«We Will Make Peace With You»: The Christians of Najrān in Muqātil's *Tafsīr*

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Resumen: Una de las versiones de la historia del encuentro entre Muḥammad y los cristianos de Najrān, según el comentario coránico de Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, contiene una serie de rasgos exclusivos. El centro de atención paulatinamente pasa desde la creencia cristiana de la divinidad de Jesús a la autoridad del profeta del islam.

Abstract: Here I deal with a version of the meeting between Muḥammad and the Christians from Najrān in the Qur'ānic commentary of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, containing a number of unique features. The focus slowly shifts from the Christian confession of the divinity of Jesus to the authority of the prophet of Islam.

Palabras Clave: Polémica. Autoridad. Reivindicación de la verdad. Diálogo interreligioso.

Key Words: Polemic. Authority. Truth claims. Interfaith dialogue.

The claims which people of faith make for the figures they revere are frequently full of fervency and deep conviction. Open disagreement about central truth claims often leads to strong feelings and lively debate. Recent experience shows the international consequences which can result from the failure of a single European publication to realistically assess the veneration which Muslims feel toward their prophet. But response to religious claims, whether to accept them or reject them, is both natural and appropriate. Disagreement need only lead to social conflict when faith is joined to physical force. There is nothing necessary—certainly not logical—

about that link, but human nature being what it is, it is all too frequently made.

Religious claim and response appear to make up a substantial portion of the contents of the first long *sūras* of the Qur'an. Certainly this is how the early Muslim exegetes understood them. They pictured major scriptural communities responding to Muslim truth claims. The two key questions in these polemical passages were whether Muḥammad was a true prophet of Allāh, and whether the recitations he was making were from Allāh. Conversely, these first long *sūras* also appear to contain responses to what Jews and Christians were claiming about their faith. The claims of these 'people of the book' often centre on the highly-revered figures of Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

A number of early Muslim works tell the story of an encounter between Muḥammad and a group of Christians from Najrān. Most versions connect the narrative with the material on 'Īsā in Āl Imrān (3).1-80. The story is famous in Muslim lore, the only such meeting in the traditional *sīra*, and from the Muslim side it represents for many a paradigm for Muslim-Christian encounter which echoes to the present day. From the Christian side, Jan Slomp suggested in the midst of an International Seerat Conference held in Pakistan in 1976, "This meeting with representatives from the Christian community in Najran was an event of major importance in the history of the universal church because of the vast consequences this meeting had for the relationships between Muslims and Christians in later centuries and even for the present Muslim-Christian dialogue..."[1]. This significance of the encounter for interfaith conversation will need to be tested in the investigation below.

Muslims traditionally date the meeting to 632-3 A.D. or 10 A.H.[2] According to Muslim sources, the delegation had made the journey north from Yemen to Madīna to make terms with the prophet of Islam when his military domination of the Arabian peninsula was established. Various versions of the story describe the meeting of Muḥammad with the Christians and, in some cases, include a fascinating discussion about Christology which ensues. The accounts also tell

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1 Jan SLOMP, "The Meeting of the Prophet Muhammad with Christians from Najran and the Present Muslim-Christian Dialogue," *Al-Mushir* XVIII (1976), p. 231-232.

2 W. SCHMUCKER, "Mubāhala," EI^2, VII, p. 276.

about an interesting way of resolving a disagreement about truth and authority.

One of the earliest extant versions of this story is found in the commentary on the Qur'ān written by Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. Muqātil was born in Balkh, lived in Marw, Baghdād and Baṣra, and died in 767 A.D./150 A.H. He is said to have taught in Mecca, Damascus and Beirut as well.[3] Muqātil's commentary on the Qur'ān has been described by scholars as one of the earliest Muslim exegetical works,[4] and as the oldest complete edited commentary in good condition.[5] The style of exegesis it typifies belongs to the most primitive form of commentary on the Qur'ān, suggests Kees Versteegh.[6] Yeshayahu Goldfeld praised Muqātil's Tafsīr as "probably the best organized and most consistent Islamic commentary."[7] However, Muqātil and his commentary seem to have lost favour among orthodox Muslim scholarship, on the evidence that he is infrequently cited in later works. A number of accusations are made against Muqātil by later scholars, among them writing about Allāh in anthropomorphic language; using too much material from the 'people of the book'; immodestly trying to specify what is vague and anonymous in scripture; and especially citing exegetical traditions without a proper *isnād*.[8] Muqātil's commentary has only become widely available to scholars in the last few decades. The *Tafsīr* was first edited between 1980 and 1987 by 'Abd Allāh Shiḥāta and published in four volumes in Cairo.[9]

In Muqātil's narrative, the Christians from Najrān ask the prophet of Islam to respond to the claims about Jesus which they have been making since before the rise of Islam. In the course of the story, the

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3 M. PLESSNER-[A. RIPPIN], "Muḳātil ibn Sulaymān," EI^2, VII, p. 508.

