

Did Islam Originate from Anti-Trinitarian Christians?

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The traditional Islamic narrative states that Islam developed in the city of Mecca in the early 7th century after a man named Muhammad received revelations from an angel that were later recorded in a book called the Qur'an. However, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that this narrative was probably not written down until the 9th century and most of the claims cannot be supported by any historical data from the 7th century. Thus, the real origins of Islam, Muhammad, and the Qur'an may provide a very different scenario than the standard Islamic narrative.

On the other hand, there are a number of reputable researchers who have utilized the available historical evidence from the 7th century in areas such as archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, and non-Muslim eye-witness accounts, to reveal a wealth of information on the origins of Islam, the development of the Qur'an, and even the most likely basis for the appearance of Muhammad. In regard to the origin of Islam, some scholars have put forth the view that Islam rose up from a form of Jewish-Christianity in Northern Arabia, Syria, and Iraq. Other scholars prefer a pathway developed through 7th century Arab leaders who espoused apocalyptic Judaism.

Another group of scholars and researchers bring forth a wealth of historical evidence that strongly indicates that Islam rose out of a heretical anti-Trinitarian Christian movement involving the Arab Ghassanid and Lakhmid kingdoms that inhabited North Arabia and the Levant region as well as Persia and Iraq. Both groups of Arabs migrated from Yemen in the 2nd and the 3rd centuries and for the most part accepted Christianity: The Ghassanids followed the Miaphysite beliefs and the Lakhmids were mostly Nestorian in their view of Christ. The Ghassanids also were allied to the Byzantines during the Byzantine/Sasanian war while the Lakhmids were allied to the Sasanians. While the long war weakened both the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires, the two Arab groups gained more and more power, especially when they were joined by other Arab factions. In time, they swept through the Levant and took control of the major centers of influence, including Jerusalem and Damascus.

At first, the two great 7th century Umayyad caliphs, Muawiya and 'Abd al-Malik were both Christians, but apparently anti-Trinitarian Christians. Shortly after this time (around 731), John of Damascus, who worked under 'Abd al-Malik, referred to this new sect that had grown out of Christian roots as the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites." Is it possible that this progression may represent a change in belief from non-Orthodox views of Jesus Christ to a nascent anti-Trinitarian belief?

To answer this question, this paper will utilize archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, and non-Muslim eye-witness accounts to make the case that Islam developed from anti-Trinitarian Christians who revered Jesus Christ as their prophet (the "chosen one"), but did not believe that he could be God himself.

The Claims made by the Standard Islamic Narrative

Over a century ago, the historian Ernest Renan (1823-1892) claimed that “Islam was born in the full light of history” in contrast to the uncertainty that he believed surrounded the life of Jesus. Through the study of medieval Islamic chronicles, biographies, and stories of Muhammad written by Muslims, especially the sayings of Muhammad passed on down through the Hadith, Renan and other scholars of his time were confident that the early history of Islam could be collected with confidence and reconstructed to give an accurate account of Muhammad and the formation of Islam as well as the revealed word of Allah through the Qur’an. From this material they determined that Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 AD and died in Medina in 632 AD, that he was already a revered prophet and a model of moral conduct for his followers, that the

Qur’an as a revealed book was written down in Arabic within 20 years of Muhammad’s death, and that Islam as a religion was fully formed by the time Muhammad died. However, the reality is that this information came from sources written over 150 to 200 years after the death of Muhammad. Due to this late date, Robert Spencer surmises that “the more one looks at the origins of Islam, the less one sees.”¹

Latest Developments in Islam

Indeed, based on recent research, we are learning that the Muhammad of traditional Islam was probably an invention of a later Arab leader, that the Qur’an was probably not collected and written down until the early 8th century (from many sources, including Christian and Jewish liturgy), and that Northern Arabia was likely the birthplace of Islam instead of Mecca, which was probably not established until the end of the 7th century. Let us now turn to the evidence that supports these conclusions.

1. Evidence of an 8th Century Qur’an

John Wansbrough, in his *Quranic Studies*, suggests that the Qur’an was collected from scattered writings generations after it was supposedly written down: “Such analysis indicates, rather, the existence of independent, possibly regional, traditions incorporated more or less intact into the canonical compilation, itself the product of expansion and strife within the Muslim community.”²

The Standard Islamic Narrative states that the Qur’an was written down within 20 years of Muhammad’s death (by 650 AD). However, there is strong evidence that demonstrates that the Qur’an was not completed until well into the 8th century. Stephen Shoemaker, in his book *Creating the Qur’an*, provides provocative evidence that the Qur’an is not a 7th century document. He argues, “On the basis of the available historical evidence, we conclude that the Qur’an’s final composition into the canonical form that has come down to us today seems to have taken place around the turn of the eighth century under the direction of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and his viceroy al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf.”³ Chase Robinson concurs: “There is in

¹ Robert Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam’s Obscure Origins* (Bombardier Books, Post Hill Press, NY, 2021), 2.

² John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 21.

³ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an* (Oakland, CA: University of California, 2022), 13.

fact a substantial body of evidence, from both inside and outside the Islamic tradition, identifying ‘Abd al-Malik as the one who, with the assistance of al-Ḥajjāj, standardized the Qur’an in the unvarying form that has come down to us today.”⁴

In regard to the Canonical textus receptus of the Qur’an, Shoemaker claims “The bewildering confusion and complexity of the early Islamic memory of the Qur’an’s formation ... only reaches some level of clarity once we recognize ‘Abd al-Malik as the primary agent responsible for producing and enforcing the canonical textus receptus of the Qur’an. Under his supervision, a team of scholars wove together and honed the various sacred traditions that had entered circulation among Muhammad’s followers during the seventh century, creating a new imperial Qur’an that was imposed across the caliphate, displacing its antecedents in the process, often by force.”⁵

Shoemaker admits, however, that other scholars claim that ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj only made minor improvements, such as adding diacritical marks.⁶ On the other hand, Shoemaker argues, “Regardless of whether we embrace such a hypothesis or not, numerous reports from the early Islamic tradition indicate that the changes to the Qur’anic text introduced at the direction of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj were in fact substantial.”⁷ For example, Shoemaker states that “Déroche, through careful paleographic and codicological study, has confirmed that the earliest extant Qur’ans were in fact produced in the imperial chancery during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik.”⁸ In a sense, then, Shoemaker concludes that “the Qur’an is a revision of an older Christian text.”⁹

In addition, Shoemaker reminds his readers, “There is a well-attested tradition that al-Ḥajjāj sent codices containing his newly standardized text of the Qur’an to the various imperial centers of the caliphate — Egypt, Damascus, Medina, Mecca, Kufa, and Basra ... exactly as ‘Uthmān was said to have ordered in the canonical narrative.”¹⁰ In response to his critics, Shoemaker clarifies that “the earliest non-Islamic sources that refer to Islamic sacred writings similarly describe these texts as existing in a fragmentary and independent state even as late as the beginning of the eighth century, when the Qur’an was first brought together under ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.”¹¹

Shoemaker even demonstrates that careful radiometric dating of manuscripts support his research: “Nevertheless, a more careful analysis of the data from the radiometric analysis of these manuscripts belies this misplaced certainty, and in fact the early manuscripts and their radiocarbon datings, when properly understood, are most consistent with the canonical Qur’an’s origins under ‘Abd al-Malik.”¹²

John of Damascus

Shoemaker realizes that John of Damascus (675-750), who worked as the chief tax collector under ‘Abd al-Malik, documented some of the evidence that supports Shoemaker’s

⁴ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 43.

⁵ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 259.

⁶ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 44.

⁷ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 49.

⁸ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 68.

⁹ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 248.

¹⁰ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 45.

¹¹ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 50.

¹² Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 14.

assertions in his treatise on the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, which was the 100th aberrant religious practice summarized in the section of John’s masterpiece, the Fount of Knowledge. Shoemaker noted,

“In a section of this treatise dedicated to cataloging various religious errors, John includes Muhammad’s followers, whom he considers to be little more than another variety of Christian heresy, naming them the “Ishmaelites.””¹³ The importance of this observation is that Shoemaker realizes that John was documenting an important phase in the development of a religious movement that was transforming earlier belief systems into a new religion. According to Shoemaker,

Islam was still a work in progress that was trying to find its way among the various monotheisms of the late ancient Near East , and John’s account provides a precious witness to how this process was still unfolding in his day before his own eyes. Indeed , it is likely that John would have been better informed than most Muslims regarding the affairs of the caliphate, including any official doctrines or scriptures that they were attempting to propagate.¹⁴

Indeed, with John’s position as the chief tax collector in Damascus under ‘Abd al-Malik , he would have been aware of the movement away from Trinitarian Christianity. Shoemaker agrees and writes,

In any case, John would have known well what was going on inside the caliphate at this time, and it surely stands as no mere coincidence that he identifies significant portions of the Qur’an as separate writings, seeming to confirm the conditions implied by al-Ḥajjāj’s speech. Clearly, we must conclude, the sacred Ishmaelite writings that John knew in this era and describes in his account of their beliefs “cannot have been the Qur’an as we know it in its present form.”¹⁵

However, John, who probably wrote this treatise in the early 740s, only seemed to be aware of a small portion of what would later become the Qur’an.¹⁶ Instead of a single book, John seems to be aware of only four separate “writings,” (graphe), which he names as The Woman, The Table, The Heifer, and one that does not appear in the Qur’an as The She-Camel. The fact that these were still separate writings rather together in a book, and especially since John included a long narrative that concerned the antics of a camel that belittled the beliefs of the Ishmaelites, seems to strongly indicate that the Qur’an was still in the process of being gathered together and edited.¹⁷ Therefore, Shoemaker concludes, “On this basis alone, it seems highly unlikely that the Qur’an as we now have it had been completely fixed by the turn of the eighth century, when John, who again was extremely well-informed and well-connected, wrote his description of the writings that Muhammad’s followers ascribed to him and revered as sacred scripture.”¹⁸ For many Christians at that time, like John of Damascus, this new religion was understood as just a heresy of Christianity with anti-Trinitarian beliefs and a false prophet.

