

The Beginnings of Islam as an Apocalyptic Movement

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1. The Early Ecumenical State of Islam

The importance of the development of Islam in the land of Syria during the seventh and eighth centuries has frequently been under-appreciated by scholars seeking to divine what the nature of the new faith was during this crucial period. According to the traditional Muslim historical interpretation, Arab tribesmen swept out of the Arabian Peninsula shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. Within the short time span of 10-15 years they conquered the lands of Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Persia, halving the territory of the ancient Byzantine empire based in Constantinople, and bringing the Sasanian Persian empire to a close. These tribesmen were inspired by the faith of Islam, and according to the Muslim interpretation of events given divine aid to judge these two evil empires which had engaged in a pointless war previous to the Muslim invasion lasting some 25 years and destroying nearly the entire region.

This interpretation, relying as it does upon divine intervention in human affairs, has not been well received by western scholars, who have offered more mundane interpretations, ranging from the climatic changes resulting in the desiccation of the Arabian peninsula, to economic factors necessitating the Arab victory, to the superior military tactics of the Bedouin against the trained armies of the Byzantines and Sasanians. While reviewing these western theories, one must honestly say that the theory of divine intervention still sounds more plausible. However, the above interpretations do not exhaust the possibilities as far as explaining how early Islam developed and why it conquered much of the classical world and the Iranian plateau. In order to work towards a theory, one must examine first the religious foundations of early Islam were, and what the nature of the energy feeding it was.

Reading the Qur'an, it is difficult to believe that the Prophet Muhammad truly thought in terms of founding a new faith. The text speaks more of reminding its audience of essential truths rather than bringing an entirely new ideology to the fore. Therefore, in a quest for the ideological birth-point of Islam, we must seek out those more ecumenical attitudes in the earliest Muslim religious literature and seek to bridge the gap between the pan-monotheistic message of the Qur'an and the aggressive spirit of the jihad as revealed in this literature. For example, in the Qur'an,

"Say: 'People of the Book [Jews and Christians], come to an equitable word between you and us, that we worship none but Allah, do not associate anything with Him and do not set up each other as lords besides Allah.'"(Qur'an 3:64)

This seems to be a most strait forward vision of the monotheism proclaimed in the Qur'an; the desire to build bridges, at least with the majority Christian population of the region is stated even more categorically in Qur'an 5:82:

"You will find the most hostile people to the believers to be the Jews and the polytheists; and you shall find the closest in affection to the believers those who say: 'We are Christians.' For among them are priests and monks, and they are not arrogant."

It is clear that the basis is a belief in one God, which although seemingly denied in the Qur'anic attacks upon the doctrine of the Trinity, still allows the very real possibility that Christians and, as we will see, Jews as well, have a place in the pan-monotheistic creed being created. In the text of the Qur'an, clearly the word used to describe the new community of faith is the word *mu'min* (believer), which is used hundreds of times. The community was one of believers in the one God,

whose belief was to be purified by the revelation of the Qur'an. By contrast, the words *muslim* or *islam* are only used adjectivally; that is to describe the condition of a person who is submissive to God.

As the revelation of the Qur'an ceases with the death of the Prophet in 632, we must look for those notices in the historical and religious literature which continue the pattern set by the Qur'an-- speaking of a general monotheistic faith, open to all. One early common tradition tells us of this reality:

"I [Muhammad] was commanded to fight people until they say 'there is no god but God', and when they have said it, their lives and their property are protected from me, solely because of it (*illa bi-haqqihi*), and judgment upon them is in the hands of God."

Those who are familiar with the tenets of Islam as they were to develop during the following three centuries will recognize the statement "there is no god but God"-- it is the first half of what would become the Muslim confession of faith "There is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger." However, in this early version of that statement, the only element required is the basic profession of monotheism which can be stated by both Jews and Christians as well as Muslims. Apparently the primacy of Muhammad's revelation was not important. Indeed, we have documented evidence of Christians who are identified as Christians speaking the above confession of faith in a formal setting, using precisely this formula and being accepted as Christians. Although there no such parallel evidence for Jews, the probability is that they would have had a far less difficult time stating a confession which is very similar to the *shema`*.

