Christianity in Western Arabia, A.D. 200-600

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Iakovos Graduate Student Conference on Patristic Studies
Boston, MA
March 6-8, 2014

Abstract

This paper analyzes Christianity in Western Arabia from the third through the sixth centuries A.D. It includes discussion of the notorious difficulty of defining the boundaries of Arabia and the identity of Arabians. It recognizes distinctions between the Syriac-speaking church in the northwest, simultaneously in the Byzantine orbit and defined in opposition to the empire; the southwest and the established kingdom of Himyar; and the Red Sea Coast of the Hijaz. And it notes the doctrinal distinctions that emerged among the almost exclusively non-Chalcedonian Christian churches of the region. The paper argues that Christianity was real and significant in Arabia in the centuries before Islam, but that its societal influence varied widely across the three regions. Syriac-speaking Christianity in northwestern Arabia was both widely popular and deeply rooted. In the west and southwest, Christianity in a diverse milieu, but was not necessarily even the primary monotheistic religion. The trade interests of a wide variety of international Christians led the southwest to become Arabia's most doctrinally diverse region, while the central-west region, including Mecca and Medina, was the least Christianized. The paper charts a course between J. Spencer Trimingham's assertion that Christianity never deeply touched the lay Arab soul and Irfan Shahid's assertion that the Arab world into which Islam was born was "Christianized." In the process it draws significantly on Trimingham's study of Christianity among the Arabs and Shahid's multi-volume work on Byzantium and the Arabs.

Introduction

Christianity has had interactions with Arabs and Arabia from its beginning. With the possible exception of Judea, Jesus would have encountered Arab pagans throughout his travels in "Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem, Idumaea, and Transjordan, and the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon" (Mark 3.7-8).[1] Not all these pagans were Arab—some were Canaanite—but Jesus' *milieu* included people from "Arabia", to the south and east of Palestine. Yet documentation has been scarce from the start. Arabs were certainly amongst those present at Pentecost (Acts 2.11), but New Testament history does not follow their progress or record significant apostolic evangelism in the east. Paul traveled to Arabia following his conversion before "returning" to Damascus (Galatians 1.17), but debate remains as to the character of the place he visited.[2]

Early Christian sources show a cumulative ambiguity about the definition of "Arabia." For instance, Athanasius' *Apology Against the Arians* refers to Asterius and Arius, both Eastern bishops who sided with the "occidental" and Athanasian orthodoxy against Arianism at Sardis in 343. The first, Asterius, is from Petra "in Arabia", while Arius is from the same Petra, but this time "in Palestine."[3] Even today, the northwest-southeast orientation of the state of Saudi Arabia make geographical definitions of the Arabian peninsula difficult. How much more so ancient Arabia,

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[1] J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979), 41.
[2] Trimingham, 42, assumes that there was a Christian community that Paul visited. N.T. Wright, "Paul, Arabia, And Elijah (Galatians 1:17)" in *JBL* 115:4 (1996) 683-692, sees an Elijah-like self-imposed contemplative exile, with Arabia politically and theologically connected to Mt. Sinai (Galatians 4.25), but Paul more likely remaining far north of the Sinai peninsula.
[3] Trimingham, 120.

which was broadly associated with the desert that extended from Palmyra to the Indian Ocean in the south and from Gaza and the Red Sea to the Fertile Crescent.

Similarly, "Arabs" are an ill-defined group. On the Arabian peninsula, "Arab" referred specifically to nomadic desert dwellers, but the region was known as "Arabia" and the language – developed and shared in towns – was "Arabic."[4] Among the related tribes in and around Arabia, some scholars (including those of the modern Syriac Orthodox Church)[5] draw a soft line between Arabs and "Arameans" of greater Mesopotamia who spoke Aramaic (including Syriac) and lived more sedentary lives than the nomads to the south.[6] Such a distinction may fit with later developments, but it does not represent the Arabian situation in the first six centuries A.D. In the second century, the Aramaic-speaking kings of Hatra—in what is today northern Iraq, closer to the Tigris than to the Euphrates—were referred to as the "king of the Arabs."[7] But as the Sasanian empire expanded Persian influence in the region starting 224, self-proclaimed Arabs were restricted to the west of Persia, though at least some Arab identity survived in the north, to the southern reaches of Armenia. In discussing "Arabian" Christianity before the

