Article / Aufsatz

Byzantine Roots of Muslim Jihad[1]

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The article explores some of the Byzantine roots of Muslim jihad. Particularly, it examines the phrase "to kill and be killed" in Sura 9:111 of the Qur'an, tracing its Christian predecessors, especially 6th-century Byzantine texts that depict religious zeal leading to violence. The study highlights how Byzantine religious and political contexts, such as the violent enforcement of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, may have shaped early Islamic militancy. It suggests that early Islamic notions of jihad were influenced by pre-existing Byzantine ideas, demonstrating a complex interreligious exchange.

Keywords: *Jihad, Religious Violence, Byzantine Orthodoxy, Christian Martyrdom, Early Islam, Qur'an*

In Sura 9, verse 111, we find one of the most succinct and lucid explanation of what jihad is. The very word "jihad" is not used but referred to with its common synonym "the path of God."[2]

> God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of Paradise; they fight in the path of God; they kill and get killed; that is a promise binding upon God in the Torah, and the Gospel, and the Qur'an.[3]

Sura 9 (its Arabic name is At-Taubah, *The Repentance*) is notable in various respects. Revealed most likely in 631,[4] it is the only sura in the Qur'an that does not open with the words "In the name of Allah, the

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1 This article expands on some observations made by the author in "Thirst for Killing and Being Killed: A Conflict over Execution of Pagans according to a 6th century Syriac Source" (in Russian), *Trudy Kyievskoi Dukhovnoi Akademii* 36 (2022), 241–51 and in "Thirst for Killing and Being Killed in the Syriac *Eusebius Narrative* and the Qurʾan," in *The Qurʾan and Syriac Christianity: Recurring Themes and Motifs*, ed. Ana Davitashvili, (Brill, forthcoming).

2 For this expression cf., e.g., Sura 3:169; 4:74.

3 Translation according to Arthur J. Arberry (trans.), *The Koran Interpreted* (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2003), 265–66 with small modifications.

4 Adel Th. Khoury, trans., *Der Koran Arabisch-Deutsch: Übersetzung und wissenschaftlicher Kommentar*, *Bd. 7: Sure 7,1–206; Sure 8,1–75; Sure 9,1–129* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 275.

Compassionate, the Merciful,"[5] which indicates the militant character of this text.[6] David Cook remarks that Sura 9:111 "contains the account of the salvific covenant between God and the Muslims that helps define the nature of jihad. […] this covenant is presented in contractual terms. The exchange is clear: the Muslims' lives and wealth are given to Allah in return for an assurance of Paradise."[7] Particularly noteworthy is the general reference to Jewish and Christian Holy Scriptures, as well as the Qur'an, as sources promising reward in the afterlife in exchange for death and murder on the religious path.

The reference to the Torah is not surprising: The Pentateuch is full of stories illustrating the virtue of killing and being killed for the monotheist faith,[8] although the Jewish idea of reward in the afterlife certainly developed later than the Torah.[9]

In contrast, the mention of the Gospel is somewhat obscure. Though the exact meaning of this reference remains uncertain, I will try to clarify the possible Christian background of the words about killing and being killed in the way of God.

To begin with, it is useful to consider a few insights into the history of research. In his 2017 "Introduction" to the Qur'an, Nicolai Sinai observes: "[…] just as Qur'anic militancy is discontinuous with traditional Arabian tribal warfare, so it is continuous with broader late antique valuations of violent zeal."[10] The Christian evidence provided by Sinai as corroboration for this statement can be divided into two groups: "the violence enacted or instigated by Christian holy men" and "the construction of warfare as a form of militant piety."[11] The second issue has been treated by

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[5] Cf. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, "Sourate 9," in *Le Coran des historiens: Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique: Sourates 1 à 26*, vol. 2, part 1, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye (Paris: du Cerf, 2019), 381.

