

# A MESSIANIC CONTROVERSY BEHIND THE MAKING OF MUḤAMMAD AS THE LAST PROPHET?<sup>1</sup>

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For S. G. – may the passion for scholarship ever dwell in your heart

## 1. *Pro- and anti-Christian texts in the Qur'ān?*

Marie-Thérèse Urvoy<sup>2</sup> and Haggai Mazuz<sup>3</sup> rightly note that the Qur'ān displays a twofold contradictory attitude towards Christianity – an attitude that wavers between approval and dismissal. An apparently straightforward, yet in my view misleading, interpretation of this contrast would be that Muḥammad first tried to gather theological support from some Christian group or groups, but then distanced himself from them after they rejected his teachings.<sup>4</sup> In my view, there are two major problems with this interpretation, but before

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<sup>1</sup> Like all others in this volume, this paper was presented in June 2015 to the 1st Nangeroni Meeting of the Early Islamic Studies Seminar. I should like to thank Gabriele Boccaccini, Michael Bonner, Barbara Holcátová, Manfred Kropp, Ulrika Mårtensson, Isaac Oliver, Cecilia Palombo, Anders Petersen, Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, Meira Polliack, Parvaneh Pourshariati, Jan Retsö, Stephen Shoemaker, Francis Watson, and very especially Guillaume Dye, David Powers, and Philip Wood for their valuable comments. Also, I am thankful to Daniel Beck, Emilio González Ferrín, Andreas Görke, Ghilène Hazem, Naomi Jacobs, Haggai Mazuz, Alexander Mirkovic, Jerome Parker, Barbara Roggema, May Shaddel, and in particular Claude Gilliot, Gerd-R. Puin, and Peter von Sivers for their likewise helpful feedback during an online discussion session dedicated to my paper on [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) in July 2015. Lastly, I would wish to thank Gabriel Said Reynolds for kindly inviting me to publish a summary of the arguments put forward pro and against my paper on the International Qur'ānic Studies Association (IQSA)'s website.

<sup>2</sup> Marie-Thérèse Urvoy, “Chrétiens, Christianisme,” in *Dictionnaire du Coran*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007), 163-4.

<sup>3</sup> Haggai Mazuz, “Christians in the Qur'ān: Some Insights Derived from the Classical Exegetical Approach” *Studia Orientalia* 112 (2012): 41-53.

<sup>4</sup> See David Marshall, “Christianity in the Qur'ān,” in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London and New York: Routledge), 16. Another option consists in surmising that the Qur'ān refers to two particular Christian groups: the Abyssinians/Ethiopians and the Najranites, respectively. This, in fact, is the majority view among the post-quranic Muslim authors, who put forward a poor binary typology according to which those who converted to Islam (the Abyssinians) were good Christians, while those that did not (the Najranites) were bad Christians (Mazuz, “Christians in the Qur'ān”). There is no evidence to support this claim, which is entirely biased and tells us more about the purpose of the later Muslim authors than about the exchanges between Muḥammad's own religious group and several Christian groups in 7th-century Arabia. It is as though the later Muslim authors intended to say to Christians living under Islamic rule: “Behold, a powerful Christian king and his court accepted Muḥammad as a true prophet, so follow their example!” Obviously, this is ideology, not history. Anyway, determining the identity of the Christian group or groups alluded to in the Qur'ān is not an easy task. See Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur'ān and the Many Aspects of Qur'anic Rhetoric,” *Al-Bayān: Journal of Qur'ān and Ḥadīth Studies* 12 (2014): 42-54, who albeit showing due caution tends however to downplay perhaps too much the view that the beliefs of some particular Christian groups are reflected in it; cf. Section 2 below. A survey of the history of the interpretation of the quranic allusions to, and uneven attitude vis-à-vis, the Christians, may be found in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

examining them I would like to suggest a different *typological* classification of the quranic passages explicitly or implicitly referring to Christianity.

### Remapping parameters

In fact, rather than two types of such texts (pro- and anti-Christian, respectively) we have *four* separate types of texts that may be labelled as follows:

(a) Christian formulas, often with anti-pagan and anti-Jewish overtones (e.g. Q 2:67-74?, 87, 124, 253; 4:153-9; 5:51?, 70-1, 78-81?; 9:31?; 19:2-34a?; 23:49-50; 43:57-80?; 57:26-7?; 61:6?, 14);

(b) Pro-Christian compromise formulas (e.g. Q 3:42-64; 5:46-7, 78-81?, 82-6, 110-18?; 19:2-34a?; 29:46; 43:57-80?; 57:26-7?; 109);

(c) Anti-Christian polemical formulas (e.g. Q 3:79-80; 4:171-2; 5:17, 72-7; 9:31?; 17:111; 19:34b-6; 112?);

(d) Anti-Christian (as well as anti-Jewish) supersessionist formulas (e.g. Q 3:65-88; 5:18-19, 44-7, 51?, 59, 65-9; 9:29-35; 19:88-95; 61:6?).<sup>5</sup>

Hence, whatever we make out of it, there is in the Qurʾān (1) *identification* with Christianity (which implies more than, and differs from, a pro-Christian attitude) = *a*, (2) *sympathy* towards it = *b*, and then a gradual *withdrawal* from Christianity that ranges from (3) *polemics* against it (or against the Christological beliefs characteristic of various Christian groups) = *c* to (4) its *rejection and replacement* (together with that of Judaism) by something else = *d*. Cf. e.g.:

• Q 61:14:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا أَنْصَارَ اللَّهِ كَمَا قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ لَلْحَوَارِيِّينَ مَنْ أَنْصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ . . .  
الْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ

O you who believe, be God's helpers – as when Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples, "Who are my helpers for God?" The disciples said, "We are God's helpers!" . . .

(b) • Q 3:59-64:

<sup>5</sup> Question marks indicate that the formulas at stake could be placed elsewhere, depending on their interpretation. Thus, for example, the standard text of Q 5:51 ("O you who believe, do not take the Jews and the Christians and friends . . .") could be said to belong to group *d* instead of *a*; yet the reference to the "Christians" may be interpreted as an interpolation (see Édouard-Marie Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète. Aux origines de l'Islam* [Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2005], 2:86-7, which suggests that it may be also included in *a*. In turn, Q 5:78 might be read either as a Christian formula or as a pro-Christian formula, and therefore Q 5:78-81 either as a Christian- or as a pro-Christian text – there is no clear indication as to where it belongs. This is also the case with Q 5:110-18 and 57:26-7, whereas Q 43:57-80 looks like Christian due to its emphatic rhetoric. On Q 4:153-9, see Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity: The Representation of Jesus in the Qurʾān and the Classical Muslim Commentaries* (London and Albany, NY: Macmillan and SUNY Press, 1991), 79-89, 106-11, 127-4; idem, "Jesus," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 3:17-20; Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?," *BSOAS* 72.2 (2009): 237-58. On Q 19:2-34, see Guillaume Dye's paper in this volume. On Q 61:6 and 112, see below. On Q 2:67-74 and 9:31, see n. 27 below. On Q 29:46 and 109, see Gerd-R. Puin, "Vowel Letters and Ortho-epic Writing in the Qurʾān," in *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (RSQ; London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 176-9; I am grateful to prof. Puin for drawing my attention to these two passages.

إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَىٰ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ آدَمَ ۖ خَلَقَهُ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ / الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ فَلَا تَكُنْ مِنَ الْمُمْتَرِينَ / فَمَنْ حَاجَّكَ فِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ فَقُلْ تَعَالَوْا نَدْعُ أَبْنَاءَنَا وَأَبْنَاءَكُمْ وَنِسَاءَنَا وَنِسَاءَكُمْ وَأَنْفُسَنَا وَأَنْفُسَكُمْ ثُمَّ نَبْتَهِلْ فَنَجْعَلْ لَعْنَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَى الْكَاذِبِينَ / إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْقَصَصُ الْحَقُّ ۚ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۚ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ / فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ بِالْمُفْسِدِينَ / قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَىٰ كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ

Indeed, the likeness of Jesus to God is like that of Adam. He created him of dust; then he said to him, “Be!,” and he was. | The truth is from your God, so do not be among the doubters. | Then whoever argues with you about it after this knowledge has come to you – tell him, “Come! Let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves; then let us pray humbly [together] and invoke the curse of God among the liars [among us].” | This verily is a true narration – it is indeed. There is no God but God, and indeed he surely is the Mighty, the Wise. | But if they turn away – well, God knows [who are] the corrupters. | Say, “O people of the Scripture, let’s come to an agreement between us and you [and concur in] that we shall worship none but God, that we shall ascribe no partner to him, and that none of us shall take other lords beside God. But if they turn away – say, “Bear witness that we are those who submit to him.”

(c) • Q 4:171:

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ وَلَا تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ ۚ إِنَّمَا الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ أَلْقَاهَا إِلَىٰ مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِنْهُ فَآمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ ۚ وَلَا تَقُولُوا ثَلَاثَةٌ ۚ انْتَهُوا خَيْرًا لَكُمْ ۚ إِنَّمَا اللَّهُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ ۚ سُبْحَانَهُ أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ وَلَدٌ ۚ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ وَكِيلًا

O people of the Scripture, do not exaggerate/err (*taghū/ta ‘lū*)<sup>6</sup> in your religion/judgement and do not say about God save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, is but the messenger of God and his Word, which he conveyed to Mary, and a spirit from him. So believe in God and his messengers and do not say “Three!”; cease [doing that], it is better for you. God is but one God – may he be praised! How could he have a child!? To him belongs all there is in the heavens and upon the earth. God is sufficient as a helper [to mankind].

