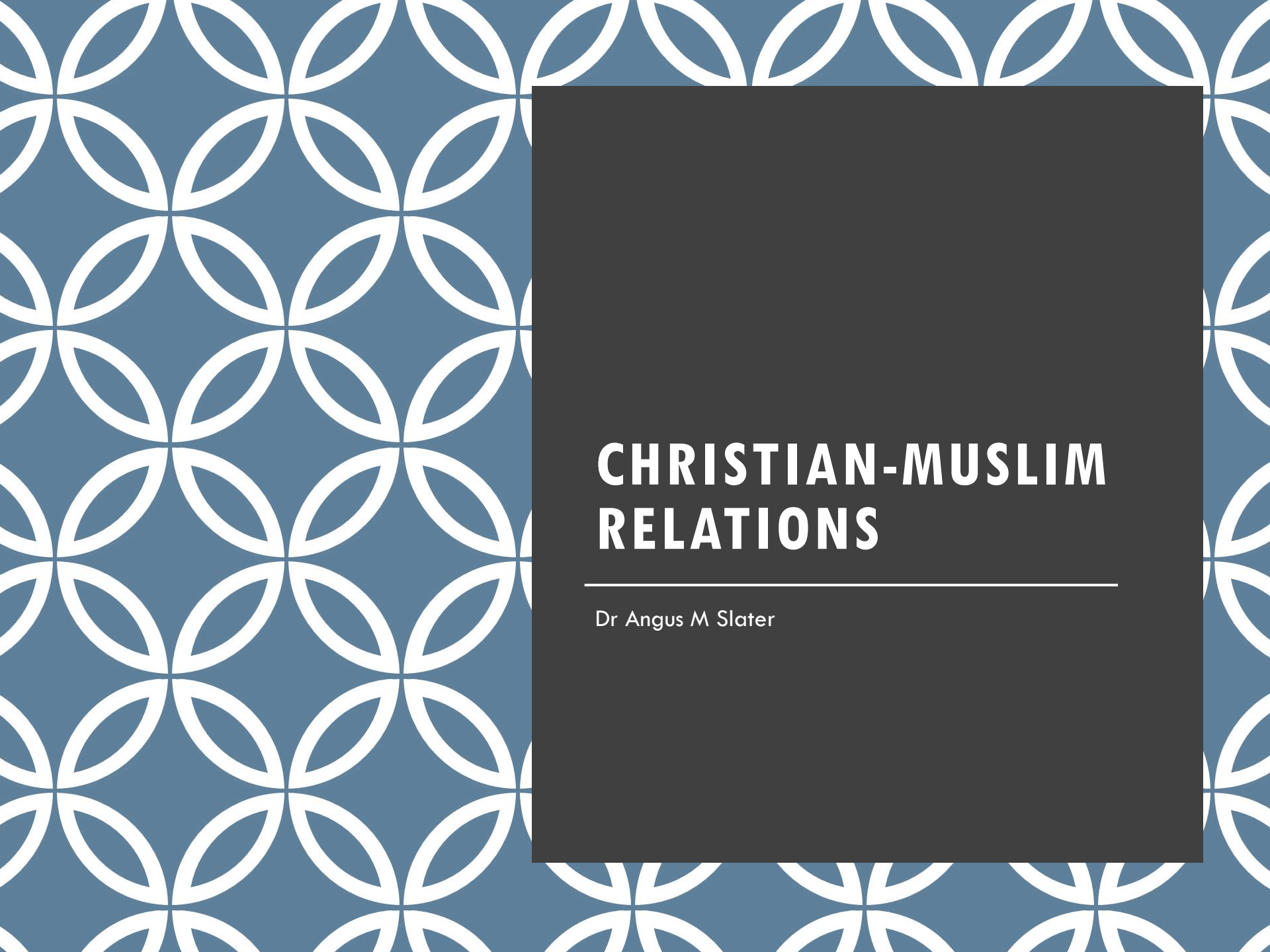




CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the last section, we began our entry into studying Christian-Muslim relations by looking at the genesis of the Christian tradition, its relationship with other religious traditions such as Judaism and Hellenic philosophy, and its growth and changing relationship to Empire.

In addition, we set the scene by examining the place of Christianity in pre-Islamic Arabia – the existence of geopolitical concerns between the Sassanids and Byzantines, the presence of important trade routes to Yemen and Ethiopia, and the growth of hermeticism and desert monasticism.



