

When Christians First
Met Muslims

*A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac
Writings on Islam*

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PROLOGUE

THE YEAR 630

The year is 630 according to the Christian calendar, and the Byzantine emperor Heraclius is celebrating at the center of the world. Through a daring sneak attack that still impresses military historians, he has just defeated the Sasanian King of Kings, concluding a twenty-five-year war between the Byzantine and Persian Empires. To crown his victory, Heraclius triumphantly processes into Jerusalem, to the Church of the Resurrection, the “navel of the world,” where Adam was thought to be buried and Christ resurrected. Sixteen years earlier the Persians had wrested Jerusalem from Byzantine control, gained possession of this church, and captured Jesus’s true cross. In 630 Heraclius is reversing all of this. As part of their peace settlement with the Byzantines, the Persians have returned Jesus’s cross to Heraclius, and this relic now leads his exultant procession into the recently reclaimed holy city and holy sepulcher. It is hard to think of a more appropriate or a more carefully staged ending to a war that many have labeled the first true crusade.

In 630 Heraclius has a lot to celebrate. Twenty years earlier, this son of a Byzantine general rebelled against Emperor Phocas (d. 610), who in turn had come to power through the murder of his predecessor, Emperor Maurice (d. 602). As the last one standing after a series of coups, Heraclius took charge of an empire fraught with military and theological challenges. His most immediate concern was the ongoing campaigns against the Persians. In 602 the Sasanian king had used Phocas's murder of Maurice as a pretext to invade Byzantine territory. Heraclius's murder of Phocas did not end Persian advances, which simply intensified. In 614 the Persians gained control of Jerusalem and the true cross. It took Heraclius ten years to begin turning the tide. In 624 he headed a military campaign into Armenia that eventually brought him through Mesopotamia and, in 628, to the outskirts of the Persian capital of Ctesiphon, twenty miles from modern-day Baghdad. His military successes prompted a Persian coup and subsequent capitulation.

Now, in 630, the return of the cross seals a quarter century of warfare. But though Heraclius's entry through Jerusalem's Golden Gate symbolizes a militarily united Byzantium, it does not lessen the vast theological rifts that continue to divide his empire. His rule inherited centuries of intra-Christian strife. By all accounts, he soon made the situation even worse. At stake were the increasingly heated debates regarding Christology: how best to describe the relationship between Christ's divinity and Christ's humanity.

Two hundred years earlier, these controversies had surfaced when Constantinople's Bishop Nestorius declared that Jesus's mother should not be called "the bearer of God." Nestorius and his supporters argued that Mary could not have given birth to Christ's divine nature, only to his human nature. From their

perspective, only by keeping Christ's human nature and his divine nature conceptually separate could one avoid the blasphemous belief that during the Crucifixion God himself had suffered and died. In 431 Nestorius was outmaneuvered by his nemesis Cyril of Alexander, and the Council of Ephesus ruled that Nestorius and the views attributed to him were heretical. For Nestorius, this meant exile. For Christianity, this meant a division that continues to this day.

By the fifth century there were already many Christians for whom some version of the two-nature Christology espoused by Nestorius and his teacher Theodore of Mopsuestia was a central theological dogma. This was particularly the case for the Church of the East, primarily located in Persian territory. By anathemizing these beliefs, the Council of Ephesus further separated the Church of the East from the rest of Christianity. This church continues today. Present-day adherents are often called Assyrian Christians or, more disparagingly, Nestorians. Twenty-first-century scholars more often refer to members of the Church of the East as East Syrians.

In 451 the Byzantine emperor Marcian convened the even more divisive Council of Chalcedon. The council's decision that Christ was "in two natures" became official doctrine for the Byzantine Church and eventually for Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Many, however, saw the council as artificially dividing Christ into two parts and undermining the central importance of his incarnation as the key to salvation. During the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, opponents of the council's decision began to consolidate into several anti-Chalcedonian churches, such as the Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic Churches. In the geographic area most central to this book, the predominant anti-Chalcedonian church is what modern scholars call the

West Syrian or the Syrian Miaphysite Church. This church also continues today, and in the twenty-first century its official name is now the Syrian Orthodox Church. Its Miaphysite adherents are disparagingly called Monophysites or Jacobites.

By 630 Heraclius has already spent two decades dealing with this array of churches. The Byzantine church that he supports is Chalcedonian. Yet many Christians living in Byzantine territory are Syrian Miaphysites (also known as West Syrians, Syrian Orthodox, Jacobites, or Monophysites) or, in some cases, East Syrians (also called members of the Church of the East, Assyrian Christians, or Nestorians). A linguistic divide further cements these divisions, as most Syrian Miaphysites and East Syrian Christians speak and write not Greek but the lingua franca of the late ancient Middle East, the Aramaic dialect of Syriac.

