

NASCENT ISLAM IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY SYRIAC SOURCES

Abdul-Massih Saadi

Introduction

The Arab invasions of the seventh century marked the beginning of a dramatic change in the heartland of Eastern Christianity. The Arabs' style until that time had been to overrun and pillage the landscape, and then, just as quickly, to withdraw to their desert. At this time, however, things were different. They called their new invasion *هجرة* :*hijra*, that is, Immigration,¹ and the Syriac people called them *ܡܫܚܝܢܐ* :*Mhaggrayê*, that is, Immigrants. In the present paper I will ask how the Syriac Christians responded when the *Mhaggrayê* settled in this conquered land. How did they view the *Mhaggrayê* historically, religiously, and ethnically in the seventh century?

The diverse Syriac Christians had varying opinions about the *Mhaggrayê*. However, their common description of the *Mhaggrayê* warrants attention and consideration. In this paper, except for comparative hints, I will avoid the Byzantine Christian sources. Byzantine Christians were attacked and lost their land to the conquering Muslims. Having faced this experience, Byzantine authors tend to be polemical. Additionally, I will avoid Arabic, Muslim authors not simply because they were victors who wrote in justification of their conquests, but in actual fact because there is no contemporary Arabic writing concerning the events in the seventh century. Arabic chronologies and other writings are not available before the late eighth century. Thus, I will limit myself to the Syriac writers, who were neither declared enemies nor outward friends of the new conquerors.

The diverse Syriac Christians

By the seventh century, Syriac Christians were ecclesiastically divided into four main groups. There were Chalcedonians (or Melkites) and Non-Chalcedonians. Each of these two groups was further subdivided into two groups. The Chalcedonians were either monotheletes or dyotheletes while the non-Chalcedonians were either "Nestorians" or "Jacobites." The Syriac, Chalcedonian Christians,

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who had been at something of an advantage under the Byzantine rule because of their ecclesiastical affiliation with the dominant Byzantine emperor,² grieved their loss and expressed anger at the invasion. The Non-Chalcedonian Christians, however, lost no advantage and were saved of religious and doctrinal persecution – the Jacobites had been oppressed by the Byzantines over doctrinal issues, and many Nestorians had undergone persecution by the Persian Zoroastrians. Thus, they viewed the advance of the *Mhaggrayê* from the standpoint of their own ecclesiastical affiliations, their relations with the previous political authorities, and their relations with the Arabs, whom they referred to as the *Ṭayyāyê*.

Historical orientation

Before the invasions Syriac writers refer to Arabs in various contexts and with various appellations: *Arabāyê*, *Ṭayyāyê*, Sons of Hagar and Ishmaelites. With the seventh century advance of the Arabs, however, additional names were employed, like *Ṭayyāyê* of Muhammad, but most often: *Mhaggrayê*. The unprecedented name, *Mhaggrayê*, is provocative because it provides the greatest evidence for their self-identification as immigrants (*muhājirūn* مهاجرون in Arabic). In other words, the name Immigrants (*muhājirūn* مهاجرون) implies that the Arabs had arrived to stake a claim on, occupy, and then inherit the land. The Syriac writers, reporting and repeating what they were hearing rather than inventing a historical event, merely Syriacized this native Arabic name.

An early story circulated among the Syriac writers, also present in the contemporary history of Sebeos,³ that reflects the impression of Christian writers that the Arabs had come with the intention to stay. According to the story, when Muhammad visited Palestine, he admired the monotheism of the Jews and the fertility of the land, which “had been given to them (Jews) as a result of their belief in one God.” The story continues that when Muhammad returned to his tribesmen, declared: “If you listen to me, abandon these vain gods and confess the one God, then to you too will God give a land flowing with milk and honey.”⁴ That is to say, according to the Syriac writers, the Arab tribesmen misinterpreted and exploited a Jewish tradition to legalize wars and conquer lands.