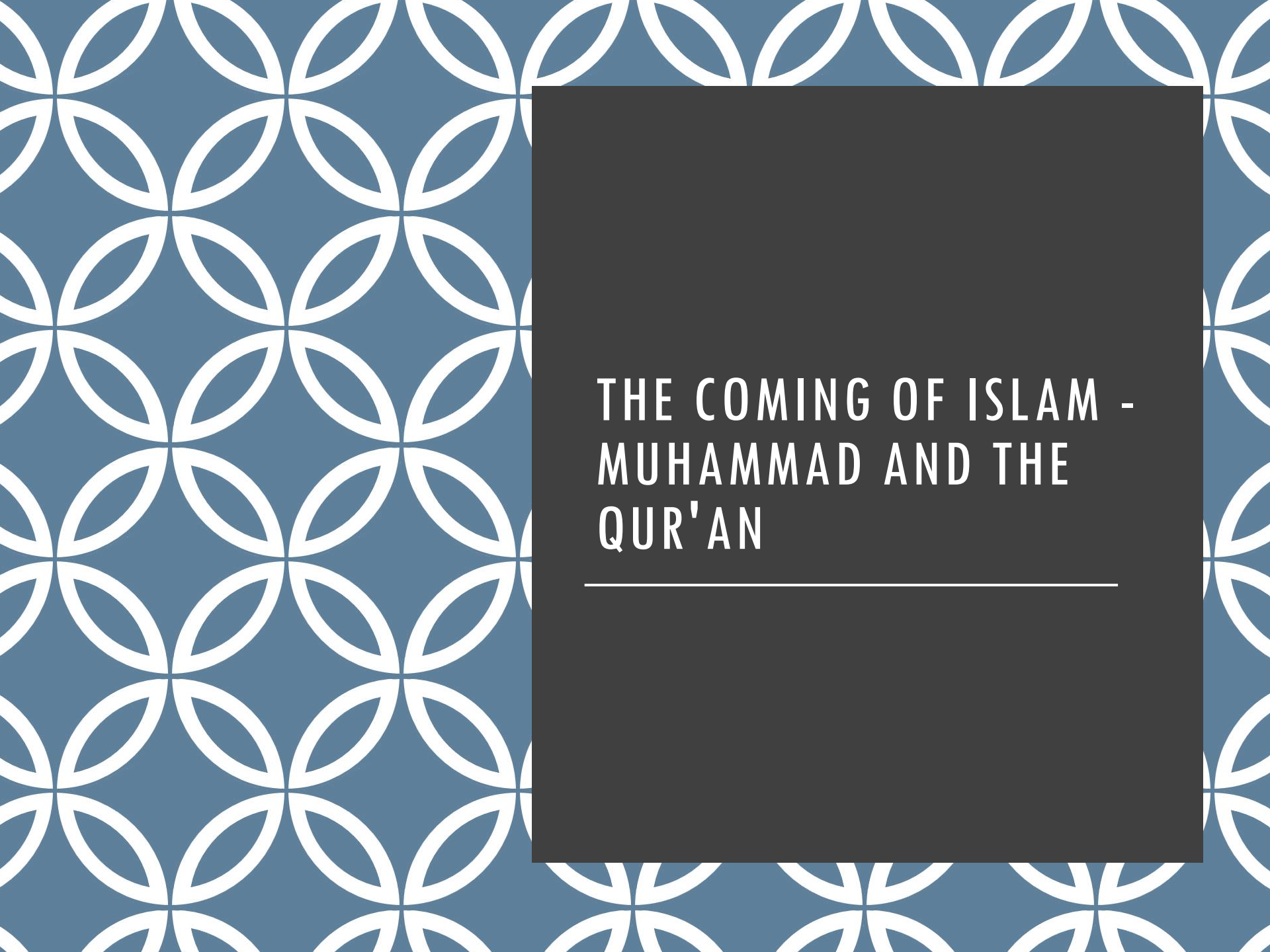
REVISION

Your readings fleshed out the relationship between Christianity and Judaism more fully – Parkes offering up a scholarly account of early Christian attitudes to the Jewish tradition, and Chrysostom serving as a short example of its virulence.

You also had a section exploring the way that Clement of Alexandria saw the relationship between the Christian tradition and pre-existing forms of Hellenic philosophy – another vital tradition in the Near East.

Make sure that you take the time to discuss the readings in the appropriate Moodle section.





THE COMING OF ISLAM - MUHAMMAD AND THE QUR'AN



PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

As we have begun to explore, pre-Islamic Arabia (before 610AD) was formed by three characteristics:

1 – Location

2 – Geopolitics

3 – Religion

Each of these factors added to the constantly changing and diverse society that was present in Arabia at this time and formed an aspect of the backdrop to the Prophet Muhammad's initial experiences, the foundation of Islam as a religious tradition, and its growth and spread across the Near East.

We will examine each of these factors in turn to give us a firmer grounding in the context of pre-Islamic Arabia, before beginning to look at the specific instances of contact between the early Muslim community and the Christian tradition.



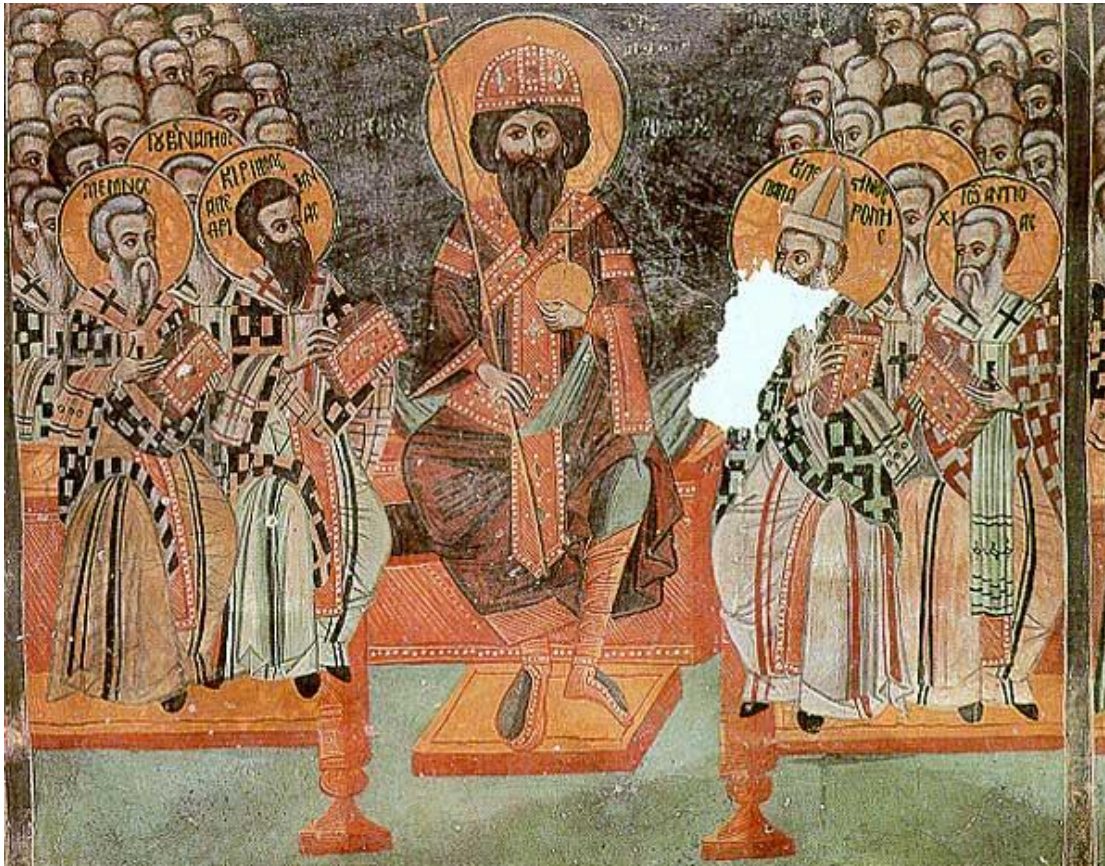
LOCATION

The location of Arabia is vitally important in the story of the beginning of Islam – sitting astride key routes in the pre-Islamic Near East, the Hejaz (where Mecca and Medina are found) was a vital trading link between the empires of the West (the Byzantines, the Frankish etc) and the East (China, India, Malay etc) with trade flowing back and forth between caravan stop cities scattered across the desert.

