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MONKS, MANUSCRIPTS, AND MUSLIMS: SYRIAC TEXTUAL CHANGES IN REACTION TO THE RISE OF ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

Syriac scribes and readers often changed the texts that they were reading. In some cases, these modifications were motivated by the political and religious challenges brought about by the Islamic Conquests and subsequent Muslim rule. Such emendations provide important, material witnesses for how Syriac Christians reacted to the rise of Islam. They also challenge modern scholars to reevaluate the ways we read manuscripts and how we understand Syriac manuscript culture.

There has been a gradual shift in how modern scholars approach ancient manuscript culture. Although the production of critical editions that attempt to recover an ur-text remains the focus of most manuscript work, researchers in fields ranging from biblical text criticism to early modern studies have become increasingly interested in also analyzing how later revisions reflect changing social and political contexts.[1] Such work, often categorized under the

[1] Among biblical text criticism Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effects of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New*

monikers new philology, new medievalism, or the history of the book, has led to a greater recognition of the malleability of manuscript text and has begun to challenge the primacy of original authorship.[2] Although rarely examined from such a perspective, Syriac manuscripts are particularly rich sources for this type of analysis

Even a brief perusal of extant manuscripts shows that Syriac scribes did not simply reproduce the works that they were copying. Instead, their own beliefs occasionally motivated them to modify texts in ways that reflected particular ideological biases. An especially striking example can be found in *British Library Additional* 14,509. William Wright categorized the manuscript's contents as "a collection of Choral Services for the festivals of the whole year," a

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Testament (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) has been particularly influential. Similar approaches can be found in Anne Marie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Kim Haines-Eitzen, "Engendering Palimpsests: Reading the Textual Tradition of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*," in *The Early Christian Book*, William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2007), 177–193; Jennifer Wright Knust, "Early Christian Re-Writing and the History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14:4 (2006): 485–536; Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia, The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Eldon Jay Epp, "The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: 'Not without Honor Except in their Hometown,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123:1 (2004): 5–55; Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Eldon Jay Epp, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," *Harvard Theological Review* 92:3 (July 1999), 245–281.

[2] The bibliography of recent works often categorized as "history of the book" is immense. Especially influential are the works of Roger Chartier and Anthony Grafton as well as the University of Pennsylvania Press's Material Texts series. Of particular import to the debate surrounding "new philology" and "new medievalism" was the January 1990 special issue of *Speculum* and the collection of essays *Towards a Synthesis? Essays on the New Philology*, ed. Keith Busby (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993). An especially articulate critique of both "new" and "old" philology by a scholar who nevertheless remains very committed to studying medieval manuscript culture can be found in John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the* Libro de Buen Amor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). A more recent discussion of these issues can be found in Andrew Taylor, *Textual Situations: Three Medieval Manuscripts and Their Readers* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2002), 1–25, 197–200.

characterization that fits well with its various hymns and prayers addressing such events as the annunciation, the nativity, and the commemoration of various saints.[3] This eleventh-century codex begins with a madrasha set to the tone "the priest Zacharias."[4] As written, however, this would be a particularly difficult madrasha to sing as every few lines one comes across an illegible word, illegible that is until you turn the page 180 degrees (Figure 1). The scribe has written upside down the names of figures such as Bardaison, Marcion, and Mani whom he considered heretical.

Such modifications were not limited to scribes trying to make a point. Later readers also changed manuscript text. Consider one of the most famous of Syriac manuscripts, *British Library Additional* 14,451. This fifth-century codex is one of two extant witnesses to the early gospel translation now known as the Old Syriac.[5] In the last century and a half, there have been numerous studies on the differences between the Old Syriac and the Peshitta.[6] For at least

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[3] William Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, 3 volumes* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1870–1873; reprinted Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002), v. 1, 271–272. As noted by Wright, ten folio that originally belonged to this codex are now bound as *BL. Add.* 17,216.

[4] *BL. Add.* 14,528, f. 1a. Unfortunately this manuscript does not have an extant colophon and its dating is dependant on Wright's paleographic judgment.

[5] The fifth-century *BL. Add.* 14,451 was the first manuscript known to preserve the Old Syriac. Its version of the gospels is now called the Curetonian after its discoverer William Cureton. In 1893 Agnes Smith Lewis discovered a second version of the Old Syriac in a fifth-century manuscript at Saint Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, now referred to as the "Sinaitic Version." Scholars generally date the composition of the Old Syriac to about the third century. For a detailed comparison of these versions with each other and with the more common Peshitta version see George Anton Kiraz, *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels*, 4 volumes (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

[6] There is an extensive literature on the Old Syriac versions of the Gospels. Bibliographic references can be obtained from Cyril Moss, *Catalogue of Syriac Printed Books and Related Literature in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1962; reprint, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007); Sebastian Brock, *Syriac Studies: A Classified Bibliography (1960–1990)* (Lebanon: Parole de l'Orient, 1996), 54–61; Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Studies: A Classified Bibliography (1991–1995)," *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998): 265–267; Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Studies: A Classified Bibliography (1996–2000)," *Parole de l'Orient* 29 (2004): 291–294. For brief discussions of the Old Syriac versions of the New Testament, see Bruce Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission,*

one ancient reader this variation was not merely academic. He became so upset at the variances that, in the course of just two folios, he inserted nine words, removed twenty-four, and changed over a hundred in order to make the text correspond with the Peshitta (Figure 2).[7] After expending so much energy on only four pages, faced with over one hundred and twenty more, he apparently gave up.[8]

Textual changes often stemmed from more fundamental disagreement with a manuscript's content than simply a difference in bible translations. For example, *British Library Additional* 14,528 contains alterations made by three different readers who shared similar motives. This sixth-century manuscript consists of ecclesiastical canons and letters translated from Greek into Syriac.[9] Not surprisingly, later Syriac readers were particularly concerned with those parts of the manuscript most closely aligned with the Council of Chalcedon. One reader erased over two and a half folios from the manuscript's first references to the decisions of Chalcedon and then wrote a brief marginalia telling later readers not to be alarmed by the removed sections.[10] Later in the same document, another

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and Limitations (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 36–48 and Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition, 2nd rev. ed.* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 33–34.

[7] *BL. Add.* 14,451, ff**.** 6b-8a. Despite this reader's zeal and diligence he still did not remove all the variants. Even with his modifications, over a dozen variations remain between the amended manuscript pages and our version of the Peshitta.

