Muḥammad, Menāḥem, and the Paraclete: new light on Ibn Isḥāq’s (d. 150/767) Arabic version of John 15: 23–16: 1

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Abstract
Biblical proof-texts for the prophethood of Muḥammad play a prominent role in early Muslim interest in the Bible. This study re-examines the earliest known attempt by Muslims to find such a biblical proof-text in the New Testament – the Arabic version of Jesus’s sermon on the “advocate/comforter” (Gk. παράκλητος) in John 15: 23–16 found in Ibn Isḥāq’s Kitāb al-Maghāzī. Key to understanding Ibn Isḥāq’s adaptation of the Johannine text, this study argues, is the Christian Palestinian Aramaic Gospel behind it as well as the climate of Late Antique apocalypticism and messianism out of which Ibn Isḥāq’s distinctively Islamic version emerged. This study concludes with an interpretation of Quran 61: 6, which appears to claim that Jesus prophesied a future prophet named Ahmad.

Keywords: Ibn Isḥāq, Ahmad, Muḥammad, Quran, Menāḥem, Paraclete, Late Antiquity, Apocalypticism, Messianism, Gospel of John, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Translation

The belief that Jewish and Christian scriptures prophesied Muḥammad’s prophetic mission has inspired Muslim interest in the Bible since the earliest days of Islam. This belief was integral to the first efforts Muslim scholars undertook to articulate Islam’s relationship to the scriptural legacy of its monotheistic forbears. The Quran even describes the early community of Believers as those who follow “the Messenger, the gentle prophet whom they find inscribed in the Torah and the Gospel (al-rasūl al-nabī al-ummī alladhī yajidūnahu.

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maktūban fi l-tawrāti wa-l-injīl)’ (Q. A’rāf 7: 157). Elsewhere in the Quran, Jesus proclaims to the Children of Israel:

I am God’s Messenger to you, sent to confirm the teachings of the Torah before me and to announce good tidings of a messenger who shall come after me; his name is Ahmad (inna rasūl Allāh ilaykum musaddīqan li-mā bayna yadayya min al-tawrāti wa-mubahshīran bi-rasūlin min ba’ dī ismuhu Ahmad, Q. Ṣaff 61: 6).

Inasmuch as one interprets “Ahmad” (most praised one) and “Muhammad” (praised one) to be the same person, the Quran thus also asserts that Jesus proclaimed Muhammad’s advent. Yet, despite the explicitness of such proclamations, the Arabic scripture makes no precise claim concerning where in the Torah or Gospels such prophecies appear. The task of combing through the Jewish and Christian scriptures for these portents fell to its community, which assiduously pursued signs of such portents in the Bible.

Yet how early did this search begin? Our best evidence suggests that from at least the mid-eighth century CE, if not earlier, Muslim readers of the New Testament singled out Jesus’s discourse on the Paraclete in the Gospel of John as the very announcement of Muhammad’s prophetic destiny that Jesus proclaims to the Israelites in Q. 61: 6. For many early Muslims, Muhammad was indeed this Paraclete prophesied by Jesus. Muslims were not the first to claim that Jesus’s sermon on the Paraclete was in fact a fatidic pronouncement about the founder of their religious movement. The New Testament Johannine literature, in fact, recognizes two “Paracletes”: the exalted Christ who intercedes with God on the believers’ behalf (1 John 2: 1) and “the other Paraclete”, the Spirit of Truth, whom Jesus promises will ever remain with his followers after Jesus departs from the world (John 14: 16–9). Although this “other Paraclete” has been traditionally identified with the Holy Spirit (John 14: 26), the history of Biblical interpretation has seen no lack of attempts to envisage this second Paraclete as an actual successor to Christ embodied by, or even incarnated in, a historical person. As early as the late second century CE the Montanists saw in the founder of their prophetic movement, Montanus of Phrygia, a manifestation of Jesus’s promise of the Paraclete, even if it is uncertain if Montanus himself claimed to be the Paraclete. Manichaeans, too, regarded the rapture of Mani and his union with his Sýzygos (his celestial pair-comrade and alter ego) in the third century CE as the moment in which he united

with the Paraclete predicted by the Johannine Christ. Modern historians are more certain that the Mani himself, and not just his acolytes, claimed that he embodied the Paraclete.

This study investigates the earliest known attestations for Muslim attempts to uncover the textual counterpart in the Gospels of the Quranic Jesus’s prophecy of a future prophet named Âḥmad. In particular, this study takes a fresh look at our earliest extant Arabic translation of a Gospel passage: the translation of Jesus’ prophecy of be coming the Paraclete (Gr. parâklétes), a comforter/advocate, in John 15: 23–16: 1 as preserved in Muḥammad b. Išāq’s (d. c. 767) seminal biography of Muḥammad.

Ibn Išāq’s reading of John 15: 23–16: 1

The earliest exemplar of Muslim attempts to connect Q. 61: 6 and the Paraclete is the translation of John 15: 26–16: 1 found in Ibn Išāq’s Kitāb al-Maghāzī, a work compiled and taught under ‘Abbāsid patronage during the caliphate of Abū Ja’far al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75). The historical importance of Ibn Išāq’s reworking of this passage from the Johannine discourse on the Paraclete has been recognized for over a century, inspiring a substantial corpus of scholarship.

This scholarly corpus has been primarily interested in Ibn Išāq’s excerpt of


the Gospel of John because it predates all other extant translations of the Gospels into Arabic – even translations by Arabic-speaking Christians. 9 Yet, there remains one key aspect of Ibn Ishâq’s excerpt from the Gospel of John – an aspect that, in my view, has been underappreciated.

What makes Ibn Ishâq’s translation exceptional, even among its successors, is that his version draws on neither a Greek nor a Syriac version of the Gospel text. Unlike subsequent Arabic translations of the Bible, behind Ibn Ishâq’s translation lay a Christian Palestinian Aramaic (hereafter CPA) version of the Gospel of John. The significance of this fact deserves further emphasis, because the language of the template for Ibn Ishâq’s translation sheds considerable light on its provenance, both in terms of geography and chronology.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic is a “Western” Aramaic dialect once used by Christians of Palestine, Roman Arabia and the Sinai. It differs from Syriac – an “Eastern” Aramaic dialect used predominantly, though not exclusively, by non-Chalcedonian Christians – in its script, corpus and geographical reach. Whereas the corpus of Christian Syriac spans chronologically from the second century CE to the contemporary era and spread geographically from the Near East to the reaches of China, CPA survives in a far more limited corpus that flourished in a comparatively circumscribed geographical area. The CPA corpus consists mostly of inscriptions, short texts (personal letters, prayers, etc.), and translations of Greek texts (e.g. the Septuagint and New Testament, vitae, homilies, and liturgies). Scholars divide the corpus into three periods: the early (400–700 CE), the middle (700–900 CE), and the late period (900–1300 CE). 10

Lastly, whereas Syriac emerges as the language par excellence of non-Chalcedonian, Miaphysite Christology in Late Antiquity, CPA gradually emerges as a key language for the monastic communities of Eastern Palestine and the Transjordan from the sixth to eighth centuries CE. As a different Aramaic dialect to that of Syriac, the distinctiveness of CPA and its script provided a viable, and perhaps


purposefully elevated, diaphysite alternative to the increasingly dominant Syriac lexicon of miaphysite theology by the time of the Islamic conquests. Hence, CPA found favour in particular alongside Levantine Greek with the diaphysite monasteries that dominated the Jerusalem Patriarchate and powerful Sabaite monasteries of the Judaean desert,\(^1\) a favour it enjoyed at least until the mid-ninth century CE when Arabic began to eclipse CPA among Melkite Christians.\(^2\)

Ibn Ishāq’s reliance on a CPA version of John is, therefore, not merely a philological curiosity. His reliance on a CPA Vorlage means that historians can trace his source text to a particular geography within the early Islamic polity and a specific Christian community. To my knowledge, no other Arabic translations of biblical texts, fragmentary or otherwise, draw upon a CPA text and a specific Christian community. To my knowledge, no other Arabic translation of biblical texts, fragmentary or otherwise, draw upon a CPA Vorlage – although one may reasonably expect future research to bring more to light.