The early Muslims went much further than this in their ecumenical outlook towards Christianity. Scholars of comparative religions have long noted that there is no evidence of any Christian polemics against Islam during the seventh and early eighth centuries-- a most uncharacteristic silence from a community which had long specialized in polemic, apologetic and heresiography. When the first polemics do appear-- from the pen of St. John of Damascus, who was apparently a highly placed government servant of the Umayyad dynasty-- they insist upon declaring Islam (or the religion of the Saracens) a Christian heresy. Although this characterization can be interpreted in reductionist terms or as a simple misunderstanding, given the fact of the early Muslim literature, it may well have been responsive to the public perception of the early Muslims. Their attempts to find common ground with Christians include an inordinate focus upon the person and the mission of Jesus, even above and beyond his place in the Qur'an. (One should, however, note that this exaltation of Jesus never touched upon the absolute Muslim rejection of his divinity.) From early Syrian collections of religious material, we actually find confessions of faith in which Jesus is given more space than Muhammad:

"Whoever bears witness that there is no god but God-- alone without any associate-- and that Muhammad is His servant and His Messenger, and that Jesus is the servant of God and the son of His handmaiden (ama), and His Word which He cast upon Mary and a Spirit from Him, that paradise is true and hell, it is obligatory for God to let him enter whichever of the eight gates of paradise he wishes."

It is very likely that the element of Muhammad's role is a later insertion by writers concerned with the position of Jesus in this confession of faith-- as we have epigraphic evidence in which Jesus is mentioned alone-- but even with it present, the position of Jesus is striking.

Thus, the idea of "belief" is separated from the idea of "Islam." The Believers, as they called themselves at this early period, were an ecumenical group which sought to bring into its fold all who believed in God and the Last Day (a very frequent formula appearing in the Qur'an and the earliest Muslim religious literature). Their society is characterized by the following tradition, which is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7):

"You will never enter paradise until you believe, and you will never believe until you love one another (tahabbu) and make peace widespread between yourselves, loving one another, and not one of you will ever believe until his neighbor is secure from his injustices.' They said: 'O Messenger of God, what is *islam*?' He said: 'It is when the *muslimun* are at peace from his tongue and hand.' They said: 'What is belief?' He said: 'Those whom *ahl al-islam* have given surety over their blood and their possession.'"

The foundation point for the more exclusive side of the early Muslims is "Islam" which the texts define being at a state of peace with each other. Tradition after tradition reveals that these two facets of the early Muslims existed side by side. Believers took as their foundation the statement that "there is no god but God" while those who would eventually be called Muslims emphasized their absolute commitment to internal peace within the community. They were at peace with God and with fellow human beings (Qur'an 48:16). Belief is more of a personal quality, while *islam* belongs to the field of action. With this understanding of the ideology of the earliest Muslims, and their ecumenical attitude toward Christians focused upon the figure of Jesus, let us now discuss the messianic kingdom which they sought to promote.

2. The reality of the apocalyptic kingdom of the Umayyads

Jesus is not only a bridge between the early Muslims and the Christians in the confessional sense, but one of the most prominent figures in the apocalyptic future-- he was the first Mahdi, the Muslim messiah. Although in the following centuries as the polemical relationship between Islam and Christianity became ever more acrimonious, this position was diminished, it is clear that at this early time, Jesus is one who was to usher in the messianic kingdom and the ultimate unity between the monotheistic faiths as described in the previous section:

"The Mahdi, Jesus, will send to fight the Byzantines... and he will remove the *tabut al-sakina* (probably the Ark of the Covenant) from a cave in Antioch. In it is the Torah which was revealed by God to Moses, and the Gospel which God revealed to Jesus. He will judge between the people of the Torah according to their Torah and between the people of the Gospel by their Gospel."