[8] It is unclear why the reader targeted these particular pages of the Sermon on the Mount. He begins at the top of folio 6b which corresponds to the last few words of Mt 5:17 and finishes at the bottom of folio 8a which corresponds to the first few words of Mt 6:8. His beginning and ending points do not relate to complete sentences or phrases in the gospel, but simply to the beginning and ending of these folios. He is not the only reader to modify the manuscript. Other hands have also made small changes to the biblical texts (e.g., ff. 11a, 31b, 43b, 45b, 54b, 59b, 71b) as well as adding various rubrics and marginalia (e.g., ff. 3b, 4a, 5b, 33b, 40a, 45a, 54a, 57a, 59a, 60b, 76b, 81a, 83b, 86a).

[9] The work's colophon states that the codex contains 193 canons which in 812 AG (501 CE) were translated from Greek into Syriac. Wright, *Catalogue*, v. 2, 1030–1033 describes the manuscript's content in greater detail. On paleographic grounds, Wright dates the codex to the "earlier half of the sixth century." Wright suspects that "this manuscript was not improbably written in the same year" as the canons' translation, but he provides no further evidence to support this.

[10] The middle of folio 8b begins a listing of the canons from the Council of Chalcedon that continues until 14a. There are several modifica-

reader made three further erasures and additions. Through effacement and marginal glosses he changed "the holy council" of Chalcedon to "the wicked council," its "illustrious" participants became "despised," and a letter addressed "To Leo the Head of the Bishops," now reads "To the Wicked Leo" (Figure 3).[11] Another reader, perhaps inspired by these alterations, added an additional marginalia at the end of the same letter reading, "Woe to your mouth, wicked, unclean Leo."[12]

A list of such emendations could easily be expanded. For instance, Wright's catalog of Syriac manuscripts now held in the British Library refers to more than 239 cases of manuscript erasure. The frequency of such changes should alert us to the instability of Syriac manuscript text. It also suggests that analyzing the ways scribes and readers altered the works they were studying could tell us much about the history of Syriac Christianity.

As just one illustration of this sort of study, I want to briefly examine five sets of manuscript changes. At first glance these five cases are quite diverse: the earliest of these codices was composed in the sixth century, the latest in the twentieth; they are now housed in Berlin, Birmingham, London, Mardin, Paris, and Vatican City; their contents range from a copy of the bible to a story about demon possessed monks. They do, however, share one thing in common. Each has been modified in response to Islam.

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tions to this material. In particular, at the bottom of folio 8b there is a note in the lower margin: "Leaves came from here. Reader, do not be disturbed." The next folios—9a, the top part of 9b, and the bottom of 10a—have all been erased thus removing several canons. A single canon was erased on 10b. On the top of folio 9a over the erased material is a note from the monk Abraham stating that he encountered this codex in 1802 AG (1490/91 CE) and asking for future readers' prayers. Wright, Catalogue v. 2, 1030 attributes the erasures on folios 8–10 to this Abraham. It seems more likely, however, that Abraham encountered these pages having already been erased and simply added his prayer petition to the top of the first blank page he found. His handwriting varies considerably from the marginalia found at the bottom of 8b (a more likely culprit for the erasure) and nowhere in his note does he express displeasure with the manuscript's discussion of the Council of Chalcedon.

[11] *BL. Add.* 14,528, ff. 119a, 119a, 138a.

[12] *BL. Add.* 14,528, f. 144b.

ADDING A TEXT—BRITISH LIBRARY ADDITIONAL 14,461

The best known and most straight forward of these manuscript changes is the composition of a text now called *The Account of 637*. This short notice appears on the front of the first folio of *BL. Add.* 14,461, a sixth-century biblical codex that preserves the Peshitta version of the gospels of Matthew and Mark.[13] The Gospel of Matthew appears on the verso of the codex's first page thus initially leaving the recto blank. In 637 CE a writer used this extra space to compose what appears to be an eye-witness report of the Islamic Conquests. Like the exterior folio of many Syriac codices, this one is poorly preserved permitting only a partial reconstruction of the notice.[14] Nevertheless, even in its fragmentary state the extant text clearly refers to Muhammad, to Arabs, to towns surrendering, and to substantial Byzantine casualties. The dates and places that can still be made out suggest that *The Account of 637* may also contain a reference to the Battle of Yarmuk, perhaps the most important battle of the Islamic Conquests. In addition to the inherent drama of an autographon most likely written while the Conquests were occurring, this brief note provides a vivid example of how the rise of Islam directly affected the content of a Syriac manuscript.

CHANGING A NAME—BRITISH LIBRARY ADDITIONAL 14,643

A more complicated set of manuscript changes appears in *BL. Add.* 14,643. The majority of this codex contains a document now known as *The Chronicle of 640*.[15] At the end of this chronicle, how-

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[13] The original manuscript is described in Wright, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, 65–66 where, on the basis of paleography, Wright dates this copy of Mark and Matthew to the sixth century. A later writer, from the ninth or tenth century, according to Wright's judgment, added a number of additional quires so that, as it is now bound, the manuscript contains all four canonical gospels (Wright, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, 68).

[14] Edition in Theodor Nöldeke, "Zur Geschichte der Araber im 1. Jahrh. d.h. aus Syrischen Quellen," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 29 (1876): 77–79 and Brooks, *CSCO 3*, 75. English translations appear in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 117 and Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 2–4. Discussions found in Nöldeke, "Zur Geschichte der Araber," 79–82; Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 1,4; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 116–117.

