Muḥammad, Menāḥem, and the Paraclete: new light on Ibn Ishāq’s (d. 130/767) Arabic version of John 15: 23–16: 1

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Abstract
Biblical proof-texts for the prophethood of Muḥammad play a prominent role in early Muslim interest in the Bible. This study re-examines the earliest known attempt by Muslims to find such a biblical proof-text in the New Testament – the Arabic version of Jesus’s sermon on the “advocate/comforter” (Gk. paraklētos) in John 15: 23–16 found in Ibn Ishāq’s Kitāb al-Maghāzī. Key to understanding Ibn Ishāq’s adaptation of the Johannine text, this study argues, is the Christian Palestinian Aramaic Gospel behind it as well as the climate of Late Antique apocalypticism and messianism out of which Ibn Ishāq’s distinctively Islamic version emerged. This study concludes with an interpretation of Quran 61: 6, which appears to claim that Jesus prophesied a future prophet named ʿĀḥmad.

Keywords: Ibn Ishāq, ʿĀḥmad, Muḥammad, Quran, Menāḥem, Paraclete, Late Antiquity, Apocalypticism, Messianism, Gospel of John, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Translation

The belief that Jewish and Christian scriptures prophesied Muḥammad’s prophetic mission has inspired Muslim interest in the Bible since the earliest days of Islam. This belief was integral to the first efforts Muslim scholars undertook to articulate Islam’s relationship to the scriptural legacy of its monotheistic forbears. The Quran even describes the early community of Believers as those who follow “the Messenger, the gentile prophet whom they find inscribed in the Torah and the Gospel (al-rasūl al-nabī al-ummī alladhī yajidūnahu

* This essay is dedicated to the memory of Patricia Crone (1945–2015), whose generosity and brilliance is already sorely missed. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 223rd annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in March 2013 and the Institute for Advanced Study in October 2013, and this final version benefited considerably from the queries and comments of those who attended. I would also like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Inasmuch as one interprets “Aḥmad” (most praised one) and “Muḥammad” (praised one) to be the same person, the Quran thus also asserts that Jesus proclaimed Muḥammad’s advent. Yet, despite the explicitness of such proclamations, the Arabic scripture makes no precise claim where in the Torah or Gospels such prophesies appear. The task of combing through the Jewish and Christian scriptures for these portents fell to its community, which assiduously pursued signs of such portents in the Bible.

Yet how early did this search begin? Our best evidence suggests that from at least the mid-eighth century CE, if not earlier, Muslim readers of the New Testament singled out Jesus’s discourse on the Paraclete in the Gospel of John as the very annunciation of Muḥammad’s prophetic destiny that Jesus proclaims to the Israelites in Q. 61: 6. For many early Muslims, Muḥammad was indeed this Paraclete prophesied by Jesus. Muslims were not the first to claim that Jesus’s sermon on the Paraclete was in fact a fatidic pronouncement about the founder of their religious movement. The New Testament Johannine literature, in fact, recognizes two “Paracletes”: the exalted Christ who intercedes with God on the believers’ behalf (1 John 2: 1) and “the other Paraclete”, the Spirit of Truth, whom Jesus promises will ever remain with his followers after Jesus departs from the world (John 14: 16–9). Although this “other Paraclete” has been traditionally identified with the Holy Spirit (John 14: 26), the history of Biblical interpretation has seen no lack of attempts to envisage this second Paraclete as an actual successor to Christ embodied by, or even incarnated in, a historical person. As early as the late second century CE the Montanists saw in the founder of their prophetic movement, Montanus of Phyrgia, a manifestation of Jesus’s promise of the Paraclete, even if it is uncertain if Montanus himself claimed to be the Paraclete. Manichaeans, too, regarded the rapture of Mani and his union with his Sýzygos (his celestial pair-comrade and alter ego) in the third century CE as the moment in which he united

with the Paraclete predicted by the Johannine Christ. Modern historians are more certain that the Mani himself, and not just his acolytes, claimed that he embodied the Paraclete.

This study investigates the earliest known attestations for Muslim attempts to uncover the textual counterpart in the Gospels of the qurʾānic Jesus’s prophecy of a future prophet named Aḥmad. In particular, this study takes a fresh look at our earliest extant Arabic translation of a Gospel passage: the translation of Jesus prophecy of coming the Paraclete (Gr. parāklētos), a comforter/advocate, in John 15: 23–16: 1 as preserved in Muḥammad b. Ishāq’s (d. c. 767) seminal biography of Muḥammad.

Ibn Ishāq’s reading of John 15: 23–16: 1

The earliest exemplar of Muslim attempts to connect Q. 61: 6 and the Paraclete is the translation of John 15: 26–16: 1 found in Ibn Ishāq’s Kitāb al-Maghāzī, a work compiled and taught under Ṭāhir ibn Ṣaḥwī. This scholarly corpus has been primarily interested in Ibn Ishāq’s rereading of this passage from the Johannine discourse on the Paraclete has been recognized for over a century, inspiring a substantial corpus of scholarship.

This scholarly corpus has been primarily interested in Ibn Ishāq’s excerpt of

the Gospel of John because it predates all other extant translations of the Gospels into Arabic – even translations by Arabic-speaking Christians. Yet, there remains one key aspect of Ibn Ishaq’s excerpt from the Gospel of John – an aspect that, in my view, has been underappreciated.

What makes Ibn Ishaq’s translation exceptional, even among its successors, is that his version draws on neither a Greek nor a Syriac version of the Gospel text. Unlike subsequent Arabic translations of the Bible, behind Ibn Ishaq’s translation lay a Christian Palestinian Aramaic (hereafter CPA) version of the Gospel of John. The significance of this fact deserves further emphasis, because the language of the template for Ibn Ishaq’s translation sheds considerable light on its provenance, both in terms of geography and chronology.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic is a “Western” Aramaic dialect once used by Christians of Palestine, Roman Arabia and the Sinai. It differs from Syriac – an “Eastern” Aramaic dialect used predominantly, though not exclusively, by non-Chalcedonian Christians – in its script, corpus and geographical reach. Whereas the corpus of Christian Syriac spans chronologically from the second century CE to the contemporary era and spread geographically from the Near East to the reaches of China, CPA survives in a far more limited corpus that flourished in a comparatively circumscribed geographical area. The CPA corpus consists mostly of inscriptions, short texts (personal letters, prayers, etc.), and translations of Greek texts (e.g. the Septuagint and New Testament, vitae, homilies, and liturgies). Scholars divide the corpus into three periods: the early (400–700 CE), the middle (700–900 CE), and the late period (900–1300 CE). Lastly, whereas Syriac emerges as the language par excellence of non-Chalcedonian, Miaphysite Christology in Late Antiquity, CPA gradually emerges as a key language for the monastic communities of Eastern Palestine and the Transjordan from the sixth to eighth centuries CE. As a different Aramaic dialect to that of Syriac, the distinctiveness of CPA and its script provided a viable, and perhaps


Ibn Isḥaq’s reliance on a CPA version of John is, therefore, not merely a philological curiosity. His reliance on a CPA Vorlage means that historians can trace his source text to a particular geography within the early Islamic polity and a specific Christian community. To my knowledge, no other Arabic translations of biblical texts, fragmentary or otherwise, draw upon a CPA Vorlage — although one may reasonably expect future research to bring more to light.