In this circumstance, the flow of trade led to a high level of social, cultural, and religious mixing in the trading cities such as Mecca and Medina, as well as a transnational network of economic and knowledge transfer.

Arabia, although geographically isolated from the centres of population and power at this time, was a critical economic link – control of trade cities and trade routes was associated with tribal social formations which combined political, economic, and religious factors.





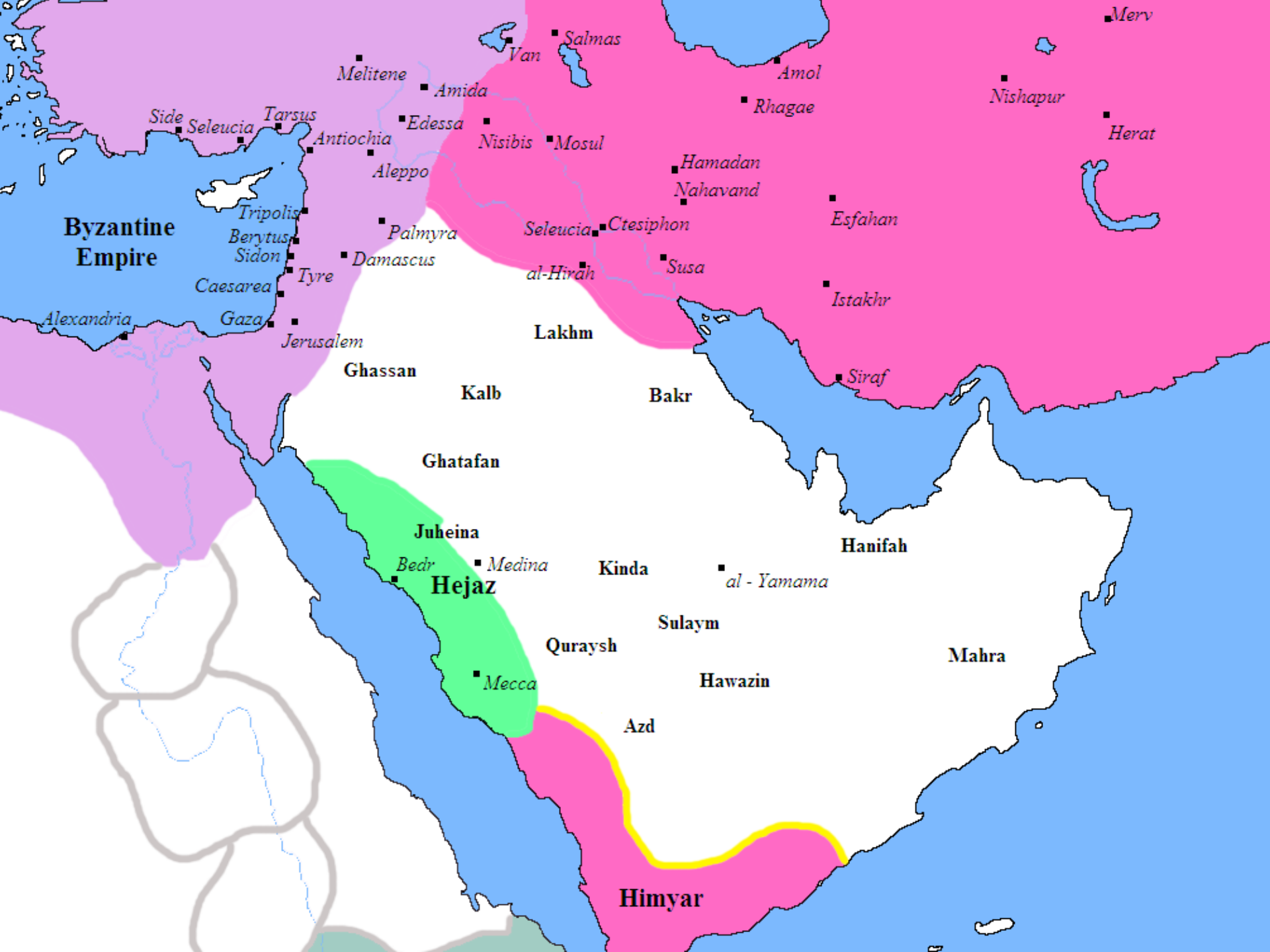
GEO-POLITICS

In addition to this importance due to trade, Arabia was also the borderland between Byzantium and the Sassanid Empire, the superpowers of their day.

Arabia, because of its size, tribal organisation, and low population, was not of great value to either empire, but, as is so common in history, it had value to each as a buffer against the other.

Both empires sought to protect themselves from the other by vassalizing or hiring mercenaries from competing tribal groups in Arabia. The Byzantines allied with the monophysite Ghassanids, while the Sassanids allied with the Nestorian Lakhmids.

By the time of the rise of Islam, both empires were severely weakened by their struggles, which had, in some form, been going on since wars between the Roman Republic and Parthian Empire in 54BC. 650+ years of recurring war had internally destabilised and weakened the ability of either empire to effectively control their lands or to project power – this made the border zone increasingly important but also increasingly unstable.