(d) • Q 3:65-8:

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تُحَاجُّونَ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمَا أُنزِلَتِ التَّوْرَةُ وَالْإِنْجِيلُ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِهِ ۚ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ / هَا أَنْتُمْ هَؤُلَاءِ حَاجَجْتُمْ فِيمَا لَكُمْ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلِمَ تُحَاجُّونَ فِيمَا لَيْسَ لَكُمْ بِهِ عِلْمٌ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ / مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ / إِنَّ أَوْلَىٰ النَّاسِ بِإِبْرَاهِيمَ لَلَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُ وَهَذَا النَّبِيُّ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ۗ وَاللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

O people of the Scripture, why do you argue about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Will you not reason? | Here you are. You argue [even] about that of which you have some knowledge. But why do you argue about that of which you have no knowledge? God knows, while you do not know! | Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a pagan who submitted [to God] – he was not of the idolaters! | Indeed, the true heirs to Abraham are those who follow him, as well as this prophet and those who believe. – And God is the Protector of the believers!

**Which sequence then?**

<sup>6</sup> The *rasm* or consonantal skeleton (سكنا) is ambiguous and may thus be interpreted in both ways (see Christoph Luxenberg, “A New Interpretation of the Arabic Inscription in Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock,” in *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New research into Its Early History*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010], 137).

Unwilling to acknowledge the historical reliability of the traditional chronology of the Qurʾān and/or Nöldeke’s timid adaptation of the latter,<sup>7</sup> I take *a*, *b*, *c* and *d* to represent *successive* steps in the development of what – lacking a better term – may tentatively be called “early Muslim-Christian relations” (if it is possible to speak of “Islam” and “Muslims” before *c* or even *d*!). Surely specific compromises might have been reached after particular polemics (in which case *c* or at least some texts in *c* may be said to predate *b* or several texts in *b*). Likewise, theological discrepancies about Jesus’s nature might have been at stake in the period to which the *a* texts belong (the apparently early style of Q 112<sup>8</sup> may well point to this possibility; see Section II below). Lastly, some of the group-*a* texts may in fact belong to group *d* (cf. Q 61:5-6 in the canonical Uthmanic recension [“. . . Jesus, the son of Mary, said: ‘O children of Israel, I am the messenger of God to you, confirming what came before me in the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is Aḥmad.’ . . .”] and Ubayy b. Kaʿb’s codex [“. . . Jesus, the son of Mary, said: ‘O children of Israel, I am the messenger of God to you, bringing good tidings of a prophet whose community will be the last community and by whom God shall place the seal on the prophets and the messengers’ . . .”]), whose reference to a new community can be read in a supersessionist way). Yet I think the *gradual* development earlier suggested proves overall more coherent, as it better matches the multilayered sequence distinctive of the formation of late-antique religious identities: (I) unclear dissemination of vague identity markers against a brewing background of common ideas and practices, (II) re-dissemination of such markers along new ad hoc but still fuzzy lines or axes of crystallisation, and (III) the final promotion and consolidation of these.<sup>9</sup>

A visual metaphor for this threefold process could result from a sequential comparison of Jackson Pollock’s and Piet Mondrian’s paintings. I am especially thinking of Pollock’s *Number 18* (1950)<sup>10</sup> and Mondrian’s *Tableau 2* (1922),<sup>11</sup> with a so-to-say “fractal-Mondrian” interstitially placed between both.<sup>12</sup> Their respective traces completely differ, but they almost share the very same colour stock (basically, red, yellow, green/blue). The dividing lines between different chromatic regions in Pollock’s *Number 18* are unclear, the black and white trajectories linking them fuzzy, and there is no single region for each specific. In contrast, in “Mondrian’s fractal” the border lines separating the various chromatic regions become more precise despite remaining unstable due their number and constant juxtaposition; likewise, the trajectories linking them are better defined, though they are again too many, as also as the number of similar chromatic regions of different proportions, some of which include other regions inside them; besides, there are different regions juxtaposed to one another, all disseminated across the picture in a chaotic fashion, notwithstanding the incipient geometry that can now be perceived. Finally, in Mondrian’s *Tableau 2* there is one region for each specific colour, their border lines are neatly designed and the black trajectories linking them are clearly marked. As I have written elsewhere, “what usually begins as a juxtaposed set of indeterminate flows, gradually

<sup>7</sup> See Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Le problème de la chronologie du Coran,” *Arabica* 58 (2011): 477-502.

<sup>8</sup> On which see Manfred Kropp, “Tripartite, but Anti-Trinitarian Formulas in the Qurʾānic Corpus, Possibly Pre-Qurʾānic,” in *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds, 247-64.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, re-dissemination in Phase II implies re-semanticisation, as well; I am grateful to Guillaume Dye for suggesting this additional notion to me.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/3484>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/3013>.

<sup>12</sup> Like this one, eventually: <http://kottke.org/tag/Piet%20Mondrian> – but see already Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-3): <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/78682?locale=es>!

transforms into an agglomeration of interdependent clusters before narrowing into a few well-defined realms, be they ideas, communities, texts, or practices.”<sup>13</sup>

If I am correct, therefore, the Christian (*a*), pro-Christian (*b*), and intra/anti-Christian polemical passages (*c*, *d*) in the Qur’ān may be chronologically distributed along such sequence. I do not want to suggest that a clear-cut chronological dividing line can be traced between categories *a*, *b*, *c*, and *d*, or between their corresponding stages, as formulas *apparently* belonging to one stage may in fact belong to a different one (see n. 5 above). Furthermore, it would be possible to identify different types of formulas (e.g. compromise- and polemical formulas) *within* a single stage, for it is hard to believe that only one attitude prevailed at any given time. So I am not claiming – and I ask the reader to bear this in mind – that the scenario suggested in this paper is the only plausible one. Yet I maintain that a dividing line must be drawn between all such categories and periods, and that the basic idea behind such fourfold division – namely, that Islam emerged gradually from within a peripheral Christian milieu – makes sense. To be sure, this is a bold, folded statement that therefore needs to be unfolded and nuanced, and to do so it is absolutely necessary to carefully explore a plausible scenario and reconstruct its many complex details (a few preliminary remarks thereof are provided in Section 2 below). Besides, a major question arises at the very outset of such undertaking: Where the Christian and pro-Christian components of the Qur’ān introduced into the corpus, whenever that actually happened, in Syria-Palestine and/or Iraq, or can they be traced back to pre-Islamic South Arabia?; or should we maybe keep both options in mind and do our best to articulate them instead?<sup>14</sup>

### Countering potential objections

I am fully aware, moreover, that my suggested division emphasises *typology* and *logical coherence* above any other eventual concern; and that this could seem to be done at the expense of evidence – in fact, this was David Powers’s major criticism towards my approach in his response to my paper. However, in a field of research where, somewhat surrealistically to say the least, logical coherence is normally downplayed and replaced by the authoritative, if pseudo-historical, arguments of the Muslim tradition, which are themselves taken as evidence, the introduction of logical coherence as an interpretative criterion is in my view an absolutely essential undertaking. Indeed, what kind of evidence could assist the interpreter’s task? It would be nice, for instance, to find early quranic manuscripts containing some of the above-mentioned early Christian formulas but lacking those labelled as anti-Christian. But we have no quranic manuscript of which we may reasonably assume that it predates Marwanid times. Thus François Déroche’s dating of BNF Arabe 328, based exclusively on palaeographical grounds, to the 670s lacks the necessary carbon-14 support.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, the C-14 dating of the Ṣan‘ā’ palimpsest (on which see Alba Fedeli’s excellent paper in this volume) has provided uneven, indeed extravagant, results: 388 to 588 CE (!), 433–599 CE (!), 543–643 CE, and 578–669 CE, for which reason it is not possible to establish with accuracy the date of its composition. As for the manus-

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<sup>13</sup> Carlos A. Segovia, *The Quranic Noah and the Making of the Islamic Prophet: A Study of Intertextuality and Religious Identity Formation in Late Antiquity* (JCIT 4; Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015). That is to say, religions are never born like Athena from Zeus’s forehead: all of a sudden and complete! On the virtual (in a Deleuzean sense) effects of this approach on the making of religious identities in a post-modern, multicultural world, see the online interview “Abdul-Rahman Abul-Majd and Carlos A. Segovia Discuss on the Quranic Noah,” *Alukah: Journal of Islamic Literature* (2015): [http://en.alukah.net/World\\_Muslims/0/6889/](http://en.alukah.net/World_Muslims/0/6889/).

<sup>14</sup> See further Carlos A. Segovia, “Abraha’s Christological Formula *Rḥmnn w-Msʿh-hw* and Its Relevance for the Study of Islam’s Origins,” *OC* 98 (forthcoming in 2015); idem, “The Jews and Christians of Pre-Islamic Yemen (Himyar) and the Elusive Matrix of the Qur’ān’s Christology,” in *Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins – Papers presented at the Eighth Annual ASMEA Conference (Washington DC, October 29-31, 2015)*, ed. Francisco del Río Sánchez (JAOC; Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming in 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See François Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l’islam. Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009); idem, *Qur’āns of the Umayyads* (LSIS 1; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).

cript fragments in Tübingen and Leiden, due caution is also needed despite their unwarranted, official interpretation as representing either evidence of the “earliest” extant quranic manuscript or of the possibility of dating a few fragments (of which precise document?) sometime between the 650s–700s instead of the 650s–710s or even the 750s–760s, respectively.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, a stylistic analysis of all the passages in question might prove helpful, and I would be more than willing to undertake such an analysis in the future. Be that as it may, ideas should be acknowledged to have their own weight, to be typologically classified, and to be chronologically distributed accordingly. For style can turn into a tricky interpretative key. In the neighbouring field of New Testament studies, for instance, one often finds that “similarities in style . . . are coupled with alleged differences in theological positions, [thus] ruling out common authorship”<sup>17</sup> and a similar date range for the passages in question.