Soon Heraclius will make this situation even more complicated. The emperor will try to circumvent the juggernaut of discussing Christ's nature by instead speaking of Christ as having a single will. Heraclius's attempts to forcefully impose this Monothelite doctrine even on fellow Chalcedonians will lead to the creation of yet another church, the Maronites. As a result, even though the Christians examined in this book belonged to a single linguistic community—they all spoke Syriac—they comprised four competing confessional communities: East Syrians, Miaphysites, Chalcedonians, and Maronites.

Heraclius is trying to overshadow these theological divisions with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But no amount of pomp and circumstance can eclipse his ongoing persecution of non-Chalcedonian Christians. It turns out, however, that the greatest threat to his empire will come not from recently defeated Persians or from dissenting Christians but from a group that up until this point he has mainly ignored.

In 630 Heraclius is not the only late ancient military leader to process into a sacred city. In the same year, 750 miles to the southeast, the prophet Muḥammad triumphantly returns to Mecca. According to Muslim tradition, he first began receiving divine revelations the same year that Heraclius came into power. Then, while Heraclius was engaged in his campaigns against the Persians, Muḥammad was fighting his own battles. First he struggled to form a fledgling community of believers in his hometown of Mecca. Next, in 622 he relocated that community two hundred miles to the north, to the city of Yathrib, later named Medina, a migration (*hijra*) so important in Muslim tradition that all later years are dated relative to the *hijra* (A.H.). Finally, while Heraclius was campaigning through Armenia and Mesopotamia, in Arabia Muḥammad led the Medinans on a series of military ventures against the Meccans, whom he defeated in 630 when he took control of Mecca and its sacred shrine, the Ka'ba.

In 630 it is unlikely that Heraclius has heard much about Muḥammad. As part of their ongoing conflict with each other, the Byzantine and Persian Empires had frequently bribed various Arab tribes or employed them as mercenaries. But neither Heraclius nor his Persian contemporaries ever imagined that the tribes of Arabia could effectively unite around a single figure. So Muḥammad's death in 632 will pass unremarked by the Byzantines and the Persians. Both empires will also mainly ignore Muḥammad's successor, Abū Bakr, as he consolidates the Arab tribes in the *rida* wars of 632–33.

In early 634 Heraclius will most likely be in Damascus when he hears about the Arab defeat of a Byzantine garrison near Gaza. Soon afterward he will receive reports of major Syrian cities falling under Arab control. In response, he will send in

substantial Byzantine troops. The Arabs will defeat the majority of these, most resoundingly in 636 at the Battle of Yarmuk, after which Arab forces will take effective control of all of Syria as Heraclius makes a strategic withdrawal. The Persians will face a similar phenomenon, with the first military engagements occurring in 634 and a fairly continuous loss of territory continuing throughout the late 630s and early 640s. Unlike the Byzantines, they will eventually lose their entire empire, with the last Sasanian king dying in 651.

In the 630s and 640s, the physical destruction and human casualties from the Islamic conquests will be substantially less devastating than those of the Byzantine-Persian wars that preceded them. With a few notable exceptions, the majority of sustained military engagements will take place in the countryside, minimizing civilian casualties, and most cities will capitulate to Arab forces without prolonged siege. The conquests will not leave the type of destruction layers associated with much more devastating invasions. Instead, inscriptional evidence will witness continual church occupation and even new construction throughout the period. This does not mean that the Islamic conquests will be of little consequence for the indigenous populations. But it does remind us that the conquests' political and theological ramifications will have little correlation to the number of lives lost.

In 636 Heraclius will leave Syria for Constantinople. Later authors will repeatedly depict this retreat in the starkest of terms. For example, the medieval Syriac *Chronicle ad 1234* will state:

An Arab Christian came to Antioch and told Heraclius of the Roman armies' destruction and that no messenger had escaped. In great sorrow, the Emperor Heraclius left Antioch and entered Constantinople. It has been said that when he bid Syria farewell and said "*Sozou* Syria," that is "Good-bye, Syria," [Heraclius was]

like someone who had given up all hope. He raised the staff held in his hand and permitted his armies to take and plunder everything they found, as if Syria already belonged to the enemy.

The Greek historiographic tradition will be more sympathetic to Heraclius but often more filled with pathos. From these writers will emerge the often repeated claim that his despair becomes so debilitating that Heraclius develops incurable hydrophobia, preventing him from ever crossing the Bosphorus Strait to enter Constantinople proper.

The year 630 makes Heraclius such a melodramatic figure. He so carefully stages his entrance into Jerusalem as a triumph. But in retrospect, this scene can transform so easily into the opening act of a tragedy. Intending to mark the beginning of a new age, Heraclius chooses to enter Jerusalem on March 21, a date traditionally associated with the day that God created the sun and the moon. Four years later a new age will indeed come, but an age very different from what Heraclius and his contemporaries expect.

