733), the Zāhirīs, and the early Shī‘īs in this practice). Upon retracting a conversion and rejoining Islam, someone imprisoned for apostasy should be free to go, according to al-Shāfi‘ī and Abū Yūsuf.<sup>594</sup>

As a non-Muslim, an apostate may not be buried according to Muslim ritual, and any property owned by him or her is considered *fay*’ (according to the Malikīs and al-Shāfi‘ī) unless he or she ritually returns to the faith, after which it is supposedly returned to him or her, though of course this would have been near-impossible if the land had been given away in the intervening period (legally the amount of time given to retract an apostasy was advised to extend no more than a few days, though some of our martyrologies describe months-long imprisonment).<sup>595</sup> The Ḥanafīs do not require the return of this property upon return to the faith, and any return of remaining property does not require one to compensate for property lost or sold during the apostasy. After the death of an apostate or his defection to non-Muslim lands, his or her property is divided among legal heirs, any slaves are freed, and all other legal arrangements

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<sup>594</sup> al-Shāfi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, v.1, 228; Abū Yūsuf, *Kharāj*, 109.

<sup>595</sup> al-Shāfi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, v.1, 231.

are null (thus equating emigration to the *dār al-ḥarb* with death!).<sup>596</sup> If an apostate returns to Islam, he or she may be liable for crimes committed before the apostasy (including payment of *diyya*, blood money), but not during the period in which he or she was an apostate.<sup>597</sup> This seems to present something of a conflict of interest: a person could claim apostasy, whether true or false, for a period of time in which he or she committed crimes, and while such an admission would be dangerous due to the threat of capital punishment, “returning” to Islam would essentially absolve that person of any crime, including capital crimes. Of course, as with any other crime, witnesses to the apostasy would be required, though one wonders if the witnesses would need to testify as to whether the defendant’s apostasy occurred prior to the committing of a crime, or if witnessing apostasy after the crime was sufficient (assuming the defendant claimed the apostasy occurred prior to it).

### Marriage and Conversion

Marriage played a central role in legal discussions of conversion in both Muslim and Christian contexts, which suggests that its effects on conversion in the region were significant. Fattal writes that Malik, Shāfi‘ī and Abū Yūsuf discuss the legal standing of a non-Muslim woman who is married to a *dhimmī* and converts to Islam. If the marriage has not been consummated, it is dissolved, because a Muslim woman cannot be married to a non-Muslim man. If it has been consummated, the marriage ends at the end of the ‘*idda*, and only if the man does not also convert to Islam during that time. If he does, the marriage is upheld. According to Abū Ḥanīfa, whether the marriage is consummated or not, if the man converts, it is maintained.

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<sup>596</sup> Al-Sarakhsī. *Siyar*, v.4, 152; cf. Abū Yūsuf, *Kharāj*, 111.

<sup>597</sup> Al-Shāfi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, v.1, 231.

If the man does not convert, the marriage is ended by divorce, pronounced by the qādī. The woman has rights to the dowry if the marriage was consummated (all, according to Malik; some, according to Abū Ḥanīfa and al-Shāfi‘ī), but not if it was not.<sup>598</sup> If a married couple of *dhimmi*s decides to convert, it is permitted so long as any existing kinship relationship between the two is not prohibited by Islam (if so, divorce must happen). If the marriage takes place without sufficient witnesses, according to Islamic law, this is not reason to break the marriage, according to Abū Ḥanīfa, Malik, Shāfi‘ī, Shaybānī and Abū Yūsuf. In contrast, the marriage of an apostate (a convert away from Islam) of either gender is automatically annulled. Thus, early regulations around marriage and conversion are lenient in the case of conversion *to* Islam (even in the case of conversion or ‘reversion’ to Islam after apostasy), while they are rather strict, and indeed life-changing, in the case of conversion away from Islam, even in the case of one’s spouse and not oneself.

Here we may note an apparent contradiction in early Islamic legal stances toward conversion. The Qur’ān sets out very clear restrictions on leaving the Muslim community: apostates are liable for the death penalty. Early Muslim legal scholars proscribed the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men; indeed, if a Muslim man apostatizes, his Muslim wife must leave the marriage, thus creating multiple disincentives for leaving Islam. Yet the Qur’ān discourages forced conversions. From an early Islamic administrative perspective, non-Muslim taxpayers within the caliphate (outside of the *rida* wars of the Arabian Peninsula, which occurred in the 630s) were not forced to convert. Only during the initial conquests were they encouraged to convert (in that group submission to Islam, linked to conscription of men into the

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<sup>598</sup> Gerrit J. Reinink, “Following the Doctrine of the Demons: Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam,” Jan N. Bremmer, Wout J. van Bekkum and Arie L. Molendijk, eds. *Cultures of Conversions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 135.

army) was purportedly presented as one of three options to conquered population centers, the most commonly accepted other option being payment of the poll-tax, which ostensibly freed one from the requirement of army service). By the Umayyad era, conversion was at times discouraged due to concerns about a potential loss in tax revenue (non-Muslims paid higher taxes than Muslims, as we have seen).

It is not really possible to explore the motivations of the Qur'ān's apparent contradictions here beyond the traditional historical narrative of Islam's origins: proscription of apostasy is in line with the desire to increase a religion's number of followers (presented as salvation), whereas discouragement of forced conversion (e.g. "there is no compulsion in religion/religious law," as in Qur'ān 2:256, or "to your religion, and to me my religion," in 109:6) may relate to the early community's lack of power outside its own members—in Arabia, during most of Muḥammad's lifetime, forced conversions were not possible, and once they were (e.g. after the conquest of Mecca), they often were not politically expedient. Again, the only instances of large-scale forced conversions we have are the *ridda* wars, and from the early Islamic perspective this was a fight against mass apostasy, not forcing non-Muslims to become entirely new members of the faith.

