THE AŠHĀB AL-UKHDŪD: HISTORY AND ḤADĪTH IN A MARTYROLOGICAL SEQUENCE*

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1. Introduction

The sequence of Qurʾān 85:1–9, referring to the mysterious ašhāb al-ukhdūd, has long been identified with the historical “Martyrs of Najrān.”¹ These were martyrs who, according to the Christian Book of the Himyarites, and also according to Muslim historiography, were executed by Yūsuf Ashʿar Dhū Nuwās (ca. 521–3 CE), the Judaizing king of Hīmyar. Starting with Ibn Ishāq’s (d. ca. 150/767) al-Sīra al-nabawiyya, the issue of the Najrān persecutions was discussed in numerous Muslim history books, and eventually in the Ḥadīth literature as well. This article will explore the relationship between the principal accounts of the martyrological narrative of the Christians of Najrān (ašhāb al-ukhdūd), and examine the reasons why certain accounts have been favored over others.

The Muslim sources concerning the origins of Christianity in the city of Najrān focus upon the figure of one Faymiyun (apparently from the Greek name Pethion).² Ibn Ishāq in the version of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) gives many details of his Syrian origins and tells how he traveled

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¹This article benefitted from the critique of Michael Lecker, Christian Robin, Uri Rubin, Zeev Rubin, and other participants of the conference “from Jāhiliyya to Islam,” held at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University in July 2006.


²Discussion in C.E. Bosworth (trans.), The history of al-Ṭabarī: the Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids and Yemen, pp. 192–4, note 487.
through Arabia, was captured by the Bedouin and sold as a slave to the people of Najrān. The message put into the mouth of Faymiyūn is one that is very close to Islamic teaching. Standard comments such as those ascribed to Faymiyūn — when he confronted the pagan worship of a palm tree, he is said to have stated: “This palm tree neither harms nor benefits, so why do you worship it? If I called my Lord, whom I worship, he would destroy you” — strongly echo similar comments in the Qurʾān. These comments do not attest to the historicity of these accounts, although it is possible that a figure such as Faymiyūn did exist.

There is little material in Ibn Hishām about the period between the time of the original foundation of Christianity in Najrān by Faymiyūn until the persecution of Dhū Nuwas. In Ibn Hishām’s text we are given a lengthy story of the fate of the ʿaṣḥāb al-uḫdūd (henceforth: AU1). According to this account, there was a magician (ṣāhir) who taught magic to the youth of the town of Najrān in a village close by. When Faymiyūn settled in the region of Najrān, he erected a tent between the town of Najrān and the village in which the magician would teach. Since the children of Najrān would pass by this tent as they went to learn magic, they had an opportunity to see Faymiyūn worship. One of these children by the name of ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Thāmir was impressed by Faymiyūn’s devotion and began to sit and listen to him. After this ʿAbd Allāh converted to Islam and proclaimed the unity of God, and began to ask about the laws (shāriʿ al-Islām); when he became proficient in this, he asked about the greatest name of God (al-ʾism al-aʿẓam).

Faymiyūn apparently knew the greatest name of God, but concealed it from ʿAbd Allāh b. Thāmir, saying to him: “O my brother’s son! You would not be able to bear it [the name]; I fear for you on account of your...
weakness with it.” At the same time, al-Thāmir, ‘Abd Allāh’s father, was entirely unaware that his son was not attending sessions with the magician like the other children, and the magician was starting to bear a grudge against ‘Abd Allāh (presumably because of his failure to attend classes). ‘Abd Allāh then determined that he was going to learn the greatest name of God, and so took the sacred arrows (qidalj), and wrote every name of God that he knew on them, each name on a different arrow. Then he lit a fire, and proceeded to shoot the arrows into it; when he reached that with the greatest name on it, and tried to shoot it in, the arrow flew out of the flame unharmed.

Through this process of elimination, ‘Abd Allāh learned the greatest name of God, and went to Faymiyūn and told him of the name that he had learned and how he had learned it. Faymiyūn encouraged ‘Abd Allāh to keep this knowledge to himself, but instead the latter began to walk through Najrān and singled out each person who had some ailment. He would say to them: “If you will proclaim the unity of God and enter into my religion, I will pray to God and He will heal you from whatever trouble you are in.” 10 ‘Abd Allāh continued to do this until he had healed everyone in Najrān and converted them all.

News of these feats reached the king of Najrān, and he called ‘Abd Allāh, and said to him: “You have corrupted the people of my town (qarya) and opposed my religion and the religion of my fathers, so I am going to make an example of you.” ‘Abd Allāh remained defiant, however, and merely said that the king would be unable to do so. The king tried to kill ‘Abd Allāh in three different ways: first by throwing him off a high mountain, and then by throwing him into the waters (buljūr) of Najrān. 11 As for the third, ‘Abd Allāh had to give the king a hint as to how he could actually be killed. He said: “You will never be able to kill me until you proclaim the unity of God and believe in what I believe; if you do that then you will have power over me and will be able to kill me.” 12 The king did just that and took a staff with which he caved in ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir’s head. There is an enigmatic ending to all of this: “The king then perished in his place” and the people of Najrān followed the religion of Jesus.

This story is quite interesting, but also raises a number of questions. First of all, its relation to the story of the aṣhāb al-ukhdūd, as they are described in Qurān 85:1–9, is tenuous. This story is as follows:

10 Ibn Hishām, Sīra, vol. 1, p. 34.

11 It is unclear exactly what this means. The AU2 accounts below seem to indicate that a barge was needed to float out into the sea, but the buljūr here could be some local water source (thanks to Christian Robin and Michael Lecker this observation).

