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The Co-Production of Early Islam in the Maronite Chronicle



The Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount of Jerusalem, as seen from the Mount of Olives (Public Domain; Wikimedia Commons)

Around the year 665 AD, an anonymous Christian Syriac-speaker living under Arab rule wrote a short and rather typical history of the world. Typical, that is, for the Christian tradition of his time, which had long been in the habit of producing year-by-year chronicles meant to encompass all or most of world history. The anonymous author of this *Maronite Chronicle* was probably a member of the Maronite community, which insisted—in agreement with the East Roman emperor in distant Constantinople—that Christ had both a divine and a human nature, but a single will. This put the author at odds with many other Christian Syriac speakers, especially the Syrian Orthodox community, which rejected the idea of distinct divine and human natures in Christ. For the most part, the *Chronicle* he wrote was unremarkable. He started with Alexander the Great, based his work on the Greek chronicle of Eusebius of Caesarea, and ended with an eyewitness account of the happenings of his own time. None of this is special for students of Syriac literature; there are dozens of such chronicles within the Syriac tradition. But the *Maronite Chronicle is* rather special for a different category of scholars: students of early Islam.

Despite surviving in truncated form within a mere 14 folios, the *Maronite Chronicle* can pose some fascinating questions about when Islam emerged as a distinct faith and how

the new creed co-produced its mutual distinction from the Jewish and Christian communities that attended its birth. The *Chronicle*'s special value for these questions rests on two key facts: first, when it was written, and second, the surprising eyewitness information its author gives about his Arab overlords.

The Maronite Chronicle was written under Arab rule, near the middle of the seventh century; this in itself makes the Chronicle very interesting to Islamicists, in light of the unique difficulties of studying the first century if Islam. One of the most vexing issues for students of early Islam is that hardly any Islamic texts were written down in Arabic before the middle of the eighth century AD. This was more than a hundred years after the crucial events in the biographies of the Prophet Muhammad and the earliest leaders of his community. Most scholarly knowledge about the first century of Islam—dated from the Prophet's hijra or emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD—is thus dependent on Arabic texts written during the second century of Islam or much later. There are a few famous exceptions to this rule, above all the Qurʾān itself, which on the testimony of some very ancient manuscripts must have been circulating in some form or another within the term of the first *hijri* century. But aside from the Qurʾān, a figcaption corpus of rock graffiti, and a few fragmentary documents, the earliest elements of Islamic tradition are preserved only by their transmission in works dating from after the 750s. The Islamic tradition before this point was largely oral, and passed on to its written descendant the habit of preserving chains of informants for much of the information it relates.

From the moment that the Arab-Islamic literary tradition comes into historical view, its participants have started using these chains of informants (*isnads*) to argue with each other about how to validate received knowledge about events that took place during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime and the lifetime of the earliest Muslim community. Modern historians have done little more than join a very old and ongoing debate. Yet the question of how to evaluate the accuracy of the many Arab-Islamic traditions about the first *hijri* century (from 622–722) remains unsettled. This makes the *Maronite Chronicle*, despite being a short and typical work of Christian Syriac chronicle writing, very interesting to scholars of early Islam, since it was written smack in the middle of that mysterious period.

Nearly every one of the *Maronite Chronicle*'s laconic eyewitness accounts of the events of that century pose fundamental questions about the nature of the earliest Muslim identities. Consider, for instance, the question of whether it even makes sense to call Muhammad's community and the polity of his successors "Muslims." Some scholars, notably the Chicago Islamicist Fred Donner, prefer to refer to this community simply as "the believers," in keeping with the language of the Qurʾān itself and an early surviving document from Muhammad's Medina, which can be read as including Jews and Christians who accept Muhammad's prophethood within the community of the believers. On this reading, it would take decades for the "believers" to reimagine themselves as a distinct religion, "Islam," to the exclusion of Judaism and Christianity. Other scholars reject this idea, insisting that Muhammad himself was intent on confessionally distinguishing his message from that of Judaism and Christianity.