[15] Modern scholars also refer to this text as *The Chronicle of Thomas the Presbyter*. An edition can be found in Brooks, *CSCO* 5, 77–155. A Latin

ever, there has been appended a two-page list of Muslim rulers.[16] J. P. N. Land published an edition of these pages in 1862 and E. W. Brooks published a slightly different edition in 1904.[17] The caliph list consists of a brief notice concerning Muhammad and then the names and lengths of reigns for subsequent caliphs up to Yazid (d. 724 CE).[18] In their analysis of the text, Andrew Palmer and Robert Hoyland successfully argue that this short notice's dependence on a lunar calendar and its preservation of Arabic words such as *fitna* indicate that this work is a Syriac translation of a no longer extant Arabic text. They also note that the Arabic original was most likely written after Yazid's death in 724 but before the death of his successor Hisham in 743.[19]

According to the paleographic judgment of Wright, our Syriac copy comes from a mid- eighth-century manuscript.[20] If Wright is correct, then only a few years after this list's composition in Arabic a Christian scribe translated it into Syriac. Apparently this Syriac scribe produced a literally faithful copy of the Arabic for the Syriac begins: "A notice of the life of Muhammad, the *rasul* of God" (Figure 4).[21] The surprise for modern readers is, of course, the willing-

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translation is in J. B. Chabot, *CSCO 4*, 633–119. An English translation of selections appears in Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 13–23. For a discussion of this text see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 118–120; Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 5–12, 23–24; and especially Andrew Palmer, "Une chronique syriaque contemporaine de la conquête Arabe" in *La Syrie de Byzance à l'islam VIIe-VIIIe siècles*, Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais, eds. (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1992), 331–346.

[16] *BL Add.* 14,643, ff. 56b-57a. Wright, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, 1040–1041 summarizes the codex's content.

[17] J. P. N. Land, *Anecdota Syriaca* (Leiden: Lugnuni Batavorum, 1862), vol. 1, 40, and E. W. Brooks, *CSCO 5*, 337–349.

[18] As noted by Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 49–50 and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 395–396, the list is not completely accurate in terms of its chronology and never speaks of the caliphate of Ali but simply refers to five years of *fitna* (dissension).

[19] Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 49–50; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 395–386.

[20] Wright, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, 1040.

[21] The last word of the list's first line has been erased. In his edition Land, *Anecdota Syriaca*, 40 reconstructs the word as ܢܒܝܐ (prophet) while Brooks *CSCO 5*, 337 reconstructs ܫܠܝܚܐ (messenger). The manuscript itself gives greater support for Brooks's reading than Land's. One can still make out some of the upper line of the ܝ and even more decisive, the dot over the ܝ remains quite clear. Both Palmer and Hoyland also follow Brooks's reading. Both the eighth-century *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (*CSCO* 104, 396, 398) and the twelfth-century Dionysius bar Salibi's *A Response to the*

ness of an eighth-century Christian to describe Muhammad as God's messenger. This did not shock only modern readers. At least one ancient reader became so affronted that he erased this word leaving simply "Muhammad of God."[22]

In and of itself, this single erasure provides important information concerning what various Syriac Christians thought was, and later was not, an acceptable way to refer to Muhammad.[23] I suspect, however, that the later reader made a more intricate intervention than previously has been recognized. Land's and Brooks's editions of this document represent the text as: "A notice of the life [of] Muhammad the [messenger] of God."[24] If one looks only at the Syriac in these editions there is no difficulty; my objection is not to the text but to the text-critical notes. The notes indicate two issues. They first denote that the possessive ending of the word "of his life" (ܕܚܝܘܗܝ) is no longer extant but easily reconstructed by the modern philologist. They then mark the last word in the line with footnotes that read "*vox erasa*." An examination of the original manuscript, however, reveals a problem with these transcriptions. The last two letters of the word for "of his life" seem not simply to have decayed over time but appear to have been purposefully erased in the same manner as the word "messenger."[25] In other words, contrary to Land and Brooks, the manuscript does not contain one erasure but two.

So why would a reader remove a fairly meaningless possessive ending? By erasing these two letters the reader has changed what

Arabs (*CSCO* 614, 6, 86, 87) also use the term ܪܣܘܠܐ in reference to Muhammad.

[22] Land, *Anecdota Syriaca*, 40, and Brooks, *CSCO 5*, 337.

[23] For a more general treatment of Syriac Christian discussions of Muhammad see Sydney H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muhammad His Scripture and His Message According to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century," in *La vie du prophète Mahomet* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), 99–146.

[24] Brooks, *CSCO 5*, 337. Like Brooks, Land, *Anecdota Syriaca*, 40 indicates only a single erasure but, as noted above, reconstructs the erased word as "prophet."

[25] There are several factors pointing toward this being a deliberate erasure: 1) It is visually similar to the erasure found at the end of the line. 2) In the previous 55 folios there are many places where various letters have faded over time. None look like this. 3) The damage to the velum at this spot is identical to that found in a series of ownership erasures appearing in the manuscript's colophon at folio 60b.

originally was a noun, "of the life of" into a verb "reject" (ܕܚܐ).[26] Thus, with these two erasures the sentence now reads, "The notice that Muhammad (is) of God is rejected." This both explains the reader's removal of the possessive ending from "of his life," as well as the otherwise surprising fact that he kept intact the phrase "Muhammad of God."

This reader was none too subtle in how he erased the text. Both the erasures themselves and the motives behind them are easily ascertained. As a result, to us this sort of intervention might appear to be either trivial, or at best, clever. I would suggest, however, that for ancient manuscript readers this was a very serious endeavor. Syriac Christians did not take manuscript changes lightly. Syriac manuscripts contain anathemas attempting to protect codices from erasure, marginalia cursing individuals who erased part of a text, and requests asking later readers to fill-in previously erased data.[27] A canon from the famed School of Nisibis even proclaims that whoever erases ownership notices from the school's manuscripts will be expelled.[28] I suspect that one reason Syriac Christians were so concerned about manuscript modifications lay not in their finesse but in their blatancy. Alterations such as this double erasure in *BL. Add.* 14,643 were not attempts at subtle subterfuge, rather they were observable displays of power. Such interventions allowed later readers to express their displeasure with a manuscript's initial content and, by manipulating the text, to express their control over

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[26] For the pa'el of ܕܚܐ being translated as "reject" see R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1879; reprinted Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 862; Carolo Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum* (Halis Saxonum, Sumptibus M. Niemeyer: Gottingon, 1928), 148; Louis Costaz, *Dictionnaire Syriaque-Français* (Imprimerie Catholique: Beruit: 1963), 62.