RELIGION — CHRISTIANITY

The religious context of pre-Islamic is hard to determine – a lack of archaeological evidence and recent destruction of archaeological evidence by the Saudi Arabian government means that it is difficult to determine detail about the nature of religious belief in pre-Islamic Arabia.

However, from textual sources, we are able to assert that pre-Islamic religion mostly consisted of indigenous polytheistic beliefs, forms of Eastern Christianity, Nestorian Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Christianity in its various forms had been present in Arabia almost since the beginning of the Christian tradition – having spread eastward just as much, if slower, than it has westward to the Roman Empire. This spread has been encouraged by Arab traders travelling on trade routes through Arabia (Acts 2:11), as well as those evangelized by Paul's ministry in Arabia (Galatians 1:17) and by St Thomas on his mission to India.

While largely monophysite Arabian Christianity was strong in areas of Southern Arabia, especially with Najran being an important centre of Christianity, Nestorian Christianity was the dominant religion in Eastern Arabia prior to the advent of Islam (Goddard, 2000)

This mixing of forms of Christianity within Arabia lasted much longer than diversity within the Eastern Roman Empire and Byzantium as the Church and Empire sought to develop stability and cohesion in the Christian community.



RELIGION — JUDAISM

As well as the Christian tradition, the Jewish tradition was also a significant factor in pre-Islamic Arabia, with a strong Jewish community and history.

The first mention of Jews in Arabia dates to the time of the First Temple but migration to the Arabian Peninsula began in earnest in the 2nd century CE following the destruction of the Second Temple and by the 6th and 7th centuries there was a considerable Jewish population in Hejaz, mostly in and around Medina. This was partly because of the embrace of Judaism by leaders such as Abu Karib Asad and Dhu Nuwas, who were very aggressive about converting their subjects to Judaism, and who persecuted Christians in his kingdom as a reaction to Christian persecution of Jews (Gil, 1997)

The Jewish tribes of the Hejaz come to play a significant role in the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad - before the rise of Islam, there were three main Jewish tribes in the city of Medina: the Banu Nadir, the Banu Qainuqa, and the Banu Qurayza (Mazuz, 2014)

In addition, there were Jewish influence present in the Nabatean peoples in Jordan, in Yemen to the south of Arabia, and across the Red Sea in areas like Axum and Ethiopia. This meant that the presence of the Jewish tradition was both a strong factor in pre-Islamic Arabia, but also one that was internally varied.



Ms. Mich. 619. fol. 100v.

BOULETIAN LIBRARY

RELIGION — PAGANISM

While the Christian and Jewish traditions were prominent presences in pre-Islamic Arabia, it is thought that the majority of peoples practiced a variety of forms of paganism (Hoyland, 2005) – mostly polytheistic, with a variety of different pantheons and relationships between them.

Amidst this variety, a distinction can be seen between urban forms of polytheistic worship and tribal Bedouin forms of worship (McAuliffe, 2005). In addition there is speculation that pre-Islamic practice was heno-theistic in character (Campo, 2009) with Allah present as a remote creator God.

Other aspects of worship seem to include a veneration for goddesses associated with celestial bodies and the sky (Hawting, 1999), a reverence for pilgrimage – including to Mecca and the Ka'aba (Al-Azmeh, 2017), and a strong connection to aspects of other Near Eastern polytheistic cults such as Isis or Aphrodite.

Much of this description is heavily contested and debated, for historical and theological reasons, hence the heavy citation in this slide!



RELIGION — OTHERS!

There were a number of other religious traditions present in pre-Islamic Arabia, including Zoroastrianism from Persia, which asserted a dualistic posture towards the divine and a reverence for fire, Sabianism, an offshoot of Abrahamic reverence which had a strong connection to astrology and angels.

Within the Qur'an, there is also discussion of the existence of those who were "hanif" before the coming the Prophet — those who had recognised and worshipped the One God before Muhammad's revelation, shunning the idol worship of the communities around them.

As you can see, the religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia was one that was complex, fluid, and varied — with a great variety of traditions and internal to those traditions as well.

This sets the scene for the next stage in our exploration of the relationship between Christianity and Islam - the coming of the Prophet Muhammad and his relationship with the existing Christian communities.

