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Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥîrâ:
Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times

In Syriac-speaking communities, from sometime in the ninth century until virtually the present day, a story has circulated according to which the prophet Muḥammad received his early religious instruction from an errant Christian monk of the east. The story is couched within the framework of an apocalyptic narrative which builds on earlier Christian apocalypses in Syriac composed in the early years of the eighth century. The text has been published since the years 1898-1903, but few scholars have paid much attention to it as an exercise in Christian literary apologetics.¹ Rather, the work has mostly attracted the attention of scholars bent either on tracing the history of Christian apocalyptic texts, or on investigating the many reports, Muslim as well as Christian, of Muḥammad's encounter with the monk Sargis/Baḥîrâ, whose principal claim to fame in Islamic lore is to have recognized the signs of prophethood in connection with the person of the youthful Muḥammad.² It is the purpose of the present article to review this important work from the point of view of its role as an exercise in Christian literary apologetics. Accordingly, the study will unfold under three major headings: the text in its present forms and the literary history of the work; the disputational design of its arguments; and its place in the Christian controversial literature of the early Islamic period.

- 1 See Richard Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898), pp. 189-242; 14 (1899), pp. 203-268; 15 (1900), pp. 56-102; 17 (1903), pp. 125-166. Gottheil read a paper on the Baḥîrâ legend before the members of the American Oriental Society in May, 1887. See Richard J. H. Gottheil, "A Syriac Bahîrâ Legend," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 13 (1889), pp. clxxvii-clxxxi. In the course of the lecture he announced that the text of the legend would be published in the Society's journal. Instead, it appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*.
- 2 See most recently Stephen Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Bahira; the Cult of the Cross and Iconoclasm," in P. Canivet & J.-P. Rey-Coquais (eds.) *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam* (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1992), pp. 47-57. Gero's article contains copious references to the most important earlier bibliography.

I. The Story and its History

A. The Text

The Christian Baḥîrâ story has survived in both Syriac and Arabic versions. The Syriac manuscripts known to contain it are all of a relatively recent vintage, and they emanate from both West Syrian ('Jacobite') and East Syrian ('Nestorian') milieux.³ While they all agree on the essential outline of the story, there are so many variations in the telling that in his edition of the text Richard Gottheil opted to publish the West Syrian and East Syrian recensions side by side rather than to attempt to re-constitute the common original from which, in his judgment, they may be presumed to descend.⁴ The variations in fact testify not only to the composite origins of the story, as we shall see, but to its timely topicality in the communities in which it continues to circulate. Each hand which has copied it seems to have contributed refinements of its own to the telling, thereby signifying the story's continuing interest.

The Arabic version of the Christian Baḥîrâ story survives in at least nine known manuscripts dating from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries.⁵ While there are shorter and longer recensions among them, Gottheil based his edition on three manuscripts from the fifteenth, the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries respectively, which all represent the same, fuller recension of the text. He cites an occasional reading from other manuscripts, but otherwise made no attempt to produce a critical edition. This state of affairs allows one to conclude only that the work was popular among Arab Christian readers, without providing enough evidence to chart its history in any more concrete way. Clearly, a modern, critical edition of the text is a scholarly *desideratum*.

The story-line is the same in both the Syriac and Arabic versions, and the outline is simple. There is a frame-story in which a monk-narrator (Isho'yahb in Syriac, Murhib in Arabic⁶) tells of his encounter with the fugitive monk Baḥîrâ

3 One knows of a copy made as recently as 1971 for the use of the current Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of the Americas. The three Syriac manuscripts used by Gottheil all date from the nineteenth century. See Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 13 (1898), pp. 199-200.

4 See Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 13 (1898), p. 200. A truly critical edition of the Syriac text, based on all the available manuscripts, is in the planning stages, under the direction of Prof. G. J. Reinink of the Dutch Rijksuniversiteit at Groningen.

5 See Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 13 (1898), pp. 200-201. See also Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (vol. II, Studi e Testi, no. 133; Vatican City, 1947), p. 149.

6 The vowelings of the Arabic name is uncertain. 'Murhib' is Gottheil's choice; 'Murhab' is another possibility, but neither of them are known Arabic names. One scholar has made the ingenious suggestion that the text be emended to read 'Mawhib', that is to say 'Gift', a reading which would correspond somewhat with the meaning of the Syriac name, i.e., 'Jesus has given'. He notes that the letters 'r' and 'w' can resemble one another in some Arabic hands. See J. Bignami-Odier & M.G. Levi Della Vida, "Une version latine de l'apocalypse syro-arabe de Serge-Bahira," *Mélan-*

(called Sargis-Bahîrâ in Syriac). The narrator recounts the story of Bahîrâ's adventures, tells of his experience of apocalyptic visions, of his encounters with Muḥammad, and of the monk's prophetic vision of the hardships to come with life under the Muslims. Within the text bounded by the frame-work story then there are three major divisions of material in the narrative: the apocalyptic vision of the coming rule of the Arab 'Ishmaelites,' the 'sons of Hagar,' as the text calls the Muslims;⁷ an account of the catechizing of Muḥammad by Bahîrâ; and the prediction, or prophecy *ex eventu*, of the course of Islamic history from the time of Muḥammad to the projected coming of the Mahdî, and the end-time when, according to the text, the Christian emperor of the Romans will, by God's grace and dispensation, set the world aright once again.

It is clear from the outline of the story that a Christian writer has chosen as his leitmotif the well known episode in the biography of the prophet Muḥammad, in which a monk, called only by the epithet *bahîrah*, an Arabic calque on the Syriac title of honor for monks, *bahîrâ*, recognizes the signs of Muḥammad's prophethood. As in Islamic sources, so in this story, Bahîrâ lives in a hut by a well, where nomad Arabs come for water. On one such occasion the monk unexpectedly singles out the teen-aged Muḥammad among his visitors, recognizes and foretells his prophetic career. For all practical purposes, the details aside, this is all there is to the Islamic account. But in the Christian writer's hands Bahîrâ acquires a story of his own. He is an errant monk with a troubled past. And into his story the Christian author grafts examples of two genres of writing which were common in the Syriac and Arabic-speaking communities of Christians in the early Islamic period: apocalypse and apologetics. There does not seem to be any reason to suppose that there were independent memories of Bahîrâ in the Christian communities. As we shall argue below, the best hypothesis seems to be that the Christian story is a clever construct, not lacking in verisimilitude, which builds on well-known Islamic lore, to serve as a literary vehicle for a Christian response to the civil and religious pressure of Islam. It provides the Christian reader not only with a way religiously to account for the rise of Islam and the course of its history, but it also suggests that Islam is actually a misunderstood form of Christianity. And it provides the Christian reader with apologetic strategies for rebutting Islamic objections to Christian doctrines.

ges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire 62 (1950), p. 129, n. 4. Alternatively, Stephen Gero prefers the vocalization 'Marhab', and he suggests that it represents an elision of the monk's full title and name, viz., Mar Ishô' Yahb. See Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Bahira," p. 52, n. 36.

7 These are standard epithets for Muslims in Christian texts in Syriac and Arabic. They are theologically suggestive terms, with polemical overtones. See S.H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muhammad, his Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century," in T. Fahd (ed.), *La vie du prophète; colloque de Strasbourg – 1980* (Paris, 1983), pp. 122-123. See also the remarks in S.H. Griffith, "Free Will in Christian *Kalâm*: Moshe bar Kepha against the Teachings of the Muslims," *Le Muséon* 100 (1987), pp. 151-154.

The frame story tells the tale of Sargis-Baḥîrâ in different ways in the Syriac and Arabic versions. The differences have been meticulously detailed by earlier commentators.⁸ Suffice it to say here that the monk is called by the double name Sargis-Baḥîrâ in Syriac, while in Arabic, as in the Islamic story, he is called simply Baḥîrâ.⁹ And in Syriac there is a much fuller account of Sargis-Baḥîrâ's ecclesiastical affiliations with seemingly 'Nestorian' hierarchs, while in Arabic he is said simply to be "of the people of Antioch."¹⁰ In Arabic the narrator-monk, Murhib *ar-rāhib*, meets Baḥîrâ in a desert monastery, the location of which is not specified, but it is in the desert "near the Ishmaelites."¹¹ In Syriac, the narrator-monk Isho'yahb, after having toured the famous sites of desert monasticism, meets Sargis-Baḥîrâ in "the desert of Yathrib."¹² In both versions Sargis-Baḥîrâ is himself an ecclesiastical fugitive who has sought refuge in the remote desert because of the irregularity of his view that in Christian churches there should be only one wooden cross to receive the veneration of the worshippers – no more than one, and no cross of precious metals, nor any ornamented with gems. He had worn out his welcome in Christian communities by vandalizing crosses which did not meet his approval.

In the Syriac versions of the story of Sargis-Baḥîrâ the apocalyptic sections are the most important features, and they occupy by far the most space in the texts. This prominence of the apocalyptic genre is not surprising, given the fact that in the Syriac-speaking communities apocalypses were the most important literary reactions to the challenge of Islam, from the time of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685-705) until the Abbasid revolution, as we shall see below. In the Baḥîrâ story the apocalyptic sections have two foci. The first part, which details Sargis-Baḥîrâ's vision at Sinai about the coming rule of the 'Ishmaelites' is an apocalypse in the vintage Danielesque style, which owes a large debt to the earlier apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, itself an originally Syriac composition.¹³ In fact, in the

8 See Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Bahira."

9 See A. Abel, "Baḥîrâ," *EI*, new ed., vol. I (1960), pp. 922-923. The name Sargis/Sergius for the monk was not unknown to Muslims. Al-Mas'ûdî says that Baḥîrâ is called by this name in Christian writings. See C. Pellat (ed.), *Mas'ûdî; les prairies d'or* (vol. I; Beirut, 1966), p. 83. The name Sargis/Sergius was common among Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christians. The popularity of the cult of St. Sergius is evident also in the number of churches and sanctuaries dedicated to him. See R. B. Serjeant, "Saint Sergius," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22 (1959), pp. 574-575. His main shrine and martyrion was at Rusafah/Sergiopolis in Syria. See M. Mackensen, *Resafa I: eine befestigte spätantike Anlage vor den Stadtmauern von Resafa* (Mainz am Rhein, 1984); T. Ulbert, *Resafa II; die Basilika des heiligen Kreuzes in Resafa-Sergiopolis* (Mainz am Rhein, 1986).