Meanwhile, the Syriac writers employed secular or political terms to address the leaders of *Mhaggraye*. They frequently called the Arab caliphs Kings (*melkê* ملك), the governors as princes (*amirê* أمير), rulers (*shalitê* شليطه, or *rishê* ريشه, or *rishānê* ريشانه).⁵ In a clearly ethnic approach to the *Mhaggrayê* as a group, the seventh century Nestorian John of Phenek (d. 690s) writes, “Among them (Arabs), there are many Christians, some of whom are from the heretics, others from us.”⁶

Concerning Muhammad, for the most part, he is described as “the first king of the *Mhaggrayê*,”⁷ but occasionally he is called Guide (*mhaddyānā* مهدياناه)⁸ or Teacher (*terā’ā* تيراهاه),⁹ or Leader (*mdabrānā* مدبرانه),¹⁰ or the great ruler (*shalitā rabbā* شليطه ربه).¹¹ None of the Syriac writers ascribed to Muhammad or the

caliphs any religious title, instead, they regarded them as ethnic rulers, and they perceived their conquest as a temporary invasion sent by God in punishment.

The invasion as God’s punishment

The four groups agreed in principle on this basic precept: that the invasion was sent by God Himself in punishment for their sins. On Christmas Eve of 639, one year after the conquest of Palestine, the Melkite Patriarch, Sophronius of Jerusalem exhorted his congregation to repent so that God’s punishment may be removed, namely, the occupation of the Ishmaelites. He continued, “Through repentance, we shall blunten the Ishmaelite sword and break the Hagarene bow, and see Bethlehem again.”¹² John of Phenek (690s) viewed the *Mhaggrayê* as a people sent by God to punish Christians on account of heresies, but also for laxity of faith of his own community.¹³ John also sees the Arab invasion as God’s punishment of the sinful Empires, namely the Byzantine and the Persian. He writes that “God called the Arabs from the end of the earth, to destroy through them a sinful kingdom and to humiliate through them the proud spirit of the Persians.”¹⁴

Often, however, Syriac authors blame one another for having brought down God’s anger. Jacobite authors report that because of the persecution of the Byzantines, the God of vengeance sent the Ishmaelites, the most insignificant of the peoples of the earth, from the land of the South; in this way we were saved from the tyrannical rule of the Byzantine.¹⁵ The Chalcedonian, monothelite author¹⁶ of the Syriac *Life of Maximus* attributed the sweeping invasion of the Arabs (*Ṭayyāyê*) to all the lands and islands where Maximus’ heresy (dyotheletism) was present, a result of God’s wrath.¹⁷ Conversely, the dyothelete Anastasios considers the Arab victories as God’s punishment for the emperor Constans II’s pro-monothelite belief.¹⁸

The common assumption among all Syriac groups that the advance of *Mhaggrayê* was a divine act of punishment implies that they all expected a quick end, or some kind of closure of the *Mhaggrayê*’s dominance. Writing in last decade of the seventh century, John of Phenek stated, “From that time on the kingdom of the *Ṭayyāyê* was no longer firmly established.”¹⁹ This was not merely conjecture. In fact, all sources that date to the late seventh century saw in the “First and Second Civil Wars” among Arab political and tribal factions a sign of their total destruction.²⁰

The *Mhaggrayê*’s religious orientation

The Syriac writers were the first people to report about and eventually engage with the *Mhaggrayê* on religious matters. The earliest Syriac document, dated to 644, reports a religious colloquium between the Emir of the *Mhaggrayê* and the Syrian Patriarch, John of Sedreh. The document refers to *Mhaggrayê* as

- 22 Saadi, "The letter of John of Sedreh: A new perspective on nascent Islam," *Karmo* 1.2, 52.
- 23 Ephraem, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones III*, CSCO 320, ed. E. Beck, Louvain: Peeters, 1972, 61.
- 24 *Chronica Minora*, CSCO 1, 38 (ed.); *Chronica Minora*, CSCO 2, 31 (trans.).
- 25 Ibid. On Midian see Genesis 25:2.
- 26 Mingana, *Sources Syriaques*, 146*.
- 27 Mingana, *Sources Syriaques*, 146*.
- 28 *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 2, 431 (ed.), 4, 421 (trans.); *Chronicon ad annum* 1234, 260.

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