

# Apocrypha on Jesus' Life in the Early Islamic Milieu: From Syriac into Arabic\*

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Apocryphal traditions are narratives and stories about figures and events that feature some noticeable relationship to biblical traditions, but that are conceived and told in a way that clearly goes beyond the data that is found in the contemporary canonical texts.<sup>1</sup> They are central texts and traditions, in which wider circles of Christians expressed their reception of and interaction with the core of the biblical message, that God worked and continued to work in their own history. In the eastern Christian world, apocrypha are often an integral part of traditions comprising hagiography and liturgical traditions as well.<sup>2</sup> Apocryphal texts and traditions hold a key position right in the middle and in-between the biblical and patristic writings anywhere in Oriental Christian literature and Christian literature more broadly. Christian literature in Arabic is no exception to this. In fact, Arabic apocrypha play a crucial role in the transmission of Oriental Christian traditions into a world, which in the Middle East from the seventh century onwards was increasingly dominated by a new religion, Islam.<sup>3</sup> Christian apocryphal writings constitute a prominent reservoir of traditions that allow the modern researcher to trace connections between developing sacred scriptures beyond the boundaries of religions. At times, the trajectories of such interreligious connections are even traceable with chronological and geographical precision.

For the study of the interaction of Christians and Muslims in the framework of apocryphal traditions, Christian Arabic witnesses ought to have a role of

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1 For useful discussions that assist in clarifying the terminology of what is “canonical,” “apocryphal,” and pertinent to the “New Testament,” see, among others, Marksches, “Haupteinleitung,” 10–24; Nicklas, “Semiotik – Intertextualität – Apokryphität,” and Horn, “Christian Apocrypha in Georgia.”

2 Bovon, “Beyond the Canonical and the Apocryphal Books,” has drawn some attention to this more recently.

3 See also Horn, “Apocryphal Gospels in Arabic.”

particular importance. These canonical and non-canonical traditions constitute a substantial subset of Christian literature in Arabic, including writings from the Byzantine and medieval periods.<sup>4</sup> Although scholarship on the Bible and patristic literature has long treated writings in the Arabic language as at best a marginal phenomenon, more recently one can observe over time a veritable shift of attention to the Bible and patristic writings in Arabic.<sup>5</sup>

The present article limits its focus to considering some aspects of two intriguing apocryphal works, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* and the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John*. Both belong to the wider genre of "Lives of Jesus." On a journey to the Ambrosiana in Milan in the early 1940s, the Swedish Orientalist scholar Oscar Löfgren (1898–92), who during the latter part of his career taught at the university in Uppsala, discovered and in the course of his further work carefully analyzed the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John*. Based on examining the text and its structures, he concluded already in 1943 that this text is "the only, almost completely preserved ... New Testament apocryphal text, which in fact also represents the (literary) genre of a gospel."<sup>6</sup> Advances in genre studies of the gospels as well as on-going analysis of heretofore largely neglected apocryphal writings, especially the so-called infancy apocrypha, may make it necessary to revise such a judgement. For instance, upon closer examination, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* could be regarded as a "Life of Jesus," even though it places a heavy emphasis on Jesus' childhood.<sup>7</sup> However, this infancy narrative comes at least closer to being classified as a gospel than previously thought. Overall, details of genre questions within the realm of biblical and Bible-related texts in Arabic and neighboring Christian Oriental languages are indeed a fruitful area for further investigations.

The Qur'ān parallels very specific elements of some of the stories to which the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* and the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* are textual witnesses. Thus, these two texts constitute a part of the corpus of Christian, Jewish, and other materials which are the sources that illuminate the background to the Qur'ān, its formation history, and its early interpretation. The

4 See Graf, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, 85–297.

5 Among recent publications and projects, see Schulthess, *Les manuscrits arabes des lettres de Paul*; Hjälm, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel*; Vollandt, *Arabic Versions of the Pentateuch*; Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*; Binay and Leder (eds.), *Translating the Bible into Arabic*; Schulthess, "Die arabischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments"; and Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels*.

6 Löfgren, "Ein unbeachtetes apokryphes Evangelium," 159.

7 Genequand (trans.), "Vie de Jésus en arabe," entitles the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* as an *Arabic Life of Jesus*. See also idem, "Vie de Jésus en arabe," 207.

concept of “sources” used here is open to at least two differentiable, yet closely related meanings. It may characterize a given text that serves as an immediate and direct text at the origins of at least one or several parts of another text, including direct citations. It is also an apt label with which to describe the role or function of a text through which that text witnesses to one or several traditions, which in their turn in oral or written form directly or through further mediation have contributed to the process of communicating ideas in and to the production process(es) of another text. In the second case, a text may still be understood to be a “source,” even if its own precise wording is not present in the text to which it contributes. In that second instance, the “source” text may serve as the place of origin from which traditions, in whichever direction, traveled to the recipient text in question, and it may serve as a textual location from which our present-day knowledge receives information about the very existence of such processes of transmission.

