Jewish Christianity and the Qur’ān
(Part One)

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1. Introduction

“Jewish Christianity” is a modern term for the beliefs of those followers of Jesus who saw devotion to Jesus as part of God’s covenant with Israel, not as a transfer of God’s promise of salvation from the Jews to the gentiles. Some of them regarded Jesus as a prophet, others saw him as a heavenly power, but all retained their Jewish identity and continued to observe the law.1 The first Christians were all Jews, but they were not all Jewish Christians by this definition, for they disagreed over the necessity of keeping the law after the coming of Christ. The question of whether gentile believers in Christ should undergo full conversion to Judaism is a highly contentious issue in the New Testament. Both Paul and his opponents, the leaders of the Jerusalem church, are presented as accepting that gentile Christians did not have to be circumcised or otherwise observe Jewish law (with some exceptions), but whereas Paul, “the apostle to the gentiles,” seems to have been happy with the idea of any Christ-believer abandoning Jewish law, his opponents insisted that those of Jewish origin must continue to practice it. This was the Jewish Christian position. It was somewhat like saying today that non-Muslims attracted to Sufism can be accepted as Sufis without full conversion to Islam, whereas Sufis of Muslim origin must continue to observe Islamic law.

It was not a stable solution in the long run, and as Christianity spread among the gentiles, the latter became the dominating force. Observance of Jewish law was now forbidden and Jewish Christians were marginalized, to be described by patristic authors of the third and fourth centuries under the names of Ebionites, Nazoreans, and Elchasaites.2 These labels notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to think of them as divided into three neatly demarcated sects. Rather, they formed a wide variety of Christians who did not think of Christianity as a religion that abrogated Judaism. Their views shaded into those of other Christians who followed select aspects of the law such as circumcision, Sabbath-observance, or avoidance of pork (as did Ethiopian Christians and many Syrian

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1 My minimalist definition of Jewish Christianity is indebted to that of Edwin Keith Broadhead, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus* (Tübingen, 2010), e.g., 161. For an extended discussion of the term, see James Carleton Paget, “The Definition of the Terms Jewish Christian and Jewish Christianity in the History of Research,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA, 2007), 22–52.

“Judaizers”), or who interpreted Jesus’ message in the light of Jewish traditions without following Jewish law at all, but on the contrary engaged in anti-Jewish polemics (after the fashion of Aphrahat).

Originally, the bastion of law-observing Christianity was the Jerusalem church, the undisputed center of Christianity until the first Jewish war with Rome (AD 66–70). When this war broke out, the Jerusalem Christians reportedly fled to Pella (Ar. Fīl) in the Decapolis in Transjordan, and though some returned to the devastated city in 70, they were expelled again after the suppression of Bar Kokhba’s revolt in 135, when Hadrian forbade Jews to reside in Jerusalem. Thereafter, Jewish Christians were concentrated in the Aleppo region in northern Syria, in the Decapolis around Pella, including Dir’a in the territory of the Ghassānids, and in the Dead Sea region, as we know from Epiphanius (d. 403) and Jerome (d. 420). They would seem also to have been present in the Golan, where excavators of an abandoned village have found lintels decorated with a combination of crosses, menorahs, and other mixed Jewish and Christian symbols, probably indicating that the building was a Jewish Christian synagogue. After Epiphanius and Jerome, however, we have no certain evidence for the existence of Jewish Christians in Greek, Latin, or Syriac sources written before the rise of Islam. Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 457) even claims that they and other early sects, such as the Marcionites, had been so completely forgotten that most people did not know their names. But this is hyperbole, for Theodoret himself claims to have converted eight Marcionite villages in Syria to the true faith; and even if we assume that they were the very last Marcionites left in Syria, there were many more of them on the Persian side of the Euphrates. Jewish Christians, too, could well have survived beyond the Byzantine border, in the Sasanian empire, Ethiopia, and Arabia, and even in that part of Arabia which formed the deep south of the Byzantine empire itself. They certainly reappear after the Arab conquests. According to the seventh-century abbot of Iona, Adomnán, the Frankish pilgrim Arculf (c. 670) heard, during his visit to Jerusalem, that back in the days after the resurrection of Jesus, a believing Jew (a common term for what modern scholars call a Jewish Christian) had stolen the sacred linen cloth from Jesus’ sepulcher and that this linen cloth had recently been rediscovered. By now, however, it had passed into the hands of unbelieving Jews and the believing Jews wanted it back; both parties appealed to Mu‘āwiya, who threw the cloth into a fire, over which it hovered away, NJ, 2010), 48ff. and the literature cited there.


5 The main sources for the flight to Pella are Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.5.1–8; Epiphanius, Panarion, 29.77; and Epiphanius, Treatise of Weights and Measures: The Syrian Version, trans. and ed. James Elmer Dean (Chicago, 1935), par. 15, 2–5 (the Greek original only survives in fragments).

6 The testimonia are discussed in Broadhead, Jewish Ways, chapters 7–11.


8 Both John of Damascus and Theodore Bar Koni describe Jewish Christians as still living in the Dead Sea region (Klijn and Reinink, Patristic Evidence, 265, 267), but their information plainly comes from Epiphanius. Only he knew about the two women of Elxai’s family, Marthous and Marthana, one of whom had died in Epiphanius’ time (cf. Epiphanius, Panarion, 19.2.3) and neither of whom can have been present among them “even up to now,” as John of Damascus says (my thanks to Tommaso Tesei for reminding me of these passages).


until it descended in the camp of the Christians. This story is one out of several involving Jewish possession of a Christian relic in Jerusalem or Constantinople, but Arculf is the only author to mention “believing Jews” in this connection. We also hear of them later in the Islamic world, in sources composed from the second/eighth centuries onwards.

The relevance of all this to Islamicists lies in the fact that many scholars have come away from the Qurʾān with the impression that Jewish Christianity must have played a role in its formation. A major argument to this effect was mounted by Aloys Sprenger in 1861. His thesis was taken up by several specialists in Christian theology, notably Jules-Charles Scholl in 1874, Gustav Rösch in 1876, Adolf von Harnack in 1909, Adolf Schlatter in 1918, Hans-Joachim Schoeps in 1949, M. P. Roncaglia in 1971, J. Dorra-Haddad in 1973, Magnin in 1977–78, Édouard Gallez in 2005, and Joachim Gnilka in 2007; but several scholars coming to the subject from the study of Islam have likewise argued for, or simply assumed, a Jewish Christian input, notably Clément Huart in 1904, Tor Andræc between 1918 and 1932, Karl


12 Cf. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford, 2002), 71–72, in which two converts from Arianism, Galbius and Candidus, transport the Virgin’s robe to Jerusalem after stealing it from a Jewish woman who had kindly offered them hospitality on their way to Jerusalem; Arculf, *De Locis Sanctis*, III, 5, pp. 62–63, in which an unbelieving Jew in Constantinople has a picture of Mary.


26 Tor Andræc, *Die Person Muhammads in Lehr und Glauben seiner Gemeinde*, Archives d’Études Orientales 16 (Stockholm, 1918), 292–93 and 295n, where Muhammad’s chain of prophets, ablation, qibla, and other matters are considered perhaps all of Ebonite origin; see also Andræc, *Mohammed, the Man and His Faith
Ahrens in 1935. Günter Lüling in the 1970s onwards, 
Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī in 1979 (= J. Azzi, 2001), Thomas O’Shaughnessy in 1984, Shlomo Pines in 1984, Julian Baldick in 1989, and François de Blois in 2002. Holger Zellentin, a Judaist, has now joined the fray, and a book by John Jandora in support of the Jewish religious thesis has recently appeared, too. Some of these works are based on poor scholarship (especially, but not only, those by laymen, who seem to have a particular liking for the Jewish Christian thesis); but this certainly is not true of all of them. Yet many Qur’ān scholars ignore the Jewish Christian thesis, and some argue against it. The most notable opponent of a Jewish Christian input is Sidney Griffith, who holds that nothing but mainstream Near Eastern (i.e., Melkite, Jacobite, and Nestorian) Christianity is reflected in the Qur’ān. This is a somewhat extreme position, but it provides a useful benchmark.

In what follows, I re-examine the question of whether there is a Jewish Christian input in the Qur’ān by examining the Qur’ānic topics of relevance to the subject, taking full account of Griffith’s position where known. The argument may be summarized as follows. Four points are extremely hard to explain without recourse to the hypothesis of a Jewish Christian contribution: the Qur’ānic Jesus is a prophet sent to the Israelites, not to the gentiles (no. 2); the Israelites appear to include Christians (no. 3); the Messenger sees Jesus as second

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36 Thus Nick Brown, The Judaeo-Christian Presbyter of Makah [sic] & Madinah (New York, 2011) (drawn to my attention by Adam Silverstein); Samuel Zinner, The Abrahamic Archetype: Conceptual and Historical Relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Bartlow, 2011), a work in the metaphysical and philosophical tradition of Frithjof Schuon which takes the Jewish Christian contribution to Islam for granted on the basis of Schoeps. Jandora is also a layman, though he has published extensively on Islamic subjects (esp. military matters); and Azzi, also known as Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, is not a specialist either.


40 The first half of this article will cover sections no. 1–7, with 8–15 in the next half.
in importance to Moses and as charged with confirmation of the Torah (no. 4), and insists that Jesus was only a human being, not the son of God (no. 9). Another two doctrines are often held to point away from Jewish Christianity, but actually point in that direction, too: some of the Messenger’s opponents regarded both Mary and Jesus as divine beings (no. 7), and the crucifixion is interpreted docetically—as though it did not really happen—even though the death of Jesus seems to be accepted (no. 10). Yet another doctrine, namely the virgin birth of Jesus, at first sight looks equally compatible with mainstream and some strands of Jewish Christianity, but must in fact also have come from a Jewish-Christian milieu (no. 11). Another is incompatible with mainstream Christianity and probably also of Jewish-Christian origin, namely that Mary was an Aaronid (no. 12); and the Qur'ānic chain of prophets may be related to that of the Elchasaites and other Jewish Christians, though this is much less obvious to me than it was to Schoeps, Andrae, and others (no. 13). Two further elements of Qur'ānic Christology are incompatible with mainstream Christianity without pointing in a Jewish-Christian direction: the Messenger seems to think that Jesus was born under a palm tree rather than in a cave or stable (no. 14); and although he calls him al-masīḥ (Christ) and al-kalima (the Word), he does not credit Jesus with the characteristic features of the Christian messiah or present him as the logos in the Christian sense (no. 15). All in all, a full seven doctrines, several of them central to the Qur'ān, point to the presence of Jewish Christians in the Messenger’s locality, and since they are attested in Egypt in the seventh century (no. 8), there is nothing particularly hazardous about postulating that they were present in Arabia too.

It is also clear that in order to understand the Qur'ānic Jesus, whether as seen by the Messenger or by his opponents, one has to go back to the early centuries of Christianity. This would appear to be when these Jewish Christians parted ways with mainstream Christianity and Judaism, not in the sense that their further development took place in isolation, but rather that whatever mainstream ideas they received thereafter were interpreted in the light of their own fundamental convictions.

2. Christ’s mission is to the Israelites

Along with the mushrikūn, the sons of Israel (banū Isrā’il) are the prime audience to whom the Qur’ān is directed: “This Qur’ān tells the sons of Israel most of what they are disagreeing about,” as a Meccan sura says (27:76). The reference may be to the disagreement over Jesus, though the immediate context suggests that it is over the resurrection; it is at all events clear that the Messenger was active in a locality in which Israelites formed part of the population. (One can, of course, strike out all passages mentioning Israelites in the Meccan suras, as the exegetes tend to do, on the premise that all such passages must reflect Medinese conditions, but the premise is not valid.) Several suras, both Meccan and Medinese, inform us that Jesus was sent to the Israelites. Thus the angels announced to Mary that her son would be a messenger to the Israelites (rasīlān ilā banī Isrā’il, 3:49). Jesus himself declared, “O Sons of Israel, I am God’s messenger to you, confirming the Torah in front of me and giving good news of a messenger to come after me whose name is Ahmad” (61:6). God made Jesus an example (mathālan) to the sons of Israel, as we are also told (43:59); Jesus came with evident proofs to explain the things they disagreed about, but the disagreements only increased (43:63–65), for one party of the Israelites believed in him while another did not (61:14). The sons of Israel fell into disagreement after knowledge came to them, presumably meaning after Jesus had brought them the Gospel (45:17; cf. 2:253). All these passages present the mission of Jesus and the conflict it generated as internal to the Israelites.41

That Jesus was sent to the Israelites is an astonishing claim for a seventh-century preacher to make. It is perfectly true, of course, that Jesus was a Jew who preached to Jews, some of whom believed while others did not, and that one can read as much in the New Testament; but it is not how gentile Christians normally thought of his mission. To their minds, the Jews were those who refused the new covenant and crucified Jesus, whereas Jesus and his disciples were Christians like themselves. As Origen explains, when Jesus says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 15:24), we should remember that there was an Israel according to the flesh and another according to the spirit; we should not think that Christ came especially to the Israelites according to the flesh, as the Ebionites, poor in understanding, claimed.42 But


it is precisely to the Israelites according to the flesh that Jesus came in the Qurʾān.

