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Temporal Gaps and Textual Parallels: Investigating the Chronology of Christian Apocryphal Intertexts of the Qur'ān

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Abstract

This study critically investigates the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Orientalist and Christian missionary thesis pioneered by figures such as W. St. Clair Tisdall and later C. F. Robinson, D. S. Margoliouth, and Thomas Carlyle, which posits that Qur'ānic narratives concerning Jesus (ʿĪsā) and Mary (Maryam) are direct, derivative borrowings from non-canonical Christian apocrypha and Gnostic Christological heresies. Utilizing a historical-critical and text-critical methodology, this paper evaluates the putative literary antecedents often cited in source-critical discourse, including the Protoevangelium of James, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and Basilidian docetism. The analysis reveals critical chronological, textual and historiographical fractures within the direct-borrowing paradigm. First, text-critical evidence demonstrates that several key apocryphal texts represent late, composite recensions or post-date the rise of Islam, while early Gnostic sects had virtually dissolved or re-assimilated into the orthodox Church centuries prior to the seventh-century Hijazi milieu. Second, drawing upon contemporary scholarship on Late Antique intertextuality and Arabic biblical translation history (notably Sidney H. Griffith), the paper demonstrates the complete absence of written Arabic biblical or apocryphal codices in pre-Islamic Arabia. Third, the study deconstructs the alternative oral transmission model, demonstrating the historical and chronological implausibility of alleged informants such as the monk Baḥīrā, Waraqah ibn Nawfal and Māriyah al-Qibṭiyyah (Coptic mary) whose arrival in 7 AH post-dates the revelation of the relevant Qur'ānic surahs. The study concludes that thematic parallels do not establish empirical literary dependence, affirming the structural and theological independence of the Qur'ānic corpus.

Keywords: *Christian Apocrypha, Source Criticism, Orientalism, Historiography, Wahy.*

Introduction

The pronounced focus on the origins of the Qur'ān that characterized nineteenth and early twentieth-century Western scholarship was deeply intertwined with the prevailing nineteenth-century intellectual climate of historicism and evolutionary theory. Within this paradigm, emergent religious traditions were presumed to be historically determined by antecedent developments, effectively precluding the possibility of absolute textual or religious originality. Operating from the entrenched assumption that Islam was an intrinsically derivative faith, Western-Christian and secular scholars sought to deconstruct the Qur'ānic corpus into imported Judeo-Christian components. This approach stood in stark contrast to the classical Islamic epistemological framework, which grounds the text unassailably in *wahy* (divine revelation). While

Muslim scholarship readily acknowledges that Islamic civilization historically absorbed and integrated intercultural elements from neighboring societies, it strictly delineates this socio-cultural synthesis from the foundational, transcendent core of revelation namely, the monotheistic conception of God, angelology, eschatology and prophetic narratives which Muslims hold to originate entirely with God rather than through horizontal textual borrowing. The resulting divergence between traditional Islamic theology and secular Orientalism established deep methodological and ideological fractures. As Muslim critics such as A. L. Tibawi have observed, Western scholarship often presupposed human authorship, reducing its inquiry to identifying narrative and linguistic parallels between the Qur'ān and prior Near Eastern traditions. However, parallels alone do not constitute empirical evidence of direct literary dependence or conscious borrowing; they may point toward a shared Late Antique milieu, a common Semitic heritage, or, from the Islamic theological vantage point, the single transcendent divine source inspiring successive prophets. Furthermore, rigorous historical discipline cannot definitively demonstrate that the Prophet Muhammad had direct access to prior written scriptures, especially given the fragmented and largely vanished historical records of pre-Islamic Arabia. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the search for specific religious origins crystallized into competing academic camps. The Jewish-influence thesis was pioneered by Abraham Geiger in his seminal 1833 work, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentum aufgenommen?* and subsequently expanded by scholars such as A. J. Wensinck, Charles Cutler Torrey, Julian Obermann, Abraham Katsh and S. D. Goitein. Concurrently, other orientalists including Julius Wellhausen, H. P. Smith, Tor Andrae, Richard Bell and Karl Ahrens argued for the primacy of Christian environments in shaping the Qur'ānic worldview. Yet, as critics like Johann Fück emphasized, this atomistic obsession with identifying external prototypes caused scholarship to lose sight of the overarching thematic, rhetorical and structural unity of the Qur'ān, arbitrarily dissecting the text into isolated fragments. More recent critical scholarship has challenged the normative assumption that earlier texts are inherently original while later texts are merely derivative. Scholars such as Marilyn Robinson Waldman have demonstrated that thematic parallels, such as the Joseph narrative, reflect distinct literary structures and theological objectives that warrant treating the biblical and Qur'ānic accounts as independent traditions. Similarly, Brannon M. Wheeler's re-examination of the Moses narrative (Q. 18:65–82) subverts the traditional trajectory of influence, arguing that later Jewish traditions may have incorporated motifs from the surrounding Islamic environment rather than vice versa. Consequently, contemporary research increasingly moves away from unilateral models of influence in favor of exploring multidirectional transmission, Late Antique intertextuality and the internal originality of the Qur'ānic text. A radical rupture in Qur'ānic studies occurred in the late 1970s with John Wansbrough's *Qur'ānic Studies* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (1978). Departing from traditional historical-philological approaches, Wansbrough applied literary criticism to posit that the Qur'ān was not the product of the seventh-century Hijaz, but rather a canonized collection arising from second-century AH sectarian polemics in Northern Arabia. While students and proponents of the Revisionist School including Andrew Rippin, Norman Calder, Gerald Hawting, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook adopted and adapted aspects of this scepticism, mainstream scholarship largely rejected Wansbrough's conclusions due to the absence of conclusive external evidence. Despite the shift in modern academia toward nuanced textual and intertextual frameworks, the earlier nineteenth- and early twentieth-century source-critical paradigms of Geiger, Nöldeke, Margoliouth and Tisdall continue to be repurposed in contemporary polemical discourse most notably in

