The Jewish Theme in Theophanes the Confessor’s Testimony on the Prophet Muḥammad

Abstract. Theophanes’ account regarding the rise of Islam and the history of the Prophet Muḥammad appears to be the most detailed and precise one that can be found in Byzantine historiography. The Confessor’s aim was to reproduce as many details about Muḥammad’s life as possible. Since his focus was not on religious ideas, but on key events surrounding the rise of the new religion, his account is not predominantly concerned with discussing Islam’s ideology. However, this does not allow us to regard it as in any way objective. Some of the views it contains were included with the clear goal of discrediting Islam as a religion that rivalled Christianity. This, for example, can be said of Theophanes’ remarks about the relationship between Muḥammad and the Jews. In this article, I focus on this aspect of Theophanes’ account, discussing it in the context of the long-running (the last several decades) scholarly debates regarding Jewish-Muslim relations.

Keywords: Theophanes the Confessor, Byzantine historiography, Christian-Muslim relations, Muḥammad, Islam’s Prophet

Theophanes’s work provides a great deal of information about the Prophet Muḥammad. The Byzantine chronicler, who can be considered to have obtained detailed knowledge of Muḥammad’s life, lived in a country (150 years after the Prophet’s death) that maintained constant relations with the Caliphate, both in war and on peaceful terms. It was thus impossible for Islam’s founder to remain an unknown figure in the Empire. The reason why the information about

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1 Some of the issues dealt with in this article I have also discussed in B. Cecota, Islam, the Arabs and Umayyad Rulers according to Theophanes the Confessor’s Chronography, SCer 2, 2012, p. 97–111. For detailed discussion of Muḥammad as presented in Theophanes the Confessor’s Chronography cf. idem, Islam, Arabowie i wizerunek kalifów w przekazach Chronografii Teofanesa Wyznawcy, Łódź 2022 [= BL, 43], p. 51–73.

2 The knowledge of Islam and the Prophet in the early period of the Arab invasion of Syria and Egypt was scarce, if there was any awareness at all that Islam was a new religion (it was difficult to become aware of the fact not only because of the lack of reliable information, but because chaos and anarchy arose during these events and the level of understanding of Islam’s principles among Arab
him seems so precise may lie in the fact that Theophanes strove to give an account not only of Muḥammad’s ideas, but also of Muḥammad’s life, focusing on details that went unnoticed by other chroniclers, whether the Byzantine ones or the ones coming from countries that remained under Arab occupation. However, one may be puzzled by the fact that the fullest account of the Prophet’s life given from the Byzantine perspective comes from as late as the beginning of the eleventh century3.

Regardless of these biographical details, Theophanes never lost sight of the fact that his main goal was to point out the falseness of the Islamic doctrine. One cannot agree with the view that he aimed to offer an objective description of the Muslims’ religion4, although his account is actually calm and balanced, as was rightly stressed by Teresa Wolińska5. On the other hand, however, one should bear in mind the opinion expressed by Sidney H. Griffith, according to whom Christian apologists (including Theophanes) drew on details of Muḥammad’s life in order to show that he was not a prophet in a biblical sense of the word, and that what he was after was mainly power. There was then no doubt that he was not called by God, but by people who gave him some notion of Christian and Jewish doctrines. The apparent interest in details of his life may thus have stemmed from the intention of discrediting him and his ideas6.

The pejorative attitude towards the Prophet is attested to in three fragments of Theophanes’ account. The first concerns the Jews and their reaction to Muḥammad’s teachings, while the remaining two pertain to his supposed illness and women’s role in the spread of the new doctrine. This article discusses only the first of those fragments. Theophanes employed a clever strategy of making the Jews seem to be casting something of a ‘double’ doubt on Islam. They are reported to have first recognised the doctrine, a fact sufficient for a Christian to deny warriors was low); J. Flori, L’islam et la fin des Temps. L’interprétation prophétique des invasions musulmanes dans la chrétienté médiévale, Paris 2007, p. 114–122; J.V. Tolan, Réactions chrétiennes aux conquêtes musulmanes. Etude comparée des auteurs chrétiens de Syrie et d’Espagne, CCM 44, 2001, p. 350–352. However, in the years that followed the awareness of Islam’s distinctiveness spread not only among Byzantium’s lay and clerical elites, but also among its lower strata, for example, among soldiers from the themes of Asia Minor. According to David Turner, the theme Anatolikon’s cry regarding the faith in the Holy Trinity, reported from the reign of Constantine IV (668–685), can be interpreted as aimed at stressing the importance of the Christian religion as opposed to strictly monotheistic Islam: The Trouble with the Trinity: The Context of a Slogan during the Reign of Constantine IV (668–685), BMGS 27, 2003, p. 118–119. For similar conclusions cf.: L. Boras, A Prophet has appeared coming with the Saracens. The Non-Islamic Testimonies on the Prophet and the Islamic Conquest of Egypt in the 7th–8th centuries (MA Thesis, Radboud University, Nijmegen 2017), p. 14.