Jesus' role is first of all a martial one: he is to defeat the Byzantines, slay the Antichrist and bring the conquests to a close. But secondly, he is to be an ecumenical messiah; each community of monotheists will continue to adhere to their own revelation and not be converted to Islam. This early sense of ecumenism is graphically described by the Muslim version of the Parable of the Workers (Matt. 20:1-16)

"Your [length of] staying comparative to the communities previous to you is like that of between the afternoon prayers and the setting of the sun. The people of the Torah were given the Torah and worked with it until the middle of the day, then they could not [anymore], and were given *qirats* [as their wage]. The people of the Gospel were given the Gospel and worked with it until the mid-day prayer, and then they could not [anymore], and were given *qirats* [as their wage]. Then you were given the *Qur'an*, and you worked with it until the sun went down and were given double the *qirats*. The people of the Torah and of the Gospel said: 'Lord, these have less work and more wage!' He said: 'Have I cheated you in your payments in any way?' They said: 'No.' He said: 'This is My bounty, given to whomever I wish'"

Although this is basically a fair translation of the New Testament parable, there are subtle differences. For one, the version in Matthew lists off a total of five groups hired throughout the day, and not three only, nor, of course, are they given the blatant identifications as in this tradition. Secondly, the New Testament version is clearly designed to show the bounty of God towards his servants, to change their feelings from having been cheated by a hard task-master to generosity towards their fellow-workers. Although the original is eschatological-- many of Jesus' parables have this characteristic-- lacking the identifications given in the Muslim version, it does not have any immediacy. The early Muslims clearly saw themselves as working just before the end of the world and the rightful recipients of God's bounty, worthy to stand with the other

previous faiths on an equal footing. But, crucially, this story does not deny God's reward to the Jews and the Christians, that this reward is deserved and will be given at the end of the world, as later Islamic doctrine would do-- nor is this predicated in any way upon their reception of the message of Muhammad. Indeed, if there is an element of unworthiness among the three groups, it is on the part of the Muslims themselves. Their sole reason for receiving the same wage as the earlier groups did is the arbitrary and irrational decision of God, not as the result of their own actions.

Nor is the judgment of the end to be long delayed. There are a large number of dateable apocalyptic predictions still extant in the early Muslim religious literature indicating that the first Muslims expected the world to come to an end at the year 100/717. The fact that these predictions are still available in such quantities long after the obvious disconfirmation of the original prediction demonstrates the authentic nature of the belief in this date and its power within the community.

"A man came to the Messenger of God [Muhammad] and asked: 'O Messenger of God, what is the length of prosperity (*rakha* ' for your community?' He did not answer anything and the man asked three more times without receiving an answer, so the man turned away and then the Messenger of God said: 'Where is the questioner?' and he turned back. He said: 'You have asked me about something that no one in my community has ever asked about-- the length of the prosperity of my community is 100 years' and he said it two or three times, and then the man said: 'O Messenger of God, is there a principality or a portent or a sign?' He said: 'Yes, swallowing up by the earth, earthquakes, and release of the bound demons upon the people'"

Thus the end was not be delayed until long after the Prophet's passing; the Muslims were allotted a bare 100 years in order to accomplish the goals of conquering the world, reforming and unifying the belief in God and passing this messianic kingdom to Jesus who would rule it until the Last Judgment.

Part and parcel of this messianic kingdom was the construction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem on the site of the Second Temple, which was destroyed in 70 C.E. This structure, which is the earliest Muslim monument still standing today, possesses some of the earliest inscriptions in Arabic which are identifiably Muslim. These inscriptions are largely citations from the Qur'an and consist in their entirety of statements about Jesus, frequently to deny the doctrine of the Trinity and to accord Jesus the position of a prophet. Once again, this focus upon Jesus is striking. Though Trinitarian Christians in the final analysis see these inscriptions as an attack upon Christianity, it may very well be that the original intent was instead to focus upon purification of Christianity from the principal offensive element in the eyes of the early Muslims-- the divinity of Jesus-- and at the same time turning the focus upon Jesus the man who would establish the messianic kingdom for both Christians and Muslims in the immediate future.

Nor were Jewish expectations ignored in this building. It is clear that Jews served in the Dome of the Rock for some 50 years after its construction as part of those venerating the site. From a very early tradition, the Umayyad builder of the Dome, `Abd al-Malik, is actually compared to King David:

"Ka`b found written in one of the books: "Jerusalem-- which is *Bayt al-maqdis*-- and the Rock is called the Temple: I will send to you My servant `Abd al-Malik who will build you and decorate you. I will return to *Bayt al-maqdis* its earlier dominion, and I will crown you with gold, silver and coral, and I will send My people to you, and I will place My Throne upon the Rock. I am the Lord God, and David is the king of the *Banu Isra'il*"