The transmission history of Ibn Ishāq’s biography of Muḥammad is notoriously complex: the text survives in at least four discrete recensions, most of which are fragmentary. Yet the Arabic Gospel text only appears in one recension of Ibn Ishāq’s work. This recension is also the most widely preserved: the recension transmitted from Ibn Ishāq’s student, Ziyād ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Bakkaṭ (d. 799).\(^3\) Other redactors of Ibn Ishāq either omitted the text, or else their version thereof does not survive, given the fragmentary state of their preservation.\(^4\)

For this reason, the passage appears independently attested in only two works, each drawing from Ziyād al-Bakkaṭ’s recension: Ibn Hishām’s (d. c. 830) al-Sīra al-nabawīyya and an unedited fragment of Abū Jaʿfar Ibn Ābī...
Shayba’s (d. 909) Tārīkh.\textsuperscript{15} Insofar as the latter source is accessible only in manuscript, I reproduce the Arabic text in an appendix.

Other key aspects of Ibn Ishāq’s version the Johanne Paraclete discourse become clearer with reading; its text runs as follows:\textsuperscript{16}

(15.23) Whosoever despises me, despises the Lord. (24) Had I not performed in their presence deeds no other had performed before, then they would have been without sin. But now they have seen me from the beginning (would be a witness for me, and you (pl.) as well, because you (pl.) despised me without reason\textsuperscript{17} – that is, “in error”.\textsuperscript{20} (26) If al-Mūḥammad,\textsuperscript{21} the one whom the Lord will send, had come to you from the Lord – the Spirit of Truth\textsuperscript{22} who comes forth from the Lord – he would be a witness for me, and you (pl.) as well, because you (pl.) were with me from the beginning (qadīman). (16.1) I have spoken of this lest you doubt.

\textsuperscript{15} Ms. Zāhiriyya, Majmū a 19, fol. 54r (with thanks to Saud Al Sarhan for help locating the manuscript). Ibn Abī Shayba’s isnād for the report suggests a transmission independent of Ibn Hishām’s redaction (see Appendix). Unfortunately, Ibn Abī Shayba’s version is also truncated and garbled in several places. On the identification of this fragment with Ibn Abī Shayba’s Tārīkh, see Sezgin, GĀS, 1: 164 and Mutā’ al-Ṭarābīshī, Riwāt Mūḥammad b. Ishāq b. Yasar fī l-maghāzī wa-l-sīyār wa-sār ir al-mawāniyāt (Damasces: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu’āṣr, 1994), 37, 492–7.


\textsuperscript{17} In the text: يحَرَّر يَتُّوبُ. Thus, Griffith translates the text as “they have become proud”, plausibly suggesting that Ibn Ishāq “Islamicized” the passage and rendered his reading to align closely with the Quran (“Arguing from scripture”, 39–40; cf. Q. Anfāl 8: 47 and Qisas 28: 58). Baumstark (“Eine altarabische Evangelienübersetzung”, 205) and Guillaume (“Version of the Gospels”, 293) suggested, instead, reading reading (طُورُهُ) and this reading is supported by Abū Ja’far Ibn Abī Shayba’s recension. Van Reeth’s suggestion to read يِسْرَأْل is also plausible (“Comforter”, 438), but lacks the support of the manuscripts available to me. However, I reject van Reeth’s subsequent, and in my view unjustifiably speculative, reconstruction of the text.

\textsuperscript{18} Reading (cf. Lane, 1, 1990a) rather than يُؤدِّى من حَرْزُونِي as in Ibn Hishām, ed. Wüstenfeld, 1, 150.1 (=ed. Saqqā et al., 1, 233.3).

\textsuperscript{19} In Ibn Abī Shayba’s recension: “… that the Kingdom will be fulfilled among the people (an tatīmma l-mamlaḵatū fī l-nāṣ); see the appendix.

\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Ps. 35: 19, 69: 4. The sense of majāfīn’ as “without reason” derives from the CPA l-mgn; hence, Ibn Ishāq glosses majāfīn’ as meaning “in error (bāṭīl)’”.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibn Abī Shayba’s version reads مَحْمُودٌ مَيْهِمًا rather than مَحْمُودٌ مَيْهِمًا, garbling the letters somewhat and dropping the all-fām. See the appendix.

\textsuperscript{22} Reading with the CPA rūḥ d-qwāš and Ibn Hishām (ed. Wüstenfeld), 1, 150.3. Even though the majority of the Arabic MSS have روح القلب (Ibn Hishām, ed. Saqqā et al., 1, 233.5 and n. 3 thereto), this is most likely a result of hyper-correction since qist in Arabic means “justice” rather than “holiness”. I have also translated the text without the waw preceding rūḥ al-qist, since some of the Arabic MSS omit it and this reading conforms more closely to the CPA lectionary.
As amply documented by Griffith, Ibn Ishaq’s translation is not merely a literal, word-for-word Arabic rendering. He also offers a quasi-Islamicized version of the passage. Hence, “my Father” (by) and “the Father” (b) in the CPA become merely “the Lord” (al-rabb) in the Arabic. Moreover, in Ibn Ishaq’s rendering of John 15: 26, God rather than Jesus sends the Paraclete. All of these modifications accommodate touchstone tenets of Islamic Christology. However, Ibn Ishaq’s rendering of the passage still preserves sufficient vestiges of the original to determine with relative certainty its source.

Two features reveal to us that Ibn Ishaq’s Arabic translation derives from a CPA Gospel. The first is the rendering of the Paraclete as al-mnihmā, thus transcribing the CPA mnhmn (comforter) rather than the Greek παράκλητος. In contrast to CPA, where the lexical root nhm generally means “to comfort”, neither nhm nor mnhmn mean “comforter” in Syriac25 nor is the Syriac root used to translate the Greek paraklētos in Syriac versions of John’s Gospel (see below). The second is the rendering of the Johannine “Spirit of Truth” in Arabic as rūḥ al-qist, conforming to the CPA rwh‘ d-qwšī rather than the Syriac rwh‘ d-sr‘.26

The first feature is especially striking. Immediately after his quotation from the Gospel of John, Ibn Ishaq explains to his readers that al-Mnihmā in “Aramaic” (al-siryānīyya)27 and means “Muḥammad”. He also notes that in Greek (al-tūmīyya) the word is al-Baraqlītus (البراقليس = παράκλητος). While the equivalence of mnhmn and paraklētos is relatively straightforward, the identification of these words with Muḥammad is certainly less so. Unlike mnhmn in Aramaic and paraklētos in Greek, “Muḥammad” does not mean “comforter” in Arabic, but rather “praised one”.28