The year 630 is, however, also a liminal moment. Lingered over Heraclius's procession just before it enters Jerusalem provides the opportunity to gaze back and forward. Looking back to the Christological controversies and the Byzantine-Persian wars, one gains a better understanding of the context in which the competing churches of East Syrians, Miaphysites, Chalcedonians, and Maronites developed. Looking forward to the Islamic conquests, one foresees an event that will forever change these communities. As soon as the once jubilant Heraclius flees back to Constantinople, he will leave the Syriac churches to a new world empire. Under Muslim control from then on, Syriac Christians will become the first Christians to encounter the emerging religion of Islam and the first to interpret this dramatic change of fortune.

Introduction

The year 630 and those immediately following are a turning point not simply for world history but also for the modern study of world history. Until recently, most historians traveled the same route Heraclius did: as soon as they reached the time of Muḥammad's death, their studies quickly retreated westward, concentrating on either the European Middle Ages or the later Byzantine Empire. Even those historians interested in Christian-Muslim interactions quickly shifted to a more Western perspective, focusing on conflicts between the Byzantine and Islamic Empires or on relations between Islam and the Latin West.

Starting in post-Enlightenment Europe, a different type of historian began to emerge. Originally called orientalist and more recently Islamicists, these historians were often trained in Western universities but consciously went in the opposite direction than Heraclius. Focusing on the post-630s Middle East, they often specialized in the history of early Muslims.

As a result, most modern historians of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages said either good-bye to Syria and the rest of

the Middle East (just as Heraclius allegedly had) or good-bye to Christianity. If one studied Christian sources written after the 630s, one almost certainly studied the writings of Western Christians, primarily in the languages of Greek and Latin. If one studied what happened in the Middle East after the 630s, one almost certainly studied the writings of early Muslims, primarily in the languages of Arabic and Persian.

Although pragmatic, this division of scholarly labor was also problematic. For those interested in the history of early Christianity, ignoring the post-630s churches in the Middle East meant ignoring almost half of that period's Christians. For those interested in the history of the early Middle East, ignoring Middle Eastern Christians meant ignoring the majority of people inhabiting that region; in the first centuries of the Islamic Empire, the population was not mainly Muslim but Christian. As long as there remained a divide between scholars of Christian sources who focused on the West and scholars of the Middle East who focused on Muslim sources, modern narratives of the later part of late antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages would continue to exclude most of the people alive at that time.

Two additional factors further marginalized Middle Eastern Christianity. The first was linguistic. Many Middle Eastern Christians did not use Greek or Latin, the languages most commonly studied by church historians. So too during much of the time when Christians were the majority population of the Middle East, many did not use Arabic or Persian, the languages most commonly studied by Islamicists. Because the writings they left behind were in the "wrong" languages, they rarely appeared in modern scholarship. The second factor was theological. Due to the Christological divisions that Heraclius also had struggled

with, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Greek and Russian Orthodox deem most Middle Eastern churches heterodox. Because almost all church historians, at least until recently, were closely affiliated with a tradition that considered Middle Eastern Christians to be heretics, their history was routinely excluded from serious consideration. For different but no less pervasive reasons, most Muslim scholars deemphasized the role of Middle Eastern Christians in the early Islamic Empire.

In the past decades, however, this has begun to change. With the emergence of the field of religious studies, the study of pre-modern Christianity has become less tied to confessional allegiances. As late antiquity has emerged as its own subfield and become defined by many as increasingly later, the seventh through ninth centuries have gained more attention among historians. With a surging interest in a “global Middle Ages,” medieval studies has become much more supportive of scholarship about the Middle East. Most important, the field of Islamic studies has become one of the most rapidly expanding disciplines in the Western academy.

The recognition of how important Middle Eastern Christianity is for a proper understanding of world history has been a gradual process. Nevertheless, it was greatly accelerated by a 1977 book titled *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. Written by the Islamicists Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism* presents a controversial reassessment of Islamic origins based primarily on early Christian sources that previously were known to only a few specialists. Most ended up rejecting *Hagarism*'s conclusions about the formation of early Islam. But the book's main methodological point ended up winning the day. After the publication of *Hagarism*, it became axiomatic that a historian could not do serious scholarship of the early Islamic world without taking

early Christian sources seriously. Nevertheless, this has not always been an easy axiom to put into practice.