One may also object that my proposal suffers from tunnel vision, and that analysis, for example, of the pro- and anti-Jewish passages in the Qur’ān would lead to a totally different conclusion, according to which Islam gradually emerged from within a Jewish, instead of Christian, milieu. I agree that *a priori* everything I have written about the Christians and Christianity in the Qur’ān may seem to be applicable *mutatis mutandis* to the Jews. Yet I fear that things are *not* so simple. First, it is not possible to find in Qur’ān, apropos de Jews, a single passage similar to Q 61:14, whose addressees (see above) are asked to behave towards God like Jesus’s disciples; put differently: full identification with Judaism is never recommended in the Qur’ān. Secondly, it would be necessary to determine which quranic passages are in fact pro-Jewish. The apparently pro-Jewish passages that one can find in the Qur’ān often prove tricky, as positive references to the Jews (e.g. Q 2:40-61, 63-73, 87a, 89a, 122) are often placed within, or next to, more or less violent anti-Jewish pericopes (e.g. Q 2:40-71, 64-66, 74, 75-82, 83-103, 118-21, 123) that bear the marks of Christian rhetoric in spite of a few occasional anti-Christian interpolations (e.g. Q 2:62, 111-14, 115-17). See also (in addition to the Q 2-passages I have just mentioned) Q 5:44, where a good point is made about the rabbis as witnesses to the giving of the Torah immediately after a set of verses in which the Jews themselves are accused of being liars and unbelievers (5:41-3) and immediately before a verse that recalls that Jesus was sent by God as a model for the pious (5:46). In fact, the Qur’ān explicitly reproves the Jews not only for having presumably corrupted their scripture, but also for their hostile attitude vis-à-vis Jesus (cf. e.g. 2:87; 4:155-9; 61:5-6), which is in my view highly significant. Indeed, the anti-Jewish reasoning of the quranic authors is for the most part fully Christian, i.e. except in those arguably late cases in which it is both anti-Jewish and

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<sup>16</sup> The traditional Muslim claim that the “Uthmanic” codex predates the turning of the 8th century lacks any evidence. I take it to be a discursive strategy aiming at providing legitimacy to the document then established as authoritative. Finding authoritative ancestors and attributing authorship to them is a common strategy in the process of scribal production. A good example of this is provided within the New Testament, where Jesus’s disciples themselves are credited to have authored the four canonical gospels – a view no longer shared today by scholars of Christian origins.

<sup>17</sup> Michael J. Gilmour, *The Significance of Parallels between 2 Peter and Other Early Christian Literature* (SBLAB 10; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002), 70.

anti-Christian.<sup>18</sup> In short, while there are Christian formulas in the Qurʾān, there are no *clear* Jewish formulas in it, and the same can be said about its apparently pro-Jewish formulas. Conversely, there is a number of anti-Jewish polemical formulas (which cannot be read as intra-Jewish ones in contrast to many of the anti-Christian polemical formulas that can be interpreted as intra-Christian controversial formulas, on which see below), as well as a few anti-Jewish (and anti-Christian) supersessionist formulas, in the corpus. Thus we have in the Qurʾān:

- (a<sub>1</sub>) Christian formulas ✓
- (a<sub>2</sub>) Pro-Christian formulas ✓
- (a<sub>3</sub>) Anti-Christian (and/or intra-Christian) polemical formulas ✓
- (a<sub>4</sub>) Anti-Christian supersessionist formulas ✓

vs.

- (b<sub>1</sub>) Jewish formulas ?
- (b<sub>2</sub>) Pro-Jewish formulas ?
- (b<sub>3</sub>) Anti-Jewish polemical formulas ✓
- (b<sub>4</sub>) Anti-Jewish supersessionist formulas ✓

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. the Abraham story in Q 2:124, which draws heavily on the very same argument found *inter alia* in the Epistle of Barnabas, the *Apology* of Aristides, and Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, and the implicit quranic reworking of Apocalypse of Abraham 21–2 in Q 56:1-56 (Carlos A. Segovia, “Discussing/Subverting Paul: Polemical Re-readings and Competing Supersessionist Misreadings of Pauline Inclusivism in Late Antiquity: A Case Study on the Apocalypse of Abraham, Justin Martyr, and the Qurʾān,” in *Paul the Jew: A Conversation between Pauline and Second-Temple Scholars*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia [Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming in 2016]). Actually, if one leaves aside Q 2:124 because of its peculiar (i.e. Christian) reasoning, one may well regard the Abraham story in Q 122-38 (and, in general, the various quranic passages that depict Abraham’s religion as prior to, more authentic than, and ultimately called to supersede both Judaism and Christianity) as radically different from, and much later than, those quranic passages likewise dealing with the patriarch where no anti-Jewish overtones, and no anti-Christian overtones, can be detected. Hence in my view it is wrong to read e.g. Q 6:74-83 and 19:41-50 in light of 2:122-38, however natural such tacit subordination may seem to almost everyone. There moreover is an interesting contrast between Q 2:135 and 3:67 (were Abraham is presented as a *hanīf* in the sense that he is neither a Jew nor a Christian, which obviously adds something to his presentation as just a *hanīf* in 3:95: 4:125; 6:79; 6:161; 16:120, 123), on the one hand, and Q 2:124, on the other hand; for even if in the latter case Abraham is not depicted as a *hanīf*, he is implicitly described as the father of a “people” that can no longer be equated with his carnal descendants, who are no longer regarded as Abraham’s true offspring insofar as they have been superseded by a new group: the righteous or right-doers. Now, this is a typically Gentile-Christian anti-Jewish argument that, as I have already suggested, one finds somewhat ambiguously in both Paul’s letters to the Romans and the Galatians and the Fourth Gospel, as well as much less ambiguously in Barnabas, Aristides, and Justin Martyr. It is also interesting to note that the 6th-century Palestinian author Cyril of Scythopolis, in his *Vita Euthymii* 10, suggests that through Aspebetus’s (formerly a pagan Arab) conversion to Christianity, Aspebetus’s people were transformed from “Agarenians” and “Ishmaelites” into the descendants of Sarah, which implied for them becoming heirs of God’s promise to Abraham. Thus according to Cyril – who seemingly follows here Galatians 4 – becoming a Christian means to be of Sarah’s, instead of Hagar’s, lineage (Hagar representing, both for Paul and Cyril, the Sinaitic covenant, while Sarah symbolises God’s promise to Abraham as fulfilled by Christ), and thus to partake in a new purely spiritual, rather than carnal, Abrahamic lineage. Despite their apparent contrast, both arguments point to the same notion; that is to say, it is the rhetorical emphasis, but ultimately not the concept, that shifts from one text to the other (Cyril’s *Vita Euthymii* 10 and Q 2:124, respectively): In one case (Cyril’s *Vita Euthymii* 10), Abraham’s carnal lineage is symbolically represented by Hagar and rejected as such, whereas in the other one (Q 2:124) it is mentioned and rejected in its own right without any concurring symbolism (in spite of the fact that several quranic passages tend to inscribe an Ishmaelite, and therefore a carnal Abrahamic genealogy, for the Arabs themselves). But then – one may ask – what made the difference for a late-antique Arab between becoming a Christian and becoming a *hanīf*? And when exactly were these two notions rendered as opposites?

Also, when one looks into the biblical material in the Qurʾān – by biblical I mean here relative to the Hebrew Bible alone – one gets the overall impression that this material is generally read *through* a Christian lens; in fact, its knowledge often seems to be mediated through other, basically Syriac-Christian, parabiblical texts (e.g. the Joseph story in Q 12, as convincingly shown by Joseph Witztum).<sup>19</sup>

This does not mean that one cannot find Jewish elements in the Qurʾān. Indeed, these are most intriguing.<sup>20</sup> But if we were to agree that they may go back to the earliest quranic layers, and hence to the early quranic milieu, it still seems to me this does not prevent from seeing them as theological loans witnessing to the complex religious-political map of pre-Islamic Arabia. For I basically see Muḥammad’s mission (wherever exactly we may need to place the historical Muḥammad) as a political movement with somewhat *peripheral* but *nonetheless strong* Christian trimmings that took shape in the aftermath of the Persian invasion of the near East. In my view, there is no intrinsic contradiction between this hypothesis and the very likely probability that the Qurʾān as we now have it (i.e. the Qurʾān’s *textus receptus*) was written and edited in Syria and/or Iraq after a few texts originally belonging to Muḥammad’s milieu that were thus expanded in some cases, abridged in other cases, and in any event reworked and mixed with other miscellaneous writings a few decades after his death – and that in was in this new scenario (evidently a *scribal* one) that some additional Jewish and Christian components were incorporated into the quranic corpus.

Besides, since the Qurʾān does not contain many references to external events – which makes it difficult to establish a chronology of its multiple layers – its Christian, pro-Christian, and intra/anti-Christian (whether polemical or supersessionist) passages look like some of the very few that may provide us a *clue* to their chronological development, inasmuch as they contain more or less direct references to the complex interactions between their authors and other social groups, unlike the passages dealing with the Jews and the pagans, which prove far more stable in tone.

Lastly, the fact that pro-Christian passages are *placed* near or next to anti-Christian passages in the Qurʾān may be odd to our modern eyes: Why should the quranic redactors place them together?, one may ask. There is no clear-cut answer to this question, but the shift in meaning of the expression *ahl al-kitāb* (“people of the writing”) in 3:64 and 65 clearly shows that different theological approaches were *merged* at some point by the quranic authors/editors.