Although Ibn Ishaq’s version of this excerpt from the Gospel of John is early, it is also scarcely cited outside Ibn Hisham’s recension. This is puzzling given

23 “Arguing from scripture”, 36–45.
25 In Syriac, the root n.h.m is, rather, usually associated with raising the dead back to life; see, e.g., Robert Payne Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus, 2 vols (London: Clarendon, 1879–1901), 2, 2337. On the translation of παράκλητος as “comforter” in Syriac, see n. 58 below.
26 PSLG, 24; cf. Kiraz, 4: 287 (see n. 22 above). The corruption of rwh‘d-qwšī into rwh d-qwšī also occurs in CPA; see, for example, CCPA, 2(a), 193b (John 15: 26).
27 “Christian Palestinian Aramaic” is a modern designation, and Arabic-speaking writers referred to Aramaic generally as al-siryānīyya without distinguishing between Aramaic dialects such as CPA and Syriac properly so-called. Cf. Griffith, “From Aramaic to Arabic”, 17.
28 Ibn Ishaq’s interest in mnhmn might be rooted in something other than its literal sense. Muslim scholars cited the Hebrew m’ōḏ m’ōḏ (“exceedingly”) in Gen. 17: 20, for instance, because the numerical value of the Hebrew letters matched the numerical value of Arabic letters for Muḥammad. See Uri Rubin, The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims (Princeton: Darwin, 1995), 24. Albeit writing a century later than Ibn Ishaq, ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī (d. c. 860) argued that Muḥammad must be the Paraclete because the alphanumeric value of Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdallāh al-nabī al-hādī in Arabic equaled the alphanumeric value of prqlyt (البرقليت) in Syriac; see The Book of Religion and Empire, tr. A. Mignana (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1922), 141.
that the Johannean Paraclete discourse plays an exceedingly prominent role in Muslim discussions of the Bible from the eighth century CE onwards. Yet, Ibn Ishāq’s citation of the CPA mnḥmn’ to demonstrate Muhammad’s identity with the Paraclete is nearly without parallel – virtually all discussions of Muhammad as mnḥmn’ elsewhere derive from Ibn Hishām’s recension of his text.29 Without the version preserved in Abū Ja’far Ibn Abī Shaybā’s Tārikh, one could justifiably doubt whether the passage really went back to Ibn Ishāq at all.

Muslim theological literature is replete with references to Muḥammad as the Paraclete,30 but such literature, rather than being indebted to Ibn Ishāq or Ibn Hishām, are most often indebted to Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 889) A lām al-nubuwwa and, to a lesser extent, the works of ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarānī (d. c. 860).31 Hence, the singularity of Ibn Ishāq’s rendering of the biblical proof-text is not because Muslim scholars rarely cited this proof-text. The Johannean Paraclete discourses left a profound mark on nearly all of the earliest ‘Abbāsid-era testimony to Gospel proof-texts for Muḥammad’s prophecy.

Even non-Muslim sources testify to the currency of the Johannean proof-text in Muslim scholarly circles. Thus, it appears as an integral theme in the disputation of the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–785) with the East Syrian Patriarch Timothy I (780–823) in 165/781 (or shortly thereafter). The caliph al-Mahdī at one point challenges the patriarch, “Who then is the Paraclete (صلى الله عليه وسلم)”? “The Holy Spirit!” the patriarch answers and courteously refutes the caliph’s attempt to read John’s Gospel as predicting the advent of


30 For a survey of the citations of the Johannean Paraclete passages in Muslim apologetic and polemical literature, see Martin Accad, “The Gospels in Muslim discourse of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries: an exegetical inventorial table (IV)”, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 14, 2003, 459–79.

Muhammad. The debate over the identity of the Paraclete also manifests itself in the famous, although dubious, correspondence between the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–741) and the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar II (r. 717–720).

Yet another early rendering of John 15: 26 also appears during the caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd in a disputational letter composed by the caliph’s scribe (kāthib) Abū l-Rabi’i Muhammad ibn Layth. Rashīd dispatched the letter in c. 796 to Constantine VI (r. 790–797). In the letter, Rashīd’s scribe declares to the Byzantine emperor, “Jesus has testified of [Muḥammad] in your midst (‘indākum) and described him (bayyanaḥu) to you (pl.) in the Gospel”. Thereafter, the Muslim scholar cites a garbled excerpt of the Johannine Paraclete discourse mixing elements from John 15: 26 and 16: 7–9, 13. His quotation of Jesus’ Paraclete discourse reads as follows:

I am going so that the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth (al-bāraqūtī rūḥ al-haqq), will come to you, and he shall not speak on behalf of himself, but shall only speak as he is spoken to. He shall bear witness to me – you (pl.) will bear witness to me because you were with me – against the sins of the world(?); and he will tell you of everything God has prepared for you.

Ibn al-Layth then concludes by glossing his text, “the translation (tarjama) of Paraclete is Aḥmad”. Even though this is a fascinating specimen of an early Arabic translation of John’s Gospel, the text notably lacks the distinctiveness in language that separates Ibn Išāq’s version from all of its successors. In other words, Ibn Layth’s version shows no trace of a CPA Vorlage; rather,

34 The text seems corrupt here due either to the stray addition of bi-l-khaṭṭā’i a or a lacuna. In my translation, I have read wa ntim tashhādīn li-annakum ma’i min qabla l-nās bi-l-khaṭṭā’i a in order to make sense of the text; however, in my view, the more plausible reading would be min qabla l-nās, “prior to the people/world”, with bi-l-khaṭṭā’i a stricken from the text as a copyist’s error.
this later text appears to have been translated from either Greek, Syriac, or a combination of the two.

Why was Ibn Ishāq’s translation so singular and neglected? Part of the answer must be that later, ‘Abbāsid-era, translations of the Gospels into Arabic from Greek and Syriac swiftly eclipsed the *ad hoc* translation Ibn Ishāq transmitted. A second possibility merits consideration, too: Ibn Ishāq’s translation probably derived from a Syrian, Umayyad-era tradition of *ad hoc* translations of the Bible into Arabic that did not otherwise survive the vicissitudes of the ‘Abbāsid transformation of the early Islamic polity.

A number of considerations make this second thesis highly plausible. First, Ibn Ishāq must have acquired his translation of the Johannine Paraclete discourse prior to seeking out ‘Abbāsid patronage because of the limited geographical circuit of the CPA corpus. Although he hailed from Medina, Ibn Ishāq compiled and transmitted his works, in particular his works on the Prophet’s biography, exclusively in Iraq (Hīra, Baghdād), the Jazīra (Harrān), and Rayy, due to, on the one hand, the networks of patronage he enjoyed there from the ‘Abbāsids and, on the other, the controversies surrounding him in his native Medina.