4 Yeshayahu GOLDFELD, "Muqātil ibn Sulaymān," *Bar-Ilan Arabic and Islamic Studies* 2 (1978), p. xiv.

5 Regula FORSTER, *Methoden mittelalterlicher arabischer Qur'ānexegese am Beispiel von Q 53, 1-18* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2001), p. 11.

6 Kees VERSTEEGH, "Grammar and Exegesis: The Origins of Kufan Grammar and the *Tafsīr Muqātil*," *Der Islam* 67 (1990), p. 210.

7 Y. GOLDFELD, "The Development of Theory on Qur'ānic Exegesis in Islamic Scholarship," *Studia Islamica* 67 (1988), p. 23.

8 Claude GILLIOT, "Muqātil, Grand Exégète, Traditionniste et Théologien Maudit," *Journal Asiatique* 279 (1991), pp. 50-68.

9 The edition used in this exploration is, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, edited by Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Tārīkh al-'Arabiyya, 2002), five volumes.

focus slowly shifts to the response of the Christians to the authority of Muḥammad. At the climax of the story, the test of truth is neither intellectual nor even spiritual, but rather physical. The methodology of this short exploration of Muqātil's version of the encounter of Muḥammad with the Christians of Najrān is that of literary analysis.

1. Najrān Christians signaled in Sūrat al-Baqara

Muqātil makes reference to the Christians of Najrān in his commentary before he arrives at the main story in Āl Imrān. In his exegesis of the second *sūra*, Baqara, Muqātil is far more interested in the responses made to Muḥammad by the Jews of Madīna than in any other community. But when the term "Christians" (*Naṣārā*) appears in scripture at 2.113, Muqātil accordingly identifies where these are from. Here, "the Jews say the Christians follow nothing, and the Christians say the Jews follow nothing." In this verse Muqātil finds the "readers of the book" to be "the Jews of Madīna and the Christians of Najrān.[10]

In many commentary passages which follow, these two groups act or speak in tandem. At 2.120, neither group is pleased with Muḥammad, but both rather call Muḥammad to their own religion.[11] Similarly at 2.135, Muqātil groups the Sayyid and the ʻĀqib together with Kaʻb ibn al-Ashraf and other Jews who frequently appear in the commentary.[12] These say to the Muslims, "Come to our religion. There is no religion except ours." Again at 2.139, the two groups join together to invite the Muslims to their religion, on the basis that "the prophets of Allāh were from us—from Banī Isrā'īl."[13] Finally, at 2.145 the Sayyid and the ʻĀqib join a group of Jews to challenge Muḥammad: "Bring us a sign we will recognize like the prophets used to do."[14] Muqātil's explanations of these verses raise the themes of the acknowledgement of Muḥammad's prophethood and the superiority of Islam. These are strong themes in the commentary and influence many other subjects which the exegete treats.

The first reference in the Qur'ān to the concept that Allāh has a son comes at Baqara (2).116. Here Muqātil forecasts the story he will tell

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10 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 132.
11 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 135.
12 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 141.
13 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 143.
14 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 147.

more fully in his exegesis of the third *sūra*. Who are the ones who say in the verse, "Allāh has taken to himself a son"? "This came down only (*innamā*) concerning the Christians of Najrān, the Sayyid and the ʻĀqib and whoever was with them from the delegation," Muqātil writes. "They approached the prophet, may Allāh bless them and grant them peace, in Madīna and said, ''Īsā is the son of Allāh.' So Allāh called them liars, praise him, and magnified himself, almighty, from what they said…."[15]

2. Muqātil's account of the meeting

Muqātil asserts at the very start of his commentary on Āl Imrān that Allāh sent down the first part of the *sūra* in response to a confession of the Christians of Najrān. The confession of the Christians was that "'Īsā is Allāh."[16] In order to refute (*takdhīban*) their saying, Allāh sent down the recitation of Sūrat Āl Imrān, writes Muqātil.

In the introduction to his commentary on the *sūra*, Muqātil writes that the subject of the *sūra* is the dispute (*munāzara*) of the delegation from Najrān, "up to about eighty verses from the first."[17] He also forecasts that coming in verse 61 will be news of the cursing ceremony (*mubāhala*) and the protest (*iḥtijāj*) against the Christians.[18]

Though the intervening passage contains a substantial amount of material on Zakariah, Maryam, ʻĪsā and his disciples (3.35-55), Muqātil does not mention the Christians of Najrān again until verse 59. There, after the scriptural words, "Truly, the likeness of ʻĪsā with Allāh," Muqātil writes, "This is about how a delegation of Christians came to the prophet…."[19] The setting is Madīna, and Muqātil specifies that "the Sayyid and the ʻĀqib" were part of the delegation.[20]

Muqātil's version of the encounter, whether it be seen as interfaith conversation, heated dispute, or threat of force, follows the main lines