10 Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 14 (1899), p. 254.

11 Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 14 (1899), p. 260.

12 Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 13 (1898), p. 203.

13 See F. J. Martinez, "Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius," (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America; Washington, D.C., 1985); G. J. Reinink, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (CSCO, vols. 540 & 541; Leuven: Peeters, 1993).

Arabic version, the text refers explicitly to Methodius twice.¹⁴ Both the Arabic and the Syriac versions then say that Sargis-Baḥîrâ brought the warning of his vision to the Byzantine emperor Maurice and the Persian emperor Chosroes, to no avail.

The second apocalyptic section of the Baḥîrâ story comes after the report of the monk's encounter with Muḥammad in both versions. In this section the accent is on the *ex eventu* prophecy of the conditions of life for Christians under Islam until the projected coming of the Mahdî and the inception of the events of the end-time. There are references not only to the many disabilities to be suffered by Christians, but pointed references to numerous Christians who will have become Ishmaelites. Here, and throughout the apocalyptic sections of the work there are a number of allusions to Islamic history and lore which have given scholars some points of reference for their efforts to date the text, as we shall see below.

In the Arabic version of the Baḥîrâ story, in sharp contrast to the Syriac versions, the monk's encounter with Muḥammad is the longest and obviously the most important part of the narrative. Here, in both versions, the Qur'ân is the focus of attention; the text claims that effectively Baḥîrâ is the author of this new scripture. In the Syriac versions of the report of the encounter, the narrator-monk, Ishô'yahb, has the story not from Sargis-Baḥîrâ himself but from a disciple named Ḥâkim, whom Ishô'yahb met only after Baḥîrâ's death. He is said to have reported the gist of the conversations between Muḥammad and the monk, and he also tells the tale according to which Baḥîrâ contrived to have the scripture destined to become the Qur'ân arrive, seemingly miraculously, in the midst of a gathering of Muḥammad and his followers. In its original form, as the story goes, the Qur'ân contained Christian truth told in a form suitable for Arab ears. But in the Syriac telling, in the end the text that was to become the Qur'ân first came into the possession of Jews and was distorted into the familiar form of it we now have, at the hands of a scribe variously called Ka'b, Kalef, and Kaleb, who seems to have been none other than the Jewish early convert to Islam, well-known from Islamic sources, Ka'b al-Aḥbar.¹⁵ There are also a number of other anti-Jewish remarks in both versions, to which we shall call further attention below.

In the Arabic version of the Baḥîrâ story the author has expanded the section reporting Muḥammad's encounter with the monk to become the major part of the text. It includes numerous quotations from the Qur'ân, supplying in each instance the Christian understanding of the passage which the author says Baḥîrâ

14 See Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 14 (1899), p. 262 and 15 (1900), p. 71.

15 See the discussion below, and the references in n. 74.

actually intended to communicate to the Arabs. In fact, throughout the section Baḥîrâ speaks in the first person, as reported by the monk Murhib.

Clearly, the text of the Christian Baḥîrâ story in both its Syriac and Arabic versions is an artfully conceived exercise in apocalypse and apologetic, carefully plotted and well articulated. It depends not only on earlier Syriac apocalypses, and Islamic traditions about the monk Baḥîrâ, but on Christian modes of apologetics in Arabic and Syriac as well. It is in fact a hybrid of Christian modes of discourse in Syriac and Arabic in the early Islamic period, the literary history of which will help to propose a suggested date for its composition and the ecclesiastical milieu of its first appearance. And this is also the framework within which the question of the relationship of the Syriac and Arabic versions to one another will most naturally come up for discussion.

B. Literary History

Stephen Gero, the most recent scholar to give a close scrutiny to the text of the Christian Baḥîrâ legend, concludes that in its present form it is a composite work. He says,

The oldest layer of the Christian Bahira legend is in fact the first part, the apocalypse proper in the context of the autobiographical narrative; this section, as the Latin version demonstrates, had at some point an independent literary existence, perhaps already in the ninth century; the other sections, with the echoes of the Muslim tradition proper about Muhammad and the citations of the Qur'anic material, were added piecemeal later.¹⁶

Gero's mention of the "Latin version" refers to the translation of the first part of the Baḥîrâ legend which was done into Latin by the early years of the fourteenth century.¹⁷ On the basis of certain syntactic and stylistic features of the version, the editors of the Latin text have suggested that the translation was made from an Arabic original. Since this Latin version contains only the first part of the story as we have it in the published Syriac and Arabic texts, including only the account of the monk's vision at Sinai and his settlement in the territory of the Ishmaelites, these same scholars have concluded that the Latin version preserves an earlier form of the story, perhaps even the original Christian Baḥîrâ legend, before it was embellished with the additional features one now finds in the available Syriac and Arabic texts. On this account, the Arabic text from which the Latin version was made is presumed to have been itself a translation from the Syriac original of the Baḥîrâ legend.¹⁸ Be this as it may, it is nevertheless clear that the

16 Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Bahira," p. 55.

17 See Bignami-Odier & M. G. Levi Della Vida, "Une version latine."

18 See Bignami-Odier & M. G. Levi Della Vida, "Une version latine," p. 133.

substance of the apocalyptic vision which came to be part of the legend would already have been available to the original composer of the Bahîrâ story in the eighth century apocalypses which are the earliest literary responses to the challenge of Islam to be found in Syriac.

Recent studies, particularly those by Han J. W. Drijvers and Gerrit Reinink, have called attention to a number of Syriac compositions of an apocalyptic character which were produced by Syriac writers in the Syro-Mesopotamian milieu in the Umayyad period, beginning in the reign of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685-705). The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* is the most well known of these compositions, but in the same breath one might also mention the Syriac *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, and the so-called *Edessene Apocalypse*.¹⁹ All of these texts, as Reinink and Drijvers have shown, have their roots deep in Syrian tradition as far back as Ephraem the Syrian (d.373), and they rely heavily on motifs found in such earlier works as the *Romance of Julian*, the *Alexander Legend*, and the *Judas Cyriacus Legend*. For the most part these texts seem to have been composed in a Syrian Orthodox ('Jacobite') milieu, although they became widely popular throughout the Syriac-speaking world.²⁰ They attempted to make sense of the rise of Islam and the rule of the Muslims in terms of the traditional eastern Christian exegesis of the book of Daniel. In this sense, while the texts are often highly polemical against Islam, they are very much intra-Christian documents. And they would have been readily available to the composer of the Christian Bahîrâ legend.

19 See F. J. Martinez, "Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius," (Ph. D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America; Washington, D.C., 1985); *idem*, "The Apocalyptic Genre in Syriac: the World of Pseudo-Methodius," in H. J. W. Drijvers *et al.* (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 229: Rome, 1987), pp. 337-352; H. Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der edessenischen Apokalypik des 7. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt a.M., 1985); *idem*, "Der byzantinische Endkaiser bei Pseudo-Methodios," *Oriens Christianus* 71 (1987), pp. 140-155; G. J. Reinink, "Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende vom römischen Endkaiser," in W. Verbeke *et al.* (eds.), *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages* (Leuven, 1988), pp. 82-111; H. J. W. Drijvers, "Christians, Jews and Muslims in Northern Mesopotamia in Early Islamic Times; the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles and Related Texts," and G. J. Reinink, "The Romance of Julian the Apostate as a Source for Seventh Century Apocalypses," in P. Canivet & J.-P. Rey-Coquais (eds.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam*, pp. 67-74 & 75-86; G. J. Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius: a Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam," and Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: a Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period," in A. Cameron & L. I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material; Princeton, N.J., 1992), pp. 149-187 & 189-213.

20 The problem of the community of origin for these texts is still not completely solved. It is difficult to judge between the Melkite community and the Jacobite community. For Pseudo-Methodius, for example, Martinez opts for a Melkite origin, while Reinink chooses the Jacobite option. See Martinez, "Eastern Christian Apocalyptic", and Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius: a Concept of History." The same ambivalence will emerge in the case of the Christian Bahîrâ Legend.

