

THE CORRUPTION OF CHRISTIANITY: SALMĀN AL-FĀRISĪ'S QUEST AS A PARADIGMATIC MODEL

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The corruption of Christianity has always been a problem for Muslims: How could the followers of the Prophet of Allah, Jesus – *nabīy Allāh ʿĪsā*, *ʿalayhi s-salām* – become corrupted? After all, their prophet had selected his followers and as the Qurʾān proves (e.g. 3:52), his apostles (*ḥawārīyūn*) were ready to serve their master, the Prophet of Allah. Did Jesus fail in his mission or was he just a bad connoisseur of men? Did he select unfaithful friends?

Naturally, as a prophet of Allah, Jesus himself could not be blamed. The prophetic paradigm of Islam is very strong. Although the infallibility (*ʿiṣma*) of the prophets was most emphatically attributed to Muḥammad himself, it was also extended to Jesus and his virgin mother.¹ Thus, it must have been the later Christians who did the damage.

The historical sources disagree with each other when trying to explain the change of the original, monotheistic 'Islamic Christianity' to the (then) modern, tritheistic Christianity, which had adopted the *thālīth ath-thalātha* doctrine (the trinity), as the Qurʾān puts it (5:73). Some sources find fault with Paul.² Thus, ʿAbdallāh at-Tarjumān (Anselmo Turmeda) in his *Tuḥfat al-adīb* often puts the blame on Paul and the four authors of the Gospels (as contrasted to the unadulterated *al-Injīl* of Christ himself), who, he emphasizes, were not among the original *ḥawārīyūn* of the Qurʾān, but later disciples who had not themselves seen Jesus.

By contrast, Ibn Kathīr in his *Qiṣaṣ* (II, p. 454) tells of Paul's conversion quite in accordance with Christian tradition, and even states that 'the belief of Paul in Christ was good and he believed that Christ was the servant of God and his messenger'. He also quotes a *ḥadīth* of Muḥammad (*Qiṣaṣ*, II, p. 453) that the religion

¹ And, among the Shiites, to the Imams. The final doctrine of *ʿiṣma* is, of course, later than Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām, but the idea had clearly already started developing in the Qurʾān.

² Robinson (1991: 21) notes the absence of any mention of Paul in the Qurʾān and sees some significance in this. As the Qurʾān gives very sparse references to late characters in Judaism and Christianity, I cannot see the lack of any mention of Paul as significant; it would be much more significant to find him mentioned in the Qurʾān.

of Christ remained unadulterated for 200 years after him (*la-qad makatha aṣḥāb al-Masīḥ ‘alā sunnatihi wa-hadyihi mi’atay sana*).

It was also often held (e.g. Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ*, II, pp. 455-456) that it was the action of Constantine that finally destroyed the original purity of Christianity, some three hundred years after Christ, and that the Arian Christians were the remnants of the first Christians.

Whatever the ultimate cause of this corruption was, the question was not only academic. Later, Sunni Islam may have disavowed Christianity for good, but Early Islam of the 7th century was less unanimous, and as I have tried to show elsewhere,³ Christianity seems to have played a major role in the formation of Islam during the Umayyad period.

The corruption of Christianity was a moot point in another sense, too. Later Islam was totally convinced of the prophecy of Muḥammad and no longer needed confirmation of his prophecy which had become, in a way, *mutawātir*, known to everybody and generally accepted and thus true even without further proof. Early Islam was in a more problematic situation and very keen on finding testimonies for Muḥammad’s prophecy. In fact, the first parts of the *Sīra* by Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām are very much interested in the annunciation⁴ of the Prophet: pagans, Jews and Christians are all led on stage to testify to the coming of the next or the last Prophet.

Especially welcome seems to have been the testimony of Christians, the dominant religious group of the Near East which had, by the late 7th and early 8th century, been conquered but not converted by the Muslims. That meant, on the other hand, that either the Christians themselves had to be at least not totally corrupted – in which case their testimony’s value would have been diminished⁵ – or they had to have original documents still at their disposal, dating from the time before the corruption of Christianity.

