

Ovidiu Ioan, *Muslime und Araber bei Īšōʿyahb III. (649–659)*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: Syriaca, herausgegeben von Martin Tamcke, Band 37, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2009, ISSN 0340-6326, ISBN 978-3-447-05861-2, pp. 145.

**ANDREW PALMER, UNIVERSITY OF MÜNSTER,
NORDRHEIN-WESTFALEN, GERMANY**

Introduction

The earliest references to Christian dealings with Muslims are in two letters written between 628 and 659 by Īšōʿ-yhab of Adiabene, a leading cleric of the Church of the East (Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Islam, vol. 13, Princeton, 1997, pp. 174–82). The name Īšōʿ-yhab means ‘Jesus-gave’. Ovidiu Ioan prepares his reader for a close reading of these two letters (Ch. 9) by presenting him with a biography of the letter-writer (Chs. 2–5) and a history of the Islamic Conquest and its impact on the Church of the East (Chs. 6–8); this history would have been easier to follow if it had been accompanied by a timeline and a map. Ch. 1 contains the author’s introduction, Ch. 10 his short conclusion.

The references to Christian-Muslim relations have been interpreted in various ways by various scholars. Ioan here claims to translate them more accurately and to evaluate them more completely and more reliably than his predecessors. He ought, then, to have quoted the original Syriac texts in his book. The reader may wish to form his own opinion on the basis of the original; nor should he be obliged to go to the trouble of obtaining a copy of Duval’s edition of the *Liber epistularum* of Īšōʿyahb III, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Syri, vol. 11 (text) and 12 (Latin translation), Paris, 1904–5 (reprint: Louvain 1955), to keep open beside him as he reads this book. (Ioan presents the reprint as the original publication.)

Letter 48 of the Bishop of Nineveh (628–640)

The first reference occurs in No. 48 of the collected letters written by Īšōʿ-yhab as Bishop (p. 97). The title describes him as Bishop of Nineveh, which, if correct (Fiey ‘Īšōʿyaw le Grand: vie du catholicos nestorien Īšōʿyaw III d’Adiabène’, *Orientalia Christiana*

Periodica, vol. 35 [1969], pp. 305–33, and vol. 36 [1970], pp. 5–46, has his doubts about this), dates the letter to the years 628–640. Hoyland translates it as follows:

The heretics are deceiving you [when they say] there happens what happens by order of the Arabs, which is certainly not the case. For the Muslim Arabs (*tayyāyē mbaggrē*) do not aid those who say that God, Lord of all, suffered and died. And if by chance they do help them for whatever reason, you can inform the Muslims (*mbaggrē*) and persuade them of this matter as it should be, if you care about it at all. So perform all things wisely, my brothers; give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

Indexes to such a study, including an *index locorum*, are surely a necessity. The reviewer, having read the book from cover to cover, now has to hunt back through the footnotes to find the author's comments on the above passage; this is made more difficult by Ioan's omission of the crucial information. On pp. 114–22 he discusses this letter, but he does not give its number until n. 162 on p. 121.

Ioan's German translation of the passage from Bishop-Letter 48, which—together with his other renderings—will here be translated into English, begins (in line 2 of p. 115) a little before the point at which Hoyland begins:

But if it happens that you, in that you invent false reasons or the heretics deceive you and say: 'What happened was done by order of the *Tayyāyē*.' That is quite untrue.

The verb which should complete the clause 'that you' has apparently been omitted in error; from the mention of the heretics onwards there is no substantial difference from Hoyland's version. Ioan continues to translate in line 10 from the bottom of the same page, but does not say that this passage follows on from the first without a break.

For the *Tayyāyē mbaggrē* do not help those who say that the omnipotent God suffered and died. And if they happen to help them, for whatever reason, you could surely explain *la'mbaggrē* what [the matter] is and

convince them of the matter, if the matter is appropriately important to you, as it should be.

Ioan's 'what [the matter] is' replaces Hoyland's 'as it should be' and Ioan's 'appropriately' replaces Hoyland's 'at all'; and he omits the last sentence with its reference to Matt. 22:21. It is unclear why Ioan, here and on p. 89, transcribes the word translated by Hoyland as 'the Muslims' as 'la'mhaggre'. Firstly, the transcription should be *la-mhaggrē*, and secondly, the first syllable is no part of the name which is labelled by the prefixed Lomad as the object (direct or indirect) of the verb. This verb, whatever it is, is translated as 'inform' by Hoyland, by Ioan as 'explain' and by Suermann and Fiey (quoted in Ioan's footnotes) as 'say'. All this demonstrates the need to quote the original.