Ibn Ishāq had sought ‘Abbāsid patronage as a virtual exile from Medina, in part due to the fierce and violent opposition he faced from Mālik b. Anas’s followers.36 First he adopted the ‘Abbāsid governor of Mesopotamia, al-‘Abbās b. Muhammad b. ‘Affī, as his patron in Harrān and subsequently the caliph al-Mašrūr in Hīra.37 Prior to his exile, however, Ibn Ishāq was deeply enmeshed in Medinan scholarly circles and their networks in Syria and Egypt.38 CPA circulated in these western territories in the Levant; however, CPA was foreign to the eastern territories where Ibn Ishāq found refuge from the tribulations he suffered at the hands of the Medinans. Subsequent renderings of the Johannine Paraclete discourse (i.e. from the early ‘Abbāsid period onwards) are not dependent on CPA but, rather, derive from either Greek or Syriac Gospel texts. If CPA texts did not circulate in the cities where Ibn Ishāq taught and transmitted his *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* (i.e. Harrān, Hīra, Rayy and Baghdād) then Ibn Ishāq must have acquired the text prior to his exile from Medina.39

Second, Ibn Ishāq possessed no knowledge of CPA as far as we know. Scholars have speculated that Ibn Ishāq’s grandfather Yasār was Christian


38 Ibn Ishāq journeyed to Egypt at least once to study with Yazīd b. Abī Ḥabīb in 115/733; however, after his stay in Egypt he returned directly to Medina. No evidence indicates that he travelled to Syria or that he, like al-Zuhrī, ever enjoyed the favour of Umayyad court. See Horovitz, *Earliest Biographies*, 77, 79.

and, therefore, knew Syriac, since he was taken captive from a sanctuary of worship, sometimes called a synagogue and on other occasions a church, in 12/633 at ‘Ayn Tamr in Iraq. However, even if Ibn Ishāq’s ancestry were Christian, this ancestry would most likely be rooted in the East Syrian (so-called “Nestorian”) Christianity that predominated in this region of the former Sasanid Empire – i.e. of Syriac- or Aramaic-speaking heritage but not a speaker of CPA. Furthermore, speculation regarding the putative Christian heritage of Ibn Ishāq, as recently argued by Michael Lecker, is tendentious – he is just as likely to have been of Jewish heritage.

Lastly, the Syrian, late Umayyad provenance of Ibn Ishāq’s Gospel text is made all the more plausible by the fact that the only other Muslim upon whom the influence of the CPA versions of the Gospel has been directly documented is Ibn Ishāq’s teacher Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri (d. 742). An eminent scholar of Quraishi descent with intimate ties to the Umayyad court, al-Zuhri’s connections with the Umayyads earned him fame and controversy. His seminal influence on early Muslim scholarship, however, is beyond dispute. A star student of al-Zuhri, Ibn Ishāq might have acquired the Johannine text through his teacher, but just as feasibly through his own exertions. Ibn Ishāq was an intrepid scholar who courted controversy by transmitting materials from Jews and Christians – one detractor claimed to have seen Ibn Ishāq copy down written material from one of “the people of the Book”. Other critics even cited the name of one of Ibn Ishāq’s non-Muslim sources, calling him “Jacob the Jew”.

However, in citing non-Muslims as authorities, Ibn Ishāq also emulated his teacher al-Zuhri. In his narrative of Muhammad’s letter to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, al-Zuhri cites the authority of a Christian cleric from Jerusalem whom he met during the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) to vouch for its authenticity. The language of the letter bears out al-Zuhri’s claim (in part at least) to have drawn from a Christian Palestinian source. Muhammad’s letter threatens that Heraclius and the Byzantines will suffer “the sin of the tenants (ithn al-arīsīn)” – a clear reference to the gospel parable

40 Horovitz, *Earliest Biographies*, 76.
44 Khafīf, 2: 14.
of the “wicked tenants” dispossessed of their land due to their evil deeds (cf. Mark 12: 1–12; Matt. 21: 33–46; Luke 20: 9–20). Yet, the word for “tenant” used in al-Zuhri’s account, arūs, is neither Arabic, Greek, nor Syriac. Arūs only appears as a word for tenant in CPA translations of the Gospels.48 If Ibn Ishaq’s translation does not derive from his teacher al-Zuhri, he certainly acquired his Arabic rendition of the Johannine Paraclete discourse from the same networks exploited by al-Zuhri.

Arabic sources are rich with anecdotes of Muslims acquiring, requesting and stumbling upon the sacred writings of Jews and Christians. Some accounts appear contradictory and offer conflicting data. Umar ibn al-Khattāb and his daughter Ḥafṣa allegedly aroused the Prophet’s ire by over-indulging in their enthusiasm for reading stories from Jewish scripture,49 and in other accounts, Umar as caliph berates a man so severely for reading the prophecies of Daniel that he erases the book.50 Yet other accounts portray ‘Umar as constantly wooed by Ka‘b al-‘Abbār’s ability to decipher the caliph’s fortune from the Hebrew scriptures.51 Equally curious stories circulate about personalities of later generations, too, such as the intrepid bibliophile Mālik b. Dīnār (d. 748), who would eagerly pilfer the libraries of Iraq’s monasteries for learned tomes,52 and Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. c. 732) about whom stories abound of the prodigious erudition he acquired by studying with non-Muslim scholars.53 Yet, as fascinating as these anecdotes are, they are scarcely verifiable. In the case of Ibn Ishaq’s Arabic rendition of the Johannine Paraclete discourse, however, the philological data present us with a verifiable and accessible case of historical transmission.

48 Ma‘mar ibn Rāshid, The Expeditions (Kitāb al-Maghāzī), ed. and tr. S.W. Anthony (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 48–9 (2.7.3) and 292, n. 76. The first scholar to discover the CPA behind this reference to iḥḥān al-arūs was Lawrence Conrad, “Heraclius in early Islamic Kerygma”, in G.J. Reinink and B. Stolte (eds), The Reign of Heraclius (610–641): Crisis and Confrontation (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 115–6. Such citations raise the spectre of Umayyad translations of the Gospels into Arabic and the role of CPA therein. Christian sources recount a story about John III, Patriarch of Antioch, re-reading the Gospels into Arabic in 643 alongside well-versed scholars from the Tāyā, Tanūkh and ʿUayyal tribes at the request of the governor ‘Umayr b. Sa‘d. See Michael Penn, “John and the Emir: A new introduction, edition, and translation”, Le Muséon 121, 2008, 77–80. Presently, however, the evidence only permits us to suggest the possibility, and our hypothesis works just as well if one assumes the translations from CPA were ad hoc rather than systematic.


Menahem and the Paraclete

Ibn Ishq’s Arabic rendition of John 15: 23–16: 1 sheds light not merely on Muslim interest in the Bible – his Arabic rendition also sheds light on a key facet of the translation of the Gospels into CPA in the context of transformations of Late Antiquity and early Islam. The rendering of the Greek paraklētos into CPA as mnḥmn – an Aramaic word meaning “comforter” – was not an artificial concoction of Ibn Ishq. Rather, he bears witness to an authentic and autochthonous shift in Christian translation of the Gospel of John into CPA. Two textual corpora confirm this: 1) palimpsests of a CPA lectionary edited by A.S. Thomson, dating to 1029 CE. All of these twelfth-century CPA versions of the Gospel of John, like Ibn Ishq’s Arabic version, translate the Greek paraklētos with the CPA mnḥmn. Yet, these two texts are also late – they belong to the so-called late period (c. 900–1300 CE) of the CPA corpus. Hence, a considerable chronological gap separates these twelfth-century witnesses and our earliest, surviving exemplar of the Gospels in CPA on the one hand and, on the other, Ibn Ishq’s Arabic version of Johannine Paraclete discourse. What makes matters more curious is that the earliest testimonia to the Gospels in CPA, in particular the Codex Climaci Rescriptus (CCR) (c. sixth century CE), lack any attempt to provide a vernacular translation of the Greek paraklētos and, instead, merely transcribe the Greek original as prəftq, as do all Syriac versions of the Gospels. Why this discrepancy?

