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a comparative study

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Groups and Community in Ibn Ishaq / Ibn Hisham and al-Waqidi – a comparative study¹

¹ This paper will use a simplified transliteration of Arabic limited to the Latin alphabet.

Studies on the literary sources pertaining to the Life of Muhammad have mainly focused on the question: how close are such sources to a perceived historical reality, assuming that the sources accurately reflect historical circumstances of the Life of Muhammad. Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to the question of how our sources reflect the circumstances, environments, and ideas of the “authors” of these works.² To be sure, early biographical works on Muhammad are not “authored” in the modern sense of the word; rather, they are compilations of earlier materials that have been collected by traditionalists of the later generations. Thus Ibn Ishaq (in the recension of Ibn Hisham³) and al-Waqidi, the two compilers upon whom I shall mainly focus, are not autonomous authors who produce their narrative accounts about the Life of Muhammad *ex nihilo*, but draw upon a wealth of traditions about Muhammad.⁴ Yet still, a comparison of the narrative works of these two men shows that neither transmitted everything to which they had access, but rather that each chose from an available pool of traditions, selectively arranging, and at times modifying traditions to suit their own narrative intent, and composing out of the choice of available materials a narrative edifice that each compiler deemed adequate for their ideological, theological, and historical perspective.⁵

² The most successful attempts in this regard in recent years have been undertaken by Rizwi Faizer (see note 3f., below)

³ I am following R. Faizer who suggests that one can rightly assume Ibn Ishaq to be the main compiler of the *Sira* as it comes down to us in the recension of Ibn Hisham. Cf.: Rizwi S. Faizer, “Muhammad and the Medinan Jews: A Comparison of the Texts of Ibn Ishaq’s *Kitab Sirat Rasul Allah* with al-Waqidi’s *Kitab al-Maghazi*,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (1996), 463-89.

⁴ On the main “ingredients” of these compilations (*khbar / akhbar*), please see S. Leder, “Classical Arabic Prose Literature: A Researchers’ Sketch Map,” in: *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23 (1991), 2-26.

In addition to these two compiler-authors, I will also draw on Ibn Sa’d’s *Tabaqat*.

⁵ Cf.: Rizwi Faizer, *Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi Revisited. A Case Study of Muhammad and the Jews in Biographical Literature.* Diss. (McGill University, 1995).

In the following paper, my aim is to spotlight some of the larger, more significant differences in how the early Muslim community was portrayed by Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi, so as to shed light on their ideological, religious, and historical locales. I will focus on the way in which each compiler taxonomizes peoples and time within the larger narrative framework. I suggest that looking at gender, religious grouping, geographic origin, together with a taxonomy of history / time reveals significant differences in the way in which each writer imagines and constructs the segments which make up the narrative framework.

Women:

A comparison between Ibn Ishaq's and al-Waqidi's portraiture of both Muslim and non-Muslim women within the context of the life of Muhammad reveals significant differences: Ibn Ishaq's narratives involving women strongly dichotomize Muslim women and non-Muslim / *Jahilite* women, as I have shown elsewhere.⁶ Ibn Ishaq's portrayal of Hind bt. `Utba's cannibalist behavior contrasts with that of Muslim women, who –having lost as many or even more relatives on the battlefield as Hind- are portrayed as long-suffering and calm, exhibiting the ideal Muslim virtue of patience (*sabr*). More importantly, while Ibn Ishaq “exposes” non-Muslim women such as Hind in the public-male domain of the battlefield, he appears to be “protecting” Muslim women by portraying them as confined to the private sphere of households.

Al-Waqidi, on the other hand, shows no such concern. A reader of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, for example, would know very little about the virtuous involvement of Nusayba / Umm `Umara during and after the battle of Uhud. The same reader would know, on the other hand, that a number of non-Muslim women fought against the Muslims. However, al-Waqidi's portrayal suggests that both

non-Muslim and Muslim women participated in some fashion in the battle; in his portrayal, Muslim women shine as more capable than their non-Muslim sisters. Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi thus appear to reflect different attitudes toward women's proper role in the public sphere.