12 Ibid.
By the heaven of the many constellations, and by the promised Day, and by every witness and what is witnessed. Perish the Companions of the Pit [aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd], the fire well-stoked; while they sat around it, and were witnessing what they did to the believers. They did not begrudge them except that they believed in Allah, the All-Mighty, the All-Praiseworthy, to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth...\(^{13}\)

As is usual with the Qur'ān, the allusion is rather indistinct, but unlike most other Qur'ānic stories of prophets and pious figures taken from biblical and pre-Islamic Arabian sources, apparently the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd were a group who did not have a single prominent figure to whom a name could be put. It is also not clear from the Qur'ānic reading whether the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd refers to those burned or those doing the burning. While the dominant reading among the Muslim exegetes was that the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd were the ones who were burned,\(^{14}\) there were those (apparently Mu'tazilites) who believed that the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd were those who carried out the punishment of the believers, and that they themselves would be punished in the hereafter.\(^{15}\) Moreover, the primary punishment meted out by or to the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd was fire, which someone — depending upon how one understands the text — tended while they observed the fate of the believers unfortunate enough to be roasted in it. According to the Qur'ān, these believers suffered only because of their belief in God.

It is difficult to reconcile ALL in the history books with that of the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd in the Qur'ān.\(^{16}\) Although Faymiyūn appears to have been morally upright, the conduct of 'Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir is, to put it mildly, unusual. His methods in gaining the awesome power of the greatest name of God are manipulative and in direct contradiction to the instructions of his believing master Faymiyūn.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, in his confrontation with the king, 'Abd Allāh committed, to a certain extent,\(^{18}\)

\(^{13}\) All Qur'ānic translations are from Majid Fakhry, *The Qur'ān: A Modern English Version.*


\(^{17}\) And probably embarrassing to later Muslim historians: al-Suhaylī, *al-Rawd al-unuf,* vol. 1, pp. 91–4 refutes the idea that anyone could learn the greatest name of God in this manner, and Ibn Khaldūn makes no mention of 'Abd Allāh b. Thāmir's learning the greatest name of God: *Ta'rikh Ibn Khaldūn,* vol. 2, p. 68.
suicide by giving the king the key to destroying his powers of invincibility. It is difficult to understand the point of the king’s conversion, and equally difficult to believe that the king was truthful in converting to Islam; if he had been, why would he still want to kill ‘Abd Allāh, but if he was not, then how did he manage to actually kill him? In addition, the king’s behavior — if he is to be associated with the historical Dhū Nuwās (a convert to Judaism) — is hard to explain. Since he spoke of his and his ancestors’ religion, there is no indication that he was a truly a convert. But if he was not Jewish, there does not seem to be any obvious reason why the king should be moved to such a murderous rage against ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir. And last, and most obviously, there is absolutely no mention within the story of any khadd or ukhdūd.

Historians like Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) demonstrated some ambivalence towards this account by adding that Dhū Nuwās lived after the time of this story. Al-Ṭabarī states:

‘Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir was the leader and the imām of those whom Dhū Nuwās killed. It is said that ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir had already been killed; that a previous king had killed him, and that he was the founder of this religion. Dhū Nuwās only killed those of his religion after him.18

Like so many of the other frame stories supplied by Muslim historians to explain allusions in the Qur’ān, this one is also problematic.19 All of the accounts are geographically indistinct and give us virtually nothing specific upon which to build a historical reconstruction, although ašhāb al-ukhdūd are said to have been in existence at the time of the antiquarian geographer al-Bakrī (d. 487/1094).20 They are not mentioned in any of the geographical literature after his time.

The basis of this account and the importance accorded to it by the early historians seem to be apologetic. Ibn Hishām emphasizes that Faymīyūn “was a man from the remnants of the religion of Jesus” (rajul-an min baqīyyā ahl dīn ‘Īsā b. Maryam), and he is given further epithets of an ascetic, righteous man.21 All of these comments indicate that the Christian community of Najrān was seen by Muslim historians as visible proof of an uncorrupted form of the original Christianity that Jesus preached and which survived in the Yemen until close to the time of

18 Al-Ṭabarī, ii, p. 123; see Ibn Isḥaq’s comments in Ibn Hishām, vol. 1, p. 35.
20 Al-Bakrī, Mu’jam ma ista’jam, vol. 1, p. 121.
Muḥammad. It is interesting to note that the first part of AU1 (mentioning Faymiyun) derives from Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110/728), while ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir’s account derives from Muḥammad b. Ka‘b al-Quraẓi (d. ca. 118/736), and is associated with descendants of Jewish converts to Islam. The more prevalent version, AU2, is that with Christian antecedents and appears in the ḥadīth and exegetical literature.

2. Ḥadīth and exegesis in the story of the king, the soothsayer-magician, the monk and the boy

The story of the martyrdom of the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd entered the ḥadīth literature in a slightly different form. Not surprisingly, the earliest version of the text appears to be from Yemenite sources, most specifically from the Muṣannaf of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 211/826). The text reads as follows:

There was a king and he had a soothsayer (kāhin) who would perform soothsaying rites for him. This soothsayer said: “Find me a youth (ghulām) who is understanding and intelligent (faṭīnan) (or he said: keen-minded, laqinan), so that I can teach him about this, for I fear that when I die this knowledge will be cut off from you and that there will be no-one who can teach it.” So they sought a youth according to the manner in which he described, and ordered him to attend to this soothsayer, and to go to him frequently (an yakhtalif ilayhi).