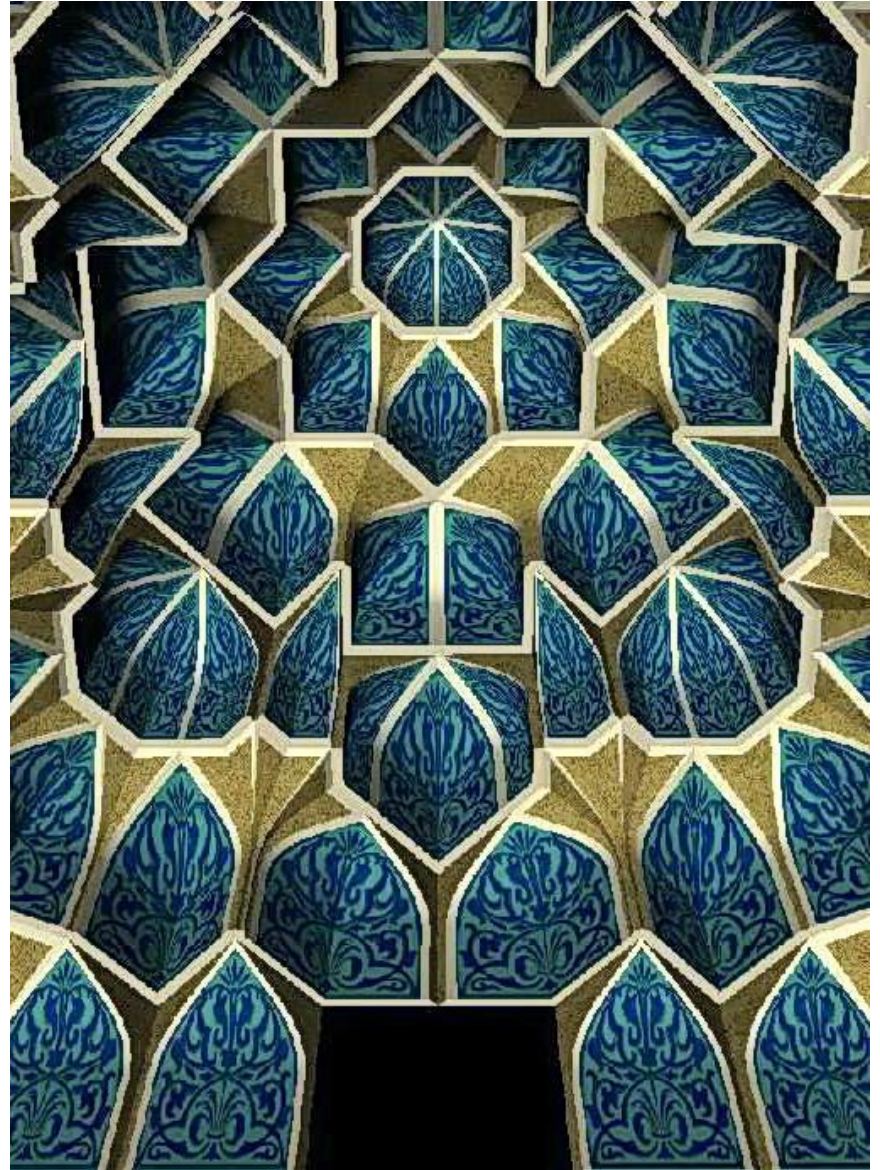


THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS CONTACTS WITH CHRISTIANS

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS CONTACTS WITH CHRISTIANS

The issues of contact between the Prophet Muhammad and early Christians in / around Arabia is a subject that has attracted a great deal of controversy within the Islamic tradition, and also in discussions between Christian and Muslim scholars.

This is because the issue of contact raises questions of authenticity for Muhammad's message – with differing scholars seeking to emphasise contact or lack of contact for their own theological reasons.



THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS CONTACTS WITH CHRISTIANS

This can be seen in some claims by Muslim scholars that, seeking to maximise the originality of Muhammad's message and its delivery direct from Allah, there was no contact between Muhammad and early Christians.

Conversely, a number of Christian scholars have made the claim that, because of early contact between Muhammad and early Christians, that Muhammad's message was entirely derivative of Christian / Jewish teaching.

Both of these positions are almost certainly overstatements or over-simplifications (Torrey, 1967; Bell, 1968; Crone & Cook, 1977). Rather, as we can see from traditional Muslim biographies of Muhammad, contact with early Christians was an accepted and expected part of pre-Islamic Arabian life.



THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS CONTACTS WITH CHRISTIANS

Within the *Sirat Rasul Allah* (The Life of the Prophet of God) by Ibn Ishaq (d.797/150), an established biography of Muhammad's life and work, we find five instances of contact between Muhammad and either Christian individuals or communities.

I want to each in turn to give us an idea of the nature of these interactions – focusing on the way in which they are framed and the potential implications of this contact for the ongoing relationship developing at this time between the religious traditions of Islam and Christianity.

A useful (if dated) resource for this material can be found in Guillame's *The Life of Muhammad*, 1955.





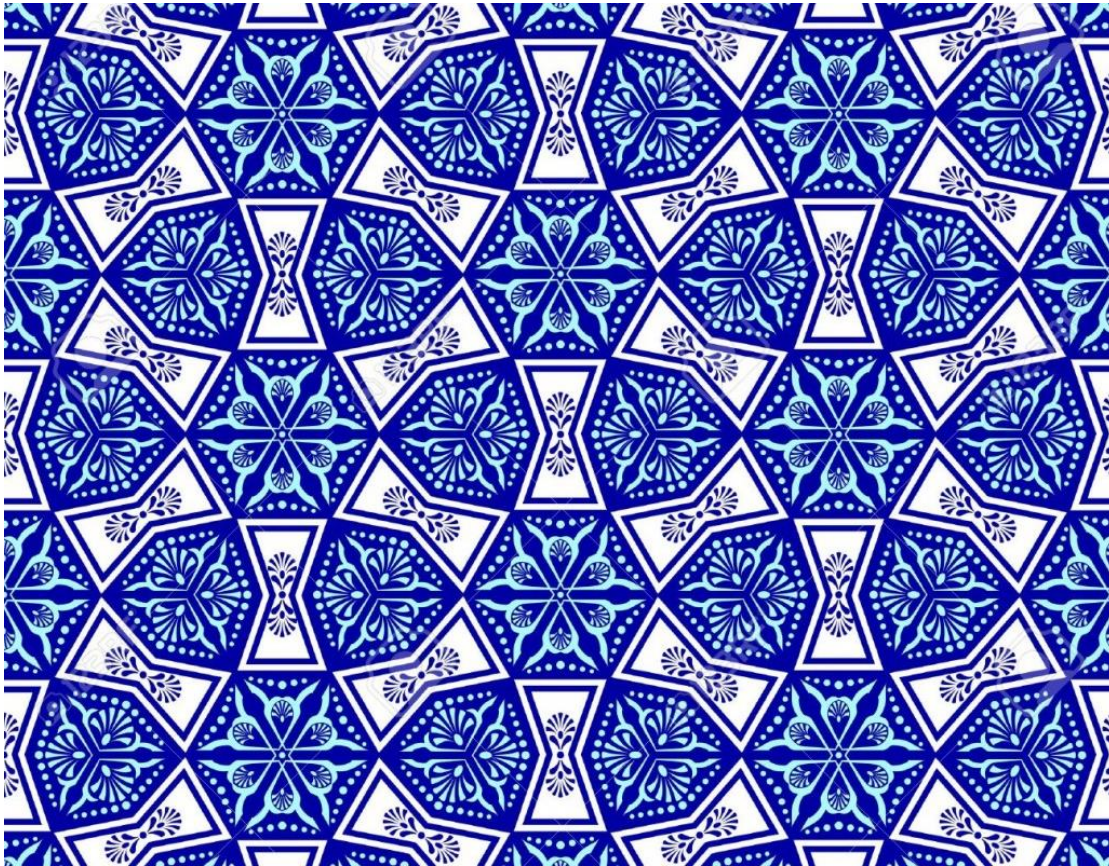
BAHIRA AND THE SEAL OF PROPHETHOOD

The first reported contact between Muhammad and a member of the Christian community occurs when he is around 12, when, taken to Syria as part of a caravan by his uncle Abu Talib, he meets a desert hermit called Bahira.

