

Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts

Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone

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Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins

Guy G. Stroumsa

In an article published in 1980, “Islam, Judaeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” Patricia Crone sought to find a link between an early Christian heresy and the birth of Islam.¹ More than three decades later, she has returned to the topic of Jewish Christianity, this time in connection with the text of the Qurʾān.² Throughout her career, Professor Crone has retained an iconoclastic mind and a passion for challenging scholarly orthodoxies and retrieving ancient heresies. Moreover, as her recently published *magnum opus*, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge, 2012), amply shows, she has never forgotten that early Islamic doctrines can only be fully understood in the context of earlier religious trends, in Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. In the following pages, through a renewed reflection on Jewish Christianity and Islamic origins, I wish to pay a modest tribute to an exceptionally brilliant, daring and original scholar, who has put so many in her debt, far beyond the traditional boundaries of Islamic studies.

It is to the Irish freethinker John Toland (1668–1722) that we owe the concept of Jewish (or Judaeo-) Christianity. In 1718, Toland published, in London, *Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity*. This text further developed ideas first presented in his French manuscript written in 1710, *Christianisme judaïque et mahométan*, which sought to offer a historical argument, recognizing the Jewish roots of Christianity, in order to promote the toleration of Jews in modern European societies.³

Toland based his argument upon the *Gospel of Barnabas*, an apocryphal writing of unknown date, the full text of which we only possess in an Italian

1 Crone, “Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm.” For a slightly different French version of this text, see Stroumsa, “Judéo-christianisme et Islam des origines.”

2 Crone, “Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān” (forthcoming). I should like to express my deep thanks to Professor Crone for having shared with me the draft of her article and for her incisive and useful comments on my own draft. Crone’s conclusion of her detailed research tally with my own: the Jewish Christians are “the most obvious candidates” for the role of transmitters of a number of Qurʾānic themes. I also wish to thank Sarah Stroumsa for her careful reading and for her very useful remarks on this article.

3 On Toland’s conception of Jewish Christianity, see Palmer, *Ein Freispruch für Paulus*.

version of a lost Spanish one. This text announces the coming of Muḥammad and makes reference to the *shahāda*, the Muslim profession of faith. According to the *Gospel of Barnabas*, Jesus is a prophet, and not the Son of God, and does not die on the cross. In his stead, it is Judas Iscariot who is crucified.⁴ A human rather than a divine Jesus, and a Docetist conception of the Passion: these traits are typical of the figure of Jesus both for the Jewish Christians and in the Qurʾān. For Toland, some of the fundamental doctrines of Islam are rooted in the “most ancient monuments of the Christian religion,” and not in the views of the Nestorian monk Sergius.⁵ It is to Toland’s refutation by the Lutheran orthodox theologian Lorenz von Mosheim (1693–1755), *Vindiciae antiquae christianiorum disciplinae*, published in 1720, that Toland’s book owed its fame, and the concept of Jewish Christianity its survival. Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), the founder of the Tübingen school of New Testament studies, made *Judenchristentum* a cornerstone of his conception of Christian origins. For the Hegelian that he was, second century Christianity represented the synthesis or sublimation (*Aufhebung*) of Petrine Christianity and Paulinian (“gentile”) Christianity. For most historians of early Christianity, it is Baur, rather than Toland, who is at the origin of the concept of Jewish Christianity, a phenomenon which would be studied, from Baur on, only in the first Christian centuries. Toland’s intuition, according to which one of the earliest manifestations of Christianity, having survived late antiquity, had a major impact upon the earliest stages of Islam, and hence on the world history of religions, practically disappeared from the horizon of research. The Patristic sources do not speak, of course, of “Jewish Christianity.” From the second to the fourth century, the Patristic heresiographers usually mention the Ebionites (*ebionitōi*), whose name would have come from their imaginary founder, a certain Ebion. In fact, it comes from their insistence upon the spiritual value of poverty: they call themselves *evyonim* (“poor” in Hebrew), a Biblical term they borrowed from *Psalms*. The Christian heresiographers also mention other names of sects, in particular those of the Nazoreans (*nazoraioi*), who share, at least partly, Ebionite ideas. For the Nazoreans, Jesus was, rather than God’s Son, a prophet, the last of a long chain of true prophets, starting with Adam, in which each prophet is preceded by a false prophet. Moreover, Jesus had not died on the cross; the heresiographers often associate this Docetism with other doctrines of Jewish Christian groups.⁶

4 On the Gospel of Barnabas, see Cirillo and Frémaux (text and translation), *Evangile de Barnabé*.

5 Toland, *Nazarenus*; see Jones, *Rediscovery of Jewish Christianity*, 139.

6 On the Nazoreans, see especially Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*. Cf. Mimouni, “Les Nazoréens”. Cf. idem., *Le judéo-christianisme ancien*. Two recent studies: Skarsaune and

Historiographic revisionism is fashionable today. One often questions the usefulness of some of our concepts, such as Gnosticism, for a better understanding of historical realities. Thus, for example, the Talmudist Daniel Boyarin has expressed serious doubts concerning the possibility to speak of “Judaism” (*ioudasimos*) before the fourth century CE. For him, Jewish beliefs and practices are defined as such by Patristic theologians. Hence, more than reflecting historical reality, they reveal something about those using them.⁷ And since Boyarin believes that concept of “Judaism” is not valid in this period, he also proposes to abandon the concept of Jewish Christianity, without suggesting a clear alternative. But a historical phenomenon needs to be named if one is to study it.