The transmission history of Ibn Isḥaq’s biography of Muḥammad is notoriously complex: the text survives in at least four discrete recensions, most of which are fragmentary. Yet the Arabic Gospel text only appears in one recension of Ibn Isḥaq’s work. This recension is also the most widely preserved: the recension transmitted from Ibn Isḥaq’s student, Ziyād ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Bakkarāʾ (d. 799).13 Other redactors of Ibn Isḥaq either omitted the text, or else their version thereof does not survive, given the fragmentary state of their preservation.14 For this reason, the passage appears independently attested in only two works, each drawing from Ziyād al-Bakkarāʾ’s recension: Ibn Hishām’s (d. c. 830) al-Sīra al-nabawīyya and an unedited fragment of Abū Jaʿfar Ibn Abī Mūhammad, Menahem, and the Paraclete


13 Ziyād al-Bakkarāʾ’s transmission of Ibn Isḥaq’s text was one of the most sought after, as Ibn Isḥaq purportedly dictated his text to him twice (ʿamīlāʾ ālāyhi ʿamīlāʾ an marratayn”). See Jamāl al-Dīn al-Mizzī, Tahdīḥ al-Kamāl fī asmāʾ al-rijāl, 35 vols, ed. Bashshār ʿAwwād Maʿīf (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1983–92), 9, 489.

14 For a concise overview of the different transmissions of Ibn Isḥaq’s work, see Miklos Muranyi, “Ibn Isḥaq’s Kiṭāb al-Magāzī in der Riwāya von Yūnās b. Bukair: Bemerkungen zur frühen Überlieferungsgeschichte”, Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 14, 1991, 214–75. Thus, al-Ṭabarī (d. 922) does not include an excerpt of the translation in the corpus of Ibn Isḥaq’s materials he preserves in his Tārīkh and the Jāmiʿ al-bayān, his taṣfīr, from Ibn Isḥaq’s student Salama ibn al-Fadl (d. c. 806). The transmission of Yūnās ibn Būkayr (d. 815) preserved by ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-ʿUṯāridī (794–886) also omits the passage, as does the transmission of Muḥammad b. Salama al-Ḥarrānī (d. 806).
Shayba’s (d. 909) Ṭarīkh,\footnote{Ms. Zāhiriyya, Majmū‘a 19, fol. 54r (with thanks to Saud Al Sarhan for help locating the manuscript). Ibn Abī Shayba’s ḫisnād for the report suggests a transmission independent of Ibn Hisḥām’s redaction (see Appendix). Unfortunately, Ibn Abī Shayba’s version is also truncated and garbled in several places. On the identification of this fragment with Ibn Abī Shayba’s Ṭarīkh, see Sezgin, GAS, 1: 164 (full details) and Muţā’ al-Ṭarāʾibīshī, Ṣawāqīt Muḥammad b. Hisāq b. Yasār fī l-maghāzī wa-l-siyar wa-sāʾir al-marwiyyāt (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr al-Muʾṣir, 1994), 37, 492–7.} Insofar as the latter source is accessible only in manuscript, I reproduce the Arabic text in an appendix. Other key aspects of Ibn Isḥāq’s version the Johannine Paraclete discourse become clearer with reading; its text runs as follows:¹⁶

(15.23) Whosoever despises me, despises the Lord. (24) Had I not performed in their presence deeds no other had performed before, then they would have been without sin. But now they have seen this lest you doubt. (25) But it is inevitable that the word of the Law (al-nāmūs) will be fulfilled:\footnote{In Ibn Abī Shayba’s recension: “… that the Kingdom will be fulfilled among the people (an ṭamīnna l-mālūkātā fi l-nās)”; see the appendix.} “They despised me without reason” – that is, “in error”.\footnote{Cf. Ps. 35: 19, 69: 4. The sense of majjān\textsuperscript{54} as “without reason” derives from the CPA l-meg; hence, Ibn Isḥāq glosses majjān\textsuperscript{55} as meaning “in error (bāṭin\textsuperscript{56})”.} (26) If al-Munḥinā,\footnote{Ibn Abī Shayba’s version reads rather than منحنما, garbling the letters somewhat and dropping the alif-lām. See the appendix.} the one whom the Lord will send, had come to you from the Lord – the Spirit of Truth\footnote{Reading, with the CPA ṭawḥ d-qūšī and Ibn Hisḥām (ed. Wüstenfeld), 1, 150.3. Even though the majority of the Arabic MSS have روح الفصل (Ibn Hisḥām, ed. Saqqā et al., 1, 233.5 and n. 3 thereto), this is most likely a result of hyper-correction since qist in Arabic means “justice” rather than “holiness”. I have also translated the text without the waw preceding rūḥ al-qist, since some of the Arabic MSS omit it and this reading conforms more closely to the CPA lectionary.} who comes forth from the Lord – he would be a witness for me, and you (pl.) as well, because you (pl.) were with me from the beginning (qādīman). (16.1) I have spoken of this lest you doubt.

As amply documented by Griffith, Ibn Ishaq’s translation is not merely a literal, word-for-word Arabic rendering. He also offers a quasi-Islamicized version of the passage. Hence, “my Father” (‘by) and “the Father” (‘b’) in the CPA become merely “the Lord” (al-rabb) in the Arabic. Moreover, in Ibn Ishaq’s rendering of John 15: 26, God rather than Jesus sends the Paraclete. All of these modifications accommodate touchstone tenets of Islamic Christology. However, Ibn Ishaq’s rendering of the passage still preserves sufficient vestiges of the original to determine with relative certainty its source.

Two features reveal to us that Ibn Ishaq’s Arabic translation derives from a CPA Gospel. The first is the rendering of the Paraclete as al-mnnmā, thus transcribing the CPA mnmm (comforter) rather than the Greek παράκλητος. In contrast to CPA, where the lexical root nhm generally means “to comfort”, neither nhm nor mnmm mean “comforter” in Syriac, nor is the Syriac root used to translate the Greek parakletos in Syriac versions of John’s Gospel (see below). The second is the rendering of the Johanne “Spirit of Truth” in Arabic as rūḥ al-qist, conforming to the CPA rwh d-qwšt rather than the Syriac rwh d-sr’r (rwh d-sr’r).

The first feature is especially striking. Immediately after his quotation from the Gospel of John, Ibn Ishaq explains to his readers that al-Mnnmā in “Aramaic” (al-siryanīyya) and means “Muḥammad”. He also notes that in Greek (al-rūmīyya) the word is al-Brāqīlūs (البرقيلتـس = παράκλητος). While the equivalence of mnmm and parakletos is relatively straightforward, the identification of these words with Muḥammad is certainly less so. Unlike mnmm in Aramaic and parakletos in Greek, “Muḥammad” does not mean “comforter” in Arabic, but rather “praised one”.

Although Ibn Ishaq’s version of this excerpt from the Gospel of John is early, it is also scarcely cited outside Ibn Ḥishām’s recension. This is puzzling given
that the Johannine Paraclete discourse plays an exceedingly prominent role in
Muslim discussions of the Bible from the eighth century CE onwards. Yet, Ibn
Ishāq’s citation of the CPA mnhmn’ to demonstrate Muḥammad’s identity
with the Paraclete is nearly without parallel – virtually all discussions of
Muḥammad as mnhmn’ elsewhere derive from Ibn Hishām’s recension of his
text.29 Without the version preserved in Abū Ja’far Ibn Abī Shayba’s Tārīkh,
one could justifiably doubt whether the passage really went back to Ibn Ishāq
at all.