Few oppose a more chronologically, geographically, and religiously inclusive approach to history. But divisions born from the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines and linguistic training often prevent this from becoming a reality. Some branches of Middle Eastern Christianity have been easier than others to incorporate into Western scholarship and teaching. For example, Middle Eastern Christians writing in Greek, such as John of Damascus, have been much more carefully studied. The dozen or so pages John wrote about Islam are frequently cited, translated, and assigned in undergraduate and graduate classes. Writings in Arabic by Christians are rarely found on course syllabi but are accessible to most Islamicists due to their linguistic training. Similarly, the extremely important seventh-century Armenian work attributed to Sebeos benefits from an excellent modern translation and is thus often cited by modern scholars, even if only a few of them can read Armenian.

The largest and most diverse collection of early Christian texts about Islam, however, was written in the Aramaic dialect of Syriac, because Syriac served as the *lingua franca* for much of the late ancient Middle East. These documents have fared less well. In the decades following the publication of *Hagarism*, scholars of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages have become increasingly aware of how important Syriac sources are for the study of the early Islamic period. Nevertheless, these texts' number and diversity, the very factors that make them so precious, have also inhibited their wider study.

Scholars of Syriac have produced editions and translations of most of these works. The results of their labor, however, remain scattered, mainly in hard-to-find journals and specialist publi-

cations. These became easier to navigate with the publication of Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* in 1997 and *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographic History*, volume 1, edited by David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, in 2009, which provided a several-page summary, an essential bibliography, and a number of short excerpts of early Christian texts on Islam, including most of the Syriac corpus. But these publications lacked what is most important for specialist and nonspecialist alike—the texts themselves. In 1993, Andrew Palmer's *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* partially ameliorated the dearth of easily accessible translations. Palmer provided brief critical introductions and fresh translations of more than a dozen seventh-century Syriac works. But as his title suggests, he focused on a specific genre of Syriac literature and did not include East Syrian texts.

When Christians First Met Muslims builds on this important shift in the study of premodern history. Modeled on Palmer's volume, it puts between two covers introductions, new translations, and a bibliography for almost every known Syriac text on Islam written prior to the Abbasid revolution of 750. Even for specialists of Syriac studies, it will be convenient to have all these translations and an up-to-date bibliography in one place. For scholars of early Islam, such a compilation is much more important, as few have the time to make the dozens of interlibrary loan requests necessary to obtain translations of most of these texts into a modern language (or, in some cases, nineteenth-century Latin), not to mention keeping up with the scholarship on these sources. *When Christians First Met Muslims* is also designed for nonspecialists, whether they be scholars of another place or time period, graduate or undergraduate students, or more general readers, because the import of these texts

extends far beyond the boundary of any single academic discipline.

IMAGES OF ISLAM

This book's collection of twenty-eight texts crosses chronological, geographic, confessional, and genre divisions. The earliest was most likely written within a few years of Muḥammad's death, the latest toward the end of the Umayyad dynasty, in the mid-eighth century. Their authors lived in lands that constitute present-day Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. They were written by Miaphysites, Maronites, and East Syrian Christians. They include apocalypses, caliph lists, conciliar decisions, chronicles, colophons, disaster lists, disputations, encyclical letters, epistles, flyleaf scribblings, hagiographies, inscriptions, legal opinions, and scriptural exegesis. What unites these diverse documents is how important they all are for ancient as well as modern images of Christian-Muslim interactions and of early Islam.

Because Syriac Christians were among the first to meet Muslims, their records of such encounters remain particularly important for the history of Christian-Muslim relations. This does not mean that Syriac texts objectively describe moments of first contact. But they have preserved some of the earliest impressions and portrayals of Muslims. They were at the forefront of Christian constructions of Islam.

These Syriac images of Islam are especially valuable because Syriac writings came from a much different perspective than Byzantine and Latin sources. Since within a few years after Muḥammad's death Syriac Christians were under Islamic control, unlike Byzantine and Latin authors, most Syriac Christians were not writing from the context of active military conflict.

Living in the Islamic Empire, they also had much greater contact with Muslims and a more direct knowledge of Islam. Syriac Christians ate with Muslims, married Muslims, bequeathed estates to Muslim heirs, taught Muslim children, and were soldiers in Muslim armies.

These direct interactions did not result in uniformly positive images of Islam. Syriac texts do not suggest that early Christian-Muslim relations were a paragon of harmony and coexistence. But the incredible diversity of Syriac depictions, ranging from overtly antagonistic to downright friendly, also belies a solely hostile reaction. These texts remind us that Christians' and Muslims' first interactions were not characterized by unmitigated conflict.

At the same time, Syriac texts remain an important, and often underused, resource for better understanding early Islam. There are few Islamic documents besides the Qur'an itself that scholars can securely date to within a century of Muḥammad's death. Thousands of pages of Islamic sources describing the time from Muḥammad up to the end of the Umayyad dynasty in 750 survive, but almost all of these were written under the subsequent dynasty of the Abbasids. Few doubt that these later works contain at least some accurate accounts. No one, however, has successfully separated authentic early traditions from later interpolations. If historians rely solely on Arabic texts, they remain almost entirely dependent on documents written centuries after the events that they depict.