Methodological remarks are always necessary, and sometimes useful. In the present case, however, I fail to see what one gains by replacing one concept by another. This is not the place for examining or refuting Boyarin’s approach. Suffice here to say that in any domain, research demands an intellectual effort to identify common denominators of various phenomena (for instance, multiple religious sects and groups). Such common denominators allow us to retrace central trends underlying the complexity of observable reality. One cannot fulfill this task without creating categories, the primary justification of which is their heuristic usefulness. Gnosticism or Jewish Christianity are examples of such categories, which cannot be abandoned, although they must be used with care, without forgetting what they are not: they are not truthful representations of historical reality. In particular, these categories do not reflect clearly identifiable groups. Thus, it is often among Jewish Christians (or in Jewish Christian texts or traditions) that we can find some easily identifiable Gnostic *theologoumena*, such as Docetism.⁸

By Jewish Christianity, I mean the faith of Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah announced by the prophets, but did not give up traditional Jewish religious practice. For Origen, in the first half of the third century, these Jewish Christians, who wished to be at once Jews and Christians, succeeded in being neither Jews nor Christians. One should note that the Jewish sources are singularly less prolix than the Christian ones: for the Rabbis, the best way of dealing with their enemies was to “kill them by silence.” Contemporary scholars thus rely on the perception of the Patristic sources, for which these archaic heretics had practically disappeared before the end of the fourth

Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, as well as Jackson-McCabe, ed., *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered*.

7 Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish Christianity.”

8 On Docetism and Jewish Christianity, see Stroumsa, “Christ’s Laughter,” as well as Stroumsa and Goldstein, “The Greek and Jewish Origins of Docetism.”

century. Consequently, most contemporary scholars treat the existence of Jewish Christian communities beyond the first centuries with deep skepticism.⁹

And yet, the Jewish Christians of antiquity (who are unrelated to the contemporary “Jews for Jesus,” whose theology is that of Evangelical Christianity) do not seem to have disappeared from the late antique scene. The sources (or at least the reliable ones) are quite scarce, and hard to interpret. Another method, then, is needed in order to detect the presence of Jewish Christians, in particular through the use of common sense and the careful interpretation of indirect sources. To be sure, late antique Jewish Christian communities must have been small, marginal groups, often living in a protecting isolation. As far as I know, there is no clear-cut and irrefutable proof of their existence in the seventh century. But the traces they left constitute enough circumstantial evidence to let us assume their continued existence long after the end of the fourth century (when Epiphanius and Jerome testify unambiguously to their presence) and their *Fortleben*. John of Damascus mentions, in the early eighth century, the existence “to this day” of a Jewish Christian Elchasaite group, the Sampseans, on the shores of the Dead Sea.¹⁰ His testimony is usually rejected by scholars, as he repeats what Epiphanius of Salamis had written in the fourth century. And yet, one must remember that John writes from the monastery of Mar Saba, in the Judean wilderness, a place very close to the Dead Sea (a few kilometers as the crow flies). It is improbable that John’s mention of heretics living on the shores of the Dead Sea does not refer to a concrete reality. The very late existence of such groups, however, is less striking than the impact they may have had, much beyond their own boundaries.

Among the various theories on the origins of Islam, those involving the Jewish Christians seem fashionable today. This may be a bit puzzling, since Toland’s *Nazarenus* was for all practical purposes forgotten long ago. It is the liberal theologian and great historian of early Christianity Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) who seems to be at the origin of the present trend of thought. In a few pages of his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (1909), he had proposed to identify in some Jewish Christian *theologoumena* some of the most important

9 Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land*, represents the *opinio communis* when he notes (p. 80): “no significant Jewish Christians communities were left in Palestine itself” (in the fourth century).

10 John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 53. Although John repeats here a text from Epiphanius, one is allowed to receive his testimony, as he writes from Mar Saba, in the Judean Desert, a monastery very close to the Dead Sea. On the Elchasaite, see in particular Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasai*.

sources of earliest Islam.¹¹ Harnack, who had no particular interest in Islam, rejoined Toland through his intuition on the similarity between prophecy and Docetism in the Qurʾān (Q 4.157) and among the Ebionites. To the suggestive remarks of Harnack, one should add those of Ernest Renan and Daniel Chwolson, in two studies published in the 1850s, to which we shall return presently.¹² Thus, a number of Baptist and Jewish Christian sects from the first centuries were brought to bear upon the study of Islamic origins.

Over the years, Harnack's intuition regarding Jewish Christian origins was picked up and developed by a number of scholars – first by the New Testament scholar Adolf Schlatter, and then, in particular, by Hans-Joachim Schoeps, the great specialist of Jewish Christianity in the early centuries.¹³ The most serious difficulty of the thesis on the Jewish Christian impact on the Qurʾān, however, remained the fact that our documentation on Jewish Christian communities rarely goes beyond the fourth century. With no chronological and geographical proximity, the structural similarities between Jewish Christian theology and some Qurʾānic verses remained parallels, certainly interesting from a phenomenological viewpoint, but useless for explaining the transmission of these *theologoumena* to the Qurʾān. Thanks to a series of discoveries and studies, our knowledge of the early Jewish Christians has now become more precise. We now know that some Jewish Christian communities may have survived, at least in Palestine, until the Muslim conquests.¹⁴ It is certainly not far-fetched to imagine a possible Jewish Christian presence in late antique Ḥijāz.

Rather than offering a new theory, I should like to offer here a *status quaestionis*, adding some methodological and epistemological reflections on the way in which the question is framed today for the historian of late antique religion – a historian who, in my case, in no way claims competence to proffer an opinion on the redaction of the Qurʾān or the formation of Islam. As in the

11 Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, II, 529–38. As noted by Sidney Griffith, Julius Wellhausen had already emitted the same hypothesis in *Reste arabischen Heidentumes*, 232. See Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 36, n. 84.

12 Renan, “Note sur l’identité de la secte gnostique des Elchasaites”; in the following year appeared Chwolson, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*. Cf. Fahd, “Ṣābiʾa.”

13 Schlatter, “Die Entwicklung des jüdischen Christentums zum Islam”; Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*. See also Andrae, *Mahomet, sa vie et sa doctrine*, 99: “La notion d’une révélation particulière à chaque peuple est tout-à-fait étrangère à la doctrine chrétienne de la révélation.” Again, *ibid.*, 107: “L’idée de révélation chez Mahomet témoigne donc d’une parenté avec la doctrine ébionite-manichéenne, qui ne peut être fortuite.”

