PENN, Michael Philip
When Christians First Met Muslims
A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam

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and

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Envisioning Islam. Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World
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Muslim scholars have long recognized the Qur'ān's engagement with Syriac(1), the Aramaic dialect of Edessa that, especially between the 4th and 9th centuries CE, was a flourishing literary and liturgical language in Syria and Mesopotamia(2). Interest in Syriac among Islamicists has, however, tended towards finding linguistic and conceptual links between Syriac and qur'ānic Arabic, often with a tendency towards a revisionist reading of Islamic history(3). At the turn of this century, this interest received a boost with the pseudonymous Christoph Luxenberg's *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*. Pp. ix+ 311 (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000). Despite strong scholarly criticism of his methodology(4), aspects of his work (e.g. the suggestion that the enigmatic heavenly houris mentioned in the Qur'ān are grapes instead of virgins) have been featured in well-regarded news outlets such as *The New York Times*(5).

These two recent works by Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (hereafter *Sourcebook*) and *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (hereafter *Envisioning Islam*), are a refreshing contrast to the use of Syriac for sometimes-sensationalist revisionist readings of the Qur'ān and Islamic history. Although various Semiticists, Arabists and Islamicists have studied possible connections between Syriac and the Qur'ān, Penn is the first to produce a comprehensive study of the earliest Syriac allusions to what later generations would come to call "Islam" and "Muslims". The vocabulary and imagery early Syriac texts employ to describe both the actors and the events in what Islamic literature would term the *futuḥāt* ("openings") – the Arab, Muslim conquests – is a valuable addition to traditional Muslim and Orientalist discussions of the early Islamic period. For example, that Timothy I (r. 780-823), an East Syrian catholicos, was "one of only two first-millenium Syriac writers who occasionally termed Muslims '*mashlmane*'" (*Envisioning Islam*, 79) is potentially important for our understanding both of the nature of early Syriac Christian perceptions of Islam, as well as of the very nature of early Islam itself. Penn's discussion of the different Syriac terms employed by the various sources (e.g. *Envisioning Islam*, 56-59; *Sourcebook*, 19) is particularly useful for those interested in the nuances of community (*umma*), polity (*dār*) and religion (*dīn*) in the earliest centuries of Islam.

The *Sourcebook* and *Envisioning Islam* are also a welcome addition to the corpus of Syriac studies that has tended to focus on topics related to individual Christians or communities(6) who wrote in Syriac, especially before the rise of Islam(7). In ecclesiastical studies, important scholarly attention has focused on the early (e.g. pre-Islamic) Syriac church, with studies on topics such as the *Doctrina Addai*(8), the hymns and person of Mar Ephraim(9), the role of women in

(1) See, e.g., Rippin, Andrew. "Syriac in the Qur'ān, Classical Muslim Theories." p. 249-261 of *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*. Ed. G. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008).
(2) For further discussion and resources on Syriac, see http://www.bethmardutho.org/index.php/about-us/about-syriac.html.
(3) For a recent survey of these trends, see Elbadawi, Emran. "The Impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur'ān." *Religion Compass* 8.7 (2014): 220-228.
4 Such as that of François De Blois in the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5/1 (2003): 92-97.
(5) See, e.g. http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/02/arts/scholars-are-quietly-offering-new-theories-of-the-koran.html and http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/04/opinion/martyrs-virgins-and-grapes.html .
(6) Examples of projects that have focused on a single community include ter Haar Romeny, Bas, et al. "The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project." *Church History and Religious Culture* 89.1 (2009): 1-52 or Andrew Palmer's *The seventh century in the West-Syrian chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993).
(7) For an overview of literature on early Syriac Christianity, see Drijvers, Han JW. "Early Syriac Christianity: Some Recent Publications." *Vigiliae christianae* (1996): 159-177.
(8) Griffith, Sidney H. "The Doctrina Addai as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Edessa in the Fifth Century." *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 6 (2003): 269-292.
(9) As in Griffith, Sidney H. "Images of Ephraem: The Syrian Holy Man and His Church." *Traditio* 45 (1990): 7-33.