[27] For example, in the British Library collection of Syriac manuscripts anathemas against those who erase part of a manuscript include *BL. Add.* 12,172, f. 195a; *BL. Add.* 14,442, f. 48a; *BL. Add.* 14,485, f. 121b; *BL. Add.* 14,486, f. 91a; *BL. Add.* 14,487, f. 71b; *BL. Add.* 14,503, f. 178b; *BL. Add.* 14,522, f. 26a; *BL. Add.* 14,531, f. 159b; *BL. Add.* 14,550, f. 1a; *BL. Add.* 14,577, f. 130a; *BL. Add.* 14,587, f. 135b; *BL. Add.* 14,593, f. 2a; *BL. Add.* 17,102, f. 59b, 60b; *BL. Add.* 17,124, f. 68a; and *BL. Add.* 17,181, f. 136b. An example of curses that a later reader wrote against his predecessor who erased part of the manuscript he was reading can be found in *BL. Add.* 17,264, f. 12b, 15a. A marginalia requesting that later readers fill-in information erased by a previous reader appears in *BL. Add.* 17,264, f. 65a.

[28] *Canons of Henana* 8 in Arthur Vööbus, *The Statues of the School of Nisibis* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1961), 96.

it. So while there was little a reader could do about the outcome of the Islamic Conquests, he could change what was originally a simple list of Muslim caliphs into a polemic against Muhammad.

ADDING A TITLE—BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE SYRIAC 62, MARDIN 310, 322, 337, MINGANA SYRIAC 8, SARF 73, 87 VATICAN SYRIAC 148, 560

While the rise of Islam could motivate a Syriac Christian to add a new text to a manuscript or a reader to change the content of a previously composed work, it could also inspire a scribe to reframe an earlier document. In the late 680s, the Miaphysite patriarch Athanasius of Balad wrote an encyclical letter presenting a multipage critique against Christians who participated in pagan festivals and ate from pagan sacrifices.[29] The word Athanasius used for "pagans" was the typical Syriac term to denote polytheists, ܚܢܦܐ.[30]

Although after Athanasius's reign the term ܚܢܦܐ continued to be used to describe polytheists, in the century following his patriarchate it was employed also to speak of Muslims and of Islam.[31] For example, in 775 C.E. the author of the Miaphysite *Chronicle of Zu-*

[29] Arthur Voobus, *CSCO* 35, 200–202 discusses the manuscripts that contain this letter. An edition of the letter and a French translation appears in Francois Nau, "Litterature canonique syriaque inedite" *Revue de l'orient chretien* 14 (1909): 128–130. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 147–148 discusses the document's contents and provides an English translation of part of the letter. For a brief overview of Athanasius of Balad see Michael Penn, "Athanasius (II) of Balad" in *Encylopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (Piscataway: N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2009).

[30] Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 1322; Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 244. It remains possible that Athanasius used ܚܢܦܐ as several later writers did and was really talking about Christians participating in Muslim feasts. There are, however, several factors that make this unlikely: 1) The use of ܚܢܦܐ to mean Muslim is unattested in the seventh century. 2) The letter reads as a straight forward polemic against Christian participation in polytheist feasts and nothing in its content hints at Muslims being present. 3) The repeated reference to ܚܢܦܐ sacrifices makes much more sense when speaking about polytheists whose sacrifices have been the target of Christian invective since the first century than about Muslims. 4) The letter refers to the "food of their sacrifices and to what is strangled," an allusion to Acts 15:20, 29 and 21:25 each of which speaks of what has been sacrificed to idols—that is, by polytheists—and what has been strangled.

[31] Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 244 briefly notes this change of meaning in his *Lexicon* by citing the eleventh-century writer Elias of Nisibis.

qnin referred to Islam as paganism (ܩܢܢܝܘܬܐ).[32] A few years later, the East Syrian scholar Theodore bar Koni cast his disputation against Islam as a debate between a teacher and a ܩܢܝܐ.[33] Soon afterward, the ninth-century Nonnus of Nisibis did the same in his anti-Muslim tractate and, at one point, even called Muslims the "new pagans" (ܩܢܢܝܐ ܚܕܬܐ).[34] Labeling Muslims as pagans distinguished them from Christians, maligned them, and, as pointed out by Sidney Griffith, was a bilingual pun because the Syriac ܩܢܝܐ sounded like one of the Qur'an's terms for a follower of Islam, hanif.[35]

As a result of the changing meaning of ܩܢܝܐ, for subsequent generations of readers the subject of Athanasius's invective may have become somewhat ambiguous. Had the patriarch written against Christians mingling with polytheists or Muslims? Once, however, the letter was preceded by its present incipit, such ambiguity was removed. In extant versions the letter is titled, "A letter of the blessed patriarch Athanasius concerning that a Christian should not eat of the sacrifices of these Hagarenes who now hold power."[36]

It is possible that upon finding the term ܩܢܝܐ in Athanasius's letter, whoever wrote the incipit sincerely believed that Athanasius had been writing against Muslims. Alternatively, the scribe may have seen an easy opportunity to redirect the now dead patriarch's authority against Islam. In either case, instead of using Athanasius's term ܩܢܝܐ, this later scribe called the ܡܗܓܪܝ, a term exclusively used for Muslim.[37] Just to be safe, he even specified "the ܡܗܓܪܝ

[32] *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (*CSCO* 104, 381, 383, 392).

[33] Thedore bar Koni, *Scholion* 10 (*CSCO* 69, 232).

[34] Nonnus of Nisibis, *Apologetic Tractate* (Albert van Roey, *Nonnus De Nisibe: Traité Apologétique* [Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1948], 9*, 12*, 17*, 33*).

[35] Sidney Griffith, "The Prophet Muhammad His Scripture and His Message According to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century" in *La vie du prophète Mahomet*, T. Fahd, ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), 120–121; Sidney Griffith, "The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis" *ARAM* 3, no. 1&2 (1991): 127; Sidney Griffith, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam* (Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1995), 9.

[36] Nau, "Littérature canonique," 128.

[37] Isho'yahd III, *Letter* 48B (*CSCO* 11, 97); The colophon of *BL Add.* 14,666 [dated 682] (*BL Add.* 14,666, f. 56); Jacob of Edessa, *Questions of Addai* (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 604–695); Jacob of Edessa, *Letter II to John Stylites* (*CSCO* 367, 237); *The Life of Theoduṭe* (excerpts translated in Andrew

who now hold power." With the addition of this title the scribe repackaged what most likely was originally an anti-pagan polemic and redeployed it against Muslims. This strategy's success can be seen in the eight extant manuscripts that preserve this letter; all contain this same incipit.[38] Although a careful reader might still ascertain that Athanasius's original concern was most likely not Islam, the combination of later Syriac Christians using ܫܪܟܐ, as a polemical way to connote Muslims and the letter's title now referring to Hagarene sacrifices effectively transformed the patriarch's letter into an anti-Muslim tractate.