There was a monk in a cell on the way of the youth (Ma‘mar said: I think that the inhabitants of cells at that time were muslimūn), and the youth began to ask that monk every time he passed by him, and did not stop until he informed him, saying: “I only worship God (Allāh),” and the youth began to stay with the monk, and delay [his arrival] to the soothsayer. So, the soothsayer sent to the family of the youth, “He is almost not attending me” and the youth told that to the monk. The monk told him: “When the soothsayer says: Where were you?, Say: I was with my family, and when


23 Presumably in the sense of true monotheists prior to the emergence of Islam.
your family says: Where were you?, Say: I was with the soothsayer.”

While the youth was doing this, a large group of people passed who had been detained by a creature (dabba). One of them said: “This creature is a lion”\(^{24}\) and the youth took a stone and said: “O God (allāhumma), if what the monk says is true then I ask you that I kill this creature, but if what the soothsayer says is true, I ask you that I not kill it.” Then he threw it and killed the creature. The people said: “Who killed it?” They said: “The youth,” and the people sought refuge in fear from the youth, saying: “This youth knows knowledge that no one else has.”

A blind man (a’ma) heard of him, and came to him, saying: “If you restore my eyesight, I will give you such-and-such.” The youth said: “I do not want that from you, but if your eyesight is restored, will you believe in the One who returned it to you?” He said: “Yes.” [The youth] prayed to God and his eyesight was restored, and the blind man believed.

This reached the king; he sent for them and they were brought [to him]. He said: “I will surely kill each one of you in a different way from his companion.” He gave an order concerning the monk and the man who had been blind, and a saw was placed on the head of one of them and he was killed. The other was killed in a different manner. Then he [the king] issued an order concerning the youth, saying: “Take him to Mt. such-and-such and throw him off the top of it.” But when they took him to the place he wanted, they began slipping off the mountain and fell from it until none remained but the youth.

He returned and the king gave another order, saying: “Take him to the sea and throw him in.” They took him to the sea and God caused those who were with him to drown, but God saved him. The youth said: “You will never kill me until you crucify me, shoot at me [with arrows] and say when you have shot at me: ‘In the name of the Lord of the youth.’ Or he said: ‘In the name of God, the Lord of the youth’.”

So he ordered him to be crucified and then shot at him, and

\(^{24}\) It is not inconceivable that the creature was a lion, since there were lions in Yemen until a century ago. The Italian traveler Ludovico di Varthema who was in Yemen in 1503–4 also states that “something like a lion” blocked the road to Ṣan‘ā\(\) (\textit{The travels of Ludovico di Varthema} 1503–08, p. 85).
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said: “In the name of God, Lord of the youth.” Then the youth placed his hand upon his temple and died. The people then said: “This youth has knowledge that no one else has, so we will believe in the Lord of this youth.” It was said to the king: “Did it unnerve you when three people opposed you? The entire world now opposes you!” So trenches were dug (fa-khudda al-ukhdūd), and then fire-wood and fire were thrown into them. Then the people gathered, and he said: “Whoever returns to his religion, we will leave them unharmed; whoever does not, we will throw them into the fire!” So, he began to throw them into the trench. This was the word of God “Perish the Companions of the Pit [aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd], the fire well-stoked”... [Qur’ān 85:4-5].

This story is related from the well-known companion Šuhayb al-Rūmī (d. ca. 38/658–9), who is said to have been a Christian Arab originally from the region of Mawsīl (Iraq) captured by the Byzantines. Eventually he was sold into slavery, arrived in Medina, met the Prophet Muḥammad, and converted to Islam, closely paralleling the career of Faymiyun.26 It is difficult not to sense that the entire sequence is misplaced in Yemen, with talk of monks and monks’ cells (so common in the Fertile Crescent), and other details discussed below.

The above version of the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd story (henceforward AU2) exists in a number of subsidiary versions which are to be found in both the ḥadīth and the exegetical literature.27 While the version in ‘Abd al-Razzāq is narrated from the isnād of Šuhayb—‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Abī Laylā—Thābit al-Bunārī—Ma‘mar—‘Abd al-Razzāq, the two other prominent versions, one in the authoritative ḥadīth collection of Muslim (d. 261/875) (henceforth AU2-M) and the other in the exegesis of the historian and exegete al-Ṭabarī, ḽāmi‘ al-bayān (henceforth AU2-T), are given slightly different isnāds. Muslim’s isnād joins that of ‘Abd al-Razzāq at Thābit and continues Thābit—Ḥammād b. Salama—Haddāb b. Khalīd,28 while al-Ṭabarī’s isnād joins that of Muslim at the link of

25 It is not clear how he could have done this while being crucified.


27 Not all of the exegetes were convinced that the aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd story should be identified with Najrān: al-Māwardī, vol. 6, pp. 241–2 lists the other possibilities: ‘Āli: of the habasha [Ethiopians]; Mujāhid: Najrān; Ibn ‘Abbas: of the Banū Isra‘īl; ‘Atiyya al-‘Awbā: Daniel and his companions; al-Ḥasan: people from Yemen; ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. al-Zubayr: a group of Christians in Constantinople at the time of Constantine; al-Daḥḥāk: a group of Christians in Yemen about 40 years before the mission of Muḥammad.