14 See Arculf’s testimony (n. 53 below), as well as the studies of Shlomo Pines discussed below.

case of Christianity or Manichaeism, Islam permits us to observe how a religion is born, although we know infinitely more about the birth of Christianity than about that of Islam.

For almost two centuries now, research on Islamic origins seems to have oscillated between two main options. In 1834, the young Abraham Geiger published his monograph on Muhammad's Jewish sources, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentume aufgenommen?* Geiger insisted on Midrashic traditions the traces of which can be discovered in various suras. Geiger's central idea, the deep impact of some Jewish traditions on the Qur'an, was generally accepted by Orientalists. This acceptance stands in stark contradistinction to his perception of Jesus as having been close to the Pharisees, an idea which all Christian theologians rejected with deep horror (one of them, the Hebraist Franz Delitzsch, wrote that calling Jesus a Pharisee was "ten times worse" than the crucifixion). A long list of (usually Jewish) scholars, familiar with rabbinic literature, has pursued research following in Geiger's footsteps. It is mainly thanks to the great Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke (who was very impressed by Geiger's book) that research looked for the Christian sources of Islam. For Nöldeke, Islam actually represented the Arabic form of Christianity. The learned Swedish bishop Tor Andrae would pursue Nöldeke's research, insisting on the fact that the Christian orthodox traditions are not the only sources reflecting the Qur'an's background, and that one should not forget Jewish Christianity (or Manichaeism, for that matter) as possible roots of Qur'anic doctrines. Such an approach is still favored today by scholars such as Günter Lüling or Christoph Luxenberg, for whom the source of the Qur'an (the *Ur-Qur'an*) is to be found in Syriac Christian hymns (Arian for Lüling).¹⁵ Until today, research does not seem to have really rephrased the problem and continues to oscillate between Judaism and Christianity in order to better understand the birth of Islam.¹⁶

In 614, the Byzantine Empire suffered a humiliating defeat by the Sasanians. Yet, this was only the foretaste of the amputation of much of its territory a few decades later with the Islamic conquests. Tensions ran high and the heightened expectation of the **last days**, the *Endzeit*, encouraged a renewal of an apocalyptic mode of thought.¹⁷ Eschatological *furore* was as alive among the

15 Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'an*; Luxenberg, *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*.

16 See for instance Gilliot, "Les 'informateurs' juifs et chrétiens de Muhammad." One must not forget the dynamic interface between Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity, on which see, for instance, Stroumsa, "Religious Dynamics."

17 Averil Cameron writes: "Islam took shape within a context of extreme religious and cultural tension." See her "Eastern Provinces." On the context of nascent Islam, see, for instance, Donner, "The Background to Islam."

Jewish communities as among the Christian populations. For the Jews, however, the interpretation of coming events was strictly the opposite to that of the Christians: the antichrist and the violent tribulations expected by the Christians (before Christ's return in glory), was the Jews' messiah.¹⁸ For both Jews and Christians, the eschatological expectations were anchored in a long tradition, but this tradition had become blurred or neutralized in the course of the centuries (for the Christians, mainly since the Constantinian revolution). Yet, eschatological expectations had never quite disappeared. Rather, they had become an underground stream, ready to reappear in times of dramatic events.

The conquest of Jerusalem and the captivity of the True Cross in 614, which represented for the Byzantines a true military, political, and religious catastrophe were perceived by Jews as a messianic promise.¹⁹ We have learned to recognize the centrality of Jerusalem for the earliest stages of Islam. Some indications suggest that the military defeat of the Byzantines and the Muslim conquest of the Holy City were perceived by the Jews as signs that the messiah and the end of times were near. For the Jews, the Muslim conquerors could have appeared as announcing the Messiah. Indeed, it seems that the early architectural activity of the new masters of the Temple Mount – for them, *al-Ḥaram al-sharīf* – was interpreted by Jews as announcing the coming of the *Endzeit*. It might even have been perceived in that way by the Muslims themselves, as suggested by Andreas Kaplony, in his detailed study of the Islamic sources.²⁰

In the last generation, and in particular since the publication of Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), late antiquity is no longer defined only by the joint presence of pagans and Christians in the Roman world. In a number of aspects, the Islamic conquests retained the cultural traditions of the Roman Empire and Greek remained the administrative language under the early Umayyads. Hence, historians now commonly agree that late antiquity continues at least until the end of the Umayyad period.

In parallel to the extension of the chronological limits of late antiquity, we can witness today the extension of its geographical boundaries. In particular, we have learned to recognize that the Arabian peninsula, considered previously to have been located on the margins of the *oikoumene* and to have played a rather limited historical and cultural role, must now be considered to have been an integral part of the world of late antiquity. This is particularly true, in our present context, in the realm of religious ideas and practices. Robert Hoyland, who has significantly contributed to a better knowledge of the

18 See Stroumsa, "False Prophet."

19 On this, see Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*.

20 Kaplony, *The Haram of Jerusalem*. See further Stroumsa, "Christian Memories."

complex religious milieu of earliest Islam, can refer to late antique Arabia as a “laboratory” for observing the transformation of religious traditions, the end of paganism, and the birth of Islam.²¹

In order to understand in what sense Arabia can be called a laboratory for religious change, one can refer to Max Weber. For Weber, it was not by chance that the prophets of Israel belonged to a marginal society, outside the main political, economic, and cultural centers of the ancient Near East. For him, it was precisely the relative distance from those centers that made possible fruitful exchanges between periphery and center, as well as the birth of new forms of cultural and religious expression. According to Weber, the creative tension permitting the birth of such new forms demands some distance between two societies, one of which is to an extent dependent upon the other. This distance, however, should not be too great, lest it prevents cultural communication.²²

Mutatis mutandis, late antique Arabia is like ancient Israel: in permanent contact with the great political centers of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, as well as with the religious trends throughout the region.²³ From the 570s and the Sasanian conquest of Yemen, Arabia is practically surrounded by the Persians. Under such conditions, the slow but clear religious evolution at work since Hellenistic times, from polytheism to monotheism, has a powerful impact upon the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula.

