

Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam



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Although Islam was born, and became a world religion largely within the ambience of the Syriac-speaking communities of the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, little study has in fact been focused on the significance of Syriac culture in the early formation of Islam, or on the shaping influence of the academic and literary institutions of the Syriac-speaking churches on the early efflorescence of Islamic culture, particularly in Syria and Iraq. It is almost as if the scholarly world has accepted the apologetic claims of Muslim writers in the eighth and ninth centuries that in the somewhat remote world of the Hijaz in the prophet Muḥammad's day there was only ignorance (*al-jahiliyyah*) and the worship of idols until the fateful moment when the angel Gabriel brought the first lines of the *Qur'ān* down from heaven to an ecstatic Muhammad.¹ Of course both the *Qur'ān* itself, and modern

1. See John E. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (London Oriental Series, v. 32; Oxford; New York, 1978).

Islamicists, admit the presence of Jews and Christians in the world in which Islam was born.² And there have been a few venturesome studies into what one writer called "the foreign vocabulary of the *Qur'ān*,"³ along with several more quixotic proposals about the Christian or the Jewish origins of early Islam.⁴ But for the most part there has been a scholarly silence in modern times about the broader religio-cultural matrix from which Muhammad and Islam emerged, and especially about that part of it which involves the Aramean heritage of the Syriac-speaking people.⁵ The limitations of modern scholars may be largely responsible for this state of affairs, rather than any disinclination to study Islam from the point of view of the methods of the

2. See, e.g. among more recent studies, the works of M. J. Kister, J. Spencer Trimingham, Irfan Shahid, Gordon Newby, where bibliographies of earlier scholarship are readily available. See too the essays collected in a special issue of *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 61 (1991) entitled *L'Arabie antique de Karib' il à Mahomet : Nouvelles données sur l'histoire des arabes grâce aux inscriptions*.

3. See A. Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda, 1938). See also J. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin, 1926).

4. On the supposed Christian origins see Gunther Lüling, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad: eine Kritik am "christlichen" Abendland* (Erlangen, 1981). On the supposed Jewish and Samaritan origins see P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism; the Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977). On Manichaeism and early Islam see Moshe Gil, "The Creed of Abū 'Āmir," *Israel Oriental Studies* 12 (1992), pp. 9-47.

5. A notable exception to this neglect was the work of Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam et le christianisme* (Trans. J. Roche; Paris, 1955). Andrae originally wrote this study in German in 1923-1925, and published it in the journal, *Kyrkohistorisk Arsskrift*, which is not available to me. Two early works of Dom Edmund Beck, O.S.B. also are relevant: E. Beck, "Das christliche Mönchtum im Koran," *Studia Orientalia* 13 (1946), 29 pp. *idem*, "Eine christliche Parallele zu den Paradiesesjungfrauen des Korans?" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 14 (1948), pp. 398-405.