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15 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 133.
16 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 262.
17 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 261.
18 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 261.
19 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 279. *Wa-dhālika an* is a characteristic introduction to a passage of narrative exegesis for Muqātil. John WANSBROUGH suggests that the phrase indicates the 'occasion' of revelation. *Quranic Studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 124.
20 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 279. Muqātil also names al-Asqaf, al-Raʼs, al-Ḥārith, Qays and his sons, Khālid, Khalīd, and ʻAmr in the delegation. *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280.

of the more familiar *sīra* accounts.[21] However, it contains some unique features as well. Notably, in Muqātil the discussion begins with a question from the Najrān delegation, "O Muḥammad, why do you abuse (*shatama*) and dishonor (*'āba*) our master (*ṣāḥib*)?"[22] The prophet of Islam answers, "What master of yours?" and the Christians say, "'Īsā son of Mary the virgin." The Christians pursue their request: "Show us a servant like him in what Allāh has created. He gives life to the dead and heals the blind and the leper and creates a bird from clay."[23] Muqātil comments at this point that the Christians did not say "by leave (*idhn*) of Allāh." This is the phrase which repeats in the Qur'ānic accounts of the miracles of 'Īsā at 3.49 and 5.110. The Christians continue, "While every human has a father, 'Īsā had no father. So agree with us that 'Īsā is the son (*ibn*) of Allāh and we will follow you."[24]

3. The Christology of the Christians from Najrān

Muqātil's description of the Christology of the Christians from Najrān is not entirely consistent. Already at 2.116 Muqātil begins to associate the Najrān Christians with a particular credal statement. According to Muqātil, the three main Christians groups in the Middle East at the time make three distinct confessions. He gives a confident summary and response at Mā'ida (5).15:

> [...] the *Nasṭūriyya* say, "'Īsā is the son of Allāh"; and the *Mār Ya'qūbiyya* say: "Allāh is the Messiah son of Maryam"; and the *'Ibādat al-Malik* say that Allāh, powerful and exalted, is the third of three—he is a god, 'Īsā is a god, and Maryam is a god, making Allāh weak (*fatara* IV), blessed and almighty. On the contrary, Allāh is one God, and 'Īsā is a servant of Allāh and his prophet, may Allāh bless him and grant him peace, as Allāh, praise him, described himself: "One, *ṣamad*, he does not give birth, he is not born, and no one is equal to him."[25]

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[21] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280. Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat al-Nabī*, ed. by Muḥammad Muḥī l-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat Muḥammad 'Alī Ṣabīh wa-Awlād, 1963), II, pp. 412-422. IBN SA'D, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), I, pp. 357-358.

[22] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280.

[23] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280.

[24] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280.

[25] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, pp. 462-463. Muqātil's citation is similar to, but not an exact quotation of, 112.1-4.

Elsewhere Muqātil identifies the Christians of Najrān as part of the *Mār Ya'qūbiyyīn*—the Jacobites or Monophysites.[26] According to the above scheme, therefore, he writes at 5.17, at the first Qur'ānic occurrence of the claim, "Allāh is the Messiah, son of Maryam," that this verse came down concerning the Christians of Najrān, among them the Sayyid and the 'Āqib.[27] This does not seem to match the exegete's first characterization of Najrān faith at 2.116, nor does it follow the point of the insistence in the exegesis of 3.59. But Muqātil repeats this identification once more at 5.72.[28]

At 5.76, according to Muqātil, the people who "serve, apart from Allāh, that which cannot hurt or profit" them, are the Christians of Najrān, who serve (*'abada*) 'Īsā.[29] Again the exegete repeats "their saying," that "Allāh is the Messiah son of Maryam," but here also they say, "the third of three."[30] In the same context, it is the Christians of Najrān for whom Allāh sends down the exhortation, "go not beyond the bounds in your religion, other than the truth…" (5.77).[31]

One other curious identification with the Christians of Najrān is the statement that 'Īsā was Allāh's "word that he committed to Mary, and a spirit from him" (4.171). Muqātil writes that these words descended concerning the Christians of Najrān, concerning the Sayyid and the 'Āqib and those who were with them.[32] In the end, Muqātil seems to identify the Najrān Christians with all three confessions in his neat typology.[33]

Muḥammad responds to the Najrān Christians' confession of 'Īsā as son of Allāh by saying, "Allāh forbid that he should have a son (*walad*) or that there be a god with him."[34] Two from the delegation,

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[26] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 463. Irfan SHAHÎD writes that through various Christian denominations existed side-by-side in Najrān, Monophysitism was the one that prevailed. "Nadjrān," EI^2, VII, p. 872.

[27] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 463.

[28] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 494. Muqātil also continues the identification of the confession of the trinity with the *Malkāniyyūn* or Byzantines at 5.73 (though not at 4.171 or 5.116). *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 495-496.

[29] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 495.

[30] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 495-6.