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[4] Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs In History, 4th ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 10. The seeming specificity of the term Arab for nomads is likely less of an ethnic distinction as of lifestyle and political alliance, as with the John McCain campaign flap about "real Virginia" outside of D.C. suburbs ("McCain Aide Says He's Strong in 'Real Virginia'," http://www.nbcnews.com/id/27255494/ accessed 2/24/14).

[5] Mar Sawirus Ishaq Saka, "The West Syriacs," in Habib Badr, et al., eds., *Christianity: A History in the Middle East* (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005) 235-53, 247.

[6] Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs,* 2.

[7] Jan Retso, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003),444.

seventh century rise of Islam, this paper will include Arab tribes of any lifestyle and language, but avoid entanglement in the heart of the surrounding and subsequent empires.

There were three borders and three empires surrounding Arabia in the centuries before Islam. In the northwest was the Roman/Byzantine empire. In the northeast was the Sasanian/neo-Persian empire, founded in A.D. 224. On all other sides was ocean, but in the southwest, Aksum (Ethiopia) had kinship, economic, and political interaction with south Arabia from across the Red Sea.

Though we avoid discussion of the text of the Quran and early Islamic encounter with Christianity by halting the present study at the end of the sixth century, the reader should be aware that those concerns are the constant subtext in studies of this era. David Grafton provides a framework for this subtext, referencing three conclusions about Western Arabia, coming not incidentally from a Christian missionary, a secular Jew, and a textually liberal practicing Muslim.[8] As Grafton sees it, the missionary, J. Spencer Trimingham of the Church Missionary Society (1904-87), concluded that pre-Islamic Christianity in Arabia was never deeply integrated into society. Though prominently represented by Christian monks, the faith never challenged the lay Arab soul. Yehuda Nevo (1932-92) was an Israeli archaeologist who was radically skeptical of the Quran's account of Muhammad's life. He believed that the Quran was completed in the 9th century as a unifying retro-active accounting for Arabs' newfound prominence. His theory is that the Byzantine empire, in an attempt to rid itself of difficult eastern territories, fostered

[8] David Grafton, "The Politics of Pre-Islamic Christianity in Contemporary Western Scholarship," *Theological Review* 34(1) 3-21.

nationalistic schism in the church as a way to facilitate transfer of onerous eastern provinces to (not yet Muslim) Arabs in the 6th-9th centuries. Irfan Shahid (b. 1926), a Palestinian Muslim scholar in the U.S. with expertise on Byzantine-Arab relations concludes that Islam came into a Christianized Arabia, but that the politics of Christian schism and Western condescension against Arabs ("*Arabia haerisius ferax,*" wrote Eusebius) was less agreeable than an indigenous faith. Grafton himself is skeptical of Nevo's assessment of Byzantine politics, and is most sympathetic to Shahid.[9]

Avoiding the evident difficulties of Nevo's Quranic criticism and high level Byzantine politics, there is much to be said for combining Trimingham's and Shahid's seemingly opposed conclusions. Christianity played a more prominent role in Arabia than most scholars have suspected. Many Arabians, and some of Arabia, particularly in the northwest, were indeed "Christianized," and for some, the Syriac language was indigenous enough to touch the soul. But Arabian identity, language, and religion was not uniform. There was never a complete Bible in northern or southern Arabic[10] and it would be misleading to claim that "Arabia" was "Christianized." Central and western Arabia, including Mecca and Yathrib (Medina) for instance, had contact with Christians and Jews, but were dominated by pagans with only vaguely monotheistic sensibilities. Jews were a significant presence, and Christianity, very little of which was Chalcedonian, faced a politicized divide