Muslim theological literature is replete with references to Muḥammad as the
Paraclete,30 but such literature, rather than being indebted to Ibn Ishāq or Ibn
Hishām, are most often indebted to Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 889) A’lām al-nabuwaa
and, to a lesser extent, the works of ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. c. 860).31
Hence, the singularity of Ibn Ishāq’s rendering of the biblical proof-text is not
because Muslim scholars rarely cited this proof-text. The Johannine Paraclete
discourses left a profound mark on nearly all of the earliest Abbāsid-era testi-
monia to Gospel proof-texts for Muḥammad’s prophecy.

Even non-Muslim sources testify to the currency of the Johannine proof-text
in Muslim scholarly circles. Thus, it appears as an integral theme in the
disputation of the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–785) with the East Syrian
Patriarch Timothy I (780–823) in 165/781 (or shortly thereafter). The caliph
al-Mahdī at one point challenges the patriarch, “Who then is the Paraclete
(المنى البشري)” “The Holy Spirit!” the patriarch answers and courteously
refutes the caliph’s misguided attempts to read John’s Gospel as predicting

vols., ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Ḥammād al-Nasīḥī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya,
1999), 3: 361–62; and Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-ʿĀrābī, Ṣūrah al-fāṭiha fi ʿādī

30 For a survey of the citations of the Johannine Paraclete passages in Muslim apologetic
and polemical literature, see Martin Accad, “The Gospels in Muslim discourse of the
ninth to the fourteenth centuries: an exegetical inventory table (IV),” Islam and
31 A determination of the ultimate source(s) for the early Abbāsid-era translation of the
Gospels into Arabic used by these authors is still elusive. See Sabine Schmidtke,
“Abū al-Husayn al-Basrī and his transmission of Biblical materials from Kitāb al-dīn
wa-al-dawa by Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī: the evidence from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s
Mafāthīl al-ghayb”, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 20, 2009, 105–18; Sabine
Schmidtke, “Biblical predictions of the Prophet Muḥammad among the Zaydi of
the advent of Muḥammad. The debate over the identity of the Paraclete also manifests itself in the famous, although dubious, correspondence between the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–741) and the Umayyad caliph 'Umar II (r. 717–720).

Yet another early rendering of John 15: 26 also appears during the caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd in a disputational letter composed by the caliph’s scribe (kātib) Abū l-Rabī’ Muḥammad ibn Layth. Rashīd dispatched the letter in c. 796 to Constantine VI (r. 790–797). In the letter, Rashīd’s scribe declares to the Byzantine emperor, “Jesus has testified of [Muḥammad] in your midst (‘indakum) and described him (bayanahu) to you (pl.) in the Gospel”. Thereafter, the Muslim scholar cites a garbled excerpt of the Johannine Paraclete discourse mixing elements from John 15: 26 and 16: 7–9, 13. His quotation of Jesus’ Paraclete discourse reads as follows:

I am going so that the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth (al-bāraqīlī rūḥ al-ḥaqiq), will come to you, and he shall not speak on behalf of himself, but shall only speak as he is spoken to. He shall bear witness to me – you (pl.) will bear witness to me because you were with me – against the sins of the world(?)

Ibn al-Layth then concludes by glossing his text, “the translation (tarjama) of Paraclete is Aḥmad”. Even though this is a fascinating specimen of an early Arabic translation of John’s Gospel, the text notably lacks the distinctiveness in language that separates Ibn Ishāq’s version from all of its successors. In other words, Ibn Layth’s versions shows no trace of a CPA Vorlage; rather,

34 Even in the Armenian text the Greek paraklētōs is merely transliterated as paraklito, with the Armenian equivalent mxiʿ̣atirē ("comforter") only being added later as a gloss. Leo III’s letter survives in an Armenian translation preserved in the late-ninth-century chronicle of Lewond cited above, a medieval Latin translation (ibid., 439–52), and an Arabic version discovered in the manuscript collections at St Catherine’s in the Sinai peninsula. That this Arabic version still remains unpublished is particularly regrettable, inasmuch as recent research suggests that, rather than being originally a Greek composition (as recently suggested by Mahé in ibid., 347–8), the letter may have originally been a Christian Arabic composition. See Cecilia Palombo, “The ‘correspondence’ of Leo III and ‘Umar II: traces of an early Arabic apologetic work”, Millenium 12, 2015, 23164.
35 The text seems corrupt here due either to the stray addition of bi-l-khaṭ‘a or a lacuna. In my translation, I have read wa’ntum tashhadān li-annakum ma’i min qibal al-nās bi-l-khaṭ‘a in order to make sense of the text; however, in my view, the more plausible reading would be min gabra l-nās, “prior to the people/world”, with bi-l-khaṭ‘a stricken from the text as a copyist’s error.
this later text appears to have been translated from either Greek, Syriac, or a combination of the two.

Why was Ibn Ishāq’s translation so singular and neglected? Part of the answer must be that later, ‘Abbāsīd-era, translations of the Gospels into Arabic from Greek and Syriac swiftly eclipsed the *ad hoc* translation Ibn Ishāq transmitted. A second possibility merits consideration, too: Ibn Ishāq’s translation probably derived from a Syrian, Umayyad-era tradition of *ad hoc* translations of the Bible into Arabic that did not otherwise survive the vicissitudes of the ‘Abbāsīd transformation of the early Islamic polity.

A number of considerations make this second thesis highly plausible. First, Ibn Ishāq must have acquired his translation of the Johannean Paraclete discourse prior to seeking out ‘Abbāsīd patronage because of the limited geographical circuit of the CPA corpus. Although he hailed from Medina, Ibn Ishāq compiled and transmitted his works, in particular his works on the Prophet’s biography, exclusively in Iraq (Hīra, Baghdaḏ, the Jazīra (Ḥarrān), and Rayy, due to, on the one hand, the networks patronage he enjoyed there from the ‘Abbāsīds and, on the other, the controversies surrounding him in his native Medina.

Ibn Ishāq had sought ‘Abbāsīd patronage as a virtual exile from Medina, in part due to the fierce and violent opposition he faced from Mālik b. Anas’s followers. He first adopted the ‘Abbāsīd governor of Mesopotamia, al-‘Abbās b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, as his patron in Ḥarrān and subsequently the caliph al-Manṣūr in Hīra. Prior to his exile, however, Ibn Ishāq was deeply enmeshed in Medinan scholarly circles and their networks in Syria and Egypt. CPA circulated in these western territories in the Levant; however, CPA was foreign to the eastern territories where Ibn Ishāq found refuge from the tribulations he suffered at the hands of the Medinans. Subsequent renderings of the Johannean Paraclete discourse (i.e. from the early ‘Abbāsīd period onwards) are not dependent on CPA but, rather, derive from either Greek or Syriac Gospel texts. If CPA texts did not circulate in the cities where Ibn Ishāq taught and transmitted his *Kitāb al-Maghāẓī* (i.e. Ḥarrān, Hīra, Rayy and Baghdaḏ) then Ibn Ishāq must have acquired the text prior to his exile from Medina.

Second, Ibn Ishāq possessed no knowledge of CPA as far as we know. Scholars have speculated that Ibn Ishāq’s grandfather Yasār was Christian...

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37 Yaqūt, *Irshād*, 6,2419.