Time – framing

A second area of difference, at times closely connected to the portrayal of women, is the portrayal of time. The *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq strongly emphasizes an utter discontinuity between Arabian realities before Islam, the so-called “time of ignorance,” or “*Jahiliyya*,” and realities since the coming of Islam. Ibn Ishaq’s emphasis on discontinuity is most pronounced in a speech he records in the context of the emigration to Abyssinia, in which Ja’far b. Abu Talib explains the coming of Islam to the *Najjash* of Abyssinia in the following way:

““Oh king,” Ja’far exclaims, “we were an uncivilized people [literally: a people of *Jāhiliyya*], worshiping idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus we were until God sent us an apostle”⁷

Ja’far then goes on to enumerate all the positives which resulted from the coming of Islam: barbarity giving way to civility, idol worship to true monotheism, cannibalism to dietary law, rudeness to hospitality, and greed giving way to charity. Throughout the *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq one finds reverberances of this dichotomous construction of *Jahiliyya* vs. *Islam*; the former always

⁶ Alfons H. Teipen, “*Jahilite* and Muslim Women: Questions of Continuity and Communal Identity,” *Muslim World* (92:3-4), 437-59.

⁷ Alfred Guillaume. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 151; hereafter: Guillaume. Quotations from the *Sira* are taken from this translation, except where otherwise noted. When the Arabic text is consulted, reference will be made to Ibn Hisham, ‘Abd al-Malik, *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah*, Mustafa al-Saqqa, Ibrahim al-Abyari, and Abd al-Hafiz Shalabi, eds., (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1413/1993), 1: 336; hereafter: Ibn Hisham. Cf.: J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)

associated with vice, the latter with virtue. Al-Waqidi, on the other hand, does not dwell on the dichotomy between *Jahiliyya* and Islam

A special subset of *Jahilite* vice is found in the topos of ignorance, or the absence of knowledge among the pre-Islamic Arabs. One particularly telling anecdote in this regard is told by Ibn Ishaq early in the *Sira*, dealing with a certain `Amir b. Zarib B. `Amr, and his slave-girl Sukhayla. In the narrative, `Amir is introduced as a wise man to whom "the Arabs used to refer every serious and difficult case . . . for decision;" whereas Sukhayla is a simple slave-girl who tends `Amir's sheep. Ibn Ishaq introduces the anecdote by stating that "[the Arabs] had never brought him [`Amir] such a difficult matter before, so he said: `Wait awhile until I have looked into the matter, for by Allah you have never brought me a question like this before.'⁸

Sukhayla notices that her master cannot sleep that night, and offers her help, only to be rejected. It is her persistence that finally moves her master to share this apparently impenetrable problem with her: "Well then, I was to adjudicate on the inheritance of a hermaphrodite. Am I to make him a man or a woman? By God I do not know what to do and I see no way out." Her answer, pronounced straightaway without even taking any time to contemplate the problem, sounds almost irreverent, given the fact that she is talking to her master: "Good God, merely follow the course of the urinary process."

Sukhayla in this story is "othered" against her master: she is referred to as the "slave girl who used to pasture his flock," whereas he is the "judge who gave decisions." His devastation in face of such a difficult question and his need for extra time to ponder the problem is contrasted with her spontaneity; ultimately, his "wisdom" -a wisdom that "the Arabs" used to draw on- is put to shame by this slave-girl. Sukhayla disappears from the *Sira* never to be heard of again. The intent of this anecdote is easily discerned: Sukhayla in this narrative merely functions as a pawn to ridicule pagan Arab "wisdom" or the utter lack thereof. Thus, this narrative is not

⁸ Guillaume 51; Ibn Hisham 1:122.

primarily a story about Sukhayla and `Amir, but it rather is a story about pre-Islamic Arab wisdom that can be put to shame even by a sheep-herding slave girl.