The *Sīra*, or biography of the prophet Muḥammad, by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), as revised by Ibn Hishām (d. 833), gives several cases of Christian testimony for Muḥammad, but the most interesting and cogent is the story of the conversion of Salmān al-Fārisī (*Sīra*, I, pp. 184-191),⁶ not the testimony of the Christians of Najrān (*Sīra*, II, pp. 180-182) nor the secret conversion of the Ethiopian Negus (*Sīra*, I, pp. 275-281),⁷ although these, too, were eagerly welcomed.

³ Hämeen-Anttila 1998 and forthcoming.

⁴ Cf. Rubin 1995: 21-55.

⁵ Interestingly enough, the pagan testimonies were also accepted; many a Jinni, *tābi* (or pagan god(dess)) is seen giving humans some preknowledge of the Prophet. As is well known, this was explained by reference to their eavesdropping on matters discussed in the heavens, see *Sīra*, I, pp. 177-178, with reference to Qur. 72:1-10.

⁶ Also in *as-Sīra al-Ḥalabīya*, I, pp. 303-313 (the version of Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām with commentaries) and I, pp. 315-317 (another version), Ibn al-Athīr, *Uṣd al-ghāba*, II, pp. 417-421, and Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, V, pp. 441-444. Two versions also in Abū Nu‘aym, *Hilya*, I, pp. 190-193 and 193-195, both differing from that of Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām.

As is shown by the organization of the material in the *Sīra*, the story of the conversion of Salmān is not, after all, *his* story. It is placed before other conversion stories and falls outside the chronological framework. It is a story of annunciation, placed among other stories telling about Jews and pagans – or their Jinnis – who had some preknowledge of the coming of the new prophet. The same story, though, could naturally be also used in the personal hagiography of Salmān; in, e.g., al-Maḡdisī's *Bad'* (V, pp. 110-113) the same story, transmitted on the authority of Ibn Ishāq and al-Wāqidī, is placed among stories of conversion, which implicitly changes the focus, even though the stories are otherwise almost identical, except for the abbreviations by al-Maḡdisī. Likewise, Ibn Sa'īd's biographically ordered *Ṭabaqāt* (IV, pp. 75-81)⁸ makes Salmān the theme of the story.

The story of Salmān is especially forceful; one should also not forget that Salmān had become, by the time of Ibn Ishāq, a major figure in early Shiite movement, and he was later deified by several *ghulāt* groups. For the Sunnites and the moderate Shiites, though, he was not a cosmic force incarnate in the material world to stand by Muḡammad and 'Alī, as a trinity of *Sīn*, *Mīm* and 'Ayn, but a paradigmatic figure exemplifying religious quest⁹ leading upwards on a hierarchical scale, from fire worship,¹⁰ through Christianity, to the final truth of Islam.

Salmān started as a Zarathustrian (*majūsī*) fire worshipper. His conversion from the Zarathustrian religion to Christianity is quite similar to many Christian hagiographies. Being kept inside four walls, Salmān once gets an opportunity to go outside of his home, and the Christian service entralls him as soon as he hears the voices from inside a church – prayer, as is said in the story, but more probably a service.

The conversion is shown as natural; the Zarathustrian religion is seen as much inferior to Christianity and the conversion is in no need of explanation. The living, One God of Christianity is on another level as the Fire adored by Zarathustrians. In fact, we do not have any stories about a religious quest leading from Christianity, through Zoroastrianism to Islam. In this particular story, the fire worship is clearly equated with paganism.¹¹

⁷ Here we find the motif of two kinds of Christians which we also meet in the story of Salmān. The positive Christian hero, the Negus, is finally converted (in secrecy) to Islam; the difference between him and the last teacher of Salmān, is of course that the Negus lives until the coming of this new prophet whereas Salmān's teacher may only participate in his annunciation. Note also the difference between patricians (*baṭāriqa*, bad Christians) and bishops (*asāqifa*, good Christians) in the story of the Negus.

⁸ Another version of the story is found in IV, pp. 81-82.

⁹ Cf. the *ḡanīf* stories, e.g. the quest of Zayd ibn 'Amr, told in *Sīra*, I, pp. 191-198.

¹⁰ In one version by Abū Nu'aym (*Ḥilya*, I, p. 190) the religion of the Persians is instead given as horse worship.

¹¹ The formula *dīnuka wa-dīn ābā'ika* used by Salmān's father (e.g. *Sīra*, I, p. 185) has strong pagan connotations and is frequently used in the *Sīra* to refer to the religion of Jāhilīya.