## 2. A tentative historical reconstruction

Let’s now canvass the two problems mentioned at the outset with regard to the straightforward interpretation of the apparently twofold, in fact fourfold, quranic attitude towards Christianity – according to which Muḥammad tried to gather theological support from some Christian group or groups and then distanced himself from them when they rejected his teachings.

### A peripheral Christian movement?

As I have suggested, the *first* problem with this argument is that the texts grouped under *a* are (fully) Christian rather than (just) pro-Christian. In other words, they express identification with Christianity from within instead of expressing a favourable attitude towards Christianity from without. Now, if one accepts that these

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Witztum, “Joseph among the Ishmaelites: Q 12 in Light of Syriac Sources,” in *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds, 425-48.

<sup>20</sup> See José Costa’s excellent paper on the rabbinic parallels to the quranic use of the terms *al-dunyā/al-āḥira*, “‘*Olam ha-ze/‘olam ha-ba*, *al-dunyā/al-āḥira*: étude comparée de deux couples de termes dans la littérature talmudique et le Coran,” *Arabica* 62 (2015): 234-59.

texts, or most of them, date from Muḥammad's time and bear witness to his mission – the opponents of which, judging from the *frequent* anti-Jewish overtones and the number of apparently early anti-pagan passages in the Qur'ān, may well have been the pagans and the Jews of the Ḥiḡāz (i.e. the two social and religious groups that profited from the decay of Abraha's Christian kingdom in the 560s or the 570s)<sup>21</sup> – then one is compelled to ask whether Muḥammad himself *may* have been raised in a Christian milieu and initially struggled to re-affirm a particular, if *peripheral*, type of Christianity; peripheral because of its very complex, and not altogether clear, constituting elements – which in my view fall close, nevertheless, to Dyophysite/Nestorian Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

The early Islamic sources preserve some oblique memory of this possibility when they recall, for instance, that Jesus's grave was to be found near Medina,<sup>23</sup> that it was a(n Arian in later anti-Muslim Christian apologetics) monk named Baḥīrā (whom Ibn Sa'd names Naṣṭūr) who examined Muḥammad for the sign of prophecy when he was nine years old, and that Muḥammad's call to prophecy was later acknowledged as authentic by a Christian learned man from Mecca – namely, Ḥadīḡa's cousin Waraqa b. Nawfal (as

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<sup>21</sup> See Christian Julien Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 247-332.

<sup>22</sup> See further Segovia, "Abraha's Christological Formula"; idem, "Jews and Christians." In my view, the Qur'ān's elusive Christology provides some very interesting clues in this respect. It operates on a different level if compared to Dyophysite/Nestorian Christology, for it does not address the question of the relationship between Christ's divinity and his humanity, i.e. between Christ's divine and human hypostases, as Guillaume Dye insightfully pointed to me in a private communication of August 12, 2015. Nonetheless, it reflects its premises in so far as it takes the earthly Jesus to be a man and labels him the Messiah, son of Mary, instead of son of God. For in contrast to Chalcedonian "orthodoxy," Dyophysites/Nestorians in late antiquity often depicted Jesus as a teacher and example, so that Christ-believers could effectively imitate the pattern that the man *assumed* by the Logos had set (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 600-17*, vol. 2 of idem, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 46); otherwise, they argued, humanity would be deprived of the hope of salvation. Besides, they normally gave the name Christ to the person of the union of both hypostases, the human and the divine, rather than to Jesus, the human teacher; and this, in turn, raised among their opponents the objection that they endorsed the view of a double sonship, one divine and the other human (Pelikan, *Eastern Christendom*, 48). It was only with Babai the Great (c. 551-628) that an effort was made on the part of the Dyophysites/Nestorians to solve this and other related ambiguities (Pelikan, *Eastern Christendom*, 42-43) and to counter the threat of a growing Miaphysite influence between 571 and 610, which must in turn be seen as one of the reasons that led Ḥusraw II to temporarily suppress the catholicate in 609 (see Gerrit J. Reinink, "Tradition and the Formation of the 'Nestorian' Identity in Sixth- to Seventh-Century Iraq," in *Religious Origins of Nations? The Christian Communities of the Middle East*, ed. Bas ter Haar Romeny [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010], 217-50; Geoffrey Greatrex, "Khusro II and the Christians of His Empire," *JCSSS* 3 [2003]: 78-88). Thus it is fair to ask what knowledge of such problems and conflicts might certain peripheral groups more or less inclined towards Diophysitism have had around that time, and if any of such groups might have eventually striven to uphold an even more radical distinction between Christ's divinity and humanity by stressing Jesus's exclusively human condition. The possibility that the Qur'ān reflects their hypothetical views cannot be excluded, either. On the eventual connections between Dyophysites and Unitarian Christians (i.e. Christians who refused to see Jesus as more than a man and thus reserved the title "God" for the Father alone) in the late-6th- to mid-7th century Arabian peninsula and Iraq, see Philip Wood's paper in this volume, whose references to the *Acta Arethae*, Iṣō'yahb I, and Thomas of Marga are particularly helpful. Lastly, it is curious to notice the positive references to the religion of the Arab conquerors in several Dyophysite/Nestorian writings of the 7th century, including Iṣō'yahb III's letters (48B.97; 14C.251), the Khuzistan Chronicle (34), and John bar Penkāyē's *Book of Main Points* (141), on which see now Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland, CA: California University Press, 2015), 33, 36, 50, 88-89. I must add that I am grateful to Peter von Sivers for drawing my attention to the relevance of the early 600s in the making of a Dyophysite orthodoxy, which has helped me to nuance my former view – endorsed in the first draft of this paper – that some Anomoeans, whose presence therein back in the 4th century is documented in Philostorgius's *Church History*, might have managed to survive in pre-Islamic Arabia.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon D. Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989, 206, 211.

reported by Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hišām).<sup>24</sup> See further the textual evidence collected by Irfan Shahid on the several churches (*masāğid*) devoted to Mary and the existence of a Christian cemetery (*maqbarat al-naṣārā*) in pre-Islamic Mecca; a place on its outskirts (a shrine on the pilgrimage road to Nağrān?) known as *mawqif al-naṣ-rānī*, i.e. the “station of the Christians”; and the strong connections between the Ğurhum, who were said to have introduced Christianity in the Ĥiğāz, and the (re)building of the Ka‘ba.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, all this may explain why some of Muḥammad’s followers supposedly fled to Abyssinia to escape persecution from the pagan oligarchy of Mecca and met the Aksumite king there (as reported by Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hišām), as well as why Muḥammad respected the icons of Jesus and Mary found inside the Ka‘ba when he conquered Mecca in 630 and had all the pagan idols of the Meccan shrine destroyed (as reported by al-Azraqī).

Let me be clear: I am not directly interested in the information provided by the Muslim tradition, which is usually too late and biased to be uncritically accepted. Put differently: I do not dismiss the Muslim sources as spurious, for I believe that some useful, if *oblique*, information may be occasionally gathered from them. What I question, in any event, is the acceptance of their master narrative. Therefore, I use this material here as a hint that may be of some relevance and prove especially significant perhaps for those scholars who tend to rely on the “data” collected by the Muslim historiographers.<sup>26</sup>

Arguably, however, the most fascinating clues to the Christian background of formative Islam are those contained in the *quranic* descriptions of Jesus as not only a prophet (*nabī*) and a messenger (*rasūl*), but also as God’s messiah (*masīḥ*), God’s word (*kalimatu llāhi*), and a spirit from him (*rūḥun minhu*) – a series of titles that are never applied in the *quranic* corpus to other (prophetic) figures. Q 3:46 (*wa yukallimu fī-l-mahdi*) and 19:29-30 (*kayfa nukallimu man kāna fī-l-mahdi ṣabiyyan*) implicitly characterise Jesus as a quasi-heavenly being (after 1 Enoch 106:1-3 and the presumable Syriac *Vorlage* of Arabic Gospel of the Infancy *ad* 1:2?); and he seems to share God’s spirit and likeness, either in his own right or as the second and true Adam (after Hebrews 1:6; Philippians 2:10; and *Cave of Treasures* 2:12-13, 22-5?), in Q 21:91 (*fa-nafaḥnā fīhā min rrūḥinā*); 66:12 (*fa-nafaḥnā fīhi [sic!] min rrūḥinā*), and Q 15:29; 38:72 (*fa-’idā . . . nafaḥtu fīhi min rrūḥī*), respectively. The astonishing wording of these passages is obviously reminiscent of Genesis 1:26-7 and 2:7, for which reason I cannot read them against a Jewish background; cf. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann’s opposite claim in this volume, which in my view minimises their tacit Adamic Christology in spite of rightly

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<sup>24</sup> On the Baḥrā legend and its sources, see Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 333, 337-8, 345, 385-9, 390-2; idem, “Islam and *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD,” in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, and David Thomas (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 12-13. Shahid was unable to find the exact reference to the *mawqif al-naṣrānī* provided by Cheikho (*Tāğ al-’Arūs*, Kuwait edition, 9.15b-16a, sub rad. *h.ṣ.r.*). I am grateful to prof. Claude Gilliot for confirming this reference to me.

<sup>26</sup> The fact that the Christian Old Testament apparently circulated among the Arabs long before the Hebrew Bible, as Meira Polliack underlined in one of the discussion sessions held in Milan, may be seen as an additional hint in this direction.

pointing to some Jewish elements perceptible in Q 2:30-9. and which might perhaps be read as intending to counter, or at least minimise, the Adamic Christology implicit in Q 15:26-42; 38:67-85.<sup>27</sup>

### The gradual struggle for a new tribal supremacy

Yet describing Muḥammad's mission as a peripheral Christian movement does not shed enough light on such movement's motivations – which may well have been *political* above everything else. Yet it may be important at this juncture to clarify a few concepts.