[31] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 496.

[32] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 424.

[33] Jan SLOMP comments in relation to the *Sīra* account (see below) that "The Najranites, thought they were monphysites, represented the universal Church." "The Meeting of the Prophet Muhammad with Christians from Najran," p. 231.

[34] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280.

evidently the Sayyid and the ʿĀqib, keep the conversation alive by asking the prophet, "Are you more praised (*aḥmad*)?" The prophet replies, "I am more praised, and I am praised (*muḥammad*)." The two then ask, "In what [are you] more praised?" The prophet replies, "more praised by the people concerning *shirk*."[35]

The two then say, "We will ask you about (some) things." The prophet responds, "I will not tell you until you submit (*salima* II), then follow (*tabiʿa*) me."[36] The two protest, "We submitted prior to you," but the prophet denies their claim. "You two are not submitting," he says. "Three things hold you back from *islām*: your eating of pork, your drinking of wine, and your saying that Allāh, powerful and exalted, is a son (*walad*)."[37]

Muqātil recounts that, hearing this statement, the Sayyid and the ʿĀqib become angry. They ask the prophet, seemingly with mounting exasperation, "Who is the father of ʿĪsā? Bring us a likeness (*mithl*) to him."[38] At exactly this point, according to Muqātil, Allāh sends down this verse (3.59), "The likeness of ʿĪsā with Allāh is as Adam's likeness; he created him of dust, then said to him, 'Be!' and he was."

In Muqātil's narrative, the recitation of this verse should satisfy the Christians. The subsequent verse (3:60) challenges them not to doubt the truth of Allāh concerning the likeness of ʿĪsā, according to Muqātil. However, the Christians do not agree. They say to the prophet, "It is not as you say. He does not have this likeness."[39] Again, writes Muqātil, at this point Allāh sends down the following verse (3.61) about mutual cursing: "Whoever disputes with you concerning him, after the knowledge that has come to you, say: 'come now, let us call our sons and your sons, our wives and your wives, our selves and your selves, then let us humbly pray (*nabtahil*)[40] and so lay Allāh's curse upon the ones who lie.'"

Muqātil glosses the phrases of this verse in his characteristic way. To dispute (*ḥājja*) means to argue (*khāṣama*). The argument concerns ʿĪsā. The knowledge which has come is the declaration of the matter of

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[35] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280. In the context, these two terms seem to be adjectives rather than proper names, *aḥmad* meaning more commendable, praised, and *muḥammad* meaning praised.

[36] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 280.

[37] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 281.

[38] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 281.

[39] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 281.

[40] Arthur ARBERRY's translation. *Bahala* VIII means "to supplicate, pray humbly; to implore, beseech."

ʻĪsā as given in the preceding verses. Muqātil glosses *bahala* VIII as to dedicate (*khalaṣa* IV) prayer to Allāh.[41] The word *mubāhala*, passive participle of *bahala* III, became the technical term for a trial of mutual cursing.[42]

4. Muqātil's portrayal of the mubāhala

Muqātil does not tell the story of the mutual cursing at 61, but rather waits until after verse 64. On the intervening verses, Muqātil writes that Allāh has revealed "the true story" (*al-qaṣṣaṣ al-ḥaqq*) about ʻĪsā. Allāh commands Muḥammad to appeal to the Christians to not associate anything with Allah which has been created, and not to take ʻĪsā as a Lord (*rabb*). If the Christians then "turn" (3.64), writes Muqātil, it means that they are rejecting (*abā*) *tawḥīd*.[43]

At this point, then, the ʻĀqib gives his response to the challenge, evidently speaking to his fellow Christians out of earshot of the prophet of Islam.[44] "We will not produce anything through his trial of cursing (*mulāʻana*)," he reasons. "By Allāh, if [Muḥammad] is lying, cursing him won't do any good. If he is truthful, then Allāh will destroy the liars by the end of the year."[45] As a group, therefore they give their answer to the prophet: "O Muḥammad, we will make peace (*ṣalaḥa* III) [46] with you lest you (sing.) attack (*ghazā*) us and frighten us and dissuade us from our religion."[47] The Christians make terms with the prophet of Islam by offering to pay him a thousand suits of clothes in the month of Ṣafar and a thousand suits in Rajab, plus 30 iron coats of mail.[48] In response the prophet accepts these terms and settles with the Christians.