Islam, however, is unusual among world religions in having its origins more thoroughly documented by outsiders than by insiders. Dozens of seventh- and early eighth-century Christian texts refer to Islam. Describing Islam from the outside, these works have their own agendas and biases. Nevertheless, they

contain a treasure trove of data essential for better understanding the first Islamic century.

The value of this perspective can perhaps best be appreciated by analogy. Scholars of early Christianity face a somewhat similar dilemma to that of early Islam scholars. There is only a small corpus of surviving first- and early second-century Christian writings, primarily found in what later became the canonical New Testament. Most surviving early Christian texts were not written until the mid-second and early third centuries. Scholarship thus often turns to early non-Christian sources.

For example, there is hardly an undergraduate class offered on early Christianity whose syllabus does not include the two pages that the early second-century pagan author Pliny the Younger wrote about Christians. Virtually every New Testament textbook includes a discussion of the one paragraph referring to Jesus found in the late first-century *Antiquities of the Jews*. New Testament scholars continue to vigorously debate whether these few sentences were actually written by the Jewish historian Josephus or were a later Christian interpolation. So too the handful of sentences by the Roman historian Tacitus that speak of Christianity remains central to all scholarship on Roman persecution of Christians.

The sum total of these early, outsider references to Christians is less than five pages. In contrast, there are almost two hundred pages' worth of very early Syriac references to Islam. Historians and students of early Islam must use such passages with great care. Outsider literature is no less biased than insider literature. Syriac authors had their own agendas and vary substantially in their historical reliability. Nevertheless, one can only imagine the impact a similar quantity of material would have on the study of early Christianity.

If used critically, these early Syriac references to Islam may have a lot to tell us. They not only preserve an invaluable record of the earliest Christian images of Muslims. They are also highly significant for our own understanding and images of earliest Islam.

630s – 750

When Christians First Met Muslims includes almost all known Syriac texts that most scholars think were composed before the Abbasid revolution in 750 and that explicitly refer to Muslims, Islam, the Islamic conquests, or the direct circumstances of Islamic rule, such as the poll tax. I have chosen to organize these texts in as close to chronological order as current scholarship allows. One could quite profitably group them by genre, by confessional affiliation, or by some other heuristic. Chronological order, however, has the advantage of highlighting the often strong correlation between the changing circumstances of Syriac Christians and their depictions of Islam.

No surviving Syriac sources written prior to the death of Muḥammad (ca. 632) speak of Islam. But just a few years after his death, during the period of his first four successors, known as the Rashidun, or “rightly guided,” caliphs (632–61), several Syriac authors noted their experiences under Islam. It is extremely unusual to have ancient, outsider accounts written so close to the beginning of a new religious movement. Although such references are brief, they are particularly valuable.

The earliest surviving Syriac reference to Islam, the *Account ad 637*, was most likely written as the Islamic conquests were unfolding. The *Chronicle ad 640*, from only a few years later, also briefly speaks of the conquests. In addition to helping one better

understand the military history of the time, both these sources are remarkable in referring to Muḥammad, and they indicate how quickly Syriac Christians were aware of his centrality to the emergence of Islam. Neither source, however, attributes any particular religious beliefs to the new conquerors. Both refer to them simply as *ʾarāyānē*, which was the most typical Syriac word for “Arabs” but, at the time, was not limited to followers of any given religion.

A decade later, the head of the East Syrian Church, Catholicos Isho‘yahb III, referred to Muslims in a couple of his extant letters. His brief allusions to Muslims and Muslim rule are particularly good examples of political expediency. Isho‘yahb generally seemed much more interested in keeping his bishops in line than in Islam. He referenced Christians converting to Islam as an example of why his least favorite bishop should be seen as particularly inept. In order to reprimand another set of bishops, he mentioned that Muslims honored and aided the church. When speaking about Muslim leaders, he reminded his audience of Jesus’s command to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. He also presented the first of many examples of Syriac clergy trying to use Muslim rule for the benefit of their own branch of Syriac Christianity and to the detriment of competing Syriac churches. Overall, Isho‘yahb devoted only one or two dozen sentences to Islam. And even these references, valuable though they are, were always in the context of his much greater concern for internal church politics. The scant attention these early authors paid to the rise of Islam may surprise modern readers. Yet it was perfectly understandable given their historical context. For seventh-century Syriac Christians, the most involved geopolitical changes came not with the Islamic conquests of the 630s but with the Byzantine-Persian war from 602 to 628, which

was much more destructive than the Islamic conquests. In a period of just over thirty years, many Syriac Christians experienced no fewer than four changes of governance: Byzantine to Persian to Byzantine to Arab. Initially there was little reason to suppose that Arab rule would last any longer than its immediate predecessors. At first, Arab forces settled mainly in newly founded garrison towns; Islam generally did not proselytize non-Arabs; conversion rates among non-Arabs remained low; local governing structures were left almost completely intact; and even the poll tax seems to have been more a gradual expansion of previous revenue structures than a radically new burden. As a result, Syriac Christians first described what we call the Islamic conquests as though there was nothing explicitly Islamic about them, and what we see today as one of the world's most important interreligious encounters barely received mention from its contemporaries.

