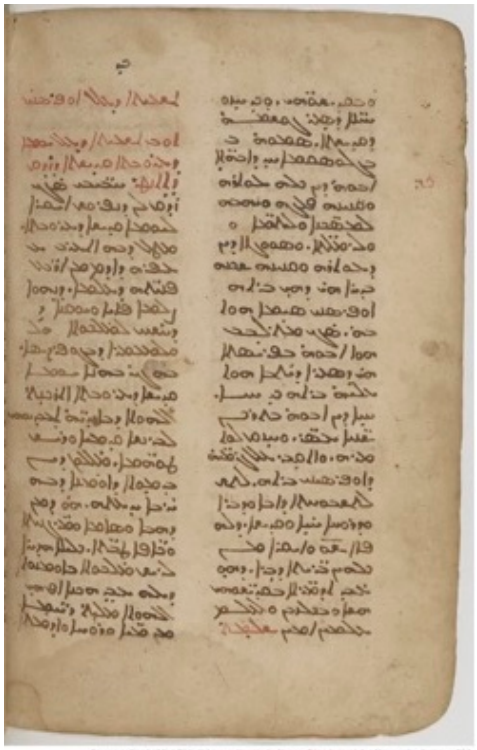
David Gyllenhaal, 2023

The Syriac Christian Story About the Day of Holy Friday and its Muslim Background



Can we discern how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were mutually shaped by one another's example in texts that rarely or never mention that example? We can, but only with great care, long effort, and a cheerful willingness to acknowledge the provisional character of our conclusions. This essay discusses a Syriac Christian text—recently published and studied by Sergey Minov—that endorses a specific kind of celebration of Friday as a holy day. Although the text was probably written under Muslim rule, the Story of Holy Friday never once makes mention of Muslim persons or Muslim tradition. But as Minov points out, given that Friday is the Muslim day of prayer, the text invites the question of whether it might be in conversation with a Muslim counterexample. I believe that a close reading of some of the key Muslim traditions on the holiness of Friday reveals that the Syriac Story was indeed in conversation—or perhaps contestation—with the Muslim Friday tradition.

Friday–Saturday–Sunday

The sibling status of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is legible even in their appointed days of common worship: Muslims gather on Friday, Jews on Saturday, and Christians on Sunday. The principle of distinction (the day of the week) cannot obscure the deeper kinship (the presumption that a specific day in a seven-day week should be appointed for communal prayer). But a newly published piece of Syriac Christian literature

highlights the extent to which even the days of prayer—precisely as principles of distinction—are coproduced phenomena that carry hidden traces of the fraught kinship between the three faiths. This Syriac text is a short composition entitled *The Story of Holy Friday*, which promotes a distinctive form of Christian Friday veneration involving abstinence from food and work. It also bears the marks of a long and complex sibling rivalry with Muslim tradition over the true significance and proper observance of Friday as a holy day—but only if you know where to look.

The Story of Holy Friday and the Muslim Day of Prayer

Friday has been the Muslim day of prayer since the seventh century, so the most elementary question about the*Story* is whether its Christian Friday veneration was "borrowed" from Muslim tradition. But even a cursory look at the evidence makes it clear that things are much more complicated. *The Story of Holy Friday* was largely unknown until Sergey Minov made the first publication, study and translation in 2020 on the basis of a single twelfth century manuscript housed in Paris: BnF syr. 234. There is no definitive evidence about when the *Story* was first composed, but by the time it was *copied*, Friday had been the Muslim day of worship for half a millennium. So, was the Friday veneration promoted in the *Story* an attempt to somehow imitate or appropriate Muslim Friday observance? Minov's careful study of the text shows that this cannot be true, because there is a Christian tradition of Friday veneration going back to the second century. But that does not rule out the possibility of Muslim influence on the *Story of Holy Friday*. In the conclusion of his study, Minov makes the tantalizing suggestion that we might understand the text "as an attempt to counterbalance the importance, with which this day was invested in the Muslim tradition, by ascribing to it a special prominence based on different principles" (Minov, 221). If we follow that suggestion into the Muslim traditions about the holiness of Friday, we find a striking confirmation of Minov's suspicions, revealing a long history of sibling rivalry between Syriac Christianity and Islam over the true significance of holy Friday. The *Story of Holy Friday* does not represent a Christian "borrowing" from Islam nor a Muslim "borrowing" from Christianity. Rather, it crystallizes a particular moment in an ongoing debate—like an insect suspended in amber.