We now know that, at the end of the sixth century, Arabia had become, as it were, a *plaque tournante* of the Near East, between the Sasanian and the Byzantine Empires as well as Axum’s Christian kingdom.²⁴ In Arabia, monks, dissidents, missionaries, soldiers, refugees, and merchants, all facilitated, *inter alia*, the free circulation of religious ideas.²⁵ Since the last years of the sixth century, Arabia absorbed the repercussions from the conflict between the two empires.²⁶ It is probably in the context of the eschatological tensions mentioned above that one should understand what Christian Robin has called the “prophetic movement” in early seventh century Arabia. As Robin has also noted, new epigraphic discoveries reflect the religious crisis long undermining traditional beliefs in Arabia.²⁷ Many opted for a form of monotheism, but

21 Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion,” 1053–77, esp. 1069.

22 Weber, *Ancient Judaism*.

23 See esp. Robin, “Arabia and Ethiopia.”

24 Bowersock, *Throne of Adulis*.

25 See Sarris, *Empires of Faith*.

26 On this, see Bowersock, *Empires in Collision*.

27 Robin, “Les signes de la prophétie,” esp. 472–3. Tor Andrae already spoke of Muhammad’s eschatological piety. Cf. Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams*, 59.

the precise nature of this monotheism escapes us, although it seems to have followed “Jewish” patterns. Iwona Gadja has been able to show how a similar kind of monotheism developed in Ḥimyar, in the cracks, as it were, between Judaism and Christianity as Jews and Christians vied for power.²⁸

Our knowledge of the presence of Jewish and Christian communities in the Ḥijāz in Western Arabia is very limited. There are no remaining imprints of Christian communities north of the Yemen. François Villeneuve writes that in Arabia, Christianity never succeeded in getting a foothold south of ‘Aqaba.²⁹ Moreover, the testimonies regarding the existence of Jewish tribes in the Ḥijāz do not enlighten us on the nature of their Judaism, although some clues would point to Jews coming from Palestine.³⁰ Even if one can detect the impact on earliest Islam of some ideas originating in the Sasanian realm,³¹ the Qur’ān clearly points to the fact that the main religious trends underlying Islamic monotheism come from Jewish and Christian milieus.

Reading the Qur’ān in the light of late antique literature, as Angela Neuwirth suggests, is meaningful only if it is made clear that what is meant are Jewish or Christian late antique texts.³² Classical *paideia* and the Greek philosophical tradition, which are of crucial importance in late antiquity, will have a major impact on Islamic culture, but only later in ‘Abbāsīd Baghdad. Even if limited to its Jewish and Christian expressions, however, late antique culture in the Near East offered a rich gamut of exegetical possibilities. All sectarian and hermeneutical trends stemming from the foundational texts of Jews and Christians must therefore be studied together. These include not only the various Jewish Christian groups as mentioned by the Christian heresiologists, such as the Ebionites, the Nazoreans, or the Elchasaïtes, but also Gnostic and Manichaean dualists, and also the “noble” heresies of Monophysitism and Nestorianism, who together represent the majority of late antique Christians in the Near East, from Egypt and Syria to Armenia and Iran.

In 1978, John Wansbrough, who taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, published *The Sectarian Milieu*, a book in which he sought to identify, beyond the multiple communities in Arabia at the dawn of Islam, a conflict of hermeneutics and even a midrashic mythopoiesis, within which

28 Gadja, “Quel monothéisme en Arabie du sud ancienne?”

29 Villeneuve, “La résistance des cultes béthyliques,” 228.

30 On the Jews of Ḥijāz, see Hoyland, “Jews of the Hijaz.”

31 See Shaked, “Popular Religion in Sasanian Babylonia,” esp. 115. For the broader perspective, see Crone, *Nativist Prophets*.

32 See esp. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*.

one should study the formation of the Qurʾān.³³ Wansbrough's approach had a powerful impact upon Patricia Crone, one of the two co-authors of *Hagarism*, a book published the preceding year.³⁴ *Hagarism* offers a fresh approach to Islamic origins, and establishes its argument solely on seventh-century sources, i.e., mainly, on Christian texts, while ignoring the Islamic (Arabic) sources, all later, unless corroborated by other sources. To be sure, the reconstruction of Islamic origins thus obtained remains speculative, as the two authors willingly admit. Such a revisionist attitude, however, permits us to formulate anew the problem of Islamic origins within the frame of biblical hermeneutics among Jews and Christians.

The scholarly oscillation mentioned above between emphasizing either the Jewish or the Christian roots of Islam (and of course the various movements between these two main traditions) stems, I think, from an error of method. It is a mistake to choose between a number of options (postulated to be exclusive of one another) in order to identify the roots of theological ideas in earliest Islam. There is no reason to think that in a religious, cultural and political milieu as complex as in the sixth and seventh century Near East, Islam would have originated from a single source. Moreover, categories which propose a taxonomy of religious ideas tend to freeze them, suppressing their dynamism, erasing their free circulation and their constant restructuring in new forms.

In a world endowed with great social and religious complexity, the constant intersection and transformation of ideas and persons is the default option, as it were, and permanent fluidity is the essential rule. This is how one should conceive the interface between religious traditions in the Near East, an interface in which Islam was born. One should insist on the flow of religious ideas between communities. The formation of Islam and its early conquests restructured religious communities in the Near East and permitted the stabilization of both religious ideas and boundaries between communities. Referring to the transmission of ideas between religious communities in the Arabic Middle Ages, Sarah Stroumsa has spoken of a "whirlpool effect," as it is usually impossible to specify the origin of each specific element.³⁵

All this leads to what I propose to call the principle of non-exclusivity. I prefer to speak of communities rather than of sects, as this last term entails deviance vis-à-vis an orthodoxy, the existence of which cannot always be

33 Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*. In that same year appeared Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a polemical book soon to become a cult book. On Wansbrough, see esp. Hawting, "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism."