[6] Cf. Uri Rubin, "*Barāʾa*: A Study of Some Qur'anic Passages," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984): 18: "When the barāʾa [i.e., Sura 9] was proclaimed, all Qur'anic verses prescribing friendly relations with inoffensive non-Muslims were abrogated. Friendly relations with infidels, offensive and inoffensive alike, were forbidden."

[7] David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

[8] Concerning various aspects of violence in the Hebrew Bible in general see Norbert Lohfink, Gewalt und Monotheismus. Beispiel Altes Testament, *Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift* 153, no. 2 (2005): 149–62 and Matthew J. Lynch, *Portraying Violence in the Hebrew Bible. A Literary and Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[9] Cf. Bart D. Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell. A History of the Afterlife* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020), 81–126.

[10] Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 195.

[11] *Ibidem*, 194–95.

Tommaso Tesei in 2019. Tesei argues for a direct connection between the sacralization of warfare during the reign of the Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641) and the Qur'an.[12] As far as I can see, the role of violence caused by late antique holy men in the establishment of the Qur'anic militant discourse of the Medinan period has not been systematically studied. However, scholars such as Tor Andrae,[13] Michael Gaddis,[14] Thomas Sizgorich,[15] and Nicolai Sinai[16] have offered valuable remarks on this topic and related issues.

The aim of this article is to call attention to a couple of 6th-century Christian Coptic and Syriac texts that clearly belong to the first category identified by Sinai, i.e. their heroes are holy men who both enact and suffer extreme forms of violence. One of those texts, the so-called *Eusebius Narrative*, evinces an intriguing textual overlap with the Qur'anic statements concerning killing and being killed on the path of God (Sura 4:74; 9:111). Since the above-mentioned sources are quite unusual compared to earlier Christian views on the active killing of religious rivals, it seems appropriate to cite some examples of the attitude of Christians towards religiously motivated killings prior to the 6th century.

A brief glance at the New Testament clearly shows that Christians are instructed not to resist evil when it comes from human beings. Most telling in this respect is the Sermon on the Mount:

Mt. 5.38-42

> 38. You have heard that it was said, «An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.»
> 39. But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil (μὴ ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ). But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.
> 40. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.
> 41. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

[12] Tommaso Tesei, "Heraclius' War Propaganda and the Qurʾān's Promise of Reward for Dying in Battle," *Studia Islamica* 114, no. 2 (2019): 219–47.
[13] Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1926), 163.
[14] Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 151–250.
[15] Thomas Sizgorich, "Sanctified Violence: Monotheist Militancy as the Tie That Bound Christian Rome and Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 4 (2009): 895–921; idem, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 108–143.
[16] Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 192–96.

> 42. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (ESV)

Not less clearly and with the same Greek verb ἀντιστῆναι, Christians are commanded to resist the evil spirits:

Jas. 4.7

> Resist the devil (ἀντίστητε δὲ τῷ διαβόλῳ), and he will flee from you. (ESV)

Eph. 6.12

> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (ESV)

Thus, Christians participate in the Holy War of the Messianic Warrior Jesus against demonic powers,[17] but, at the same time, are not allowed to retaliate people.

This doctrine can be found in the *Apology* of the Latin Christian author Tertullian of Carthage (d. after 220) from 197 AD. In his interpretation, Tertullian uses the phrase "to kill and be killed", which we know from Sura 9:111, with one significant change – Christians are not allowed to kill:

> If likewise we are forbidden to retaliate when injured, lest we should resemble them (i.e. Christians' enemies) in so acting, whom can we injure? […] For what war shouldn't we […] be ready and prepared […], if it were not more in accordance with our religion to be killed rather than to kill (*magis occidi liceret quam occidere*)?[18]

A good illustration of how this teaching was understood and applied during the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire can be found in St. Cyprian of Carthage's (d. 258) letter to Pope Cornelius (p. 251–253), written in early 253 AD during Emperor Trebonianus Gallus' (r. 251–253) persecution of Christians.