First and foremost, there is no evidence that “Islam” was the main reason behind the Arab overtake of the Near East. Nor is there evidence that the latter followed a linear development. In fact, it is difficult to speak of a unified Arab state, and of Islam as a new religion for that matter, until the late 7th century. Between the 620s and the early 690s we know only that different Arab groups, with apparently similar albeit not necessarily identical religious ideas, strove to achieve political hegemony in the Arabian peninsula and its adjacent regions. One of such groups, led by a prophet apparently named Muḥammad, partly succeeded in that effort between the 620s and the 630s. From the 630s to the early 690s different Arab leaders, though probably not all of them, claimed to be heirs to Muḥammad's polity in the Ḥiǧāz, Syria, and Iraq. By the early 690s a new, unified Arab state, with its capital in Syria, was fully established. Indeed, it is only with ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 692-705) and his successor Walīd I (r. 705-15) that the foundations of an Arab

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<sup>27</sup> Let me recall an anecdote at this point. I usually tell my students to fancy that they casually come to discover a late-antique fragmentary document that states: “O you who believe, be God's helpers – as when Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Who are my helpers for God?’ They replied, ‘We are God's helpers’” (see Q 61:14 above), repeatedly defends Jesus against the “Jews,” declares him to be the messiah, makes systematic use of a number of crucial Christian notions and rhetorical moves, and quotes more or less verbatim the New Testament Apocrypha and the writings of several late-antique Christian authors. “How on earth would you label that text?,” I ask them. Also, it is possible to ask – just ask – whether the cow in Q 2:67-74 is but an implicit allusion to Christ drawing on Barnabas 8:1-4 instead of a direct reference to Numbers 19 and/or Deuteronomy 21:1-9, *pace* Ali Aghaei's recent attempt in this volume to read it as an adaptation of Numbers 19 through a rabbinic lens. And to inquire what could be the implications of reading *al-masīh* in the genitive in Q 9:31 – an issue to which I intend to dedicate a future paper. Let me also add that I am currently working on a new monograph on the quranic Jesus, whose provisional abstract can be accessed here: [https://www.academia.edu/17878086/The\\_Quranic\\_Jesus\\_Traditional\\_Views\\_and\\_New\\_Insights\\_2018\\_Upcoming\\_Book](https://www.academia.edu/17878086/The_Quranic_Jesus_Traditional_Views_and_New_Insights_2018_Upcoming_Book), and which aims at moving beyond the somewhat outdated approaches framed by R. C. Zaehner, “The Qur'ān and Christ,” in idem, *At Sundry Times: An Essay in the Comparison of Religions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958; reprint. in Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977), 195-217; Henri Michaud, *Jésus salon le Coran* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1960); Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; reprint. in Oxford: Oneworld, 1996); M. Ali Merad, “Le Christ salon le Coran,” *ROMM* 5.1 (1968): 79-94; Heikki Räisänen, *Das koranische Jesusbild: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Korans* (SFGMÖ 20; Helsinki: Finnischen Gesellschaft für Missiologie und Ökumenik, 1971; see also idem, “The Portrait of Jesus in the Qur'ān: Reflections from a Biblical Scholar,” *MW* 70 [1980]: 122-33); Claus Schedl, *Muhammad un Jesus: die Christologisch relevanten Texte des Korans neu übersetzt und erklärt* (Vienna-Freiburg-Basel: Herder, 1978); Günther Risse, “Gott int Christus, der Sohn der Maria”: eine Studie sum Christusbild im Koran (Bonn: Borengäßer, 1989); Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*; and Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010; 2nd ed.) – notwithstanding Räisänen's, Robinson's, and especially Zaehner's, Schedl's, and Risse's useful insights. My study proposes to distinguish six types of Jesus-passages in the quranic corpus: (I) those passages that depict Jesus as a prophet or a righteous among others while simultaneously, if paradoxically, highlighting his prominence over them; (II) those that defend him against the Jews, which I take to be the key to understanding the I-group passages; (III) those that introduce him as the God's Messiah instead of God's Son, which in my view need not to be envisaged as being anti-Christian; (IV) those that explicitly claim that God has no son and counter the trinity, which save a few exceptions do not belong to the same textual series than the III-group passages – an issue to which due attention has not been paid as yet; (V) those that implicitly contain traces of a high Christology, whose articulation with the III- and IV-group passages obviously represents a very remarkable challenge; and (VI) those that expressly connect Jesus and Muḥammad. The fact that there are six types of Jesus-passages in the Qur'ān (be they short third-person references to Jesus, long narratives about him, or Jesus-speeches, just like we find all this in the canonical and apocryphal gospels) is, I think, of paramount importance to better understand the religious setting of early Islam – if we still want to use a term that proves more and more tricky as we advance in the study of its undefined, ambiguous origins.

state were laid and Islam emerged as a new religion, the official religion of that particular Arab state.<sup>28</sup> With respect to the events before that date (which I take to be the period in which the Qur'ān was collected and established as authoritative scripture),<sup>29</sup> all we can do is to *put forward*, and *test*, hypotheses.

A plausible *hypothesis* could be as follows: The struggle for political supremacy among rival Arab tribes in the Arabian peninsula of the early- and mid-7th century – i.e. the political struggle out of which Islam arose – was due mainly to (1) the overthrow of the the Ethiopian dynasty of Ḥimyar with the help of the Sassanians in the 570s, which likely offered the Arabs of the Ḥiǧāz and other regions in central Arabia a reason to expand southwards; (2) the elimination of the Jafnid/Gassanid kingdom around 582, which caused Byzantium to lose a powerful ally against the Sassanians and brought instability to Syria-Palestine and the northern regions of the Arabian Peninsula – from which the Arab tribes of the Ḥiǧāz and central Arabia profited as well; and (3) the subsequent elimination of the Nasrid/Lakhmid kingdom by the Sassanians in 602, which entailed similar consequences in the north-eastern regions of the Arabian peninsula.<sup>30</sup> These three factors *coalesced* to make possible the conditions for a new Arab (tribal) supremacy in the region between the late 6th century and the mid-7th century. Against this background, Muḥammad may have been one of the Arab leaders who claimed authority in the region and he who ultimately acquired authority – no more, no less. His supremacy was not uncontested, however: we should probably re-read the *ridḍa* literature as pointing to the political opposition countered by him and his immediate followers rather than as a collection of reports about the apostates and apostasies that followed the establishment of an Islamic rule in the Ḥiǧāz.

Still, religion and politics went hand in hand in the late-antique Near East. The Persian invasion of Syria-Palestine in 610 caused a turmoil that highlighted the political vacuum in the region raising religious concerns among its Arab inhabitants, who were mostly Christian; while the Byzantine campaign against the Sassanians in 622, which lasted until 629 (the Sassanians were defeated in Nineveh in 627 and Jerusalem in 629), gave the Arab Christians the symbolic support (as well as financed support from the Byzantine administration?) to counter the Persian invasion and the political claims of the socio-religious groups that benefited from it.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to notice, in this regard, the coincidence of these two events with the dates commonly assigned to the beginnings of Muḥammad's mission in Mecca (610), the establishment of his rulership in Medina (622), and the beginnings of his military campaigns shortly afterwards. Of course, political and religious *allegiance* to the Empire (whether Byzantine or Sassanian) need not mean total *submission* or

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<sup>28</sup> See Chase F. Robinson, *'Abd al-Malik* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005; reprint. 2012); Carlos A. Segovia, "Identity Politics and Scholarship in the Study of Islamic Origins: The Inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock as a Test Case," in *Identity, Politics, and Scholarship: The Study of Islam and the Study of Religions*, ed. Matt Sheedy (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox, forthcoming in 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Robinson, *'Abd al-Malik*, 100-4; Alfred-Louis de Prémare, "'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and the Process of the Qur'ān's Composition," in *The Hidden Origins of Islam*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin, 189-221.

<sup>30</sup> See Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sassanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia"; and in particular Jan Retsö, "The Contradictory Revelation: A Reading of Sura 27:16-44 and 34:15-21," in *Micro-Level Analyses of the Qur'an*, ed. Hakan Rydving (AUUHR 34; Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2014), 95-103.

<sup>31</sup> On the plausible Byzantine plot behind Muḥammad's *hiǧra*, cf. Michael Lecker, "Were the Ghassānids and the Byzantines behind Muḥammad's Hijra," in *Les Jafnides. Des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VIe siècle de l'ère chrétienne) – Actes du colloque de Paris, 24-25 novembre 2008*, ed. Denis Genequand and Christian Julien Robin (OM 17; Paris: de Boccard, 2015), 277-93; Glen W. Bowersock, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press and Historical Society of Israel, 2012), 56. On the Alexander legend in the Qur'ān and its sources, see Kevin van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qur'ān 18:83-102," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (RSQ; London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 175-203; Tommaso Tesei, "The Prophecy of Dū-l-Qarnayn and the Origins of the Qur'ānic Corpus," *MA* (2013-14): 273-90.

heteronomy, for the latter often allowed some leeway to its Arab allies.<sup>32</sup> Put together, these various hints suggest that Muḥammad's mission *may* have had a Christian rationale regardless of the exact way in which it should be *qualified* and *conceptualised*.