34 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, viii.

35 Stroumsa, "Muslim Context," 54–7.

demonstrated.³⁶ Proper method demands that we do not identify a source as the sole origin of Qur'ānic terms or formulae, at the exclusion of other possible filiations. At the same time, the principle of non-exclusivity is also a principle of indetermination: in a world in which religious ideas circulate freely and transform themselves constantly, it is almost impossible to determine the precise origin of these ideas or the proximate channels through which they reached the Qur'ān.

Arguments highlighting the similarity between various Jewish Christian concepts and some Qur'ānic passages receive their full value only in a discourse insisting upon the plurality of the sources of earliest Islam. According to a number of Christian traditions, the Prophet had met a heretical monk who taught him certain Christian doctrines (in a perverse way, of course). As early as 1858, Nöldeke had raised the question of Muḥammad's Christian teachers.³⁷ For him, however, the Arab "priest" Waraqa was a Jew rather than a Christian. In later Arabic sources, Waraqa is deemed to have been "a bishop from the Naṣārā," who "belonged to the Prophet's family." Although *naṣārā* usually refers to Christians, the term may also indicate the *Nazoraioi*, one of the Jewish Christian sects according to Patristic heresiologists.³⁸

After Hans Joachim Schoeps, Martiniano Pellegrino Roncaglia develops Harnack's thesis on the Jewish Christian origins of Islam, in reference to the traditions concerning Waraqa. For Roncaglia, like for the great German scholar of early Christianity, Islam represents the transformation on Arabic soil of what he calls "Gnostic Jewish Christianity." Roncaglia notes that the Islamic prohibition of wine seems to be "Elchasaite." To the best of my knowledge, no extant source mentions the prohibition of wine among the Elchasaite, although

36 On the concept of community, see Fowden, "Religious Communities."

37 For an updated *status quaestionis*, see Szilagyi, "Muhammad and the Monk."

38 On *naṣārā*, see the references below to the studies of Gnilka and de Blois. On Waraqa, see Robinson, "Waraqa b. Nawfal." Robinson notes that we have few biographical details, most of them legendary, on Waraqa, an Arab monotheist contemporary of the Prophet. The possibility that Waraqa was an Ebionite or an Elchasaite has caught the fancy of some contemporary Arab intellectuals. Thus Joseph Azzi, in a book written in Arabic and translated into French with the title *Le prêtre et le prophète*, suggests, without bringing any evidence, that "la véritable intention de Waraqa était de designer Mohammed pour lui succéder à la tête de l'assemblée des nazaréens de la Mecque" (p. 85) and that he had tried to unify the Jewish Christian sects (p. 86). Cf. Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète*, as well as *Vol. II: Du Muhammad des Califes au Muhammad de l'histoire* and *Vol. III: Histoire et légendologie*, which refers to the various sources in a highly confused way. Gallez cites Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans*.

according to Irenaeus, the Ebionites abstain from wine.³⁹ For Roncaglia, moreover, the Jewish Christian idea of the true prophet lies at the root of the Islamic conception of prophecy. He also points out the similarity between the Ebionite conception of a diabolical falsification of Scripture and the Islamic concept of *tahrif*, i.e., the falsification of their revealed Scripture by Jews and Christians.⁴⁰

In a recently published book, the New Testament scholar Joachim Gnilka concludes a fresh analysis of the *naṣārā/nazoraioi* file with a striking theological proximity between the Qurʾān and Jewish Christian traditions.⁴¹ Like other scholars before him, he notes the similarity between Sura 19 (*sūrat mariam*, which deals with Zachariah and the birth of John the Baptist) and the *Protoevangelium of James*. One must recognize that Gnilka's results are a bit disappointing, as he remains unable to explain the ways through which these Jewish Christian concepts may have reached early seventh century Ḥijāz.

For Roncaglia, as we have seen, Ebionites and Elchasaïtes are identical. Such an identification, however, is not based on the sources and nothing points to an Elchasaïte presence in the Ḥijāz. The origin of this identification seems to go back to Renan, for whom the Qurʾān's Sabaeans were Elchasaïtes and Mandaeans, and to Chwolson, who, in his great monograph on the Sabaeans, had detected some Manichaean elements in Islam.⁴² The Baptist group within which Mani had grown up, in North Mesopotamia of the early third century, had been called *mughtasila* (Baptists) by the tenth-century Islamic bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm. These *mughtasila* seem to have had many affinities with the Elchasaïtes as the Christian heresiologists present them. The final proof of the identity between the two groups was made by the publication, in 1975, of the Cologne Mani Codex (CMC), an ancient biography of the Prophet of Light, found in a Greek version. This text preserves for us precious details on the Elchasaïtes as Mani had known them in his childhood and youth.⁴³

The discovery of the CMC has triggered renewed reflection on some remarkable parallels between Manichaeism and Islam. Robert Simon, who studied these parallels, has noted that one might have overstressed Judaism and

39 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1:3; cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 30:16, and Clement, *Stromata*, 1:96, who refers to heretics celebrating the Eucharist with pure water. On wine in ancient Christianity, see McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*.

40 The idea of mistaken (or wrong) passages inserted in Scripture is found in the second century Valentinian theologian Ptolemy's *Epistle to Flora*. See for instance *Ep. Flora* 5.4 and 6.2 in Ptolemy, *Lettre à Flora*, 62–3 and 66–7.

41 Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran*.

42 See n. 12 above.

43 For the critical edition, see Koenen and Römer, *Der Kölner Mani-Code*. Cf. Henrichs, "Mani and the Babylonian Baptists."