Yet the first master of Salmān proves to be a fake, a covetous bishop, quite on a par with the *clérigo* of Lazarillo de Tormes.¹² He calls for alms, but instead of distributing them to the poor, keeps them for himself until he has amassed a treasure of seven jars full to the brim of gold and silver.¹³

This first episode serves as a reminder that Christianity is not (always?) what it claims to be. The bishop is a corrupted Christian.¹⁴ This, however, does not discourage Salmān, who keeps on in his quest for the true religion. The next three men, the Christians from Mosul, Nisibis and Amorium are pious men – in fact they are as pious as non-Muslims come (I, p. 186).¹⁵

Obviously, Ibn Ishāq is here echoing the Qurʾānic statement (3:75) on different kinds of Jews and Christians. His view point is moralistic, as in the Qurʾān. Theological details are not in question – trinity against monotheism – but merely the morals of the churchmen. The first bishop of Syria belongs to those to whom you cannot entrust a *qinṭār*, the men of Mosul, Nisibis and Amorium, as well as the successor of the corrupt bishop (four against one!) belong to those who may be trusted. Naturally, the moral decadence of the bishop implies all the corrupt doctrines of Christianity, as well.

Yet the good, and original, Christians come to an end with the fourth good Christian, the man of Amorium. Thus, the story gives us to understand that the true Christian doctrine – Islam, that is – dies out just a few years before the advent of Islam, and that some of the last Christians were aware of this and waiting for the new prophet to appear from Arabia.¹⁶

Later, when Muslims became better aware of the internal schisms of Christianity,¹⁷ the Arians, with their Christology, became the paradigm of true Christianity. For the earliest Muslims, the theological details were of little interest, and it

¹² See Fr. Rico (ed.), *Lazarillo de Tormes*: 46-71. Catedra: Letras Hispánicas.

¹³ In the variant version of Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt* (IV, pp. 81-82), this particular motif is less obvious.

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, this episode is radically changed (mainly by abbreviation) by al-Maqdisī, (*Badʿ*, V, pp. 110-111). Al-Maqdisī tacitly amalgamates the two bishops of Syria into one, positive character and thus eliminates the bad bishop from the story. In his version, as also in the two versions of Abū Nuʿaym, all the Christians who are described are positive characters and the underlying corruption of Christianity remains very much in the background. It is the good Christian teachers of Salmān who tell him (and us) that the original Christianity is dying out as the time of the new prophet approaches but otherwise this corruption remains invisible in the story.

¹⁵ Cf. the use of the same formula in a Jewish context, *Sīra*, I, pp. 183-184 (the pious Ibn al-Hayyabān who belongs to the Jewish annunciation).

¹⁶ As the material of Islamic historiography is atomistic, each *khbar* contingent with itself but not necessarily with the other *akhbār*, it goes without saying that in other stories we have plenty of other monks and bishops who are likewise called the last good Christians.

¹⁷ A charming and interesting example of this awareness comes in one of the stories of the Christians of Najrān (*Sīra*, II, p. 182).

was more important to show how their Prophet had in fact been predicted by Jesus and his faithful followers.

The Gospels were searched for *loci classici* for Muḥammad, and legends of Christians acknowledging Muḥammad were found or fabricated. The Christians of Najrān, Warāqa ibn Nawfal, Baḥīrā and his less famous comrades, and finally Christ himself, as in an addition to the conversion story of Salmān (*Sīra*, I, p. 191), all predict the coming of Muḥammad or recognize him when he has already come. Likewise, in eschatology Jesus was made to side with al-Mahdī – who in this case is acting for Muḥammad – and even in the hereafter, Mary was married to Muḥammad (e.g. Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ*, II, pp. 365-366), and the obvious implication of this story is that the prophecy of the latter is proven by his total acceptance by former prophets and even by Jesus' mother.¹⁸ Likewise, in the story of *Mi'raj*, other prophets, Jesus amongst them, hail Muḥammad as one of their own.