Hammād but goes to Ḥaramī b. ‘Umāra.29

These two subsidiary versions of AU2 differ from each other and are in places incomprehensible unless compared with each other. In both versions the kāhin changes back to sāhir (magician) of AU1. Instead of merely complaining when the youth takes his time with the monk, the magician beat him and remonstrated with him; likewise the youth’s family. When the youth kills what in the AU2-M and AU2-Ṭ versions is called al-dābba al-‘azīma (the awe-inspiring creature),30 the narrative takes on considerably more detail:

[The youth]31 said: “Now I will know — is the magician better in the eyes32 of God or the monk?” So he took a rock, and said: “O God (allahumma) if the monk is more beloved to you than the magician, then when I throw my rock, let it kill him [the beast] while the people are passing by.” So he threw it and killed [the beast], while the people passed. This news reached the monk, and the monk (T. came to/ M. said to) the youth: “[M. O my son]: you are greater33 than I am [M. what you have done has reached me]; if you are tortured do not reveal me.” The youth would heal those born blind, the lepers and those suffering from other maladies.

The king had a boon-companion who became blind, [T. and it was said to him “There is a youth who heals those born blind, the lepers and those suffering from other illnesses so maybe you should go to him.”] So he took [M. many] gifts for him and said “O youth, if you heal me, all of these gifts are yours.”34 He said: “I am not [T. a doctor] who can heal you, but God heals, and so if you believe then I will pray to God to heal you.” The blind man believed and he [the youth]


31 From al-Ṭabarī; Muslim, “he said.”

32 T. (al-Ṭabarī) ardā; M. (Muslim) afdal.

33 T. khagr; M. afdal.

34 T. ya’ ghulāmu in abra’tanī fa-hādhīhi al-hadāyā kulluhā laka; M. mā hāhunā laka ajmā’u in anta shafaytānī.
prayed to God and healed him. The blind man sat with the king as he used to sit, and the king said “[T. Weren’t you blind? M. Who returned your sight to you?]” [T. He said: “Yes.” He said: “Who healed you?”] He said “My Lord.” He said: “Do you have any other lord besides me?” He said: “Yes, my Lord and your Lord is Allah.” [T. They took him to be tortured, M. They continued to torture him until he pointed out the youth] [T. He said: “You will show me who taught you that” and he pointed the youth to him]. So he called the youth, and said: “Renounce your faith” and the youth refused, so he took him to be tortured, then he pointed the monk out to him. Then he took the monk and said: “Renounce your religion” and he refused. So he placed a saw upon his [the monk’s] head and sliced him [in two] until he fell to the ground. Then he took the blind man, and said “Verily, if you do not renounce your religion, I will kill you!” And the blind man refused, so he put the saw upon his head, and sliced him [in two] until he fell to the ground. Then he said to the youth: [T. “Renounce — or I will kill you!” M. “Renounce your religion!”] and he refused.

[M. He then surrendered him to a group of his companions] and said [T. “Take him to the peak of a mountain. M. Take him to Mt. so-and-so, take him up it and when you have reached its peak], if he renounces his religion [then fine], but if not — toss him over.” [T. When they arrived at the peak of the mountain, they fell off of it and all died. M. They took him to the peak of the mountain but the mountain shook, they fell off and all died.] The youth came seeking the king and entered into his presence, and he said: [T. “Where are your companions?” M. “What did your companions do?”] He said: “God took care of them for me.” He [M. gave him to a group of his companions and] said: “Take him and put him in a barge (qurqur), and set sail in the sea. If he renounces his religion [then fine], if not drown him.”

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35 T. qa’ada; M. jalasa.
36 T. hâma; M. mafriq ra’sihi.
37 Ibid.
38 T. wa-illâ fa-da’dâdîhu; M. fa-‘râhhu.
39 T. jâ’a al-ghulâm yataalammasu; M. jâ’a yamshî.
40 If this is taken from the Syriac qorqoro, “a light boat, a ship’s boat”, it might indicate a Syrian milieu.
41 T. gharrîghu; M. iqdhîghu.
they took him and when they had set sail to sea, the youth prayed: "O God, enable me to take care of them!" and the boat flipped them over [M. and they drowned]. The youth came seeking the king and came before him, and the king said: "Where are your companions?" He said: [T. "I prayed to God, and] He took care of them for me." [T. He said: "Verily, I am going to kill you!"] He said: "You will not be able to kill me until you do what I command you." The youth then said to the king: "Gather the people onto one plain (ṣa‘īd wāḥid), then crucify me [M. on a beam], then take an arrow from my quiver [M. and place it in the middle of a bow] and shoot it at me, saying: In the name of the Lord of the youth! [M. Then shoot it at me] and then you will have killed me."

So he gathered the people onto one plain, crucified him [M. on a beam], took an arrow from his quiver, placed it in the middle of the bow, shot it, and said "In the name of [M. God] the Lord of the youth!" The arrow landed in the temple of the youth [T. and he placed his hand thus upon his temple and the youth died], and the people said: "We believe in the Lord of the youth [M. We believe in the Lord of the youth, we believe in the Lord of the youth]" [T. They said to the king: "What have you done? That from which you were cautioned has come to pass. The people have believed!" M. The king was approached and it was said to him: "Do you see that that from which you were warned has, by God, come to pass. The people have believed."] So he ordered [T. for them to be taken to the entrances of the streets], to dig trenches (ukhdūd) [M. at the entrances of the streets], and to light fires, [T. and to take them] and say: "If they renounce [M. your religion] [good and well]; if not, throw them into the fire." [T. They would throw them into the fire], and then a woman came with her boy, and when she went into the fire