Bahira notes a cloud shadowing Muhammad and, intrigued, invites the whole caravan to join him for food and shelter. Once the caravan is settled, Bahira notes the branches of a tree bending to shade Muhammad, and, on closer inspection, saw the 'seal of prophethood' between his shoulders.

On seeing this, Bahira warned Muhammad's uncle to keep him safe and guard him from harm.

This incident serves an important theological purpose in the Muslim tradition of Muhammad's life – validating the idea of Muhammad's prophethood beyond the Islamic tradition and its recognition by non-Muslims.



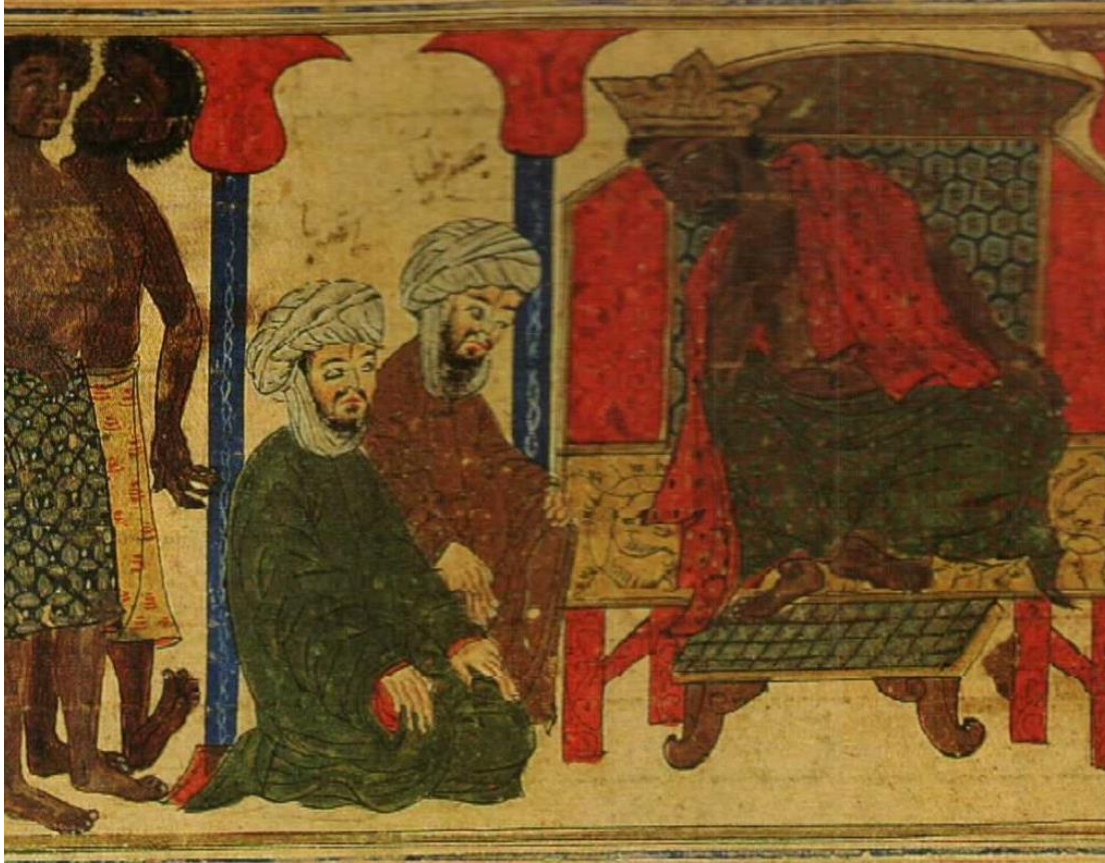
WARAQA IBN NAFAL AND THE ASSURANCE OF PROPHECY

The next moment of contact occurs at a vitally important part of the history of Islam, not long after Muhammad experiences his call to prophethood – a vision of the angel Gabriel and a commission to recite the message of God.

Following this unsettling experience, Muhammad seeks out the wisdom of his wife, Khadija's, cousin Waraqa Ibn Nafal who is known to be a Christian who had studied the scriptures and was a scholar.

On learning of Muhammad's experience, Waraqa confirmed that the vision was from God and stated that it showed Muhammad was to be the prophet for the Arab peoples.

This is important because it strengthens the claim that the revelation to Muhammad is of the same source and descent as those previous revelations in Christian and Jewish traditions.