¹³ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 50.

¹⁴ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 51.

¹⁵ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 51.

¹⁶ Daniel Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 91.

¹⁷ Daniel Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims*, 106-110.

¹⁸ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 52.

The Role of Al-Ḥajjāj

If the Qur'an was not yet standardized by the time that John of Damascus wrote in the early to mid-700s, what is the likely scenario for its compilation? As mentioned above, Shoemaker believes that 'Abd al-Malik's right-hand man, Al-Ḥajjāj was the one tasked with collecting the material that would in time make up the Qur'an. As a way of verifying this view, Shoemaker refers to one of the earliest contemporary non-Islamic sources to "confirm the Qur'an's composition and standardization under 'Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj." Using the letters of the Byzantine emperor Leo III (ruled 717-41) and the Umayyad caliph Umar II (717-20), Shoemaker highlights a section where Leo, as he discusses the subject of the Trinity, exposes the Qur'an as a collection of material overseen by al-Ḥajjāj: "But you are yourself wont to make such falsifications, especially in the case of a certain al-Ḥajjāj, who was appointed governor of Persia by you, who gathered all your ancient books and wrote another according to his taste and distributed it throughout all your lands."¹⁹

From this exchange, Shoemaker proposes that, "Al-Ḥajjāj himself had died just over a decade before this in 714, and his efforts to compose and disseminate the standard version of the Qur'an presumably took place during the two decades from 694–714, while he served as viceroy in Iraq first for 'Abd al-Malik and then for his son al-Walid (705–15)."²⁰ Therefore, Shoemaker concludes, "Clearly, according to this witness, the final composition and edition of the Qur'an was achieved by al-Ḥajjāj. While others may have made earlier efforts to gather Muhammad's teachings together, it was al-Ḥajjāj who produced the final authoritative version of the Islamic sacred text."²¹

Another indication that the Qur'an was probably not a 7th century compilation is the lack of evidence that the Qur'an was known before the time of al-Ḥajjāj. Therefore, after summarizing some of the 7th century non-Muslim sources, Shoemaker concludes, "None of these first-century witnesses so much as mentions any sort of sacred writing used in any capacity at all by Muhammad's followers."²²

2. Evidence that the Early Believers were not Muslims

If the Arabs who took control of the Middle East in the 7th century were not yet called "Muslim," then who were they and what were their beliefs? Shoemaker, who still holds loosely to an historic figure named Muhammad, believes that Muhammad and his followers do not seem to have conceived of themselves initially as "a separate religious confession distinct from others" during the first several decades of their movement's existence. Instead, the earliest "Islamic" community appears to have been a loosely organized confederation of Abrahamic monotheists "who shared Muhammad's intense belief in one God and in the impending arrival of the Last Day, and who joined together to carry out what they saw as the urgent task of establishing righteousness on earth — at least within their own community of Believers, and, when possible, outside it — in preparation for the End."²³

¹⁹ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, 53.

²⁰ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, 54.

²¹ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, 55.

²² Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, 57.

²³ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, 59, Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 87.

Fred Donner, a leading scholar of early Islam, was one of the first to refer to this community as the “muminun,” or *believers*.²⁴ According to Donner’s theory, he believes that Jews and Christians were considered to be among these believers as long as they subscribed to the belief in One God and the Last Day. Donner also believes that this Believers movement redefined itself as the distinct monotheistic confession known as Islam around 700 AD during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik.²⁵ Furthermore, Donner

contends that “Islam,” as a formal confessional religious identity, did not exist until at least a century after Muhammad’s death, but that the community he founded developed around the idea of Islam, “submission,” to the law of the one Abrahamic God, and that confessional identity was irrelevant (i.e., individuals could come submit to God’s law through any of its successive revelations, from the Torah to the Gospels to the Qur’an). Any “believer” (mu’min) in the unity of God and the imminent approach of Judgment Day (yawm al-din), and who accepted Muhammad’s leadership, could be a part of the Believers’ Movement, whether he or she were a Jew, a Christian, or neither.²⁶

On the other hand, Karel Steenbrink concludes that Crone, in her book *Hagarism*, rejected the traditional Muslim historiography and focused on Christian, Jewish, and other sources for the rise of Islam and reconstructed it as a socio-political and religious movement of Palestine that stressed an eschatological message.²⁷ If we ask if the invaders were welcome, Steenbrink concludes that

The ease of the Arab conquests themselves suggests that the invading armies did not act, and were not perceived, as conquerors practicing an alien or even heretical faith, but that they found support or at least quick acquiescence among the Jewish and Christian populations they conquered; perhaps the invaders promised more freedom of worship to breakaway Christian sects than Constantinople had provided, or maybe the disaffected and impoverished of all religious affiliations appreciated the movement’s egalitarianism.²⁸

Shoemaker also recognizes that there seems to have been tolerance for other faiths and writes that,

Prior to ‘Abd al-Malik’s rule, the caliphate appears to have shown a remarkable degree of tolerance for other monotheist faiths; and, as noted above, there is even good evidence to suggest that they were welcomed within the fold of the Believers’ religious community, even as they remained in their own religious faiths Whether or not one agrees entirely with this hypothesis, the evidence on which it rests — which is substantial, particularly given the limitations of what we know about earliest Islam — indicates fairly broad

²⁴ Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 57.