5 In this way: Ю. Максимов, Прп. Феофан Исповедник Сирианский об исламе, БВе 4, 2004, p. 312–335.

6 S.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:] idem, Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine, Aldershot 2003, p. 132.
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its authenticity7. We are explicitly informed of the conversion of some members of Jewish communities to Islam: ὡς καί τινας τῶν προσωνότων αὐτῶν προσελθεὶν αὐτῷ καὶ δέξασθαι τὴν αὐτοῦ θρησκείαν. Theophanes accuses them of disowning Moses, while at the same time confirming the credibility of his mission: καὶ ἀφῆσαι τὴν τοῦ θεοπτοῦ Μωσέως. He then goes on to state that those Jews who converted to Islam soon found the religion false. They took note of the fact that Muhammad’s habit of eating some foods ran counter to the principles of Judaism (the ban on eating camel’s meat): θεωρήσαντες δὲ αὐτὸν ἐσθίοντα ἀπὸ καμήλου ἐγνωσαν, ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτός, ὅν ἐνόμισαν. However, acting out of fear, they stayed with the Prophet and, it is emphasized, affected his mission in such a way that it became directed mainly against the Christians: καὶ ἠπόρουν τί πρᾶξαι, καὶ ἀφῆσαι αὐτοῦ τὴν θρησκείαν δειλιῶντες οἱ τάλανες ἐδίδασκον αὐτὸν ἀθέμιτα καθ’ ἡμῶν τῶν Χριστιανῶν. The chronicler thus seems to suggest that Islam’s hypocrisy was so dreadful that even the Jews, themselves guilty of blasphemy, realised that it was not a true religion8.

Given the above, it seems that the range of arguments on which Christian apologists drew in dealing with Islam involved accusing it of ties to Judaism9. It holds especially true for the circles that remained under Islam’s direct influence – the Christians of Syria, both the Monophysites and Nestorians. The latter included so distinguished an apologist as Timothy I (almost the peer of Theophanes the Confessor), Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 780–82310. In one of the surviving letters, addressed to Sergius, Elam’s future Metropolitan (the end of the eighth century), Timothy referred to the Muslims as the ‘new Jews’, regarding polemical engagements with them as a direct continuation of the early Christians’ disputes with Jewish communities in Palestine11. Similar references appeared in the

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7 The whole of this complicated description is found between the lines: Theophanis Chronographia, AM 6122, ed. C.G. de Boor, Lipsiae 1883 (cetera: Theophanes), p. 333.4–9.
8 Theophanes, AM 6122, p. 333.9–13.
9 It is still open to debate to what extent Christian works from the seventh century engaged in polemics with Judaism were directed only against the Jews and to what extent they referred to the new variant of Moses’ religion – that is, Islam. It is worth noting here that this polemic always pertained to similar elements: The Holy Trinity, Incarnation, Crucifixion etc. There is a vast body of literature on the topic. Cf.: Sh. O’Sullivan, Anti-Jewish Polemic and Early Islam, [in:] The Bible in Arab Christianity, ed. D. Thomas, Leiden–Boston 2007 [= HCh-MR, 6], p. 49–68; V. Déroche, Polémique anti-judaïque et émergence de l’Islam (7e–8e siècles), REB 57, 1999, p. 141–161; A. Cameron, Byzantines and Jews: Some Recent Work on Early Byzantium, BMGS 20, 1996, p. 249–274; G. Dagron, V. Déroche, Juifs et chrétiens dans l’Orient du VII siècle, TM 11, 1991, p. 17–273.
record of a supposed debate (there is still no agreement among scholars about its authenticity\(^\text{12}\)) between the patriarch and representatives of Caliph al-Mahdī in 782. Syrian and Arab sources that record the supposed debate contain a fragment in which Caliph and his representatives point to their kinship with the Jews and Moses' mission, trying to infer from the Book of Deuteronomy 18.18 (\textit{I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kindred, and will put my words into the mouth of the prophet; the prophet shall tell them all that I command}) a herald of Muḥammad's advent. The patriarch questions this assertion by indicating that ancient peoples, such as the Edomites, the Ammonites, or the Moabites, were more closely related to the Israelites than the Ishmaelites\(^\text{13}\). Another Theophanes's 'peer'\(^\text{14}\), Theodore Bar Koni, also representing the Church of the East\(^\text{15}\), wrote in his \textit{Ktābah d-'eskoliyon}, in the part presenting arguments against Islam, that Muslims \textit{believe in the same way as Jews}\(^\text{16}\). Among those who claimed that the latter paved the way for regarding the crucified Christ as a human being was Abū Rāʾīṭah l-Takrītī\(^\text{17}\), a representative of the Syrian Monophysite Church. However, he drew no distinction between Muslims and members of Christian denominations holding such a view of Christ\(^\text{18}\). The charge of the Jewish origin of Islamic dogmas