Muqātil's narrative seems to swerve at this point to answer the question of the identity of "our sons and your sons, our wives and your wives, our selves and your selves" in 3.61. According to Muqātil, it is ʻUmar who sets up the question. "If you would have cursed them,"

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41 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 281.
42 W. SCHMUCKER gives the meaning of *mubāhala* as "mutual imprecation, curse," with *mulāʻana* as a synonym. "Mubāhala," p. 276.
43 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 281.
44 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, pp. 281-282.
45 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, pp. 281-282.
46 W. SCHMUCKER describes this as "an indissoluble treaty of protection." "Mubāhala," p. 276.
47 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 282.
48 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 282.

asks ‘Umar, “whose hand would you have taken?” The prophet of Islam answers, “I would have taken the hand of ‘Alī and Fāṭima and Ḥassan and Ḥusayn, upon whom be peace, and Ḥafṣah and ‘Ā’ishah, Allāh be merciful to them.”[49]

5. Muqātil’s account in context

Muqātil begins his account of the meeting of Muḥammad with the Christians of Najrān with a question to the prophet of Islam about his response to ‘Īsā. But as the story progresses, the focus shifts to the authority of the prophet of Islam to recite the word of Allāh on the identity of ‘Īsā. The question then becomes the response of the Christians to the authority of Muḥammad. This claim of the authority of Muḥammad and the responses of the scriptural communities to that claim is the overwhelming theme of the first part of Muqātil’s commentary. As mentioned earlier, the main non-Muslim community which the second *sūra* brings to mind for Muqātil is the Jews of Madīna. Even in 3.1-80, which Muqātil has forecast as sent down concerning the Christians of Najrān, it is mainly the Jews whom the exegete pictures.[50] From verse 4 on, it is the Jews who disbelieve in the *qur’ān*, behave treacherously with the Muslims, discourage converts, dispute with Muḥammad, lie to him, disobey him and, indeed, falsify the description of Muḥammad in the Torah. This then is the context into which Muqātil sets the Najrān story. It leaves no wonder that the Najrān story should be about the authority of Muḥammad rather than about the divinity of ‘Īsā. Though the concern of the Najrān Christians is originally that Muḥammad is dishonoring their master, the concern of much of the exegesis of 3.1-80 is the dishonoring of the prophet of Islam.

6. Comparison to other early accounts

Other accounts of the delegation of Christians from Najrān found in early works of *sīra* and *tafsīr* help highlight the details of Muqātil’s narrative. Ibn Sa‘d’s (d. 845) account of the deputation of Najrān comes near the end of a long series of accounts of deputations to

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[49] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 282. About the Shi‘ite elements in the tradition cited by Muqātil, see R. STROTHMANN, “Die Mubāhala in Tradition und Liturgie,” *Der Islam* 33 (1957), pp. 8-27.

[50] *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, pp. 262-287.

Madīna from the Arabs and from the people of Yemen.[51] He specifies that there are 14 nobles in the deputation. Ibn Sa‘d gives another name for the ‘Āqib, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ. He also explains the roles of the three leaders among the nobles: al-‘Āqib is the political leader, Abū al-Ḥārith is the bishop and scholar, and al-Sayyid "was in charge of their journey." As they enter Madīna, the brother of Abū al-Ḥārith, named Kurz, recites a poem in which he says the religion of Muslims in opposed to the religion of Christians.[52]

When the Christians meet Muḥammad in Ibn Sa‘d's account, Muḥammad immediately invites them to embrace Islam. Ibn Sa‘d writes that they decline the invitation, and a long discourse (*kalām*) and argumentation (*ḥajāj*) ensues. No details of the Christological discussion referred to by Muqātil are given in the *Ṭabaqāt*. Ibn Sa‘d merely says that the prophet of Islam recited the *qur'ān* to them.[53] Then the apostle gave then the ultimatum, here in his own words, "If you refuse to acknowledge (*nakira* IV) what I say to you, then come on! Let's curse one another!"[54]

Upon hearing this challenge to the mubāhala, the Najrān Christians retire to consider. Ibn Sa‘d does not give information about the nighttime deliberations among the Christians. But the next morning, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ and two other wise men of the delegation approach Muḥammad to give their response. "We think it proper not to curse (*bahala* III) you (sing.)," the Christians tell the prophet. "You may order us as you like and we shall obey you and shall make peace with you."[55]

Ibn Sa‘d gives a thorough description of the terms on which the prophet makes peace with the Christians. He also adds two interesting details to his account. Ibn Sa‘d writes that after the Sayyid and the ‘Āqib traveled back to Najrān with their delegation, these two then returned to the prophet and embraced Islam.[56] Ibn Sa‘d also writes that the caliph ‘Umar later expelled the Christians from the Arabian

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[51] IBN SA‘D, *Ṭabaqāt*, I, pp. 357-358. English translation by S. Moinul HAQ and H.K. GHAZANFAR, *Ibn Sa‘d's Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1967), I, pp. 418-420.
[52] *Tabaqāt*, I, p. 357.
[53] *Tabaqāt*, I, p. 357.
[54] *Tabaqāt*, I, p. 357.
[55] *Tabaqāt*, I, pp. 357-358.
[56] *Tabaqāt*, I, p. 358.

peninsula to Syria. The reason they needed to be expelled, according to Ibn Sa'd, is that they started receiving usury.[57]

The account of the meeting given in the *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767) is a substantial continuous narrative with many verses from Sūrat Āl 'Imrān incorporated into the text.[58] He gives many more details of the arrival of the Najrān Christians in Madīna and the make-up of the delegation. In this account the 14 nobles are among a total deputation of 60 riders.