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koVaxbWBlr4&t=25s>, talk given at the Nina Maria Gorrissen lecture at the American Academy of Berlin on 31 Jan., 2019.

²⁶ <https://fx-companion.com/2013/05/21/islamic-history-part-7-alternative-theories-of-the-early-islamic-community/>

²⁷ <http://islamicmanuscripts.info/reference/articles/Steenbrink-2010-Origins.pdf> (Karel Steenbrink, “The New Quest for the Origins of Islam”)

²⁸ Karel Steenbrink, “New Orientalist Suggestions on the Origins of Islam” (The Journal of Rotterdam Islamic and Social Sciences, Vol. 1, 2010).

tolerance and inclusion of other monotheists within the early history of the Believers movement.²⁹

When we realize that these “believers” (*muminun*) were not referred to as “Muslims” until well into the 8th century (741AD), and we recognize that there is mounting evidence that followers of different faiths (Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism) participated in the governance of the early Umayyad period, then it is reasonable to accept the view that the early believers were not Muslims but rather believers in a common cause.

3. Evidence of Arian-like Anti-Trinitarian Beliefs

A number of researchers dealing with the origin of Islam have wondered if the later anti-Trinitarian incursion into what became Islam developed from a form of Arianism or “like-Ariaism.” Even though the view of Arius on the divine nature of Jesus was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, this heretical view persisted for centuries after, especially in the eastern portions of the Byzantine empire where the Abbasid dynasty had its roots. Most of what Arius wrote was destroyed, but the essence of his belief is found in a letter to his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia:

But we say and believe and have taught, and do teach, that the Son is not unbegotten, nor in any way part of the unbegotten; and that he does not derive his subsistence from any matter; but that by his own will and counsel he has subsisted before time and ages as perfect as God, only-begotten and unchangeable, and that before he was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established, he was not.³⁰

Essentially, Arius considers Jesus as a unique creation of God, but definitely one who had a beginning and therefore separate from the eternal nature of God.

There are verses in the Qur’an that support a similar view of Jesus and therefore refute the belief in God as a triune God.

...The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not "Three" - Cease! (it is) better for you! - Allah is only One Allah. Far is it removed from His Transcendent Majesty that He should have a son. (4:171, Pickthall)

They have certainly disbelieved who say, “**Allah is the third of three.**” And there is no god except one God. And if they do not desist from what they are saying, there will surely afflict the disbelievers among them a painful punishment. (5:73)

In one sense, these verses may be interpreted as refuting a belief in tritheism, which is the belief in three Gods rather than the correct understanding of the Christian Trinity, which is One

²⁹ Stephen Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur’an*, 64.

³⁰ Arius of Alexandria's Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia (circa AD 300)

God who is one essence in three persons. In regard to the verses above, Donner places the writing of these anti-Trinitarian verses in the mid-Umayyad years during the time of ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705). Donner notes that “The Qur’an’s stridently anti-trinitarian passages certainly would fit well into the program of ‘Abd al-Malik and his advisers to emphasize Muhammad and the Qur’an, to make clear that Jesus was only a prophet, and boldly to proclaim Islam as a distinct religious confession.”³¹

When the Dome of the Rock is considered later, the discussion on the developing anti-Trinitarian views found in the Qur’an and from the time of ‘Abd al-Malik will be developed more. For the time being let us consider the research of a scholar who claims that the Qur’an was first a Christian document. Gunter Lüling was a German protestant theologian and linguist who realized that much of the text of the Qur’an came from Syriac Christian hymnody that was transliterated into Arabic and then collected in what became the Qur’an. The subtitle of his book, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, reads *The Rediscovery and reliable Reconstruction of a comprehensive pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal hidden in the Koran under earliest Islamic Reinterpretations*. In other words, Lüling “maintains that the original Qur’an was not an Islamic text at all but a pre-Islamic Christian document. . . . Lüling believes that the Qur’an reflects the theology of a non-Trinitarian Christian sect that left traces on Islamic theology, notably in its picture of Christ and its uncompromising Unitarianism.”³²

If this is accurate, then it means that the movement that started out as a community of “believers” in various monotheistic faith traditions evolved into a unitarian belief that honored Jesus as a prophet of God, but denied his deity and therefore espoused anti-Trinitarian views.

4. Evidence that Mecca Did Not Exist in the Time of Muhammad

Muslims claim that Muhammad was born in Mecca and the earliest parts of the Qur’an were revealed to him there. Indeed, without Mecca the whole story of Muhammad would have to be re-evaluated and the very foundations of Islam would have to be questioned. However, recent archaeological and historical research calls into question whether Mecca even existed in the traditional time of Muhammad (570-632 AD). There are no archaeological artifacts from Mecca until the 8th century AD, the first direct mention of Mecca in external literature occurs in 741 AD, and the first time Mecca is listed on a map of the Middle East was 900 AD. In addition, the geographical descriptions of the city of the prophet in the Qur’an do not match up with the barren landscape found in Mecca. In fact, the presence of grazing lands, animals, abundant water, and olive trees depict a Mediterranean climate such as would be found in the city of Petra. Speaking of Petra, the qiblas, or the direction of prayer in the mosques, apparently pointed toward Petra rather than Mecca until 724 AD, over 100 years after Muhammad is said to have escaped from Mecca to Medina. In fact, the pilgrimage to Mecca was apparently not established until the Abbasids had taken over (750 AD).³³ The original pilgrimage was to Jerusalem.