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the early Syriac-speaking church(10), as well as speculations about the nature and extent of its asceticism(11). Scholarship has also focused on the divisions within the Syriac churches that can be traced, in part, to the Christological controversies that came to a head in the fifth century, with the Council of Chalcedon (451). Due in part to these ecclesiastical divisions, the disparate histories of the various churches have resulted in scholarship that often focuses on one or another branch of Syriac Christianity(12).

Certainly, scholars prior to Penn have studied Syriac texts that come from the early and later Islamic periods, producing editions and translations, articles and monographs on a wide range of subjects, a number of which Penn cites. But, while Penn notes his indebtedness to scholars such as Andrew Palmer, Sidney Griffith, Barbara Roggema and Gerrit Reinink, *Envisioning Islam* and the *Sourcebook* are the first works to synthesize, provide translations of and to critically analyze many of the earliest Syriac references to Islam, from both Chalcedonian and a range of non-Chalcedonian perspectives. As such, he has furnished scholars of Islam with an impressively comprehensive resource that is also generally accessible for undergraduates, graduate students and scholars with little or no familiarity with Syriac.

The *Sourcebook* (published by the University of California Press) provides concise descriptions of the contents, compositional context and manuscript tradition for "almost every known Syriac text on Islam written prior to the Abbasid revolution of 750" (*Sourcebook*, p. 5). He has selected 28 of the earliest Syriac texts to allude to what later generations would term "Islam" or "Muslims", complementing general overviews of early interactions between Muslims and others such as Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997) and the comprehensive *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, edited by D. Thomas and B. Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009). As such, it is an extremely useful tool for students and scholars of early Islamic history – but the rationale for the selection (as well as an indication of the texts that were not included) would also have been of interest to specialists. Similarly, more precise descriptions of the length of the texts (e.g. how many folios each comprises), would give a clearer sense of the relative importance of the excerpted passages. But the incomplete nature of many of the manuscripts may have argued against the utility of such descriptions. Although the texts are arranged in rough chronological order, an indication of the pagination of each bibliography's corresponding text (*Sourcebook*, 218-234) would assist those not yet familiar with the chronology of the 28 texts. Finally, for all but two of the 28 texts, Penn provides his own translation of the passages. Although (as with the texts for which he does provide translations) he gives a clear description of the two untranslated texts, the decision not to include their translations in the *Sourcebook* is a bit regrettable for, as Penn noted in his introduction (*Sourcebook*, 5), it would have been "convenient to have all these translations and an up-to-date bibliography in one place." Although he alludes to the imminent publication of the translation of both "Life of Theoduṭē" and "Disputation of Bēt Ḥalē", only the latter, in fact, now available (Taylor, David G.K., ''The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē: Syriac Text and Annotated English Translation", Pages 187-242 in *Christsein in der islamischen Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag*. Edited by Griffith, Sidney Harrison and Grebenstein, Sven. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015).

With the *Sourcebook*, Penn has furnished us with translations of various chronicles and canons, some of which are very fragmentary, such as the "Account ad 637" (*Sourcebook*, 21-24), which Penn uses to highlight the complications of working with early manuscripts. But the *Sourcebook* is also replete with vivid imagery that is likely to far exceed the expectations of first-time readers of Syriac texts. Specialists and non-specialists alike, seasoned scholars as well as undergraduate students, will be gripped by Penn's able rendering of vivid apocalyptic imagery:

"*The wretched state of children was a dreadful sight. For the color of their faces was [so] altered that a father would not recognize his children. Like sheep they grazed on grass, hugged stones, and slept. In the morning they were found dried out like a piece of wood. Many mothers made food of their children. Sometimes in the evening she would be sleeping with her children. In the morning, their lives were found to have been silenced.*" (from the late 7th century "Book of Main Points" by the East Syrian John bar Penkaye, *Sourcebook*, 104).

Equally engaging are the letters, such as those from another late 7th century source, Jacob of Edessa,

(10) See, for example, Harvey, Susan Ashbrook, and Sebastian P. Brock. *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient (The Transformation of the classical heritage; 13)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

(11) E.g. Murray, Robert. "The exhortation to candidates for ascetical vows at baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church." *New Testament Studies* 21.1 (1974): 59-80.