It might be argued that all we see here is an example of the Messenger’s belief that all prophets were sent to their own people,43 but leaving aside that this belief is not always in operation in the Qurʾān (e.g., that Moses was sent to Pharaoh, not the Israelites), it is hard to believe that any seventh-century (as opposed to first-, second-, or third-century) Christian saw the Jews as Jesus’ own people. One would have expected the Messenger to say that Jesus was sent to the Christians. Of course there were no Christians before Jesus, but this would hardly have prevented the Messenger from seeing God as sending Jesus to them; and even if we assume his historical sense to have been too well developed for him to do so, one would have expected him to say that the Israelites responded to his preaching by dividing into Jews and Christians, which is historically correct. But what he actually says is that they divided into believing and unbelieving Israelites (61:14): in religious terms they split, but ethnically they remained the same. This is in line with a famous passage in the Jewish Christian section of the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions (probably composed in the mid-fourth century), in which we are told that the only difference between the authors and “those of our people who do not believe” or, as the Latin version puts it, “between us who believe in Jesus and the unbelieving Jews,” is that “we” believe Jesus to be the prophet foretold by Moses and the eternal Christ whereas the unbelieving Jews do not.44 It is not easy to imagine Chalcedonian (Melkite), West Syrian (Monophysite or Jacobite), or East Syrian (Nestorian) Christians presenting Jesus as a prophet to the Israelites, nor have mainstream Christian parallels ever been adduced to my knowledge (and Griffith says nothing about it). The perspective here is unquestionably Jewish Christian.

How then did the Messenger know that Jesus was sent to the Israelites? We are hardly to imagine that he had worked it out on the basis of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, for even if he possessed the requisite books and skills, he had no interest in the past for its own sake. He was a preacher rather than a historian, and he routinely rewrote the past in his own image: all the prophets before him preached the same message as he did, and all contended with opponents guilty of the same “polytheism” (shirk) and denial of the afterlife. It will not have been on the basis of research that the Messenger knew Jesus to have had Israelite followers. Rather, he will have taken it for granted, because believing and unbelieving Israelites were what he was confronted with in his own locality. Indeed, everybody in his locality seems to have taken it for granted, for he did not engage in polemics about it or argue against alternative views. He does not explain how Jesus had come to be “the King of all the gentiles,”45 or even that there were people who saw him as such. Paul is not mentioned, and though the Disciples are called hawāriyyun, an Ethiopic word for apostles, there is no reference to their apostolic role as missionaries to the gentiles.46

All this is surprising, for the Messenger must have had considerable contact with gentile Christians. For example, his famous statement “there is no compulsion in religion” is downstream of third-century Christianity.47 Further, he plainly had a concept of religion in the sense of a system of beliefs and laws separate from ethnic and civic affiliation, a concept pioneered by the Christians. It is true that every messenger is sent to his own people in the Qurʾān,48 and

43 This possibility was suggested to me by Adam Silverstein.
46 The commentators make up for it by unpersuasively identifying the mursalān sent to a town in 36:13 as disciples of Jesus, while Reynolds identifies the ruusal of 23:51 as apostles in the sense of missionary disciples of Jesus rather than messengers sent by God to their own communities on the model of Muhammad himself (Gabriel Said Reynolds, “The Quran and the Apostles of Jesus,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 76 [2013]: 1–19, esp. 16). Though I am generously thanked in this article, I disagree with almost every word said in it.
48 This notion is probably also rooted in Christianity, though its pre-history is still obscure. The starting point would be the New Testament concept of the apostles as missionaries. When the apostles came to be understood as divinely-commissioned envoys (prophets), it was they who were seen as sent to a specific people, as already in Manichaeism (at least in the case of the Buddha and
that each messenger addresses his people in their own language; but the result is not a string of ethnic religions, for all genuine messengers preach the same message. The Messenger never addressed his audience as Arabs, only as believers and unbelievers, and he made it clear that there had been believers in quite different communities.

In addition, he often fielded arguments against the Jews that he must have learned from Syriac-speaking Christians, and retold several Old Testament stories in versions partly or wholly filtered through the Syriac tradition.\(^5^9\) He may have been addressing gentile Christians in 6:101, and even seemed to side with them at times. When the Qur’an informs us in the course of anti-Jewish polemics that God promised Jesus to make his followers superior to the unbelievers until the day of resurrection (3:55), one could admittedly take it simply to predict the victory of the Messenger’s followers—but it could also be taken to suggest that he saw himself as continuing the veneration of Jesus by the dominant, i.e., gentile, Christians, or more probably, by all Christians without distinction. Further, when he says that Jesus and his mother were a sign to all beings (lī-‛ālamīn) (21:91), he appears to be adopting a universalist view of the two of them that sits better with gentile than Jewish Christianity; and finally, when he notes that one party of the Israelites believed in Jesus and another did not, he says that it was the believers that won: “We assisted those who believed against their enemy and they became victorious” (61:14). If this statement is taken to refer to the Jews that he must have learned from Syriac-speaking Christians, and retold several Old Testament stories in versions partly or wholly filtered through the Syriac tradition,\(^5^9\) it is wondrously unrealistic.\(^5^0\)

It is admittedly possible that the Messenger identified so strongly with the believing Israelites that he presented them as victorious by way of predicting his own victory over the Jews: he promised God’s help (naṣrūn min Allāh) and a victory soon to come (fātḥun qarībun) to the believers in the preceding verse, and started 61:14 by presenting his position as analogous to that of Jesus: “O you who believe, be helpers of God (anṣāra Ṭūlāb), as Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Who will be my helpers unto God?’ So the disciples said, ‘We are God’s helpers.’” The expression “God’s helpers” (anṣāra Ṭūlāb) is undoubtedly a word play on “Christians” (naṣārā). But leaving aside the question of whether the naṣārā were Jewish or gentile Christians, it seems more likely that the Messenger was ignoring the divided state of the Christians in order to field them as a single, dominant party against the Jews. All in all, the Messenger was clearly familiar with gentile Christianity; but even so, the fact that Jesus had a following outside the ranks of the Israelites cannot be said to receive much attention in the book.

3. The Israelites include Christians

The term banū Isrā’īl (“sons of Israel”) occurs forty-four times in the Qur’an, in both Meccan and Medinan suras. Many of the passages concern the Israelites in the past, especially in the time of Moses, but some relate to the time of Jesus, and others to that of the Messenger himself; and a few of these passages suggest that the Israelites included both Jews and Christians, not just Jews, as normally assumed. This may sound like a wild theory, but it is actually what many exegetes say in their comments on 27:76 (“This Qur’an tells the sons of Israel most of what they are disagreeing about”). Thus Qatāda (d. 117/735) glosses “the sons of Israel” as meaning Jews and Christians here,\(^5^1\) while al-Ṭabarī adduces the Israelite disagreement over Jesus as an example of the type of question on which the Israelites could not reach agreement.\(^5^2\) Other exegetes say much the same.\(^5^3\) Even a modern scholar such as Heikki Räisänen renders “the sons of Israel” in 27:76 as “Jews and Christians.”\(^5^4\) The exegetes do not seem to give thought to the implication that the Israelites of

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\(^{50}\) This is nonetheless how S. Pines seems to understand it; cf. his “Notes on Islam,” 135–52, esp. 137.


Muhammad’s own time included Christians, for they usually read the verse with the Israelite division over Jesus with the time of Jesus in mind; but wittingly or unwittingly, they do of course imply that the Israelites consisted of Jews and Christians in the Messenger’s time as well. So too do the traditions regarding Waraq b. Nawfal, Khadija’s cousin, have “presentist” implications. He is said to have abandoned idolatry in pre-Islamic times and to have become a Christian who reacted to Muhammad’s revelation by declaring that it was “the law which God had sent down to Moses.” Some corrected this apparent asymmetry by having him become a Jew rather than a Christian, others by having him declare Muhammad’s revelation to be “the law of Christ”; but the combination of Jewish and Christian features recurs in the report that he could write Hebrew and used his skill to copy the Gospel in Hebrew. The asymmetry here caused some to replace Hebrew (‘ibrāniyya) with Arabic (‘arabiyya), but the sheer existence of traditions in which a Christian identifies his own law as that given by Moses, and the language of the Gospel as Hebrew (presumably in the sense of Jewish Aramaic) is noteworthy.55

55 Sprenger, Leben, 1:124–25, 128, citing Ibn Hishām, the Aghānī, Bukhārī, and Muslim, with a different explanation of the languages. Hebrew in the sense of Aramaic is well attested in Greek writings from the New Testament period onwards. This has usually been debited to Greek confusion, but a more interesting explanation has recently been proposed by D. R. G. Beattie and Philip R. Davies, “What Does Hebrew Mean?,” Journal of Semitic Studies 57/1 (2011): 71–83 (drawn to my attention by Kevin van Bladel). According to them, “Hebrew” was actually a word for Aramaic, not for “the holy tongue” (i.e., the language of what we now call the Hebrew Bible). It was only later—in the West perhaps as late as the nineteenth century—that the word came to stand for the “holy tongue.” This is wonderfully thought-provoking, but at the very least in need of modification. Leaving aside the complicated and often enigmatic Talmudic statements on the languages and scripts used by the Jews (to which Rachel Neis drew my attention), Judah Halevy (d. 1141) distinguishes clearly between Hebrew (‘ibrāniyya), the holy tongue which was called after Eber, and Aramaic (suryāniyya), the language of the Chaldeans that Abraham brought with him and continued to speak for everyday purposes (Hartwig Hirschfeld, trans., Judah Halevy’s Book of Kuzari [New York, 1946], 309, part III, sections 66–67, drawn to my attention by Adam Silverstein; for the text I have used the edition of Nabih Bashi, al-Kitāb al-Khazari [Freiberg am Neckar, 2012], which presents the Arabic text in original script rather than the Judeo-Arabic used by Halevy himself, retaining Hirschfeld’s parts and sections). The Kuzari was translated into Hebrew by Judah b. Tibbon in 1167, to be much read by Jews in Europe from then onwards (cf. Adam Shear, The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167–1900 [Cambridge, 2012]).

Sura 5 contains one of the passages suggesting that the Israelites included Christians. Here we are reminded that when God made a covenant with the Israelites and sent messengers to them, the Israelites reacted by calling the messengers liars or by killing them, thinking they would not be tested (after death?) (5:70–71); the next verse continues on to say that those who (go to the other extreme and) say “God is Christ” are unbelievers (5:72, similarly 5:17). This is normally understood as a reference to mainstream Christians, and Griffith too takes it as such.56 Given that abrupt changes of subject are common in the Qur’ān, this would have been a reasonable interpretation if the verse had not continued on to explain that the culprits should not say this, because Christ had told the Israelites not to ascribe partners to God (5:72). Why does the Messenger envisage Jesus as saying this to the Israelites rather than the Christians? Jesus does of course address his preaching to Jews in the Gospels, but neither the Gospels nor the mainstream Christian tradition say anything that could have caused the Messenger to envisage Jesus as reproaching the Israelites for casting Jesus as divine. The idea would have sounded utterly absurd to both the Jews and the mainstream Christians of the Messenger’s time. If there were Israelites who were at fault for deifying Christ, they must have been Israelite Christians.

The sura continues that those who say that “God is the third of three” are also unbelievers (5:73). One assumes the reference still to be to the Israelites, and this is also how some early readers understood it, for Ibn al-Najīḥ apparently held that it was the Jew Phinehas who said that “God is the third of three.”57 Further, Qatāda is credited with the view that when the early Christians split into several groups, it was a certain Isrā’il who held that “God is the third of

56 Griffith, “Al-Naṣārā,” 311, explaining that the Qurʾān is not quoting the Christians correctly (the Christians only said that Christ was God) and that the statement is a polemically inspired caricature. But if the reference is to mainstream Christians, it is not actually much of a caricature. Isaac of Antioch, for example, says that people disputed about whether God had died or not, and exclaims in indignation that His death had redeemed the world—and still they asked whether He had died! (P. S. Landersdorfer, trans., Ausgewählte Schriften der syrischen Dichter [Kempten, 1912], 140 of the continuous pagination). God is indeed Christ here, exactly as the Messenger says.

three,” and that this Isrāʾīl was supported by the king and others who came to be known as the Melkites!\(^{58}\) The sura continues by polemicizing against a Trinity consisting of God, Christ, and Mary, which it refutes with reference to the fact that both Jesus and Mary ate food (5:75; cf. below, no. 7). The culprits are now addressed as “People of the Book,” which leaves their ethnicity unidentified, but Qatāda once more knows them to be al-isrāʾiliyya min al-naṣārāʾ, Israelite (as opposed to Jacobite and Nestorian) Christians: it was they who said that Jesus was a deity (īlāh), and his mother a deity, along with God Himself. A variant version of his statement once more identifies them as “People of the Book,” (al-isrāʾiliyya mulūk al-naṣārāʾ).\(^{59}\) Qatāda’s strange idea that there were Israelite Melkites reflects the fact that he was trying to combine several Qurʾānic passages to fit a single group,\(^{60}\) though there could conceivably be more to it.\(^{61}\) Here, however, the key point is that Qatāda took the Qurʾānic Israelites to include Christians.