This debate makes a terse notice in the *Maronite Chronicle* concerning the Caliph Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (r. 661–680) extremely interesting. The notice concerns Muʿāwiya's accession to the caliphate after winning the first Arab civil war: "Many Arabs gathered at Jerusalem and made Muʿāwiya king and he went up and sat down on Golgotha; he prayed there, and went to Gethsemane and went down to the tomb of the blessed Mary to pray in it." From the perspective of later Muslims, this would be a peculiar thing for the Muslim caliph and "commander of the faithful" (*amīr al-muʾminīn*)

to have done. After all, the received text of the Qurʾān explicitly rejects the reality of the crucifixion, saying of the Jews: “They neither killed nor crucified Him [Jesus], though this is how it appeared to them” (Q. 4:157, trans. Arberry). What meaning could the hill of Golgotha, the place of Christ’s crucifixion, have to the leader of the Muslim community?

A visit to Mary’s tomb was perhaps more understandable, given the high esteem afforded her in the Qurʾān and early Muslim tradition. But it is still unclear why this particular association should have been invoked by the leader of the Muslim community in the hour of his elevation. There are two ways to read this peculiar episode. One is to take the new caliph’s visit to Christian shrines as an indication that the distinction between Arab ‘believers’ and their Christian subjects was not yet so clear as it would become. Another is to take it as an ‘ecumenical’ gesture to Muʿāwiya’s majority-Christian subjects. This is less surprising than it might seem; much of Muʿāwiya’s power base rested on unconverted Syrian Arab Christians from the tribal federations of Kalb and Tanūkh, who formed the bedrock of his army. Indeed there are some other notices in the *Chronicle* that show Muʿāwiya as intimately involved in the affairs of his Christian subjects. Apparently, the Syrian Orthodox competed with the Maronites for favorable treatment by the new Arab ruling class. The chronicler even describes a public Christological debate between the two rival faith communities presided over by Muʿāwiya himself, with the “commander of the believers” assuming something like the role of the Christian Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea. In other words, there were good reasons for the caliph to adopt a ritual idiom of power that changed its aspect depending on the faith commitments of the person watching.

Only a few lines down, the *Maronite Chronicle* provides another mysterious passage about the actions of the first Umayyad caliph: “He also minted gold and silver, but it was not accepted, because it had no cross on it.” Archeologists have not found any gold coins that clearly match this description from Muʿāwiya’s Syria. What they find instead are mostly re-mintings of older Byzantine gold coins, which do indeed have crosses on them. Does this mean the *Maronite Chronicle*’s information is wrong? Maybe. But it could also mean that Muʿāwiya made a trial issue of an iconographically non-Christian coinage that did not strike the majority of his subjects as “real money” and thus failed to circulate. Perhaps the failure of this coinage paved the way for the late seventh century “standing caliph” coinage discussed by Paul Neuenkirchen, in which a cross appears next to the figure of the caliph, but without its crossbar, a remarkable iconographic compromise between the ruling Arab minority and their majority Christian subjects. Tantalizing details such as these are grist for the mill of early Islamic historians, and have even made their way into online Christian polemics against Islam, where they have been used to argue (implausibly) that Muʿāwiya was actually a Maronite Christian himself.

When all its evidence is set in the balance, the *Maronite Chronicle* does not decisively resolve any of the outstanding issues that Islamicists continue to argue about. But it does seem sufficient to show why, when the later Umayyad Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705 AD) erected the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, he had it inscribed with a Qurʾānic verse that affirms the prophethood of Jesus but denies him divinity, for “It is not for God to take a son unto Him” (Q. 19:35). Whatever we call the community that built the Dome of the Rock—whether “Muslims” or “believers”—their religious life was so thoroughly co-produced with the example of their Jewish and Christian neighbors that it prompted a reforming caliph like ʿAbd al-Malik to set in stone a new principle of distinction for a new community. That this principle of distinction was itself co-produced with both Christianity and Judaism—simultaneously a denial of Jewish claims that Jesus was a false prophet and a rejection of the Christian idea that He was divine—made it no less significant for the future history of Islam.

Further Reading

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