From a post-630s administrative perspective, apostasy remained a red line for the caliphate, but for financial reasons, non-conversion of local populations was preferable and could be accepted within the Qur'ān's legal boundaries. It is probable that Umayyad and 'Abbasid administrators were trying to balance the need for a sizeable army, mostly or entirely comprised of Muslims after the seventh century, with the need for sufficient tax revenue to pay for that army, among other administrative expenses. The fact that Muslim men who married non-Muslim women were legally required to raise their children as Muslims (while Muslim women could not even marry non-Muslim men, and thus would not raise non-Muslim children) may have factored

into this equation: perhaps, they figured, from a demographic standpoint, the “Islamization” of any given region within the caliphate would take care of itself, and thus both army and population numbers would, as well.

### Inheritance and Slavery

Non-Muslims may not inherit from Muslims, which means that *dhimmīs* who convert to Islam may not leave their descendants and relatives any inheritance unless those family members also convert to Islam. This is universally agreed upon among *madhhabs*, though whether members of different faiths may inherit from one another (e.g. Christians from Jews) is disputed.<sup>599</sup> Such a requirement discourages one from converting to or from any religion in an isolated social context. However, if one has converted to Islam and has potential inheritors, this regulation would encourage conversion of relatives who stand to inherit from the convert. One also wonders if this restriction on inheritances, something that may not have been publicly known by non-Muslims, could have been a factor in conversion back to Christianity—a phenomenon dealt with at length in church canons throughout the late antique and medieval eras.

There are many regulations that cover slavery, but only a handful about conversion of a slave. A non-Muslim may not keep a Muslim slave. Muslims are not to enslave other Muslims, but if a non-Muslim slave converts to Islam, it is not required to manumit him or her if the owner is a Muslim. The term most often used is *mawla* (or related words from its root, *wala* ’), which has an ambiguous meaning which can suggest ownership (slavery), friendship, or a kinship-clientage system, which was often used for early converts who by necessity sought the protection

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<sup>599</sup> Freidenreich 106; Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35-58; 106-59 and Fattal, *Statut legal*.



of a tribe. The so-called Constitution of Medina uses the term *mawla/mawālī* frequently, in what may be either of the latter two definitions. Khalifa b. Khayyat's *Ta'rīkh* notes a large number of *mawālī* in the army and the administration.<sup>600</sup> Some of these client relationships were purely tribal in nature, but a few of the *mawālī* were clearly Christian converts or would-be converts.

### Boundaries and Restrictions

Boundaries on Christians, and requirements that they visibly differentiate themselves from Muslims in the public sphere, emerge from time to time. Some of these restrictions seem to be reducible to polemical perspectives (perhaps even whims) held by individual caliphs.<sup>601</sup> In 850, the caliph al-Mutawakkil ordered Christians to wear yellow *zunnārs*, churches built after the conquests destroyed, and one tenth of Christian homes turned over to the government; that all Christians leave the administration or any position of authority over Muslims, and that they not display the cross on Palm Sunday.<sup>602</sup> Sometimes the prevalence of such requirements is not clear. The most famous edict restricting the actions and appearance of Christians and the church is the so-called "Pact of 'Umar," of uncertain origin. The Pact of 'Umar is said to have been written at the time of the Syrian conquest (specifically as part of the Byzantine surrender in 637, in which Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, surrendered on condition that he surrender personally to Caliph 'Umar), and addresses interactions between Muslim conquerors and the Christians of Syria. Given that the regulations stipulated in it are far stricter than others we have seen from this

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<sup>600</sup> *Ta'rīkh Khalifa b. Khayyāt*, ed. Akram 'Usfuri (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, 1977), *passim*.

<sup>601</sup> David M. Freidenreich writes that jurists from the Malikī school tend to be far more concerned with the ability to distinguish Christians from Muslims by appearance (this likely has to do with their prevalence in Spain, where the issue was more of a concern). David M. Freidenreich, "Christians in early and classical Sunnī law," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 105.

<sup>602</sup> Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 164.

time period, it is unlikely to be authentic. Much speculation has been made about its authenticity, its date, and its authorship (of which there is no specific one), but it is probably from the ninth century, perhaps the early ninth century. Multiple versions exist, and its authenticity has been called into question for centuries by Muslims and Christians alike.<sup>603</sup> It reads:

We heard from 'Abd al-Raḥman ibn Ghannam (d. 78/697): When Umar ibn al-Khattab, may God be pleased with him, accorded a peace to the Christians of Syria, we wrote to him as follows:

“In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful. This is a writing to ‘Umar from the Christians of such and such a city. When you marched against us we asked of you protection for ourselves, our posterity, our possessions, and our co-religionists, and we made this stipulation with you, that we will not erect in our city or the suburbs any new monastery, church, cell or hermitage; that we will not repair any of such building that may fall into ruins, or renew those that may be situated in the Muslim quarters of town; that we will not refuse the Muslims entry into our churches either by night or by day; that we will open the gates wide to passengers and travelers; that we will receive any Muslim traveler into our houses and give him food and lodging for three nights; that we will not harbor any spy in our churches or houses or conceal any enemy of the Muslims.

That we will not teach our children the Qur’ān, that we will not make a show of the Christian religion nor invite anyone to embrace it; that we will not prevent any of our kinsmen from embracing Islam if they so desire. That we will honor the Muslims and rise up in our assemblies when they wish to take their seats; that we will not imitate them in our dress, either in the cap, turban, sandals, or parting of the hair; that we will not make use of their expressions of speech, nor adopt their surnames; that we will not ride on saddles, or gird on swords, or take to ourselves arms or wear them, or engrave Arabic in inscriptions on our rings; that we will not sell wine; that we will shave the front of our head; that we will keep to our own style of dress, wherever we may be; that we will wear belts round our waists.

That we will not display the cross upon our churches or display our crosses or our sacred books in the streets of the Muslims or in the market-places; that we will strike the clappers in our churches lightly; that we will not recite our services in a loud voice when a Muslim is present; that we will not carry palm-branches or our images [icons] in procession in the streets; that at the burial of our dead we will not chant loudly or carry lighted candles in the streets of the Muslims or their market-places; that we will not take any slaves that have already been in the possession of the Muslims; nor spy into their houses; and that we will not strike any Muslims.