Instead of beginning with a question to Muḥammad about his abuse of Jesus, as in Muqātil, the *Sīra* account opens with a statement of the Christology of the Najrān Christians. Ibn Isḥāq says these Christians are Byzantines (*dīn al-malik*). They say "he is Allāh," and "he is the son (*walad*) of Allāh," and "he is the third of three."[59] Ibn Isḥāq gives the arguments of the Christians for these three statements, which are all Qur'ānic Christian arguments. For example, their argument for the Trinity is that Allāh uses the pronoun "we" about himself when he describes his actions in the Qur'ān.[60]

The prophet of Islam commands the Christians to submit. Here the actions which hold them back from submission are their assertion that Allāh has a son, their worship of the cross, and their eating pork.[61] At this point Allāh sends down the first 80 verses of Sūrat Āl Imrān. The long passage which follows is exegetical, weaving fragments of scripture together with gloss, paraphrase and explanation.[62] In this sense, Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra* is not very different from Muqātil's *Tafsīr*. One might say that while Muqātil intersperses narrative into the continuous text of scripture, Ibn Isḥāq intersperses the text of scripture into a continuous narrative.[63] One interesting part of this long exegetical

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57 *Tabaqāt*, I, p. 358.

58 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, pp. 412-422. English translation by Alfred GUILLAUME, *The Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 270-277.

59 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 414.

60 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 414. For these Christians the Trinity is Allāh and 'Īsā and Maryam. In his description of the case which the Najrān Christians make, John WANSBROUGH remarks that the level of discourse is "a reflex not of the current state of trinitarian doctrine, but rather, or the register of that expression in the Arabic language." *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and composition of salvation history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 104.

61 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 414.

62 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, pp. 415-421.

63 This observation seems to confirm what John WANSBROUGH wrote about the structural similarity between the works of Muqātil and Ibn Isḥāq. He suggested that

passage is its approach to the death of ʻĪsā. Early on Ibn Isḥāq uses the Christian confession of the death of ʻĪsā to argue that ʻĪsā could not therefore be Allāh, "the alive, the eternal" (3.2).[64] Later, however, Ibn Isḥāq claims that the enigmatic 3.55 refutes what the Christians assert about the Jews in regard to ʻĪsā's crucifixion.[65] As in Muqātil, Ibn Isḥāq tells the story of the challenge of mutual cursing after his quotation of 3.64.

Ibn Isḥāq's explanation of the mubāhala includes details of a consultation which members of the delegation conduct with the ʻĀqib before giving their answer to Muḥammad. The ʻĀqib says, "O Christians, you already know (*ʻarafa*) that Muḥammad is indeed a prophet sent, and that he has brought a decisive declaration (*faṣl*) about the matter of your master."[66] Because of his certainty of Muḥammad's prophet- hood, the ʻĀqib reasons that to curse a prophet would surely bring their extermination. He advises them that if they want to follow their religion and keep their doctrine about Jesus, they should say good-bye to Muḥammad and return to Najrān.[67]

The Christians approach the prophet of Islam and say, "We see that it is best not to curse you, that we rather leave you to your religion and return to our religion."[68] However, the Christians ask Muḥammad to send along with them an arbitrator from among his companions.

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the *narratio* was paramount for both writers, and that they considered even the scriptural text subordinate. Wansbrough concluded, "if the terms *sīra* and *tafsīr* later became designations of distinct literary genres, their basic identity for the earlier period may, I think, be conceded." *Quranic Studies*, p. 127.

64 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 415.

65 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 420. In 3.55 Allāh says, "O Jesus I am about to cause you to die (*mutawaffīka*) and to exalt you to myself and to purify you from those who disbelieve." (Alfred GUILLAUME's translation, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 276) Muqātil does not bring the death of ʻĪsā into the confession of the Najrān Christians, but he offers an interesting explanation of 3.54 which includes a version of the theory that another person (here a *raqīb*) was made to look like ʻĪsā and was crucified instead. *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, p. 278.

66 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 422. Earlier in the *Sīra* account is another claim that the Christians of Najrān know all along that Muḥammad is a true prophet. On the way to Madīna Abū Ḥāritha's brother, here called Kūz, curses the prophet of Islam. Abū Ḥāritha rebukes him and says, "he is the prophet we have been waiting for." Abū Ḥāritha confesses that he doesn't accept Muḥammad because of all the benefits which the Christian kings of Byzantium have been heaping upon him. *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, pp. 412-413.

67 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 422.

68 *Sīrat al-Nabī*, II, p. 422.