(12) E.g. Reinink, Gerrit J. "Tradition and the Formation of the 'Nestorian' Identity in Sixth-to Seventh-Century Iraq." *Religious Origins of Nations?*. Brill, 2009. 217-250 or ter Haar Romeny, Bas, et al. "The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project." *Church History and Religious Culture* 89.1 (2009): 1-52.

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a Miaphysite who also served as the bishop of Edessa. His correspondence addresses a range of topics, from the conscription of priests and deacons to fight for the Arab/Muslim armies, to questions of inter-marriage, to purity questions after Christian altars have been used as dining tables (*Sourcebook*, 160-174).

Finally, one of the most valuable aspects of the *Sourcebook* is the introduction that Penn provides for each text, containing a brief summary of the contents and an overview of the textual history (manuscript/edition, as well as author/composition). These introductions are particularly valuable, given the variety of genres and confessions, times and places that the texts represent. They also give scholars, teachers and students a rich resource for the classroom, as well as a starting point for independent research projects. For, thanks to Penn's careful introductions contextualizing each source, even the more fantastical or polemical become comprehensible for the non-specialist. For example, following his suggestion in his introduction to the "Syriac Life of Maximus the Confessor", Penn's masterful rendition of this Maronite "history of the wicked Maximus of Palestine, who blasphemed against his creator and whose tongue was torn out" (*Sourcebook*, 62-68) could easily be assigned to undergraduate students in history courses as an exercise in reading polemical texts for details of political and even military history.

Based in part on the 28 sources presented in the *Sourcebook*, the four chapters of *Envisioning Islam* (published by the University of Pennsylvania Press) walk the reader through Penn's suggestions of various ways in which both contemporaneous and later Syriac Christians used the events of the seventh century to make sense of their own situations. He argues that each generation would reinterpret the Arab/Muslim conquest in the light of its own circumstances. As with the *Sourcebook*, he provides careful and clear guidance so that those not versed in the Syriac language, or the various genres of Syriac literature, might successfully navigate the complex, rich and varied sources he has mined to formulate his arguments. Using discussions of the conquests (Chapter 1: "When Good Things Happened to Other People: Syriac Memories of the Islamic Conquests"), conceptualizations of Islam (Chapter 2: "A Different Type of Difference-Making: Syriac Narratives of Religious Identity"), representations of Muslim rulers (Chapter 3: "Using Muslims to Think With: Narratives of Islamic Rulers"), and anecdotes of life under Islam (Chapter 4: "Blurring Boundaries: The Continuum Between Early Christianity and Islam"), Penn persuades his reader that early encounters between Muslims and Christians were anything but uniform. His writing is lively and engaging, making the work accessible for non-specialists. But specialists will also value his insights into the nature of early Christian-Muslim relations, some of which can also be found in his previously-published articles.

As Penn has organized his narrative in *Envisioning Islam* along thematic, rather than source - or time- or geography-based lines, a cover-to-cover reading finds a number of repetitions, since the same text is explored in separate chapters for different themes (e.g. the allusions to the consequences of a theological debate before the caliph Mu'awiyya in the *Maronite Chronicle* on both p. 62 and p. 134, or the Bahira legend on pp. 87-89 and 111-112). But, this approach also makes it possible to assign a single chapter as a supplementary reading for a class on Islamic Origins or Christian-Muslim relations. The assessments of the texts are sometimes uneven, which is perhaps inevitable, given the sheer number of texts surveyed in *Envisioning Islam* and the various stages of editing in which they can be found. Why, for example, does Penn accept another scholar's understanding of John bar Penkāyē's "Book of Main Points" "as a Christian response to the rise of Islam" when only one of its 15 books discusses the Sons of Hagar (*Envisioning Islam*, 27), especially as he proffers the hypothesis that, for the work containing the "Apocalypse of John the Little" and two other apocalypses, one against Jews and one against Chalcedonians, "explaining the conquests was just one of the author's many concerns" (*Explaining Islam*, 32)?