Arabs of the Hiġra

Hoyland signals, with a reference to Fiey, pp. 315–20, that 'the letter may be misplaced' (my emphasis) in the period 628–640. I had hoped that Ioan would be able to date this passage more securely. However, he only refers to p. 331 of Fiey's study. His own statement that the title of the letter is wrong to describe the author as Bishop at the time of writing is, however, unqualified. He assumes, without giving grounds for this assumption (n. 132 on p. 114), that the letter was composed in the period 649–659. Nevertheless, Ioan quotes without revision Hoyland's statement (cautiously based on the earlier date) that this is our earliest reference to Christian dealings with Muslims. This reviewer thinks it unlikely that we know enough to exclude the possibility that Jacobites had already obtained permission from Muslim Arabs before 641 to occupy a building which had once belonged to the Church of the East.

Whether it is correctly dated by the manuscript tradition to 640 or earlier, or was written between 649 and 659, as Ioan believes, this passage is early evidence for the Christian adoption of the name *muhāġirūn*, 'which is the name by which the Arabs are designated on all official documents of the first century of Islam' (Hoyland, *op. cit.*, p. 180 with n. 25 on that page). In the mid-seventh century *mhaggrē* must have sounded in Christian ears like 'of the *hiġra*', whereby the Arabic word is left untranslated. Later a pun was made on the name of Abraham's slave Hagar, who was

the mother of Ishmael, and some Christians sneeringly called the Muslims 'sons of Hagar'; but this reviewer disagrees with Ioan, who sees the word *mhaggrē* as polemical and supposes that ʾĪṣō'-yhab uses it in a derogatory way 'for Muslims who take up a false theological and political position' (p. 119).

West-Syrians vying with East-Syrians for the favour of the Muslims

Hoyland finds in this passage evidence for the general statement that 'Monophysites and Nestorians vied for privileges from their new masters much as they had done in Sasanian times'. According to Ioan (p. 118f.) there is too little contemporary evidence to generalise from this isolated text. However, the passage surely does imply that the Muslims ('the *mhaggrē*?) would never knowingly support Christians who claim that the only God suffered agonies and died. It is also evident that ʾĪṣō'-yhab claimed the Muslims, believing as they did in a transcendent God, would support the Christians of the Church of the East against the Jacobites, because the former were prepared to deny categorically that God was vulnerable.

Ioan should perhaps have taken time to explain how a follower of Theodore of Mopsuestia (the teacher of Nestorius) might edit his theology to make it seem acceptable to the Muslims. Perhaps he would avoid calling Jesus the Son of God, calling him the Son of Mary and the Word of God instead, as he is called in the Gospel of John and in the Qu'rān. He would probably try to avoid discussion of the crucifixion of Jesus, which was an illusion, according to the teachings of Muhammad; instead, he would condemn the alleged belief of the Jacobites that the Lord of the Universe suffered agonies and died on the Cross, saying that the Church of the East taught that the Person of God was incapable of suffering and death and condemned the 'theopaschite' position.

This reviewer is not convinced that Ioan has invalidated Hoyland's generalisation on the basis of the first passage in which ʾĪṣō'yhab touches on Christian-Muslim relations; but I would say that Hoyland's comparison with Sasanian times is not entirely appropriate, because the Church of the East could not claim that their doctrine was closer to Zoroastrianism than that of the Jacobites. This new element seems a dangerous gambit on

Īšōʿ-yhab's part. Will it not have encouraged conversion to Islam to say that the faith of the Church of the East is close to that of the Muslims?

Letter 14 of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (649–659)

The second passage in which Īšōʿ-yhab touches on Christian-Muslim relations is in No. 14 of the collected letters written by him as Catholicos-Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, titular head of the Church of the East. I quote Hoyland's translation (p. 181):

As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule (*shultānā*) over the world, you know well how they act towards us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries.