Early Christian Friday Veneration

The key to Minov's suspicion of a link with Muslim tradition is found in a single crucial detail: the stress laid by the *Story* on Friday as the day of Adam's creation. Friday is actually assigned a double distinction in the opening lines of the text, as the day when Adam was created and the day when Christ was crucified for the sake of Adam's progeny. The *Story* goes so far as to express this connection through Christ's own mouth as he hangs on the cross: "on his [Adam's] account I gave my soul on Friday and became a pledge for him" (trans. Minov p. 205). When this double distinction is compared against the earlier Christian tradition as well as the Muslim tradition, it becomes possible to separate what the author has joined together. Christians had long promoted prayer and fasting on Friday in commemoration of Christ's passion, but the idea that Friday veneration commemorated Adam's creation is not attested before the *Story of Holy Friday*. Not, at least, in Christian tradition. Instead, early Christian tradition focuses exclusively on Friday observance as a celebration of Christ's passion. There is evidence as far back as the second century for a custom of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays (*Didache* 8.1.). Fourth century texts link these observances with events in the final week of Christ's life, since he was betrayed on a Wednesday and crucified on a Friday (*Apostolic Constitutions* 5.14.20). Friday observance was an enduring practice in the Christian east, although Wednesday observance dropped out of favor. The famous fifth century ascetic Symeon the Stylite signed a "covenant" with the inhabitants of a little

village near Antioch in which they agree to observe Friday and Sunday in exchange for his prayers (Doran, p. 196). Yet Adam's creation on the sixth day is never invoked as a reason for Christian Friday veneration in these early texts. Why should the later author of the Syriac *Story of Holy Friday* be so fixated on this point? While the author never admits it, there are reasons to believe that it betrays a link with Islamic traditions of Friday veneration and observance.

Muslim Friday and the Bible

The most compelling precedent for the emphasis on Friday as the day of Adam's creation is actually found in Muslim collections of *hadith*—oral traditions purported to come from Muhammad himself. These collections grew over time, and later compilers subdivided them under thematic chapter headings. Most of the major collections that crystallized in the ninth and tenth centuries include a chapter on the "virtues of Friday." It is in these chapters that we find a precedent for venerating Friday as the day of Adam's creation: "The best day on which the sun ever rose is Friday; on it Adam was created, on it he was brought into paradise, and on it he was expelled from [paradise]" (Muslim, *Saḥīḥ, bāb faḍl yawm al-jumuʿa*.) What's more, this tradition already bears the mark of some kind of interfaith encounter, because the Qurʾan never specifies that Adam was created on a Friday: only the Hebrew Bible does. The use of a biblical detail to vindicate the Muslim day of prayer is less surprising than it might seem. Strategic appropriations of this kind are common in early Muslim tradition; they mean to demonstrate that Jews and Christians have falsified or misunderstood their earlier revelations, abandoning a latent truth for Islam to rediscover. Another Muslim tradition about the virtues of Friday makes that point explicit, claiming that Friday had already been "enjoined" for Jews and Christians but they fell into debate about it, leaving Islam to take up its proper observance. This is a hidden sign of how eschatology will invert the order of history. Just as Muslims were the last to arrive at their holy day of communal prayer, but Friday comes before Saturday and Sunday, so it is that: "Although we are the last, on the day of resurrection we will be first" (Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ, bāb farḍ al-jumuʿa*).

There is also compelling evidence that Muslims sought to distinguish their Friday observances from those of their Christian neighbors. The Christian tradition of Friday veneration had always prioritized fasting or abstention from meat as the key mark of its observance. Many Muslim traditions, by contrast, specifically discourage fasting on a Friday. One of the most common variants of these traditions reads: "Let none of you fast on Friday unless you fast the day before it or the day after it" (Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ, bāb farḍ al-jumuʿa*). In other words, it was only permissible to fast on a Friday as part of a longer fast which *included* Friday, but did not mark it out as a special day of fasting. Muslim tradition rarely acknowledges the pressure of Jewish and Christian counterexamples on Muslim Friday observance explicitly, but on closer inspection those counterexamples are constantly making themselves felt.