Indeed, if Mecca did not exist in the early 7th century, then who was Muhammad and from where did he come?

³¹ Fred Donner, “Early Muslims and People of the Book,” *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, Herbert Berg, ed., (Routledge Handbooks, 2018), 189. Note: Shoemaker states that Donner has become acceptant of a later time for the formation of the Qur’an under the guidance of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj.

³² Robert Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist*, 13.

³³ *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, Herbert Berg, ed., (Routledge Handbooks, 2018), 315.

5. Evidence that Muhammad Did Not Exist in the 7th century

Meaning of MHMD

Nothing is known of Muhammad until the late 7th century, from within Arab sources, until the Dome of the Rock was built in 691-2 and the letters MHMD were etched on the wall inside. In addition, much of what we know of Muhammad was written down hundreds of years later, and hundreds of miles away in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Interestingly, the earliest reference to a person named Muhammad may be nothing more than a later redaction possibly initiated during the time of 'Abd al-Malik. In addition, this new evidence from archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, and early non-Muslim sources may also reveal a very different use of MHMD. When we consider that the first coin to mention Muhammad was minted by 'Abd al-Malik in 692 AD, and the first inscription with Muhammad's name on it is not until 690 AD, then the reason for this late association could indicate that the term "Muhammad" simply mean the "Praised One," or the "Chosen one." This makes sense when we realize that the earliest discovered use of the term MHMD goes back to the 13th century BC in Mesopotamia and referred to the quality of gold at its highest level of purity: "desirable, precious thing," best, selected," or "choicest of, chosen."³⁴

Therefore, according to the Inarah Institute scholars, which includes Volker Popp, the beginning of Islam was a movement led by 'Abd al-Malik to unite all the Christians of the Arabian Empire under Jesus who would be conceived as Abd-Allah, the servant of God and known as the *muhammad* ("praised one"). This move would be similar to the position of Arius who claimed that Jesus was a created being ("Like-Arian"). Later, we will see how this view of Jesus was promoted through the minting of coins and also etched on the walls of the Dome of the Rock in the time of 'Abd al-Malik. Could it be, then, that at this time Jesus was praised as the "chosen one" who, as God's messenger and prophet (but not son), would lead the community of believers to reach the Middle East with a message of hope in a time when many believed the end times were upon them?

6. Evidence that the Arabs Were Already Part of the Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine period began with the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 when the last Western emperor was overthrown. However, the Roman Empire's eastern capital, Constantinople, was founded in 330 AD, and some say this was the beginning of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine Christianity was Orthodox, but other Christian views in Northern Arabia and the Levant were held by Nestorians and Miaphysites (Jacobites). Already present in this area were two Arab kingdoms known as the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids.

The Ghassanids were an Arab tribe that emigrated from Yemen in the early 3rd century to the Levant where many converted to Christianity. The Ghassanids also became a client state to the Byzantine Empire and fought alongside them against the Persian Sassanids and their Arab vassals, the Lakhmids. They were known as Syrian Arabs and often referred to as "Saracens." The Ghassanids favored Miaphysitism, and their promotion of this simpler monotheism may have opened the door for Islam.

³⁴ Volker Popp, *Early Islam: A Critical Reconstruction Based on Contemporary Sources*, Ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig (NY: Prometheus Books, 2013), 15.

The Lakhmids emigrated from Yemen in the 2nd century and comprised an Arab kingdom in Southern Iraq and Eastern Arabia with al-Hira as their capital (300 -602 AD). They were known as Mesopotamian Arabs and often referred to as “Ishmaelites.” They were often clients of the Sasanian Empire, especially in the Byzantine/Sasanian wars. Lakhmid Christians followed the Nestorian views on the nature of Jesus Christ.

Nestorius (d. 450) argued that Jesus had two distinct natures, one divine and one human, contained in two distinct persons that were somehow united in Jesus Christ. This view was declared heretical in the Council of Ephesus (431 AD). Nestorianism became the theological view of most Christians living in the Sasanian Empire and it is still represented by the theology of the Assyrian Church of the East.