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appeared in the Apology of Al-Kindi\(^9\), a work dating from the ninth or tenth century, depending on which modern interpretation we accept\(^20\). The Apology also contains a suggestion, according to which the idea of establishing a new religion came from two Jewish scholars, (actually against Muḥammad’s will)\(^21\), one of whom is known in the Muslim tradition as a companion of two just Caliphs – ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān\(^22\). In accordance with the later Islamic traditions, a famous monk, Bahīrā\(^23\), reported to have prophesied Muḥammad’s future greatness as a prophet, was in fact a rabbi\(^24\). To the above, one might add the account by the Armenian historian Seboes who claimed that the Arab invasion was inspired by the Jews who


\(^21\) Apology of Al Kindy…., p. 23–24.


\(^24\) B. Roggemea, The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā. Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam, Leiden 2009 [= HCh-MR, 9], p. 44. On the other hand, however, there is also the version suggesting that Bahīrā came from the Arab tribe of Qays: B. De Vries, On the Way to Bosra. Arab Settlement in South Syria before Islam – the Evidence from Written Sources, [in:] Hereux qui comme Ulisses a fait un beau voyage. Movements of People in Time and Space, ed. idem, N. Naguib, Bergen 2010, p. 72.
had fled Edessa for fear of Byzantine persecution. In the High Middle Ages, the charges and suggestions that Muhammad had ties to the Jews spread as far as the circle of Slavia Orthodoxa. We find them, explicitly offensive in form, in the Palea from the fourteenth century, where the Prophet is referred to as a Jewish slave.

This brief review of the attitudes of Christian apologists who, coming from different circles and belonging to warring Christian denominations, wrote about Islam in the early stages of its development allows us to conclude that the 'Jewish issue' was exploited to a significant extent. There was thus nothing surprising about the fact that Theophanes decided to refer to it in his own work. It is interesting to note that by drawing so extensively on anti-Jewish themes, Christian apologists may have brought about their increased occurrence in Muslim literature. Particularly interesting in this context is the figure of 'Abdallāh ibn Saba', one of the first infidels and heretics of the early Islam, who was accused of the Jewish origin. Those involved in the ongoing political struggle did not flinch from

25 Cf. R. Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Other Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam, Princeton–New Jersey 1997, p. 124–132. Considering the fact that Sebeos described the rise of Islam (or at least the invasion of Christian lands) as a Jewish intrigue, it is worth noting that the tendency to regard the Jews as conspirators who spread subversive ideas undermining social order can also be found in Muslim literature: B. Lewis, Jews of Islam, Westport, Connecticut 2002, p. 103.


27 For a multifaceted discussion of the anti-Jewish rhetoric used by Christian apologists writing about Islam cf. S.H. Griffith, Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth century, JH 3, 1988, p. 65–94. It is worth noting that the Arabs were accused of having ties to the Jews already in pre-Islamic era. It suffices to mention here Hermias Sozomenos who noted that in following some habits and rituals such as circumcision or the ban on eating pork, the Arabs were similar to the believers of Judaism. Sozomenos even suggested that the Arabs had initially been, and some still continued to be, of Jewish faith (Sozomenus, Kirchengeschichte, VI, 38.10–13, ed. J. Bidez, G.Ch. Hansen, Berlin 1995 [= GCS.NF, 4], p. 299). According to Greg Fisher, these insinuations aimed to denounce the Arabs as having ties to the Jews. – Between Empires. Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity, Oxford 2011 [= OCM], p. 166–167. However, one should keep in mind here the essay by Elizabeth Jeffreys. Although she described her text as only an introduction to a wider discussion worthy of a whole book, she began it by comparing references to the Arabs from the pre-Islamic era to those found in Theophanes and Patriarch Nikephoros. Thus, references to the Jews, rather than being Chronographer's original idea, may have been part of the specific tradition of describing this desert tribe: E. Jeffreys, The Image of the Arabs in Byzantine Literature, [in:] The 17th International Byzantine Congress at Dumbarton Oaks, Major Papers, New York 1986, p. 305–323.