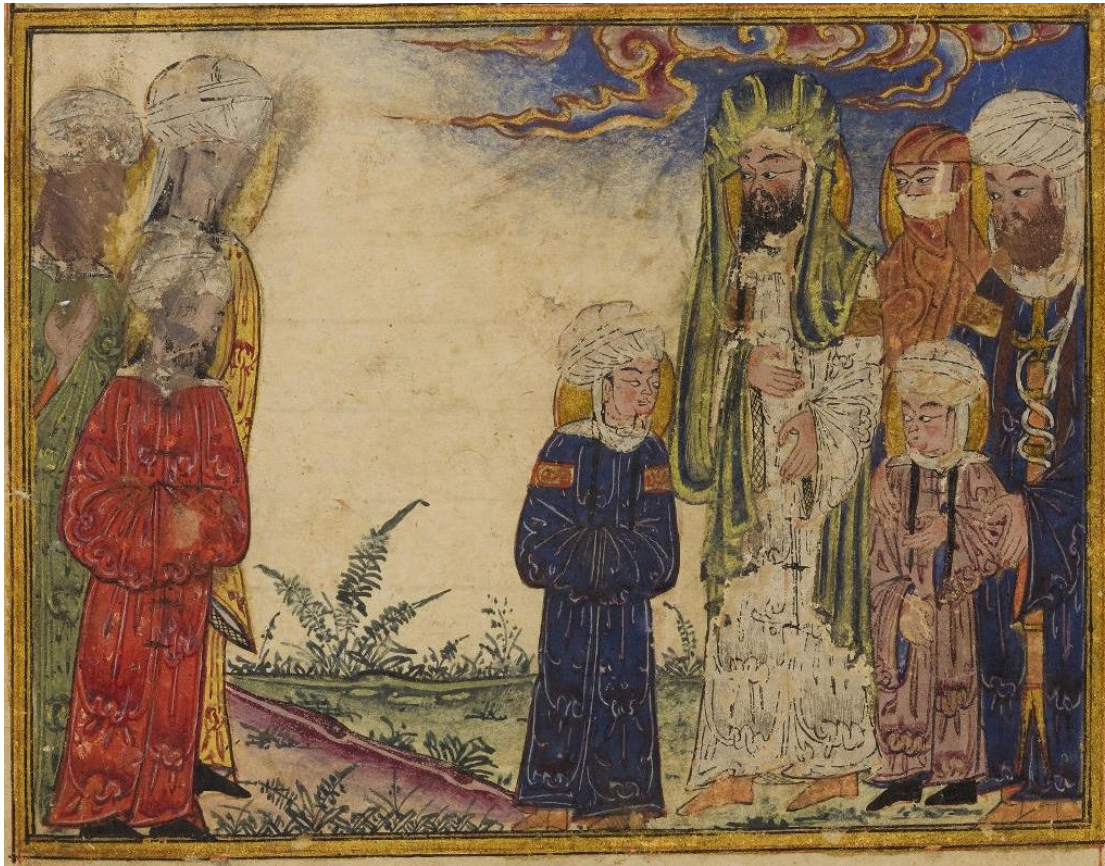
THE NEGUS OF AXUM AND JA'FAR IBN ABU TALIB

The Negus of Axum was the ruler of an area in Africa, across the Red Sea from Mecca, which was majority monophysite Christian.

When the early Muslim community faced persecution in Mecca from the ruling Quraysh clan, a number migrated to the Abyssinian kingdom of Axum. While there, the still pagan rulers of Mecca sought their repatriation to Mecca, and initiated a conversation between the leaders of the migrant group and the Negus.

The leader of the migrant group, Ja'far ibn Abu Talib responded by enumerating the beliefs of the Muslim community, and recited the Quranic account of the conception and birth of Jesus.

The Negus was convinced that the beliefs of the Muslim community matched closely enough to his own that he rejected the request of the Meccans and offered continued shelter to the Muslim community.



MUHAMMAD AND THE CHRISTIANS OF NAJRAN

This meeting is somewhat the inverse of the previous, with a group of Christians from the town of Najran seeking the protection of Muhammad, who was by now ruling Medina.

This protection would form part of a treaty between the two peoples in which those from Najran would show submission to Medina – although whether this was religious or political submission is contested.

As part of the negotiation of the treaty between them, we see the allowing of Christian prayer in the mosque at Medina and a long discussion of the Christological beliefs held by the two communities – the disagreement is to be settled by a curse from both communities.

The Christian group declines and leaves, preferring to disagree peacefully.



The last account offered by Ibn Ishaq of contact between Muhammad and Christian communities is that, towards the end of his life, Muhammad wrote letters to the rulers of those nations near to Arabia, calling on them to embrace Islam.

These letters, sent to Axum in Africa, the Emperor Heraclitus of the Byzantine Empire, and the Sassanid Emperor Khusro, invited them to convert to the Islamic faith.

There is no account of a response or reply, however.

LETTERS TO THE RULERS OF THE WORLD

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS CONTACTS WITH CHRISTIANS

These incidents vary in historical reliability (Bahira and the Letters are generally seen as apocryphal, the negotiations and Waraqa ibn Nafal as more reliable). This is partly because of historical sourcing, but also the theologically useful nature of the two events.

Bahira adds weight to Islamic claims of descent from Jewish and Christian prophethood and the Letters offer a justification for Islam's later relevance to non-Arab peoples. Think of the Three Wise Men in the Nativity story and their (very similar) role.

The two incidences of negotiation are more firmly established in other reports and offer an illuminating insight into the changing political dynamics between the communities at this time.



THE QUR'AN AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

THE QUR'AN AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

During this time period, another source for reflection on the interaction between Muslim and Christian communities is the Qur'an

This is a critical time frame, as the revelation of the Qur'an continues throughout Muhammad's life and reacts and interacts with the passage of events in the history of the early Muslim community.

In looking at Qur'anic references to the Christian faith, two interconnected factors are particularly important:

1 - The relationship of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities – often aspects of Qur'anic narrative about the Christian community need to be read in the context of Qur'anic narratives about the Jewish community, with which the early Muslim community was much more familiar.

2 – The timing of the revelations relative to political developments – various parts of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad at different times and in response to different events. This means that there are changes apparent in the timeline of revelation, something that is particularly noticeable in the changing attitudes to Jewish and Christian communities as they come into contact with, and then reject, the early Muslim religious tradition.

THE QUR'AN AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Some examples of references include the following stresses on commonalities and differences between the two religious faiths:

"Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians -- whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord. And there will be no fear for them, nor shall they grieve" (2:62, 5:69, and many other verses).

"...and nearest among them in love to the believers will you find those who say, 'We are Christians,' because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant" (5:82).

"O you who believe! Be helpers of God -- as Jesus the son of Mary said to the Disciples, 'Who will be my helpers in (the work of) God?' Said the disciples, 'We are God's helpers!' Then a portion of the Children of Israel believed, and a portion disbelieved. But We gave power to those who believed, against their enemies, and they became the ones that prevailed" (61:14).

"If only they [i.e. Christians] had stood fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that was sent to them from their Lord, they would have enjoyed happiness from every side. There is from among them a party on the right course, but many of them follow a course that is evil" (5:66).