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43 T. tašna‘a; M. taf‘ala.
44 This seems reminiscent of narratives of the final judgment; see al-Bukhārī, Șahiḥ, vol. 4, p. 127 (no. 3340): yajma‘u Allāhu al-awwalin wa-l-akhīrin fī sa‘īd wāḥid... (cf. sa‘īd wāḥid, Wensinck, ed., Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane, s.v.).
45 Presumably the king’s advisors.
46 T. darrama fihi; M. i[d]ram; see also al-Tanūkhī, al-Faraj ba‘d al-shidda, vol. 1, p. 78.
47 T. alqihim; M. fa-‘ymilāhu.
and felt the heat, she drew back\textsuperscript{48} [T. because of the heat]. [T. Her boy, M. the youth (\textit{ghulām})] said to her “Mother, [T. go on, M. endure, for you are in the right” [T. and she went into the fire].”

Comparison of the texts in Muslim and Tabarî, together with the subsidiary texts (for example in al-Nasā’î’s \textit{Tafsîr}) reveals that this story had not achieved any literary or linguistic unity by the time the \textit{hadith} and exegetical literature was being written down in the 3\textsuperscript{rd}/9\textsuperscript{th} centuries. What is most interesting about the differences between AU2-\textit{T} and AU2-M is the fact that while the story is clearly more or less the same, the versions seem to preserve dialectic linguistic differences. This does not detract from other implausibilities, such as the account of the attempt to drown the youth in the sea (unlikely in Najrân). Substantial details are added on to the base of what was apparently a confusing story in order to elucidate matters. Unfortunately these two versions are only the beginning of what in the larger Muslim literature is already a difficult story because of its content.

3. Exegesis and issues

Not surprisingly, Muslim historians and scholars were confused by the contradictions between the two main versions of the \textit{aʃhāb al-ukhdūd} story. It is interesting that those early writers who might be in a position to know both versions, such as the historian and exegete al-Ṭabarî, chose the first version for their history books\textsuperscript{49} and the second for their exegesis or \textit{ḥadīth} works without resolving the problems between the two (see below for further discussion of this point). Others like al-Dinawārî (d. 282/895–6) created a harmonizing tradition in which many of the problems are resolved. In al-Dinawārî’s account, after Dhū Nuwās converted to Judaism, he confronted ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir who was at that time the king of Najrân. When ‘Abd Allāh refused to convert, his head was caved in with a sword, and he was walled into the city walls while the other Christians were burnt in the ditches.\textsuperscript{50} (In AU1, con-

\textsuperscript{48}T. \textit{wajjadat ḥarr al-nār fa-nakaṣat}; M. \textit{taqā‘asat an taqa‘a fihā}.


\textsuperscript{50}Al-Dinawārî, \textit{Akhbār}, p. 109; the story in al-Ya’qūbî (d. 292/905), \textit{Ta‘rīkh al-Ya‘qūbī}, p. 171 is similar with the exception of the fact that ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Thāmir is merely referred to as \textit{al-raju}. The later Persian historical tradition tends to follow harmonizing trends as well; see Mirkhwând (d. 903/1498), \textit{Ta‘rīkh Rawżat al-safā fī sīrat al-anbiyā‘ wa-l-mulūk wa-l-khulaṣā}, vol. 2, pp. 546–9; and Khwândamīr (d. 962/1553?), \textit{Ta‘rīkh-i Ḥabīb al-siyar}, vol. 1, pp. 274–6.
siderably earlier than that of al-Dinawārī, the first Muslim conquerors actually found the body of ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Thāmir with his hand still covering the hole in his head. After they moved his hand, blood flowed from the wound.\footnote{Ibn Hishām, \textit{al-Sīra}, vol. 1, p. 36.} Some later figures, such as the commentator al-Suhaylī (d. 581/1185–6), who commented on Ibn Hishām’s \textit{Sīra}, and the historian-exegete Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372–3)\footnote{Al-Suhaylī, \textit{al-Rawd al-unuf}, vol. 1, pp. 94f.; and Ibn Kathīr, \textit{al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya}, vol. 2, pp. 129–32 (at p. 129 he says \textit{humā mutaʿāriḍatān}, the versions are contradictory).} flatly stated that the two versions could not be harmonized or rationalized according to Islam, because both contained elements that were problematic from a religious point of view. Presumably Ibn Kathīr means by this the use of the greatest name of God in AU1 and manner by which the youth brings about his own death in AU2. Other historians, such as Ibn al-Athīr, quote both versions.\footnote{Ibn al-Athīr, \textit{Kāmil}, vol. 1, pp. 429–31; also al-Kalāṭī, \textit{Iktifā'}, vol. 1, pp. 73–6.} But most historians were more influenced by AU2, and so, like the historian-exegete Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), they especially favored AU2-M, no doubt because of the prominence of Muslim’s collection.\footnote{Ibn al-Jawzī, \textit{Muntaṣām}, vol. 2, pp. 154–6.}