Conversely, representing Muḥammad's religion as a reaction to Judaeo-Christian acculturation that, unlike other similar reactions (e.g. that of Musaylima), effectively succeeded to blend together the Judaeo-Christian demand of monotheism with a number of ancestral forms of Arab/pagan religiosity in a time of pagan decline,<sup>33</sup> looks to me like another way of projecting onto it the *traditional* view of Islam's origins – that is to say, the view that Islam was a distinct phenomenon right from the start. In turn, Fred Donner's argument that Muḥammad's religious community was an inclusive, inter-confessional or non-sectarian monotheistic confederacy open to Jews and Christians alike<sup>34</sup> is too *ecumenically-oriented* in my opinion, even if it aptly points to the necessary examination of the ways in which Christians and Jews interacted in pre-Islamic South Arabia.<sup>35</sup>

### **Dismantling a prejudice – but which one?**

Claiming that Muḥammad's religion might have been *peripherally* Christian, however, does not amount to say that Islam was a Christian *heresy* – a view somehow endorsed by John of Damascus in antiquity (for he merely states that Muḥammad was taught by an Arian Christian)<sup>36</sup> and echoed in more forceful terms by G. K. Chesterton in modern times. It is the only way one has to interpret the Christian lore in the Qur'ān, on which, ultimately, one out of three interpretative options might be taken: (i) to circumscribe it to Muḥammad's original Hijazi milieu alone (*à la* Van Reeth,<sup>37</sup> with whom I nonetheless concur in considering that Islam sprung out of a complex Christian milieu); (ii) to circumscribe it to Muḥammad's milieu without denying its later expansion in a Syrian/Iraqi one (which is the best option in my view); or (iii) to circumscribe it to the latter alone (*à la* Wansbrough and Shoemaker).<sup>38</sup>

The explicit statement that Muḥammad's religion should not be understood as a Christian heresy was already included in the first draft version of this paper. I would like to highlight it again, however, for during the discussion over my paper in Milan Cecilia Palombo astonishingly reproved me for representing Muḥammad's religion as a Christian *heresy* (!). To do so would imply to side with Christian orthodoxy, which has never been, and is not, my position, as in my view all early (and later) variant forms of Christianity – and hence all early (and later) Christianities – had (have) their own and ultimately unquestionable right to theological legitimacy. What needs to be asked is *why* is it that pointing to the Christian roots of formative

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<sup>32</sup> See Greg Fisher, "Between Constantinople and Ctesiphon: Arab tribes, Arab leaders, and religious identity in late antique Syria, Arabia, and Mesopotamia" (2013), workshop paper: <https://lists.lsit.ucsb.edu/archives/borderlands.religion/attachments/20130530/93f0d24c/attachment-0001.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," 303.

<sup>34</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> See further Segovia, "Jews and Christians."

<sup>36</sup> See now Gilles Courtieu, "La *threskeia* des Ismaélites Etude de la première définition synthétique de l'islam par Jean de Damas," in *Hérésies: une construction d'identités religieuses*, ed. Christian Brouwer, Guillaume Dye, and Anja van Rompaey (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2015), 105-26.

<sup>37</sup> Jan M. F. van Reeth, "Ville céleste, ville sainte, ville idéal dans la tradition musulmane," *AOB* 24 (2011): 121-31.

<sup>38</sup> John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Contents and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (LOS; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978; reprint. with a foreword, translation, and expanded notes by Gerald Hawting in Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), 18, 22; Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (DRLAR; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 225.

Islam proves so very controversial and causes so much misunderstanding in our days. I am afraid this is an issue about which the field of early Christian studies has patently moved ahead of ours, since it is now current in it to view Jesus, even Paul, as second-temple Jews, as Gabriele Boccaccini and Isaac Oliver perspicaciously stressed in the discussion (see also Stephen Shoemaker’s paper in this volume); whereas most scholars of early Islam continue to view Muḥammad as a Muslim and the Qur’ān as a book containing his *ipssima verba* rather than as a composite corpus formed over several decades – more, probably, than we are often willing to assume. So I think Anders Petersen was perfectly right in Milan when he made the point, *contra* Ulrika Mårtensson, that religious identity formation is a slow process, that the comparative study of late-antique religions leaves little doubt about this, and that depicting formative Islam in a different way makes no sense and would require some counter-evidence that we simply lack. In short, maybe the biggest *prejudice* does not consist in seeing Islam as a Christian heresy – a view that no serious scholar would support today – but in equating any scholarly claim about the Christian roots of formative Islam (however we may represent them and whatever its other eventual roots) with the out-fashioned views of the Christian heresiologists that, quite surprisingly to say the least, many scholars of early Islam have interiorised and transformed into a dark, obsessive ghost. My recommendation is that they read Spinoza to understand they are confusingly depicting things, i.e. trapped into a world of unclear signs, by merely paying attention to the way in which things do affect them – but I honestly doubt they will ever do.

### 3. The Inflection Point

My *second* concern with the view that Muḥammad tried to gather theological support from some Christian group or groups and then distanced himself from them when they rejected his teachings is that this view implicitly points to the *c*-texts (i.e. the anti-Christian polemical formulas that counter the belief that Jesus is the Son of God in addition to being God’s Messiah) as representing a clear-cut break with Christianity. For we have an alternative option here, which consists in interpreting them as being addressed against those Christians who overstressed Jesus’s divinity, i.e. the Miaphysites.

#### Summary: the texts and their plausible chronology

Now, since Miaphysitism was not only was widespread in 7th-century Syria-Palestine (and Egypt), but also was the *mainstream* Christian denomination in the region – whereas we simply cannot make a similar statement about the Arabian peninsula, the confessional ratio of whose Christian population we totally ignore – should we take al-Šam and the period elapsing from the 630s to the 690s, or else early-7th-century Iraq, where Miaphysitism represented a threat for at least two decades, as the more likely *background(s)* for such polemical formulas?<sup>39</sup>

Be that as it may, the fact is that several of the texts grouped under *c* (Q 4:171-2; 17:111; 19:34b-6; 112, which in addition to 5:117; 19:14; 43:64 are reproduced on the Dome of the Rock) can be safely dated to ‘Abd al-Malik’s time, i.e. to the late 7th century – which is also the period in which the word “Islam” appears for the first time on an official inscription (again, the inner drum on the Dome of the Rock in

<sup>39</sup> In a forthcoming paper to be published in Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig, eds., *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion IV* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2016), Peter von Sivers argues that “[t]he most straightforward way to describe the formation of Islam is that it began with a christological debate *within* the Arab ruling class under Mu‘āwiya, composed of generals, bureaucrats, scribes, and monks,” that “[i]n this debate, anti-Paschite and pro-Paschite, anti-Trisagion and pro-Trisagion convictions clashed,” and that “[t]races of these clashes – which also involved polemics around Monophysite Julianism and tritheism – can be found in Penkāyē, Anastasius Sinaiticus, Arculf, and the Maronite Chronicle” (private communication of July 11, 2015). I am grateful to him for sharing his reflections with me prior to the publication of his paper.

Jerusalem, built by ‘Abd al-Malik in 692) in connection, moreover, with Muḥammad’s name.<sup>40</sup> But then it could be that the texts grouped under *a* and *b* predate them and those grouped under *d* postdate them. Certainly, the Dome of the Rock inscriptions may be and are usually understood to *reflect* earlier texts and/or formulas. I am not completely against this view, but I ultimately find it too speculative. Let me anticipate any eventual objection in this regard: Why should one regard as speculative the view that they do belong there, and as non-speculative the view that their content is earlier, as some of my interlocutors claimed in Milan? There simply is *no* evidence to support the view that they are earlier to the inscriptions themselves. Whether we like it or not, the *only* evidence we have about them is that they are found... inside the Dome of the Rock. Projecting back onto such inscriptions the idea of a pre-Marwanid Qur’ān that they would in turn quote (with some perceptible variances in the wording, though) is certainly possible, but in fact there is no proof to assist this claim. Alternatively, one may surmise that the inscriptions reproduce texts already used by, or known to, ‘Abd al-Malik. Personally, I have nothing against this view, but once more we have no evidence for it. The more we can say is that the texts themselves are found inside the Dome of the Rock for the first time, and that putting forward a different hypothesis goes against this evidence. But again, why is it then that basing an argument on this simple fact proves so problematic? As Alfred-Louis de Prémare writes,

A historian studying these texts might envisage three hypotheses concerning the content of the inscriptions on [this monument], which have parallels within the Qur’ān:

1. the texts were composed directly for the [monument] in question, and were reused later, with some slight modifications, in the final composition of the Qur’ānic text;
2. they represent fragments that were scattered, attesting to the existence of a sort of Ur-Qur’ān, still being drafted, selected, and assembled, some of which at the same time could have been used in the inscriptions on the monuments;
3. they were actual “quotations” taken from a fully formed Qur’ān that is the one we now have today.