Other passages in the same sura also suggest that the Jews and Christians formed two parts of a whole. In 5:18 they both declare that “We are children of God and His beloved,” and the Messenger is instructed to retort, “Why then does He punish you for your sins?” That God was punishing the Jews for their sins by depriving them of sovereignty was a well-known anti-Jewish trope, but how could the same be said of the Christians, God’s seeming favorites at the time? Perhaps the Persian victories over the Byzantines had enabled the Messenger to turn the anti-Jewish argument against the Christians, but a more persuasive explanation would be that the local Christians were Israelites suffering from the same loss of autonomy as their unbelieving counterparts. What is more, at the beginning of the sura, the Messenger declares the food of the People of the Book to be lawful to Muslims (5:5), which is puzzling. Jesus had supposedly declared all foods to be clean (Mark 7:18–19), and Paul had allowed the Christians to eat anything “from gnats to elephants,” as a later Muslim polemicist put it,\(^{62}\) meaning that the Christians were free to eat foods forbidden in the Qurʾān.\(^{63}\)

How then could their food be permitted to the believers? One solution would be that the “People of the Book” here stands for the Jews alone: this is what Griffith argues.\(^{64}\) But the Messenger is engaging in legislation, not in loose polemics: he can hardly have used a term bracketing Jews and Christians if he meant the Christians to be excluded. The only alternative is that the local Christians also followed dietary law. In fact, all Near Eastern Christians did follow some dietary law, notably the prohibition of Jewish food, sacrificial meat, blood, and thus also strangled animals (which had not been drained of blood).\(^{65}\) But that still left them free to eat many things forbidden in Muslim law, e.g., pork, so that does not solve the problem. In 7:157, which is addressed to the followers of Moses and set in Moses’ own time, God says that He will have mercy on those who follow the gentle prophet predicted in the Torah and the Gospel who will release them from the burden and fetters upon them. The reference is to the Messenger, who believed himself to be predicted in both the Jewish and the Christian

\(^{58}\) See below, p. 251 and n. 213.


\(^{60}\) Apart from 5:73 and 5:75, the main passage Qatāda was working with was 61:14, in which the Israelites split into two—those who believed in Jesus and those who did not—adding that “We assisted those who believed against their enemy and they became victorious” (61:14). As noted, this does not fit the believing Israelites, whereas it does fit the Melkites. But he also worked, in 5:82, on the naṣārāʾ who were friendly to the Muslims because their qissīsūn and monks were not arrogant (cf. the passage in Ibn al-Murtadā, Munya, 74, in which the Christian leader who represents the truth is called Qissa, the antithesis of Isrāʾīl).


\(^{63}\) Noted by de Blois, “Naṣrānī,” 16. The continuation that “your food is permitted to them” is hardly a problem. The message is that the believers may share their food with the People of the Book; whether the latter regard the believers’ food as kosher was not for the Messenger to decide.


\(^{65}\) See David M. Freidenreich, Foreigners and Their Food (Berkeley, 2011), part 3 (drawn to my attention by Sarah Stroumsa). For the prohibition of blood, which is still upheld in the Greek orthodox church today, cf. the Council of Gangra (ADO 340), canons 2, Council of Trullo (ADO 692), canon 67, Herman G. B. Teule, “The Prohibition of Blood, Which is Still Upheld in the Greek Orthodox Church Today,” Orients Christianus 79 (1995): 23–47, esp. 33 (Jacob of Edessa). In the Latin West, too, the prohibition of blood was often upheld, but in the end the Latins followed Augustine, who held that it need not be upheld any more (Augustine, Contra Faustum, XXXII, 13).
scripture, and it implies that the devotees of the Torah and the Gospel alike carried heavy legal burdens, from which he would free them. The prohibitions observed by the gentile Christians hardly suffice in the role of their “burden and fetters,” however; the local Christians must have observed dietary restrictions comparable with those of the Jews.

Finally, in the originally Christian story of the Companions of the Cave, one of the young men is sent out to find the cleanest (azkā) food available (18:19). Torrey thought that the Qur'anic story might reflect a Jewish recension, on the grounds that there are no Christian elements in it and that the clean-food motif is not found in any early Christian version. The argument would work equally well if the transmitter was a Jewish Christian.

It is not until the Medinese suras that the Messenger uses the terms Jews (yahūd) and Christians (naṣārā), though the expression alladhīna hādū, “those who Judaize/follow Judaism,” appears in three Meccan (or one Medinese and two Meccan) suras (6:146; 16:118; 22:17). In the Medinese suras, we find both the expression alladhīna hādū (seven attestations) and the term yahūd (nine attestations) along with the term Israelites. The Christians, on the other hand, are either covered by the term “Israelites,” or else not mentioned by name at all in the Meccan suras, though there are certainly references to their doctrines (notably 19:16–36). It is striking that once the Messenger starts speaking of Jews and Christians, he almost always speaks of them in tandem, casting them as equally misguided rivals: the Jews say that God’s hand is tied (5:12–14: the Israelites broke their covenant, the Christians forgot theirs, and both forgot a portion of what they had been reminded of). There is also a famous passage describing the Christians as being friendlier to the believers than were the Jews, with the explanation that their presbyters or priests (qissīsūn) and monks were not arrogant (5:82). Even so, we are assured, the believers should not choose friends from either the Jews or the Christians (5:51). There are also three passages in which the Jews and Christians are listed together, but there together with other religious groups. In short, the Messenger seems to think that the Jews and Christians belonged together, as also when he subsumes them under the label of “People of the Book” (ahl al-kitāb). This strengthens the case for the view that both had been covered by the name of Israelites.

That the Israelites included both Jews and Christians is also suggested by the very substitution, in the Medinese suras, of yahūd and naṣārā for banū Isrāʾīl when the Messenger is speaking of contemporaries. It is not the case that banū Isrāʾīl always refers to the ancient Israelites, as some have held: the Meccan verse 27:76 (“This Qurʾān tells the sons of Israel most of what they are disagreeing about”), for example, clearly envisages the Israelites as alive and well in the Messenger’s own locality, and they are addressed directly in several other passages as well (e.g., 2:40, 47, 122; 17:5–8). But the Qurʾān does seem to separate the Israelites of the past from their contemporary manifestations as Jews and Christians in the Medinese suras.


67 The Messenger retorts that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian (2:140; 3:67) and that the same was true of Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the (twelve) tribes (2:140). Compare Eusebius, Demonstratio Evangelica, 1.2.5.

68 This passage is discussed in Patricia Crone, “Pagan Arabs as God-Fearers,” to appear in Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya and Late Antiquity in Early Muslim Sources, ed. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford, forthcoming).

69 God would judge between the believers, Jews, Christians, Sabians, Zoroastrians, and polytheists on the day of judgment (22:17); and anyone who believed in God and the last day and did good works, including the Jews, Christians, and Sabians, would get their due reward (2:62; similarly 5:69).
Why did the Messenger start using these terms in Medina? One possibility is that the change reflected a new hostility to the Jews and Christians, or perhaps just to the Jews, for Israel(ites) is what the Jews called themselves in their liturgy and other religious writings (such as the Talmud)—and also, at least in Graeco-Roman Palestine, in everyday usage. It was outsiders and Jews writing in Greek outside Palestine who used the term “Jews” (Ioudaioi, i.e., inhabitants of Judaea).70 Polemical works, whether written in Greek, Syriac, or (after the conquests) in Arabic, were always directed against “Jews,” and the word quickly acquired derogatory overtones. One would have expected the Messenger likewise to direct his anti-Jewish polemics against “Jews,” and so eventually he did. But though he argued against them already in the Meccan suras, he still called them Israelites, accepting their self-designation. This is why the switch to “Jews” in Medina comes across as a sign of increased hostility to them. 

The usual term for Christians in Syriac was kristyānē, which was also a self-designation and which is translatable as masihiyyūn. This term does not appear in the Qurʾān. Hostile Zoroastrians in Mesopotamia, however, would call the Christians nāṣrāyē, Nazoreans, using the same word as the Qurʾānic naṣārā.71 Kristyānē and nāṣrāyē were not simply insider and outsider terms for the same group, however, for they appear as the names of two separate religious communities in the inscriptions of Kirdīr in the late third century; they could stand for gentile and Jewish Christians.72 One takes it that the gentle Christians disliked being mixed up with their Jewish Christian counterparts, whom they probably despised, and that this is precisely why the Zoroastrians would taunt them by calling them nāṣrāyē.

Did the Messenger also use the name in a derogatory vein? It would be a neat parallel to the derogatory “Jews,” but it does not go well with 5:14 and 5:82, for both verses refer to those who say, “we are naṣārā”; and though the first passage is hostile, the second eulogizes the naṣārā rather than masihiyyūn, that the local Christians called themselves? The simplest solution is the one proposed by de Blois, namely that they were Jewish Christians,73 though that solution also leaves some problems.74

4. The relative importance of Moses and Jesus

By far the most prominent prophet in the Qurʾān is Moses. He is mentioned in thirty-six suras, Jesus in eleven; Moses’ name appears in 153 verses against a mere twenty-five for Jesus. There are many more references to the book of Moses than to the Gospel, and far more material from the Old Testament than from the New. The New Testament material is concentrated in eight suras, whereas there is Old Testament material in almost every sura.75 The Qurʾān refers to the birth of Moses, his exposure in a box (not basket), his upbringing among Pharaoh’s people, his killing of an Egyptian, his time in Midian, the burning bush, the miracles that he and Aaron performed at Pharaoh’s court, the exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, the golden calf, and the dispatch of scouts to the holy land: practically all the key points of his life are narrated. As regards Jesus, we hear of the annunciation, Mary’s labor pains under a palm tree (cf. Part Two, no. 14), the Jewish calumnies against her (see also no. 14), his childhood miracles (3:46, 49, 5:110), and, in the view of some modern scholars, his second coming as Messiah. If naṣārā was a self-designation, the Messenger probably adopted it in Medina simply because he had to call the Christians something now that the unitary category of “Israelites” had broken down. But why was it naṣārā, rather than masihiyyūn, that the local Christians called themselves? The simplest solution is the one proposed by de Blois, namely that they were Jewish Christians,73 though that solution also leaves some problems.74

72 De Blois, “Naṣrānī,” 12–15; cf. also Gnilka, Nazarener. De Blois holds them to have been Nazoreans/Nazarenes “pure and simple,” but it is not clear exactly what he means by that, given that, as he himself notes, “Nazorean” would seem not always to be the name of a clearly defined sect, but rather to cover a large part of the Jewish Christian spectrum (de Blois, “Naṣrānī,” 4). The picture drawn of them in Ray A. Pritz, Nazarene Jewish Christianity (Jerusalem, 1988), is misleadingly coherent. On top of that, there is no direct continuity between any of the Jewish Christian sects described by Patristic authors and those reflected in the Qurʾān: for every similarity, there are numerous differences.

74 The main problem is 5:82, in which those who call themselves naṣārā have priests/presbyters/elders (qissīsūn) and monks (rubḥān), which suggests that they are gentile Christians. De Blois does not discuss the passage.

Christians. Jesus did of course say in the Gospel that ing the Pentateuch would have been alien to gentile cf. 46:30). The idea of Jesus as a prophet confirm too was the Messenger himself (e.g., 3:3; 46:12, dinese suras say) the Torah (3:50; 5:46; 61:6); so (23:49–50); “We gave Moses the book . . . and We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, the clear proofs (al- bnyinât) and strengthened him with the holy spirit” (2:87, 253). But in another verse, Jesus declares, “I am God’s servant; God has given me the book and made me a prophet” (19:30), and elsewhere God is said to have given him the Gospel (5:46; 57:27) and to have sent down the Torah and the Gospel (3:3, 65; cf. 3:48; 5:46, 66, cf. 68; 9:111, all Medinese).77

Injîl is a derivative of the Greek evangélion, not a translation, and it is not clear how far the Messenger knew that the word meant good news; but he depicts all God’s messengers, Jesus and himself included, as bringers of good news (busbrâ). The good news that Jesus brings is not, however, the news of God’s incarnation in a human being, the sacrifice of His only son, or the latter’s resurrection, but rather the news of the coming of Ahmad (61:6). In addition, Jesus preaches strict monotheism (5:72; cf. 3:51; 19:30), and the duty to pray and pay alms (19:31). The Gospel seems to be the contents of the teachings of Jesus, presumed by the Messenger to be identical with his own, not the news of God’s redemption of mankind through the death of Jesus.