38 Ibn Ishāq journeyed to Egypt at least once to study with Yazīd b. Abī Ḥabīb in 115/232, however, after his stay in Egypt he returned directly to Medina. No evidence indicates that he travelled to Syria or that he, like al-Zuhrī, ever enjoyed the favour of Umayyad court. See Horovitz, *Earliest Biographies*, 77, 79.

and, therefore, knew Syriac.\footnote{Horovitz, Earliest Biographies, 76.} since he was taken captive from a sanctuary of worship, sometimes called a synagogue and on other occasions a church, in 12/633 at Ayn Tamr in Iraq.\footnote{ʿAyn al-Tamr is located some 50 km west of Karbalāʾ. Cf. Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarānī, Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-muḥājirūn, 3 ser., ed. M.J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901), 4: 2064 and Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Yaʿqūbī, al-Tārīkh, 2 vols, ed. M.Th. Houtsma (Leiden: Brill, 1883), 2: 150–1.} However, even if Ibn Ishāq’s ancestry were Christian, this ancestry would most likely be rooted in the East Syrian (so-called “Nestorian”) Christianity that predominated in this region of the former Sasanid Empire – i.e. of Syriac- or Aramaic-speaking heritage but not a speaker of CPA. Furthermore, speculation regarding the putative Christian heritage of Ibn Ishāq, as recently argued by Michael Lecker, is tendentious – he is just as likely to have been of Jewish heritage.\footnote{Michael Lecker, “Muḥammad b. Ishāq ṣāḥīb al-maghāzī: was his grandfather Jewish?”, in Andrew Rippen and Roberto Tottoli (eds), Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World: Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 26–38.}

Lastly, the Syrian, late Umayyad provenance of Ibn Ishāq’s Gospel text is made all the more plausible by the fact that the only other Muslim upon whom the influence of the CPA versions of the Gospel has been directly documented is Ibn Ishāq’s teacher Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 742). An eminent scholar of Qurašī descent with intimate ties to the Umayyad court, al-Zuhrī’s connections with the Umayyads earned him fame and controversy. His seminal influence on early Muslim scholarship, however, is beyond dispute.\footnote{M. Lecker, “Biographical notes on Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī”, Journal of Semitic Studies 41, 1996, 21–63.} A star student of al-Zuhrī,\footnote{Khaṭīb, 3: 14.} Ibn Ishāq might have acquired the Johannine text through his teacher, but just as feasibly through his own exertions. Ibn Ishāq was an intrepid scholar who courted controversy by transmitting materials from Jews and Christians – one detractor claimed to have seen Ibn Ishāq copy down written material from one of “the people of the Book”.\footnote{‘Uqaylī, Dūʿaʾ, 4: 1200, “raʾaytu Ibn Ishāq yaktubuʿ an rajulin min ahl al-kitāb”.} Other critics even cited the name of one of Ibn Ishāq’s non-Muslim sources, calling him “Jacob the Jew”.\footnote{Ibn ʿAdār al-Jurjānī, al-ḵāmil fī ḏūʾaʾ al-rijāl, 7 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1984), 6: 2118.}

However, in citing non-Muslims as authorities, Ibn Ishāq also emulated his teacher al-Zuhrī. In his narrative of Muḥammad’s letter to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, al-Zuhrī cites the authority of a Christian cleric from Jerusalem who he met during the caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) to vouch for its authenticity.\footnote{Ṭabarānī, Tārīkh, 4: 1565; ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Salafī (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, 1983), 8: 23–4.} The language of the letter bears out al-Zuhrī’s claim (in part at least) to have drawn from a Christian Palestinian source. Muḥammad’s letter threatens that Heraclius and the Byzantines will suffer the “sin of the tenants” – a clear reference to the gospel parable of the “wicked tenants” dispossessed of their land due to their evil deeds (cf. Mark 12: 1–12; Matt. 21: 33–46; Luke 20: 9–20). Yet, the word for “tenant”
used in al-Zuhri’s account, *arīs*, is neither Arabic, Greek, nor Syriac. *Arīs* only appears as a word for tenant in CPA translations of the Gospels. If Ibn Isḥaq’s translation does not derive from his teacher al-Zuhri, he certainly acquired his Arabic rendition of the Johannine Paraclete discourse from the same networks exploited by al-Zuhri.

Arabic sources are rich with anecdotes of Muslims acquiring, requesting and stumbling upon the sacred writings of Jews and Christians. Some accounts appear contradictory and offer conflicting data. ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and his daughter Ḥafṣa allegedly aroused the Prophet’s ire by over-indulging in their enthusiasm for reading stories from Jewish scripture, and in other accounts, ʿUmar as caliph berates a man so severely for reading the prophecies of Daniel that he erases the book. Yet other accounts portray ʿUmar as constantly wooed by Kaʾb al-Aḥbār’s ability to decipher the caliph’s fortune from the Hebrew scriptures. Equally curious stories circulate about personalities of later generations, too, such as the intrepid bibliophile Mālik b. Dinār (d. 748), who would eagerly pilfer the libraries of Iraq’s monasteries for learned tomes, and Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. c. 732) about whom stories abound of the prodigious erudition he acquired by studying with non-Muslim scholars.

Yet, as fascinating as these anecdotes are, they are scarcely verifiable. In the case of Ibn Isḥaq’s Arabic rendition of the Johannine Paraclete discourse, however, the philological data present us with a verifiable and accessible case of historical transmission.

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Menaḥem and the Paraclete

Ibn Isḥaq’s Arabic rendition of John 15: 23–16: 1 sheds light not merely on Muslim interest in the Bible – his Arabic rendition also sheds light on a key facet of the translation of the Gospels into CPA in the context of transformations of Late Antiquity and early Islam. The rendering of the Greek paráklētos into CPA as mnhmn‘ – an Aramaic word meaning “comforter” – was not an artificial concoction of Ibn Isḥaq. Rather, he bears witness to an authentic and autochthonous shift in Christian translation of the Gospel of John into CPA. Two textual corpora confirm this: 1) palimpsests of a CPA lectionary edited by A.S. Lewis and M.D. Gibson from two twelfth-century Sinai codices discovered at St. Catherine’s Monastery; and 2) the Evangeliarium Hierosolymitanum dating to 1029 CE.⁵⁴ All of these twelfth-century CPA versions of the Gospel of John, like Ibn Isḥaq’s Arabic version, translate the Greek paráklētos with the CPA mnhmn‘. Yet, these two texts are also late – they belong to the so-called late period (c. 900–1300 CE) of the CPA corpus. Hence, a considerable chronological gap separates these twelfth-century witnesses and our earliest, surviving exemplar of the Gospels in CPA on the one hand and, on the other, Ibn Isḥaq’s Arabic version of Johannine Paraclete discourse.⁵⁵ What makes matters more curious is that the earliest testimonia to the Gospels in CPA, in particular the Codex Climaci Rescriptus (CCR) (c. sixth century CE), lack any attempt to provide a vernacular translation of the Greek paráklētos and, instead, merely transcribe the Greek original as prqlyṯ‘, as do all Syriac versions of the Gospels.⁵⁶ Why this discrepancy?

I would like to suggest that Ibn Isḥaq offers us a key testimony to a sea-change in CPA translations of John’s Gospel, wherein Christians translating John’s Gospel into CPA began rendering Paraclete as mnhmn‘, probably from the seventh century onwards. In other words, Ibn Isḥaq’s text, although a Muslim text preserved for Muslim theological purposes, provides us with an important terminus ante quem for a key change in the translation practices of CPA. Sometime before Ibn Isḥaq’s composition of his biography of Muḥammad in the mid-eighth century CE but after the sixth-century Codex Climaci Rescriptus, CPA translators began rendering paráklētos as mnhmn‘. Yet, why did this sea-change in CPA translations of paráklētos transpire in the first place?