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<sup>603</sup> Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60-2.

All this we promise to observe, on behalf of ourselves and our co-religionists, and receive protection from you in exchange; and if we violate any of the conditions of this agreement, then we forfeit your protection and you are at liberty to treat us as enemies and rebels.”<sup>604</sup>

It is unclear which religion the author adhered to: it could have been a Muslim, writing a false precedent for such restrictions into existence. It could have been a Christian, writing a text with outrageous demands placed upon Christians in order to stoke fear of Muslim administrative overreach. Stephen Humphreys lays out clearly that there were plenty of repairs and new developments of churches and monasteries during this period, including Mu‘āwīya’s financing of the repairs of the church of Edessa, which was destroyed in an earthquake.<sup>605</sup> At least six of the laws in the first section were taken over from earlier Christian laws against unbelievers. However, it was later used in the creation of legal rights and restrictions on Christians in the public sphere, and therefore may be considered a legal document worthy of examination, if only for the purpose of precedent.

### Rituals of Conversion to Christianity from Islam: Education and Process

Daniel Sahas argues that conversion from Islam to Christianity probably was not prevalent until the late ninth century or early tenth, “after the Byzantines had scored some significant victories over the Arabs and had reclaimed some of the former Byzantine territories.”<sup>606</sup> This statement was made in the context of a study of a text likely from the twelfth

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<sup>604</sup> In Noble and Treiger, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 275-6.

<sup>605</sup> Humphreys, “Christian communities,” in *Money, Power and Politics*, 2010.

<sup>606</sup> Daniel Sahas, “Ritual of Conversion from Islam to the Byzantine Church,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36.1 (1991), 59.

century C.E., commonly attributed to Niketas Choniates (c.1155-1215/6); some scholars question this authorship and place it as early as the eighth or ninth century, but most place it between the tenth and the twelfth. The text outlines the process of conversion from Islam to Christianity. Sahas argues that some elements suggest this process was designed for re-converts, but others suggest it was for people completely new to the religion, so it is unclear. There is a multi-step process of education, ritual and engagement, including fasting, creedal lessons, baptism, and presentation before the congregation.

Sahas argues it could be based on another Greek text from the mid-ninth century, the “Order about those various persons and ages who have denounced and are returning to the Orthodox and true faith.”<sup>607</sup> This text was written by Methodios, Patriarch of Constantinople 843-7 (and an iconophile). Sahas assumes that the reference here is most likely to Muslims rather than Jews, pagans or Manichaeans (he does not mention Christians who join ‘heretical’ sects). Missionaries with the specific goal of reconverting Christians who had converted to Islam appear in the tenth century (Sahas discusses St. Nikon the “Metanoite” (d. 998) who does this in Crete after its conquest by the Byzantines in 961).<sup>608</sup> This would have been extremely dangerous in any region actually controlled by Muslims (and even areas under Byzantine rule, though far less so). Methodios has separate rules for captured children who converted out of fear or ignorance. The children must pray for a week and then are given new clothes to symbolize that they are newly baptized, without actually rebaptizing them. Young people who convert after being tortured must fast for two Lents, then they go through a similar process to the children involving prayer and ‘symbolic’ baptism, but not rebaptism. Adults who have chosen to convert away and convert

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid., 62.

back willingly may be let into the church, but may not receive communion again until the end of their lives (according to Canon 73 of St. Basil (d. 379 C.E.)).<sup>609</sup>

As with the canons of St. Basil, many of the rituals of reconversion seem to borrow from pre-Islamic precedents involving people leaving the church for paganism, or converting to a ‘heretical’ sect. Sahas writes that Methodios’ rituals are closely related to those of Timothios, who wrote a treatise, “Regarding those who are coming into the holy Church,” for converts in 622 C.E.—before the church would have known or understood Muḥammad’s movement.<sup>610</sup> It divided converts among those who have to be baptized, those who have to be chrismed (a sacrament formally signifying one is a member of the church) but not baptized, and those who have done both but must denounce all heretical sects by name, including the one they converted from. Among Christians, Sahas notes, the Gnostics would fall under the first category, Arians under the second and Nestorians under the third. Sahas wonders what an early convert from Islam would have done, given that many early scholars classified Islam as a Christian heresy—some classified it as Arian while others thought it was Nestorian. He also suggests that the Byzantine Church may not have known how to deal with Muslim converts to Christianity during the early period, and perhaps Methodios’ rules were a way of addressing the issue.<sup>611</sup> It may have also been adapted from eighth-century rules about converting to Christianity from Judaism (e.g. Second Council of Nicaea, 787 C.E., focused on genuine vs. false conversions from Judaism).<sup>612</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Daniel Sahas, “Ritual of Conversion from Islam to the Byzantine Church,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36.1 (1991), 63.

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-6.

<sup>612</sup> Daniel Sahas, “Ritual of Conversion from Islam to the Byzantine Church,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36.1 (1991), 67.

Conversion to Christianity, from a Christian legal perspective, reflects Christian understandings of conversion as linked with the inner spiritual transformation of personal belief. This is reflected in the development of a catechism of sorts for converts who are truly new to the faith, especially those from Islam, as well as a process of re-opening the faith to those who left Christianity for Islam and returned to it. (The requirement that those who were once baptized should not be rebaptized has echoes in the aftermath of the schisms of the third through fifth centuries C.E., particularly whether rebaptism was necessary if one was baptized by a priest or bishop who was later deemed a traitor or heretic.) Ultimately, catechetical instruction was a doctrinal and moral initiative intended to educate and prepare new converts for baptism. This may have as much to do with Christian ideas of belief and conversion's connection to it as it does to the fact that Christianity no longer permeated the public sphere the way it did under the Byzantines (at least for Syria and parts of the Jazīra). An education, or reeducation, was necessary because culture no longer reflected Christian belief systems and practices. Muslim legal responses to conversion, as we have seen, reflect different social conditions and different concerns.