Research which I have conducted thus far indicates that the two apocryphal texts under consideration here are “sources” for the Qur’ān in the second sense. They are potentially “sources” in the first sense as well. In addition, both texts offer evidence that Christians responded to the Islamic portrayal of Jesus by redacting their own apocryphal sources. Although each of the two apocryphal Christian texts is preserved in its entirety in Arabic, there exist indications that the underlying originals were composed in Syriac and circulated not later than the early part of the seventh century.<sup>8</sup> Early contacts between Christians and Muslims appear to have led to the reworking of both texts in light of early Islamic influences. Evidence for this includes the selection of vocabulary, phraseology, and literary motifs as well as the incorporation of apocalyptic narrative that captures aspects of the encounter between Christians and Muslims in the early centuries of a shared history.<sup>9</sup> In their new garb, that is after reformulations had been achieved in a milieu influenced by emerging Islam, the rewritten texts continued to be part of popular religious literature.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Mescherskaya, “‘L’Adoration des Mages’ dans l’apocryphe,” 100; and Мещерская, “Протооевангелие Иакова,” 51. See also Horn, “Editing a Witness.”

9 I study aspects of the apocalyptic material in “Apocalyptic Ecclesiology in Response to Early Islam,” forthcoming in a *Festschrift* edited by Sandra Keating and David Bertaina, with the assistance of Mark Swanson and Alexander Treiger.

10 Given the remarkable prominence of miracles of Jesus in both of these texts and given the onset of debates within Islam and between Muslims and Christians regarding miracles as proof of divinity, one may argue that the two apocryphal texts presented here constitute significant milestones in the development of this interreligious exchange.

The *Arabic Infancy Gospel* and the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* are apocryphal texts. As such, they develop material that stands in some recognizable and identifiable relationship to figures or events known from the canon of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament or the New Testament, here primarily that of the latter. In addition and more specifically, both texts prominently feature a strong emphasis on Jesus working miracles, a feature of early and late antique Christian piety and spirituality, which was present throughout the ancient Mediterranean realm, but which was prominently at home in significant trajectories in the Syriac-speaking milieu.<sup>11</sup> The concentration of these several characteristics makes the texts selected for this investigation highly relevant for comparisons both with the Qur'ān and with texts that in their turn witness to the development of theological debates on miracles within Islam and between Muslim and Christian authors on the validity of considering miracle-working as a proof of divinity.

### **The *Arabic Infancy Gospel*: Main Content, Manuscript Evidence, Linguistic Milieu of Origin, and Transmission**

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*.<sup>12</sup> Following the analysis of Constantin Freiherr von Tischendorf, one can section off the text into three parts. A first portion, chapters 1–9, retells events preceding and accompanying Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, followed by his presentation in the Temple, the visit of the Magi, and Herod's wrath in the middle section. The final section, roughly chapters 34 through 55, features miracles worked by the young Jesus between ages seven and twelve.<sup>13</sup> The text is explicit with regard to its intention of presenting miracles that Jesus concealed from or did not make available to the eyes of the larger public. It ends in the last two chapters by taking the period it

11 See for instance Horn, "Jesus' Healing Miracles as Proof of Divine Agency and Identity."

12 For access to an edition of the Greek version of the *Protoevangelium of James*, see de Strycker (ed. and trans.), *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques*. For the critical edition of the Greek text of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, see Burke, *De infantia Iesu Evangelium Thomae Graece*. For an overview of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, see Horn, "Arabic Infancy Gospel."

13 Tischendorf, *Evangelium apocrypha*, xlix–liv (introductory comments) and 171–202 (Latin translation).

covers up to Jesus' public ministry at age thirty and it does identify Jesus right from the beginning as the one who brought salvation.<sup>14</sup> The text therefore at least approaches the basic and characteristic theme of a "gospel." The unique character of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* however derives from its middle section (chapters 10–35) recounting miracles Jesus worked as a child while travelling with his family through Egypt, and again after his return to Bethlehem and Nazareth. This section presents Mary as the mediator of Jesus' power to those seeking help.<sup>15</sup> The mother and her son collaborate in healing the possessed, leprous, mute, and spell-bound, most of whom are women or children. An ass is changed back into a human, and fruitful coupling of spouses resumes throughout the land. Most miracles in this section are performed through an object that is in contact with the infant; either Jesus' swaddling-cloth, his diapers, or his bath-water. Some occur in direct contact with Jesus' body. The middle section also incorporates the story of an encounter between the Holy Family and a group of robbers (chapters 13 and 23) that circulated widely, in part independently, in other narratives in Eastern Christian literature.<sup>16</sup>