Miaphysitism holds that Christ was both human and divine but that these were united in one single nature. This was rejected as a heresy in the Council of Chalcedon (451). In contrast, the Orthodox view is that Jesus Christ has two natures, human and divine, but that these are united in a single person. Today, Miaphysitism is the dominant theology in the Coptic Church in Egypt as well as the Syriac Orthodox Church. Over time, both the Nestorian view of Christ as well as the Miaphysite view of Christ have ameliorated their positions enough to fit into an acceptable doctrinal position.

| Comparison | | |
|---|------------------|--|
| <u>Miaphysitism</u> | | Nestorianism |
| 2P → 1N | | 2N → 2P |
| Human nature absorbed into his divinity | | Two loosely-united natures, divine and human |
| Key | Orthodox | Arianism |
| N = Nature | Christianity | 1N → 1P |
| P = Person | 2N → 1P | Christ is not God |
| | Hypostatic union | |

By way of comparison, Chalcedonian theology was the orthodoxy for the Byzantine empire centered in Constantinople. Around the time of the formation of Islam, Miaphysite churches were heavily persecuted by imperial authorities. Patriarchs were even tasked with converting or executing Miaphysites as heretics. Nestorians were also persecuted, but since they were mostly out of reach in Persia they were able to avoid most of the persecution. Because of the persecution by the dominant Orthodox church, the non-Chalcedonian Christian communities had no love for their fellow Byzantine Chalcedonian Christians.

During the late 6th century and into the early 7th century there was war between the two superpowers, the Byzantines and the Sasanians. One of the main reasons they periodically went to war with each other was for control over trade or control over Syria and Iraq. In the earlier

phase of their fighting, the Byzantines had a major setback when the Bubonic plague of Justinian in 541-542 claimed the lives of 25 million under Byzantine rule. After a pause in their disputes, the assassination of emperor Maurice of the Byzantines by a rival named Phocas prompted a renewed threat from the Persian forces in 602. The Sasanian ruler, Khosrau II, took advantage of the loss of Maurice and by 621 had conquered Palestine and Egypt and controlled large swaths of Byzantine territory. However, in 622 Heraclius had a devastating victory over the Persians and gave his Arab vassals, the Ghassanids, more autonomy at this time. This passing of the baton to the Arab Ghassanids in 622 may better represent the phrase “year of the Arabs” than the historically undocumented year of the *hijra* involving Muhammad according to Muslim traditions.³⁵ However, in time Heraclius’ Byzantine army invaded Mesopotamia in 627 and by 628 his army trounced the Persians so severely that Khosrau was overthrown by his own generals. This not only brought an end to the fighting, but the long war brought exhaustion and disillusion to both forces.

One scholar writes,

Needless to say that by the end of this conflict these two formerly dominant empires were shells, ripe to be defeated by a new player on the geopolitical scene. The Persians had expended enormous blood and treasure on this enterprise, and were totally beaten by Heraclius. Their armies were decimated, their treasury empty, the people resentful of the heavy taxes that had been levied to pay for an unsuccessful war, and Khosrow II’s deposition brought about a period of huge turmoil around the throne, with various claimants and their backers fighting amongst each other and no political stability whatsoever.³⁶

In the end, the only ones who made out from this long dispute were the Arab vassals who now had the land open to them after the Byzantines retreated back to Constantinople and the Sasanians were too devastated to engage. Since both the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids had new opportunities to expand their kingdoms throughout North Arabia, the Levant, and Persia, they also had authority to tax the people under their rule. In addition, since their taxes were more lenient than that of the Byzantines and the Sasanians, at least in the beginning, and the Arab warriors mainly resided in garrison towns outside the cities, their new subjects were generally happier than they were when they were under their former rulers.

7. Evidence of a New Christian Movement

Mu’awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (597-680), was the first bona-fide Arab leader and “caliph”³⁷ and it was under his leadership that the Arabs were unified and swarmed over the land. One of the most significant things about Mu’awiya was that he was probably a Christian. There is an inscription at a bath in Gadara, Jordan, around 633 AD with a cross at the beginning of the text. There are also coins minted during Mu’awiya’s rule (663 AD) that had the figure holding a large cross with one arm and an orb with a cross in the other hand. In addition, there is a cross on the

³⁵ *Routledge Handbook*, 313.

³⁶ Islamic History: The pre-Islamic World, <https://fx-companion.com/2013/05/05/islamic-history-part-2-the-pre-islamic-world/>

³⁷ The first four “Rashidun caliphs” may have been minor historical leaders or mostly made up in later writings.

reverse side over the denomination amount. Muawiya was known as the “Commander of the **Faithful**” (The title “Caliph” was not yet in use). This may indicate that the Umayyad Empire at this time was Christian in some way.

Cross

Was Mu’awiya a Christian?



Greek Muawiya inscription of Hammat Gader, 663 AD

The coin of Mu’awiya’s rule had the cross on it (663 AD)



Volker Popp, a scholar with the Inarah group, posits that,

The situation at the time of Mu’awiya was not a conflict between Arabian-Islamic conquerors and a Byzantine-Christian emperor, as the later, historicizing literature of the Abbasid period would have its readers believe. Rather, as shown by documents in the form of inscriptions by the Arabian rulers, the conflict involved the Christians of the former Byzantine east – natural allies of the Nestorian Christians of Iran and under the leadership of Arabian Christians of Iran – on the one side, and the Christians of the emperor in Constantinople (as leader of Greco-Roman Christianity) on the other. The conflict played out as war of religion between the eastern devotees of a Semitic understanding of Christianity and the defenders of the Hellenistic and Roman counter-development.³⁸

Under the leadership of Mu’awiya there was a general unity that developed through a militaristic expansion, but it was still built upon the model of the Persians and lacked the ability to accomplish the unity that would bring the various religions together under a common belief. However, this is where ‘Abd Al-Malik was able to succeed.