⁵⁴ PSLG, 24:9, 51.14, 55.4.
⁵⁵ Ibn Isḥaq’s text may or may not draw from a direct ancestor of the Evangeliarium Hierosolymitanum or the Sinai codices. There are some interesting departures from the extant CPA versions of John 15 that make such a position difficult to uphold without reservation. Ibn Isḥaq’s rendering of John 15: 24b, 25a: 24b more closely matches the reading of Peshitta ŕlnt ́m (Kiraz, 4: 286) than the st̄l twt lwtn of CPA gospel texts (PSLG, 24: CCR, 82, col. b). Ibn Isḥaq’s use of “the Law” (al-nāmūs) in translating John 15: 15 rather than the more standard “their Law” – thus, the ʾmnhmn‘ of the Sinaiticus and the ʾmnryshn of the Peshitta and the CPA š̄nwn – in fact conforms to the š̄nwn of the Harklean text (Kiraz 4: 286.ult and CCPA, 2a: 139b). Lastly, the Arabic rendering of John 15: 27 ʾmn ryš ‘my twn (PSLG, 24: CCR, 83, col. c; CCPA, 2a: 194a).
⁵⁶ Kiraz, 4: 287; CCR, 82; CCPA, 2(a): 139b.
In order for this process to transpire, two key developments were necessary. The first is the emergence and dominance of the exegetical current that interpreted the Paraclete as “comforter” rather than “advocate”. The Greek *paráklētos* can mean either “comforter” or “advocate”. Indeed, modern Bible translations tend to prefer the meaning “advocate” as the earlier sense, perhaps even rooted in Aramaic usage of *paráklētos* as a calque. Grounds for this judgement can be found in the fact that, by the Roman period, the Greek word *paráklētos* entered Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic as the loanword *נביאOTE, meaning “advocate”, as it was often paired with its antonym דבイト, another loanword from the Greek *katégōr*, meaning “accuser”. In patristic exegesis, however, the Paraclete’s role primarily in the sense of a “comforter” rather than an “advocate” gradually came to hold sway, thus eclipsing the earliest meaning of the term. We can see this, for example, in a seminal treatise on the Holy Spirit by Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), who writes:

As our Lord said concerning Her [viz., the Holy Spirit], “She will glorify me” (John 16: 14). She does not give glory . . . as a creature to the creator, but as the Spirit of Truth (*rwhʾ d-śrʾr*) who plainly manifests true testimonies concerning Him through the indication of the Godhead’s glory; . . . and, again, as the Spirit-Paraclete (*rwhʾ prqlyʾ*), which She was called, for this name she has taken upon herself the likeness of the Son, that through her benefactions she might comfort (*ibyʾ hwʾ*) the hearts of those to whom She should come . . .

Evidence for this shift in the interpretation of *paráklētos* appears in the CPA translation of the *Catechesis* of Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–387) as well. This CPA translation of Cyril’s *Catechesis* – dating perhaps to the sixth or seventh century CE – simultaneously renders the Greek *paráklētos* first as *mnhmn* (comforter) and then subsequently in transcription as *prqlyʾ* in a matter of a few lines.

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59 The CPA translation of the *Catechesis* survives only as a fragmentary undertext of a palimpsest known as *Codex Sinaiticus Rescriptus*, overwritten by a Georgian monk in the tenth century CE. For an extensive description of the manuscript, see C. Müller-Kessler, “Codex Sinaiticus Rescriptus (CSRG/O/P/S): a collection of Christian Palestinian Aramaic manuscripts”, *Le Muséon* 127, 2014, 263–309.

60 *CCPA*, 5: 193a (citing John 14: 16).
Yet, this exegetical shift in reading of the Paraclete as “comforter” does not merely hold importance for CPA Gospel translations. The impetus behind a shift in Palestinian–Aramaic Gospel translations away from transcribing παράκλητος as prqlyt’ and towards a new trend in favour of translating paráklētos into mnhn’ must also be placed in the broader religious context of Late Antique Palestine. This leads us to our second key development that gave rise to this translation shift: the CPA translation of paráklētos as mnhn’ emerges simultaneously with the rise in messianic expectations among Palestinian Jewry of Late Antiquity.61

A central theme to the Jewish messianism of Palestine in Late Antiquity is the expectation of the advent of a Messiah named Menahem. The name is highly significant. Menahem means “comforter”. The name is thus roughly the Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic equivalent of paráklētos and mnhn’ of the Paraclete discourse. The name Menahem is also widely attested in Late Antique Jewish texts, appearing in the seminal Talmudic discussions of the Messiah’s names as well as Jewish apocalypses and Palestinian piyyutim.62

The Jerusalem Talmud provides one of the earliest attestations to the Messiah named Menahem in a story attributed to Rabbi Aibo. In R. Aibo’s tale, an Arab delivers shocking news to a Jew ploughing his fields. First, the Arab announces the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, but then he relates what is seemingly more hopeful news (y.Ber 2.4.25b):


Upon hearing the Arab’s declaration of the Messiah’s birth, the Jew promptly abandons his life as a farmer to become a peddler of swaddling cloth for children. Travelling and selling his wares, he finally come across the Messiah’s mother, to whom he offers his wares on a loan. When he later returns for his payment, he asks about her child, but receives a shocking reply: “She answered,


‘After you saw me, winds and whirlwinds came and snatched him out of my hands’.”

R. Aibo’s curious story of the Messiah’s birth has inspired numerous studies of its interpretation, but our main interest lies in the name Menahem it provides for the Messiah. As noted above, Menahem simply means “comforter” – a perfectly apt title for a Messiah. The Babylonian Talmud illuminates the Biblical roots behind calling the messiah Menahem: “comforter” (b. San 98b):

His name is Menahem because, “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter (םחנמ) is far from me, one to revive my courage” (Lam. 1: 16).

Regardless of the original intent of R. Aibo’s story, its reverberations – especially the idea that Israel’s messiah had already been born and awaits the time of his advent – can be found in an array of sources. A popular messianic motif, for example, places the Messiah at the gates of Rome where he suffers in solidarity with Israel as a leper indistinguishable from the throngs of lepers around him until the time of his re-appearance draws nigh.

Leading up to the seventh century, the urgency of messianic fervour among the Jews of Palestine becomes particularly acute in the liturgy (amida) and hymns (piyyutim) of the synagogue as well as in apocalyptic literature. The expectation of a Messiah called Menahem is a common motif throughout the compositions of this period. The words of the payyta Shim on bar Megus offer a vivid example of such messianic urgency:

Send us the man called Menahem!
Vengeance will spout from him.
Let him come in our day,
And may authority rest on his shoulders (Is. 9: 5).

64 Schäfer, The Jewish Jesus, 215–6
66 A surviving palimpsest of Lam. 1: 16 in CPA translates the Hebrew menahem with mnhmn; see W. Baars, “A Palestinian Syriac text of the Book of Lamentations”, Vetus Testamentum 10, 1960, 225 (col. a, l. 15).
69 Leon J. Weinberger, Jewish Hymnography: A Literary History (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998), 38. The date of Shim on bar Megus’s piyyutim are uncertain, but the virulent diatribes against Christian authorities and the absence of any mention of Arab or Muslim authorities suggest that he flourished in Palestine prior to the Islamic conquests. See Ben Eliyahu et al., Handbook, 137.
An important catalyst for the spread and codification of these ideas, particularly in Jewish apocalyptic literature, comes first in the form of the Perso-Byzantine War (602–628) and in the form of the Arab conquest of Jerusalem (637), leading to yet another expulsion of Byzantines from Syria. The Sasanid conquest of Jerusalem in 614 even briefly placed Palestinian Jews in control of the city until 617 and saw in particular the outbreak of spectacular violence and upheaval that struck many as apocalyptic in significance, if not in scale. However short-lived this restoration of Jerusalem to the Jews was, Byzantium’s humiliation stoked eschatological dreams of Israel as Rome’s messianic and imperial heir and of the Messiah Menahem’s imminent advent.