While the dating of this middle section may perhaps go back to the fifth century or even earlier, the compilation of the text as a whole as it is accessible today unlikely dates to before the sixth century.<sup>17</sup> The *Arabic Infancy Gospel* has been presented thus far in two editions. In 1697, Henricus Sike edited the text together with a Latin translation, based on a manuscript owned by Jacob Golius.<sup>18</sup> This manuscript is Ms Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Or. 350, dated 1442 CE.<sup>19</sup> In 1973, Mario E. Provera published an edition and Italian translation of an even earlier manuscript. His base manuscript was Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Or. 32 (n. 387), dated 1299 CE, which is accompanied by a rich selection of fifty ink drawings of scenes from the life of the young Jesus and his family. To this manuscript, Provera collated Ms Vatican, Biblioteca

14 Tischendorf, *Evangelium apocrypha*, 171.

15 See Cecchelli, *Mater Christi*, vol. 3, 369; and Schneider, *Evangelia infantiae apocrypha*, 54.

16 Geerard, "Le bon larron, un apocryphe inédit"; idem, "Der gute Schächer: Ein neues unediertes Apokryphon"; Gounelle, "Une légende apocryphe"; and Bilby, *As the Bandit Will I Confess You*.

17 Peeters, *Évangiles apocryphes II*, i–xxviii, discusses introductory matters pertinent to the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*. At times, Egyptian origins of the material in the middle section are assumed although no immediate Coptic or Greek witness of Egyptian provenance has been found. For this question, the precise relationship to traditions in the *Vision of Theophilus* remains to be examined. See also Schneider, *Evangelium infantiae*, 55.

18 Sike, *Evangelium infantiae*.

19 Sike, *Evangelium infantiae*, "praefatio ad lectorem," 3; see also Peeters, *Évangiles apocryphes II*, iii.

Apostolica Vaticana, Syr. 159 (hereafter Vatican Syr. 159), fols. 231v–39r, which offers texts in Arabic in Syriac script, or Garšūnī, and Syriac.<sup>20</sup>

Thus far, the manuscripts that are considered as text basis for the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* represent the text for the most part as a separate, independent, and clearly circumscribed work. Largely neglected is the body of manuscripts that feature the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* as an integral component of more comprehensive, composite apocryphal compositions, primarily in the form of a *Life of Mary*. Here lies a significant potential for advancing the investigation not only of the text's transmission history, but also of the development of the shape of the text itself. By considering the evidence of Ms Vatican Syr. 159, for instance, Provera has taken a first step in that direction.<sup>21</sup> Following this path can lead to new observations. Ms Vatican Syr. 159 has a peculiar feature. While the text of chapters 1 through 40/41 is in Arabic in Syriac script, from chapter 40/41 onwards the manuscript offers a Syriac text of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the question of the manuscript evidence for the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* is intricately connected to the questions of possible features of the material that speak in favor of the origins of the text in the Syriac milieu. The presence of a Syriac version of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* in Ms Vatican, Syr. 159 is just one point in that direction.

Although the entire text of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* is also attested in Syriac in another line of manuscript evidence, the dating of this material neither invalidates nor immediately supports a late antique origin of the Syriac version. The relevant Syriac version is incorporated into a composite apocryphal narrative known as the *Syriac History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge edited this text in 1899.<sup>23</sup> The manuscript evidence here dates to between 1200 and 1900. However, these manuscripts constitute the last stage of a long process of composition of the *Syriac History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, which, as I have argued elsewhere, begins no later than the fifth century.<sup>24</sup> Budge assumed that the editor of his base manuscript of the *Syriac History of the Blessed Virgin Mary* had translated the *Arabic Infancy*

20 An edition of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, based on a broader manuscript basis, is in progress.

21 Genequand, "Vie de Jésus en arabe," 209, noted that Ms Vatican Syr. 159 is closer to Sike's manuscript than Ms Florence, Biblioteca-Medicea Laurenziana, Or. 32.