I would like to suggest that Ibn Ishq offers us a key testimony to a sea change in CPA translations of John’s Gospel, wherein Christians translating John’s Gospel into CPA began rendering Paraclete as mnḥmn, probably from the seventh century onwards. In other words, Ibn Ishq’s text, although a Muslim text preserved for Muslim theological purposes, provides us with an important terminus ante quem for a key change in the translation practices of CPA. Sometime before Ibn Ishq’s composition of his biography of Muhammad in the mid-eighth century CE but after the sixth-century Codex Climaci Rescriptus, CPA translators began rendering paraklētos as mnḥmn. Yet, why did this sea-change in CPA translations of paraklētos transpire in the first place?

54 PSLG, 24–9, 51, 14, 55, 4.
55 Ibn Ishq’s text may or may not draw from a direct ancestor of the Evangeliarium Hierosolymitanum or the Sinai codices. There are some interesting departures from the extant CPA versions of John 15 that make such a position difficult to uphold without reservation. Ibn Ishq’s rendering of John 15: 24b more closely matches the reading of Peshitta ḫrwm šlām ṭulwḥw (Kiraz 4, 286) than the skf ʾ lhw ʾlwḥw of CPA gospel texts (PSLG, 24; CCR, 82, col. b). Ibn Ishq’s use of “the Law” (al-nāmūd) in translating John 15: 15 rather than the more standard “their Law” – thus, the ṭwm ṭwm of the Sinaiticus and the ṭwm ṭwm of the Peshitta and the CPA b-nmuwshw – in fact conforms to the ṭwm ṭwm of the Harklean text (Kiraz 4: 286, ult and CCPA, 2a: 193b). Lastly, the Arabic rendering of John 15: 27 ṭwm appears slightly closer to the Sinaiticus reading ṭwm ṭwm, than the CPA mn rysʾ my ṭwm (PSLG, 24; CCR, 83, col. c; CCPA, 2a: 194a).
56 Kiraz, 4: 287; CCR, 82; CCPA, 2(a): 139b.
In order for this process to transpire, two key developments were necessary. The first is the emergence and dominance of the exegetical current that interpreted the Paraclete as “comforter” rather than “advocate”. The Greek παράκλητος can mean either “comforter” or “advocate”. Indeed, modern Bible translations tend to prefer the meaning “advocate” as the earlier sense, perhaps even rooted in Aramaic usage of παράκλητος as a calque. Grounds for this judgement can be found in the fact that, by the Roman period, the Greek word παράκλητος entered Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic as the loanword טילקרפ, meaning “advocate”, as it was often paired with its antonym דוגיטק, another loanword from the Greek κατήγορ, meaning “accuser”.

In patristic exegesis, however, the Paraclete’s role primarily in the sense of a “comforter” rather than an “advocate” gradually came to hold sway, thus eclipsing the earliest meaning of the term. We can see this, for example, in a seminal treatise on the Holy Spirit by Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), who writes:

As our Lord said concerning Her [viz., the Holy Spirit], “She will glorify me” (John 16: 14). She does not give glory ... as a creature to the creator, but as the Spirit of Truth (rwḥ ʾd-šr r) who plainly manifests true testimonies concerning Him through the indication of the Godhead’s glory; ... and, again, as the Spirit-Paraclete (rwḥ prqlyṭ), which She was called, for this name she has taken upon herself the likeness of the Son, that through her benefactions she might comfort (tbyʾ hwʾt) the hearts of those to whom She should come ..." \(^{58}\)

Evidence for this shift in the interpretation of παράκλητος appears in the CPA translation of the Catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–387) as well. This CPA translation of Cyril’s Catechesis – dating perhaps to the sixth or seventh century CE \(^{59}\) – simultaneously renders the Greek παράκλητος first as mnḥmn (comforter) and then subsequently in transcription as prqlyṭ in a matter of a few lines.\(^{60}\)

59 The CPA translation of the Catechesis survives only as a fragmentary undertext of a palimpsest known as Codex Sinaicicus Rescriptus, overwritten by a Georgian monk in the tenth century CE. For an extensive description of the manuscript, see C. Müller-Kessler, “Codex Sinaicicus Rescriptus (CSRG/O/P/S): a collection of Christian Palestinian Aramaic manuscripts”, *Le Muséon* 127, 2014, 263–309.
60 *CCPA*, 5: 193a (citing John 14: 16).
Yet, this exegetical shift in reading of the Paraclete as “comforter” does not merely hold importance for CPA Gospel translations. The impetus behind a shift in Palestinian–Aramaic Gospel translations away from transcribing παράκλητος as prqlt’ and towards a new trend in favour of translating paráklētōs into mṇhmn must also be placed in the broader religious context of Late Antique Palestine. This leads us to our second key development that gave rise to this translation shift: the CPA translation of paráklētōs as mṇhmn emerges simultaneously with the rise in messianic expectations among Palestinian Jewry of Late Antiquity.61

A central theme to the Jewish messianism of Palestine in Late Antiquity is the expectation of the advent of a Messiah named Menahēm. The name is highly significant. Menahēm means “comforter”. The name is thus roughly the Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic equivalent of paráklētōs and mṇhmn of the Paraclete discourse. The name Menahēm is also widely attested in Late Antique Jewish texts, appearing in the seminal Talmudic discussions of the Messiah’s names as well as Jewish apocalypses and Palestinian piyyutim.62

The Jerusalem Talmud provides one of the earliest attestations to the Messiah named Menahēm in a story attributed to Rabbi Aibo. In R. Aibo’s tale, an Arab delivers shocking news to a Jew ploughing his fields. First, the Arab announces the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, but then he relates what is seemingly more hopeful news (y.Ber 2.4.25b):63

[The Arab] said to [the Jew], “Son of a Jew … harness your ox and harness your plow, for the King Messiah has been born”.

He [the Jew] said to him, “What is his name?”

[The Arab] answered, “Menahēm.”

[The Jew] asked, “What is his Father’s name?”

[The Arab] answered, “Hezekiah.”

[The Jew] asked, “Where is he from?”

[The Arab] answered, “From the royal city, Bethlehem in Judah.”

Upon hearing the Arab’s declaration of the Messiah’s birth, the Jew promptly abandons his life as a farmer to become a peddler of swaddling cloth for children. Travelling and selling his wares, he finally come across the Messiah’s mother, to whom he offers his wares on a loan. When he later returns for his payment, he asks about her child, but receives a shocking reply: “She answered,

'After you saw me, winds and whirlwinds came and snatched him out of my hands’.”

R. Aibo’s curious story of the Messiah’s birth has inspired numerous studies of its interpretation, but our main interest lies in the name Menahem it provides for the Messiah. As noted above, Menahem simply means “comforter” – a perfectly apt title for a Messiah. The Babylonian Talmud illuminates the Biblical roots behind calling the messiah Menahem/“comforter” (b. San 98b):

His name is Menahem because, “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter (םחנמ) is far from me, one to revive my courage” (Lam. 1: 16).

Regardless of the original intent of R. Aibo’s story, its reverberations – especially the idea that Israel’s messiah had already been born and awaits the time of his advent – can be found in an array of sources. A popular messianic motif, for example, places the Messiah at the gates of Rome where he suffers in solidarity with Israel as a leper indistinguishable from the throngs of lepers around him until the time of his re-appearance draws nigh.