As his conclusion indicates, *Envisioning Islam* was written in part to address "widely read hate literature" that builds on Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis[(13)]. While it succeeds in challenging the paradigm of clearly defined "Islamic" and "Christian" civilizations, Penn's own experience in the contemporary United States is evident in statements such as the assertion that "[f]ew twenty-first-Christians would anticipate a Muslim funding Christian religious institutions, consulting Christian clergy for spiritual aid, or using Christian holy water. But as numerous Syriac sources attested, such a character was quite at home." (*Envisioning Islam*, 157). Based on personal experience and anecdotes from Christian colleagues from Middle Eastern societies in which Christians and Muslims continued to live in close proximity, at least through much of the 20th century, examples of such inter-communal exchanges have continued into the modern period.

Although these two books are complementary, they are perhaps best used as separate works. While *Envisioning Islam* alludes to all the works presented

(13) A concise articulation of which appears in Huntington, Samuel P. "The clash of civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (1993): 22-49.

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in the *Sourcebook*, it also employs other Syriac texts that are not featured there. It expands the scope of the *Sourcebook* by investigation into "the entire known corpus of early Syriac writings on Islam, a collection of more than sixty seventh-through ninth-century documents" (*Envisioning Islam*, 5-6). And, perhaps due to their production by different presses, there is no cross-referencing between the books, although one can of course search the index of *Envisioning Islam* for the individual works presented in the *Sourcebook*. Both are generally well-edited, although each contains a few minor errata, probably the result of a final round of proofreading imperfectly executed (e.g. "Sydney" instead of "Sidney" Griffith on the dust jacket endorsement, on p. 5 and in the index of *Envisioning Islam*, but spelt correctly on p. 95; the sometimes slightly inaccurate pagination of the *Envisioning Islam* index; or extraneous words or phrases, as in note 183 on p. 236 of *Envisioning Islam*, or the extra "soon" in *Sourcebook*, 213).

Although Penn is neither an Islamicist nor a scholar of the Qur'ān, these two works should be considered in courses and scholarship on the Qur'ān and early Islam. In addition to the value of these extra-communal testimonies for scholars of early Islamic history, scholars interested in the textual history of the Qur'ān would do well to consider mining Syriac sources for allusions, even polemical, to the Qur'ān (such as the prominence of the second chapter of the Qur'ān in the Bahira legend, a trope that is reminiscent of John of Damascus' Greek polemic against Islam, *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites*). His accessible rendering of the early Syriac literature on Islam will encourage students of Late Antique or early Islamic history, comparative religion or comparative linguistics to consider adding Syriac to their repertoire of languages studied. His works will also persuade students of Christian Arabic and other eastern Christian languages to increase their efforts at inter-disciplinary cooperation so as to better understand the nature of life under Islamic rule and the connections, or disconnect, among the various Christian communities. (Many of the polemics found in Penn's Syriac sources are, for example, found in early Christian Arabic texts, sometimes with a twist. For example, while Timothy I uses the mysterious letters that begin some chapters of the Qur'ān as proof of the Trinity [*Encountering Islam*, 112], a common trope in early Christian Arabic texts is that *a-l-m* at the beginning of Q 2 is a Christological allusion. Is the Christian Arabic polemic a refinement of the earlier Syriac approach, or do they represent separate strands of polemics?)

In conclusion, with these two works, Michael Penn succeeds in demonstrating both the importance and complexity of an aspect of Christian and early Islamic history that is frequently overlooked. For, while many reputable institutions of higher education train both church historians and Islamicists, Syriac (if it is studied at all) is often a minor, rather than required, course of study. And, as universities around the globe are rationalizing their resources, faculties that once offered Syriac as part of a larger program in Near Eastern or Semitic languages and literature are increasingly shifting their focus to languages that are more widely spoken, or those that attract more students and/or funding (such as Arabic). In this context, the life he has breathed into Syriac sources from the early Islamic period is all the more welcome, as it will do much to attract a new generation of students to the richness of the Syriac heritage.

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