28 A. Teipen, Jews in Early Biographies of Muhammad. A Case Study in Shifting Muslim Understandings of Judaism, JAAR 88, 2020, p. 543–568. The complex nature of anti-Jewish arguments that began to be used in Christian literature in connection both with Islam's appearance, including in the context of iconoclastic debates held in the eight century, and with different religious communities' adherence to the idea of the covenant with God, has been dealt with by V. Déroche in Polémique..., p. 141–161.

29 S.W. Anthony, The Caliph and the Heretic. Ibn Saba' and the Origins of Shi'ism, Leiden–Boston 2012 [= IHC, 91], p. 313–317. Jewishness was only one element of 'Abdallāh ibn Saba' negative leg-
making similar accusations against members of the ruling family – the Umayyads – in some traditions Muhammad is reported to have called 'Uqbah ibn 'Abī Mu'āyt, Umayyah great-grandson (a representative of one line of the family, the other lines were led by 'Uthmān bin 'Affān, Mu'āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān and Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam) a Jew.30

Interestingly, Theophanes' remarks, which are unique in their account of the Jews' hesitation in deciding whether or not to accept Muḥammad's doctrine, partly reflect today's view of the problem. As long as a quarter-century ago, Steven M. Wasserstrom argued in the work devoted to the early Jewish-Islamic relations that Muḥammad proclaimed himself the last prophet and not a Messiah. The acceptance of this 'human' function, and the rejection of any claims to 'divine' messianism, must have been disorienting to Jews and the Christians alike, producing different, not always negative, attitudes towards the new religion. This state of unclearly defined positions and the problem of how to understand Muhammad's message is rightly reflected in the Chronography.32 In the context of the Jewish roots of Islam, one cannot omit to mention here the theory put forward ten years ago by Fred M. Donner, according to whom the Muslim religion originated in a monotheistic reform movement, which included both Jews and Christians. Donner claims that it emerged from the movement only several decades after the Prophet's death.33 However, based on his research into the writings of John of Damascus, Peter Schandler has noted that even if Donner's theory is generally acceptable, it certainly is not so with regard to the lifespan of the great philosopher and theologian whose works are indicative of the fully shaped doctrine of the new religion, and
not of any kind of Christian or Judaic heresy\(^\text{34}\). If the son of Caliph 'Abd al-Malik's treasurer Sarğūn ibn Manṣūr stressed that Muḥammad had become acquainted with the books of the Old and New Testament before embarking on his teaching mission, as is indicated by Diego Sarrió Cucarella in his polemic with Peter Schandler\(^\text{35}\), this can hardly be taken to mean that the Prophet was either a member or an organizer of any Christian or Jewish community.

It should be kept in mind that the Muslims’ leader was not considered to act, in line with the idea of supersessionism\(^\text{36}\), as a continuator of the previous revelations, at least in the sense of nullifying all other revealed beliefs and replacing them with Islam as their natural fulfilment. Contrary to the suggestions that can be encountered in historical studies, Quranic texts and traditions, especially Hadiths, indicate that Muḥammad put forward the entirely new, if not systematically developed, revelation theology, which was not a simple reformulation of the older Judaic and Christian beliefs. For this reason, Islam’s possible link with supersessionism can be conceived of only in connection with the tahřīf – an idea which, while it was fully articulated in the eleventh century by Ibn Ḥazm\(^\text{37}\) (that is, long after Muḥammad’s death) and served as an inspiration to Theophanes’s work, can also be found in Islam’s theologically primary texts – Quran and Sunna. According to this idea, both Jews and Christians, acting independently of the Lord, introduced many changes to the message of the revelation, and only Muḥammad managed to rectify these mistakes. Consequently, Islam cannot be regarded as a continuation, but rather as a negation of these two religions. While the latter distorted God’s revelation, Islam’s view of it was purified and flawless\(^\text{38}\).