Leading up to the seventh century, the urgency of messianic fervour among the Jews of Palestine becomes particularly acute in the liturgy (amida) and hymns (piyyutim) of the synagogue as well as in apocalyptic literature. The expectation of a Messiah called Menahem is a common motif throughout the compositions of this period. The words of the payytan Shim on bar Megus offer a vivid example of such messianic urgency:

Send us the man called Menahem!
Vengeance will sprout from him.
Let him come in our day,
And may authority rest on his shoulders (Is. 9: 5).

64 Schäfer, The Jewish Jesus, 215–6
66 A surviving palimpsest of Lam. 1: 16 in CPA translates the Hebrew menahem with mnhm; see W. Baars, “A Palestinian Syriac text of the Book of Lamentations”, Vetus Testamentum 10, 1960, 225 (col. a, l. 15).
69 Leon J. Weinberger, Jewish Hymnography: A Literary History (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998), 38. The date of Shim on bar Megas’s piyyutim are uncertain, but the virulent diatribes against Christian authorities and the absence of any mention of Arab or Muslim authorities suggest that he flourished in Palestine prior to the Islamic conquests. See Ben Eliyahu et al., Handbook, 137.
An important catalyst for the spread and codification of these ideas, particularly in Jewish apocalyptic literature, comes first in the form of the Perso-Byzantine War (602–628) and in the form of the Arab conquest of Jerusalem (637), leading to yet another expulsion of Byzantines from Syria. The Sasanid conquest of Jerusalem in 614 even briefly placed Palestinian Jews in control of the city until 617 and saw in particular the outbreak of spectacular violence and upheaval that struck many as apocalyptic in significance, if not in scale. However short-lived this restoration of Jerusalem to the Jews was, Byzantium’s humiliation stoked eschatological dreams of Israel as Rome’s messianic and imperial heir and of the Messiah Menahem’s imminent advent.

No Jewish apocalyptic work embodies these expectations more vividly than the early seventh-century apocalypse Sefer Zerubbabel, itself likely written in response to the tumultuous events in Palestine and Syria during the Perso-Byzantine War (601–628). The apocalypse recounts the vision of the Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel of Biblical fame, whom the archangel Michael carries away to the gates of Rome to meet the Messiah-in-waiting:

Then [the angel Michael] said to me, “This is the Messiah of the Lord: [he has been] hidden in this place until the appointed time [of his advent]. This is the Messiah of the lineage of David, and his name is Menahem ben ʿAmiel. He was born during the reign of David, king of Israel, and a wind bore him up and concealed him in this place, waiting for the time of the end.”

This Menahem, the angel reveals, will soon defeat the satanic “Armilos” and liberate Jerusalem to restore Israel. Reference to the Sefer Zerubbabel and

71 Alexei M. Sivertsev, Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
73 Reeves, Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic, 55.
74 The patronymic “ben ʿAmiel” here replaces the Talmudic “ben Hezekiah”, but elsewhere in Sefer Zerubbabel the Messiah is also referred to as the son of Hezekiah (see Reeves, Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic, 35). Himmelfarb (“Mother of the Messiah”, 383–7; cited by Reeves, 53 n. 91) has suggested that “ben ʿAmiel” might be a cipher for “ben Hezekiah”. On the significance behind calling the Messiah “son of Hezekiah”, see Schäfer, Jewish Jesus, 225–7. Another text to refer to the Messiah by this name is Pirqa de Rabbi Eliezer; see Goldberg, “Die Namen des Messias”, 232–3; Sivertsev, Judaism and Imperial Ideology, 118.
75 Armilos being the anti-Messiah modelled after the Byzantine emperor Heraclius; see Lutz Greisiger, Messias, Endkaiser, Antichrist: Politische Apokalyptik unter Juden und Christen des Nahen Ostens am Vorabend der arabischen Eroberung (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014).
Menahem’s role therein appears also in Jewish hymnography, as one can see the piyyut known as ’Oto ha-Yom:76

And the vision of the Son of Shealtiel77 will come, 
Which God has shown to him. 
And He will give the staff of Israel’s salvation, 
In the city of Naphtali in Kadesh in Galilee, He gives the staff of God. 
And Hezibah78 will come before God, 
In order to awaken in her Menahem son of ’Amiel, 
Whom God gave her from of old.

Read in light of these currents of Jewish Messianism in Palestine, the tiny shift in the translation of the Gospel of John into CPA in which “Paraclete” becomes mn̄mn̄, in my view, creates a profound statement. This subtle shift marks the emergence of a discretely Christian counter-discourse against Jewish expectations of their own messiah-comforter whom they call “Menahem”. By calling the Paraclete mn̄mn̄, the Christians using CPA signalled that their Comforter – their Menahem – had already come. He was at once the Christ Jesus of Nazareth and the “other Comforter” (John 14: 16), the Spirit of Truth who comforts Christ’s followers in his absence. What makes the story of this subtle shift in CPA translation practice in response to Late Antique Jewish messianism all the more extraordinary is that, wittingly or unwittingly, Ibn Ishāq’s Arabic rendition of John 15: 23–16: 1 offers us our best evidence that this shift transpired simultaneously with the rising tides of Jewish messianism at its epicentre in Palestine.

The broad currents of Late Antique apocalypticism did not disappear with the rise of Islam. Indeed, the Islamic conquest harnessed and reinvigorated these currents in unanticipated ways, as apocalypticism and its attendant literature continued to flourish well into the second century of the Islamic conquests.79 Does Ibn Ishāq’s appropriation of the Johannine Paraclete discourse, therefore, share a messianic subtext with CPA translations of parάκλητος as mn̄mn̄? 

On the one hand, scholars have long seen in Ibn Ishāq’s narrative of Muhammad’s call (mabʿath) and his encounter with the angel Gabriel at Mt. Hira’ references to passages from the Biblical book of Isaiah in the textual underlayer of the narrative – in particular Is. 29: 12 and 40: 6.80 The latter

77 I.e. Zerubbabel.
78 Menahem’s mother, responsible for the opening salvo of the eschatological showdown with the anti-Messiah; see Himmelfarb, “Mother of the Messiah”.
passage serves as quite a striking example. When in Ibn Īshāq’s narrative Gabriel appears to Muhammad in his sleep and, holding a silk scroll, commands, “Read (iqra’)!” the Prophet famously replies, “I cannot read (mā iqra’!”

Isaiah 40: 6 shares a similar structure and wording with the passage, even in the Hebrew: “A voice says, ‘Proclaim/Read (qārēā’)!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry out (māh ‘eqrā’)?’” What makes this correspondence significant for our concerns is that Isaiah 40 actually begins with divine admonition to “comfort” God’s people, “Comfort, comfort my people (nahāmū nahāmū ammī), says your God….” The CPA version of Isaiah 40: 1 matches the Hebrew very closely, reading: nhwmw nhwmw qhly ‘mr ‘lh’. 

Is this the messianic subtext to Ibn Īshāq’s narrative of Muhammad’s call to prophecy? Put another way: is Muhammad a/the “comforter” – in the mould of Menahēm and the Paraclete/mnḥmnī – by virtue of his prophetic mission? The evidence for affirming that Ibn Īshāq’s text does put forward such a view is not definitive, but it is suggestive.