Ioan's translation is on p. 90:

And also these Arabs, to whom God has given empire over the world at this time, are also—as you know—where we live. Moreover, they are not against Christianity, but rather they praise our Faith and pay their respects to the priests and the saints of our Lord and help the churches and the monasteries.

This agrees with Hoyland, except for one thing: Hoyland has 'how they act towards us', but Ioan has 'are also [...] where we live' (German: bei uns). H. Suermann, 'Orientalische Christen und der Islam. Christliche Texte aus der Zeit von 632–750', *Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 67 (1983), pp. 120–36, at p. 128, as quoted by Ioan in note 6 on p. 90, has: 'As for the Zealous Ones (the Arabs), [...] you know that they are for us.' We are presented with three different translations of one Syriac phrase, which Ioan does not quote; and yet he will base one of his 'nine foundational theses' on it. He discusses the differences between his translation and that of Suermann and says that Suermann must have read *tannānē*, where the text clearly has *tayyāyē*; but when it comes to the question of the meaning of the phrase so differently translated by Hoyland, Suermann and himself, he simply states: 'In contrast, the text simply expresses an observable fact: "they are also—as you know—where we live".' He does not justify his

translation by reference to the Syriac and the lexica, nor does he discuss the translations of other scholars, although he notices that Fiey (art. cit., p. 30) agrees with Suermann on this point.

'To be taken with a pinch of salt'

Hoyland's comment on this passage (p. 181f.) is as follows: 'The mention of warmth towards the Nestorians in this passage must be taken with a pinch of salt, for, as is shown by the remark of Isho'yahb cited above, the Monophysites also claimed that the Arabs favoured them; apparently both sides alleged this in order to win adherents and reassure their own community.' Nevertheless, there are other witnesses to the closeness of Nestorianism and Islam. These are cited by Ioan (p. 92) from Fiey (art. cit., p. 30f.): 1) a letter of 'Abd Allāh b. Ismā'īl al-Hāšimī to 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī; 2) the legend of the prophecy of a Nestorian monk to Muhammad concerning his mission; 3) the remark of a Greek official to his Arab captors, reported by Gregorius Barhebraeus. Ioan might have given his reader the information he needs in order to evaluate the credibility of these witnesses: Who were those two Arabs and when and where did they live? Why should that particular legend be taken seriously? Is not a snide remark about the Nestorians, allegedly made by a Byzantine Orthodox Christian to his Muslim captors and reported by a Jacobite who lived in the thirteenth century, a source to be discounted in discussing ʾĪšō'-yahab III, both because of its polemical bias and because of its late date?

ʾĪšō'-yahab writes: 'Not only do they (the Arabs) not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries.' This seems to refer to all Christians and indeed the Christians in the Arab Empire enjoyed a measure of religious freedom; but, as Ioan's biography shows, ʾĪšō'-yahab was no ecumenist. He did not regard the Jacobites as Christians at all, but as devils, who use the name of Christianity to mislead the faithful. Where he speaks of 'our faith', he refers to the doctrine of the Church of the East. He had evidently heard Muslims speak with approval of what he taught, though no doubt he gave them a selective account of his faith. According to the *Kitāb al-Mağdal* by Mārī b. Sulaymān, official biographer of the Nestorian patriarchs (I have slightly improved

the English of Hoyland's translation on p. 182, without reference to the Syriac):

He was a respected man to whom the governors of the region were beholden, and one of them gave him a diploma assuring him a free hand with regard to his monasteries, his see, his revenue and exemptions for those things; and only a small charge was exacted for those things. He would go every week to ask for what he needed and for anything whereby he might benefit the affairs of the Christians.

The 'nine foundational theses' elaborated by Ovidiu Ioan

On p. 93 Ioan lists 'nine foundational theses' for ʾĪšō'-yhab's view of the conquerors:

1. He calls them *Tayyāyē*, not *Tayyāyē Mbaggrāyē*. (Here Ioan's desire to find fault with the admittedly erratic Ohlig leads him to suppress the fact that ʾĪšō'-yhab does elsewhere call them *Mbaggrē*.)
2. He accepts that God has given them empire, but seems to limit this by the expression 'at this time'. (One might say this means 'in our own lifetime' and refers to the gift of empire, that is, to the fact of conquest, not to its duration.)
3. Their conquest is treated as an event in world politics. (Ioan might have added: 'not as part of an apocalyptic scenario'.)
4. The area conquered by them is described subjectively—but inaccurately—as 'the world'. (Might the author not have supposed that his letter could be translated for a curious Arab, who would be flattered by this exaggeration? Such a possibility should make us even more cautious about taking his positive statements about Muslim-Christian relations at face value.)
5. They are daily present in his direct proximity. (This thesis assumes that Ioan's translation 'are also [...] where we live' is right and that the alternative translations of Fiey/Suermann and Hoyland are wrong, an assumption which, as we have seen, he does not corroborate with reference to the original Syriac.)
6. They are not hostile to Christianity.

7. They praise his own belief system, i.e. that of the Church of the East.
8. They honour the priests and the saints of the Church of the East. (The text actually says: 'The priests and the saints of our Lord'.)
9. They have shown themselves helpful towards the churches and monasteries.

On p. 94f. Ioan sketches the historical context of the source from which he has extracted these theses. The addressee is Šem'un, the Metropolitan of Rew-Ardašīr, in the province of Fars. Šem'un belongs to the same East-Syrian tradition as Īšō'-yhab, but he, like his predecessors, does not accept that his see is under the jurisdiction of the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Īšō'-yhab's purpose is to bring this see under his jurisdiction. This purpose is presented to Šem'un as 'the necessity of unification'.

Rhetorical usefulness of the last four theses to the leader of a divided Church

It is the chief merit of Ioan's book that he places the texts cited by Hoyland in their context. This enables the reader to see that Īšō'-yhab's positive presentation the state of his Church under Muslim rule is necessary to the rhetoric of his letter. In Fars and Kermān the Muslims have destroyed sanctuaries belonging to the Church of the East. Evidently this is due to the separation of these regions from the centre. They have cut themselves off from the well-springs of divine Grace; they have broken the apostolic succession and their holy orders are holy in name, without possessing the power of the Holy Spirit, which would have protected them from the demons. For it is to an evil demon, not to the Muslims, that Īšō'-yhab attributes the destruction of the churches. He connects this demon with the presence in the same provinces of heretics, whom Šem'un's community had not driven out. In Iraq, by contrast, where the apostolic succession was unbroken (and where—one might add—the Church of the East took violent measures to drive out heretics), the Muslims have been helpful respecters of the Christians.

Īšō'-yhab blames Šem'un and his confederates for their failure to argue with those who were out to destroy their churches and convince them of the power and the rightness of their faith;

instead, they had adopted a meek and unmanly submission. The earlier part of the letter suggests (though Ioan does not make this connection) that this lack of persuasive power and of spirited resistance is due to the schism, whereby these regions have been cut off from the Spirit of God.

Theology and deception

Ioan notices a parallel with Bishop-Letter 48 (the text from which we quoted a passage at the beginning of this review): there, too, the author blames the victims of sectarian violence perpetrated in the name of the Muslims and says the monks had remained ‘without movement, without pain, without anger, like dumb idols’ in the face of persecution. They should have followed Īšō‘-yhab’s own example and explained to the Muslims why they should respect the teachings of the Church of the East and despise those of the Jacobites.

In the fourth section of his long ninth chapter, the last before the short conclusion, Ioan considers those of the nine theses which outline a theological view of the conquerors: Nos. 2–3 and 6–9. He rightly emphasizes that the Church of the East had never been the Established Church of an empire, so that it was not a theological problem for them that God had not given the empire to a Christian ruler. With respect to his last four theses (Nos. 6–9), Ioan supposes that Īšō‘-yhab is speaking of Arabs who used to be Christians and have recently been converted to Islam, for these certainly had been admirers of the Christian Faith and supporters of the churches and monasteries and writers remarked on their great reverence for Christian priests and saints. Should we suppose that this reverence, this support and this admiration continued after these Arabs became Muslims?

One possibility not noticed by Ioan is that Īšō‘-yhab uses a rhetorical sleight of hand here: he calls the conquerors Arabs, not *Mbaggērē*, then speaks of them as conquerors, leading the reader to understand that he means the Muslims. Thesis No. 6 confirms this, for it merely says that the Arabs are not hostile to Christianity. But at this point the Arabs may be an inclusive term, including both Muslim and Christian Arabs. However, supposing the last three theses could not really be applied to the Muslims, they might at least be applied to the Christian Arabs; and if Šem‘ūn believed they

applied to the Muslims, so much the better for ʾĪšōʿ-yhab's argument.