22 Peeters, *Évangiles apocryphes II*, xiii–xv.

23 See Budge (ed. and trans.), *The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*.

24 Horn, "Syriac and Arabic Perspectives on Structural and Motif Parallels," 270.

*Gospel* into Syriac when incorporating it into the text.<sup>25</sup> A final reevaluation of this judgment depends on further progress towards a critical edition of the manuscripts witnessing to the *Syriac Life of Mary*.<sup>26</sup> For the time being, the possibility cannot be excluded that the author or compiler of the *Syriac History of the Blessed Virgin Mary* already had access to a Syriac version of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*.<sup>27</sup>

The evidence deriving from the codicological realm as well as from studies of translation matters does not exhaust the evidence that is available for suggesting a Syriac *Vorlage*. The realm of literary investigations is of remarkable relevance for deciding the matter. Chapter Seven in Sike's Bodleian manuscript features text that employs the image of angels surrounding or encircling Jesus. The parallel passage in the Laurenziana manuscript tells of angels filling the building of the Temple in the space that is around Jesus. This motif takes parts of its origins in the Gospel of Luke that speaks of the presence of angels near the place of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8–15). Yet the motif of angels surrounding Jesus' birthplace that one encounters in the text in Sike's manuscript also occurs in fifth-century Syriac poetic homelies of Jacob of Sarug and other near-contemporary Syriac writers. The image of angels filling space around Jesus in contexts related to his birth occurs also in medieval Islamic witnesses to *agrapha* traditions, recorded for instance in the *Revival of Religious Sciences*, in Arabic *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 505 AH / 1111 CE). Such observations suggest that this imagery may have been received in multiple ways in the Islamic interpretation of Jesus' birth.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John: Main Content, Manuscript Evidence, Linguistic Milieu of Origin, and Transmission**

The *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* is presented as the mysteries which Christ shared with John, son of Zebedee.<sup>29</sup> Referring to itself as a "Book of

25 Budge, *The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 46. At the time Budge worked on the text of the *Syriac Life of Mary*, the text of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* that was in circulation was Sike's edition.

26 Naffah, "Les 'Histoires' Syriaques."

27 Genequand, "Vie de Jésus en arabe," 207, saw no reason to question the witness of the *Syriac History of the Blessed Virgin Mary* as the valid and main point of access to the original Syriac text of the work.

28 A fuller analysis of this motif and its reception shall become available in due course in the publication of a study I am preparing.

29 *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* 1.2; and Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*, 18.

Apocrypha,"<sup>30</sup> the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* is a complete account of the life of Jesus, incorporating sections from synoptic and Johannine New Testament gospels and filling in their biographical gaps with copious miraculous evidence of Jesus' divinity. At once a gospel harmony, an apocryphon, and an apocalypse, it draws on Christian apocryphal and apocalyptic sources, while offering unique material. Among other intriguing features, it offers for instance a greatly expanded apocalyptic discourse, which makes overt reference to the Arab invasions of the seventh century and to the Christian experience of Islamic hegemony.<sup>31</sup> The polemic of the text is also carried through in the language of the miracles, which emphasize Jesus' divinity, over those who though admitting he is a great teacher deny that he is the Son of God.

The manuscript evidence for the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* consists of two witnesses: Ms Sinai Ar. 441, dated to 1196 CE, and Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Or. 93 (E sup. 96), dated to 1342 CE.<sup>32</sup> Following upon Löfgren's discovery of the text in the Ambrosiana library, Giovanni Galbiati published a facsimile edition of the Ambrosiana manuscript in 1957.<sup>33</sup> Michel van Esbroeck identified the Sinai witness after Galbiati's edition had been issued.<sup>34</sup> The Ambrosiana witness has lacunae, which hitherto were filled in with supplementary material from a later Ethiopic recension of the work, the *Ta'āmrāt Iyasus*, or *Miracles of Jesus*.<sup>35</sup> A new text edition will rely on the full spectrum of the Arabic witnesses.<sup>36</sup>

The *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* witnesses to the process of the transmission of apocryphal traditions from the Syriac-speaking milieu into the world of speakers of Arabic, both Christian and Muslim. The colophon of the

30 It should be noted, that a similar collection of material comprising a "Life of Jesus" in Ethiopic manuscripts, one which differs only slightly from the Ethiopic *Miracles of Jesus* and the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John*, is called *maṣḥafa el'atqarfā*, an expression which is a corruption of "Book of the Apocrypha." I am grateful to Robert Phenix for sharing this observation with me.

31 Horn, "Apocalyptic Ecclesiology."

32 For fuller discussion, see also Horn, "Editing a Witness."

33 Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*.

34 See Van Esbroeck, "À propos de l'Évangile apocryphe arabe attribué à Saint Jean."

35 For a partial edition of the text of the *Ta'āmrāt Iyasus*, see Grébaut, "Les miracles de Jésus," *Patrologia Orientalis*, 12/4 (1916), 551–652, 14/5 (1920), 771–844, and 17/4 (1924), 783–857. Additional sections of the text are published elsewhere. See Grébaut, "Un miracle de Notre-Seigneur"; idem, "La légende du parfum de Marie-Madeleine"; idem, "La Pentecôte et la mission des Apôtres"; idem, "Les relations entre Abgar et Jésus"; and Grébaut and Roman, "Un passage eschatologique de Miracles de Jésus."