**Conclusion: “… and his name will be most praised”**

The preceding analysis leaves us with a curious result. Even though the tools of historical philology illuminate considerably not just the provenance of Ibn Īshāq’s Arabic translation of the Johannine Paraclete discourse but also important features of his source-text, we have learned little about the Quranic text that ostensibly inspired this early Arabic translation. Part of the issue is that the connection between the Gospel of John’s Paraclete and Q. 61: 6 is tendentious. “Ahmad” and “Muhammad” on the one hand and parāklētos/mnḥmnī/Menahēm on the other do not carry even approximately similar meanings. The words are simply incommensurate. Polemicists note the fact that the Johannine proof-text fails to work the way early Muslim apologists would like virtually from the outset. Ps.-Leo III thus writes to the Umayyad caliph Umar II:

> Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Paraclete since he sought to console his disciples for his departure … Paraclete thus signifies “comforter”, while Muhammad means “to give thanks”, or “to render grace”, a meaning which has no connection whatsoever with the word Paraclete.


82 CCPA, 1: 142.

83 Bruce Chilton (tr.), The Isaish Targum (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987), 77, “Prophets, prophesy consolation to my people, says your God … A voice of one who says, ‘Prophesy!’ And he answered and said, ‘What shall I prophesy?’ All the wicked are as the grass….”

84 Erroneously reading the Prophet’s name as the active participle (muḥmmādīd, “giving much praise”) rather than the passive (muḥmmād, “receiving much praise”).

85 Jeffery, “Correspondence”, 293.
The relationship between Q. 61: 6 and John is, therefore, tenuous at best. Most likely, Q. 61: 6 is not a reference to the Johannine Paraclete at all, and the putative Biblical subtext Ibn Ishāq posits for Q. 61: 6, is a red-herring. If I am correct, this realization represents a significant step forward, but it also admittedly leaves modern scholars with a vexing loose end: the significance of “Armad” in Q. 61: 6 remains unresolved. Several solutions have appeared over the centuries; we explore them below.

The first is what one might called the “philological” solution – even if the philology supporting it is rather dubious. This solution aims to maintain the connection between Q. 61: 6 and the Paraclete of John’s Gospel, but it proposes a rather novel solution to the incommensurability between the Arabic āhmād and the Greek paráklētos. According to this argument, the Greek παράκλητος (“comforter/advocate”) was either misread or misunderstood as περικλύτος – meaning “renowned”, “far-famed”, or even (with a little imagination) “praised one”. This proposition first appears, to my knowledge, in the Refutatio Alcorani of the pioneering Italian professor of Arabic at La Sapienza University, Ludovicco Marracci (d. 1700). A modified version of Marracci’s suggestion has gained and maintains a considerable following in popular Muslim apologetic writings. Drawing upon Quranic claims regarding the corruption (tahrij) of Jewish and Christian scriptures, such writings argue that περικλύτως was the original reading of the Greek text John’s Gospel rather than paráklētos. It’s certainly an odd twist of fate that the arguments of such Muslim apologetic works ultimately derive from a suggestion popularized by a priest of the Order of the Mother of God and confessor to pope Innocent XI.

Marracci’s suggestion is clever, but probably too clever. In order for his proposition to work, one first must assume that Muhammad (or even, say, a hypothetical redactor of the Quran) knew both Greek and Syriac. Second, one must assume that Muhammad, or the Quran’s redactor, lacked access to the original Greek text of the Gospels, and so had to “reverse engineer” a Greek word from the Semitic consonantal skeleton p.r.q.l.y.t.s, which he found in either a Syriac or CPA Gospel text. Faced with the Greek letters π.ρ.κ.λ.τ.ς, either Muhammad or the redactor then reinserted the missing Greek vowels but arrived at περικλύτως, “renowned”, rather than παράκλητος, “comforter”. While the reading butchered the original text of John’s Gospel, it did just so happen to match, albeit rather approximately, the meaning of “Armad”. The scenario is so convoluted as to be absurd.

86 Refutatio Alcorani (Patavii: Ex Typographia Seminarii, 1698), 26–7, 719; cf. Gilliot, “Nochnals: Hieß der Prophet Muhammad?”, 77 f. On Marracci, see Roberto Tottoli, “New light on the translation of the Qur’an of Ludovico Marracci from his manuscripts recently discovered at the Order of the Mother of God in Rome”, in Rippin and Tottoli (eds), Books and Written Culture, 91–131

87 To make matters even worse for the proposition, the word periklytōs, albeit present in Classical Greek lexic, is virtually unknown to the Greek lexic of the New Testament, early Christian writings, Patristic writings, or even the pseudepigrapha. The sole example of its use I could locate makes for a rather unflattering parallel to Muhammad. In the Testament of Solomon, the Israelites’ king Solomon exorcises a series of bound demons by interrogating them. When he asks one gnarly demon his name, the demon replies, “Among mortals I am called Asmodeus the renowned (periklytōs).” [1Sol
Another radical solution tweaks not the text of the New Testament but rather the text of the Quran. This second, “codicological”, solution jettisons the *āya* in which Jesus prophesies a future Messenger (rasūl) altogether, in favour of an alternative, albeit far less historically attested, reading. Nearly a century ago, Arthur Jeffery unearthed a reading of Q. 61: 6 ostensibly deriving from the Companion Quran codex (*musḥaf*) of Ubayy b. Kaʿb (d. c. 640–656) that provided an entirely different rendering of Jesus’s prophecy of a future messenger (rasūl) named Ahmad. In the reading attributed to Ubayy’s codex, Jesus’s prophecy in Q. 61: 6 rather ran as follows:

I bring you good tidings of a prophet whose community will be the last of [God’s] communities, by him God will seal the prophets and the messengers (ubashshirukum bi-nabiyyin ummatuhu dikhiru l-umami yakhtimu Līlāhu bihi l-anbiyāʾ wa-l-rusul).

Thus did Ubayy’s codex purportedly omit any mention of Jesus’s prophecy of a prophet named Ahmad altogether. While an intriguing possibility, the documentation for this variant reading attributed to Ubayy is late and exceedingly sparse. Jeffery uncovered the reading from the margins of an autograph manuscript titled *Qurrat ʿayn al-qurrāʾ*, a work on variant readings (*qirāʾāt*) of the Quran by an otherwise unknown Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muhammad ibn ‘Alī al-Qawāṣī al-Marandī (fl. latter half of sixth/thirteenth century). The work remains unpublished, but the manuscript remains accessible in the Escorial Library in Madrid. Jeffery characterizes this source as exceedingly rich with information on readings from Ubayy’s *musḥaf*, and indeed, his *Materials* drew heavily on the manuscript when documenting the hypothetical text of Ubayy’s codex. Yet, outside al-Marandī’s work, the reading offered for Q. 61: 1 is rarely, if ever, attested in the *qirāʾāt* literature or in the earliest extant manuscripts of the Quran. Any argument in favour of Ubayy’s reading as an “original” and, therefore, “better” reading of the Quran faces an uphill climb.