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<sup>40</sup> Unless one takes *mḥm(m)d* to be no more than a gerundial participle referring to Jesus (Luxenberg 2008) – which is a possible but not fully satisfactory option in my view. On ‘Abd al-Malik’s Muhammadan policy, see Robinson, *‘Abd al-Malik*. On the anti-Christian fragments of the Dome of the Rock themselves, their purpose and their plausible religious and political context, see Frank van der Velden, “Die Felsendominschrift als Ende einer christologischen Konvergenztextökumene im Koran,” *OC* 95 (2011): 213-46. On Luxenberg’s reading of the term *mḥm(m)d*, cf. Peter von Sivers, “Christology and Prophetology in the Umayyad Arab Empire,” in *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion III*, ed. Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2014), 255-85. See also my forthcoming paper, “Identity Politics and Scholarship in the Study of Islam’s Origins: The Inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock as a Test Case,” to be published in *Identity, Politics, and Scholarship: The Study of Islam and the Study of Religions*, ed. Matt Sheedy (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2016), where I contend that the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, while implicitly witnessing to the official promotion of a new confessional creed centred around the figure of Muḥammad as God’s servant, prophet, and messenger – and hence to the official inscription of a new religious identity based upon a somewhat innovative confessional symbol which is only documented prior to that date in a Arab-Sassanian Zubayrid coin from the 680s – show that the time in which those very same titles were rather applied to Jesus was not distant enough to avoid some very significant conceptual ambivalences, and, therefore, that they evince a moment of transition in the process of identity making instead of representing the official sanction of an already existing one or a clear-cut new start within that process. How are we to explain, furthermore, the fact that ‘Abd al-Malik had coins minted that bear crosses together with that new confessional symbol and the allusion to God’s uniqueness? See further the evidence gathered by Tareq Ramadan, “A Rare Arab-Byzantine Hybrid Coin of Damascus: An Intriguing ‘Mule’ Bearing a Standing Emperor Obverse and a Sphere through Pole-on-Steps Reverse,” *JONS* 203 (2010): 43-5. Be that as it may, ‘Abd al-Malik apparently was not the first to mint coins in which Muḥammad’s name is paradoxically linked to the Christian symbol of the cross: a fals, possibly from the 680s, bearing a cross and Muḥammad’s name on its reverse was auctioned in November 2014 at Numismatica Genevensis (Session 1, Lot 229); see <http://www.sixbid.com/browse.html?auction=1609&category=33779&lot=1442255>.

Although none of these hypotheses seems sufficient to prevail over the others, based only on the inscriptions, it seems to me . . . that one can exclude the third hypothesis. It is in Jerusalem, in any case, in the place that stood as the symbol of eastern Christianity, where the Islamic anti-trinitarian and Christological polemic, as expressed in the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, has its true *sitz im leben*.<sup>41</sup>

I therefore endorse here the first of these hypotheses while not entirely dismissing the second one.

Keeping all this in mind, I suggest the following tentative *chronology* – notice that I have labelled it “tentative” – for the quranic passages earlier referred to as belonging to groups *a*, *b*, *c*, and *d*:

- Group *a* = Stage 1: Early-Muhammadan formulas;
- Group *b* = Stage 2: Late-Muhammadan- or else post-Muhammadan formulas – if post-Muhammadan then possibly pre-Marwanid, and hence contemporary with the Arab overtake of the Near East;
- Group *c* = Stage 3: Post-Muhammadan, possibly early-Marwanid formulas;
- Group *d* = Stage 4: Post Muhammadan, either early or late-Marwanid formulas.

In short, we have, first (1/*a*), a still *basically-Christian* faith; then (2/*b*) a period of *pro-Christian compromise* – in spite of Mu‘āwīya’s occasional anti-Christian policy, I personally would incline towards Mu‘āwīya’s reign due to his purported sense of diplomacy;<sup>42</sup> and finally (3/*c*, 4/*d*) the *struggle* for a *new* religious identity that was (3/*c*) promoted by ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 692-705) and (4/*d*) almost fully achieved by his son and successor al-Walīd I (r. 705-715).<sup>43</sup>

#### **A anomaly that does not necessarily turn the model inoperative**

As far as I can see, the major objection that could be raised against this overall scheme has to do with the arguable antiquity of Q 112, which is widespread in early graffiti and inscriptions, employs a Hebrew Jewish formula in v. 1, and discusses Jesus’s divinity in v. 3 (cf. the strict monotheist formulas in Q 2:116; 6:101; 10:68; 17:111; 18:4; 19:35, 88-94; 23:91; 39:4; 43:81; 72:3). Yet Q 112 may reflect an original non-Muhammadan formula common among early Arab monotheists (maybe philo-Jews in light of its opening verse?) with which Muḥammad tried to reach some *political* agreement,<sup>44</sup> and that was later used in the Dome of the Rock and included in the Qur’ān to highlight the *parting of the ways* between ‘Abd al-Malik’s

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<sup>41</sup> De Prémare, “‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and the Process of the Qur’ān’s Composition,” 193.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson, ‘*Abd al-Malik*, 24-5.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 271-95; Robinson ‘*Abd al-Malik*, 59-128; Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 194-224. I intend to develop this line of inquiry in a future book co-authored with my colleague Guillaume Dye. It is provisionally entitled *Re-Imagining Islam in the Late 7th century*, and a preview of its contents is available at [https://www.academia.edu/7050551/Re-Imagining\\_Islam\\_in\\_the\\_Late\\_7th\\_Century\\_with\\_Guillaume\\_Dye\\_2017\\_Upcoming\\_Book](https://www.academia.edu/7050551/Re-Imagining_Islam_in_the_Late_7th_Century_with_Guillaume_Dye_2017_Upcoming_Book)). The views on the chronology of the Christian, pro-Christian and anti-Christian formulas in the Qur’ān endorsed in this paper are my own, however. Aside: The possibility that learned Christians helped the quranic scribes to insert biblical stories in the corpus does not go against the idea that by that time Islam had become anti-Christian in its outlook, as anti-Christian in Christological matters obviously does not mean anti-biblical in a more general sense, and you can always hire the vanquished if you intend to benefit from their expertise.

<sup>44</sup> Segovia, “Jews and Christians.”

“Islam” and Christianity. Thus, even if Q 112 represents an *anomaly* vis-à-vis the early Christian and pro-Christian formulas grouped under *a* and *b*, respectively, it need not be read as an *unexplainable* anomaly. Conversely, to interpret it as representing the anti-Christian Muhammadan beginnings of something that became more and more Christian just before it became overtly anti-Christian makes little sense to me. Unless, of course, it all started and developed in a totally different way: with different groups (the Zubayrids, the Umayyads, and the Alids), each with its own religion (a strict monotheism going back to Muḥammad’s religious convictions, something that looked like Christianity or was favourable to it, and something falling close to Manichaeism, respectively?), whose different views were synthesised by ‘Abd al-Malik by means of subordinating those of the Umayyads and the Alids to those of the Zubayrids when he took effective control of the provinces in which the three groups had developed between the 630s and the early 690s (the Ḥiǧāz, Syria, and Iraq). Besides, questioning an explanatory model because of an anomaly it presents is certainly possible. But we should be aware that models are never perfect. They often present grey areas, and it needs to be determined whether a given model should be replaced by a different one when a singular element does not fit within the model itself (as Karl Popper contends) or its *hard core* assumed while acknowledging some margin of error in the experimental results obtained from its application (as Imre Lakatos would have it).<sup>45</sup>

### Replacing Jesus’s messiahship – or, the crucial albeit unnoticed event

Let’s now go back to the texts themselves and to their allusions to Jesus. For it is here, perhaps, that the major *shifting vector* is to be found.

It should be observed, first, that several *a*-, *b*-, and *c*-texts (Q 3:45; 4:157, 171-2; 5:17, 72, 75), and at least one *d*-text (Q 9:30), explicitly affirm that Jesus is to be regarded as God’s Messiah. But, quite remarkably, there is *no* other *d*-text that supports this view – and this *is* the fascinating issue! On my reading, this shows that the importance of Jesus’s messiahship *declined* among Muḥammad’s followers from the 710s onwards (cf. the chronology provided above). As far as I know, however, this issue has not deserved due attention yet, albeit its implications are extremely relevant.

It is also interesting to note that, in the mid-8th century, Ibn Ishāq refers to Jesus as a *mere prophet* who got an angelic nature “after God assumed him into heaven and removed . . . his human attributes.”<sup>46</sup> And that, in an intriguing parallel move, either Ibn Ishāq himself, or Ibn Hišām a century later, goes on to bestow upon Muḥammad several Noahic and Christological traits that seem to make of him a new and rather ambiguous *messianic* figure in contrast to the mainstream Christian view on Jesus, and perhaps as a *substitute* for him. I have elsewhere examined this issue,<sup>47</sup> so there is no need to go over it again in detail. Suffice it to say that Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hišām have Muḥammad’s conception announced to his mother by an angel; moreover, a light comes forth from her when she is pregnant; and a mysterious light too inhabits his father prior to his marriage, as though Muḥammad’s miraculous/luminous seed was awaiting a womb wherein to bear fruit (*Sīra* 100-2, ed. Wüstenfeld). Now, this *symptomatically* recalls Noah’s, Melchizedek’s and Jesus’s luminous birth in a series of Parabiblical texts which cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, Muḥammad is introduced in *Sīra* 101 as “lord,” and in 171 as someone he who would “separate a man from his father, or from his brother, or from his wife, or from his family” (cf. Matthew 10:34-6) and as “a palm-tree whose branches are fruitful” (a widespread Jewish metaphor alluding to the righteous’ seed) – three motifs that help

<sup>45</sup> I am grateful to my colleague at Saint Louis University - Madrid Campus, John Welch, for drawing my attention to Lakatosian epistemology. See further on this issue his paper “New Tools for Theory Choice and Theory Diagnosis,” *SHPS* 44 (2013): 323-4.

<sup>46</sup> Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 206.

