FOLLY TO THE HUNAFĀ': THE CRUCIFIXION IN EARLY CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM CONTROVERSY

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Introduction

One of the oldest known Arabic versions of the letters of St. Paul is found in a manuscript of the ninth century AD preserved in the library of St. Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai and catalogued as Arabic MS 155. In it, we find a rendering of I Corinthians 1.22-5 that we might translate as follows:

[T]he Jews demand signs, and the hunafā’ seek wisdom. As for us, we proclaim the crucified Christ, for the Jews a thing of doubt, and for the nations folly, but for those who are chosen from among the Jews and from the hunafā’, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God; because the folly of God is wiser than the people, and the weakness of God is stronger than the people.

The word left untranslated, hunafā’ (singular hanīf), comes from the Syriac hanīpē, meaning ‘pagans’ or ‘Gentiles’ or ‘Greeks’. According to St. Paul in his early Arabic dress, the generality of the hunafā’ found the ‘word of the cross’ (1 Cor. 1.18) to be ‘folly’ (humq), the precise opposite of the wisdom (hikma) that they were seeking.

As is well known, the loan word hanīf / hunafā’ is not only to be found in the Arabic writings of Christians of Syriac background, but occurs several times in the Arabic sacred scripture of the Muslims,

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2 The manuscript was published by M.D. Gibson, ed. and trans., An Arabic Version of the Epistles of St. Paul to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, with Part of the Epistle to the Ephesians, from a Ninth Century MS in the Convent of St. Katharine on Mount Sinai (Studia Sinaitica 2), London, 1894.

3 My translation of the text in ibid., p. 39 (Arabic).
the Qur’an. There it has a distinctive meaning, referring not to Greek pagans but rather to persons with a monotheistic faith such as that of Abraham, who was ‘not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a ḥanīf and a muslim’. In Islamic usage, ḥanīf very quickly came to be a synonym of ‘Muslim’ and al-ḥanīfiyya a synonym of ‘Islam’.

Christians who found themselves under Islamic rule as a result of the conquests of the seventh century AD quickly discovered that the New Testament ‘word of the cross’ had not only been folly to the Greek ḥunafā’ of whom St. Paul had spoken, but was also a puzzle, at the very least, to the Muslim ḥunafā’. In particular, they learned that the Muslims’ sacred scripture appeared to deny the simple fact of the crucifixion of Christ—to say nothing of its meaning and redemptive significance. The critical verse al-Nisā’ (4) 157 is part of a polemic against the Jews, who are rebuked for a variety of offenses—including their claim to have crucified Christ. To this claim the Qur’an responds:

... mā qatalāḥu wa-mā ẓala būḥu, wa-lākin shubbiha lahum ...
... they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them ...

Christian interpreters throughout fourteen centuries have sought ways of construing this verse to allow for the reality of Christ’s death on the cross, so central to Christian faith. In the Christian version of the legend of Bahūrī the monk, which may date to the ninth century AD, the claim is made that the original Christian meaning (!) of the verse is that ‘Christ did not die in the substance of his divine nature’. Much more recently, Louis Massignon and scholars from his extended circle (including Giulio Basetti-Sani and

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