Other subsidiary exegetical versions in Persian are once again different from the versions previously cited, and will be referred to as AU2-P. The earlier version (probably) is that of al-Sūrābādī (d. 494/1100–1).\footnote{Al-Sīrābādī, \textit{Tafsīr-i Sūrābādī}, vol. 4, pp. 2790–2.} In it the king claimed divinity, which gives the overall story more coherence. In other versions of AU2 the king had used the ambiguous term \textit{rabb}, which could mean “lord” without meaning God; in AU2-P he uses the word \textit{khudā}, god. But most surprisingly the magician is made to be the one who was healed by the youth. He lamented to the youth that he wished he had two eyes with which to see him, and the youth prayed to heal him. From there the story proceeds naturally with the magician being forced to tell the king of the identity of the one who healed him. The \textit{Tafsīr-i Qur’ān-i majid} (otherwise known as \textit{The Cambridge Anonymous Tafsīr}), probably dating from about the same time as Sūrābādī, also preserves a different version in which the story of the \textit{ašhāb al-ukhđūd} is mixed with that of Daniel\footnote{Note other figures who were thrown into the fire in the Yemen and did not burn, such as Abū Muslim al-Khwālī; see al-Ṭāmūrī, \textit{Kitāb al-miḥān}, pp. 358–9.} and his companions in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3).\footnote{\textit{Tafsīr-i Qur’ān-i majid}, vol. 2, pp. 574–5; see E.G. Browne, “An Old Persian commentary on the Qur’ān,” \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society} (1894): 417–524, on the dating of this text.} Although the name of Yūsuf Dhū Nuwās is given, he is said to be in either Mawṣīl (Iraq) or Najrān, and the entire
sequence of the boy, the monk and the magician is missing. Instead, the
king and his wazir make the people bow down before an idol but throw
anyone who does not comply into the fire. The story of the woman and
her child is added on artificially at the end.

Reading these accounts, one is confronted with these irreconcilable
differences and some thematic issues. It is difficult to tell why precisely
the figure of the soothsayer-magician is included at all (other than in
AU2-P). He only functions as a schoolmaster, and does not seem to have
had any influence over the king in the latter’s decision to kill the youth
and the monk. The figure of the monk is problematic as well. In AU1
he is presented as a passive figure, located in his cell and only engaging
the youth upon the latter’s initiative. Even more bizarrely, the monk,
when he was presented with the problem of the youth missing out on his
lessons with the magician, advises the youth to lie to both the magician
and to his family. Such conduct hardly merits praise in any context. It
is unclear precisely why the monk never had access to the type of power
that the youth was to show, since according to AU1 he knew the greatest
name of God, while in the later versions he is presented at the very least
as having some power (although not as great as that of the youth).

Interestingly enough, there is a fragment in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s (d. 638/
1240) Muḥaddarat al-abrār in which Faymiyun is said to have slain a
*tinnīn* (a snake, a monster) aided by the power of God:

> While he was praying, a *tinnīn* came toward him, a snake
> with seven heads. When Faymiyun saw it, he cursed it and
> it died. Šāliḥ58 saw this and did not know what hit it and so
> he feared it. He lamented and screamed: “O Faymiyun! The
> *tinnīn* is coming toward you!” but he did not turn towards
> it... Šāliḥ knew that he had seen his place [with God] and he
> said to him: “O Faymiyun! You know, by God, that I have
> never loved anyone the way I love you; I desire to accompany
> you, since the *kaynūna* is with you and wherever you go.”59

Although the meaning of the word *kaynūna* is obscure, the idea that
Faymiyun had great powers seems to be attested in more than just AU1
and AU2. Perhaps there is a larger group of stories that are attached
to this figure that might put the story into more of an understandable
context.

But the oddest figure is that of the youth who dominates the entire
story except for the artificial ending. He is presented as intellectually

58 One of his assistants.
59 Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Muḥaddarat al-abrār wa-musāmarat al-akhyār fi al-adabiyyāt wa-
nawādir al-akhbār*, vol. 1, p. 188.
and religiously curious. In AU1 he gains the power of the greatest name of God through a process of elimination, and then proceeds to use it in ways that are erratic, to say the least. In AU2 he acquires knowledge that nobody else knows, and proceeds to heal people. His statements in this section of the tradition are in accord with Muslim ideals; however, his choice of a criterion by which to test his faith in God is unusual. The awe-inspiring creature, whatever it was, that the youth kills in order to find out whether the God of the monk is the true God or not replaces in AU2 and its subsidiary versions the idea that the youth learns the greatest name of God. This is not the most convincing feature of the story, since it seems unlikely (without any certain knowledge of what type of creature this was) that this feat would impress anybody. However, according to the responses of the people in AU2, who said: “This youth possesses knowledge (‘alima ‘ilman) that no one else has,” for some reason killing the creature demonstrated powerful knowledge. How people would know generally about this type of knowledge, since the existence of the greatest name of God can hardly have been a common phenomenon, is also unclear. Later, in the healing of the blind man in AU2 and its subsidiary versions, there is no mention of the greatest name of God; the healing takes place in an ordinary fashion through prayer.

However, the youth’s most unusual abilities come to light when he is sentenced to death. Three times the king tries to kill him, each time in a different way (reminiscent of the three temptations of Jesus (Matthew 4:1–10; Luke 4:1–13). While after each of the first two unsuccessful attempts to put him to death he comes back willingly to the king — even though he could have presumably fled — the third is successful. During the course of this attempt to put him to death, he actually gives the king advice on how to kill him. Although his two compatriots, the healed blind man and the monk, were put to death in gruesome ways, the youth’s death involving crucifixion and multiple arrow wounds is particularly brutal. But the most unusual element of this whole sequence is the fact that the king has to proclaim his belief in one God in order to kill the youth.

Why precisely the element of the king declaring his faith is so significant, why the youth would be protected from bodily harm until such a

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60 This issue continued to confuse the exegetes (see note 24); the Ottoman Ismā‘īl Haqqī al-Bursawī (d. 1137/1724–5), Tafsīr rūḥ al-bayān, vol. 10, p. 387 says “a lion or a snake (ḥayya) called in Persian azhdar [a dragon].”