The story of Salmān's conversion, an early one as it is already codified by Ibn Ishāq, shows Christians in a positive light. Out of the five Christians described, four are as pious as can be and even the Christian crowds are seen in a positive light. Even though the good Christians despair of their present age, yet the crowd in Syria is shown as good believers, although misguided by their evil leader. After Salmān lays the latter's plots bare, the Christians are indignant and elect another – obviously more pious – successor to the corrupt bishop. Thus, even though the men from Mosul, Nisibis and Amorium claim that there are no longer good Christians around, their claim must be seen somewhat exaggerated and it has to be taken *cum grano salis*. The majority of Christians would be good, but they seem to lack trustworthy overseers, bishops.

The life of Salmān, as told by Ibn Ishāq, may be seen as a paradigmatic quest for the true religion.¹⁹ The first step in his quest is more implied than stated; his youthful religiosity which is directed towards the then only religious form he is aware of, the worship of fire, is the first sign of this quest. Misguided or not, we see him searching for something outside the profane world.

The parallel story in the Qur'ān (6:74-82) of Abraham's quest is especially close here. He, though, was a prophet and did not need human teachers as (the Sunni version of) Salmān did. It is very conspicuous that in both versions of Abū Nu'aym (*Hilya*, I, pp. 190 and 193) Salmān's quest starts without a human

¹⁸ A feminist interpretation might see in this sexual undercurrents: the virgin mother of Jesus is married to the conquering prophet. Her virginity is given to the conquering male.

¹⁹ We might also read, in connection with this spiritual quest, the *ḥadīth* (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 3946; cf. also Abū Nu'aym, *Hilya*, I, p. 195) according to which Salmān alternated (*tadāwal*) from one master (*rabb*) to another for more than ten years. Just as Salmān's human master changed (but note that in the version of Ibn Ishāq there are only two, both Jewish, masters), so also his celestial Lord changed several times. Would it be too much to speculate that the *ḥadīth* does have a religious undercurrent?

teacher.²⁰ In *Ḥilya*, I, p. 190, he says: ‘I knew that they [Salmān’s people] had no basis whatsoever [in their religious beliefs]’, and in *Ḥilya*, I, p. 193, the same is told in slightly different words: ‘So I was until God threw to my mind the question: Who has created the heaven and the earth?’²¹

Most probably the parallelism did not go unnoticed by the author of the version of Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām, either. The reference to ‘the religion of Abraham’ (*dīn Ibrāhīm*) comes very explicitly at a central place, before the final decision of Salmān to move on to the Arabian Peninsula to witness the coming of the new prophet and to join him (Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, I, p. 187; al-Maḡdisī, *Badʿ*, V, p. 111).

Salmān’s pagan, or Zarathustrian, background leads to an obvious betterment, as he is converted to Christianity, and despite some problems, Christianity is seen as a good religion. The real problems of Salmān start with the Arab merchants of the tribe Kalb²² who do not keep their word and sell Salmān to a Jew.²³

Here again we can see the superior position of Christianity in the story as told by Ibn Ishāq. Among Christians, Salmān is all right, but his acquaintance with Judaism happens through deceit. Although in a certain sense the Jew is not guilty of this betrayal – Salmān is sold by Arabs and the Jew who buys him is merely buying a slave, as anyone could have done in the 7th century – yet he is described as the ‘owner’ of Salmān and later his exaggerated claims for three hundred palm saplings and 40 ounces of gold as the price of Salmān’s freedom obviously tax the meagre treasury of the first Muslims.

Likewise one may remark the total lack of any Jewish annunciation in this story (cf., e.g., the scene in *Sīra*, I, p. 188 when Salmān hears of the arrival of Muḥammad to Medina). In general, there is in the *Sīra* no lack of Jewish pre-knowledge of the coming of the new prophet, both positive (some of the Jews await the coming of the new prophet and convert to Islam or would have done so had they lived long enough to witness it) and negative (the Jews recognize the prophet but refuse to follow him due to their mischievous nature), but these are in no way echoed in the story of Salmān.

²⁰ In *as-Sīra al-Ḥalabīya* (I, p. 315) the elder brother of Salmān initiates Salmān’s interest in Christianity.

²¹ In the second of the two versions of Abū Nu‘aym, there seems to be another echo of Abraham’s quest (cf. Salmān’s words, *Ḥilya*, I, p. 193: ‘I wish to know the Lord of heaven and earth’). In the first version, there is (*Ḥilya*, I, p. 190) an echo of Qur. 2:113, polemic between Jews and Christians, which conforms with the general theme of the story, the hierarchy of the religions.