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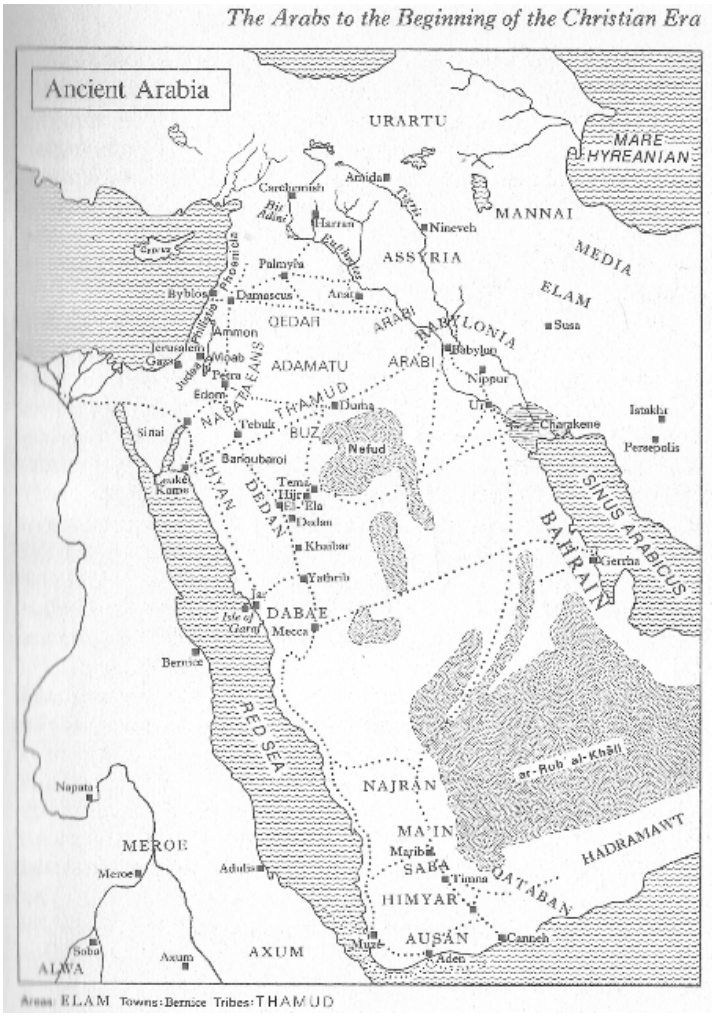
[9] Grafton, "The Politics of Pre-Islamic Christianity," 20.
[10] Irhan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), 435-43, has begun to build the case for some portions of scripture having been translated for the purposes of liturgy into North Arabic, which is what became classical Arabic.

between the Nestorian[11] Church of the East in the east and miaphysite[12] Syriac Orthodox Church in the west. Christianity, though spread broadly, was not universal, very divided, and, though a deep influence in the miaphysite northwest and the Nestorian northeast, did not penetrate the whole peninsula. [13]



Christianity in Northwest Arabia

The northwest, from Sinai and Gaza up through Palmyra in Syria was pre-Islamic Arabia's busiest territory for cultural interaction. It was located at the edge

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[11] "Nestorian," though not the term used for the modern Church of the East, which prefers "Assyrian," was a term accepted by proponents and opponents alike after the Church of the East allied itself with Nestorius' teachings.