7. Discussion of Muqātil's narrative

The various versions of the visit of the Najrān delegation show that the story existed in several forms in the second century of Islam, or perhaps that the story was still in the process of formation. Schmucker suggests that the story is "still fragmentary" in the "very original" accounts of Ibn Isḥāq and Ibn Sa'd but "soon became subject to enlargement and transformation as regards form and content."[69] Schmucker further explains that in subsequent versions, an elaborate plot unfolds when the Christians from Najrān initially accept the mubāhala challenge.

Reflection on the unique features of Muqātil's account of the story draws attention to a number of important matters. The first is the characterization of the Christological conversation. The second is the response of the Christians to Muḥammad's challenge to curse. As noted above, Muqātil's portrayal of the Najrān Christians' Christology is not consistent and seems to amount to a stereotypical formula rather than a result of a living conversation with Christians. Jan Slomp writes that the reports of the conversation in Ibn Isḥāq "hardly present the Christian point of view."[70] Another way of describing these Christian confessions is that they are not authentic Christian expressions, but rather are the expressions of Qur'ānic Christians.

Muqātil's and Ibn Sa'd's accounts do not mention that the Christians of Najrān declined the mubāhala because they knew that Muḥammad was a true prophet.[71] Ibn Sa'd says nothing at all. Muqātil portrays the 'Āqib as reasoning that nothing good could come from accepting the challenge, apparently for practical reasons.[72] The 'Āqib

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69 W. SCHMUCKER, "Mubāhala," p. 276.

70 J. SLOMP, "The Meeting of the Prophet Muhammad with Christians from Najran," p. 231.

71 W. SCHMUCKER suggests that "enlargement and transformation" of the account began already during the lifetime of Ibn Hishām. "Mubāhala," p. 276. This may account for the presence of the 'Āqib's certainty about the prophethood of Muḥammad. This element of the story appears again in Ṭabarī's explanation of 3.61, in a tradition attributed to Muḥammad ibn Ja'far ibn al-Zubayr. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. by Maḥmūd Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969), VI, pp. 479-480.

72 J. SLOMP remarks that Ibn Sa'd presents the 'Āqib, or political leader, rather than the bishop as chief advisor in the matter. He queries whether the 'Āqib spoke as a

considers the possibility that Muḥammad may be truthful. But he sees that accepting the challenge, whatever the result, would be a reckless provocation—really a statement that they did not consider Muḥammad to be a true prophet.

Among the various versions, are a number of possibilities why the Christians may have rejected the mubāhala challenge. At one extreme is the possibility that they did not want to participate in a cursing ceremony. At the other extreme is the *Sīra*'s claim that the Christians knew of the prophethood of Muḥammad and therefore feared that mutual cursing would mean their destruction.

Jan Slomp, in considering this question, indicates the biblical precedent of the encounter between Elijah and the priests of Ba'al in 1 Kings 18.[73] But as Christians, the Najrān delegation would have had other resources at their disposal. In their Gospel, they possessed Jesus' command to his disciples to bless those who curse them (Luke 6:28). Once when the people of a Samaritan village did not welcome Jesus because he was traveling to Jerusalem, the disciples asked Jesus whether he wanted them to call fire down from heaven to destroy the village. But this was completely out of keeping with Jesus' mission. He rebuked the disciples instead (Luke 9:51-56). Is there any reason why Monophysites in the 7th century would not have thought of the words and *sunna* of Jesus?

The context for this episode in Muslim "salvation history" is that Muḥammad and his followers are consolidating their control over the Arabian peninsula. In Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqāt*, the story comes at the end of a long series of accounts of "delegations," in which many tribes come to make terms with Muḥammad. According to Muqātil, the Christians of Najrān are realistic about the possibility of being attacked and terrorized by Muḥammad and dissuaded from their religion. At the time of their meeting in Madīna, they are a group of 14 (according to Ibn Sa'd) in the midst of a Muslim army of growing strength. The remarkable feature of this story is that the Christians would have the temerity to dispute Christology with Muḥammad, and to confront Islam's prophet with a question about his dishonoring of Jesus.

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diplomat or a theologian. "The Meeting of the Prophet Muhammad with Christians from Najran," pp. 231-232.

[73] J. SLOMP, "The Meeting of the Prophet Muhammad...," p. 232.