In the mid-650s, however, there was a decisive change in the political history of the Islamic Empire. In 656 the assassination of the caliph 'Uthmān ignited a succession crisis between his successors 'Alī and Mu'āwiya, the governor of Syria. In 661 this first Arab civil war (*fitna*) ended soon after 'Alī's assassination by the Khārijites, a group that had split off from his own. After 'Alī's death, Mu'āwiya founded the first Islamic dynasty. His family, the Umayyads, retained control of most of the Islamic Empire until 750.

Syriac sources written around the beginning of the Umayyad dynasty were quite varied. As before, some, like the *Kbuzistan Chronicle*, look back to the Islamic conquests and provide important data about the battles fought. Others were much more impressionistic. For example, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem* contains a hundred-line poetic description of the Islamic conquests

depicting them in the most horrific of terms and seeing them as the harbinger of the end times. Some sources, like the *Maronite Chronicle*, document the Syriac churches' continuing to jockey for power as they tried to gain Muslim support for their particular branch of Christianity. Other writings, such as rulings from an East Syrian synod convened in 676, allude to some of the everyday issues that arose under Muslim rule: Christians turning to Muslim courts to gain more advantageous decisions than they thought they could in ecclesiastical courts, Christian tax collectors demanding the poll tax from their bishops, and intermarriage between Christians and Muslims.

Syriac Christians were now referring to Islam in an increasingly diverse set of genres—historical chronicles, ecclesiastic letters, apocalypses, and conciliar decisions. They also continued to make an occasional allusion to Muḥammad or to issues we attribute to Islam, such as the importance of the Ka'ba. But none yet depicted what we call Islam as anything close to an independent religious tradition.

This began to change in 683 with the second civil war and its aftermath. Following the death of Mu'āwiya's grandson Mu'āwiya II, the Umayyad caliphs Marwān (r. 684–685) and his son 'Abd al-Malik (d. 705) fought a nine-year war against a rival caliph, 'Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr (d. 692). This second fitna resulted in substantial casualties and threatened to tear apart the Islamic Empire. One of the few contemporary witnesses to these events whose writings survive was the East Syrian monk John bar Penkāyē. At the request of his abbot, John wrote a world history that culminated in the second civil war. In light of what he and his monastery were experiencing, he believed humanity had lost its last chance for reform. According to John, God had realized that nothing would now motivate humans to

repent, so he had removed his heavenly care from the world, ushering in the beginning of the end.

John turned out to be wrong. Just a few years after he finished his lengthy chronicle, Ibn al-Zubayr was defeated in Mecca. In 692 ‘Abd al-Malik became the sole caliph, and his descendants would control the caliphate until 750. The end of the second fitna was not, however, an unmitigated blessing for Syriac Christians. The political stability following the second Arab civil war, along with ‘Abd al-Malik’s substantial building program, the minting of his own coins, a census, and tax reform, suggested that the Arab state was not going away anytime soon.

As the head of this state, ‘Abd al-Malik began to champion Islam. Toward the end of the second fitna, Muslim proclamations of faith and polemics against Christian theology began to appear on milestones, coins, and, most prominently, the newly constructed Dome of the Rock. Built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and inscribed with Qur’anic passages decrying Trinitarian theology, the Dome of the Rock clearly pronounced ‘Abd al-Malik’s intention of proclaiming Islam a successor religion to Christianity. While he was increasing Islam’s public prominence, the caliph also began to regulate public displays of Christianity, especially depictions of the cross. At the same time, he changed the language of governance, replacing a variety of local languages—such as Coptic, Greek, Persian, and Syriac—with an Arabophone administration. This helped begin a centuries-long process that eventually reduced Syriac from a lingua franca to a primarily liturgical language.

For Syriac Christians, the immediate literary response to these changing circumstances was a spate of apocalypses. Works such as the *Edessene Apocalypse*, the *Apocalypse of John the Little*, and the immensely popular *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* all stubbornly

proclaimed the invincibility of the Byzantine Empire and the Muslims' imminent demise—a stance that contemporary events made increasingly untenable. For these authors, the conquerors' role as a short-lived scourge of Christian sins completely overshadowed their beliefs and practices.