61 Perhaps along the lines of the test of Gideon, Judges 6:36–40.

62 Arrows overall seem to play a role in the story: the youth discovers the greatest name of God through arrow divination, and is then executed (presumably destroying the protective power of the name) by arrows.

63 The crucifixion of the martyrs of Najrān is attested in Moberg, Book of the Ḥimyarites, p. cix.
declaration was made, or what incentive he had in revealing the manner by which this protection could be overcome, is quite unclear. Logically, the youth’s protection was knowledge of the greatest name of God; however, in the versions of AU2 this is never mentioned. It is equally unclear why the king, once he had made a public declaration of faith, would be able to kill the youth or even desire to do so. Why the people who converted to the youth’s belief in one God did not challenge the king or at least shame him because of his proclamation, even as he was sentencing them to death, is also unclear. The entire story would seem to encourage hypocritical conversions to Islam, since the king is clearly insincere. In the historical version of the story (AU1), the persecution of the Christians of Najrān by Dhū Nuwās makes a good deal of sense. Since these people were perhaps a danger to the unity of the country (or might sympathize with Dhū Nuwās’ enemies in Ethiopia), it is easy to see why they had to die. But in the story of the king and the youth, it is unclear what precisely the danger posed by the conversion of youth and the others was, with the exception of the idea that they would have a sovereign above and beyond the king. The difference between the versions seems to be that while in AU1 the threat posed by the aḥāb al-ukhdūd was that they were leaving the faith of their fathers, in AU2 the king claims either lordship or divinity and is threatened by their conversions.

The belief system represented in the aḥāb al-ukhdūd stories is rather indistinct. This is best represented by the phrase rabb al-ghulām, “the Lord of the youth,” which the people cry out at the end of the story. “We believe in the Lord of the youth” is reminiscent of the many Qur’ānic references to a deity worshiped by the opponent of a prophetic figure, who converts following a demonstration of God’s power, but knows virtually nothing about the faith he now professes. For example, when Moses defeated the magicians of Pharaoh (cf. Ex. 7:8–12), the Qur’ānic sequence is similar: “Then the magicians fell down prostrate. They said: We believe [now] in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.” (20:70, versions in 7:122, 26:48). Just as in the aḥāb al-ukhdūd story, the magicians are willing almost immediately to die for their new faith (20:72–3) the name of whose deity they do not know. This is partially religious triumphalism, but perhaps also harks back to the idea that Islam is the natural religion of humanity (the idea of fitra) and therefore it is unnecessary to know the particulars — other than the profession of the one God.

It is interesting that the version of the aḥāb al-ukhdūd story in the Qiṣṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ (stories of the Prophets) literature (henceforth AU3) is yet different again from those listed above. In the version given by al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1036), the above story is cleaned up considerably.64

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64 Al-Tha‘labī, ‘Arā‘is al-majālis, pp. 439–41, see the translation by William Brin-
The dābbāʿażīma of AU2 in AU3 becomes a snake (ḥayya), which makes the sequence of stoning credible, but detracts from the miraculous nature of the story overall. The blind man healed by the youth becomes the king’s nephew, and the conversation between this nephew and the youth prior to the former being healed of his blindness is far more detailed. When the methods by which the king attempted to kill the youth are listed, an attempt with a sword is added. After the youth is killed, the narrative is much more coherent, as the people immediately proclaim the shahāda and use Islamic phrases. In this martyrological sequence, the mother in AU3 has three children: the first two are thrown into the fire after she refuses to apostatize, but she wavers with the third and youngest (still nursing as in the other versions). When she intended to renounce Islam, the young boy spoke to her and persuaded her to stay constant; unlike the other versions instead of jumping into the fire herself, they are both cast in.65

It is the very last sequence, the story of the woman and her young boy (ṣabīr or ghuslām) that seems to be the oldest. Muqāṭīl b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) in his Tafsir recounts this as an isolated fragment, and it may derive from some Christian martyrology.66 According to this element of the story, eighty men and nine women believed in tawḥīd, and Dhū Nuwās ordered them to abandon Islam. When they refused, he ordered them to be tortured in the fire, and all of them were burnt. (It is interesting that this is almost exactly a reversal of the historical Martyrs of Najrān, of whom far more seem to have been women.)67 When only a woman who had a very young son (sometimes described as ṭarīʿ, suckling) was left, she is said to have hesitated at the point of going into the fire so that the people asked demanded from her to apostatize. Several times she is said to have gone back and forth between the fire and apostasy, until finally her son spoke to her and said: “O mother, there is a fire before you that will never be put out [hell-fire]” and then she threw herself into the flames. This boy is said to have been one of the few who spoke at

65 65Other versions such as that of Rabghūzī (ca. 7–8th/13–14th cens.), al-Rabghūzī: the stories of the prophets: Qiṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ, an eastern Turkish version, vol. 2, pp. 753–5 (from Manuscript C, not in the regularly printed versions of Rabghūzī) are so different that they would require an entirely separate analysis.