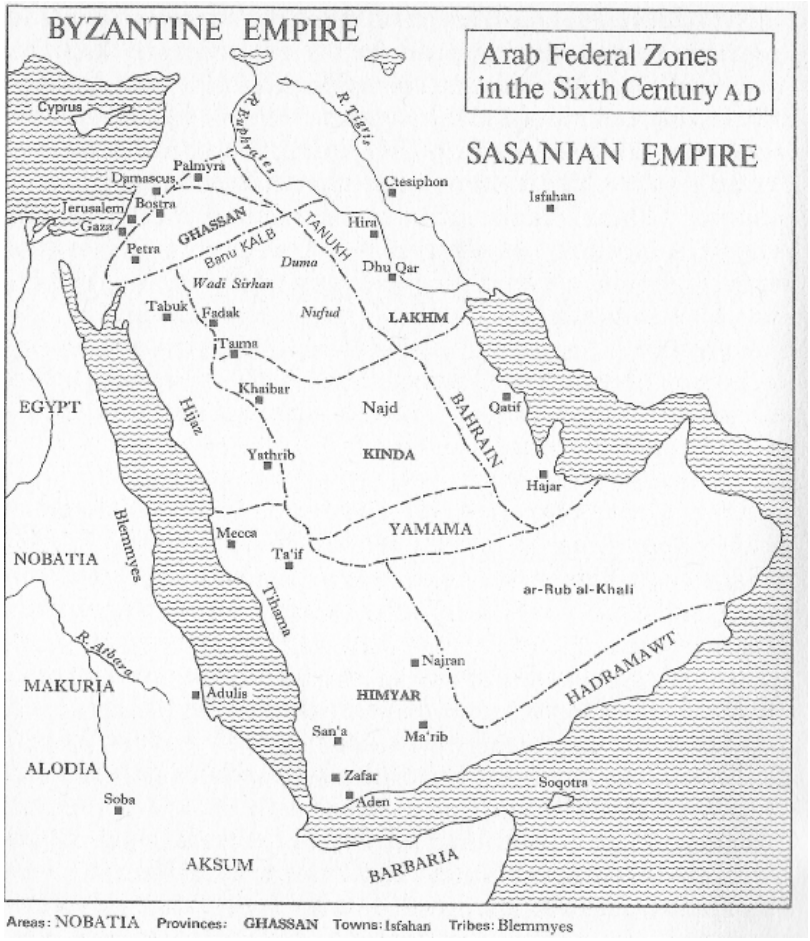
[12] Fergus Millar proves that even the older pejorative Monophysite was not current to the period under consideration. "The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?" *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 21(1), pp. 43-92, 55. Since "Jacobite" refers only to the church following the Bishop Jacob Baradaeus (Bp. 542-78), and after 580 was not used by members of the Syriac Antiochian Orthodox Church—see Saka, "The West Syriacs," 241—we use the modern, politically correct term miaphysite to represent the theological position.

[13] Image: Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs,* 9.

of the Roman/ Byzantine empire but within range of the Parthian and Sasanid empires, and coexisted with Canaanite, Judean, Phoenician, and Mesopotamian cultures.

People between Palestine and Persia spoke Aramaic, with Syriac common in the western portion of the region and standard among Christians, but language was never a primary driver of identity.[14]

Cartographically, a study of northwest Arab Christianity includes Gaza, the Roman province of Arabia Petraea, and parts of the provinces of Syria Palestine and Mesopotamia.[15] On the southern edge, it extends in a line from the Sinai peninsula to the northern Red Sea coast of Lihyan, or northern Hijaz, and into the central Arabian peninsula.[16]



[14] Fergus Millar, "The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?" *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 21 (1) 2013, pp. 43-92, 46.

[15] This study excludes Judea and the historically Canaanite and Phoenician Maronite Christians of northern Syria.

[16] Image: Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs,* 274.

The distinction of northwest from northeast is driven by the increasing divisions between the Church of the East and the Syriac Orthodox Church. It is difficult to firmly define Arab Christianity, since not all Syriac speakers would be classified as Arab, but Arabs played a prominent role in the western Syriac Church. The unquestionably Arab Ghassanid tribes came from the central peninsula in the mid-sixth century, and became the strongest defenders of the miaphysite faith.

Just as Philip went to Gaza following the persecution at Jerusalem (Acts 8), both Christians and Jews seem to have formed a diaspora presence to augment the converts in Arabia. Origen visited Bostra—east of Jersualem and south of Damascus—in the 220s and 240s. His stand against soul sleep during the latter visit, for the Councils of Arabia, earned him Arab loyalty in his later controversies.[17] And two of the most famous early eastern monks, Hilarion of Gaza (291-371) and Simeon the Stylite of Antioch (c. 388-459), were within reach of Arabs. At least one record survives of Hilarion healing a man from near Aila, on the Gulf of Aqaba on the east side of the Sinai peninsula.[18]

Aila was the seat of a bishop by at least 325, when its bishop attended the Council of Nicaea, and provided leadership to churches on some of the Gulf of Aqaba islands.[19] But though the Sinai peninsula was understood as, or even mistaken for

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[17] Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, Louisville: (Westminster John Knox, 1991), 42.
[18] M. Schwabe, "A Greco-Christian Inscription from Aila," *Harvard Theological Review* 46:1 (Jan. 1953), 49-55, 54.
[19] Schwabe, "A Greco-Christian Inscription from Aila," 53.