Writing at the same time as his more apocalyptically inclined brethren, Jacob, the Miaphysite bishop of Edessa, provided a much different perspective on life under 'Abd al-Malik. Of particular import are his letters, which often preserve a much more on-the-ground viewpoint of Christian-Muslim interactions than those found in most other sources. Jacob reported extensive contact and a great deal of religious overlap between Christians and Muslims. His writings also reflect a more detailed knowledge of his conquerors' beliefs and practices than earlier sources do. Of all seventh-century authors, Jacob came the closest to depicting Islam as an independent religious tradition, albeit one with extremely ill-defined borders. This shift was undoubtedly related to the consolidation of Islamic identity under Umayyad rule and the caliphate's increased emphasis on religious promotion.

As the Umayyad dynasty further solidified under 'Abd al-Malik's successors, Christian hopes for a quick end to Arab rule soon fizzled. When apocalyptic expectations were not met, eighth-century Syriac writers had to develop other interpretive frameworks to address life under Islam. Eighth-century Umayyad caliphs expanded 'Abd al-Malik's project of Islamization. Particularly significant was the reign of 'Abd al-Malik's nephew 'Umar II (r. 718–20). As caliph, he began to assess taxes not on the basis of lineage but on the basis of religion. Prior to this, the main way to be exempt from the poll tax was to be born an Arab. In most cases, even the process of becoming the client

of an Arab sponsor and then joining the Muslim community did not result in a change of tax status. That is, the poll tax was tied primarily to natal, not religious, affiliation. Although his policy changes were not consistently implemented until well after his death, ‘Umar II declared non-Arab converts exempt from the poll tax. From this point on, the caliphate presented a religion that, at least in theory, transcended ethnic difference. ‘Umar II may also have begun a series of evolving regulations that tried to more clearly distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims. In later centuries, this increasingly discriminatory legislation was consolidated into the so-called Pact of Umar.

As their conquerors’ religion was becoming both more assertive and—in terms of its self-presentation—less exclusively tied to ethnicity, Syriac Christians more frequently distinguished themselves from their conquerors through the categories of religion and religious difference. Particularly important was the emergence of disputation texts like the *Disputation of John and the Emir* and the *Disputation of Bēt Ḥalē*, which each describe an alleged debate between a Christian and a high-status Muslim interlocutor.

The very choice to write in this genre tells much about Syriac Christians’ changing views of their conquerors. Such disputations, both in real life and in literature, almost always occurred between proponents of competing religious traditions. By discussing Muslim beliefs and practices in the framework of a disputation, the authors of *John and the Emir* and the *Disputation of Bēt Ḥalē* implicitly gave them the categorical status of a religion—more specifically, a religion that threatened Christian orthodoxy. Other Syriac sources from this time, such as fragments from the writings of Ḥnanisho‘ I and Mār Abbā II, provide further evidence of an increased awareness of Islamic beliefs and practices that differed from Christian ones.

Umayyad-era Syriac sources reflect radical changes in the ways Christians thought about, wrote about, and categorized their conquerors during the first century after the conquests. Developments in terminology, level of detail, narrative context, choice of genre, and even length of presentation suggest that later generations of Syriac Christians were increasingly inclined to construct their conquerors' beliefs and practices as constituting a categorical entity (what we call Islam). They became more familiar with their conquerors' doctrines and more specifically defended Christianity against its challenges. In the latter part of the Umayyad era, Syriac authors also began to designate their conquerors more explicitly as having a religion, albeit one whose boundaries with Christianity remained quite porous and hard to define.

By the mid-eighth century, authors of all genres of Syriac literature had developed areas of rough consensus for how to portray their conquerors' beliefs and practices. The terminology that Umayyad-era writers developed, their growing knowledge base regarding Muslims, their inclination to more directly address Muslim polemics, and their tendency to attribute religious characteristics to the conquerors served as the foundation for all later Syriac texts about Islam.

In 747 the Abbasid family led a revolt against Umayyad rule. Three years later they defeated the Umayyad caliph Marwān II, took control of most of the Islamic Empire, and established the Abbasid dynasty. A plethora of Islamic texts survive from early in this period. Syriac sources written in the Abbasid era remain essential for understanding how non-Muslims viewed Muslim rule and for the history of early Christian-Muslim relations. But with the rise of a robust Muslim historiographic tradition and with greater chronological distance from the events that they

depicted, these later Syriac authors are often seen as less central than their predecessors for understanding earliest Islam.