²² Although Kalb was a (partly) christianized tribe, they seem to stand here for (the mainly pagan) Arabs in general, if I am not mistaken.

²³ In the two versions of Abū Nu‘aym there is no reference to the Jewishness of Salmān’s masters. The versions also state that Salmān deliberately sold himself off as a slave to finance his voyage to Arabia (*Ḥilya*, I, pp. 191 and 194). The change in the story is naturally used to highlight the ascetic character of Salmān who prefers witnessing the advent of the new prophet to his own personal freedom.

It is obvious that the Jew is here negatively described,²⁴ with (some of the) Christians and all of the Muslims on the other side. This hierarchy is relatively clear in the version of Ibn Ishāq: paganism (here identified with fire worship) is the lowest step; Judaism is implicitly at about the same level or – although this is not said in the story but may be deduced from other material – slightly above it, and Christianity is the last step before Islam.

The annunciation theme is closely connected to the hierarchical ordering of the religions. In Ibn Ishāq's version the hierarchy is:

paganism/fire worship	negative	no annunciation
Judaism	slightly negative	no annunciation
Christianity	negative/positive	annunciation
Islam	positive	annunciation fulfilled

The place of Judaism is explicitly mentioned in a short note appended to the same story in al-Maqqdisī, *Bad'*, V, p. 113, where it is stated: 'Some people say that Salmān lived more than two hundred years and sought²⁵ Judaism, Zoroastrianism (*majūsīya*) and Christianity', that is, before finally converting to Islam. Whether the transposition of Judaism and Zoroastrianism in the hierarchy has some significance or not, is not clear.

Now, we come to the question of the date of the story. It should be obvious for all scholars that the stories cannot simply be dated according to the first link of the *isnād* attached to the story. It is most improbable that the story of Salmān could be historically accurate information, deriving from Salmān himself.

It is not necessary for us to touch the question of whether Salmān himself told the story of his conversion to someone. It is enough to state that it is most improbable that the story could have been transmitted without adjusting it to the later development of Islam. The version of Ibn Ishāq is, moreover, clearly more paradigmatic than historical. Its aim is to show the relative hierarchy of the religions and to give further proofs for the prophecy of Muḥammad, not to give an accurate reminiscence of Salmān's early life.

Now, the development in the Qur'ān shows a gradual change in the attitude towards other monotheistic religions.²⁶ The situation seems to have started with an overall positive attitude. The prophet of Islam – a term anachronistic for the beginning of Muḥammad's career, though – is shown in congruence with the earlier prophets and as the latest link in a long chain of prophets sent by God to deliver His

²⁴ Negative and anti-Judaic features have been added to the version of *as-Sīra al-Ḥalabīya* (I, p. 308).

²⁵ I read *sāma* instead of *sa'ama*.

²⁶ Actually, a similar gradual change may also be seen in relation to paganism, which has been studied, e.g., by A. T. Welch in his illuminating article on the Qur'ān's attitude to the pagan goddesses (Welch 1980), but this development was completed very early, during the lifetime of the Prophet himself, and it underwent no crucial changes later.

message to mankind. One can hardly avoid the feeling that the prophet of Islam must have expected the other monotheists to accept him and to join Islam, their common religion. Muḥammad must have felt himself to belong to the monotheistic tradition of (true) Judaism and Christianity. He was not, after all, starting a new religion, but merely reviving an old monotheistic tradition, which had already been brought to mankind by Moses, Jesus and the other prophets.

The next major point in the development of this attitude was the disappointment of Muḥammad with Jews which is contrasted with the hopes still put in Christians. Only finally do we see the disappointment with Christians, too. Now the transmission of the Qurʾān is strong, and I do not believe that there is enough reason to doubt – in general – the integrity of the Qurʾānic text and its dating to the early decades of the 7th century.

If we thus accept – as I believe we have to – the traditional view that the Qurʾān was revealed to Muḥammad in the early 7th century, we may put his career in juxtaposition with his attitude towards other monotheistic traditions. Muḥammad seems to have been gradually disappointed with both major monotheistic traditions of the Near East, first Judaism and then Christianity, and finally to have discarded both.