Popp says that under ‘Abd al-Malik, “A new Christian movement, intended to unite all the Christians of the Arabian Empire, was announced by the demand that an understanding of Jesus as the Muhammad be adopted. This demand was preceded by another, namely, that Jesus

³⁸ Volker Popp, *Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into its Early History*, Ohlig, Karl-Heinz and Gerd-R. Puin, eds.(NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), 48.

be conceived as *Abd Allah*.”³⁹ Popp then relates how this term, *Abd Allah*, may have been used as a unifying program to unite the Christians in the former Byzantine east and the former eastern Sasanian empire. He also believes that, “the idea of Jesus as *Abd Allah* is reminiscent of the position of Arius, who came from Antioch; it also can be found later, in the inscription in the Dome of the Rock.”⁴⁰

According to Popp, “‘Abd al-Malik wanted to strengthen the Arabian empire from within by erecting an Arabian Church of the Arabian Empire.”⁴¹ Furthermore, “His goal was to unify, under the banner of the Muhammad motto, the adherents of the old Syrian theology who had been driven into the East.”⁴² The new religion was neither Nestorian nor Arian, but it was influenced by the unorthodox views of Jesus represented by both belief systems, as well as the apocalyptic urgency of Abrahamic Syrian Arab Christianity that promoted orthopraxy over orthodoxy.

‘Abd al-Malik may have been an anti-Trinitarian Christian, but according to a number of revisionist scholars his use of “Muhammad” is a reference to Jesus as the “chosen one” or “praised one.” One of these revisionist scholars, Karl-Heinz Ohlig,⁴³ also claims that this “chosen one” is the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary. In addition, Ohlig claims the inscriptions ‘Abd al-Malik had inscribed on the Dome of the Rock “actually concern Christian texts and symbols, which document Syrian-Arabian theological ideas.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Ohlig also believes that ‘Abd al-Malik was “the first to found the Arabian church in Jerusalem as a foil to the church of the emperor, as a defender of orthopraxy against Orthodoxy.”⁴⁵

These claims by the Inarah Institute, as well as a host of other revisionist scholars, are devastating for those who hold to the Standard Islamic Narrative. Indeed, if Islam grew out of a “believers movement” that held Jesus as the “Muhammad,” better understood as the “chosen one” of God, or the “praised one,” then the whole picture of Islam refocuses as an Arab movement that gained its independence from the Byzantines and the Sasanians allowing it in its earlier phase to admit Arab Jews, Christians, and others in its formation, but later breaking away from the Jews and the Trinitarian Christians as the leaders, such as ‘Abd al-Malik, began to impose an anti-Trinitarian dogma that rejected Jesus as God, but still considered him as the prophet to follow. Yet, this is where the evidence from archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, and non-Muslim sources from the 7th century seem to lead us.

8. Evidence that the First Leaders of the New Movement Were Christians

We already noted that the coins minted under Mu’awiya had crosses on them. It is also known that many of the Arabs from the Ghassanid and Lakhmid tribes were either Miaphysite or Nestorian Christians. These were the Arabs that inhabited the area of Northern Arabia and the Levant, as well as the Mesopotamian and Persian lands. After 628, as the Byzantines moved back to the north to defend their capitol and the Sasanians struggled to maintain their government, the Arabs who already lived in these areas began to assume more control of the

³⁹ Volker Popp, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 52.

⁴⁰ Volker Popp, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 52.

⁴¹ Volker Popp, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 57.

⁴² Volker Popp, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 57.

⁴³ Karl-Heinz Ohlig is the chairman of the Inarah Institute for Research into the Early History of Islam and the Qur’an.

⁴⁴ Ohlig, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 9.

⁴⁵ Ohlig, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 21.

cities and towns and were actually welcomed by many of the people because at first the new rulers held back from making overbearing demands and even seemed to ease up on the amount of taxes that had to be paid. In addition, as the Believers Movement consisted of an alliance of Jewish, Christian, and perhaps even Semi-Arian Christian sects, those who had faced persecution under the rule of the Byzantines or the Persians now could practice their religious beliefs without the pressure and scrutiny of their former rulers. By the time of ‘Abd al-Malik , however, this sense of a new freedom began to dissipate as greater doctrinal demands were made on the various belief systems. First there was an ousting of the Jews, and then in time the Trinitarian Christians found themselves to also be cast aside as the leaders in ‘Abd al-Malik ’s government began to push an anti-Trinitarian view of God. They still espoused a monotheistic belief in God, but determined that God could not be three nor have a son. These pronouncements were made very clear through the inscriptions on the coins minted under the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik as well as the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock built in 691-2 AD.