In his article on Christian canon law about Muslims, David M. Freidenreich differentiates between "Islamic law," which developed in the Muslim tradition, from "Saracen law," Christian laws about Muslims (this distinction is drawn directly from parallel legal relationships between Christians and Jews).<sup>613</sup> He argues that "Saracen law" from the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. covers two major categories: how to deal with Muslims in power, and regulations on Muslim-Christian interactions.<sup>614</sup> The earliest legal responses were orders to monks in response to the conquests

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<sup>613</sup> David M. Freidenreich, "Muslims in Canon Law, 650-1000," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 83-98, 85.

<sup>614</sup> David M. Freidenreich, "Muslims in Canon Law, 650-1000," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 86.

themselves: in 692, bishops met at the Council of Trullo in Constantinople and ordered any church leaders who abandoned their posts during “barbarian incursions” return to them once things had calmed down. Migrating to Byzantine territory with one’s followers was promoted. The fact that travel to synods from Muslim lands was more difficult was acknowledged in the canons. In 676, George I (Catholicos of the Church of the East) ruled that Christians could not seek judgment from non-Christian judges.<sup>615</sup> Timothy I issued ninety-nine canons in the early ninth century in response to the fact that Christians regularly turn to non-Muslim courts, so the church could not settle disputes appropriately—one chapter addresses non-Muslim courts in particular.

### Interactions with Muslims

Pre-Islamic Christian jurists had three categories of non-Christians: heretics, Jews, and pagans. Muslims were placed in the ‘pagan’ category, as might be surmised by Syriac terminology for them, but also in the context of legal categories. Christians could not share food/meals with pagans, nor could they have sexual relations with them or adopt their cultural practices, so these were also applied to Muslims—at least in theory, or according to edict. Yet it is clear that they did these things (with pagans generally or Muslims; by the end of the seventh century it is hard to discern what terms like *ḥanpē* did and did not signify).<sup>616</sup> Athanasius of Balad, Syrian orthodox patriarch of Antioch wrote a letter about this exact issue (engaging in ‘*ḥanpē*’ practices) in 684 C.E. Jacob of Edessa also forbids eating with Muslims (again, *ḥanpē*, whose association with Muslims will be explored later in this chapter), but creates exceptions for

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<sup>615</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid., 90-1.

clergy eating with heretical rulers. He then extends that exemption to cover meals with other Muslim officials.<sup>617</sup> Marrying one's daughter to a pagan, a Muslim, or a Nestorian was condemned by George I, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch (d. 785 C.E.), in the Nestorian Synod of George I (785 C.E.), as was the marrying of two women or the taking of concubines by any married Christian man. Marrying a daughter to a man of the wrong religion barred father and daughter from entering the church, and men who married multiple women or took concubines were ex-communicated if they did not repent.<sup>618</sup> Jacob of Edessa allows Christian women who have married Muslim men to take communion, however, on grounds that not allowing them to do so would encourage conversion to Islam.<sup>619</sup>

Gabriel of Basra forbids the hiring of a *nawwāḥa*, which is a female funeral wailer. His use of the Arabic in a Syriac text, Freidenreich argues, indicates that he considers this a Muslim practice, and therefore should be forbidden, despite the fact that Muslim jurists also condemned the practice (which was likely a pre-Islamic Arabian custom). Freidenreich argues that in this case, it is possible that authorities in both religions were fighting to uproot a local custom that they found reprehensible. Dionysius I, Patriarch of Antioch from 817-45, forbade Christians from circumcising their children, on grounds that it was a pagan and Jewish custom. (Circumcision has been used as an identifying marker of pseudo-converts to Christianity in some of the martyrdoms covered in previous chapters.) Jacob of Edessa also rules that church doors must be locked during services so that Muslims cannot enter the sanctuary and mock Christians. At the same time, he encourages clergy to offer blessed items to Muslims and pagans for healing

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<sup>617</sup> David M. Freidenreich, "Muslims in Canon Law, 650-1000," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 91-2.

<sup>618</sup> J.B. Chabot, *Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 224.

<sup>619</sup> Penn, 164-5.



purposes, essentially arguing that such actions and items represented soft power on the part of the Church. He also permits clergy to teach the children of Muslims when the need arises.<sup>620</sup>

### Reversion

The rituals surrounding conversion to Christianity also developed significantly, particularly in the late eighth and early ninth centuries C.E. Many of these rituals seem to have ‘reverts’ in mind, or individuals who converted away from Christianity and then back to it.<sup>621</sup> Some explicitly address converts from Islam: the Greek Orthodox’s ninth-century conversion ritual requires the convert to reject “Moamed also known as Mouchoumet” along with the Qur’ān, various Islamic teachings, the family and associates of the Prophet, and even Mecca and the ‘God of Muḥammad.’ The title of the guide refers to ‘Saracens’ who ‘return’ to Christianity, suggesting that most converts to Christianity from Islam were perhaps once Christian converts to Islam.<sup>622</sup> Jacob of Edessa also addresses the issue, forbidding the rebaptism of anyone who had previously been Christian, as he viewed them as having never truly left the faith. The dispute over whether baptism was required of re-converts or reverts harks back to the fourth century Donatist schism, in which one of the issues church leaders dealt with in the aftermath was whether bishops who had opposed the church’s creeds were required to be rebaptized, or if they could even reenter the church at all. Along the same lines, he allowed deathbed conversion from

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<sup>620</sup> David M. Freidenreich, “Muslims in Canon Law, 650-1000,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 94.

<sup>621</sup> As noted in Chapter One, the term "revert" is used today by Muslims to refer to people who convert to Islam, based on the idea that all people are born Muslim, thus converts are simply ‘reverting’ to their 'original' religion.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Islam to Christianity, though with tiers of more or less preferred ways of doing so (the most preferred way involving some kind of penance ordered by a bishop).

We may note, based on the details above, that Jacob of Edessa was particularly lenient toward converts to Christianity who had left the faith for Islam. Perhaps this was because of the dangers of converting back to Christianity: if found out, former Muslims could be put to death for apostasy, and perhaps Jacob felt that such a move already carried enough threat of punishment to suffice as penance (perhaps literal and figurative). But perhaps more likely was the newness of Islam during his lifetime, which spanned the seventh century from the conquests to the end of the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik. It is not clear, for much of it, what Christians may have thought they were converting to, and perhaps as this was becoming more clear to both Christians and Muslims, many converts to Islam from Christianity realized that they were actually leaving a faith, instead of subscribing to one sect of it over another.