On the other hand, we find Ibn Ishaq locating knowledge (in particular knowledge about scripture and religion) firmly situated within the Jewish communities, as well as other monotheists. In a number of anecdotes, Ibn Ishaq tells the reader that the Jews (unlike the Arabs) knew of the coming of a messenger, yet they kept their knowledge to themselves, and did not act upon it.⁹ Likewise, Bahira the monk and Khadijah's cousin Waraqah, among others, are said to have recognized Muhammad as a Prophet.

When we compare Ibn Ishaq's portrayal of knowledge of Jews and ignorance of Arabs in pre-Islamic times with that of al-Waqidi, again some significant differences emerge, as al-Waqidi's *Maghazi* appears to portray the Arabian Jews as ignorant.¹⁰ Rizwi Faizer, for example, points out that al-Waqidi relates a story about Jews participating in a pagan ritual at the Ka'ba, thus "indicating their obvious ignorance of their own Jewish practices."¹¹

One other prominent scene that illustrates such Jewish ignorance occurs in the aftermath of the battle of Uhud. Al-Waqidi emphasizes much more than Ibn Ishaq (and also more than the later Ibn Sa'd) Muhammad's own suffering during battle. All three accounts quote a wounded Muhammad as saying "How can a people prosper" (Guillaume 380; Wellhausen 117; Moinul-Haqq, 52)¹² who injure their prophet, and all three accounts produce evidence that indeed Muhammad has been wounded. However, when looking at the extent to which each account dwells on Muhammad's wounds and Muhammad's mortality, including the rumor that

⁹ In the context of the first converts from Medina, for example, Ibn Ishaq relates that "God had prepared the way for Islam in that they (the Medinese pagan Arabs) lived side by side with the Jews who were people of scripture and knowledge, while they themselves were [people of shirk and possessors of idols]" (Guillaume 197. Arabic: ahl shirk wa ashab awthan. (Ibn Hisham 2: 428))

¹⁰ Cf. Faizer, Revisited, 160

¹¹ Faizer, "Muhammad," 475.

¹² Cf.: Julius Wellhausen, ed. And transl., *Muhammed in Medina. Das ist Vakidi's Kitab al-Maghazi in verkuertzter deutscher Wiedergabe.* Berlin: G. Reimer, 1882 / 1978 (hereafter: Wellhausen); Muhammad ibn `Umar al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi lil-Waqidi.* Marsden Jones, ed. (London: Matba`at Jami`at Uksfurd, n.d.); *Ibn Sa'd's Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, S. Moinul Haq, ed., New Delhi: Kitab al-Bhavan, nd. (hereafter: al-Waqidi); Muhammad ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, n.p: n.d. (hereafter: Ibn Sa'd)

Muhammad died in battle (Guillaume 379; Wellhausen 106; Moinul-Haqq 54), surprisingly al-Waqidi focuses much more on various narratives concerning Muhammad's wounds and his precarious situation during the battle than do either Ibn Ishaq or Ibn Sa'd.¹³ Al-Waqidi presents a very vulnerable Muhammad, while the earlier Ibn Ishaq only very briefly mentions Muhammad's precarious situation. Al-Waqidi's Muhammad, for example, in one scene is portrayed as utterly deserted, asking the fleeing Muslims to return to him, and exclaiming: "I am the messenger of God," but not one Muslim is turning around; (Wellhausen 113 / al-Waqidi 1:237) no comparable scene is found in Ibn Ishaq's portrayal. Whereas Ibn Ishaq has very few, brief references to Muhammad's wounds, and in one instance his lack of mobility is blamed not on sustained wounds, but on old age (Guillaume 383), al-Waqidi dwells on various wounds, including bloody cheeks, injured knees, and broken teeth, in repetitive traditions. While at first sight such focus on the vulnerability of the Prophet by that later source is somewhat surprising, it can be understood when placed in context with al-Waqidi's narration of the reaction of the Medinese Jews to the battle of Uhud: al-Waqidi quotes these "Jews" as claiming that "never has such a thing befallen a Prophet." (Wellhausen 145; al-Waqidi 1:317). Such a statement must, of course, strike the ears of the intended audience as misguided and ignorant, given the general Qur'anic evidence to the contrary. Rather, for both Islam and Judaism, persecution and suffering are indeed additional proofs for the authenticity of a prophet. While Muslims know this, al-Waqidi insinuates, Jews do not.