How does the story of the conversion of Salmān fit into this picture? If we merely put it into the curve of Muḥammad's gradual disappointment, we might date it to the middle period, when Jews already had lost their allure but Christians were still seen in a positive light. Now the problem is that if the story was thus dated – and taken as genuine – we would have to explain why it was not changed during transmission. A story viewing Christians in a very positive light, one might expect, would have been changed during the first decades of Islam, when there was not yet any rigorous system of transmitting inherited religious materials, or it would have been left untransmitted when the attitude towards Christians had changed. Yet this did not happen with the story of Salmān.

An Islamic stance would be clear. The story was not changed, since it was true and faithfully transmitted without accretions. I do not think that there are nowadays many scholars who would subscribe to this view and believe in such a faithful transmission of early Islamic material. Thus we are forced to search for another explanation.

As I have elsewhere suggested, Christian influence seems to have been in the ascendance *after* the death of the Prophet when the conquering Muslims came into closer contact with the Christian population of the Near East.²⁷ Early Islam, approx-

²⁷ Note also the almost total lack of annunciation stories where Christians would deny the Prophet merely because of their own evil nature, a theme much used when it comes to the Jews (see *Sīra*, II, pp. 122-179 and elsewhere). The Christians, on the contrary, keep to their own religion but remain friendly with the Prophet. Thus, even though some material gain is referred to in the story about the delegation of Najrān (*Sīra* II, p. 180), the theme is not particularly emphasized as the cause of their non-conversion.

imately until the rule of ʿAbdalmalik (r. 685-705), was approaching Christianity. The eschatology of Islam seems to be one of the strongest cases for the post-Muḥammad, early Islamic veneration of Jesus. After all, most subjects of the Islamic empire were Christians during the whole of 7th century (and later).²⁸

Thus, if we do not accept the story of Salmān as dating from the time it purports to date from, one has to search for a later date. A natural *terminus ante quem* is the time of Ibn Ishāq.²⁹ This, together with the general acceptance of the story, without critical comments by, e.g., Ibn Hishām, implies that the story, in its present form, at least, had already been deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition and must thus have been generated several decades before Ibn Ishāq.

There is also one feature conspicuously missing from the story, which might imply that it was finished before this feature had become part and parcel of the common stock of motifs in stories of Christian annunciation of the Prophet. I refer to the motif of age-old secret books of Christianity where the Prophet is either described, named or otherwise identified.

These books seem to have been found everywhere where Christians came into contact with Arabs. Thus, the monk Baḥīrā had a volume inherited from among the inhabitants of his *ṣawmaʿa* (*Sīra*, I, pp. 160-162) and the Christians of Najrān had a volume which had even been sealed by each of its successive owners (*Sīra*, II, pp. 180-181), thus testifying to its authenticity and antiquity.

These secret books have to be differentiated from the Gospels or the Torah, both of which were also used as evidence by Muslims. The Gospels and the Torah were existing, even though somewhat corrupted, books, available to be examined by all – it was only later that the identification of the present Gospels and the Torah with the Qurʾānic *al-Injīl* and *at-Tawrāh* was started to be looked at askance. The secret Christian books inherited from the time of Christ himself were something else, and no Jewish parallels are found in the *Sīra*.³⁰

Basically, the function of these secret books is to solve the problematic question of Christian authority in annunciation versus Christian corruption and consequently, lack of authority. When the late-6th-century Christians are supposed to have been corrupted, the Christian authority for annunciation has to be sought from earlier times. The search for testimonial passages in the Gospels was one

²⁸ See Hämeen-Anttila 1998 and forthcoming.

²⁹ There is not enough ground to disavow the attribution of the main part of the *Sīra* to Ibn Ishāq. I take those parts which are transmitted on the authority of Ibn Ishāq to originate with him until something else is proven.

³⁰ Instead we have some pagan parallels, although not in book form. The mysterious inscriptions found during the rebuilding of the Kaʿba (*Sīra*, I, pp. 170-171) and testifying to its sacred origin are functionally equivalent with the Christian secret books in their testimony for Muḥammad. In both, the authority of the testimony does not come from contemporaries but from hitherto unknown written materials dating from the time when no corruption of Mekkans, or respectively Christians, had yet occurred.

solution but it was slightly problematic as it remained based on the interpretation of less than obvious passages and the contemporary Christians might counter it with their own interpretation. The secret books were, on the contrary, easier to use, because one could insert in them unequivocal proofs concerning the advent of Muḥammad.