While the earlier coins minted under ‘Abd al-Malik ’s rule portrayed the image of ‘Abd al-Malik in a similar fashion to the previous Byzantine coins, an early form of the Shahada began to appear on the coins from around the beginning of his reign (685 AD). However, the characteristic cross on the reverse side of the coin no longer portrayed an image of the cross, but rather was replaced by a staff. The Christians of the time refused to use these coins and the Byzantine emperor even brought his forces down to bear on the new Arab government. ‘Abd al-Malik was forced to pay tribute to the Byzantines, but he made his point. By 696 AD, the first coins were minted without any images and included both the Shahada and some Qur’anic-like verses. This alarmed the Byzantines, but by that time ‘Abd al-Malik had secured sufficient control over the area and now held the upper hand.

- **Abd al-Malik’s Coins [685-692]**
- **(Image of Abd al-Malik, with the ‘Shahada’)**



- Abd al-Malik’s Coins [696 ->]**
- (No images, and the ‘Shahada’, with Qur’anic verses)**



While the question of whether ‘Abd al-Malik was a Christian still remains, according to the evidence of the coins that were minted under his rule it is quite apparent that he believed in one God, and while he diminished the status of Jesus to only a human stature, very much as Arius had done centuries beforehand, he still considered Jesus to be the chosen prophet of God. In regard to this anti-Trinitarian view espoused by ‘Abd al-Malik Volker Popp writes, “The contemporary epigraphic materials allow one to reconstruct the contents of ‘Abd al-Malik ’s

da'wa (mission), namely, the understanding of Jesus as the *muhammad*, who as *rasul* is the apostle of the (Sasanian) Arabs.”⁴⁶

We can understand this view better when we explore the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock constructed during the rule of Abd al-Malik in 691-2.

9. Evidence that the Dome of the Rock was Originally a Christian Church

‘Abd al-Malik had the Dome of the Rock built in 691-2 AD. It employs the same Byzantine architecture as a number of churches built at that time. It did not have a *qibla*, or direction of prayer, as a mosque would have, nor was it used as a mosque. It was also built at a higher altitude overlooking the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which was the representative Byzantine church at that time. Some say that the purpose of building the Dome of the Rock in the environs of the previous Jewish temple and at a prominent height in comparison with the Byzantine church was to demonstrate that there was a new ruler and a new belief system that would replace the earlier beliefs of both the Jews and the Trinitarian Christians. The inscriptions that ‘Abd al-Malik had etched inside the Dome of the Rock provides strong evidence for this assessment as well as the foundation for a new way to view God and his prophet Jesus.

It is very evident that the inscriptions are against Jesus being the Son of God as well as belief in a trinitarian view of God. Notice that the following references are all “Qur’anic,” yet they all attack the Trinity as well as Jesus’ divinity:

- *“O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not “Three”. Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that he should have a son.” (Sura 4:171)*
- *“Praise be to God, Who hath not taken unto Himself a son, and Who hath no partner in the Sovereignty, nor hath He any protecting friend through dependence” (Sura 17:111)*
- *“There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate. Say: He is God, the One! God, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him. Muhammad is the Messenger of God” (Sura 112)*

Though some scholars view these verses as simply refuting the erroneous view called *tritheism*, which basically espouses the belief in three gods, others argue that these verses promote an explicit reference to the concept of *tawhid*, or the divine oneness of God. On the other hand, scholars at the Inarah Institute promote the idea that while the inscriptions assail the belief that God is a Trinity, they still hold to a type of Christianity that stresses the oneness of God and the exalted position of Jesus as the prime messenger of this one God. Volker Popp asserts that “According to the inscription in the Dome of the Rock, ‘Abd al-Malik’s Jesus is *Abdallah* (servant of God) and *Muhammad* (the praised one, [God’s] chosen one).”⁴⁷ Adding to this, Karl-Heinz Ohlig concludes that, “The inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock, actually

⁴⁶ Volker Popp, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 64.

⁴⁷ Volker Popp, *Early History of Islam*, 63.

concern Christian texts and symbols, which document Syrian-Arabian theological ideas: that God is one and single, and that the one he has sent (Jesus) is to be praised (*muhammad*).⁴⁸ Ohlig explains that the Syrian-Arabian theological ideas, or simply the beliefs of Arab-Christians, were even present in the year 622 AD, when they gained more autonomy from the Byzantines and the Sasanians, and then the Arabian-Christian tribal leaders, including the Umayyad leaders and even the early Abbasids were able to promote their form of Christianity as they gained more control of the Near East as well as North Africa.⁴⁹ Over time, however, there was apparently a detachment from the understanding of Jesus as the Muhammad (the “praised one”) and the stories began to include a Christian apostle-prophet named Muhammad. This seems to have taken place in the 8th century as the Abbasids gained more power over the empire and began to rewrite history in order to obliterate the memory of the Umayyad leaders who were then held with disdain. During this process, the Arabian-Christianity was apparently further transformed through the promotion of the person of Muhammad, especially through the explosion of stories comprising what would later make up the collections of the Hadith, until any remnant of the earlier Arab-Christian doctrine and the place of Jesus as the “chosen one” was lost in the tangled web of the new religion we now call “Islam.”

⁴⁸ Karl-Heinz Ohlig, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 9.

⁴⁹ Karl-Heinz Ohlig, *Hidden Origins of Islam*, 10.

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