The early adoption of Islam in the area of modern Oman under fiscal pressure

The argument of Catholicos-Letter Nr. 14 continues in Hoyland's translation (p. 181) as follows:

Why then do your *Mrwnaye* reject their faith on a pretext of theirs? And this when the *Mrwnaye* themselves admit that the Arabs have not compelled them to abandon their faith, but only asked them to give up half of their possessions in order to keep their faith. Yet they forsook their faith, which is forever, and retained the half of their wealth, which is for a short time.

Ioan, who translates this section on p. 100, does not say that it follows on without a break from the section earlier quoted.

Why then have your Mazūnāyē abandoned their Faith on their [the Arabs'] account? And that while the *Tayyāyē*, as the Mazūnāyē themselves say, have not compelled them to abandon their Faith, but have only ordered them to surrender one half of their possessions and keep their Faith. But they actually abandoned their eternal Faith and retained that portion of their transitory possessions.

Here again there are small differences which make one wish one could see what the Syriac has. In note 28 on the same page Hoyland surveys various theories as to the identity of the *Mrwnaye*, including F. Nau, 'Maronites, Mazonites et Maranites', *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, vol. 9 (1904), pp. 268–76, and concludes that, whoever they are, their country must be somewhere in Persia. Ioan emends the name (with Braun and Chabot) to *Mazūnāyē* and so applies it to modern Oman; oddly, though, he does not seem to be aware of Nau's article or indeed of the problem that the text has a Rish instead of a Zayn, for he simply says that ʾĪšōʿ-yhab called the inhabitants of modern Oman 'Mazūnāyē' (p. 100). Apparently Oman fell under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan of Rew-Ardašīr (hence 'your Mazūnāyē'), on the other side of the Persian Gulf.

The Catholicos probably intended this story as a warning to the schismatic Metropolitan: if he refused to let his see be unified with Seleucia-Ctesiphon, more of the peoples under his jurisdiction would be converted to Islam. Ioan is puzzled by the punishing level of taxation which was the price of religious freedom for the Christian population of Oman. It seems difficult to reconcile with ʾĪšōʿ-yhab's testimony to the high esteem in which the Muslims held the Christian Church and its Creed. Taxing Christianity out of existence is not obviously the action of a government which 'helps the churches and monasteries'.

Conclusion

Ioan's study notices the relevant literature (perhaps according too much space to the refutation of the views of Karl-Heinz Ohlig) and is well constructed: the biography of ʾĪšōʿ-yhab III and the story of the Arab Conquest of his region prepare the reader for a detailed appraisal of the two letters containing passages which touch on Christian-Muslim relations. It is only a pity that the crucial passages, the interpretation of which needs to be argued philologically, are not reproduced in the original language.

The book enables one to appreciate that it was useful to the rhetorical purposes of the Catholicos to exaggerate the beneficence of the Muslims towards the Christians in general and towards the Church of the East in particular, especially in the vicinity of his see, Seleucia-Ctesiphon. One suspects that the Catholicos acquired the favour of his Muslim rulers by the discreet influence of money and that theological arguments for giving preference to the Church of the East over the Jacobites would not have cut much ice with the Muslims without the more tangible persuasive power of silver and gold. All the same, since ʾĪšōʿ-yhab claims that the Arabs 'praise our faith' and suggests that they would never have helped the Jacobites, had it been 'properly' explained to them what heresy they held, it might have been useful to explore theoretically how the Faith of the Church of the East might have offered more scope than that of the Jacobites for claiming common ground with Muslim ideas about God and Jesus. On the other hand, as Ioan rightly emphasizes, the heroic practices of Christian ascetics commanded respect from the Arabs before Muhammad and made a far greater

impression on them than any abstract theological argument. The same may well have been true of the early Muslims.

The editor of the series 'Syriaca', Martin Tamcke, who supervised the doctoral thesis of which this book is the fruit, is to be congratulated, together with the author, on an elegant volume without too many blemishes; but, while doing so, this reviewer suggests that a future volume of this kind should include maps, timelines, indices and an English summary.