This menace of force also comes out in a tradition cited by Ṭabarī on the authority of ʻĀmir al-Shaʼbī.[74] Here the Christians of Najrān initially accept the mubāhala challenge. But when they seek the advice of a wise man from their deputation, he rebukes them: "What have you done? If Muḥammad is a prophet, and he invokes Allāh against you, Allāh would never anger him by not answering his prayers. If, on the other hand, he is a king, and he were to prevail over you, he would never spare you."[75] As in Muqātil, here is the practical voice in the midst of the heated dispute. The possibility that Muḥammad may be a prophet of Allāh is conceded. However, he also may simply be an earthly ruler. Should the Christians curse him, and should he subsequently prevail upon them in physical combat, he would not hestitate to exact revenge.[76]

Of course, the *Sīra* portrays the Christians as knowing the prophethood of Muḥammad all along. It is typical for Ibn Isḥāq, as well as Muqātil, to find Jews and Christians aware of the prophethood of Muḥammad from the Torah and Gospel but refusing to acknowledge and act upon it. Subsequent *tafsīr* accounts definitely highlight this aspect of the story.[77] Sharif al-Hasan drew attention to the fact that in Ibn Saʻd's account, the Sayyid and the ʻĀqib later returned to Madīna to embrace Islam. "Their predilection for Islam seems to be the main reason for their refusal to have a mubāhala," he suggested.[78]

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[74] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmiʻ al-Bayān*, VI, pp. 478-479.

[75] AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmiʻ al-Bayān*, VI, p. 478.

[76] Another example of practical reasoning based upon ambivalence about Muḥammad comes in Muqātil's commentary on 5.41, the famous stoning verse story. The Jews of Khaybar send an adulterous couple to the prophet for a ruling. These conspiring Jews reason that if Muḥammad prescribes flogging, this would show he was a mere ruler and the Jews should accept it. But if Muḥammad prescribes stoning, this would show that he is a prophet, therefore "beware of him, because he will steal what you possess." *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, pp. 475, 478.

[77] W. SCHMUCKER, "Mubāhala," p. 276. Mahmoud AYOUB presents translations of a wide variety of exegetical traditions on the mubāhala, from Wāḥidī to Sayyid Quṭb, in *The Qur'an and its Interpreters*, Vol. II, The House of ʻImrān (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 183-202.

[78] Sharif AL-HASAN, "Fresh Look at Ancient Christians of Najrān and Present Religious Dialogues," *Islamic Studies* 16 (1977), p. 372.

8. Religious claims and response

Muqātil's account of the meeting between Muḥammad and the Christians of Najrān contains some fascinating features. It is unique in starting out the conversation with a call to Muḥammad to account for his personal response to Christian claims about Jesus. The Christians from Najrān ask the prophet of Islam: "Why do you abuse and dishonour our master?" In Muqātil's commentary, the Christians of Najrān confess the equality of the Messiah with Allāh on the one hand, and the divine sonship of ʻĪsā on the other. Though Muqātil's description of Najrān follows Qur'ānic categories rather than the New Testament, the Christians are bearing witness to what they have learned from a scripture which they believe to be the Word of God. In any case, they hold ʻĪsā to be divine. In their terms, the Muslim estimate of ʻĪsā—including in the "recitation" of Āl Imrān 35-59—is a drastic diminution of the true identity of Jesus. In their terms someone who is divine is being called merely human, which is blasphemy. When Muḥammad tells them that they have not "submitted" because they say that ʻĪsā is divine, they become angry. In modern parlance, the prophet of Islam has offended their beliefs. Perhaps this helps explain the temerity of the Christians of Najrān in Muqātil's story. In a second unique feature of Muqātil's version, the Christians press their argument about the nature of ʻĪsā even after the recitation of 3.59 ("Truly, the likeness of ʻĪsā with Allāh is as Adam's likeness"). Though the story has them surrounded by a strengthening Muslim military force, and far away from home in Madīna, the Najrān Christians retort, "he is not as you say. This is not his likeness."

In the course of the story, however, the focus shifts slowly from the Muslim response to Christian claims about Jesus to the Christian response to the authority of Muhammad. Muḥammad calls the Christians to submit. The submission (*islām*) required is clearly not the generic 'submission to God' which the Christians have already made. Rather, the prophet of Islam demands that they accept the code of faith and conduct which he has established in Madīna. According to Muqātil, after setting the Christians straight on the identity of ʻĪsā, he recites, "this is the true story." Whether the words of Allāh or the claim of Islam, this recitation amounts to an ultimatum about the authority of Muḥammad in Muqātil's story. The interfaith conversation, such as it was, is now finished. If the Christians still don't agree, let them proceed with the mutual invocation of curses.

The authority of the prophet of Islam, within the context of the larger *sīra* structure, is both spiritual and temporal. Muqātil is clear that the command to call for the mubāhala comes from Allāh. However, the discussion of the possible consequences (in Muqatil and other early versions of the story), had the Christians chosen to agree to mutual cursing, seems more ambiguous. Would the certain destruction of the Christians have been the result of divine punishment or would it be the physical power of a dominating warrior? This, of course, is the third unique feature of Muqātil's version. The Najrān Christians settle for terms "lest you [Muḥammad] attack us and frighten us and dissuade us from our religion."

Seen in this way, the meeting between Muḥammad and the delegation of Christians from Najrān may have had important consequences for the relationships between Muslims and Christians in later centuries, as Slomp suggests. But the meeting is not a happy one. It is indeed a theological encounter. However, the menace of force is hovering constantly overhead. These are not the best conditions for interfaith dialogue.