The genius of the author of the Christian Baḥîrâ legend was to have chosen the Islamic story of Muḥammad's encounter with the monk as the center-piece for his work of apocalypse and apologetics. The Islamic story was widespread by the ninth century. It appears already in Muḥammad ibn Ishâq's (d.767) biography of the prophet as it has survived in the recension of Ibn Hishâm (d. 834).²¹ The appearance of the Baḥîra story in Ibn Ishâq's *Sîrah* reminds the reader that such a document itself had an apologetical/polemical agenda.²² In it Baḥîrâ's recognition of the sign of prophecy on the person of the youthful Muḥammad was one of a series of *topoi* in the narrative, designed to show that the prophet's coming was expected, foretold, and recognized by earlier 'scripture people'. The Christian writer's adoption of this motif as the center-piece for his narrative shows his recognition of the fact that in the Islamic story the figure of Baḥîrâ was already a character in the drama of inter-religious controversy. And it is worth noting that in the *sîrah* account, in aid of his recognition of the signs of Muḥammad's future prophethood, Baḥîrâ is said to have asked him a number of questions about himself which the future prophet readily answered, enabling the monk to verify the distinguishing characteristics of Muḥammad's vocation. This brief interrogatory dialogue is the feature of the story which in the Christian writer's hands was expanded to become what we may call "the catechesis of Muḥammad."²³

In Christian sources too there are early reports of Muḥammad's alleged encounter with a monk. One finds them in the heresiography of John of Damascus (d. c. 749), where Muḥammad is said to have been in dialogue with an Arian monk,²⁴ and in the chronicles of Theophanes (d. 817), and of George Hamartolos (fl. 866), which report that Muḥammad's wife received reassurances about his experience of revelation from "a monk exiled for false belief" and living among the Arabs.²⁵

By the mid-eighth century it was already clear to writers such as Anastasius of

21 See Th. 'Abd ar-Ra'îf Sa'd (ed.), *As-Sîrah an-Nabawiyyah* (4 vols.; Beirut, 1975), vol. I, pp.165-167. Among other Islamic sources, the story of Baḥîrâ also appears in the biographical traditions transmitted in Ibn Sa'd's *aṭ-Ṭabaqât al-Kabîr*. See E. Mittwoch & E. Sachau (eds.), *Ibn Saad, Biographien* (vol.I; Leiden, 1917), pp.99-101.

22 See J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu; Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford, 1978).

23 Mention of "le catechisation de Mahomet" seems first to have been mentioned in Bignami-Odier & Levi Della Vida, "Une version latine," p.133.

24 See the text quoted and discussed in Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam; the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites,"* (Leiden, 1972), p.132; R. Le Coz, *Jean Damascène, écrits sur l'islam* (Sources Chrétiennes, n.383; Paris, 1992), pp.97-98, 210-212.

25 Carolus de Boor (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (2 vols.; Leipzig, 1883 & 1885), vol. I., p.334. Carolus de Boor (ed.), *Georgius Monachus Chronicon* (2 vols.; Leipzig, 1904), vol. II, p.699.

Sinai,²⁶ John of Damascus,²⁷ the writer of the dialogue of the Syrian Patriarch John III with the emir 'Umayr ibn Ṣā'd al-Anṣarī, and the composer of the dialogue between the monk of Bêt Ḥālê and an Arab notable,²⁸ to name only a few, that Christology was the main issue between Muslims and Christians. In the theological vocabulary of all the contemporary Christian denominations, the label 'Arian' fairly well expressed the intra-Christian theological judgment about the Islamic view 'Isā ibn Maryam. For 'Melkites' and 'Jacobites' the further label 'Nestorian' served the same purpose. Indeed this Christian characterization of the situation seems even to have found its way back into the Islamic apologetical/polemical tradition. For there is yet another episode in the biography of the prophet Muḥammad in which he is said to have encountered a monk who recognized his prophetic vocation. According to the tradition, as a young man in the employ of his future wife Khadijah, Muḥammad came once with a merchant caravan to Syria, there a monk whom Islamic tradition calls *Nasṭūr* (Nestorius?) is said to have recognized him as a future prophet.²⁹

The dialogue of the monk of Bêt Ḥālê with a Muslim notable, which was in all probability composed in the 720's, is the earliest Christian text actually to mention the monk Baḥîrâ by name. In it the monk tells his Muslim interlocutor that Muḥammad's teaching of monotheism was "the doctrine he had received from Sargis-Baḥîrâ."³⁰

An Arab Christian apologetical/polemical text with its roots in the ninth century, the correspondence between 'Abd Allāh ibn Isma'īl al-Hāshimī and 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī melded the figures of Sargis-Baḥîrâ and the monk *Nasṭūr*. The text claims that Sargis-Baḥîrâ, "gave himself the name Nestorius, wanting by the change to prop up the doctrine of Nestorius to which he adhered and which he professed."³¹ The monk succeeded in weaning Muḥammad away from idolatry, the text says, and "he made him his disciple and a propagator of

26 See S.H. Griffith, "Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos*, and the Muslims," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987), pp. 341-358; John Haldon, "The Works of Anastasios of Sinai: a Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief," in Cameron and Conrad, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, pp. 107-147.

27 See Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*.

28 See S.H. Griffith, "Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)," in B. Lewis & F. Niewöhner (eds.), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter* (Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien, 4; Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 257-261.

29 'Abd ar-Ra'ūf Sa'd, *As-Sirah an-Nabawiyyah*, vol. I, p. 172; Mittwoch & Sachau, *Ibn Saad, Biographien*, vol. I, pp. 82-83. A character named *Nasṭūr* also appears in Jewish polemical texts of the early Islamic period. See Daniel J. Lasker, "Qissat Mijadilat al-Usquf and Nestor Ha-Komer; the earliest Arabic and Hebrew anti-Christian Polemics," in J. Blau & S.C. Reif (eds.), *Genizah Research after Ninety Years: the Case of Judaeo-Arabic* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 112-118.

30 Diyarbakir MS 95, f. 9.

31 Georges Tartar, "Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien sous le calife al Ma'mûn (813-834); les épîtres d'al-Hashimi et d'al-Kindi," (2 vols.; Combs-la-Ville, France: Centre Évangélique de Temoignage et de Dialogue, 1982), vol. I, p. 107; vol. II, p. 112.

the religion of Nestorius.”³² The most sensible construction to put upon this remark is to see in it a polemical characterization of the faith in which Baḥîrâ is said to have instructed Muḥammad. That is to say, the Christian composer of the al-Ḥāshimî/al-Kindî correspondence was himself probably a ‘Melkite’ or a ‘Jacobite’.³³

In the ninth century the Muslims too put the Baḥîrâ story to a further polemical purpose in the on-going religious confrontation with Christians. For example, the *Muʿtazilî littérateur* al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869), in his *Kitāb ar radd ʿalā n-naṣārā*, wrote that the Christians whom the *Qurʾān* says are “the nearest in loving friendship to those who believe” (*al-Māʾidah*, V:82) were not those with whom he, al-Jāḥiẓ, was arguing in the ninth century. Rather, he said, “God did not mean these Christians nor their like, i.e., the ‘Melkites’ and the ‘Jacobites’. He meant the likes of Baḥîrâ and the monks who were at the service of Salmān.”³⁴

Together with the Syriac apocalypses and the stories about Muḥammad’s encounter with a monk, both Christian and Islamic, the author of the Christian Baḥîrâ legend also had at hand a growing supply of dispute texts, particularly in Syriac and Arabic, to inspire him.³⁵ No small part of his own literary genius in this line is displayed in the middle section of his work, the catechesis of Muḥammad. Here there is a marked difference in the Syriac and the Arabic versions of the story. In Syriac the catechizing of Muḥammad is reported briefly, and second hand, as it were. The narrator-monk hears it from Ḥākīm, Baḥîrâ’s disciple. And the author is content to report how in those *Qurʾān* passages and Islamic beliefs and practices which Christians find most objectionable, the refugee monk had misguidedly accommodated his instructions to the weaknesses of the Arabs – thereby not only explaining but dismissing them from serious religious consideration, as far as any Christian reader of the text would have been concerned. In this section the major points of dispute between Christians and Muslims are cleverly addressed in an artfully literary way. In the Arabic version of the story this section is expanded almost to vie with the apocalyptic portions of the text in literary importance. The author cites numerous quotations from the *Qurʾān* and then explains how Baḥîrâ had, misguidedly, it is implied, originally intended

32 Tartar, “Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien,” vol. I., p. 107; vol. II., p. 112.

33 There has been no scholarly consensus on this point. L. Massignon thought the writer was a Jacobite. See L. Massignon, “al-Kindî,” *EI*, 1st ed., vol. II (1927), p. 1080; Georg Graf insisted that he was a Nestorian. See Graf, *Geschichte*, vol. II, pp. 135-145. Armand Abel claimed that he was a Melkite. See A. Abel, “L’apologie d’al-Kindî et sa place dans la polemique islamico-chrétienne,” in *L’Oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà* (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Anno CCCLXI, Quaderno no. 62; Rome, 1964), pp. 501-523. Tartar would like to have al-Kindî be a non-denominational Christian. See Tartar, “Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien,” vol. II., pp. XLI-XLIII.

34 J. Finkel (ed.), *Three Essays of Abu ʿOthman ʿAmr ibn Babr al-Jahiz* (d. 869), (Cairo, 1926), p. 14.

35 For rapid surveys see S.H. Griffith, “Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts,” and *idem*, “The Prophet Muhammad, his Scripture and his Message.”

them to be interpreted in an acceptably Christian way. In the process, the author manages to cover all of the issues currently in dispute between Christians and Muslims in the early Islamic period.

In view of these considerations of the antecedent materials available to the composer of the Christian Baḥîrâ legend in the forms in which we actually have it: the Syriac apocalypses, the Islamic and Christian accounts of Muḥammad's encounters with monks, and the dispute texts of the early Islamic period, one returns to the question of authorship. Gero and others, as we have seen, have spoken of "layers" in the composition of the work, and of the earlier "independent existence" of the first part of the story. However this may be, and it is clearly not improbable that the account of Baḥîrâ's vision at Sinai may have once had an independent circulation, the fact remains that the whole work integrally is a literarily ingenious composition. In the forms in which it has survived, the Syriac version of the story seems to be the primary one; all of the constitutive features are present. In the Arabic version, the catechesis of Muḥammad is expanded and the whole work is tightened up in a stylistic way which bespeaks not only translation but re-authoring. Yet, *mutatis mutandis*, the story remains the same.