"Arabia" by visitors from the north,[20] it was actually more connected to the Egyptian church than to the Syrian and Arab church.[21]

In A.D. 106, the Roman overthrow of the Nabateans (among whom were the Idumeans, Herod's people) led to the creation of the Roman province of Arabia, with its capital at modern Petra. It was likely to areas like Petra, Sinai, and Origen's Bostra that Eusebius referred as being fertile ground for heresies. The Nabateans themselves were sometimes referred to Arabs,[22] and they were eventually squeezed out of existence by a combination of Roman assimilation, Roman pressure, and Arab pressure. The "law of generation and decay" that fostered military strength in central Arabia and sent tribes out to settle in more accommodating climes sent the Salihid and then the Ghassanid tribes up into Syria.[23] Once established, both converted to Christianity. The Salihids and many early Ghassanids were Chalcedonian, but as the Salihids unsuccessfully appealed to Byzantium for help against the Ghassanids at their rear, Ghassan leaned toward the more locally popular miaphysitism. With the appointment of Jacob of Baradeus as miaphysite Bishop of Edessa, they committed to that doctrine while maintaining open communication and generally anti-Persian military connections with Constantinople.

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[20] Philip Mayerson, "P.Oxy.3574: 'Eleutheropolis of the New Arabia,'" *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 53 (1983) 251-58, 252.
[21] Schwabe, "A Greco-Christian Inscription from Aila," 55.
[22] Cragg, *The Arab Christian, 35.*
[23] Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks: 1989), 535.

The Ghassanid miaphysite influx saved and invigorated a flagging Antiochian miaphysite church.[24] But Chalcedonian Christianity retained at least a little influence, as most of the close-in monasteries, all the way south into the Arab Hijaz region, remained what the Syrians would call Melkite—loyal to the king, i.e. Chalcedonian.[25] Later "generation and decay" would send up the Tanukhids, who gave their king the title "King of all the Arabs" in an epitaph mixing old Nabatean early developing northern Arabic.[26] Greater Roman "Arabia" and Syria, therefore, at the intersection of Egypt, the Greek world, and Arabia, were fields of theological, spiritual, cultural and linguistic competition.

Yet for all the intrigue in Roman Arabia, by as early as the second century, the most vigorous Christian faith east of Jerusalem was beyond the bounds of the Roman empire, with an Aramaic-speaking hub in Edessa. Edessa, the seat of Jacob's bishopric, was to became the point of division between the West Syriac miaphysite and East Syriac Nestorian churches.[27] But before that division arose, the academy at Edessa was a meeting point between Arab, Aramean, and Armenian Christianity. Edessa influenced the Arab church via its theological schools. In the late 4th century, the Syriac school's most famous catechist, Ephrem, was known his appropriation of Greek scholarship, though he avoided the typical Greek emphasis on doctrinal

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[24] Grafton, "The Politics of Pre-Islamic Christianity," 17. Alternatively, the Ghassanid addition could be said to have *established* the "Jacobite" Syrian Church as an entity, since it was only after his tenure that the church consistently appointed its own bishops, without help from miaphysite dissenters in Constantinople.
[25] Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs,* 259.
[26] Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century,* 529.
[27] Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, 36. The Church of the East leaned "Nestorian," even before Nestorius, showing a strong affinity for Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose creed was anathematized at Ephesus as too Nestorian.

boundaries. He also helped shape the use of poetry in catechesis and included women in his classes, leading to the later poetic honor, "a second Moses, for women."[28] With more Arabs converting to Christianity, there was more demand for Syriac education, which in turn informed the language of north Arabic, based largely on Syriac and much more sophisticated than south Arabic's Musnad writing system.[29]