Arabs and *mawali*

The differential portrayal of Jews and Arabs in Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi also is somewhat mirrored by Ibn Ishaq's portrayal of non-Arab individuals. A quick look at only the most famous

¹³ Ibn Sa'd, the latest of the three sources, minimizes accounts that portray a vulnerable Muhammad; while both Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi report that Muhammad is asking his followers in a precarious situation "who will sell his life for us" (Guillaume 380; Wellhausen 115). Ibn Sa'd's Muhammad does not have to ask for assistance; instead, Ibn Sa'd turns the situation around: thirty Muslims come to Muhammad, kneel in front of him to offer themselves up for Muhammad (IS 55). Clearly, Ibn Sa'd portrays Muhammad as less vulnerable, as is to be expected of this later account.

non-Arab converts, Bilal and Salman al-Farisi again reveals some differences: Ibn Ishaq overall pays more attention to both Salman and Bilal; given that Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* covers a much greater time-span, this does not come as a surprise. Yet, the tone of portraiture in Ibn Ishaq is overall very positive, whereas al-Waqidi's portrayal is somewhat more mixed. A few scenes involving Bilal catch the reader's particular attention. After the affair of Khaybar, for example, Bilal is reported to have overslept, not waking Muslims in time for morning prayer. In Ibn Ishaq's account, Bilal had spent the night in prayer. When Bilal is criticized for oversleeping, by Muhammad, Bilal retorts that the same thing had happened to Muhammad himself, and Muhammad admits as much, indicating his forgiveness. (Guillaume 517, Ibn Ishaq 3:355) In al-Waqidi's parallel account, on the other hand, Bilal is heftily criticized by Abu Bakr, who is usually portrayed as a rather mild-manner man. (Wellhausen 292f., al-Waqidi 2:711f) Whereas Ibn Ishaq thus portrays Bilal in a rather positive fashion, al-Waqidi is more critical. In Ibn Ishaq's narration, Bilal fulfills important functions, as he handles gold, in one scene the standard of the prophet, etc. Al-Waqidi has Bilal associated with women's chores, such as kneading dough and serving food.¹⁴ It appears thus that Ibn Ishaq presents a more positive portrait of non-Arabs: whereas Pre-Islamic Arabs were barbarous and ignorant, pre-Islamic Jews are portrayed as knowledgeable, and other non-Arabs are presented as capable people who receive the trust and approval of Muhammad. Al-Waqidi, on the other hand, portrays Jews as ignorant of their own tradition, and non-Arabs do not play significantly positive roles in the life of the Prophet; rather, Muslim Arabs are just as capable and successful as non-Muslim Arabs, or even more so.

¹⁴ Although Bilal is said to have been one of a few people who entered the Ka'ba together with Muhammad after the conquest of Mecca. Cf.: G. R. Hawting, "We were not ordered with Entering it but only with circumambulating it." *Hadith and Fiqh on Entering the Ka'ba*, BSOAS 47:2 (1984), 228-242.