There are a number of items in the Arabic version which suggest its dependence on Syriac sources. Twice the author cites the authority of 'Methodius', in reference to the work which scholars now call the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, an original composition in Syriac of the late seventh century.³⁶ He cites dates according to the years of Alexander,³⁷ a convention of the Syriac writers of the Syrian Orthodox community. And Syria (*bilād ash-Shām*), the homeland of the Syriac-speaking communities, is the geographical setting of the oppressive treatment of Christians at the hands of Muḥammad's Ishmaelite successors as it is described in the author's second apocalyptic section of the work. These considerations, plus the fact that the Arabic version follows the outline established in the Syriac version, argue in behalf of the priority of the Syriac.

The Arabic version, in its subtlety and literary ingenuity, is on the order of other Christian apologetical/polemical compositions of which one knows from the ninth or tenth centuries: the dialogue of the monk Abraham of Tiberias with the emir 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Hāshimī,³⁸ and the correspondence between al-Hāshimī and al-Kindī mentioned earlier. All three of these compositions have it

36 See Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 262 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 132 (English) & 15 (1900), p. 71 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 146 (English). On Pseudo-Methodius see n. 19 above.

37 See, e.g., Gottheil 15 (1900), p. 91 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 153 (English).

38 See Giacinto Bulus Marcuzzo, *Le Dialogue d'Abraham de Tiberiade avec 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hasimi à Jerusalem vers 820* (Rome, 1986). See also S.H. Griffith, "The Monk in the Emir's *Majlis*: the Apologetic Dialogue of Abraham of Tiberias; a Christian Arabic Text of the Early Abbasid Era," forthcoming publication.

in common that they are now virtually anonymous; they have their origins in the ninth century; they are artfully contrived in an ingeniously literary way; and they have all enjoyed a long and widely disseminated popularity in all the Christian communities of the Middle East, not least in more recent centuries. In this latter feature they have eclipsed the more scholarly and staid Christian apologies in Syriac and Arabic of the early Islamic period. Indeed, these three works are more rhetorically and more knowingly anti-Islamic in their polemics than most other apologetical/polemical texts. One might conclude that it is their very artfulness that has carried them forward.

As with all of these works, so with the Christian Baḥîrâ legend, to date them one must rely on internal criteria to suggest a plausible time for their composition. Here one has been speaking of ninth-century origins. The justification for this position is twofold: the descriptions of, or allusions to, persons and events in Islamic history one finds in the text; and the character of the apologetical/polemical arguments the author advances against Islam. In the former instance, the apocalyptic parts of the text yield the most helpful information. Armand Abel studied them from this point of view and came to the conclusion, which remains the most plausible one today, that the material reflects the state of affairs in the second half of the first Abbasid century, probably during the reign of al-Ma'mûn (813-833).³⁹ It is the burden of the second half of the present essay to study the overtly argumentative parts of the text more closely, especially the section of the story dealing with the catechesis of Muḥammad. Here too, as we shall see, it makes sense to think that the material has its origins in the ninth century, and that it is plausible to think of the mid-tenth century as the period when the full text will have come into its present form, particularly in the Arabic version. It remains true, however, that throughout the history of its transmission through the several Christian denominations in which it was read, editors and copyists have adapted the story to their own requirements. Only a true critical edition of the text will allow any more specific conclusions to be made.

There remains the question of the denomination in which the text was first composed. The role of the monk and his own ecclesiastical profile is the best indicator.⁴⁰ Here one consideration is primary: Baḥîrâ is a fugitive; he is *persona non grata in his own community*. What he has taught Muḥammad and what he provided in the *Qur'ân*, according to the story, independently of any alleged dis-

39 See A. Abel, "L'Apocalypse de Bahira et la notion islamique de Mahdi," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales* 3 (1953), pp. 1-12; *idem*, "Changements politiques et littérature eschatologique dans le monde musulman," *Studia Islamica* 2 (1954), pp. 23-43.

40 Gottheil mistakenly thought that the references to the 'Romans' in the apocalyptic portions of the legend referred to the Crusaders, rather than to the Byzantine rulers, and he therefore not only dated the text much later than current scholars do, but he supposed on this basis that the text came from a Chalcedonian Orthodox milieu. See Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend," 13 (1898), p. 192.

tortions at the hands of Jews or others, is not acceptable to Christians. In spite of the monk's good intentions, what he taught Muḥammad is presented as both doctrinally and morally objectionable to Christians, as our review of this material will show. As for the monk's ecclesiastical profile, the author seems clearly to portray him as a refugee from the 'Nestorian' community. As Stephen Gero has noted, the reported episodes in Sargis-Baḥîrâ's life "are put into a church-historical context of unambiguously 'Nestorian', East Syrian character."⁴¹ The ecclesiastical events and personages in his story all confirm this assessment. However, this fact does not mean that the work is simply a product of the 'Nestorian' community, as some scholars have assumed. Rather, the best assumption seems to be that the author has cast the story in a 'Nestorian' mode for polemical purposes. That is to say, the 'Nestorian' church, through one of its errant monks, is seen to be responsible for the rise of Islam. To a 'Melkite' or 'Jacobite' author and audience such an innuendo would be plausible, and, like the 'Arian' monk in the account of the "heresy of the Ishmaelites" attributed to John of Damascus, Sargis-Baḥîrâ's 'Nestorian' ecclesiastical identity would serve as a theological label as well as an historical claim about Islam. In fact it seems that the Syrian 'Jacobite' milieu was the more likely provenance of most of the apocalyptic sources from which the author of the Sargis-Baḥîrâ story drew his material. And in the longest text containing the Syriac version of Baḥîrâ's teaching, in contrast to the text which circulated in the 'Nestorian' community, the monk is made, uncharacteristically and inconsistently, explicitly to teach 'Jacobite' Orthodoxy.⁴² So it is not improbable that the author was 'Jacobite'.

A peculiar twist in the Sargis-Baḥîrâ story is the nature of the monk's own reported misdemeanors. One will recall that he was passionately devoted to the idea that there should be only one cross in a church and that a wooden one. Accordingly, he did not shrink from vandalism in his enthusiasm to enforce his conviction. Stephen Gero has speculated in this connection "that the ninth century redactor of the Sergius-Baḥîrâ legend, for reasons of his own, attributed to his hero a view espoused and promulgated by the Byzantine iconoclasts."⁴³ Gero's observation that Sargis-Baḥîrâ's attitude toward the cross is compatible with that of the Byzantine iconoclasts is correct, and it must be put into context by calling to mind the additional fact that in Syria too in the eighth and early ninth centuries the cross and the icon were moments of conflict between Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, there is evidence that as a result of this conflict, there was also dissension within the Christian communities over the appropriate public veneration to be paid to cross and icon.⁴⁴ With this fact in mind, one may

41 Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Bahira," p. 55.

42 See below, n. 58.

43 Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Bahira," p. 56.

44 See Sidney H. Griffith, "Theodore Abû Qurrah's Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Ve-

notice yet another instance in which Sargis-Baḥîrâ is at variance with the mainstream Christian communities over an issue that had arisen from the encounter with Islam. On this reading Sargis-Baḥîrâ could be seen portrayed as one of those 'hypocrites' (*munāfiqîn*) of whom a 'Melkite' writer complained in the second half of the ninth century that "they are the hypocrites among us, marked with our mark [i.e., the cross], standing in our congregations, contradicting our faith, forfeiters of themselves, who are Christians in name only."⁴⁵

In the present state of research one must be content to say that the author of the Christian Baḥîrâ legend in its full Syriac form was a West Syrian, perhaps a 'Jacobite', but widely knowledgeable about ecclesiastical affairs generally in ninth century Syria. He drew on pre-existing materials in terms of the apocalyptic sources he used, and on the Islamic and Christian stories about the monk whom Muḥammad is said to have encountered; he highlighted doctrinal issues which were in dispute between Muslims and Christians in the ninth century. Subsequently, but perhaps still within the ninth century, or the first half of the tenth century, the story was re-told in Arabic, with a considerable enhancement of the section dealing with the catechesis of Muḥammad, in line with the heightened interest in debate and apologetic among Arabophone Christians in the early Islamic period. Throughout the work in both languages there is a perceptible interest on the author's part to suggest that Islam was inspired in its origins from within the 'Nestorian' community, albeit at the hands of a monk whom the 'Nestorians' themselves had repudiated. The work achieved a wide popularity in all the Christian denominations in the Middle East, surviving in a number of manuscripts which show how later copyists occasionally adjusted the details of the story, the better to make it accord with the copyist's own confessional requirements. It is particularly noticeable at the end of the Arabic version of the story, as we shall see, that presumably later hands have enhanced the monk's sense of contrition for the instructions he gave to Muḥammad, and have added

nerating Images," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985), pp. 53-73; *idem*, "Baḥîr/ Bêšêr: Boon Companion of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III: the Islamic Recension of his Story in Leiden Oriental MS 951 (2)," *Le Muséon* 103 (1990), pp. 289-323; *idem*, "Images, Islam and Christian Icons: a Moment in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in Early Islamic Times," in Canivet & Rey Coquais, *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam*, pp. 121-138. See also A. P. Kazhdan, "Kosmas of Jerusalem: 2. Can We Speak of his Political Views?" *Le Muséon* 103 (1990), pp. 329-346; Marie-France Auzépy, "De la Palestine à Constantinople (VIIIe - IXe siècles): Étienne le sabaïte et Jean Damascène," *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994), pp. 183-218.