Jesus by this account was sent to confirm (musaddigan li-) the book of Moses or (as the Medinese suras say) the Torah (3:50; 5:46; 61:6); so too was the Messenger himself (e.g., 3:3; 46:12, cf. 46:30). The idea of Jesus as a prophet confirming the Pentateuch would have been alien to gentile Christians. Jesus did of course say in the Gospel that he had come to fulfill the law, not to abolish it, and that not a single jot of it would ever pass away (Matthew 5:17–18); but Christians explained the law as meaning the Decalogue, dismissing everything else as punishment imposed on the Jews for their worship of the golden calf,78 or they used the word “law” in the vague sense of natural law, moral principles, or “the law of the Gospel.”79 Origen, for example, held Ebion (the supposed ancestor of the Ebionites) to have destroyed the law, even though it was by observing Jewish law that Ebion did so: Christ came to lead people away from the law, as Origen said.80 Or, as a converted Jew exclaims in the Doctrina Iacobi, written in the 630s: “After the law of Moses another law has been proclaimed, that of Christ, the holy gospels of the new covenant . . . We will no longer Judaize or observe the Sabbath.”81 What is so striking about the Qurʾānic Jesus is that it is specifically the Torah, at least in the Medinese suras, and not the law in some unspecified sense, that he was sent to confirm. God taught him the book, wisdom, Torah, and Gospel, apparently all containing the same message (5:110). The Qurʾān also says that Jesus came to undo some of the prohibitions imposed on the recipients of the Torah (3:50), and informs us that some foods had been forbidden for the Jews by way of punishment for their sins (4:160). This is much more suggestive of a gentile Christian perspective. Christ came to fulfill the law and to loosen us from the bonds of the “second legislation” (i.e., Jewish law), as the twelve apostles are made to declare in the Didascalia (composed in

76 This view is not tenable; see Part Two, no. 15.
77 For all the passages on the Injîl, see Parrinder, Jesus, 143–44.
Syria c. 200), contradictory though it sounds. But it is only some of the prohibitions that Jesus came to undo in the Qurʾān, and the very same passage has him confirming the Torah too. In short, the Messenger’s view of Jesus suggests that he had been shaped in a community in which Jesus was revered, but Moses remained the paradigmatic prophet. Only Jewish Christians fit that description.

5. Jewish Christian Christologies

Before proceeding, the reader needs to invest a bit of energy into familiarizing him/herself with Jewish Christian Christology. It is often assumed, especially by laymen, that all Jewish Christians regarded Jesus as a prophet of the purely human kind, much as did the Messenger, but this is not correct. There were indeed Jewish Christians who espoused a low Christology, and it is indeed likely that the Christology of the Qurʾān is of Jewish Christian origin, though it is difficult to prove (see no. 9, in Part Two). But many other Jewish Christians—perhaps most of them—had high Christological views of the type that some modern scholars classify (or classified) as Gnostic, and we need to understand both types in order to assess the degree to which Jewish Christian ideas are present in the Qurʾān, whether as an element of the Messenger’s thought or as a target of his polemics.

Unlike the question of whether gentile converts had to follow Jewish law, Christology was not an object of debate between Paul and the Jerusalem church, so we do not actually know how the earliest Christians envisaged Christ, or even whether they shared a single understanding of him. However, a famous passage from an epistle of Paul, widely assumed to be a hymn, and perhaps one translated from Aramaic, may give us a glimpse of early Palestinian Christology. It appears in the Epistle to the Philippians (2:6–11), one of the seven Pauline letters generally accepted as genuine; if it was indeed written by him, it takes us back to the 50s or 60s, a mere twenty or thirty years after the death of Jesus. Against this, it must be said that the Epistle to the Philippians is not among the four letters to which Baur, the founder of the Tübingen school, would reduce the authentic Pauline corpus, and that the Dutch Radicals, who dated all the Pauline epistles to the second century, still have their sympathizers. There is, in fact, something suspicious about the fact that Paul’s letters simply presuppose a high estimation of Jesus as messiah, Lord, and son of God instead of explaining that he was all of these things, especially considering that his audience included gentile newcomers. But be that as it may, the hymn is certainly early.

In this hymn, Christ is described as a pre-existing heavenly being that assumed human form and was obedient even to the point of death: “though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be desired, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Moreover, as a human he humbled himself to the point of dying on the cross; therefore God exalted him and gave him the name above all names, “so that every knee should bend . . . at the name of Jesus and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” In other words, instead of seeking parity with God (after the fashion of arrogant human kings), he chose to become a slave, i.e., a human being, and further humiliated himself by letting himself be killed on the cross, whereupon God exalted him. It is not clear whether his exaltation simply restored him to his former position or rather elevated him to parity with God, but the latter seems the more likely implication. Contrary to what used

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82 Didascalia, chap. 2 (ed. and trans. Voöbus, 18 = 15); cf. Zel- lentin, *The Qurʾān’s Legal Culture*.

83 The literature is enormous. For a readable introduction and references, see Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2005), chap. 4.
to be thought, there was nothing particularly unusual about the idea of such a second divine power in Judaism at the time.88 Philo happily called the logos both an archangel and a “second God,” as well as God’s “first-born son” and His viceroy (hyparchos).89 many modern scholars speak of Jewish “binitarianism.” But Philo never envisaged this archangel or “second God” as appearing on earth in human form. It was this idea that was new, and clearly immensely exciting to people at the time.

In Paul’s hymn, the heavenly Christ is born in the likeness of a human being; so too in the Dialogue of Justin Martyr (d. c. 165), if we take “in the likeness of” to mean no more than “as.”90 This was to become the standard Christian position: the word became flesh, as John 1:14 puts it. Other Christians, however, used imagery implying that the pre-existing being did not actually become flesh, but rather assumed flesh as an outer cover: they compared the body to a vessel or temple that he filled, or to clothes that he put on. Christ’s body was “the receptacle of the spirit,” as we read in the epistle of Barnabas (130s?); or “God caused the holy pre-existent spirit which had created the whole of creation to dwell in flesh that He desired,” as the probably mid-second-century Shepherd of Hermes says.91 Christ “clothed himself with the/a man,” as Melito of Sardis (d. c. 180) and Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215) put it.92 “There are some who say that Jesus was merely a receptacle of Christ, upon whom the Christ, as a dove, descended from above,” as Irenaeus (d. c. 202) informs us.93

The two concepts of the incarnation coexisted in the first centuries, and the differences between them may sometimes have been purely verbal, but this was certainly not always the case. Those who saw the body of Jesus as a receptacle for the pre-existing being often envisaged this being as having taken up abode in him when he was an adult, usually (but not always) meaning when he was baptized; until then, Jesus had been an ordinary man. They also saw the pre-existing being as remaining distinct from its human host, and as departing when the latter died. “My God, why have you abandoned me?” as Jesus says in Mark (15:34) and Matthew (27:46): this could easily be understood as a complaint about the departure of the spirit that had taken up abode in him. “My power (dynamis), O my power, you have left me behind!” as Jesus exclaims in the Jewish Christian Gospel of Peter.94 Modern scholars often refer to this idea as “spirit Christology,” meaning the concept of the spirit as the pre-existing Christ that dwelt in the man Jesus.95

But it was not necessarily the spirit, as opposed to the word (logos), wisdom, or power of God, or a power or angel, or the son, or simply the pre-existing Christ without further explanation, that was said to have filled the human Jesus.96 Some scholars speak of “possession Christology,” which has the unfortunate effect of suggesting that Jesus was in need of exorcism; still others speak of “separation Christology,” with reference to the fact that the human Jesus and the divine Christ were distinct and eventually separated. An even better term, if it were not so crass, would be hotel Christology, since it is precisely as if the body were a hotel that the spirit (or word, wisdom, angel, etc.) moves in and out of. Since one can say that the body hosted the pre-existing Christ, I shall settle for “host Christology.” The doctrine was premised on a sharp distinction between the human Jesus and the heavenly Christ, and since mainstream Christians stopped making this distinction, they sometimes found the doctrine contradictory: on the one hand, the Ebionites...
claimed that “Christ” (read: Jesus) was an ordinary human being, and on the other hand, they held that he was a heavenly power, as Epiphanius complained, though the two doctrines were two sides of the same coin (as in fact he knew very well). 97

Modern scholars sometimes react much like Epiphanius. 98 But host Christology was a very old form of Christology, perhaps the oldest recorded. 99 It is combated already in the first Epistle of John (probably c. 90), 100 and it seems to be espoused in the Gospel of Mark, which “begins with the entrance of the Holy Spirit into Jesus and ends with the Spirit forsaking him on the cross,” as Price nicely puts it, 101 though Mark does tell of the resurrection as well. 102 Mainstream Christians rejected this view of the incarnation as heretical, but it remained characteristic of that stream of Christianity that modern scholars label Gnostic, and also of much Jewish Christianity. 103

97 Epiphanius, Panarion, 30.34.6; cf. 30.3.1–6; 30.14.4. He himself explained that according to the Ebionites, “Christ himself is from God on high, but Jesus is the offspring of a man’s seed and a woman,” and responded that Jesus was Christ and God from the moment of his birth, not thirty years later or after his baptism (Panarion, 30.29.1–10).

98 See, for example, Darrell D. Hannah, Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity (Tübingen, 1999), 176.


101 Robert M. Price, review of Michael Goulder, St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions (Louisville, KY, 1995) (for the website, see note 84; this review was accessed January 2013). Goulder himself believes Mark to be a reworking of an earlier gospel espousing the Christology of the Jerusalem church (Two Missions, 129, 134), which would indeed make it the oldest known Christology.

102 The last twelve lines of the gospel are deemed to be a later addition, but the original includes the empty tomb. The resurrection is actually something of a problem in terms of host Christology, for if the spirit left Jesus on the cross, what enabled him to be resurrected? Cerinthus did say both that the Christ flew away and that Jesus rose again if Irenaeus (Adv. Haer., 1.26.1) is to be trusted. But Epiphanius, who repeats this at Panarion, 28.1.7, also has Cerinthus claim that Christ (i.e., Jesus?) would not rise again until the general resurrection (ibid., 28.6.1).

103 For a discussion of Jewish Christian host Christology (here “possession Christology”), see Goulder, Two Missions, chapters 15–18.

Host Christology could be understood in both a high and a low Christological vein, and both positions were found (with many variations) among Jewish Christians. Many passages in the Patristic literature taken by modern scholars to deny Christ’s divinity actually deny only the virgin birth. From a mainstream Christian point of view, of course, anyone who denied the virgin birth ipso facto denied that Christ was the son of God, and modern scholars sometimes seem to share this view; 104 but it was not how Jewish Christians reasoned. Most of them denied that Jesus had been born of a virgin, but that still left the question of whether he remained a human being or achieved divine or angelic status when he was baptized; alternatively, when he was transfigured (on which more below); or when he was resurrected (the position in Romans 1:4). There were also some who postponed his deification until he was raised to heaven, 105 and still others held that Jesus was never deified at all. Low Christology is attested (along with high Christology) in early Christian literature such as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, a work of uncertain date variously held to be a Jewish work adapted by Christians, a Christian composition ab initio, or a work by Jewish Christians. Jesus was here predicted as “a man who by the power of God renews the law.”106 “The most High will send forth His salvation in the visitation of an only-begotten prophet,” as we are also told (however exactly this is to be understood). 107

It is not always clear what type of Christology is implied in the texts. Our earliest heresiographer, Irenaeus (d. c. 202), says that the views of the Ebionites regarding Christ were similar to those of Cerinthus...
(c. 100) and Carpocrates (fl. 130s). Of the latter two, he informs us that they held a pre-existing, heavenly being (the Christ according to Cerinthus, a power according to Carpocrates) to have descended upon, or rather into, Jesus, thanks to his superior merits. According to Cerinthus, it came down in the form of a dove when he was baptized. The reference of Cerinthus is to Mark 1:10 (cf. Matthew 3:16–17; Luke 3:21–22): “just as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove [going] into him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” The passage obviously suggests that Jesus only became the son of God when God’s spirit entered him (which it only does in Mark). But does it mean that Jesus became divine? “Son of God” could have different positions. This would certainly help Jesus after all, but rather stayed to be crucified along with his human host, who suffered whereas he did not. This makes better sense. This Ebionites lived according to the law and believed in justification by it, as Hippolytus explains, without telling us exactly what the status of Jesus as Christ or messiah meant to them. Hippolytus does not explicitly say that they denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, but a group so committed to the observance of the law was not likely to have believed it possible for the divine to manifest itself in a man, let alone for every human to be a potential host: direct contact with the divinity normally led to the view that the observance of the law was superfluous.

Justin Martyr (d. c. 165) also knew of Christians who held that Christ was an ordinary human being and the messiah by election: they are “of your race,” he said, i.e., they were Jews. Theodotus of Byzantium (fl. c. 190), a leatherworker or shoemaker who disseminated host Christology some thirty years after Justin, had followers who likewise denied that Jesus was ever more than a man. These Ebionites probably believed Jesus to have been filled with God’s spirit in the same way that ordinary prophets were, or more so, but not to the point of making him divine: it enabled him to prophesy, but did not alter his human status. If so, it was prophetic status that all could hope to achieve by imitation of Jesus. This is perfectly credible, for it was widely held in the first two centuries of Christianity that ordinary believers

suggests that Jesus acquired otherwise unobtainable knowledge and power when he was baptized and used them to preach and work wonders, just as other prophets did. He had special powers, but he was not divine. Those Ebionites who held a position similar to Cerinthus (according to Irenaeus) are said by Hippolytus (d. 235) to have held it possible for everyone to become Christ on the grounds that Christ was a man like any other; he was named both Jesus and “Christ of God” (not Christ and God) because he had kept the law, whereas everyone else had failed to do so—these Ebionites lived according to the law and believed in justification by it, as Hippolytus explains, without telling us exactly what the status of Jesus as Christ or messiah meant to them. Hippolytus does not explicitly say that they denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, but a group so committed to the observance of the law was not likely to have believed it possible for the divine to manifest itself in a man, let alone for every human to be a potential host: direct contact with the divinity normally led to the view that the observance of the law was superfluous.