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[17] About Jesus' Holy War see Otto Betz, "Jesu Heiliger Krieg," *Novum Testamentum* 2, no. 2 (1957): 116–137.

[18] Tertullian of Carthage, Apology 37,1.5. English translation according to T. Herbert Bindley, trans., *The Apology of Tertullian for the Christians. Translated with Introduction, Analysis, and Appendix Containing the Letters of Pliny and Trajan Respecting the Christians* (London – Oxford: Parker and Co., 1890), 108, 110 with insignificant modifications. Latin text: Eligius Dekkers, ed., *Q. S. Fl. Tertulliani Apologeticum*, in: *Qvinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani opera*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina II, Pars I (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), 147–48.

> But being *driven back* by both the faith and vigor of the *united army* he (i.e. the devil) encountered, he has realized that the *soldiers of Christ* are now *keeping alert watch*, that they are now standing at the ready for *battle* with a clear mind, that *die* they can but *conquered* they cannot be, and that they are *unconquerable* just because they are unafraid to die [and because] they *do not return the attack of their attackers* since it is not lawful for the innocent to kill even the guilty, but, instead, they readily surrender their lives and their blood so that they may withdraw all the more speedily from wicked and cruel men, because such great wickedness and cruelty are raging in this world [today].[19]

Particularly important are, on the one hand, the numerous military metaphors (set in italics) demonstrating that, for Cyprian, persecution is a true spiritual warfare with the devil. On the other hand, it is to be emphasized that the author does not have in mind any actual armed confrontation between the persecutors and the persecuted:[20] Christians are not allowed to resist violence and to retaliate by killing others, even if they are being killed themselves.[21]

Another significant aspect of the spiritual battle against the angels of darkness is to be found in Christian asceticism. In the Syriac *Book of Steps* written by an unknown Christian author at the end of the 4th or beginning of the 5th century in the Sasanian part of Northern Mesopotamia, we find a brief description of the final step before achieving spiritual perfection:

> This step is difficult because through it a person does battle against sin, and if he does climb this step, he will enter the house of our Lord. Severe and full of force, it (i.e. the sin) stands in front of him: either it kills or is killed.[22]

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[19] Cyprian of Carthage, Letter 60,2,3. English translation according to Graeme W. Clarke, trans., *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage: vol. 3, Letters 55–66* (New York-Mahwah: Newman Press, 1986), 90 with small modifications. Latin text: Chanoine Bayard, ed. and trans., *Saint Cyprien, Correspondance*, 2 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1961), vol. 2, 192.

[20] Cf. *idem*, Letter 60,5,1: "Let us be urgent and constant with tearful entreaties and frequent supplications; for us these are heavenly arms which enable us to take our stand and to hold our ground with steadfast courage; these are our spiritual fortifications and divine weapons which protect [us]." English translation according to Clarke, *The Letters*, 91–92 with small modifications.

[21] Cf. *idem*, Letter 60,2,3: "it is not lawful for the innocent to kill even the guilty".

[22] *Book of Steps* 20:4. English translation according to Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F.G. Parmentier, *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2004), 213 with minor modifications. Syriac text: Michael Kmosko, ed., "Liber graduum," *Patrologia Syriaca 3* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Socii, 1926), 533,1–6.

The deadly battle with sin is concisely described with words very close to the formula of jihad known to us from Sura 9:111:

> Sura 9:111 − they kill and get killed[23]
> *Book of Steps* 20:4 − either it (i.e. the sin) kills or is killed

In each case, the passive voice follows the active, with the same Semitic root (Arab. *q-t-l*, Syr. *q-ṭ-l*) used for "to kill." Both instances employ a rhetorical figure that can be considered a form of *figura etymologica*. Such expressions are easily memorable and maintain their impact even when translated into other, particularly linguistically related, language. Additionally, it is worth noting the parallel situation of religious warfare addressed in both the Qur'an and the *Book of Steps*.