Adam's Creation and Christ's Crucifixion

The Syriac *Story of Holy Friday*, in its turn, seems to simultaneously *reject* and *appropriate* these Muslim traditions about Friday. This in spite of the fact that it never makes a single explicit mention of Muslim persons or Muslim theology. The implicit rebuke to these Muslim traditions lies in the *Story's* opening discourse, which takes a biblical detail appropriated by Muslims—God's creation of Adam on a Friday—and folds it back into the original Christian tradition of Friday veneration—which celebrated Friday as the day of Christ's passion. The whole force of the Syriac *Story's* opening paragraphs is to so thoroughly entangle the significance of Adam's creation and Christ's crucifixion on the holy day of Friday that they can never

again be separated, as evident in Christ's own imagined words on the Cross:

> And because Adam has stretched his hand to the fruit and fell, I myself stretch my hands to the nails and raise him up. Because for his sake I embraced the breasts with milk; for his sake I became a fugitive in Egypt; for his sake I was baptised in water; for his sake I received spittle from enemies; for his sake I was sold; for his sake I was mocked; for his sake the wicked reviled me; on his account I was beaten and imprisoned; on his account I received spittle in my face; on his account I was insulted; on his account they gave me to drink the gall and vinegar; on his account I was crucified on a cross; on his account my hands and feet were nailed; and on his account I gave my soul on Friday and became a pledge for him (trans. Minov, p. 205).

It is, of course, possible that the author of the Syriac *Story* fixed on Friday as the day of Adam's creation completely independently of Muslim tradition. After all, it is a biblical detail, not a qurʾanic one. The *Story* never mentions Muslim tradition explicitly, so we have no way of proving beyond a doubt that the text is responding to Muslim influence. By the same token, we cannot prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Muslim traditions assigning Adam's creation to a Friday are indebted to the Bible. But when all this circumstantial evidence is marshalled together, it's hard to avoid the suspicion that we are overhearing fragments of a stimulating debate between Abrahamic siblings—albeit only in snatches and with some strain on the ear.

A Message in Disguise?

This raises further suspicions in its turn. The main body of the Syriac *Story of Holy Friday* is taken up with a moralizing parable about a faithful Christian laborer under a fourth century pagan master. Every Friday, he plays sick so that he can respect the prohibition on work, and his master beats him severely. But as Minov points out in his study, the Christian prohibition on working on Friday does not appear until the writings of Jacob of Edessa in the late seventh century. Does its appearance in Syriac Christian tradition have something to do with the Muslim counterexample—just as the Muslim suspicion of Friday fasting may have something to do with a Christian counterexample? Reciprocal distinctions of this kind have a funny habit of proliferating. It is not a question of linear Christian influence on Islam or Muslim influence on Christianity, but of an iterative and ongoing process of coproduction.

Our first attestation of the *Story of Holy Friday* comes in a 12th century manuscript. It is theoretically possible that the text itself is pre-Islamic, and that its imagined conflict between a pagan master and a Christian slave reflects real social realities at the time it was first written. With all the details we have just reviewed in mind, however, this is hard to believe. Syriac-speaking Christians under Muslim rule were in a delicate situation; it was not wise to express open hostility against Islam. So perhaps the *Story of Holy Friday* does reflect the social realities of its time of composition beneath a gauzy veil of anachronism, with an unequal encounter between Christianity and paganism standing in for an unequal encounter between Christianity and Islam. It is impossible to say for certain, but as the evidence accumulates, it becomes easier and easier to believe that the *Story of Holy Friday* was written well after the advent of Islam. It also seems likely that this was after the ninth century moment when some of the Muslim traditions on the virtues of Friday became widely distributed.

Unfreezing the Amber

When all the interfaith parallels embedded within the Syriac *Story of Holy Friday* are

taken together, they leave us wondering how many other texts from the dogmatic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam contain hidden traces of these long sibling rivalries frozen in their amber. They also leave us with a duty of imagination: to see religious coproduction not as a single frozen instant—a discreet transmission of "influence" at a particular moment in time—but as an iterative and ongoing process that will last for as long as the sibling faiths themselves.

Further Reading

Sergey Minov, "Friday Veneration among Syriac Christians: The Witness of the *Story of Holy Friday*," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30:2 (2020), pp. 195-222.

Basil Lourié, "Friday Veneration in the Sixth- and Seventh-Century Christianity and the Christian Legends on Conversion of Nağrān," in *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom?* ed. Carlos A. Segovia and Basil Lourié (Piscataway, 2012), pp. 131-230.