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suggests that Jesus acquired otherwise unobtainable knowledge and power when he was baptized and used them to preach and work wonders, just as other prophets did. He had special powers, but he was not divine. Those Ebionites who held a position similar to Cerinthus (according to Irenaeus) are said by Hippolytus (d. 235) to have held it possible for everyone to become Christ on the grounds that Christ was a man like any other; he was named both Jesus and “Christ of God” (not Christ and God) because he had kept the law, whereas everyone else had failed to do so—these Ebionites lived according to the law and believed in justification by it, as Hippolytus explains, without telling us exactly what the status of Jesus as Christ or messiah meant to them. Hippolytus does not explicitly say that they denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, but a group so committed to the observance of the law was not likely to have believed it possible for the divine to manifest itself in a man, let alone for every human to be a potential host: direct contact with the divinity normally led to the view that the observance of the law was superfluous.

Justin Martyr (d. c. 165) also knew of Christians who held that Christ was an ordinary human being and the messiah by election: they are “of your race,” he said, i.e., they were Jews. Theodotus of Byzantium (fl. c. 190), a leatherworker or shoemaker who disseminated host Christology some thirty years after Justin, had followers who likewise denied that Jesus was ever more than a man. These Ebionites probably believed Jesus to have been filled with God’s spirit in the same way that ordinary prophets were, or more so, but not to the point of making him divine: it enabled him to prophesy, but did not alter his human status. If so, it was prophetic status that all could hope to achieve by imitation of Jesus. This is perfectly credible, for it was widely held in the first two centuries of Christianity that ordinary believers
could be filled by the spirit and function as prophets while it was in them.\footnote{116} Ebionites who cast Jesus as an ordinary human being were known to others too. According to Origen, some Ebionites accepted that Jesus was born of a virgin, but did so without any \textit{theologia}, presumably meaning without any talk about divinity.\footnote{117} They did not accept his pre-existence as God, the \textit{logos}, and wisdom, as Eusebius reformulated it.\footnote{118} They claimed that Christ did not exist before Mary, as Jerome put it.\footnote{119} According to Tertullian, Ebion asserted that “Jesus is a mere man and only of the seed of David, that means not also the son of God.”\footnote{120} Here it is not just virgin birth that was denied (though Tertullian knew the Ebionites rejected that too), but also the status of Jesus as the son of God. Tertullian further said that the Ebionites made their claim about Jesus as a mere man even though Jesus was obviously more glorious than the prophets (according to them or to him?), “so as to say that an angel is in him in the same way as in Zachariah.”\footnote{121} In other words, they agreed with adherents of host Christology that an angel dwelt in Jesus, but they held this angel to be his source of inspiration rather than a being which raised him to the status of mediator between the divine and human worlds. The fact that these Ebionites spoke of an angel “in him” \textit{(in illo)}, which is not dictated by the text of Zachariah, suggests that the union of Jesus with a pre-existing being was taken for granted even by those who wanted to keep him as a mere man.\footnote{122} Tertullian later mentioned that, in Ebion's opinion, one ought to believe that Jesus was nothing more than Solomon and Jonah.\footnote{123} This confirms that the Ebionites in question regarded him as a prophet of the normal human kind.

Modern scholars usually call the position of Cerinthus and the Ebionites adoptionist, but it is a misleading label in that the crucial movement is that of a heavenly being from heaven to the earth,\footnote{124} and it also fails to bring out that the result was the indwelling of a heavenly being in the body of an ordinary man. Like Cerinthus and Carpocrates, the Ebionites (and others too) saw the transformation as having taken place when Jesus was baptized.\footnote{125} Both the Ebionites and the Nazoreans read an uncanonical gospel in “Hebrew” \textit{(i.e., Aramaic)},\footnote{126} which they called the \textit{Gospel According to the Hebrews} and which was widely believed to be a “Hebrew” version of Matthew,\footnote{127} though that read by the Ebionites was

\footnote{117} Origen, \textit{Commentary on Matthew}, XVI, 12 (in Klijn and Reinink, \textit{Patristic Evidence}, 129–30, translating it quite differently); cf. Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum}, V, 61 (in Klijn and Reinink, \textit{Patristic Evidence}, 134–35). Luomanen, \textit{Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects}, 28, 234, unpersuasively argues that Origen's distinction between the two groups is a mere inference from the two versions of Irenaeus' statement that Ebionite Christology was/was not similar to that of Cerinthus \textit{(who did not believe in the virgin birth); cf. above, note 108.}
\footnote{119} Jerome, \textit{De viris illustribus}, 9 (in Klijn and Reinink, \textit{Patristic Evidence}, 211), crediting this position to Cerinthus and the Ebionites in general.
\footnote{122} Cf. Zachariah 1:14; 4:1; 5:2: the angel spoke \textit{bi} and \textit{alay}, all rendered \textit{pro me} in the Vulgate and “to me” in English versions, not “in me.”
\footnote{124} “Adoptionism” is actually defined by Kelly as the doctrine that Christ was a mere man on whom God's spirit had descended \textit{(Early Christian Doctrines}, 115), but this does not fit the ordinary sense of adoption, so it is not a helpful term. Another expression for “adoptionism” is “dynamic monarchianism,” which requires more explanation than the phenomenon it is meant to explain.
\footnote{125} For the Ebionites, see their gospel in, for example, Ehrman and Pleše, \textit{Apocryphal Gospels}, 213, from Eusebius, \textit{Panarion}, 30.13.7; for the Nazoreans, see the same work, in ibid., 221. The position is also attested for Theodorus of Byzantium (fl. c. 190), cf. Hippolytus, \textit{Refut.}, 7.35.
\footnote{126} For Hebrew in the sense of Aramaic, see now Beattie and Davies, “What Does Hebrew Mean?,” and note 55, above.
\footnote{127} Most scholars postulate the existence of three distinct Jewish Christian gospels, of which only one, the Gospel of the Nazoreans, was in Aramaic; the other two, the Gospel of the Ebionites and that of the Hebrews, are both held to have been in Greek \textit{(for this view, pioneered by J. Waetz, see A. F. J. Klijn, \textit{Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition [Leiden, 1992], chap. 2; Ehrman and Pleše, \textit{Apocryphal Gospels}, 197ff.; P. Vielhauer and G. Strecker, “Jewish Christian Gospels,” in \textit{New Testament Apocrypha}, ed. Wilhelm Schnemelcher, trans. R. McI. Wilson [Cambridge, UK, 1991–92], 1:134–78, esp. 135–36; J. K. Elliott, \textit{The Apocryphal New Testament} [Oxford, 1993], 3ff.). But a few (with whose position I sympathize) hold that there was only one Jewish Christian gospel, or at least that the Ebionites and the Nazoreans read different recensions of the same Aramaic gospel known as \textit{According to the Hebrews}. Pioneered by A. Schmidtke, this view is favored by William L. Petersen, “A New Testimonium to a Judaic-Christian Gospel Fragment from a Hymn of Romanos the Melodist,” \textit{Vigiliae Christianae} 50 (1996): 105–16 (reprinted in his collected essays, \textit{Patristic and Text-Critical Studies} [Leiden, 2012], chap. 18), n. 4; Pritz, \textit{Nazorean Jewish Christianity}, 85–86. Whether this gospel was

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mon 7:27; Sirach 24:7. For further discussion, see Patricia Crone, “Today I have given you birth.”

“entered” has been added for clarification, as has the statement, , 213, from Epiphanius, , 30.13.7). Here the word Panarion
Gospels
Apocryphal
as a dove which enters him (cf. Ehrman and Pleše,
naturally assumed it to be the original behind the Greek text.

When the Lord came up out of the water, the whole fount of the holy spirit descended upon him and rested on him and said to him, My Son, in all the prophets I was waiting for you that you should come and I might rest in you. For you are my rest, you are my firstborn son, who rules for ever.

Here Jesus is presented as the culmination of a chain of prophets in all of whom the spirit has been: the spirit of God, which is the spirit of wisdom, had passed into holy souls before, making them prophets and friends of God, but the whole fount of the holy spirit descended on Jesus when he was baptized and it found its final resting place in him. This is also compatible with the interpretation of Jesus as a human prophet, but the Nazoreans known to Jerome understood it to mean that “the whole fullness of the godhead (omnem plenitudinem divinitatis) took pleasure to dwell corporeally” in Jesus, whereas it had only dwelled “moderately” in the earlier holy persons. In this passage, the human Jesus is indeed deified when the heavenly being (here the holy spirit) takes up abode in him. A stronger version of this view is voiced in a passage in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, in which we are told that the pre-existing being “has changed his forms and his names from the beginning of the world until, coming upon his own times, and being anointed with mercy for the works of God, he shall enjoy rest for ever.” Here all the prophets are the same divine being in different human bodies, but only the last of them is the messiah (who seems still to be awaited). Yet another view is found in the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions: Jesus (presumably in the sense of the heavenly Christ) “took a Jewish body and was born among the Jews.” As in other forms of host Christology, Jesus assumes a body as if it were clothing, but here he does so before, or when, he is born.

Both the Nazorean understanding of the divinity dwelling moderately in the prophets before Jesus, but fully in him, and the passage in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies in which the messiah is still to come are likely to reflect the magnetic pull of the Book of Elchasai, a work composed in Aramaic by a Jew or Jewish Christian writing in Parthian Mesopotamia in 116–17. Elchasai (if that is indeed what he called himself) constructed all the prophets as incarnations of the same pre-existing Christ in different bodies: all prophets were ultimately identical and all bore the same message, but only the last of them was the messiah, in whom the spirit would enjoy rest for ever. About a century later this book, now apparently translated into Greek, was brought to Palestine and Rome, where it stirred up much excitement among Christians and so attracted the attention of Hippolytus, Origen, and Epiphanius.

128 In the gospel used by the Nazoreans, the account of the baptism is somewhat different:

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a “Hebrew” version of Matthew is another question, but even if it was, it evidently would not follow that it was the original version of Matthew, as some assume (rejecting its identification as Matthew, because the canonical Matthew clearly is not a translation of a Semitic original). If a “Hebrew” version of Matthew circulated, Greek-speaking Christians who had not seen or read it would have naturally assumed it to be the original behind the Greek text.

129 Jerome, In Esaiam, 11:1–3, in Ehrman and Pleše, Apocryphal Gospels, 213, from Epiphanius, Panarion, 30.13.7). Here the word “entered” has been added for clarification, as has the statement, “Today I have given you birth.”

132 As in Mark (cf. above, note 110), the holy spirit comes down as a dove which enters him (cf. Ehrman and Pleše, Apocryphal Gospels, 221; in Klijn, Jewish Christian Gospel Tradition, 98 (text and a less idiomatic translation; the passage is cited only in a truncated form in Klijn and Reinink, Patristic Evidence, 223). It is on the basis of the difference between these two baptism narratives that some hold that there must have been at least two different gospels.

133 Jerome, In Esaiam, 11:1–3, in Klijn and Reinink, Patristic Evidence, 223; cf. Klijn, Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition, 19, strangely supposing that their version of Isaiah had revealed to Jerome a Christology “which might be called orthodox.” That the fullness of divinity dwelt in Christ is Pauline orthodoxy (cf. Colossians 1:19; 2:9), but the idea that it had done so moderately in earlier figures was not.

129 Homilies, III, 20; discussed in Crone, Nativist Prophets, 289ff. This does not represent the normal view in the Homilies, in which only Adam and Christ are incarnations of the divine spirit.

134 Recognitions, 1.60.7 (cf. 1.48.4). The passage is deemed remarkable by van Voorst, Ascents of James, 164, in view of the “generally low” Christology of the second and third centuries, when there was supposedly no belief in the pre-existence of Jesus, an extraordinary claim for an expert to make. Yet Richard Bauckham, “The Origin of the Ebionites,” in The Image of the Judeo-Christian in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature, ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry (Tübingen, 2003), 162–81, esp. 171, goes so far as to dismiss the passage as an editorial interpolation.