The tension between authoritative annunciation and ultimate corruption surfaces in a version of the quest of Salmān (Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, IV, pp. 81-82) where Salmān asks Muḥammad whether his last Christian teacher – the man of Jerusalem, in this version, equivalent to the man of Amorium in the main version – will enter Paradise. The prophet's answer puts things right: 'No one will enter Paradise except for submissive (*muslima*) souls.' The *nafs muslima* seems here to refer in the first place to Muslims even though it does leave the door just a little open for the man of Jerusalem. Annunciation is not enough for salvation.

Whatever its exact date, the story of Salmān's quest originates roughly in the earlier part of the century between Muḥammad and Ibn Ishāq, a time when Jesus was much in ascendance and the story is, at the same time, a further proof of this ascendance. In the story, Christianity is seen as still basically representing the teachings of Jesus – moral teachings, that is: no theological questions are discussed in the story, but obviously, no tritheist could have been as good as the good Christians of the story.

That the timetable of the story is not ours goes without saying. For us, there is a gap of six centuries between Jesus and Muḥammad, and later Islamic historians knew this as well as we do.³¹ Yet, the creator of the story of Salmān's conversion seems to have had another schedule in his mind, despite the fact that it is Salmān who in another source (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 3948) is quoted as an authority for this six-hundred-year gap between Jesus and Muḥammad.³² No clear hints concerning chronology are given in the text of Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām, but one can hardly escape the feeling that the author of this story – whoever he may have been – sees the good Christians as a physical, and not only spiritual, remnant from the time of Jesus, or his nearest followers.

Thus, the question of the corruption of Christianity finds its solution in the story. Christianity was gradually corrupted when the real followers of Christ simply grew old and died out. Were the good Christians of our story the last surviving Christians from the time of Christ himself? Obviously they were, and the coming of

³¹ See, e.g., Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣaṣ*, II, p. 453.

³² The longevity of Salmān is often mentioned in sources; in one source (Ibn al-Athīr, *Uṣd al-ghāba*, II, p. 421, quoting Abū Nuʿaym) this longevity is connected with the story of his meeting Jesus (*yuqālu innahu adraka ʿĪsā ibn Maryam*), for which, see below. This seems to be a misunderstanding of the original story, where Salmān meets Jesus who has gone into occultation. When the two meet, the coming of the Arabian prophet is already at hand; Salmān did not live during the public *career* of Christ – we cannot speak of his earthly life, as he is not supposed to have ever died – but he met him afterwards, during his occultation.

Muḥammad was scheduled by God. The teaching of Christ had been given up when his last disciples had died, and it was time for the next prophet to appear.

If the story of Jesus moving from thicket to thicket (*Sīra*, I, p. 191) goes with the rest of the story, as it does in this version, it also helps us to date the story. The doctrine of the celestial occultation of Christ must have developed no later than the mid-8th century, and this story has to predate it, as the 'occultation' of Christ is here seen in human terms. Christ is not in heaven in this story, but hiding in two thickets and annually showing himself to (some) believers and healing them. He is a Christ-on-earth, not in any celestial occultation, as he already is in the *Mi'raj* story of the *Sīra* (II, p. 16).³³

In fact, in later stories, it is a *mu'ammār* Christian saint, not Christ himself, who is awaiting in a worldly occultation either the coming of Islam, or the second coming of Christ in the final days. As it comes, the same adjustment is also seen in another version of this story of Salmān and Jesus, quite briefly referred to in the commentary of al-Yamīnī to al-ʿĀmirī's *Bahjat al-maḥāfil* (I, p. 56) where it is said that, according to Ibn al-Athīr³⁴, Salmān met *waṣī ʿĪsā*, not Jesus himself but his spiritual inheritor.

In any case, an informed guess would be that this story received its more or less final form no later than about 700 AD.

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³³ In *as-Sīra al-Ḥalabīya* I, pp. 316-317, the monk in the cave near Jerusalem has taken the place of Jesus. Ultimately, his healing miracle and subsequent mysterious disappearance make one wonder whether he was, in fact, Christ in disguise.

³⁴ This seems to be a reference to Ibn al-Athīr, *Uṣd al-ghāba*, II, p. 419 according to which Salmān is said to have met one of Jesus' apostles (*ḥawārīyūn*).

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