Considering this differential portrayal of Jews, it appears that al-Waqidi and Ibn Ishaq also have different understandings of how the Jews of Medina of Muhammad's time fit within the larger scheme of the relationship of communities.¹⁵

Distancing between Muslims and Jews:

In order to appreciate the differences between Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi in their understanding of the relationship between Muslims and Jews, a brief look at a third category, namely the "hypocrites" (*munafiqun*), and its chief proponent, `Abdullah b. `Ubayy is necessary. The differential portrayal comes out most clearly in the narratives concerning the battle of Uhud, where Ibn Ubayy withdraws his troops shortly before the battle, together with his associates, who are identified by Ibn Ishaq as "waverers and doubters (Guillaume 372), "ahl al-nifaq wa'l-rayb" (Ibn Ishaq) A Muslim, `Abdullah b `Amr b. Haram, brother of the B. Salama asks these men to reconsider their decision to withdraw. After they refuse to do so, he calls them "enemies of God". (Guillaume 372) Immediately¹⁶ afterward, Ibn Ishaq relates a tradition according to which "one of the Ansar" asks Muhammad whether one should not ask for "help from [among] **our** allies, the Jews." (Guillaume 372 / Ibn Ishaq 3/68) In Ibn Ishaq's account, the Jews are thus understood to be allied with the Muslims at this point. We hear no more of either the Jews or Ibn Ubayy until after the battle has been fought.

In al-Waqidi, the relationship between these groups is portrayed in a somewhat different fashion. On the way toward the battlefield, Muhammad and his troops are said to have encountered a troop of Jews, who are identified as "allies **of Ibn Ubayy**, who want to join in battle." Muhammad however rejects their offer, referring to them as "ahl al-shirk" (al-Waqidi, 1,

¹⁵ Cf. R. Faizer. Faizer's dissertation already has pointed out that Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi understand the relationship between Muhammad, Muslims and Jews in a different fashion. Whereas Ibn Ishaq assumes that the so-called "Constitution of Medina" regulates communal relations, al-Waqidi mentions repeated contracts written between Muhammad and the Jews.

¹⁶ This juxtaposing of hypocrites and Jews proposes a correlation between these two groupings, both of which are perceived as problematic vis-à-vis the dichotomy of Medinese Muslims and Meccan polytheists.

215f) Significantly, here the Jewish contingent, presumably the same contingent to which Ibn Ishaq refers, is no longer called “our allies,” but rather identified as “allies of Ibn Ubayy.”

Al-Waqidi’s account thus puts a certain distance between the Muslims and this Jewish contingent. Finally, in Ibn Sa’d’s portrayal, this distance is even more pronounced: “The apostle... passed by Thaniyat al-Wada’. There he came across an army of rough people. He asked: ‘Who are they?’ The companions said: He is `Abd Allah ibn Ubayy ...with sixhundred allies, the Jews of Qaynuqa’ ... He asked: Have they embraced Islam? They said: No, O Apostle of Allah. He said: Tell them to go back. We do not accept help from polytheists against polytheists.” (Moinul Haqq, 57; Ibn Sa’d 1, 379) Ibn Sa’d insinuates that Muhammad neither knows Ibn Ubayy, nor knows whether these sixhundred men have converted to Islam, but has to ask his companions about these men. Also, it is worthwhile pointing out that Ibn Sa’d no longer emphasizes Ibn Ubayy’s status as a hypocrite (*munafiq*) but rather emphasizes a very close connection with Jewish allies; both he and the Jews are associated with the *mushrikun*.

The relative closeness between Ibn Ubayy and Jews is repeatedly emphasized in al-Waqidi, much more so than in Ibn Ishaq. For example, Muhammad criticizes Ibn Ubayy's friendship to the Jews even while Ibn Ubayy is breathing his last in al-Waqidi's account (Wellhausen 414); Ibn Ishaq does not relate a parallel tradition; likewise, al-Waqidi reports that Ibn Ubayy no longer felt quite at home in Medina after the expulsion of the Banu Nadir (Wellhausen 165), again without parallel in Ibn Ishaq.