135 For the Mesopotamian/Iranian background and further details, see Crone, Nativist Prophets, esp. chaps. 11, 14, and pp. 336–41 (at which point I would have cited the Biblical scholars advocating host Christology as the oldest form of Christology if I had been aware of them at the time).
The heavenly Christ was “transfused” into many bodies and was now in Jesus, as Hippolytus observed with reference to the beliefs of the Elchasaites in Rome.135 When he chooses, he takes Adam’s body off and puts it on again,” as the Sampseans, formerly called Osseus, said according to Epiphanius.136 The Osseans/Sampseans were one of four groups that the Elchasaites had corrupted, according to Epiphanius, the other three being the Ebionites, the Nazoreans, and the Nasareans,137 in other words, at least some if not all of them had adopted this Christology. It is clear from both Hippolytus and Epiphanius that on the Greek side of the border the number of divine incarnations was reduced to two, Adam and Christ, whereas the Book of Elchasai postulated many more. By contrast, the Elchasaites of Iraq apparently accepted all their prophets (or, as they more commonly said, apostles) as the same divine being in human bodies; or at least their Manichaean offshoot did, and so too did the Mandaeans.138

The Elchasaites explicitly identified the pre-existing Christ as an angel created by God.139 If nothing created can be divine, as the Qurʾānic Messenger held, the Elchasaites and the many Jewish Christians who adopted their Christology could claim that they did not deify him. Whether they made this claim or not we cannot tell, presumably because it did not matter yet: nobody operated with a sharp distinction between divine and angelic status at the time. Thus Melchizedek, identified with the archangel Michael, was called both el and elohim in the Dead Sea scrolls;140 and when God’s spirit, power, wisdom, or logos were personified as angels, the import was not that they were angels as opposed to divine beings, but rather that they were part of Him. The sharp distinction between God and angels that we encounter in the later literature, including the Qurʾān, seems to be a product of the Christian battle against paganism.

What the Elchasaites did claim, according to Epiphanius, was that the heavenly Christ was a being “created before all things . . . higher than the angels and Lord of all,” which sounds much like Christ in Paul’s hymn.141 Like the Michael/Melchizedek of the Dead Sea scrolls or Philo’s logos, the heavenly Christ occupied the position of mediator, a heavenly being placed at the intersection between the divine and human worlds; and on lodging himself in a human host, he propelled the latter, too, to mediator position: this seems to be the sense in which Jesus became the son of God and Christ in their view.


All this is relevant to a book called the Gospel According to the Hebrews, which in turn has a bearing on the Qurʾān. We hear about it in a Coptic sermon attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), but probably composed in the sixth or seventh century.142 In the sermon, “Cyril” discusses a heresy to the effect that Mary brought her body from heaven, which he traces to Ebion and Harpocrates (also known as Carpocrates), informing us that a monk in the neighborhood of Maiuma at Gaza was among those who had been spreading it.143 The monk, whose name was Annarichos or Annarakos, is presented as crediting his own beliefs to Ebion and Sator/Sarton/Sarto, i.e.,

135 Hippolytus, Refut., 10.29.2.
137 Epiphanius, Panarion, 19.5.4–5.
138 For all this, see Crone, Nativist Prophets, 293–301.
141 Epiphanius, Panarion, 30.3.4.
142 The sermon has been edited and translated three times, by Ernest A. Wallis Budge, “Discourse on Mary Theotokos,” in his Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt (London, 1915), 626–51 (reproducing British Library Or. 6784, fols. 1a–23b; the folio numbers are given in the left margin); by Antonella Campagnano, Omelie Copte: sulla passione, sulla croce e sulla vergine (Milan, 1980), 152–95 (based on Pierpont Morgan M.583); and by Stefan Bombeck, “Pseudo-Kyrillos In Mariam virginem,” Orientalia 70 (2001): 40–88 (based on Pierpont Morgan M 597). I shall use the title “On the Virgin” for all three versions. For all of the works attributed to Cyril with short summaries of their contents, see Tito Orlandi, “Cirillo di Gerusalemme nella letteratura copta,” Vetera Christianorum 9 (1972): 93–100.
143 For the date, see Simon Claude Mimouni, Dormition et assumption de Marie (Paris, 1995), 193–94 (between 431 and the second half of the sixth century); Shoemaker, Ancient Traditions, 60 (before the mid-sixth century); cf. Terry Willung, “Constantine in Coptic: Egyptian Constructions of Constantine the Great,” in Constantine: History, Historiography, and Legend, ed. Samuel N. C. Lieu and Dominic Montserrat (London, 2002), chap. 9, esp. 181 (placing the six pseudo-Cyrillian works in Coptic in the sixth or seventh century).
Satornilus (a Gnostic active in Antioch c. 120); and we are told that the bishop of Gaza sent him to Cyril in Jerusalem, whereupon we get some snippets of the debate between them. The monk cited the Gospel of the Hebrews as saying that

when Christ wished to come upon the earth to men, the Good Father called a mighty “power” in the heavens which was called “Michael,” and committed Christ to the care thereof. And the “power” came down into the world, and it was called Mary, and [Christ] was in her womb for seven months.\footnote{Pseudo-Cyril, “On the Virgin,” in Budge, Miscellaneous Coptic Texts, fol. 12a = 637; Campagnano, Omelie Coptes, par. 28; Bombeck, “Pseudo-Kyrillos,” par. 28; cf. Pieter van der Horst, “Seven Months’ Children in Jewish and Christian Literature from Antiquity,” Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 54 (1978): 346–60. For Micha and (in the BL manuscript used by Budge) Michael, see Roelof van den Broek, “Der Bericht des koptischen Kyrillos von Jerusalem über das Hebräerevangelium,” in his Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity (Leiden, 1996), chap. 9, esp. 147, nn. 13, 15.}

The monk affirmed that there were five gospels, the four canonical ones plus the Gospel written to the Hebrews. “Cyril” responded by emphatically declaring Hebrew doctrine to be incompatible with that of Christ, whereupon the monk realised his error and repented. Ebion (once just Bion) and Harpocratus are probably concatenated in this story because Ebion had once been depicted as adhering to much the same views regarding Christ as Carpocrates and Cerinthus. But Cerinthus is missing in the Coptic sermon and, though Irenaeus is cited, the doctrine reported is unknown to the patristic literature.

Just as the pre-existing Christ was an archangel according to Jewish Christians influenced by Elchasai,\footnote{Cf. Schoeps, Theologie, 324.} so Mary was a power identified as an archangel according to the Gospel of the Hebrews available in the seventh-century Gaza region. But the Ebionites and Nazoreans saw the heavenly Christ or holy spirit as having descended on the human Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, to take up abode in him when he was baptized, whereas the Jewish Christians quoted by Annarichos held that the heavenly being was actually born to Mary as the Christ and son of God; and the idea that Mary was a heavenly being is new. This makes it unlikely that the passage quoted from the Gospel of the Hebrews in the Coptic sermon originated in the older gospel of that name. It is hard to be sure, for if the older gospel grew by accretion as its readers updated it, the passage cited in the Coptic sermon could perhaps have come to form part of it by “Cyril’s” time.\footnote{Van den Broek, “Kyrillos,” 152–53.} But more probably, the gospel read by Annarichos was a later Jewish Christian composition of the Gnosticizing type.

Whatever the precise identity of Annarichos’ gospel, is “Cyril” right to identify the doctrine he quotes from it as Jewish Christian? Or should we rather see it as having developed within Monophysitism? There are several reasons to think that “Cyril” is right. In the first place, Jewish Christians were not normally envisaged as a live presence anymore, and as a heresiographical bugbear, Ebion stood for the view that Jesus was a mere man born to ordinary human parents, not that he was a heavenly power born of an archangel in human guise.\footnote{For all this, see Petersen, “New Testimonium,” 105–16 and n. 24.} If “Cyril” had been thinking stereotypically, he would have attributed the doctrine regarding Mary’s angelic status to “Manichaeans” or “Borborians” or some such Gnostic group, not to Ebion. The tenth-century Eutychius of Alexandria (Sa’d ib. Ba’traq), followed by the fourteenth-century Abû al-Barâkât, did in fact ascribe the doctrine to the Borborians, in wording taken from the Qur’ân (16:51). Van den Broek is inclined to agree with them, without explaining why in that case “Cyril” chose to present the doctrine as Hebrew.\footnote{For all this, see Petersen, “New Testimonium,” 105–16 and n. 24.}

In the second place, there is nothing implausible about the claim that a Jewish Christian gospel (even an ancient one) was available in the sixth or seventh century. The sixth-century Byzantine poet Romanos the Melodist, who was born in Emesa (Hims), “of the Hebrew race,” and who drew heavily on Syrian traditions, has two quotations from a Jewish Christian gospel. One of them is also found in Tatian’s Diatessaron, which is probably where Romanos found it, but the other is not attested anywhere else apart from a fourteenth-century Latin source, which credits it (in a variant form) to the gospel used by the Nazoreans. Romanos may have quoted or paraphrased this passage directly from a Jewish Christian gospel.\footnote{The citation is accepted as part of the original Gospel of the Hebrews in Schneemelcher, New Testament Apocrypha, 177, but it is omitted in other compilations, and van den Broek, “Kyrillos,” 148–50, fiercely rejects it.}
In the third place, a variant version of the passage cited by “Cyril” from the Hebrew Gospel turns up in a medieval Latin source. In the *Interrogatio Iohannis* used by the Cathars of Italy and southern France, Christ says, “When my Father thought to send me to this earth, He sent before me one of His angels through the holy spirit; this angel was called Mary, my mother. I descended: I entered and left again through her ear.”150 The Cathars had obtained their book around 1190 from the Bogomils of Bulgaria,151 and the Bogomils had it from an unknown eastern source, presumably Paulician. There can in any case be no doubt that it was based on Near Eastern materials.152 As noted already, the passage quoted by “Cyril” probably did not form part of the Hebrew Gospel known to the Church Fathers, but it was not spurious in the sense that “Cyril” had invented it. He had it from a real book. It is of central interest for a doctrine about Jesus and Mary rejected in the Qurʾān, namely that both Jesus and Mary were divine.

7. Mary and the Trinity

In the Medinese sura 5:116, we are told that on the day of judgment God will ask Jesus, *a-anta qalta lil-nāšī ʾttakhidbūnī wa-ummī ilābāni min dūni ʾllāhi,* “did you tell people, ‘adopt me and my mother as two gods apart from God?’” Jesus responds with a vigorous denial. That there were people who revered both Jesus and his mother as divine beings could hardly be clearer.153 This is not how Griffith reads the passage, however: in his view, its rhetoric is designed to bring out the absurdity of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus by showing that it would entail that Mary was also divine.154 But this cannot be right. For one thing, there is no inference from the one to the other in the passage, nor is the response that such a doctrine regarding Mary would be manifestly absurd, but rather that there is no basis for deification of either her or her son in Jesus’ own preaching. For another thing, an earlier passage in the same sura tells us that “Christ (al-masīḥ), the son of Mary, was nothing but a messenger and his mother was [simply] a truthful woman, both of them ate food” (5:75). The fact that they ate food is given as proof of their human status. According to the Qurʾān, the messengers (in the sense of angels rather than prophets) who visited Abraham did not touch the calf that Abraham had prepared for them (11:69–70; 51:26–28). The polytheists who expected the Messenger to be an angel sarcastically asked what kind of messenger it was who ate food and walked about in the markets (25:7). God replied that all earlier messengers had also been humans, not endowed with bodies that did not eat, and not immortal (21:8). It is plain that the Messenger was up against opponents who regarded both Jesus and Mary as heavenly beings of the type indiscriminately known as angels or gods in the Qurʾān. This is also why he declared that God could destroy both Jesus and his mother if He wished (5:17), and probably why he denied that God had either a consort (ṣāḥiba) or a son (6:101; 72:3). The adherents of the view he opposed were identified as People of the Book in 4:171, where they were told (for the second time) not to go to extremes and say “three,” and here the Messenger affirmed that Jesus was just a messenger of God, His Word, and a spirit from him that God cast into Mary. That angels did not eat or drink was an old view. The Bible does of course depict them as eating with Abraham (Genesis 18:8; 19:3) and describes manna

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151 Cf. Nazarius, an old former bishop of the Cathars, who declared that he had heard many declare in his presence that the Blessed Virgin was an angel and that Christ did not assume human nature but an angelic one, and a celestial body. “He said he got this error from the bishop and elder son of the church of Bulgaria almost sixty years ago” [i.e., around 1190] (Rainerius Sacconi, *Summa de catharisa*, cited in Bozóky, *Livre*, 151–52; Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans, trans., *Heroes of the High Middle Ages: Selected Sources Translated and Annotated* [New York, 1969], 344 [25]).

152 The Paulician origin is denied by van der Brock, “Kyrillos,” 155; van der Brock, “Cathars,” 168, on the grounds that both the Armenian and Byzantine Paulicians held Mary to be an ordinary woman who had merely served as a conduit for the heavenly Jesus (she had children by Joseph afterwards; cf. Peter of Sicily below, notes 222, 224). But they share the conduit idea (first proposed by Valentinus), and there must have been many kinds of Paulicians, not just the Armenian and Byzantine varieties. There were at least three kinds of Cathars (some thought Mary was an archangel, others that she was a real woman born without human seed, and still others that her body was made of heavenly elements; cf. Bokózy, *Livre*, 152). For the eastern origins, see van den Brock, “Cathars,” esp. 164–65, 172–76.

153 Similarly de Blois, “Naṣrānī,” 13, noting the agreement of the exegetes.

154 Griffith, “Syriacisms,” 103*.
as their food, but Jewish readers from the Second Temple period onwards interpreted these and other passages in a docetic vein. "Although you were watching me, I really did not eat or drink anything—but what you saw was a vision," the archangel Raphael explains to Tobit and Tobias in the Book of Tobit (second century BC). The angels who visited Abraham only seemed to eat and drink, as Philo, Josephus, and the Palestinian targums inform us. According to the Testament of Abraham (c. AD 100?), God told the archangel Michael to eat whatever Abraham ate, whereupon Michael protested that angels neither ate nor drank, so God assured him that an all-devouring spirit would consume the food for him. When in Rome one must do as the Romans do, the rabbis explained, so Moses abstained from food and drink when he ascended on high, while conversely the angels ate with Abraham down below—except that the angels only appeared to eat. The view that angels did not eat is also widespread in the patristic literature.