No Jewish apocalyptic work embodies these expectations more vividly than the early seventh-century apocalypse Sefer Zerubbabel, itself likely written in response to the tumultuous events in Palestine and Syria during the Perso-Byzantine War (601–628). The apocalypse recounts the vision of the Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel of Biblical fame, whom the archangel Michael carries away to the gates of Rome to meet the Messiah-in-waiting:

Then [the angel Michael] said to me, “This is the Messiah of the Lord: [he has been] hidden in this place until the appointed time [of his advent]. This is the Messiah of the lineage of David, and his name is Menahem ben ’Amiel. He was born during the reign of David, king of Israel, and a wind bore him up and concealed him in this place, waiting for the time of the end.”

This Menahem, the angel reveals, will soon defeat the satanic “Armilos” and liberate Jerusalem to restore Israel. Reference to the Sefer Zerubbabel and

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71 Alexei M. Sivertsev, Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).


73 Reeves, Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic, 55.

74 The patronymic “ben ’Amiel” here replaces the Talmudic “ben Hezekiah”, but elsewhere in Sefer Zerubbabel the Messiah is also referred to as the son of Hezekiah (see Reeves, Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic, 53). Himmelfarb (“Mother of the Messiah”, 383–7; cited by Reeves, 53 n. 91) has suggested that “ben ’Amiel” might be a cipher for “ben Hezekiah”. On the significance behind calling the Messiah “son of Hezekiah”, see Schäfer, Jewish Jesus, 225–7. Another text to refer to the Messiah by this name is Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer; see Goldberg, “Die Namen des Messias”, 232–3; Sivertsev, Judaism and Imperial Ideology, 118.

75 Armilos being the anti-Messiah modelled after the Byzantine emperor Heraclius; see Lutz Greisiger, Messiah, Endkaiser, Antichrist: Politische Apokalyptik unter Juden und Christen des Nahen Ostens am Vorabend der arabischen Eroberung (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014).
Menahem’s role therein appears also in Jewish hymnography, as one can see the piyyut known as ‘Oto ha-Yom.\(^{76}\)

And the vision of the Son of Shealtiel\(^{77}\) will come,  
Which God has shown to him.  
And He will give the staff of Israel’s salvation,  
In the city of Naphtali in Kadesh in Galilee, He gives the staff of God.  
And Hephzibah\(^{78}\) will come before God,  
In order to awaken in her Menahem son of ’Amiel,  
Whom God gave her from of old.

Read in light of these currents of Jewish Messianism in Palestine, the tiny shift in the translation of the Gospel of John into CPA in which “Paraclete” becomes \(mn \text{hmn}\)’, in my view, creates a profound statement. This subtle shift marks the emergence of a discretely Christian counter-discourse against Jewish expectations of their own messiah-comforter whom they call “Menahem”. By calling the Paraclete \(mn \text{hmn}\)’, the Christians using CPA signalled that their Comforter – their Menahem – had already come. He was at once the Christ Jesus of Nazareth and the “other Comforter” (John 14: 16), the Spirit of Truth who comforts Christ’s followers in his absence. What makes the story of this subtle shift in CPA translation practice in response to Late Antique Jewish messianism all the more extraordinary is that, wittingly or unwittingly, Ibn Ishāq’s Arabic rendition of John 15: 23 –16: 1 offers us our best evidence that this shift transpired simultaneously with the rising tides of Jewish messianism at its epicentre in Palestine.

The broad currents of Late Antique apocalypticism did not disappear with the rise of Islam. Indeed, the Islamic conquest harnessed and reinvigorated these currents in unanticipated ways, as apocalypticism and its attendant literature continued to flourish well into the second century of the Islamic conquests.\(^{79}\) Does Ibn Ishāq’s appropriation of the Johannine Paraclete discourse, therefore, share a messianic subtext with CPA translations of \(\text{paraklētos} \text{ as } mn \text{hmn}’\)?

On the one hand, scholars have long seen in Ibn Ishāq’s narrative of Muhāmmad’s call (\(m\text{b}\text{ʿ} \text{ath}\)) and his encounter with the angel Gabriel at Mt. Hirā’ references to passages from the Biblical book of Isaiah in the textual underlayer of the narrative – in particular Is. 29: 12 and 40: 6.\(^{80}\) The latter


\(^{77}\) I.e. Zerubbabel.

\(^{78}\) Menahem’s mother responsible for the opening salvo of the eschatological showdown with the anti-Messiah; see Himmelfarb, “Mother of the Messiah”.


passage serves as quite a striking example. When in Ibn Ishāq’s narrative Gabriel appears to Muhammad in his sleep and, holding a silk scroll, commands, “Read (iqra’)!” the Prophet famously replies, “I cannot read (mā aqrā’)!”

Isaiah 40: 6 shares a similar structure and wording with the passage, even in the Hebrew: “A voice says, ‘Proclaim/Read (qērā’)! And I said, ‘What shall I cry out (māh ‘eqrā’)?’” What makes this correspondence significant for our concerns is that Isaiah 40 actually begins with divine admonition to “comfort” God’s people, “Comfort, comfort my people (nahāmū nahāmī ‘ammī), says your God. . .”. The CPA version of Isaiah 40: 1 matches the Hebrew very closely, reading: nḥm nḥm w qhly m r ‘lh’. Targumic readings of Isaiah 40, in fact, connect the command to “comfort” explicitly with the act of prophecy. Is this the messianic subtext to Ibn Ishāq’s narrative of Muḥammad’s call to prophecy? Put another way: is Muḥammad a/the “comforter” – in the mould of Menahem and the Paraclete/mnḥmn – by virtue of his prophetic mission? The evidence for affirming that Ibn Ishāq’s text does put forward such a view is not definitive, but it is suggestive.

Conclusion: “. . . and his name will be most praised”

The preceding analysis leaves us with a curious result. Even though the tools of historical philology illuminate considerably not just the provenance of Ibn Ishāq’s Arabic translation of the Johannine Paraclete discourse but also important features of his source-text, we have learned little about the Quranic text that ostensibly inspired this early Arabic translation. Part of the issue is that the connection between the Gospel of John’s Paraclete and Q. 61: 6 is tendentious. “Ahmad” and “Muhammad” on the one hand and paraklētos/mnḥmn/Menahem on the other do not carry even approximately similar meanings. The words are simply incommensurate. Polemicists note the fact that the Johannine proof-text fails to work the way early Muslim apologists would like virtually from the outset. Ps.-Leo III thus writes to Umar II:

Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Paraclete since he sought to console his disciples for his departure . . . Paraclete thus signifies “comforter”, while Muhammad means “to give thanks”, or “to render grace”, a meaning which has no connection whatsoever with the word Paraclete.