During the time of the Nestorian controversy, Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa from 412-35, upheld the 431 Ephesian anathema against Nestorius, but his theology had been preemptively out-maneuvered by the 424 Synod of Markatba, which appointed a Patriarch of all the East. The subsequent Persian shift in Nestorianism saw the theological academy move east across the Euphrates to Nisibis. "The enfeeblement of Edessa … spiritually impoverished the Arab churches in Mesopotamia and eastern Arabia, where it had formerly been a lively factor."[30]

Christianity in Southwest Arabia: Himyar and Najran

South Arabia had the longest-standing unique culture in Arabia. The region included Saba (the Sabaens, associated with the kingdom of Sheba); Aden on the Arabian Sea coast; Najran in the north, which became a Christian stronghold; and Himyar, the dominant kingdom. The region's agricultural strength had provided Himyar with stability since at least 1000 B.C. It was connected by the spice trade route and by vague early Christian memory to India.[31] For centuries, it was vitally

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[28] Sebastian Brock, "The Theological Schools of Antioch, Edessa, and Nisibis" in Badr, et al., eds., *Christianity:* 143-59, pp. 151, 159.
[29] Soro, "The Assyrians," 261.
[30] Cragg, *The Arab Christian,* 43.
[31] Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs,* 290.

connected to Aksum across the strait in the Horn of Africa, but it developed independently as the Himyarite Kingdom from 110 B.C., and was not associated with Aksum's 4th century conversion into a Christian kingdom.[32] Himyar was the dominant single power on the peninsula (an admittedly relative distinction) for almost 250 years, but its influence began to wane with the long Roman-Persian peace of 384-540, which obviated the need for a lengthy detour around land-based trade routes. The Romans knew south Arabia as "Arabia Felix," the happy connotation owing to its position as both producer and way-station for the spice trade.

South Arabia's religion was remarkably diverse. The Gospel was brought to Himyar by Theophilus, an Arian priest *cum* trade emissary sent by Constantius in 356 to establish a presence for the empire along the spice trading route that went around Persia.[33] He established three churches in the area. Early in the 5th century, a trader named Hayyan visited both Constantinople and Hira (the 5th and 6th century eastern Arabian Nestorian hub, dominated by the Lakhmid tribal confederation) before coming home to try to evangelize Najran and the rest of Himyar. That visit pre-dated firm definitions of miaphysitism and Nestorianism, but Najran developed as an outpost of miaphysite faith, and its first bishop was consecrated by Philoxenus in Syria.[34] It was to Najran that several Julianists—subscribers to the docetic heresy that Christ never died on the cross, and was replaced by either Simon of Cyrene or

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[32] Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Vol. I, The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974), 51.
[33] Robert Brenton Betts, *Christianity in the Arab East* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 2.
[34] Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 511.

Judas Iscariot—fled after being expelled from Constantinople.[35] Julianists were not the majority, but they were able to survive in the miaphysite milieu. The Julianist bishop sent to Himyar managed to appoint one successor and the community was strong enough to send missionaries into Alodia, on the Nile in present-day Sudan.[36]

To the south, Zafar, the larger capital of the Himyarite kingdom, also had some Christians, but "considering Zafar to be a Christian settlement is like calling ancient Rome the same thing."[37] Himyar, "like the Fertile Crescent, … was Christian and Jewish in religion, but it had a more important pagan sector than had survived in the Fertile Crescent."[38]

In the early 6th century, in search of a workable monotheism and in resistance to Najran's Christian connections in Aksum across the Red Sea and with Byzantine allies to the north, the king and ruling class of Himyar converted to Judaism. For a long time, modern scholars doubted that this could be anything like the Judaism known to other parts of the world.[39] But it is now understood that, in addition to the possible earlier influence of the Queen of Sheba, Jews from the diaspora were present in Himyar and travelled there from its ally, Persia.[40] King Yusuf (Dhu Nuwas) persecuted Christians brutally beginning in 523, and recorded it