The question discussed with reference to angels came to be debated about Jesus as well. The fact that he ate food and drank wine was an objection to his status as the heavenly being "Son of Man," already apparent in an approving vein. Compare Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, 25:15, and Tertullian, Against Marcion, 3.9. Tertullian, writing against Marcion, insisted that even the angels who visited Abraham had solid bodies and truly ate; and a Coptic sermon seems to share this view, for it has Abraham casually mention that he ate with the archangel Michael.

This was also the Messenger’s view. Like his “polytheist” and Christian opponents, he held that angels did not eat, but he did not think that either Jesus or Mary were angels, let alone gods. In sura 16:51, God tells people not to adopt two gods (lā tattakhidhū ēlāhānī ʾthnayni without naming the deities in question. The passage is so similar in wording to the Medinese 5:116—in which God asks Jesus, “did you tell people, ‘adopt me and my mother as two gods apart from God’ (ittakhidhāni wa-ummī ēlāhānī min dānī ʾlāhī)?”—that one wonders if the reference is not to Jesus and Mary here too. In short, it is hard to see how Griffith, who is presumably familiar with all these passages, can deny that the Messenger was arguing against Christians who operated with a Trinity consisting of God, Mary, and Jesus as Father, Wife/Mother, and Son.

155 Psalms 77:25 LXX (78:25 RSV); Wisdom of Solomon 16:20; cf. Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (orig. 1909–56; Baltimore, 1998), 1:243. See also Joseph and Asenath 16:8, where a honeycomb made by the bees of the heavenly paradise is the food of angels: he who eats it will never die.
156 Book of Tobit 12:19.
159 Genesis Rabba, 48:14; cf. the later Deuteronomy Rabba, 11:4; Exodus Rabba, 47:5.
162 Ibid., 39–40, 199.
163 Ibid., 45 (Acts of Peter, chap. 20).
164 Ibid., 46–47 (Clement, Stromata, 3.59.3, on Valentinus, apparently in an approving vein). Compare Justin Martyr, Dialogue, 57, on the angels who visited Abraham: they ate the way fire devours wood, without teeth and jaws.
166 Tertullian, Against Marcion, III, 9.
167 Theodosius of Alexandria, “Encomium on St Michael, the Archangel,” in Budge, Miscellaneous Coptic Texts, 910 (fol. 18a).
168 Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition, vol. 2, part 4, 352, n. 45. See also below, sections 7 and 10a (in Part Two).
In the wording of the Qurʾān, the offensive Christians said that “God is the third of three” (5:73).\(^{169}\) The Messenger could of course have made this observation with reference to any Trinitarian Christians: only the continuation in 5:75 indicates what kind of Trinity is involved. But Griffith does not even grant that the reference is to the Trinity, a fact which necessitates a brief digression. According to him, the expression “the third of three” (\(\text{thālīthu} \ \text{thalāthatin}\)) is enigmatic and best understood as a rendering of the Syriac epithet for Christ, \(\text{tlīthāyā}\), meaning treble or threefold: Christ is threefold with reference to Biblical narratives figuring “three days,” taken as types of Christ’s three days in the tomb; and the expression also refers obliquely to Jesus as one of the persons in the triune God.\(^{170}\) But this is somewhat far-fetched, and in any case it is not Christ who is characterized as \(\text{thālīthu} \ \text{thalāthatin}\), but rather God, nor is the expression enigmatic, since it simply means “the third of three,” just as \(\text{thānīya} \ \text{tḥnayni}\) means “the second of two” in the account of those who sought refuge in a cave (9:40).\(^{171}\) The charge is that the Christians reduce God to the position of the third of three deities by giving Him two partners, even though Christ explicitly ascribes to God is Christ, as we are also told in 5:72; the other is Mary, whose full humanity is asserted against them along with that of Christ in 5:75. The evidence is both coherent and unambiguous.

\(\text{(a) The Offensive Christians}\)

So what kind of Christians was the Messenger confronting here? I shall start by discussing the possibilities fielded in the secondary literature and then move on to the Coptic evidence, which no Islamicist seems to have considered yet.

One view is that the Messenger’s target was a sect dignified by Epiphanius with the grand name of “Collyridians.”\(^{173}\) Actually, there was no sect of that name, merely a practice that Epiphanius had learned about from oral sources,\(^{174}\) and which he deemed quite ridiculous, absurd, nonsensical, mad, and more besides. The practice had been brought to Arabia by Thracian and Scythian women, presumably wives of the legionaries at Bostra (Buṣrā). Once a year, they would cover a square seat with a cloth, put bread (or cake) on it, offer it to Mary, and eat it. What incensed Epiphanius about this practice, making him write page after page against it, was the fact that the ritual was performed by women. “Never at any time has a woman been a priest!” he thundered.\(^{175}\) women were unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited; all priests had been men; even Mary, deemed worthy of bearing the son of God, had not served as a priest; even Eve had not undertaken anything so impious; and so on. “Servants of God, let us adopt a manly frame of mind and dispel the madness of these women”.\(^{176}\) Mary was not to be worshipped, nor were any of the saints.\(^{177}\) Epiphanius did not actually know whether the “worthless women” were offering Mary the loaf “as though in worship,” but whatever they were doing, it was an altogether silly, heretical, and demon-inspired insolence and imposture.\(^{178}\)

It would have been good to know how these women regarded Mary, but since even Epiphanius could not claim to know, we shall have to leave this aside. It is in any case somewhat unlikely that a ritual attested for a clutch of foreign women in fourth-century Arabia should have been sufficiently long-lived.

\(^{169}\) Cf. further above, in section 3.


\(^{171}\) Ibid., 317 n. 9, where this is pointed out to him by Manfred Kropp and Joseph Witztum; also noted in Joseph Witztum, “The Syriac Milieu of the Qurʾān: Recasting the Biblical Narratives” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 60.

\(^{172}\) For other attempts to make the statement technical, see Parrinder, Jesus, 31, 133–34, 137, construing 5:72 as a reference to Patrippians; C. Joan Block, “Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia at the Advent of Islam with Implications for the English Translation of ‘Thalātha’ in Qurʾān 4.171 and 5.73,” Journal of Islamic Studies 23 (2012): 50–75, arguing that the reference is to a Philoponian type of Monophysitism derided by opponents as Tritheist.


\(^{174}\) Ibid., 78.23.3–4 (“I have heard,” “they say that”); 79.1.1 (“word of it has reached me”).

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 79.2.3.

\(^{176}\) Ibid., 79.4.6; 5.3.


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and widespread to attract the polemical attention of the Qurʾānic Messenger.

Another hypothesis is that the Qurʾānic Trinity had something to do with the fact that “spirit” is grammatically feminine in Aramaic and Syriac, and often envisaged as female by Syrian Christians, meaning that it could be identified as Mary. (This was so up to the early fifth century; thereafter, it became customary to treat the word ruḥā as masculine in connection with the holy spirit even though this did violence to the grammatical rules). Sometimes the spirit was envisaged as a daughter of God. Thus a Mandaean hymn cast the human spirit as God’s daughter when it had it ask, “My Father, my Father . . . why hast thou . . . cut me off and left me in the depths of earth?” The holy spirit was similarly cast in the Book of Elchasai, which described two giant angels identified as Christ and his sister, the holy spirit (i.e., the son and daughter of God). Origen remarks that his Hebrew teacher used to say that the two angels (seraphs) with six wings in Isaiah were the only begotten son of God and the holy spirit, probably meaning that this teacher likewise envisaged the holy spirit as Christ’s sister.

More often, however, the spirit was envisaged as a mother. Sometimes she was said to be the mother of all of us, just as God was the father of all of us, and not just of Christ; sometimes she was said to be the mother of the entire creation; and at other times it was her status as the mother of Christ that was singled out. Christ referred to himself as “the son of the holy spirit” in the (possibly second-century) letter or apocryphon of James (“James” is a confusing English form of the name Jacob). The Greek version of the possibly third-century Acts of Thomas, which was composed in Syriac and translated into Greek from a more primitive Syriac version than the one extant today, repeatedly invoked the holy spirit as “mother” (once as “hidden mother”) and declared to Christ that “We hymn you and your unseen Father and your holy spirit, (and) the mother of all created things.” As Brock says, the “and” placed in parenthesis here should be deleted as an intrusion; the passages, he notes, provide clear evidence of a Trinity consisting of Father, Mother, and Son. Such a Trinity is also reflected in the Hymn of the Pearl, which was incorporated in the Acts of Thomas and which features a king, a queen, and their son (Christ). Bar Daysān similarly spoke of a Father and Mother of Life who begot a Son of Life, i.e., Christ, while Mani envisaged God (“the Father of Greatness”) as having evoked the Great Spirit (alias “the Mother of Life”), who evoked the firstborn Son of God (i.e., Ohrmazd), who was Primal Man.

The spirit also appears as a mother in the old Gospel According to the Hebrews read by the early Jewish Christians. Origen cites it as containing a passage in which Christ says that “My mother, the holy spirit, took me by one of my hairs and brought me to a great hill, the Tabor.” The reference is to either the


180 E. S. Drower, trans., The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean (Leiden, 1959), 74 (my thanks to Charles Hāberl for locating the reference for me), in which the human spirit is said to be crying out because it has been abandoned in the darkness of the material world.

181 Hippolytus, Refus, 9.13.2–3; Epiphanius, Panarion, 19.4.1–2; 30.176; 53.1.9; cf. de Blos, “Naṣrān,” 14.


186 Ibid.


188 Cf. Iain Gardner and Samuel N. C. Lieu, Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire (Cambridge, 2004), 13, deeming this a consciously Trinitarian structure.

189 Origen, Commentary on John, II, 12; Origen, Homilies on Jeremiah, XV, 4, in Patristic Evidence, ed. Klijn and Reinkin, 127; Klijn, Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition, 52–53 (probably the Gospel read by the Ebsionites {“in Micha,” 7:5–7; “in Esaiam,” 40:9–11; and “in Hiezechielem,” 16:3}); brief references to the passage in Jerome with reference to that read by the Nazoreans, in Patristic Evidence, ed. Klijn and Reinkin, 209, 225, 227; compare the apocryphal “Bel and the Dragon,” verses 38–42, in which an angel carried Habakkuk by his hair from Judaea to Babylon to feed Daniel in the lions’ den. The inspiration of both is Ezekiel 8:3, in which a supernatural being carried Ezekiel by his hair from Babylon to Jerusalem; cf. Klijn, Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition, 54, for two further parallels.
transfiguration or the temptation of Christ. In the synoptic gospels, the transfiguration took place on a great mountain which was not named; some readers took it to be the Mount of Olives, but Origen identified it as Tabor, and this was the winning solution. When Jesus went up this mountain, we were told that his face became radiant (like that of Moses at Sinai), both Moses and Elijah appeared to him, and a voice said, “This is my son in whom I am well pleased.” These are the words that others place at the baptism of Jesus, suggesting that the story of the transfiguration originated as one out of several different accounts of how the holy spirit transformed the human Jesus into the pre-existing Christ. But it is in the company of the Disciples that Jesus goes up the mountain in the Synoptics, whereas he seems to be transported on his own in the Gospel of the Hebrews, so the reference is perhaps more likely to be to the temptation. It was the spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (Mark 1:12; Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:1), and the temptation continued first in Jerusalem and next on a mountain (thus Matthew 4:8–11; implicitly also Luke 4:5, not Mark). This mountain, too, was identified as Mount Tabor. But it was the Devil rather than the spirit who took Jesus to Jerusalem and up this mountain in the Synoptics (Matthew 4:10; similarly Luke 4:5). Maybe the Jewish Christian gospel presented the spirit as transporting Jesus through all three stages of the temptation. In any case, it is its identification of the spirit as Christ’s mother that matters here.

The fact that the spirit was often identified as Christ’s mother does not necessarily mean that it was identified with Mary, however. Neither Bar Daysan nor Mani seems to have envisaged the Mother of Life as having appeared on earth in a human body, whether real or illusory; and the readers of the Gospel of the Hebrews probably distinguished between Mary, the mother of the human Jesus, and the holy spirit, the mother of the heavenly Christ. The Odes of Solomon, written in Mesopotamia in the second or third century, do connect the holy spirit with Mary, but they too stop short of identifying them. “I rested on the spirit of the Lord and she lifted me up to heaven and caused me to stand in the Lord’s high place,” the author tells us, adding, now speaking as Christ, that “(the spirit) brought me before the Lord’s face, and although I was human [or, “because I was the Son of Man”], I was named the Light, the son of God.” Jesus here becomes the son of God, not by baptism or ascent of Mount Tabor, but rather by ascent to the highest realm, carried by the spirit. (This too models Jesus on Moses, who was envisaged as having ascended to heaven when he went up Mount Sinai.) In another passage, the spirit milks the Father, then herself, and gives the milk of both to the womb of Mary, who conceives and gives birth; the son is the cup, the Father is he who was milked, and the holy spirit is she who milked him, we are told. The two portions of milk were envisaged along the lines of sperm and egg, which were mixed in a heavenly petri dish and then implanted in Mary. The real parents of Christ were clearly God and the spirit. But in the Odes, as in the other works, Mary is a human being distinct from the members of the Trinity. Ephrem does have a verse blessing “the child [Jesus] whose mother [Mary] is the bride of the Holy One,” but he does not mean that Mary was God’s consort in a literal sense. In short, none of this takes us to the doctrine condemned in the Qurʾān.