As significant as these similarities might be, they nevertheless do not explain the decisive step from the purely internal struggle with sinful thoughts and emotions in the Syriac source to the Qur'anic notion of killing people in religiously motivated wars.

The following considerations aim to trace some key developments that make the transition from Christian religious discourse to jihad plausible. It is worth noting that the Christian sources discussed up to this point either belong to the pre-Constantine period or were composed outside the Byzantine Empire, such as the *Book of Steps*. Now we will focus on Byzantine texts that address Christian engagement in the killing of religious rivals. It should be emphasized that I intend to provide only a preliminary overview, rather than an exhaustive analysis. Consequently, the focus will be on one particularly significant example: The literature of the Byzantine Miaphysites in the 6th century.[24]

Following the death of Emperor Anastasios I (r. 491–518), Emperor Justin I (r. 518–527) introduced a policy of violently enforcing Chalcedonian orthodoxy across the Byzantine Empire.[25] The religious policy of Justin I was continued and extended by his nephew Justinian

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[23] See n. 3 above.

[24] For the general history of the miaphysite movement in the 5th–6th centuries see William H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement. Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). About Syriac and Coptic miaphysites at that time see Volker L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Stephen J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice. Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–55.

[25] Cf. Peter Charanis, *Church and State in the Later Roman Empire: The Religious Policy of Anastasius the First, 491–518* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1939), 28; Ernst Honigmann, *Évêques et évêchés monophysites d'Asie antérieure au VIe siècle*

I. It was directed towards the final extermination of the minor dissident groups – pagans, Samaritans, Manichaeans and Christian heretics like Arians or Montanists. On the other hand, its goal was a severe limitation on the civil rights of those groups whose annihilation was either undesirable or impossible, such as Jews or Miaphysites.[26] These policies put the Miaphysites in the position of a persecuted community, and made them witnesses of much more severe, sometimes mortal persecutions of other religious groups, such as pagans or Manichaeans.[27]

The idiosyncratic position of the Byzantine Miaphysites, situated between the ruling Chalcedonian majority and other religious communities, prompted them to compose hagiographic documents mirroring their search for religious and political identity in the Justinianian world. Those texts were likely intended to address their perceived sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the state and the Chalcedonian orthodoxy it backed up, particularly in the context of their vigorous support for the condemnation of religious groups whose rapid disappearance they endorsed. In these sources, we find the fully developed concept of killing out of religious zeal, even at the risk of death. Earlier evidence of this attitude in Byzantine literature is rare, ambiguous, and, to my knowledge, exists only in a rudimentary form.

This motif can, for instance, be found in two fictionalized Coptic hagiographic texts of the 6th century from Upper Egypt: the *Panegyric on Macarius of Tkow* attributed to Dioscorus of Alexandria and the *Life of Moses of Abydos.* According to the chapter 5 of the *Panegyric*, Macarius burns the pagan priest of the god Kothos alive after narrowly escaping the danger of being sacrificed to Kothos himself.[28] In the chapter 4 of the *Life of Moses of Abydos*, the pagans try to kill Apa Moses but eventually,

(Louvain: Durbecq, 1951), 142–145; Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 221–254.

[26] Cf. John Meyendorff, "Justinian, the Empire and the Church," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22, (1968): 45–46; James A. Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*, Greenwood Guides to Historic Events of the Ancient World (Westport–London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 26–27.

[27] Cf. Menze, *The Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, 16–17.

[28] For the Coptic text and an English translation of Ps.-Dioscorus of Alexandria see David W. Johnson, ed. and trans., *A Panegyric on Macarius, Bishop of Tkôw: Attributed to Dioscorus of Alexandria* (Louvain: Peeters, 1980), 2 vols, vol. 1, 29–40 (Coptic text) and vol. 2, 21–30 (English translation). On the episode mentioned above see David Frankfurter, "Illuminating the Cult of Kothos: The Panegyric on Macarius and Local Religion in Fifth-Century Egypt," in *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity: Language, Literature, and Social Context. Essays in Honor of D. W. Johnson*, ed. James E. Goehring (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 176–88. Johnson observes on the dating of the *Panegyric* that "an early 6th century *terminus a quo* is the

through prayers, he succeeds in destroying the temple of Apollo, killing thirty priests under the rubble.[29] In both hagiographic documents, the killing of religious opponents by Macarius and Moses is justified by the experience of mortal danger they face, which roughly corresponds to the kill-and-be-killed formula. In all likelihood, both stories are fictitious.