It is clear that in this early Muslim tradition, the position of `Abd al-Malik is that of a renewer. What is he renewing? Most probably a type of the Third Temple, remembering that the Jews during the Byzantine-Sasanian war of 602-28 had made an effort to rebuild this structure after

Jerusalem fell to the Sasanians in 614. The Muslim apocalyptic literature speaks extensively of the Temple elements-- such as the Table of shew-bread, the altar, Ark of the Covenant and the Tablets of the Ten Commandments-- and indicates that the early Muslims felt that it was their purpose in the conquests to find these elements either in Rome or in Constantinople and return them to Jerusalem where the Mahdi could use them in the worship of God. In fact, much of the fighting of the first century of Islam is interpreted in terms of vengeance for the destruction of the Temple. About the future taking of Constantinople, we find

"[Ka`b al-Ahbar] have heard that [the destruction of] Constantinople is in return for the destruction of Jerusalem, since she [Constantinople] became proud and tyrannical, and so is called 'the haughty.' She [the city] said: 'The throne of my Lord is built upon the waters, and I [the city] am built upon the waters.' God promised punishment [for it] on the Day of Resurrection, and said: 'I will tear away your decoration, and your silk, and your veil, and I will leave you when there is [not even] a rooster crowing in you, and I will make you uninhabited except for foxes, and unplanted except for mallows, and the thorny carob, and I will cause to rain down upon you three [types] of fire: fire of pitch, fire of sulfur, and fire of naphtha, and I will leave you bald and bare, with nothing between you and the heavens. Your voice and your smoke will reach Me in the heavens, because you have for such a long time associated [other deities] with God, and worshipped other than Him.' Girls who will have never seen the sun because of their beauty will be deflowered, and none of you who arrive will be able to walk to the palace (*balat*) of their king [because of the amount of loot]-- you will find in it the treasure of twelve kings of theirs, each of them more and none less than it [the one before], in the form of statues of cows or horses of bronze, with water flowing on their heads-- dividing up their treasures, weighing them in shields and cutting them with axes. This will be because of the fire promised by God which makes you hurry, and you will carry what of their treasures you can so you can divide them up in al-Qarqaduna [Chalcedon]."

This tradition brings us to the last part of the early Muslim ideology: the redemptive nature of the fighting.

3. The centrality of *jihad* as a spiritual exercise

Clearly *jihad* was a major part of the early Muslim belief. Fighting was what enabled the Muslims to conquer unimaginable tracts of territory, and forced the peoples around the Mediterranean basin and the Iranian plateau to take the despised Arabs seriously. This fighting is closely connected to the apocalyptic aspirations of the early Muslims as shown above:

"Behold! God sent me [Muhammad] with a sword, just before the Hour [of Judgment], and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear, and humiliation and contempt on those who oppose me, and whoever imitates a group is [numbered] among them."

This concise theological statement is one of the most important early traditions gathering together under one heading the elements which the Muslims found to be important. The Prophet is pictured being sent by God with a sword and a spear, just before the Day of Judgment. This is a blunt statement which clearly indicates the method through which proclamation of the new revelation to the world was to be made. God's personal intervention on the side of the early Muslims is clear throughout the literature-- here the believer is promised victory, because God has already decreed humiliation and contempt for the opponents of Islam. In early Islam, it is clear, the fighting was not only the method of proclamation, but also the means by which the individual believer was redeemed.

"Yazid b. Shajara said: 'Swords are the keys to paradise; when a man advances upon the enemy, the angels say: 'O God, help him!' and when he retreats, they say: 'O God, forgive him!' The first drop of blood dripping from the sword brings forgiveness with it for every sin...'"

In other words, the practice of *jihad* was roughly equivalent in its redemptive and salvific qualities for the early Muslim as the doctrine of the cross was for the Christian. Indeed, we find interspersed throughout the literature statements such as "only the sword wipes away sins"--almost certainly a response to the equivalent Christian statement "only the cross wipes away sins." Even the Arabic words sound very similar. The fighting was in and of itself a spiritual exercise which bound disparate groups together.