45 British Library Or. MS 4950, ff. 6r-6v. The remark comes from a work which the present writer calls the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*. See S.H. Griffith, "The First Christian *Summa Theologiae* in Arabic: Christian *Kalām* in Ninth-Century Palestine," in Michael Gervers & Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Papers in Mediaeval Studies, 9; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), pp. 15-31.

a number of lines in which he abjectly confesses his sinfulness – this in contradistinction to his earlier, more confident tones.

Up until now most scholarly commentary on the Christian Baḥîrâ legend has so much concentrated on its apocalyptic features that little sustained attention has been paid to its disputational sections, particularly in the Arabic version. It is to this study that the present inquiry now turns.

II. Disputational Design

The major polemical/apologetical claim of the Christian Baḥîrâ legend is, as the Syriac version puts it, the allegation that Baḥîrâ “had made disciples of the Sons of Ishmael and had become their chief, because he prophesied to them what they liked. He wrote and handed over to them the scripture which they call *Qurʾān*.”⁴⁶ The author elaborates on this claim in the middle section of the work, in which the narrator-Monk tells the story of Sargis-Baḥîrâ’s interviews with Muḥammad – the catechesis of Muḥammad in the narrative. The account is different in the Syriac and Arabic versions, and so one must review them separately.

A. *The Syriac Version*

According to the Syriac version, Ishō’yahb, the narrator, heard the account of Sargis-Baḥîrâ’s interviews with Muḥammad, not from the monk himself, but only after his death from a disciple of Sargis-Baḥîrâ named Ḥâkim. From a narratological point of view, therefore, Ḥâkim is the reporter of the advice which Baḥîrâ is said to have given to Muḥammad. Given the tenor of this advice, it may be the case that from the point of view of the narrative, Ḥâkim is introduced precisely to put some distance between the narrator-monk and Sargis-Baḥîrâ in matters of which a well informed Christian could only disapprove. For although Sargis-Baḥîrâ is an errant, misguided monk, he is also presented as a holy man who works miracles. Even after his death, the text says that his bones miraculously aided in the identification of a murderer.⁴⁷ Ḥâkim is himself not a monk, but one who as a child had been cured of leprosy at Baḥîrâ’s hands when he, at the monk’s insistence, came to believe in the “Messiah, the son of the living God,” the “Messiah God,” as he testifies.⁴⁸

Ḥâkim first tells what the reader recognizes as being essentially the Islamic Baḥîrâ story. He relates how the monk recognized Muḥammad’s future pro-

46 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 212 (Syriac); 14 (1899), pp. 213-214 (English).

47 See Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 214.

48 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 214 (Syriac); 14 (1899), pp. 215-216 (English).

phethood when he came to the well by the hermitage in the company of a troop of Arabs. Baḥîrâ saw a vision above Muḥammad's head, "the likeness of a cloud," and he recognized it as a sign of prophecy.⁴⁹ He blessed Muḥammad and foretold the Arab conquest and the coming peace of Islam. It is at this juncture that the catechesis of Muḥammad takes place. It is in the guise of a dialogue between Muḥammad and Sargis, in the question and answer format: Muḥammad poses leading questions, which Baḥîrâ answers in a way which allows the reader to see both a statement of Christian doctrine, and, by implication, the normative Islamic position which it is meant to countervail.

In the first place Sargis explains that he has received his vision about Muḥammad and his future from Mt. Sinai, "the place where Moses received his divine visions."⁵⁰ And the monk specifies that Muḥammad's mission will be "to turn your people away from the worship of images to the worship of the one true God."⁵¹ One recognizes in this purpose what Christian apologists writing in Syriac and Arabic in the early Islamic period were always prepared to concede to Muḥammad: he turned the Arabs away from idolatry to the worship of God.⁵²

As to the identity of the one true God, the Monk testifies as follows:

I worship the living God ... I profess and believe in his son Jesus the Messiah, and in the Holy Spirit.⁵³

One notices immediately the locution, "his son Jesus the Messiah," a phrase which in Syriac echoes more the *Qur'ân's* "*al-masîḥ 'Isā ibn Maryam*" (e.g., in *an-Nisā*, IV: 157, 171) than it does current Christian usage. In Syriac, Christians customarily spoke simply of "our Lord Jesus" (*mâran Ishū*).

In answer to the question about how one comes to know about such a God, Baḥîrâ replies, "from the Law and the Prophets."⁵⁴ This was the answer of all the Christian controversialists in the early Islamic period; many of them developed elaborate apologies for Christianity based on testimonies drawn from the Law and the prophets.⁵⁵ This strategy drew its strength from the *Qur'ân's* own prophetology, in which Muḥammad's mission is presented as continuous with that of Abraham, Moses and the rest of the prophets. Christians argued that prophecy was truly fulfilled only in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus.

49 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 216 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 216 (English). The Islamic version of the story mentions a mark on Muhammad's body, not a cloud hovering over his head.

50 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 217 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 217 (English).

51 Gottheil, 13 (1898), pp. 217-218 (Syriac); 14 (1899), pp. 217-218 (English).

52 See, e.g., the dialogue of the monk of Bêt Ḥalê with a Muslim notable in Diyarbakir MS 95, f. 9, where the author characterizes Muḥammad's teaching of monotheism as "the doctrine he had received from Sargis-Baḥîrâ." See also Marcuzzo, *Le Dialogue d'Abraham de Tiberiade*, p. 321.

53 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 218 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 218 (English).

54 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 218 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 218 (English).

55 See, e.g., Theodore Abû Qurrah's tract on the Law of Moses and the prophets who prophesied

As one would expect, a major portion of the exchange is concerned with Christology. The monk confesses, "I am a Christian (*kristyānā*)." In answer to Muḥammad's question, "What is Christianity (*kristyānūtā*)?" the monk answers that "it is being anointed" (*mshihūtā*). When Muḥammad asks "what is being anointed?" the monk answers with a quotation from the *Qurʾān*. He says,

The Messiah is the Word of God and his Spirit. The Ishmaelites too acknowledge the Messiah, that he is the Word of God and his Spirit.⁵⁶

One readily recognizes here the quotation from *an-Nisāʾ*, IV:171, as well as the attempt to elucidate the sense of the term 'Messiah' by reference to the root meaning of the verb *masaḥa*, 'to anoint'. Then, in answer to Muḥammad's question, "Is the Messiah God, prophet, or man?" Baḥrā replies that "the Word of God the Father was sent by God, and came down and dwelt in the womb of the holy virgin Mary. She became pregnant and gave birth without copulation."⁵⁷ When Muḥammad wanted to know, "how could a virgin get pregnant without copulation?" the monk gives the answer that "the Word of God came down from heaven and was clothed with a body from the virgin. The Messiah was born from her in a bodily way, although he was God in terms of person and nature."⁵⁸ The 'Jacobite'/Monophysite character of this statement is very clear, insisting as it clearly does that the Messiah is God in both 'person' or 'hypostasis', and 'nature', the very terms of the Christological controversy. It is significant that in the form of the story which circulated in the 'Nestorian' community, the corresponding passage states only that the virgin "gave birth to a son without copulation and God became man."⁵⁹ The Christological section of the dialogue then concludes with a brief exchange about the crucifixion of Jesus. The monk teaches, in direct contradiction to the *Qurʾān* (see *an-Nisāʾ*, IV: 157) that "the Jews crucified him" and he answers Muḥammad's question about why he would worship (*sāged*) someone whom the Jews crucified, as follows:

I worship the man in whom [God] worked wonders, and many signs on the earth, whom he took up with him to heaven (cf. *an-Nisāʾ*, IV:158), and in whom he will come to bring about the resurrection of the just and the wicked.⁶⁰

about Christ, and the Gospel in C. Bacha (ed.), *Un traité des oeuvres arabes de Théodore Abou-Kurra* (Tripoli de Syrie & Rome, 1905).

- 56 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 219 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 218 (English). In the Syriac text circulated in the 'Nestorian' community the monk's reply is different. He says, "Christianity is the confession the Messiah taught us." In answer to the question, "Who is the Messiah?" Sargis says, "The Messiah is the Word of God and his Spirit." Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 219 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 239.
- 57 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 220 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 219 (English).
- 58 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 220 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 219 (English). The translation given here differs from the one given by Gottheil, who seems to have missed the Christological significance of the terms.

- 59 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 220 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 240 (English).

- 60 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 221 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 219 (English).

Next the monk beseeches Muḥammad in behalf of the Christians (*kristyânê*) "who are 'Messiahites' (*mshihāyyê*)," as the text calls them,⁶¹ because there are among them monks, priests and deacons who are humble, God-fearing, celibate, poor, and who live in monasteries, cloisters and hermitages. This intervention echoes a positive sentiment in regard to monks and solitaries which one does in fact find in some early Islamic sources,⁶² and which is also evoked in Christian dispute texts in Syriac and Arabic.⁶³ No Christian reader of the Baḥîrâ legend could miss its appeal.

The latter part of the Syriac account of the monk's interview with Muḥammad consists of a report of the strategies which the two of them are said to have devised to facilitate the Arabs' acceptance of Baḥîrâ's religious teaching. Since Muḥammad was worried that his people would not accept him, "because I do not read scripture and I do not know anything,"⁶⁴ the monk proposed to teach him by night what he would preach by day. Muḥammad would then claim that the angel Gabriel had given him instructions. As for the heavenly reward which would await the believers in his message, Baḥîrâ provides Muḥammad with a description of paradise which echoes that of the *Qur'ân*. When Muḥammad says that Arabs cannot go without sex, the monk tells him to say that "in the garden there are girls with large eyes, fat and beautiful to look at, seven of whom will be given to each man."⁶⁵ Christian apologists and polemicists in the early Islamic period seldom failed to highlight such Islamic pictures of paradise as this one, to suggest that it is morally deficient.⁶⁶ As for other religious observances and practices, the monk counsels Muḥammad to enjoin his followers to fast only during day-light hours for thirty days, if they cannot bear more intense fasts. He counsels prayer seven times a day, "five times during the day-time and twice at

61 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 222 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 219 (English). The Syriac text which circulated among the 'Nestorians' explains the Greek term 'Christian' by the phrase "clothed in the Messiah." Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 222 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 240, a phrase which Gottheil renders "imitators of the Messiah," thereby missing the rich sense of the clothing metaphor in Syriac.