anthologies compiled by polemicists such as "Ibn Warraq" and now Gabriel Said Reynold are demonstrating the enduring ideological legacy of the origin-hunting framework. Once it is established that this methodological paradigm persists today, a critical examination of its foundational premise becomes imperative. This approach ensures that core epistemological assumptions are directly addressed, rather than merely debating derivative or secondary formulations. Within the Christian context, this inquiry will undertake a historical-critical evaluation of those Christian sources traditionally alleged to constitute the subtext or primary source material of the Holy Qur'ān.

Part 1. Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha:

A prominent assertion among Western orientalist and Christian missionary commentators posits that select Qur'ānic accounts trace their origins directly to apocryphal Christian literature. Articulating this premise, John C. Blair observes:

"Much of Muhammad's teaching about the Person of Jesus was evidently taken from apocryphal sources."¹

According to W. St. Clair Tisdall's hypothesis, the primary textual antecedents for the Qur'ānic passages concerning Jesus and Mary are located within extra-canonical Christian apocryphal literature. He writes:

"From the careful examination of the whole subject dealt with in this chapter (i.e., The influence of Christianity and Christian Apocryphal books) we therefore conclude that the influence of true and genuine Christian teaching upon the Quran and upon Islam is general has been very slight indeed, while on the other hand apocryphal traditions and certain respects heretical doctrines have a claim to be considered as forming one of the original sources of Muhammadan faith."²

Tisdall contends that polemical elements challenging orthodox Christian doctrine were consciously and systematically integrated into the Qur'ānic text by the Prophet (peace be upon him).

"Muhammad was never brought into contact with pure Gospel Christianity; and it is largely to the false forms which the faith had then almost universally assumed that the rise of Islam is really due, since repulsion from these prevented Muhammad from ever really seeking to discover the truth contained in the Gospel and thus impelled him to found a new and anti-Christian religion."³

Tisdall contends that the Qur'ānic narrative corpus assimilated apocryphal traditions originating from marginal and heterodox Christian sects circulating in the Late Antique Near East. He writes:

"Muhammad having but an imperfect knowledge of the Gospel, learned from these people, who were all around him, what he believed to be the purport of the New Testament. It was his object to establish a faith which should embrace and unite all races of the Peninsula and the Christians among the rest. He therefore entered in the Qur'ān very much of the teaching and vain imaginations of these ignorant sects."⁴

Proponents of the source-critical hypothesis contend that key episodes within the Qur'ānic corpus find their textual antecedents in extra-canonical Christian apocrypha rather than NT:

1. Mary's early life and her dedication to temple service
2. The nativity of Jesus under the shelter of a palm tree
3. The infant Jesus speaking miraculously from the cradle
4. The breathing of life into birds fashioned from clay
5. Crucifixion of Jesus

1. Mary's Early Life and Her Dedication to Temple Service

Proponents of this source-critical perspective argue that this specific Qur'ānic narrative traces its origins to the extra-canonical work entitled the *Protoevangelium of James* (*Gospel of James*). In this regard, W. St. Clair Tisdall says:

"In an Arabic apocryphal book, called the History of our holy Father the Aged, the Carpenter (Joseph), there is given the following account of Mary as a child. Her parents took her to the Temple when three years old and she remained there nine years. Then when the Priests saw that the Holy Virgin had grown up, they spoke among themselves, Let us call a righteous man, one that fears the Lord, to take charge of Mary till the time of her marriage, that she may not remain in the Temple. But before that time when her parents brought her, a new occasion had arisen, of which we read as follows in the Protoevangelium."⁵

Second Perspective

Alternatively, this account is identified as having been adapted from the apocryphal *Coptic History of the Virgin*. Citing this specific tradition within his comparative framework, W. St. Clair Tisdall observes:

"When placed by Hanna in the Temple, Mary was fed there like the doves, as the angels of the Lord brought her food from the heavens. When she worshipped the Lord in the Temple, they did reverence to her and often brought her fruit from the Tree of Life, which she did eat with cheerfulness..... Mary lived in the Temple, a pure and holy worshipper, till twelve years of age. She had been her first three years in her parents' home and nine years in the Temple. Then the Priests seeing that she was growing up a virtuous and God-fearing maiden, consulted together, saying: "We must seek for a righteous God-fearing man to whom she may be given in marriage." And so having summoned the tribe of Judah together, they chose twelve men according to the names of each of the twelve tribes of Israel and the lot came out upon that good old man Joseph. Then when she became with child, Mary was summoned with Joseph before the High priest, who thus addressed her: O Mary, what is this thou hast done and debased thy soul: thou who in the Holy of holies feddest from the hand of an angel and heardest their hymns,what is this thou hast done? Weeping bitterly she answered: By the living God I swear that I am pure before him and have known no man."⁶

2. The Nativity of Jesus Under the Shelter of a Palm Tree:

Clair Tisdall posited that the narrative from the *History of the Nativity of Mary and the Saviour's Infancy* served as the source for the Qur'ānic account of Jesus's birth, remarking:

Mary, the Palm-tree, etc., we give an extract from an apocryphal book called the History of the Nativity of Mary and the Saviour's Infancy: Now on the third day after she had set out, Mary was wearied in the desert by the heat and asked Joseph to rest for a little under the shade of a palm-tree. So, he made haste and made her sit down beneath it. Then Mary looking up and seeing its branches laden with fruit, said, I desire if it were possible to have some of that fruit. Joseph answered: I wonder at what thou sayest, since thou must see how lofty the branches of the palm-tree are; and besides, I am anxious to get water, for all in my vessel is done and there is none anywhere about to fill it with. Just then the

child Jesus, looking up with a cheerful smile from his mother's bosom, said to the palm-tree: Send down thy branches here below, that my Mother may eat fresh fruit of thee. Forthwith it bent itself at Mary's feet and so they all ate of its fruit. When they had gathered all the fruit, it still remained bent, waiting for orders to arise. Then Jesus said: O palm-tree, arise with cheerfulness, be one of my Father's trees in Paradise; but with thy roots open the fountain beneath thee; and bring me here for my refreshment some of the water flowing from that fount. At once the tree became erect and began to pour from its roots water beautifully clear and sweet before them. So, when they saw the water, they were all filled with delight and drank of it with their cattle and servants, till they were satisfied and praised the Lord. Between this story, as told here and in the Qur'ān, there is just this divergence, that with the latter the Palm-tree appears at the time of the Messiah's birth, whereas this ancient Christian tale belongs to a somewhat later period, namely, after the journey of Joseph and Mary into Egypt."⁷

3. The Infant Jesus Speaking Miraculously from The Cradle

Scholars advancing the borrowing thesis contend that the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* (*Gospel of Pseudo-Thomas*) constitutes the direct textual antecedent for the parallel Qur'ānic account.

"The origin of this legend is not far to seek. We have already seen that one of the apocryphal Gospels represents Christ, when on His journey to Egypt in His infancy, as addressing the palm-tree and bidding it how down and permit His Mother to pluck its fruit. But probably the source from which Muhammad borrowed the incident is Injilu't Tufuliyyah, better known as the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy."⁸

Reinforcing this line of argument, W. St. Clair Tisdall additionally contends:

"This book of the Childhood was translated into Arabic from the Coptic original and must have been known to the Prophet's Coptic hand-maiden, Mary. From her he must have heard the tale and believing it to have come from the Gospel, adopted it with some little change and so entered it in the Qur'ān."⁹

4. The Breathing of Life into Birds Fashioned from Clay

This Qur'ānic narrative is alleged to have been derived from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas the Israelite*. According to the author of *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān* (*The Sources of Islam*)¹⁰, this connection is demonstrated as follows:

"Such as these have nothing to do with the Gospel, but like those before of the cradle, palm-tree, etc., have been taken from imaginary and fabulous Christian writings, such as the following from a Greek story-book called The Gospel of Thomas the Israelite: The child Jesus, when five years of age, was playing on the road by a dirty stream of running water; and having brought it all together into ditches, immediately made it pure and clean; and all this by a single word. Then having moistened some earth, he made of it twelve sparrows. And it was the Sabbath day when he did these things. There were many other children playing with him. Now a Jew, seeing what Jesus did, that he was playing on the Sabbath day, forthwith went his way to his father Joseph; Behold, he said, thy son is at the stream of dirty water and having taken up some mud, hath made of it twelve sparrows and hath thus desecrated the

Sabbath. On this Joseph went to the spot and cried out: Why dost thou do these things on the Sabbath day which it is not lawful to do? Whereupon Jesus, clapping his hands at the sparrows, cried aloud to them, Go off! So, they, clucking, flew away. The Jews seeing it, were astonished and went and told their Rulers what they had seen Jesus do."¹¹

5. Crucifixion of Jesus

With respect to the crucifixion of Jesus (‘alayhi al-salām), the conventional exegetical stance maintains that he was spared crucifixion, with a substitute bearing his resemblance being crucified in his stead. Conversely, orientalist scholars investigating Qur’ānic narrative motifs argue that this docetic interpretation was appropriated from Gnostic Christological heresies. Articulating this polemical source-critical thesis, Tisdall observes:

"He gladly adopted the assertion of certain heresiarchs, with whose views in other respects he had little in common. Several of these had, long before Muhammad's time, denied the actual suffering of Christ. Irenaeus tells us with reference to the teaching of the Gnostic heretic Basilides, who flourished about A.D. 120, that, in speaking of Jesus, he taught his deluded followers "That He had not suffered; and that a certain Simon of Cyrene had been compelled to carry His cross for Him; and that this man was crucified through ignorance and error, having been changed in form by Him, so that it should be thought that he was Jesus himself."¹²

John C. Blair similarly identifies the provenance of this substitution’s motif within the apocryphal corpus, specifically locating it in the pseudo-epigraphic *Travels of the Apostles* (*Periodoi Apostolon* / *Acts of the Apostles* preserved in Byzantine heresiography). He asserts:

"The same idea is contained in an apocryphal work called the *Travels of the Apostles*, which Photius in his *Bibliotheca* refers to. It is asserted in this book that 'Christ had not been crucified, but another in His stead.'¹³

Part 2. Dating of Rabbinical and apocryphal Scriptures

In evaluating the distinct narrative details that the Qur’ān records regarding the life of Jesus (and the venerated persona of his mother Mary, W. St. Clair Tisdall and subsequent orientalist-missionary critics contest their transcendent, revelatory status (*wahy*). Instead, they posit a direct literary dependence upon non-canonical Christian traditions. The putative apocryphal corpora central to this source-critical claim comprise:

1. The *Protoevangelium of James* (Proto-Gospel of James)
2. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*
3. The *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy* (*Evangelium Infantiae Arabicum*)
4. The *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (*Liber de Infantia Mariae et Christi Salvatoris*)
5. Gnostic Christological heresies

The *Protoevangelium of James* (Proto-Gospel of James)

The *Protoevangelium Jacobi* conventionally designated in text-critical scholarship as the *Protoevangelium of James* or the *Infancy Gospel of James* is generally situated by patristic and historical-critical scholars within the mid-second century CE. Although critical consensus locates its original Greek composition in the late second century. The usable manuscripts are Greek and are not later than the tenth century AD. J.K. Elliott dates them:

"Most surviving Greek manuscripts of PJ are later than the tenth century."¹⁴

J. K. Elliott likewise underscores the ahistorical character and legendary status of these apocryphal traditions, noting:

"The historical value of the stories in PJ is insignificant. The names of Mary's parents, the names of Reuben, Zacharias and Samuel are all fictitious. Zacharias is wrongly identified with Zacharias of Matt. 23: 35. Simeon was not a high-priest. The water of jealousy was not administered to men. The oracular plate on the forehead is not known outside PJ. Other peculiar details include the contradiction of the angelic annunciation (12. 2, cf. u) and the warning given to the Magi not to go to Judea when they were already there (21. 4).² Such details do not necessarily indicate the author's use of variant sources; they may result from his own lack of interest in, or awareness of, such apparent inconsistencies."¹⁵