"Abu Misbah al-Himsi said: While we were traveling in the land of the Byzantines, during a summer raid led by Malik b. `Abdallah al-Khatha`mi, the latter passed by Jabir b. `Abdallah who was walking and leading his mule. Malik said to him: 'O Abu `Abdallah, ride, for God has granted you a mount.' Jabir said: 'My mount is fine; I am not in need of it. I heard the Messenger of God say: 'Whoever dusts their feet in the path of God [*jihad*], God will protect him from hell.' Men leaped from their mounts-- never was a day seen with more [soldiers] walking [than that one]."

There is every reason to believe, from the Syrian religious literature, that much of what would later come to be known as "Islam" was actually developed in the atmosphere of the army camps and on the way to the battle field. The literature is replete with situations occurring in these contexts, with questions being asked, problems being solved and models of conduct being developed literally on the war-path. Although it is impossible to know exactly how many of the fighters entered the army sincere Muslims-- since it is apparent that Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and other religious groups fought alongside the early Muslims-- one must hazard the guess that on the basis of this literature, the religious indoctrination was intense and it is very likely that those who did not believe at the beginning of a campaign did so by the end.

4. Conclusions

The elements of the successful early Muslim coalition with Jews and Christians are clear. They include a willingness to acknowledge them both as monotheists as long as their belief was pure (and the Christians did not overemphasize the divine nature of Jesus), a fulfillment of both of the Jews' and the Christians' messianic aspirations and the joint warfare to bring in the messianic age. If one might have thought that the Christians would have hesitated to collaborate with non-Christians against the Christian Byzantine empire, the early Muslims seem to have effectively neutralized that threat. Christians fought alongside the Muslims, prominent Orthodox Christian families such as that of St. John of Damascus served in lofty governmental capacities willingly and ably to the ultimate detriment of their co-religionists in Byzantium, and there is little evidence that the Christian population ever served as a fifth-column for the Byzantines. For example,

"We [the Muslim troops] came from the land of the Byzantines returning [from battle]; when we had left Hims going towards Damascus we passed by a cultivated place which is near Hims--about four miles-- at the end of the night. When the monk who was in the cell heard our speech, he came up to us and said: 'Who are you all?' We said: 'People from Damascus, coming from the land of the Byzantines.' He said: 'Do you know Abu Muslim al-Khawlani?' We said: 'Yes.' He said: 'When you come to him, greet him with the peace, and inform him that we find him in the Holy Books as a companion of Jesus son of Mary'."

The monk sees a spiritual kinship with the "Muslim" Abu Muslim al-Khawlani, who was a very prominent religious figure close to the caliph, and even outright says that in the messianic future when Jesus returns that there will be a unity. So, too, we find Jews and Muslims establishing common ground while speaking about the end of the world and the judgment which is about to occur.

More and more students of Islam are coming to realize that the energy and power required by the conquests was actually supplied by a belief in the imminent end of the world. This belief was common throughout the region of the Mediterranean basin and Iraq where both Christians and

Jews composed apocalypses at this time. Christians noted that seven centuries had elapsed between the death and resurrection of Jesus-- a number with a great many symbolic connections-- and that apparently God had judged the Christian Byzantine empire for its numerous failings. Jews were caught up in the liberation of Jerusalem from Christian rule, and the possible rebuilding of the Temple. There is good evidence that these expectations were utilized by the early Muslims both to mobilize support and to win converts. The apocalyptic foundation of Islam is clear from the Qur'an, from the numerous predictions and prophecies in the early literature, from the doctrine of *jihad*, from the ecumenical spirit of the Believers, and from the rule of peace they sought to extend throughout the known world during the first century of their existence.

Notes

(Numbers missing from document <http://www.mille.org/publications/winter2001/cook.html>)

Al-Tabarani, Musnad al-Shamiyyin, IV, p. 167 (no. 3017), versions are I, pp. 90 (no. 129), 372 (no. 645), IV, p. 130 (no. 2916); al-Bukhari, Sahih, I, p. 14 (no. 25); al-Zuhri, Hadith, I, pp. 207-8 (nos. 165-66); and see Kister, "...illa bi-haqqihi..." JSAI 5 (1984), pp. 33-52 for a discussion of all of the variants; also Bashear, Muqaddima, p. 397.