62 One finds such a sentiment in commentaries on such passages in the *Qur'ân* as *al-Mā'idah*, V:82 and *al-Ḥadid*, LV:27. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians; an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 220-233, 263-284.

63 See, e.g., the debate of the monk of Bêt Ḥālê with a Muslim notable, Diyarbakir MS 95, f. 15.

64 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 223 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 220 (English). One thinks in this connection of the *Qur'ân*'s description of Muḥammad as *nabî'ummî*. See *al-A'râf*, VII:157 & 158.

65 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 225 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 221 (English). The description echoes such passages from the *Qur'ân* as *ad-Duhân*, XLIV:54, *at-Tûr*, LII:20, and *al-Wāq'iah*, LVI:22.

66 See S.H. Griffith, "Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians," *Proceedings of the PMR Conference: Annual Publication of the Patristic, Mediaeval and Renaissance Conference* 4 (1979), pp. 63-87.

night.”⁶⁷ And he appoints Friday as the day for a communal assembly for prayer, “for on it you received divine laws and statutes.”⁶⁸

As a warrant for these measures Bahîrâ is said to have written a scripture (i.e., the *Qurʾān*) for Muḥammad to set before his people. He tells the future prophet:

I shall write a book for you and I shall teach you. On a Friday I will put it on the horn of a cow. You go and assemble the people in one place. Take a seat among them and say, today the Lord will send you from heaven a great book, laws and statutes, by which you are to be guided all your life. When you see a cow coming, rise from your seat, go towards it, and take the book from its horn in the sight of all your people. Then say to them, this book has come down from heaven, from God. The earth was not worthy enough to receive it; so this cow received it on its horn. From that day on the book was called, *sūrat al-Baqarah*.⁶⁹

One could hardly miss the polemical intent of this passage. It was a ploy that had appeared in earlier Christian texts in the early Islamic period, so to indict parts of the *Qurʾān*. One finds it in the Greek account of the rise of Islam attributed to John of Damascus, and in the Syriac account of the debate of the monk of Bêt Hālê with a Muslim notable.⁷⁰ Some modern scholars have seen in these mentions of the names of individual *sūrat* evidence for the gradual growth of the *Qurʾān* to the form in which we presently have it.⁷¹

Islam, of course, did not profess the doctrines which the Christian legend says that Bahîrâ taught Muḥammad. To explain this fact the Syriac version of the story says that after Bahîrâ's death a Jewish scribe, variously called ‘Kaleb,’ ‘Kaʿaf,’ or ‘Kaʿb’ in the manuscripts, came to prominence among the Arabs, and “corrupted what Sargis had written and taught.”⁷² It was ‘Kaleb,’ according to the story, who suggested to the Arabs that the ‘Paraclete’ whom, according to the Gospel, Jesus would send after his ascension to heaven (see John 15:26), would be Muḥammad. But ‘Kaleb’ fell into disgrace when his prophecy about Muḥammad's resurrection from the dead failed to come true. Nevertheless, the text says:

Because of their ignorance, the people discarded the words of Rabban Sargis-Bahîrâ, which were the truth, and received and accepted this tradition (*mashlmānūtā* / *shalmūtā*) which Kaleb the scribe had given them; even to this day they say that the Paraclete is Muḥammad.⁷³

67 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 226 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 222 (English). Presumably, in the Syriac author's mind the reduction of the number of times of prayer from the Christian seven times a day to the Islamic five is a result of the alteration of the *Qurʾān* at a later time.

68 Gottheil, 13 (1898), pp. 226-227 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 222 (English).

69 Gottheil, 13 (1898), pp. 227-228 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 222 (English).

70 See Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, pp. 89-94, 137-141; Diyarbakir MS 95, f. 11.

71 See P. Crone & M. Cook, *Hagarism; the Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 17.

72 Gottheil, 13 (1898), p. 213 (Syriac); 14 (1899), 214 (English).

73 Gottheil, 13 (1898), pp. 213-214 (Syriac); 14 (1899), p. 215 (English).

'Kaleb' here is no doubt a reference to Ka'b al-Aḥbār, the early Jewish convert to Islam, to whom a number of early Islamic traditions are traced.⁷⁴ His appearance in the Baḥîrâ story is in service of the *adversus Judaeos* strain in Christian apologetics/polemics in the early Islamic period. In this literature there was a considerable effort to portray Islam as a species of Judaism, which the writers would then describe in the most disdainful tones.⁷⁵

In the Syriac version of the Baḥîrâ story, the catechesis of Muḥammad is clearly a literary attempt, knowingly to depict Islam as a degraded and simplified form of Christianity, which was further distorted by Jews. It fairly well reflects in its fictional form many of the features of the more formally conceived Christian apologies in the Islamic milieu. And even its fictional motifs are well selected items from the lore of the Muslims, including the *Qur'ān* and the *ḥadīth*, which the composer of the story has woven into a narrative which is both apocalyptic and historical in its claims.

B. The Arabic Version

The Arabic version of the catechesis of Muḥammad is longer than this feature of the story is in the Syriac version. It is better integrated into the narrative as a whole, and it is of a different character. In Arabic the narrator-monk tells the story in the first person, reporting Baḥîrâ's account of his meeting with Muḥammad. He had previously told of his location among the Ishmaelites near a well, and how he had begun "to tell them the story of their father Ishmael, and the promise of God to Abraham in regard to him."⁷⁶ The allusion to God's scriptural promise regarding Ishmael (cf. Gen. 21: 13 & 18) attracts the reader's attention because one knows of only one other reference to this promise in Christian controversial texts of the early Islamic period, in the dialogue of the monk Abraham of Tiberias with a Muslim emir.⁷⁷

The catechesis of Muḥammad begins with the story of the meeting of Baḥîrâ and Muḥammad at the former's well, where the monk recognizes the future prophet straightaway among some approaching Arabs by his bearing and his de-

74 On Ka'b see M. Schmitz, "Ka'b al-Aḥbār," *EI*, new ed., vol. IV (1978), pp. 316-317; M. Perlmann, "A Legendary Story of Ka'b al-Aḥbar's Conversion to Islam," *Joshua Starr Memorial Volume* (New York, 1953), pp. 85-99; *idem*, "Another Ka'b al-Aḥbar Story," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 14 (1954), pp. 48-58. For further bibliography see Gordon D. Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia; from Ancient Times to their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, S.C., 1988), p. 141, n. 41.

75 See S.H. Griffith, "Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century," *Jewish History* 3 (1988), pp. 65-94.

76 Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 261 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 131 (English).

77 See Marcuzzo, *Le Dialogue d'Abraham de Tiberiade*, p. 321.

meanor among his fellows. Three days after the first encounter, according to the story, Muḥammad returned alone to visit the monk, who reports that “he asked me questions and listened wonderingly.”⁷⁸

At the very start of the catechesis the monk assures Muḥammad, “You will remove the people of your house and all your countrymen from worshipping idols, and you will bring them to the worship of God the exalted one, the only one (*Allāhu taʿālā waḥdahu*)”.⁷⁹ The reader recognizes immediately the *Qurʾān*’s diction in this statement (e.g., in *al-Aʿrāf*, VII: 70, 90); it marks what will be the writer’s style throughout the narrative – he evokes the *Qurʾān* in allusions and quotations at every opportunity. In the present statement he makes a claim about Muḥammad which often appears in Christian texts of the early Islamic period: while not a prophet in Christian eyes, he nevertheless saved his people from idolatry.⁸⁰

Baḥrā’s first instructions to Muḥammad took the form of a brief statement of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which are presented as fulfilling the preaching of the ancient prophets. The monk proposed that Muḥammad too was going “to certify the coming of the Messiah, his miraculous signs, his resurrection, and his ascent into heaven.”⁸¹ What is more, at the outset Baḥrā sounds the *Adversus Judaeos* theme. He says that Muḥammad’s testimony to Christ, “will be received as true by the nations and the tribes, with the exception of the cursed Jews. For they wrongly say, ‘the Messiah has not yet come; the one who did come with innovation, him we have crucified, killed and destroyed.’ But they are wrong about this. In their craftiness they have become hostile towards all peoples.”⁸² Here one recognizes the language of the *Qurʾān* about the alleged Jewish claim to have killed and crucified “the Messiah, Jesus, Mary’s son” (*an-Nisāʾ*, IV: 157). And it is clear that the author is notifying the reader in advance that in his opinion Jewish hostility will account for the deformation of Christian doctrines at the hands of the Muslims, a not uncommon claim in Christian dispute texts of the early Islamic period.⁸³ As for Muḥammad, when he expresses the desire to learn more, the monk first extracts from him the pledge not to levy taxes on monks in the future, nor to engage in hostilities against Christians and their churches. He promises to teach Muḥammad by night what he should say to his followers by day, claiming the authority of the angel Gabriel. Then he pledges to equip Muḥammad with all the knowledge he will require, from scrip-

78 Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 264 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 133 (English).

79 Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 265 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 134 (English).