One more 6th-century, likewise fictitious, source under consideration – the *Eusebius Narrative*[30] – is the second part of a large hagiographical work known as the Syriac *Julian Romance*, a critical and highly polemical Christian invective against the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (r. 361–363).[31]

The relevant episode from the beginning of the *Eusebius Narrative* unfolds as follows:

After Emperor Constantine's death,[32] Julian undertakes preparations to travel from Gaul to Rome to officially ascend to the throne of the Roman Empire. As news of this spreads throughout Rome, Pope Eusebius summons all Roman Christians to encourage them to remain firm in their faith in light of the impending persecution. Meanwhile, Adoctus,[33] an

earliest permissible", see Johnson, *A Panegyric on Macarius*, 11. The historical Macarius died around 451–52.

[29] For the Coptic text with a French translation see Emile Amélineau, ed. and trans., *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux IV^e^, V^e^, VI^e^ et VII^e^ siècles: Mémoires publiés par les membres de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1895), 685–87. About the manuscript tradition of the Coptic *Life of Moses of Abydos* see Mark Moussa, "The Coptic Literary Dossier of Abba Moses of Abydos," *Coptic Church Review* 24, no. 3 (2003): 74. Moses lived in the late 5th and early 6th century. See René-Georges Coquin, "Moses of Abydos," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia,* ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), vol. 5, 1679–1681.

[30] This designation has been used by Jan W. Drijvers, "Julian the Apostate and the City of Rome: Pagan-Christian Polemics in the Syriac Julian Romance," in *Syriac Polemics: Studies in Honour of Gerrit Jan Reinink,* ed. Wout Jac. van Bekkum, Jan W. Drijvers, and Alex C. Klugkist (Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 6.

[31] On *Julian Romance* see Aaron M. Butts, "Art.: Julian Romance," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage,* eds. Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz, and Lucas Van Rompay (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 236–238 and Marianna Mazzola and Peter Van Nuffelen, "The *Julian Romance*: A Full Text and a New Date," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 16, no. 2 (2023): 324–377.

[32] The author (or the scribe) of the *Romance* confuses Constantine with his son, Constantius II.

[33] Adoctus or Adocetus; in Syriac: *ʾwdqṭws*. See Michael Sokoloff, ed. and trans., *The Julian Romance: A New English Translation* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017), 31, line 2. The name is a pejorative characteristic, apparently composed of Greek *alpha privativum* and Latin *doctus* (learned, skilled); an English equivalent would be Ignorant used as a name.

officer and confidant of Julian,[34] arrives in Rome, bringing a letter from the emperor with him.

The letter addresses the pope as "ruler of all Christians," praises his accomplishments and wisdom, and appoints Eusebius as "a minister and chief priest to the holy gods,"[35] apparently granting him the exclusive right to preserve the present Christian position at the same time. Overcome by religious zeal and ignoring Adoctus, who threatens him with execution, Eusebius rejects the emperor's gifts[36] and tears the letter into pieces.[37]

Adoctus produces one more letter from Julian to be read before the "nobles of Rome."[38] Here, Julian claims that it is the will of the gods that a great pagan altar be erected in front of the entrance to the main church of Rome. Sacrifices offered on it shall expiate for the Christian desecration of the Eternal City. Eusebius once again is honored with the appointment as chief pagan priest.