36 Together with Robert Phenix, I am working on a critical edition and English translation of the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John*.

Ambrosiana manuscript indicates that it is a copy of an Arabic translation of a Syriac original.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, one can identify various elements in the text that strongly suggest a Syriac original. The term “Martmaryam” for Mary in the Arabic is a borrowing from the Syriac. The incorporation of the Abgar legend, and the importance of Clement in the list of apostles and early successors to the apostles are further indications of Syriac origins; it may also be that the inclusion of Clement goes back to an even earlier Greek-Syrian tradition, which manifests itself, for instance, in the Pseudo-Clementine novel.

The date of the first Arabic translation is unclear. Luigi Moraldi dated it to about 800.<sup>38</sup> He argued that a stemma for the development of the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* consists of an original Syriac text and a subsequent original translation into Arabic in the process of which additions were introduced. At that point, one branch developed into a separate tradition, and that branch, with further additions and cuts, was translated into the Ethiopic *Ta’āmrat Iyasus*, the *Miracles of Jesus*. This Ethiopic text contains an extensive reworking of the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John*, adding and removing scenes, miracles, and narrative formulations. The other line of transmission in Arabic experienced further additions, possibly also eliminations of material, and finally came to be accessible in the copy of Ms Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Or. 93 (E 96 sup). Yet Moraldi did not know of the Sinai witness. Thus his hypothesis remains to be tested.

### The Influence of Islam on Reworking Earlier Christian Traditions

Both the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* and the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* show the influence of Islam on the transmission of Christian apocryphal Jesus material. Genequand has already noted the Islamicization of vocabulary in the Laurenziana manuscript of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* over and against the Bodleian manuscript edited by Sike. Indeed, there are many pieces of evidence for a redaction of the Laurenziana manuscript. One notices, for instance, that the first chapter of the text employs the name *bayt al-maqdis* for Jerusalem, whereas elsewhere *Urišalim* is used.<sup>39</sup> One may observe other instances where a redactor inadvertently left her or his mark in both versions. At the first

37 Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*, 267–68; see also Moraldi, *Vangelo Arabo apocrifo*, 13.

38 Moraldi, *Vangelo Arabo apocrifo*, 13.

39 Sike, *Evangelium infantiae*, 4 (initial chapter of *Arabic Infancy Gospel*); and Provera, *Il vangelo arabo*, 70 (*Arabic Infancy Gospel* 5.1).

reference to Mary and Joseph, the text features Joseph, but references him merely with a personal pronoun; only later on does the text provide his name "Joseph" as identification. In this case, the fact that the Bodleian and the Laurenziana manuscripts both offer evidence of this same phenomenon suggests that one witnesses here the result of redactional work that occurred prior to the production of both manuscripts. Thus, in this instance both of the available edited versions of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* depend upon an even earlier Arabic translation.

The Bodleian manuscript presents the phrase: "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit: one God" as an introductory formula to the text. In the manuscript in the Laurenziana library (Or. 32) one reads instead the *basmala*, a formulation which emerged under the influence of Islam, "In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful one (*bi-smi llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*).<sup>40</sup> In chapter 10, the Laurenziana manuscript features the story of a pagan priest, who is serving an assortment of idols and deities in Egypt. In referring to the priest, the text uses the title *imām*; the Bodleian manuscript features instead the term *kāhin*, from Syriac *kāhen*.<sup>41</sup> A similar tendency is to be noticed in chapter 15 of the Laurenziana manuscript where the text speaks of the "cursed demon" (*al-šaytān al-raḥīm*), using an expression familiar from Qur'ān 15:17 and 16:98, whereas the Bodleian manuscript employs the expression *al-šaytān al-la'īn* "cursed demon" instead.<sup>42</sup> This set of evidence suggests that the version featured in the Laurenziana manuscript was redacted more immediately under the influence of Islamic terminology and texts.

The Laurenziana manuscript offers an intriguing detail in its presentation of the scene of the visit of the women at Jesus' tomb, one which is not in the Bodleian manuscript.<sup>43</sup> In the list of women who come to attend to Jesus' body at the tomb, the first name one encounters is that of "Mary the mother of Jesus." The fourth name is "Mary, the spouse of Joseph before Mary the mother of Jesus." The text obviously presumes here that at the time of Jesus' death both his mother Mary and another Mary, the first wife of his step-father

40 Sike, *Evangelium infantiae*, 2; and Provera, *Il vangelo arabo*, 6. Although the *basmala* had its origins within Islam, as far as one can tell, Christians and Jews also used it quite regularly and developed it. See for instance the comments offered in Treiger, "From Theodore Abu Qurrah to Abed Azrié"; Hjälm, "The Changing Face of the Arabic Bible," 835; idem, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel*, 80; and Almbladh, "The 'Basmala' in Medieval Letters in Arabic Written by Jews and Christians."