In view of the above, Theophanes’s remarks regarding the Jewish attitudes toward Islam take on an interesting meaning. They can be considered to confirm the suggestion that Muḥammad established an entirely new religion, which thus was not a continuation of either Judaism or Christianity. It seems paradoxical that the supposed ties between Islam and Judaism, to which Christian apologists paid special attention in the early Middle Ages, are today part of the reflection of ecumenically inclined theologians. One may mention here the recently late Hans


Kung who argued for recognizing Islam as revealed religion based on its similarity to the Jewish forms of the early Christian communities\textsuperscript{39}. Some also call for such arguments, which arise from the past coexistence of the two religions, to be used in today’s politics\textsuperscript{40}. However, it does not mean that nowadays no one is willing to support the view\textsuperscript{41} that our efforts to understand the origins of Islam should take into account its similarities to Judaism, an approach which was suggested even by Theophanes. The first to be mentioned among today’s advocates of the view are the scholars (Patricia Crone, Michael Cook and Martina Hids)\textsuperscript{42} who, half a century ago, put forward a theory of Hagarism, drawing not only on literally understood accounts of such authors as Sebeos\textsuperscript{43}, but also on the suggestion that Muḥammad had ties to the Jewish apocalyptic traditions\textsuperscript{44}.

One should note in conclusion that it is impossible to absolutely rule out the possibility that Theophanes could have referred in his enigmatic remarks to some complex historical relationship between Muhammad and local Jewish tribes. A good example of this is provided by the tradition recounting Banu Qurayţa’s tragic fate\textsuperscript{45}, especially as it is known to us from Ibn Hišām’s account (indebted to Ibn Ishāq), which was, as is sometimes suggested in scholarly literature, used by the group involved in preparing the Chronography. However, it seems that had it actually been the case, the Confessor would not have missed a chance of emphasising

\textsuperscript{39} Similar analyses can be found in D. Marshall, Muhammad in Contemporary Christian Theological Reflection, ICMR 24, 2013, p. 161–172.


\textsuperscript{41} As A.P. Pierzyński wrote in Christians and Jews: Historical and Theological Perspectives of their Relationship, SOec 19, 2019, p. 331: The study of the Church Fathers in order to understand their relationship with the Judaism of Eretz Israel and the diaspora (as expressed in particular in the Talmud) has not yet been completed. Herein, the study of the heresies of the first centuries, especially in Asia and the East, and their relationship with the Jewish thought, would be valuable to understand the origins of Islam.


\textsuperscript{43} Eadem, M. Cook, Hagarism. The Making of..., p. 77–79. The efforts to explain the origins of Islam by means, among others, of its ties to Judaism are excellently discussed in M. Grodzki, Panteon sceptyków. Przegląd współczesnych teorii naukowych poświęconych genezie islamu, Warszawa 2017, p. 165–212.


the fact that Muḥammad, in accordance with the account mentioned above, carried out the execution of almost genocidal proportions.

Also interesting in this context are references pertaining to Moses. As is known from Muḥammad’s first sīrat’s, the motive of comparing the Prophet with Israel’s Patriarch became part of the Jewish-Muslim polemics already at the dawn of Islam. As Shari L. Lowin reminds us, modern scholarship has found these references unreliable because they come from late Muslim sources. However, the tradition of drawing comparisons between Moses and Muḥammad (favourably to the former) can also be found in the surviving Jewish apologetic literature, which, argues Lowin, prevents us from excluding the possibility that such comparisons could have been a constant part of the polemics under discussion, although such an exclusion is inherent in the Prophet’s various biographies. It seems that the remarks about Moses found in Chronography can be regarded as a contribution to discussions concerning the comparisons in question. However, they can also be treated as part of the anti-Jewish rhetoric regarding the believers of Judaism who abandoned their own (and the Christian) Patriarch’s teachings in favour of those of the Messenger. Thus, the Confessor could be considered to have attempted to simultaneously undermine the message of both Islam and Judaism.

To sum up, the above introduction to the topic is hoped to give an idea of how many issues regarding Muḥammad’s relationship with the Jews can be touched upon based on a brief passage, only a few lines long, from Theophanes’ chronicle. In writing it, Theophanes certainly aimed to discredit the Prophet. However, he also included in it details that, when interpreted by comparison with other scholars’ findings that are based on other sources (including Jewish ones) pertaining to the history of Islam, may help us ask new questions and draw interesting conclusions regarding Theophanes’ view of Muslims.

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