80 See, e.g., the remarks of Patriarch Timothy I in H. Putman, *L’église et l’islam sous Timothée I* (Beyrouth, 1975), pp. 31–33 (Arabic).

81 Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 267 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 135 (English).

82 Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 267 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 135 (English).

83 See Griffith, “Jews and Muslims in Texts of the Ninth Century.”

ture and from reason, to deal with any 'question' (*mas'alah*) anyone will pose to him.⁸⁴ This too is the language of the dispute texts of the early Abbasid period.⁸⁵

The main body of the catechesis of Muḥammad in the Arabic version of the Christian Baḥrā legend consists of the quotation in succession of passages from the *Qur'ān* which the monk says, "I wrote", together with an explanation of their Christian interpretation. This is said to have been in response to Muḥammad's request to the monk to "set out to write down for me something I might say and learn."⁸⁶ The passages quoted or alluded to raise most of the issues of doctrine and practice which were the subjects of controversy between Muslims and Christians at the time. Here we may review only some of the more interesting ones.

The monk alleges that the *basmalah* indicates the Trinity; the night of *al-Qadr* (XCVII), he says, describes the night of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. The *ṣibghat Allāh* ('God's dye' or 'color') mentioned in *al-Baqarah*, II:138 refers to Christ's baptism by John the Baptist.⁸⁷ The famous passage which denies that the Jews killed or crucified Christ (*an-Nisā'*, IV:157) means "that the Messiah did not die in his divine being (*jawhar*), but he died only in his human being (*jawhar*)."⁸⁸ The admonition to call in witnesses for a commercial transaction in *al-Baqarah*, II:182 is taken to refer to the testimony of the Father and the Holy Spirit in behalf of the Son at Christ's baptism (Mk. 1:11). John the Baptist and all the people present heard it, the text says, as "a testimony of the two hypostases (*al-uqnūmayn*) to the [one] hypostasis (*al-uqnūm*), in the harmony of the unity of the being (*jawhar*), one eternal God, living, speaking."⁸⁹ Of the famous *crux interpretum* in *al-Mā'idah*, V:64: "The Jews say 'God's hand is bound.' But their hand is bound and they are cursed in what they say," the monk says that the passage refers to what the Jews are on record in the Gospel as saying in mockery to Christ on the cross (Mt. 27: 40-43).

The text refutes the Islamic charge that Christians have changed and altered the scriptures by having the monk claim that he wrote *Yūnus*, X:94, "If you are in doubt . . . ask those to whom the scripture was given before you"⁹⁰ to prove that the Gospel of all the scriptures has not been affected by any deficiency, alteration or corruption. He implicitly explains the *Qur'ān*'s term for 'Christi-

84 See Gottheil, 15 (1900), pp. 57-58 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 137.

85 See this issue discussed in S.H. Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian *Kalām*: Theodore Abū Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion," in Samir K. Samir & Jørgen S. Nielsen, *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 1-43.

86 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 58 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 137 (English).

87 Christian writers use the root *ṣ-b-gh* to mean 'to baptize'. See G. Graf, *Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini* (CSCO, vol. 147; Louvain, 1954), p. 70.

88 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 61 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 138 (English).

89 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 62 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 140 (English).

90 The *Qur'ān*'s text actually has "those who read the scripture before you."

ans,' i.e., *an-naṣārā*, by reference to the phrases *anṣār Allāh* and *anṣārī ilā Allāh* used in reference to Christ's apostles (*ḥawāriyyīn*) in *aṣ-Ṣaff*, LXI:14.⁹¹ And he says that the apostles were called God's *anṣār* (helpers) because of the confession of Christ's divinity attributed to Peter in Mt. 16:16, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." The monk ended his first account of how he had tried to express Christian doctrines in the *Qur'ān* with the following allegation:

Many other things I wrote for him, too numerous to mention, by which I sought to turn him to a belief in the truth and a recognition of the coming of the Messiah into the world, and the condemnation of the Jews in regard to that which they say of our Lord, the true Messiah.⁹²

The discussion between Muḥammad and the monk turns next to the religious practices to be inculcated among the Arabs. Baḥîrâ counsels prayer and fasting. He describes what the reader recognizes as the typical Islamic ritual for the Friday prayers: the worshippers lined up in ranks behind the *imām* who sets the pattern for the three *rak'āt* and the accompanying recitations, which the monk says he intended as testimonies to the Trinity. Similarly with the regular ablutions before prayer, the monk explains that the washings of face, hands and feet are meant to be a similitude for the Trinity. Initially Baḥîrâ counselled prayer seven times a day, with the *qiblah* eastward,⁹³ toward the rising of the sun, with the times for prayer marked by the sound of the bell. But Muḥammad's followers resisted these innovations, so the monk told Muḥammad to say, "God gave me orders that you should pray toward Mecca."⁹⁴

At this point in the narrative, as Muḥammad demands special concessions for the Arabs in religious practice, Baḥîrâ becomes defensive in his confession to the monk-narrator. He explains that in accordance with his vision at Sinai, and with what he had learned from Methodius about the coming rule of the Ishmaelites,⁹⁵ Baḥîrâ was determined to teach Muḥammad the truth about the Messiah. But, he says of Muḥammad, "his understanding could not encompass it, and the faith of Arius . . . became fixed in his thinking, who had said, 'I believe that the Messiah is the Word of God and the son of God, but he was created, . . . limited'."⁹⁶ It is at this juncture that the monk admits his responsibility for the *Qur'ān*'s descrip-

91 See the same evocation in Marcuzzo, *Le Dialogue d'Abraham de Tiberiade*, p. 396.

92 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 64 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 141 (English).

93 This was, of course, the Christian *qiblah*.

94 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 69 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 145 (English).

95 The reference is to Methodius of Patara, the pseudepigraphic author of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, the principal source for the apocalyptic sections in the legend of Baḥîrâ. The author of the Arabic version refers to Methodius twice. See Gottheil, 14 (1899), p. 261 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 132 (English) and 15 (1900), p. 71 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 146 (English).

96 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 72 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 146 (English). John of Damascus was, as mentioned above, the first Christian writer to identify the monk whom Muḥammad met as an Arian. See n. 24 above.

tions of the garden of paradise, and of the pleasures which there await the believers – including the beautiful *Houris*, which all the Christian polemicists of the day were in the habit of ridiculing. The monk goes on to take the credit for having taught Muḥammad the first phrase of the *shahādah*. And he taught him to say to people:

You should become Muslims. God said to me, “I want Islam to be your religion.” I meant by this name the ‘Muslim’ of the Messiah.⁹⁷

Then the monk takes credit for directing Muḥammad to forbid celibacy, and the consumption of blood or pork among his followers. He appoints Friday as their day of assembly because, he says, Adam was created on a Friday, at the time of the mid-day prayers.⁹⁸ And the monk admits his responsibility for the second phrase of the *shahādah*. He says, “I wrote, ‘Muḥammad is God’s messenger’ (*ra-sūl Allāh*).”⁹⁹ And he includes a number of passages from the *Qurʾān* which refer to Muḥammad’s mission. It is at this point that the monk admits that he knew that after his time others would come to the fore to “change the greater part of what I wrote for him.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, he continues to cite what he wrote in the *Qurʾān*, and to explain how he intended the passages to affirm both the Trinity and the Unity of God. For example, the plural verb and the singular noun (your Lord) in the phrase, “we have given you abundance, so pray to your Lord” (*al-Kawthar*, CVIII:1-2) means the affirmation of three *aqānīm* (hypostases) but one Lordship (*rubūbiyyah*).¹⁰¹ Similarly, “Do not dispute with the scripture, except for what is better” (*al-ʿAnkabūt*, XXIX:46) means “do not address the Gospel people, except courteously.”¹⁰² “To say, ‘We have become Muslims’,” the monk tells Muḥammad, means that “the true faith is faith in the Messiah and Islam is the submission (*islām*) of the Messiah’s disciple.”¹⁰³

As in the Syriac version, so in the Arabic one, the monk devises the ruse of sending the scripture he wrote for Muḥammad into the assembly of his followers on the horn of a cow to dramatize the allegation that it was not composed by man but was supposed to have come down from God in heaven. Muḥammad is said to have called the scripture *Furqān* “because it was scatter-shot (*mufarraḡ*); it was assembled from many scriptures.”¹⁰⁴ One could hardly miss here

97 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 74 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 148 (English). Here, as in a number of instances, the English translation given in the present essay is different from Gottheil’s.

98 For the time of Adam’s creation in Jewish lore see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia, 1918-1938), vol. I, p. 82.

99 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 76 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 149 (English).

100 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 76 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 150 (English).

101 See Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 77 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 150 (English).

102 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 78 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 151 (English).

103 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 79 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 152 (English).

104 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 80 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 153 (English).

one of the *Qurʾān*'s own names for itself and previous revelations, (i.e., *al-Furqān* in, e.g., *al-Baqarah*, II:53 & 185; *Al-Imrān*, III:4), polemically used to signify the *Qurʾān*'s disparate and derivative character.