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[35] Shahid, "Islam and *Christianus Oriens,*" 20.
[36] Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs,* 302.
[37] Paul Yule, Interview, *Mediteraneo Antigua: Arqueologia e Historia*, January 13, 2013. http://www.mediterraneoantiguo.com/2013/01/interview-paul-yule-considering-zafar.html, accessed 11/13/13.
[38] Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Vol. I, The Classical Age of Islam,* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974)., 151.
[39] Michael Lecker, *Jews and Arabs in Pre- and Early Islamic Arabia* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), xii.
[40] Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs*, 296.

all in *The Book of The Himyarites*. "The Himyarite king and persecutor of the Christians kept taunting the Monophysites of Najran for what he called their folly in asserting the divinity of Christ while the Christian world had renounced that folly and started calling Christ 'the son of Mary'."[41]

King Yusuf's well-documented cruelty aroused both sympathy and ambition among Christians to the west. Caleb, *negus* king of miaphysite Aksum, gained the support of Byzantium for an intervention. His invasion launched in 525 with visions of unifying miaphysitism around the Red Sea. It was bolstered by the memory of Aksum's prior connection to Himyar, represented by the Throne of Adulis, an ornamental trophy in the Aksumite port city of Adulis whose inscription told the story of earlier centuries' Aksumite power in Arabia.[42]

Aksum succeeded in halting the persecution, protecting south Arabian Christians from the Himyarites. But they did not invade strategically. Caleb supported a local puppet dynasty, but the second in line rebelled, allowing an Aksumite military presence, but reducing its political influence. In addition, the Marib dam, which had sustained agriculture for a millennium, broke in 550. Twenty years later Persia, with Lakhmid assistance, conquered the Arab southwest, introducing additional Nestorian competition and almost totally diminishing Aksum's political influence.

Western and Central Arabia, Between the Christians: Mecca and Medina

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[41] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,*" 21.
[42] G.W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14.

Surprisingly, even some recent studies are skeptical of any Christian presence in Hijaz before Muhammad.[43] Waraqa ibn Nawfal, one of Muhammad's wives' cousins, was a Christian. Some sources, both Muslim and secular, identify him as a Jewish-Christian Ebionite (Ebionites denied the deity of Christ), but sources are too limited to be certain.[44] Mecca, where the Kaba already existed and which attracted polytheistic pilgrims in the name of Arab unity,[45] was certainly in communication with nearby Najran, which after the martyrdoms of the 520s had become a center for Christian pilgrimage.

In the central plateau of Arabia, the "law of generation and decay" had more tribes to send out. After the Ghassanids moved to the north and west, the Tanukhids, connected with but separate from the Nestorian Lakhmids, took up space between the two, paralleling the Euphrates but further west.[46] The Kalb and Taghlib nomadic tribes also confessed Christianity. The height of this penetration was the substantial conversion of the Kinda, a central Arabian power originally from south Arabia.[47] But the death of their most powerful king in 528 opened the way for influence by the Quraysh. That tribe, into which Muhammad would be born, had more of an east-west orientation from the desert into its hub at Mecca, and did not profess Christianity.

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[43] David Thomas, Introduction to David Thomas and Barbara Roggema, eds., *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* Volume 1: 600-900, (Boston: Brill, 2009), 3.
[44] Jaakko Hameen-Anttila, "Christians and Christianity in the Quran," in Badr, ed., *Christianity*, 28.
[45] Betts, *Christianity in the Arab East*, 2.
[46] Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs,* 174.
[47] Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs*, 274.

Western Arabia was one of the least Christian portions of the region. Ghada Osman's survey of Christianity in the region finds evidence of its existence that should be difficult to ignore, but that still demonstrates the distance of the faith from common life. Her study supports, in that one region, Trimingham's assertion that Christianity did not touch the Arab soul. She finds that the two common themes of Christian conversion were travel to foreign lands and encounters with desert monks.[48] Both experiences inspired dramatic personal conversions, but neither type permeated the tribal structure of society. Still, in Mecca and Medina, Christianity did exist. Both cities hosted a multiplicity of tribes, thrived on trade, and participated in cultural life from Himyar up through Hijaz. Later sources record historical Qurayshi intermarriage with Jews, Ethiopians, "Nabateans," and "Christians."[49] Mecca had an Ethiopian cemetery, undoubtedly full of Christians (though the Ethiopians' underclass status may have deterred urban Arabs from the faith).[50] Irfan Shahid has taken some tentative steps toward establishing the presence of significant portions of Scripture in northern Arabic as a part of translated West Syriac liturgy, but on logical grounds feels even more certain of the presence of an Ethiopic Bible in Mecca and south Arabia.[51]