Dancing and shouting about their eagerness to accomplish Julian's command, the Jews and pagans of Rome exalt over this unexpected turn in their city's history. They had not forgotten that Christians, several years ago, had destroyed their temples and synagogues. They are therefore quick to mock the Christians now, in the same manner as their forefathers had mocked Christian believers in the days of the great persecutions by Diocletian and Maximian.[39]

Through this sequence of flashbacks, the unknown author shows how, little by little, the religious discord starts spiraling out of control. The decisive step leading to confrontation is ultimately taken by the pope Eusebius himself. Seeing that the escalation to violent conflict becomes increasingly likely, Eusebius warns the emperor's envoy Adoctus: "If our enemies, the Jews, incite you against us, know and see what you do. All the people who are with me are ready and prepared. They are resolute to slay or to be slain."[40]

Once again, in this text, we are confronted with the formula known from Sura 9:111 and this time – unlike the Syriac *Book of Steps* – it does

[34] Cf. "the right hand of my kingdom" in Hermann Gollancz, trans., *Julian the Apostate: Now Translated for the First Time from the Syriac Original (The only known ms. in the British Museum, edited by Hoffmann of Kiel)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 27.
[35] Sokoloff, *The Julian Romance*, 39, line 16.
[36] *Ibidem,* 41, lines 6–8.
[37] *Ibidem,* 43, lines 19–20.
[38] *Ibidem,* 47, line 7.
[39] *Ibidem,* 51, lines 14–16; 53, line 16–55, line 11.
[40] *Ibidem,* 55, lines 14–16. For an English translation see Sokoloff, *The Julian Romance,* 54 with small modifications.

not refer to an inner spiritual struggle, but to a real armed conflict between Christians and their religious opponents.

The conflict was not long in coming. Its following description illustrates beautifully the spirit of the Justinianian age and the new identity the Syriac Miaphysites found when suffering and witnessing persecution on religious grounds. To be emphasized is the key role played by the monks and their willingness to kill and be killed.

> When the overseer[41] learned these things […] he arose hastily, and informed all the monasteries there. He assembled all of the monks who were in Rome and its environs, all who were able to wage war, about 1400 men. […] They made an oath to one another to die for their brethren who were in the church.[42] […] they entered Rome with great courage. Also, about 500 soldiers, who were of the province of Mesopotamia,[43] who, out of zeal for God, had changed their dress for the monks' outfit and had their hair cut, were mixed in with them. They entered with them armed into Rome, without anyone recognizing them at all. The whole city was frightened by them. […] When the pagans and the Jews saw them, they began to be frightened by them. The Lord cast fear and trembling over the Jews and the pagans, and they began to flee […] before the monks. They fought them with batons in the streets and struck them like dogs. Many of the Jews and pagans died on that day, and only a very few persons who hid themselves in secret places, clefts, and the sewers of the city escaped from them and were saved. Not even one of the group of the monks was injured. The Lord placed His hand over them and protected them.[44]

Several scholars including myself have argued that the *Julian Romance* had been written as a reaction to the religious policies of the Emperors Justin I and Justinian I towards the Syriac Miaphysites.[45] This hypothesis

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[41] Syr. *'ksark'* < Greek ἔξαρχος, leader (of the monasteries around and in Rome). *Ibidem,* 57, lines 9, 19.

[42] Adoctus advises the Jews and pagans of Rome to lock up Pope Eusebius and his people in the main church of Rome, while the pagan altar is erected in front of its entrance, see *ibidem*, 55, lines 14–28.

[43] Although the plot of the *Eusebius Narrative* is set in Rome, this detail tellingly demonstrates the Syriac author's national perspective.

[44] English translation according to Sokoloff, *The Julian Romance,* 56–58.