From a text-critical perspective, assigning the earliest extant manuscript of the *Protoevangelium of James* to the fourth century remains an estimate rather than a definitive dating. Critical work on this manuscript underwent significant editorial correction before being published in 1961; as Wilhelm Schneemelcher observes, "It was only with the discovery of the Papyrus Bodmer 5 (edition: M. Testuz. *Papyrus Bodmer V Nativité de Marie*, 1958; the papyrus is probably to be dated to the 4th cent., rather than to the 3rd, as by Testuz) that a new phase began in research into the Greek tradition. In 1961 E. de Strycker published his great investigation... in which he wrought the printed Greek texts and the versions into a text which was intended to present 'the most ancient form'. In the process the significance of PBodmer 5 was certainly rated very high, but it was not overestimated. Thus, de Strycker was able on the one hand to correct many errors in Testuz' edition and on the other to show that some development of the text had already preceded the Bodmer papyrus."¹⁶

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas

The original, pristine recension of the text remains entirely unrecovered in manuscript form, leaving the foundational archetype beyond direct empirical reconstruction:

"The version of the 2nd century is not yet possible. A final critical edition is still awaited. But even if such an edition should succeed in reconstructing a text underlying the later manuscripts and translations, the question still remains whether the original infancy gospel can be reconstructed at all and whether any statements about the date of composition will be possible."¹⁷

The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy (Evangelium Infantiae Arabicum)

Orientalist and missionary source critics have frequently asserted that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) possessed direct knowledge of these apocryphal traditions, alleging that they served as the literary precursor to specific Qur'ānic narratives:

"At any rate Mohammed was familiar with this tradition and adopted many of the legends into the Koran."¹⁸

Nevertheless, contemporary textual scholarship underscores that this narrative corpus concerning the lives of Mary and Jesus constitutes a secondary, composite recension that harmonized and reworked earlier apocryphal literature, notably the *Protoevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*:

"The Arabic Infancy Gospel or Arabic Life of Jesus is a composite apocryphal gospel that reworks traditions known from at least two other earlier apocryphal texts, the *Protoevangelium of James*, sometimes referred to as the *Infancy Gospel of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*."¹⁹

The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (Liber de Infantia Mariae et Christi Salvatoris)

Text-critical analysis demonstrates that this apocryphal narrative is a secondary Latin reworking of the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, historically dated by scholars to the eighth or ninth century CE:

"The Gospel of Ps.-Matthew is primarily a reworking of the Protoevangelium of James, to which Ps.-Matthew adds some 'unique' material, including in particular the story of Mary's encounter with the date palm during the flight into Egypt. It was long thought that the Gospel of Ps.-Matthew was quite late, having been composed only in the eighth or ninth century."²⁰

Gnostic Christological Heresies

The Qur'ānic denial of the crucifixion of Jesus and the substitution motif articulated through the phrase *shubbiha lahum* have long been categorized in Western orientalist polemics as direct borrowings from early Christian Gnostic heterodoxy. Presenting this source-critical hypothesis, W. St. Clair Tisdall writes:

"He gladly adopted the assertion of certain heresiarchs, with whose views in other respects he had little in common. Several of these had, long before Muhammad's time, denied the actual suffering of Christ. Irenaeus tells us with reference to the teaching of the Gnostic heretic Basilides, who flourished about A.D. 120, that, in speaking of Jesus, he taught his deluded followers 'That He had not suffered; and that a certain Simon of Cyrene had been compelled to carry His cross for Him; and that this man was crucified through ignorance and error, having been changed in form by Him, so that it should be thought that he was Jesus himself.'"²¹

From a rigorous historiographical standpoint, this transmission thesis is fundamentally flawed. The Basilidian and Valentinian schools, which flourished during the second century CE, were practically extinct or fully reabsorbed into orthodox patristic Christianity by the middle of the fifth century. Crucially, the historical record contains no documentary or epigraphic evidence demonstrating that Gnostic Christological doctrines were professed, transmitted, or institutionalized within seventh-century Hijazi society. Rejecting this presumed Gnostic lineage, J. M. Rodwell concedes:

"It has been supposed that Muhammad derived many of his notions concerning Christianity from Gnosticism and that it is to the numerous gnostic sects the Koran alludes when it reproaches the Christians with having 'split up their religion into parties.' But for Muhammad thus to have confounded Gnosticism with Christianity itself, its prevalence in Arabia must have been far more universal than we have any reason to believe it really was. In fact, we have no historical authority for supposing that the doctrines of these heretics were taught or professed in Arabia at all. It is certain, on the other hand, that the Basilidans, Valentinians and other gnostic sects had either died out, or been reabsorbed into the orthodox Church, towards the middle of the fifth century and had disappeared from Egypt before the sixth."²²