### Inheritance

The issue of inheritance comes up rather quickly in the Christian legal literature. Can a convert to Islam from Christianity leave money to Christian relatives, per both Muslim and Christian legists? What of the opposite scenario? Timothy I argues that Christians may leave inheritance to Muslims only if they are pious and no Christians live in the area.<sup>623</sup> Jacob of Edessa lays out rules for using altars and food vessels that Muslims have used. Holy relics that have been handled by Muslims do not lose their power, for example. Various popes attempted to

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<sup>623</sup> David M. Freidenreich, “Muslims in Canon Law, 650-1000,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 96, see also Labourt, *De Timotheo I*, 80-1.

stop the sale of Christians as slaves to the Muslims in the eighth century (Zachary, Hadrian), just as Christians were not allowed to be sold as slaves to Jews.<sup>624</sup> Mark Cohen notes that prior to the Islamic conquests, Byzantine territories were run according to the Justinianic Codex, which forbade the ownership of Christian slaves by Jews.<sup>625</sup> While many of those lands found themselves under Muslim rule by the 640s, ‘Umayyad administrators were often Christians and former Byzantine administrators, thus perhaps inclined to incorporate prior practice when a legal response was lacking.<sup>626</sup>

### Canons on Conversion and Interaction with Muslims

George I

George I (Mar Ghiwarghis, d.680-1) served as *catholicos* in Adiabene from 660/1-680/1. The canons issued by him are from 676, the result of a synod he held in Bahrain. The canons decree that Christian disputes should be settled within the church’s legal system, rather than in front of Muslim (*ḥanpē*) judges (Canon 6); that women should not unite with or marry pagans (*ḥanpē*, Canon 14); and that bishops should be exempt from the *jizya*, which appears to have been something local Christian populations actually had some control over.<sup>627</sup> This early text is representative of Syriac legal texts from the seventh century in that it does not refer to Muslims directly, but uses the term *ḥanpē*, pagans, to describe practices or situations involving Muslims.

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<sup>624</sup> David M. Freidenreich, “Muslims in Canon Law, 650-1000,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Vol. 1 (600-900), ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 96-7.

<sup>625</sup> Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 55; “Novel 37 (Authenticum 39), Concerning the African Church (De Africana ecclesia: Justinian to Salomon, Praetorian Prefect of Africa),” *Annotated Justinian Code*, tr. Fred H. Blume, ed. Timothy Kearley. [www.uwo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian](http://www.uwo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian). Accessed May 7, 2018.

<sup>626</sup> Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 56.

<sup>627</sup> <sup>627</sup> J.B. Chabot, *Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 224.

Thus, while *ḥanpē* can still refer to pagans, Muslims are lumped under this category for legal purposes in the seventh century. The frequent use of *ḥanpē* to describe Muslims is unique to these early legal canons; in other genres, *mhaggrāyē* or *ṭayyāyē* is more frequently used, and by the eighth century, that is the case in Syriac legal texts, as well.

#### Athanasius of Balad

Athanasius was Miaphysite (Syrian Orthodox) patriarch from 684-7 at Qenneshrē. His encyclical, *Egartā d-ṭibtānā Atanāsīus paṭriarkā meṭul hāy d-lā nēkul (')nāsh kristyānā min debḥē da-Mhaggrāyē hālen d-hāshā aḥidin / Letter of the Blessed Patriarch Athanasius on that no Christian should eat of the sacrifices of those Hagarenes who are now in power (684 C.E.)* forbids certain interactions with Muslims. He commands rural bishops and traveling priests to better regulate interactions between Christians and pagans (*ḥanpē*), which almost assuredly means Muslims. He focuses especially on Christian women marrying them (and on Christians eating with Muslims).<sup>628</sup> This letter is preserved in Chronicle of Zuqnīn, and is concerned with eating the food of Muslims, but it is especially concerned about women interacting with Muslims in any way. Hoyland notes that the use of *ḥanpē* is unusual for the time period, during which *ṭayyāyē* and *mhaggrāyē* are more often used to describe Arabs/Muslims, respectively.<sup>629</sup>

As noted above, the results of this project suggest that the use of '*ḥanpē*' to denote Muslims was almost exclusively a seventh-century legal phenomenon, while *mhaggrāyē* and *ṭayyāyē* are found in early historical and polemical works. The term *ḥanpē* was used for legal purposes: while *ṭayyāyē* likely referred to Arabians and/or tribal nomads, it did not speak to

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<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 82-4.

<sup>629</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 148.

religious affiliation; one could be *ṭayyāyā* and Christian, and indeed several tribes were. *Mhaggrāyē*, too, did not necessarily have a separate religion, 1) because the term literally denoted émigrés, and 2) because Syriac scholarship had not yet identified the *mhaggrāyē* as having a separate, distinct religion in the seventh century. Thus, lumping them in with pagans made the most sense from the perspective of placing them into a legal category. Yet, as we will see, this is corrected by the early eighth century, when Jacob of Edessa refers to *mhaggrāyē* as having a separate religion. This is our earliest case of the *mhaggrāyē* occupying their own legal category in the Syriac literature due to having a separate religion.

#### Jacob of Edessa

Jacob of Edessa (Syrian Orthodox, d. 708) is “by far the most prolific pre-1000 legal authority on the subject of Muslims.”<sup>630</sup> Jacob (c. 640-June 708 C.E.) was born outside of Aleppo and studied at the monastery of Qinnasrin. He was appointed metropolitan of Edessa, but only held the post for three to four years due to opposition to his overly strict enforcement of canons. Some years later, in 708 C.E., he was appointed bishop of Edessa, but died four months after taking leadership. As previously mentioned, his canons are relatively lenient with those who have intermarried with Muslims or have converted to Islam and now seek to convert back to Christianity.