Christianity as possible sources of Islam, and that the Manichaeism track has almost not been followed.⁴⁴ Simon calls attention to both the universal character of these two religions, from the time of their birth, and their conception of holy books. The most striking similarity concerns the notion of the “seal of the prophecy.” This notion, which is fundamental for the Qur’ānic idea of prophecy, can be found already in Manichaeism, as I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere. It originates in the Jewish Christian roots of the Religion of Light.⁴⁵ As noted by Simon, both Mani and Muḥammad perceive their prophetic role as being at once the summit and the conclusion of a long chain of prophets, from Adam to Jesus. The Manichaeans, for whom proselytizing was an essential religious duty, had moved to the north-east of the Arabian Peninsula. Simon also postulates the arrival of the Manichaeans in Mecca, with the Lakhmids, after the collapse of the kingdom of Ḥimyar following the Abyssinian conquest.⁴⁶ One should note with Patricia Crone, however, that there is no trace of Manichaeism in the Qur’ān itself.

In three important articles, published between 1995 and 2004, François de Blois has made significant contributions to research on the Sabaeans in pre-Islamic Arabia, as well as to the terms *naṣrānī* (according to him an Arabic translation of *nazoraios*) and *ḥanīf* in the Qur’ān, and finally to the comparison between Manichaeism and Islam.⁴⁷ In the first of these articles, de Blois argues that the religious milieu in which Islam emerged included at least five religions: Arab paganism, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism. After the Maronite scholar Abraham Ecchellensis in 1660, Renan and Chwolson proposed in the nineteenth century, as we saw above, to identify the Qur’ān’s Sabaeans with the Mandaeans. De Blois notes that there is no trace of a hypothetical Mandaean presence in seventh century Arabia.

In his article on *naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*, de Blois first argues that in the Qur’ān *naṣārā* indicate Nazorean Jewish Christians, rather than Christians. He then discusses the meaning of *ḥanīf*, a puzzling term of Aramaic origin. The Syriac equivalent is quite negative, as it refers to paganism, in contradistinction to the meaning of the term in the Qur’ān, where a *ḥanīf* is a believer in the true religion of Abraham. According to de Blois, the Qur’ānic conception of the *ḥanīf*

44 Simon, “Mani and Muhammad.”

45 See Stroumsa, “Seal of the Prophets.” Cf. Colpe, “Mohammed und Mani als Prophetensiegel,” esp. 237–8 (this article was first published in 1984). Via a different argument, Colpe and I reached the same conclusions.

46 See Tardieu, “L’arrivée des manichéens,” as well as Tardieu, “L’Arabie du nord-est.”

47 De Blois, “The ‘Sabians’”; idem, “*Naṣrānī* (*Nazoraios*) and *Ḥanīf* (*ethnikos*)”; idem, “Elchasai – Manes – Muḥammad.”

reflects a polemic against the Nazoreans, a fact which proves the presence of a Jewish Christian community in seventh century Arabia.

In “Elchasai – Manes – Muḥammad: Manichäismus und Islam in religions-historischen Vergleich,” de Blois first offers a synthesis of the results of his investigations so far. Going further, he seeks to explain the remarkable parallels between those two syncretistic religions, Manichaeism and Islam. For him, these parallels, in particular those associated with the idea of prophecy in the two religions, come from their common Jewish Christian background. De Blois thus proposes to see in the idea of a “seal of prophecy” a Jewish Christian idea adopted by Muhammad, and concludes by noting that the Jewish Christians find themselves at the very epicenter of the history of religions in the Near East.

The *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* offer a major testimony in our quest for Ebionite central theological conceptions, such as the chain of prophecy through the ages. *Inter alia*, the pseudo-Clementine writings (both the Latin *Recognitions* and the Greek *Homilies*) develop the idea that some Scriptural passages were inserted by Satan, and must hence be expurgated from the sacred text.⁴⁸ This early Jewish Christian conception, which was picked-up by Marcion for some of the Gospels, will reappear in the (post-Qur’ānic) concept of *tahrīf*.⁴⁹

The latest contribution to our present problem which I should like to mention here is the work in progress by Holger Zellentin, who has discovered in some Qur’ānic passages striking parallels to a number of Patristic texts, in particular with the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and the *Didaskalia*, a fourth century text on ritual and legal precepts, rooted in the *Didache* (a Jewish Christian text from the early second century) as well as on Christology and scriptural hermeneutics. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus in the fourth century and one of the major heresiologists, who was born in Eleutheropolis (Beit Guvrin), tells us that the *Didaskalia* is read by Audians in Palestine. We know precious little about the Audians, quartodeciman sectarians from Mesopotamia, who read apocryphal texts retaining anthropomorphic esoteric traditions on God’s body. Henri-Charles Puech, who had been the first to call attention to the Audians, showed that some of their traditions were patently

48 See, for instance, Pseudo-Clement, *Hom.* 2:15:17; cf. *ibid.* 2:38:1, as well as Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions* 1:21:8–9. See further Gobillot, “Das Begriff ‘Buch’”.

49 On the idea of *tahrīf*, see Lazarus-Yafeh, “Tahrīf,” *ET*².

Gnostic. He was unable, however, to identify the (probably) Jewish origin of their conception of the divine body.⁵⁰

Whatever the case might be, the *Didaskalia* originates in a milieu close to the Jewish Christians, a fact reflected both by its ethics and its conception of ritual purity. Basing his reflections on this closeness, Zellentin believes that the text of the Qurʾān “responds” to a specific group of Jewish Christians in its audience. More precisely, the Qurʾān stands for him between Jewish Christians and Rabbinic Jews in its legal culture as well as in its approach to ritual practices. Although Zellentin still has to publish much of his recent research, what we already know of it suggests that it will open new horizons and a broadened discussion of Qurʾānic origins.⁵¹