"Oh People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion, nor say of God anything but the truth. Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, was (no more than) a messenger of God, and His Word which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him. So believe in God and His messengers. Say not, 'Trinity.' Desist! It will be better for you, for God is One God, Glory be to Him! (Far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is God as a Disposer of affairs" (4:171).

"The Jews call 'Uzair a son of God, and the Christians call Christ the son of God. That is but a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. God's curse be on them; how they are deluded away from the Truth! They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of God, and (they take as their Lord) Christ the son of Mary. Yet they were commanded to worship but One God: there is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him! (Far is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him)" (9:30-31).

THE QUR'AN AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Waardenburg (1981) attempts to explain some of the shifts seen in Qur'anic attitudes towards the Christian community by focusing on the encounters Muhammad had with both the Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia.

Given Muhammad's location of his prophetic work within the long tradition of Jewish and Christian monotheism, the initial expectation was that members of these faiths would recognise his position and follow his leadership.

However, the encounter with Jewish tribes in Medina did not result in this, with many references then occurring that portrayed a negative account of the Jews in comparison to the still relatively unknown Christians.

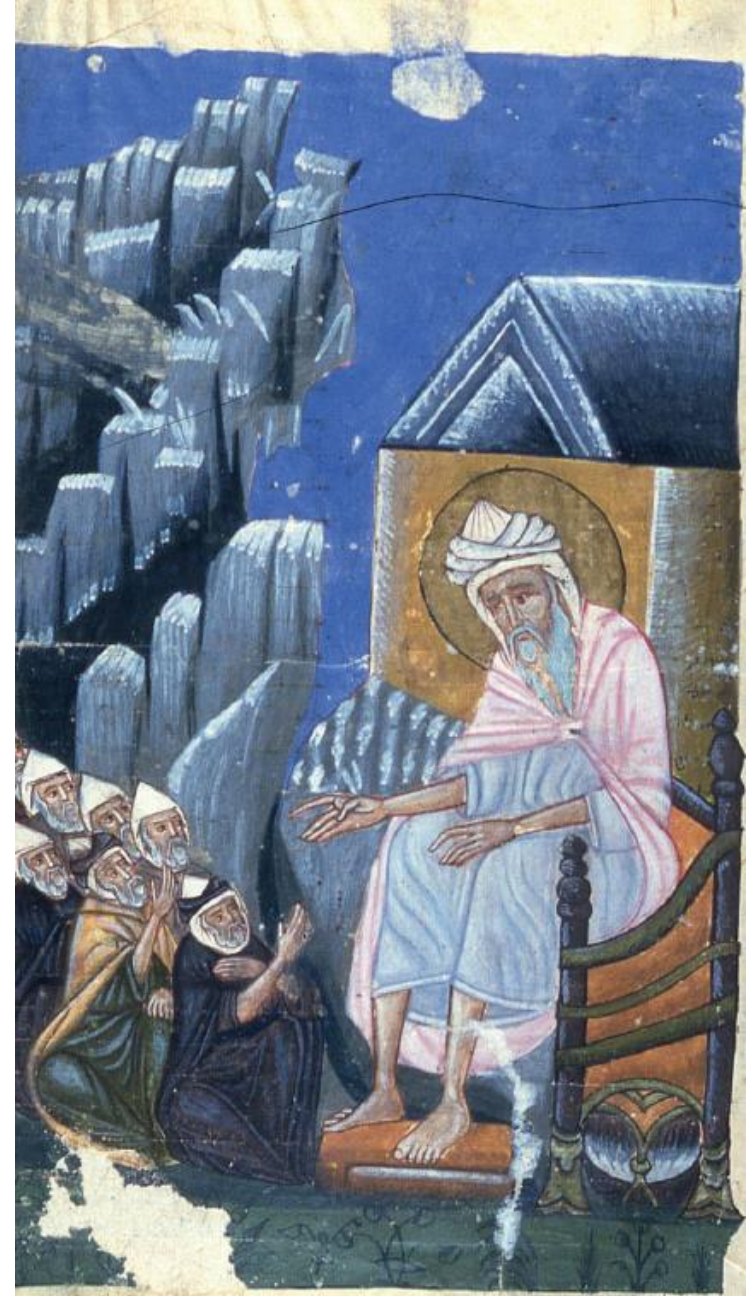
In time, as the Muslim community came to further contact with Christian communities, and they also rejected the prophethood of Muhammad, a similar process occurs.



THE QUR'AN AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The scholar McAuliffe (1991) somewhat supports this notion, with a detailed study of the nature of positive references to the Christian community in the Qur'an. In doing so, she notes that often these positive portrayals of the Christian community are predicated on the acceptance of submission to Muhammad in a religious sense – that Christians can be seen in a positive light so long as they accept the prophethood of Muhammad.

This attitude is mirrored by many of more negative portrayals of Christian belief within the Qur'an, which focus on aspects of theological disagreement between the two faith (even where the description of Christian belief is incorrect).



READINGS

READINGS

If you are more generally interested in this period, there is a great deal of scholarship available on pre-Islamic Arabia, early interactions with Jewish and Christian communities, the life of the communities at Medina, and the early expansion of the Islamic world.

More introductory material can often be found in histories of Islam, which may also be useful throughout this section of the module.

READINGS

Waardenburg, J. "The Early Period: 610-650" in Waardenburg, J (ed) (1999) *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 3-17

McAuliffe, JD. "Christians in the Qur'an and Tafsir" in Waardenburg, J (ed) (1999) *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 105-121

I would heartily recommend the entirety of *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* as an excellent resource for this part of the course.

Jaques, R. (2015-11-01). Muḥammad's Mission and the Dīn of Ibrāhīm according to Ibn Ishāq. In *Varieties of Religious Invention: Founders and Their Functions in History*. : Oxford University Press.

THAMINA, K., 2004. Abraham in Islamic Perspective Reflections on the Development of Monotheism in Pre-Islamic Arabia. *Der Islam*, **81**(2), pp. 184-205.