“Further Questions of Addai ... Q. 75: “Concerning a Christian woman who of her own free will marries a Muslim (*mhaggrāyā*), is it appropriate for priests to give communion to her and is there a known canon regarding this? And if her husband threatens to kill the priest if he

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid., 89.

does not give communion to her, is it right for him to consent temporarily while he (the husband) is seeking that he (the priest) be killed, or is it a sin for him to consent? Or is it better that he give her communion lest she become a Muslim, since her husband is compassionate towards the Christians?”

Jacob’s reply is: “All these doubts of yours, you have resolved them [yourself] in that you have said it is appropriate that communion be given to her lest she become a Muslim; [just] so that she does not then become a Muslim—even if it be that the priest is sinning when he gives [it] to her and even if her husband is not making threats—it would be right to give her communion and it would not be a sin for him because he gives [it] to her. As for the other thing that you say, is a canon known regarding this, you should conduct yourself [according to what I have said] even if there is no fear of her apostatizing and her husband is not making threats. So that other women fear lest they too stumble and for the rebuke of that particular woman, it is right, however much she supplicates those in authority, that she suffer under the canons whatever she is able to bear.”<sup>631</sup>

Here Jacob is highly lenient towards women who marry Muslims, for fear they will convert to Islam if they are ostracized by the church. Later that perspective would change significantly as conversion to Islam likely became more frequent within the context of a marriage, and as more Christian women raised Muslim children.

Letter #16 to Addai: “If he is about to die, is a priest permitted to pardon someone who became a Hagarene or became a pagan?” Jacob responds: “If he is about to die and a bishop is not near, [the priest] is permitted to pardon him, give him the Eucharist, and bury him if he dies.

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<sup>631</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 604-5.

But if he lives, [the priest] should bring him to a bishop and [the bishop] should impose on him a penance that he knows he is able to bear.”<sup>632</sup>

Here, too, Jacob is lenient to those who converted to Islam and wish to convert back on their deathbeds—perhaps because the fear of capital punishment prevented them from doing so earlier.

#13 to John (Harvard Syr. 93, fols. 42b-43b): “if a Christian should become a Hagarene or a pagan and, after awhile, he should regret [this] and return from his paganism, I want to learn whether it is right for him to be baptized or if by this he has been stripped of the grace of baptism.” Jacob responds: “On the one hand, it is not right for a Christian who becomes a Hagarene or a pagan to be [re]baptized. He had been born anew by water and by spirit according to the word of our Lord. On the other hand, it is right that there be a prayer over him [said] by the head priest and that he be assigned a time of penitence for as long as is proper. After a time of penitence, he should be allowed to also share in the [divine] mysteries. We have this as confirmation: those who were baptized by water but had not received the Holy Spirit were later made worthy of [the Spirit] by prayer alone and through the laying on of hands by the head priest [Acts 8:14-18]. But concerning whether he had been stripped of the grace of baptism because he became a Hagarene, I have this to say: Concerning those things whose giver is God, it is not ours to say whether they are taken away, or indeed stripped, from whoever had received them. But this is God’s alone [to decide]. He looks for their return and penitence because he does not want the death of a sinner. Rather, he wants him to be separated [from evil] and to return. So here, in this world and this present life, he will not take grace from him. But there, on that last day, [the

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<sup>632</sup> *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition, I and II*, CSCO 367:261.

day] of judgment, he will strip him of grace, take the talent from him as from the evil servant [Mt 25:28-30], and throw him into eternal fire.”<sup>633</sup>

Here, too, Jacob is lenient toward converts, though he warns of their likely punishment in the afterlife.

Second letter to John the Stylite:

[#23] John writes, “If an entire village of heretics should return to the true faith, what should one do with their mysteries [Eucharist/communion wafers]?” Jacob responds: “They should be sent to the adherents of their faith. For this also happened to me. Once there were some Hagarenes who carried off the Eucharist from Byzantine territory. When they feared their conscience[s] and brought it to me, I sent it to adherents of the Byzantine confession.”<sup>634</sup>

This seems to refer to mass conversion to, followed by reversion from, a Christian heresy. The reference to Muslims who took the Eucharist and returned it illuminates the fact that concerns about Christian heresy did not go away with the advent of Muslim rule and potential conversions to Islam. Rather, heresy became less of a singular focus in the church as interactions with Muslims, in terms of both leadership and daily life, came to the fore.

Giwargis

Giwargis, (Diophysite) Patriarch of Antioch 758-790 C.E.,<sup>635</sup> also wrote canons, two of which pertain to conversion, or what was likely a fear of conversion due to interaction with Muslims:

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<sup>633</sup> Penn, 169.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid., 170. *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition, I and II*, CSCO 367:237.

<sup>635</sup> *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition, I and II* (in II, pp 2-6). Not to be confused with the seventh-century Giwargis, above. Note that there was an earlier Miaphysite Giwargi, Patriarch of Antioch, r. 684-724, whose diocese



“Canon 12: Christians who give their daughters to pagans or Muslims or Nestorians—if they are priests, they shall not serve in the priesthood. If they are laymen they are not allowed by God to enter the holy church and shall not participate in the holy mysteries.

Canon 13: The women who have become (wives) to pagans and Muslims—the holy synod has ordered that they shall not enter the church and shall not receive the eucharist.”<sup>636</sup>

Note that whereas in the seventh century, the prevailing wisdom encourages priests to give communion to women who marry Muslim men, lest they convert if they are not granted it. By the end of the eighth century, this logic has been totally superseded by a punitive measure, permanently forbidding women who marry Muslims or pagans from even entering the church, let alone taking communion. This was likely intended to prevent intermarriage and/or conversion, rather than deal with instances where one might encourage the other.