One of the most striking parallels between the pseudo-Clementine writings and the Qurʾān is probably Peter’s claim, in the *Homilies*, that “God is one, and there is no God but Him.”⁵² Although this partial presence of the Qurʾānic *shahāda* in an early Jewish Christian writing has already been noticed, it does not seem to have received all the attention it deserves. Other similarities are worth noting, although they do not constitute concluding evidence, as for instance the Qurʾānic term “believers” (*muʾminūn*). The same word, indeed (*pisteuontes*) refers in the New Testament (*Acts*) to Jews having recognized Jesus as the Messiah without giving up on the practice of the biblical commandments in their traditional Jewish interpretation. In Patristic literature, from Origen to the testimony of Arculf, a Gaulish monk who came to the Holy Land on pilgrimage in the 680s, *pisteuontes* (or its Latin equivalent, *credentes*), often refers to Jewish Christians. Arculf, as quoted by Adomnan, mentions the existence in Jerusalem of a community of “believing” Jews, side-by-side with that of the Jews who refuse to recognize Jesus as the Messiah announced by the prophets.⁵³ Shlomo Pines has proposed to see in the Qurʾānic concept *muʾmin*, plural *muʾminūn* (for instance, Q 2.62; 5.69; 22.17), a linguistic calque of the term *pisteuon* (or *credens*). According to him, “believers” would thus refer in the Qurʾān to Jewish Christians, side-by-side with the Jews, the Christians (*naṣārā*), the Sabeans and the Zoroastrians (*majūs*).⁵⁴ One should also note that the Qurʾānic *mushrikūn* (from *shirk*, association), traditionally perceived

50 About the Audians, and for a discussion of Puech’s argument, see Stroumsa, “Jewish and Gnostic Traditions.”

51 Zellentin, *The Qurʾān’s Legal Culture*. See also idem, *Islam Before Muhammad* (forthcoming).

52 *Eis estin ho Theos, kai plen autou ouk estin Theos*: Pseudo-Clement, *Hom.*, 16:7:9.

53 Adomnan, *De Locis Sanctis*, quoted by Pines, “Notes on Islam”, 326–8.

54 Pines differs here from de Blois, for whom the Qurʾānic *naṣārā* are Jewish Christians.

as polytheists, are considered by Gerald Hawting and Patricia Crone to have been monotheists.⁵⁵

In a series of articles, published from 1966 to 1987, Pines offered what I consider to have been a very powerful argument for the survival of some Jewish Christian communities until at least early Islam.⁵⁶ Sadly, Pines' articles have not had the impact one could have imagined. This is due to both the technical nature of his arguments and to the fact that these publications are not always easy to find. Moreover, the conservative instinct of the scholarly community, to some extent still prisoner of the Patristic tradition, has proven unwilling to admit the survival of Jewish Christian groups after the fourth century.⁵⁷ Pines establishes his arguments, first, upon the discovery of new anti-Christian polemical texts in Arabic (and Judeo-Arabic) and in Hebrew. He shows how the understanding of Christianity in these texts reflects a Jewish Christian rather than an orthodox theology. Pines also points out how some of the concepts in these Arabic texts seem to be calques of terms used to describe Jewish Christianity by the Patristic heresiographers.⁵⁸

In a recent book, Fred Donner develops a controversial thesis on original Islam as an ecumenical movement which included monotheists from various denominations, former pagans, Jews and Christians, all "believing" in Muḥammad's mission without abandoning their original faith and community.⁵⁹ According to him, earliest Islam represents an Arab nativist movement rallying around an Abrahamic monotheism, close to both Judaism and Christianity, whose existence had been ignored by most scholars.

From different angles, the hypothesis has been made of a pre-Islamic Abrahamic trend, i.e., one or a few religious groups perceiving themselves to be following in the spiritual footsteps of Abraham, and practicing the true religion which Abraham had discovered (or established). This religion would have been perverted by both Jews and Christians, who considered themselves

55 Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*. See for instance his conclusion, on pages 150–1. Cf. Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans."

56 These articles are reprinted in Pines, *Collected Works: Vol. iv*.

57 Pines' discovery triggered a virulent polemical response by Samuel Stern, who collaborated with Pines in analyzing the newly-discovered manuscript of 'Abd al-Jabbār. See Pines, *Jewish Christians*.

58 See for instance Q 7.159, on a group (*umma*) of the Just among "Moses' people," and Q 43.65 and 61.14, according to which a faction (*tā'ifa*) from the *Banū Isrā'īl* "believed," while another one remained "unbelieving." On the medieval Muslim authors discussing Jewish sects, see Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, chapter 4.

59 Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers*. Donner's thesis has been strongly rejected by Patricia Crone, "Among the Believers."

to be his [spiritual] offspring. Such a hypothesis would explain the Qur'anic allusions to "Abraham's religion" (*millat Ibrāhīm*). Even more than in the case of the Jewish Christians, our sources are here almost totally silent. In his *De Monogamia*, Tertullian, at the turn of the third century, had mentioned the existence of such a group. Sozomen, a fifth century ecclesiastical historian born in Palestine, describes in a famous passage the annual Abrahamic festival in Mamre, an international and inter-religious fair in which Jews, Christians as well as "Palestinians, Phoenicians, and Arabs" took part.⁶⁰ Sozomen writes elsewhere that the Arabs, having learned from the Jews about their Abrahamic roots, were practicing circumcision and abstaining from eating pork, as well as practicing a number of other Jewish rituals and customs.⁶¹ Sozomen's testimony has of course been noted by scholars, and in the last generation, a number of important studies have suggested a possible trajectory of Abrahamic rituals up to the birth of Islam, in particular those related to the Mecca sanctuary.⁶²

In late antiquity, Abraham was considered as a "culture hero" beyond the Jewish and Christian communities. For many pagans, his Babylonian origin made him the first astronomer. For both Jews and Christians, as Eusebius pointed out, Abraham was of course the first Hebrew patriarch (*Historia Ecclesiastica* I:4:5), as well as the inventor of true religion (*theosebeia*; *ibid.* I:4:9–10). Moreover, according to Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, in the fifth and sixth centuries some Negev Arabs had been attracted by an "Abrahamic form" of monotheism, which expressed their ethnic identity, in other words, and Arab faith.⁶³ Nevo and Koren underline the frequent mention of the name Abraham in the Nessana documentary papyri. These late papyri, dating from the sixth and seventh century, were redacted in a community of Christian Arabs who, according to Nevo and Koren, may have previously developed an

60 Sozomène, *Histoire Ecclésiastique*, II:4 (vol. I, 244–9 Sources Chrétiennes [306]). On this festival, see Kofsky, "Mamre." See also Fowden, "Sharing Holy Places."