67E.g., Moberg, Himyarites, pp. cx–cxi, cxiv, cxviii, cxxi, cxxiii, cxxvii–cxxxiv (male martyrs are listed on pp. cxvi–cxvii).
such a young age.\textsuperscript{68} Incidentally, the presence of this further ghulām raises the question of whether he is actually the “youth” from which the story takes its title. Despite the fragmentary nature of this story, it is really the only section of the story that has a topical connection with the Qur’ānic sequence, and is one of the earliest literary martyrologies in Islam not connected with the life of Muḥammad.\textsuperscript{69}

4. Conclusions: martyrrology, history and \textit{ḥadīth}

Whether or not the accounts of the \textit{aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd} have any historical value is a question that stands apart from their usefulness in Islam as a martyrrological account. Comparison of the stories above with those of the historical Martyrs of Najrān does not reveal very many similarities. While the youth is given three or four types of martyrdom, only crucifixion overlaps with the punishments inflicted upon the Martyrs of Najrān, which included stoning, breaking of bones, being dragged by a camel, being beaten to death and many other variants. It seems rather unlikely that drowning in the sea, which is not very close to Najrān, would have been an attractive option for the king. While the theme of burning in the \textit{ukhdūd} may overlap with the martyrrological narratives, the burning is almost always associated with being burnt in houses or in churches. And the story of the little boy who speaks to his mother could have parallels in a number of stories of young children who are mentioned in the martyrrologies, except for the fact that none of these children are mentioned in conjunction with their mothers when they are put to death (let alone being burnt alive).

Whether the \textit{aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd} narratives are based upon historical recollection is open to question. The narratives described above are highly contradictory and, oddly, in their most dominant form, avoid any of the details that would lend the story credibility. Names are replaced with generic terminology, historical themes that appear in earlier accounts become moralizing rather than historically rooted in later ones. This trend is most apparent in the accounts of the historian and exegete al-Ṭabarānī. His historical accounts demonstrate some skepticism about the relevance of the stories connected with the \textit{aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd}, as he

\textsuperscript{68} Al-Tha‘labī, ‘Arā‘is, p. 441, lists six infants who spoke from the cradle: Joseph, the son of Mashita (daughter of Pharaoh), John the Baptist, Jesus (Qur’an 3:46, 5:110, 19:29), the companion of St. George, and the boy of the \textit{ukhdūd}.

points out the fact that the cardinal connecting point with the Qur’ānic narrative, the mention of the mysterious ukhūdūd goes virtually unmentioned in the story attached to it. But this skepticism is not to be found in the text of his Qur’ānic commentary. While in his Ta’rīkh he cites the versions of the story with names (that of ‘Abd Allāh b. Thāmīr for example), no hint of this version is given in his commentary. Even the early account of Muqātil, which seems to preserve the base form of the woman and young boy martyrs, does not contain useful historical information.

The Qur’ān has few stories of martyrdom. However, the aṣḥāb al-ukhūdūd are said to have been roasted for their belief in God — if one accepts the general interpretation that they are the ones being burned in the verses and not the ones doing the roasting. Is the story of the aṣḥāb al-ukhūdūd true martyrdom or is it suicide? Through the period of the three attempts upon the youth, the latter demonstrated invincibility. The king’s servants were unable to throw him off a mountain or drown him, and in the end the youth is killed only because he reveals to the king the manner in which he can be killed. This is quite peculiar, and stands out in contrast to most martyrdom narratives in which the martyr is not actually responsible for his own death. Here, the youth appears to have been protected by the power accorded to him by the monk. However, this logically raises the question of why it was that the monk could not (or would not) defend himself? If one is to take classical Christian martyrologies as an example, then the ideal martyrdom should be a confrontation of power: the worldly power of the evil oppressor should be countered by the spiritual power of the oppressed. But in fact the two principal figures, the two natural opposites of the story (the soothsayer-magician and the monk) are both passive figures. The real confrontation is between the king and the youth, and raises the question of what precisely the reason is behind the youth’s martyrdom.

While it is possible that like in the Anonymous Cambridge Tafsīr, details of the Daniel story have influenced that of the aṣḥāb al-ukhūdūd, it seems that here is an example of a partially recollected historically based story that has gone through repeated refinements to end up as a moralizing tale. The trajectory of this ḥadīth moves further away from whatever historical roots it might have had into generalities. But unlike most ḥadīth, this story never achieved a set form and is still — if we are to take into account the Swahili versions — changing through

70 It is interesting that while burning is mentioned quite a number of times in the Christian accounts (Moberg, Himyarites, pp. cxi–iii; Shahid, Martyrs, pp. 46–7, 49), never is a pit or a ditch mentioned.

71 Such as the stories in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā’s many books or those in Ibn Qudāma’s Kitāb al-tawwābīn.
the telling. The origin of AU1 seems to have been Yemeni legends, albeit with an apologetic tone, but the origin of AU2 would seem to have been either Syrian or Iraqi — despite the fact that it appears first in the Yemeni ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s *Muṣannaf*. While these versions are probably based upon some Christian martyrology, one should not forget possible Hindu influences as well. Comparison of the story of the king’s son Prahlada, appearing in al-Bīrūnī’s *Ṭahqīq mā li-l-Hind*, is also a possibility. This story includes the elements of the religious quest of the boy, the influence of another (unnamed) religious master who seduces him away from the faith of his father, and three attempts by his father to kill him. In the last two attempts upon his life, the boy is thrown into the sea (as in AU2, etc) and finally into a fire, from which he converses with his father after remaining unburnt. However, as Narasimha (avatar of Vishnu) eventually rescues the boy, the the Hindu tale does not end in martyrdom. It appears to have been combined with the sequence of the woman and her young boy, taken from Muqāṭīl, into a complete story. If there are genuine historical fragments inside AU2, they are difficult to reveal.

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