### Early Ninth Century Canons

Ishō‘ bar Nūn (patriarch of the Church of the East, 823-828 C.E.) was from Beth Gabbare, near Nineveh. He was head of a monastery near Mosul before he ruled as patriarch in Baghdad from 823-828 under al-Ma’mun. He wrote that anyone who informed the authorities of a Christian who converted to Islam and then converted back to Christianity, when that information was not already known to them, that the informant would be barred from the church.<sup>637</sup> This suggests that conversion back to the church was a common enough phenomenon that a fear of informants ‘outing’ these converts (who would then face the death penalty) needed

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consisted of many nomadic Arabian converts to Christianity, and whose canons largely related to the monasteries (and did not address Islam at all).

<sup>636</sup> Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 5.

<sup>637</sup> Simonsohn 209; Sachau, *Syrische Rechtsbücher* v.2, 172-3.

to be addressed in an ecclesiastical context. Whether such incidents actually happened is a different matter – we have seen a few narratives where converts from Islam are found by Muslim family members, but we cannot confirm their validity. What we can confirm, based on the existence of this canon and these narratives, is that fear of converts being found out (and informed on) by the authorities was very real.

The Canons of Dionysios (d. 845), Patriarch of Antioch from 818-845, forbid clergy from taking second wives, concubines, or engaging in ‘secular marriages.’<sup>638</sup> This was not the first time Christians were admonished for and forbidden from taking multiple wives or concubines, arguably in response to witnessing Muslim elites do so, but it may be the first time clergy were forbidden from it.

The Canons of Jōḥannān, Patriarch of Antioch (846-873 C.E.; canons from 846) contain some familiar material (on women marrying Muslim men) and some unfamiliar (on bishops abandoning shrinking churches). As the final dated entry in this study of church canons related to conversion or interaction with Muslims, it reflects both real demographic change and increasingly stringent measures intended to stop the direction of that change (in this context, by preventing Christian women from marrying Muslim men and raising Muslim children). It also suggests a flow of Christians and Christian leaders in surprising directions. Canon 1 addresses bishops abandoning small or poor or dwindling dioceses, or ones that are not shrinking but bishops just seek a bigger one, are banned from serving the church in any way until they return to the diocese they abandon.<sup>639</sup> Those who abandon posts in Persia to come to Syria can serve, but not in leadership, or laying of hands, or circulating in search of collections. Anyone who

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<sup>638</sup> What is meant by “secular marriages” is unclear. Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 32-3.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

does come to Syria and dislikes the regulation or complains shall not be considered a priest.<sup>640</sup> One would not expect to see reference to a flow of clergy from Persia into Syria in the high ‘Abbasid period, but these canons reflect one.

Canon 23 is more familiar, if more punitive than previous iterations of its content, which we saw earlier: it states that any man who gives his daughter to a pagan (which almost certainly signifies Muslim, as commonly-used terms for “Muslim” aren’t used elsewhere in these canons) or Jew or Magian, or any woman who chooses this, will be considered strangers to the church and participation in the divine mysteries.<sup>641</sup>

A calculation of inheritances by a Mar Johannan (not necessarily the one above—we do not know who this Johannan was or when the text is from, and the oldest extant manuscript copy is from the thirteenth century C.E.) provides a detailed breakdown of different inheritance scenarios according to Muslim inheritance law (“according to the laws of the Arabs”),<sup>642</sup> along with a corresponding section on wills and testaments.<sup>643</sup> Both of these include instructions on what to do if a relative is not recognized as an inheritor by all family members, which may be related to conversion by some of the family but not all. The next sections discuss slave inheritance and manumission, along with other inheritance concerns.<sup>644</sup> The latter section notes that Christians who leave things to a church or monastery in a will, to be spent on construction, that is valid. Also, “A Muslim does not inherit a Christian and a Christian does not inherit a Muslim,” confirming Muslim doctrine from the period.<sup>645</sup> It allows for conversion until the moment of division of shares, but conversion afterward has no effect. If a Muslim dies and has

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<sup>640</sup> Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 40.

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-86.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-8.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-92.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*, 90. Assume this means “inherit from.”

heirs who are not Muslim, they can only inherit if they convert before his death, not after.<sup>646</sup> The text shows a clear understanding of established laws of inheritance in Islam, and provides it to Christian followers apparently in an effort to clarify what rights Christians have to inheritance from Muslim relatives, whether converts or not. It suggests that ‘blended families’ of a sort were probably quite common, and that an understanding of Islamic law would have been necessary in order to work out the implications of interacting within that blended family.<sup>647</sup>

### Conclusions

What do these regulations tell us about both popular religious trends and the ruling apparatus(es), and changes in attitude among each? Due to a lack of corroborating evidence, we must say that in most cases, regulation was prescriptive and not necessarily reflective of how converts (or any other populations) were actually regulated or treated. Most of our legal sources treat converts and conversion in a hypothetical manner. They may tell us about changing attitudes: certainly Christian leaders became far more stringent in regulating interactions with Muslims, and Muslim leaders developed complex systems for managing converts, over the first two hundred years of Muslim rule. Yet ordinary people may have converted away from their religious community and back again, or practiced elements of multiple religions, without a second thought. Indeed, that seems to have been one of the biggest problems of the religious authorities, both Muslim and Christian. Viewed in tandem with our narrative sources, we may

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<sup>646</sup> Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 91.

<sup>647</sup> Uriel Simonsohn writes: “The task of fully exploiting the potential of legal sources for understanding social phenomena in general and that of conversion in particular is still very much ahead of us. ... Yet even though we are still far from understanding the phenomenon of conversion in the early period, it seems that for some at least, it entailed a progressive process, in which individuals would move from one religious identity to another, at times continuously: households were left intact, and to an extent, so were communities. The notion of a social rupture between the convert and his former coreligionists should be qualified in this context.” Simonsohn, 214-5.

say that conversion represented a very real concern for both Muslim and Christian leaders, and that in the process of responding to issues of conversion in the general populace, whether actual cases or imagined scenarios, these leaders delineated clear boundaries with one another.<sup>648</sup> Can timelines of legal and narrative development tell us about conversion rates? Probably not. But they can tell us how Muslim and Christian communities, leaders, and most of all writers thought about, discussed, and responded to conversion in early Islamic Syria and Iraq.