Similarly, in the narration of Ibn Ubayy's withdrawal from the expedition to Tabuk, Ibn Ishaq groups Ibn 'Ubayy with the hypocrites and doubters, whereas al-Waqidi in the parallel tradition groups him with the hypocrites and the Jews. (Guillaume 604, Wellhausen 393)

The figure of Ibn Ubayy thus is associated in some fashion with both the hypocrites and the Jews in all of these accounts. However, in terms of relative emphasis, Ibn Ishaq leans toward a primary identification as hypocrite, while al-Waqidi, and even more so Ibn Sa’d, see Ibn Ubayy

associated with the Jews and polytheists. The latter, closer identification between hypocrites, polytheists and Jews also leads to a greater distancing between Jews and Muslims; whereas Ibn Ishaq's Jews still have some –if ever so tenuous- relationship with the Muslims, al-Waqidi's, and even more so the later Ibn Sa'd's, do not.¹⁷

The Jews in Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi

From the above observations, we can thus see how Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi interpret differently the relationship between hypocrites, polytheists, Jews, and the Muslim community. Al-Waqidi's primary concern –at least in the episode of the Battle of Uhud- seems to be to shed negative light on the Jews; Ibn Ishaq, on the other hand, is more concerned with his critique of hypocrisy, particularly vis-à-vis Ibn Ubayy.

Both authors do relate a specific incident involving a single Jewish convert to Islam, namely Muhayriq, whom Muhammad is said to have called “the best of Jews.” (Guillaume 384) Both Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi report that Mukhairiq tried to convince his fellow Jews to fight on the side of Muhammad during the battle of Uhud; however, his request is rebuffed, since the fighting would take place during the Sabbath. Mukhairiq's response, in Ibn Ishaq's version, reads: “You have no Sabbath.” (Guillaume 384; Ibn Ishaq 3: 94: *la sabt lakum*); interestingly, al-Waqidi's quote is shorter: There is no Sabbath (Wellhausen 124; al-Waqidi 1:263: *la sabt*). While the difference between these two reported responses consists of just one word, it is significant: Whereas Ibn Ishaq's Mukhairiq limits the abnegation of Sabbath regulations to the particular Jews who are part of this conversation, al-Waqidi's Mukhairiq abnegates the Sabbath altogether, and is thus much harsher in outlook. Read in the context of the differential treatment of the Jews' relationship with the Muslim community by our two authors, it becomes clear that Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi view the dynamics between Jews and Muslims in a different fashion. For Ibn Ishaq, Jews who keep their contractual obligations toward the Muslim community can be

¹⁷ In this context, Uri Rubin's observations regarding the place of Jews in the “Constitution of Medina” raise interesting questions. Cf. U. Rubin, “The ‘Constitution of Median’ Some Notes,” *Studia Islamica* LXII, 5-23.

tolerated. Al-Waqidi, however, does not seem to be inclined toward tolerance: his earlier allusions to the utter ignorance and misguidedness of Jews, taken together with Mukhayriq's abrogation of the Sabbath can be understood as a rejection of any Jewish claims toward tolerance. Lastly, as we had seen earlier, Ibn Sa'd does not even allow for a categorization of Jews as other than polytheists: a majestic Muhammad asks whether the Jews of Ibn Ubayy had converted; since they have not, they are counted among the mushrikun.

The differences in understanding of groupings suggest that Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi, while drawing on a similar pool of traditions, view the place of women, non-Arabs, Arabs, and Jews in rather different ways. The origins of these differences in understanding are in all likelihood reflections of the circumstances in which each of these author-cum-compiler is writing. Reasons for Ibn Ishaq's rather positive portrayal of non-Arabs are most certainly closely connected to and reflective of changing attitudes toward non-Arabs in late Umayyad / early Abbasid times.

Yet, Ibn Ishaq's more positive portrayal of the Jews of Muhammad's time appears more puzzling. I suspect that Ibn Ishaq's more positive portrayal, together with al-Waqidi's negative portrayal, is connected with, and attributable to contemporary polemics, that is to say, a "Sectarian Milieu," however in a way other than intended by Wansbrough.