ADDING POLEMIC—*SACHAU* 315

Centuries after a scribe reframed Athanasius's letter, the same term, ܫܪܟܐ, played a similar role in a reader's marginal addition to *Sachau* 315. Preserved in this fifteenth-century Miaphysite codex is a most likely eighth-century work that modern scholars call *The Qenneshre Fragment*.[39] *The Qenneshre Fragment* contains a series of anecdotes concerning what happened when the monastery of Qenneshre suf-

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Palmer, "Amid in the Seventh-Century Syriac Life of Theodore," in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*. Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, and David Thomas, eds. [Leiden: Brill, 2006], 111–138); The *Kamed el-Loz Inscriptions* [dated 714/15] (P. Mouterde, "Inscriptions en syriaque dialectal a Kamed [Beq'a]," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 22 [1939]: 83, 96); *John and the Emir* (Michael Philip Penn, "*John and the Emir*: A New Introduction, Edition and Translation," *Le Muséon*, 121 [2008]: 100, 102); *The Chronicle ad 724* (*CSCO* 3, 155); *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (*CSCO* 104, 341); *The Chronicle ad 775* (*CSCO* 5, 348); *The Canons of Giwargi* (*CSCO* 375, 4); *The Qenneshre Fragment* (François Nau, "Notice historique sur le monastère de Qaramin, suivie d'une note sur le monastère de Qennesré," in *Actes du XIVe congrès international des orientalistes, Alger 1905, Part 2* [Paris: 1907]: 131); St Mark Colophon [dated 806] (cited in Sebastian Brock, "The Use of *Hijra* Dating in Syriac Manuscripts: A Preliminary Investigation," in *Redefining Christian Identity*, 283); Moshe bar Kepha, "On Free Will" (*BL Add.* 14,731, f. 11a);.

[38] Two of these manuscripts, *Mardin* 310 and *Vatican Syriac* 148, are from the eighth century, *Bibliothèque National Syriac* 62 is from the ninth century and *Vatican Syriac* 148 is dated 1576 CE. The remaining manuscripts are from the twentieth century.

[39] The colophon of *Sachau* 315 states that it was copied by the scribe Jesus bar Isaiah in AG 1792 (1480/1481 CE). For a description of *Sachau* 315 and its contents see Eduard Sachau, *Verzeichniss der syrischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, 3 volumes (Berlin: A. Asher & Company, 1899), 521–530.

fered a demon infestation.[40] Part way through the story, one of the possessed monks is bound and the demon within him is interrogated regarding general demonic preferences. The grilling begins with the question "Who is more loved by you (demons), the ܬܝܐ or the Jews?" Needless to say, being the demons' beloved is far from a compliment. The demon's original answer was, "The ܬܝܐ are greatly cherished and loved by us. And the Jews, they know a little concerning He who lives in heaven. But we rejoice greatly in them and love them more than the ܬܝܐ because they crucified God their Lord."[41] As in Athanasius's letter, it is clear that the original author intended ܬܝܐ to mean pagans. The text implies that at first glance one could assume that the demons would prefer the ܬܝܐ because, unlike the Jews who "know a little concerning He who lives in heaven," they are unaware of God. Nevertheless, according to the original author, the demons find the Jews' crucifixion of Christ even more appealing than the ܬܝܐ's polytheism.

A later reader, however, added a marginal note expanding the demon's response. The marginalia reads that the demons love the ܬܝܐ "because they do not believe that Christ is God but say that He is a created man."[42] With the original statement addressed to pagans, there would have been no need to supply more specifics regarding the ܬܝܐ's beliefs. The later reader added the marginalia not to provide further information but to change the ܬܝܐ's identity. The statement that the people in question considered Christ not to be God but to be a created man was a standard Christian critique of Muslims and would have been unmistakable to Syriac readers. Thus with a brief marginal note, the demons' love has been redirected from polytheists to Muslims.

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[40] François Nau, "Notice historique sur le monastère de Qaramin, suivie d'une note sur le monastère de Qennesré" in *Actes du XIVe congrès international des orientalistes, Alger 1905, Part 2* (Paris: 1907), 124–135 provides an edition, although it unfortunately contains a number of substantial errors and must be used with care. So too, Nau's French translation (Nau, "Notice historique," 114–123). Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 144–146 provides an English translations of a few passages. A discussion of the text can be found in Gerrit J. Reinink, "Die Muslime in einer Sammlung von Dämonengeschichten des Klosters von Qennesrin" in *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992*, René Lavenant, ed. (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Orientale, 1994), 335–346 and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 142–147.

[41] *Sachau* 315, 61b.

[42] This marginal addition was first noted by Reinink, "Die Muslime," and briefly discussed in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 146.

The Qenneshre Fragment is extant in only a single manuscript, so unlike the case of the multiple copies of Athansius's letter we cannot measure the effect of this intervention on later manuscript traditions. This marginalia did, however, have a surprising afterlife in printed text. In the only published edition of *The Qenneshre Fragment*, François Nau included this marginalia in the body of the text and gave no indication that it was not original to the document but rather came from a later marginalia.[43] That a Syriac scholar as renown as Nau would make such an error serves as a poignant reminder of how powerfully seemingly minor interventions could affect future readings of a text.

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In addition to the composition of a new document, the erasure of part of a previous text, the insertion of a title, or the adding of a marginalia, a text could also be affected by how a scribe decided to position it within a manuscript. For instance, on August 17, 874 a monk named Abraham completed a codex containing 125 short pieces ranging from biblical passages to lists of councils, caliphs, and calamities.[44] Despite scholars referring to Abraham's work as a miscellany, there may have been a method to his madness, particularly when he sequentially ordered two key works. The first is perhaps the best known Syriac disputation against Islam now called *The Disputation of John and the Emir*.[45] Immediately after this alleged

[43] Nau, "Notice historique," 130.

[44] The codex's content is summarized by Wright, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, 989–1002. Information regarding the manuscript's composition is found in Abraham's colophon on f. 1a. For a list of modern editions and translations of documents found in *BL Add.* 17,193 see Sebastian P. Brock, "An Excerpt from a Letter to the People of Homs, Wrongly Attributed to Ephrem" *Oriens Christianus* 86 (2002): 1–4.