[45] Philip Wood, *We have no King but Christ: Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c. 400-585)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 157–62; Nestor Kavvadas, *Ephraem der Syrer und Basilios der Große, Justinian und Edessa: Die Begegnung griechischer und syrischer Traditionsautorität in der Ephraemvita und der miaphysitisch-chalkedonische Konflikt* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 113–14; Dmitrij F. Bumazhnov, "Thirst for Killing and Being Killed: A Conflict over Execution of Pagans

explains why an extensive hagiographic work (245 pages in the edition by Michael Sokoloff) dedicated to the distant past was written in the 6th century. Following this vein, Julian the Apostate should be understood as a cipher for the Emperor Justinian I, and sufferings of Christians under Julian reflect the use of violence in the interplay between the Miaphysite church and the pro-Chalcedonian state.

In this context, the words of the pope Eusebius: "My people are resolute to slay or to be slain,"[46] should probably be understood as applying to the historically documented armed resistance by the Syriac Miaphysites in the clashes with the government troops.[47]

Referring back to the initial point in Sura 9:111, it can be observed that, in an attempt to justify the growing militancy of Muslims during the Medinan period, Muhammad (or his followers) could have drawn upon a variety of Jewish and Christian religious models, both past and present. The religious disposition of the 6th-century Miaphysite zealots was just one of them. Therefore, despite their considerable similarities, it is not indisputably clear that the *Eusebius Narrative* had a direct influence on the Qur'an.

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according to a 6th century Syriac Source" (in Russian), *Trudy Kyievskoi Dukhovnoi Akademii* 36 (2022), 241–51.

[46] See n. 40 above.

[47] As we know from the *Chronicle of Edessa* and from other Syriac sources (see Amir Harrak, trans., *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn. Parts III and IV A.D. 488–775* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1999), 55 n. 2), on November 4, 518, the senior general Patricius was sent to Edessa, accompanied by a detachment of soldiers, to enforce the acceptance of the council of Chalcedon and to make its metropolitan Paul sign the *libellus* of Pope Hormisdas (p. 514–23); on Paul of Edessa see Kavvadas, Ephrem der Syrer, 133-147. Paul neither signed the document nor resigned from his office, but fled to a baptistery. As Patricius led Paul away by force, the citizens and monks from surrounding monasteries started a riot and in the ensuing street fights, many people, especially monks, were killed. Paul was arrested, but was soon able to return to Edessa after the intervention of the Emperor Justin I. The Edessenes came out to welcome him and he was accepted as somebody who had fought and won.
It is not hard to see that these historical events and the episode from the *Eusebius Narrative* discussed above are connected by several parallel motifs: a high officer arrives in a city (Rome or Edessa) and tries to impose an alien faith upon its inhabitants; the bishop of the city is invited to accept this faith; he rejects the proposal and is arrested, but eventually returns to his flock; the monks from the surrounding monasteries join forces with the citizens in order to release the bishop; as a result of the fighting, many people die; and both monks and citizens are gripped by their religious zeal. The relatively broad evidence for this episode in the West Syriac historiography testifies that it was deeply imprinted on the Miaphysite collective memory. For more details see Bumazhnov, "Thirst for Killing and Being Killed."

Yet the conformity in wording of the two short formulas in the *Eusebius Narrative* and in Sura 9:111, both of which have an active and a passive form of the same verb "to kill" with a similar formula in the *Book of Steps* in the background, suggests the possibility of oral transmission. In this scenario, the kill-and-be-killed formula might have reached the founder of Islam disconnected from the concrete story in which these words occurred. It goes without saying that this assumption cannot be strictly proven and remains hypothetical, albeit not without a certain degree of probability.