The polemical background against which Ibn Ishaq is tracing his portrayal of Islam can be sketched out in rough lines when one looks at non-Muslim writings on early Islam. Robert G. Hoyland has recently published a collection of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam¹⁸ that allows us to glimpse some of the polemical milieu¹⁹ into which Ibn Ishaq may be writing his account. In many of the early non-Muslim sources, the political events affected by

¹⁸ Seeing Islam as Others saw it. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam. Princeton: Darwin Press, Inc., 1997.

¹⁹ I am not in agreement with Wansbrough's thesis of an early, seventh century sectarian milieu; rather, many of Wansbrough's topoi of Sectarianism are in all likelihood responding not to the opponents of Muhammad's times, but rather to later religious competitors of the late seventh and 8th century in newly conquered territories.

early Muslim expansion are not yet understood as an outcome of a religious movement; rather, the “calamities” that befall different non-Muslim communities in the newly conquered territories of Islamdom are understood by the original inhabitants as temporary raids of the “barbarian” Arabs or Saracenes. The portrayal of the perpetrators is –as would be expected- almost uniformly negative and utilizes stereotypical depictions of Arabs or Saracenes that predate the rise of Islam.²⁰ Thus the Muslims are called “barbarian,”²¹ “most ignorant,”²² “wild ... , filled with every diabolical savagery,”²³ “godless,”²⁴ or even “God-hating,” lead by the devil,²⁵ “worse than the demons.”²⁶ It seems to be these portrayals of barbarity to which Ibn Ishaq responds.

Additionally, a few gendered references to Islam are also telling. A portrayal of Muslims by Athanasius of Balad, Patriarch of Antioch (683-87) has the following to say about Muslims: “wretched women mingle anyhow with the pagans unlawfully and indecently...”²⁷ While in this quotation a violation of the public-private divide seems to be the main issue of contention, in other texts Islam itself is feminized. In one of his portrayals in which he demonizes Islam, Anastasius of Sinai (d. ca 700 CE) personifies Islam to an “indecent and horrible old woman” who rises from the ground of a Muslim charnel ground to gather up heads and feet of sacrificed

²⁰ Hoyland is certainly correct that Greek writings against the Muslims are much more hostile than Christians writing in Arabic or Syriac, as Greek Christians were losing political control, which Christians living under the Sasanids never had. A few, positive remarks of non-Muslim materials are found occasionally. Griffith mentions one such “occasional remark in favor of the Arabs, such as the one attributed to Patriarch Ishôyahb III, writing to his correspondent Simeon of Rewardashir around the year 650, in the heat of the intra-Christian controversy of the time. He said: ‘As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule (shultânâ) over the world, you know well how they act toward us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries.’” Sidney H. GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Hâlê and a Muslim Emir,” in: HUGOYE: JOURNAL OF SYRIAC STUDIES 3/1 (2000). Online Journal at: <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol3No1/HV3N1Griffith.html>, accessed 8/31/2007

²¹ Hoyland 25 et al

²² Hoyland, 25

²³ Hoyland, 58.

²⁴ Hoyland, 70

²⁵ Hoyland, 73.

²⁶ Anastasius of Sinai (d. ca. 700), quoted in Hoyland, 100.

²⁷ Quoted in: Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it. A survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam.* Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997, 148.

animals and returns underground. Two Christian sailors in this narrative, witnessing the event, exclaim: “See their sacrifice! It did not go up towards God but down. As for their old woman, it is their erroneous faith.”²⁸ Such portrayal of a feminized Islam contrasts with the Christian woman paragon of virtue, Mary the decent virgin and Theotokos, who “alone defeated the Saracens and prevented their aim,” at the siege of Constantinople in 717 CE.²⁹ Likewise, an apocalyptic account, Pseudo-Methodius, penned in all likelihood at the end of the seventh century, describes the Muslim armies as a “people of deformed aspect... their appearance and manners like those of women.”³⁰

In this polemical environment, Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira* posits that Islam is an utter abrogation of pre-Islamic barbarity, and that Islam –integrated into a universal narrative of history from creation to Muhammad – is surpassing its Abrahamic competitors in theology as well as “appropriate” gender hierarchy, that is: patriarchal gender expectations, of the urban Middle East of late antiquity. In that sense, Ibn Ishaq’s portrayal of gender expectations of Islam parallels one of the functions of the “Haustafel” of the New Testament, namely to squelch potential or real criticism that the new religion is threatening established patriarchal norms and values of the Middle East.³¹

Transition to alWaqidi.