[45] Edition and English translation in Penn, "*John and the Emir.*" French translation in Nau, "Un colloque," 257–264. Recent discussions of this text include Penn, "*John and the Emir*"; Barbara Roggema, "The Debate between Patriarch John and an Emir of the Mhaggrāyē: A Reconsideration of the Earliest Christian-Muslim Debate" in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, ed. Martin Tamcke (Beirut: Ergon Verlag Würzburg, 2007), 21–39; Harold Suermann, "The Old Testament and the Jews in the Dialogue between the Jacobite Patriarch John I and ʿUmayr Ibn Saʿd Al-Ansari" in *Eastern Crossroads: Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy*, Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 131–141; Abdul Massih Saadi, "The Letter of John of Se-

conversation between the Miaphysite patriarch John and an unspecified Muslim leader appears a much less known document aptly named *The Chronicle of Disasters*.[46] After discussing how "our sins" have resulted in comets, plagues, earthquakes, drought, locust swarms, and hurricanes, the author of this uplifting list ends anticlimatically with a hail storm killing a number of birds. Even more interesting than these fowls' unfortunate fate, however, is how the author interweaves these natural catastrophes with two political references: one to the reign of the Umayyad caliph Walid and the other to Walid's successor Suleiman. Although the text does not explicitly link "the kingdom of Ishmael" with other listed items, the intercalation of these two rulers in the midst of more conventional misfortunes certainly suggests that these caliphs may also be part of God's chastisement of Christian sinners.

This strategy of suggestion by proximity was not limited to the original author of *The Chronicle of Disasters* but appears to have been taken up by the scribe Abraham as well. Given that only four of the 125 documents that Abraham collected explicitly speak of Islam, the chance of any two of them randomly following one another is less than ten percent.[47] More likely by far is that Abraham deliberately positioned these two documents next to each other. By placing *The Chronicle of Disasters* directly after *John and the Emir's* multipage discussion of Muslim theological challenges to Christianity, this ninth-century scribe created the impression that catastrophes naturally follow in Islam's wake.

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Although in recent years there have been a number of studies analyzing how Syriac authors originally wrote about Muslims, pre-

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dreh: A New Perspective on Nascent Islam" *Karmo* 1, no. 2 (1999): 46–64 reprinted in Abdul Massih Saadi "The Letter of John of Sedreh: A New Perspective on Nascent Islam" *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 11, no. 1 (1997): 68–84; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 459–465; Gerrit Reinink, "The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam" *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993): 165–187; Khalil Samir, "Qui est l'interlocuteur Musulman du patriarche syrien Jean III (631–648)?" in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, C. Molenberg and G. J. Reinink, eds. (Rome: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 387–400.

[46] Edition and French translation found in Nau, "Un colloque," 253–256. An English translation and brief commentary appear in Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 45–48.

[47] Special thanks to statistics professor George Cobb for calculating this probability.

vious scholars have never concentrated on how the Islamic Conquests affected the ways Syriac Christians physically modified the texts they were copying and reading.[48] Works such as *The Account of 637*, *The Caliph List of 724*, *The Letter of Athanasius of Balad*, *The Qenneshre Fragment*, *John and the Emir*, and *The Chronicle of Disasters* help us to better appreciate the materiality of manuscripts and to treat the alterations they underwent as essential evidence for the ongoing development of Syriac Christianity. Such an approach to manuscript culture has important pay-offs both for our understanding of early Christian/Muslim interactions and, more generally, for how we approach Syriac texts.

An examination of how the rise of Islam affected extant manuscripts builds upon the important work of text critics such as Bart Ehrman and Kim Haines-Eitzen.[49] It suggests that Ehrman and Haines-Eitzen's insight that early theological debates affected the ways Greek scribes transmitted biblical texts is also quite applicable to later theological and linguistic contexts. The type of interventions we find among Syriac manuscripts also indicates that ancient reading practices were physical endeavors in which later readers, not just scribes, often changed the text.

As a result, manuscripts are material witnesses for how Syriac Christians read Islam. It is important to note that the strategies which readers and scribes used in their physical interactions with manuscripts concerning Muslims strongly corresponded with the exegetical techniques employed by Syriac authors.[50] For example,

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[48] Some of the most recent discussions concerning Syriac texts about Islam can be found in Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, and David Thomas, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2006); *Redefining Christian Identity*, J. J. van Ginkel, H. L. Murre-van den Berg, and T. M. van Lint, eds. (Leuven: Peeters, 2005). For a bibliography of earlier studies see Michael Penn, "Syriac Sources for Early Christian/Muslim Relations," *Islamochristiana*, 29 (2003), 59–78 and Robert Holyland, *Seeing Islam*.

[49] Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*; Haines-Eitzen, *The Gaurdians of Letters*. For an example of a similar approach to changes in Syriac New Testament manuscripts see Sebastian P. Brock, "Hebrews 2:9b in Syriac Tradition," *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1983): 236–244.

[50] An intriguing parallel can be observed in the *Pericope Adulterae* found in many later manuscripts of the Gospel of John. Knust, "Early Christian Re-Writing and the History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," does a masterful job of showing how patristic exegesis and textual composition

the erasure of the term *rasul* allowed a reader to challenge a traditional way of addressing the prophet Muhammad. So too whenever the medieval author Dionysius Bar Salibi wrote about the "apostle Muhammad," he intentionally misspelled the Syriac word for apostle.[51] Likewise, the very ambiguity of the term ܫܠܝܚܐ which allowed a scribe to repackage Athanasius's letter as a diatribe against Islam, also permitted the ninth-century author Nonnus of Nisibis to use ܫܠܝܚܐ as a code for Muslims in his prison writings.[52] Throughout Syriac anti-Muslim polemics more generally, addition, erasure, redeployment, glossing, and reordering were important author as well as scribal and reader strategies.

This leads to a broader methodological point concerning how we read Syriac manuscripts. An analysis of how ancient scribes and readers interacted with codices suggests that we should treat Syriac manuscripts less as literature and more as what medievalist John Dagenais calls "lecturature."[53] That is, we need to remember that the works we study are not so much the product of individual authors as the accumulation of a series of readers. Similarities between the ways authors, scribes, and readers interpret a historical development, such as the rise of Islam, should not be analyzed as one group unilaterally influencing another. Rather, their shared exegetical strategies suggest that in antiquity there was much greater permeability between these categories than is commonly acknowledged. An approach to manuscript culture that refuses to sharply delineate between author, scribe, and reader shifts one's focus from the recovery of an ur-text to transmission history, where manuscripts reflect an evolving, frequently contested, multi-layered process of meaning making. Such a perspective can present a more nuanced picture of the interactions between monks, manuscripts, and Muslims. I suspect that it could do the same for other topics as well.