61 Sozomène, *Histoire Ecclésiastique*, VI:38:11 (vol. III, 242–6 Sources Chrétiennes [495]). Sebeos, an Armenian ecclesiastical historian writing in the second half of the seventh century, also mentions that the Arabs had learned from the Jews about their Abrahamic ascendance (quoted by Nevo and Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, 187).

62 See in particular Nagel, "Der erste Muslim". Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, grant much importance to the figure of Abraham in the late antique background of Islam. See also Cook, *Muhammad*, 81: "This evidence [from Sozomen] is not lightly to be set aside... [Although there is] no evidence that would show any direct link between this early religion of Abraham and Muhammad's message... but it is at least a confirmation that Muhammad was not the first in the field...". On the late antique background of Islam, see also Al-Azmeh, *Rom, das Neue Rom und Bagdad*.

63 Nevo and Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, 189–90.

“Abrahamic” identity. Yet, Abraham is also common as a name in the Egyptian papyri of the fifth century.⁶⁴

The idea of a late antique Abrahamic religious movement, flourishing especially among the Negev Arabs, is certainly a plausible hypothesis, but not one that can be demonstrated in the present state of our knowledge. Such a movement would have been located on the margin of both Judaism and Christianity, just like Jewish Christianity. One might also point out the striking importance of Abraham in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*, a text according to which Abraham was the first man to cross from ignorance to knowledge.⁶⁵

For a very long time, the Jewish tradition had insisted upon Abraham’s versatility. According to *Genesis* 17.3–8, Abraham was both the ancestor of Israel and the father of “a multitude of peoples” – and not only the forefather of Ishmael’s offspring. According to *Jubilees* (Chapter 9) and the Mishna (*Kiddushin* 4.14), Abraham had followed God’s commandments before the promulgation of the Torah. Similarly, according to Philo, Abraham had followed God’s ways before Moses had proclaimed the written Law (*agraphos physis*; *De Abrahamo* 275–6). Philo also notes elsewhere (*de Virt.* 216) that Abraham was the first man to have believed in God – an idea echoed by Paul, Philo’s contemporary (*Romans* 4.1). In the footsteps of Pines and Dominique Urvoy, de Blois argues that the Qur’ānic *ḥanīf*, the gentile truthful to Abraham’s religion, reflects a conception of Abraham as the father of a multitude of nations, i.e., of pagan *ethnes* (*goyyim*). The Syriac term for pagan, *hanpā*, would have undergone a semantic inversion in its passage to Arabic. The Qur’ānic concept of *fiṭra*, original and primordial nature implanted in man by God (Q 30.30), also reflects true religion, and could well be related to the idea of *ḥanīf*.⁶⁶ If this were the case, Abraham would have been neither a Jew nor a Christian. To be sure, this hypothesis on Islamic origins is different from the one insisting on the Jewish Christian origins of the Qur’ān. The two hypotheses, however, are based on the same hermeneutical principles, as they connect contemporary prophetic activism among the Arabs to the biblical tradition.

64 Cf. Millar, “Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus, and the Origins of Islam.” On the Nessana papyri, see Stroumsa, *People and Identities*. For another allusion to the “Abrahamic” dimension of earliest Islam, see the “Sarah fresco” at Qusaḡayr ‘Amra, which dates from the Umayyad period, and may reflect Sarah’s identification with the Arabs. See Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 145–9.

65 Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitiones*, 1:33.

66 See Gobillot, *La conception originelle*.

Can we draw any conclusions from this rather disparate evidence? To my mind, it is probable that some Jewish Christian groups survived until at least the seventh century. The fact that such groups were probably not more than a few marginal communities does not really matter. Their ideas, unbearable for both rabbis and bishops, might well have appeared as a surprisingly attractive version of Christianity, at least for people living on the margins of the Byzantine Empire.⁶⁷ In particular, as surmised by Oscar Cullmann in 1930, the idea of the “true prophet” may certainly have survived in some circles. Such a possibility entails a significant reorientation of research on the origins of the Qurʾān. Henri Corbin has claimed that arguments about anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemics in the Qurʾān often reflect a category mistake. For him, the Qurʾān cannot be either anti-Jewish or anti-Christian, as it is nothing but a Jewish Christian text. As is well known, Corbin often expressed himself in elliptic and hyperbolic terms, not always very usefully from an epistemological viewpoint. And yet, he was putting his finger on a remarkable phenomenon, to which we should devote all our attention. If a text like the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* preserves in Greek a phrase strikingly reminiscent of the Qurʾānic *shahāda*, the Jewish Christian track imposes itself as having offered an exceptional yeast, which allowed Muḥammad’s message to ferment in the rich humus of late antique religious traditions and attitudes. Jewish Christianity seems not only to have survived across the centuries, but also to have retained a really seducing power, and to have been a key element of what one can call *praeparatio coranica*.

It is to its heuristic utility that the Jewish Christian track owes its strength. Its significance, however, disappears as soon as the metaphor of source rather than that of yeast is being used. A number of reasons prevent us from considering Jewish Christianity as *the* source of Islam. The evidence is too sparse, the precise mechanisms through which ideas are transmitted are too little known. We know, as in the case of Manichaeism, that its influence was often indirect. Somewhat paradoxically, the essentially Jewish Christian idea of a chain of prophecy offered a model applicable to religious trends stemming from new cultural and ethnic milieus, for Muḥammad as well as for Mani. We do not deal here with a teleological vision of the history of religious ideas. Like any complex historical phenomenon, the birth of Islam is over-determined. Delimiting it too precisely risks over-simplifying reality, and freezes the essentially fluid interaction of ideas and sects. The mystery of the birth of a religion

67 See Crone, “Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” and “Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān.”

cannot be solved, and neither can the alchemical transformation of religious ideas, of their passage from fluid to solid state.

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