At this juncture, it seems appropriate to draw some conclusions. To begin with, it is important to situate these observations within the broader scholarly context. In their research over the past decade, Stephen Shoemaker and Tommaso Tesei have highlighted the significant influence of Byzantine imperial eschatology on the early development of Islam.[48] This ideology identified the Byzantine Christian empire with the fourth and final earthly kingdom from the vision of the prophet Daniel[49] and with the "one who restrains" the Antichrist from 2. Thess. 2.6–7. As Stephen Shoemaker put it: "[T]he early Believers would have understood the success and the rapid expansion of their devout polity not merely as a sign of divine favor but also as events that marked the "beginning of the end" and were actually inaugurating the eschatological rule of God."[50]

Using the Suras 18 and 30 as evidence, Tommaso Tesei suggested that the literary products of the imperial Byzantine propaganda reached the Qur'anic milieu through the channel of the former Arabic members of the Miaphysite community who had joined the proto-Islamic movement.[51] In the same direction points likewise the influential book *Muhammad and the Believers* by Fred Donner who reconstructs the earliest Islam as a monotheistic movement[52] to which some Jews and Christians could

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[48] Cf. for instance Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire. Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 146–80; Tommaso Tesei, "«The Romans Will Win!» Q 30:2–7 in Light of 7th c. Political Eschatology," *Der Islam* 95, no. 1 (2018): 1–29; idem, "Heraclius' War Propaganda and the Qurʾān's Promise of Reward for Dying in Battle," *Studia Islamica* 114, no. 2 (2019): 219–247. For a critical evaluation of Shoemaker's and Tesei's approach in general see Nicolai Sinai, "The Christian Elephant in the Meccan Room: Dye, Tesei, and Shoemaker on the Date of the Qur'ān," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 9, no. 1 (2024): 57–118.

[49] See Dan. 7.7–8;23–26.

[50] Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire*, 139.

[51] Tesei, "«The Romans Will Win!»," 21–26.

[52] Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 68–69: "The Qur'anic evidence suggests that

have belonged.[53] Seen in this context, the identification of one more Miaphysite formula ("to kill and be killed") in the Qur'an reflects the general research trend.

Moving from the modern scholarly discussion to the metahistorical Christian interpretation of the rise of Islam, it becomes evident that both the general scholarly discussion outlined above and the current essay clearly demonstrate direct and indirect influences of the Byzantine Empire on the emerging new monotheistic religion in the Near East.

On the one hand, it shows that the Russian patriarch Kyrill and other Russian Orthodox hierarchs are not entirely mistaken in claiming that the Christian Orthodoxy and Islam have much in common.[54] Viewed from a different perspective, this state of affairs invites to reflect on Christian and specifically Byzantine Orthodox responsibility for the appearance of militant ideology of jihad.

The truly biblical dimension of Islam as well as its persistence up to the present day clearly indicates that God wanted to address Christians with a message which is still to be extracted from historical events and critical exegesis of the Qur'an by interested theologians.

The late antique and medieval Christian tradition proposed various readings of this message, which can be seen as helpful preparatory work for the speculations of today. Already in the 7th century, the Eastern Syrian Christian historian John bar Penkaye attempted to explain why God had allowed the rapid breakdown of the Byzantine and Persian empire under the Arab onslaught and pointed out the harmful interplay between church and state in Byzantium as one of the reasons which, in his interpretation, drew the wrath of God upon the Christian civilization of the Greeks.[55] The development of the Christian attitude regarding killing and being killed in religious pursuits outlined above, starting with the New Testament and early Christian martyrs and ending with the militant Syriac and Coptic monks of the 6th century, as well as the role played by

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the early Believers' movement was centered on the ideas of monotheism, preparing for the Last Day, belief in prophecy and revealed scripture, and observance of righteous behavior, including frequent prayer, expiation for sins committed, periodic fasting, and a charitable and humble demeanor toward others."

[53] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 68–71, 220–22.

[54] See e.g. the address by Patriarch Kirill at the meeting of the Strategic Vision Group "Russia – Islamic World" on May 19, 2023: https://pravoslavie.ru/153741.html, accessed on August 12, 2025.

[55] See Sebastian Brock, "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century: Book XV of John Bar Penkāyē's Rīš Mellē," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 58–59; reprinted in idem, *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature and Theology* (Great Yarmouth: Variorum, 1992), II.

the Byzantine state in this process makes it indeed hard to exclude that the Almighty had substantial reasons to be unhappy with His imperial followers.