41 Provera, *Il vangelo arabo*, 76; and Sike, *Evangelium infantiae*, 22.

42 See also Genequand, "Vie de Jésus en arabe," 217.

43 *Arabic Infancy Gospel* 50.2 (ed. and trans. Provera, *Il vangelo arabo*, 132–33).

Joseph, were alive. Genequand offered as comment that the identification of the fourth name serves as an etiology for Jesus' brothers. Yet one may ask further whether this explanation in the Laurenziana manuscript may not also reflect the presence of thought about social structures which are familiar with the legal status of divorce and polygamy in Islam. Moreover, it is conceivable that this remark was edited out in the copying of Sike's manuscript or in the transmission leading up to it, while being retained in the *Vorlage* of the Laurenziana. Polygamy was an institution of Judaism and non-Christian religions of the Roman Empire. Polygamy was also an ideal of Persian society with roots in the military policy of the Achaemenids. Christians in Sassanian Persia were confronted with the problem of official polygamy; stories of Sassanian persecution of Christian monastics and other celibates are well known. A synod of the Church of the East outlawed polygamy explicitly in 544,<sup>44</sup> suggesting its prevalence among Christians in Sassanian Persia. It is quite conceivable that some aspect of Islamic-Christian differences on polygamy may underlie the discrepancy in these two manuscripts, with or without a factor of Sassanian influence.

Some evidence in the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* could be construed as Christian self-censorship under Islamic influence. In Sike's edition of the Bodleian manuscript, Jesus declares that he will be crucified together with the robbers Titus and Dumachus; the Laurenziana manuscript does not mention this prediction. It is conceivable that the text in the Laurenziana manuscript was informed by knowledge of Islam's resistance towards acknowledging the reality of Jesus' crucifixion. Thus the redactor of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* in that manuscript witness may have censored his text.

Other material in the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* is less clear in its implications. In both of the editions of the text, one finds a scene in which the infant Jesus speaks in the cradle; in the Bodleian manuscript this scene is the first episode, while the Laurenziana manuscript places it more towards the middle of the text.<sup>45</sup> The qur'ānic parallels of the speaking newborn Jesus found in sūras

44 See canons 16 and 38 of the Synod of Mar Aba I. See Chabot (ed. and trans.), *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, 518, 549–50, 557–58, and 561. For a discussion of Roman legal perspectives concerning Christian-Jewish inter-marriage in preceding centuries, including the related problem of polygamy as a Jewish institution that was contrary to Roman law, see for instance Sivan, "Why not marry a Jew?"

45 Sike, *Evangelium infantiae*, 4; and *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, 36 (Provera, *Il vangelo arabo*, 112–13.

3:46, 5:110, and 19:29–33 are well known.<sup>46</sup> The *Arabic Infancy Gospel* could have been incorporating this scene in order to demonstrate that Christians were aware of such a story and had kept its tradition since long before the qur'ānic versions, perhaps suggesting that the qur'ānic text made use of such a tradition from the Christian community. In some parts of the Christian orbit, knowledge of the scene of Jesus speaking as a newborn may have been treated as a post-Islamic phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> Yet there are earlier Christian texts that witness to the spread of ideas about the Jesus-baby speaking before its proper age, for instance in the Syriac apocryphal *Revelation of the Magi*.<sup>48</sup> Traditions about newborn or very young children speaking before their proper age were not exceptional in the ancient Syriac milieu.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether this particular text can be understood as a story which was part of a pre-qur'ānic Syriac forerunner of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*.

Another example of an ambiguous text is the scene that features the woman healed of leprosy that is found in *Arabic Infancy Gospel* 18:11 in the edition of the text from the Laurenziana manuscript. At this instance, the woman says to the infant Jesus, "Fortunate are your parents! Indeed, you purify human beings, who are [in] your likeness, through the water with which you cleanse your body." Perhaps the author of this passage had in mind human beings who take on the likeness of Christ's divinity through baptism. Or the text may have intended to suggest that Jesus was truly a human being, and not in outward appearance only. The phrase "[in] your likeness" evokes Genesis 1:24, in which Elohim creates Adam in "our image and likeness." This intertextual connection would imply the view that Jesus is God, who participated in the creation of the world. Yet whether or not the author or redactor of the passage in the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* indeed had such an allusion in mind is difficult to discern. If

46 Horn, "Syriac and Arabic Perspectives on Structural and Motif Parallels," 281–83; and Horn, "Jesus, the Wondrous Infant." For the later reception of this motif, see Horn, "Jesus Speaking as an Infant."