NAVIGATING WHEN CHRISTIANS
FIRST MET MUSLIMS

A quick perusal of more than a century of Syriac writings on Islam provides some historical context for these works, isolates a few major trends of their authors, and hints at several reasons why they are so important for our knowledge of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. But such a cursory overview certainly does not do justice to the richness and complexity of these works, nor does it indicate all the ways they can add greater nuance to how we understand early Islam. For that, it is necessary to read the texts themselves.

When Christians First Met Muslims provides three resources to help one navigate this corpus. First are the brief introductions to each text. Because I have analyzed these documents' contents more extensively elsewhere, my introductions here aim to provide only the most basic source-critical information to help orient the modern reader. This includes a brief discussion of the text's import to the study of early Islam, the state of its preservation within extant manuscripts, and arguments concerning its provenance, with a particular focus on the likely composition date and the author's confessional affiliation.

Second, those who want to do more in-depth research of a given work will find at the end of *When Christians First Met Muslims* bibliographies corresponding to each text. These citations are heavily indebted to the bibliographic projects of my predecessors but also include more recent publications. For less studied texts, these bibliographies are meant to be fairly inclusive.

For the few Syriac works that have been more extensively researched, I limit the bibliographies to some of the most influential and some of the more recent studies.

Third, with the exceptions of the *Life of Theoduṣē* and the *Disputation of Bēt Ḥalē*, which others soon will publish in translation, my own translation of the text follows each introduction. Here I am in great debt to those scholars who have painstakingly produced editions and prior translations of most of these works. Their labor has kept me from a myriad of errors. My decision to produce my own translations is not a critique of their work. It simply seems desirable to provide a fairly unified style of translation across documents.

My goal to have as large an audience as possible read and study these works has substantially affected how I translated them. As a translator I have presumed that historians engaged in the in-depth, specialized study of an individual document will always read that text in the original language. To help such specialists, I have included in the margins page numbers from the editions I have used, so that they can quickly coordinate my English translation with the Syriac text. The purpose of this volume, however, is to provide an entryway into early Syriac writings on Islam, often for those who do not read Syriac. For this purpose, I am much more invested in providing readable prose than in producing a mirror translation of the Syriac.

This results in certain trade-offs. Most important, I do not always translate a Syriac word into the same English word throughout the corpus. Even though there would be benefits to such consistency, most Syriac words have a range of semantic meanings, and at times context and idiom require different words in English. So too I occasionally use a given English word to render more than one Syriac term because there are

places where Syriac vocabulary is simply more expansive than English.

Nevertheless, because of the book's focus I retain formal equivalence for one particular set of words. By the 750s there had not yet emerged a word corresponding to our term *Islam*. Instead, Syriac sources used a variety of terms to describe people whom we would call Muslims. None of these were identical to our word *Muslim*, and their connotations not only varied between texts but also developed over time. To help trace this evolution I translate each of these Syriac terms with only one English word and reserve that English word for the corresponding Syriac term. These one-for-one correspondences are "Arab" for *ṭayyāyā*, "Arabian" for *'arabāyā*, "Hagarene" for *mbaggrāyā* (and its alternate spellings), "Ishmaelite" for *'Ishma'elāyā*, "Saracene" for *sarqāyā*, "Son of Hagar" for *bar Hāgār*, and "Son of Ishmael" for *bar 'Ishma'el*. I have also rendered the Syriac term for a polytheist (*ḥanpā*) as "pagan," even though later texts derogatorily apply this term to Muslims.

To avoid good Syriac sounding like bad English, I have also employed the types of transformations that most translators of Syriac use. I have often dropped the nearly ubiquitous "and" (*wa*) from the start of many Syriac sentences. I have occasionally converted a dependent into an independent clause to avoid half-page-long sentences that work fine in Syriac but inevitably become awkward in English. I have sometimes made a passive sentence active to avoid stilted English. For Syriac idioms that have a clear English equivalent I have often used a similar English phrase, even if it is not identical word for word. I have also occasionally changed word order to clarify an antecedent. In general, however, I have kept such interventions more minimal than those found in most dynamic translations, and the English

remains fairly close to the Syriac. Because Syriac normally does not include vowels for proper names, I have translated the most common (e.g., John) directly into English and for the names of Arabic rulers have used Arabic transliteration (e.g., Muḥammad). Less well-known names and places I have maintained in Syriac transliteration, adding vowels in those cases when the referent is obvious, preserving only the consonantal structure when it is not. I have also left untranslated the Syriac honorific *Mār*, as something like “my lord” or “sir” is simply too awkward in English.

The combination of basic introductions, detailed bibliographies, and accessible translations should help specialists and nonspecialists alike. As the largest and most diverse collection of early Christian writings about Islam, these texts certainly deserve a broad audience. Their perspective of seeing Islam from the outside provides invaluable information about the first Islamic century and the earliest interactions of the modern world’s two largest faith communities.