Ibn 'Asakir, Ta'rikh, XLVII, pp. 378-80, XXIX, p. 354; and compare XII, p. 330 (which purports to be a letter of Muhammad to the bishop of Ayla); and al-Awza'i, Sunan, pp. 30-31 (nos. 43-47).

al-Qurashi, Jami', I, p. 318 (no. 218); and compare Ibn Bishran, Amali, p. 26 (no. 3); al-Madini, Naddara Allah amran..., pp. 21-28, 57; al-Khara'iti, Makarim al-akhlaq, I, pp. 410-11; Abu Ya'la, Musnad, VII, p. 199 (no. 4187). Ringgren, Islam, p. 3 makes fun of this tradition, wrongly in my judgment.

Nu'aym, Fitan, p. 220.

Al-Tabarani, Musnad al-Shamiyyin, IV, p. 224 (no. 3142); and compare the following version "A likeness of you among the previous communities is between the afternoon prayers and the setting of the sun. A likeness of you and the Jews and the Christians is like a man who hired workers and said: 'Who will work for the wage of a qirat until the middle of the day?' The Jews and the Christians did so until the middle of the day for the wage of a qirat, and then he said: 'Who will work from the afternoon prayers until the setting of the sun for two qirats-- for double the wage?' and the Jews and Christians became angry. They said: 'We worked more and earned less!' He said: 'Have I cheated you of what you deserved?' They said: 'No.' He said: 'This is my bounty which I give to whomever I wish.'" (al-Tabarani, Musnad al-Shamiyyin, IV, p. 144 [no. 2955]).

It is difficult to take this statement seriously, since the Qur'an itself (7:187, 33:63, 45:32, 79:42) records people asking about the Hour, and the hadith literature is full of these sort of conversations (e.g., Abu Ya'la, Musnad, V, pp. 144-45 [no. 2758], VI, p. 313 [no. 3631], VII, p. 104 [no. 4049]; al-Sa'di, Hadith 'Ali b. Hajar al-Sa'di, pp. 192-93; and Bashear, "Muslim apocalypses" op. cit.).

Ibn 'Asakir, Ta'rikh, LVIII, p. 461; al-Khawlani, Ta'rikh Daraya, p. 98; these last bound demons are unknown to me from other Muslim apocalyptic literature-- however, see Rev. 16:13-14; although they may be alluded to in Ibn Abi al-Dunya, Ahwal, p. 61; and compare al-Daraqutni, al-Mu'talif wa-l-mukhtalif, II, p. 616.

Apparently God is speaking.

Musharraf, Fada'il, pp. 63-64 (no. 50).

Nu'aym, Fitan, p. 284; and compare the variants in al-Dani, Sunan, III, p. 1125 (no. 605); al-Sulami, 'Iqd, p. 285 (no. 339); and al-Musharraf b. al-Murajja', Fada'il, pp. 231-32 (no. 342).

'Abdallah b. al-Mubarak, Kitab al-jihad, pp. 89-90 (no. 105); al-Awza'i, Sunan, p. 360 (no. 1165); Ibn Abi Shayba, Musannaf, XII, p. 349 (no. 13056); and see Bashear, "Muslim Apocalypses," IOS 13 (1993), pp. 76ff., esp. 80; and Kister, "Do not assimilate yourselves..." pp. 321-53.

Ibn Abi Shayba, Musannaf, V, p. 301; and compare Ibn al-Mubarak, Jihad, p. 117; Ibn 'Asakir, Ta'rikh, LXV, p. 220, and the full speech by Yazid (who Mu'awiya appointed over the army) is recorded on pp. 230-31.

Ibn al-Mubarak, Jihad, pp. 44-45; compare Abu Ya'la, Musnad, II, p. 242 (no. 944); Ibn 'Asakir, Ta'rikh, XVIII, p. 117; and Ibn Mansur, Sunan, II, pp. 155-56 (nos. 2401-2). □ Ibn 'Asakir, Ta'rikh, XXVII, p. 232; al-Dhahabi, Siyar, IV, p. 13 (this is a little odd since al-Khawlani is said to have died in Byzantine territory: Abu Zur'a, Ta'rikh, p. 64 [no. 221]); the monks who live in cells are those who "still believe they are doing well" (Qur'an 18:104) according to al-Muhamili, Amali, p. 124 (no. 87). Note al-Tanukhi, Nishwar, I, 56 (about a monk who is kind to the Muslim prisoners and who is repaid).