At the end of the Arabic version of the Baḥîrâ legend, after the second apocalyptic section, the narrator-monk recounts Baḥîrâ's own apology for what he had done, with an emphasis on his guilty conscience for having composed the *Qurʾān*. He confesses:

I know that I have brought a grievous sin upon myself by reason of what I have done – especially for what this book contains. I know that it will, someday, fall into the hands of some of the Christians. They will blame me for what I have done to them: for I know that I have strengthened the power of the enemy over them.¹⁰⁵

Although Baḥîrâ agrees that “the sons of Ishmael . . . are the very worst of men,”¹⁰⁶ he nevertheless explains that in what he did for them he was motivated by God's promise to Abraham about Ishmael. He says,

I wanted to confirm the dominion of the sons of Ishmael so that God's promise to Abraham about Ishmael might be fulfilled.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, Baḥîrâ says that he sponsored Muḥammad's mission, and composed the *Qurʾān*, “so that our Lord the Messiah's saying in the Gospel might be fulfilled, ‘False prophets will surely come to you after I am gone. Woe to him who follows them’ (cf. Mt. 24:11).”¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Baḥîrâ insists,

I made the better part of this scripture a recollection of the divinity and the humanity [of Christ], of the pure mother of light¹⁰⁹, and of all the miracles he worked among the sons of Israel. I confirmed the curse upon the sons of Israel and I commended the Christians (*an-naṣārā*) to him (i.e., to Muḥammad).¹¹⁰

Still, the author of the Arabic version has a hard time bringing his work to a close. He goes on to cite other passages from the *Qurʾān*, together with the interpretations he had in mind when he composed them for Muḥammad. Due to the lack of a truly critical edition of the text, however, as well as its inherent obscurities, a number of the passages are difficult fully to understand. He goes on too, to speak of the great sin he has committed. In this connection he mentions the moral laxities he permitted Muḥammad. He mentions that in the book he

105 Gottheil, 15 (1900), pp. 89-90 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 158 (English).

106 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 91 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 159 (English).

107 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 91 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 159 (English).

108 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 92 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 160 (English).

109 By this expression the author means the Virgin Mary. Throughout the text he has cited a number of passages from the *Qurʾān* referring to Mary, the authorship of which he claims for himself.

110 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 92 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 160 (English).

had allowed up to ten wives, and he does not forget to bring up the affair of Muḥammad's marriage to Zayd's wife.¹¹¹ Finally, Baḥîrâ claims that "in the greater part of what I wrote for him, one part contradicted the other, one verse abrogated another."¹¹² He even claims credit for the mysterious letters which appear at the head of some *sûrât*; he says they are the names he gave them. He cites *al-Baqarah*, II:2, "This is the book in which, without doubt, there is guidance for the pious." And he says, "I meant only the holy Gospel in this statement, and that its adherents are the pious ones."¹¹³

There are many difficult and obscure passages in the Arabic version of the Baḥîrâ story. The text is sorely in need of a new and more critical edition. Even the quotations from the *Qur'ân* have many variations from the received text. But enough has been said here to convey a fair sense of the gist and the ingenuity of the work. More than once the reader has had the sense that the text has grown over the years of its transmission, as later scribes have added more material. But in the present state of research it is difficult to separate the "original" from the "accretions". Suffice it for now to take notice of the ambiguity of Baḥîrâ's career as the Christian writer presents it. He has at once portrayed a sympathetic character who has lost no opportunity to insinuate Christian truth into the *Qur'ân*, and a heretical monk who has in the end done great damage to the Christian community.

III. Christian Apologetics in the World of Islam

In comparison with the other apologetical/polemical texts written by Christians in the early Islamic period, the Baḥîrâ legend is unique; it combines both apocalypse and disputation. The disputation is embedded in the dialogue between Muḥammad and Baḥîrâ. This feature of the legend is much more evident in the Arabic version, where the dialogue has become as important a part of the narrative as the apocalyptic sections of the story are in both the Syriac and the Arabic versions. For the apocalyptic material the author is heavily dependent on the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and works like it from the late seventh and early eighth centuries.¹¹⁴ He displays his ingenuity and his literary originality by construing this material together with the Islamic story of Muḥammad's meeting with Baḥîrâ, which by the second half of the eighth century had already become a feature in nascent Islam's apologetic stance in the "sectarian mi-

111 Actually the *Qur'ân* allows only four wives (*an-Nisâ'*, IV:3).

112 Gottheil, 15 (1900), pp. 99-100 (Arabic); 17 (1903), pp. 164-165 (English).

113 Gottheil, 15 (1900), p. 100 (Arabic); 17 (1903), p. 165 (English).

114 See the references in n. 19 above.

lieu".¹¹⁵ In the Christian context there was already a disposition to see in the teachings of Islam evidence of Muḥammad's having had contact with a heretical monk, as in the famous passage from the *De heresibus* of John of Damascus.¹¹⁶ But one is inclined to take this as an expression of a theological judgment about Islamic teaching, rather than as a statement of how historically Muḥammad came by his distinctive doctrine. Among Christians, the theological label 'Arian', or 'Nestorian' in some circles, would already effectively classify Islam. In the Islamic story the monk, who already has a name, serves as a representative of one community from among the 'Scripture People' who in the newly minted Islamic 'salvation history' testifies to Muḥammad's prophethood. What both the Christian and the Islamic stories share is the assumption that early in his career Muḥammad was in colloquy with at least one monk. The same kind of story serves the apologetical/polemical purposes of both communities, albeit from different perspectives. The Christian writer of the Baḥîrâ legend, therefore, attempts to seize a dialectical advantage when in the ninth century he construes the apocalyptic material about the rise of Islam, which had already become traditional in his community, together with the outline of the Islamic Baḥîrâ story, and folds the whole narrative, again not without apologetical/polemical intent, into a framework story which situates the action in the 'Nestorian' community. The message is that the 'Nestorians' are in some measure responsible for Islam, at least theologically, through the machinations of the errant monk Baḥîrâ, a fugitive from within their ranks.

In the Islamic Baḥîrâ story there was already a scene in which the monk plies Muḥammad with questions. The writer of the Christian legend used this feature of the story as the setting for a dialogue between the two characters after the manner of an interview between a master and his disciple. It gave him the opportunity to argue that Islam is simply misunderstood Christian heresy, which has subsequently been distorted at the hands of Jewish scribes. And he hit on the polemically effective idea of alleging that the monk, misguidedly as it turned out, had originally taught Muḥammad the text of the *Qur'ân*, together with Christian interpretations of it, which upheld the Christian side of all the major points of dispute between Christians and Muslims, both doctrinal and practical. In the Syriac version of the story, this feature is less well developed, and it is short by comparison with the apocalyptic material, which is of much greater interest to the writer. But in the Arabic version it has been expanded to become a major component of the composition. In Arabic there is not just the claim that Baḥîrâ taught Muḥammad what one might call a Christian *Qur'ân*, but there are numer-

115 Here one presumes the basic accuracy of the views expressed in Wansbrough, *The Sectarial Milieu*.

116 See Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, p. 132.

ous quotations from the actual *Qur'ân*, for which the writer provides what he presents as the monk's original interpretations. All of the major topics of debate between Christians and Muslims come up in the course of the narrative, not just doctrinal ones, but practical ones as well, such as the *qiblah*, the direction the worshipper should face when he prays. In this way the Baḥîrâ story becomes a vehicle for a Christian presentation of all the issues about which the disputants of the two communities were arguing at the time of the composition of the work. And it is certainly the first Christian commentary on selected verses from the *Qur'ân*, if one may so call it.

In terms of its place in the Christian literature of the Muslim/Christian dialogue in the early Islamic period, the Baḥîrâ legend goes together with those other anonymous pieces such as the al-Hāshimī/al-Kindī correspondence, and the literary dialogues, such as the one between Abraham of Tiberias and the emir in Jerusalem,¹¹⁷ to form a body of imaginative compositions which allow their Christian readers not only to fend off the challenge of Islam, but to reinforce in themselves the sense of being in the right. They have defended their faith in the very idiom, and indeed, in the instance of the Baḥîrâ legend, in terms of the very traditions which in Islamic lore, to the contrary, suggest the Christian commendation of Islam.

The Baḥîrâ legend, or portions of it, were translated into Latin, as we have seen, and into Armenian.¹¹⁸ Like the other exercises in what one might call imaginative apologetics/polemics, the Baḥîrâ legend had a wide circulation in the Christian communities in the Middle East, in both its Syriac and its Arabic versions. As for its value as a historical document, it is of interest chiefly for the light it sheds on the growth and development of Christian controversial literature, beginning in the first Abbasid century. It clearly presumes the prior circulation of the Islamic Baḥîrâ story for its effectiveness. Like the other, mostly anonymous Christian texts with which we have compared the Baḥîrâ legend, it shows a detailed knowledge of the *Qur'ân*, and of Islamic religious beliefs and practices generally. It is likely that it was intended to play a role in discouraging conversion to Islam on the part of socially upwardly mobile Christians. In it one can also see the attempt on the part of Christians to find a theological rationale for the appearance and success of Islam in the world. But the most important thing to notice in this unique document is the fact that in it the author manages to

117 For the bibliographical information on these two works, see above, nn. 31 & 38.

118 See J. Bignami-Odier & M. G. Della Vida, "Une version latine" and Robert W. Thomson, "Armenian Variations on the Bahira Legend," in I. Sevcenko & F. E. Sysyn (eds.), *Eucharisterion: Essays Presented to Omeljan Pritsak* (Harvard Ukrainian Studies, vol. III/IV; Cambridge, Mass., 1979-1980), pp. 884-895; *idem*, "Muḥammad and the Origin of Islam in the Armenian Literary Tradition," in Dickran Kouymjian (ed.), *Armenian Studies/Études Arméniennes in Memoriam Haïk Berbérian* (Lisbon, 1986), pp. 829-858.

combine in the same work the two literary reactions to Islam that had appeared in the Christian communities, apocalypse and apologetics. Furthermore, in its literary history the work shows the progression of thought from Syriac to Arabic which parallels the actual growth of the Christian reaction to the religious challenge of Islam, from an apocalyptic assessment in traditional theological terms to dialectical engagement in inter-religious controversy.