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<sup>648</sup> Jack Tannous, “You Are What You Read: Qenneshre and the Miaphysite Church in the Seventh Century,” in *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, ed. Philip Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 84.

## Conclusions

This dissertation examined religious conversion in the social, political, cultural, religious and linguistic contexts of Greater Syria and al-Jazira (northern Iraq) from the mid-seventh century to the mid-ninth century C.E., which roughly aligns with the first two hundred years of Muslim rule of these regions. It surveys Syriac and Arabic works from this region and era, written or compiled by Muslims and Christians, that address conversion in some form, in order to gain an improved understanding of what conversion signified to people in these overlapping contexts. I find that understandings of conversion, as represented in texts across various genres, changed for both Muslims and Christians over the course of the early Islamic era. Historical texts came to identify Muslims as a separate religious group from Christians, but not at first: Christian texts from the conquest period and beyond identified Muslims by geographic origin or political leadership, but not by religion. Muslim historical texts from the seventh century are not extant, though later ones that are extant demonstrate a clear division between Christians and Muslims. We do not know how this division evolved in Muslim writing, if at all: such boundaries may have emerged fully formed from the pre-conquest era, but several studies suggest that a process of boundary construction occurred instead. This theory is supported by the non-Muslim historical material.

The theory is also supported by polemical material. Seventh-century polemical material, both Christian and Muslim, more often than not recognizes Islam or Christianity as an erroneous or heretical strain of the writer's own religion. Only in the eighth century is this view replaced by the understanding that the two religions are distinct, and also in direct competition with one another for souls. The evolution of these perspectives affects the tone and style in which

polemical material is written by each scholar. Concerns about individuals who cross the newly constructed boundaries between each religion are also reflected in polemical material.

Concerns over crossing religious boundaries are most emphasized in the legal literature, however. Legal material demonstrates the earliest understanding of boundaries between Christianity and Islam; in the seventh century, when it was not clear to what religion the leaders of the conquests belonged, Syriac Christian leaders placed them in the legal category of “pagan,” which essentially stood in for non-Christian in the most generic way possible. Eventually Muslims came to occupy their own legal category, particularly in cases of conversion, and various scenarios related to conversion were addressed from a legal perspective. Even still, the moniker “ḥanpē,” “pagan,” continued to be used to describe Muslims (alongside other terms specifically denoting Muslims). Muslim legal scholars were required to address legal distinctions rather early, as well, as issues related to taxation, the military, marriage, inheritance and other facets of life depended on the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim, and particularly between Muslims and those who belonged to the *ahl al-kitāb* but were not considered Muslim (or came to be placed in the legal category of *dhimmī*). As with the Christian material, distinctions between Muslims and Christians in the Muslim legal material were addressed in the context of possible scenarios in which conversion to or from Islam might have played a role.

Apocalyptic texts, too, relayed hypothetical scenarios, often based on historical events in recent collective memory, in which conversion was a major factor in the apocalypse. While these texts had no bearing on people’s lives, and on whether they converted, their existence speaks to the fears Muslim and Christian leaders held about the competition for constituents and the potentially catastrophic consequences of losing that long-term battle.

Yet despite all of the concern reflected by Muslim and Christian writers during this era, it seems that ordinary people were much less concerned by the boundaries and restrictions on interfaith interactions and even conversions that were being constructed around them (often, from what we can tell, without their knowledge). When we read this material for implications, it suggests that conversions to and from Islam might have been somewhat common, despite potentially severe penalties for apostasy, such as excommunication or death. It took some time for the rulings of the religious authorities in Damascus or Aleppo to reach the average pastoral nomad or remote villager (if at all), regardless of religious affiliation, and in that gap people were left to make their own decisions, which may have been unwittingly heretical. If our narratives are to be taken as representative of the views of the elite, individual believers in larger population centers were more aware of these boundaries and the consequences of transgressing them, but they were also aware of the social limits of belonging to one or another community. Urban Christians were apparently careful to echo the Qur'anic terminology of monotheism in discussing their religion with strangers, avoiding mention of the Trinity, lest they be persecuted for it by Muslims. Muslims knew that conversion to Christianity carried a very real threat of the death penalty, and often fled the city if they chose to convert (and if they subsequently chose to reveal their conversions, did so after some deliberation and with full understanding of the consequences).

While this study did not identify a rate of conversion to Islam in the early Islamic period, or any way to measure such a thing, it did register a change in the way conversion was written about between 640 and 850 C.E. In the seventh century, conversion is probably the wrong term to use for movement between Islam and Christianity: the boundaries between the two were not distinct to elites or non-elites in Bilād al-Shām and al-Jazīra, and so one could not really



‘convert’ to or from either of them, at least not according to the definitions and understandings laid out in Chapter One. This is reflected all but ubiquitously in seventh-century texts across genres, languages and affiliations. By the eighth century, such boundaries were being delineated, and so from that point on it was possible to understand conversion as a legitimate phenomenon, according to at least one or another of the definitions and terms addressed in Chapter One. Fears of demographic loss began to appear in textual references to conversion, and the legal, financial, cultural and societal implications of conversion were being hammered out by leaders, scholars and jurists of both religions. By the late eighth and early ninth centuries, conversion was a cultural phenomenon imbued with a set of fears, expectations, and requirements that were different for each religion, but well-known by members of urban society (and, to a lesser extent, rural society). These fears, expectations and requirements formed the basis of Muslim and Christian attitudes toward conversion for the next several centuries (though other elements were added to them in later societal contexts, such as the Crusades). Future research will hopefully clarify the nature of Muslim-Christian interactions in the seventh-century context; due to major lacunae in the literary record, archeological studies are likely to yield the most fruitful results. For the eighth century and onward, a comparison of textual records to the archaeological record may allow scholars to develop a firmer sense of the rate of demographic change in the region as it relates to religious affiliation. But we may say that during the early Islamic period, conversion between Christianity and Islam developed from a non-existent or nebulous concept, to one that was clearly identifiable, actionable, ritualized, regulated and understood as a phenomenon in early Islamic Bilād al-Shām and al-Jazīra.

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