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190 Thus the Bordeaux pilgrim of 333 (A. Stewart, trans., “Itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem,” in Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society 1 [London, 1887]: 24–25); similarly Pistis Sophia, chap. 1 (here placed after the resurrection).

191 Mount Tabor won universal assent as the location of the transfiguration among other things because both Origen and Cyril of Jerusalem had placed it there; see above, note 189, and Cyril of Jerusalem, Catecheses, trans. Edward Yarnold, Cyril of Jerusalem (London, 2000), 12:16.

192 Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36; compare Pistis Sophia, I, 15ff., in which Jesus was enveloped by a light-power and transported to heaven, just as Moses was enveloped by a cloud and, in the view of many, transported to heaven when he stood on Mount Sinai.

193 Thus Epiphanius, Panarion, 51.21.7.

194 This point seems always to be overlooked by those who ad-

duce the feminine nature of the spirit in explanation of the Qurʾānic Trinity (most recently de Blois, “Naṣrānī,” 14–15; Gallez, Le messie, II, 80ff.).

195 J. H. Charlesworth, ed. and trans., The Odes of Solomon (Chico, CA, 1977), ode 36:1–3 (cf. Charlesworth, Critical Reflections on the Odes of Solomon, vol. I [Sheffield, 1998], for the work). Charlesworth prefers the translation that I have put in parenthesis. The passage is also discussed in Murray, Symbols, 314–15, 318, on the basis of Charlesworth’s translation, which he does not discuss. He does wonder, though, whether there is a reminiscence of Origen’s Mount Tabor account (see above note 189, in verse 1).

196 Cf. Wayne A. Meeks, “Moses as God and King,” in Reli-

197 Charlesworth, Odes of Solomon, ode 19:1–6; also in Murray, Symbols, 315.

Yet another (by no means incompatible) hypothesis is that the Trinity reflected in the Qur'ān should be related to the long tradition in the Near East for divine triads consisting of Father, Mother, and Son. The best known example is probably the Egyptian triad of Osiris, Isis, and their child Horus, but other triads are attested for the pagan Syrians at Hierapolis/Mabboq, and for the pagan Arabs at Hatra. (It used to be thought that there was also one at Heliopolis/Baʿlabakk, but this seems not to be correct.)

At Petra, a virgin mother and her son Dusares were venerated without any father being named. If the virgin mother was al-ʿUzzā, the father was presumably the chief deity (Dhū ʿal-Sharā), with whom she was associated. Christianization eliminated the pagan divinities, but even so the triads reappeared. In fact, they remained alive into the twentieth century, for Alois Musil heard an old tribesman in the Kerak area of the Syrian Desert mutter, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

That the triads played a role in the formation of the Trinity consisting of Father, Mother, and Son is undoubtedly true: we have seen them return in the Acts of Thomas, the Hymn of the Pearl, and in Bar Dayṣān’s and Mani’s thought. But Mary is not implied to be the divine Mother until we reach the heresy about her heavenly body.

The earliest evidence thus dates from the late fourth century, when Epiphanius says, against the women denounced as Collyridians, that Mary was not to be worshipped (see above, p. 247). Though he did not actually know whether these women worshipped Mary as a superhuman being, it does suggest that he knew of people who did, and this is confirmed by another passage in which he sternly warns us that “Mary is not God and does not have her body from heaven but by human conception.” In another work, he or a Coptic author writing as him tells us not to think that Mary’s status was so exalted that she could not have been of this earth or born of a man, but rather must have come from heaven, as claimed by those who “go about publicly stirring up schism.”

The adherents of the doctrine that Mary’s body was from heaven were disseminating it quite openly, then. The doctrine is also reflected in a Sahidic fragment which affirms that “she died like all human beings and was generated from human seed, like us.” In the same vein, a Coptic sermon on the dormition by Theodosius of Alexandria (d. 566 or 567) has Christ tell Mary that he did not want her to know death: “I wanted to carry you up to heaven, like Enoch and Elijah,” he says, but if he had done so, “bad people would think that you are a heavenly power descended on the earth from heaven and that the plan for the incarnation and the way it has come about is an illusion.”

The heresy reappears in the Coptic sermon by “Cyril,” in which he mentions Annarichos and the Gospel of the Hebrews. “Cyril” protests that Mary was flesh and blood, begotten by a human father and mother like all other human beings, and not a power (dynamis), as claimed by Ebion and Harpocratus, the godless heretics who said that she was a power of God that took the form of a woman and came upon the earth, to be called Mary. “Cyril” rehearses her conception and childhood as presented in the Protoevangelium of James, assuring us that she died like everyone else as well.

Here we have the divine Mary also opposed by the Messenger in the Qur'ān.
The doctrine also appears in the Greek Doctrina Iacobi (Didascalia Iakóbou), written in Syria in the 630s. Here, a Jewish teacher of the law from Tiberias is presented as denying that Mary was the mother of God (theotokos), and affirming that she was of Davidic descent, which to him (as to “Cyril”) means that she was an ordinary human being. “So don’t let the Christians think that Mary is from heaven,” he concluded. In the next paragraph, the Jews are presented as arguing that Jesus could not be God’s son, because God had not taken a wife, presumably another reference to Mary. The Doctrina Iacobi was written for Jews forced into Christianity, and its Christian author apparently wanted these Jews to understand that even their own rabbinic authorities believed Mary to be of Davidic descent (which is quite untrue, of course). Apparently, he also wanted them to understand that Jewish objections to the Trinity rested on a misunderstanding of the Christian doctrine: Christians did not in fact regard Mary as God’s wife or a heavenly being, though they did regard her as the mother of God. The author was clearly familiar with a Christian version of the Near Eastern triads of Father, Mother, and Son. So too was the Messenger, for it is surely the same doctrine that he is rejecting when he says that “God has taken neither a wife nor a son” (72:3). In another passage he asks, “How can God have a son when he does not have a consort?” (6:101); but here the opponents would seem to share his assumption that God did not have a wife, suggesting that they were mainstream Christians, or alternatively that he has caught them in an inconsistency.

(b) The Role of Mainstream Christianity

Even if we accept that “Cyril” was familiar with a Jewish Christian gospel of the Gnosticizing type, its readers had long coexisted with gentile Christianity, and “Cyril” clearly envisaged some of them as gentile Christians themselves. The monk Annarichos is presented as a Christian subject to the bishops of Gaza and Jerusalem (which makes him a Melkite), who repents of his errors when he realizes that he was wrong. Annarichos does say, in two manuscripts, that he had been baptized in “the heresy of Ebion,” but it sounds like the mere elaboration of a story which probably was not literally true, but rather meant to illustrate where the heresy regarding Mary flourished. In his sermon on the passion, “Cyril” observed that “We do not say, as Anthony the shoemaker (or leatherworker) and Severus say . . . that the Theotokos is a spirit; rather, we believe she was born in the same way as other human beings.” Anthony the shoemaker/leatherworker and Severus also sound like gentiles, presumably Monophysites, though they could all have been Melkites. This was also true of the “bad people” who saw Mary as a heavenly power (according to Theodosius) and of the unidentified people from whom the author of Doctrina Iacobi had heard of Mary as a heavenly being and the wife of God. In fact, the doctrine of Mary’s heavenly origins was occasionally branded Eutychian or Julianist, but this does not seem to be right at all.

That the doctrine should be debited to Eutyches (d. c. 456) was the view of the late sixth/early seventh-century Occumenius, who wrote in Greek in (probably) Anatolia. He assured us that Mary was consubstantial with us: “the unholy doctrine of Eutyches, that the virgin is of a miraculously different substance from us, together with his other docetic doctrines, must be banished from the divine courts.” Eutyches was a Monophysite monk who seems not to have had any theological training, and who could not bring himself to accept two natures in Christ. He did not deny that two natures had gone into his making (though he did object to explaining the deity in terms of notions about “nature”); but he insisted that in the incarnate Word the two were fused, and he would not affirm that Christ’s body was consubstantial with ours: the body of God was not a human body, as he said. Accordingly, he was accused of saying that Christ had taken his flesh from heaven, which he himself characterized as an insane belief.

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211 Doctrina Iacobi, II, 42.
212 Ibid., II, 1.
213 This could conceivably have contributed to Qatāda’s idea of Melkite Israelites (above, 14).
That Christ (not Mary) had taken his flesh from heaven was an old view, however. It was associated, among others, with the Gnostic Valentinus (d. 160), and it had proven hard to eradicate. In the Apocalypse of Paul, a fourth-century work extant in several languages, Paul (or, in an Ethiopic version, Mary) visits heaven and hell, and sees a flaming pit in hell full of people who said “that Jesus has not come in the flesh and that he was not brought forth by Mary,” i.e., that he did not receive his body from her.218 Shenoute (d. 465) also knew of blasp emers who denied that Christ was conceived by Mary, and four centuries later Peter of Sicily (c. 870) informed the archbishop of Bulgaria that the Paulicians claimed that Christ had brought his body from heaven, denying that he was born of Mary.219 But this evidently was not what Eutyches himself believed.

That the doctrine was Julianist, on the other hand, is the view of the modern scholar Dirk Krausmüller, who simply treats it as self-evident that the “bad people” mentioned by Theodosius were “aphthartodoceticists.”220 Julian of Halicarnassos (d. after 527) was a Monophysite who held that Christ’s body was incorruptible (aphthartos) from the moment of its conception, not just from the resurrection, so that he could not sin, an uncontroversial point, and was not subject to pain or death, which seems to make the doctrine docetic. If Christ had not suffered and died, in what sense had he died for us? Had he merely seemed to do so? It was because the Julianists were taken to deny the reality of the incarnation that they were saddled with the cumbersome name of aphthartodoceticists.

What neither Oecumenius nor Krausmüller explains is how a doctrine regarding Christ’s body had come to be transferred to Mary, for neither Eutyches nor Julian nor their followers are on record as having professed that Mary’s body was incorruptible, let alone that she had come from heaven. On the contrary, Eutyches explicitly affirmed that the virgin’s body was consubstantial with ours.221 Denying that Christ was consubstantial with us in no way implies that Mary, too, was a heavenly being. On the contrary, if Christ had brought his body from heaven, Mary did not have to be seen as the mother of God, but rather an ordinary woman who had served as a mere conduit for the entrance of Christ into this world, a point which some Paulicians emphasized by accepting the idea that she had children after the birth of Christ.222 Bar Koni presented Eutyches as sometimes claiming that Christ entered Mary through her ear and came out through her side, thus stressing that she had served as a mere conduit for him, but this is actually unlikely: what Eutyches meant seems rather to have been that Christ had taken his human flesh from his mother, but that the union with the Word had so glorified his flesh that it differed from ours from the moment of the incarnation.223

Exaltation of Mary was a general feature of Byzantine Christianity in the sixth century, when both Chalcedonian and Monophysite Christians had come to accept that the although she was born and died in the same way as other human beings, her body was too pure to have suffered decay after death: when she died, her body was transferred to paradise and either reunited with her soul, or else left beneath the Tree of Life to await the resurrection.224 It could perhaps be postulated that the veneration of Mary had caused her to be envisaged as a pre-existing heavenly being by analogy with Christ himself at a popular level. But even if we accept this, it does not explain how she came to be seen as an angel or archangel in human guise, as she is in the doctrine refuted by “Cyril.” Angel Christology had disappeared from mainstream Christianity in its Melkite, Jacobite, and Nestorian

from heaven in his polemics against Eutyches (Landersdorfer, Ausgewählte Schriften, 144).

218 “The Apocalypse of Paul,” in Elliott, Apocryphal New Testament, 637 (par. 41), with an introduction to the work; in Budge, Miscellaneous Coptic Texts, 1066.


form alike by the time of “Cyril.” It was a feature of Jewish Christianity of the Elchasaite type, and as noted, Christ still appears as a “great angel” in the Ethiopian Liber Requiei. In short, the adherents of the heresy were formally mainstream Christians, or at least they lived among them; but “Cyril” was probably right that the heresy was of Jewish Christian origin.

[Ed.: Part Two of this essay, to appear in vol. 75 no. 1 of the Journal of Near Eastern Studies (April 2016), will take up the subjects of Jewish Christians contemporary to the life of the Messenger (no. 8); the view that Jesus was held to be a prophet, but not the son of God (no. 9); docetic crucifixion (no. 10); the virgin birth (no. 11); Mary as an Aaronid (no. 12); the prophetic chain (no. 13); the birth of Jesus under a palm tree (no. 14); and Jesus as the messiah and the Word (no. 15).]