<sup>47</sup> Segovia, *The Quranic Noah and the Making of the Islamic Prophet*, 102-7.

to reinforce the overall impression that he is there intended to replace Jesus. Compare nevertheless the subordination of Muḥammad to Jesus in *Sīra* 106, as well as the way in which Jesus is explicitly downplayed in 237 for having been worshiped by his followers. Thus the more we can say is that Muḥammad's messianic status is here quite *ambiguous*, but perhaps this is just normal – for it may be that a time came for Muḥammad's followers in which it was easier for them to rely on a *new* charismatic figure *deprived* of the godly traits commonly bestowed on Jesus by his own followers (or at least by most of these) *without* entirely suppressing, however, Jesus's eschatological/soteriological role, which was therefore transferred to Muḥammad by some of his own followers in so far as he was also declared to be the “last prophet” by them.<sup>48</sup>

Significant albeit generally overlooked *traces* of the interpretation of Muḥammad as a new Messiah can likewise be found in a series of fascinating texts already studied by Uri Rubin in 1975 – but to which surprisingly almost nobody has paid renewed attention in the past decades.<sup>49</sup> Rubin's basic purpose in that paper was to examine the heavenly representations of Muḥammad in *medieval*, especially Shiite, Muslim literature, so the writings he surveys are rather late indeed. Yet they do not only prove that Muḥammad was marginally thought of as a new Messiah in medieval times, but *also* hint at the possibility that he was seen in that fashion from very early on in the development of the Islamic community.<sup>50</sup> Thus Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī's reference to a tradition presumably going back to 'Umar b. al-Ḥaṭṭāb (Rubin 1975: 105-6) suggests, whatever its accuracy, that representing Muḥammad as the Messiah (or, at least, providing him with messianic features) might have actually been an early practice in formative Islam.

In addition to expanding the motifs of Muḥammad's miraculous seed and luminous body, the texts studied by Rubin endorse the view (*i*) that Muḥammad's *light* was pre-existent (i.e. created before God's throne, the heavens, the earth and the sea) and (*ii*) that Muḥammad's *name* was from the beginning (*ii*<sub>1</sub>) inscribed on God's throne (to which it would moreover provide stability), (*ii*<sub>2</sub>) written on Adam's shoulders (as also on the celestial veils, on leaves of the trees of paradise, between the eyes of the angels and upon the necks of the *huris*), and (*ii*<sub>3</sub>) known by the angels, the demons, the prophets, the inhabitants of paradise and hell, the continents and the seas.

Illustrations of *ii* are found in al-Bayhaqī's *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa* (*b*<sub>1</sub>); al-Ḥalabī's *al-Sīra al-Ḥalabiyya* (*ii*<sub>1</sub>, *ii*<sub>2</sub>); al-Ḥarkūšī's *Šaraf al-Nabiyy* (*ii*<sub>1</sub>, *ii*<sub>2</sub>); Ibn al-Ġawzī's *al-Wafā bi-Aḥwāl al-Muṣṭafā* (*ii*<sub>1</sub>, *ii*<sub>2</sub>); al-'Iṣāmī's *Simṭ al-Nuġūm al-'Awālī* (*ii*<sub>1</sub>, *ii*<sub>3</sub>); al-Suyūfī's *al-La'ālī al-Maṣnū'a fī-l-Aḥādīṭ al-Mawḍū'a* (*ii*<sub>1</sub>, *ii*<sub>2</sub>); al-Ta'labī's *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (*ii*<sub>2</sub>); and al-Zurqānī's *Šarḥ 'alā al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyya li-l-Qaṣṭallānī* (*ii*<sub>1</sub>, *ii*<sub>2</sub>). Rubin correctly notes that these texts of Shiite and Sunnite provenance alike *echo* the depiction of the Messiah/Son of Man in 1 Enoch 48:3, where we read that his name was named before the Lord of Spirits (i.e. God) even before the sun and the constellations were created and the stars of heaven made. It should be highlighted, nonetheless, that a similar point is already made in the preceding verse (1 En 48:2), as well as in

<sup>48</sup> On the making of Muḥammad as the *last* prophet see David S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (DRLAR; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); idem, *Zayd* (DRLAR; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). On his making as an *eschatological* prophet, Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, 118-96; Segovia, *The Quranic Noah and the Making of the Islamic Prophet*. On 'Alī as the Messiah (a parallel move?), Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, “'Alī et le Coran. Aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine XIV,” *RSPT* 98 (2014): 696-703. See also the traditions studied by Crisztina Szilágyi, “A Prophet like Jesus: Christians and Muslims Debating Muḥammad's Death,” *JSAI* 36 (2009): 131-71, which significantly depict Muḥammad ascending to heaven after his death.

<sup>49</sup> Uri Rubin, “Pre-Existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad,” *IOS* 5 (1975): 62-119; reprint. in idem, *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia* (VCS; Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2011), No. IV. See now too idem, “More Light on Muḥammad's Pre-Existence: Qur'ānic and Post-Qur'ānic Perspectives,” in *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic world: Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Andrew Rippin and Roberto Tottoli (IHC 113; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 288-311.

<sup>50</sup> See further Segovia, *The Quranic Noah and the making of the Islamic Prophet*, 114-17.

vv. 48:6 and 62:7, where it is furthermore claimed that the Son of Man was *chosen* and *hidden* in God's presence *before* the world was created and forever preserved in the presence of his might. In turn, these passages in the Enochic Book of Parables are reminiscent of the prophet's election "from the womb" in Isaiah 49:1, the creation of the angels on the first day in Jubilees 3:2-11, and the role conferred to Wisdom as the instrument of creation in Proverbs 8:22-31 and Sirach 24:1-3; whereas the notion that the hidden Messiah is to be revealed at the end of time is expressly mentioned in 4 Ezra 13:26, 52.

For its part, *i* divides into two specific sub-motifs that are well illustrated in the aforementioned works of al-Ḥarkūšī, Ibn al-Ġawzī, al-ʿIṣāmī, al-Suyūṭī, al-Ṭaʿlabī, al-Zurqānī and in al-Masʿūdī's *Itbāt al-Waṣīyya li-l-Imām ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭalīb*, respectively: according to the former sub-motif (*i*<sub>1</sub>) Muḥammad's *light* was the only cause for the creation of mankind, the heavens, the earth, paradise and hell; according to the latter (*i*<sub>2</sub>), it was not just the cause but also the substance of God's creation. Interestingly enough, al-Zurqānī establishes a significant *parallel* between Jesus and Muḥammad in this respect (the two being the cause of God's creation), while al-Ḥarkūšī curiously links the view that it is with Muḥammad that all things *began* and will come to an *end* to the notion that he is the "seal" of the prophets.

But perhaps the most fascinating passage thereof is contained in al-Ḥarkūšī's *Šaraf al-Nabiyy*, Ibn Šahrāšūb's *Manāqib ʿAl Abī Ṭalīb*, al-ʿIṣāmī's *Simṭ al-Nuġūm al-ʿAwālī*, and al-Maġlisī's *Bihār al-Anwār*, who report that "when Ḥalīma (i.e. Muḥammad's nurse) took him in her arms he opened his eyes and they beamed." This story implicitly *fulfils* that found in Q 3:46; 19:29-30: "He [= Jesus] will speak to people in the cradle and in his adulthood, and he shall be amongst the righteous"; "She [= Mary] pointed at him [= the newborn Jesus]; but they said: 'How can we speak to one who is in the cradle, [and hence to] a little child?' He [= Jesus] said: 'I am God's servant; He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet.'" Cf. 1 En 106:2-3, where the story is told in its integrity and the messianic symbol fully developed: "When he (Noah) opened his eyes the house shone like the sun. And he stood up from the hands of the midwife opening his mouth and praising the Lord."

### **A political-rhetorical approach to Muḥammad's short-lived messiahship**

Affirming that Muḥammad's image was made to match that of distinctive prophets in the late-antique milieu out of which Islam gradually emerged should not surprise anyone. Yet claiming that he was once, if tentatively and provisionally, thought of as the *Messiah* challenges our common picture of Islam's origins. To substantiate this claim, I have put forward a two-part argument: (1) Even within the Qurʾān itself, Jesus's messiahship seems to be progressively *downplayed* – I have dated this significant shift towards the end of the 7th century or the beginnings of the 8th century; (2) later on, we find a number of sources that implicitly *depict* Muḥammad in the likeness of Christ and the Messiah Son of Man. To end with, I shall attempt to place the making of Muḥammad as a new Messiah along the overlapping dynamic *trajectories* characteristic of a complex ideological apparatus of which the making of a new religious community and the sealing of salvation history represent the two major axes – or, at least, to provide a few clues apt to shed light on these.

In my view, it is possible to distinguish *three* major rhetorical devices/emphases (supersessionist, eschatological, and meta-historical), each with its own conceptual outcome (the making of a new community, the making of a new Messiah, and the sealing of salvation history, respectively) within the power/knowledge apparatus of formative Islam – one that in addition to being fully dynamic is neither limited to such devices nor a jumbled set of heterogeneous elements, however. For, on the one hand, the making of a new community and the sealing of salvation history may be said to *co-determine* (albeit differently, since of these two notions the former seems to be of a more practical nature than the latter) the fabrication of a new Messiah, which I therefore regard as a contingent strategy (as suggested by the fact that it was neither promoted nor endorsed as overtly as its counterparts were). On the other hand, both the making of a new community and the sealing of salvation history *required* the making of a new sacred book given the religious and scrip-

tural context in which Islam emerged, first as a new group and then as a new religion; and the subsequent elaboration of an authoritative scriptural corpus (which was not composed in a single movement) proved more *biding* and *consistent* than the tentative making of a new Messiah as a means to strengthen the new group identity *beyond* the natural delay of the eschaton. Lastly, it is obvious that all such strategies, with their regular *twofold* pattern (rhetorical device/conceptual outcome) eventually combine and even divide into minor rhetorical units or mechanisms, e.g. arguments aiming at genealogical self-legitimation (a subtype of identity making) or arguments that strengthen the distinction between sameness and otherness (another subtype of it).

If I am correct, therefore, we are faced with an intricate *web*, rather than a simple threefold scheme, of interrelated discursive strategies and concepts. My research currently moves along this line of inquiry by attempting to unravel and systematise such overlapping trajectories. The exploration undertaken in this brief study aims at clarifying merely one of these.

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