82 CCPA, 1, 142.
83 Bruce Chilton (tr.), The Isaiah Targum (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987), 77.
84 Errorously reading the Prophet’s name as the active participle (muḥammid, “giving much praise”) rather than the passive (muḥammad, “receiving much praise”).
85 Jeffery, “Correspondence”, 293.
The relationship between Q. 61: 6 and John is, therefore, tenuous at best. Most likely, Q. 61: 6 is not a reference to the Johannine Paraclete at all, and the putative Biblical subtext Ibn Isḥāq posits for Q. 61: 6, is a red-herring. If I am correct, this realization represents a significant step forward, but it also admittedly leaves modern scholars with a vexing loose end: the significance of “Aḥmad” in Q. 61: 6 remains unresolved. Several solutions have appeared over the centuries; we explore them below.

The first is what one might called the “philological” solution – even if the philology supporting it is rather dubious. This solution aims to maintain the connection between Q. 61: 6 and the Paraclete of John’s Gospel, but it proposes a rather novel solution to the incommensurability between the Arabic āḥmad and the Greek paraκλήτος. According to this argument, the Greek παράκλητος ("comforter/advocate") was either misread or misunderstood as περικλυτός – meaning “renowned”, “far-famed”, or even (with a little imagination) “praised one”. This proposition first appears, to my knowledge, in the Refutatio Alcorani of the pioneering Italian professor of Arabic at La Sapienza University, Ludovico Marracci (d. 1700). A modified version of Marracci’s suggestion has gained and maintains a considerable following in popular Muslim apologetic writings. Drawing upon Quranic claims regarding the corruption (tahrīf) of Jewish and Christian scriptures, such writings argue that periklytōs was the original reading of the Greek text John’s Gospel rather than paraκλήτος. It’s certainly an odd twist of fate that the arguments of such Muslim apologetic works ultimately derive from a suggestion popularized by a priest of the Order of the Mother of God and confessor to pope Innocent XI.

Marracci’s suggestion is clever, but probably too clever. In order for his proposition to work, one first must assume that Muhammad (or even, say, a hypothetical redactor of the Quran) knew both Greek and Syriac. Second, one must assume that Muhammad, or the Quran’s redactor, lacked access to the original Greek text of the Gospels, and so had to “reverse engineer” a Greek word from the Semitic consonantal skeleton p.r.q.l.y.t.s, which he found in either a Syriac or CPA Gospel text. Faced with the Greek letters π.ρ.κ.λ.τ.ς, either Muhammad or the redactor then reinserted the missing Greek vowels but arrived at περικλυτός, “renowned”, rather than παράκλητος, “comforter”. While the reading butchered the original text of John’s Gospel, it did just so happen to match, albeit rather approximately, the meaning of “Aḥmad”. The scenario is so convoluted as to be absurd.86


87 To make matters even worse for the proposition, the word periklytōs, albeit present in Classical Greek lexic, is virtually unknown to the Greek lexic of the New Testament, early Christian writings, Patristic writings, or even the pseudepigrapha. The sole example of its use I could locate makes for a rather unflattering parallel to Muhammad. In the Testament of Solomon, the Israelites’ king Solomon exorcises a series of bound demons by interrogating them. When he asks one gnarly demon his name, the demon replies, “Among mortals I am called Asmodeus the renowned (periklytōs)” (TSol
Another radical solution tweaks not the text of the New Testament but rather the text of the Quran. This second, “codicological”, solution jettisons the aya in which Jesus prophesies a future Messenger (rasūl) altogether, in favour of an alternative, albeit far less historically attested, reading. Nearly a century ago, Arthur Jeffery unearthed a reading of Q. 61: 6 ostensibly deriving from the Companion codex (mushaf) of Ubayy b. Ka‘b (d. c. 640–656) that provided an entirely different rendering of Jesus’s prophecy of a future messenger (rasūl) named Ahmad. In the reading attributed to Ubayy’s codex, Jesus’s prophecy in Q. 61: 6 rather ran as follows:

I bring you good tidings of a prophet whose community will be the last of [God’s] communities, by him God will seal the prophets and the messengers (ubashshirukum bi-nabiyyin ummatuhu ākhiru l-umami yakhtimu Llāhu bihi l-anbiyya‘ wa-t-rusul).

Thus did Ubayy’s codex purportedly omit any mention of Jesus’s prophecy of a prophet named Ahmad altogether.88 While an intriguing possibility, the documentation for this variant reading attributed to Ubayy is late and exceedingly sparse. Jeffery uncovered the reading from the margins of an autograph manuscript titled Qurrat ‘āyn al-qurrā‘, a work on variant readings (qirā‘āt) of the Quran by an otherwise unknown Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muhammad ibn ‘Alī al-Qawāsī al-Marandī (fl. latter half of sixth/thirteenth century).89 The work remains unpublished, but the manuscript remains accessible in the Escorial Library in Madrid. Jeffery characterizes this source as exceedingly rich with information on readings from Ubayy’s mushaf, and indeed, his Materials drew heavily on the manuscript when documenting the hypothetical text of Ubayy’s codex.90 Yet, outside al-Marandī’s work, the reading offered for Q. 61: 1 is rarely, if ever, attested in the qirā‘āt literature or in the earliest extant manuscripts of the Quran. Any argument in favour of Ubayy’s reading as an “original” and, therefore, “better” reading of the Quran faces an uphill climb.

The reading attributed by al-Marandī to Ubayy, however, deserves careful consideration. Aspects of the reading suggest an early, perhaps even a seventh-century, dating. Its tone is, for one, eschatological. On the other hand, other aspects of the reading suggest that it post-dates the seventh century. Its depiction

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88 Arthur Jeffery, Materials for the History of the Text of the Qurʾān (Leiden: Brill, 1937), 170 (with thanks to David Powers for first pointing me towards this reading).
89 MS Escorial (Madrid) no. 1337, fol. 200b. Brockelmann gives the death date for Marandī as 569/1173 (GAL, 4, 519), but this date is rather the date of the author’s ijāza from one of his teachers; the author himself states that he completed the work in 588/1192. I have benefitted greatly from the discussion of the Escorial manuscript written by Muhammad al-Shanqīṭī at: http://vb.tafsir.net/tafsir7010/#.VQD2t nF-So (last accessed 11 March 2015). My thanks to Walid Saleh for directing me to the website.
90 Materials, 116; hence, this reading does not appear in Ibn Abī Dāwūd’s Kitāb al-Masāḥif, which in any case only attributes a handful of readings to Ubayy b. Ka‘b’s codex.
of Muhammad as the final prophet is categorical and unambiguous. Muhammad “seals [the line of] prophets and messengers”. This is a sentiment paralleled only in Q. 33: 40 where Muhammad is also deemed “Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets (rastū Allāḥ wa-khātam al-nabīyyīn)”. Yet, the latter, far better-attested verse also suggests that al-Marandi’s alternative rendering of Q. 61: 6 is late. The categorical interpretation of Muhammad as the seal of the prophets is not present in Q. 33: 40, which suggests that the categorical tenor of al-Marandi’s/Ubayy’s reading of Q. 61: 6 probably reflects a more systematic and developed prophetology than one would expect to encounter in the Quran. Early Arabic poetry provides more than one compelling example of how the root *kh.t.m.* in the early Islamic period does not necessarily denote finality. Hence, a verse attributed to Umayya b. Abi Ṣalt speaks of Muhammad as the man, “by whom God sealed the prophets who come before him and after him (bihi khatama Allāhu man qablahu/ wa-man bá’dahu min nabīyyin khatām)”. Likewise the *Naqāʾid* of the Umayyad-era poets Jarīr and Farazdaq refers to Muhammad as “the best of the seals (khayr al-khawāṣṣ)”91 – where the very multiplicity of “seals” precludes their finality.

