

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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## *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*

Unknown author

DATE OF BIRTH    Unknown, 8<sup>th</sup> c.?  
PLACE OF BIRTH    Unknown, probably Iraq  
DATE OF DEATH    Unknown, 9<sup>th</sup> c.?  
PLACE OF DEATH    Unknown, probably Iraq

BIOGRAPHY    —

### MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

*Primary*    —

*Secondary*    —

### WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Tash'itā d-rabban Sargīs*, 'The story of Rabban Sergius' (with different subtitles in East- and West-Syrian recensions); modern title: 'The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā', 'The Baḥīrā legend'

DATE    Unknown, probably early 9<sup>th</sup> c.

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE    Syriac

### DESCRIPTION

This 'story' is a Syriac polemical legend that seeks to explain the rise of Islam from a Christian perspective. It purports to reveal the influence of a Christian monk on Muḥammad during his early life and the beginning of his mission as prophet, and it exploits the story found in the Muslim biographies of Muḥammad (e.g. Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*) about a monk called Baḥīrā who recognized Muḥammad as the true and final prophet.

The legend begins and ends with apocalyptic sections. In the first, Baḥīrā receives a vision on Mt Sinai about the imminent political rise of the 'Sons of Ishmael'. A sequence of rulers, symbolized by heavenly animals in the style of the Book of Daniel, is then revealed, followed

by a number of Islamic messianic figures (the Sufyānī, the Qaḥṭānī and two Mahdīs). These are vanquished by a king from the east, who ushers in the rule of the Last Emperor and the second coming of Christ. This vision is repeated in the final section of the legend in the form of a long prophecy, in which the plight of humankind, and of Christians in particular, under the 'Abbasids ('Sons of Hāshim') is spelled out in greater detail.

The story of the encounter between the monk and Muḥammad is placed between these two apocalypses. The text describes how the monk preached the veneration of the one cross among Christians and diligently removed other crosses from churches and shrines. Persecuted on account of these actions, he fled to Arabia where he recognized the young Muḥammad as the future leader of the Arabs when he saw a miraculous vision appearing over his head (this echoes the Islamic account of the recognition of the young Prophet).

This element in the text reinforces the notion clearly present in the apocalyptic sections that Islam was preordained by God. However, the next section, in which Sergius Baḥīrā teaches Muḥammad about God, is meant to make clear that, as a religion, Islam cannot rival Christianity, because it shows that the Qur'ān is not a revealed book but a compilation of the monk's well-intentioned though simplistic instruction of Muḥammad intended specifically to appeal to the backwardness of his audience. Thus, in order to keep Muḥammad's followers interested, it includes the promise of physical pleasures in the afterlife.

At the same time, the legend strives to make clear that the Christian core of the Qur'ān is nevertheless recognizable, for example when it speaks of Christ as the 'Word of God and a Spirit from Him' (Q 4:171), or when it praises monks and priests for their piety and closeness to the believers (Q 5:82). The legend also claims that the reason why this Christian origin of the Qur'ān is to some extent obscured is because the Jew Ka'b al-Aḥbār corrupted Sergius Baḥīrā's teaching after his death. In this respect the image of the monk differs in this legend from many eastern and western Christian texts. There he is usually portrayed as a heretical influence on Muḥammad, but here he is not held responsible for the 'flawed' beliefs of the Muslims and is presented as a miracle worker who was chosen by God to receive a vision about the rise of Islam.

The legend is known in two slightly different Syriac recensions, one East-Syrian and the other West Syrian. Most scholars have dated the original composition on which they are based to the time of the

Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-33) (q.v.), on the grounds that the apocalyptic parts predict that the seventh of the 'Abbasid rulers will be the last. It is possible that the composition was already by this time an amalgam of earlier polemical tales about Islam (Szilágyi), and there are also signs that the text was updated during the later 9<sup>th</sup> century (Dickens). The West-Syrian recension is distinguished by an introduction, which attempts to situate the 'mission' of Sergius Baḥīrā in an East-Syrian milieu (Griffith). The East-Syrian recension is somewhat shorter, and all the manuscripts containing this text include three additional polemical tales (see the entries on 'The confession which Ka'b al-Aḥbār handed down to the Ishmaelites', 'The affair of Muḥammad's death', 'The affair of the Qur'ān').

Compelling arguments in favor of both an East-Syrian and a West-Syrian origin have been advanced, but no definite conclusion about its original milieu has yet been reached. The legend was later reworked into a significantly different Arabic recension which contains many more quotations from the Qur'ān. There is also a hybrid Arabic recension, which consists of a translation of the Syriac legend together with the final part of the long Arabic recension. The Latin recension is based on the two apocalyptic parts only, and was probably translated directly from Syriac (see later volumes for the Arabic and Latin versions).

#### SIGNIFICANCE

The legend of Baḥīrā gives an insight into how Near Eastern Christians tried to come to terms with the fact that they were dominated by a community whose religion was at odds with their own. It tries to make sense of the religion of Islam by suggesting that it is a simplified version of Christianity suitable for pagan Arabs, and it explains the political rise of Islam as a divinely ordained but limited phase in history.

The text attests to the fact that Syriac-speaking Christians in the 9<sup>th</sup> century were well acquainted with the Qur'ān and Islamic doctrine, and were creatively using their knowledge about Islam to refute its validity and underscore Christianity's perpetual truth and divine support.

The existence of several recensions and translations is a witness to its popularity among Syriac- and Arabic-speaking Christians.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

There are eight accessible manuscripts, three of the East-Syrian and five of the West-Syrian recensions. The oldest is probably MS

Birmingham, Mingana – Syr. 71, which is datable to c. 1600. The earliest manuscript of the Latin recension, which is closely related to the Syriac recensions, can be dated to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. For a description of the manuscripts, including a number of lost ones, see B. Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā. Eastern Christian apologetics and apocalyptic in response to Islam*, Leiden, 2009, pp. 238-46.

## EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

- Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 253-99 (edition and trans. of the East-Syrian recension), pp. 311-74 (edition and trans. of the West-Syrian recension)
- R. Gottheil, 'A Christian Bahira legend', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archeologie* 13 (1898) 189-242; 14 (1899) 203-68 (*editio princeps* with two recensions printed in parallel, and trans.; superseded by Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*)

## STUDIES

## Select bibliography:

- K. Szilágyi, 'Muhammad and the monk. The making of the Christian Baḥīrā legend', *JSAI* 34 (2008) (in press)
- Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā* (includes a full bibliography)
- M. Dickens, *Turkāyē. Turkic peoples in Syriac literature prior to the Seljūks*, Cambridge, 2008 (Diss. University of Cambridge), pp. 120-29
- B. Roggema, 'The legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā. Some remarks on its origin in the East and its traces in the West', in K. Ciggaar and H. Teule (eds), *East and West in the Crusader states*, Louvain, 1999, 107-23
- S.H. Griffith, 'Muḥammad and the monk Baḥīrā: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic text from early Abbasid times', *OC* 79 (1995) 146-74 (repr. in Griffith, *The beginnings of Christian theology in Arabic. Muslim-Christian encounters in the early Islamic period*, Aldershot, 2002)
- B. Landron, *Chrétiens et musulmans en Irak. Attitudes nestoriennes vis-à-vis de l'Islam*, Paris, 1994, pp. 71-78
- S. Gerö, 'The legend of the monk Baḥīrā, the cult of the cross, and iconoclasm', in P. Canivet and J.P. Rey-Coquais (eds), *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam, VII<sup>e</sup>-VIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Damascus, 1992, 47-58

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