The reading attributed by al-Marandī to Ubayy, however, deserves careful consideration. Aspects of the reading suggest an early, perhaps even a seventh-century, dating. Its tone is, for one, eschatological. On the other hand, other aspects of the reading suggest that it post-dates the seventh century. Its depiction

89 MS Escorial (Madrid) no. 1337, fol. 200b. Brockelmann gives the death date for Marandī as 569/1173 (*GAL*, 1: 519), but this date is rather the date of the author’s *ijāza* from one of his teachers; the author himself states that he completed the work in 588/1192. I have benefitted greatly from the discussion of the Escorial manuscript written by Muhammad al-Shanqīṭī at: http://vb.tafsir.net/tafsir7010/#.VQD2t_nF-So (last accessed 11 March 2015). My thanks to Walid Saleh for directing me to the website.
90 *Materials*, 116; hence, this reading does not appear in Ibn Abī Dāwūd’s *Kitāb al-Masāḥif*, which in any case only attributes a handful of readings to Ubayy b. Kaʿb’s codex.
of Muhammad as the final prophet is categorical and unambiguous. Muhammad “seals [the line of] prophets and messengers”. This is a sentiment paralleled only in Q. 33: 40 where Muḥammad is also deemed “Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets (rasūl Allāh wa-khātam al-nabiyyīn)”. Yet, the latter, far better-attested verse also suggests that al-Marandī’s alternative rendering of Q. 61: 6 is late. The categorical interpretation of Muḥammad as the seal of the prophets is not present in Q. 33: 40, which suggests that the categorical tenor of al-Marandī’s/Ubayy’s reading of Q. 61: 6 probably reflects a more systematic and developed prophetology than one would expect to encounter in the Quran. Early Arabic poetry provides more than one compelling example of how the root ḥ.t.m. in the early Islamic period does not necessarily denote finality. Hence, a verse attributed to Umayyā b. Abī Ṣalties speaks of Muḥammad as the man, “by whom God sealed the prophets who come before him and after him (bihi khatama Allāhu man qablahu/wa-man ba’dahu min nabiyyīn khatam)”. Likewise the Naqī id of the Umayyad-era poets Jarīr and Farazdaq refers to Muhammad as “the best of the seals (khayr al-khawātīm)”90 – where the very multiplicity of “seals” precludes their finality.

Moreover, the explicit pairing of the plurals “prophets (anbiyāʾ)” and “messengers (rusūl)” in al-Marandī’s alternative reading occurs nowhere else in the Quran – and this despite the near ubiquity of these terms throughout the Quran. Hence, the pairing seems to be at odds with Quranic diction. Lastly, nowhere does the Quran refer to Muḥammad’s community (ummma) as the last (ākhīr al-ummam). While not at odds with Quranic eschatology per se, this phrase does appear early on in the ḥadīth literature where it seems to first proliferate.92 All of this evidence argues against accepting the reading al-Marandī attributes to Ubayy’s codex as either an original, or even a historically preferable, reading of Q. 61: 6.

A third option entertained at least as early as the late ninth century – but unlikely to find many defenders among modern scholars – is what one might call the “sectarian” solution. This solution denies that the “Aḥmād” figure foretold by Jesus in the Quran intends to refer to Muhammad at all. In his Kitāb al-Maqālāt, the Muṭazzīlī scholar Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī (d. c. 915–916) provides an early testimony to such a view, writing that Qarāmīṭa rebels of his day justified their belief that Muhammad was not the last prophet by claiming: 1) Jesus would return to Earth and thus be a prophet after Muḥammad; and 2) that Jesus foretold a prophet named Aḥmād, whose coming they awaited, and not a prophet named Muḥammad.93 Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī (d. 922) records a letter purportedly penned by one of these millenarian rebels’ leaders in which he claimed to be an agent (dāʾī) working on behalf of the Mahdī Aḥmād

91 A.J. Wensinck et al., Concordances et indices de la tradition musulmane, 7 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1933–69), 1, 29a.ult.
92 MS Shahāra (Sanaa), fol. 140b. Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī’s authorship of this text is somewhat in doubt; however, a strong case for its attribution to al-Jubbāʾī is made by Hassan Ansari, “Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī et son livre al-Maqālāt”, in C. Adang, S. Schmidl and D. Sklare (eds), A Common Rationality: Muʿtazilism in Islam and Judaism, IFS 12 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007), 21–37.
b. Muhammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, “the Messiah who Jesus, who is the Word, . . . who is Gabriel”.94 While certainly an extreme example, the Qarmāṭīs at least demonstrate that not all Muslims identified the Quranic Āḥmad with Muhammad.

There remains only one other solution, and to my mind it is also the most credible. This is what I would like to call the “minimalist” solution. The minimalist solution essentially rejects the very premise of Ibn Ishāq’s early quest for a Gospel proof-text; it is also a solution favoured by major exegetes of the classical tradition.95 In this reading, “Āḥmad” is not a proper name at all, but rather an adjective; the Arabic phrase ismuhu āḥmad should not be read as “his name is Āḥmad” but rather “his name is most praised” – reading āḥmad as a straightforward elative. In other words, this reading severs the putative connection between Jesus’s Quranic proclamation from the Paraclete discourse of the Gospel of John. While decoupling these two texts may defy the unrelenting impulse to embed every verse of the Quran in a biblical subtext, intertext, or source text, such a decisive decoupling of the Q. 61:6 from the textual cobwebs of biblical proof-texts, in this one instance at least, provides the most convincing reading.

Appendix: Ibn Išāq’s Arabic rendition of John 15:23–16:1 from MS Ẓāḥiriyya, majmū’a 19, fol. 54r

A fragment of a work likely composed by Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn ʿUthmān ibn Abī Shayba (d. 297/909) survives in a collection (majmū’a) of short ḥadīth texts preserved in the Ẓāhirīyya library in Damascus. The title assigned to the text is Kitāb fī kḥalq ʿĀdam wa-kḥaṭīṣ aṭṭiḥ wa-tawbathīḥ . . ., but this is merely an ad hoc title assigned by the cataloguers and derives from the contents of the initial portions of the text.96 The fragment likely derives from Abū Ja’far Ibn Abī Shayba’s Tārīkh, of which no other sections are known to be extant.

The attribution of the text to Abū Ja’far Ibn Abī Shayba is, however, by no means an absolute certainty: the first folios of the manuscript are missing and the final folio (57r, line 13) ends stating, “the end of the second quire/section of the quires of Ibn al-Ṣawwāf (ākhir al-juʿ al-thāni min ajzāʾ Ibn al-Ṣawwāf)”. This sentence seems to suggest the work belongs, rather, to the corpus of the Baghdādī ḥadīth scholar Abū ʿAlī Ibn al-Ṣawwāf (d. 359/970).97 Yet, Muṭāʾ

97 Khaṭīb, 2: 115–6.
Although manuscripts of Ibn al-Sawwaf’s works remain unpublished, fragments have been transcribed, albeit imperfectly, and posted online for *al-Maktaba al-Sha‘bīya* (see [http://shamela.ws](http://shamela.ws)) and can be accessed via their database. Included in this database as well as in a transcription of Ms. Zahiriyah, *majmūʿa* 19, fols 46–57, which Ṭaribbīshī identifies with the *Ṭairīkh* of Abū Jaʿfar Ibn Abī Shayba; however, the database attributes the work to Ibn al-Sawwaf and titles it *al-Thānī min ājā‘* Ibn al-Sawwaf. I owe this observation and information to Mahmoud Khalfia (Cairo University), who directed me to the online transcription of the text.

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**100** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 100.

**101** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 101.

**102** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 102.

**103** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 103.

**104** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 104.

**105** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 105.

**106** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 106.

**107** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 107.

**108** "al-Thānī min ājā‘ Ibn al-Sawwaf" al-MM.” - The number is 108.