47 According to the ninth-century Islamic author Abū 'Uṭmān al-Jāḥiẓ, for instance, Christians claimed that the Qur'ān's account of Jesus speaking as an infant could not be accurate since "it is not found in the gospels, or stories of the life of Jesus, or in the prophecies of his coming." See Abū 'Uṭmān al-Jāḥiẓ, "Reply to the Christians" in Allouche, "Un traité de polémique christiano-musulmane," 131. I am grateful to Nathan Gibson for calling my attention to al-Jāḥiẓ' discussion.

48 Syriac *Revelation of the Magi* chapters 13, 19, 21, and 25 (edited and translated by Landau, *The Sages and the Star-Child*, 41–44, 52–58, 60–61 [Syriac] and 99–102, 113–20, and 123–24 [English]); and Horn, "Syriac and Arabic Perspectives on Structural and Motif Parallels," 289.

49 Horn, "Jesus Speaking as an Infant."

she or he did, one would have to reflect on whether this might have been a censored claim of Christ's divinity over and against Islamic Christology. Quite obviously, much work remains to be done on this text before a firm conclusion can be reached about passages like this one with similarly ambiguous status.

Further examples could be added that indicate how discrepancies between the manuscript versions of the text of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* may be grounded more firmly in the web of influence of a milieu penetrated increasingly by Islamic ideas on one version, the one represented by the Laurenziana manuscript. The version preserved in the Bodleian manuscript that was edited by Sike for the most part does not reflect such an influence. Resisting the temptation of attempting to provide an exhaustive presentation of the evidence before the necessary critical textual basis has been established, it is advisable here to turn instead to some consideration of our second text.

In the Ambrosiana manuscript of the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* one uncovers clear signs of redaction that can plausibly be explained as responses to the Islamic presentation of the figure of Jesus. The largest section that witnesses to likely additions to an earlier text consists of two sizable expansions, a first one as an expansion to an eschatological discourse on events at the end of the world which Jesus delivers to his twelve disciples gathered at Jericho and a second one, which Jesus delivers to his twelve disciples gathered around him on the Mount of Olives.<sup>50</sup> It is possible that at least part of the eschatological discourse, to which the apocalyptic one was added, was in its own turn already part of the Syriac text. At some point that discourse was expanded with material that speaks of the impending arrival of a nation that has its origin in the desert, one which will act violently against God's people, blaspheme God with words that had not been used before, spread blood all over the earth, take God's people prisoner, rip children out of their parents' hands, sell them, and raise them as their own, and do all this out of the conviction of serving God.<sup>51</sup> A curious detail mentions that the nation that is in question colors their beard with herbs.<sup>52</sup> That this nation is the Arabs is supported by many thinly-veiled

50 *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* 30–32 and 37–38 (ed. Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*, 109–21 and 138–94).

51 *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* 30.3 (ed. Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*, 111–112); and Horn, "Apocalyptic Ecclesiology."

52 *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* 30.3 (ed. Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*, 111). Among early Muslims, the custom of dyeing one's beard may have arisen with the adoption of the use of *henna* that was employed in the regions Muslims conquered. See Juynboll, "Dyeing the Hair and Beard in Early Islam," 55. The *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* seems to react polemically to this, downgrading the quality of the plant used. For a

references to Arabs in the text of the apocalyptic section. The new nation will introduce a new religion; they are called the people of Qidar/Qeder, who as Genesis 25:13 states is the second-born son of Ishmael, and is the father of the Arabs. Indeed, Moraldi has pointed out the numerous almost historical statements in the apocalyptic discourse of this text, which are out of form for the veiled references to persons and events common in apocalyptic discourse elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

Some aspects of this apocalyptic material overlap with other known apocalypses that are in evidence in other texts in the milieu of the competitive exchange between Christianity and Islam in the first millennium. A few references to the King of the West and the people of the East and interpretations of material in the prophet Daniel (Dan 7:23) suggest connections with the Syriac *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*.<sup>54</sup> Moraldi's study of the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* tried to situate the translation of the work from Syriac into Arabic in the milieu of the monastery of Samuel of Qalamūn in Egypt.<sup>55</sup> As yet, no clear points of connection have emerged from a comparison of the apocalyptic material in the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* with the so-called *Apocalypse of Samuel*, which is not Samuel of Qalamūn's work, but rather that of a somewhat later medieval author, and which is a text that bemoans the transition from Coptic to Arabic.<sup>56</sup> Although further examination may change that picture, for the time being the two texts do not seem to be related.