Part 3. Re-evaluation

The foundational premise underpinning orientalist scholarship on the Qur'ān has systematically contested its transcendent revelatory nature (*wahy*), reducing the text to a human composition authored by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Within this source-critical and reductionist framework, the redaction, thematic development and narrative trajectories most notably the prophetic and historical accounts (*Qaṣaṣ al-*

Anbiyā') are presumed to stem either from unmediated engagement with earlier Near Eastern scriptures or from oral transmissions provided by local informants. Abraham Geiger acknowledges that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) lacked direct textual access to the biblical corpus as well as any comprehensive familiarity with its internal manuscript tradition. Articulating this critical assessment, Geiger writes:

"Though we must not conclude from this that the Jews knew nothing of the Scriptures and, though we hear of schools among them and even of their reading the sacred writings in the original, still we must doubt, if there was any widely diffused critical knowledge of the Scriptures and we may be quite certain that Muhammad himself possessed none. Many passages testify to this. First, we may take a passage already quoted, where he says he had formerly no knowledge of reading and writing and then Sura XLII. 52,7 where he denies any previous acquaintance with "the Book" or the "Faith."²³

During the prophetic milieu, although Hebrew and Syriac witnesses of the Old and New Testament corpora were in circulation, they were marred by profound recessional defects, interpolations and deep text-critical discrepancies. These theological and text-critical fractures frequently precipitated violent sectarian conflicts across Late Antique confessional communities. The biblical and post-biblical manuscript traditions circulating in Hebrew and Syriac were marked by pronounced recessional instability and intense sectarian contention doctrinal schisms that repeatedly precipitated violent civil and ecclesiastical strife across Late Antiquity. Delineating this fractured theological landscape, Lesley Hazleton notes:

"The differences went deeper than legend, however. Christians and Jews both venerated the Bible, yet they held up different versions of it. And when it came to what these books might mean, there was intense argument not only between but within the two monotheisms. Jews were divided between the teachings of this rabbi or that, between the Jerusalem Talmud and the new Babylonian one, or between legalism and messianism. And the Christians were still more deeply divided, caught up in bitter and sometimes violent internecine rivalry. Seemingly abstruse questions as to whether Jesus was both God and man, or God in human form, whether he had one nature or two, had become highly politicized, creating such deep rifts that the Byzantine Empire was essentially at war with itself as various provinces sided with one Theopolitical entity or another."²⁴

The Late Antique Near Eastern landscape was marked by acute ecclesiastical fragmentation, where rival monastic and clerical factions engaged in bitter theological and polemical confrontations. Narrative traditions were far from uniform; substantial divergences characterized not only the inter-confessional boundary between Judaism and Christianity, but also intra-communal oral and textual transmissions across different geographic centres. Emphasizing this recessional and narrative variability, Lesley Hazleton observes: "The biblical stories told by the Jews of Medina, for instance, were not quite the same as those told by the Jews of Damascus. The Christian stories differed too, often with poignant variations."

With respect to Christian early biblical translations in Arabic, the historical-critical research of Sidney H. Griffith substantiates that comprehensive Arabic translations of scripture encompassing the Pentateuch, the Gospel codices and the Septuagintal witnesses were entirely absent prior to the rise of Islam, emerging only in the late eighth and ninth centuries CE:

"According to the Muslim historian, Abul-Hasan Ali al-Masudi (d.956 CE) one of the best-known Christian translators of the Baghdad translation movement, Hunayn ibn Ishaq (808–873), translated a portion of the Bible into Arabic from the Greek of the Septuagint. As al-Masudi put it in regard to the Septuagint, "This text has been translated a number of times into Arabic by earlier and more recent scholars, among them Hunayn ibn Ishaq. For most people it [i.e., the Septuagint] is the soundest of the texts of the Torah." While no trace of Hunayn's translation seems to have survived, al-Masudi's remark that by his time the Bible had been translated a number of times into Arabic certainly rings true. The famous bio-bibliographer, Anul-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn an-Nadīm (d.995/8), speaks in his *Kitab al-Fihrist* of the translations made by one Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Salam, a scholar of the time of Harun ar-Rashid (786–809)."²⁵

Having established that direct engagement with canonical codices was historically precluded and that Arabic scriptural translations were wholly absent from seventh-century Arabia, orientalist scholarship was forced to anchor its borrowing theory in an oral transmission paradigm. Consequently, central to this orientalist hypothesis is the recurrent designation of historical figures such as the Christian monk Baḥīrā, Maccan scholar Warkah son of Naufal and Coptic Mary as putative personal conduits and oral sources of Christian narrative and apocryphal traditions.