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influenced each other in shaping and reshaping the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery.

[51] As noted by Joseph P. Amar (*CSCO* 615*, 6n. 11; CSCO* 614, 6), Dionysius bar Salibi created a neologism ܡܫܝܚܝܐ to avoid calling Muhammad the ܪܫܘܠܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ.

[52] Nonnus of Nisibis, *Apologetic Tractate* (van Roey, *Nonnus De Nisibe*, 1*-29*).

[53] Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture*, 23.

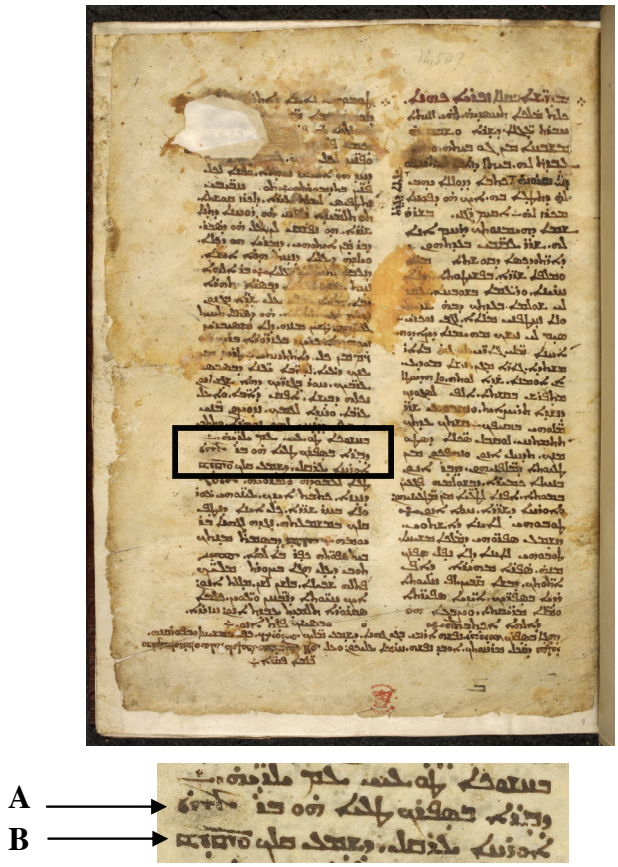

Figure 1. *British Library Additional* 14,509, f. 1a (with permission of the British Library). This twelfth-century codex begins with a madrasha containing the names of several figures whom the scribe considered heretical. Wherever these names appear on this page, the scribe has written them upside down. The inverted names in this detail include: (A) Bardaison, (where Bar is upright and Daison is inverted) and (B) Marcion.

Figure 2. *British Library Additional* 14,451, ff. 6b–7a (with permission of the British Library). This fifth-century codex contains one of two extant copies of the Old Syriac translation of the gospels. A later reader made numerous changes to four of the manuscript's folios in an attempt to have its version of Matthew correspond with the Peshitta's.

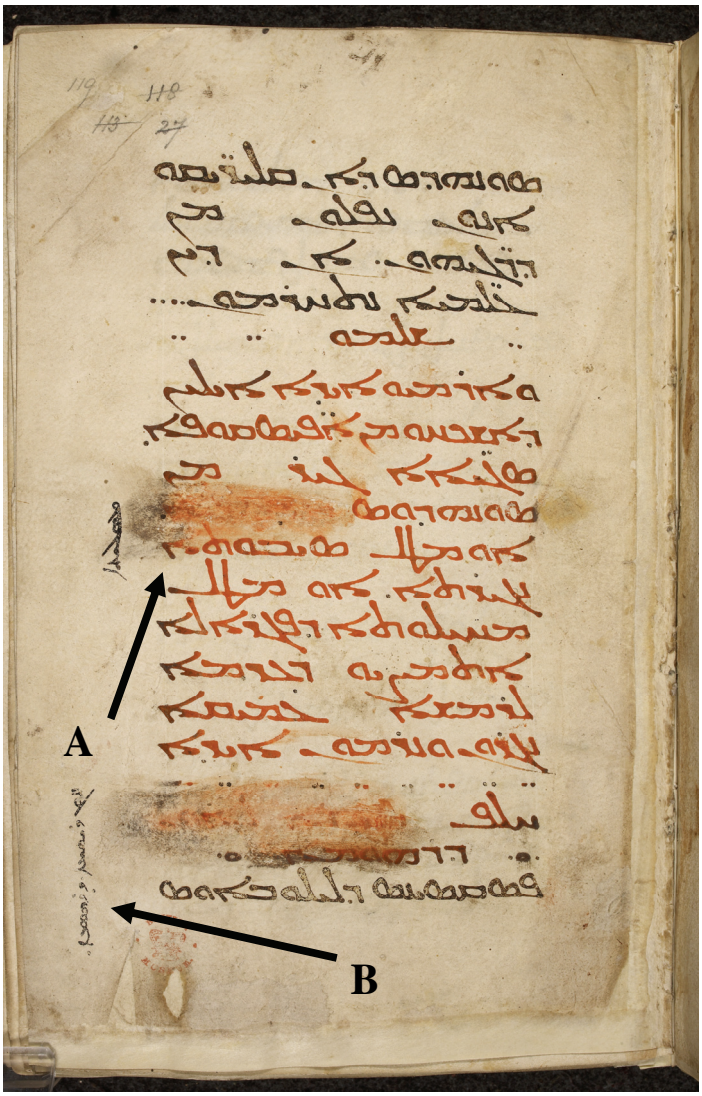

Figure 3. *British Library Additional* 14,528, f. 119 (with permission of the British Library). This sixth-century codex contains a number of canons from the Council of Chalcedon prompting three anti-Chalcedonian readers to alter the manuscript. On this page a later reader has changed the "holy" council of Chalcedon to "despised" (A) and the "illustrious" Leo has become "wicked" (B).