### Miracles in Support of Divinity

One of the many intriguing dimensions of studying the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* is the investigation of aspects of the polemical interaction between Muslims and Christians that are featured in this text. Within this perspective, one of the contexts to this polemic is the reception of Jesus' miracles

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discussion of the wider social significance and symbolism for Muslim men of dyeing their beards, see Patel, *Muslim Distinction*, 294–96.

53 Moraldi, *Vangelo Arabo apocrifo*, notes to the discourses.

54 See for instance *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* 37.23 (ed. Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*, 147–48); and Horn, "Apocalyptic Ecclesiology."

55 Moraldi, *Vangelo Arabo apocrifo*, 20–23.

56 On the *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn*, see Ziadeh (ed. and trans.), "L'apocalypse de Samuel, supérieur de Deir el-Qalamoun"; Zaborowski, "From Coptic to Arabic in Medieval Egypt"; Martinez, "The King of Rūm and the King of Ethiopia"; Rubenson, "Translating the Tradition"; Papaconstantinou, "They Shall Speak the Arabic Language and Take Pride in It"; and van Lent, "Apocalypse of Samuel."

and their theological significance in the Qurʾān and Islamic commentators.<sup>57</sup> Without doubt, one possible dimension of the usage of the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* is as an apology for the divinity of Jesus. Thus, the reception of the numerous miracles of Jesus in the text can be seen as evidence of a conversation between this Christian apocryphal text on the one hand and the Qurʾān and early Islamic commentators, who understand Jesus as a great but mortal prophet, on the other. In this sense, the use of miracles in the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* is perhaps identical, in principle, to the incorporation of the Signs Gospel into the canonical Gospel of John. Unravelling the precise Islamic and Christian theological and historical contexts of this polemic is complicated by the fact that the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* couches its polemic in the genre of apocalyptic. Yet the usage of more traditional literary motives also may aid in veiling some of that interaction. In one instance, for example, a debate is featured that arises between Satan and his demons on the question of Jesus' miracles and whether or not they show that Jesus is greater than the prophets and others who worked such miracles before him.<sup>58</sup> Whereas this debate occurs in the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* in material that seems to belong to passages that otherwise are not affected by reflections of an Islamic influence, it would have to be discerned to what extent one encounters here remnants or active parallels to themes in dialogues between Satan and a given conversation partner that are not unfamiliar from Syriac literature elsewhere. How precisely these debates fit into the context of early Islamic and early Muslim-Christian debates that center on refuting or defending the validity of taking recourse to Jesus' miracles as proof of his divinity, and which have received some initial study at the hands of David Thomas, is a topic that logically connects to the present inquiry.<sup>59</sup>

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57 See for example Thomas, "The Miracles of Jesus in Early Islamic Polemic"; idem, "The Miracles of Jesus in early Islamic anti-Christian Polemic: Further Thoughts," paper presented at the VIIIth Conference of Christian-Arabic Studies, Granada, Spain (September 2008); Robinson, "Creating Birds from Clay"; and Avci, "The Miracles of Jesus in the Christian Tradition." For a modern perspective, see for example Zebiri, "Contemporary Muslim Understanding of the Miracles of Jesus."

58 *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* 36.8–10 (ed. Galbiati, *Iohannis evangelium apocryphum arabice*, 135–38).

59 Thomas, "The Miracles of Jesus in Early Islamic Polemic."

## Conclusions

For both the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* and the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* one can discern pre-Islamic *Vorlagen* or versions, which likely derive from within the milieu of Syriac-speaking Christian literature. Yet contacts between Christians and Muslims seem to have led to the reworking of earlier texts or traditions in light of an early Islamic influence that revealed its impact in the selection of vocabulary, phraseology, and literary motifs, or in the incorporation of apocalyptic narrative that attempts to capture the experiences of encounters between Christians and Muslims in the early centuries of a shared history. Both of these Christian apocryphal texts continued to be part of popular Arabic-Christian religious literature. The study in tandem of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* and the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* allowed us to discern some aspects of how contacts and voluntary and perhaps involuntary literary cooperation between Christians and Muslims expressed themselves in a competitive, polemical struggle. At least one of the issues at the heart of these struggles was the question of the miraculous powers of Jesus. The study showed also how the cross-fertilisation of ideas and imaginations about Jesus' life between Christian and Muslim traditions, in part expressed in the course of translation activities that showed respect towards, or at least an awareness of the respective other side's ideological sensitivities, contributed to a greater assimilation of shared narratives about the figure of Jesus who is and remains sufficiently central to both religious traditions.

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