Moreover, the explicit pairing of the plurals “prophets (*anbiyāʾ*)” and “messengers (*rusul*)” in al-Marandi’s alternative reading occurs nowhere else in the Quran – and this despite the near ubiquity of these terms throughout the Quran. Hence, the pairing seems to be at odds with Quranic dictum. Lastly, nowhere does the Quran refer to Muhammad’s community (*umma*) as the last (*ākhīr al-umam*). While not at odds with Quranic eschatology does appear early on in the *ḥadīth* literature where it seems to first proliferate.92 All of this evidence argues against accepting the reading al-Marandi attributes to Ubayy’s codex as either an original, or even a historically preferable, reading of Q. 61: 6.

A third option entertained at least as early as the late ninth century – but unlikely to find many defenders among modern scholars – is what one might call the “sectarian” solution. This solution denies that the “Aḥmad” figure foretold by Jesus in the Quran intends to refer to Muhammad at all. In his *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, the Muʿtazilī scholar Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī (d. c. 915–916) provides an early testimony to such a view, writing that Qarāmitha rebels of his day justified their belief that Muhammad was not the last prophet by claiming: 1) Jesus would return to Earth and thus be a prophet after Muhammad; and 2) that Jesus foretold a prophet named Aḥmad, whose coming they await, and not a prophet named Muhammad.93 Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī (d. 922) records a letter purportedly penned by one of these millenarian rebels’ leaders in which he claimed to be an agent (*dāʾī*) working on behalf of the Mahdi Aḥmad

b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, “the Messiah who Jesus, who is the Word, . . .
who is Gabriel”.94 While certainly an extreme example, the Qarmaṭīs at least
demonstrate that not all Muslims identified the Quranic Aḥmad with
Muḥammad.

There remains only one other solution, and to my mind it is also the most cred-
ible. This is what I would like to call the “minimalist” solution. The minimalist
solution essentially rejects the very premise of Ibn Iṣḥāq’s early quest for a
Gospel proof-text; it is also a solution favoured by major exegetes of the classical
tradition.95 In this reading, “Aḥmad” is not a proper name at all, but rather an
adjective: the Arabic phrase ismuḥu aḥmad should not be read as “his name is
Aḥmad” but rather “his name is most praised” – reading aḥmad as a straightforward
superlative. In other words, this reading severs the putative connection
between Jesus’s Quranic proclamation from the Paraclete discourse of the
Gospel of John. While decoupling these two texts may defy the unrelenting
impulse to embed every verse of the Quran in a biblical subtext, intertext, or source
text, such a decisive decoupling of the Q. 61: 6 from the textual cobwebs of bib-
lical proof-texts, in this one instance at least, provides the most convincing reading.

Appendix: Ibn Iṣḥāq’s Arabic rendition of John 15: 23–16: 1 from
MS Žāhirīyya, majmūʿa 19, fol. 54r

A fragment of a work likely composed by Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn ʿUthmān
ibn Abī Shayba (d. 297/909) survives in a collection (majmūʿa) of short hadīth
texts preserved in the Žāhirīyya library in Damascus. The title assigned to the
text is Kitāb fī khalq Ādam wa-khatīʾ attīḥ wa-tawbātiḥ . . ., but this is merely
an ad hoc title assigned by the cataloguers and derives from the contents of
the initial portions of the text.96 The fragment likely derives from Abū Jaʿfar
Ibn Abī Shayba’s Tārīkh, of which no other sections are known to be extant.

The attribution of the text to Abū Jaʿfar Ibn Abī Shayba is, however, by no
means an absolute certainty: the first folios of the manuscript are missing and the
final folio (57r, line 13) ends stating, “the end of the second quire/section of the
quires of Ibn al-Ṣawwāf (ākhir al-juzʿ al-thānī min ajzāʾ Ibn al-Ṣawwāf)”. This
sentence seems to suggest the work belongs, rather, to the corpus of the
Baghdādī hadīth scholar Abū ʿAlī Ibn al-Ṣawwāf (d. 359/970).97 Yet, Muṭāʿ

94 Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, 3:2128–9; cf. Wilferd Madelung, “The Fatimids and the Qarmaṭīs of
Bahrayn”, in Farhad Daftary (ed.), Medieval Ismāʿīlī History and Thought
95 See, for example, Abū Iṣḥāq al-Thaʿlabī, al-Kashf wa-l-bayān, 10 vols, ed. Abū
Muḥammad b. ’Ashūr (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002), 9: 304; and ʿAlī
and Turḵī b. Sahw al-ʿUṯābī (Riyadh: Jāmiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad b. Saʿūd al-Islamiyya,
2010), 2: 435–6. For another modern scholar in favour of this reading,
see Tilman Nagel, Mohammed: Leben und Legende (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), 181.
96 See, most recently, Yaʿṣīn Muḥammad al-Sawwās, Fihris majāmīʾ al-Madhraṣa
al-ʿUmarīyya fī Dār al-Kutub al-Ẓāhirīyya (Kuwait: Maḥfī al-Maḥṣūtāt al-ʿArabiyya,
1987), 92.
97 Khaṭṭīb, 2: 115–6.
al-Ṭarābīṣī has forcefully argued that Ibn al-Ṣawwāf is the transmitter (rāwi) of the text rather than its author, marshalling, most convincingly, the evidence of Ibn ʿAsākir’s (d. 571/1176) citations of the manuscript in his Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq as Abū Jaʿfar Ibn Abī Shayba’s. 98 The matter merits further investigation in light of Abū ʿAli Ibn al-Ṣawwāf’s other ḥadīth works, but his corpus still remains mostly unpublished in manuscript. 99

As noted above, the fragment, probably from Abū Jaʿfar Ibn Abī Shayba’s Tārīkh, is preserved in Ms. Zāhiriyah, majmūʿ a 19, fols. 46–57 and draws from Ziyād al-Bakḵāʾī’s recension of Ibn Isḥāq’s Maghāzī, in particular the first section known as al-Muḥtadāʾ (“Genesis”), which contains the early Arabic version of John 15: 23–16: 1. Ibn Abī Shayba provides a consistent isnād for the material he transmits from Ibn Isḥāq, citing the authority of the Kūfīan traditionist Miḥjāb b. ʿal-Hārīth (d. 231/845–6), who cites in turn the authority of another Kūfīan, Ziyād al-Bakḵāʾī’s student İbrahim b. Yūsuf al-Sayrāfī (d. 249/863–4). This citation is, therefore, an important (if somewhat flawed) testimony to Ibn Isḥāq’s Arabic version of John 15: 23–16: 1 outside the recension of the ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Hishām, and it for this reason that I include my edited version thereof in this appendix.

99 Although manuscripts of Ibn al-Ṣawwāf’s works remain unpublished, fragments have been transcribed, albeit imperfectly, and posted online for al-Maktaba al-Ṣāhīna (see http://shamelaw.is) and can be accessed via their database. Included in this database as well as a transcription of Ms. Zāhiriyah, majmūʿ a 19, fols. 46–57, which Ṭarābīṣī identifies with the Tārīkh of Abū Jaʿfar Ibn Abī Shayba; however, the database attributes the work to Ibn al-Ṣawwāf and titles it al-Ṭanī min ajzāʾ Ibn al-Ṣawwāf. I owe this observation and information to Mahmoud Khalifa (Cairo University), who directed me to the online transcription of the text.

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