1. Christian monk Baḥīrā

Within Byzantine and later Western polemical discourse, the monk Baḥīrā (often identified in Christian counter-literature as Sergius) is elevated to a central informant credited with transmitting scriptural lore and shaping the nascent Qur'ānic narrative corpus. Articulating this polemical framing, the entry in *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* notes:

"Bahira (Aramaic: chosen) The name of the Syrian Christian monk who, when Muhammad travelled as a boy with his uncle Abu Talib to Syria, predicted his prophecy. In the various accounts of the event, the monk is supposed to have found a mark of prophecy on Muhammad's body or seen a branch move to provide him shade regardless of where he moved. He said that he had found a prediction of Muhammad's advent in his scriptures and warned Abu Talib to protect the boy from harm. This event took place, according to some traditions, when Muhammad was twelve years of age, the same age as Jesus when he encountered the rabbis in the Temple. The figure of Bahira is found in Greek, Syriac and Christian Arabic literature Bahira as a heretic monk who aided Muhammad in the composition of the Qur'ān. These polemical works date from the early Islamic period and reflect the attitudes of some of the Christians of the time to the Islamic conquest."²⁶

Critiquing the historical plausibility of the Baḥīrā informant hypothesis, Thomas Carlyle challenges the orientalist assumption that an unlettered youth monolingual in Arabic and experiencing the trans-regional Syrian trade route for the first time could have assimilated complex theological lore from a Syrian Nestorian monk during a transient caravan stop:

"The young man here first came in contact with a quite foreign world, with one foreign element of endless moment to him: the Christian Religion. I know not worth to make of that Sergious [Bahira or Buhayra, what so ever pronunciation be, has also been so called as Sergius], the

Nastorian Monk whom Abu Talib and he are said to have lodged with; or how much anymore could have taught one still so young. Probably enough it is greatly exaggerated, this of Nastorian Monk. Mohamet was only fourteen [according to the tradition he was either only nine or, at the most, twelve]; had no language but his own: much in Syria must have been a strange unintelligible Whirlpool to him."²⁷

Richard Gottheil critically deconstructs the episode, categorizing it as a fabricated anti-Islamic polemical legend:

"The story of the Christian Monk Bahira and his meeting with Mohammed is made the basis for a series of apocalyptic visions and of prophecies designed to show that there was nothing at all original in the teachings of the prophet, that he was an arch-fraud and that he was instigated to practice this fraud by his mentor, who wished in this manner to bring the ignorant Arabs to the knowledge of one God."²⁸

2. Warkah son of Naufal

The second historical personage invoked in the orientalist transmission hypothesis is Warkah son of Naufal, who is routinely characterized as the foundational informant and literary conduit responsible for transmitting biblical lore into the nascent Qur'ānic corpus. D. S. Margoliouth explicitly frames Warkah son of Naufal as an intellectual preceptor whose alleged translations supplied the narrative material for early Islam:

"Warkah son of Naufal, cousin of Khadijah, is likely to have had much to do with the beginnings of Islam. He is credited with having translated the Gospel or part of one, into Arabic; it was probably the Gospel of Nativity and was afterwards useful to the prophet "²⁹

This orientalist paradigm further asserts that Warkah son of Naufal was instrumental in fostering the proto-Islamic movement within Meccan society. Articulating this perspective, the entry in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* notes:

"Warka bin Nawfal most likely played a larger role in the rise of Islam."³⁰

Historical-critical analysis of the *Sīrah* literature and canonical Hadīth corpora indicates that personal contact between the Prophet (PBUH) and Warkah son Nawfal was confined to three transient episodes:

1. The restoration of the young Muḥammad (PBUH) to 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib after being lost in the upper quarters of Mecca.³¹
2. The post-Hira consultation mediated by Khadijah, wherein the aged, blind Ebionite scholar identified the revelatory agent with the *Nāmūs* of the Mosaic theophany, corroborated the divine mandate and anticipated the coming tribal expulsion.³²
3. A brief encounter during the circumambulation of the Ka'bah, in which Waraqah offered an oath of solidarity before his demise during the subsequent hiatus of revelation (*fatrat al-wahy*).³³

The textual evidence confirms that although Hebraic biblical and apocryphal recensions existed among localized literati, Waraqah's historical function was purely that of a confirmatory patristic witness acknowledging scriptural typologies, thereby decisively refuting the orientalist hypothesis that positioned him as an intellectual architect or literary mentor of the Qur'ānic discourse. Lesley Hazleton fundamentally challenges the conventional orientalist typification of Warakh son of Naufal as an institutionalized Christian ecclesiastic or rabbinic scholar, arguing that he is more accurately identified with the pre-Islamic *ḥanīfiyyah* an independent monotheistic current deliberately detached from confessional dogmatism. She Writes:

"We know of six of them by name, including Waraqa, who was reputed to have studied both the Hebrew and the Greek bibles deeply. By some accounts he was actually a Christian, by others a rabbi. More likely he was neither, the attribution being merely the result of the human need to categorize. The whole point, after all, was that the hanifs resisted categorization. Their search was for a purer form of monotheism, untainted by the sectarian divisiveness rife in the Middle East of the time. They were deliberately unaffiliated with any one sacred practice."³⁴

3. Coptic Mary

Articulating the hypothesis that Coptic apocryphal lore was orally transmitted into the Qur'ānic narrative through domestic channels, W. St. Clair Tisdall observes:

"The style of the Arabic of this apocryphal Gospel, however, is so bad that it is hardly possible to believe that it dates from Muhammad's time. As, however, Arabic has never been supposed to be the language in which the work was composed, this is a matter of little or no consequence. From a study of the book there seems little room for doubt that it has been translated into Arabic from the Coptic, in which language it may have been composed. This explains in what way Muhammad most probably became acquainted with the legend. For it is a well-known fact that the Christian governor of Egypt sent him a present of two Coptic girls, one of whom, "Mary the Copt," became one of his favourite concubines. This girl, though not well acquainted with the Gospel, must doubtless have known so popular a legend as that contained in the "Gospel of the Infancy" at that time was. Muhammad probably learnt the tale from her, and, fancying it to be contained in the Gospels universally accepted by Christians as of Divine authority, he on that account incorporated it into the Qur'ān. Of course, it is possible that he had others besides Mary who told him Coptic legends, but, whoever his informant or informants may have been, it is clear that the source of the story of the miracle is the one we have mentioned."³⁵

The arrival of Coptic Mary in Medina is historically situated in the seventh year of the Hijrah (628 CE),³⁶ following the diplomatic epistolary initiative undertaken by the Prophet (peace be upon him) inviting the Alexandrian ruler, al-Muqawqis, to Islam. In his cordial formal reply, al-Muqawqis dispatched an official delegation alongside the emissary Ḥaṭīb ibn Abī Balṭa'ah (raḍiya Allāhu 'anhu), tendering honorable gifts comprising Coptic Mary, her sister Sīrīn, textiles and a riding mule (*Duldul*).³⁷ So, the argument claiming that the Prophet (PBUH) derived biblical or apocryphal lore from Coptic Mary is chronologically and historically untenable. The Qur'ānic narratives had already been revealed years prior to her arrival in Medina in 7 AH (628 CE).

Conclusion

The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century quest to trace the Qur'ānic corpus to external, human sources was built on a foundational error: conflating thematic resonance with literary dependence. By assuming from the outset that Islam was fundamentally derivative, early orientalist and missionary polemicists fragmented the text into isolated narrative motifs, attempting to anchor its Christological and Marian accounts directly to non-canonical Christian apocrypha. However, when subjected to text-critical and manuscript analysis, this transmission model collapses under its own chronological weight. Key texts like the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* represent later composite traditions rather than pre-Islamic Arabian

originals, while the Gnostic sects alleged to have influenced the Qur'ān's denial of the crucifixion had effectively vanished centuries before the revelation in Mecca and Medina. The pivot toward an oral transmission hypothesis seeking to explain these parallels through personal informants like the monk Baḥīrā, Waraqah ibn Nawfal, or Māriyah al-Qibṭiyyah proves equally untenable upon historical scrutiny. As contemporary scholarship on Late Antiquity has established, seventh-century Arabia lacked a comprehensive corpus of Arabic biblical translations. The historical records confirm that encounters with figures like Baḥīrā and Waraqah were either transient or typological, while Māriyah's arrival in Medina took place years after the relevant Marian and Christological passages were already established. Transforming these fragmented, historically situated encounters into systemic channels of theological instruction relies on conjecture rather than empirical historiography. Ultimately, moving beyond the reductive origin-hunting paradigm allows for a more authentic appreciation of the Qur'ān's unique theological and structural coherence. The presence of shared Late Antique motifs does not signify horizontal borrowing; rather, it reflects a vibrant, shared Near Eastern milieu and, from an Islamic epistemological standpoint, the continuity of transcendent divine revelation (*wahy*). Treating the Qur'ānic text as an autonomous, unified literary and theological discourse honors both the integrity of the historical record and the internal logic of the revelation itself.

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- ⁵ Ibid, 53–54.
- ⁶ Ibid, 54–55.
- ⁷ Ibid, 56.
- ⁸ Ibid, 169 – 170.
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