A note on the integrative role of poetry

Poets and poetry were pervasive across Arabia and had a prominent position in all the Arabian cultures. Poetry would eventually have a preliminary role in

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[48] Ghada Osman, "Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arabic Sources," *Muslim World* 95 (1) (2005), 67-80.
[49] Lecker, *Jews and Arabs*, 18.
[50] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,"* 12.
[51] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,"* 24, 13.

popularizing and standardizing the Arabic language, and especially in the less materially-oriented southern Arab cultures was a primary means of artistic, academic, and theological expression.[52] Fr. Louis Chiekho identifies at least 54 Christian poets as major influences in pre-Islamic Arabian culture.[53] Poets' popularity across a large territory represented a developing cultural unity, informed by Greek, Persian, desert, and Mesopotamian cultures. But their actual experiences sparked some confusion in the process. Al-Nabigha, the poet laureate of the Byzantium-allied Ghassanid tribes, travelled south to officiate poetry competitions at Ukaz, the market town between Najran and Mecca. There, he was known as "the Persian Poet."[54] In the early seventh century, an Arabic-speaking Ethiopian, Antar, became famous for one of his poems, the *qasida*.[55] The 6th century news of the Martyrs of Najran sparked Christian poetic response throughout Arabia, with John Psaltes writing odes in Syriac in the northwest and Adi ibn Zayd in Hira.[56]

Conclusion

Though Eusebius' negative judgment on Arabia's theological predilections only encompassed the northwest corner of what could be called Arabia, perhaps he would have used stronger words had he known the full truth. Irfan Shahid goes where most scholars—Christian, Muslim, or otherwise—fear to tread, claiming that the Christian "denominations" present in south Arabia alone can "shed a bright light

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[52] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,"* 28.
[53] Soro, "The Assyrians (East Syriacs)," 261.
[54] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,"* 29.
[55] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,"* 13.
[56] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,"* 11.

on Quranic Christology."[57] That he makes this claim in the service of a triumphalistic vision of Islam conquering a fully Christianized Arabia makes it only slightly less bold. Chalcedonian Christians, of course, might draw different conclusions from the presence and ultimate overshadowing of so many "heretical" doctrines. But the perseverance to the present day of the Syriac Orthodox Church is a testimony to the depth and sincerity of the Christian faith among a core of northwest Arabian Christians.

This paper has argued that Christianity, divided by both doctrine and politics, played very different roles in the different cultures constituting pre-Islamic Arabia. In some cases, Christian faith was deeply held, manifest for instance in the society-wide influence of the Jacobite hierarchy and the martyrs of Najran's tenacious acceptance of their fate. But in places like Mecca, though the faith was in fact known, it remained outside common life.

To shed more light on Christians in Arabia and Arabians in Christianity, more study could be undertaken in the rise of Arabic alongside Syriac in the meeting place between the Arabian peninsula and Meopotamia, and the relationship of the two languages to religious faith. Scholars should also accept the presence, if not the widespread acceptance, of Christianity even in central Hijaz in Mecca and Medina. And Irfan Shahid's investigations into Christian scripture in Arabic, including the theory of Ethiopian linguistic influence or even a full Ethiopic Bible in Arabic deserves further attention. In light of the later rise of Islam, the story of early Arabian Christianity is discouraging for Christians. But Christians must not be

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[57] Shahid, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus,"* 19.

tempted into abandoning the brothers and sisters remaining in the area or accepting Islamic or Eusebian dismissal of the historical field as one of an age of blank-slate ignorance or irrelevant heresy.

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