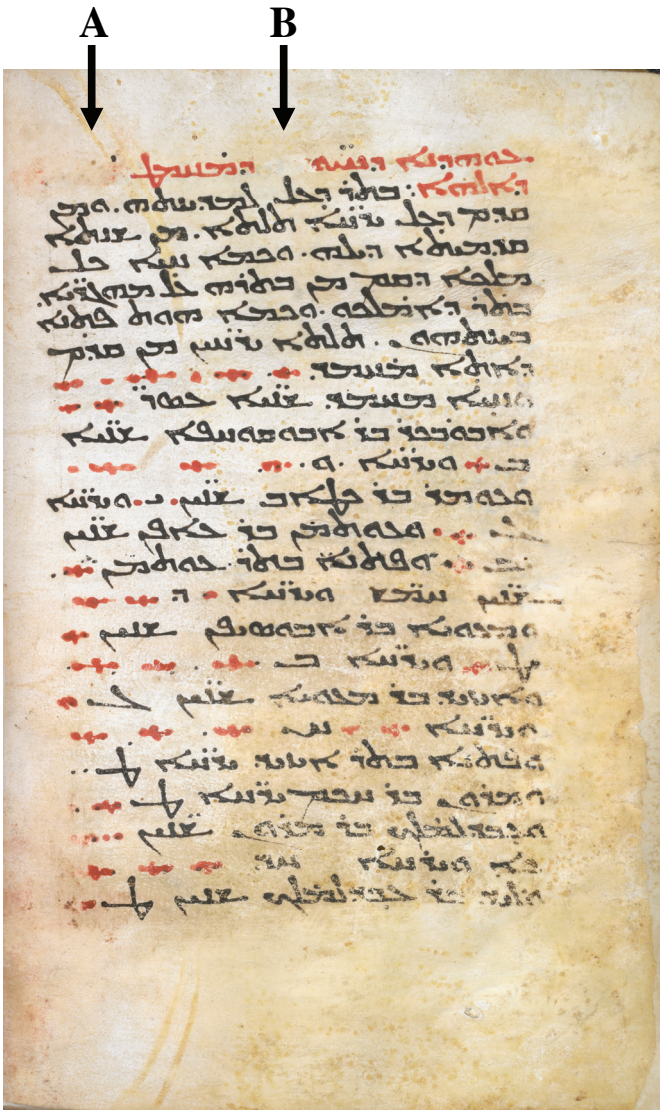

Figure 4. *British Library Additional* 14,643, f. 60b (with permission of the British Library). This eighth-century caliph list originally began, "A notice of the life of Muhammad, the messenger of God." A later reader erased the word messenger (A). The title also contains another erasure (B). With these two erasures the text now reads: "The notice that Muhammad (is) of God is rejected."

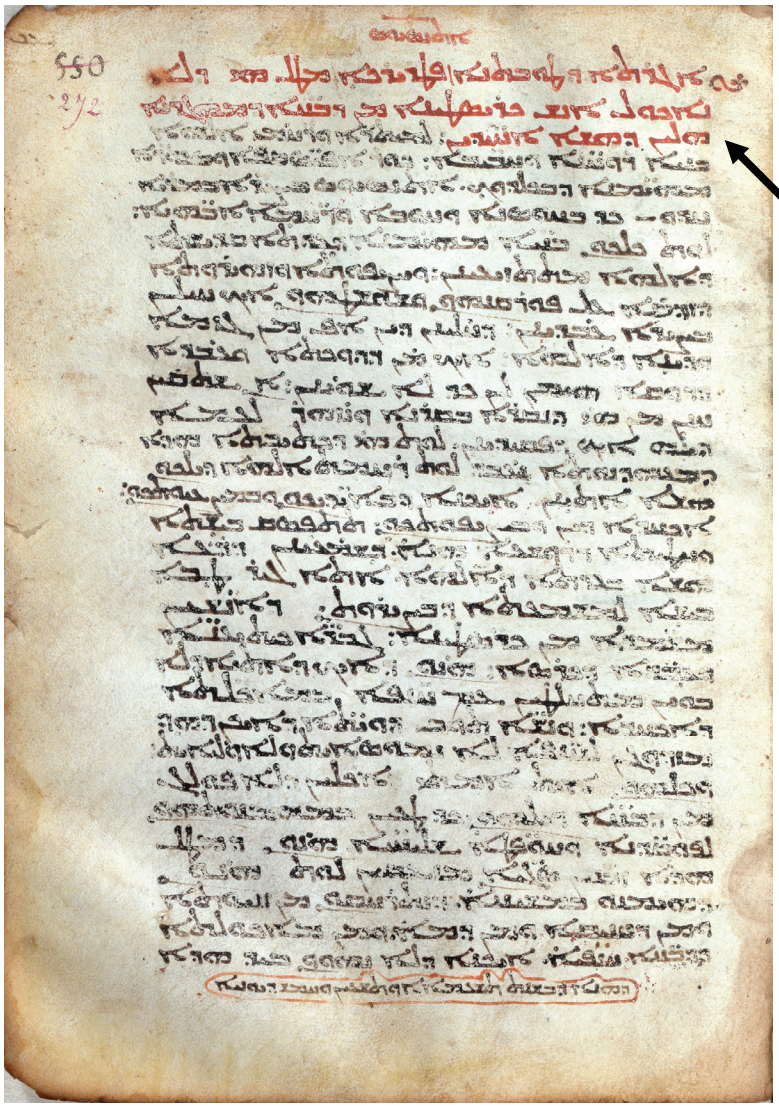

Figure 5. *Bibliothèque Nationale Syriac* 62, f. 272a (with permission of the Bibliothèque nationale). This letter from Athanasius of Balad was originally directed against pagans. A late-seventh- or eighth-century scribe shifted Athansius's polemic to be toward Muslims when he added the title: "A letter of the blessed patriarch Athanasius concerning that a Christian should not eat of the sacrifices of these Hagarenes who now hold power" (A) .

Figure 6. *Sachau* 315, f. 61b (with permission of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin). In this part of *The Qenneshre Fragment* a demon-possessed monk is asked whom demons love the most. The original response spoke of the demon's love for pagans but a later reader added a gloss redirecting the demons love to be toward Muslims. The gloss reads that the object of the demons' affection "do not believe that Christ is God but say that He is a created man" (A).