Polemics against the Arab or Saracene tribulations by non-Muslim populations living under Islamdom gradually tend to shift their points of contention after the first century. Later texts are

²⁸ Anastasius of Sinai, d. ca. 700), quoted in Hoyland, 101.

²⁹ Patriarch Germanus ca 715-30, quoted in Hoyland, 107.

³⁰ Pseudo-Methodius, quoted in Hoyland, 269.

³¹ Cf. David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive. The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981. See especially Chapter VI, “The Apologetic Function of the Household Code in 1 Peter.”

no longer uniformly derogatory toward the Arabs. Daniel J. Sahas³² shows how connotations with the term “Saracene” change over time: “From a tent dweller, barbarian, robber, pillager of Syrian villages, the Saracen of Zigabenos (fl. Ca. 1100) becomes a philosopher.”³³ While this particular reference is rather late for our question, Sahas does remark on examples as early as the early 10th century where Saracen is used in a complimentary fashion. Likewise, we find the Nestorian catholicos Timothy I (780-823), a contemporary of al-Waqidi, say that the Arabs “are today held in great honor and esteem by God and men, because they forsook idolatry and polytheism, and worshipped and honored one God.”³⁴ From these and many other texts, from the mid-eighth century onwards one can discern that the religious competitors gradually change their verbal assault, and polemics target more directly basic tenets of Islam as a religion,³⁵ rather than dealing with general stereotypes about the barbarity of the Arabs / Saracenes. Islam thus became gradually recognized as a religious tradition in its own right within the polemical environment of the eighth and ninth century.

While the earlier Ibn Ishaq is still relying on “credentialing” of the new religious tradition by its ancient peers, namely Judaism and Christianity (as in the knowledge of the Jews about a prophet from Arabia, or Bahira’s recognition of Muhammad’s “seal of prophethood”), the much more confident al-Waqidi no longer needs a credentialed Muhammad; rather, the religious competition, in this case particularly Judaism, can be portrayed as ignorant, pagan, and polytheist.³⁶ Similarly, al-Waqidi also no longer needs to be embarrassed about the Arabian

³² “Saracens and the Syrians in the Byzantine Anti-Islamic Literature and Before,” in: Symposium Syriacum VII, René Lavenant, S.J. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1996, 387-408.

³³ Sahas, 405.

³⁴ Hoyland, 24.

³⁵ Cf. Griffith, who lists a few examples of early Abbasid interreligious disputes. See also William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim – Christian Encounters. Perceptions and Misperceptions*. London: Routledge, 1991, esp. Chapter 5.

³⁶ Hannah Rahman’s observation that the *munafiqun* and pagans had ceased to be a serious threat to the Muslims by the 8th century, while the Jewish communities still were vibrant in Abbasid times is pertinent in this regard. See H. Rahman, “The Conflicts Between the Prophet and the Opposition in Madina,” *Der Islam* 62:2 (1985), 260-97.

background of the new religious tradition: As Rina Drory has convincingly argued, during the second half of the eighth century “[t]he pre-Islamic past becomes an icon of “Arab” ethnic identity in the context of power struggles roiling the contemporary cultural arena.”³⁷ No longer is it embarrassing to belong to the Arab’s cultural heritage; rather, the religion originating among the Arabs has now proven itself as the superior, indeed as the only truly viable, religion of the land. Jews are no longer needed for purposes of certification; indeed, Arabian Jews now are regarded as the true *ignorami* to begin with.

³⁷ Rina Drory, “The Abbasid Construction of Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making,” *Studia Islamica* 83:1 (1996), 33-49; here 34.

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